

Inca-redible Peru

DEREK BALMENT ticks off two bucket list destinations in one trip to this South American gem!



✓ Bucket list #1 MACHU PICCHU

One of the world's best football kits and one of the world's best views... that's Peru!

The locals are friendly and always spin a good yarn.



Those Incas sure knew how to build on a mountain!



Del, Austin and the gang taking a breather – literally.



Here's the money shot! It's the climax of a five-day, multi-activity tour of the Sacred Valley of the Incas with Mountain Lodges of Peru (MLP). This unique, all-inclusive experience mixes Inca history, Peruvian culture, hiking and exclusive overnight accommodation. Travelling with a small group of Americans (which included a guy called Austin who was actually from Austin!) and dedicated guides who were as helpful and informative as they were hilarious, meant by the time

we reached Machu Picchu we all felt like Inca experts. Oh, and our fitness levels had also greatly improved! I'm not going to lie, hiking at altitude (you can be as high as 4260 metres above sea level) can be like sucking air through a straw at times. Luckily going at our own pace was encouraged and it got easier with each hike. But if we had any breath left it then got taken away by the type of views no camera can ever do justice to... Our heads were literally up in the clouds. It's not all hiking though, with our own personal mini-bus (and if you didn't fancy a hike, the bus was always on hand to ferry you to a less physical activity instead) we were also able to soak up the culture and visit communities other tourists can't access as well

as markets, towns, historical sights, and even a brewery. It was a great way to mix with the locals – and the ever-present llamas. Everywhere we went, even halfway up remote mountains, the Peruvian women spun yarn and made the traditionally colourful garments that appeared to be modelled by most of the locals living in this beautiful landscape. Each day would end with us all gathered around the dinner table

at one of MLP's exclusive lodges, with a buffet-style selection of traditional food on offer, including that Peruvian specialty, guinea pig! Run by locals, their five-star hospitality gives our stay a homely feel, and it's hard to beat a soak in an outdoor spa, with mountain views and a beer as the sun sets. At the trip's end I feel enlightened, wiser and fitter, and definitely at one with the llamas! This genuinely has been the high life.



A selfie? No prob-llama!



Guinea pig. Yes, it's a bit like chicken!

✓ Bucket list #2 AMAZONIAN RAINFOREST

Sunset trips to spot wildlife on the riverbanks... no jaguars this time though.



Howler monkeys sure do live up to their name!



You can find spiders as big as your hand in the Amazon.



Love macaws? The rainforest delivers!



My knowledge of "darkest Peru" before this trip came courtesy of Paddington Bear, but I'm not sure even he had ventured this far into the Amazonian jungle. From Puerto Maldonado, in the country's east, a small boat takes me several hours up river into the heart of the rainforest, slowing down only to point out any wildlife on the riverbanks... already this is a trip where a decent camera is a must. As the sun sets,

there's a small hike to reach the impressive eco lodge – and I don't only mean the open air lounge and bar area! My room is open-sided, and relaxing in the hammock you literally can have the rainforest in your room. A 4.30am start to view the sunrise from above the rainforest canopy (by climbing a very high observation tower) had me a little blurry on day one, so when I awoke to what sounded like a jet engine overhead, I questioned how isolated we really were. "Ah, that's the howler monkeys, my friend," my expert guide explained as I searched for a caffeine hit. The jungle noises can be intense and sometimes anything but peaceful. The selection of guided tours by boat or on foot allowed me to experience so much of the rainforest, from jaguar spotting (nope, didn't see one!), macaws and other exotic birds, giant trees, swamps, and of course my old mates, the monkeys. But my particular favourite was the night walk and an encounter with a family of tarantulas. The expert guide prodded its nest and proved there really is more wildlife here than you can poke a stick at!

MORE INFO
Chimu Adventures can organise the entire trip including all travel arrangements. Call on 1300 678 909 or visit chimuadventures.com

Peru-sing the accommodation

Casa Republica Hotel Lima

This 1920s luxury mansion retains original features from the republican era and is an ideal retreat after a day exploring the diverse and vibrant capital. casarepublica.com



El Retablo Hotel Cusco

Only a short walk to the main square, and part of the MLP package, this intimate hotel has been handpainted by local artists in the vibrant colours of Peru. elretablo.com



Various lodges Sacred Valley of the Incas

Exclusive to MLP tour, these luxury five-star lodges in stunning locations are perfect to recharge after a day hiking. mountainlodgesofperu.com



Inkaterra Hotel Machu Picchu



THE place to stay in the town of Machu Picchu – set in 4.8 hectares of natural beauty with waterfalls, birds and the world's largest orchid collection. Total luxury with a village feel... you'll want to stay for longer! inkaterra.com

Refugio Amazonas/Tambopata Research Center Tambopata National Reserve

Located deep in the rainforest, these luxe eco lodges enhance the Amazonian experience, yet offer all the expected creature comforts. perunature.com

