

GOING PLACES

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magical

MACHU PICCHU



Do you like mysteries and secrets? Who-dunnits and what-ifs? Long-ago history, far-away places, and spooky, goosebumpy legends? Well, you should've come with us recently to Machu Picchu. This 600-year-old 'Lost City of the Incas', perched on a mountaintop in the Peruvian Andes, has got it ALL! And I still can't quite believe that I've SEEN it ...

The first Oh-My-Gosh moment occurred during our early-morning Lima-to-Cuzco flight, when I caught glimpses below of coastal plains ... ever-steeper mountains ... ever-deeper gorges ... and ever-higher ridges and peaks.

Our destination, Cuzco, lay spread-out in one of those gorges. Home to 400,000 hardy souls (including Quechua Indians, decked out in gaudy clothes and hats), it was once capital of the Incan Empire. But today its cobblestone streets and plazas are trod mostly by tourists (like us) who breeze through en route to Machu Picchu.

Cuzco sits at a cloud-scraping 3200 metres – a full two miles above sea-level! And, within seconds of getting off the plane, the altitude had us wheezing like asthmatics and feeling as if concrete-blocks had somehow been tied to our shoes.

We grabbed a quick breakfast – plus a cup of medicinal coca-tea – then piled aboard a small bus for a two-hour drive along the Sacred Valley to the Indian town of Pisac.

From there, once we'd photo-stopped and market-shopped, we pressed on past roadside shantytowns



Cuzco rooftops

and mud-brick houses to our next OMG-moment: the remarkable Incan fortress of Ollantaytambo – accessed by a steep staircase, and featuring the massive Temple of the Sun (formed from six huge stone monoliths each weighing 50 tons).

Finally, en route to dinner, folklore show and bed at the Casa Andina Hotel, we were overtaken by an exuberant street parade – and given an up-close taste of Indian culture.

Saturday morning saw us out of bed early (again) and heading for the railway station. We swapped tickets for seats on a tourist train, and were soon rock'n'rolling through heart-stopping, vertical-sided, neck-straining gorges alongside the cascading Urubamba River.

Farewelling the train in Aguas Calientes (a rumpy little town peering out of the misty cloud-forest) we rode a small bus up a zig-zaggy, edge-of-cliff dirt road (22 hairpin-bends!) to magical Machu Picchu ... laid out on a grassy saddle between impossibly high peaks.

Mere words and photos can't describe our OMG-moments up there on top of the world. But let me share a little history ...



Farewelling the train in Aguas Calientes



Six hundred years ago, at the height of the Incan Empire, Machu Picchu was destined to be a bustling centre of culture, cultivation and worship. But this remote city-of-stone was never finished, and today it's an empty shell. Narrow stairways, archways and alleyways wind



around houses, town squares, temples, towers, sacred sundials and astrological sites (all missing their roofs) ... and near-perfect blockwork (including a still-working water system) bears silent witness to masons long gone.

In the late 1400s, something awful happened – and Machu Picchu was abandoned!

Nobody knows why, for sure. Best guess? The city's leaders got news that the Spaniards had landed down on the coast – and while Incan warriors went to drive off the invaders, the remaining population simply melted into the jungle. The secret of Machu Picchu was buried with the (eventually defeated) Incas – and no-one lived here again until an



explorer, Hiram Bingham, cleared away the encroaching overgrowth and exposed this mind-boggling sight in 1911.

We oohed and aahed and puffed and panted and clambered all over the ruins, our imaginations running riot and our cameras smoking hot. And, after lunch, we did more of the same.

An unforgettable day? You've gotta believe it! The Lost City of the Incas will have us enthusing for decades to come ...

Some final OMG-moments awaited us down in the town. We'd already spotted a spotty woodpecker, perched on a fence back in the Sacred Valley. But amongst the flora and fauna surrounding the Inkaterra Pueblo Hotel (our accommodation that night) we Kiwis began some serious bird-watching ...



Tiny, multi-coloured fruit-eaters, fly-catchers and nectar-drinkers flitted in the branches just above our heads. Even-tinier hummingbirds, their delicate



COCK OF THE ROCK

wings doing a blurring 100-beats-per-second, hovered over feeders hung in the trees. And a brilliant *Cock of the Rock* (Peru's rare orange-red national bird) touched down in the garden, right in front of our eyes!

"*Gracias, South America ...*" Thanks heaps ... 🌿

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