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PERUSING PERU: Machu Picchu, Sacred Valley, Cusco and Lima

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When the clouds clear, the Machu Picchu hills sing (with a hat tip to *The Emperor's New Groove*).
CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

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I awoke to find my head in the clouds, which felt fitting as the day's itinerary was taking me to a destination I had dreamt about for many years: Machu Picchu.

Everything about being in Sacred Valley was mind-blowing, especially our accommodations at Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba. Set on a mountainside with a main building, spa and casitas (small houses), and decorated with items made by local artisans, the five-star boutique hotel provided an authentically Peruvian stay that prepared us for the main event.



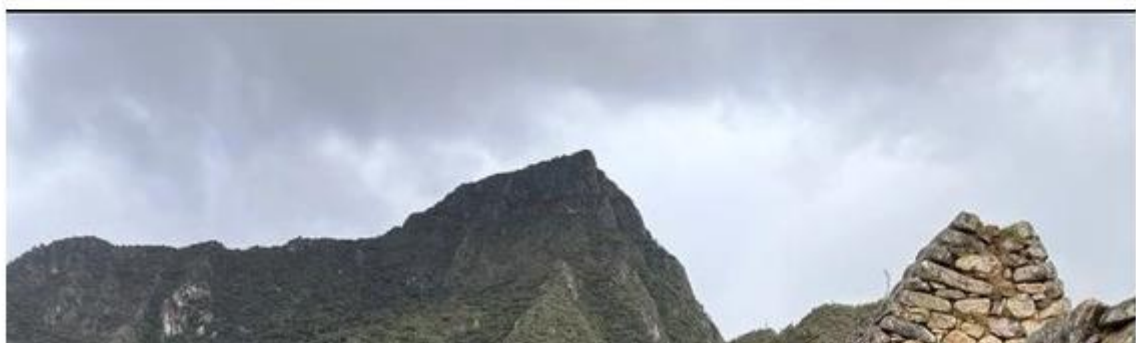
The clouds appear touchable from bed in one of the casitas at Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in Sacred Valley, Peru. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

Instead of hiking, our route to reaching the UNESCO World Heritage site – one of the new Seven Wonders of the World – matched the elevated experience of our rest. The Hiram Bingham train is named for Hiram Bingham III, the American explorer and politician who rediscovered Machu Picchu and publicized the Inca citadel's existence for the world. As it pulled into the station, I felt like I was about to board the Orient Express – not that far fetched an analogy as both are operated by Belmond.



The last car aboard the Hiram Bingham train to Machu Picchu has live music and fantastic views. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

The train is a throwback – in a wonderful way – with meal service at your assigned table and a glass-ceiling bar car in the rear that was the hotspot for fun with music and dancing and great daytime views of Sacred Valley. We then were transferred to a bus and driven up the switchback mountain (don't look out the window if heights are an issue for you!) to the historic site, where our guide pointed out the incredible Inca architecture. It truly is a remarkable place that exceeded all my expectations.



