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Cusco and Machu Picchu: Three hotels reviewed

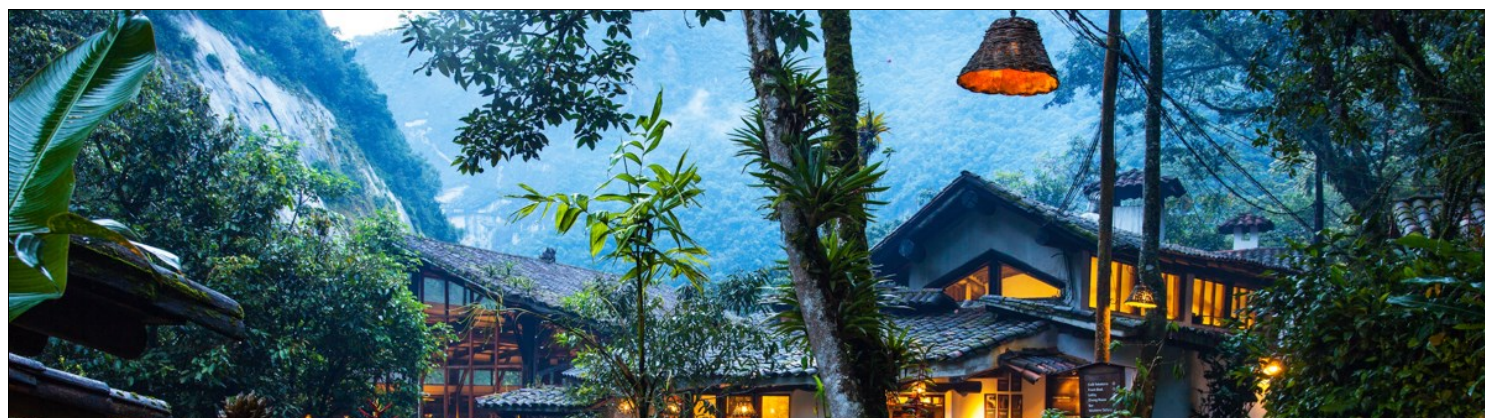
Published July 20, 2017 by Nick Dall

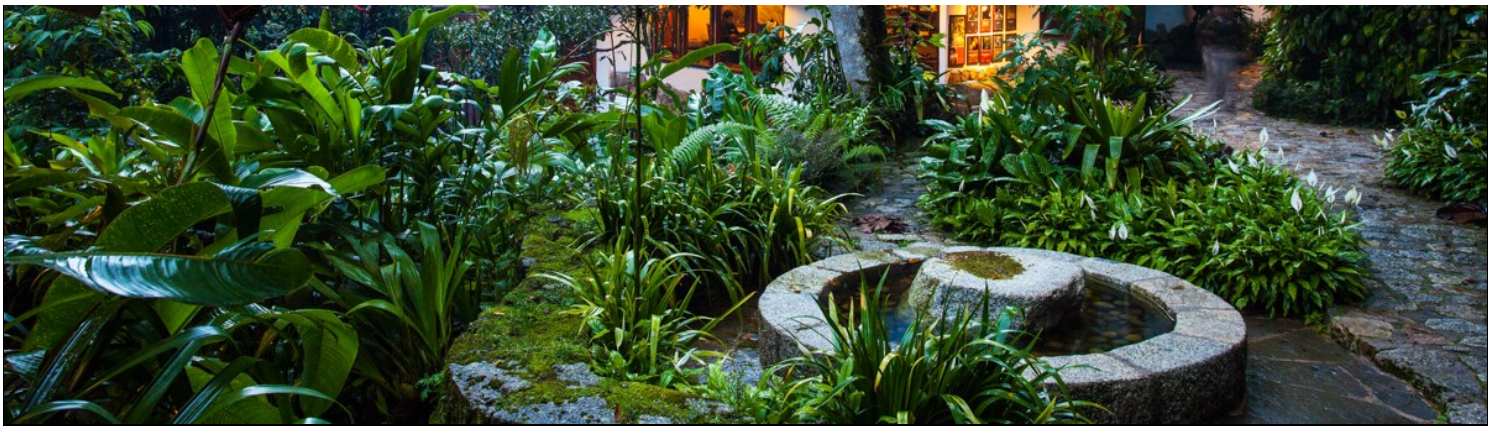
I just got back from a trip to three gorgeous – but very different – hotels in Cusco, the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu. Here's what I loved about each place...

Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo

Orchids, hummingbirds, waterfalls...and Machu Picchu

Obviously, your main motivation for visiting Machu Picchu is to see the staggering Inca citadel, and with good reason. But a little-mentioned bonus is the incredible biodiversity of the cloud forests which surround the ruins – something which is ramped up several notches if you choose to stay at the Machu Picchu Pueblo hotel. Through decades of meticulous planting and ecological restoration, the owners have created a veritable 'Garden of Eden' which is a haven for rare and endemic species.





