Adventure

Everyone dreams of going to Machu Picchu – but this is the best way to do it

By Jasper Lindell

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On a journey to Machu Picchu, JASPER LINDELL marvels at the genius of a lost empire. PHOTOGRAPHY: GARY RAMAGE

After days of squinting up at perfectly assembled stones, high on terraced hills in steep valleys, our mix of scepticism and confusion has started to wear Ernesto Andrade Morales down.

View over Machu Picchu.

"You have to stop thinking like a modern person!" our good-humoured guide tells us, as thunder and storm clouds threaten to roll southwards over Saqsaywaman, the ruined complex of temples and fortifications perched to the north over Cusco, Peru.

The precision of Incan construction is difficult to fathom. No earth-moving equipment. Cranes? Forget it. Not even a pocket calculator. Yet they managed stonework so accurate that mortar was superfluous. How

could this bygone civilisation have managed these vast projects, impervious to earthquakes and hundreds of years, when the country I hail from managed to invent wireless internet networks but still bickers ceaselessly over pothole repairs?

Tour guide Ernesto Andrade Morales at Saqsaywaman, outside of Cusco.

What mattered to the Inca is different to what matters to people now, Ernesto says. They wanted to make their gods happy. If that meant sending 20,000 men at a time to work shifting and carving heavy stones, that was

what had to be done. Don't worry about health and safety regulations. These were strong people without smartphones to scroll idly on! Time and people - they were the two natural resources the Inca had in abundance. For a while, that was enough to shape the world.

Our trail along the echoes of the Inca Empire had begun in Cusco, once the empire's grand capital. The Australian Museum's *Machu Picchu and the Golden Empires of Peru* exhibition had just opened in Sydney and we were here to see the country that had nurtured millennia of civilisations beyond the European imagination.

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The plane from Lima, Peru's modern-day capital, had descended between snow-capped peaks and we emerged in a drab, grey box of an airport. Whisked onto a small bus, we began our descent into the Sacred Valley, past earthen brown buildings, along steep roads arranged into hairpins and chicanes.

Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba.

Sunrise revealed a long wisp of cloud hanging low in the valley, where our rooms at the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba hotel were in individual buildings - *casitas*, or small houses - set above a central hacienda. At breakfast on the hacienda's verandah, there was idle talk of what a cable car could do to this part of the world. The walls of the valley towered above us, bathed in green at the bottom. We quickly agreed the steep hills around the Urubamba River did not need to be blemished by the electric whirr of a gondola.

The width of the Sacred Valley floor is, on average, just one kilometre. No pocket of the rich, fertile land is wasted. Small farms of about an acre cycle through crops, which are still tended by hand. A single acre is no justification for a tractor. On these farms, little has changed since the Inca Empire. Chemicals are expensive so farmers generally don't bother with them. The changes of the year still cycle through much the way they always have.

We ascend from the bottom of the valley in the direction of Chinchero, a colonial town built on the foundations of Inca buildings. There's a lot of that in and around Cusco. The Spanish conquistadors ransacked places but left the stones that had supported temples in place. Their construction efforts above can seem rough-shod in comparison to the finely wrought stones propping them up.

Spinning tales

On the outskirts of the town, we stop at Centro Culture Parwa. Entering through a small farmyard, where llamas and vicuna are fed grass, we reach a building lined with woven textiles and skeins of brightly coloured dyed wool. Inside, a group of women wearing the region's traditional clothes show us the techniques they use to wash and dye the wool, before spinning it into fine yarn. Weaving is a slow and careful process, with intricate patterns re-created from memory.

Parwa weaver Ofelia Uscapi Quispe.

Then it's our turn. Small looms are tied around our waists and strapped to a pole in front of us, and the women of the centre fuss over our attempts to add a line or two into the pattern that has already been well started for us. I do my best to follow along with the gestural instructions. The trick seems to be remembering where each of the two dozen or so threads need to be at any one time and keeping it all taut with one's fingers.

No wonder this is a skill locals start learning as very small children. The bigger pieces - which hang on the walls of the centre or are for sale as table runners - can take months. The women sit on the floor and work for a few hours each day, just as their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers would have done.

The circular terraces of Moray.

As we head on to Chinchero, we pass the construction site for the town's new international airport. It's being built to bring more tourists to the region, one of the biggest economic contributors. But there's also a hint of melancholy as the pre-fabricated concrete walls are stood up, waiting for glass and airplanes. It brings the rest of the world closer, and risks disrupting the traditional ways, I overhear someone say.

