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A Surprisingly Kid-Friendly Vacation to Peru's Sacred Valley

Most visitors to Peru make a beeline to Machu Picchu, but the Sacred Valley just beneath the ancient citadel offers more adventure and vistas—and juicier battle tales



INCA SPOT Descendants of the Incas still farm all along the Urubamba River's Sacred Valley. PHOTO: NICK BALLON

By

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FOR MANY TOURISTS the 15th-century Incan ruins of Machu Picchu, perched 8,000 feet up in the Andes, define Peru. And indeed, the ethereal spot is certainly worthy of the trip. I grew transfixed by the ancient citadel through a series of 1970s documentaries maintaining that a place this extraordinary could only have been built with the help of extraterrestrials. But whether you get there by plane or flying saucer, Machu Picchu's mountaintop sites are probably only going to take a day of your time. My wife and I weren't about to haul our brood 15-plus hours, from [Los Angeles](#) to Peru, for a mere day trip. Approaching by Inca Trail usually takes four days, but that was a nonstarter given that I have five children with varied enthusiasm for the great outdoors and UFO theories.

Peruvian friends steered us to the Sacred Valley, a snakelike flume carved out by the Urubamba River that stretches some 100 miles beneath Cusco to Macchu Pichu. The valley offers a lot more adventure, Incan monuments and bloody history (often a plus when traveling with boys ages 10 to 18) than Machu Picchu itself. The Inca Empire's great battles, travails and construction projects occurred all along the Urubamba River. Descendants of the Inca still live along the river in picturesque farming villages, and speak Quechua, the original Incan language. Our friends assured us that we'd need a full week to explore the valley.

Cusco, the former Inca capital and still the largest city in the region—as well as home to the main airport—sits at 11,200 feet in the Andes, high enough to trigger intense headaches as soon as you fly in. Rather than acclimatize to the thin air in Cusco, we booked a hotel at more lung-friendly elevation (9,000 feet), the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, about an hour's drive outside the city. At the airport, we hopped in one of the taxi minivans parked at the terminal and within minutes were descending the gently twisting road from the city into the valley's verdant depths. Across a 100-foot bridge over the Urubamba River, just outside the quiet hamlet of Huayllabamba, we arrived at the hotel, a low-slung compound of elegant rooms and casitas.

We were so buzzed by the surroundings that we darted out of the hotel even before we unpacked and wove up the mountain trail leading into mist-shrouded Andes. Skirting murderous cactuses and slippery rocks we found ourselves on an overhang. Corn and potato fields blanketed the ancient terraces on the mountains on the other side of the valley. Descending gingerly back down to the herbal gardens and fields that stock the Inkaterra's kitchen, we came across our first pair of llamas grazing in a fruit grove. One critter eagerly submitted to petting, while the other haughtily rebuffed all advances.

We encountered more llamas the next day halfway up the valley as we wandered around the Incan rock terraces of Ollantaytambo. Ancient stone stairways led to the remnants of three-windowed temples (three being the holy number in Inca iconology). At the ruins, we stopped to listen to a local indigenous guide holding forth to a trio of Germans. "This is one of the few places in the New World where the

Spanish conquistadors faced a stunning military defeat,” he said, with obvious proprietary pride. He went on to explain that in 1537, Hernando Pizarro and an army of some 30,000 locals he’d recruited were repelled here by the canny emperor Manco Inca who diverted the Urubamba River to flood the plains below the citadel, forcing the Spanish to retreat.



Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba. PHOTO: NICK BALLON

Today, part of the river has been diverted to form a car-wide canal into the Indian village of Ollantaytambo, one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in the Americas. We strolled the narrow alleys lined with bodegas and shops, where neon lights stick out of the Incan stones. On the central plaza, locals in brightly hued llama-wool jackets stood out like ladybugs against the facade of a 17-century Catholic church. Above the church, cliffs, hollowed out like a beehive, served as Incan grain silos.

The next day we got intimate with those cliffs on a palm-sweatingly steep via-ferrata—iron rungs hammered directly onto the sheer valley walls. We clambered up with the help of harnesses, ropes and a couple of guides from Natura Viva. Even my 10-year-old son managed the route thanks to the encouragement of one of the guides, Carlos Fuente, who wouldn’t let the kid give up long after I was willing to. “I drag my own kids up here all the time,” he told me. At the top was our reward: A half dozen zip lines zigzagging back to earth.

‘In the narrow alleys of the village, neon shop lights stick out of Incan stones.’

On the third day, we took the train and then bus up to Machu Picchu (about four hours from our hotel). Was it glorious? Yes, and one of the few places I’ve been that lived up to its postcards. The precise purpose of Machu Picchu remains a mystery. Scholars say it served as a retreat for Inca elite, but beyond that, no one knows what happened there. History and the Conquistadors passed it by.

The best came last. The day before we flew home, we stopped at Saqsaywaman, a magnificently scenic Incan fort of three massive terraced walls just above Cusco. Archaeologists theorize that the Incas built Cusco in the shape of a giant puma and the terrace represents its jagged teeth. The Spanish Conquistadors waged their fiercest fighting around those walls, including a battle in 1536 where 190 Spanish took on a force of between 40,000 and 100,000 Inca warriors and won. The angular stone walls, the most impressive we’d seen yet, left us slack-jawed. Saqsaywaman may not draw as many wild-eyed visitors as Machu Picchu, but it should.

THE LOWDOWN // Vacationing with the Brood in Peru’s Sacred Valley

Staying and Eating There: About an hour’s drive from Cuzco, the three-year-old Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba has luxurious, modern rooms and casitas on a hillside overlooking the Urubamba valley. For an extra charge, the hotel will arrange tours, horseback rides, biking and other activities within the Sacred Valley. *From about \$462 a night, inkaterra.com.* Amidst flying pig sculptures, neon-bright paintings and other hallucinogenic visions, Fallen Angel, a funky hotel and restaurant right off of Cuzco’s Plaza des Armas, serves imaginatively prepared Peruvian dishes like quinoa risotto with beet puree, oyster mushrooms and blue cheese and lamb in purple corn sauce. The inn only contains five rooms, so reserve far in advance. *Rooms from about \$210 a night, [Plazoleta Nazarenas 221](http://PlazoletaNazarenas221.com), fallenangelincusco.com.*

El Huacatay, hidden away on a tiny side street in Urubamba, offers a cozy bamboo-shaded terrace and colorful indoor lounge where chef Pio Vásquez de Velasco prepares outstanding local delicacies such as alpaca, quinoa soup and Andean trout covered in Sacred Valley herbs. *Jiron Arica 620, Urubamba, elhuacatay.com*

Zip Lining There: The via ferrata, zip-lines and Skylodges are part of an Italian-designed adventure complex called Natura Vive located off the side of the highway 3.5 miles east of Ollantaytambo. But if you’re at all fearful of heights, steer clear. naturavive.com