

VOGUE

How Ed Droste Spent Two Wild Weeks in Peru

BY

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KT and her Portos Collection bag surveying the view of Moray from Mil Centro restaurant
Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

Machu Picchu has always been on my travel bucket list. Impossibly beautiful, it's one of those destinations that I have dreamed about since childhood.

In the past year, my good friend KT Auleta, a fashion and art photographer, has been working on an incredible new handmade leather bag line called Portos Collection. The bags are sourced and hand-crafted in Peru by a third-generation saddle maker. KT was heading down to visit the workshop, film, and travel a bit, and being the travel addict that I am, I thought, "Maybe I'd like to come?" Now was my chance.

Not only does Peru hold the mountainous mystery of the Inkas nestled in the Andes, it also encompasses huge swaths of precious Amazonian rainforests, vast grasslands, open deserts, and the Pacific Ocean running up its west coast. The international food scene has also begun to take off recently with a new generation of renowned restaurants and chefs. (Plus there are 4,000 varieties of potatoes. Who knew?)

After a flurry of texts, we both agreed we had to go. Because there was a lot to see, we agreed on a time frame of at least two weeks. We were lucky my hotel critic friend steered us to the Belmond and Inkaterra properties that have locations throughout the country. This allowed us to sample Peru's diversity and we were never once disappointed.

Upon landing in Lima, we were met with the city's infamous grey layer of fog. Through dense traffic and mostly tree-less streets, we ended up at the Belmond Miraflores Park in Peru, which is located in the cliffside neighborhood of the same name. Our hotel, Miraflores, which means "behold the flowers," was a mix of newly built luxury glass buildings, charming Colonial Villas, lush parks, and misty views of the Pacific.



The gorgeous courtyards of Belmont Palacio Nazarenas

Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

This modern skyscraper hotel is located in the perfect neighborhood for a first time visitor to get their bearings. Fairly wiped from the long journey, we were warmly greeted and offered an amazing meal at their in-house restaurant, Tragaluz. I'm often skeptical of hotel restaurants, so I wasn't expecting much, but both KT and I agree: it was among one of the best meals we had in Peru.

The next day, I met KT and her production team for lunch at a lovely local favorite called Cantarana. Located in the artsy neighborhood of Barranco, it is walking distance from Miraflores. We sampled a delicious, freshly-prepared ceviche plate and some other tasty traditional dishes. I never imagined I could crave something like ceviche daily. But, given the simple way it is prepared in Peru—raw fish in lime juice plus onion, cilantro and garlic—I found myself ordering it every meal.

After lunch, we meandered back to our hotel for the night: the charming, modern colonial Villa Barranco. Later, we spent time peering through the decorative courtyards, the many neighborhood restaurants, the still-shuttered bars, and crafty shops.

The next day, we took a short one-hour flight to Cusco. It was like nowhere I've ever been: A golden, dusty, sunny city at the impossibly high altitude of 11,200 feet. This was the first shocking thing to me. I'd been that high before, but only for an hour or so skiing or hiking. I'd never ever spent a few days at such incredible heights, and, wow, I was physically not ready for it. The smallest wander up a hill felt like a massively arduous undertaking and had us both wheezing.

With our weak lungs in mind, we slowly made our way up to the gorgeous Saqsaywaman ruins just above the old city center before even checking into our room (we were quite early). I often think about how different areas of the world have different light, like how California light is much different than a sunny day in London. Some lights are similar, such as Berlin to Amsterdam. But, in general, light is quite regional and unique. I will tell you I've never seen anything quite like the light at Cusco at 11,000-plus feet up in the Andes. It was like we were constantly living in golden sunset hour.

Wandering around the reimagined stone courtyards with ancient fountains at our hotel, the Belmond Palacio Nazarenas, was quite honestly, idyllic. Our room overlooked the unexpected and lovely outdoor swimming pool courtyard. Best of all: We were immediately

treated to a Pisco Sour-making lesson by our “personal butler” on the private patio off of our large, comfortable room. Pisco is a traditional grape-based brandy produced in copper pot stills. We learned the hard way that first night about drinking at a massively high altitude—don’t overdo it, kids! Pisco is strong, and we were laid out after a few. Despite having mild altitude sickness, we were able to sleep well thanks to oxygen-enriched rooms, which I never would have thought I needed until then.

