



FROM TOP:
A breathtaking view of the Sacred Valley;
an Inca Rail train arrives at Machu Picchu



SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Become one with nature in scenic Peru

BY BECCA HENSLEY

In Peru's **Sacred Valley**, a stretch of fertile land between the mystical capital of the Inca empire, **Cusco**, and the 15th-century Inca citadel of **Machu Picchu**, I listen to a shaman croon. He's calling out to Pachamama, an ancient Andean deity who represents Mother Earth. With her blessings, past cultures sought

to restore order to the universe. Today, local denizens continue to pay her homage, knowing that when nature gets stressed, so do the people who inhabit her. Ever willing to embrace harmony, I kneel down beside this man from a faraway village who dons a handwoven red poncho and wears an alpaca cap complete with earflaps, tassels and beads. I fall into a fast trance.

Looking around at the towering mountains and a canopy of eucalyptus trees, I don't have to be convinced that Pachamama exists. From the verdant landscape to the faint tinkling of the **Urubamba River** nearby to the buzzing of an inordinately colossal hummingbird, her presence is palpable. Still, I can't resist the shaman's invitation for a ceremonial blessing. I watch as he builds an offering composed



of flower petals, coca leaves, ribbon, shells, sugar, wine and even store-bought candy atop a white linen cloth. With each addition, he makes a benediction. Then he passes me a coca leaf to intone my intentions, transferring my anxieties and concerns to Pachamama, who, the shaman assures me, will take care of everything.

In Peru, the deity sticks with me like a guardian angel. At **Sol Y Luna Lodge & Spa**,

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Insider Tips

Used for health purposes, a tea from coca leaves is said to help visitors and locals alike with ailments from altitude sickness to tummy aches.

Check out Lima, Peru's capital, which is known as the City of Kings. It has a stunning colonial historic area and urbane neighborhoods like Miraflores, loaded with galleries, cafes and bars.

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TRAVEL
FAR

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located a few miles from the mountain town of Urubamba, she defines the place. A haven of 43 adobe casitas, painted in bright Mediterranean colors and awash with panoramic windows, the intimate resort roots deeply into the region's culture. Filled with whimsical art by Federico Bauer, the guest rooms also hold statues, murals, paintings, carpets and wall hangings that reflect nature's elements. Mestizo furniture, such as carved beds, iron chandeliers, and terrazzo tiles, lend a sense of place. Plentiful gardens flank undulating walkways. Peruvian Paso horses, known for their dancelike four-beat lateral gait, seem derived from a fairy tale.

The hotel's own acrobats perform for guests before dinner. The chef, touted for his twist on traditional Peruvian cuisine, cooks everything from guinea pigs to alpaca to corn and potatoes in a pit heated by fiery stones and topped with a cover of grass and soil. But it's the lodge's European owners who embody Pachamama's power and generosity most of all. Caring for their adopted Sacred Valley community, they have built and continue to run and fund a school for local children adjacent to the property. Guests are welcome to visit, volunteer and leave donations to support this admirable project.

While **El Valle Sagrado** has long been a stopover point between Cusco and Machu Picchu, more visitors are choosing to base here, speeding up to the remarkable World Heritage site by train. Inca Rail has a vintage, bygone feel. Whizzing along the river's banks, past terraced mountain farmland, quinoa and potato fields and ascending to **Aguas Calientes**, the train ride ends amid an emerald rain forest after just 90 minutes. Steps away is the bus stop with buses that take visitors to the jaw-dropping fortress.

While a day spent at **Machu Picchu** pierces the soul, the Sacred Valley boasts a plethora of other impressive sites. Explore the ruins of **Pisac**, **Moray** and **Ollantaytambo**. Zigzag across the quiltlike salt flats of **Maras**. And trust in Pachamama—she'll show you the way. **AM**

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