



Andrew Harper's
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EXPLORING PERU

from the
Andes
to the
Amazon

{ OPINIONATED REVIEWS BY A WRITER WHO TRAVELS INCOGNITO AND ALWAYS PAYS HIS OWN WAY }

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A NEW ERA *for* TRAVEL *in*
PERU

CUSCO'S PLAZA DE ARMAS



Peruvian Discoveries

FEW COUNTRIES CAN RIVAL THE CULTURAL AND scenic riches of Peru. Home to numerous pre-Columbian civilizations, it was, of course, the center of the great Incan empire, which in the late 15th century stretched from Ecuador to northern Argentina. As well as historic remains, Peru offers glorious mountain scenery, with 11 peaks over 20,000 feet high. And the recent debut of several fine hotels, plus the launch of a notable Amazon cruise boat (see [A Splendid New Amazon Riverboat](#)), provide further incentives to American travelers.

Indigenous people still make up 53 percent of Peru's population, with their distinctive clothing and gaily decorated herds of llamas and alpacas bringing a splash of exotic color to the towns and cities of the Andes. Today, the old Incan capital, Cusco, is a thriving and irresistible mix of old and new. Nearby, the Sacred Valley is filled with charming towns, markets and imposing ruins such as the fortress at Ollantaytambo. Farther south, the region surrounding Lake Titicaca



LLAMA AT MACHU PICCHU



FLOATING ISLANDS ON LAKE TITICACA

offers a rare glimpse at a society little changed by the modern world. And to the north, the Peruvian Amazon is one of the most biologically diverse areas of the planet.

During the 1990s, Peru experienced a period of terrorist violence perpetrated by the Shining Path Maoist guerrilla movement. Since the capture in 1992 of its leader, Abimael Guzman, and the subsequent arrest of his deputy, Oscar Ramírez, in 1999, the problem has been effectively contained.

“ Politically, the country now seems relatively stable and for the past two years, the economy has enjoyed a GDP growth in excess of 8 percent.

Politically, the country now seems relatively stable — President Alan García is approaching the end of his second five-year

term — and for the past two years, the Peruvian economy has enjoyed GDP growth in excess of 8 percent.

The best time to visit Peru is the dry season from May through September. Early in 2010, the country suffered from serious mudslides close to the major historic sites, which destroyed roads, bridges and railway lines. On the basis of our recent trip, however, it seems that most of the damage has been satisfactorily repaired.



ANDES SEEN FROM THE SACRED VALLEY



MARKET IN PISAC

CUSCO

SET IN THE ANDES AT 11,200 feet, Cusco is such a singular place that the throngs of tourists entirely fail to detract from its appeal. Held to be the oldest continually occupied city in the Western Hemisphere, it comprises a harmonious array of sienna-colored buildings grouped around a series of colonial plazas. The Plaza de Armas (or Huacaypata) was the ceremonial center of the Incan empire, and today, an immense 17th-century baroque cathedral dominates the imposing square.

Cusco's most remarkable site is the Koricancha (Inca Temple of the Sun), contained within the Church of Santo Domingo. In the early 16th century, the temple was staffed by 4,000 priests and its walls were covered

by 700 gold sheets. Although its massive exterior walls have always been visible, an earthquake in 1986 revealed just how much of the original structure remained, hidden beneath white stucco.

Some people prefer to begin their trips in either the Sacred Valley (9,100 feet) or Machu Picchu (7,950 feet), owing to their lower elevations. But we have always found that if you take the first few hours in Cusco at a relaxed pace, it is relatively easy to adapt. For many years, our favored place to stay has been the **Hotel Monasterio** (see **Hotel Monasterio Reappraised**), an Orient-Express property just a short walk from the Plaza de Armas. However, three years ago, the well-respected Inkaterra group opened an 11-suite hotel close by.

La Casona is housed within one of Cusco's most

important early colonial buildings — its first owner in 1585 was the conquistador Captain Francisco Barrientos — but despite its historical grandeur, it has an unassuming exterior and can be quite difficult to find. Fortunately, as we approached the massive dark-green wooden doors, they swung open, thanks to the observant porter within.

We quickly found ourselves surrounded by attractive young staff, one of whom escorted us to a cozy salon with high ceilings, restored frescoes, colorful textiles, handcarved wooden furniture and displays of fresh flowers. Essentially, the atmosphere of La Casona is more like that of a manor house than of a hotel. Hence, there is no front desk, pool or fitness center, and only a small, elegant dining room. Nine suites are arranged

around a cloistered courtyard that has graceful stone arches, tiled walkways and a central garden; two Plaza Suites (#5 and #6) offer dramatic city views.

Our accommodations proved to be sophisticated and exceptionally comfortable. A high, timbered ceiling was illuminated by theatrical lighting and complemented by a working stone fireplace and an exquisite folk tapestry (part of owner José Koechlin's

private collection). A large bed flanked by columns with classical cornices was backed by a half-wall, which also served to separate the bedroom from the bath. Amenities included a large flat-screen television (hidden behind carved wooden doors), DVD and iPod players, and free Wi-Fi service. The bath was exquisite, with two vanities, radiant floor heating, a deep ovoid soaking tub and a marble-clad walk-in shower.

La Casona's intimate dining room offers a delicious menu that fuses modern cooking styles with traditional Peruvian ingredients. We especially enjoyed chicken breast wrapped in bacon and served with fava beans, onion, potatoes and soft Andean cheese. Many guests choose to eat out, however, at one of the numerous restaurants within easy walking distance. Although the hotel has no concierge desk, the staff is unfailingly charming and helpful. La Casona is a delightful hideaway, and if you prefer smaller, more intimate properties, then this should be your choice. The Monasterio can suffer from a surfeit of tour groups, whereas this is a place solely for individual travelers.

LA CASONA 94 Patio Suite, \$720; Balcon Suite, \$925; Plaza Suite, \$1,130. Plaza Las Nazarenas 113, Cusco. Tel. (800) 442-5042. www.inkaterra.com



CLICK PHOTO TO VIEW SCENES FROM OUR HOTEL STAYS
IN CUSCO AND THE SACRED VALLEY

