

# INCREDIBLE PERU

Experiential journeys beckon throughout the former Inca Empire.  
BY PAUL RUBIO



Peru's most fascinating attraction: the ancient Inca city of Machu Picchu.

**M**achu Picchu and its mystic surrounds headline nearly every traveler's bucket list. But this dazzling ancient city is just one of Peru's many profound treasures. Scattered along a 1,500-mile serpentine coastline and across nearly a half-million square miles of snowcapped highlands, misty rainforests and sandy deserts, prolific natural and man-made splendors prove Peru to be a diverse and exciting travel destination packed with once-in-a-lifetime experiences, including—and far beyond—Machu Picchu.

## LIMA

Not so long ago, Peru's capital possessed little appeal to the average visitor; but in the past decade, Lima transformed into a thriving metropolis, complete with a revived colonial center, gentrified neighborhoods and a growing roster of world-famous restaurants.

Lima's emerging status as a global capital of gastronomy warrants travel solely for its sublime eats. Serving as the culinary showcase of Peru's varied topographies and cultures, Lima is now rife with chefs utilizing exotic, savory items such as *choclo* (an extra-large kernel corn), *paiche* (South America's largest freshwater fish) and *cocona* (Amazon tomato), landing top accolades for a number of the city's kitchens. Don't miss the 15-course Latin-Japanese "Nikkei Experience" at Maido, helmed by Chef Mitsuharu Tsumura. Or, indulge in northern Peruvian cuisine at Fiesta, where Chef Hector Solis doles out refined delicacies from his hometown such as *arroz con pato a la chilclayana* (rice with savory duck). At Restaurant Huaca Pucllana, dine on Peruvian epicurean delights while facing the archaeological remains of a 1,500-year-old adobe pyramid erected by Lima's original inhabitants.

In between meals, stroll along the esplanade hugging Lima's cliffs, the Malecón de Miraflores, where you can also embark on a paragliding adventure over the city. Peruse the beautiful bohemian neighborhood of Barranco and its famous "Bridge of Sighs" before museum-hopping across the city, starting with the 45,000-piece pre-Columbian art collection at Museo Larco, then continuing on to the vast displays of pre-Inca gold at Museo Oro del Perú.



Paragliders above the Miraflores District in Lima; below, Lake Sandoval in the Peruvian Amazonia.

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### PARACAS

As far back as the 1940s, Paracas—some 150 miles south of Lima—was branded as the “Hamptons of Peru,” a place where Lima’s socialites gathered to strut their wealth and escape the bustle of the capital. Nowadays, the beachfront city maintains its importance in Limeño society, but also serves as the gateway to a number of Peru’s lesser-known sights. Just a 30-minute boat ride off the coast, the rocky islands comprising Islas Ballestas, affectionately known as the “Peruvian Galapagos,” teem with Humboldt penguins, sea lions and blue-footed boobies. Back on land, visitors can traverse the coastal sand dunes in a 4x4 or by sandboard. Venturing deeper into the desert, small Cessna planes glide over the mysterious and mind-boggling Nazca Lines, thought to be a pre-Inca astronomical calendar. Slightly further afield is Peru’s equivalent to wine country, Ica, which offers immersion into the world of pisco—brandy made from white muscat grapes that forms the backbone of the country’s national drink: the pisco sour.

### CUZCO & MACHU PICCHU

Though the picturesque architecture exemplifies Spanish colonialism, the enchanting spirit of Inca civilization still permeates the former Inca capital of Cuzco. Today, the history-steeped city celebrates both its past and present through institutions such as the Museo de Arte Precolombino, where 450 pieces of pre-Columbian art (from 1250 B.C. to A.D. 1532) are on display, and in neighborhoods such as atmospheric San Blas, where artisans and artists draw inspiration from the Spanish and Inca empires in their designs.

Cuzco typically serves as a home base for pursuits throughout the heartland of ancient Mesoamerica, namely the mountaintop city of Machu Picchu and smaller excursions to the ruins and landscapes of the proximate Sacred Valley. This rich region should not be rushed and is best explored over multiple days. The Belmond Sanctuary Lodge provides immediate access to the legendary and massive 15th-century site, facilitating in-depth exploration. More adventurous types may want to allot three days to reach Machu Picchu by foot via the ancient Royal Highway (aka the Inca Trail), by far the most authentic, scenic and

spectacular way to appreciate the engineering and architectural feats of the Inca Empire.

