



THE LARES TRAIL

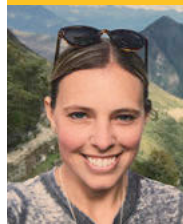
*There are many ways to hike to Machu Picchu, but with breathtaking scenery and next to no crowds, the Lares Route is the way to go, says **Sarah Reid**.*



THE RUINS OF PINKUYLLUNA AT OLLANTAYTAMBO



WHO'S WRITING?



Completing Nepal's famous Langtang Valley trek as a teenager fuelled an insatiable wanderlust in SARAH REID that only seemed to grow stronger with each consecutive adventure. Over the years, she has developed a passion for exploring the globe as responsibly as possible, from the jungles of Southeast Asia to the high Andes of South America, and everywhere in between.



here's nothing quite like hiking into the world's most famous Inca ruin. Gone are the days, however, when you could simply turn up in Cusco and book the classic four-day Inca Trail trek for the following day (or week, or month). In an effort to reduce the environmental impact of its popularity, the Peruvian government now limits trail access to just 500 people per day, including guides and porters, with permits now selling out up to six months in advance. Fortunately, there are more than half a dozen fantastic alternate routes to Machu Picchu that can still be booked on the fly, most of which include sections on authentic Inca trails, for the Incas built more than 18,000 miles of road systems during their mid-15th to mid-16th century reign.

On my first trip to Peru in 2011, lacking the time or funds to arrange an Inca Trail trek, I opted for the Jungle Trek, a four-day, multi-activity expedition through the steamy jungles that hid the famous Incan citadel from the outside world for more than 300 years. And it was great fun. But as anyone who has been to Machu Picchu will attest, a single visit to the sprawling Inca complex is barely enough time to explore a quarter of it, so when an opportunity arose to make a return journey via the increasingly popular Lares Route with Moun-



HIKERS TRAVERSE THE STUNNING LANDSCAPE

tain Lodges of Peru (MLP), one of Peru's sustainable tourism pioneers, I didn't need to be asked twice.

While the Jungle Trek appeals to budget-conscious adrenaline junkies and the five-to-eight-day, mule-assisted Salkantay Route rewards more dedicated hikers with show-stopping views along its high-altitude trajectory, the Lares Route combines lower-altitude hiking with a hearty dose of culture. Traversing parts of the Sacred Valley and the remote Lares Valley beyond, the route weaves through a handful of Andean farming communities living much as they have for centuries, providing a fascinating insight into local life far from the maddening tourist crowds.

The tricky thing about the Lares Route, however, is that it's not as clearly defined as that of the Inca Trail or the Salkantay Route. Generally, hikers start out from the village of Lares, about three hours drive from Cusco, spending the next three nights making the 18-odd-mile journey to Ollantaytambo for the train to the Machu Picchu gateway town of Aguas Calientes.

While it's possible to tackle the Lares Route independently (if you know where you're going), most hikers sign up for a multi-day tour in Cusco, with operators offering different versions of the route depending which communities they work with in the region.

Renowned for its socially and environmentally responsible ethos, MLP offers a five-day Lares adventure staying in

lodges constructed in partnership with remote communities that have traditionally benefited little from tourism in the region.

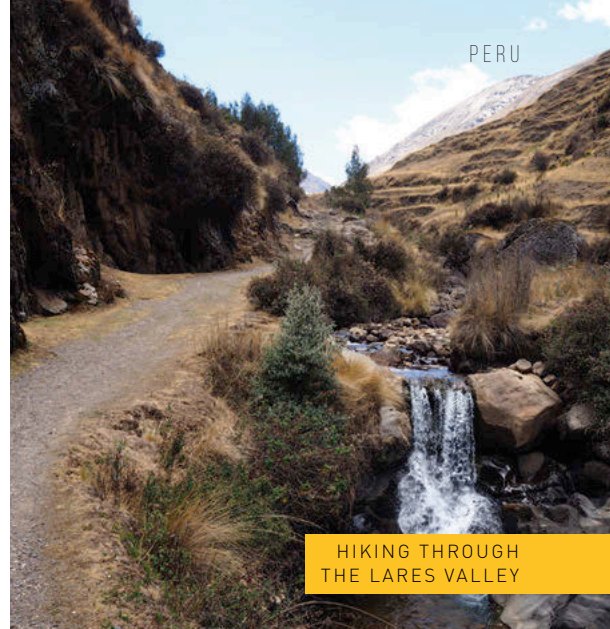
Following a couple of acclimatisation days exploring the Cusco area, our journey begins in the tiny farming community of Viacha, high above the Sacred Valley market town of Pisac. Here, the local community earns a much-needed share of the Sacred Valley tourism dollar by providing a traditional pachamanca lunch service for MLP guests.