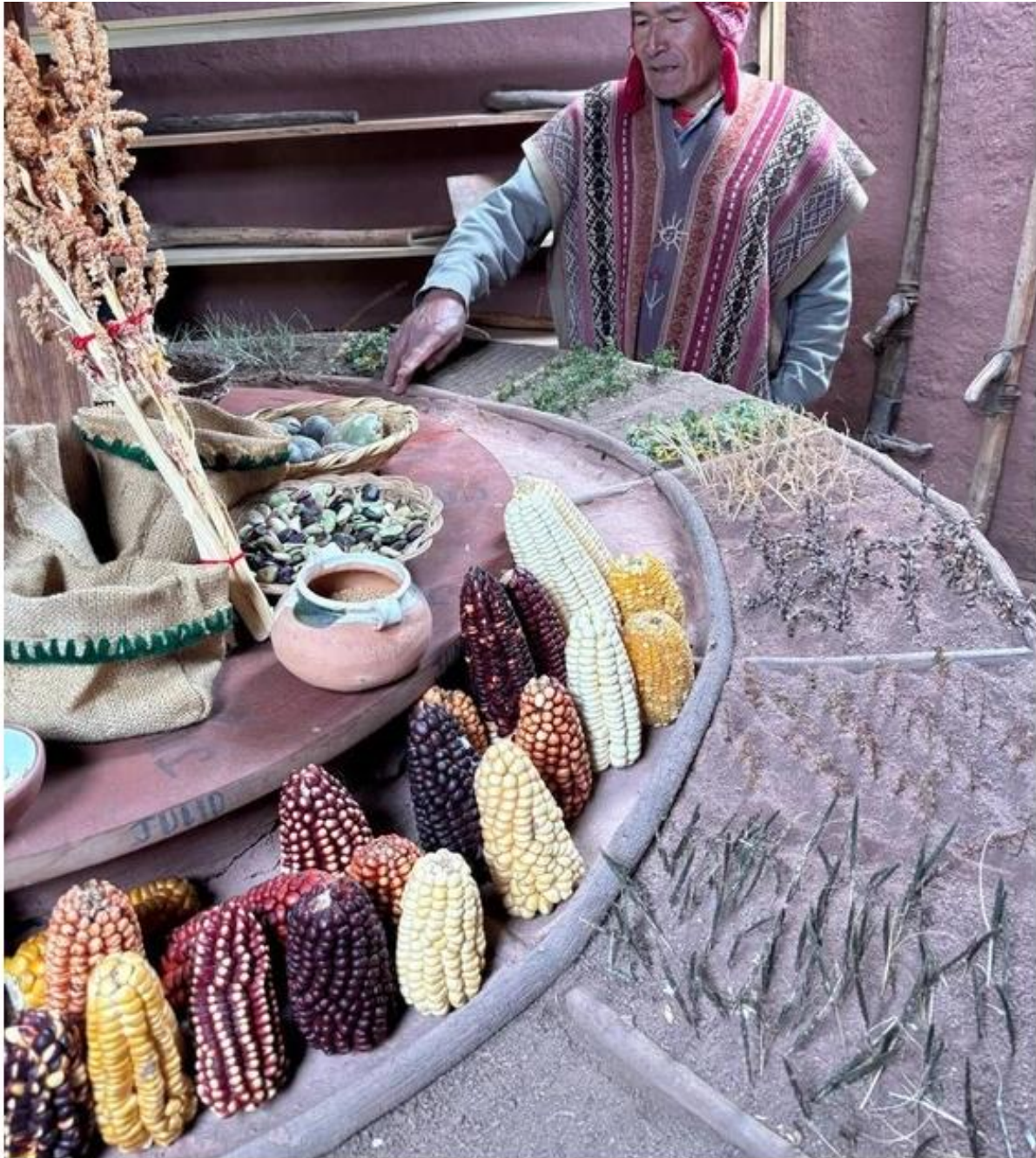


The skill of the Incas on display at 'Lost City' Machu Picchu in Peru. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

Before leaving Sacred Valley, we got the wonderful chance to connect with a farming community through La Base Lamay. Headquartered out of a shop selling local goods and coffee in Lamay village, La Base offers tourists “an authentic interaction with local people of the mountain communities to learn about their lifestyle and culture,” CEO and co-founder Franco Negri told us.

