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MONUMENTAL MAGIC

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SACRED VALLEY

Delve into the Inca kingdom and Andean villages on a Peruvian immersion tour. BY TIM LEFFEL

Ollantaytambo was the last stronghold of the Inca kingdom before its leader fled to the Amazon jungle settlement of Vilcabamba.

WHEN FRANCISCO PIZARRO and his 167 men defeated the Incas with guns, steel and horses in the 1500s, they conquered a short-lived but extensive empire. The Inca god-king ruled an area that stretched from Quito to Santiago.

The Spanish repurposed many of the Inca buildings in Cusco, but the original handiwork endures in the giant cut stones that fit perfectly together. Some luxury hotels, such as Palacio del Inka and JW Marriott El Convento, contain original stone walls dating back to when the New World was still untouched by Europeans.

One of the most important battles between the Spanish and the Incas happened at Saqsaywaman fortress, just a short taxi ride from Cusco. Many local residents still consider the immense structure a sacred site, and it hosts the grand Inti Raymi festival each June.

The Sacred Valley of Peru is home to many other Inca fortresses, temple sites and citadels. The most famous — Machu Picchu — lies at the end of the valley, but many others appear on daytrip itineraries. Those in a hurry may visit Pisac, Chinchero, Moray and Ollantaytambo in one loop. It's also possible to get to Machu Picchu and back in one day on the Belmond Hiram Bingham Express train from outside of Cusco, but what's the rush?

The experience proves much more magical if you stay in the Sacred Valley instead, making it possible to mix visits to the monuments with a deeper dive into the local culture and the Andes Mountains.

Hundreds of tour companies run the standard four-day Inca Trail trek, but a more luxurious option — with real beds instead of tent camping — involves taking the Salkantay Trek to Machu Picchu with Mountain Lodges of Peru. You stay in small hotels along the route and can enjoy a hot shower each night. The company also runs a Lares Adventure trip along the Weavers' Route in the mountains. Travelers pass through Andean villages, see high mountain lagoons and visit Inca ruins like Ankasmarca, where they may be the only people there. The tour includes a trek to the ruins and terraces of Pisac on foot from the opposite direction of the tour buses. It visits Ollantaytambo and Machu Picchu on the last two days.

Another immersion option allows for a stay at the Explora Valle Sagrado lodge in the Sacred Valley and use of it as a base. Its all-inclusive packages offer a selection of 30 active tours, including visits to Machu Picchu, Chinchero, the terraces of Moray and Ollantaytambo. Top-notch guides lead hiking and biking trips, and a comfortable lodge, a spa and an open bar wait at the end of the day.



MIGHTY FORTRESS:
Saqsaywaman, a citadel on the northern outskirts of the city of Cusco

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