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Why exploring Peru's Inca Empire and the Amazon is the perfect 10-day honeymoon

Ten days in Peru combines all the elements you'd want for the trip of a lifetime, finds Alice Howarth

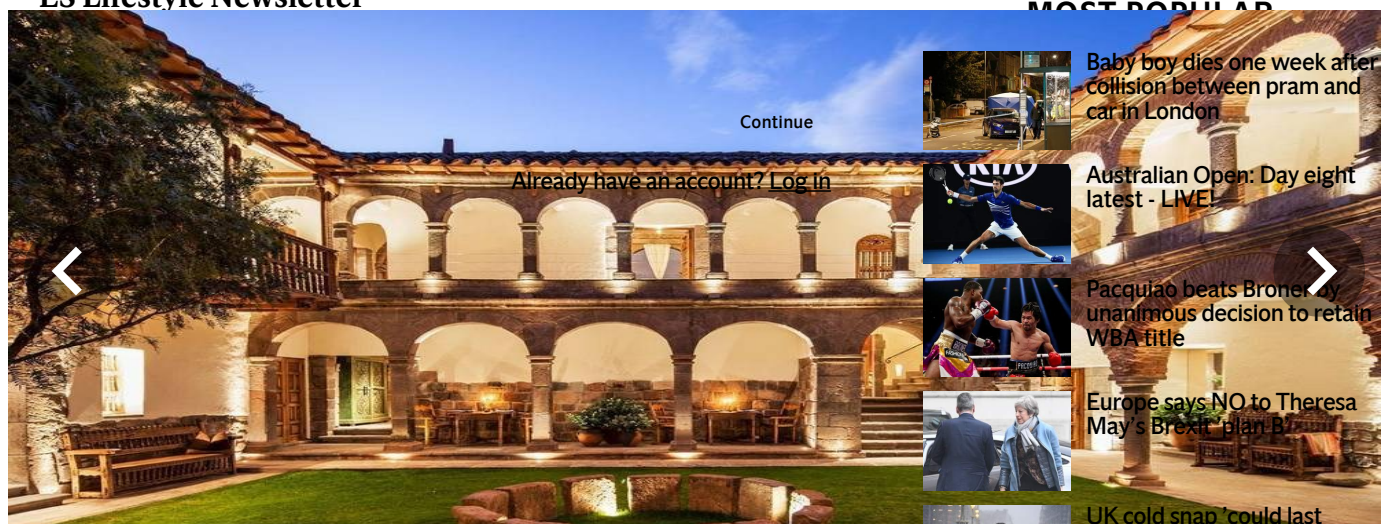
ALICE HOWARTH | Monday 31 December 2018 12:29 | 0 comments

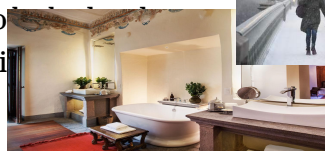
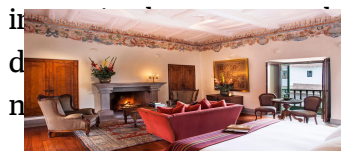


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In fact, you can see the best in as little as ten days. Here's how...

Day 1: Overnight flight to Lima and connect to Cusco

You can only fly direct to Lima from London, however it's only a one hour and 15 minute connection to Cusco.

Day 2 and 3: Cusco

Often overlooked by visitors for Peru's glitzy capital, Lima, due to its reputation as the **culinary epicentre of South America**, Cusco is where to head to experience the ancient history of the country. Formerly the capital of the Inca Empire, the city itself, as well as the surrounding area, is rich in Incan, Andean and colonial history. Base yourself in San Blas, the traditional old quarter of the city, which is made up of grid-like streets, full of structures that would make some of Europe's most famous cities feel inadequate.

Check into **Inkaterra's La Casona hotel**, situated just one block up from the main square, Plaza de Armas. Luxury of the finest taste, there's no bling chandeliers or gold plated swimming pools here, instead it's a haven of traditional textiles, frescos and original murals. A former 16th century mansion, the 11 guest suites are situated around an inner courtyard made from Moorish arches. Expect rooms with open fireplaces, freestanding tubs and deliciously large marble bathrooms.



