

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

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From the Editor-In-Chief

If you look really closely at my eyes in the top photo you may be able to glimpse the sheer terror lurking behind my smile. I'm standing at a clearing a little more than halfway up Wayna Picchu, the pointy peak that stars in the background of most Macchu Picchu photos, and is just one of the fascinating destinations featured in this month's travel feature about exploring Peru. Only 400 people a day in two waves are permitted to make the 1000+-foot climb to the peak, via ancient stone stairs and walkways with drop-offs of a few thousand feet straight down to the Urubamba River. I could never imagine its guardrail and waiver-free trek to be possible in the US because of our ludicrously litigious society.

The climb was organized by our trip facilitator, Kensington Tours, in response to my request that "light adventure" experiences be included in the daily agenda throughout our Peruvian exploration. We'd already spent a full day with an excellent guide at Macchu Picchu, so after catching the first bus up the winding, 2,000-foot road that leads to the entrance, we headed straight for the trailhead to wait for our 7am start time. The assemblage massed at the gate included people of all ages and walks of life. Some appeared to be hardcore hikers, while others, appearing much less fit and donning flip flops, seemed woefully unprepared for the task ahead. A light fog shrouded the peak, which worked to my advantage as I may have backed out if I'd seen the arduous trail that spiraled along the edge of the mountain.

After signing in with our name and departure time (no liabilities waivers here!), the thick foliage that shrouded the trail lulled me into a false sense of security. A short ascent and descent led to a clearing that laid out the daunting task before me. Despite an intense fear of heights, I took a deep breath and continued on, crawling like a baby up the stairs and literally clinging to rock faces at particularly scary drop-offs to counter my irrational fear that some unknown force would draw me over the edge. Clearly the Inca weren't affected by vertigo!

The vantage point of the top photo was at the base of a particularly scary set of stairs; contemplating the climb nearly brought me to tears. Inside my brain there was a tense battle being waged: how to reckon the knot in my stomach and weak knees with wanting to savor every bit of this once-in-a-lifetime experience. At the top, the payoff was magnificent: a condor's-eye perspective, almost 9,000 feet above sea level, one of the most celebrated cities on the planet, and one of the seven wonders of the world. From this vantage point you can really marvel at the construction and scale of the site, as well as those hikers who seemed unfazed by the dizzying heights, and demonstrated such by aping for photos while balancing on precipitous stones and scrambling over the jagged rock faces. With the summit bringing together a number of young backpackers from all over the world, it provided a platform for some interesting pickup line deliveries!

I wasn't the only one at the top with an overwhelming fear of heights; we had to help a young Brazilian girl traveling alone down from the peak as a sudden bout of fear left her nearly immobile. On the return trip, I spent a lot of time scooting down the stairs on my bum. Clearly gluttons for punishment, we took the road less traveled (with our new Brazilian friend in tow) to the Temple of the Moon and the Great Cavern, located on the far side of Huayna Picchu, which involved descending a series of primitive ladders in several places. Tucked into a cave, lined with outstanding stonework, are a series of niches that were purportedly used to hold mummies (and today make for an interesting photo opportunity).

Was it all worth it? Absolutely! Would I do it again? Probably not.

Bridget



More than Machu Picchu

Written by Bridget Williams



View of Cusco from the
Sacsayhuaman archaeological site.
Photo by Eric Williams

Peru's diverse cultural treasures and ancient wonders form a fascinating network equally intriguing as its most famous site

The ability to tick one of the boxes on my bucket list by visiting Machu Picchu was the impetus for my visit to Peru, but what I didn't expect was the City in the Clouds would be just one, among many highlights, throughout the duration of our wanderings in the Sacred Valley and Lake Titicaca regions. We discovered so much, in fact, we had to make the experience a two-part story.

Like many people these days, I began planning for my trip by conducting online research, during which, it became quickly evident the services of a tour company would be advisable to make the most of what I hoped would be an epic adventure. After reading the good, the bad, and the ugly of reviews for countless tour operators and after initial online inquiries, I settled on Kensington Tours for their ability to custom-tailor an itinerary that most suitably met my varied criteria: soft adventure opportunities and an even softer pillow on which to rest my head each night!

