

L U X

# MORE OF THE JUNGLE

*While the world thought eco-tourism meant cold showers and rough toilet paper, Inkaterra hotels in Peru were proving them wrong. Beautiful, elegant and environmentally aware, they have shown for decades that luxury really can help conservation. **Caroline Davies** travels there to learn how they do it*

**Natural Settings**

*This page: the main house of Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica at Aguas Calientes, near Machu Picchu; opposite: Inkaterra La Casona at Cusco*



Henry Moreno



There is no darkness quite like night in the jungle. With our torches switched off, the tangle of branches, from the prickly, long ferns to the centuries-old rubber trees, wound around with creepers, towering 30m above us, all disappear.

The buzz of nocturnal creatures is thick in the air. Something slips past my leg. I inhale sharply and grasp the khaki waistcoat of our guide a little tighter. “Just a few seconds longer,” my guide, Noemi, says. “You’ll feel part of it soon.”

In the green mass of the Amazon, is Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica; a small speck next to the Rio Madre de Dios, flowing from Peru down into Bolivia. More than forty years ago, José Koechlin, Inkaterra’s founder, lead a team of conservationists into the Peruvian Amazon, building Peru’s first tourist eco-reserve. This might be where Inkaterra started, but it isn’t where my introduction to Peru began.

It’s twilight as I make my way from the main train station at Aguas Calientes, which sits in the Andean cloud forest. It’s the last main stop before the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu. Built in the 15th century, the Incas abandoned it 100 years later. It lay forgotten until the early 20th century as the rainforest grew over the immaculate stone work, the temples to the sun, the grain stores and the homes.

By contrast Aguas Calientes lacks the majesty or tranquillity of the ruins. I follow the ramshackle streets past neon-lit hostels and stalls of brightly coloured woollen toy llamas to Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo. Set back amongst the forest, the sounds of the town drain away with only the distant rumble of the railway line. Steam from three hot tubs slips out from under the wooden covers, drifting across the valley. The temperature can dip to below zero at night in the mountains, but the elegant suites come with heavy woven alpaca blankets and deep-set fireplaces to keep the biting cold away. There’s a perfume in the evening air; the orchids are in bloom.

There are 372 different species of orchid registered in the hotel grounds, from the dragon orchid to the ‘man on a deck chair’, so-called because of the way the flower’s central column lies against the petals. But this isn’t Inkaterra’s only project in the region. The following morning, we head out to spot the bear from darkest Peru.

We walk 20 minutes up a path from the hotel and I can hear the crunch of leaves being devoured. Behind a thin but powerful electric fence are the bears, chewing alfalfa leaves for



breakfast. Thought to be the inspiration behind the children's literary character of Paddington, Andean or spectacled bears were seen so rarely they were thought to be a myth until development of the rainforest destroyed their habitat and brought them into contact with humans. Since then, they have become an endangered species as they have been hunted for their thick black fur.

Inkaterra rescued Pepe, their first bear, from a local zoo in 2001 and slowly rehabilitated him in their reserve. After it became illegal to keep them in captivity, Andean bears seized from circuses or people's homes were sent to find a new life in the Inkaterra reserve.

I head on to the centre of the Incan world, Cusco as the rainy season arrives. Big drops batter down on the terracotta roofs of the city and roll off the snouts of the ceramic statues of Incan bulls, placed along the ridge of the roof to bring good fortune. The streets glisten, reflecting the lights of the alpaca shops, while the city's traffic wardens wave the cars away from the pedestrianised main square with red LED sticks and a liberal use of whistles.

*We race downstream through the dark muddy water as our phone signal fades. We are heading into the Amazon rainforest.*

The Incans referred to Cusco, the capital of their empire, as the globe's navel. It remained that way until the 16th century and the Spanish conquest, but is still regarded as Peru's historical capital and is on Unesco's World Heritage List.

