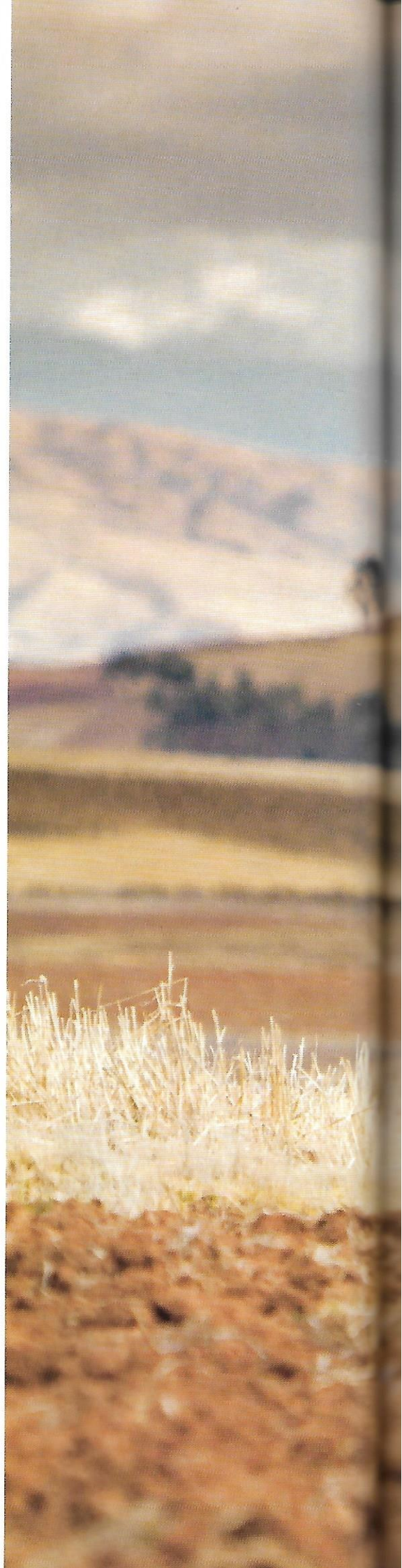


U

B

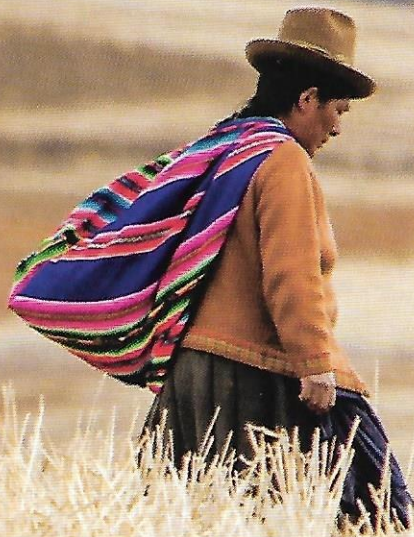
W

R



The heartland of the great Inca empire, Peru is blessed with mountains, jungle, desert and world-renowned cuisine. With no fewer than three Amazon regions, where scarlet macaws glide among the mountainside burial chambers of ancient 'cloud warriors', amongst its sky-scraping peaks you'll find the largest pre-Columbian city in the Americas and ancient citadels that predate the country's most famous site, Machu Picchu, by almost a millennium. From slick city restaurants pioneering modern cuisine to remote rainforest treks, we bring you the best of this South American country

WORDS NICOLA TRUP & BEN LERWILL



EYEWITNESS

THE LARES TREK

An alternative to Machu Picchu's Inca Trail, this route through the southern Andes links Peru's archaeological sites and traditional communities, following lightly trodden paths where you'll encounter few other travellers — unless you count alpacas

“The Inca Trail is beautiful, but you're never alone — and the toilets are disgusting.”

Juan doesn't pull any punches when it comes to explaining why we've chosen a different route to Machu Picchu. And while our comfort breaks aren't exactly the height of luxury, being more bush than bathroom, we've seen no other hikers since setting off.

Much like the Inca Trail, the Lares Trek isn't so much a single route as a network of trails across the Sacred Valley, with almost endless configurations. And in this version, run by local outfit Mountain Lodges of Peru, we're hiking along lightly trodden paths that link archaeological sites with traditional communities, traversing the southern Andes en route to our (luxurious) lodgings. Parts of the journey are taken by car, along twisting mountain roads, but each day we hike for several hours, barely seeing another soul, save for the gangs of llamas and alpacas that eye us suspiciously from the hillsides.

