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BG *on* LOCATION



## PERUVIAN PLENTY

*Alyssa Giacobbe makes the trip South of the Border to see what's new.*

**M**achu Picchu is on many a bucket list for its ancient sites and breathtaking views, but the popularity of Peru's most well-trodden destination—which sees as many as one million visitors a year—might give the impression that it's the country's only historical landmark. In fact, the epicenter of the Incan Empire was actually in the Sacred Valley, a 60-mile-long stretch of small, colonial villages nestled in the Andean highlands along the winding Urubamba River, about 30 miles from Cusco, where locals still follow a traditional way of life. Here, the mountain peaks are just as harrowing, the archeological ruins just as mind-boggling, the alpaca just as plentiful, but the crowds blissfully scant.

That's about to change. The Sacred Valley offers landscape ripe for both adventure and relaxation with scenic trails, Class III rapids and ancient salt pools, plus ample opportunity for bird-watching and star-gazing. It's also extremely fertile, with terraced crops of giant corn and alfalfa, a locavore foodie's paradise. But it only recently opened to tourism, largely in an effort to mitigate crowds at Machu Picchu. That's paved the way for a roster of luxury hotel brands that include Inkaterria, Belmond and, most recently, South American outfitter Explora, which debuted an elegant, 50-room lodge in the shadow of the Andes as its first outside of Chile, on one of the country's oldest corn plantations overlooking Inca terraces and quinoa fields. Adventure is on the menu: Guides extensively trained at Explora's School of Guides lead more than 30 different hiking and biking explorations to impeccably preserved

ancient ruins and emerald lagoons, through traditional towns and past plenty of alpaca. At night, guests return home to a cozy fireplace-filled Scandinavian-styled home base offering a refined take on authentic Peruvian cuisine, a local and international wine list and, above all, Explora's trademark camp-like camaraderie.

Sustainability is central at Explora and a touchstone that runs throughout Peru's new approach to tourism in general, and those coming to the previously untouched Sacred Valley in particular are working hard to slowly and responsibly integrate age-old customs into their businesses, whether it's through ultra-authentic cuisine or traditional spa treatments. Even with the influx of new hotels, the area stands to remain rural; it's common for your hotel view to include alpaca herders roaming throughout the valley, while Inca-built canals still irrigate much of the land (Explora diverted its construction twice, in fact, after uncovering ancient Incan farming terraces). The road from Cusco into the Sacred Valley remains lined with chicherias, the equivalent of the neighborhood dive bar. At Inkaterria Hacienda Urubamba, which opened in 2015, guests can pick their own produce from the hotel's 10-acre, carbon-free organic farm, or end the day at the hotel's brand-new spa, which features a sky-lit domed dry sauna allowing for simultaneous spa-going and star-gazing, year-round. Elsewhere in Peru, but consistent with the new eco-mindfulness,

Clockwise from top left: the former capital city Arequipa; Yanahuara Scenic Overlook in Arequipa; Inkaterria Hacienda Urubamba in the Sacred Valley



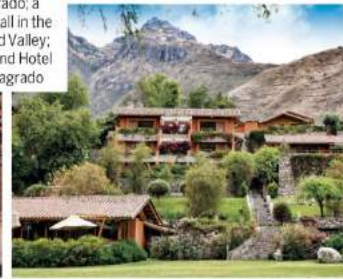
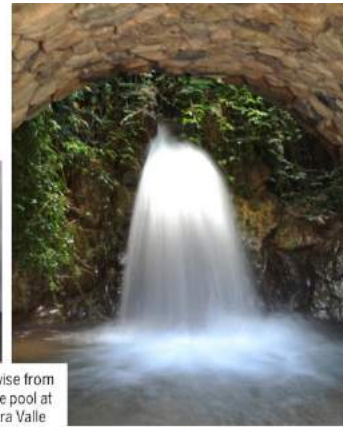
1 & 2: RICHARD JAMES TAYLOR



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Clockwise from left: the pool at Explora Valle Sagrado; a waterfall in the Sacred Valley; Belmond Hotel Rio Sagrado



Aqua Expeditions—which runs a rainforest river cruise up the Amazon—is working with a group of local fishermen to ensure the native Paiche fish are farmed responsibly as part of a growing “rainforest to table” movement.

“Latin American countries have generally turned their backs on the Amazon and have undervalued its cultures and its biological riches,” says Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, the consulting chef aboard Aqua Expeditions’ *Aria* Amazon and owner of *Ámaz* and *Malabar* in Lima. “But for gastronomy, the Amazon’s unexplored pantry, the high quality of its products, its traditional cooking techniques and the importance of its native communities’ culture are an incredible frontier.” This fall, Schiaffino will lead a new four-day journey aboard the *Aria*, taking guests to markets throughout the region and working with them to prepare meals at night.

Sustainability efforts are being noticed outside the country, too. Peru is home to 80 percent of the world’s population of alpaca, the South American cousin to the llama, and they’re not just a fun trailside spectacle. More and more luxury brands—including Isabel Marant and Stella McCartney—are incorporating alpaca into their collections for its extreme ecofriendliness

(the animals eat and drink less per pound than any other livestock and their fiber is naturally lanolin-free). Belmond’s *Andean Explorer*, South America’s first luxury sleeper train, relies heavily on alpaca textiles, and is one of the best ways to see both the country and the animal. The ride starts in Cusco, travels through the Andean plains and ends in the former capital city of Arequipa, known for its baroque buildings made of white volcanic stone.

While Cusco remains the gateway city to both Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu, the Valley’s more moderate elevation at 9,500 feet—some 2,000 feet lower than in Cusco—makes for easier acclimatization and generally milder temperatures. “Our guests enjoy one of the best climates in the Cusco region,” says José Koechlin, president and founder of Inkaterra. “It’s an ideal place for a relaxing vacation, while also being a perfect spot for adventure.” The good news, of course, for those still interested in Machu Picchu—and it is one of the New Seven Wonders of the World—is that you can get there from the Sacred Valley—all lodges in the area offer Machu Picchu outings. But chances are good you’ll be glad to get back. ☺



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