

Adventure in the Andes

ENTER A PORTAL TO THE PAST.

By Tannis Kobrinsky

The longest and one of the highest mountain ranges in the world, the Andes stretch 4,500 miles along South America's west coast. Adventurers and spiritual seekers come here to test their mettle against natural and man-made wonders and explore the misty peaks where Peru's ancient Inca Trail and Machu Picchu evoke awe. For those of us living 21st century lifestyles, interacting with the native Andeans in such a spectacular setting can awaken us to what really matters—understanding different cultures and being responsible stewards of our planet.

Throughout the region, Quechuas, descendants of the Incas and other ancient civilizations located predominantly in Peru, Ecuador and Columbia, continue to live close to the land, routinely practicing their ancestral ceremonies. Through sacred music, chants, prayers and rituals, the Quechuas pay homage to Pachamama (the Inca word for Mother Earth) and the Apus (spirits of the mountains) in order to keep the connection between humans and nature alive. A trip to this high altitude, mind-body-spirit utopia will give you memories to last a lifetime.

LODGING IN CUZCO

From Lima, Peru it's a quick flight to Cuzco; once "the navel" of the vast Inca Empire, now called the "Archaeological

Capital of America." In 1950, extensive earthquake damage exposed finely engineered Incan structures hidden by Spanish colonial walls since the 1530s. Cuzco's citizens opted to leave the ruins visible.

Cuzco is South America's travel hub, hosting visitors by the millions. Tour operators, some legitimate, but many bogus, hawk their services in the Plaza Mayor. Buyers beware. It is better to book your tours and lodgings before arriving. Lodgings range from basic \$9.00 per night backpackers' hostels to elegant \$1,200.00-a-night suites at Hotel Monasterio. Whatever your budget, find a comfortable resting place and acclimate to the 11,500-foot altitude.

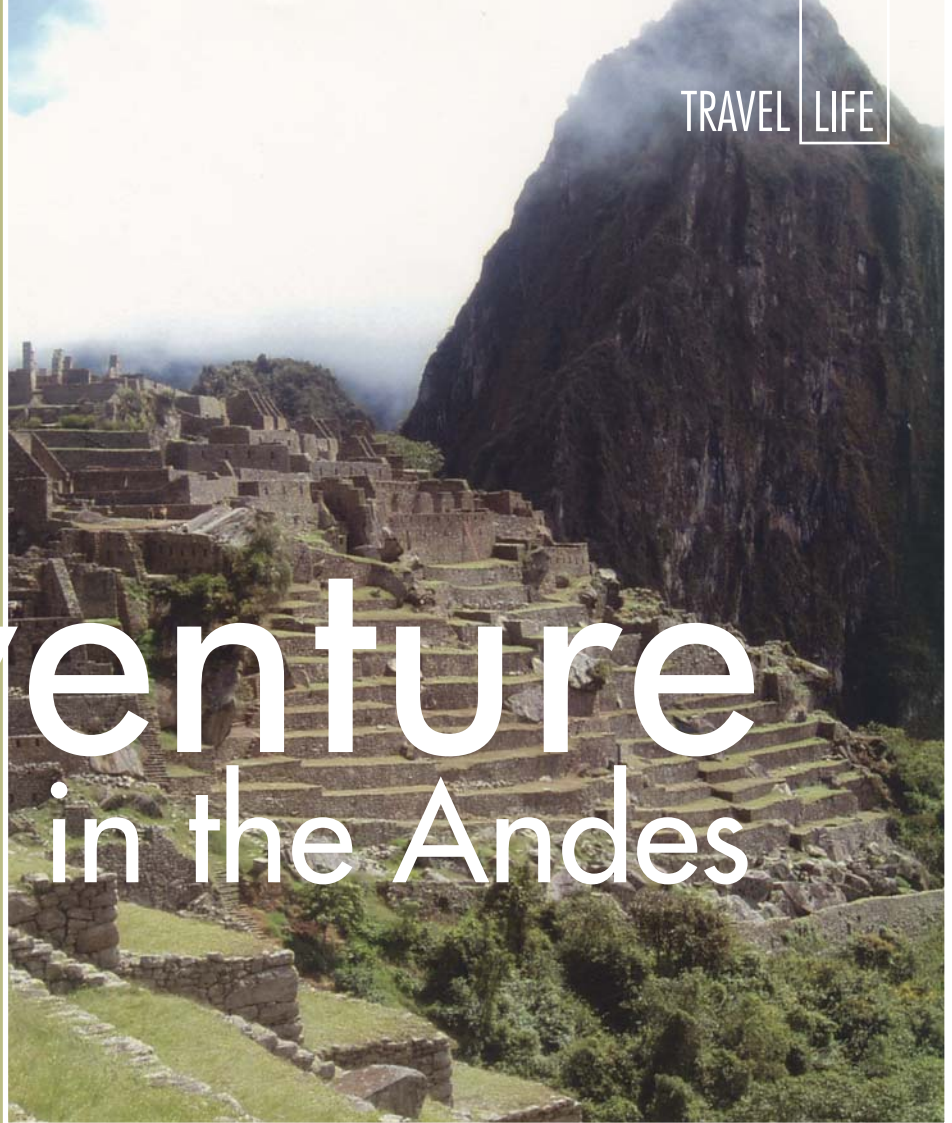
ACCLIMATE TO YOUR ELEVATION

If you'll be trekking the Inca trail, train in advance. Hike at gradually higher elevations until you reach over 8,000 feet. Inca trail passes, like Warmiwañusca (Dead Woman's Pass), which rises about 13,700 feet, can be deadly, so take

precautions. Rest on arrival in Cuzco, eat a light meal and drink lots of water. Locals sip coca tea or chew coca leaves; both are served everywhere. Theoretically, coca's active ingredient boosts circulation of blood and oxygen to the brain. Supplemental oxygen helps also, and some hotels provide it. Ask your doctor about prescription medicines Diamox (acetazolamide) and Decadron (dexamethasone), which may help. They must be taken before arrival and can cause side effects similar to altitude sickness.

