

The Way of the Condor

Peru's city-sized Machu Picchu: Rediscovered in 1911 by Yale archaeologist Hiram Bingham, the sprawling UNESCO site contains the granite ruins of Inca palaces, baths, temples, 150 houses and an astronomical observatory.



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Above a certain altitude, mountains assume a surreal quality. Here in Peru's Cordillera Vilcabamba, the snow-capped peaks surrounding us appear as though superimposed on a giant, perpetually blue canvas during the long, dry winter of the southern hemisphere's Andean montane.

My girlfriend and I, a Texan couple, a mother-son duo from Toronto and a biomedical sales rep from San Francisco are huddled next to a granite boulder. Guide Juan Carlos Carlotta Villa, or "Keki," has just led us to the blustery crest of 4,600-metre Salcantay Pass. "Come in together close," he urges, gesturing with open arms as if summoning schoolchildren for a lesson. The proud, intense 24-year-old son of an archaeologist is an expert on local flora, fauna and culture, and is as much indigenous Quechua – descended from Inca – as he is modern-day Peruvian. Around his neck, a pendant of emerald-green serpentina depicts in silver inlay the three life forms central to Andean theology: the condor, puma

and serpent, representing the spiritual, earthly and subterranean realms, respectively. While we munch chocolate and the clip-clop of hooves on stony ground heralds yet another passing mule train of tourist provisions, he shares a Quechua legend of steps carved into solid rock high on the flanks of 6,180-metre-high Nevado Salcantay. The stairs are evidence, he tells us, that Inca nobles once scaled this inhospitable mountain to survey an empire

that, at its apex, before Francisco Pizarro and his conquistadores arrived in 1532, spanned a staggering 5,500 kilometres from Quito, Ecuador, to northern Chile.

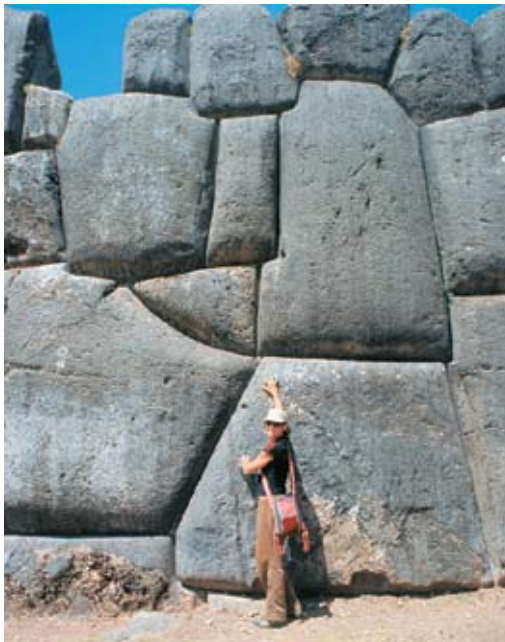
During the nearly 330-year reign of the Inca, mountains were considered gods, or *apus*. Glaciers gave rise to rivers that allowed for the meticulous terracing and cultivation of a landscape that would have defeated a less imaginative people's attempts at large-scale farming. Crop rotation, planting and harvesting were governed by a sophisticated understanding of astronomy. And as their empire unfurled its tentacles beyond the capital of Cusco, the "navel" of the world, the Inca travelled and traded on foot with llama trains along a stone-paved network of highways totalling more than 30,000 km – all of which was accomplished with neither gun nor wheel. Even the conquering Spaniards were impressed.

Walking was – and still is – as essential to the Quechua way of life as maize and quinoa are to their diet, so it seems only fitting to explore the Andes on foot. World-class trekking and mountaineering along with a global fascination with the mysteries and monuments of the Inca have spawned a tourism trade that sees more than 10 per cent annual growth. (In 2007 alone, Lima's Jorge Chavez International Airport welcomed more than 1.8 million visitors, some 160,000 of them spending at least \$1,000 a day.) Just how popular trekking in the footsteps of the Inca has become is readily apparent as we snack trailside on Salcantay Pass. Among passing hikers we catch snatches of Cockney English, French, Italian, German, Hebrew, Dutch, Spanish and several languages we can't identify.

Yet is Peru getting too much of a good thing? In places, mountain trails are littered with plastic water bottles and other garbage; some campsites are in danger of becoming open latrines. The traditional Quechua, unaccustomed to the

Salcantay to Machu Picchu
is a quieter, some might say greener,
alternative to the legendary but
crowded Inca Trail

by Andrew Findlay



junk foods and liberal mores of the West, are in turn profoundly affected by interactions with tourists, who often unwittingly exploit local porters, muleteers, cooks and guides with pauper's wages.

