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THE ANCIENT RITUAL OF COCA LEAF READING IN THE ANDES

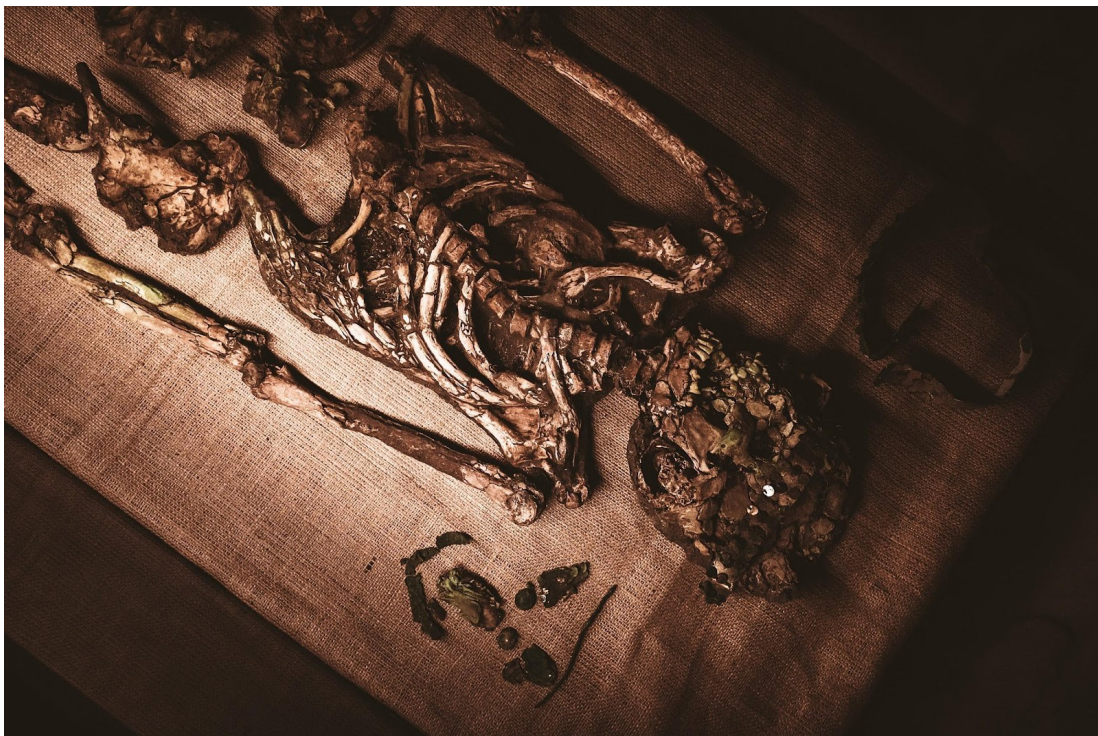
*I*n Peru, the coca leaf has a rich and important history, with many Peruvians valuing the leaves as highly as gold. The Incas treasured coca not only for its medicinal properties, but also for the integral part it played in their sacred rites and rituals. South Americans have cultivated coca plants for nearly 8,000 years.



A legend often told in the Andes shares the tale of Kuka, a woman who used her

charms to take advantage of men until word of her misdeeds reached the Great Inca's ears and he ordered for her sacrifice. After her burial, a miraculous plant sprouted from her grave; the people called it coca, in honor of the beautiful Kuka. This myth acknowledges the great importance that coca leaves had in the Inca culture and history and continues to have in Peru today.

Visitors today often know of coca leaves because of their ability to relieve altitude sickness, whilst locals use them in many different ways. They are often consumed on a daily basis, chewed or used to make tea. In the traditional Peruvian culture, coca leaves play a great part in celebrations, ceremonies, funerals, labour and religious practices. Traces of the leaves have been found in mummies dating back to around 1,000 B.C, showing the deep roots of these traditions.



Andean inhabitants usually offer coca leaf reading to visitors in Cusco, to provide a unique insight into their culture. Traditionally, the shaman who leads the ceremony will have learnt the skill from his own ancestors and will continue to pass it down to future generations.

During the ceremony, guests are invited to sit with the shaman in a circle with locals and other travellers. Participants are welcomed and asked for their name and reasons for visiting while a prayer is offered to Apus, god of the mountains. Three coca leaves are thrown into the direction of a sacred mountain and the shaman lays out a handful of leaves on the blanket in front of the guests.

The movement of the leaves falling gives the shaman information about the visitors. Additionally, the shaman can decipher details about the individual's future, work, life, family or financial situation depending on the leaves' shapes and colours.



Coca leaf reading is available throughout the year, however, it is believed to be more effective during important dates for the Incas such as June, when the Inti Raymi celebration takes place.

When coming to Peru, travellers will inevitably see or experience the coca leaves. Andean inhabitants use it as a way to regain energy, but also as an opportunity to enjoy their time together and socialise. If you are looking to explore the ancestral Andean roots and Peruvian traditions, coca leaf reading is certainly one of the ceremonies that will make your trip memorable.

Guests may book the special Coca Leaf Reading as an additional service at both

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