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Interview with José Koechlin von Stein of Inkaterra Hotels about Tourism, Conservation and Community Development in Peru

23 May 2019✂ Florian Kaefer, destination, Latin America, Peru, placemaking, premium access, South America, sustainable tourism, travel and tourism

How do you create a strong destination brand – so strong that well-meaning and well-paying visitors are attracted by what you offer, without you having to invest too much in promotion? That’s the one million dollar question for destination marketers. What I’ve learned during the many visits, interviews and meetings as editor of The Place Brand Observer over the last years: it really is down to individuals. Changemakers who have innovative ideas and bold missions – like **José Koechlin von Stein** with his **Inkaterra Hotels**: five-star luxury retreats at the service of wildlife conservation and community development in some of Peru’s most remote areas.

During my [visit of Peru](#) I had the great fortune to experience three of the Inkaterra properties first hand, all of which have impressed me both for their professionalism and quality, and their sustainability impact.

We already published an [interview with José Koechlin](#) on Sustainability-Leaders.com, but his work is relevant also from a placemaking point of view.

José, together with your wife you are Peru's leading hotel developer dedicated to sustainability and conservation. Do you remember what led you to focus on responsible tourism?

After co-producing Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) to promote tourism through film, I wanted to keep working in the Amazon rainforest. The way to achieve my goal was to invest in a field that would conserve biodiversity, and tourism seemed the right path to do so. I realized that sustainable travel is not only a source of inspiration – it is the most effective way to raise awareness on our planet's natural resources.

My wife Denise is the architect and designer of each Inkaterra hotel, all inspired by local cultures and built with native materials in harmony with the environment, providing each property with a personality of its own.

Briefly, can you tell us what Inkaterra stands for, as brand – its main characteristics and philosophy?

Inkaterra tries to demonstrate that biodiversity conservation can be a profitable endeavor, with a positive impact on the development of local communities. Since we pioneered ecotourism in Peru, back in 1975, we try to achieve this goal. We work under a holistic approach to create added value in remote natural areas. We produce scientific research as a basis for biodiversity conservation, education and the well-being of local communities.

How does Inkaterra support conservation of flora and fauna, and local communities in Peru?

Since 1978, Inkaterra produces flora and fauna inventories, setting a benchmark to measure ecotourism's long-term impact over natural areas. A total of 903 bird species (equivalent to Costa Rica's total bird diversity), 365 ant species (world record sponsored by Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson), 313 butterfly species, and 100 mammal species have been inventoried within Inkaterra hotel grounds and surroundings. 29 species new to science have been published: 20 orchids, 5 amphibians, 1 butterfly, 2 bromeliads and 1 tropical vine.

Scientific research allows us to design our biodiversity conservation initiatives, such as

- the Andean Bear Rescue Center at [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#), in benefit of the only bear species native to South America (which inspired Michael Bond's character, Paddington Bear);
- the World Birding Rally, international competition to promote Peru as a top destination for bird watching;
- the world's largest native orchid collection, according to the American Orchid Society, which conserves 373 species in its habitat.

In the Amazon, the [Inkaterra Canopy Walkway](#) is our emblematic excursion. A hanging bridge system 30 meters above the ground to enjoy one of the most privileged views of wildlife up in the canopy.

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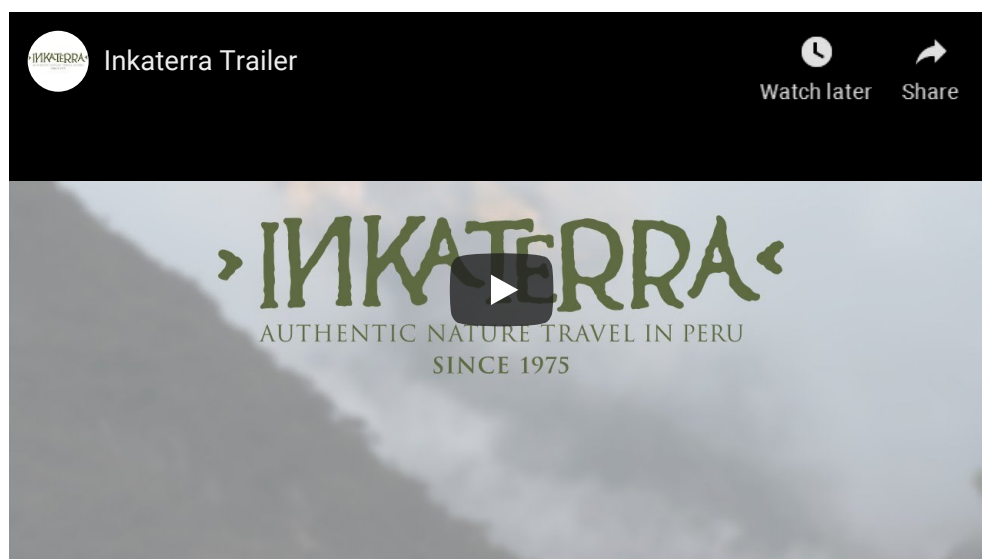
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Promoting green jobs in ecotourism is the best way to reduce migration and safeguard local cultures. Over 40 years, more than 4,000 people from local communities have been trained by Inkaterra, offering career opportunities in hospitality, field guiding (birdwatching, wildlife interpretation), sustainable fishing and agroforestry production to produce local goods such as cacao and Brazil nut.



