



# PEAKING IN PERU

High in the clouds in the Andean mountains, **Roberto Serrini** gets a taste of two worlds: one where ancient cultures still thrive and another that values a touch of luxury after a long day exploring.

Photography by **Roberto Serrini**

Looking over the city of Cusco.

You won't find Choquecancha in a guidebook or reviewed on TripAdvisor. It hasn't got a listing on Wikipedia and it's almost impossible to locate on a map. This ancient Inca town is the home of Quechua people, who live within the walls their ancestors built.

"Quickly, this way." Our guide Alvaro waves us through a wooden door. Inside three women sit on the floor weaving. "Look here, see this pattern? What do you see?" Alvaro picks up the end of an almost complete piece of fabric. It looks like a little man with his arms raised. "That is Túpac Amaru, the last Inca. If you look closely you will see he is being stretched. Here, he is attached to four horses. The Spanish forbade the Inca to record their history, so they developed a way to weave it into their fabrics. Each stitch tells a story, passed on through generations."

This is day three of a week-long Lares Adventure hosted by Mountain Lodges of Peru. Early this morning we'd left Lamay Lodge and jumped on mountain bikes to race along dirt paths, over streams and through fields. Now we're learning about ancient traditions still relevant in the twenty-first century. That's the point of Mountain Lodges' trips – they blend cultural exploration with outdoor activity where snow-capped peaks and herds of llamas are the backdrop. Each day, guests are able to choose their own adventure. Some days we get to travel in a comfortable air-conditioned van; others we'll walk or, like today, ride a bike. It all comes to a head with one of Peru's iconic rail journeys.

I'd arrived in Cusco, the Peruvian city sitting 3400 metres above sea level, just 72 hours previously, armed with a number of suggested remedies to counteract the effects of altitude sickness, ranging from Diamox to coca tea. Instead I decided an all-night session of drinking and dancing might cure what ailed me. It seemed to work. The next evening, having spent the day climbing to Cristo Blanco on Pukamayo Hill, tasting the local delicacy *cuy* (that's guinea pig to you and me, roasted whole until its skin is burned to a crisp) and exploring the rest of the city, I met the seven other people with whom I'm to spend the next week exploring the land of the Inca.

The Inca who settled the rugged, beautiful Sacred Valley were extremely productive in creating a culture that would withstand the ravages of time. They were so successful, in fact, parts of it survived the brutal conquest by the Spanish, who tried to erase them from the planet.

We visit well-known sights, like the market town of Pisac, which sits beneath ruins, and the thriving salt mines of Maras. As you approach

Maras its pastel-coloured, naturally fed salt ponds cascade down the mountainside like a lost Cézanne. Then there's Moray, a series of a dozen or so otherworldly concentric circles etched into a hillside. The depth and orientation of the terraces mean there's a temperature difference of as much as 15°C between the top and bottom. It's thought this was some kind of laboratory where the Incas would take wild vegetation and acclimatise it to growing at altitude.

While days are spent discovering Andean culture, evenings get luxurious at two five-star custom-built lodges complete with five-course dining, massages and hot tubs. It's enough to knock off your hiking boots. The first, a modern ranch with artistic flair called Lamay Lodge, has all the amenities one might expect from luxury digs. Huancahuasi is even more exquisite. After our day spent exploring Choquecancha we take a long van ride to a lush valley dissected by a meandering stream. Quaint homes are strung along its edges and we can see people herding alpacas. In the distance, there's a cascading waterfall. Then we see the lodge, hanging over the edge of the valley. We go as far as we can in the van, before being relieved of our luggage and walking the final leg. According to our guide, this is one of only five hotels in the world accessible only by foot. It's worth it. The foyer is framed with glass, so it feels as if you are floating above the valley. Thick mist and clouds begin to roll in, creating

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the perfect scene to view from the hot tubs on the balcony of each room. But, first, there's the small question of a massage.

Some days the group splits and, on one occasion, when some venture off to hike to mountain lakes, the rest of us head to Huancahuasi. For most tourists there is no reason to ever visit this village. It's tiny, there's no museum, and its remoteness makes getting to it difficult. Which, for me, is why it's one of the highlights of the trip. This town never sees travellers other than guests of Mountain Lodges. Huancahuasi and the company have a symbiotic relationship. The people who work at the lodge live here. They are trained by Mountain Lodges in management, guest services and hospitality and are given jobs and benefits. What's more, half of the proceeds from tours go to the people of the town. When you realise you can have this level of style, comfort and sophistication while supporting the local community, it becomes a wake-up call about what tourism should be.

We are invited into homes, offered meals and introduced to families and their friends. We're also laughed at when we bang our heads on the low ceilings and doors. It's a lot like visiting very distant cousins from a family you never knew you had.



A tiny church stands watch over the Sacred Valley.



Ancient hands weave stories into fabric.



Going off trail near Huancahuasi to visit a waterfall.



The pastel tones of Maras salt mines.





The train ride to Aguas Calientes runs alongside the Urubamba River.



Outside the church at Choquecancha.

Then we visit the local school. Much like anywhere else in the world, children are sitting around desks, colourful drawings hang on classroom walls and alphabet cards line the hallways. What I find remarkable, though, is the way the children are dressed in traditional, handmade garments.

We share some bread rolls we've brought with us, then head off, the children trailing behind us.

Eventually they go back to school and we keep walking past a stream and alpacas grazing on lush grass, before reaching the base of a waterfall where the gushing spray creates a series of rainbows all around us. A few brave souls climb to its head for a view of the valley. I feel as though I'm at the edge of the world.

