

Peru: Adventures from the Amazon to the Andes, Lake Titicaca to Lima



THERESA STORM

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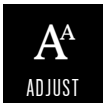


Buyers choose their deceased loved one's favourite beverage from these tiny miniatures on sale in the plaza outside Cusco's Almuneda Cemetery. These and other miniatures, from pets to food to hobbies, commemorate what they loved in life and are added to their glass-fronted coffin niche on Day of the Dead. Courtesy, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*



This is Part 2 of a three-part blog on Peru

Lovely Cusco, Inca capital



The 55-minute flight from Puerto Maldonado to Cusco ranks among my most memorable as the topography changed so quickly it was unfathomable. One minute, it seemed, I was peering at muddy rivers twisting through impenetrable swaths of jungle-covered flatlands, then, the next, at high mountain peaks studded with glaciers.



In Cusco, everything — the landscape, the flora and fauna and the people — are totally different, truly remarkable for such a short distance.

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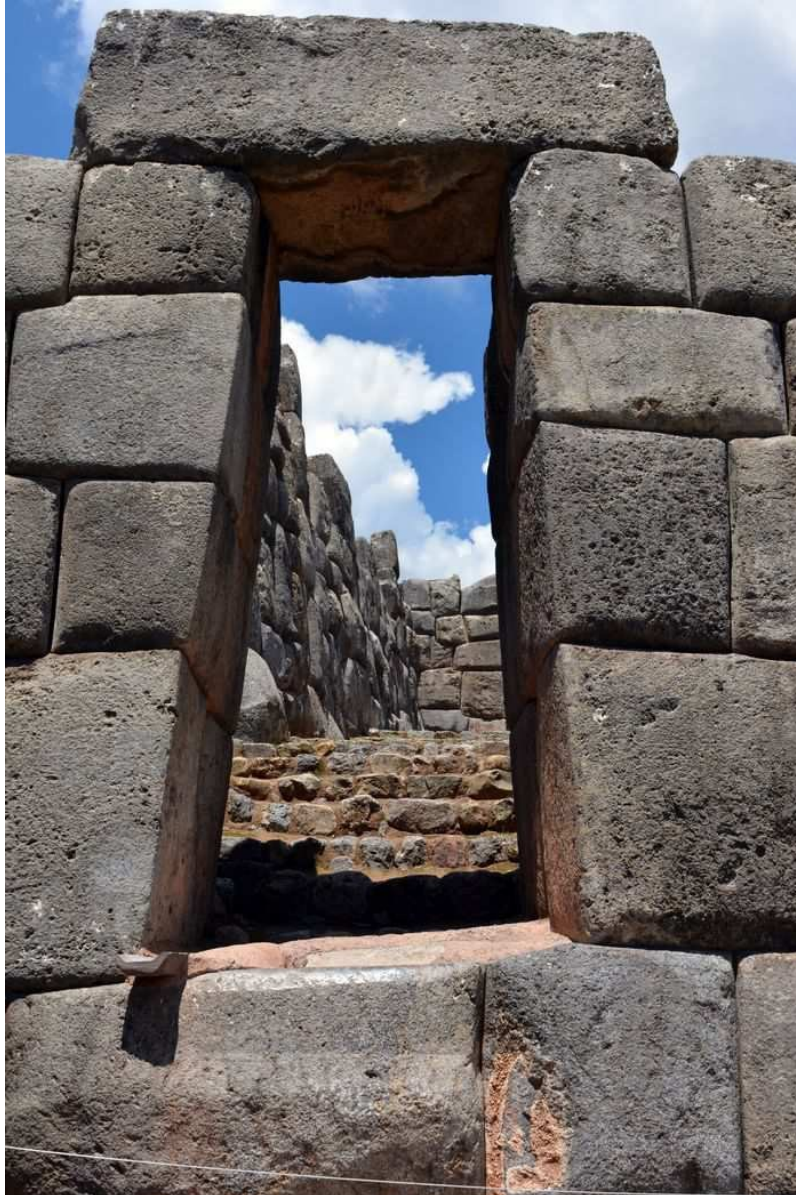




Thankfully, after a sticky week in the Amazon, so is the climate, although we are worried that the abrupt rise from sea level to 3,400 metres may bring on altitude sickness (it doesn't).

