

THE HIGH LIFE

ESCAPING THE CROWDS
IN THE INCA HEARTLAND

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OPENING PAGE: hikers on the Salkantay Trek; **LEFT:** the citadel of Machu Picchu dates back to the 15th century

EACH DAY, 500 PEOPLE SET OUT ON THE INCA TRAIL TO MACHU PICCHU, MAKING IT THE MOST FAMOUSLY TRAVERSED TRACK IN SOUTH AMERICA. THE LESSER-KNOWN ROAD TO THE CITADEL, THE LARES TRAIL, OFFERS A CROWD-FREE ALTERNATIVE

DESPITE BEING A SEASONED TRAVELLER to Latin America, I've somehow managed to avoid visiting Peru. So when a window of opportunity to fill this hole in my travel experience presented itself, I jumped at the chance to embrace my inner Inca spirit.

A prerequisite of my trip was some trekking; I was planning to be at one with Peru and what better way to do that than by immersing myself in the spectacular Andean scenery on foot? As I perused the options, I couldn't help wondering whether a preconceived notion of waterlogged boots nestling sore toes or the thought of being just one of 500 on a conveyer-belt of trekkers on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu had deterred me thus far.

It's easy to get confused when talking about the Inca Trail. The Incas built a highly advanced network of nearly 40,000 kilometres of trails to connect the distant corners of their vast empire, which stretched from Quito in Ecuador to Santiago in Chile and east to Mendoza in Argentina. Cuzco was at the heart of this great empire and almost all of the principal trails in the mountains that surround the city were either built or improved upon by the Incas.

Over the past 30 years, one of these ancient walkways—a particularly beautiful 43-kilometre section of mountain trail that connects the important Inca archaeological sites of Runcuracay, Sayacmarca, Phuyupatamarca and Machu Picchu—has become popular with hikers and is now known as the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. In response to this popularity, the authorities have been forced to control access to this section of the Inca Trail; all guides must be licensed and only a limited number of trekking permits are issued.

Old and new

ONE ALTERNATIVE to the Inca Trail is a more strenuous seven-day hike via Salkantay, a beautiful snow-capped mountain. The Salkantay Trek is famous for its scenery, which is widely considered to surpass that of the Inca Trail. The hike ascends to imposing glaciers and then drops down through lush valleys carpeted with coffee plantations, before rising again into the high jungle. On this trek, hikers have a better chance of seeing larger mammals such as foxes, deer, chinchillas and even spectacled bears, and the plant life is more varied.

I consider myself to be a moderate trekker and had no intention of taking on a trip of the Bear Grylls variety, so the option of a five-day Lares adventure to Machu Picchu piqued my interest. The Lares trail is a great option for those keen to experience the stunning beauty and rich culture of the Andes while taking the “road less-travelled”. Authentic encounters with Quechua communities and the spectacular scenery impart the trek with a wonderful blend of tradition and splendour.

Facing a multi-connection journey from Sydney, I decided to include a rest stop in the Peruvian capital, Lima. Old and new collide to both contrast and complement in Lima, the city a blend of sophisticated metropolitan streets, colonial facades and ancient temples. Some of the city's buildings date back more than five centuries and its stately museums are filled with relics of Peru's Inca past. However, Lima is also where you'll find the best of a Peru that's increasingly confident of its 21st-century style. The bohemian Barranco district is a hotbed of hip art galleries tucked between laidback lounges serving sophisticated riffs on the ubiquitous Pisco sour. Lima is also creeping onto the global fine-dining radar, with world-class restaurants melding local and international cuisines.

From Lima, it was a one-hour flight onwards to the Inca capital, Cuzco. Situated at an impressive 3,399 metres above sea level, Cuzco is the 12th-highest city in South America. Travellers to the region are often urged to spend a couple of days here to acclimatise to the high altitude.

