

A woman in traditional Peruvian attire stands on a rocky mountain trail. She is wearing a vibrant pink jacket over a blue top, a black skirt with a colorful geometric pattern at the hem, and a colorful shawl draped over her shoulders. She holds a wooden staff in her right hand. The background features a vast, scenic view of a mountain valley with green fields, a winding river, and distant mountains under a cloudy sky.

MOUNTAIN MAGIC

Sweeping vistas, colourful villages and glacial lakes combined with luxe lodgings and sumptuous meals make the new Lares Adventure trek from Mountain Lodges of Peru a memorable way to get to Machu Picchu.

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It's 7pm in the Andes and I am high – literally. After eight hours of travel from Quiswarani through high-altitude forest blanketed in cloud, I've checked in to the plush Huacawasi Lodge, 3835 metres above sea level. Winter is well behind us, but the occasional snowflake drifts down to my private patio where I'm sipping a pisco sour in a scalding jacuzzi. Inside, a hot water bottle awaits in a bed fitted with plush linen; a handwritten card invites me to enjoy a massage in the spa before my three-course dinner paired with regional wines. The only thing giving away the fact I'm at the end of day two of a trek through the Andes is my muddy hiking boots lying by the door.

On any given day, around 2500 people descend on Machu Picchu, despite new regulations limiting climbs to certain lookouts. Many arrive by train, some by bus, and a hard-core handful make the pilgrimage along the Inca Trail. The latter route – a series of three overlapping trails through cloud forest and alpine tundra – usually takes four days. Being one of the first people to see the sun rise over the Incan ruins no doubt makes the experience memorable, but bedding down in a flimsy tent in sub-zero temperatures en route doesn't appeal to everyone.

For a growing number of outdoor enthusiasts, the ability to wash away the Peruvian soil at the end of a

challenging eight-hour walk and have a double bed waiting certainly makes any trekking prospect at high altitudes all the sweeter.

It's exactly this experience that Mountain Lodges of Peru (MLP) offers on its new Lares Adventure, a four-night, five-day experience uniting serious scenery with welcome comforts. The second such lodge-to-lodge trek from the homegrown company presents a variety of walking options each day: an illness one morning sees two of my fellow hikers ferried by car from our lodge to lunch; they join us for the downhill stroll after a leisurely meal. Another day, half the group spends four hours on the trail, while others opt for an eight-hour trek over the Phoñocasa Pass. Whichever option you choose, you can be guaranteed extremely comfortable accommodations and warm hospitality at the end of the day.

DAY ONE: CUSCO TO LAMAY THROUGH THE SACRED VALLEY

An hour into the first day of trekking I find myself seriously reconsidering whether I will be able to finish the five-day experience. A slight highway hiccup – earthmoving equipment parked on a sheer cliff face blocking the entire road – means we begin walking an hour earlier than expected. And from the roadblock, all paths lead north.



Within 10 minutes of setting off, we – a motley crew of a dozen 30- to 50-year-olds: Brazilians, Americans, Brits, Australians, Peruvian guides and a pair of donkeys – are at an altitude of 4000 metres, and my breath could not be any more laboured. Every few steps I stop to recover, which is not necessarily a bad thing given the stunning scenery. “It is okay to travel slowly,” says our guide Guido Huaman. “Take the time to absorb the beauty.”

Nothing quite prepares you for the drama of the Andes; the Sacred Valley is thought to encompass the heartland of the Incan civilisation. In addition to some of the world’s most important archaeological sites, it’s home to an intoxicating mix of impossibly turquoise glacial lakes; sheer cliffs that tumble down thousands of metres; deft-footed farmers and their herds of doe-eyed llamas; and near-endless emerald-hued valleys.

Winds here can transform perfectly balmy mornings into snowstorms in the blink of an eye, and I’m constantly flipping between thermals, gloves and a beanie and my singlet and sunhat.

After reaching Challwa Casa at 4250 metres, I’m finally able to catch my breath as we stroll downhill to our lunch spot at Viacha. Here, Mountain Lodges of Peru staff and local villagers have been preparing a *pachamanca* – an underground oven of sorts, ideal for baking potatoes and meats, which we enjoy in tents as the day’s first downpour sets in. *Chicha morada* (an eye-popping juice made from maize) and cocoa-leaf tea is passed around as dessert is served.

The drizzle eases as we trek on through the village of Viacha, where schoolkids greet us and try to sell us cheap raincoats. The Incan ruins of Písac come into view in the late afternoon – unlike Machu Picchu, we have the 15th-century site largely to ourselves. Jaw-dropping terraces – still in use today – lead down to the excavated ruins: the Temple of the Sun, baths, altars, water fountains, a ceremonial platform. It’s a fitting way to end the hiking day, with a van waiting to ferry us on to Lamay Lodge.

Here warmed bath towels, down pillows, thick steaks and red wine await travellers, and with a wake-up call of 4am for day two, I don’t have to be asked twice to try out the plush beds.



COLOUR ME BEAUTIFUL
Below: Huacawasi Lodge, 3835 metres above sea level, overlooks a petite village by the same name. Magical mountain scenery includes a patchwork of stone huts and grazing llamas, with pops of colour courtesy of the alpaca-wool ponchos of the Huacawasi villagers.



+ FAST FACTS

Mountain Lodges of Peru offers four-night, five-day and six-night, seven-day Lares Adventure (laresadventure.com) trips from \$2488 per person. Rates include all meals, guides, accommodation, entrance fees and more. Watch this space in 2015, as the company plans to open another lodge in Patacancha. Book your Lares Adventure to Machu Picchu with South American specialist, Contours Travel (contourstravel.com.au).

