

Vast Cultural Riches Are Hiding in the Shadow of Machu Picchu

The Sacred Valley, with its fascinating Incan history and lush landscapes, is finally opening up to tourism. Local entrepreneurs are working to make sure that's a good thing.

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Hiking La Veronica.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek

Machu Picchu is one big marketing myth. At least, that's how our guide, Leo, puts it as

we wander the breathtaking fog-shrouded Inca ruins. First off, he says, the 600-year-old city wasn't hidden: Otherwise, why would there be seven gates to get in? Second, it was hardly the last remaining Inca citadel: You can see two others with the naked eye from Machu Picchu when the weather is clear, if you know where to look. Despite the mist, we spot one in the distance.

As we walk through the maze-like ruins, Leo continues his impassioned rant. The Peruvian government doesn't know how to safeguard its resources, he says, pointing to a sundial called Intihuatana—"the hitching post of the sun" in Quechua, the local indigenous language. In 2000, a television crew chipped it while shooting a beer commercial. After that, Leo explains, the government recognized that it needed to regulate the country's most famous heritage site before it could begin promoting any others. It took 17 years. Meanwhile, an expansion of infrastructure brought ever-larger hordes to this single, barely protected spot.

Peru received 3.3 million tourists in 2017, a number it aims to double by 2021. International visitors can fly only through Lima, making it the third-most-visited city in Latin America. Beyond Machu Picchu, travelers typically spend two days in the capital and an additional two in Cusco. Peru travel specialist Marisol Mosquera, founder and president of Aracari Travel Consulting, says only 5 percent of her clients get under the skin of the Sacred Valley—an archeologically dense, 60-mile-long area along the



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The Sacred Valley gets its name not from religious mythology but from its agricultural and cultural richness. Here, petite *Andinas* (women of the Andes) wear intricately patterned skirts in saturated hues, wide-brimmed ornamental hats, and thick braids. Men work primarily in construction or as shepherds, guiding flocks of fluffy llamas and alpacas through the region's rugged terrain as it morphs from snowcapped mountains to *altiplano* ("high plains") to Andean jungle. The only thing in the shepherds' path is the odd Inca ruin here or there. There are many, from the experimental farming terraces of Moray to the hilltop temples of Pisac.

In 2017, Peru's gross domestic product was forecast to increase 4.1 percent, making it the fastest-growing of the major Latin American economies. International tourism revenue was projected to rise 8.5 percent from a year earlier, better than that of any country except Egypt, according to the [World Trade & Tourism Council](#).



A man working in the salt ponds of Maras.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek

But while the nation has seen drastic economic improvement, little benefit has made it to the Sacred Valley, where houses are generally made of adobe and only some have electricity. Finding well-paying work opportunities often means moving to Cusco or Lima, far from traditional life. Mass tourism (think buses and backpackers) goes only so far to change the tide; sensitive tourism is what brings consistent jobs, encourages long-term investment, and makes culture a valuable asset. Without it, urban migration threatens to imperil the heritage that hides in the long shadow of Machu Picchu.

In July, the Decentralized Culture Bureau of Cusco started regulating visitation to Machu Picchu, helping mitigate the site's crowds. Visitors must now buy tickets and be accompanied by a licensed guide. And just as Leo preached, the new management plan—however rudimentary—gave way to an additional announcement: Four months later, the government began an international marketing campaign featuring the country's "wealth of experiences," with ads promoting sites far beyond Machu Picchu.

Take Choquequirao. A lost city fewer than 40 miles from Machu Picchu and three times as large, it receives only a dozen or two tourists a day. That's because it's accessible only via a tough, five-day hike across a river and a wide canyon. Late last year, the government revealed a \$62 million plan to develop the site, including a cable car that could whisk travelers there.

Grants such as these can be a blessing and a curse. "In developing countries like this one, the money from tourism won't go to the right places unless you educate rural communities on how to meet the needs of their potential clients," says Aracari's Mosquera. "These are humble people that aren't being given the proper tool kits to succeed." For example, the mass-produced trinket vendors and quick-service cafes of Aguas Calientes, the town below Machu Picchu, cater only to a high-volume, low-cost style of travel. To foster economic growth, locals must create experiences that encourage visitors to spend more than a few Peruvian soles. That's where several small companies, Peruvian and otherwise, have stepped in to help.



Peruvian women in Maras.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek

The local hotelier Inkaterra, for one, operates three luxury properties throughout the region. Others, like Mountain Lodges of Peru, G Adventures, Aracari, and others have also made a name for high-quality cultural exchanges.

New to the area is Explora, a family-owned adventure-tourism outfit based in Chile. The company opened its first lodge in the tiny Sacred Valley town of Urquillos in July 2016; it's the area's first property that combines intense hikes with extreme comfort. (Rooms for two guests start at \$3,500 for three nights, including meals and excursions.) From Cusco's airport, the ride to the lodge takes almost two hours in a Mercedes shuttle van, past tin-roofed buildings, fields of corn that look like pointillist paintings, and turn-off signs for obscure Inca ruins.

Suddenly, like an oasis, the resort appears: a low-lying, whitewashed structure with terra cotta roof tiles and a latticed shell of angular beams fashioned from local timber. Inside, the blond-wood rooms are minimalist and Wi-Fi-free, relying on the panoramic windows overlooking violet-hued quinoa fields for drama—and alpaca throws for comfort.



