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On top of the world

ABOVE Cusco's rooftops **RIGHT** Mountain horseride; Hotel Monasterio; Aranwa Sacred Valley Hotel & Wellness



After a hike along rainforest trails or through cloud-topped Andean peaks, treat tired limbs and aching feet to the natural botanical therapies of a Peruvian spa, suggests Sarah Woods

For centuries, Peru's indigenous peoples have known that health and happiness stem from a harmonic balance of the emotional, physical and spiritual. They practised the alchemy of mixing herbs, flowers and nuts with the elements and exercise to cure all ills – an ancient philosophy has been translated into contemporary therapies in Peru's thriving collection of spas and wellness centres.

Sacred seeds and stones are gathered for use in peaceful healing rituals, where ancient prayers are whispered as lanterns flicker. Sweet-smelling plants are harvested for inclusion in massage oils, scrubs and lotions and coupled with the sensual slumber sounds of Pachamama (Mother Earth). Few locations lend themselves so perfectly to restful contemplation as a Peruvian jungle's sun-dappled clearing or the crisp, invigorating mountain air and birdsong of the Andes, while the bubbling mineral-rich muds of the coastal plains promise eternal youth – or at least, softer skin.

Most visitors to Peru come to visit the antiquities at Machu Picchu and the extraordinary beauty of Lake Titicaca – or to explore the vast Amazon basin to the east, or to chill out on the beaches. It is in these areas that most of the top spas are located, an opportunity to combine high altitude mountain walking, horse riding, yoga and in the rainforest, wildlife treks, with wellness and meditation.

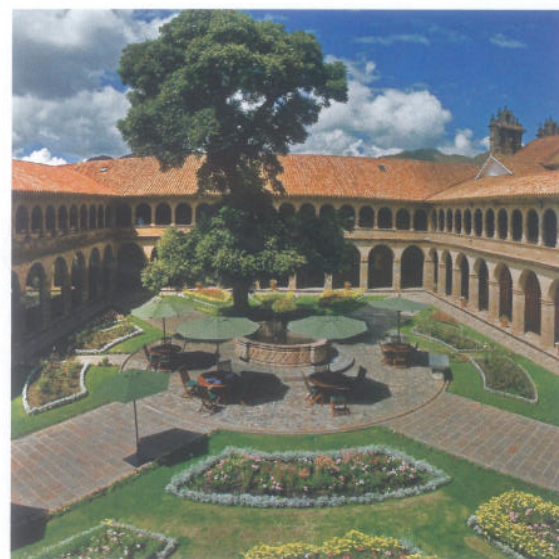
Age-old Peruvian therapies abound in the holistic Spa at the Hotel Monasterio (tel. +51 84 60 4000 / www.monasteriohotel.com), in Cusco's character-packed old quarter. Part of the Orient-Express portfolio, this handsome, colonial-era property was once Cusco's monastery. Today, as a National Monument beside the central plaza, it reflects the city's historic blend and the merging of Spanish and Inca cultures.

ANCIENT ANDEAN HEALING RITUALS

Keen walkers can travel by luxury train to pick up the legendary Machu Picchu trail from here. An alternative is a therapeutic journey of rejuvenation, meditation and deep, spiritual cleansing via the Monasterio's massage menu.

You can choose from a number of pampering rituals based on ancient Andean healing. Volcanic stones, the warm scent of the Andes, and natural muña oils (a wild mint favoured by shamanic healers) are used to soothe tired muscles. Gentle touch stimulates the body's energy points to the soft strains of traditional Inca melodies.

On the trail to Machu Picchu, an hour out of Cusco and deep in the Sacred Valley of the Incas (a fertile valley believed by some to have been the heartland of the Inca empire), the Aranwa Sacred Valley Hotel & Wellness (tel. +51 434 1452 / www.aranwahotels.com) is set in a seventeenth century colonial hacienda by the Vilcanota River. Come here to use the Uno Spa as a day visitor, or stay longer and indulge in one of the programmes, which vary from weight control to de-stressing and anti-ageing.



Alpaca farms and scrubby pasture look out across a range of jagged volcanic peaks



TOP Sure-footed alpaca are at home in the mountains **BELOW** Traditional healing herbs; a corner of the massive Amazon basin



Treatments combine the ancestral beliefs of the Valley and alternative medicine with the latest medical technology, as well as the use of essential oils from native plants like coca, eucalyptus, *muña*, *camu camu*, *aguaymanto*, corn and quinoa. Bliss out with a *herbal pindas*; an invigorating therapeutic rub with a ball-shaped bag of cloth stuffed with purifying Andean herbs, or indulge in a facial using organic Pevonia products.

To the southeast, an exhilarating journey along a skinny mountain road transports spa-lovers from the city of Arequipa to the Colca Lodge (tel. +51 54 202587 / www.colca-lodge.com), located on a plateau at over 3,600 metres above sea level. Here, bizarre, gnarled rock formations are scattered across magma-rich plains, while alpaca farms and scrubby pasture look out across a range of jagged volcanic peaks.

The Eco-Spa at the Lodge makes good use of the local lava and the volcanic terrain. Gushing underground geothermal currents rise to the surface to create mineral-rich hot springs, in which visitors can bask while inhaling the brisk mountain air. All treatments are based around the hot springs and range from traditional massage to an all-over chocolate body wrap.

