

Move Over, Machu Picchu: There's More to See in Peru

In recent years, Peru has engaged in a grass-roots effort to elevate Huchuy Qosqo, Waqrapukara and other archaeological sites that are just as well preserved or culturally significant as Machu Picchu itself.

By Richard Morgan

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Elvis Lexin La Torre Uñacori knows quite well that a wonder of the world often creates a less-wondrous world of waste — he is the mayor of Machu Picchu Pueblo, the gateway village to the bucket-list destination in Peru that draws millions of visitors (and their trash) each year.

Mr. La Torre shared this expertise in waste and waste management in February, at a two-day summit he organized about environmental and infrastructural advances at the Inca citadel. To 99 mayors and other municipal leaders from across Peru, Mr. La Torre spoke about a plastic bottle compactor, a glass bottle pulverizer and a processor his village developed for hotel and restaurant food scraps.

But the main goal of the summit was larger than recycling and food waste initiatives; it was about disseminating effective practices for sustainable tourism across Peru, part of a national desire to fast-track tourism development of lesser-known archaeological sites and their local villages. In recent years, the country has engaged in a grass-roots effort to elevate its vast trove of archaeological sites that are often just as well preserved or culturally significant as Machu Picchu itself.

“Machu Picchu is a wonder seen by the world. We are fortunate. But there are many wonders in Peru waiting to be seen,” Mr. La Torre said.

Local leadership like that of Mr. La Torre has filled a power vacuum in Peru, which has had seven presidents since 2016 — all from different political parties. Violent protests after its last transfer of power, in December 2022, prompted a mass evacuation of tourists from Machu Picchu and a complete shutdown of the site for 21 days.

The importance of Machu Picchu and tourism overall to Peru's economy is unquestionable. Madeleine Burns Vidaurrezaga, Peru's vice minister of tourism, said the industry in 2019 accounted for \$8.9 billion, or 3.9 percent of the country's gross domestic product, and 1.5 million jobs.

Ms. Burns said the Peruvian government in 2023 raised its annual tourism budget to \$100 million, about a 15 percent increase from \$87 million last year, then dedicated an additional \$144 million for tourism infrastructure, marketing, and support for artisans and businesses with fewer than 50 employees. In December, Ms. Burns plans to unveil a national campaign called “Peru al Natural” that will highlight Huascarán National Park and other “nature and adventure hot spots” and complement better-known sites like the Nazca Lines, the ancient geoglyphs etched into the coastal desert in Southern Peru.

“We have jewels but don't know how to use them, how to discuss them, how to share them,” Ms. Burns said, adding that her tourism models are Egypt and India, both of which have expanded their tourism offerings and infrastructures beyond the Great Pyramids and the Taj Mahal.

“We have a living culture and a living history,” said Jose Koechlin, chairman of Canatur, Peru's national tourism agency. “We're one of the cradles of civilization on the level of Egypt or Mesopotamia. But it needs un codazo suave.” A gentle nudge.

‘Challenging, but it's exciting’

In 1975, Mr. Koechlin founded Inkaterre, an ecotourism company based in Peru that now employs 600 workers across several properties.

“We can make things happen on our own terms. It's challenging, but it's exciting,” said Mr. Koechlin.

One of Mr. Koechlin's employees, Joaquín Escudero, transferred from Inkaterre's Machu Picchu hotel, where he worked as its general manager, to become general manager at Hacienda Urubamba, its property in the Sacred Valley near Cuzco, in 2014. In 2017, he founded a tourism alliance in the region that now includes 14 local restaurants, hotels, travel agencies and a clinic. The alliance recently met with local police chiefs to strategize on safety, including the creation of special patrols and the installation of security cameras for tourists and locals alike.

Mr. Escudero has lobbied the local government for better roads and sewage treatment for the whole community. “We are not living on another planet,” he said of the travel industry in Peru. “We are in the same towns. We are neighbors. I want to feel proud of my neighborhood. Pride is the magic that changes stones into world wonders.”

