

My favourite place

Jim Al-Khalili on Peru

The theoretical physicist, broadcaster and author is exhilarated by the natural highs of the Andes



Handicraft vendors in the Colca Valley

When I was a young and struggling academic, and before the kids came along (we're talking a long time ago, as they are 28 and 16 now), my wife, Julie, and I could only afford the cheapest of beach holidays on the Med, and I would look forward to a fortnight of lazing in the sun with a Stephen King novel. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but now life is different and the world is smaller. So while the carbon footprint of long-haul air travel preys on my

conscience, rightly or wrongly it has not yet stopped me from visiting more exotic destinations.

My career has taken me to many parts of the world, but for some reason I had never been to South America until recently. As the lure of mountain trails, Andean flora and fauna, plus ceviche, lomo saltado and pisco sours, was a huge attraction, Julie and I decided to 'do' Peru.

We both enjoy hiking, but I wouldn't go so far as to say we're hard core – and a week's walking

in the Lake District two years earlier was probably not a reliable indicator of being able to cope with the Inca Trail at an altitude of 4,000m (13,123ft). So we decided to visit the beauty spots – Machu Picchu, Lake Titicaca – in a more civilised tour group.

However, what I will always find unforgettable was the long road trip north from Arequipa to Cuzco. The landscape was so utterly stunning. The Altiplano, or 'high plain', is more commonly known throughout the



Lake Titicaca

world as the Andean Plateau, where the 7,000km-long (4,350-mile) Andes mountain range is at its widest. On both sides of the road, beyond the barren hills bulging up indiscriminately over the otherwise flat ground, are impressive peaks: to your left as you drive north, like an array of giant shark's teeth, is a chain of majestic volcanoes, and to your right, in their dramatic, serrated, snow-capped splendour, are the Andes mountains themselves. The only vegetation one can see, stretching into the distance, is highland grass. This is the ichu, the staple grazing food for the herds of llamas and alpacas.

The highlight was, without doubt, our stop in the Colca Valley and its famous canyon. This was pretty much the highest point of the entire trip, and the canyon drops to a dizzying depth of 3,270m (10,728ft) – one of the deepest in the world. Getting off the bus, we were greeted by an array of locals selling their wares to the tourists: colourful displays of traditional Peruvian hats, ponchos and pan pipes. (Yes, I bought the panpipes and proceeded to practise on the bus for the rest of the trip, to the obvious 'delight' of everyone else.)

The most memorable feature of the canyon stop was seeing



Above Jim Al-Khalili and his wife Julie in Peru. Below An Andean condor



the Andean condors. These giant vultures have 10ft wingspans and rise up the canyon on thermals of warm air at certain times of the day. It takes luck and a decent camera to snap the best photos of them as they swoop over your head. We just had to remember not to move too fast in the thin air. High-altitude headaches really are rather unpleasant.

Sunfall by Jim Al-Khalili is published in paperback on 19 March (Bantam, £8.99)

Four of the best places to stay



COLCA LODGE, COLCA CANYON
From £120 per night;
colca-lodge.com

On the banks of the Colca river, this adobe-walled hotel uses geo-thermal energy, and rooms are kitted out with llama-wool blankets. Suites have terraces with valley views. There are also thermal baths and a cosy bar.

INKATERRA HACIENDA URUBAMBA, SACRED VALLEY
From £293 per night; inkaterra.com

Spanning 100 acres and surrounded by imposing green mountains, these luxury hotel rooms and casitas have breathtaking views. There is also the Mayu Spa, nestled between an organic orchard and a pepper-tree forest, and a dedicated botanical herb garden. Guests are welcome to pick their own produce.



INKATERRA LA CASONA, CUZCO
From £280 per night; inkaterra.com

The first boutique hotel in Cuzco, this old manor house was once the most exclusive address in 16th-century Peru. Beautifully restored and surrounded by cobblestoned streets, its 11 suites, all with chimneys, heated floors and extra-large bathtubs.



HOTEL B, BARRANCO, LIMA
From £124 per night; hotelb.pe

This French belle époque mansion can be found in the most romantic district of Lima, near the 'Bridge of Sighs'. It was recently fully refurbished and expanded. Some 200 beautiful art pieces adorn the lofty landings.