

Perfect Peru *Well Planned & Thoroughly Enjoyed*

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In Cusco, Plaza de Armas is the heart of the city

Peru rose to the top of my bucket list this past spring, so I did what I always do before planning a trip to a new destination — I bought a guidebook and started reading. Then I took my “top ten” list and surfed the Web. The result? Massive confusion.

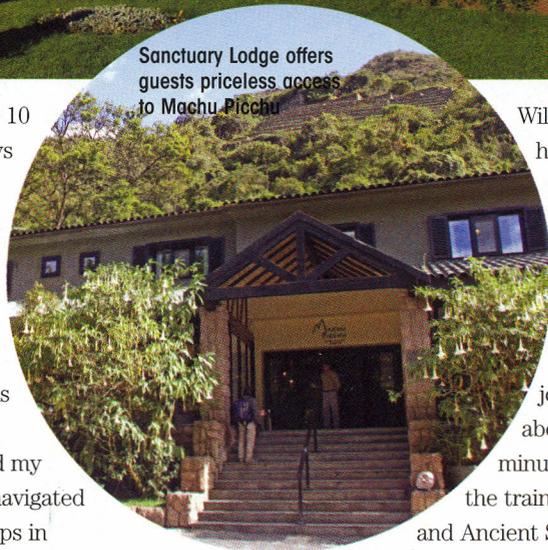
I wanted to see Machu Picchu, but I also wanted to wander off the beaten path and experience authentic Peru. How best to do both? I asked my friend Nina Fogelman, who offers personalized trip planning through her company Ancient Summit. Because she splits her time between homes in the U.S. and Peru and has been in this business for many years, Nina knows all the ins and outs and has access to the best drivers and guides. (www.ancientsummit.com)

Here are some of the highlights of the trip that she planned for us.

Wilfredo Nina carefully chose

the guide for 10 of our 18 days in Peru, and Wilfredo Huilca Gamarra was key to the success of our trip. As patient as a saint, he held my hand as we navigated the stone steps in numerous Inca archeological sites and provided on-the-spot grad school-level explanations of the engineering that made them possible. He also pointed out, with obvious pride in his Inca ancestors, the details in the design of these ancient communities.

Machu Picchu I was excited about seeing this site, but I dreaded the thought of sharing it with a herd of other visitors, so Nina planned around my concerns. At Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley,



Sanctuary Lodge offers guests priceless access to Machu Picchu

Wilfredo, my husband Richard, and I boarded the Vista Dome train for Aguas Calientes, a journey of about 90 minutes. Seats on the train are reserved, and Ancient Summit had chosen good ones for us.

Seats are important, but good hotels are critical, and this is where Ancient Summit really scored big points. Only one hotel is actually adjacent to the Machu Picchu site and that hotel — Sanctuary Lodge — has just 29 rooms and 2 suites.

(www.belmond.com/sanctuary-lodge-machu-picchu)

From Aguas Calientes, buses carry passengers up a steep, windy road to

the entrance of the Machu Picchu Sanctuary. In fact, the buses stop right in front of Sanctuary Lodge, where our room waited. We waltzed into the lodge, dropped our bags, enjoyed a quick lunch, and headed to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of my dreams.

Just past the ticket booth, we entered Machu Picchu stamps in our passports, and moments later, I caught my first glimpse — and then a wide panorama — of the newest of the Seven Wonders of the World. Oh my! This was a real pinch-me-so-I-know-I'm-not-dreaming moment. The site is stunning — even more than I'd expected because I hadn't anticipated the grandeur of the tall mountains surrounding it.

But wait — where are the crowds? Why are we almost the only ones here? “Oh,” said Wilfredo, “most people come in the morning and have already gone.” We three climbed up and down and all around until after 5pm when the guards ushered us out.

The next morning, Richard and I entered the site when it opened at 6am before the first bus from Aguas Calientes arrived. We walked around in a light drizzle — again sans crowds — until the clouds parted just in time for us to see the sunrise.

We met up with Wilfredo after breakfast and spent the next six hours admiring the genius of the Inca people who more than 800 years ago created structures that have withstood time and earthquakes and are still stunningly gorgeous.

