

 PHOTO GALLERY



In Peru, a slower, richer tourism route has emerged that links Cusco and the country's chief attraction — Machu Picchu — via the Sacred Valley.

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The blares of a strolling trumpeter in the farm-hemmed village of Urquillos in Peru's Sacred Valley draw a Pied Piper-like procession of costumed dancers, skipping children and more solemn supplicants to a faded yellow church on the town square.

Backdropped by the serrated Andes, a dozen men, shouldering a weighty dais supporting a regal Madonna statue, shuffle out, feeling haltingly for the steps down to the cobblestoned plaza. As the parade inches up a dirt road for prayers, less devout villagers drink Cusquena beer on park benches, grill beef skewers and suddenly embrace the only gringo family — mine — in attendance with cups of potent chicha, a traditional fermented corn drink.



"No money," our outgoing benefactor shakes her head, rousing the infant strapped in a bright shawl to her back. "Just to welcome you."

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Forget pisco sours. As welcome drinks go, few are more faithful to the Andean spirit than chicha, and fewer are served with such spontaneity as in the Sacred Valley, where nascent tourism has yet to dull native curiosity.

Traditionally, travelers on a South American highlights tour landed in Cusco and fled its 11,000-foot elevation for more oxygenated Machu Picchu at 8,000 feet. Now, a slower, richer tourism route has emerged that links Cusco and the country's chief attraction via the Sacred Valley, split by the Urubamba River one range north of the city.

To the founders of Cusco, original home of the Inca, the mountain-walled Sacred Valley between it and Machu Picchu was a breadbasket, a fertile region of terraced fields growing corn, quinoa and potatoes. Now, with the occasional assist from John Deere tractors, it's still worked by hand tools from Pisac northwest about 35 miles to Ollantaytambo, the hub for trains headed to Machu Picchu.

A spate of new lodges here, including Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, aims to introduce travelers to the larger Inca world easily accessible in the many ruins that pepper the Sacred Valley.

For a blend of culture and adventure, we checked into the new hiking-centric lodge Explora Valle Sagrado, outside of tiny Urquillos. Its all-inclusive format best resembles a safari lodge, offering a daily roster of guided excursions hiking or mountain biking in the Andes. Guests return to comfortable rooms in the minimalist-chic lodge and multicourse meals accompanied by as many pisco sours, Cusquenas or Chilean wines as you can drink.

"Every time we started constructing something, we bumped into archaeological remains," said Rodrigo Donoso, general manager of Explora, describing the ancient adobe brick walls that encircle the cornfield in front of the lodge. Above it lie the razor-sharp peaks to which guides point when describing their hikes.

Allowing guests to acclimate, Explora, at 9,500-foot elevation, gradually introduces new arrivals to the landscape. Our first, gentle hike explored a few levels of terraces, stepping up a hillside behind the nearby village of Yucay, sprouting orderly rows of indigenous corn and quinoa. Outside of officially protected historic sites, these fields, banked by the intricately cut walls for which the Inca are famed, are farmed and irrigated by ancient canals. Among these evidently fertile plots, cactus blooms crowd prickly pear pads, and rosebushes overhang streams. Occasional residents passed carrying bundles of firewood strapped to their backs, or herding donkeys by flowering walnut and pear orchards. A modest Catholic church perched atop a small Inca temple inside one terrace, a colonial practice designed to synchronize the two religions.

Our two-hour amble ended at sunset at the transport van parked on a sleepy lane where the driver surprised us with a makeshift bar for Sacred Valley sundowners, a pampering practice, we soon learned, that would bookend nearly every expedition.

In another happy hour ritual, this one at the lodge, guides seek out guests to discuss the next day's adventure from a roster that includes cultural itineraries and hardcore hikes. Sometimes, as in a hike to the town of Chinchero that started at a weaver's coop and ended after a rugged trek to a series of mountain-terraced salt pans, they combine both.

Fully acclimated within a few days, we prepared to hike over a 14,000-foot mountain pass by dressing in layers that emptied our suitcases and chewing numbness-inducing coca leaves (they're legal) to ward off headaches.

"Like our teeth turn red from drinking wine, the people of the countryside, their teeth are green from coca," said Mariana Ortiz, doling out the natural anesthetic.

Rain spat and the sun shone moodily above the tree line where we spotted the occasional llama herder amid the lake-dotted landscape. Andean geese wheeled overhead despite a constant gale, and small potato patches bivouacked the hillsides. We stopped to eat quinoa and cheese packed in tins for lunch and, five hours later, threaded a mixed herd of alpacas and baby sheep bleating urgently as if to punctuate the end of our exhilarating day. The clouds cleared now and then to reveal a skyline of snowy summits.

"With global warming, many glaciers in the Sacred Valley are melting," said guide Abel Santander, an indigenous Quechua who described paying homage to Pachamama, or Mother Earth, with sacrifices of coca leaves. "We feel bad, like a member of our family has passed."

If the ubiquity of Inca ruins in the region gives the impression that the Sacred Valley is deserted, the saints day in Urquillos quickly corrected that. As did vendors rushing to our car on the valley's main road with grilled guinea pig skewered on sticks for sale. We met women in traditional braids and stovepipe hats ladling chicha on street corners and spotted Pachamama offerings throughout the fields. Only the ruin sites with their tremendous assemblies of gravity-resisting rock seemed, apart from the few tourists with us on our last day at the dramatic Ollantaytambo, empty.

"Imagine these terraces with the flower of the potato blossom, one purple the other white, and tiers of quinoa, kiwicha and corn," said Santander, painting a colorful image of the ruin sites, where, unlike the rest of the valley, nothing is grown. "What we see now is a skeleton."

A skeleton — or many, rather — amid a garden.

Elaine Glusac is a freelance writer.

IF YOU GO

Explora Valle Sagrado requires a two-night minimum stay, which costs \$1,391 per person for both nights, including airport transfers, all meals, excursions with bilingual guides and an open bar. For guests staying at least three nights, Explora will arrange a day-trip excursion to Machu Picchu for \$300 per adult. The resort is offering a 40 percent discount on new bookings between May 1 and Oct. 31; 866-750-6699, www.explora.com.

To reach the Sacred Valley, travelers generally fly via Lima to Cusco. Several American carriers fly to Lima from the U.S., but LATAM Airlines generally dominates the transfer between Lima and Cusco, which takes just over an hour.