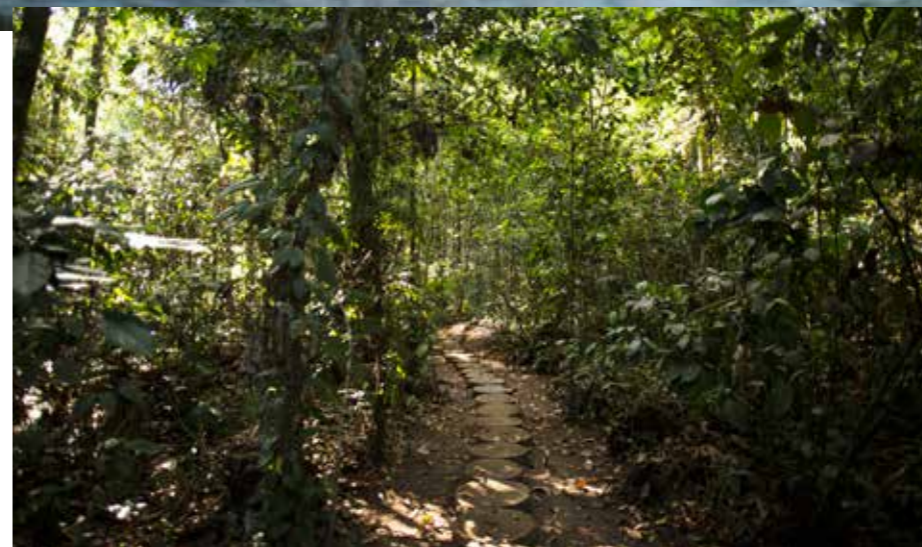
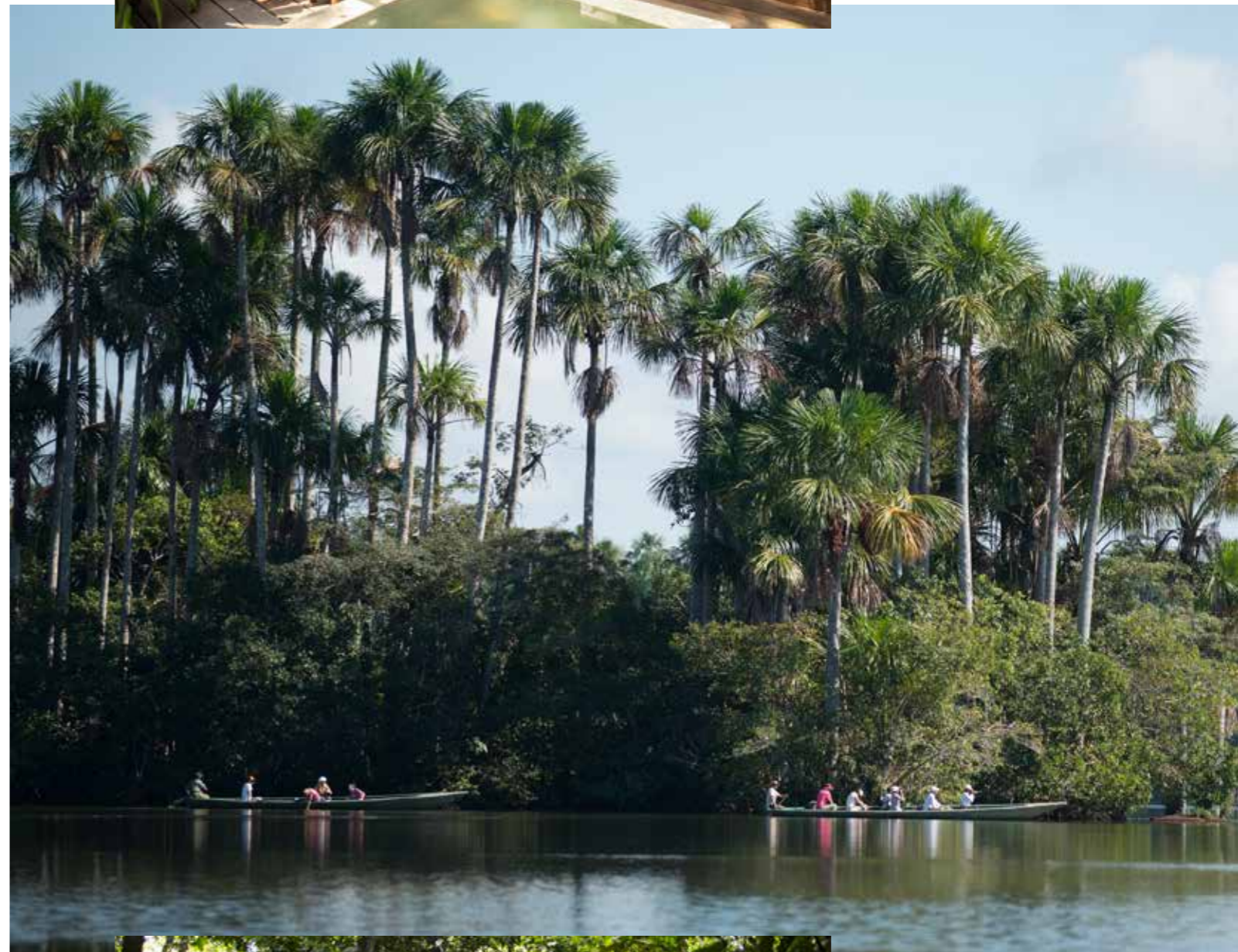


