



# The Path Less Travelled

**Sarah Gilbert** discovers how a mountain-activity lodge in the Peruvian highlands is working hand-in-hand with remote communities to benefit both the local culture and the growing tourist trade



**ABOVE:** the Lares Valley is less well known than the more popular 'Inca Trail' for visitors to Machu Picchu; **LEFT:** Mountain Lodges of Peru strives to make sure the inhabitants of the Lares Valley benefit from the tourist trade as much as the tourists benefit from the locals; **RIGHT:** llamas are a staple of the region



**T**he only sounds were the whistling wind, the crunch of boots on rock and my own ragged breathing. At 4,218 metres, the Cruzcasa Pass was breathtaking in every way; the glaciers of Mount Veronica shimmered in the distance, the jagged peaks and cobalt-blue sky were reflected in the glass-like surface of Alpine lakes. Suddenly a woman appeared from nowhere, put down her heavy bundle and spread her wares across the ground to create an impromptu stall. I browsed exquisite cloth, hand-woven with intricate symbols and imagery that dated back centuries.

Before the Spanish conquistadors destroyed the Inca empire in the mid-16th century, Inca territory covered an area the size of Western Europe, with the Peruvian city of Cusco at its heart. Today, an average of 500 people hike the

Inca Trail to Machu Picchu every day, but I was taking an Inca road less travelled.

## DIRECT BENEFITS

As a concept, Mountain Lodges of Peru (MLP) began in 2002 when Enrique Umbert turned a former family home into a multi-activity lodge in the mountains near Lima. It was officially founded in 2005 when he partnered with fellow commodities trader, Eduard Rauchdobler from Austria, who shared his love of adventure travel.

His son, Enrique Umbert Jr, has been MLP's General Manager from the start and the younger Umbert has been able to combine his passion for environmental protection, cultural preservation and corporate social responsibility to create a unique business model, designed to mix high-end lodges and innovative programmes with sustainable tourism practices

that directly benefit the local communities in which they operate.

The challenging seven-day Salkantay Trek became MLP's flagship programme and was paired from the start with social initiatives supporting health, education and environmental projects, created and supported by MLP's non-profit arm, Yanapana Peru.

By 2010, MLP decided it needed to grow and began developing another lodge-to-lodge trekking route, but one with a difference. It realised that the Lares Valley was seen as a low-budget alternative to the Inca Trail and that there was limited engagement with tourism for the locals. It also saw that these remote rural communities were possibly the most direct descendants of the Incas and pre-Incas, with a singular culture.

While hiking through spectacular mountain scenery would still be a major draw of the 'Lares Adventure', it wasn't just for hard core trekkers. Guests would have the opportunity to combine hiking with visits to oft-forgotten archaeological sites and remote communities, where they could learn about the culture first-hand.

#### STEP BY STEP

From the outset, MLP's vision was based on long-term partnerships with the communities but that came with its own unique challenges.

'The first step was recognising and respecting our differences and similarities,' says Umbert. 'While MLP has the know-how and technology to do business, the Andean communities have inhabited and protected their territory for thousands of years. They have their own set of values, vision, organisational structure, and so on. Both sides had to make an effort to adapt.'

Other complications included the language barrier between Spanish and the native language, Quechua, the communities' level of formal education, and sociopolitical issues - they are formally recognised as 'agricultural communities' and are required by law to change their governing members every two years.

It was also a time-consuming strategy. MLP began by mapping out the entire Lares Valley, identifying up to six different communities that would work as locations for the lodges and began developing adventure and cultural activities for each of them.

'You'd never know how long the negotiations would take or what the outcome would be,' says Umbert. 'We began the process with one community at a time, thinking that if they accepted and the business was set up, then other communities would react more favourably to our proposal, like a domino effect.'

For the first Lares lodge, MLP entered into negotiations with the Huacahuasi community with the help of Arawira, an NGO that's been working in the valley for close to 30 years. In 2012, it entered into a partnership agreement in



which the initial share for the community was 20 per cent, growing to 25 per cent after the first ten years. What the community brings to the partnership is its cultural heritage and use of the land, on the premise that the land would not be productive or valuable from an agricultural or farming perspective - normally on the outskirts and on hills with a steep incline.

#### VIRTUOUS CYCLE

In September 2014, the lodge began operations. Of the ten people who work there, eight came from the village and had no experience of hotels or hospitality. MLP had to train them from scratch. To start with, lodge manager Alex Custer took them to El Mercado, MLP's stylish boutique hotel in Cusco, to educate them as to how a hotel operates. Inevitably they saw things they'd never previously encountered - there's no television in the village, only radio for example - and Custer had to modify his management methods learnt from his time at more sophisticated hotels in Europe.

Sabina, one of the staff members, tells me, 'It feels great to be part of such a project. I never could have imagined something like this here. I'm learning about myself and hospitality, and it's fun.' It's clearly fun for the guests too, with lots of laughter around the lodge.

It was always MLP's intention that the lodges would support more than just the employees and their families, but that it would benefit the wider community. 'The lodges represent a cluster of development,' says Umbert. 'The aim



These remote communities were perhaps the most direct descendants of the Incas and pre-Incas

is that they will lead to a general increase of tourism in the area, which will in turn lead to increased engagement from the communities and a higher value being placed on culture and the environment. The corresponding economic injection will elevate the communities' quality of life in terms of education, nutrition, health and communications. It's a virtuous cycle.'

