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## TRAVEL

SEPTEMBER 09, 2016

### DISCOVER PERU BEYOND MACHU PICCHU

*Text by Aparna Pednekar*

*Even as the Lost City of the Incas lords over Peru's vast landscape, the South American country has an unbelievable variety of experiences on offer...*

A ruin here, a monument there and a wonder of the world towering at 8,000 feet above them all; it's difficult to imagine Peru without its historical and archaeological heft. Lima, however, has a distinct lack of period atmosphere. The country's coastal capital may not be as insane as Mexico City or São Paulo (Lima currently stands as the third most populated city in South America) but there's an airy cosmopolitan appeal that's hard to miss. Landing at the city's posh district — Miraflores — where steely-calved men and women jog, cycle and pump steel at the Parque del Amor (Love Park) overlooking the Pacific Ocean, I have a less strenuous rendezvous planned, and it couldn't possible not involve food.

#### Haute cuisine, haute couture

Peru's cuisine is now rivalling the country's most dazzling attraction, Machu Picchu. At the deliciously located Huaca Pucllana, I'm privileged to enjoy fine dining under a covered gazebo looking out at 1,000-year-old temple ruins. Chef Marilú Madueño's twists on Peruvian classics have found fans in Mick Jagger, and Bill and Hillary Clinton. The addictive pisca sours

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(brandy with egg white and lemon) flow in as crunchy quinoa salad and creamy sea bass soup are followed by a lamb risotto and airy lucuma mousse crowned with crispy, dark quinoa tuiles.

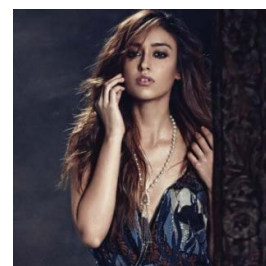
After strolling through the temple ruins with a group of visiting schoolchildren and cooing at a gang of caged guinea pigs, it's time for a whiff of Lima's bohemian art scene. Formerly a dilapidated ghetto, Barranco — like many transitional neighborhoods in cities across the world — is attracting the capital's young and restlessly edgy artists. The cliff-side district has a Californian vibe, with quirky boutiques and cafes in the shade of flaming Poinciana (Gulmohar) trees and free salsa classes at the park.

It's too early to sample the Japanese-style tuna carpaccio at hipster haunt, Chala, but I'm here for a fashion pilgrimage of sorts, at MATE — The Mario Testino Association. Set in an atmospheric 19th-century bungalow, the museum is a gorgeous celebration of the works of one of the world's most famous photographers. Different rooms in the museum display life-size portraits of Testino's celebrity subjects — Madonna, Kate Moss, Brad Pitt and Gisele Bündchen. Right between the in-house cafe and bodega (ideal to pick up a fun souvenir, an haute couture poster or risqué puzzle from) is an entire room devoted to Diana, Princess of Wales; Testino's pictures reveal an intimately playful side to the late princess. Along with his shoots for Gucci and Versace, there's a riveting series of traditional costumes — alta moda — celebrating Testino's Peruvian heritage. A quote on the wall summarises his feelings on the project, 'So much of Peruvian history and culture is sewn into these clothes... They are in their way as rich in technique and colour and form, and as mysteriously beautiful and handmade, as the finest creations of the Haute Couture Houses of Europe.'

It's only a matter of a few days before I get to witness these vivacious costumes in person. But first, there's thrilling Machu Picchu and a taste of the Inca heartland.

### Empire of the sun

A short flight away from Lima is the Andean city of Cusco, the capital of the 13th-century mighty Incan empire, and the base from where one scales Machu Picchu. Driving into the Plaza de Armas with its gold-speckled cathedral, sloped cobbled roads, by-lanes and chic boutiques, my first eye-opener to Cusco's surprisingly glamorous avatar is the Belmond Palacio Nazarenas.