The Eco-Spa has a strong responsible tourism ethic and uses thermal energy to power all its spa facilities, including showers, rooms and steam baths. All staff employed, including the spa therapists, are local and embody a particular quality of serenity that comes from living in such a beautiful, natural area. The owners are committed to local causes and are working on a project to revive a network of rural trails that has been used by locals for centuries, creating a pattern of footpaths and bridleways for hiking, horse riding and mountain biking.

SYMBIOTIC HARMONY

This is ideal walking country; there are short hikes from the Lodge to the nearby ruins at Uyo Uyo, an ancient pre-Inca settlement that once functioned as the capital of the region, as well as horses and mountain bikes for day trips. More adventurous excursions can be arranged by the adventure travel agency Colca Explorer (www.colca-explorer.com) deep into the surrounding canyons, or to find the Amazon River's most remote source on Mount Mismi, more than 5,000m above sea level.

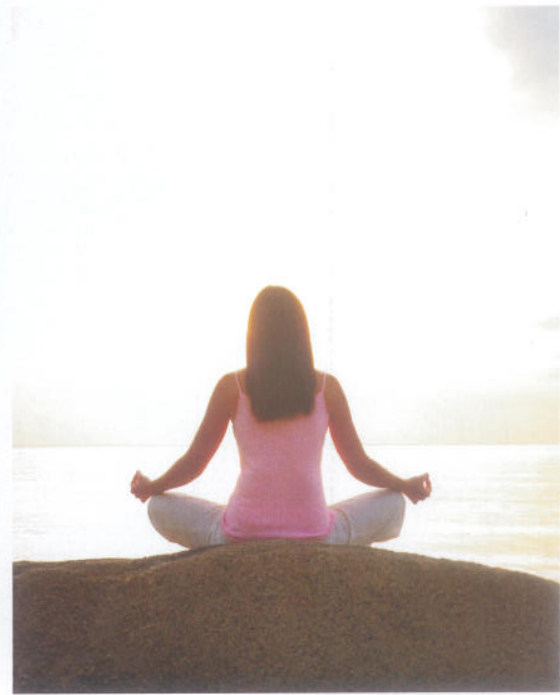
While on the Peru spa trail, why not combine a spell in the rainforest with the invigorating mountains for contrast? The ENA Spa at the Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica (tel. 0808 101 2224 / www.inkaterra.com), in Puerto Maldonado, owes everything to Peru's expanse of Amazon jungle, where over 10,000 plant species and an extraordinary diversity of wildlife enjoy symbiotic harmony.

Almost every spa therapy reflects the botanical make-up of the surrounding





LEFT The ENA Spa at the Inkaterra Reserva; Sunset yoga



Airy spa suites look out over the river or onto towering ferns through which giant blue butterflies flit

rainforest at this rustic retreat. Tucked alongside the meandering Madre de Dios River, in a private nature reserve under an imposing jungle canopy, a string of 35 simple mud-and-thatch cabins blends in seamlessly with the Amazon's lush vegetation.

Balconies amid the foliage are great for bird watching, while forest trails criss-cross the land. Airy spa suites look out across the river, or onto towering ferns through which giant blue butterflies flit.

Try the signature Amazon Purification Treatment, an organic cleansing ritual created from a local medicinal plant (Cat's Claw), and used for centuries as a blood cleanser, detoxifier, diuretic, anti-inflammatory and analgesic. Stress can also be alleviated by an old health ethos of the Inca centred on the curative power of Andean eucalyptus, which can help achieve a state of total relaxation with its sedative effect.

Activities on the reserve include a fascinating, 200m boardwalk over the Aguajales rainforest swamps and a canopy walk through the tree tops as well as boat rides to spot monkeys and birds.

HIPPIE VIBE

More traditional therapies are on offer in the coastal plains around the lively beach resort of Máncora, in the Piura Region of northwest Peru, close to the Ecuadorian border. With its picturesque coastal walks and shoreline-nesting birds, Máncora is much more than a holiday playground – not that all party-mad tourists take time to discover its quieter alter ego. The place has a slight hippie vibe, with a gorgeous yoga centre on the beach, the Samana Chakra Spa (Tel. +51 73 25 86 04 / www.samanachakra.com), offering classes, retreats and traditional Peruvian massage therapies. Stay here and learn to kiteboard or surf, or ride along the vast expanse of beach at sunset.

No trip to Máncora is complete without a visit to Poza de Barro (mud thermal bath) just outside the town. This mud-filled crater attracts people from near and far keen to take a dip in its murky, nutrient-rich depths. Packed with natural gases and curative organic matter, the mud is of a sticky consistency with a frothy top. Lather it on – and rinse with the thoughtfully provided buckets of water afterwards. There is even a range of recycled plastic bottles, should you want some mud to take away. ①

WAY TO GO

THE REAL PERU

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PERUVIAN SECRETS

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ENIGMA

Peru-based ENIGMA pioneered luxury treks in the Andes and its portfolio has expanded to include classic, adventure and family trips. A recent addition is its Wellness Collection, which provides yoga trips and treks, spiritual retreats and luxury spa stays.

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