After a few back-and-forth interactions via email and phone with Kensington's South American destination expert, Noraly Barillas, I received a link to a proposed itinerary that promised a comprehensive tour of Lima, Cusco, Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca, all with a private guide and vehicle. Each day's schedule was outlined first in bulleted summary form and later in expanded detail on subsequent pages, which allowed me to research each tour stop and proposed accommodation. With the itinerary settled, we booked about three months in advance of our mid-October travel date, at the tail end of peak season and just prior to the rainy season, November-April.

Considering that the only way to reach Machu Picchu is via a four-day hike or a train from Cusco to Aguas Calientes (the closest town to the ruins) and the area's elevation ranges from 8,500 – 11,000 feet, it's advisable and enjoyable to spend a day or two in Cusco for an altitude adjustment.



A grassy terrace provided an ideal view of the nearly empty site just before sunset.
Photo by Eric Williams

More than Machu Picchu



Tourism is a well-oiled machine in Peru – demonstrated by the massive assemblage of taxi drivers and sign toting tour operators just outside the terminal in Lima. This is the moment that always makes me hold my breath in anticipation and just a bit of worry. In this instance it was just a split second as I easily spied a smiling man holding a large printed sign with my name on it in a sea of handwritten ones. After exchanging pleasantries, Christian Chang whisked us across the street from the terminal to the Hotel Costa Del Sol Ramada.

We convened briefly in the lobby to go over our welcome packet with all of the tickets we'd need over the course of the next eight days before turning in for a very brief rest. Like many airport hotels, this one was spare but clean and comfortable. I wouldn't want to spend a week here, but it was easy for our early morning flight to Cusco the next day. Even though he'd left us at 2am the night before, Christian was back at the hotel by 6am with our boarding passes in hand to walk us back across the street to the terminal. Prior to takeoff, we took his advice and had a cup of mate de coca tea; an

herbal tea made using leaves of the coca plant and purported to help ward off altitude sickness.

The historic capital of the Inca Empire and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the southeastern Peruvian city of Cusco receives nearly 2 million visitors each year. We were met outside the tiny airport by Meliton, our contact in Cusco who related points of interest and places we'd be wise to avoid, en route to our hotel, Palacio Nazarenas, the newest member of the Orient Express hotel portfolio in the Peru.

Located in a quiet, cobblestone plaza behind Cuzco's central square, the Plaza de Armas, and next to another Orient Express property, the opulent and lauded Hotel Monasterio, the architecture of Palacio Nazarenas, a former convent and palace, is simple, austere, and elegant. Notified in advance of our impending arrival, we were greeted at the door by our personal butler who presented me with a bouquet of local flowers and ushered us to our room to complete the check-in process.

A floating wall with a flat-panel television mounted on either side separated the living room and bedroom in our Grande Suite.



Indulgent bathrooms at Palacio Nazarenas boast a soaking tub and separate shower with rain shower head and body sprays, under-floor heating and Peruvian travertine marble décor.



A bedroom in the Grande Suite at Palacio Nazarenas.

The interior design was serene and appropriate to the magnificently restored building's humble roots. Hand painted details adorned the vaulted ceiling and plaster walls, while wall niches served as a receptacle for objects that gave a nod to Catholicism. Richly colored textiles comprised the upholstery and accent pillows. Passing through the bedroom furnished with an iron, four-poster bed, there was a large walk-in closet with both silk and terrycloth robes, an even bigger bathroom with fluffy, monogrammed towels, an oversized soaking tub, and separate shower with rain shower head and body sprays, under-floor heating and Peruvian travertine marble décor. Two sets of six-pane windows flanked by blue painted shutters overlooked a central courtyard landscaped with indigenous flowers and kitchen herbs. The tranquil sound of flowing water emanated from a multitude of fountains as well as a steady stream of water that is pumped through water channels designed to mimic irrigation channels found throughout the Sacred Valley and at Machu Picchu.

Though tempted by the complimentary cocktail bar stocked with rum, Peruvian pisco, simple syrup, lemon juice,

egg whites, and recipe cards to whip up signature cocktails, I opted for even more coca tea to accompany a welcome plate of gourmet chocolates in the hope that it would counter an altitude-induced headache. Enjoying our modified high tea, we explored destination information pre-loaded on an in-room iPad.

