

VANTAGE

COVERING ST JOHN'S WOOD, MAIDA VALE, PRIMROSE HILL, MARYLEBONE, REGENT'S PARK AND THE SURROUNDING AREA

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forbidden LAND

From the mountainous Andes, to the desert coast and the vast expanse of the Amazon jungle, Peru offers such a wide range of experiences that it can be difficult to choose between them, says **Sarah Gilbert**

From the capital Lima, it's only a short hop by plane east to Puerto Maldonado, the gateway to a swathe of hot and humid rainforests, and a biodiversity hotspot.

From there we took a boat to Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, perched on the banks of the Madre de Dios River that connects to Brazil and the mighty Amazon. The lodge's 35 private cabañas are the epitome of rustic luxury, and environmentally friendly too. Built from natural materials, they are designed to blend into their surroundings with palm-thatched roofs, cedar-wood floors and furniture made from reclaimed ironwood.

Surrounded by a lush garden full of exotic plants and trees, we could see and hear the resident wildlife through our screened porch – the weaverbird's peculiar chortle, the chatter of night monkeys and the constant chirp of cicadas.

Early the following morning we set off on one of the many walking trails led by an all-seeing native guide who pointed out the fascinating flora and fauna en route, from a slumbering bat to a praying mantis stalking its prey.

The afternoon saw nothing more strenuous than lying in a hammock in blissful indolence for hours, listening to the distant growl of howler monkeys, before a trip to the spa and a reinvigorating cold-stone massage, the perfect antidote to the sultry heat.

After caiman spotting on the moonlit river, it was time for happy hour in the dining pavilion-cum-lounge, built around the trunk of a giant strangler fig. I opted for a refreshing Pisco Sour, Peru's signature cocktail, and a delicious seafood ceviche.

The next morning we got a bird's-eye view of the forest from the treetop walkway, strung from tree-to-tree across the jungle canopy. With up to 200 bird species around the lodge, it's a bird watchers paradise, and we had close encounters with magnificent scarlet macaws and colourful toucans.

Then it was on to Cusco. Built in the shape of a crouching puma with a fortress at its head and a temple at its heart, the former Inca capital is now a charming mix of impressive ancient stonework and Spanish colonial architecture.

We checked into the 11-suite Inkaterra La Casona, set in a 16th-century mansion on the historic Plaza Las Nazarenas, just a short walk from the picturesque main square. It was one of the first Spanish buildings in Cusco, built over an Inca complex and later occupied by the conquistadors of Peru. Built around a courtyard, the sumptuous



Cusco

Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica



Inkaterra La Casona



Inkaterra Machu Picchu



◊ suites have log fires and tubs large enough to share and the hotel artfully combines original Inca wall hangings and Spanish religious icons with iPod docks and underfloor heating.

After exploring the artists' enclave of San Blas and the Convento de Santo Domingo – once an Inca Temple to the Sun, now a monastery, we dined on traditional Cusquenian treats, including surprisingly tasty marinated guinea pig and alpaca steaks. Outside, the square was filled with Andean women with their long plaits and distinctive full skirts, selling everything from alpaca clothing to musical instruments.

We spent a day driving through the Sacred Valley, stopping off at the imposing fortress of Sacsayhuaman, high on a hill overlooking Cusco, and the pretty mountain town of Pisac famed for its high-grade silver and daily market, as well as a farm to see adorable llamas, alpacas and doe-eyed vicuñas, whose wool is the most expensive natural fibre in the world.

While this winding and fertile valley was at the spiritual and commercial heart of the Incan empire, Peru's most famous site is Machu Picchu. The majestic Lost City sits in splendid isolation in a valley almost 8,000 ft above sea level, dominated by the green-clad mountain of Wayna Picchu. The citadel was built around 1450 at the height of the Inca Empire and abandoned less than 100 years later at the time of the Spanish conquest.

Unlike other Inca sites, it was not found by the Spanish and remained, enveloped in vegetation, until Yale historian and explorer, Hiram Bingham, rediscovered it in 1911. As we explored the religious temples, ceremonial sites, homesteads and agricultural terraces of the site, we marvelled at the architectural wonder of it all.

While Bingham had to scramble through dense jungle for several days to reach the ruins, we took a comfortable three-hour train ride from Cusco to Machu Picchu Pueblo, watching the dramatic scenery change from snow-capped mountains to cloud forest through the panoramic windows.

Our base was Inkaterra Machu Picchu, set in 12 acres of protected cloud forest flanked by verdant mountains, where hummingbirds dart through the trees and stone pathways lead to whitewashed, tiled-roof casitas. Guides will take you along nature trails that wind past the hotel's tea plantation, herb garden and the world's largest private collection of exquisite orchids, some no bigger than a thumbnail.

After a day spent clambering up and down Incan stone steps, we began by easing our weary muscles at the hotel's award-winning spa, sweating it out in the Andean sauna – an adobe hut lit by candles and lined with delicious-smelling Eucalyptus leaves – and star-gazing from the hot tub.

Then we relaxed on a sofa in front of a log fire in the elegant lounge before heading to the gourmet restaurant to feast on Andean trout and suckling pig, reflecting that our own Peruvian trail had taken us from steamy jungle to colonial splendour and sacred cities via some incredible natural highs. ■

Getting There

The author travelled with Journey Latin America, who specialise in tailor-made holidays and group tours throughout Latin America. A return flight to Lima with domestic flights to Puerto Maldonado and Cusco starts from £1,184, and all Inkaterra properties can be booked through JLA. For more information contact www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk or 020 8747 8315

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