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THE REAL INCA TRAIL

Steeped in myth and legend, Peru's Sacred Valley is a place where diligent toil pays dividends, and where visitors are gifted with an unforgettable insight into the evolving face of a historic culture. Michael Raffael takes a hike into an ancient world

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ULF SVANE



FARAWAY PLACES SACRED VALLEY

From left: a woman in traditional local dress in Patabamba village; mist-shrouded Machu Picchu





This page, clockwise from top left: men of Patabamba village; a woman holds a skein of wool; spit-roast guinea pig; bowls of quinoa; a weaver at work; Peruvian potatoes. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: a man shows off a mountain potato; wool on the loom; quinoa porridge; lunch in Patabamba; a child travels on her mother's back; village scenes

Travel information

The Sacred Valley is a region in Peru's Andean highlands, which, along with nearby Cusco and the ancient city of Machu Picchu, formed the heart of the Inca Empire. Flights from the UK take around 20 hours, with one or two stops. Trains – run by perurail.com – connect key cities. Currency is the Peruvian sol (PEN), and time is 5 hours behind GMT. In December, the average high temperature is 18C; the average low, 7C.

GETTING THERE

Avianca flies from London Heathrow to Alejandro Velasco Astete International Airport in Cusco with one stop in Bogotá. avianca.com
LATAM Airlines has flights from London Heathrow to Cusco with one stop in São Paulo and another in Santiago. latam.com

RESOURCES

Promperú is the official tourist board and its website is packed with up-to-date information, guides and maps to help you get the most out of your travels throughout the country. peru.travel

FURTHER READING

Turn Right at Machu Picchu by Mark Adams (Plume Books, £10.99) is an account of the writer's 2011 attempt to retrace explorer Hiram Bingham's 1911 Andean expedition during which Bingham 'discovered' Machu Picchu.

CARBON COUNTING

To offset your carbon emissions when travelling to the Sacred Valley, go to climatecare.org and make a donation. Return flights from London produce 3 tonnes of CO₂, meaning a cost to offset of £22.49.

Legend has it that the Incans built their capital, Cusco, in the shape of a puma. Saqsaywaman, its fortress citadel, formed the head and its snout pointed towards the *Valle Sagrado*, the Sacred Valley. On the map, this starts as a narrow rift following the Urubamba River meandering towards Machu Picchu, 100km away. En route, it passes through Spanish colonial settlements such as Pisac, Lamay and Ollantaytambo. The image, however seductive, can be misleading. Beyond the town of Urubamba, the valley opens up into a vast sierra. In the rainy season it's green, turning purple with quinoa. During the dry season, when Quechua people till the burnt ochre soil with teams of oxen, it's an empty *High Plains Drifter* landscape. Moray, an agricultural amphitheatre of terraces, and the crazy paving of the salt pans at Maras tell a more vivid story of Inca life than temples, pyramids and palaces ever could.

Patabamba, a commune of 100 Quechuan families, looks down on the river. Reaching it is a 40-minute



This page, from top: Machu Picchu; a Cusco farmer; the terraces of Moray; a woman pushes salt at Salinas de Maras. Opposite page, from top: the mountain-ringed Sacred Valley; bird's eye view of Moray

'Farmers toil side by side, digging plots where they can grow potatoes, maize or quinoa. Their system, which they call *minca*, translates roughly as, "Today I work for you; tomorrow you work for me"'

scrabble along a winding dirt track. Here is where the tourist trail hits the buffers. 'Don't be lazy, don't lie and don't steal' were the three Incan precepts. In the village, life revolves around them. At 4,000m above sea level, farming doesn't involve ox and plough. The handkerchief-sized parcels of land are worked by hand.

Farmers toil side by side, digging plots where they can grow potatoes, maize or quinoa. Their system, which they call *minca*, translates roughly as, 'Today I work for you; tomorrow you work for me'. What binds the social order on the land also applies when they build houses from adobe bricks.

To celebrate a birth or a harvest they prepare *pachamanca*, or earth pot. They heat up a pyramid of loose stones over a fire and when they're hot enough, the master cook brushes them with salty water before dismantling the roof. In the ashes underneath he buries potatoes and meat, before re-covering with the hot stones, then a layer of aromatic grass, and finally earth.

The women here weave for a living. In Cusco, traditional Peruvian ponchos are factory-made but in Patabamba they painstakingly card, spin and dye the wool by hand. Each poncho sold will have earned them around 25p per hour.

