

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



On top of the world

Magnificent mountains, ancient archaeological sites and unexpected wildlife awaits on a hiking holiday in Peru's Lares Valley, finds **Neil Geraghty**

Coffee breaks don't come any better than this. I'm in the Central market in Cusco, Peru's ancient capital, where in amongst piles of rainbow coloured corn and bundles of coca leaves I stumble across a row of middle aged ladies in cubby holes who are busy serving up coffee for morning shoppers. I've just arrived in the city and the 3,400 metre altitude is making my head spin. I need to sit down, and taking a seat on a rickety wooden bench I ask one of the ladies for a cafe con leche. With a smile she introduces herself as Maria. Behind her an aluminium vat of steaming milk lies simmering on a portable stove. She takes a ladle, carefully pours the frothy milk into a glass beer tankard and places it on my table along with a jug of viscous black coffee. I pour some into the glass and swirling patterns sink down into the milk. The coffee is smooth and velvety and the only thing missing is

a slice of cake. I notice a homemade orange sponge on the counter and order a slice. I must look famished as Maria cuts a four inch wedge for me and when I finish the coffee she tops up the glass again with some more laddles of milk. This morning feast of two pints of coffee and enough cake to feed the 5,000 comes to little more than a pound. Hipster pop up coffee shops beware if Maria ever comes to town.

Travelling to Peru can be an arduous journey but one of the easiest options for Scottish travellers is to fly KLM to Lima via Amsterdam. Departures leave from four Scottish cities and the changeover in Amsterdam requires no additional security checks or

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Llamas at Machu Picchu, main; hiking in the Lares Valley, above

complicated terminal changes. The flight is also a day flight and arrives in Lima at sunset, leaving you ample time to transfer to Cusco if time is at a premium. Upon arrival in Cusco it's essential to spend two or three days acclimatising to the altitude before tackling the more strenuous sites of the high Andes, and as one of Latin America's most historic cities it's a rewarding place to linger in and soak up the atmosphere. After visiting the market I walk to the nearby San Francisco Convent

and by chance stumble across one of Cusco's most important religious festivals, the procession of The Lord of the Earthquakes. This blackened 16th century wooden effigy of a crucified Jesus is believed to protect the city from natural disasters and each Easter Monday is paraded through the streets accompanied by crowds of the faithful. As the crucifix enters the plaza hundreds of spectators hold up ornate crosses woven from palm leaves and herbs and shower the crucifix with scarlet salvia buds representing the blood of Christ. At the steps of the convent the crucifix pauses and a band of local Quecha men dressed in traditional alpaca caps and ponchos sound a salute from giant conch shells that reverberates round the square. It's an intriguing fusion of Catholic and pre Hispanic traditions and captures all the magic of this fascinating city.

After two days acclimatising I join a five day hiking trip to the Lares Valley organised by Mountain Lodges of Peru, who work in partnership with local communities and own several atmospheric mountain lodges in remote locations. The Lares trip is

ideal for groups with mixed interests as each day offers a choice of easy or hard trails to follow and also cultural activities for those more interested in experiencing local life. Our first hike takes us over the 4,300 metre Challwacasa Pass and despite acclimatising in Cusco our group of mixed ages all needs to pause every five minutes to regain our breath. The views though are well worth the discomfort. It's the end of the rainy season and the highland meadows are carpeted in blue lupins and golden asters. The alpaca birthing season is in full swing and the fields are full of frolicking fluff balls. From the summit we catch a glimpse of distant glaciers and the mysterious ancient Inca ruins of Pisac in the valley below.

At our first lodge at Lamay, half the group disappears into the garden and jumps into a hot Jacuzzi watched by a couple of llamas who are busy nibbling the lawn (lawn mowers are rarely needed in highland Peru). I opt for a massage to relieve my aching legs but nevertheless am too tired the next day to go on another hike. Instead I opt for a trip to the remote mountain town of Choquecancha, one of the last strongholds of the Incas and renowned for its traditional textiles. Outside a stone house I stop to watch a group of ladies dressed in woven shawls and traditional saucer shaped hats twirl spindles of creamy coloured alpaca wool. Inside, another lady sits on the floor weaving a belt on a traditional loom. Her fingers move at the speed of a piano player's and the design is an intricate pattern of interlocking crosses and lozenges.

Our next lodge at Huacahuasi is high above the cloud line where waterfalls form white ribbons cascading down the steep mountain slopes. The food here prepared by local villagers is exquisite and for dinner we sit down to a creamy squash soup, fresh baked trout encrusted with quinoa and a delicious mousse made from lucuma, a mushy orange fruit that tastes like caramel.

