



AGE OF EMPIRES

ONE OF THE WORLD'S LAST UNTOUCHED PARADISES, PERU'S SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS OFFERS INTREPID TRAVELLERS THE CHANCE TO WALK IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ONCE-MIGHTY INCA CIVILISATION

Words: Becca Hensley



Mountain high
(clockwise from left)
Horsing, sumptuous lodgings and al fresco dining await guests of Sol y Luna Lodge & Spa

Natural beauty
(previous page) Huayna Picchu dominates the ancient landscape



I congratulate myself. I've just survived a ride on a Peruvian Paso horse, whose dance-like lateral gait made my ride through the Sacred Valley more like surviving a tango contest than enjoying a tranquil gambol through nature. I leap off my steed, immensely happy to still be in one piece.

My two-hour horseback ride through this portion of Peru ends near a tiny school. A verdant bit of terrain, flanked by soaring, snow-capped mountains, the Sacred Valley is a patch of land that flows between the mystical, ancient capital of the Inca Empire, Cusco,

and the 15th-century citadel of Machu Picchu. It holds archaeological marvels, terraced hillside pastureland, rushing rivers and timeworn villages. At a lower altitude than other touristic stops in the region, the valley has long been a place to begin a foray into Southern Peru; a spot to linger for a few days while the lungs adjust to the thinner air. The bonus, however, turns out to be that the Sacred Valley remains untouched by development. Denizens still wear cherry-red, hand-woven ponchos, handmade caps with earflaps (often topped with towering stovepiped hats in the case of females), gem-coloured coats and sturdy sandals hewn from discarded tyres.

Five-star hotels vaunt that cosy, friendly, mountain lodge feel, and chefs turn out menus planned around local ingredients. Think: guinea pig, potatoes (Peru grows 3,800 types of them) and alpaca meat. Less active visitors tend to sit on their porches or luxuriate in a spa offering indigenous treatments. As for the more athletic tourists? You'll find them stepping deeply into the landscape, whether hiking it, hang-gliding through its clouds, or driving an all-terrain vehicle on its dusty roads. Some, like me, dare to promenade through its picturesque trails atop these Paso ponies — the disco queens of the equine world.

After dismounting, I follow a small child into his brightly painted school compound. We enter a classroom where 20 kids wearing simple, well-pressed uniforms sit rapt with attention. "Good morning, how are you?" they say in unison, eager to practice their English—and proud to say it well. I visit as a guest of Sol y Luna Lodge & Spa, a haven of a hotel, wedged into a garden in the mountain town of Urubamba. Owned by a European couple, longtime residents of Peru, this Relais & Châteaux hotel consists of just 43 brightly painted adobe casitas, all kitted out with panoramic windows displaying the vista, and each awash in stunning local art.



On track to adventure
(left) Inca Rail's Presidential Car harks back to 1920s luxury

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The school, adjacent to the hotel grounds, is something the owners have given back to the community. Serving more than 150 children (many on scholarships funded by the hotel), the school makes a difference in this rural setting, where children might not have the same opportunities as their urban counterparts. Guests of the hotel can tour the school, read to the children, volunteer and leave donations for its good work. I am charmed by the throng of well-behaved children, who whisper conspiratorially under the supervision of their teacher. One of them, the only child with long, silken blonde hair, is the daughter of Sol y Luna's owners. When I see her, she's bent over a large book with a friend, engrossed in a story about Peru's history.

Time stands still in this bucolic valley, so much so that I find myself idle with pleasure. Generally, travellers come to check Machu Picchu off their bucket list, to visit sites in Cusco and to nibble the famous ceviche in seaside Lima. But recently, the secret's out. To linger in the Sacred Valley has its virtues. “You could stay here a month, and you wouldn't see everything,” says my guide as we hike through the salt flats of Maras, an uncanny patchwork of landscape where salt is collected via methods dating back thousands of years.

With abundant local markets, shoppers can have a heyday bartering for goods made by local artisans. The Sunday market in Chinchero, a quaint hamlet that seems to hover atop a mountain peak, features myriad vendors who display their woven goods and wood carvings on blankets along the main square. History buffs won't be able to get enough of the bevy of archaeological wonders in the region. The concentric circles in Moray look like a silver-laced labyrinth, and the terraced ruins in Pisac and Ollantaytambo defy the imagination.

But the truth is nobody should go to this part of Peru for the first time and not relish the UNESCO-listed site of Machu Picchu. While some may choose to tackle the arduous four-day trek known as the Inca Trail — an adventure which can include luxury tents and a caravan of staff — by far the most serene way is to ascend to the abandoned city by train. I ride up on Inca Rail, ensconced in the 1920s halcyon days of glamour and

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“AS WE CLIMB FROM THE VALLEY, THE CARRIAGE PASSES QUINOA AND POTATO FIELDS, AND BOULDER-FILLED EXPANSES ALONG THE EDGE OF A ROLLICKING RIVER”



THE GOLDEN BOOK

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Inca Rail

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Seeking sanctuary (above) Belmond Sanctuary Lodge is a popular base close to the revered Machu Picchu citadel side
The winding trail (previous page) The rail road to Machu Picchu rewards guests with spectacular landscape panoramas

grandeur of its Presidential Car. While passage in the first-class car costs much less, the exclusive Presidential Car (which can be reserved for US \$10,000 for one-party bookings) has polished wood, leather stools, its own bar and kitchen, and a complete team of staff. On the 90-minute ride from Ollantaytambo to Machu Picchu's train station, well-dressed staff serve a wine-paired, five-course meal as passengers gaze out at the changing landscape. As we climb from the valley, the carriage passes quinoa and potato fields, terraced mountain farmland, and boulder-filled expanses along the edge of a rollicking river. Suddenly, as the topography turns to rainforest, we know we are near.

Everyone says to go to Machu Picchu for sunrise, and that's an option if you stay at the Belmond Sanctuary Lodge, which stands like a threshold at the citadel's entrance. If you choose this option, take two nights at least. Hiking into the site early ensures the crowds are relatively thin, and that will place you among the limited

number of hikers allowed to ascend Huayna Picchu, the peak that flanks the old city like an emerald wall. Winding up those trails, as the Inca did before me, I am challenged, but the view trumps the effort. Standing atop the peak, next to a mountainside temple, I get an aerial view of Machu Picchu, feel the moisture of the cloud forest surround me and marvel at how the Urubamba River undulates in a way reminiscent of the snake revered so much by the Inca people.

After descending, I spend an entire day exploring the myriad rooms, buildings, nooks and crannies of the sacred city. When dusk comes and the park's gates are about to lock, I can't bear to leave. The palpable magic captures me and I linger to meditate for a moment more. Since my last visit, some of the shrines have been roped off from tourists, and my guide tells me that more and more of Machu Picchu's buildings will be off-limits in the future. With one last look, I make a decision to return once more. The sooner, the better. ■