The picturesque courtyard at La Casona (Inkaterra La Casona)

A relatively big city, with just two days, aim to experience a bit of history as well as the craft scene the city is celebrated for. Start by walking around Plaza de Armas, which is home to three of Cusco's most notable buildings - the Jesus Maria church, the Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús, a church built on a former Inca palace with an incredible carved facade, and the city's vast cathedral. Dating back to 1654, its grandeur is breathtaking and if you're lucky enough to visit



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during mass, seeing the traditional service from afar is an experience worth having. Just off this square is the Inka Museum which is regarded as one of the best in the country and do make time to see Qorikiancha, the Inca's Temple of the Sun, too.

Going to Cusco and not shopping would be ill advised - it's where you'll find traditional souvenirs that aren't knock offs. At Textiles Sulca, situated next to the hotel, you'll find hand embroidered wall hangings, woven geometric rugs and decorative cushions but do be prepared to pay more than you might at a neighbouring store. Here, the products are created by well known local artist who only use natural dyes and fabrics. As for markets, try to experience both a traditional Peruvian food market as well as a goods one. San Pedro, Baratillo and Centro Artesanal are your best bet to find anything from pink salt, harvested in the Peruvian Andes, to baby alpaca rugs and hand glazed ceramics.

Day 4 and 5: Machu Picchu

Cusco is known as the gateway to Machu Picchu, and you can catch the train to Machu Picchu from Poroy (25 minutes drive from the city) or Ollantaytambo (90 minutes drive from the city) depending on which train times suit you best. Inkaterra can arrange transport, as can tour operators or you can get a bus or a taxi.



Machu Picchu lives up to the hype (Supplied)

Once you arrive at the station, board the Inca Rail which is about as romantic as it comes. The train weaves in and out of the Andean landscape as you sit back, taking in the passing patch work mountains and canyons. Once you disembark at Machu Picchu, you'll find the air is so silky, it feels as if someone has poured fabric softener into it.

In terms of accommodation, there's a real mixed bag in the attraction's local village, Aguas Calientes. If you're on the lower end of the budget, there are no end of hostels you can book but there are also mid to high-end options too. For those who want something smart but mid-range, **El MaPi**, by Inkaterra is a happy medium. Located in the centre, you're a stone throw from shops and bars.

Rooms are all spacious with modern fixtures and each one comes with a window view looking out to the gardens below. However, if all-out-luxury is on the agenda, **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel** is where to retreat. Located on a private 12-acre reserve, but less than a five minute walk to the town, it's made up of individual suites that sit in the forest, by the side of the Urubamba river. Ultra snug and cosy, you'll enjoy in-suite open fires, vast pillowy beds and spacious living rooms. Guides are on-hand to take you birdwatching, walking or orchid spotting but if you feel like just kicking back, pruning in the eco-ponds to the soundtrack of birdsong is heavenly as is the Andean Eucalyptus sauna that you can rent out privately.

The following day, explore Machu Picchu citadel. A bus will take you from the village to the entrance and you can spend a maximum of four hours onsite per day - the only way to get a full day is to buy both the morning and the afternoon ticket but you'll have to re-enter between slots. It's best to get a guide, as you will almost certainly miss things going around on your own. If just doing one slot, aim to go in the morning as the afternoons are particularly crowded and be prepared for both rain and shine, the weather changes freakishly quickly up there.



Stay in the heart of the Sacred Valley (Hacienda Urubamba)

Day 6 and 7: Urubamba

Board the train at Machu Picchu Station back to Ollantaytambo early the next morning, where you will transfer, via taxi or car, to Urubamba.

