

As South America becomes an increasingly popular tourist destination, **Dominic Hamilton** gives a guided tour of some of Peru's outstanding natural and archaeological heritage. Photography by **Henry Dallal**

**D**eep in the highland valleys of Peru's majestic Cordillera Blanca, thousands of metres above sea level, peasants are already in the fields or on the roads hours before the sun climbs above the snow-capped eastern ranges. They chivy their sheep, llamas or cattle, dressed in crimson ponchos and wraps that shine bright in the morning mist. One thousand kilometres to the south, an Aymara Indian pushes his reed boat out onto the glassy surface of Lake Titicaca, chatting to his son, who paddles at the bow. At the same time, around 300 kilometres to the northeast, Ese'ija Indians in the tenebrous rainforests of the Tambopata are gathered around fires, recounting their dreams of the night before and gently coaxing the embers back to life, while fishermen on the Pacific coast some 600 kilometres west are bringing in their catch, freeing fish from the hectares of nets that pile up on the sand in languid loops. In Peru, you can greet the day in 100 different ways, in 100 different places, hundreds of kilometres apart. The choice is never easy, and sleeping in is never an option.

# A new dawn for Peru



## Machu Picchu - the main facts

The name Machu Picchu is derived from 'old' or 'ancient' mountain. It was built in the mid-15th century by Inca ruler Emperor Pachacuti, from 250 million-year-old granite rocks, and sits at an altitude of 2,492 metres.

From the layout of the buildings it is clear that it was an important religious site as well as an agricultural growing centre. It has more than 100 flights of steps that connect its palaces, temples, terraces and storehouses.

The Temple of the Sun displays some of the best examples of Inca architecture. From a window adjoining the temple it is possible to see the June solstice and also the Pleiades constellation, which the Incas used as an agricultural calendar to help farmers plan which crops to plant during the year.



**Below and bottom:** alpaca wool has been used in textile-making for hundreds of years. Traditional cloth is made on portable 'backstrap' looms, using sticks, ropes and a wrist strap – hence the name



the light. Such was the Incas' grasp of the natural world, and their reverence for the sun.

The Spanish showed no such reverence towards Sacsayhuamán. After puppet king Manco Capac II rebelled against the Spanish and made his last stand at the site, the conquistadors tore nearly all of it down. Most of the blocks were put to use in their constructions in Cusco below.

The city one sees today is a unique hybrid of Inca and Spanish, American and European. Although the Spanish razed many of the constructions they found, they also put them to good use. In places, they left the earthquake-resistant Inca foundations and plonked their houses, palaces and churches on top. The result looks something like an architectural ice-cream cone. Nowhere is this more evident than at the Qorikancha, the Inca Temple of the Sun, which has to suffer the indignity of having the Dominicans' baroque effort squatting on half its site and its finest stonemasonry.

**T**he Qorikancha was the centre of the Inca empire – Tawantinsuyo – which stretched from northern Chile to southern Colombia. It was the

largest empire ever seen in the Americas, and yet it rose and fell within little more than two centuries.

When the conquistadors arrived after their long trek down from the north – where they had captured and then killed the Inca emperor Atahualpa – they were stunned by the city they encountered. To the Incas, Cuzco was more than just the empire's capital, it was the symbolic heart and navel of their world. From it radiated the four quarters of Tawantinsuyo, imaginary lines coursing from the Qorikancha for thousands of kilometres, linking every geographical landmark and person to the empire. It was also a Mecca for the newly conquered peoples. The Incas co-opted tribes with great skill and alacrity as they expanded their territory. These new tribes had to be indoctrinated rapidly into the Inca's religious, economic and social systems. Cuzco's brilliance, its shining temples to the sun and to the elements, its nobles' palaces, plumed priests and stunning setting all worked to this end.

The Inca's intended magnificence is as potent today. It takes a very jaded and unimaginative traveller to fail to be charmed by this red-tiled



**Above:** some of the Inca's beautiful terracing escaped the ravages of the Spanish invasion and remains intact today; **Right:** the contoured landscape at Pisac



It might not be dawn as the guard lets me in to the ruins of the fortress of Sacsayhuamán, but I'm still the first one there at 7am. I masochistically decided to hike up to the ruins, which dominate the city of Cusco in southern Peru from their hilltop perch. The altitude gets to me at the best of times, and at 6 o'clock in the morning, I'm wheezing like an old nag. But the effort seems worthwhile. The site is deserted.

The walls of stones glow. Shadows recede as the sun edges higher into the sky, until finally it arcs into iridescent blue where the morning sun bites through the chill of the Andean morning.