The Explora Sacred Valley Lodge.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek



The interior of a room at Explora.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek

Since Explora was founded in 1993, its guiding principle has been to take guests as far off the beaten path as they're willing to go, almost always on their own two feet. In addition to its newest outpost in Peru, the company has three five-star properties in Chile—in Patagonia, in the Atacama Desert, and on Easter Island—and it's been recognized as a standard-bearer in each of its destinations. At the hotel in Peru, 90 percent of the employees are from local communities.

Working with Explora has become a badge of honor, says Jose Rosemberg, the general manager. The company offers its guides year-round employment instead of the seasonal contract work that's typical in the industry. They're also enrolled in a three-month guide school and an 80-hour first-responder wilderness training course, both of which provide invaluable certifications.

At check-in, our guide, Felipe Sumire, who's twig-thin and dressed in head-to-toe khaki, introduces himself as an *explorador*. "This is a center of exploration," he says. "Not a hotel."

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Sumire and his team work with guests to gradually build the intensity and altitude of their hikes, starting at the elevation of the lodge, 9,500 feet above sea level, and reaching to 15,500. I get dizzy at the thought of it.

Hikes start from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. All are fully guided, and some begin with an intimate cultural exchange. One features a visit to a small weavers' collective that sees a handful of customers on a good day. On the wide patio, a half-dozen women in traditional dress and transform it with natural dyes made from cochineal (a common insect), tree bark, and leaves from the *chilca* plant, a leafy shrub. Others nearby sing songs in Quechua as they work, waiting for the demonstration to end so they can showcase their wares. My husband and I buy a soft, red-striped rug for our tiny Brooklyn, N.Y., living room.

Afterward, we grab our hiking poles from the van and begin gently winding up and down hilly farmlands called *mesetas*. The path—worn in mainly by alpaca feet—leads to lakes that mirror the canary-colored mountains. At one, we stop for an impromptu picnic: a light quinoa salad and soup made from the area's famously large corn kernels.



Women create natural dyes at a weavers' collective near the town of Chinchero.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek

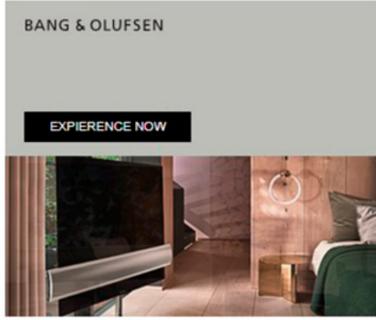


A collection of yarns—and the sources of their colors—at a weavers' collective in the Sacred Valley.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek

"Some people say the name Chinchero means 'the place where rainbows appear,'" Sumire says later, as we make our way down a pastoral trail and toward this town of roughly 10,000 people. Despite its name, Chinchero isn't especially colorful: It's a pastiche of brown tones, with adobe buildings and cobbled walkways. Neighbors traditionally become "godparents" of newlyweds' homes, christening their houses with crosses and paired terra-cotta bulls that sit like wedding cake toppers on their roofs.

Here in rural Peru, the poverty rate is about 44 percent—in a country whose monthly minimum wage is about \$250. Walk into Chinchero's church, however, and you're blinded by gold. Paintings here contain no European faces—Jesus is dark-skinned and dressed in a colorful Andean wrap.



Driving back to the lodge after our full-day hike, Sumire tells us that an international airport may soon come to Chinchero—a way to get more travelers to the Sacred Valley. Peru's president, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, laid a symbolic cornerstone for its building in February 2017, but then the public-private funding partnership fell apart. (The project still seems likely to move forward.) Word is starting to get out that there's more to Peru than Machu Picchu, whether or not the residents of the Sacred Valley are ready to receive tourists by the busload.

For now, there are still places where it's possible to have a secluded experience: just you, a guide, and the open world. An unforgettable sight for tourists lucky enough to catch it is the snowcapped peak of La Veronica. (Those tourists should also be warned: Along the switchbacked drive up to 14,500 feet, their water bottles could explode from the change in pressure.)

It's not just the altitude that steals your breath at the top. To the north, tiny specks that turn out to be macaws swoop in and out of a tangled green valley. In front of me, in the near distance, sheets of chalk-white ice cling to ash-black rock, ringed with swirls of cloud that look like the manifestation of an Andean god. To the south lies a razor-thin mountain ridge, which we will walk like a balance beam before dropping into a glacial valley.



A series of switchbacks leads the way to the glacier-topped La Veronica, where Explora facilitates a memorable hike.

Photographer: Peter Bohler for Bloomberg Businessweek

“The kind of thing we do, walking and trekking in the mountains, nobody did it before us in the Sacred Valley,” says Pedro Ibáñez Jr., who sits on Explora's board. Rather than work to protect the company's monopoly, its training methods, he says, are intended to create a boomlet of similar outfits—and a rush of sustainable tourism development. “Our guides will leave and take elements from our ideas as they adapt them for their own businesses.”

Joining their ranks is chef Virgilio Martínez, whose Lima flagship, Central, ranks fifth on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list. In February he'll open Mil, a 20-seat spot near the Inca terraces of Moray in the Sacred Valley. His goal is to spotlight local producers and ingredients such as salt from Maras, cacao from Quillabamba, and indigenous roots. At \$145 per head, Mil represents the area's rising star. “The people of the Andes are deeply connected to Mother Earth,” Martínez says. “Food is just another understanding of life in the Sacred Valley.”