And the crowds? They were there, but Wilfredo, who has been to Machu Picchu more than 1,000 times, led us to viewpoints from where we could wonder at it all without being jostled. >>

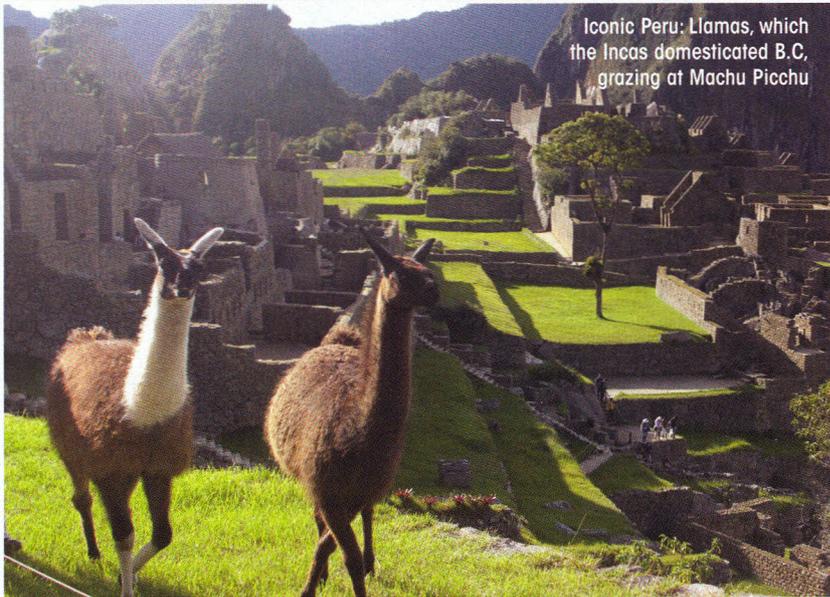
Built in about 1450, Machu Picchu was re-discovered by Yale professor Hiram Bingham III in 1911



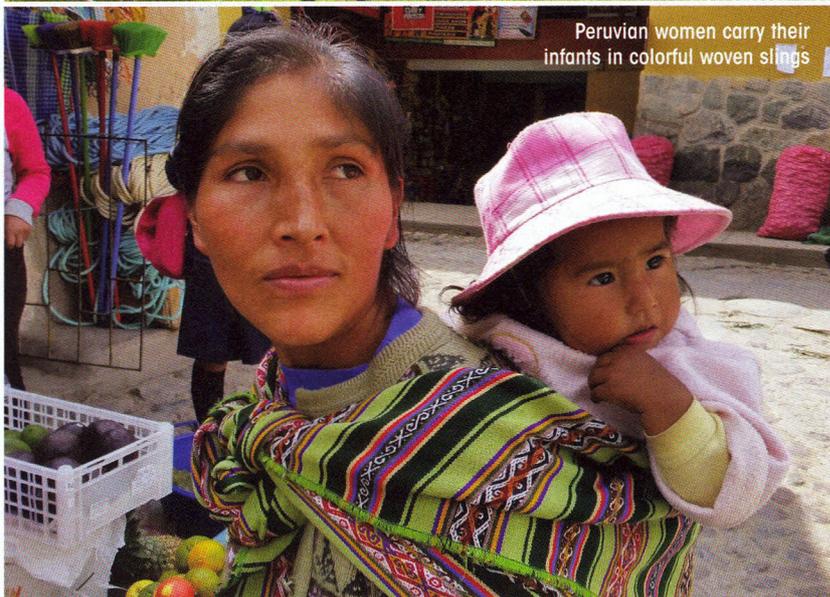
In Peru, various colors of quinoa enhance the cuisine and the landscape



Iconic Peru: Llamas, which the Incas domesticated B.C., grazing at Machu Picchu



Peruvian women carry their infants in colorful woven slings



« The Sacred Valley

Back in Ollantaytambo, Wilfredo led us away from the main square to a quiet lane only wide enough for pedestrians and bicycles. Here, we walked on stones laid by the Incas in 1400 and admired the simple cottages built on foundations from the same era. The whole scene — school kids laughing and playing on their way home, laundry flapping in the breeze, bright geraniums spilling out of window boxes — was not dissimilar to a quaint hill town in Tuscany.

Cusco As we left the Sacred Valley and drove into Cusco, the conversation turned to the great food we'd been enjoying throughout our trip. Peru's cuisine is world famous. I've never had better ceviche or guacamole — and absolutely fell in love with quinoa pancakes, quinoa pizza crust, and the national “adult beverage” — Pisco Sour.

Cusco was the capital of the Inca Empire from about 1200 until the 1530s when the Spanish arrived. It remains a vibrant city, home to a famous Inca site, many beautiful colonial churches and palaces, a vast and very colorful marketplace, and a plethora of charming cafes. Our beautiful hotel — the five-room Palacio Manco Capac — is a colonial mansion built in the late 1500s on the confiscated property of an Inca king. (www.anamay-hotels.com/palacio-manco-capac)

A few travelers we met were having difficulty with altitude sickness but, due to Nina's great planning, we went almost unscathed. Her strategy? Fly into Cusco (11,000 feet) and head immediately to the Sacred Valley (9,400). Then — and only then — return to Cusco and enjoy!

Gracias, Nina. Muchas gracias.

ELIZABETH HANSEN