Cooked in an earth oven alongside other locally-grown vegetables and tender morsels of cuy (guinea pig, an Andean delicacy) are several of the most delicious varieties of potato I've ever tasted. I'm staggered to learn that nearly 4,000 varieties are grown across Peru, and if half of them are anywhere near this good, I certainly won't be leaving the country any lighter.

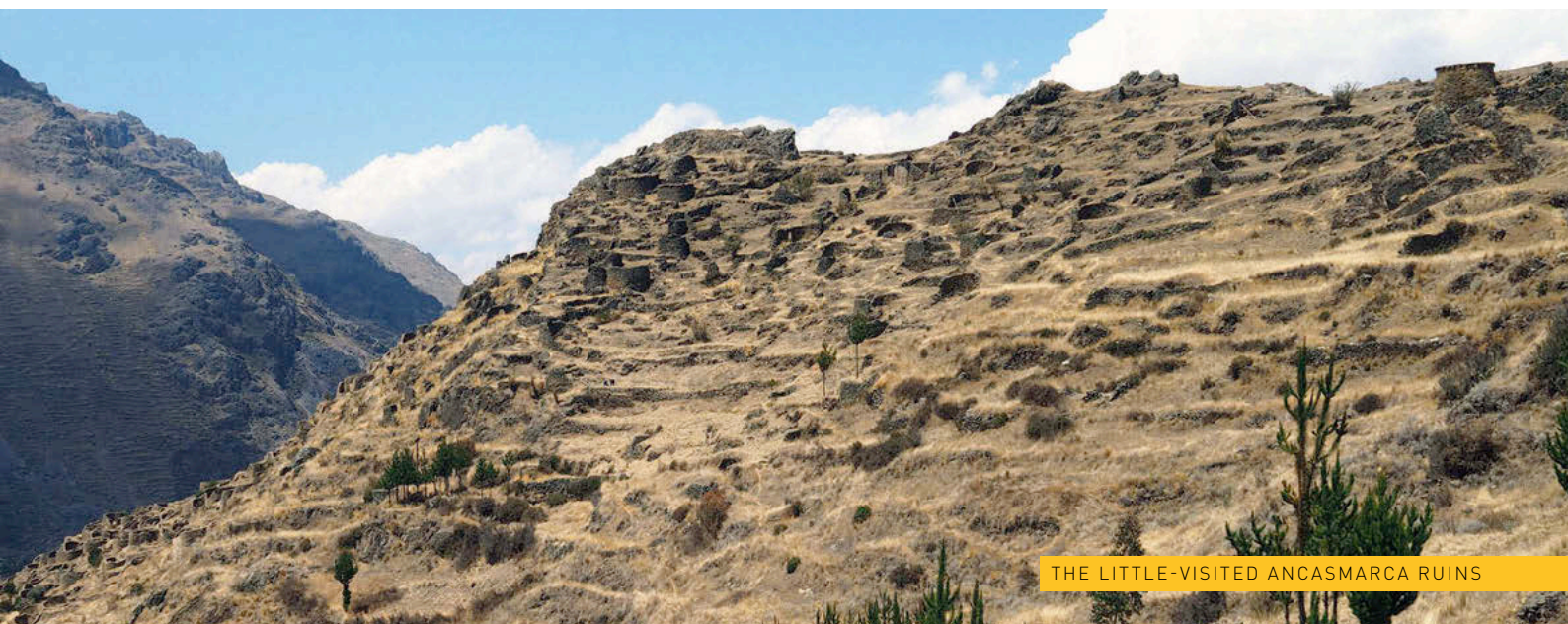
After washing down our meals with a deliciously refreshing chichi morada (an elixir made from purple corn that dates back to the Inca era) our wonderful guide Miguel leads our small group on a gentle hike through local farmland, past crumbling churches and grazing alpacas, to a viewpoint over the Inca ruins of Pisac. I'd visited the site - known for its cascading agricultural terraces and 'vertical cemetery' with hundreds of tombs carved into a cliff face - once before on a day trip from Cusco, but admiring it from this angle was much more impactful. By the



LADIES AT A
CHOQUECANCHA WEAVING



HIKING THROUGH
THE LARES VALLEY



THE LITTLE-VISITED ANCASMARCA RUINS

time we'd picked our way down to the bottom, most of the tour buses had left for the day, essentially affording us exclusive access.