Inkaterra La Casona sits a few streets back from the main square. Stepping through the ornate wooden doorway, I am greeted by a dramatic, colonial grass-covered quad, floor-lit columns and rounded archways, with terracotta-coloured walls and an inviting fire. The hotel was once a 16th-century Spanish colonial mansion and had Spanish conquistador Diego de Almagro and 'Libertador' Simón Bolívar as guests. Inkaterra began work to restore it to its former glory after they purchased the property in 1999.

Inkaterra don't rely on guilty consciences for bookings; you can have both a luxury hotel and support the country you are visiting. Hotels like La Casona sustain Inkaterra's other projects. The company protects more than 15,000 hectares of Amazon rainforest, works with local people and contributes to the scientific community with their research centres. It has trained more than 4,000 local people as guides and hospitality workers.

The temperature has dropped significantly, but I find a roaring fire, a bubble bath and a Pisco sour – a Peruvian drink made with the white spirit Pisco, egg white and lemon juice – waiting for me. I savour it and try to enjoy the cold. Tomorrow, I go to the jungle.

We race downstream through the dark muddy water, the banks thickening with trees as our phone signal fades. The sun warms our bare arms and legs. We are heading into the Amazon rainforest.

Across South America, governments sold rainforest land on the cheap to farmers; if you cultivate it, you can own it. As the forest was torn down for cattle across the continent, José purchased uncultivated land from a local farmer, setting up a research centre and five cabins.

Today, Inkaterra has two bases on the river, each with a conservation hub and a colonial style wooden built dining room, where giant wood fans rotate slowly overhead. The wooden cabins dotted around the grounds are not opulent but are comfortable. Each has its own hammock for swinging lazily in and listening to the sounds of the rainforest.

The afternoon rain picks up. It's at the level that would normally send office workers running for the shelter of an awning, coats shielding their heads, but when I peer cautiously at the grey sky, my guide Noemi laughs. "This is light rain," she says determinedly, as we stomp through puddles and into the trees. My slightly incongruous black umbrella that I've brought is almost instantly rendered useless. Nature's umbrella has blocked out all but the odd raindrop, each tree, fern and shrub absorbing and draining away the water that reaches them. The air smells of sweetly rotting mangos and garlic. "That's the garlic tree," says Noemi. "When its bark is wet, it gives off the same smell."

Deeper into the rainforest is the research centre. Inkaterra have been monitoring and recording flora and fauna since 1978 and have recently built new bunks for university groups and PhD students. Even here, though, Inkaterra doesn't believe in being puritanical for its own sake; the main lodge has a bar where you can try a



1. **Classical Latin**

| *The Plaza suites at Inkaterra La Casona in Cusco blend European and Amerindian styles*

2. **Come On In**

| *The welcoming reception entrance at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel in the Andean forest*

3. **Above It All**

| *The canopy walkway at Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica*

lethal shot of chilli Pisco if the day's data collecting hasn't gone to plan.

Liberally doused in mosquito repellent, trousers tucked into socks, I am guided by Noemi on a night-time walk. A line of worker ants, each carrying a leaf five times its size, marches past our feet and up the tree to their nest out of reach of our torch beam. We spot a pinktoe tarantula the size of rugby player's hand, poised for a catch. Noemi identifies a rustle in the distance and a barely audible cry as a wild cat, perhaps a panther.

"Shall we turn these off now?" I grasp my torch a little more tightly and flick the switch. The darkness is complete. As my breathing slows, and I realise we aren't about to be the rainforest's dinner, I tune into the hum of crickets, the creak of the trees, the low rumble of life in the Amazon. "Do you feel part of it, yet?" I do, and now closer than ever. ♦♦

*A 13-day trip to Peru, visiting four Inkaterra properties, starts from £4,325 per person with Rainbow Tours, based on two adults sharing. This price includes two nights in Lima, three nights at Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica, two nights at Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, two nights at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, three nights at Inkaterra La Casona, and return flights and airport transfers. This price also includes the train and a guided trip to Machu Picchu, plus guided daily excursions at the Inkaterra properties. Book with Rainbow Tours on 020 7666 1266 or visit [rainbowtours.co.uk](http://rainbowtours.co.uk)*