Three rows of stone walls run in tiers one above another, facing south. The rows are positioned in a zig-zag pattern, representing jaguar's teeth, the ruins

symbolising the head of this sacred and revered animal, with the city of Cusco itself laid out as the beast's body by the Incas more than 600 years ago. The limestone, diorite and andesite stones are huge, seemingly set down by giants. Single, leviathan blocks at the outer points of the zig-zags tower three times the height of a man. The largest weighs as much as 360 tonnes. The stones were fitted together without mortar, but with such precision you can't stick a knife blade between them.

The light plays tricks with the rocks' relief. Rows change form as the morning light strengthens and intensifies. A mythical snake, symbol of the third underworld level in the Incas' cosmology, emerges magically. Other symbols are only visible at certain times, appearing then disappearing at the whim of

**Top:** a riding tour rests at Sacsayhuamán. **Trekking is a growth industry in Peru and, increasingly, tour operators are offering trips to the more remote high Andes and cloud forest regions on horseback as well as on foot**



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city, 3,200 metres up in the Andes. More than half the visitors who enter the country pass through Cuzco, many of them staying for up to a week. The churches and museums of the colonial quarter take days to explore in any depth, while alleyways and narrow streets feed off every square, beckoning visitors to explore them. Unassuming doorways lead into unexpectedly large patios. Above eye-level, handsome balconies hang, clamped to the two-storied whitewashed walls like gum shields. One could walk the streets for days, months even, and still make new discoveries.

Cuzco is, without doubt, the gringo capital of the Americas. It makes you realise that tourism in Peru really is an industry. Every street leading to the main Plaza de Armas teems with services for the traveller, whether it be agencies, laundries, hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops or internet cafés. The *South American Handbook* lists a place to stay for nearly every week of the year in Cuzco alone. The city of 300,000, always a bit of a provincial backwater, has dusted off its illustrious past and is enjoying a new golden age.



**Above and below:** Chinchero, the 'Village of the Rainbow', lives up to its name by hosting a colourful market every Sunday which is dominated by local women in traditional dress; **Right:** military pageants are a common sight in town squares



Of course, Cuzco also happens to be where tourists join the three-hour train ride to the continent's most famous archaeological site, Machu Picchu. Built in the mid-15th century, the ruins are thought to have been a religious and aristocratic retreat for the Inca elite. Because the ruins escaped the marauding Spaniards, much of the Inca's most beautiful stonemasonry and heliocentric temples are still intact. The stonework, terracing and mystery of the ruins would be attraction enough, but their location above the Río Urubamba, as it roils its way to the Amazon, adds to the allure.

On three cardinal points, vertiginous sugarloaf mountains rise and fall. As clouds play hide-and-seek among them, the peaks seem to shuffle themselves, chess pieces playing when your back's turned. Thousands of metres of rock plunge down to the brick-orange tumult of the Urubamba below. At several spots amid the ruins, the drop makes your stomach turn inside out. The topography dances on a Cyclopean scale. Little wonder the Incas revered their mountains as footless living gods.

Rediscovered by the Yale professor Hiram Bingham in 1911, the 'Lost City of the Incas' has

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become an icon for South America and a magnet for visitors from around the globe. According to Peru's National Institute of Culture, 9,000 tourists visited the World Heritage-listed ruins in 1992, but by 2002, that figure had increased to 150,000, and it's expected to continue rising. The Institute's ten-year plan, released earlier this year, limits numbers to a maximum of 2,500 a day, although many people feel that is still too many. Francesco Bandarin, UNESCO heritage director, said the unrelenting tourist traffic could severely damage the stone dwellings, agricultural terraces, plazas and temples. For the past two years, Machu Picchu has come within a whisker of being put on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites in Danger.

Under pressure from several sides, the Peruvian government is treading a very fine line between safeguarding its most important archaeological monument and reaping the benefits of its popularity – Machu Picchu provides around

**Right and below:** natural dyes are still used to make fabrics such as the one this Quechuan weaver is making. Inspiration for designs is drawn from the natural world



£3.3million a year in entrance fees alone. "No-one wants to see Machu Picchu damaged irreparably or closed down," says José Koechlin, director of tour operator Inkaterra, which runs the nearby Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. "But no-one wants to lose their livelihoods either."