Cheerful Jorge Mendez of [Apumayo Expeditions](#), a Cusco-based tour company that operates scheduled and custom trips throughout Peru, takes us for an introductory walk in the heart of the beautiful colonial city, which once was the capital of the Inca Empire and is the gateway to Machu Picchu.

The Plaza de Armas, a huge square in the city's historical centre, is lined with Spanish colonial buildings erected on top of older Inca walls, dominated by the massive Cusco Cathedral. We'll tour that tomorrow, Mendez promises, and learn about the extinct Inca culture (which I know little about) and how it met its demise following the Spanish conquest.



The Incas were master stonecutters, as evidenced in this perfect doorway at Sacsayhuaman, an Inca site near Cusco. The stones were cut to fit perfectly together without mortar and have stood the test of time in an earthquake-prone region. Courtesy, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*

We'll also explore the 15th-century Inca ruins in and around Cusco, including Tambomachay, Puca Pucara, Qenqo, Sacsayhuaman and Koricancha, which houses the Temple of the Sun, the Incas' most sacred site.

(Confession — until doing research for this trip, I didn't know there are numerous Inca ruins in the Cusco region and the Sacred Valley (SV). All I had heard of was Machu Picchu. This is why we decided to visit Cusco and the SV before Machu Picchu, knowing a deeper understanding would

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enrich our visit to the famous citadel.)

Our stroll is interrupted by the din of a marching band and a gathering crowd on the pedestrian-only square. Along comes a colourful parade of costumed schoolchildren and a chaotic kaleidoscope of activity, truly a tourist's delight. When we inquire what the parade is celebrating, Mendez laughs because parades are so frequent. Like Latinos everywhere, Cusqueños love a fiesta!

Although I resist, Mendez pays a pair of Indigenous women dressed in traditional Andean garb leading two tassel-adorned adult llamas and a cute cria (baby) to pose for a photo with me. In ensuing days, we discover these adorable llamas for photo-hire abound on Cusco's streets and everywhere tourists go.

Celebrating the dead

Festivals and rituals are some the best ways to experience culture here. In Peru, Nov. 1 is Día de los Todos Santos (All Saints' Day) and the second is Día de los Muertos (All Souls' Day), commemorating the saints and the dead.

However, in practice, guide Jeremy explains, Day of the Dead is celebrated Nov. 1 with cemetery visits, fireworks and ringing church bells, while Nov. 2 is a family festivity celebrated at home with a traditional meal of lechón (roast pork) and tamales.



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Young lads toting ladders are hired by the deceased person's family to clean and polish the brass and glass of the coffin niche on Day of the Dead in Cusco's Almunera Cemetery. Courtesy, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*

When we reach the plaza outside Cusco's central Almunera Cemetery we find a hive of activity, although it is still early. Vendors sell gorgeous bouquets of flowers, keys to lock the glass-fronted niches that rise in banks several stories tall and wide (behind which the coffins rest) and tiny miniatures — from beer bottles to sewing machines to pets — that commemorate the deceased person's life in the niche front.

Inside the cemetery, Day of the Dead rituals — also part of the Inca culture — have transformed the quiet resting place. The entire cemetery smells of roses and of burning candles. Young lads toting tall green ladders are hired to climb up to niches and polish the bronze and glass, while a trio of elder musicians strum guitars and softly sing. Some of those paying their respects pray and a couple shed tears. Traditional bread baked in the shape of dolls and horses with candied sugar faces called tanta wawa, which had intrigued us yesterday piled high in the public market, are brought as offerings.

"We still believe in evil spirits and witches," Jeremy explains. "There's still a lot of superstition."

Where we're staying:

[Inkaterra La Casona](#) — Cusco's first boutique hotel has 11 suites in a restored 16th-century manor house furnished with antiques and original art. Located on the cobblestoned Plaza de las Nazarenas, just up a hill from the main Plaza de Armas, La Casona is a sanctuary of peace. In 1825, following Peru's independence, Simón Bolívar, the liberator, lived here a short time. Breakfast, tea time and cocktail hour are included.

[JW Marriott El Convento Cusco](#) — from an abandoned state in 2006, it took the JW six years to renovate the 16th-century Saint Agustin Convent in Cusco's heart. Smoke from a former bakery still darkens the bricks of the lobby, while a sun composed of 75,000 Swarovski crystals, an ode to Inca and other pre-Columbian cultures, shimmers behind the reception desk. The original exterior courtyard is ideal for relaxing and dining el fresco. There is also a health club, indoor pool and spa.