AMAZON

PRIME

HISTORY, CULTURE AND JUNGLE ADVENTURES CAN ALL BE FOUND IN PERU. AND, IF YOU'RE BRAVE ENOUGH, THERE'S THE ODD TARANTULA TO CHECK OUT TOO

WORDS **DEBORAH CICUREL**





Hiding out in the darkness in the jungle, I shone my torch at a towering tree. As if from nowhere, a hairy tarantula scuttled out of a hole and settled down, seemingly quite content in the glare of my light. Apparently this was his regular haunt, and he didn't mind gawping tourists.

It might not be my usual idea of fun to search for tarantulas the size of my hand in the dead of night, but then again, I'm not usually in the Amazon. This spider-seeking expedition was taking place on my very last night in Peru, after a week-long extravaganza that had seen me journey through some of the country's most famous landmarks, from the Inca Citadel of Machu Picchu to the historic city of Cusco, and finally to the Peruvian Amazon, where, escorted by an expert guide, I would see not just tarantulas, but rare birds, caimans and even sloths, snoozing cosily in the trees.

My home for my Amazonian adventure was Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica, a luxurious eco-lodge set on the Madre de Dios River. Far from a corporate hotel dropped into a jungle, this is eco-luxury done perfectly, with 35 wooden cabanas slotting unobtrusively into the pristine natural environment.

The rustic, standalone cabanas, which are simply but luxuriously decked out with natural materials, huge cosy beds and ensuite bathrooms, are a treat to sleep in because they feel so unlike every luxury hotel you've ever stayed in - for all the right reasons.

The thatched roofs offer protection from the elements, but all around you, the walls are not walls at all, but mosquito nets, so you can hear every bird chirp, every raindrop fall, every frog croak. Sleeping in this property is the luxurious equivalent of heading out to the jungle and pitching your own hammock for the night.

Every day, you're given the chance to immerse yourself in the rainforest with a range of exciting activities, in between eating meals at the stylishly rustic restaurant, with impossible high thatched ceilings, carved wooden furniture and a varied menu with traditionally Peruvian dishes, many of the ingredients grown on Inkaterra's own farm.

There are numerous jaunts to throw yourself into each day. A lengthy trail system gives guests the chance to walk in the rainforest and learn about everything you see on the way, from tiny insects and gigantic, 500-year-old trees to rare birds and medicinal plants. At night, the same walk feels totally different, with new noises, creatures and colours to discover. There are trips to Lake Sandoval, where you can see macaws, turtles and red howler monkeys, and evening boat trips to try your luck at spotting caimans and capybaras in the dead of night.

But my personal highlight was facing my fear of heights to take on the Inkaterra Canopy Walkway. Made of seven hanging bridges suspended by the trees in the middle of the rainforest, the 344-metre-long walkway is perfectly safe, but it sways just enough to make your heart beat a little bit faster, and to make

your ego feel like you're mightier than Indiana Jones.

Once the initial fear subsides and you stop staring at your feet and start looking at the scenery, the walkway gives you the opportunity to see the Amazon from a whole different perspective: through the treetops, as a bird would, and indeed there are hundreds of avian species - and thousands of mammals - to see in this area alone. It sounds unlikely, but it's disappointing once the 90-minute walk is over and you're back on solid ground.

In fact, it's not just the canopy walkway that makes you feel like you're flying. This was a consistent theme throughout my week in Peru, as I journeyed through changing landscapes and altitudes in ancient cities and sublime countryside. My very first day, after landing in Cusco, saw me driving through the majestic scenery of the Sacred Valley of the Incas, a picturesque Andean region, and boarding the Inca Rail to Aguas Calientes, the small town that acts as a gateway to Machu Picchu.

A big step for a first sleep, it might appear, but spending your first night within arm's reach of Machu Picchu makes perfect sense when you consider that you're bypassing the literally breathtaking altitude of Cusco, at nearly 3,400 metres, and instead snoozing at the more sensible altitude of 2,040 in Aguas Calientes.