“Do you feel the altitude?” I ask Juan, our guide, on the first day. He looks at me pityingly: “I'm here all the time, so it's okay.” It's like I've run a mile, but in reality we've only walked a few metres — and at a very slow pace. We're nearly 10,000ft above sea level, where the oxygen is thin. Behind our group walks a woman from a nearby village, herding a donkey with emergency supplies of water and oxygen strapped to its back. She's dressed in the formal-looking, frills-and-flamboyant-colours ensemble many women sport in this rural area. It's a look imported by the Spanish colonialists, and comes with sandals, but as we trudge uphill in walking boots, she scales the stone-speckled slope with no trouble.

Over the next few days, breathing gets easier. We cross mountain passes at more than 13,000ft, from which the peak-studded landscape unfolds in front of us like a crumpled map. We pass rectangles of emerald-green grass used as grazing grounds for guinea pigs, and wooden racks on which vast quantities of multicoloured corn are

drying. One day we find ourselves, in gloomy weather, walking across a marshy mountain plateau that's strangely reminiscent of the North York Moors.

Hikes are punctuated by many of the archaeological wonders of the Sacred Valley, from the remains of the circular buildings that pockmark the slopes at Ankasmarka to the sprawling city of Pisac, which reveals itself as we round the brow of the hill. And finally, we reach Machu Picchu, finding ourselves in a crowd for the first time in days.

Juan leads us to a viewpoint. The sharp peak of Huayna Picchu is just visible through the morning mist and, in front of it, the neat grassy terraces and geometric stone walls hug the hill. From here, the 15th-century site looks neat and compact, but it was once home to 500 full-time residents, along with thousands more temporary workers.

In search of another angle, I abandon the group to hike up to the Sun Gate, once the main entrance to the city. The mist seems thicker than ever, and when I arrive a few other visitors are draped over walls and steps like stray cats, mostly catching their breath. They're all waiting. And then, the clouds suddenly dissipate, parting just long enough to let the late-morning sun shine down on the site for a few precious moments. From here, I finally get the true scale of this feat of engineering.

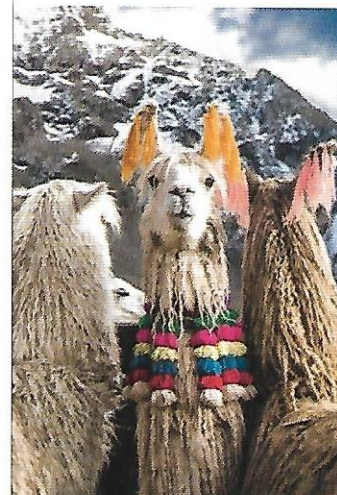
The explorer Hiram Bingham, who alerted the world to Machu Picchu's existence in 1911, described the site as a citadel, while others later labelled it a temple complex. But they were all wrong, according to Juan. “It's just a normal city,” he'd told me earlier. From here, though, it looks anything but. **NT**