After Chinchero, our next stop is at Moray, an archaeological site comprising bowls of concentric circular terraces cut into the ground. It served as a type of crop experiment station, with a difference in temperature between the top and bottom terraces allowing crops to grow at an altitude - we're 3500 metres above sea level - that they should never have been able to grow at. The precision is staggering. The circles are perfectly round. Surely the technical expertise and knowledge required to

even experiment in this way should be beyond a civilisation that never wrote anything down.

The ancient town of Ollantaytambo.

For all the time I spend in Peru, this is one of the most perplexing conundrums. I get stuck on it. Writing is, I realise, how I think - note-taking and describing a problem is an extension of what goes on in my head. How could you think up the intricacies of a civilisation as powerful and intelligent as the Inca Empire without writing? Yes, there are the

quipu, the system of knotted cords to account all kinds of information, but that still didn't resolve it in my mind. The Incas were clearly thinkers - you do not build perfect concentric circles into a hillside bowl in an effort to propagate new crops unless you're thinking - but must have done so in a completely different way to me. Moray is not just circles in the ground; it's a lot to take in.

Resistance HQ

The last stop for the day is at Ollantaytambo, a town of about 3000 people whose streets are laid out the same as they were when the Inca ruled. Traffic signallers manage the flow in and out manually, along narrow cobbled streets. A tourist market in the town's plaza sells the same merchandise we have seen over and over: the ponchos, hats and bags. But rising above the town are steep terraces, with a never completed temple at the top. This is where Manco Inca led the resistance against the Spanish conquistadors.

The stones were fitted together like a giant, immovable Lego set. Interlocking mortise-and-tenon joints were carved into the stones, invisible from the outside where they appear to sit perfectly together. Ernesto asks us where we think the stones may have come from. The obvious answer seems the best: right here, where we're standing.

Locals of Ollantaytambo.

No, he tells us. Over there. He points to a scar on the hill on the other side of the valley, about eight kilometres as the crow flies. That's where the stones came from, quarried, brought down the mountain, floated along the river, and then brought back up, carved and placed. And on the hill on the other side of the valley is the ruins of a storehouse, where the town once stockpiled years worth of grain to keep them going through the lean years.

The temple at Ollantaytambo was not finished when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 1520s. Construction had begun before this area had been conquered by the Incas. Now it stands as a monument to c

defeated empire. The view from the top of the terraces extends into the Sacred Valley, across the township. At this strategic kink in the river, it's almost possible to imagine how this landscape supported such a vast empire: rich and fertile at the bottom, near impenetrable at the top. For the villagers who lived here, this would have been a full world.

But in January 1537, Manco Inca - a former ally turned rebel - defeated the Spanish at the Battle of Ollantaytambo. Less than a decade had passed since the Spanish first made contact with the Incans.

Views from Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in the Sacred Valley.

After the battle, the Spanish withdrew to Cusco and amassed reinforcements, leading Manco Inca to abandon Ollantaytambo and head further into the valley, towards Machu Picchu and beyond. The departure was solemn; sacrifices were offered. But there was no getting past the fact the Inca Empire was in retreat.

Near the top of Ollantaytambo I come to appreciate the collective effort the Incas mustered to get things done. Their society was deeply hierarchical and highly organised. Everyone had a place and a job. "Maybe it was here that socialism really worked," Ernesto had wondered out loud with us. There was no freedom as we know it, but no one went hungry and the sick were tended to. How brutish the Spanish must have seemed in comparison when their worlds collided.

Bumps in the road

It's at this point in the trip that the words of my GP ring in my ears. She told me that if I was going to Machu Picchu, I was going to get gastro. No ifs or buts. "Machu Picchu. That's gastro central," she said.

I take very ill at dinner. Ordering guinea pig had seemed such a good idea. When in Peru, do as the Peruvians do, I'd thought. But after a couple of

mouthfuls, I take a dramatic turn for the worse and depart the dinner table in a very hurried manner. (I don't blame the guinea pig. Clearly I was already coming down with something.)

Exploring the 15th-century citadel Machu Picchu.

After a long night of the soul that any traveller who's eaten something dodgy will shudder to remember, I wake up bleary-eyed and still feeling horrendous. But I have a choice: get on the bus to get on the train to get to Machu Picchu, or miss out on the crown jewel of a trip to Peru. There is no two ways about it: I am getting on that damned train.

A long, bumpy bus ride takes us back to Ollantaytambo. A cold drink at the train station restores some of my senses, and we board a morning PeruRail service to Machu Picchu Pueblo.

Locals enjoying the view.

A mid-century locomotive and carriages, done up in fresh blue and yellow paint, follow the narrow gauge line from Ollantaytambo towards Machu Picchu. The two-hour trip follows the Urumbumba River along the floor of the Sacred Valley. Farmers tend crops and chickens scratch in pens built up near the line. From the carriage window, I see hikers and porters on the Inca Trail, ascending the old road while we roll past. This is a PeruRail

tourist service: the seats are comfortable and the carriage surprisingly empty.