Pisac's main square is packed with stalls selling Quechuan clothing. Designs are like signatures, with each pattern displaying the creator's personal stamp. Because of the ruins nearby, the town is evolving into a traveller's destination. Cute children carrying baby alpacas expect visitors to pay for a snap to show the folks back home. Down a side street, 200-year-old Homo Colonial San Francisco serves empanadas made using a soft bread dough stuffed with chicken, beef, cheese or tomato and oregano, before being baked. They're a chewable step back in time.

En route to Machu Picchu, roadside townlets vie for their fair share of travellers' time and soles, be they backpackers or jetsetters. It's a genuine 21st-century pilgrims' way. Urubamba, buzzing with tuk-tuks, has three luxury resorts on its fringes: Tambo del Inka, Hacienda Urubamba and the Rio Sagrado. —————>>



'There's no question Machu Picchu merits its rating as one of the seven wonders of the modern world. The football crowd-sized queues do their utmost to demystify it. They fail.'

Lamay promotes itself as a *cuy* (guinea pig) capital. Cars stop by roadside stalls, their drivers jumping out to buy them spit-roasted over the embers. Ollantaytambo, another Inca stronghold (its pink-granite Wall of the Six Monoliths has defied interpretation by archaeologists), is a midway meeting point. Everyone ends up at the railway station to drink the cold craft beers on tap from the Cervecería del Valle Sagrado and catch up on the local news.

All trains from Cusco, including the luxurious *Hiram Bingham*, stop here. They chug the last 30km of the narrow-gauge line to *Aguas Calientes*, AKA Machu Picchu. There's no question it merits its rating as one of the seven wonders of the modern world. The town, the constant streams of buses wriggling up the steep mountainside to reach the site and the football crowd-sized queues at the entrance do their utmost to demystify it. They fail

because it's such a magical place, perched among the clouds and surrounded by tutelary mountains.

Salinas de Maras has more poignant magic. A thin stream of brackish water trickling from a cleft in the rock feeds an opencast mine that has seen salt harvested since pre-Incan times. Its patchwork of miniature salt pans are tended by the 460 families who own it. They evaporate the water in the same way their ancestors and their forebears did. The finest *flor de sal* goes to the top restaurants in Lima, such as Central or Astrid y Gastón, but the flamingo-tinted table salt is used daily by villagers.

A baked salt crust swaddles the large river trout served at El Parador de Moray, a Cusqueña restaurant that stares down on the concentric rings of Moray. In its own right it's a 'wonder'. Believed to have been designed for growing crops, the —————>

AWAY PLACES SACRED VALLEY

Women walk their donkeys across the valley to the market





Above: a man looks out over the Sacred Valley. Below: a farmer tills the fields with a team of oxen



Below: a family herd their flock of sheep through the adobe brick-built Patabamba village



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: stone staircase at Machu Picchu; succulents thrive; a Patabamba woman in rainbow-coloured wool; Machu Picchu town; a train on the approach; boarding; a local man sports royal blue; a stop at Ollantaytambo

circles have a variety of microclimates. The crater is almost 30m deep and it allowed the Incas to compare the effects of light and temperature when growing their staple crops. The lessons they learnt about their basic foods still thrive today in the agricultural practices of their Quechua descendants.

Journey through the Sacred Valley and it's tempting to feel nostalgic for a lost civilisation. The truth is, though, it isn't lost. It survives today in the lives of the people living here. Yes, there's the gloss of multicoloured caps on wizened natives and guided tours but the spirit, even after 300 years of colonial rule by Spain, has remained very much intact. □

Michael Raffael and Ulf Svane travelled to Cusco courtesy of Promperú, BA and LATAM.

Shopping

Local markets are the best way to shop. Avoid buying at Machu Picchu, where prices are higher and some of the crafts have been factory-produced. Find original Peruvian weaving made with sheep, alpaca and llama wool in Pisac's main square and in Ollantaytambo.