Overnighting in Ollantaytambo, the oldest continually inhabited city in South America, brings us back to the real world. Dating back to the fifteenth century this was the royal estate of the Inca; today it's the connector between Machu Picchu to the west and Pisac to the east. Walking the city is a strange experience. It's both modern and ancient, as if someone put a shopping mall inside Rome's Colosseum. Alleyways are packed with apartments and shops, some of which have

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been occupied in the same manner for more than 500 years. Terraces surround the town, creating a series of microclimates that allowed the Inca to farm a variety of produce. Streams and a still-functioning system of aqueducts deliver water to the town and up to the Inca ruins. Tour buses pass slowly through the narrow streets, and throngs of tourists from all corners of the earth try not to trip on the cobblestones while looking up to the amazing terraces.

The city also has a train station and we're using it to get to our final destination: Aguas Calientes, the town below Machu Picchu. Inside the train, windows curve into the ceiling for all-round views – there's even a bar cart that wobbles through the aisles.

It's impossible not to feel as if we are time travelling to a place far more adventurous.

Arriving in Aguas Calientes is a shock to the system. The town is manic and doesn't resemble anything we've seen in the past week. Restaurants trumpeting all sorts of national cuisines crowd every space, and a large plaza seems to be the depository for every tourist trickling down the mountainside. Street vendors and the proprietors of small shops all bark for the attention of people strolling past. We are a long



Luxury meets a rugged landscape.

Ollantaytambo's massive terraces, built by the Inca emperor Pachacuti in the mid-fifteenth century.

way from the quiet authenticity of Huancahuasi and it seems the closer we get to the famed Machu Picchu the less like Peru it feels.

Even though we're up at the crack of dawn there is already a long line for Machu Picchu. Luckily we are one of the first groups, and our guide knows the path to take once inside to get ahead of the meandering crowds. We make a beeline to a central plateau to take in the view of this incredible city carved into the sides of mountain. You can't imagine how on earth anyone built this or even discovered it.

"Most people know that Machu Picchu was discovered in 1911 by a Yale professor named Hiram Bingham," says our guide Raul. "What most people don't know is that they are wrong. How did a professor from Yale know to come here, when the Spanish, who conquered this entire region, couldn't even find this place?"

"He wasn't the first?" one of the group offers. "Exactly."

The story goes that an American mining company representative auditing the area asked about a mine owned by a German named Augusto Berns that showed some very promising yields. There was only one problem – when he went to visit the mine it wasn't there.

Asking around, the auditor heard from locals about an Inca city, high in the mountains, that was taken over by the forest. He figured out Augusto had discovered it and was pillaging gold artefacts, melting them and shipping the loot home. Enter our pal Hiram Bingham. Tipped off by the auditor Hiram made a very educated guess (he was led there by locals) and 'discovered' the site. The rest is history.

Raul shows us around, explaining the way the Incas used cracks in the stone to chip off great chunks, the way they moved them with a series

of logs, and even how they carved them so they seamlessly interlocked. We stop at a strange-looking stone jutting out of the ground.

Raul tells me to open the compass app on my iPhone. The points of the stone line up with the compass points. "They had no compasses, but they knew north," he explains. "If you look to the east what do you see?" In the distance is a gap between two mountain peaks. "That gap is about 1500 metres from here and it is exactly where the sun sets during fall equinox."

Just as I gather my grey matter from the ground, Raul asks me to open the spirit level on my phone and hold it up against a wall. The measurement reads 13.9 degrees.

"Put it against another wall," Raul says. Again it's 13.9 degrees. Yet another is 13.9 degrees.

"Wow, that's amazing," I say.

"Is it? Is it amazing that considering they had no tools of measurement as far as we know they could build a series of walls all with the exact same angle?"

We all agree it is. "It's not," continues Raul. "What is really amazing is that Machu Picchu sits at exactly 13 degrees and nine minutes latitude on the globe." He then just walks away. It's the perfect mic drop.

Later in the day, back in a bar in Aguas Calientes, I thank Raul for a memory that will never leave me. "I'll be taking Machu Picchu home in my heart," I say. "What does Machu Picchu mean anyway?"

"Old penis," says Raul, not looking up from his beer. I just stare at him, but he isn't kidding. "That's why it is important to say it the correct way – Machu Picchu, with two c's. That means 'old mountain'. Big difference."

I'm not saying the Inca could see into the future, but that is one hell of a good set-up. ☺

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

LATAM Airlines flies from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to Cusco via Auckland, Santiago and Lima. Return flights from Sydney start at about AU\$1715. [latam.com](http://latam.com)



STAY THERE

If you decide to spend more time in Cusco, the JW Marriot El Convento Cusco is a bit like a museum in the city centre, within walking distance of many points of interest. There are 153 luxury rooms in the converted sixteenth-century convent, with some overlooking a restored courtyard. Double rooms start at about AU\$230 a night. [marriott.com.au](http://marriott.com.au)



TOUR THERE

Mountain Lodges of Peru offers a number of treks and tours exploring the jaw-dropping landscapes and unique culture while touring from one luxury lodge to the next. The seven-day Lares Adventure has regular departure dates between March and December. Prices in 2017 start at about AU\$4100 (twin share) and include transfers, accommodation, most meals, guide and activities. [mountainlodgesofperu.com](http://mountainlodgesofperu.com)



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