CLIMB TO THE SKY

Those awesome Andean peaks are literally breathtaking. Soroche, altitude sickness, can occur at 5,000 feet, but commonly develops above 8,000 feet, which would include most of the Andes. Soroche can affect anyone; even fitness professionals in good condition can suffer minor cases. Early symptoms of headache, insomnia and leg-swelling can start 12 to 24 hours after arrival. If ignored, these symptoms may progress to



vomiting. Next comes dizziness, difficulty breathing, and in worst-case scenarios, death from brain herniation due to increased intracranial pressure. Pulmonary edema, *soroche's* fatal form, occurs when fluid builds up in the lungs, causing shortness of breath and disorientation. Due to hypoxia, smokers and people with heart problems are at high risk. To avoid *soroche*, on day one only ascend to 5,000 feet. Above 8,000 feet, only ascend 1,500 feet maximum per day. If you are going to climb above 10,000 feet, acclimate at 6,000 to 8,000 feet for two to four days. If severe symptoms develop, descend below 8,000 feet and see a medical expert immediately.



But once you have acclimated to the altitude, take to the cobblestone streets, lined with Spanish Colonial and Incan architecture. Be ready to fend off locals selling everything from photo-ops with traditionally clad toddlers cuddling baby

alpacas to alpaca wool garments. Tour the Dominican Convent of Santo Domingo, built over Coricancha, one of the Inca's richest and most respected temples. Some tour operators can arrange for you to view or participate in simple, profound rituals at various sites. Bathing in healing waters or giving plant offerings to the Apus and Pachamama may kindle your energetic connection to the spirits and open pathways to an authentic Andean adventure.

HEALING AND RELAXATION

Before heading to Machu Picchu, visit the Sacred Valley, approximately one hour by bus from Cuzco. If you can, stay a few days at Willka T'ika, a secluded hotel/sanctuary near Urubamba, which offers an array of workshops. If you're an instructor, consider this place for a retreat or workshop. The proprietors also arrange complete tours of Peru. You can go on excursions to ruins such as the Circles of Moray where the Incas experimented with crop development, or visit the steeply tiered fortress of Ollantaytambo, barter at the colorful markets of Písaq and Urubamba, relax in lush gardens, practice yoga, or join a healing ceremony conducted by a shaman who traveled on foot 300 miles from a

remote mountain village to bless your journey. Cap off nights with meditation walks in the spiral labyrinth, lit by the Milky Way—also known as a “celestial river” by the Inca—it dazzles from this Southern Hemisphere perspective.

HIKE THE INCA TRAIL

For many, hiking the Inca trail is a lifelong dream. By the 1990s there were so many trekkers that now only 200 tourists are allowed per day, with permits required, no exceptions. So, reserve way in advance; a month for fall, two for spring, and three for summer. Anyone reasonably fit can manage the four-day, 25-mile hike that departs from Ollantaytambo.

There are also shorter treks including a two-day trek that starts along the railway to Aguas Caliente, and the seven-day, less trafficked Salkantay (Savage Mountain) trek. All routes pass near 14,000 feet and take you through orchid-strewn jungles, ethereal cloud forests, and ruins like Phuyupatamarca (Town Above the Clouds), culminating at Intipunku, Machu Picchu's Sun Gate.

Non-trekkers can arrive by rail in Aguas Caliente, which boasts numerous hotels, cafes serving roast guinea pig, alpaca steaks as well as burgers and pizzas, and Internet cafes where Inca Trail porters in traditional clothes relax after four-day treks.

No matter how you arrive at Machu Picchu, the incredible ruins and stair-stepping terraces between the towering peaks of Wayna Picchu, (Young Mountain), and Machu Picchu (Old Mountain), will amaze, especially at sunrise. The meticulously constructed temples and dwellings dating from 1475 BC, during the glory days of Inca rule have attracted travelers since 1911 when local farmers led historian/explorer Hiram Bingham to the site. It became a World Heritage site in 1983.

If you're not afraid of heights, climb Wayna Picchu toward the Moon Temple for the ultimate view. Visit the masterfully carved Intihuatana stone or “Hitching Post of the Sun” where little has changed over the past half millennium.

A FULFILLING JOURNEY

Incan descendants still worship the heavens and share their practices with travelers in their sacred land. We travelers can bring the spirit message of the Andes back home and spread the word to honor Pachamama and make a daily effort to live harmoniously in the universe. **AF**



Andes Travel Aids

TOUR OPERATORS:

- Active South America: www.activesouthamerica.com
- GAP: www.gapadventures.com
- Magical Journey Peru—Through Willka T'ika:
http://196.33.120.67/WillkaTika/willka_home.asp
- Puma Peru Expeditions: www.pumaperu.org

GENERAL INFO:

- Andean Travel: www.andeantravelweb.com/peru

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PHOTOS BY TANNIS KOBRINSKY