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THE NEW WAY TO MACHU PICCHU

Spectacular scenery, remote Inca ruins, ancient cultures and luxury lodges – Sarah Gilbert discovers there's another way to discover ancient Peru that doesn't include crowds or tents

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Written by Mike Walker



The only sounds are the whistling wind, the crunch of boots on rock and my own laboured breathing. A distant glacier glitters in the fierce sunlight, and jagged peaks and cobalt-blue sky are reflected in the mirrored surface of an Alpine lake, giving the valley another dimension. Except for our small group, there isn't another soul in sight.

At 4,435 metres above sea level, the Huallata Pass is breath-taking in every way.

Suddenly a woman appears from nowhere. Barelegged and

NEED TO KNOW

CAPITAL
Lima

POPULATION
30.4 million

CLIMATE
The Andes region has a cool-to-cold climate with a rainy season from

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besandalled, a large and heavy-looking bundle bouncing on her back, she runs past us and up the hill with the consummate ease of someone born into this wild and beautiful high-altitude terrain.

It is day one of The Lares Adventure with Mountain Lodges of Peru (MLP). A few years ago, MLP opened stylish boutique lodges along the challenging seven-day Salkantay Trek to [Machu Picchu](#), and paired it from the start with social initiatives supporting health, education and environmental projects, supported by their non-profit arm, Yanapana Peru.

The trail across the Lares Valley which takes us on our [Machu Picchu trek](#) had long been seen as a low-budget alternative to the Inca Trail and MLP saw an opportunity to develop a high-end lodge-to-lodge trekking route with a difference. The main attraction – apart from the spectacular mountain scenery – would be a range of smaller, less-visited archaeological sites along the Sacred Valley and the living culture that you encounter along the way.

They recognised that these remote rural communities were the most direct descendants of the Incas struggling to maintain their unique way of life, and designed innovative five and seven-day programmes mixing hiking and culture, with sustainable tourism practices that directly benefit the local communities.

My journey began with a short flight from Lima to the charming, high-altitude city of Cusco to acclimatise for a couple of days. A mix of Inca temples and opulent colonial churches, Cusco was the epicentre of the vast Inca Empire that stretched from Colombia to Chile until the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the mid-16th century. Now 500 people hike the Inca Trail to the iconic citadel of [Machu Picchu](#) every day – but I'm taking an Inca road less travelled.

This year, MLP opened Lamay Lodge in a tranquil village, the base for the first two nights of the Lares Adventure. Instead of a tent, every evening I return to a beautiful bedroom, a hot, powerful shower, a three-course dinner that puts a gourmet spin on traditional ingredients, and a terrace by a garden where alpacas keep the grass 'mown'.

Challwaccasa Pass

Day two brings a moderate climb to the Challwaccasa Pass and a downhill trek to the small farming community of Viacha. The reward for my exertions is a pachamanca, a traditional Inca barbeque in which river stones are heated, then the stones, meat wrapped in corn husks – traditionally llama but nowadays more likely to be chicken or lamb – and potatoes, yucca and fragrant herbs like muño, or Andean mint, are layered into a hole in the ground, covered with earth and slow cooked for hours, emerging succulent and smoky.

Viacha sits high above with its 15th-century hilltop fortress and a handicraft market that swarms with tourists, but this poor farming community of around 60 families is off the tourist trail.

As I wander through fields of purple lupins and red quinoa and watch children tending their flock, it is an idyllic scene but I also pass abandoned houses with crumbling adobe walls and roofs open to the sky.

Now MLP is providing work for the villagers in the form of logistical support – including the 'emergency' mule that follows guests on long treks – and the chance to sell their weavings.

Before we leave for our hike down to Pisac, Mario, one of the village

December to March, and warmer, drier weather from June to September.

TIME ZONE
UTC -05.00

MONEY
Peruvian Nuevo Sol

COMMS
Widely available, with free Wi-Fi in hotels and cafes

WHEN TO GO
The Lares Adventure runs from March to December

'We are already nearing an altitude of 3,900 metres, so progress is slower than usual...'

More Peruvian hikes

The Inca Trail

The only trek that will take you right to the Sun Gate of the iconic lost city of Machu Picchu. It passes through incredible Andean scenery and Inca settlements, before the final descent into the jungle. Book well in advance as numbers are limited to 500 per day, including hikers, porters and guides.

The Salkantay Trek

Often seen as a quieter option to the Inca Trail, this is a stunning trek in its own right. It will take you along ancient footpaths over varied and often challenging terrain, including the snow-covered Salkantay Mountain at an altitude of 6,270 metres.

Choquequirao Trek

Choquequirao, Machu Picchu's partially excavated sister city, is a far less-visited alternative. The impressive site sits high above the Apurimac Valley and typically takes four to five days to reach.

GEAR REVIEWS

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THULE STIR 28L BACKPACK

THULE ALL TRAIL 35L MEN'S

SALOMON WAYFARER HIKING PANTS

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leaders explains how the partnership is helping to reverse the exodus of young villagers to the cities in search of work.

The following morning, we leave Lamay for the short drive to Cuncani to begin a two-hour uphill hike to the high Cruzccasa Pass, at almost 4,200 metres. On the way, we explore the tourist-free ruins of Ancasmarca, ancient storehouses which could be reached from the mountains, coast and jungle. Here the Incas used sophisticated agricultural techniques to keep potatoes, maize and other crops, to guarantee food supply across the whole empire.

