



## Luxury Meets Heritage at Inkaterra Hotel La Casona in Cusco | In Conversation with Luisella Garmendia



**Inkaterra La Casona** hotel in **Cusco**, Peru, was my home away from home for a night during my recent visit of the country, for **The Place Brand Observer** and the **Sustainability Leaders Project** – including the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu. Let me introduce you to this boutique heritage hotel in one of the oldest buildings of Cusco, which will make you feel spoiled and comfortable at the same time.

During my stay I caught up with **Luisella Garmendia**, the hotel's manager, for a tour around the property: a charming lady – Peruvian – who patiently answered my many questions about the hotel, its sustainability, the city and life in Peru in general.

**Luisella, you are the general manager of Inkaterra La Casona in Cusco, Peru since 2008. What brought you to leading the team at La Casona?**

I worked many years for the Belmond chain of hotels, when they were called Orient Express Hotels. I started working as a receptionist and then in the guest service at the Monasterio Hotel, in Cusco. Later, and for a few years, I worked in the sales department at the **Belmond Miraflores Park Hotel** in Lima. In 2008 Inkaterra proposed me to work in the guest service at Inkaterra La Casona, a responsibility which I accepted. I worked there until 2010, when I was appointed general manager.

**Inkaterra La Casona has become quite popular among discerning city travellers looking for that “home away from home”. To your mind, what makes La Casona and the other Inkaterra hotels stand out?**

Inkaterra La Casona is considered a National Monument, with a great history; during Inca times it was the site of the Warakos Academy, which was the training center for the highest elite of the Incan army. The foundations of the current building here are

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original Inca walls from that time.

Then, after Francisco Pizarro's conquest of the Incan Empire during the late 16th century, it was the first colonial building erected on top of Inca ruins, after the siege of Cusco. At first the house was the home of Conquistador Diego de Almagro, who was one of Pizarro's Captains during the Inca conquest and then became the first European discoverer of Chile.

Later, Inkaterra La Casona was the home of Captain Francisco Barrientos and then of Don Juan Alvarez de Maldonado, who was credited with the expansion of the conquest into the Amazon. And then its most notable resident was Simon Bolivar, who lived here after leading the independence of Peru from Spain in 1825.

Besides the history at Inkaterra La Casona, the human aspect complements the theme of luxury at the level of infrastructure and decoration. In this sense, the perception of Inkaterra travelers is of a very personalized and complete level of service.

Our property has only 11 suites, which allows travelers to find an intimate environment, almost homely, and enjoy a relaxing stay.


## *Can you tell us a bit about the hotel company's history – when was it founded and how has it changed or evolved since then?*

**José Koechlin von Stein** established Inkaterra in 1975, pioneering ecotourism and sustainable development in Peru. Aiming to underscore natural and cultural values, Inkaterra works under a holistic approach. Scientific research is produced as a basis for conservation, education and the well-being of local communities.

Major flora and fauna inventories have been sponsored by Mr. Koechlin since 1978, defining natural areas where Inkaterra hotels are located – the Amazon rainforest of Southern Peru in the Madre de Dios region, the Machu Picchu cloud forest, the Sacred Valley of the Incas, the historic city of Cusco and the Cabo Blanco northern coastline.

Achievements in research and conservation on hotel grounds include the study of 814 bird species registered at Inkaterra areas of influence, equivalent to 93% of Costa Rica's total bird diversity; the description of 362 ant species (world record sponsored by Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson); the Andean Bear Conservation Center at **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel**, in benefit of the only bear species native to South America; and the world's largest native orchid collection in its natural habitat, according to the American Orchid Society, with 373 species (including 20 new to science).





***Sustainability is becoming more and more important in tourism, and the Inkaterra brand seems to be leading the way. Which of the many sustainability initiatives that you have in place at la Casona do you find the most important, or inspiring, personally?***

At INKATERRA, we strongly believe that we all need to change our behaviors as individuals, as countries and as a global community. We all contribute to global warming; thus, everyone needs to be part of the solution. Since 1975, based on a principle of respect for the ecosystem, INKATERRA has been developing conservation programs to preserve the natural characteristics of the Amazon rainforest, which helps prevent global warming.

These programs directly protect 12,000 hectares of private property, fixing 7,200 ton/CO<sub>2</sub>/ha/year.

Furthermore, INKATERRA indirectly fixes more than 12,600 ton/CO<sub>2</sub>/ha/year through its support for a variety of external conservation programs.

Additionally, Inkaterra pays a non-profit organization in the US (**Sustainable Travel International**) to offset the few carbon emissions from our activities. The total carbon emissions for Inkaterra is 277 ton/year, and we pay US\$3,607.

Moreover, the flights that our employees take when visiting the properties emit 404 ton/year (we pay US\$ 5,239) and the excursions our interpreters offer emit 7 ton/year (we pay US\$91). With these payments, Inkaterra has become a truly carbon-neutral organization. Thus every guest at Inkaterra has a 100% carbon neutral hotel stay.

In addition, Inkaterra La Casona Cusco provides its guests with the opportunity to offset their air travel related greenhouse gas emissions through a unique custom carbon calculator developed by Sustainable Travel International (STI).



GCT's Florian Kaefer with Luisella Garmendia, GM of Inkaterra La Casona

***Which aspects of running a heritage city hotel sustainably do you find the most challenging?***

Because it is our commitment and duty to preserve and protect the property,

sometimes it can be challenging dealing with the local government or the Ministry of Culture in different issues, for example decoration or safety procedures.

## *Your five bits of advice for environmentally conscious visitors, on how to best explore the city – what to do?*

1. Take always a water bottle
2. Reuse the hotel towels
3. Charge your electronic devices only when necessary
4. Cusco is a small city, so walking is a good option
5. Do not bring any spray products

## *Which restaurants, cafés or bars in Cusco would you recommend, for their commitment to sustainability?*

I'd recommend:

**Limo**, **Map Cafe**, **Greens organic** and **Cicciolina**

*Thank you, Luisella!*

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*Check facilities, availability and rates of Inkaterra La Casona [here](#). More about Inkaterra hotels and the company's philosophy [here](#).*

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