Where to stay

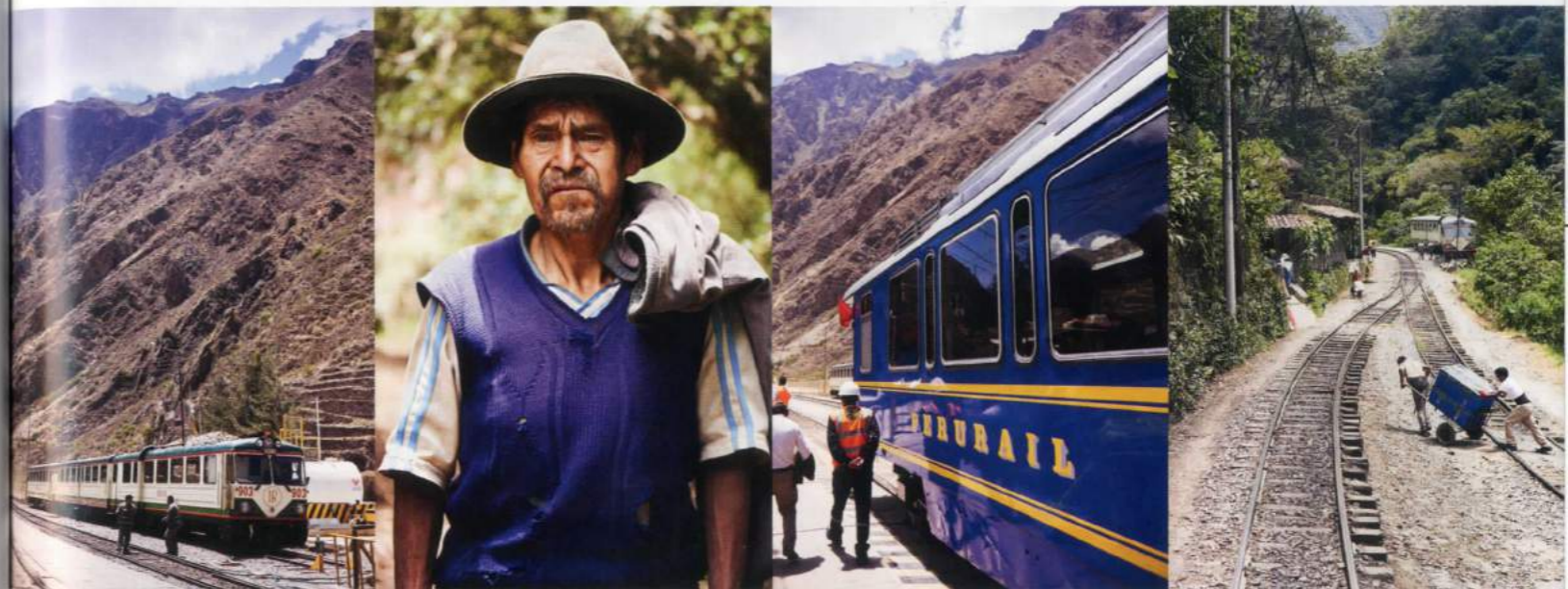
El Albergue Ollantaytambo A super spot to stay overnight, or longer, before catching the train to your next stop-off. The rooms are charming, the food is tasty and the beer from the local *cervecería* is worth the trip in its own right. Doubles from £73. *Estacion de Tren, Ollantaytambo, 00 51 84 204 014, elalbergue.com*

Inkaterra La Casona One of a small chain of luxe eco-friendly hotels, this is the closest anyone gets to peace and quiet in Machu Picchu. The menu in the main dining room makes delicious use of the hotel's own farm. There's also an orchid garden and plenty of exotic birdlife. Doubles from £340. *211 Plaza Las Nazarenas, Machu Picchu, 00 51 610 0400, inkaterra.com*

