

S B L S

Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine

July/August 2019



A PLACE IN THE SUN

Breathless

An awe-inspiring luxury trek with Mountain Lodges of Peru

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Meet Darwin, our Mountain Lodges of Peru tour guide. His favorite English word is fluffy, he loves to cook, and he knows everything there is to know about Inca history, Peru, and hummingbirds. And he only sometimes jokes about human sacrificing us. I guess you could say he's a pretty good guide. He has even guided Prince Charles and Camilla after all. He's also hilarious, which is a definite plus since we are about to spend the next five days with him, trekking through the Andes on a Mountain Lodges of Peru (MLP) Sacred Valley and Lares Adventure, from Cusco to Machu Picchu. Over the next week, Darwin leads us from one luxury lodge to the next via untrodden trails and Inca sites where we are the only visitors.

Our expedition starts in Cusco, a vibrant city in which we spend a day to acclimate. We ease into the 12,000-foot elevation and Andean culture by walking around the town—which was once capital of the Incan Empire and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site—exploring Inca fortress Sacsayhuaman (pronounced “sexy woman,” but we went for the historical aspects, I swear) and dining on alpaca skewers and giant pisco sours at Pacha Papa.

The next morning we depart MLP's El Mercado hotel bright and early. My friends and I pile into a Sprinter van as Darwin introduces us to our driver, going on about what an experienced and trustworthy driver he is. I disregard it as overkill—until we start driving. The road to our first trailhead is high, narrow, and unpaved, with only eucalyptus trees and scattered adobe dwellings between us and the Urubamba River hundreds of yards below.

For the first hike, we are accompanied by a local porter, Pedro, and his three mules who carry our water for the next several hours. Don't let his sandals fool you, at 53 years old Pedro could do laps around us. As I take the first few steps up the trail, I'm already out of breath. The 13,500-foot elevation is no joke. I look at my friend laughing, wondering what we got ourselves into. (Disclaimer: my preparation for this trek was limited to hiking a few times at an elevation slightly above sea level the weekend before the trip, and purchasing a waterproof pair of Timberland hiking boots because they looked cool. In my defense, they turned out to be super durable.) But as we continue traversing



in Peru

the trail, our bodies acclimate. The peacefulness and tranquility of the mountains override any exhaustion. If nothing else, we can always think of the beautiful lodge waiting for us at the end of the day's adventures.

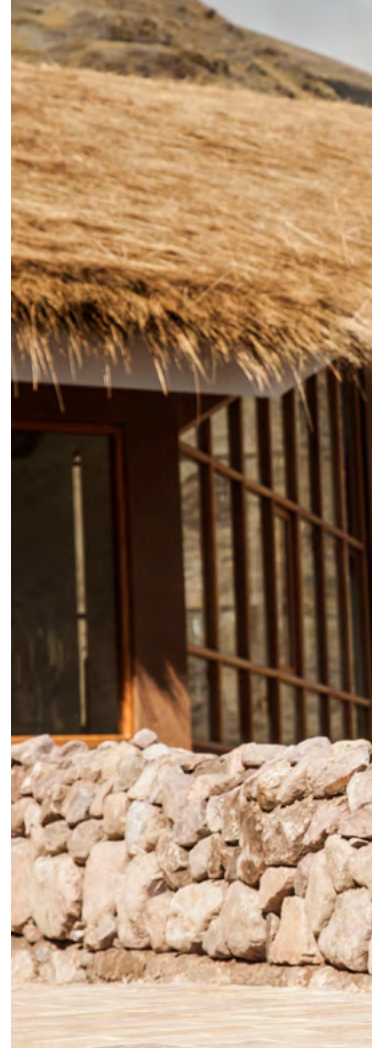
Darwin imparts knowledge about the Incas as we walk along stone-lined trails created centuries ago. There are no other hikers, only the occasional sighting of kids playing on their way home from school.

Children are a necessity in the Andes to help with farming, and it's not uncommon to have 14 in a family. We pass by a farm, and Darwin points out fava beans, quinoa, corn, and black mint, noting that Peru grows almost 3,000 varieties of potatoes, 55 of corn, and 17 of quinoa. He mentions that black mint is a guinea pig's best friend. "Why? Do they eat it?" My friend asks. "No, we marinate them in it," Darwin chuckles.

