

Sustainability Leaders Project

Sustainable tourism leaders, examples, advice

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Interview with José Koechlin von Stein, Founder of Inkaterra Hotels in Peru



*Inkaterra hotels are well known in Peru and abroad for offering truly authentic, unique and inspiring experiences to discerning visitors. Having stayed at three Inkaterra hotels during my recent visit of the country, I am now officially a fan. **José Koechlin von Stein** in this interview tells us how Inkaterra hotels go beyond offering luxury accommodation but rather use it as a means for supporting biodiversity conservation and community wellbeing.*

José, Inkaterra hotels are widely considered the benchmark for sustainable hospitality. Do you remember what got you interested in focusing your career on tourism and conservation?

My bond with nature and ecology began at a very early age. As a child, I lived in a small fishery in coastal *Naplo* in Southern Peru. My childhood was then in a farm, near Lima. At the age of ten, I volunteered on trips that took me to the Amazon, and a second one to Cusco, Puno, Arequipa and Nazca. It was a Jesuit mission organized by my school, *Colegio La Inmaculada*.

We travelled in two vans with loudspeakers to announce our arrival in streets and main squares. We carried a portable cinema to screen over any wall old films starring Charlie Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy, to communities where there was no electricity nor running water. Places where development had not arrived yet. Each region of Peru has its own unique landscape and biodiversity, and I was completely captivated by the culture and wildlife we encountered. This childlike amazement has stayed with me, and we try to share it with our guests at each Inkaterra property.

ON TOUR:



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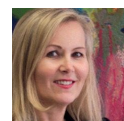


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The Sustainability Leaders Project is one of these places where you feel proud to be part of it when you are selected. Some of the “gurus” in sustainability are featured here. It is a space to share experiences, learn from each

After co-producing Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 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. Ecotourism has evolved into the right path to do so.

other and to grow our responsible tourism network.

Anna Alaman India / Spain

Sustainable travel is not only a source of inspiration – it is the most effective way to raise awareness on our planet's natural resources. Only when travelling we get to know local cultures and natural environments. We learn about their uniqueness as well as their fragility, and then we are engaged to their preservation for future generations to come.

Ecotourism is a way of economically assisting local cultures to continue their ancestral ways of living.

Together with your wife you have over the years created an impressive collection of lodges and hotels, all of them unique but following the same principles. Briefly, what does the Inkaterra brand and philosophy stand for? How does it differ from other, conventional hotels?

Denise and I are keen on preserving our national heritage through experiences that implicitly tell 5000 years of Peruvian civilization.

Since 1975, Inkaterra works under a holistic approach to create added value in remote areas of Peru – the Amazon rainforest of Madre de Dios, the Machu Picchu cloud forest, the Sacred Valley of the Incas, the city of Cusco and the Cabo Blanco tropical ocean, desert and dry forest. Scientific research is produced as a basis for biodiversity conservation, education and the wellbeing of local communities.



Social businesses in tourism have for a long time practiced a business model which goes beyond financial gain. Can you briefly describe the business model of Inkaterra?

Our services rely on native eco-luxury simplicity surrounded by nature. Inkaterra hotels are inspired on local cultures and built with indigenous materials, in harmony with the environment.

As many companies undertake stock control every year, Inkaterra performs scientific research since 1978. Studies on flora and fauna to set a benchmark to measure our 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.

You are (among many other roles) Chairman of the Peruvian Hotel Association. How has your view on tourism changed over the years? Lessons learned?

Ecotourism was not common practice when we established Inkaterra – it feels now as if our experience preceded theory.

Though conservation through tourism is always a fascinating challenge, it is easier nowadays as experiential travelers are more eco-conscious and respectful towards native cultures. Nowadays there is a deeper understanding, as the sustainable use of natural resources are now acknowledged as a profitable endeavor with a social function.

Being committed to conservation completely changes your mindset: it helps you understand that, even though results might demand more time and effort, in the long term there is no parallel to the fulfillment of outreaching the value of biodiversity.

Which changes or trends do you observe in the travel ecosystem right now that might support or hinder a sustainable development of Peru as attractive and resilient destination?

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 experiential travel, adventure travel, academic tourism, luxury, family travel, and also niche markets such as birding, orchid observation and gastronomy.