It's not just practical, though: waking up within arm's reach of Machu Picchu on your very first morning in Peru feels like quite the intrepid feat. Visiting the mysterious 15th-century citadel, shrouded in fog, as your first stop, is an otherworldly experience. The famous landmark is so often plastered across travel brochures, magazines and social media, with half a million people visiting every year, that you worry you'll almost be desensitised to its beauty once you're lucky to visit yourself.

It was my second time at the sprawling Inca city, and looking out over its perfectly preserved structures and hearing the stories and mysteries of its construction, and, centuries later, excavation by Hiram Bingham was only more magical the second time: a lifetime of looking at photos of the UNESCO World Heritage Site could never dampen the experience of being there in real life. And what a way to start my adventure: seeing one of the Seven Wonders of the World in your first morning is a great way to shake off the tiredness of the long trip.

While in Aguas Calientes, I had the chance to road-test two different hotels. The first, El Mapi, is a funky, modern property in the centre of town, with quirky rooms that have quotes on the walls, panoramic windows and luxurious furnishings, and a superb spa: a dreamy massage surrounded by views of the cloud forest is just what you need after a long flight.

The second, Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, feels like a different world: moments from the main town of Aguas Calientes, the property, on its own 12-acre reserve, feels miles away from the market stalls and tourist chatter. It's designed to feel like a mini Andean village, with rustic stone walkways, pretty water features and charming casitas.

The hotel is covered with greenery, with shade provided by ►

Seeing one of the Seven Wonders of the World in your first morning is a great way to shake off the tiredness of the long trip



► enormous trees, and hundreds of bird species flying above you as you walk to the spa or to one of the hotel's excellent restaurants. I spotted the famous Andean cock-of-the-rock bird when walking to the on-site tea plantation, where you can learn about the traditional tea making process, and even make your own tea bags. There's also the property's very own bear sanctuary, where I watched in wonder as a pair of twin endangered spectacled bears, rescued from a circus, gobbled down avocados at a speed to rival any London brunch lover.

The next stop was the Inca Rail to the Sacred Valley. Train journeys might not usually be a pleasant experience, but this was spectacular: it was impossible to look away from the panoramic views as the train wound through soaring mountains and hurtled alongside the Urubamba River, flashing past Inca sites far in the distance. Once I arrived at Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, a gorgeous hacienda-style hotel in the centre of the Sacred Valley of the Incas, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the views had only got better.

The sprawling property takes up 100 acres in the middle of the countryside, and no matter where you are, whether in the charming restaurant or in one of the achingly chic rustic casitas on a hill, there are floor-to-ceiling windows wherever you look: the Andean mountains and the valley almost look too perfect to be real.

If you can drag yourself away from the cosy casitas, each with their own homely fireplaces and colourful Andean textiles, the hotel offers plenty of quirky yet traditionally Peruvian activities to immerse yourself in. I spent an afternoon in the hotel's healing garden, learning about the medicinal properties of each herb, and was then given the chance to cut my own based on my needs: the herbs were then turned into an oil featuring my very own bespoke remedy for a heavenly, and ultra-personalised, massage.

I spent the following morning having my fortune read in coca leaves by an Andean priest, who – with disarming accuracy – told me all about my health, work and love life, and even suggested I would one day move to Peru. Surrounded by this otherworldly scenery, it was certainly a tempting thought.

Before heading to the Amazon, there was just enough time to drop my bags at Cusco's glorious Inkaterra La Casona, a luxurious boutique hotel set in a restored 16th-century manor house, before heading out on a walking tour to take in as much of the Inca capital as I could. Known for being South America's oldest continuously inhabited city, Cusco is rich with archaeological heritage and cultural sights, from the magnificent Sacsayhuamán Inca complex to the elaborate Cusco Cathedral.

It's impossible to see even a fraction of what this city has to offer in just a day, but after mad dashes to take in as many museums, markets and monuments as humanly possible in a few short hours, the Amazon – and its friendly tarantulas – were calling, and before I knew it, I was aboard the short flight to Puerto Maldonado to get the boat to Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica for the eventful end to my whirlwind trip.

It had been a week stuffed with culture, both ancient and contemporary, and creatures, from rare birds and hungry bears to frightening caimans and curious tarantulas. I can't promise you'll want to adopt a tarantula once you're back at home, but you'll never forget the delicious fear of seeing one in the most natural of settings: its very own home, an ancient tree in the heart of the Amazon. ■

Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk; 01242 547 701) offers eight nights in Peru from £2,835pp including all flights, private transfers, train journeys and accommodation including two nights at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica (inkaterra.com) on a full board basis with excursions

