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In Ancient Worlds

Beaches, jungles, ancient ritual, natural remedies and a precious eco-system - not to mention lost civilisations. Zosia Swidlicka revels in the natural beauty of South America



right: Outside pool area at Ponta dos Ganchos
far right: Aerial view, Ponta dos Ganchos
below: Chill out in a hammock at Inkaterra



Breath-taking beaches, world class food and unique handicrafts were my initial motivators to visit South America, but that list is way too short and a little uninformed the truth be told. My South American sojourn opened my eyes to its natural beauty, energy, karma and ancient civilisation.

I debunked to the vast and vibrant continent last Autumn to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Hiram Bingham's Machu Picchu discovery and indulge in the local culture.

For a beach holiday, Brazil is unavoidable. With 8,000km of coastline and countless strips to choose from, it's a beach lover's paradise. Those in the know head to Ponta dos Ganchos, an exclusive island resort near Florianopolis. It's number one in South America for ultimate luxury and comfort (think bungalows fitted with private sauna, jacuzzi and infinity pool overlooking the ocean) combined with faultless service and thoughtful touches; the island can be booked for an intimate romantic dinner with a masseuse in attendance at your bungalow. A private

beach and activities such as whale-watching complete the experience.

A different type of sun and sand vacation awaits in the Atacama desert, northern Chile. The world's driest desert is filled with stunning landscapes and it's Awasi that should be your base. Quechua for 'home', this boutique offering takes inspiration from a local village, comprising of eight bungalows made from natural, locally-sourced materials. The best thing about Awasi is that each bungalow is assigned a private 4x4 with English-speaking guide that turns your tailor-made itinerary into reality, whether you prefer to do so by foot, by car or indeed on horseback.

On any tour of South America, Peru is an essential destination due to its diverse climates and numerous attractions. Start at the highest navigable lake in the world; Lake Titicaca to see the floating Uros islands and its indigenous inhabitants, constructed from reeds by pre-incas in order to escape colonisation. The only five star hotel in the region is the Libertador, ideally located on a private island boasting



panoramic views of the lake. At 3811m above sea level, this is literally the height of luxury (thankfully an infinite supply of coca tea in the lobby staves off altitude sickness). Ask for a room with a view to enjoy the colourful sunrises and sunsets reflecting onto the water.

Staying at altitude, visit one of the deepest canyons in the world in the Colca region. Nestled amid steep drops and Inca agricultural terraces is Las Casitas del Colca, a group of private lodges that attract visitors in their unspoilt natural habitat. Each lodge has its own herb garden as well as a patio complete with hot tub, perfect for soaking after a tough hike. The spa will relax you and bind you closer to the outdoors with products made from indigenous Andean herbs. Children will enjoy feeding the hotel's resident baby alpaca and there's also trout fishing. This is a great place to unwind and explore nature, unadulterated - so don't expect much from the wifi signal.

While Orient Express has several more properties in Peru, a special mention must go to Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge. This

luxury hotel is uniquely placed at the gates to the world famous citadel, allowing its guests the benefit of visiting the mystical site before and after the coach-loads of tour groups arrive from Aguas Calientes at the foot of the mountain, the only other place to stay near the site. Make the most of this privileged location by booking into the hotel's outdoor heated jacuzzi, from which you can gaze at the breath-taking ruins and Huayna Picchu mountain long after its visitors have left.

A stone's throw away from Machu Picchu is the Sacred Valley, which most visitors skip on their way to the Inca site, yet it retains a beauty and mysticism of its own. Those who spend a few days here will be rewarded with inspiring mountain views and more Inca ruins than you can shake a coca leaf at. Check into Aranwa hotel for the ultimate rest and relaxation retreat: the hotel boasts the largest spa in Peru. Arrange for a Shaman to carry out an Andean purification ritual inside the Inca Sauna, which relaxes your muscles using hot volcanic stones, ending with a coca leaf reading. This is also the place to

try Quinoa Sushi, an excellent example of Peruvian fusion cuisine.

A trip to South America would not be complete without a few days in the Amazon rainforest, and what better way to experience this unique setting than with 100% carbon neutral, eco-luxury pioneers Inkaterra? A cluster of cabins at the heart of the Tambopata reserve, everywhere you turn you're confronted by the Amazon's wildlife. Walking the trail through swamps and palm trees an orchestra of insects, birds and monkeys fill your ears, buzzing into the night. Excursions into the rainforest are led by knowledgeable guides but just make sure you set an alarm for the early morning trips as the wake-up call (knock on the door) is not always reliable. Inkaterra is all about integration with the local ecosystem while ensuring the utmost comfort for its guests.

At a time when global warming is affecting the world's most vulnerable natural wonders, now is the time to visit South America's vibrant and varied offerings. Just don't forget to pack for both hot and cold weather.



Ponta dos Ganchos offers rates from £476 per bungalow per night, including all meals and based on two sharing. For bookings and further information visit www.pontadosganchos.com or call +55 48 39537000.

Rates at Awaši from US\$1500. For more information and to book visit www.awasi.cl or call +(56-2) 233-9641.

Rates at Libertador Lake Titicaca start from US\$200 for 1 night in a Superior Room. Visit www.libertador.com.pe or call +511 518-6500 (Lima) or +5151 367-780 (hotel).

Nightly rates at Las Casitas del Colca start from US\$434 including service, based on two sharing a Super Casita King, full board. To book visit www.lascasitasdelcolca.com or call Orient-Express Reservations on 0845 077 2222.

Nightly rates at Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge starts from US\$1017, including service, based on two sharing a Superior King Room, full board. To book visit www.sanctuarylodge.net or call Orient-Express Reservations on 0845 077 2222.

Rates at Aranwa Sacred Valley from US\$260. For reservations please contact reservas@aranwahotels.com

A 3-day/2 night program at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica starts from US\$492 per person based on two sharing a Double Room. Rate is inclusive of all a-la-carte excursions, full-board and round-trip transportation from Puerto Maldonado. Visit www.inkaterra.com to book.

WALKING THE TRAIL THROUGH SWAMPS AND PALM TREES AN ORCHESTRA OF INSECTS, BIRDS AND MONKEYS FILL YOUR EARS, BUZZING INTO THE NIGHT





*left hand page, top left: Libertador Lake Titicaca
 left hand page, centre and bottom right: Awasi
 left hand page, bottom left: Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge
 top: Valley of the Moon, Chile
 above: Las Casitas del Colca
 right: Aranwa Sacred Valley*