A free evening tour for guests reveals the hotel's most unique features: two underground exhibition halls housing ancient Peruvian artifacts. The Killke Exhibition Area is pre-Inca, while the Cusco Area reveals Inca walls upon which the convent was built. A mummy was found here, as well as pottery, jars and corncobs.

Getting high in Peru – reach for the altiplano

Getting high in the Andes — to 4,320 metres, almost higher than we've ever been before (save Cotopaxi Volcano in Ecuador) — is a memorable feat requiring some high altitude cardiovascular effort. But it's not as gnarly as it sounds.

Cautioning small steps and a slow, steady pace, guide Desiree (one of explora Valle Sagrado's three female guides) leads our ascent. It doesn't take long for our lungs to feel heavy; although, fortunately, neither of us gets altitude sickness.

Click [here](#) to read the Calgary Herald article about the Sacred Valley and the new explora Valle Sagrado.

Scenic rails to Machupicchu Pueblo

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In the charming cobblestone 15th-century Inca town of Ollantaytambo — my favourite Sacred Valley village and the site of my favourite ruins after Machu Picchu, an Inca ceremonial centre with stone terraces steeped up a hill also named Ollantaytambo — we board a [PeruRail](#) Vistadome tourist train for the 100-minute journey to Machupicchu Pueblo (formerly known as Aguas Calientes). This scenic town situated in a deep gorge shrouded by towering, vegetation-covered peaks is the jumping-off point for the Machu Picchu citadel, perched on a mountain six kilometres above.

As the train pulls out of the station, our excitement rises. We will soon see the famed ruins! From our front-of-the-car seats we snap photos of the panoramic vista, while a taped commentary points out highlights.

Soon the ecosystem starts to change — under a cap of low-hanging clouds the foliage becomes thick and green. We're now in subtropical Andean cloud forest, the commentary informs, with more rain, higher temperatures and humidity, and high-altitude plants like bamboo palms and orchids. As we sway along the narrow-gauge tracks, which run alongside the Inca's sacred Urubamba River at the foot of some extremely steep slopes, we pass some lesser Inca ruins.

Rounding a bend, a narrow thatched-roof building perched right beside the tracks is signed the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Oh oh! This is not what I'm expecting!

In the busy station, we are met by a bellman. As we walk to the hotel, he laughs, explaining the thatched building is the Cafe Inkaterra. The hotel, just ahead, is nestled in a private five-hectare mountainside reserve.

Getting here: PeruRail operates three train services to Machu Picchu at different price points: the luxury Belmond Hiram Bingham, the Vistadome and the Expedition. Tourist trains also operate between Cusco and Lake Titicaca.

Where we're staying:

[Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#) — an intimate Andean village of 83 whitewashed adobe casitas built on terraced hills among water features. A member of National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World. Packages are all-inclusive except alcohol and tips. In-house excursions (see below) are included.

Exploring the cloud forest

While many visitors either just day trip to Machu Picchu or spend one night in the pueblo, we have three and plan on two at the ruins and one here at Inkaterra to do some of the hotel's seven included natural history tours.

After a morning downpour, we venture into the fog to meet Explorer guide Ricardo Castaneda. As we walk a pathway into the dripping green Eden, he explains this was a tea plantation until 1991 (part of the plantation remains for guests to harvest and make their own tea). The vegetation is so profuse it's hard to believe the land was clear such a short time ago.

"Everything grows, even on the roofs," he says. "We change roofs three times a year."



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Explorer guide Ricardo Castaneda shows the author a tiny orchid in the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel's orchid garden, one of seven natural history tours included for guests on the cloud forest property. The garden is home to the world's largest native orchid collection. Courtesy, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*

Giant trees are thick with moss and hung with ferns and aerial bromeliads, camouflaging the plentiful bird nests. There's eucalyptus and heliconias ("little bananas"), lemony-smelling bergamot and avocados, among which 111 species of butterflies flit.

The air is filled with the chatter of 214 endemic bird species. We see many, including collared Inca hummingbirds hovering at feeders, a tropical kingbird and a juvenile golden-crowned flycatcher who is trying to fly but is more often on the ground. Call me showy, but the dazzling array of splendid-coloured hummingbirds: lime, scarlet, canary, emerald, iridescent blue — get my vote.