To your mind, would you consider Peru to be particularly sustainable, as destination?

As a destination, Peru is shifting its mindset towards sustainable practices. There is greater awareness on local resources and the need to design business models where profitability meets responsibility. In that sense, public-private alliances are essential to achieve sustainability in Peru.

Inkaterra aims to be a replicable model on sustainability for all destinations in Peru and abroad. We recently pursued a strategic partnership with the Machu Picchu Town Hall and Peruvian beverage multinational AJE Group, to turn Machu Picchu into a global sustainability model – a project that has been recipient of the travel award Die Goldene Palme in the “Responsible Tourism” category, as announced at ITB Berlin in February 2018.

The initiative saved Machu Picchu from being included in UNESCO’s Patrimony at Risk list, after the donation of a compacting machine to process 14 tons of plastic waste each day. Last year, Machu Picchu became the world’s first destination to collect and process almost all its waste cooking oil for biodiesel production. The city’s first biodiesel plant opened at [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#). Biodiesel and petrochemical-free glycerin are produced using waste oil collected from local restaurants, hotels and houses, avoiding on a monthly basis the spillage of 2000 liters of waste cooking oil to the Vilcanota River.

This April, the Ministry of Environment inaugurated Inkaterra’s pyrolysis plant – an innovative technology that decomposes organic waste through high temperatures to produce Bio-char, a nutrient-rich soil amendment used for local high-mountain agriculture and forest restoration with native flora (in alliance with SERNANP).

The ‘Sustainable Machu Picchu’ campaign has raised awareness among citizens, who are segregating waste in their houses and are committed to the destination’s environmental goals.

Which aspects or requirements would you consider the most important with regard to a destination’s

competitiveness, resilience and future success?

After surviving the 80s, when terrorism and economic crisis posed serious threats to Peru's future (back then, some days Machu Picchu would have just one visitor), it is very encouraging to confirm that sustainable tourism is one of the most thriving assets Peru has to offer nowadays.

In that sense, Peru's competitiveness is hard to match. According to UNESCO, Peru is one of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world. 84 of the 104 life zones in the Holdridge Scale have been found here. Peru is listed as the third country with the greatest diversity of bird species, including 120 endemics. The Peruvian Tropical Sea is one of the most bountiful oceans with a 2,200km coastline, recently declared a 'Hope Spot' by IUCN and Mission Blue.

We also have a significant part of the Andes mountain range, and the Amazon comprehends 62% of our national territory. Our pre-Hispanic culture spans from Caral, one of the cradles of civilization (3000-2500BC) to the splendor of the Inca Empire.

Peruvian cuisine reflects the encounter of traditions and is one of the most valuable symbols of our identity.

To achieve a long-term success, a destination has to express its authenticity through sustainable tourism. Conserving patrimony is a great way to engage travelers in a knowledgeable, enriching experience with respect towards local biodiversity and culture.


To what extent does Peru as country – and its main cities, Lima and Cusco – fulfill those requirements at the moment?

Though Peru still has a long way to go to meet top standards in terms of infrastructure, connectivity and hospitality services, sustainable tourism is quickly becoming a leading business model, generating more income and better quality of life for local populations than many extractive industries today.

Which stories of people or communities supported by Inkaterra over the years do you find the most inspiring so far?

It is quite heartening to witness how three of our Inkaterra Explorer Guides are now resident managers in our properties in the Amazon rainforest, while three generations of the Vargas family in Madre de Dios have worked at Inkaterra.





How strong do you consider Peru's brand and reputation at the moment, with regard to its potential to attract environmentally conscious travelers?

Our experience at Inkaterra confirms that sustainable tourism is a profitable market trend that benefits both wildlife and local communities. Inkaterra hotels are appealing to adventure travel, academic tourism, luxury, family travel, and also niche markets such as birding, orchid observation and gastronomy.

In your view, which are the main benefits of a country promotion organization like PromPerú for the country's tourism businesses and entrepreneurs?

Peru is a top destination for experiential travel. Our Tourism Board has contributed to strengthening Peru as a brand, which is alluring to so many niche markets.

Your five bits of advice to hotel developers considering Peru as location to invest in?

- Perform inventories: Get to know your stock to learn the value of biodiversity.
- Contribute to local communities. Promoting green jobs in ecotourism is the best way to reduce migration and safeguard local cultures.
- Go neutral. Conserving green areas and reducing carbon footprint are very beneficial to the environment.
- Embrace green practices. Reducing the use of plastic, using renewable energy, recycling water and waste, everything counts when being committed to green operations.
- Work a sustainable supply chain. It delivers a long-term, eco-conscious profitability.

Thank you, José

The interview with **José Koechlin von Stein** is part of our **special report on Peru** and its potential as destination, supported by [PromPerú](#).

Enjoyed learning about how Inkaterra hotels in Peru have mastered highest levels of sustainability with strong business performance, at the same time actively supporting biodiversity conservation and local communities? Share and spread the word!



Bio



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