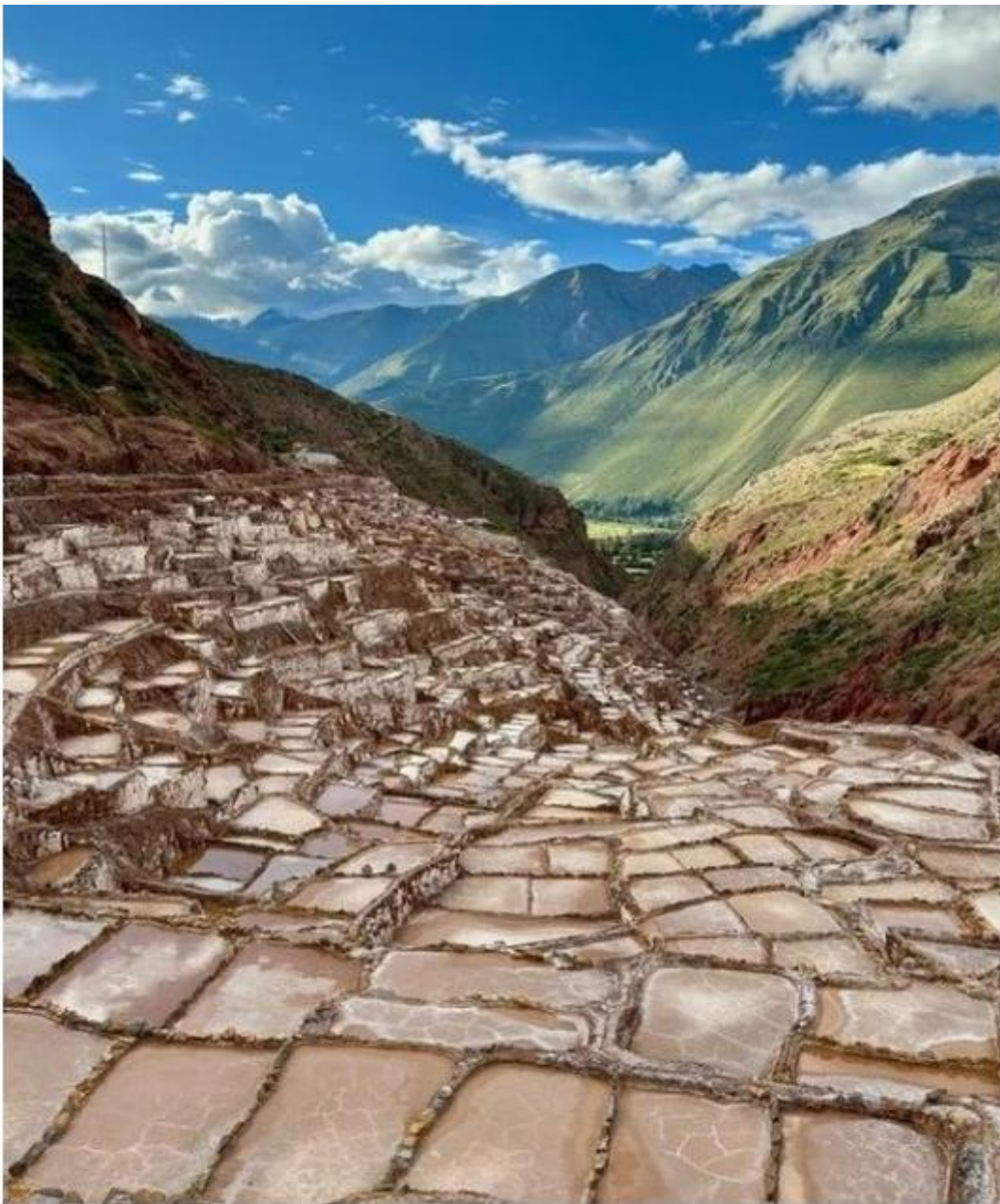
Started in 2019, Negri said the idea is to integrate locals into the travel business and to help them supplement their farming income. In addition to visits to communities, they offer hikes in the mountains and outdoor activities.





Farmer Segundino Mamani of the Huayllafara community explains the cycle for corn at the interpretation centre as part of a La Base Lamay experience in Peru. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

We were driven up a mountain (fabulous views of the valley and Lamay!) to Huayllafara, about 3,500 metres above sea level with a population of about 200, and were welcomed with a blessing that included petals on our heads. At their interpretation centre, and with the help of a bilingual guide, a farmer told us what they do each month from planting to harvesting. We then got a chance to try our hand at tilling the field with their wooden tools (the terrain makes using machinery very difficult). We also helped peel corn for lunch and grind it with a stone. But the main dish served to us was the historical delicacy of guinea pig – “cute and delicious,” our guide joked, and served on special occasions. The lady preparing them stood for 90 minutes, turning them on sticks.