Our final port of call is Machu Picchu where we check into the beautiful Inkaterra Hotel set in lush tropical woodland where in the afternoon I spot the elusive

cock-of-the-rock, Peru's handsome national bird, fluttering around in the canopy and flashing its gorgeous scarlet plumage. At 4:30am we join hundreds of excited tourists queueing up at the bus station for a 15 minute ride to the ruins. A sense of pilgrimage hangs over the queue and the mood is enlivened by friendly local vendors who walk up and down selling much needed coffee and cakes to the many visitors who have missed breakfast. At the ruins the famous view is obscured by thick billowing clouds. The tourists, many of whom are on a once in a lifetime trip, look crestfallen but their guides assure them the clouds will lift. Sure enough as the sun heats up, the clouds begin burning off and the spectacular skyline of conical mountains slowly comes into view. Spurred on by this inspiring sight I opt for a difficult two hour hike up Machu Picchu Mountain. The ascent along an ancient Inca trail involves climbing hundreds of steep crumbling steps that weave through woods where exotic orchids hang from branches and silvery blue butterflies glide through the air. At the summit I'm dripping with sweat, my insect repellent has washed off and my legs are covered in mosquito bites. The view however more than makes up for it. I gaze straight down on the fabled ruins over the rainforest canopy. Enormous storm clouds are bubbling up over the nearby mountain peaks and a sense of impending drama hangs over this enchanting landscape. ■

Edinburgh-based Andean Trails (0131-467 7086, www.andeantrails.co.uk) specialise in active holidays throughout the Andes. Their 10 day/9 night **Lares Luxury Lodges Trek with Mountain Lodges of Peru** costs from £3,555 per person based on two adults sharing. The price includes 1 night in Lima B&B, 2 nights in Cusco B&B, all meals on the trek, bilingual Mountain Lodges of Peru guide, guided visit to Machu Picchu (inc entrance fee), 4 star accommodation throughout, all transfers and international flights with KLM (www.klm.co.uk) departing from Edinburgh via Amsterdam. Special promotion – November 2018 departures – £2,955 per person.



The lodge at Huacahuasi is high above the cloud line

SHORT HAUL



Dressed to impress

Stylish, beautiful Milan is a people watcher's paradise, finds Christian Sylt

The past ten minutes have been eventful. A Vespa screamed round the square in front of me narrowly missing a chihuahua on the end of a long lead held by an elegant elderly lady. Then I witnessed a supercar sandwich as a Lamborghini nearly hit an open-top Ferrari which abruptly stopped when the driver leaned out to chat up a leggy blonde. Next a group of smartly-suited businessmen pulled up a table next to me at the cafe for an impromptu business meeting. Never has people-watching been so exciting.

I'm not sitting in front of any old square but the Piazza del Duomo in the heart of Milan. Straight ahead is the famous cathedral with its towering spires. To the left is a shopping arcade which looks like it hasn't changed in the past 140 years. It hasn't.

Covered by a huge wrought-iron and glass conservatory, the Galleria Vittorio opened in 1877 and connects two of Milan's most famous locations – the cathedral and La Scala opera house. It's a window-shopper's paradise as Prada, Gucci and Louis Vuitton all have outlets inside.

Of course the floor is marble and the central mosaic shows the four coats of arms of old kingdoms that make up modern day Italy – Milan, Florence,

Rome and Turin. Every time I walk past it there is a commotion in the middle so I finally summon up my best GCSE Italian and ask a local what was going on. The response isn't what I expected.

The coat of arms for Turin features a bull and legend has it that it brings good luck if you put your right heel on the bull's, ahem, tackle and turn around three times. It's a myth that's clearly treated very seriously as there's a huge hole in the mosaic where the bull's modesty should be.

Sitting under a cloudless sky at Bar Duomo on the square you feel like you're in the middle of the action whilst watching the world go by.

Cafes and shops line the rest of the square and there's no mistaking that it's Italy. Trams glide down the streets and everyone seems to be immaculately dressed. Men tend to be in neatly-pressed shirts and shorts or sharp suits whilst tiny clutch bags are all the rage with women.

Italy's unmistakable style is apparent from the moment you set foot in the city. Landing at Malpensa airport there's an express train into town which takes around 50 minutes and costs £11.40 (€13) each way for adults. It arrives at Milan's Centrale station with its vaulted stone ceiling which has statues carved into the sides.

Aside from showing off their good

looks, Italy's national pastime is shopping and a trip into one of Milan's many department stores soon reveals why its locals are so stylish. The biggest of the bunch is Rinascente. Think Jenners packed with very high-end Italian goods from socks to chocolates in the shapes of slippers, sofas and handbags. You soon find that dogs in department stores are the norm in Italy and are just as well groomed as their owners.