The terracotta-roofed city sprawls along the Watanay River valley, its striking architecture reflecting the distinct periods of Peruvian history, combining solid pre-Columbian stone structures, Baroque colonial Spanish churches and squat, whitewashed contemporary houses. Walking along the narrow streets, I passed impressive Incan buildings built from huge blocks of precisely cut and shaped stone that fit perfectly without mortar, interspersed with small businesses trading from dimly lit stores. And I couldn't help but be impressed by the Plaza de Armas, a lively courtyard overlooked by the 17th-century Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin, otherwise known as Cuzco Cathedral, where I joined locals sipping their mate de coca.

Unlikely tribe

IT WAS IN CUZCO that I met my fellow trekkers. Our party consisted of two expert guides, two team assistants, a well-researched “baby boomer” British couple, a Brazilian mother with her teenage daughter, my good self and hiking gurus Frank and Alice from New Jersey, USA.

Peru’s visitor demographics have changed significantly over the past decade; the country is no longer the sole preserve of budget-friendly backpackers. A discerning, more mature market is discovering Peru and demanding travel options that fit with its boutique style of travel.

As our unlikely tribe sipped coca-leaf tea at our briefing, we quickly discovered that the one element we had in common was our delight at the thought that after each day’s hike we could look forward to beautiful bedrooms, Michelin-inspired cuisine, hot showers and the odd bubbling Jacuzzi—all nestled high above the clouds in our eco-friendly mountain lodges, several of which had been established as cooperatives with the local communities.

The next day, a two-hour drive took us into the heart of the Lares region, climbing higher and higher along a narrowing road to our first trekking spot. As we all marvelled at the spectacular scenery unfolding around

us, our guide shared detailed accounts of the significance of the surroundings.

Sunshine poured across the Andes as we embarked on a moderate climb to the Challwaccasa Pass. Then, after the photographic opportunities had been exhausted, we commenced a downhill trek to the village of Viacha, where we indulged in a barbecued-guinea-pig lunch and a further trek to the hilltop Inca fortress at Pisac.

The topography was diverse as we passed through rich pastoral regions, traversing mountain valleys and stopping to enjoy scenic lagoons and Inca ruins. A cold Cusqueña (Peru’s premium beer) awaited us upon arrival at Lamay Mountain Lodge in the late afternoon.

Wide eyes

THANKS TO A RESTFUL SLEEP and a hearty breakfast, we were well prepared for the next day’s adventure—a visit to the remote and rarely visited mountain village of Choquecancha. A 14-niched Inca wall lines the square of this small, ancient village, where barter is still the main currency and wide eyes welcomed our unfamiliar faces.

Upon arrival, we were immediately whisked up a dirt track and welcomed into the home of the village’s matriarch.



LEFT: the city of Cuzco and the famous Plaza de Armas; **ABOVE:** hikers enjoy a well-earned drink at the Lamay Mountain Lodge

Under an archway adorned with colourful mountain flowers, she kissed each of us on the cheek and then went back to work at her loom, pushing and pulling a mass of colourful threads as she created her next woven masterpiece.

Taking time to wander the cobbled streets, where wayward piglets scuttled past as if on important business, I was overwhelmed by the feeling that time has stood still for this village. Children’s faces beamed as we handed them sweet pastries and we received nods of approval from village elders in exchange for coca leaves. Observing and interacting with the people of Choquecancha, where relationships with one another and the land are so powerful that they permeate every conversation, was a truly humbling experience.

That evening, our base camp was Huacahuasi Lodge, which is nestled on the edge of the remote mountain village from which it takes its name. We were all delighted to discover that each of the guest rooms comes complete with an outdoor hot tub in which we could soak our weary bones while soaking up the awe-inspiring mountain scenery. The lodge was formed as a commercial partnership with the local community, whereby community members receive a quarter stake in the business in exchange for the use of the land.

Heart and soul

AS WE DEPARTED the lodge the next day and continued along the trail, climbing higher and higher, the traditional stone huts with their smoking chimneys poking through thatched roofs slowly began to stretch farther and farther apart. The trail-side weavers and their colourful handicraft displays disappeared and eventually, it was just us and the llamas as we approached the 4,450-metre Ipsayjasa Pass. The skies began to darken and the clouds dropped down, obscuring the gorgeous panorama that surrounded us. The mood was both foreboding and spectacular.