The train pulls slowly into the station at Machu Picchu Pueblo, a town that only came to be as the railroad was built; the line was finished in 1931. The Inkaterra Machu Picchu, our hotel, is a short walk from the station. Once I get to my room, all I want to do is sleep. In front of the fireplace in the room that night, I eat chicken soup and gather my thoughts: I am virtually in the shadow of Machu Picchu. I will conquer this stomach bug, I tell myself, and bloody well make it up there. Shuffling back to bed, I'm not sure I believe myself.

Machu Picchu is a 15th-century Inca citadel located on a mountain ridge in Peru.

The next time I'm conscious of what's really happening I'm standing in a queue along a street lined with shops selling postcards, hats, trinkets, bottles of water, insect repellent and sunscreen, ready to board a bus to Machu Picchu. The town - it was once known as Aguas Calientes, which means "hot springs" - is nestled into the side of the mountains along a river. Space is at a premium. Tourists wander about on foot and buses stream towards a river crossing before they zig-zag up towards Machu Picchu.

The buses are filled with international visitors and our eyes widen in refined panic around each bend, where the sheer drops become visible and the tight curves seem improbable; all we can do is trust the drivers who work this back and forth all day.

The buses deposit us on a large patch of gravel outside the gates to Machu Picchu. After our tickets are scanned, we follow the path to start circuit No. 2 - the most popular and considered the classic circuit of the site - and soon find our way climbing up the south agricultural terraces. To the right, the stupendous vista of Machu Picchu quickly emerges. At the top, it's a sight of considerable mystique. Beautiful, practical and expansive, the terraces, gables and building walls spread out beneath us, bookended by Huchuy Picchu. We seem to be among some scant clouds, but the sun is hot and shining and the grey blocks of Machu Picchu sit nestled in the rich green of the valley.

A lama at the Raqchi lookout, which looks down over the Sacred Valley.

'Discovered for science'

Hiram Bingham gets the credit for discovering this place. Bingham, historian and adventurer based at Yale University, found the ruins on July 24, 1911, with the assistance of locals. Discovery is a bit too strong a word. Some of the terraces were being farmed when Bingham arrived. Agustin Lizarraga Ruiz, a Peruvian explorer, arrived in 1902 and wrote his name in charcoal in a temple. Bingham noted the inscription in his 1922 book *Inca Land* but dropped this inconvenient fact from his 1948 retelling of his discovery in *The Lost City of the Incas*. Maps referring to the site were also drawn in 1874. There's also evidence to suggest Augusto Berns, a German entrepreneur, arrived in 1867 and looted the ruins with permission from the Peruvian government.

Whatever happened, it was Bingham who cleared the site and who revealed it to the world. He "discovered it for science" is the preferred semantic sleight of hand.

"Would anyone believe what I had found?" Bingham later wrote of that fateful morning. "Fortunately, in this land where accuracy in reporting what one has seen is not a prevailing characteristic of travellers, I had a good camera and the sun was shining."

Visitors to the ancient site climb to the top for a spectacular view of Machu Picchu.

The paths are now reinforced to handle the feet of tourists and the industrial-scale entrance means there is no chance of accidentally missing the ruins. But the vista has not lost any of the allure it would have had more than a century ago. Millions have seen Machu Picchu since Bingham but, like him, I wonder if anyone would believe my account of this place without photographs.

The first building to stop me in my tracks is the sun temple. Our guide - Liset Aragon Ccahua, who seems no less enthusiastic for having seen Machu Picchu over and over - points out a small, semi-circular building

with two windows and a stone altar at its centre. She brings out a laminated photograph, showing the sun's rays hitting the stone altar at the winter solstice on June 21. Built above a cave, which may have held the mummified body of Inca Pachacutec, who ordered the construction of Machu Picchu, this building is block perfect.

Machu Picchu.

"It seemed like an unbelievable dream," Bingham wrote of seeing the temple. "Dimly, I began to realise that this wall and its adjoining semicircular temple over the cave were as fine as the finest stonework in the world."

About 750 people probably lived at Machu Picchu at its peak. With a productive agricultural sector and well-appointed religious area, the citadel was probably for Incan royalty, a private escape. Machu Picchu was likely built during the reign of Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui, considered to be the first Incan emperor of history rather than mythology.

Machu Picchu tour guide Liset Aragon Ccahua.

Construction started about 1450 - the same decade Gutenberg printed his first Bible using movable type - and the city was occupied for about 100 years before the Spanish conquest led to the decline and fall of the Inca Empire.

