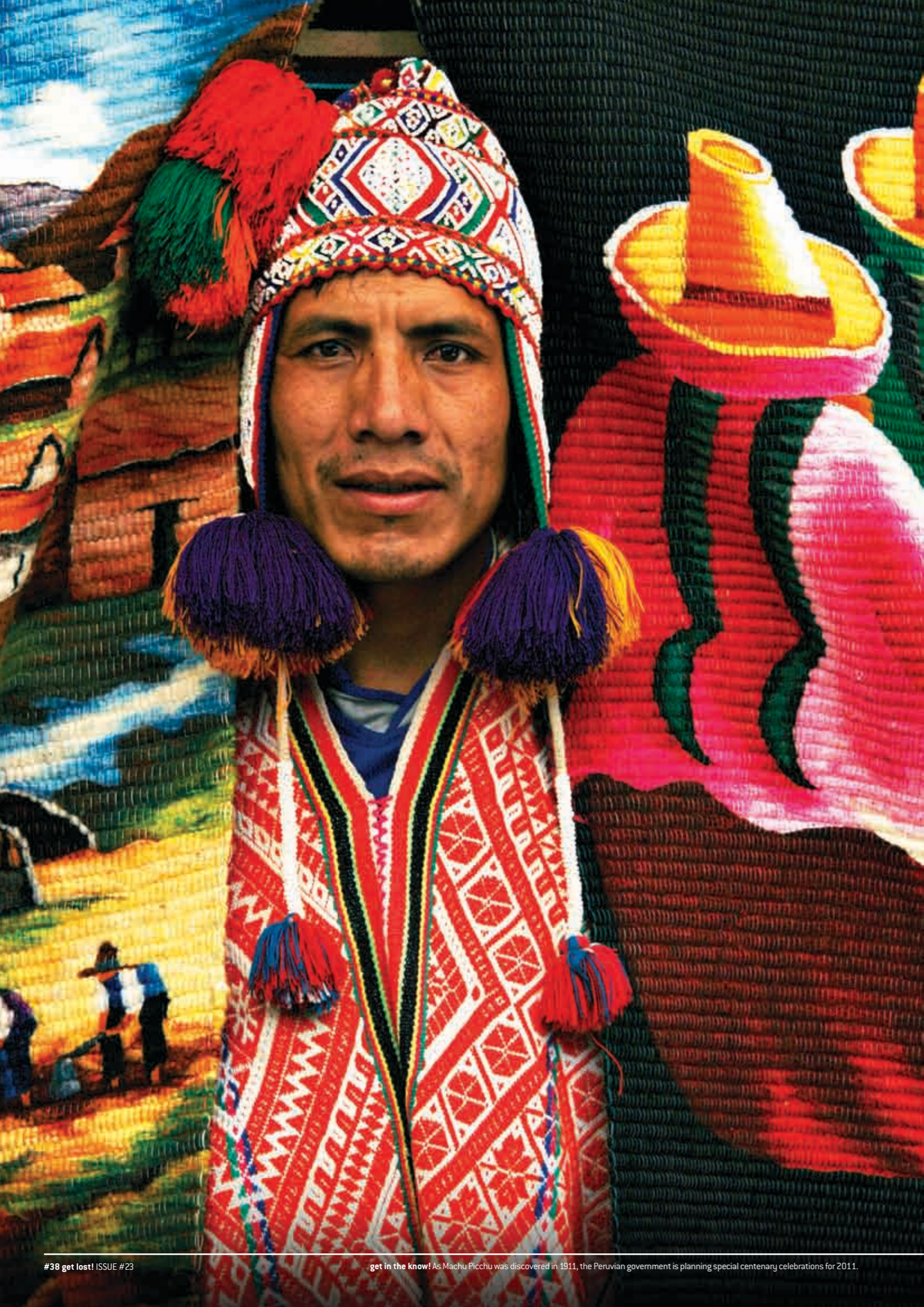




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INCA TRAILS & INCA TALES

Peru's Machu Picchu may be king of Latin American ruins but the nearby city of Cusco is an expanding playground for adventurous trekkers, rafters and riders. Beyond its walls lies an indigenous world of Incan fiestas, fortresses and far-fetched fodder.