Palacio Nazarenas has the unique distinction of laying claim to Cusco's first outdoor heated swimming pool. Located within the largest of seven cloistered terraces, the pool area, which also includes the Senzo Bar and Restaurant, serves as the social hub of the hotel. While it was a treat sitting poolside at lunch savoring a fresh, colorful salad and surveying the surrounding rooftops and hillsides, our five-course dinner later that evening inside the candlelit restaurant was the culinary high water mark of the entire trip. Every detail – from the chilled hollowed-out stone that held butter striped with cocoa and salt to accompany the warm bread service, to each of the colorful, inventive and artfully plated courses so lovely that it (almost) seemed a shame to disturb their composition – was absolute perfection!

More than Machu Picchu



A religious festival outside the Church of la Compañía de Jesus in Cusco.

Bright and early the next morning (I'd told Noraly at Kensington I'd rather spend my time exploring than sleeping), we were collected at the hotel by Rossio Echarri, our most knowledgeable guide for the day who escorted us on a private, full day tour of Cusco's cultural, historic, and archaeological points of interest, including the impressive walled complex of Sacsayhuaman, built by the indigenous people of the Killke culture around 1100 AD. It's hard not to stand in wonderment at the precise fitting of the massive stones (the largest of any building in prehispanic America) comprising the terrace walls. Positioned on a steep hill, the expansive site boasts panoramic views of the city.

Strolling the Plaza de Armas, we happened on a religious festival outside the Church of la Compañía de Jesus, during which hundreds of festively costumed dancers swayed in unison to the rhythmic drumbeats. A persistently patient street peddler (there are many), who couldn't have been more than nine-years-old, finally convinced us to buy his wares after he rattled off the names of US presidents (in order) all the way back to Richard Nixon! I came to realize quite quickly one major benefit of a private guide was the ability to stray from the itinerary if an alternate activity piqued our interest, like our impromptu stops to visit several artisans.



Street scene in Aguas Calientes.

On day three we were picked up at 6:30am for the 1.5-hour drive to Ollantaytambo where we boarded the royal blue Hiram Bingham Orient Express for the scenic ride to Aguas Calientes. The highly polished interior of the train car and the crisp white linen tablecloths certainly seemed at odds with my dressed down hiking attire. There was a convivial atmosphere among the passengers throughout the duration of the journey, and by the time we arrived at the station, everyone had become fast friends.

The train station presented a scene reminiscent of the airport in Lima, with people from all walks of life (and levels of personal hygiene) coming and going. Once again, a Kensington Tours sign with my name on it stood out among the chaos. After a short walk through the craft and bric-a-brac vendors encircling the station and picking up some bug spray, at our guide's request (one of the best pieces of advice we received judging from bug-bitten extremities of many we passed), we joined the queue of those waiting for a bus to Machu Picchu. The 30-min ride gains 2,000 feet of elevation via harrowing switchbacks; when a bus passed in the opposite direction you'd be hard pressed to fit a sheet of paper between them! You can also reach the entrance by foot, taking a strenuous trail that dissects the switchbacks and loosely follows the 1911 route of Hiram Bingham.



Hotel Sumaq is the only five-star hotel in Aguas Calientes, the town closest to Machu Picchu.

Passing through the entry and into the complex was an amazing moment, only slightly marred by the feeling I was at Disneyworld because of the huge crowds and the multitude of languages being spoken. Sensing my slight disappointment, our guide told me, after our tour, he'd show us the perfect vantage point and if I'd wait until just before closing, I'd get to experience the view as it's portrayed in countless books and magazines.

One thing to keep in mind is there are no explanatory signs, which reduces visual clutter, but those without a guide are left looking at a lot of expertly engineered rock structures with no idea of their function or significance (I noted more than one group who expressed frustration at this trip planning misstep). For a primer, visit the small Museo de Sitio Manuel Chávez Ballón, located at the end of a long dirt road near ruins detailing the history, culture, and rediscovery of the site.