During his informative tour, Miguel stooped down to pick up a small object lodged in the dirt path. "Ancient artefacts surface all the time," he explained, inspecting a tiny ancient arrowhead before carefully reburying it off the main pathway. "Unfortunately, not enough of them stay in Peru," he added ruefully. Indeed, in 2011 Yale University returned thousands of artefacts excavated at Machu Picchu by explorer Hiram Bingham in the early 20th century, but thousands more continue to be spirited out of the country by irresponsible tourists and professional smugglers. "Hopefully, this one will stay here for a little longer," Miguel said as we make to leave.

Being more accustomed to sleeping in a tent on a multi-day hike, it's a treat to check into Lamay Lodge at the end of the day. Like all MLP lodges, it was built in harmony with the local environment and is staffed by locals, facilitating an opportunity for villagers to share their customs with visitors while learning how to be industry professionals. Furnished with colorful local textiles and without a plastic bottle in sight, it's the essence of sustainable luxury.

Had I opted for the seven-day version of this tour, I'd have an extra day up my sleeve to enjoy the lodge and perhaps take in a day hike in the area, but after checking out ►

WHAT TO DO AFTER THE HIKE

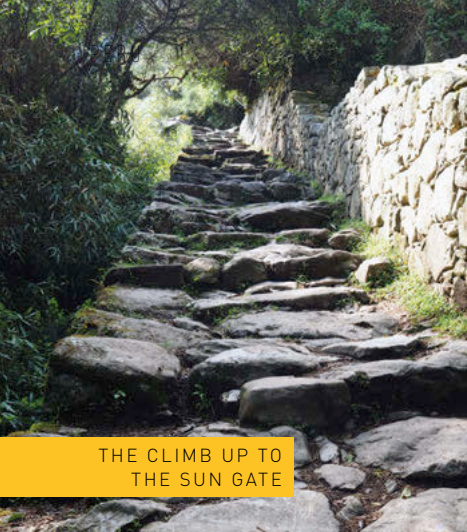
As you would expect from a country as diverse as Peru, there's much more to the country than Inca ruins and Machu Picchu. Here are a few ideas of what you can do after the hiking.

SEE THE NAZCA LINES

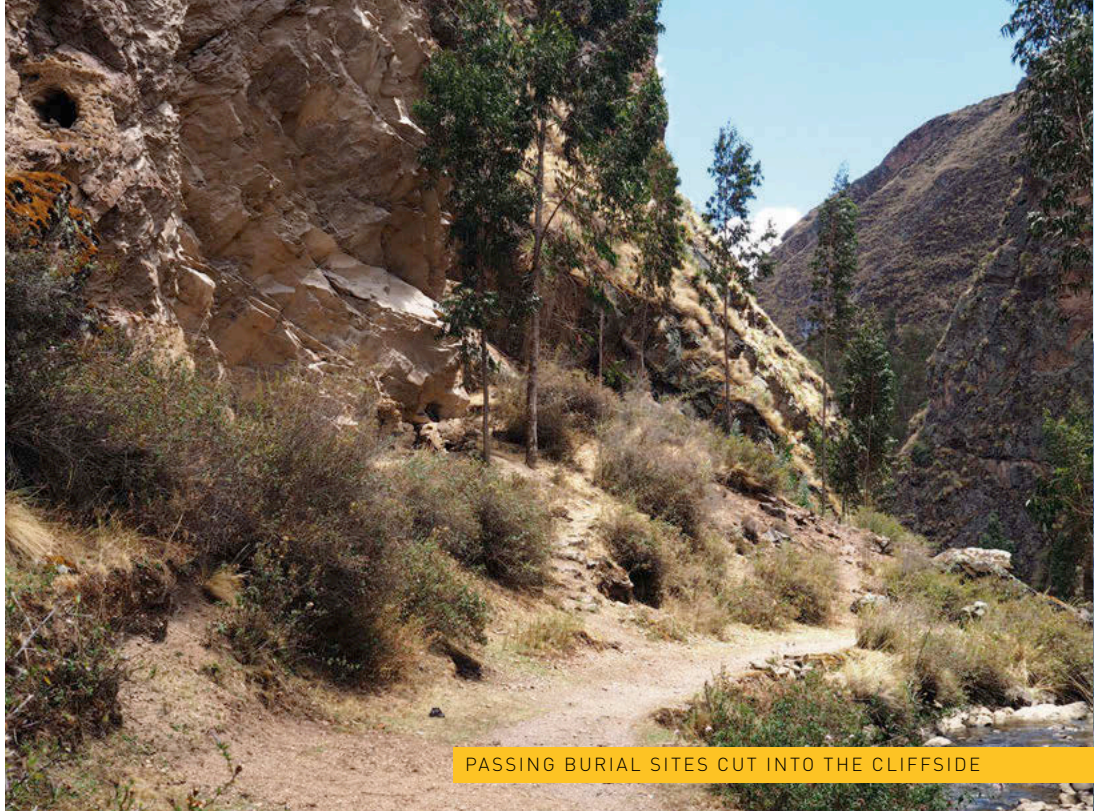
One of the most fascinating things you can tag onto a trip to Peru is a visit to the Nazca Lines. These giant glyphs stretch nearly 200 square miles across the Peruvian desert in the south of the country and were created between 200BC and 600AD. The mystery of how and why they were formed, and the incredible sight of them from the air, makes the Nazca Lines a place you wouldn't want to miss. Day Hikes Peru (www.dayhikesperu.com) offers trips here that can be tagged onto one of their many hiking tours.

