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EPIC ADVENTURES

THE SECRET TRAIL TO MACHU PICCHU

View over Ipsaycocha Pass towards the glacier in Peru
CREDIT: DAVID CROOKES

Peru's Inca Trail is a rite of passage for troops of backpackers with raggle-taggle tents. But there are now alternative ways through the Andes that twist and turn along lesser-known paths, staying in smart new lodges with condor's-eye views

by STANLEY STEWART



The Incas believed the gods lived in the mountains surrounding the **Sacred Valley**. Which strikes me as being a step up from worrying that demons - so often the concern of superstitious cultures - are running around among those white summits. It was a consoling thought as I set out on a trek in the **High Andes**, towards the **Lares Valley**, and the great pass over **Ipsaycocha**, suspended among clouds. Gods, one hoped, would smile.

The high road to the Sacred Valley starts in **Cusco**, to the Incas the



navel of the world. It runs straight as a drawn line across an *altiplano* of yellow wheat. And then on the far side, with the kind of drama that passes for normality in the Andes, the road plunges suddenly downward through red gorges to the Sacred Valley and the river the Inca called **Willkamayu**, the Milky Way. At midday, we roll into the town of the old Incan town of **Pisac** to find the market in full swing.



Members of a women's weaving group in the Lares Valley village of Choquecancha in Peru

CREDIT: DAVID CROOKES

Men in cowboy boots loiter in the arcades of the main square, mumbling about potato crops, while beneath the boughs of the ancient pisonay tree in front of the church there are gangs of women in spectacular skirts, colourful vests and wonderful hats. A thesis could be written on Peruvian hats. There are bowler hats, there are stevedore hats, there is the kind of fedora Churchill waved to cheering crowds at the end of World War II. There are elaborate floral hats that would have met with approval in Kansas on Easter Sunday in 1936. There are hats like fruit bowls and hats like tea cosies, hats like upturned jelly moulds and hats like tasselled lampshades.

I buy a modest Indiana Jones job, just to fit in, and set off to explore Pisac, overlooking the old town and the valley. Tiers of intricate stone walls rise to the **Templo del Sol**, the equal of anything at Machu Picchu. At the top, the Incas - and here perhaps is the first whisper of delusion - had carved a hitching post for the sun.

Although the Inca may feel like an ancient civilisation - the mammoth stone works, the god-like emperors, the human sacrifices - their empire only reached its peak in the late 15th century when the Renaissance was already yesterday's idea. But the fact they seem to inhabit the wrong epoch is just part of their strangeness.

To the untutored eye, the Inca look like the wackos of world civilisations, and it is not just the repeated attempts at brain surgery



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and skull modification. So much about the civilisation doesn't quite seem to make sense. Even that seminal moment at **Cajamarca**, when fewer than 200 exhausted conquistadors routed an Inca army of more than 40,000, reads like farce.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the Inca's derangement was a kind of stone masonry OCD. The Inca were obsessives. Walls could never be perfect enough. They built without mortar, fitting colossal blocks of cut stone together so precisely that, five centuries on, you still can't slide a cigarette paper between them. Had the Inca not spent so much time and effort smoothing stones, they might have got around to inventing writing, or even the wheel. Had they put their chisels down for a moment, they might have prevented Pizarro's rag-tag band from overwhelming an empire of 20 million souls.

But if the Inca were odd, it is the oddness of artistic genius. The temples are ravishing, their locations breathtaking, the masonry stunning. The vast walled terraces, with their intricate irrigation systems, sculpting whole mountainsides in places like Pisac, seem the real measure of their achievement. They are magnificent feats of engineering, but they are also works of landscape art. No other civilisation has shaped nature with such elegance.

In the mountains above Pisac we walk through valleys of stone houses and straggling farmsteads, past fields of red quinoa and purple lupins. Children herd sheep, men plough the heavy earth with wide spades, and women chase alpacas. Mountain summits loom around the horizons and black lakes pool in the valleys.



A woman and her daughters trek home across the Sacred Valley

CREDIT: DAVID CROOKES

"THEY SAY GOODBYE AND WALK BACK INTO THEIR WORLD, TWO MARKS OF COLOUR DIMINISHING ON THE DUN-COLOURED SLOPES"

At the village of **Viachi**, a luncheon tent has been set up for us. We feast on *pachamanca* - an age-old Inca dish of meat and vegetables, slow-cooked with hot stones in a hole in the ground. Roast guinea pig and several unlikely looking potatoes are served. In Peru potatoes are as prized as olive oil in Tuscany or cheese in France. And here is a little tip: never get an Andean farmer started on the subject of potatoes unless you have a couple of hours to spare. They have 200 different varieties.

After lunch I pop into the local bar, a front room in a back-street house. A yellow banner outside the door announces they are brewing *chicha*, the homemade corn beer of the Andes. I order the strawberry flavour for the novelty of drinking pink beer. It is served with a plate of ever-popular smoked chicken feet.

