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WISH YOU WERE HERE

On top of the world

Magnificent mountains, ancient archaeological sites and unexpected wildlife awaits on a hiking holiday in Peru's Lares Valley, finds **Neil Geraghty**

Coffee breaks don't come any better than this. I'm in the Central market in Cusco, Peru's ancient capital, where in amongst piles of rainbow coloured corn and bundles of coca leaves I stumble across a row of middle aged ladies in cubby holes who are busy serving up coffee for morning shoppers. I've just arrived in the city and the 3,400 metre altitude is making my head spin. I need to sit down, and taking a seat on a rickety wooden bench I ask one of the ladies for a cafe con leche. With a smile she introduces herself as Maria. Behind her an aluminium vat of steaming milk lies simmering on a portable stove. She takes a ladle, carefully pours the frothy milk into a glass beer tankard and places it on my table along with a jug of viscous black coffee. I pour some into the glass and swirling patterns sink down into the milk. The coffee is smooth and velvety and the only thing missing is

a slice of cake. I notice a homemade orange sponge on the counter and order a slice. I must look famished as Maria cuts a four inch wedge for me and when I finish the coffee she tops up the glass again with some more ladles of milk. This morning feast of two pints of coffee and enough cake to feed the 5,000 comes to little more than a pound. Hipster pop up coffee shops beware if Maria ever comes to town.

Travelling to Peru can be an arduous journey but one of the easiest options for Scottish travellers is to fly KLM to Lima via Amsterdam. Departures leave from four Scottish cities and the changeover in Amsterdam requires no additional security checks or

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Llamas at Machu Picchu, main; hiking in the Lares Valley, above

complicated terminal changes. The flight is also a day flight and arrives in Lima at sunset, leaving you ample time to transfer to Cusco if time is at a premium. Upon arrival in Cusco it's essential to spend two or three days acclimatising to the altitude before tackling the more strenuous sites of the high Andes, and as one of Latin America's most historic cities it's a rewarding place to linger in and soak up the atmosphere. After visiting the market I walk to the nearby San Francisco Convent



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and by chance stumble across one of Cusco's most important religious festivals, the procession of The Lord of the Earthquakes. This blackened 16th century wooden effigy of a crucified Jesus is believed to protect the city from natural disasters and each Easter Monday is paraded through the streets accompanied by crowds of the faithful. As the crucifix enters the plaza hundreds of spectators hold up ornate crosses woven from palm leaves and herbs and shower the crucifix with scarlet salvia buds representing the blood of Christ. At the steps of the convent the crucifix pauses and a band of local Quecha men dressed in traditional alpaca caps and ponchos sound a salute from giant conch shells that reverberates round the square. It's an intriguing fusion of Catholic and pre Hispanic traditions and captures all the magic of this fascinating city.

After two days acclimatising I join a five day hiking trip to the Lares Valley organised by Mountain Lodges of Peru, who work in partnership with local communities and own several atmospheric mountain lodges in remote locations. The Lares trip is



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Travel & Outdoors

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ideal for groups with mixed interests as each day offers a choice of easy or hard trails to follow and also cultural activities for those more interested in experiencing local life. Our first hike takes us over the 4,300 metre Challwacasa Pass and despite acclimatising in Cusco our group of mixed ages all needs to pause every five minutes to regain our breath. The views though are well worth the discomfort. It's the end of the rainy season and the highland meadows are carpeted in blue lupins and golden asters. The alpaca birthing season is in full swing and the fields are full of frolicking fluff balls. From the summit we catch a glimpse of distant glaciers and the mysterious ancient Incan ruins of Písaq in the valley below.

At our first lodge at Lamay, half the group disappears into the garden and jumps into a hot Jacuzzi watched by a couple of llamas who are busy nibbling the lawn (lawn mowers are rarely needed in highland Peru). I opt for a massage to relieve my aching legs but nevertheless am too tired the next day to go on another hike. Instead I opt for a trip to the remote mountain town of Choquecancha, one of the last strongholds of the Incas and renowned for its traditional textiles. Outside a stone house I stop to watch a group of ladies dressed in woven shawls and traditional saucer shaped hats twirl spindles of creamy coloured alpaca wool. Inside, another lady sits on the floor weaving a belt on a traditional loom. Her fingers move at the speed of a piano player's and the design is an intricate pattern of interlocking crosses and lozenges.

Our next lodge at Huacahuasi is high above the cloud line where waterfalls form white ribbons cascading down the steep mountain slopes. The food here prepared by local villagers is exquisite and for dinner we sit down to a creamy squash soup, fresh baked trout encrusted with quinoa and a delicious mousse made from lucuma,

a mushy orange fruit that tastes like caramel.

Our final port of call is Machu Picchu where we check into the beautiful **Inkaterra** Hotel set in lush tropical woodland where in the afternoon I spot the elusive

cock-of-the-rock, Peru's handsome national bird, fluttering around in the canopy and flashing its gorgeous scarlet plumage. At 4:30am we join hundreds of excited tourists queuing up at the bus station for a 15 minute ride to the ruins. A sense of pilgrimage hangs over the queue and the mood is enlivened by friendly local vendors who walk up and down selling much needed coffee and cakes to the many visitors who have missed breakfast. At the ruins the famous view is obscured by thick billowing clouds. The tourists, many of whom are on a once in a lifetime trip, look crestfallen but their guides assure them the clouds will lift. Sure enough as the sun heats up, the clouds begin burning off and the spectacular skyline of conical mountains slowly comes into view. Spurred on by this inspiring sight I opt for a difficult two hour hike up Machu Picchu Mountain. The ascent along an ancient Inca trail involves climbing hundreds of steep crumbling steps that weave through woods where exotic orchids hang from branches and silvery blue butterflies glide through the air. At the summit I'm dripping with sweat, my insect repellent has washed off and my legs are covered in mosquito bites. The view however more than makes up for it. I gaze straight down on the fabled ruins over the rainforest canopy. Enormous storm clouds are bubbling up over the nearby mountain peaks and a sense of impending drama hangs over this enchanting landscape. ■

Edinburgh-based Andean Trails
(0131-467 7086, www.andeantrails.co.uk) specialise in active holidays



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throughout the Andes. Their 10 day/9 night Lares Luxury Lodges Trek with Mountain Lodges of Peru costs from £3,555 per person based on two adults sharing. The price includes 1 night in Lima B&B, 2 nights in Cusco B&B, all meals on the trek, bilingual Mountain Lodges of Peru guide, guided visit to Machu Picchu (inc entrance fee), 4 star accommodation throughout, all transfers and international flights with KLM (www.klm.co.uk) departing from Edinburgh via Amsterdam. Special promotion – November 2018 departures – £2,955 per person.



The lodge at Huacahuasi is high above the cloud line