Such considerations have prompted each of us to journey with Lima-based Mountain Lodges of Peru as it launches an exclusive trekking operation through the Cordillera Vilcabamba north of Cusco to one of the new seven wonders of the world. Our route might be viewed as the back road to Machu Picchu, but it is a sustainable travel alternative to the legendary but crowded Inca Trail that sees more than 100,000 pairs of hiking boots annually (imagine half the population of Regina or Saskatoon traversing the West Coast Trail every year).

"¿Vamos?" asks Keki as another tribe of trekkers, this one conversing in a Slavic-sounding tongue, staggers over the pass, its members visibly feeling the altitude.

Wind whips plumes of snow from the summit ridges of Salcantay, now behind us, its icy south face blinding white against an incandescent blue sky. Northward, the Río Salcantay tumbles down over boulders and past meadows of golden ichu grass. We follow Keki down the valley, where clusters of spiky-leafed achupaya, the favoured food of the Andean spectacled bear, punch through the pebbled ground beside the trail.

It's 12:30, time for lunch, and Keki veers off the main trail into a meadow with a yellow-and-blue tent, savoury aromas wafting toward us on a light mountain breeze. The same multilingual group with whom we have swapped positions on the trail all morning looks over enviously as we sit for a hot meal at a table set with cutlery, like English aristocracy on safari. Our cook, Genaro Monge, travelled ahead this morning with a team of five horsemen and supplies and is now bent over a whistling kerosene stove in his makeshift mountain kitchen. Soon we

(above: clockwise from top left) Gringos often acclimatize around Cusco while visiting the Inca ruins of Sacsayhuamán; south face of Humantay; local mall; (opposite page) Peruvian classic, palta rellena (stuffed avocado).

are tucking into mushroom bisque followed by trout fillets and grilled veggies. Half an hour later, we relax over a post-nosh café before taking to the trail again.

On both sides the broad valley sweeps skyward to craggy ramparts and rubble-filled gullies, the detritus of retreating glaciers. A lone Andean condor circles on thermal winds, a black speck high in the great blue. On a steep hillside above us, gawky llamas, cousins of the camel, pause their munching momentarily to study our descent. Winter is dry season in the Andes, and the alpine meadows are almost uniformly tan in colour, the landscape parched, thirsty for the rains that arrive in October. Keki pauses and points to our third night's



accommodation, Wayra Lodge, now visible on a barren, treeless shelf. Beyond, the valley descends into a green chasm, transforming abruptly from the austere tan of the alpine to the verdant fecundity of the cloud forest – our first hint of the steaming Amazon basin concealed beyond wave upon wave of distant mountains.

It is five in the afternoon when we approach Wayra, where a plump pig snorts defiantly as we troop close to its muddy hollow of a bathtub. The comforting scent of woodsmoke drifts from a dingy stone hut on a nearby hillside. Darkness arrives suddenly at these equatorial latitudes, and the valley bottom is already enveloped in long shadows. Once again we pass the same group of multilingual trekkers, now laying out sleeping bags in green tents lined up like nylon chicken coops. At the lodge, a hot tub and Pisco sours await, but we soon learn from staff of a catastrophic earthquake the day before on the coast near Lima, with more than 500 lives lost. The mood is somber. Everyone in Peru has either friends or family in the country's sprawling capital more than 600 km away. Tonight's repast featuring filet mignon seems especially decadent. After dinner, I lose a game of Scrabble to one of my fellow trekkers, the cocksure 15-year-old Torontonian named Ryan, then retire early. I fall asleep over the pages of Hiram Bingham's *Lost City of the Incas* and his "discovery" of Machu Picchu in 1911, my thoughts wandering to those whose lives have been shattered by the quake.

In a country where low-ball, fly-by-night tourist outfits abound, Mountain Lodges of Peru – launched by Peruvian businessman Enrique Umberto and his family six years ago – is an anomaly. At first blush

Andrew Findlay

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(above) The stone-paved trekking routes' dreamlike landscapes are too often marred by litter.

with its deluxe lodges, plush king-sized beds and Jacuzzi spas, it seems a decadent, incongruous element in an environment where many scratch out barely subsistence lives. But peeling back the duvet on this luxury experience reveals a tourism experiment that could raise the bar on sustainable and ecologically sensitive travel in the mountains around Cusco – ground zero for trekking in southern Peru.