VISIT GOCTA WATERFALL

Known as one of the tallest waterfalls in the world, Gocta is truly a sight to behold. From the top, water dramatically spills 771m down the cliffside, landing at the bottom in a cloud of mist. It's a spectacular sight, and one that looks like it's straight out of Jurassic Park. Hiking trails allow people to reach the base of the waterfall where the full scale is clear to see. Peru Safari (www.perusafari.com) offers travellers seven and 15-day overland trips to see the best of Peru, including Gocta Waterfall.



THE CLIMB UP TO THE SUN GATE



PASSING BURIAL SITES CUT INTO THE CLIFFSIDE



PERU CULTIVATES OVER 4,000 VARIETIES OF POTATO



LOCAL PEOPLE LIVE A SIMPLE LIFE

the following morning, our group heads deeper into the mountains to tour the Ancasmарca ruins. Upon arrival, I'm surprised to find that yet again, we're the only visitors. "Not many tourists make it up here," says Miguel of the unusual Inca complex of cylindrical structures once used for food storage. "It's a shame," he adds, "as it's so different from most other Inca ruins." I couldn't agree more.

Having woken up that day feeling a few degrees less than fabulous, I'm grateful for the tour structure, which offers a choice between a hike and a cultural activity each morning and afternoon. Reluctantly passing on a scenic afternoon hike from Cuncani to Huacahuasi (about four hours), I join the rest of our group on the windy drive up over a dizzying high pass (4,461m) and down into the sleepy village of Choquecancha, which, in a nod to its remote location where the Urubamba Mountains begin to descend into the Amazon Basin, has a decidedly frontier feel. With next to no tourism infrastructure, this tiny village of around 200, many of which inhabit original Inca structures, is a fascinating study in rural Andean life.

Here, we tuck into another cuy lunch before visiting a local women's weaving cooperative. Elsewhere in the region, this kind of experience can feel very manufactured, with bored-looking local women performing scheduled weaving demonstrations in museum-like workshops for busloads of tourists. Observing a master weaver at work while our

host Maribel, a young apprentice, proudly filled us in on the important role that textiles play in both the community's social identity and financial sustainability, proves eons more rewarding. With high-quality textiles produced here rarely reaching the tourist markets of Cusco, it's a privilege to purchase intricate table runners, ponchos and blankets directly from the artisans at fair prices, before heading to Huacahuasi for the night.

Perched above the high-mountain village of Huacahuasi, around six miles south of Lares, Huacahuasi Lodge is the only hotel in town, and with personal hot tubs on the balcony of every room, it's a fine option indeed. I was loath to check out the following morning, but, feeling much better that day, I was excited to hit the trails. While tempted to tackle the seven-hour slog from Huacahuasi to Patacancha, I opt instead to join my group on a drive back up to the high pass, from where we embarked on a three-hour, mostly downhill hike to the village of Totora. En route, we followed part of an old Inca trail, spotted countless alpacas, stopped to chat with farmers in the fields, and at one point when Miguel was out of earshot, I helped a hiking buddy negotiate the exchange of a freshly-boiled local potato for some of her mixed nuts via clumsy sign language, my basic Spanish of no assistance in our struggle to communicate with the native Quechua speaker.