And with international visitors spending an average of £44 a day while in Peru, there are plenty of livelihoods to be made. Between Cusco and Machu Picchu, nestled below the Vilcambamba and Urubamba cordilleras, lies the so-called Sacred Valley, the breadbasket, playground and defensive line of the Inca. Today, all of the valley's towns rely heavily on tourism revenues. Each weekend, the streets of the town of Pisac, for instance, are packed with stalls hawking souvenirs, mainly weavings. Peru's stunning textile heritage today encompasses everything from hand-knitted alpaca-wool sweaters to intricate designs made on traditional looms.

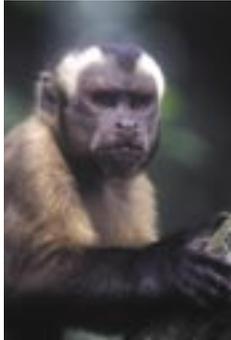


**Above centre:** storage vaults through the mist at Machu Picchu, which is visited by 150,000 tourists every year; **Above:** there are several rainforest canopy walks open to visitors to Peru

### Top ten best places to visit in Peru

- **Machu Picchu** – Crowded it may be, but visiting this site is the quintessential Peruvian experience
- **Inca Trail** – Breathtaking views and steeped in Andean history and tradition, walking a section of this ancient trail is a great way to get to the heart of Peruvian culture
- **Lima** – Bustling and sometimes bewildering, Peru's capital is nonetheless a great city to explore, with excellent museums and fantastic seafood
- **Nazca Lines** – Take a plane ride at dawn or dusk to truly appreciate the awesome scale of these lines that have been etched into the landscape of the plains
- **Cordillera Blanca** – A must for real outdoor enthusiasts, the glacial panoramas of this world-class trekking region are an unforgettable experience
- **Lake Titicaca** – Home to the world's largest high-altitude lake and the man-made Floating Islands, built by the Uros Indians when fleeing the Inca Empire
- **Puerto Maldonado** – This is the jumping-off point for the Amazon Basin's Manu and Tambopata reserves
- **The Sacred Valley** – Dotted with Inca ruins, the valley in the shadow of the surrounding snowy peaks is easy to explore and hugely rewarding
- **Citadel of Kuelap** – These unrestored and remote ruins are one of the largest Inca sites in the entire Andes
- **Máncora** – Situated on the northern coastline, Máncora is a surfing paradise with sandy beaches and a laidback lifestyle to match; a great place to finish off your trip.

Tourism revenues are also helping to protect Peru's incredible natural heritage. In a one-hectare plot of Manu Biosphere Reserve, about 200 kilometres north of Cusco at the western edge of the Amazon Basin, 17 tree species with a diameter of more than 70 centimetres were found during one study – an equivalent plot in the UK would have identified about five species. The same reserve harbours



around ten per cent of the world's bird species, more than 1,000 in all, but is only half the size of Switzerland. Manu is flanked by the more easily accessible Tambopata–Candamo Reserved Zone, as well as Bajuaña–Sonene National Park, making the range of rainforest on offer hard to beat.

Nature-based tourism has proved to be one of the best means of securing conservation and human development goals in these remote and neglected regions. It remains to be seen whether Peru will be able to reconcile its pressing and immediate economic needs with the sustainable future of its natural, cultural and archaeological wealth.

The morning sun has risen well above the distant ranges now. Knots of tourists make their way among the huge stones and between the ramparts of Sacsayhuamán. The dawn chill is replaced by the prickly high-altitude warmth of the sun's rays. Another morning in Peru. Where will the next one be? I can't wait to find out.

**Clockwise from top: tourism brings in much-needed income to local communities. Indeed, £3.3million is raised through entrance fees at Machu Picchu alone. But tour operators are becoming increasingly aware that conservation is paramount to securing their livelihoods in the long term; dramatic scenery in the Sacred Valley; December to May is the best time to see jungle fauna, when high water levels force animals to congregate in areas of dry land**



Co-ordinates



PERU

#### How to get there

There are no direct flights to Peru from the UK, so travel will involve a stop-off in Europe or the USA. Reef and Rainforest Tours (01803 866 965, [www.reefandrainforest.co.uk](http://www.reefandrainforest.co.uk)) runs 14-day specialised tours; prices start from £2,128 per person for flights, accommodation, most meals and tours to Lima, Machu Picchu and the Manu reserve.

#### When to go

The best time to go hiking in the highlands is between May and September when days are sunny and clear, although nights can be very cold. For coastal trips, December to April is best.

#### Festivals

There is a festival going on somewhere in Peru at most times of the year. The biggest events are Carnaval, which is held on the weekend before Ash Wednesday, and Fiesta de la Cruz which is celebrated in the central southern highlands and coastal areas on 1 May. Cusco has its own festival that runs through most of June.