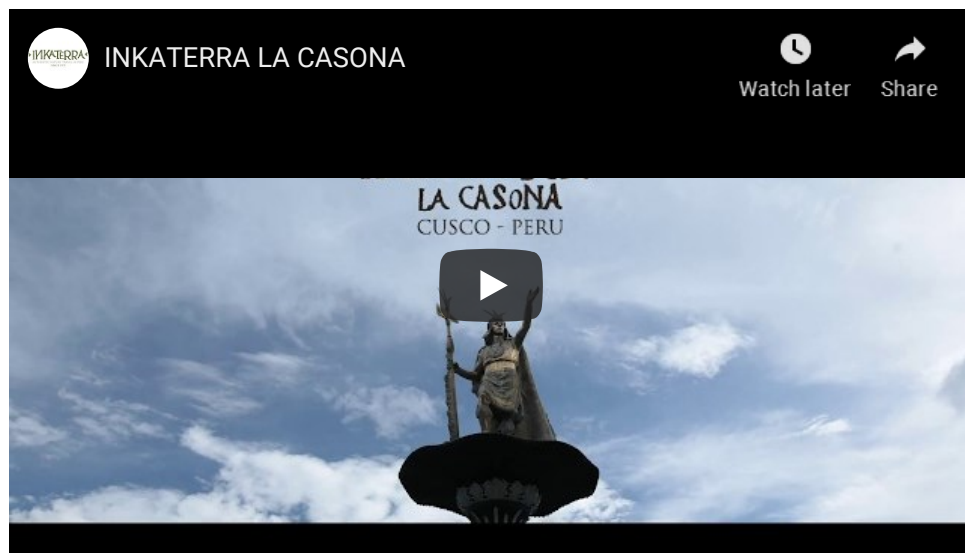
Good business practices have allowed us to cater over 200,000 travelers each year, and we are currently members of **Virtuoso**, **Relais & Châteaux** and **National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World**. It is a business model where both hoteliers and guests contribute to biodiversity conservation and community development.

Which aspects of building a sustainable luxury hotel such as Inkaterra La Casona in Cusco, or the latest addition, Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, do you find the most challenging?

Two decades ago, we dreamed of preserving an icon of Cusco's history through our brand's ethos. Once the training grounds of an elite Incan army, **Inkaterra La Casona** is a 16th Century manor house hidden in a quiet court amid the cobblestoned streets of Cusco. Its

quarters hosted Spanish conquistador Diego de Almagro and General Simón Bolívar among other illustrious guests. We recovered its splendor after five years of strenuous and thorough work steered by award-winning Peruvian holistic designer Denise Guislain Koechlin.

Denise was convinced that each stone at [Inkaterra La Casona](#) reveals a part of the city's history. Thus, Denise kept the mansion's original layout, as evidenced in the stone arches surrounding the main patio. With much care foundations were repaired, as well as cracked walls and gable roofs, for which we used vintage tiles. Original doors and windows, wooden balconies, apex ceilings and the exquisite friezes in the rooms underwent an extremely detailed restoration process in order to be preserved.



Our determination was rewarded, as Inkaterra La Casona is now the [first 5-star boutique hotel in Cusco](#) and first Relais & Châteaux property in Peru. Last July, the property topped the 'Best City Hotel in Central and South America' category and was listed fourth best hotel in the world in *Travel + Leisure's* 2018 World's Best Awards.

As stated at the latest South American Hotel Investment Conference (SAHIC) celebrated in Medellín, Inkaterra La Casona is now regarded as a successful case on how hospitality can contribute to the preservation of cultural patrimony – an example of sustainable design.

Regarding [Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba](#), Denise envisioned a contemporary country house hidden away in a gorgeous area of the Sacred Valley of the Incas, inspired by her experience of living eight years in the high Andean mountains of Peru. Its main house and stand-alone casitas offer wide-ranging views of multicolored mountains and harvest fields, while its newly opened Mayu Spa is nestled amid pepper trees and wild flowers, immersing guests in open space, serenity and relaxing solitude. We find it an ideal setting for outdoor excursions – including birding, horseback riding and stargazing, a key to the significance of astronomy in the Andean world.

Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba was built in an authentic, local, artisanal way, working on its development with specialists and rural communities who contributed with their ancestral knowledge on ambience and design.

Thanks to your pioneering work in ecotourism and the promotion of responsible travel, Peru is benefiting from a positive image internationally as a destination, especially among

***environmentally conscious, discerning travelers.
Do you think this image is justified – taking into
account Peru’s tourism development as a whole?
What changes might be needed to protect and
sustain this reputation?***

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 (3000BC) 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. These are just a few of the many factors that make Peru a top destination for experiential travel.