DAY TWO: LAMAY TO HUACAWASI

Today, our group of 12 splits in half – as the stars disappear from the sky, the early risers (booked in for the eight-hour trek) cruise through llama-laden fields on a two-hour minivan transfer to the start of our hike at Quiswarani, 3829 metres above sea level.

The trail is not as steep as on day one, but the ascent is relentless. Soon we’re in the clouds again, traversing the Abra Huchuyccasa Pass at 4414 metres – the second-highest point we’ll reach on the trek. A spongy moss covers the ground like an emerald carpet; if it weren’t for the cold, I would curl up and enjoy a mid-morning nap.

But Guido encourages us on and soon we’re overlooking stunning Qeywaqocha Lake, where tents have been set up again for a lunch of creamed corn soup and *lomo saltado* (beef tenderloin slices sautéed with onions, tomatoes and hot peppers).

The sun shines on us in the afternoon, which makes the descent to Qelqena village a rather warm end to the day. Still, I’m quick to take up the offer ▶



+ GETTING THERE

LAN Airlines (lan.com) operates seven flights a week from Sydney and Auckland to Santiago, Chile, with onward connections to Lima, the capital of Peru. We advise you to stay overnight in Lima – the food scene is among the best in South America (see our review of Central Restaurante on page 106) before catching a LAN flight southeast to Cusco.

In Lima, we love the Belmond Miraflores hotel (belmond.com), set beachside in one of the city's hippest neighbourhoods. In Cusco, check in to the Mountain Lodges of Peru-owned boutique hotel El Mercado Tunqui (elmercadotunqui.com), where beautiful rooms ring a sun-kissed courtyard.



PERUVIAN PILGRIMAGE

On any given day, around 2500 people descend on Machu Picchu. Many arrive by train, some by bus, and a hard-core handful make the pilgrimage along the Inca Trail. The latter route usually takes four days.

of having my day-pack strapped to the back of one of the horses accompanying us today – after two days on the trail, the simplest pleasures make walking all the more enjoyable.

We join the rest of our group – their five-hour trek took them to the Incan ruins of Ancasmарca – at Huacawasi Lodge, MLP’s first joint-venture initiative with the local community, with oversight from a number of financial bodies. The goal is to not only employ Huacawasi villagers, but have them stake ownership in the lodge, and have their culture guide the direction of the offerings to provide a more immersive experience for visitors. Although



our transport, Guido points out a riverside site that MLP has earmarked for a third lodge. But for now, overnight accommodation is in a garden-laced hotel in Ollantaytambo.

DAY FOUR: OLLANTAYTAMBO TO AGUAS CALIENTES

With the serious trekking behind us, our morning in Ollantaytambo is spent exploring the city’s mountain-top Inca ruins. The site is an archaeological marvel and most researchers today are still unable to comprehend how it was built. Our MLP guide for the morning, Andres Adasme (one of the architects

behind the lodges of MLP’s other Machu Picchu trek, Salkantay) has a number of theories. His passion for the site and its construction, in rhythm with the stars, sun and moon, is infectious.

Aside from the ruins, Ollantaytambo is the starting point for hikes along the Inca Trail. But while others are lacing up their boots, we jump on a train bound for Aguas Calientes, also known as Machu Picchu Town.

DAY FIVE: AGUAS CALIENTES TO CUSCO

I had intended to get up at 4am and tackle the 1000-plus steps up the mountain to Machu Picchu. But the sounds of the jungle surrounding our lushly landscaped hotel – and a bottle of good wine – mean the 6am minibus beckons instead. It’s a steep ascent that once again takes us into the clouds; they hang around a lot longer than we hope and it’s not until 10am that the sun begins to burn off the mist and reveal the ruins below.

There’s no denying the breathtaking beauty of Machu Picchu, with its sharp peaks backdropping polished-stone ruins perched above the Urubamba River. Still, it’s hard not to see the wide gorges, soaring snow-capped mountains, steep terraced fields, brilliant glacial lakes and colourfully clad locals as the real stars of the Sacred Valley and its surrounds. It’s here the mountain magic of Peru truly comes to life – with a side of malbec and a hot water bottle, of course.

still new, the project has been extremely successful, with community members active in everything from greeting guests to showcasing their handicrafts through the lodge and supplying produce for meals.

DAY THREE: HUACAHUASI TO OLLANTAYTAMBO

The snow from the night before has turned into rain, which stays with us for the first hour of our trek along the wide uphill trail to the top of the Ipsaycocha Pass at 4490 metres. Another dusting of powder snow falls as we reach the top and quickly find shelter behind a cliff face as winds whip through the gorge.

Tents are set up and waiting for us at Lake Ipsaycocha, where we enjoy lunch with a side of wildlife spotting: Andean geese, ducks and plovers all call this part of the world home, and if you visit at the right time of year you’ll also spot condors.

This section of the trek is known as the Weaver’s Trail, with many of the villagers en route producing the vibrant textiles that characterise traditional Peruvian culture. Women and children spread out blankets and ponchos before us after lunch, and villagers show off their looms when we pass by on our way to the town of Patacancha. As we near

LIFE AT LAMAY

Below: The paint is barely dry at the dramatic mud-brick Lamay Lodge, but the service is hard to fault. Rooms ring a garden replete with an oversize firepit. Inside, warmed bath towels, down pillows, thick steaks and red wine await. With a 4am wake-up for the next day of trekking, the plush beds beckon weary travellers.



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Go online to see a gallery of images from the Lares Adventure trek.

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