After a few nights, we packed our bags and boarded the cinematic and old-fashioned Belmond Hiram Bingham train to Machu Picchu. Never in my life had either of us been on a train with dining tables and lounges with bars and glass panorama ceilings. We spent the whole ride walking back and forth the length of the train, just soaking in the views followed by a surprisingly delicious lunch of steak. There’s nothing more romantic than a train fashioned after the luxurious rail travel of yore. I’m now determined to experience other Belmond trains, as this was just such an incredible highlight.

But nothing could have prepared us for Machu Picchu. Upon arrival at the sleepy town at the base, our bags were conveniently picked up our hotel porters, so we jumped on a bus to the summit of one of the world’s seven wonders.



Where's Waldo, Machu Picchu Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

I must say the Machu Picchu area was so much bigger than I imagined from pictures. There's honestly no way a picture can do justice to all the light-tipped peaks, grassy valleys, and the endless trails to wander. They have organized it rather nicely. Despite it being high season, we never really felt over-crowded. We spent over four hours with our guide, listening, learning, and ambling around marveling at the site. I truly believe that if you can, you must go to this mind-blowing display of human innovation and beauty.

Back down the mountain, we settled into our latest hotel, the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Built in the 1970s to house Boho adventurers, the hotel is a collection of stone buildings and grottos. Nestled into the tropical forest, the lodging is surrounded by fantastical summits of the region's peaks. We found it to be one of the most atmospheric spots we'd seen. The casitas and lounge areas were beautifully designed with hand-woven textiles and chic, handmade furniture. The property is also set in its own large eco-park, where we went on an orchid hike and visited a tea farm. People were birdwatching right outside of their rooms, and I am pretty certain I've never seen so many hummingbirds in my life. Though we were now at a slightly lower altitude, we cautiously sampled their in-house clear Pisco (served neat) and were grateful to not be immediately put out.



I was obsessed with the timeless and chic interiors at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel

Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

From there, we got back on the Hiram Bingham for another delicious meal. We rode back towards Cusco and disembarked at the sleepy town of Ollantaytambo. The train station had a cute travelers' pub and hotel, so we easily found a cab to our next destination, the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba. A modern and idyllic new property with a vast and beautiful view of the Sacred Valley, each room was a freestanding house with a private fireplace and a deck facing toward the valley. It

was here we went on my favorite excursion other than Machu Picchu, a four-hour horseback ride up to a waterfall. I learned many years ago that I thrive on a horse, and will always jump at the opportunity to take a ride, especially if I can get a chance to gallop a bit. Luckily for me, KT grew up riding, so we both set off on the smooth-trotting Peruvian Paso horses. It was one of those days I will never forget.

The Sacred Valley section of the trip was my favorite. After driving through large expanses of wheat fields with views of snow-capped mountains, we arrived at the almost Mars-like Salt Mines of Maras—oddly the most crowded tourist spot of the whole trip, but worth it—and the ancient ruins of Moray. At the latter, I had the best meal of the trip (and maybe of the year) at Virgilio Martinez’s restaurant Mil Centro. We hadn’t been lucky in Lima with getting a reservation at the acclaimed chef’s Central restaurant, so I was beyond thrilled when we secured one for his rural, lunch-only Mil Centro.

It is perched just above the Moray ruins because they are exactly what inspired the chef. The restaurant, upon entrance, feels more like a chic agricultural research center than an eatery. With samples of local produce and test jars of fermenting liquids, an employee explained how Incas had used the terraced levels of Moray to mimic the different altitudes and temperatures of Peru, which allowed them to cultivate and test a variety of crops. It is with that knowledge that Chef Martinez created his menu, each course highlighting crops unique to the Peruvian landscape seen through the rich lenses of history and culture.