An appropriate first stop in understanding this experiment is Cusco's glorious Plaza de Armas. Here, early on in the trip, I watched from a café while hustlers and touts hawked treks on the Inca Trail and scores of lesser-known hiking routes as they have done for decades. For the most part, the target market is the budget backpacker, whose low-priced ambles through the Andes tend to have hidden social and environmental costs. Such treks are undertaken on the backs of porters, cooks and muleteers who work for as little as 15 soles (U.S.\$5) per day – exploitative not only by North American but also Peruvian standards. As well, poorly trained local guides often show as little respect for the environment as some of the most careless foreigners who employ them. But Mountain Lodges of Peru is taking a different tack and avoiding strip-mining the local culture to cash in on the international fascination with all things Inca. "We want to do things right. We're trying to bring a different kind of tourist to

Peru, one who is environmentally and socially conscious, which allows us to pass value onto the local people we hire," says Enrique Umberto Jr., at 27 the oldest of the three Umberto siblings involved in the company's day-to-day management.

At first, the Umbertos met with resistance when they attempted to acquire land for lodges and permits. Locals were justifiably suspicious of the wealthy family's intentions. Government officials were uncooperative. Previously, nobody had ever proposed any enterprise other than tent-based trekking in the Andes. "We were even accused of being a Chilean company," says Enrique Jr., laughing at the attempt to cast the company in the role of foreign interloper.

Though the paint has barely dried on the four lodges that comprise the Salcantay trek, a small army of employees is already on hand to support our seven luxury-trekking gringos – including horsemen earning 30 soles per day (almost double the going rate). Instead of importing service industry professionals, the Umbertos are committed to hiring as many locals as possible from secluded Vilcabamba villages to work as housekeepers, servers and kitchen helpers, giving them valuable tourism experience they'd be hard-pressed to gain otherwise. As Enrique Jr. points out, this gives local

communities a stake in the tourism industry well beyond their usual role of peddling soda pop and candy. In turn, this helps convince campesinos that tourism can provide a better future than logging, clearing and burning the cloud forest for farmland. The Umbertos have also established a non-profit with a focus on rebuilding and upgrading local schools and providing much-needed teaching materials. A student sponsorship program pairs foreign donors with local Quechua kids. And, as the Inca Trail becomes more regulated and traffic on routes such as Salcantay increases, Mountain Lodges is taking a proactive approach to eco-management.

Currently as many as 25,000 travellers a year trek from the village of Mollepata to the Río Urubamba, both independently and with countless trekking outfits. As a result, in just three months last summer, workers from Peru's National Institute of Culture collected a mountain of trash from the trail – enough to stuff the average North American living room. For this reason, Mountain Lodges hires a local horseman to travel with its hiking expeditions as a safety precaution and to gather trash left behind by other guided groups. It's a case of lead by example, though Enrique Jr. knows the company's model is not beyond reproach. Simply by existing, Mountain Lodges adds to the burden on a resource as fundamental as fresh water, a serious issue in the Andes, where climate change has led to rapid glacial recession. And just how sustainable is it to operate a 12-bed mountain lodge with a Jacuzzi at 4,000 metres, all powered by a diesel generator? Indeed the contrast between Mountain Lodge's A-list digs and the rustic stone and thatch-roofed huts in which local campesinos live is striking. But "all tourism has some kind of impact," says Enrique Jr. And if tourism is a fact of life in the mountains that lie within Machu Picchu's sphere of influence, reason the Umbertos, then attracting a higher-paying tourist means some of that money can be employed to do good in local villages.

On day six we wake early at Lucrna Lodge, the last of the Umberto mountain lodges to be completed. Here the bed linen is still crisply new; the young staff shy and inexperienced. For a people whose culture is rooted in cultivating vegetables and fruits and herding livestock in high alpine pastures, tourism is as foreign a concept as owning a car. After breakfast, the staff line

the foyer to bid us farewell; the women with a diminutive single kiss on the cheek, the men with a gentle handshake.

A pebble's throw from the lodge we step onto an ancient Inca highway, where I am surprised by the effect inanimate rock can have on the imagination. If only paving stones could speak, polished as they have been by generations of passersby: by the Inca workers who first laid them; by pack trains of llamas carrying maize, potatoes, textiles and other goods for trade in other villages; by the Spanish conquistadores who

ransacked the Inca empire for gold; and, of course, by tourists like us. Occasionally Keki stoops to grab an empty plastic bottle and hand it to José María, the smiling horseman who has quietly tailed us for the past six days. We follow the ancient roadway in silence, the surrounding cloud forest exhaling an earthy aroma. Magnificently purple *Sobralia dichotoma*, one of 200 species of orchid found around Machu Picchu, blooms trailside. Brilliant yellow cornflowers bob lazily in the morning breeze, amongst ferns that would dwarf a basketball player. A flock

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of parrots squawks noisily overhead.