Thankfully, the weather held off and we made it to our tented lunch unscathed. Over the course of our trek, these tented lunches were always a welcoming beacon of hospitality. Hot soups, trout farmed in high lakes, mashed purple potatoes, stir-fries, wine-poached pears, barbecued guinea pig and chicken, sweet fruit and teas all appeared just as we were beginning to flag.

Refreshed and revived, we continue on, passing another herd of llamas, more alpacas, dogs and women in brightly coloured outfits and hats weaving among the clouds. We soon reached the so-called Sacred Valley, which stretches





The mountain camp at
Huacahuasi Lodge;



ABOVE: the village matriarch greets travellers in Choquecancha;
OPPOSITE: exploring the fortress at Ollantaytambo

from the village of Písac to the larger settlement of Ollantaytambo.

The Sacred Valley was the heart and soul of an empire that, from the 13th century, stretched out from Cusco to cover a enormous swathe of South America. Before the Spanish conquistadors destroyed the Inca dynasty during the mid-16th century, its governed territory covered an area the size of Western Europe.

Rollicking ride

WE STARTED OUR EXPLORATION of the valley with the impressive ruins near Písac, before moving on to Ollantaytambo's striking fortress. It's thought that Písac was built to defend the Sacred Valley's southern entrance and the fortress at Ollantaytambo the northern.

Dating from the late 15th century, Ollantaytambo boasts some of South America's oldest continuously occupied dwellings. It's also considered to be one of the best remaining examples of Incan urban planning and engineering. Its steep terraces provide protection for the town and fortress, and several historical records suggest that the Spanish lost a major battle here during their conquest of the region in around 1532.

Ollantaytambo is also one of the most common starting points for the Inca Trail, and an hour on the train took us to Aguas Calientes, just below Machu Picchu. At 4.30am the

following day, with dawn approaching, we wasted no time beginning our journey to the ancient citadel with a rollicking uphill bus ride. As we entered the sanctuary, the sun rose over the iconic Sun Gate, washing the structures and terraces with resplendent light. Awed by the skilful architecture of the numerous watchtowers, the Temple of the Sun, and the royal Inca residences, we each took a moment to quietly sit and listen to the wind and absorb the mystical energy.

The citadel of Machu Picchu was a complex of palaces and plazas, temples and homes; however, it's unclear whether it was built for religious purpose, as a military stronghold, or as a summer retreat for Incan rulers. The ruins sit on a high ridge at about 2,500 metres above sea level, surrounded on three sides by the Urubamba some 600 metres below.

The city's construction, which began during the 15th century, was commissioned by the emperor Pachacuti. Its unique architecture and design point to the great importance of the June and December solstices to Inca culture; many of the structures are designed to catch the sun's rays on one or both of those days.

The Inca Empire came to a rather rapid end when diseases inadvertently introduced by the Spanish and local in-fighting, wiped out an estimated two thirds of the population around the mid-1500s. According to historians, Machu Picchu was likely abandoned at around the same time, probably because of the high cost of maintenance and the various conflicts.

Time travel

THE MINIVAN DRIVE that returned us to Cuzco that evening was a quiet one; some of us were lost in sombre contemplation of the end of our adventure, others were simply exhausted from the spectacle of Machu Picchu, but we all shared a sense of having been enriched by our experiences along the Lares Trail.

Hiking the Lares Trail is all about being in the mountains with all of the time that you never seem to have, time in which to think, to wonder at nature and to marvel at Inca history. The region's remoteness has allowed its people to preserve traditions of llama and alpaca herding, potato cultivation and colourful weaving that date back to the Incas. The lifestyles and customs of these hardy people haven't changed for generations. Even today, the villagers offer a warm hospitality and welcome—in fact, it's often from the people that trekkers take their fondest memories.

When not traversing the seven continents, **NEIL RODGERS** heads up specialist travel company Adventure World.