#### TOURIST TRADES

Day two had meant a climb to the scenic Challwacasa Pass and a downhill trek to the village of Viacha high above the town of Písac, where tourists swarm like ants over the eponymous hilltop Inca citadel and flock to the daily handicraft market.

But this poor farming community of around 60 families, which only received electricity two years ago, is off the tourist trail. As I wandered

**ABOVE:** weaving is one of the traditional forms of income generators for the inhabitants of the highlands; **LEFT:** Cusco, once the capital of the Inca empire, is the gateway to the Urubamba Valley

through fields of red quinoa and purple lupins and watched children tending their sheep, it was a bucolic scene. But I also passed abandoned houses, roofs open to the sky, collapsing adobe walls and weeds winding around the stones.

MLP has begun providing work for the villagers in the form of logistical support - including the 'emergency' mule that follows guests on long treks - as well as the chance to sell their weavings. As we feasted on *pachamanca* - an age-old Inca dish of meat and vegetables, slow cooked for hours by hot stones in a hole in ground - Mario, one of the community's leaders, spoke to me in a mix of Spanish and Quechua.

He told me how their situation is improving through tourism; the villagers are seeing the value of their traditions, folklore and customs anew. Young couples see an alternative and are returning from Písac, Cusco and Lima to rebuild their houses, and impart their knowledge of farming, traditional medicines and weaving to the next generation. There's a renewed sense of pride in their heritage and, most importantly, the extra income means that they can send more of their children to school.

'It's a hard life for the villagers in the city, a life of menial work,' Mario explained. 'Here there's no rush. We can cultivate our crops peacefully, preserve our heritage and respect Pachamama (the goddess revered by people of the Andes). And when I see that the children are studying, it makes me very happy.'



## 'We're not worried about tourism changing us, we'll use the money to improve healthcare and education'

Each day on the Lares Adventure you can choose between a strenuous, moderate, or easy hike, or simply enjoy your surroundings. In Huacahuasi, I chose to explore the small village with my guide who pointed out things I would have missed, such as the fresh llama meat drying on a rooftop to make jerky.

Giggling children ran towards the school - some of them had walked for two hours or more to reach it. Women sat gossiping on the street, their cheeks fat with coca leaves, spinning wool as they talked. One of them, Cecilia, invited us into her home. Made out of adobe bricks topped with a corrugated iron roof, I had to bend to go through the low doorway. When my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I realised that there was one room for the whole family to sleep and eat in, and it seemed no bigger than my room at the lodge.

Cecilia is 44 with six children: her eldest daughter sat on the floor weaving on a

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** the hillside Pincuylluna, a series of Inca storehouses near Ollantaytambo; exploring the maze-like streets of Ollantaytambo; a bike ride through the Urubamba Valley





**ABOVE:** staff at the lodges mostly come from the local villages

backstrap loom; her youngest sat on her hip, wrapped in a bright woollen shawl.

A startled guinea pig - one of ten kept for eating on special occasions she explained - scurried under the two beds, while above my head, seeds - treasure that the woman was in charge of protecting - were stored on a wooden platform. Andean music blasted from an old radio and a llama foetus hung from the wall in honour of Pachamama.

'During the recruitment process we presented the history, background and philosophy of MLP and assured them that we would work together

like brothers,' Alex had told me. 'Too often people come here with good intentions, start a project and then have to pull out. I can understand why the communities are wary.'

### GAINING TRUST

On day five, as I wound slowly down from the Ipsaycocha Pass, criss-crossing hillsides dotted with grazing llamas, I found a row of people sat on a hillside, their traditional red clothing vivid against the landscape. They were the community leaders of Patacancha, on the spot where MLP's third lodge is to be built.

Patacancha was actually the first community that MLP approached in 2010, but after a year of negotiations the community rejected their proposal. Umbert tells me that a local politician misled the locals, telling them that MLP were 'foreigners' intending to exploit them and steal their land. Part, as he puts it, of an almost genetic distrust going back to the conquest.

However, when the community saw the success of Huacahuasi Lodge, they invited MLP to begin negotiations again. Construction on the lodge is now due to start this October.

After exploring the impressive Inca ruins of Ollantaytambo, I boarded the train to the fabled lost city of Machu Picchu, an undeniably spectacular but at once familiar Inca icon that teems with tourists. It's rightly a must-see sight, but for me the highlight of the Lares adventure were the people I'd met along the way and my glimpse into their living culture.

The people of Patacancha had told me that the partnership with MLP was an important step in the community's history: 'We're not worried about tourism changing us, we'll use the money to improve healthcare and education and build a better life for our community. We've been struggling to hold on to our cultural identity and there was no one to help us - until now.'

## CO - ORDINATES PERUVIAN HIGHLANDS



### When to go

June to August is the dry season, with hot days and cold nights. It's the best time for festivals but also the busiest, due to European and North American holidays. Spring and autumn are ideal for less crowds. December to February is the rainy season.

### Getting there

Air Europa ([www.aireuropa.com](http://www.aireuropa.com)) flies daily to Lima from London Gatwick via Madrid from £700pp, including taxes. Flight time is approximately 17 hours, depending on connections. The author travelled with HighLives Travel ([www.highlives.co.uk](http://www.highlives.co.uk) +44 208 144 2629), who offer the five or seven-day Lares Adventure from £1,445 pp, excluding international flights.

### Further information

Mountain Lodges of Peru: [www.mountainlodgesofperu.com](http://www.mountainlodgesofperu.com)  
Peru Tourism Board: [www.peru.travel](http://www.peru.travel)

