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UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE ANDES

Exploring Lares and The Sacred Valley
with Mountain Lodges of Peru.

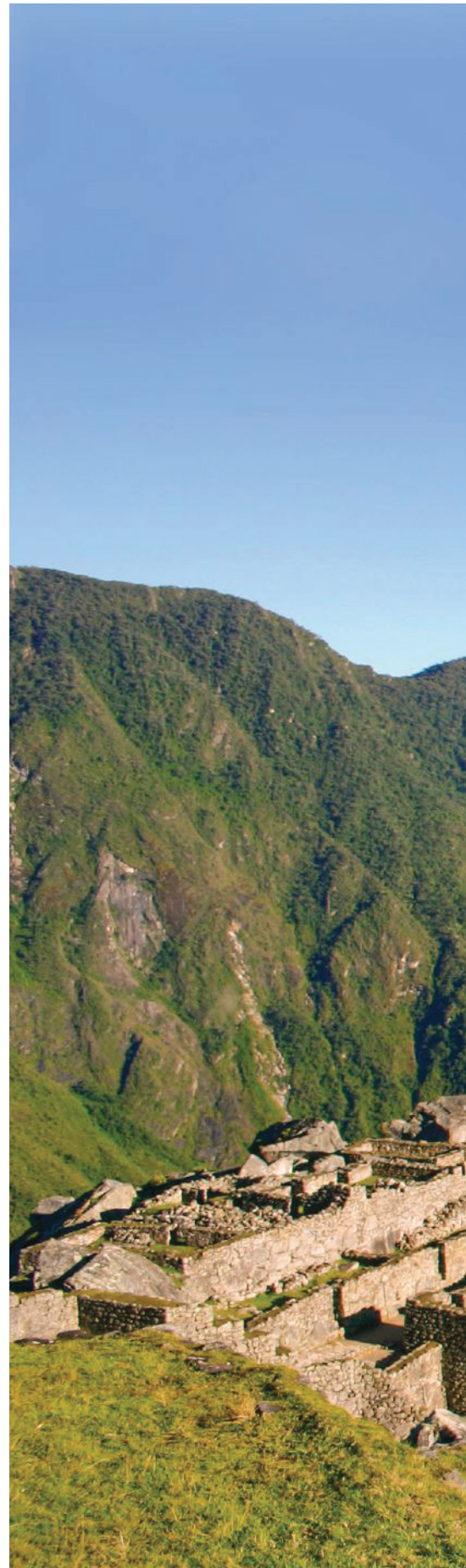
BY FREDRIC HAMBER

At least a couple of times each day on my journey through the Sacred Valley with expert guides from Mountain Lodges of Peru, I would feel the childlike fun of solving a puzzle, a “guess-what” or “spot-the-pattern” sort of thing.

It would happen, for example, when gazing at a group of Incan structures—temples, stairways, and storehouses—which, when viewed in toto from the vantage point my guide was demonstrating, mimicked the silhouette of a llama in repose. Or when encountering a passion fruit in the village market and trying to apply my new knowledge to determine which type of passion fruit it was—a tumbo? A granadilla? A maracuyá?

Although the mountains and ruins of the Andes contain secrets that will remain forever so—stories as irrevocably lost as the tens of thousands of pounds of finely crafted Incan gold and silver objects melted down by the Spaniards in the 1530s—plenty of treasures remain to be discovered in this storied region.

My itinerary, called “Sacred Valley and Lodges Adventure,” was a five-day lodge-to-lodge program that consisted of a cultural immersion into mountain communities where the traditional ways of life are practiced as they have been for many centuries.



Machu Picchu is an Incan citadel set high in the Andes Mountains of Peru, above the Urubamba River valley. Built in the 15th-century and later abandoned, it's renowned for its sophisticated dry-stone walls that fuse huge blocks without the use of mortar, intriguing buildings that play on astronomical alignments and panoramic views. Its exact former use remains a mystery.





PHOTO: FREDRIC HAMBER





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Cusco's layered history features Spanish Colonial churches established on sites sacred to pre-Inca peoples. Distinctive architecture is found throughout the Lares Valley. Daily hikes in the Andes mountains include guides with knowledge of local nature, history, and culture. Contemporary accommodations in unique settings offer relaxation at day's end.

Picchu on the next-to-last day of the trip, I was already adept at identifying some rudimentary elements of the stone structures. I could glance at a doorway, for instance, and know from the double- or triple-thickness of the entryway that it had been used for a more sacred or important purpose than the single-layered doorways of purely utilitarian buildings.

