



## EXPLORING PERU THROUGH ECOTOURISM

Leanne Bracey finds volunteering a satisfying way to experience the Amazon



📅 MARCH 19, 2018 | 👤 LEANNE BRACEY

There's something magical about being woken at 4am by a cacophony of trilling birds.

I didn't even mind the humidity casting a constant wet film over my skin. I slept in deepest black, listening to an all encompassing roar of the Howler Monkey stirring from its slumber.

It was a wake up call of the highest order and one of the endearing memories from the Peruvian Amazon.

There's a certain anticipation and excitement about visiting the jungle. It's the lungs of our planet, the heartbeat for our survival. It takes time to reach, but isn't as difficult as you may imagine.

The jungle is important for medicine, climate, communities, plant-life, animals. How much it thrives shouldn't be underestimated.

Although logging and mining are destroying the rainforest, one hotel brand in

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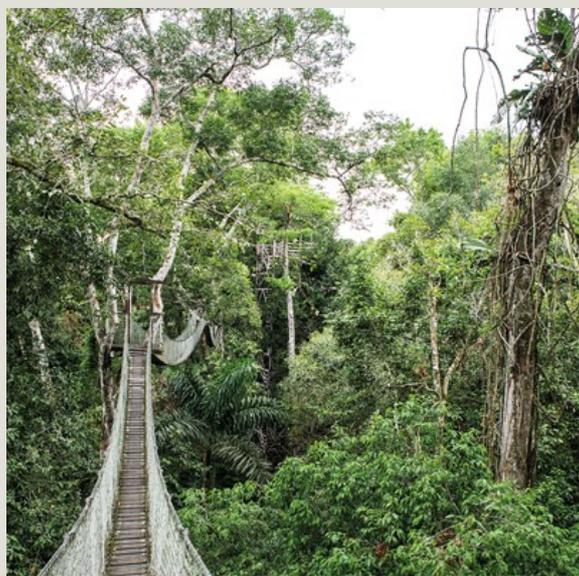
Peru is helping to keep the Amazon alive.

José Koechlin is the creator of Inkaterra, a nature hotel brand. He's an active orator on sustainable actions and globally recognised even at the age of 72.

José's vision started in 1975 with the aim of keeping the rainforest alive and providing jobs for local people. After 10 years of negotiation, the Peruvian government granted an area of the Amazon for him to create his vision.

First came Reserva Amazonica, a high-end luxury hotel working in harmony with the environment. There are now seven Inkaterra properties throughout Peru, all with local staff, and more similar projects in the pipeline.

The Field Station is Inkaterra's newest addition, providing low-cost accommodation for people who want to contribute to the world by volunteering in the Amazon. I was greeted by Erik, the softly-spoken manager, who proved a good example of a person whose life has been turned around by Inkaterra. Previously a miner, he is now able to provide for his family doing a job he really loves.



The high canopy walkway is the best way to see Amazon life

### Working together

A guided exploration into the depths of the densely tree-covered walkways revealed a lush, brilliant green rainforest teeming with wildlife.

The best way to see most life in the Amazon is via the 30ft high canopy walkway. From toucans, hummingbirds and a slowly circling vulture to huge ceiba trees, the elders of the rainforest.

The symbiosis of nature was everywhere; aggressive

fire ants protect the Tangarana tree in return for the sap inside. Garlic trees give shelter to bats, whose droppings provides good fertiliser.

The most rewarding thing about Field Station is that visitors can actively take part in crucial projects. Banding birds is ongoing (to monitor species) or helping set up the organic garden (there's one at each of the Inkaterras).

At Field Station, they are growing lost varieties of plants, ordinarily used for medicine and food sources (such as the star shaped sacha inchi) in order to remind locals, now too reliant on shops, of their farming history.