### PUNO & LAKE TITICACA

Postcard images come to life atop Lake Titicaca, the world’s highest navigable lake, at more than 12,500 feet above sea level. At this crossroads of the Peruvian and Bolivian highlands, indigenous tribes preserve their cultural heritage through a traditional lifestyle. On the floating Uros islands, constructed from totora reeds anchored to the shallows of Lake Titicaca, the natives share insight into their colorful dress, traditions and way of life. On the remote lake island of Taquile—void of roads and technology—travelers can witness the daily life of the intriguing Taquilenos. Along the shoreline in the city of Puno, aspiring photographers will want to capture the vibrant scenes around Mercado Central, as well as the many curious alpacas and llamas hamming it up for the cameras.

### PERUVIAN AMAZONIA

East of the Andes mountain range, Peru’s balmy interior is marked by the mist-shrouded, hyper-biodiverse Amazon rainforest, comprising a whopping 60 percent of the country’s landmass. Sharing the greater Amazonia region with neighboring Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia, the majority of Peru’s rainforest is inaccessible, even between its southern access point, Puerto Maldonado, and its northern access point, Iquitos. You can enter Amazonia by either river or air, but no roads connect it to the Andes.

Often overlooked on the tourist trail, Peruvian Amazonia is arguably the country’s most fascinating natural wonder. The sights and sounds ambush the senses, fostering a palpable excitement as scarlet macaws light up the sky, sacred pink river dolphins splash through fast-flowing waters, caimans prowl on the riverbanks, and sloths and monkeys watch the action from overhead. The best wildlife encounters are found deep within Amazonia, far from any human presence, and require intrepid inclinations. River cruises facilitate adventures in style, while lodges near Iquitos and Puerto Maldonado offer a glimpse at Peru’s multifaceted rainforest, catering to Amazonia first-timers. **TL**

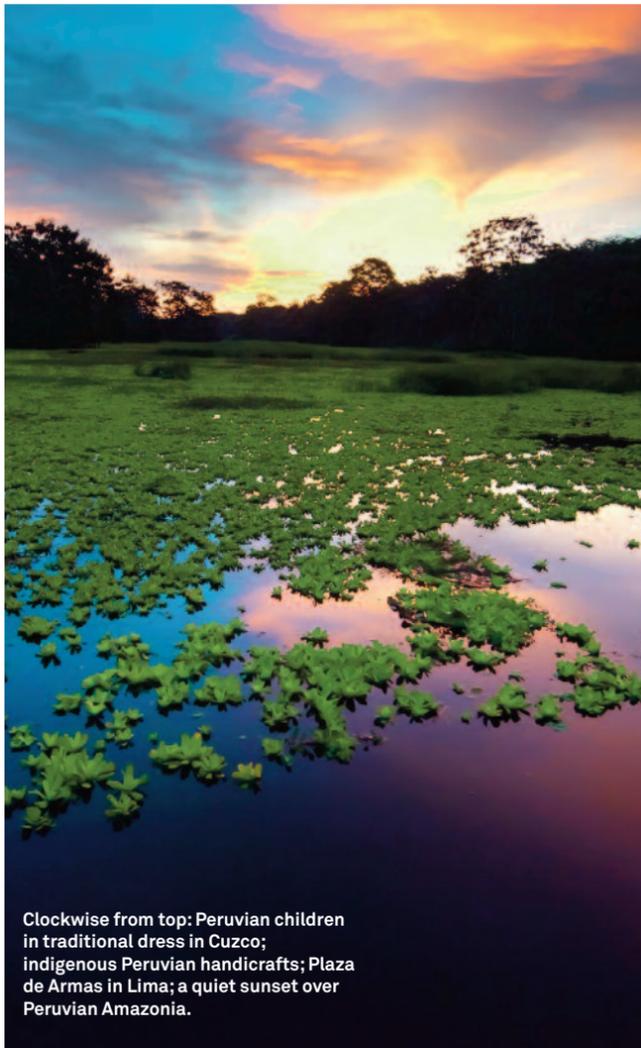
**MONEY-SAVER:** In Cuzco, purchase the Boleto Turístico del Cuzco, which grants admission to 16 different sights, including the famed Museo de Arte y Monasterio de Santa Catalina, for approximately \$22.

**WHEN TO GO:** Given the diverse topographies, peak season varies by region. In general, most people visit Peru between June and September, when it’s dry season in the Andes and the rainforest. December to April is the rainy season in these regions, yet peak season along the coast, when you’ll get idyllic balmy days.

**GETTING AROUND:** Given Peru’s vast size, the easiest way to explore the country is by air. There are multiple flights daily to take you throughout Peru, even to its far-flung destinations in the rainforest and remote highlands.

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Clockwise from top: Peruvian children in traditional dress in Cuzco; indigenous Peruvian handicrafts; Plaza de Armas in Lima; a quiet sunset over Peruvian Amazonia.