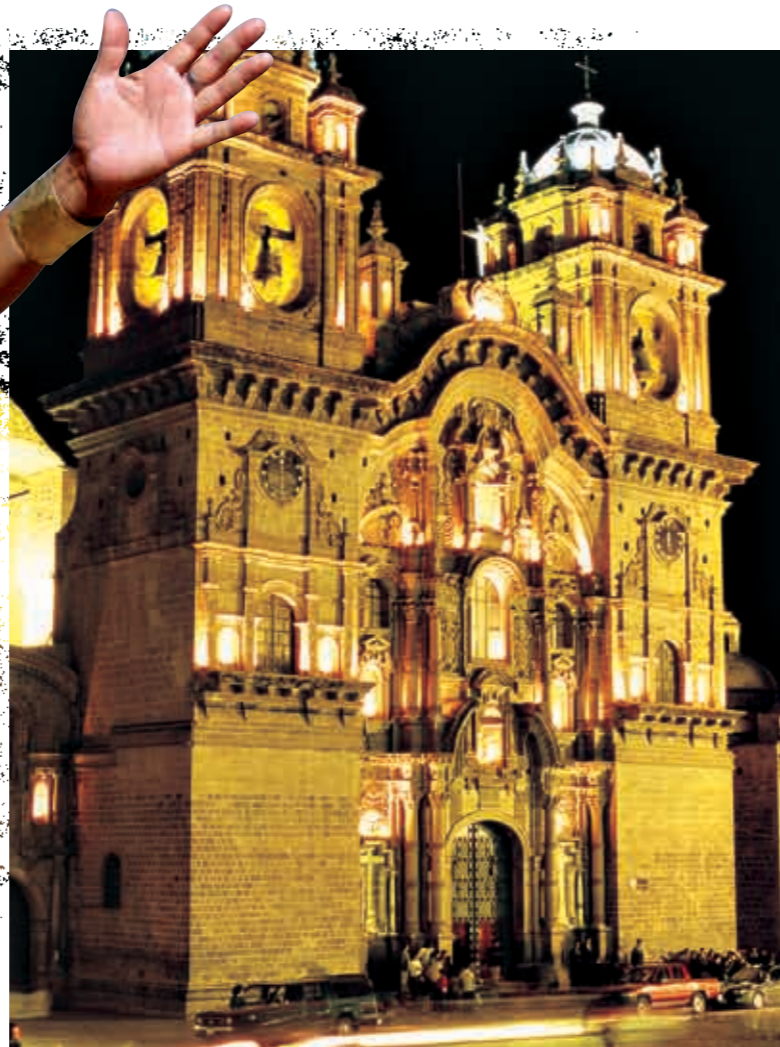
I T TASTES LIKE FRIED CHICKEN. BITING DOWN I can feel the crack of bone against my teeth as the little meat I have managed to scrape onto my fork reaches the back of my throat. Oh dear – it may have been a rib. Looking down onto my plate I see a cartoon-like gopher face staring straight back at me. Two pointed teeth jut out like coal-blackened tombstones and glazed eyes – now crisply cindered on a kitchen BBQ – seem to challenge me to finish it off. Below its head, two miniature arms and legs are spread out like a time-lapse camera still of a suicidal lemming. It has been speared onto a skewer, which enters at a bottom-wincingly extreme angle and emerges out of its mouth, as though an angry Peruvian sous-chef caught it mid-escape from a bold kitchen raid. Thankfully, the meat of my

guinea pig is sweet and succulent. Washed down with a refreshing bottle of the local brew Cusqueña, it is a gourmet experience that I did not expect to find in the Peruvian hinterlands.