The visual of Salineras de Maras with the Peruvian mountains backdrop is stunning. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

Heading to Cusco, we stopped to ogle the picturesque Maras Salt Mines with its 3,000 terraced pools fed by saline water that is filtered from the ground by the Qoripujio spring water canal. Salt, obtained by evaporation, has been extracted here since Inca times.

We also paid a visit to Chinchero, which eventually will be the site of an international airport. Textiles is the main industry and at Textil Cusi we learned from the ladies how they dye wool. They also have wonderful clothing and souvenirs for sale.





One of the ladies at Textil Cusi in Chinchero, Peru wears traditional clothing while demonstrating how the alpaca wool is dyed. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

It only takes a day or two to understand why Machu and Sacred Valley are such popular bucket list destinations. That said, don't short change yourself by thinking they are the only reason to visit Peru.

Absolutely, whatever you must do, come for the Lost City and then stay for all of this ...

CUSCO

A 75-minute flight from Lima took us to Cusco, which we promptly left to drive to Sacred Valley (it's better to start lower to help acclimatize to the Andes). After our adventures there, we returned to Cusco, about 3,400 metres above sea level. Once the capital of the Incan empire, the city was named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1983. (The kid in me enjoyed thinking of one of my favourite movies – Disney's 2000 animated flick *The Emperor's New Groove* – and its lead character Emperor Kuzco, voiced by David Spade, who gets transformed into a llama. FYI, if you haven't seen it, you need to!)

What we did:

In the Main Square, the Cathedral of Cusco – built on the foundation of an Inca temple – has among its impressive collection the 16th-century *Senor de los Temblores*. Depicting Jesus on the cross, the statue is believed to have lessened the damage done to the city by a 1650 earthquake and is carried through the streets annually on Holy Monday during Easter.

Nearby you must see the 12-angled stone, an example of the Incas' perfection and skill, as well as Santo Domingo convent and sacred Inca temple Qorikancha.



It is hard to fathom how the Incas in the 15th century assembled these massive stones at the Saqsaywaman archeological complex in Peru. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

The Saqsaywaman (or “sexy woman,” as our guide joked to help our pronunciation) archeological complex of walls of stone fit together without mortar, as well as the nearby Jesus statue reminiscent of Christ the Redeemer in Rio, are on a hill and offer great views of Cusco.





The Sulca family textiles museum in Cusco, Peru. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

At the Sulca Textile Museum, the Sulca family carry on their ancestral tradition by using ancient techniques to create textiles that are available for purchase in addition to beautiful creations by Andean artisans in the community. Plus, they have loads of llamas and alpacas!

The vast San Pedro market is packed with vendors hawking ready-made food, fresh and baked goods, meat (don't look the decapitated heads in the eye – or do, if you can), souvenirs and so much more. Be ready to haggle for the best deal.

Where we ate:

– For lunch at Cicciolina tapas restaurant where I put all the cute faces out of my mind and took the 'when in Rome' approach with the alpaca appetizer served in an Asian sauce with creamy sweet potato, barbecued bacon and pineapple and drizzled with wasabi mayo. It was tasty!

– Dinner was in the courtyard of the Museo de Arte Precolombino at MAP Cafe, with walls of glass offering a refined view to match the elevated menu. The quinoa with avocado sour cream, braised baby vegetables, local cheese and arugula was divine.



Pet a baby alpaca to start your day as a guest at Palacio del Inka, a Luxury Collection Hotel from Marriott in Cusco, Peru? Don't mind if I do! CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

Where we stayed:

Palacio del Inka, a Luxury Collection Hotel from Marriott in the heart of the city, was a great launch spot for exploring Cusco. The 500-year-old mansion feels like a museum with all the antiques and art. Plus, it has its own eight-angled stone and – the best for last! – guests can pet a baby alpaca that accompanies ladies selling artisan goods during the day.