We peppered our guide with questions during our two-hour tour, after which we adjourned for a late lunch at the Tinkuy Buffet Restaurant in Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge, located just outside the ticket booth. The only other choice for those who don't opt for the buffet is an expectedly overpriced concession stand, as outside food and drinks aren't permitted (though we had no problem bringing in bottled water). Following lunch we took the trail-less-traveled to

the Inca Bridge – a relatively easy hike that culminates at an impressive piece of architecture – a stone path cut into a cliff face that is partially built up by a tower of stones. The 20-foot gap in the path – with a nearly 2,000-foot drop in-between – was designed to be bridged by tree trunks that could easily be removed to stop intruders.

After exploring every nook and cranny to our satisfaction, we sought out the spot recommended by our guide: a grassy terrace above the ruins and patiently waited, watching the interplay of light and shadow on the ancient stone structures. Just before sunset, the crowds dissipated and there it was – the magical moment I'd traveled so far to experience.

Enveloped by towering, verdant mountains whose jagged peaks snag cotton-candy clouds, the town of Aguas Calientes caters to the throngs of visitors with a host of lodging and dining options at all levels of quality and service. Hotel Sumaq, positioned near the boulder-strewn banks of the Vilcanota River, has the distinction of being the only five-star hotel in the small town. Committed to sustainable tourism, the property immerses guests in the local culture through its architecture and interior design, cuisine, and authentic custom-designed experiences. A coca sour in the Suquy Café Bar proved to be a good tonic for our aching muscles, as was the hearty Peruvian-

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Each of the 21 suites and two villas spread over 2.5 lushly landscaped acres at Hotel Rio Sagrado by Orient Express are oriented to overlook the Urubamba River.

style dinner with heavy American influence orchestrated by chef Rafael Piqueras. The sound of the river rushing over the boulders just outside our window provided a wonderful soundtrack for a peaceful night's sleep.

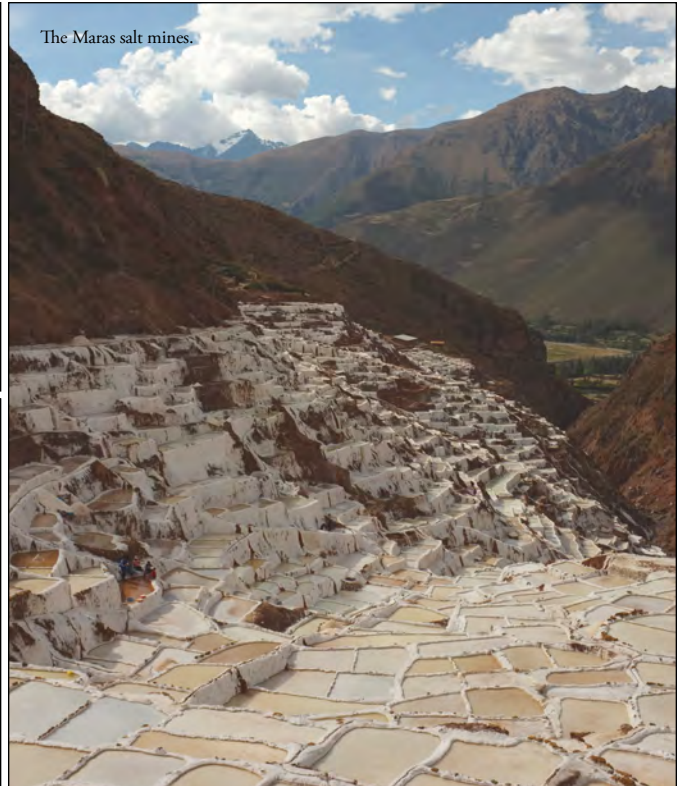
We'd turned in our bus tickets to Machu Picchu the night before and two staff members from Hotel Sumaq waited in line for us at the bus stop at 5:30am so we wouldn't have to. An hour later, the bus stopped in front of the hotel, the staff members hopped off, and we took their seats. Among the first to arrive, we headed to the trailhead for Wayna Picchu – the prominent peak seen behind the ruins in most photographs. Planning ahead for this experience is essential as only 400 people are given tickets to attempt the ascent each day. Dually strenuous and exhilarating, hiking shoes and stamina are a must, but the bird's eye view of the ruins and the chance to stand at the edge of a several thousand foot drop, are well worth it. After summiting and catching your breath, I'd advise taking the much less traveled trail to the Temple of the Moon, located a few thousand feet below the peak, where a ceremonial shrine with niches, purportedly used to hold mummies, has been built into a large cavern.