Around me, the locals enthusiastically rip at the guinea pig flesh and chew contentedly. This is cuy, or roast guinea pig to the Western world, a traditional Andean dish served up with all the trimmings in the village of Aguas Calientes in central Peru. Despite its role as a domestic pet in the West, the guinea pig still plays an important role in the folk culture of many indigenous South American groups, especially when served on top of a heap of boiled rice. "Te gusta la comida?" enquires my five-food-high server. "Sí yo lo quiero; it's perfect, thanks," I reply. But after a hard four-day slog across

a spine of ancient peaks into the heartland of the Incas, I can't help thinking – I wish I had just ordered a cheeseburger. My plate was barely enough to satisfy, well, a really hungry guinea pig.

Cusco is the lifeblood of Peru's tourist industry; awash with expensive tour groups, squeaky-clean newlyweds from Lima and fresh-faced backpackers hailing from Israel to Ireland. The city itself, which sat at the heart of the Incan empire in the fifteenth century, no longer finds itself beholden to the call of the sun gods or the notorious cross-border drug barons. Political skirmishes in Peru have died down and in Cusco five-star boutique hotels like Monasterio link arms with effortlessly hip backpacker bars like El Perros and Mama Africa. Last year half of the more than two million visitors



to the country stopped over in Cusco for a fleeting date with Machu Picchu – the greatest Inca citadel of all.

Seven days previously I had also arrived in Cusco on a frigid overnight bus from Puno. Lying 384 kilometres to the south, Puno hugs the shores of Lake Titicaca like a hungry baby at its mother's bosom. Arriving sleep-deprived and hungry, I soon found myself wrapped in Cusco's welcoming blanket of hot cocoa, wood-fired chorizo pizza and travellers' tales. Centuries-old colonial buildings

and pre-Hispanic Incan temples may line the dusty alleyways like packed bookshelves but the soundtrack is a constant chorus of Simon and Garfunkel's 'El Condor Pasa' on panpipes. A labyrinth of lopsided lanes and baroque cathedrals anchors the quirky art galleries and intoxicating cafes of this UNESCO World Heritage site.

Set among snow-capped peaks, volcanoes, canyons and valleys that give life to the imposing Andes, Cusco and the surrounding Sacred Valley are opening up to trekking, horseriding,

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rafting and climbing like never before. Options are seemingly endless and the outlying areas become more accessible to adventurers each day – and you never know what you may find. Last year archaeologists uncovered eight new burial sites with more than 15 bodies in the Temple of the Moon, part of the important ceremonial site of Sacsahuamán (pronounced – oh yes – ‘sexy woman’). Built in the fifteenth century by some rather clever Incan engineers and only a short trip from Cusco's centre, Sacsahuamán is an imposing terraced fortress. According to experts, the find is evidence that the descendants of Pachacútec lived here – the Incan equivalent of Julius Caesar but without the rather large handkerchief as clothing.

Come summer, the zigzagging megalithic defensive walls host the Inti Raymi annual sun festival. Every year on June 24, more than 200,000 people descend on Cusco to celebrate the most famous party on the Incan calendar. Ushering in the winter solstice and local harvest, Peruvians bow down to honour Wiracocha,

the God creator. Like Carnival in Brazil, but with more of a *Sesame Street* touch, there are parades, fireworks and all-night parties: the rainbow feather headdresses and technicolour dreamcoats on display would give Andrew Lloyd Webber a run for his money should he ever drop by. It is the perfect tonic for Cusco's well-stocked toy box of surrounding ruins, which dot the landscape like half-built LEGO villages and seem to grow in number year upon year.

Ultimately, however, people come to Cusco for Machu Picchu. For the Incas, Machu Picchu's enveloping hills were worshipped as indigenous gods, regarded as the guardians of the earth, providing water for the rivers and nurturing their crops. For today's intrepid visitor, the site brings out a different type of worship – one that is heavy on the knees and light on the wallet.

Rediscovered in 1911 by American explorer and politician Hiram Bingham, the lost city of the Incas was, depending on your perspective, an ancient centre of study or a great temple for Incan VIPs. The local government views the site as an open cash register. Well-publicised measures designed to limit the number of tourists may have been implemented to preserve its fragile environment but they also ensure that trekking the Inca trail is an expensive undertaking. “Reglamento de uso turístico”, is the official line. Every trekker is required to be accompanied by a certificate-wielding sanctioned guide.