After two hours, we arrive at a flat summit surrounded by dense jungle that eclipses any possible views. Keki warns us to watch for the deadly poisonous fer-de-lance snake if we venture into the woods. We break for a snack, then branch off the Inca road down a narrow campesino trail hemmed by impenetrable bush. Ahead the vegetation thins into a clearing that suddenly opens to a dizzying panorama of green mountains and

the seemingly bottomless gorge of the Río Urubamba. Half a millennia ago this exact spot bustled with the comings and goings of Inca nobles. It is Llactapata, believed to be an administrative centre from which the ever-meticulous and pragmatic Inca controlled and regulated trade, travel and commerce in this corner of the Cordillera Vilcabamba. Only in the past 10 years have archaeologists begun the painstaking task of unearthing and mapping the ruins; most of



Guide Juan Carlos "Keki" Carlotta Villa, backdropped by the icy south face of Nevado Humantay.

the site remains partially concealed beneath a matrix of overgrown roots and jungle.

The ancient masonry is mesmerizing for its precision: Stone blocks custom cut and stacked without mortar so snugly a razor blade can't be slipped between them, trapezoidal windows and double-jam doorways. The Inca were obsessed with the sun, moon and stars, and also invested their sacred buildings with an astronomical significance we can barely grasp. Less than 10 km away as

the condor flies are the distinctive summits of Huanya and Machu Picchu, the two densely vegetated spires that flank that enigmatic Inca settlement, now barely visible through a veil of mist. I feel a surge of excitement. "Experts believe that Llactapata's sun temple was associated with rituals at Machu Picchu," Keki tells us as we sit on a stone wall next to what was once a small plaza.

"The corridors of the temple provide views of the rising sun on June solstice and of Machu Picchu itself."

Another group of hikers, familiar faces from the days previous, joins us. Lunch bags come out; trash hits the ground. Keki is agitated. He waits for a moment, then saunters over for a quiet chat with the guide, an unusually dour-looking young Quechua lad. A few words are exchanged, the other guide nods his head, expressionless, then reluctantly collects a few candy wrappers from the ground. Keki returns to our group. Earlier, he had made a rather bold weather prediction: that the low-lying clouds would lift within half an hour to reveal Machu Picchu across the valley in its full glory. But a half-hour passes, the clouds still press upon the mountaintops and, like any prudent weatherman, Keki adjusts his forecast. We leave the evocative ruins of Llactapata for the long descent to the train station on the Río Urubamba.

The next day is the last of our pilgrimage through the Cordillera Vilcabamba. We stand at the entrance to Machu Picchu after a pre-dawn bus ride up from the village of Aguas Calientes, soft light bathing the vista that unfolds before us: a surreal and complex array of terraces, plazas, temples and other buildings perched improbably atop a steep ridge, the scene of a million picture postcards and snapshots. Still, the exquisite architecture and magnificent location leave me speechless. Keki leads us to the "Templo de Tres Ventanas," from where sacred Nevado Salcantay, in whose shadow we trekked four days ago, makes a brief appearance far to the southeast. As it vanishes in the clouds, he sets us loose to wander among the sprawling ruins with tourists from every corner of the earth. ■

trekonnoitre

In 1983, Machu Picchu was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and in July 2007, it made the New World Corporation's popularly voted list of the new seven wonders of the world. Yet the Peruvian government has been forced to take strong measures to protect what is one of the country's marquee tourism draws. In 2003, its National Institute of Culture began strictly enforcing a limit of 500 trekkers starting the route per day, including cooks, guides and porters (a number that some believe is still too high). And instead of a free-for-all, the government also now limits the number of guiding permits to roughly 100 outfits that meet standards around safety, equipment and treatment of porters and cooks. Tourists must also hire the services of an approved guide and, officially, porters are restricted to a humane load of 25 kilograms, including personal gear, though word is that this regulation is frequently overlooked.

International non-profits have also turned toward Peru. The Mountain Institute, an NGO focusing on conservation, community development and cultural preservation in mountain regions, opened a chapter in 1995 in the city of Huaraz in northern Peru. Since then the organization has developed an ecotourism management plan for nearby Huascarán National Park that involves training local community members and tourism operators in ecological and cultural heritage conservation. The institute is also spearheading a project to develop community-based tourism along a well-preserved stretch of Inca Trail between the villages of Huari and the Inca archaeological site of Huanaco Viejo, a particularly impoverished region of Peru's Cordillera Blanca. □—A.F.

➔ *Mountain Lodges of Peru's Salcantay trek (mountainlodgesofperu.com) combines the best of the Andes: spectacular mountain scenery, ecological diversity – ranging from barren high-altitude passes to humid jungle – and Inca archaeology. Best of all, it's an alternative to the overused Inca Trail. For more on the Salcantay trek and other Inca Trail tours, as well as off-the-beaten-track adventures elsewhere in Peru (including Cusco and the Sacred Valley), contact your local CAA Saskatchewan travel agent.*

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