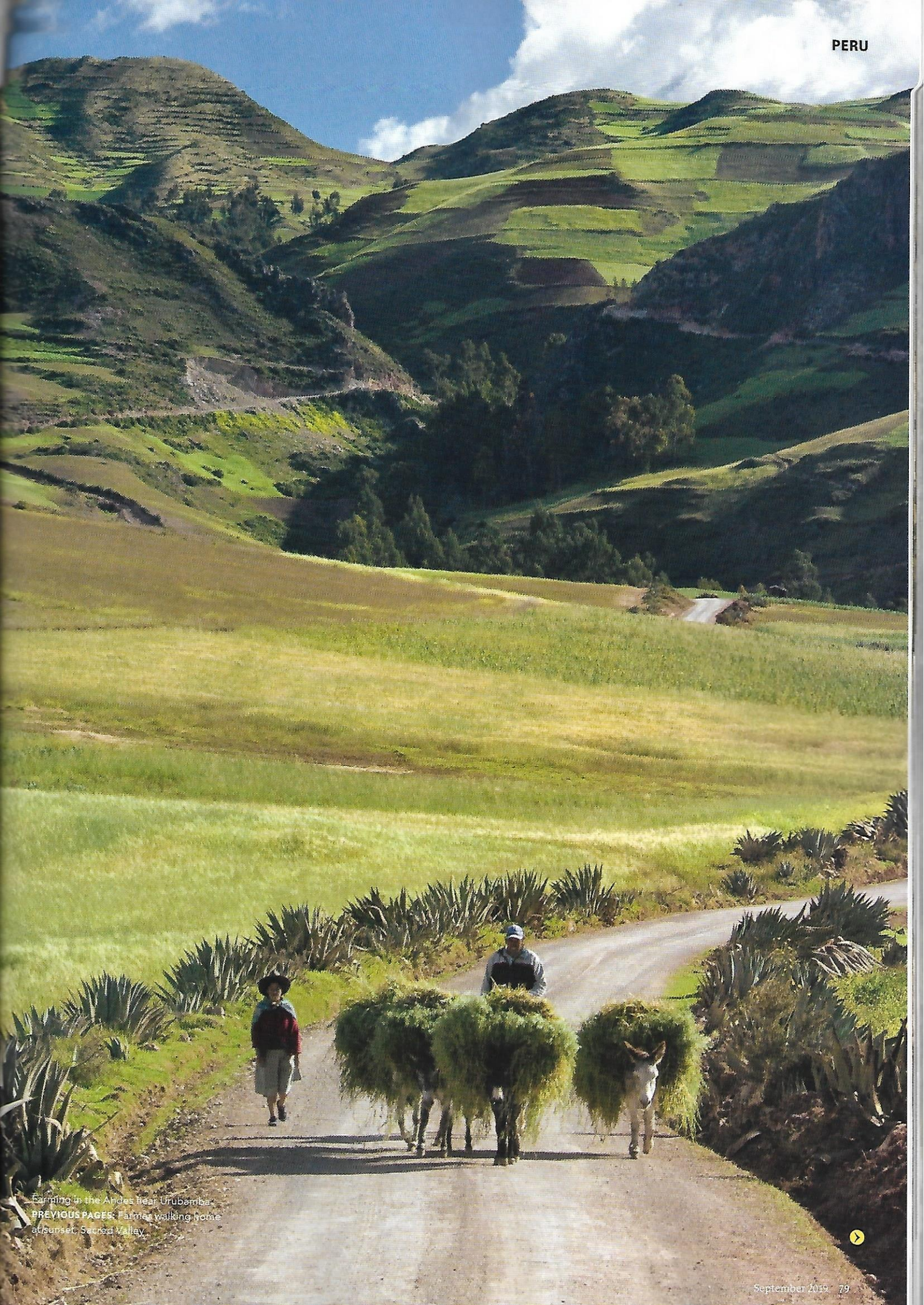
HOW TO DO IT: Mountain Lodges of Peru offers the five-day, guided Sacred Valley and Lares Adventure, ending at Machu Picchu, from £1,494 per person. It includes accommodation, domestic transport, a choice of hikes and excursions, entrance fees and all meals. Excludes international flights. mountainlodgesofperu.com

HOW TO

Tell the difference between a llama and an alpaca

Throughout the hills and valleys of central Peru you'll find fluffy camelids going about their business, chewing the scenery and eyeing up passers-by. But what exactly distinguishes a llama from an alpaca? Firstly, the former is bigger, growing up to 6ft tall, compared to alpacas' 5ft. Secondly, alpacas have small, fluffy faces with short muzzles and straight, pointy ears, whereas llamas have elongated faces and long, curved ears. And finally, if you get close enough to stroke them, you'll find the alpaca's wool is much softer than the llama's coarse coat. Now, how do you tell a vicuña from a guanaco?





Farming in the Andes Near Urubamba
PREVIOUS PAGES: Farmer walking home
at sunset, Sacred Valley



24 HOURS

A DAY IN CUSCO

The capital of the Incas, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Cusco is where Incan and Andean baroque architecture meet

10.00: Set off to explore the historic centre, starting at Plaza de Armas. Once an important site for Inca ceremonies, it was decimated by the Spanish and rebuilt in the colonial style, so today it's a place of colonnaded arcades, wide walkways and a smattering of churches. Visit the cathedral for the art (including a 17th-century, distinctly local take on the Last Supper, in which Jesus and his disciples are dining on guinea pig), and the baroque Compañía de Jesús church for the gaudy decor.