Following the return train to Ollantaytambo, we bedded down at Hotel Rio Sagrado by Orient Express. Ideally located

between Cusco and Machu Picchu, each of the 21 suites and two villas, spread over 2.5 lushly landscaped acres, have riverfront views of the mighty Urubamba. The property's riverfront orientation makes it appear rather non-descript from the street side, especially for those arriving after dark, as we did. Rooms are best described as rustic contemporary, pared down to white walls with vaulted lashed-beam ceilings. An orange velvet upholstered headboard and local textile bedspread enlivened the décor. Doors led to a private terrace. The chic bath included a two-person rain shower with a rear glass wall to savor the river and mountain views. Recycling bins and toiletries, in large bottles, help reduce and reuse waste.

We rewarded ourselves for another day of hiking by seizing on a last minute cancellation and indulging in a couples massage at Mayu Wilka, the onsite spa. Relaxed and hungry we took a short walk along a Jasmine-scented walkway to El Huerto, the hotel restaurant. This area of the country is known for a wide variety of high-altitude potatoes of all shapes and sizes as well as 40 different kinds of corn, and a variety of indigenous ingredients, including four local trout options, played heavily into the menu.

Since we'd arrived at night, the next morning we were awed by the sunrise view of the river and mountains, whose scrubby brown/green vegetation were in stark contrast to the



lush tropical environs in which we'd found ourselves just a day earlier. After breakfast we were reunited with Rossio, our guide in Cusco, for a full day of exploring the Sacred Valley. Our first stop was Inca Pisac, an impressive and expansive set of hillside ruins that encompass military, religious, and agricultural structures. Clear societal and functional delineations, evidenced in the layout and styles of architecture, provide a comprehensive overview of daily Inca life.

Pisac is considered the regional center of artisan silver jewelry production, and in the colorful, bustling market, Rossio steered us to the most reputable artisans (should you be so inclined a two-hour hike leads from the aforementioned ruins to the market). An abundant *al fresco* lunch of grilled meats, empanadas, and the like served family style at Wayra Ranch was accompanied by the thundering hooves of Paso horses who "danced" to the rhythm of 'la merinera', the national dance of Peru, in unison under the direction of their Peruvian caballeros. The exhibition culminated in a beautiful duet between one of the riders and a lovely *senorita*.

A long trip down a dusty dirt road led to the Maras salt ponds, operated communally by local villagers since pre-Inca times. The intricate mosaic of several hundred collecting pools, terrace down

the hillside along with a carefully controlled flow of water from a nearby natural salty spring. As water evaporates from, the salt crystals form on the inner surfaces of the pond's wall and floor. When water flow is shut off, the pond goes dry, the salt is harvested, and the process repeats itself. The most amazing spectacle is observing men of small stature hauling bags of salt weighing in excess of 100 pounds up the hillside, balancing on pond sidewalls so narrow I had trouble staying upright unencumbered!

As we headed to the day's final destination, the Moray Incan Ruins – a series of enormous concentric terraced circular depressions, the largest of which is 98 ft deep, creating a temperature difference of as much as 27 degrees from top to bottom – our driver took a number of "shortcuts" on dirt paths through miniscule towns way off the tourist grid. Children in school uniforms herding sheep, sleeping babies wrapped in slings while their mother's tended to the fields, and a man with a time worn face taking an afternoon siesta in the doorway of his adobe home – these moments of exploration provided a memorable glimpse of a robust culture whose daily lives are so different from my own. **sl**

Sources

Kensington Tours, kensingtontours.com, 888.903.2001; Palacio Nazarenas, palacionazarenas.com; Hiram Bingham Train, perurail.com; Hotel Sumaq, machupicchuhotels-sumaq.com; Hotel Rio Sagrado, riosagrado.com; Wayra Ranch, wayrasacredvalley.com