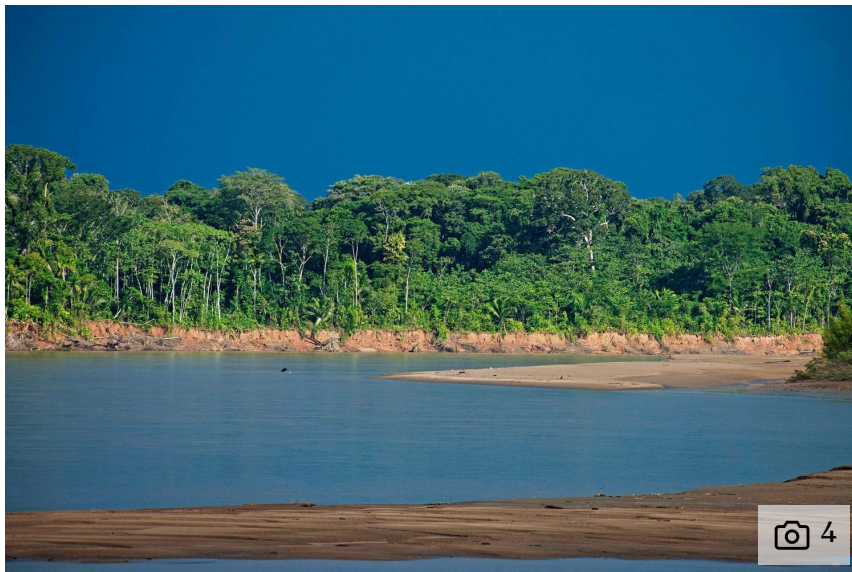
Check into **Hacienda Urubamba**. Right in the heart of the Sacred Valley, surrounded by sloping marbled mountains and away from any light pollution, the sky is so dark and clear that between May and the 1st of August (the traditional month of Mother Earth) you can actually spot the majestic constellations of the Milky Way's zodiac as well as Mars, Saturn, Venus and Jupiter from the hotel grounds.

Centred around one main hacienda-style house (or mansion, if you prefer), the hotel is made up of individual casitas that are dotted around the surrounding hill. Private and utterly peaceful, you'll

experience 5-star service here without noticing anyone else is around.

You must make time for a pamper at the spa. Built on land that is still farmed, it's has a garden that grows endemic herbs and plants so you can take cuttings of fragranced leaves to be mixed into oil for your treatment. With a pool looking out over the mountains, block out an entire afternoon to lounge here.

In terms of activities, the hotel boast exemplary guides. They can take you hiking, show you how to make the ancient Chicha Beer, bring you to a Shaman to have your tea leaves read (surprisingly nerve racking) or take you stargazing. Make sure to pick their brains - they're knowledge of the people and the land is impressive.



Don't forget the mosquito spray when visiting the Amazon (Supplied)

Day 8 and 9: The Amazon

Transfer back to Cusco to catch a morning flight to Puerto Maldonado, a city that sits at the entrance to the Southern Amazon Rainforest. From the airport, you'll have a ten minute transfer to the jetty where you'll board a traditional wooden boat to **Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica**. A world-class eco lodge, made up of 35 cabanas that sit on the edge of the Madre de Dios river, it's a proper pinch-yourself location. Luxurious but not out of touch with its surroundings, the cabins are plush with large doubles, a front living-room-cum-porch (complete with an inviting hammock) and a separate bathroom. However, you won't forget you're in the jungle when you realise the electricity is available at only certain times of the day and the turnover service includes a full mosquito net being placed around your bed, with a torch and whistle left on hand.

When exploring the Amazon, it's important to remember it's not like a safari-style holiday, most people go for the atmosphere more than the animals. With such lush, carpeted forest, it can be hard to spot them but wandering through the vegetation, or high above the canopy is wonderfully evocative. The hot humidity, the sound of the jungle, the remoteness of your location and the proximity to nature is a totally extraordinary experience.

If the weather is in your favour, bright and sunny, you will have the chance to see Howler Monkeys, Macaw parrots and some of the rarest birds in the world like the famous Hoatzin, otherwise known as the Skunk Bird. If you go to Lake Sandoval, chances are you'll see the famous giant otters and at Gamitana Creek be prepared for the piranhas. In the mornings, rise early to look for sloths. If you're lucky, you'll find them at dawn perched high in the trees. At night, take a boat tour with the hotel's guide to see White Caiman coming out to hunt or go on a midnight walk to spot the likes of giant spiders and majestic fireflies dancing in the dark. Strangely, it's not as terrifying as it sounds.

Day 10: Depart for London

Fly direct from Puerto Maldonado to Lima and connect to London.

Good to know:

- You may experience altitude sickness while in Cusco, Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley but this is not guaranteed as it affects people randomly. If you are worried, talk to your GP about medication before you leave for the trip. If you experience symptoms, avoid alcohol, instead drink water and coca tea and enquire at your hotel about oxygen boosts.

- It's essential to bring mosquito spray with you to the Amazon - even those who "never get bitten" often do. It's also worth bringing binoculars for those hard-to-spot creatures.

- In terms of clothing and footwear, bring a range for the entire trip. The weather varies dramatically across different parts of the country and at different elevations.

Alice was a guest of Inkaterra hotels. ■

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