The escalators inside seem to keep on going upwards and there's a real reward for those who persist. The top floor of Rinascente is filled with outdoor bars and restaurants under parasols directly opposite the cathedral. Down below, the crowds fight for the best view of it but all

Parts of original frescoes line the lobby and tapestries hang on the corridor walls

you need to do to get the perfect shot is buy a drink on the top floor of Rinascente. If you're feeling peckish the place to visit there is Il Bar as it offers reasonably-priced plates of cheese and ham as well as main courses of pasta.

Even Milan's hotels take their looks seriously. Buildings shaped like rectangular boxes aren't the done thing in this city and perhaps the best example of that is the Four Seasons

Clockwise from main: view of the Duomo in Milan; Galleria Vittorio; the Campari bar on the Piazza del Duomo

which is one of Milan's leading hotels. Discretion is the name of the game as the hotel is hardly visible from the outside. It is on a cobbled alley and integrated into what looks like a row of houses, complete with shutters on the windows. It was actually a 15th century convent and there's no mistaking it inside.

Parts of original frescoes line the lobby and tapestries hang on the corridor walls. There's a covered central courtyard and the rooms around it still have lamps outside the doors from when it was open air. The original structure of the building has been preserved in some of the rooms which have arched stone ceilings and stone floors.

The only downside of being in such a central location is that you have to watch out for prying eyes which I failed to do one morning. On getting up and looking out the window, dressed in only my boxer shorts, I found the resident in the house opposite staring right at me.

The houses are above yet more high-end clothes shops, this time, men's fashion brand Brioni and Cartier which explains the smell of eau de toilette in the air as you walk down the road. The high fashion and scented air of Milan are far from the real world and a few days in the city just serve to remind you that you're not really stylish enough to be in it. ■



48 HOURS IN

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Friday, midday

Check into the Hotel Maniumpathy (doubles from £120, www.thecolombohouse.com), a stately colonial-style dame in the leafy Cinnamon Gardens district. This boutique gem has just eight rooms, which reline around a tree shrouded pool.

1pm

Try the national staple of 'curry and rice' at the Maniumpathy. Deceptively simple sounding, it's actually curry served with a thali-style array of tasty side dishes.

2pm

Time to explore the city centre on a tour with Colombo City Walks (www.colombocitywalks.com).

5pm

End your walking tour at the old Dutch Hospital, which has recently been brought back to life with new cafes, bars and restaurants. Botanik (www.botanik.lk) sits on a rooftop with great views.

7pm

It's dinner in one of Asia's best seafood restaurants at the legendary Ministry of Crab (www.ministryofcrab.com). The Sri Lankan crustaceans deservedly enjoy top billing, best savoured with a garlic pepper sauce, though the massive local prawns are also superb.

Saturday, 9am

For a real local experience take a tuk tuk to the chaotic but exciting Pettah market district, which is a senses stimulating contrast to the gleaming glass and steel of Colombo's emerging skyline.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Hello Dubai

Visit Dubai and take advantage of a free upgrade to half board with Netflights.com. They're offering three nights at the five star Anantara The Palm Dubai Resort, which has 10,000 square metres of lagoon pools, from £599pp, with breakfast and dinner, as well as flights from Glasgow with Emirates on selected dates in June. Book by 31 May. www.netflights.com

Offer at Airds

Available until the end of June, the Early Bird Summer offer at Airds Hotel & Restaurant, Port Appin, costs £150pp per night (based on



Midday

Head down to the city's beach and enjoy a simple street food experience with the hulking Port City project, which will transform the Sri Lankan capital's waterfront, taking shape in the background.

5pm

As the temperature cools make your way to the Galle Face area to enjoy one of the famously spectacular Indian Ocean sunsets in one of the cafes and bars.

7pm

It's Wagyu beef time at Café Nihonbashi (www.nihonbashi.lk). This is the real Japanese deal here with melt in the mouth steaks.

Sunday, 9am

Peel back the centuries with a lavish breakfast on the Maniumpathy's colonial-style terrace, before a dip in the pool to ease your muscles before your flight. ■

Robin McKelvie

Etihad (www.etihad.com) fly to Colombo from Edinburgh via Abu Dhabi from £503.16 return. Flat beds available in business class. **Indian Odyssey** (www.indianodyssey.co.uk) can package together the hotel, restaurants and tours above.

two sharing for three nights), and includes half board accommodation, a cream tea on the day of your choice, a newspaper delivered to the room each day and a glass of prosecco on arrival. Call 01631 730 236 or see www.airds-hotel.com

Jet to Spain

EasyJet Holidays is offering seven nights at the five star Precise Resort El Rompido The Hotel in Costa de la Luz on a room only basis for £380pp including flights from Edinburgh on 7 June. Call 020 3499 5232 or see www.easyjet.com/holidays