There's a haunting quality to Machu Picchu. It must have been fiendishly difficult to build, and yet it was completed with such ingenuity. Our group stops to admire a drainage passage, about three metres wide with walls on either side. Liset tells us the gap between the walls follows the geological fault, giving the structure of the city wiggle-room in the event of an earthquake. This is work of staggering genius. How did they know that was there? How did they know how to build this way? How did we lose all this knowledge?

The town of Cusco.

All this for only a century. There are multiple hotels in Japan which were open for hundreds of years before Machu Picchu was built and are still taking bookings now. I follow the path around Machu Picchu in awe of the steadfastness of its ruins - some restoration work has helped, it's true - and the fragility of the civilisation that built it. They seem incompatible somehow.

On the train back to Ollantaytambo that afternoon, I try to make sense of what I've seen. I'm not sure I do. Machu Picchu may not be the scene of any great confrontations in the conquest of Peru. It may not be where the Inca Empire originated. But it feels important. The view is stupendous. The postcards I will buy later in a small shop in Cusco - the owner of the shop seems surprised anyone in this day and age is still buying postcards; he gave up selling stamps to go with them long ago - barely do the place justice. But Machu Picchu is more than the view. Each door, lintel and window is an achievement. The temples, stripped of their adornments, seem bare but not ruined.

The Cusco town square.

It would not be right to say Machu Picchu is a haunted place. There are no jump scares waiting around each twist in the path. What lingers is a sense of people having been here long before. Of lives - ordinary and extraordinary - lived out in walls now stripped of roofs and furniture. The eeriness I felt, I think, comes because this was supposed to be a living place and yet it is now held in a state of suspended animation.

Fallen glory

Back in Cusco, the built Incan heritage has been absorbed into the city. The gold in the cathedral was no doubt stolen from Incan temples and put to use spreading God's word. A painting of the Last Supper shows what happens when Catholicism and the New World mix: a roasted guinea pig sits at the centre of the spread.

A food market in Cusco.

By the time we make it to Saqsaywaman it is all too much to take in. A vast empire that did not write anything down. Rulers of 12 million people toppled by a band of a couple of hundred miscreant Europeans. A

landscape that is inhospitable and abundant, barely navigable and yet paved with perfect trails.

Ernesto says something that really does stick with me. Cusco is prone to earthquakes. Senor de los Temblores, one of the most famous statues in Peru, is a depiction of Jesus Christ as a black figure on the cross. The name means Lord of the Earthquakes, and the figure is thought to have lessened the damage of a massive temblor in 1650.

A food market in Cusco.

But Ernesto points out that no Incan buildings have ever collapsed in an earthquake. Their construction is careful, angled in to be self supporting in times of tremors. Plenty of Spanish colonial buildings have fallen over.

There's that mix again: of fragility and stability. A powerful, clever empire attuned to the land that supported it, now lost with so much of what it knew. And now just its stone walls mark where it had once looked to eternity.

Machu Picchu in Australia

Touted as featuring the most opulent collection of Andean gold to ever travel outside Peru, *Machu Picchu and the Golden Empires of Peru* is a major exhibition on at the Australian Museum in Sydney until May 11. It showcases to stunning effect more than 130 ancient artefacts, from jewellery and royal burial treasures to textiles and immaculately preserved, erotic ceramics that reveal the Andeans' preoccupation with the cycles of life.

An exhibit at the Machu Picchu and the Golden Empires of Peru show in Sydney.

You'll need to book (tickets $42.50 for adults, $23 for children), and for an additional fee you can experience Machu Picchu in virtual reality with 360-degree motion chairs and drone footage that gives you a spectacular bird's eye view of the citadel, llamas included. Just about the next-best thing to being there! *australian.museum*

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: LATAM Airlines flies directly from Sydney and Melbourne to Santiago, Chile, four times a week, with connections to Lima and Cusco, Peru. A return Sydney-Cusco economy ticket starts from about $2250. latamairlines.com

Staying there: The five-star Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba has rooms in a central hacienda or in luxury standalone casitas, from about $540 a night. Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo, also five-star, is set on a five-hectare property with spa, tea plantation and restaurant, with rooms from about $660 a night. Palacio del Inka in Cusco is a five-star Marriott Luxury Collection hotel built into a 500-year-old mansion in central Cusco. Rooms from $532 a night. inkaterra.com; marriott.com

Touring there: Adventure World offers a 14-day, 13-night "Authentic Peru" itinerary, including meals, accommodation and domestic flights, from $US7085 (about $11,400) a person. adventureworld.com

Explore more: peru.travel; machupicchu.gob.pe

The writer and photographer travelled courtesy of the Australian Museum, LATAM Airlines and Adventure World

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