For some of Peru’s Indigenous Quechua people, the movement to expand tourism is also a chance for increased visibility for their ancestors and culture.

“Peru is not only Machu Picchu. It is the home of a vast empire,” said Roger Gabriel Caviades, a tour guide across the Cuzco region who is mestizo of Andean descent and who grew up speaking Quechua. “If tourists can see all of our story, we have an opportunity to exist in their hearts, not only their Instagrams.”

Mr. Caviades is especially hopeful that tourism could be developed around Waqrapukara, an Inca fortress, and Vilcabamba, the final holdout of the Inca Empire before the Spanish-led conquest in 1572.

“When someone arrives in Cuzco or even Peru, most of the names — of places, of plants, of birds, rivers and mountains — are Quechua,” Mr. Caviades said. “By sharing this knowledge with tourists, I am maintaining the cultural heritage of Quechua.”

New infrastructure to go farther afield

One of the obstacles in expanding Peru’s tourism is that many archaeological sites can be reached only by intense hikes. After a four-hour drive from the city of Cuzco, the round-trip trek from the trailhead of Capuliyoc to Choquequirao, an Inca citadel three times as large as Machu Picchu, requires four days.

Yet industry insiders are encouraged by the rapid prepandemic increase of younger tourists’ treks to Rainbow Mountain, which requires a two-hour hike after a four-hour drive from Cuzco. In 2019, government agencies reported it received a record 440,676 foreign visitors.

“Rainbow Mountain is not just a possibility,” said Ms. Burns, the vice minister of tourism. “It’s proof of other possibilities.”

To create access to those possibilities, infrastructure projects abound.

A new airport for Cuzco, one that will offer international service, is scheduled for completion in 2025. The development is expected to eliminate the need for 80-minute flights to Cuzco from Lima, the country’s capital and currently home to Peru’s only international airport. (Lima is also renovating its airport, to be completed by 2025.) Similarly, Ms. Burns said a cabled gondola to Choquequirao is being planned, to be completed by 2029.

New visitors can bring new price points. In the first eight months of 2023, the luxury hotelier Belmond’s Andean Explorer train service from Cuzco to Lake Titicaca pulled in \$1,758 per passenger, as opposed to \$327 in per-passenger revenue for its Machu Picchu-bound Hiram Bingham train, according to Carla Reyes, Belmond’s communications director for Peru.

“It’s a different way to experience and see things,” said Seema Kapur, head of Latin American travel design at the Jacada Travel agency. “But it’s not getting up at 4 a.m. or having a long day. It’s within comfort.”

This year, luxury tour group Black Tomato began itineraries to Huchuy Qosqo (a royal estate of Viracocha, the eighth Inca ruler) that include a candlelit sunset dinner by a local chef amid the ruins. The five-night package start at \$6,800 per person, without international flights.

At the same time, a visit to Machu Picchu has become a highly choreographed experience with specific arrival times, time-limited visits, roped-off areas and caps on daily visitors (now set at 4,044).

“It was almost like the Disneyfication of the Incas,” said Rachel Rucker-Schmidt, 48, a tourist from Dallas, of her Machu Picchu visit last summer. “It was like being back in Texas. Everyone was American, just a little less special. It was neat to see but had a different vibe. We had resigned ourselves to checking it off the list.”

Then her family went to Moray, a terraced farm site built by the Incas, where they encountered fewer than a dozen other tourists. “It was very intimate,” Ms. Rucker-Schmidt said. “We were often the only people there with locals.”

Her husband, Jason, 48, agreed. “I found it much more charming,” he said of Moray. “It wasn’t being presented to you in a perfect state. It’s maintained, but not to the same level as Machu Picchu. Everyone has the same photo from Machu Picchu.”

Moray and the eight-hour hikes the family completed through the Andean wilderness also resonated with their daughter, Trilby, 15. “It was more of a local point of view,” she said. “We were basically in Peru’s backyard.”

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A correction was made on Oct. 5, 2023: An earlier version of this article misspelled the given name of a traveler in Peru. Her name is Trilby Rucker-Schmidt, not Twilby.