Though Peru still has a long way to go to meet top standards in terms of infrastructure, connectivity and hospitality services, it is expected that a significant part of the travel industry will embrace sustainable practices soon.

Ecotourism might become a leading business model on a world scale, generating more income and better quality of life for local populations than many extractive industries today.

***Having co-produced films and published various
books on tourism and conservation, what role do
those play as facilitators of a more sustainable
tourism?***

We co-produced Werner Herzog’s classic films *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972). Later on Werner took an original idea of mine to film *Fitzcarraldo* (Best Director, Cannes Film Festival 1982), a four-year odyssey portrayed in a documentary we produced – Les Blank’s documentary *Burden of Dreams* (1982).

Film is a great medium to promote travel experiences. Aguirre played throughout three years in France, attracting the first waves of tourism to rural Peru.

Our willingness to share knowledge on Peru’s biodiversity and culture was the driving force behind educational tools and publications such as

- *Cusco Amazónico: The Lives of Amphibians and Reptiles in an Amazonian Rainforest* (Cornell University Press, 2005), described by Cornell University as “the baseline against which all future studies of Amazonian amphibians and reptiles will be compared to”;
- *Flórula de la Reserva Ecológica Inkaterre*, an inventory of 1422 vascular plant species (Missouri Botanical Garden and Inka Terra Asociación, 2007);
- *Orchids at Inkaterre Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel* (Inkaterre, 2007);
- Kim MacQuarrie’s *The Last Days of the Incas* (Inkaterre, 2012);

- and *Lord of Miracles* (Inkaterra, 2014).

To your mind, is there a good synergy between destination managers, property developers and public authorities in Peru, in terms of sustainability strategies? If not, what could be done to strengthen cooperation between these stakeholders?

Public-private alliances are essential to achieve sustainability in Peru. Aiming to be a replicable model for all destinations in Peru and abroad, Inkaterra pursued a strategic partnership with the Machu Picchu Town Hall. Peruvian beverage multinational AJE Group is working 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.

On April 5, 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.



If you had to pick one, which would you consider the most rewarding experience or event so far, linked to your work with Inkaterra?

Our most recent property in the Peruvian Amazon enhances a knowledgeable experience

for scientists, students, volunteers and eco-conscious travellers. **Inkaterra Guides Field Station** welcomes guests to be part of diverse research and conservation projects overseen by our NGO *Inkaterra Asociación (ITA)*.

Within Peru's first concession for tourism purposes (10,000Ha of Amazonian rainforest), ITA manages interactive excursions such as a Palmetum with the most diverse sample of native palms; a bio-orchard nurtured with ancestral agroforestry techniques; a bird banding station; and a motion-sensitive camera trap system to study wildlife in hotel grounds, such as ocelots, giant armadillos, tapirs, peccaries and tamanduas.

With four cabanas and two large pavilions, the lodge houses an Eco-Center and a lab for native flora and fauna analysis. GreenLab is the first molecular biology and genetics field research laboratory established in the Amazon rainforest.

This initiative promoted by ITA and Field Projects International (FPI) aims to explore and apply genetic research methodologies to conserve Amazonian and broader Peruvian biodiversity by local capacity building.

More than 90% of the total estimate of living organisms inhabiting our planet are yet unknown to science. A disproportionate number of these organisms reside in biodiverse ecosystems like the forests of the Madre de Dios region. Given this situation, efforts are committed to promote and spread access to genetic information. This allows the identification of organisms and their functional features, their ecological inputs and relationships, as well as further studies on their evolution. Applying genetic research to biodiversity conservation will give access to previously unknown information to design and implement more effective conservation actions.

The devices in this laboratory are designed to withstand the most adverse conditions, while simultaneously being portable and efficient for research and conservation. The two main advantages of working at the GreenLab are to offer an alternative to researchers that decreases time and resources invested in DNA analyses going from extraction to sequence; and to provide an adequate space for training students and professionals at any levels in molecular biology and genetics.



Which 3 bits of advice could you share with hotel developers and managers in terms of how to succeed with sustainability?

Ecotourism has allowed us to improve the quality of life of many living beings at all Inkaterra destinations, creating a harmonious relationship between man, flora and fauna through the encouragement of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Producing scientific research is a stepping stone towards biodiversity conservation. Our inventories have allowed us to develop 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.

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.

Thank you, José.

With thanks to **Inkaterra** and **PromPeru** for facilitating the visit and interview.

Enjoyed this interview with José Koechlin von Stein on how Inkaterra hotels in Peru are combining unique experiences with wildlife conservation and community well-being? Share and spread the word!

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