The most popular route through the mountains is the four-day trek. This is why I have come to Cusco. Like an Amazonian snakes



and ladders set, it cuts through otherworldly landscapes, tiers of emerald forest and archaeological sites belonging to the days of Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama. After a few days of waiting in Cusco for an available space with a trekking group, I am ready to do battle with the sun gods. Equipped with sun block, suntan lotion and a traditional flap-eared

alpaca hat, I lace up my boots and hit the trail. The weather forecast is for rain.

Our trek begins with an assault through oak and rhododendron forests inhabited by toucans. After crossing sparkling streams, we break out along a razor-edged ridge.

The following day, we follow a steeply zigzagging trail. Like an Incan yellow brick





“ We climb staircases cut deep into the mountainside, seemingly built for immortals, and encounter tunnels that penetrate 20-metre-thick rock.”

road, it crosses mountain passes at altitudes of more than 4,000 metres. Each is as equally unpronounceable as the next – from the heady heights of Warmiwañusqa (4,200 metres) and Runkuraqay (3,860 metres), we descend to meet the bushy eyebrows of the jungle 2,000 metres below. We climb staircases cut deep into the mountainside, seemingly built for immortals, and encounter tunnels that penetrate 20-metre-thick rock. They carry aching trekkers from tented camp to tented camp. From these heights, heaven and its lofty clouds seem as though they're just around the corner.

It is the next morning when, behind the Sun Gate (Intipunku) and cloaked in morning mist and breaking sunrays, Machu Picchu pokes its nose out from the dawn. On our final descent towards the citadel, the serenity is broken by the arrival of a pack of highly strung and fearless llamas. Within seconds, I have a set of nostrils twitching in front of my face as if building up for a huge wet sneeze. The llama's ears point skywards, one of which has been tagged by a local farmer, and evidently, it can hear everything that our tour guide is saying. “These animals can be pretty dumb creatures,” he explains as my new friend totters off into the temple. “Just look at this hombre. Not too smart, but they are inquisitive and are allowed to roam freely. Yet it's us humans who leave the mess behind.”

According to our group leader, legend has it that the Sun God sent two children to earth to guide mankind to lead better lives. As he continues his tale, I gaze across the Temple of the Sun from the citadel's interior and see the ancient stone ruins bathed in a glorious golden light as though it were a halo of mist.



With knees and stomach aching, my thoughts begin to turn elsewhere. Lunchtime beckons and it is then that we descend to Aguas Calientes, a creaking village that has blossomed under the royal shadow of Machu Picchu. With a 43-kilometre walk imprinted on my hiking boots, I can't wait for my well-earned lunch. I imagine a feast of princely proportions that would be worthy of the great Incas themselves. I'm so hungry I could eat a llama when my meal arrives. It tastes like fried chicken. ☹

GET PLANNING

Getting There

LAN offers return flights from Australia to Cusco starting at approximately A\$2000. For booking information visit www.lan.com Cusco is a one-hour flight from Peru's capital, Lima.

Cusco Accommodation

Owned by those fine people responsible for the Orient Express, Monasterio is a five-star hotel originally built as a monastery that retains a certain level of sanctity. Its central courtyard is a sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of the neighbouring streets and travellers have made pilgrimages here for decades. www.monasterio.orient-express.com

For more information on visiting Peru and Cusco, the Peruvian tourist outfit PromPeru is a great resource for pre-departure planning. www.peru.info

Machu Picchu Accommodation

Machu Picchu is closed during February for conservation work so it is crucial to plan your visit to Cusco and its surrounding valleys wisely. The Inca Trail can also be booked weeks in advance so turn up without a booking or without some extra time on your hands and you may be disappointed.

The rainy season starts in November and ends in March, and it is the time when the mountains are covered in green. Between June and July is the time of sunny skies and frosty Andean air – even with occasional snowfalls.