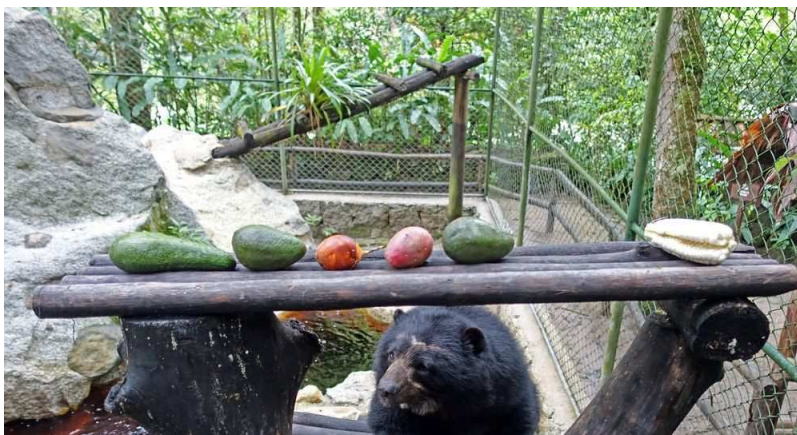
Castaneda says birds you can only see here include tucanettes and the Andean cock-of-the-rock, which is Peru's national bird. (We don't see either until sunset when a strange sound draws us outside to find a scarlet male cock-of-the-rock perched in a tree, the strange disk-like crest of his head bobbing as he calls. Reid is elated to photograph the bird that eluded his lens in Ecuador.)

We visit the orchid garden to see the world's largest native collection (372 species), including extinct-in-the-wild species. Seeds — five million per pod — are collected by a biologist and released into the wild, Castaneda explains.

Ever heard of spectacled bears?

We continue into the spectacled bear rescue centre and conservation program, an initiative of the Inkaterra Association (the hotel's NGO) and Peru's Protected Natural Areas National Service. The centre recovers bears impacted by humans and reintroduces them, if possible, to their natural habitat.

Once common throughout the Andes, in 2001 there were only 18,000 of these South American bears left, mostly in Peru and Bolivia. They are the only species found on the continent and the world's last remaining short-faced bear, who now, sadly, are listed as vulnerable.





A rare spectacled bear, the only species found on the South American continent â mostly in Peru and Bolivia â at Inkaterra's rescue centre at the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Courtesy, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*

In large separate enclosures, we see rescued Pepe (who doesn't rouse from sleep) and Keena, who is intent on eating a chunk of watermelon, licking it slowly and removing the seeds first (yes, these bears are mainly herbivores). Beige markings on her black face look like tattoos and, like human fingerprints, are unique. Not able to move much, she was rescued several years ago from a circus. She was fed chocolate of all things, explains Castaneda.

We learn about the bears' survival challenges and happily make a donation to the project, for which we receive a certificate.

Machu Picchu, the old peak

At last to Machu Picchu we go! Those with moxie can hike up, up, up to reach the ruins in about 1.5 hours. Most, like us, board one of the 26 buses that zigzag nine kilometres up the mountain on a narrow hairpin road.

We have hired our favourite guide Santos on his day off. He knows the lay of the land so we depart mid-morning, avoiding a bus wait. Although the citadel can be like a "phantom town" when blanketed in mist, says Santos, today we are blessed with sun for our visit to Machu Picchu, which in Quechua means "old peak."



The Inka citadel of Machu Picchu, high in the cloud forest, lives up to its lofty billing, despite its popularity with tourists. Courtesy, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*

So much is written about this sit that I feared it may be a tourist-overrun letdown, but it is stunning, so remote and so high up, set among green mountain peaks. How in the world did the Inca build this sprawling, expertly crafted stone fortress?

The next day we return to trek to Inca Bridge and the Sun Gate (Inti Punku), where those hiking the Inca Trail get their first glimpse of the citadel far below. Both are well worth doing.

Machu Picchu need to know:

- New regulations went into effect July 1. Visitors must have a guide and entry is for a half-day only, starting at 6 a.m. or 12:30 p.m. Buy tickets

in advance from your tour operator or hotel or from

<http://www.machupicchu.gob.pe> (last year \$68 USD).

- Bus lines can be long, with wait times 1.5 hours in high season (that was before the new time regulations went into effect, which I imagine has made for longer wait times).
- It is worth having an extra day scheduled in case of inclement weather.
- The late afternoon light was beautiful for photographs.

Part 3, the final instalment of this blog will run in January. You can find the first portion of this blog [here](#).