Also known as the Inca peanut, the sacha inchi has been cultivated and used as a food source for 3,000 years in the Amazon rainforest. The fruit that these seeds grow in is inedible, but when lightly roasted with low heat the seeds take on a crisp nutty flavour, rich in protein, omega 3, 6, and 9, alpha tocopherol vitamin E, carotenoids (vitamin A), and fibre.

One plant with cause to thank the Field Station volunteers is the humble palm tree. There are 35 different varieties of it in the Amazon and to keep this thriving,

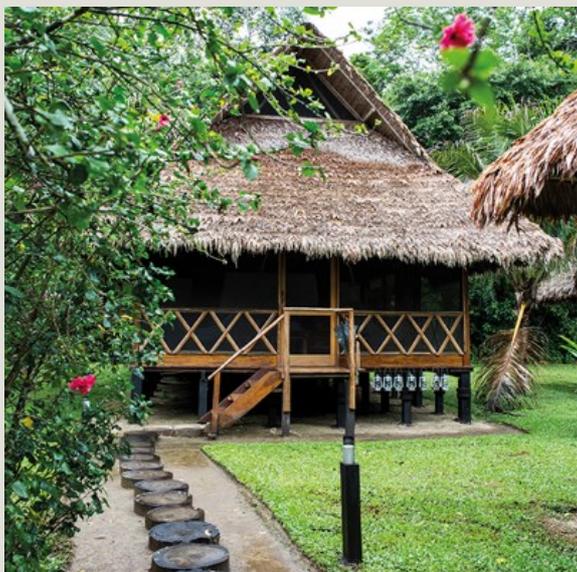


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volunteers collect palm seeds and then plant them in specific areas. It sounds like a small thing, but it's enough to make a big difference.



Home in the jungle

### Exploring traditions

I left the Amazon feeling heart-warmed. It was calm, glorious and the most natural place I've ever been.

But if you're visiting Peru, you cannot leave without seeing Machu Picchu and so, after a brief interlude in Cusco to feel the heady altitude and see the colours of the local costume, it was time to make the journey to this mysterious Inca citadel.

The journey starts with a drive through the rolling Andes to the colourful village of Ollantaytambo, where the Inca Rail is picked up.

It's a shaky, not very relaxing yet fun journey lasting just over an hour.

At the Inkaterra Pueblo Machu Picchu hotel, they are working to help nature thrive. There's the Orchid Garden full of microscopic rare varieties, an on-site tea plantation and the sanctuary for the rare Andean Bear (the original Paddington Bear).

Inkaterra has rescued bears from circuses and households with the aim of helping them to adapt to their habitat. Sadly, not being used to hunting, a release into the wild would mean their inevitable end. So now, Inkaterra is working to breed them and release offspring into the wild. The bears are soft, gentle and loved by their carers.

After a trip to the old Inca ruin – Machu Picchu really is well deserving of its 'Wonder of the World' status – it's another shaky but scenic rail journey back to Ollantaytambo. There I head for Inkaterra Hacienda Urumbamba, set in the heart of the Sacred Valley.



Here I learned how to make Chicha, a traditional corn-based beer used in offerings and rituals. Under the night stars I sip it and learn from our guide about 'Pachamama', Mother Earth, the goddess of fertility.

I love that Inkaterra has provided him with a vocation in life, one he clearly adores and excels at.

Working in Inkaterra gardens, to support local trade

Yes, Inkaterra is a hotel brand but it's more than a luxurious place to stay.

I hear about its new project working with fishermen in the North of Peru and other ways to help the country.

I wrote this overlooking the Sacred Valley mountain range reflecting on my journey from the Amazon, to Cusco, Machu Picchu to here.

Inkaterra offers an authentic experience which is more than travel. It helps make you realise how important it is always to give something back to the communities you visit.

## Booking info

[Black Tomato](#) can tailor eight-night trips to [Peru](#) staying at Inkaterra properties plus English-speaking guides, experiences, domestic flights and transfers, from £3,200 per person.

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