There were hikes each day. The itinerary offers a choice of moderate or more strenuous options depending on one's preference. In the late afternoons my duffel bag traveled with me to the next destination

by van, or, for the last leg of the journey, aboard Inca Rail's Voyager Machu Picchu Train, featuring plush seats and meal service.

Each lodge in the MLP group has its unique charms and amenities. At Lamay Lodge I soaked in a hot tub at sundown while a couple of llamas on the property regarded me with disinterest. At Huacahuasi, there are individual hot tubs on the patios of each guest room, and one building houses a couple of massage rooms. In the upstairs guest rooms at El Retablo in

Along the banks of the Urubamba River, I saw Andean geese and yellow-billed pintails. Above the Patachancha Valley, I was welcomed by villagers as they prepared to slaughter a sheep, performing a prayerful ritual that has been handed down through generations. At the marketplace of Cusco, I hefted bags of canchita and sniffed bundles of palo santo wood. In the town of Písac, I tasted fresh bread, still warm from an oven that has been in use for 160 years, and visited the botanical garden lush with pear trees, trumpet flowers, jasmine, orchids, and cantata blossoms, the national flower of Peru.

In the village of Choquecancha, I watched women setting their alpaca yarn to dye in a steaming hot pot of water infused with cochineal. Then I sat down to a lunch that began with wine and ceviche and ended with a cinnamon-scented purple corn pudding. After lunch, a local named Valentin (who resembled a gaunt Humphrey Bogart) did a coca leaf reading of my future, spreading the leaves out on a table as we sat opposite each other and spoke through a Quechua interpreter.

It wasn't just coca leaves but also the stars of the night sky that were on the curriculum. Mountain Lodges of Peru has an astro-archaeologist on staff who has made a career of studying how Inca and pre-Inca civilizations used astronomy in their architecture and urban planning. After-dinner talk included tidbits of native South American folklore and cosmology.

As a result of this preparation, by the time I arrived at Machu



Cusco, you can giddily fling open your window shutters in the morning to gaze out at the sunlit rooftops and churches of the whole city. But El Retablo was the one place where I preferred the view of indoors, as the white walls (and ceilings, and headboards) had been painted by a local artist in a dizzying floral explosion of royal blues and berry reds and saturated yellows.

Peru has been home to fusion cuisine throughout its history as the Spanish Colonial invaders met the bounty of the Americas, which in that region means *lúcuma* fruit, corn, amaranth, quinoa, a few thousand types of potatoes, guinea pig, and, of course, Pacific Ocean seafood. It was fun to learn that the word *jerky* came to English originally from a native Quechua word adapted by the Spanish in Peru. Chinese immigrants arrived in 1849 and the Japanese in 1899, and the local culinary vocabulary has incorporated both cultures.

Of course, a visit to Peru will begin and end in the capital city of Lima. Casa Republica, located on a quiet street in the Barranco district, is a 1920's mansion that has been revitalized as a stylish and serene 22-room hotel. High ceilings, walls left uncluttered and painted a hue of grey that the French call *gris gratin*, and a rooftop bar with a view over the Pacific make it a perfect cocoon of a spot to relax after a flight and before setting out to explore the nearby galleries and restaurants.

My arrangements were hosted by Chimu Adventures, which creates tailor-made itineraries in Lima (and elsewhere in South America), handling everything from airport welcome transfers to hotel and restaurant reservations. They introduced me to Astrid & Gaston, a Relais & Châteaux restaurant with delicious, haute Peruvian fare.

At the end of the meal, the charming Astrid sauntered out with a custom-designed wooden box and proceeded to open a series of drawers and compartments to reveal an assortment of chocolates that she offered to me and my dining companions. She pointed to each variety in turn—another “guess-what” moment—explaining which ones contained dulce de leche or which ones were made, she explained, “with cocoa from the Ica region where the Nazca lines are. The green one is a cocoa truffle that has huacatay, which is a spice herb from the Andes”

It went on for a couple of minutes. I took a dark chocolate cordial containing a mini-shot of Pisco and toasted another memorable moment of an unforgettable adventure. ♦



PHOTO: FREDRIC HAMBER





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
The spacious gardens of Lamay Lodge in the Sacred Valley of Peru. The work of Peruvian artisans is a design feature throughout El Retablo hotel in Cusco. Casa Republica boutique hotel in Lima's Barranco district was originally a 1920's mansion. Mountain Lodges of Peru offers a cultural immersion into village life.