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Once an 18th-century convent and palace, this refurbished hotel sits next to El Monasterio, creating a sepia-tinted picture of nuns and monks living next door to each other, under the wealthy patronage of the Roman Catholic Church. Whitewashed walls, cerulean-blue windows and local artwork give it a homey feel, but there's a great level of attention to detail that catapults this Belmond property to world-class standards. They have me at the slinky silk lilac bathrobes along with the fluffy white ones. And there's much more. Whether it's the oxygen on request (released via AC vents), under-heated marble floors, pre-loaded iPad guides, all-complimentary bar bolstered with rum and pisco decanters, the indigenous use of pink Andean salt, purple corn or coffee and coca leaves at the gurgling Hypnoze spa, the property's all about understated luxury. The staff is friendly and courteous and the menu at the restaurant Senzo by Chef Virgilio Martinez — whose London outpost Lima has been garnering critical acclaim since its launch in 2012 — features a must-try guinea pig with purple corn and yellow maize.

Besides the spectacular food, there's much to explore. The Sacsayhuamán temple overlooks the city, and if mammoth rocks bore you, there's the opportunity to chase a small herd of sashaying alpacas. With head-to-toe Rapunzel locks and a perpetually bemused expression, this indigenous animal is a scene-stealer. But if you have just one afternoon in Cusco, make sure you spend it exploring Coricancha — the Temple of the Sun. Once the crown jewel of the Incan empire, it forms the 'tail' end of Cusco which is said to have been built in the shape of a puma. Bathed in sunlight around a huge courtyard, there are different chambers dedicated to the moon, stars, thunder and rainbows. Get a good local guide to point out the finer nuances of Incan architecture and astrophysics.

### **On an island far away**

A week spent between Lima's coastal charms, the Sacred Valley with the rolling hills and the swaying quinoa fields of Urubamba Valley and Cusco, one may think one has seen most of Peru's landscapes. Flying further southwards, a drive from Juliaca to Puno is unremarkable. The city of Puno, unlike dreamy Cusco, has a gritty working-class aura, thanks to its status as the trade hub of the entire area. Another 45 minutes later, when things couldn't get more dreary or dusty, a serene mirage appears on the horizon, under the setting sun. It's the venerated Lake Titicaca, South America's second-largest lake and the world's highest (more than 3,800 metres) navigable body of water. This famously calm freshwater body



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straddles Peru and Bolivia, and is home to an indigenous people, along with trouts and giant frogs.

Our hotel, Titilaka Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux property, has a uniquely remote location. In a room with no television (thank heavens!) one wakes up early morning to a direct view of the sun rising above the lake. Over eggs Benedict (served beautifully in locally produced clay pots) at breakfast I get an hour more of terrific views and incredible peace. Through the day, there are plenty of relaxing activities on offer — birdwatching, boating and cycling — but I absolutely recommend the half- or full-day trip to Titicaca's unique floating islands. I'm ferried across by the hotel boat to these extraordinary residences, created from reeds by the native Uros people, and immediately identify their colourful costumes. They are the same vibrant textile captured in Mario Testino's Andes portraits displayed at MATE in Lima.

Lunch is scheduled at Taquile Island. Save for the afternoon heat, it's the ideal destination to enjoy solitude and a good spot of light trekking. At the top of the rugged hill, there's a rustic meal at the visitors' centre and lovely textiles, ponchos and purses to buy from the traditional weavers, who speak in the local Aymara language. Stuffed with quinoa soup, fried chicken, tamales and refreshing muna leaf tea, I spend more than an hour at the vantage viewing point. Miles and miles of silent and still turquoise water reflect the last rays of sunlight. Floating islands pop up like little clouds settled on the lake's surface, and the Andes looms on the horizon. Peaceful, mystical and magnanimous, it's an apt metaphor for the country. And yet, I'm sure the discoveries made on this maiden journey are just the beginning of what Peru has to offer.

### **Train to Machu Picchu**

Locals will tell you that the best way to enjoy it is by sweating through the four-day Inca trail that brought the intrepid race to its citadel site in the 13th century. If time is a constraint, your next best bet, and most luxurious option, is taking the three-and-a-half-hour Belmond Hiram Bingham train, named after the American explorer who discovered Machu Picchu. The hours pass by quickly relaxing in the '20s-style Pullman carriages and the bar, or watching the landscape unfold through the observation car. The ticket cost includes a sterling four-course brunch and dinner on the ride back. Expect dishes like Wayllabamba trout with fava bean, Andean mint and airampo (purple pear) emulsion, accompanied by fine wines and sinful puds. Passing through gorgeous valleys and the occasional waterfall, the train drops you at the base of Machu Picchu, for an on-foot exploration of the wonder of the world.

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