

ALL THE WONDERS OF PERU WITHOUT LEAVING THE HOUSE

Joe Minihaue visits the Sacred Valley where culture, history and stunning scenery are literally on your doorstep

KEY DETAILS

Cox & Kings
Joe Minihaue was a guest of (co)kandings.co.uk has a ten-day tour to Peru costing from £2,795pp (two sharing) with eight nights' B&B at Inkaterma Hacienda Urubamba. Inkaterma Machu Picchu Pueblo, Inkaterma La Casana and Inkaterma Reserva Amazonica, including return flights with BA, domestic flights (to Cuzco, Puerto Maldonado and Lima), all transfers, guided sightseeing and entrance fees.

The last of the evening sun burnishes the rocky slopes of the surrounding Andes a deep red as I walk into the herb garden. My therapist hands me a small wicker basket and a pair of secateurs, before explaining what each of the herbs is: muna – a nose-sharp-

ening Andean mint, soothing chamomile and enlivening coca, used to alleviate the effects of altitude sickness. At her direction, I cut a handful of sprigs, place them in the basket and hand over my small harvest, ready to be pounded down into a powder and mixed with essential oils for my imminent stress-relief massage.

I'm deep in the heart of Peru's Sacred Valley of the Incas, staying at Hacienda Urubamba, a luxury property owned by the Inkaterma group. Since 1975, Inkaterma has operated several hotels across the country, each rooted in the local area's history, culture and environment. Hacienda Urubamba is the newest, opening its doors in 2015, and its recently upgraded spa is its biggest draw.

Inside the treatment rooms, the windows are flung wide open, all the better to smell the lavender, which sways in the breeze just outside. In a state of massage-induced bliss, I reflect on how this corner of Peru, largely bypassed by those on the way to the ancient citadel of Machu Picchu, should be at the top of every visitor's itinerary.

It's a feeling that's impossible to shake off as I leave the massage table and spend ten hot minutes kicking back in the sauna, before sliding into the hot tub to watch the last light disappear on the mountains across the valley. Each of them stands well over 13,000ft, four times as high as Scafell Pike in England's Lake District.

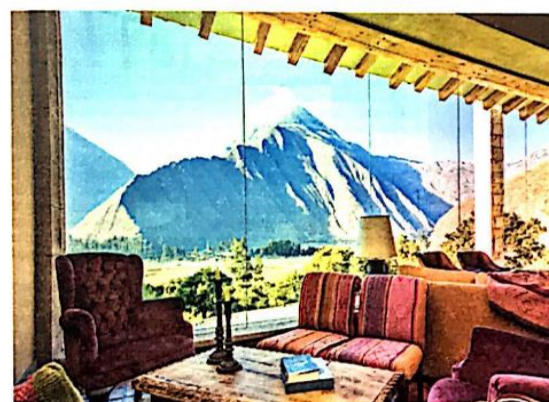
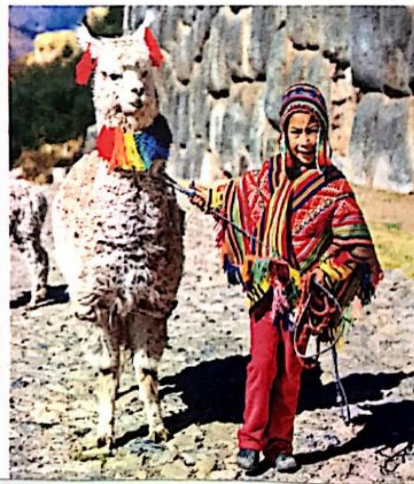
This area is rich in Incan and pre-Incan history, tradition and myth, not to mention ancient agriculture and some of the finest wildlife in Latin America. Best of all, it's possible to experience all of this without having to leave the beautiful

grounds of Hacienda Urubamba, with key experiences included in the price of every stay, each one led by in-house guides.

Mine is Juan Pablo, a keen young naturalist. In the hours before my spa treatment, he leads a group of us on a short but breathless hike into the hills just above the hotel's 24 casitas – standalone suites, each with their own arresting views.

The hotel stands at 10,500ft above sea level, meaning your pace can't be anything but leisurely. That's all the better for catching sight of a tiny mountain hummingbird, flitting through the branches of a eucalyptus tree while swallows dart overhead. Jagged, snow-capped peaks appear from behind the clouds. And as we're set so far back from the main road, the only sounds are the

SPIRITUAL HIGH: The Sacred Valley of the Incas and, below, a brightly dressed young local with a llama



birds and the light rustle of the wind through the grass. Razor-sharp cacti line the path.

We return to the same route that evening. Juan leads us to a small bench and lights candles inside the small torches handed to our group at the start of the night hike.

As stars begin to flicker, he regales us with stories about the spirits that the Inca people who call this valley home believe in.

As if on cue, the last of the cloud clears and the night sky becomes a riot of stars and planets. Juan opens a stargazing app, helping us to pick out constellations and signs of the Zodiac.

The following morning I emerge to a totally different view. It has rained and cloud sticks to the bluffs and passes that surround the hotel. Juan is

ROOM WITH A VIEW: Mountains surround the Hacienda Urubamba, which serves local delicacies, right



THE PERUVIAN WONDERS YOU MUST NOT MISS

ISLAS BALLESTAS

Just off the southern coast, near the town of Paracas, the Islas Ballestas are renowned for their stunning wildlife. Boat trips will get you up close to Humboldt penguins, sea wolves (sea lions), blue-footed boobies (a gannet-like bird) and – between August and October – humpback whales.

MADRE DE DIOS

A tributary of the Amazon, the Madre de Dios river flows through Peru's southern rainforests. A stay at the five-star Inkaterma Amazonica includes trips out to Lake Sandoval, home to giant otters and anacondas, as well as hikes through the jungle, with guides on hand to point out tarantulas, fire ants and other exotic creepy-crawlies.

IGUITOS

The largest town in the world that is inaccessible by road, Iquitos sits where the Nanay and Itaya rivers meet the Amazon. Its vibrant streets make for a fun introduction to this northern region, with excursions on the Amazon for piranha fishing and great access to a range of luxury hotels.

ready to give us another lesson in local culture, taking us to the hotel's own chicha house.

Chicha is a famous home-brewed corn beer. The Sacred Valley is known for its hundreds of varieties of corn, with much of it finding its way into this moonshine, still sold in roadside shacks throughout the region, available wherever a red ribbon is hung on the door.

Juan throws down some dried corn and has me grind it down to dust, before adding water into a vast, terracotta jug. This concoction will be left to ferment for 24 hours, but he produces some he's made earlier. It's a pungent tippie – and not for the faint-hearted.

'This is the way of making chicha in the Sacred Valley,' he says. 'It dates from the 1100s, so it's not like Heineken!'

We explore the 3.5-hectare farm, the centre of Hacienda Urubamba's 'Earth To Table' concept. There are fields of corn, kale and carrots, with elderberries, oranges and strawberries at every turn. More than 30 crops are grown and harvested, all used in the hotel restaurant. The surplus goes to Inkaterma properties in nearby Machu Picchu and Cuzco, as well as its original hotel on the Madre de Dios River, deep in the Amazon rainforest.

That evening, having eaten Peruvian treats including trout ceviche and lomo saltado – a classic beef dish served with vegetables grown on the farm – I return to my casita sated and alive with the freshness of the cool mountain air. The wood burner in my room has been lit and I pull up a chair in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, all the better for catching another glimpse of the stars. Peru's more famous sights might pull in the crowds, but when it comes to learning about its fascinating culture surrounded by understated luxury, this little corner of the Sacred Valley of the Incas is hard to beat.