Our own lunches, which appear as if by magic on remote hilltops, are a testament to Peru's abundance of produce: corn soup, chicken, guinea pig, four types of potato, tropical fruits and coca tea.

On the three-kilometre descent to Huacahuasi the weather changes: the wind whips up and cloud obscures the views over the surrounding mountains and valleys. I pull on my waterproofs and walk stoically through the rain until I descend through the clouds and into the sun once more, which is dipping behind the ragged peaks by the time I reach Huacahuasi Lodge, perched on a hilltop on the outskirts of its namesake village.

Time to get serious. Or not...

With altitude and travel acclimatization complete – in theory – day four brings the option of a tough hike, with a series of ascents through two high passes – the Huchuyccasa Pass at 4,421m and Phonoccasa Pass at 4,412m – before a long descent.

Instead we all choose an easy alternative: a short hike to a scenic waterfall beyond the village, where giggling children in bright red ponchos and colourful hats run past us on their way to school – some of them have to walk over the mountains for two hours or more every day to get there – to our shame.

On the way back, Raúl points out things that I would miss, including the swooping Caracaras, a species of Latin American falcon; drying sheaves of grass that will be used for roofing, and fresh llama meat drying in the sunshine to make jerky.

Women sit outside their houses, spinning wool while they chat, their cheeks fat with coca leaves. One of them invites us into her home. Made of adobe bricks topped with a corrugated iron roof, I have to bend to go through the low doorway, and into the one room where a family of six sleep and eat.

Her eldest daughter sits on the floor dexterously weaving traditional backstrap loom designs that have been passed down through the generations; her youngest sits on her hip, wrapped in a bright woollen shawl. A guinea pig, kept for eating on special occasions, scurries under one of the two beds, while Andean music blasts from an antiquated radio and a llama foetus hangs from the wall in honour of Mother Earth.

Back at the lodge, the chef is giving a cooking demonstration and I learn to rustle up lomo saltado, a classic Chinese-inspired Peruvian dish of wok-fried beef, onions, tomatoes and peppers, traditionally served with a double carb helping of rice and chips, before watching the kaleidoscope of colours as the sun hits, then dips below the hills.

There is an early start the following morning, as we drive to the outskirts of the village to begin the 13 kilometre hike to Patacancha. The dirt track has a gradual incline, but we are already nearing an altitude of 3,900 metres, which means progress is slower than seems reasonable.

The vegetation grows sparse, the wind bites and muscles grow tired but Eusebio from Huachuasi is following us, wrapped in his poncho, leading a mule for anyone whose legs – or lungs – give out.

There is a final steep push to reach the Ipsaycocha Pass where I'm met with panoramic views over the undulating valley, snow-capped pinnacles and a sparkling glacier. Then downhill to Ipsaycocha Lake – blue and glittering among the green-clad peaks – where a hearty lunch is waiting for us, and a few local women have set up an impromptu market, laying out their intricate weavings on the ground.

Replete, the pace picks up as we continue downhill, surprising grazing llamas that watch us, docile and curious, as we pick our way over loose rocks and negotiate streams.

It is physically demanding with many ups and downs but wonderfully quiet.

Santa Cruz Trek The most popular hike in the Cordillera Blanca, the Santa Cruz Trek through Huascarán National Park is considered to have some of the best Alpine hiking in the world. It's good for all levels, as long as you acclimatise in Huaraz and, while you don't need a permit, it's best to trek with a reliable operator.

'The Sacred Valley lies like a lake of fertile fields below the steep mountain slopes'

The chef and porters have packed up our temporary camp and passed us with ease, and I see no one else until school finishes and children begin appearing on the trail, their red clothing vivid in the green landscape.

Patacancha will be the site of a soon-to-be-built third lodge in another close collaboration with the community. For now, we drive through the fertile Sacred Valley to the quaint village of Ollantaytambo, where the narrow cobblestone streets and pretty plazas seem to heave with people after the remote villages I've just passed through.

The following morning I walk up a steep, vertigo-inducing path to the little-visited ruins of Pinkuylluna. The Inca granary clings precariously to the side of a mountain overlooking the ruins of Ollantaytambo fortress, where the precision-cut, multi-angled stones and the connection to the earth, sun, moon and stars, are a taster of what is to come at [Machu Picchu](#).

Mighty Machu Picchu

The majestic Lost City of the Incas sits in splendid isolation in a valley almost 2,450 metres above sea level, dominated by the green-clad mountain of Wayna Picchu. Built around 1450 at the height of the empire, the citadel was abandoned less than 100 years later at the time of the Spanish conquest.

Unlike other Inca sites scattered around Cusco and the Sacred Valley, it was never found by the Spanish and remained enveloped in vegetation, until Yale historian and explorer Hiram Bingham rediscovered it in 1911. He had to scramble through dense jungle for several days to reach the ruins. I board the Vistadome train for the journey, which snakes its way through narrow valleys as spectacular scenery unfurls through the panoramic windows, from snow-tipped peaks and fast-flowing rivers to misty cloud forest.

My base for visiting the ruins is Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, where tiled-roof casitas sit in acres of protected cloud forest. Here hummingbirds dart through the trees and stone pathways lead to the world's largest private collection of exquisite orchids, some no bigger than a thumbnail.

Early the next morning, I take one of the fleet of buses that winds upwards, arriving as the sun's first rays reach over the mountaintops. Exploring its temples and agricultural terraces, still populated by doe-eyed llamas, I spend the morning clambering up and down Incan stone steps, simply marvelling at the Inca's architectural prowess and the sheer beauty of the setting.



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