To say the house is traditional would hardly do it justice. The only modern note is a 1930s Singer sewing machine standing against the back wall. Otherwise all is as it was five centuries ago: stone walls, a thatched roof, a lot of fattened guinea pigs running around. There is a cooking fire, a loom, a stack of sheepskins, and an altar with three skulls and a lucky llama foetus.



Children in the Sacred Valley town of Ollantaytambo, 2,792m above sea level

CREDIT: DAVID CROOKES

On a shelf above the altar is Equeco, a small moustached doll with a passing resemblance to the late Terry Thomas. Equeco is a good-luck charm, a votive symbol, a pampered saint, and a mysterious domestic

god. Householders serve him food and glasses of *chicha*, give him sweets and coins. At the moment he is enjoying a post-prandial cigarette: a lighted Marlboro has been stuck between his painted doll's lips.

Equeco is the go-to guy for whatever you need - from a new donkey cart to a new husband - the fulfiller of hopes and desires, an effigy who can sway the great cosmic forces contained in the Apu, the surrounding mountains. For all the sweets and cigarettes, who knows how often Equeco is able to tip the balance of fortune in someone's direction. But the mountain people keep him on because they feel the great forces that govern their lives, resident among these spectacular mountains, were well beyond their control or influence. Life can be a struggle, fate is unpredictable, and a lucky charm offers the occasional diversion of hope.

The next day a four-hour trek across the **Cruzocasa Pass** brings us to a narrow valley and the **Huacahuasi Lodge**. In a stride we step from Andean wilderness to underfloor heating and power showers. The lodge is one the latest projects of Mountain Lodges of Peru, part of its commitment to social initiatives. A joint project with the local village of **Huacahuasi** and **Arariwa**, a rural development NGO, it has provided employment to the villagers and will eventually return 25 per cent of its profits to the community. Other villages, suspicious of such projects in the past, are now beginning to understand that visitors can help make their remote communities sustainable.

In the morning there are clouds nosing about Huacahuasi village below the lodge. The lanes and fields begin a series of appearances and disappearances: curling mists swallow a house where a woman spins wool in a doorway; clouds part momentarily to reveal another woman in a cape chasing a llama; further up the slope a farmer materialises in a field, hoeing potatoes.

After breakfast a small group of us set off towards **Patacancha**, climbing a mountain pass on rising paths. A lacework of silver streams splays across the slopes above us. Tiny crofts of stone houses and walled fields are dotted across slopes of lichen-patinated rock. The sounds of the lower valley follow us as we climb: trailing voices, dogs barking, water cascading.

At first glance this mountain valley seems a monochrome world, muted in shades of brown and mossy green. But rainbow colours are found in the details: in the intricate mineral-shading of the rock; in the bright lichens that cover them; in the tiny heathers and wild flowers which carpet these altitudes. I look up to an amphitheatre of

spectacular stony-faced summits, shredding banks of clouds, then down to find miniature butterflies searching out their treasure among delicate blue flowers.

As we climb, villages, fields and trees all fall away. At midday we reach **Ipsaycocha Pass**, a long saddle slung between two heights at over 4,450 metres. Beyond the pass, a new world opens. Overseen by fresh ranges of mountains, a narrow valley falls away to what looks like the edge of the world. In the stillness of the immense vista, only the weather moves. Clouds tumble across mountain faces; sudden squalls of rain march around distant corners of the valley; provinces of light and sun push one another across vast distances.

At the top of the pass we meet a mother and child. They are on their way home from a market, hours behind them. The woman's name is Alicia. The little girl - perhaps five or six - introduces herself with her only phrase of English: 'My name is Laura,' she says. And she shakes our hands rather formally, like an emissary from another world.



Street view to the Arco Santa Clara in Cusco

CREDIT: DAVID CROOKES

Like most Andean women, Alicia is a tumult of material - layers of wide *pollera* skirts, bands of *puyto* embroidery, a rust-coloured woollen jacket, cummerbunds, woven bags, wonderful woven shawls or mantas known as *k'eperina*. Laura is a miniature version of her mother, the same patterns, the same layers of intricate design and colour, the same tasselled hat. Side by side on the mountain path, they look like two stages of a set of Russian dolls. Inclining their heads together, they speak to one another in Quechua, the soft sibilant sounds of the language of the Inca.

One of the joys of Andean clothes are the storage opportunities. A lamb peers out between the buttons of Laura's woollen jacket. Various items emerge from the inner folds of Alicia's clothing: two apples, a

knife to peel them, a bag of sweets, a live trussed chicken. Finally a baby's head appears, four-month old Armeta, cocooned somewhere in her mother's *k'eperina*. She wants to see who their strange new friends are. When I ask where they live, Laura points out one of three distant homesteads on the far side of a deep canyon, still several hours' walk away. We produce a Thermos and share biscuits and cups of hot tea with them. Finally they stand and say goodbye and walk back into their world, following a trail slanting northward towards the canyon. They walk hand in hand. I watch them for a long time, two marks of colour diminishing on the colossal dun-coloured slopes.