Better still is the fact that there are loads of free guided activities designed to open your eyes to the wonders of the cloud forest. When I read that the hotel is home to the world's largest collection of native orchids, I didn't realise that some of the flowers would be smaller than my fingernail! I didn't need a guide to point out the hummingbirds (they're everywhere) but going on the birdwatching walk helped me distinguish between species and it taught me about birds I'd never even heard of, like the adventurous Torrent Ducks that thrive in the raging river below the hotel.

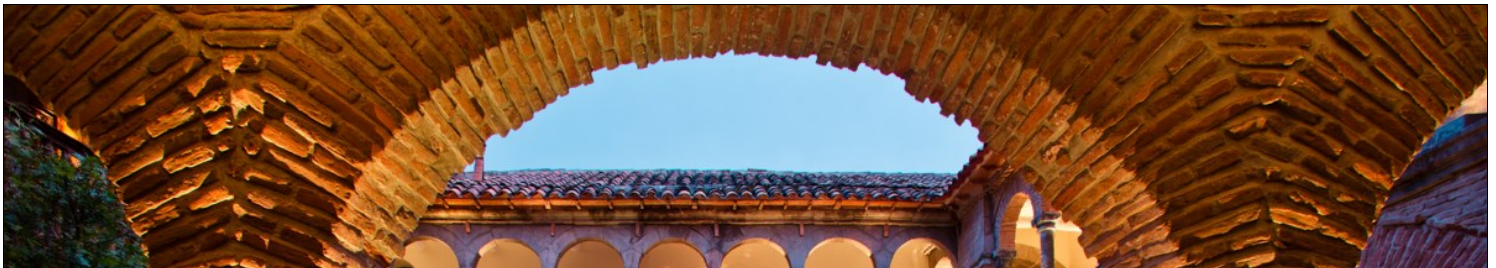


Even if you don't go on any tours, it's impossible not to relax surrounded by so much nature. Especially if you're sitting in one of the hotel's crystal-clear natural hot springs, surrounded by orchids and birdsong...

Inkaterra La Casona

Your own 16th century mansion at the heart of Cusco

When you arrive at La Casona you're greeted by a massive set of oak doors that are always closed. Give the doors an old-fashioned knock and prepare to be transported into a different world. Cusco is a city of incredible history, art and architecture and La Casona gives you the chance to experience all these things 24/7. The 11-room hotel's location – on tiny, picture-perfect Plaza Nazarenas – is impeccable, as are its historic credentials. Built in 1585, on land which was once the training ground of the elite Inca army; Simón Bolívar (the greatest of all *libertadores*) once called it home. Now you can do the same...





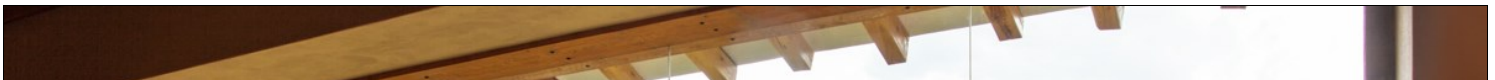
The elegant central courtyard took my breath away the first time I saw it. And every subsequent time too. Throw in the décor (colonial furniture, pre-Columbian textiles, original murals) and the exquisite food, and it's very easy to understand why this was Peru's very first Relais & Chateaux hotel. Living in a 16th century mansion for a few days was magnificent, but it also brought some funny moments. La Casona's walls are so thick that each room has its own wi-fi...Even then, I had a hard time getting signal in the bathroom!



Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba

Discover Andean culture at the heart of the Sacred Valley

Located on the slopes above the tiny town of Urquillos, Hacienda Urubamba is all about experiencing the Andes as the Incas would have, albeit with every comfort imaginable. The *hacienda* was constructed from scratch a few years ago using sustainably-sourced local materials (I loved the exposed eucalyptus beams with their expressive cracks and gnarls). Sipping on a glass of red as a fire blazed in the central lounge reminded me of the elegance of an Argentine estancia.





I really enjoyed my tour of the 7-hectare organic garden (serviced by an ancient irrigation system) which provides up to 50% of the produce served in the hotel. I also went on a fascinating Twilight Walk where I tried and failed to identify the llama, serpent and partridge who lived in the dark spaces between the stars. Inca astronomy, I learned, was unique in the world for focusing on the negative spaces in the Milky Way...which was, for the Incas, a celestial mirror of the Willkamayu River that flows through the Sacred Valley.



If you ask me, Hacienda Urubamba's location 'far from the madding crowd' is its biggest drawcard, but it's also near to two of my favorite attractions in the Sacred Valley: the incredible Inca agricultural laboratory of Moray and the *salineras* at Maras where salt has been made the same way for at least a thousand years.

All photos supplied by Inkaterra. The title image is of Hacienda Urubamba.