By the time this “food emersion experience” ended, the sun had started to go down, so we hopped in our car and headed to the airport for our last destination, the Peruvian rainforest.

I don’t have a lot of experience in the jungle, but I know humidity and bugs generally aren’t my bag. That said, I was so pleased we got the

chance to experience the Amazon area around Puerto Maldonado. The Inkaterra Hotels had invited us to two amazing lodges about a hour boat ride up the river from the town. Each lodge was rustic, but beautifully constructed to blend into the forest. As they were eco-lodges, there were moments of no electricity or phone reception, but in exchange we were offered outdoor adventures to learn about the surrounding flora and fauna, and the Madre de Dios River.

The first lodge we stayed at was the Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, which boasted a wide variety of amazing activities to do each day for adventurers. This hotel was different than their other properties as it was all about utilizing the nature around you, less about unwinding by a pool with a Pisco. We went on a truly insane canopy walk atop massive suspended rope bridges that went from tree to tree, amongst wild birds and monkeys and giant spiders. Being that high up on a narrow bridge that sort of sways definitely had me sweating, but the rush was like no other—not to mention the view.

Their other property, the Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, was also lovely. This location had a little wifi, which we enjoyed during the rainy moments, plus a room with a gorgeous view of a swampy lagoon nestled in the jungle. For me, the jungle is a terrifying place (I kept imagining myself plopped in the middle of it, “Naked and Afraid” style), but I greatly enjoyed dipping my toes into the edge of it. There were wall-to-wall net screens everywhere, allowing us to sit amongst the trees and feel outdoors without having to suffer the mosquitoes. This leg of the trip was by far the most-wild and sweaty—a great ending to our journey.

With one final night at the gorgeous boutique Hotel B in Lima, we met again with KT’s associates and shared one final Pisco while inspecting various handbag prototypes they had created together. Peru had won me over with its nature, history, cuisine, and most of all, its people. We

had one last ramble into Lima traffic en route the airport and said goodbye, both knowing we would be back very soon.

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Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

1/12 **Ceviche on our first night at Belmont Miraflores**



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

2/12 **Me and a baby alpaca just having a moment**

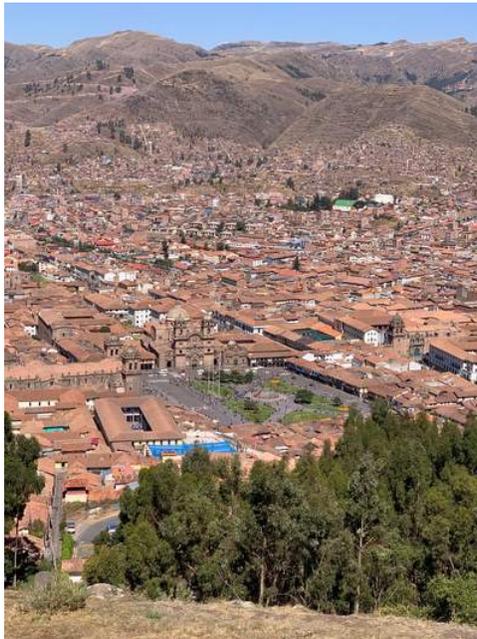


Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

3/12 **Cusco**



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

4/12 **The Bag that prompted the trip**



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

5/12 **Mellow Llama at Machu Picchu**



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

6/12 **The view away from the ruins of Machu Picchu was equally stunning**



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

7/12 **The view away from the ruins of Machu Picchu was equally stunning**



Photo: Courtesy of KT Auleta

8/12 The stunning Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in Sacred Valley



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

9/12 The dish called “Diversity of Corn” at the epic Mil Centro



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

10/12 **Gorgeous views and jungle abodes at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica**



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

11/12 **KT taking pictures from high above during a canopy walk outside Reserva Amazonica**



Photo: Courtesy of Ed Droste

12/12 **Just a pretty butterfly**

Link to the article: <https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/how-ed-droste-spent-two-wild-weeks-in-peru>