LIMA

The soupy fog coming off the Pacific Ocean and hovering over the coastline on

our arrival in Peru's capital city was what our guide, with a smile, told us the locals call "donkey's belly." Luckily it didn't last our whole visit and we got clear views driving along the oceanfront with massive cliffs to one side and waves and surfers on the other. It's a sight to behold – and you'll have plenty of time to ogle it as Lima daytime traffic makes Toronto's Gardiner Expressway feel quick. We suggest letting locals do the driving for you!



Huaca Pucllana adobe and clay pyramid built from seven staggered platforms sits in the Miraflores district of central Lima, Peru. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

What we did:

- The Huaca Pucllana adobe and clay pyramid, built between 450 AD and 650 AD, was uncovered starting in 1981 and sits amid the modern buildings of the Miraflores district.
- Museo Larco with treasures from ancient Peru teaches visitors about the cultures that flourished centuries before the rise of the Incas. Check any prudishness at the door at the Erotica Gallery with its collection of artworks depicting sexuality in Peruvian pre-Columbian art.





A beautiful sunset is the backdrop as Hotel B bar manager Axel Romero walks us through the art of making a Pisco Sour, the signature cocktail in Peru. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

– On the rooftop patio at Hotel B (as in Barranco, the name of the hipster neighbourhood that’s worth walking for murals, artists, bars and theatre) with a party vibe and a killer sunset view, we took a cocktail class with bar manager Axel Romero, who taught us how to make a Pisco Sour. Known world over as the quintessential Peruvian cocktail, it is, ironically, an American’s reinterpretation of a whisky sour made with Pisco, which is a spirit like brandy that is distilled from fermented grape juice. The boutique hotel – two houses from 1914 joined together and opened in 2013 – has 20 distinct rooms and 342 pieces of impressive contemporary art.

Where we ate:

– Astrid & Gaston restaurant, started by the namesakes who met while studying cooking in Paris, it has six kitchens preparing contemporary Peruvian cuisine in a stunning 17th-century residence with a beautiful patio space.

– Mercado No. 28 Miraflores opened in 2018 as the first gastronomic market in the country. Located on the second floor with light pouring in from the roof, it has more than a dozen food and drink options. Another location opened in 2021 in the city’s Surco district.



A stone bowl with petals holds a dessert of camu camu, melipona honey, copoazu and macambo at Mayta in Lima, Peru. You crush the cover and it's creamy goodness. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

– We relished the outstanding nine-course tasting menu with wine pairing at Mayta (“noble land” in the native language Aymara), which was No. 41 on the 2024 list of The World’s 50 Best Restaurants. Prepare to be wowed by the unique dish presentations from chef and restaurateur Jaime Pesaque.



The infinity rooftop pool at Miraflores Park in Lima has views of the Pacific Ocean and coastline. CYNTHIA MCLEOD/TORONTO SUN torsun

Where we stayed:

Miraflores Park, A Belmond Hotel is perched on the Pacific coast overlooking the ocean and across from a park with a short walk to outdoor mall Larcomar with local and American brand shops and restaurants including Mangos with its cliff's-edge patio view. With 89 suites, two restaurants, a bar and a spa, Miraflores Park also has a deep, heated rooftop pool that I hit repeatedly, and a pond out front with three different species of turtles.

For our early flight we stayed at Wyndham Costa del Sol hotel at the airport and considering Lima's traffic, it was worth it to be able to roll out of bed and practically land on the plane.

IF YOU GO

Voted World's Best Leisure Airline according to Skytrax in 2023 for the fifth time, Air Transat flies direct to Lima from Toronto Pearson twice weekly on Wednesdays and Saturdays and from Montreal Trudeau once a week on Fridays, with a second flight on Tuesdays starting in winter 2024-25. An upgrade to Club Class provides additional bag allowance of two checked bags, priority check-in, more spacious seating and legroom in the upfront cabin, blanket and sleeping mask, gourmet meal, wine and snacks. A new collaboration between Air Transat and Porter Airlines now means travellers can make bookings via either airline for the broad range of domestic and international destinations that they service. Find out more at airtransat.com.

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