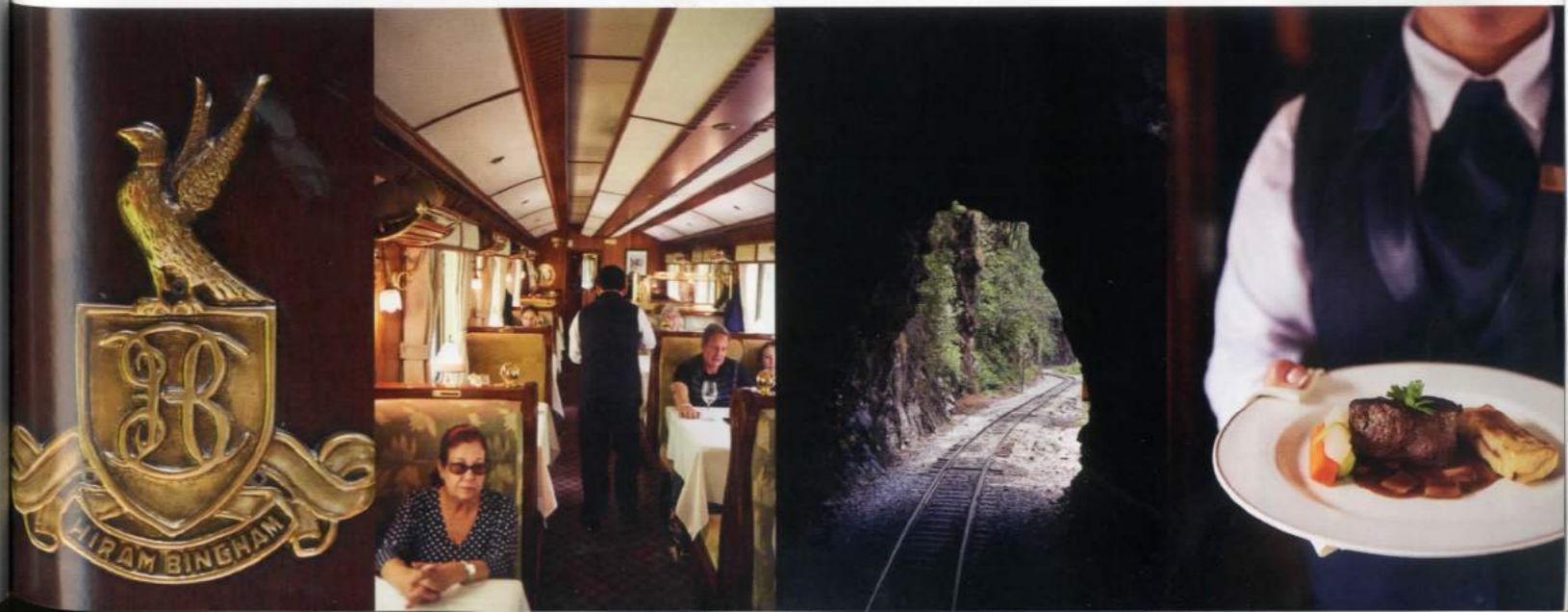
Tambo del Inka In Quechuan, *tambo* means a refuge. This is a palatial building-cum-resort on the fringe of a small town with little going on, and it's the only hotel around to boast its own private train station to Machu Picchu. Doubles from £210. *Avenida Ferrocarril, Urubamba, 00 51 8458 1777, tambodelinkaresort.com*



'Miniature salt pans are tended by the families who own them. The finest *flor de sal* goes to the top restaurants in Lima, but the flamingo-tinted table salt is used daily by villagers'



Below, from left: the Hiram Bingham's crest; the train's stylish interior; light at the end of the tunnel; great meals on fine crockery are served on board





Clockwise from above: a woman surveys the Salinas de Maras terrain; salt panning; *flor de sal* crystals; salt pans are tended by their owners

Where to eat

Prices are per person for three courses, with a glass of beer or wine, unless otherwise stated

Café Inkaterra This cool café-restaurant is a longhouse between the tracks leading to the Machu Picchu railway station, and an outpost of the nearby Inkaterra hotel. The colourful salads and vegetable dishes are fresh and full of flavour. It's always packed at lunchtime but walk in and you'll probably get a table. From £17. *Machu Picchu Pueblo, 00 51 610 0400, inkaterra.com*

Chicha Por Gaston Acurio Easily the best restaurant in Cusco, championing local produce and culinary traditions. Choice ingredients are handled with skill and imagination. Try the alpaca tartare or a trout ceviche with artichokes and toasted corn, followed by the baked quince and cheese mousse. From £20, excluding wine. *261 Plaza Regocijo, Cusco, 00 51 84 240 520, chicha.com.pe*

Cuchara de Palo Its name means 'wooden spoon', but you imagine the kitchen kit is rather more high-tech than that in this high-end joint on Pisac's main plaza. Serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, visitors can expect organic, locally grown ingredients featuring in traditional dishes with a modern twist. From £20. *Plaza Central, Pisac, 00 51 84 203 062, cucharadepalorestaurant.com*

El Parador de Moray Fall off the grass lawn in front of this colonial hacienda and you could end up somewhere near the bottom of the Incan circus ring that is Moray. The offering is fresh, right down to the glass of homemade lemonade handed to guests on arrival, and the regional Cusqueñan dishes are a winning combination of salads, stews and *parrilla* (barbecue). The trout baked in a salt crust is recommended, being both succulent and sweet. From £30. *23 Portal de Carnes, Valle Sagrado, 00 51 84 402 213, cuscorestaurants.com*