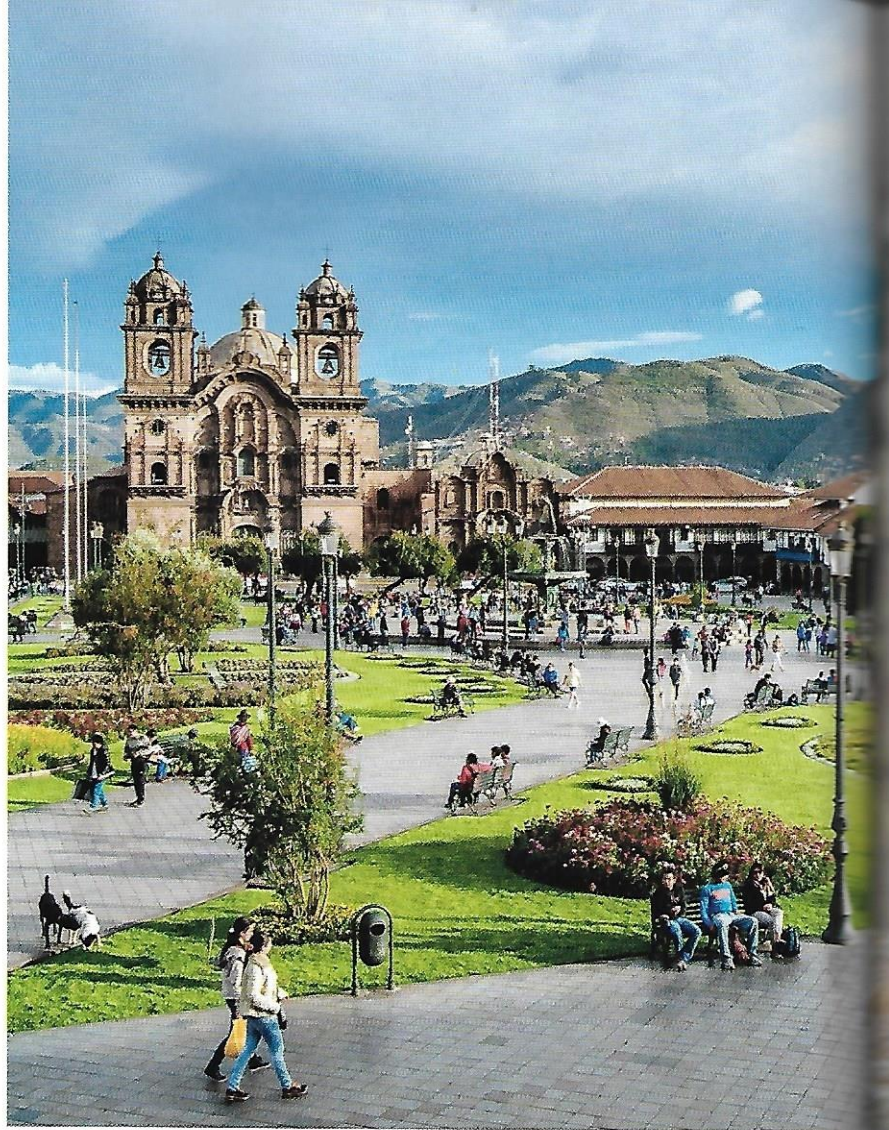
12.30: Wander over to San Pedro Market, where, alongside fresh produce and an assortment of alpaca-wool products, you'll find everything from suckling pig to pastries, with a few offaly options in between. Wash it all down with a juice from one of the many women hawking mixed fruit concoctions.

13.30: Just south of the old town is Coricancha. Once the most sacred site for the Incas, it was incorporated into the Catholic church and convent of Santo Domingo. Today, what's standing is a confounding combination of original masonry and colonial architecture. If you have time, also squeeze in a visit to Sacsayhuaman, a citadel just north of the city dating back in part to the 12th century.

17.00: Grab a cab — or walk 10 minutes from Sacsayhuaman — up to Cristo Blanco, the 'White Christ' statue that stands guard over the city. Like a miniature Christ the Redeemer, it was a gift from Palestinian refugees who sought asylum here after the Second World War, and it's a good spot from which to watch the sunset (check the timing of this before heading up).

19.00: Sit down for dinner at Limo, a restaurant in the historic centre that dishes up Nikkei cuisine — the Japanese-Peruvian fusion of flavours — including top-notch sushi using local fish. Round it all off with a pisco sour, of course. **NT**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Plaza de Armas, Cusco; Quechua, Sacred Valley, Pisac; circular terraces, Moray; traditionally dressed dancers at a parade in Cusco



Q&A

THE ARTIST



Cusco-based Berenice Diaz is the founder of all-women art collective Totemiq, and curator at XO Art House hotel

WHAT'S THE AIM OF TOTEMIQ?

Totemiq is a contemporary, Cusco-based art collective that I founded in 2016 in response to various objectives, the main one being the need to highlight popular Cusqueño and Peruvian art. We're losing techniques, know-how and skills for our native art — and with them the memory of who we are.

WHAT KIND OF ART DO YOU MAKE?

I have so many artistic interests, but I've ultimately found myself working in two styles: one is generative art (the union of art, science and technology) and the other focuses on traditional, local plastic arts. My surroundings are my leading source of inspiration.

WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR CUSCO?

L'atelier Café Concept, in the San Blas neighbourhood, is a small cafe-cum-art gallery full of contemporary design touches. I often visit the Rica Chicha cultural centre, too — it's a space where shops, art galleries, restaurants, cafes and a bookshop come together to offer cultural activities. A visit to Cusqueña artist Isa Luna's galleries is a must; she curates an exquisite collection of pieces by artists, artisans and creatives from all over Peru. Lastly, ceramicist Julio Gutierrez's workshop has a great collection of local, colonial tin-glazed ceramics. @totemiquperu xoarthousecusco.com **NT**