Towards the end of the trail, we passed an Inca burial



site similar to that of Pisac. Here, however, the cliff-side tombs are so close you could climb into them, with a pile of freshly excavated human bones in the dirt suggesting that some unscrupulous modern-day tomb raiders had taken the liberty of doing so recently. It's another sad reminder of Peru's ongoing struggle to preserve its rich cultural and archaeological heritage, yet makes me even more grateful for the opportunity to explore a corner of the country where cultural traditions still run so deep.

In the coming years, MLP is expected to open a new lodge closer to the end of the Huacahuasi to Patacancha trail, near Ollantaytambo. For now, guests backtrack to a partner lodge in Urubamba, 12 miles east of Ollantaytambo, which, thanks to a wonderful little micro-brewery, Cerveceria del Valle Sagrado, is not a bad place at all to retire for the night.

The following morning, we rise early to tour Ollantaytambo's sprawling, terraced Inca fortress. Perched on a hillside opposite the fortress, the ruins of Pinkuylluna, a former Incan storehouse, are well worth the 40-minute climb from the northeastern fringe of the town centre if time permits, before catching the train to Aguas Calientes. Following the Urubamba River, the 90-minute rail journey is among the world's most scenic, with snow-capped peaks and several glaciers visible on a clear day as the train descends from the stark, dry landscapes of the Sacred Valley

into the lush emerald jungles surrounding Machu Picchu.

Buzzing with the energy of several thousand tourists preparing for one of the most memorable moments of their travelling lives, Aguas Calientes might not be much to look at, but it's a perfectly comfortable base from which to access the ruins perched some 300m above. For everyone but Inca Trail hikers, who enter Machu Picchu via the Sun Gate high in the jungle mountains above, there are two ways to access the ruins: by hiking up a steep Inca staircase just south of town (allow at least one hour from the base), or taking a bus. When I last visited, summiting the staircase by 6am (when Machu Picchu opens) was the only way to ensure a ticket to climb Huyana Picchu, the small mountain that juts up behind the ruins in the classic image of Machu Picchu, and well worth the steep ascent for fantastic views over the main site. With Huyana Picchu tickets now bookable in advance, taking the bus is more practical for many visitors, albeit far less atmospheric. For any hope of getting on one of the first few buses departing Aguas Calientes at 5.30am, you will need to join the queue by 4am.

I wasn't sure what to expect on my second visit to Machu Picchu, but it moved me more than I anticipated. While the ruins will blow your mind no matter how you get there, the journey plays such an important role in the experience. After traversing the Lares Route myself, I can guarantee it will elevate yours. **At**



PERU

HOW TO GET THERE

The Lares Valley lies north of the Sacred Valley, two to three hours drive north from the tourist hub of Cusco. Tours to the region include return transport from Cusco. Return tickets can be had for roughly £550 with a stop in Lima or Bogota, Colombia. Flight times range from 18-22 hours and you can compare flights at www.skyscanner.net.

WHEN TO VISIT

The May to October dry season, with its predominantly clear skies, is optimum for hiking, but it's possible to hike through the valley year-round.

HOW TO DO IT

I travelled with Mountain Lodges of Peru (www.mountainlodgesofperu.com), which offers five- and seven-day versions of its Sacred Valley and Lares Adventure. Dozens of operators in Cusco offer various Lares Route options (no advance booking necessary), as do several international operators including G Adventures (www.gadventures.com).

Permits are not required for hiking in the Lares or Sacred Valleys, but tickets to Machu Picchu should be booked in advance, either through the official government website (www.machupicchu.gob.pe), or through a licenced travel operator. Tickets for the Ollantaytambo-Aguas Calientes train should also be booked in advance via PeruRail (www.perurail.com) or Inca Rail (www.incarail.com).

WHERE TO STAY

The Lares Valley is largely untouched by tourism, and beyond the Mountain Lodges of Peru properties (which are exclusive to MLP guests) accommodation options are few. You should have no problem finding a guesthouse in Cusco, Ollantaytambo, or Aguas Calientes, but it's a good idea to book ahead in the peak season (May to October).

ESSENTIAL GEAR

If you're planning to hike independently, you'll need to bring everything with

you, from tent to food to camping stove, all of which can be purchased or rented in Cusco if needed. It can get quite cold at higher altitudes and can rain at any time, so bring adequate gear. To help prevent altitude sickness, consider bringing medication, and avoid drinking alcohol the night before (and during) your tour. **AT**