We end the day's hike at the largest Incan burial site, where the faces of cliffs are strewn with holes once occupied by mummies (which have since been looted). Even though the hike is physically challenging, there's no point at which I feel incapable or frustrated. I'm not sure if it's the ample time to think, the spiritual setting, the strength required, or a combination, but I feel as though after this, I could do anything. And I'm excited to wake up and hike again tomorrow.

Our ride is waiting at the burial site and takes us to the bohemian Lamay Lodge where we are welcomed by gardens with a jacuzzi, fire pit, and two llamas. That evening we feast on local specialties of Andean trout, guinea pig, several types of potatoes, and mushroom ceviche, finished off with a thick, syrupy blue corn pudding. Afterward, we stretch out our muscles in a yoga class and then curl up on velvet couches in the lobby to go over tomorrow's itinerary. Each night we discuss options for the next day's schedule and customize it to fit each person's interests.





The following morning we visit Mercado de Cala, where local vendors offer everything from giant avocados, to cheeses and cakes. Old women sit on the ground selling herbs and natural remedies for any ailment. Many vendors have been working at this market their entire lives, and the resulting camaraderie is apparent.

After a short drive, we climb to Asamarka, an Inca site used for storing grains and jerky. The only other people at the secluded ruins are women sitting at a loom weaving as children nearby spin wool. Darwin translates for us as we ask about what they are making. I feel lucky to interact with locals who are carrying on traditions of Incan culture. These are not your get-the-Insta-photo-and-dash tourist attractions.

That afternoon I set out on my own (accompanied by our other guide Jose) to hike the trail from Quelquena to Huacahuasi. We have a picnic by the river then climb up steep switchbacks to reach the ridge with a breathtaking view of both valleys. He points out a village below. There are 10 families that live in this village, and they grow potatoes and raise guinea pigs. Once a week they walk a few hours to town in order to stock up on supplies and trade with people from jungle climates for coca leaves and tropical fruit.

As we head down the other face of the mountain, we slosh through mud as alpacas stare at us in disbelief. We're one of the few people they see a day; the trail is used only by MLP. Our hike ends directly at the door of Huacahuasi Lodge. The surrounding mountains and waterfalls are even more awe-inspiring when seen through the floor to ceiling windows in the lobby. I settle into a couch and take in the panorama before heading to my room, which has a jacuzzi on the balcony overlooking the Sacred Valley. I reconvene with my friends at dinner and hear about how they spent the day visiting the small town of Choquecancha where a healer read their futures on coca leaves.

The next day we drive through the Sacred Valley. The views of lakes and glaciers appear too pristine to be real. We stop multiple times to take photos, but no photo truly captures the beauty. The only traffic is llamas wandering along the dirt road, some with colorful earrings and necklaces to identify their ownership. In the afternoon we hike to Pumamarca archeological site where we enjoy lunch and a yoga class within the stone walls of the ruins. On our descent, we encounter a dog who follows us for miles. When we reach "Half Moon" terraces, our new furry friend leaves us for its owner as we hop in the van and head straight to Sacred Valley Brewery for a well-earned pint.



What to Pack



**Timberland Men's Mt. Maddsen
Mid Waterproof Hiking Boots**

timberland.com



Sun & Swell Fruit & Nut Bites

sunandswellfoods.com



**Medicine Mama's Bee Magic Wand
lip & face balm**

medicinemamasapothecary.com



M-61 Hydraboost Moisturizer

SPF 30

bluemercury.com



In the morning we explore the ruins and town of Ollantaytambo and then hop on the Inca Rail to our final destination: Machu Picchu. As the train to Aguas Calientes (the town at the base of Machu Picchu) runs along the river, the landscape changes from farmland lined with cactus to drizzly cloud forest. We arrive at Inkaterra Pueblo Hotel and are lead through the jungle-like property to our rooms. My suite's lofty ceilings, fireplace, and large windows remind me of how fortunate we were to stay in beautiful and comfortable lodges every night instead of the campsites along the trail.

The next day we explore Machu Picchu: it is a place of centuries-old temples built in the 1400s and towering peaks lost in the clouds. Darwin's narratives give meaning to the impressive and magical Inca site, otherwise buzzing with tourists in a rainbow of plastic ponchos. The visit makes me appreciate not only the history but also our week of near solitude that only MLP could offer. Having the sites to ourselves offered so much more of a spiritual experience. From learning about the culture through immersion in local practices, to hiking to different sites, to staying in beautiful lodges, it was never the same thing twice, and all without a hitch or tourist.

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mountainlodgesofperu.com