We follow the valley down towards Patacancha, past stone houses and bemused groups of llamas. Squalls of misty rain come and go. After a time, I stop and look again for the two figures. For a moment I cannot find them in the vastness of the landscape but when I do - now the tiniest coloured specks already on the far side of the gorge - I feel suddenly tearful and am not sure why.

Two days later we arrive at **Machu Picchu**. An Inca eyrie, isolated on its mountain top, the ruins of this lost city never disappoint. Dozens of mysteries still surround the site and the city. There is a sacred geography at work here as well as astronomical influences. There are religious practices we barely understand, and ideas of kingship and governance that mystify us. But the nub of it is that there is little agreement about what this city was for, how it was used, or even who lived here. For the visitor, not steeped in Inca history, it is the location that overwhelms, astride its own summit, framed by plunging canyons, surrounded by an assembly of other summits.

Every year it grows more crowded, though frankly the population of Greater Mumbai could hardly rob Machu Picchu of its atmosphere. But should you wish to avoid the crush of selfie-sticks, visit in the afternoon when many of the groups have left.

Avoiding the crowds will not be a problem on the Lares trek, or on any of the other itineraries in the Andean heights that enclose the Sacred Valley. In these valleys you can have the mountains to yourself. And it was the mountains, and not Machu Picchu, that I carried home with me, that still resonate when I think of Peru.

Their scale is beyond anything we can easily comprehend or manage. Mountains dwarf and unsettle us. It is no wonder the Incas thought of them as gods. They look like gods. And like gods, they can seem indifferent to us, to the tiny figures stepping slowly across their lower slopes. It is no wonder we turn to dolls to act as intermediaries.

If I found myself strangely tearful watching Laura and her mother, far away on distant slopes, making their way homeward hand in hand, perhaps it was because their stoic determination was so touching in the immensity of these landscapes. The mountains remind us how small our lives are. And our shared vulnerability creates unexpected bonds, offering poignancy to brief encounters beneath those towering summits.

And so I hope little Laura got home safely, that she is settled with her pet lamb by her mother's fireside. And that the world, and the gods, will be gentle with her.

PERU INSIDER GUIDE: EXPLORA VALLE SAGRADO



View from the mountain pass at Ipsaycocha

CREDIT: DAVID CROOKES

The Sacred Valley is also the setting for this brand new hotel from [Explora](#), known for its architecturally eye-popping properties in remote regions of South America. Its outposts in Patagonia, the Atacama and Easter Island changed the way we interact with the world's wildest places, introducing the concept of experiential travel long before it became fashionable. Like Inkaterra, the group was founded on ecologically sound principles and all its hotels are deeply rooted in local culture. Astonishingly, this one was nine years in the making, during which time Inca ruins within the grounds were excavated and a multitude of trails and local relationships established. None of the 50 vast but simple bedrooms have TVs, mini bars or Wi-Fi: it's all about total immersion in your immediate surroundings, with over 20 adventures on offer, to be taken either on foot or bicycle, in small groups or with a private guide. +44 8000 869054; *doubles from about £3,360 for three nights, all inclusive*

INKATERRA HACIENDA URUBAMBA

The latest project from the home-grown Peruvian hotel group [Inkaterra](#) opened last year in the Sacred Valley, between the ancient town of Ollantaytambo and Machu Picchu. Like its five other properties - a colonial house in Cusco, two lodges in the Amazon and two hotels at Machu Picchu Pueblo - the focus here is on making the most of local produce and materials (pre-Inca fabrics) and treading lightly in the environment. There are bird-watching trails, traditional Andean agriculture classes in the organic garden and visits to nearby Inca sites with brilliant guides. Local art and vintage crafts sourced by Denise Guislain, wife of Inkaterra owner Jose Koechlin, decorate the 25 casitas and a 12-bedroom main house that, with its soaring entrance, pretty valley views and terracotta-tiled courtyard, feels halfway between a country club and the sort of private bolthole beloved of wealthy Limeños. +44 808 101 2224; *doubles from about £355*

BELMOND ANDEAN EXPLORER

Next May, the company formerly known as Orient-Express Hotels launches South America's first truly smart sleeper train. [Belmond](#) is long-established in Peru, notching up no fewer than five properties; the most famous of which is the Belmond Sanctuary Lodge, the only hotel adjacent to Machu Picchu, set high on a mountain summit with giddy views. The new Andean Explorer will be one of the highest train journeys in the world, crossing the Andes from Cusco to Lake Titicaca and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Arequipa on four different overnight trips. The train will have 32 beautifully finished cabins by South African-born interior designer Inge Moore (who also worked on the Belmond Eagle Island Lodge in Botswana), and an observation car with a sensational outdoor viewing deck. +44 845 0772222; *from about £325 per person*

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[Audley Travel](#) (+44 1993 838620) can arrange a 13-day itinerary to Peru, including the five-night Lares Adventure with [Mountain Lodges of Peru](#), from £4,750 per person, staying at Inkaterra properties in the Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu and Cusco. The price includes direct flights from the UK to Lima using the new British Airways service, internal flights, transfers, accommodation on a bed-and-breakfast basis and all meals on the trek.

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View over Ipsaycocha Pass towards the glacier

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