

High altitude, high style

Claire Rigby takes in the effortless charm and revitalising mountain air of one of Peru's most exclusive mountain retreats.

I arrived at the citadel in the early morning light to find the exquisite stone city – lost to the jungle for four-hundred years – suspended between silent peaks on a lonely plateau, sunbeams raining down. I climbed Huayna Picchu, the sugarloaf-shaped mountain that towers over the citadel, and returned bewitched and exhausted to the Inkaterra Machu Picchu hotel, Inkaterra's boutique retreat in the cloud forest. Tearing myself away from the crackling fire, I floated through the hotel's lush, atmospheric gardens to a white-draped, rush-floored spa. After a fragrant massage and a spell in the rustic Andean eucalyptus sauna, I emerged into the twilight for an icy, bracing dip in a plunge pool fed by mountain springs.

A dream destination for adventurers, since the American explorer Hiram Bingham brought Machu Picchu to the attention of the world in 1911, Peru has come a long way since the days of uncrossable rivers, impassable passes, guerrilla warfare that almost

brought tourism to a standstill and the 'darkest Peru' of the Paddington Bear stories.

By running a small eco-tourism business through those dark years, Inkaterra has played a pivotal role in transforming Peru from a difficult, challenging country to visit into one of the most thrilling, exotic and luxurious destinations in the world.

Backpackers may have been the pioneers driving this shift, but the remote, spectacular places they once had to themselves are quickly being discovered by a more well-heeled foreign traveller. These sophisticated vacationers may have trekked the high-altitude Inca Trail to Machu Picchu or simply boarded

Orient Express's luxury Hiram Bingham train from Cusco, dining on fine food and wine, while winding through deep mountain canyons by the roaring Urubamba river.

A few days earlier, at a rustic jungle mooring on the banks of the tawny-brown Madre de Dios river – the entrance to Reserva Amazónica, Inkaterra's oldest property – I climbed the river bank waving away swarms of biting flies feeling that this trip wouldn't

Inkaterra's Machu Picchu hotel, left.

be as effortless and elegant as it had first seemed. I reminded myself that this was what the Amazon jungle was all about, steeled myself, and thanked insect repellent and long sleeves for small mercies.

However, seconds later, safe behind screen doors in the resort's nature centre, there was a chilled glass of passion fruit juice in my hand and a cold, lemon towel at my neck. I then enjoyed a delicious lunch in the sprawling Swiss Family Robinson-style restaurant. A quick inspection of my luxurious riverside cabaña followed – a brilliantly-conceived, rustic-chic jungle hideaway in bamboo and white linen, dressed with endless, thoughtful touches.

Reserva Amazónica

The next three days at Reserva Amazónica, spinning from one riveting excursion to another watching varied and fascinating wildlife will always stay with me. And that's the key to the Inkaterra experience. Far from being a relaxing holiday, it's an electrifying chance to visit one of the most captivating countries in the world, where comfort and luxury are, quite simply, a given.



You travels effortlessly from one enchanting location to another, luggage appearing and disappearing as if by magic. Fires are lit when you most need them, and tea and cocktails prepared. All you have to do is soak up your glorious surroundings and immerse yourself in the wonders of the archaeological and natural world.

On long, hot walks through the rainforest and silent paddles around jungle lakes, on a night river excursion under the Milky Way with the eyes of cayman glowing on the riverbank, nature was the star of the show. A long-bodied howler monkey moving slowly overhead, peering through leaves with a small, worried face; the green, half-seen flash of a kingfisher at the lake; tight martial columns of long-legged army ants on the march – all unforgettable moments on this incredible journey. Reserva Amazónica is located in one of the world's diversity hot-spots.

The focus on nature is appropriate, since Reserva Amazónica is located in one of the world's mega-diversity hot-spots – there are trees here that contain more species of insects than the entire British Isles. Though the kudos of endured hardship might elude you, there's a different kind of satisfaction to be had from Inkater's eco-credentials, which go considerably deeper than lip service.

The lodge is just a tiny part of Inkater's private nature reserve, which puts 30,000 acres of rainforest at the disposal of researchers and out of reach to slash-and-burn farmers, which left millions of hectares abandoned and barren, its soil washed away forever. At the Machu Picchu property, Inkater curates the world's largest collection of native orchids, with 372 species, as well as running a rescue project for spectacled bears – Paddington's long-lost cousins.

I left Peru with my head spinning from vivid impressions of its scenery and archaeology, lavish flora and fauna, extravagant beauty

PACKAGE DETAILS

A 12-night package through Abercrombie & Kent costs from £3,190 per person including accommodation, some meals, all flights, transfers and excursions as detailed:

Two nights Country Club, Lima.
Two nights Reserva Amazónica, Puerto Maldonado.
Three nights Inkater Urubamba Villas.
Three nights Inkater Machu Picchu.
Two nights Libertador Cusco.
One night Country Club.

Trip includes: a city tour of Lima, Amazon excursions, a visit to Chincheros, Pisac and Ollantaytambo, the train to Machu Picchu and a city tour of Cusco.

For more information and bookings please contact:

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and the simple grace of the people I'd met there. The impeccable hospitality and sheer indulgence offered by Inkater, whose capacity is about to be doubled by a raft of new properties, in Cusco, Lima and on the shore of Lake Titicaca, make being there simply effortless, and place magnificent, magical, spectacular Peru right where it belongs: centre stage. ■

Las Villas



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