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Tasmania
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PLUS 

- ▶ Culinary Caribbean
- ▶ Peru
- ▶ Luxury Xmas Markets
- ▶ Skiing Eastern USA

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PLUS
NEW FAM TRIPS
on page 39

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P-2 P453



ABSOLUTE LUXURY PERU - The Amazon and Beyond

By Maxine Albert

Having just returned from Peru, it's easy to echo the sentiments of many visitors I met along the way. I love this destination, and so will your clients.

Peru offers the Amazon, the Andes, Cusco and Machu Picchu. It is a veritable foodie paradise, voted the Best Culinary Destination Award at the World Travel Awards in 2012. This gem of a country offers diverse, gorgeous topography with luxurious havens.

Inkaterra (www.inkaterra.com), a top tour operator in Peru that also owns superb properties, will create custom itineraries and take care of everything from the moment clients arrive until their departure, including accommodations, connecting flights, ground transportation, dining and all excursions. Their expertise, taste level, attention to detail and excellent guides guarantee the best in experiential luxury. Inkaterra properties and **Aqua Expeditions** (which can be booked through Inkaterra) are commissionable. Here are some highlights of my remarkable trip.

LUXURY ON THE AMAZON

Land in Lima and explore the gastronomic capital of South America, with on-trend designer shops and a burgeoning art scene. Then take a short flight to Iquitos to board the *MV Aria* for your 5 star **Aqua Amazon Cruise**. Your clients will love the comfort and style of this floating luxury hotel with sixteen spacious, well-appointed air-conditioned suites with sitting areas, private bathrooms and floor to ceiling windows for scenic Amazon viewing, massage and outdoor Jacuzzi. Star chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino's inspired cuisine highlights innovative Peruvian fare locally sourced. Exemplary dishes such as Dorado fish, braised short ribs and amazing seafood tiradito were paired with fine South



Eco lodge **Inkaterra**
Reserva Amazonica

American wines. There's ample leisure time to relax; take a siesta or enjoy a pisco sour. Excursions on skiffs with first rate guides take guests to swim with pink dolphins, spot sloths, howler and capuchin monkeys, macaws, herons, egrets, falcons, caimans, fish for piranhas, visit the native village Puerto Prado and participate in a ceremony with a medicine man. Trekking the Pacaya Samiria Reserve and seeing an anaconda - safely held by a guide - was a thrill. After disembarking, visit the Manatee Rescue Center in Iquitos, where I bottle fed a baby manatee. www.aquaxpeditions.com

THE MAGIC OF MACHU PICCHU

After a short flight to Cusco, a scenic drive through the Sacred Valley of the Incas takes you to Ollantaytambo to board Inca Rail. Enjoy first class service for the hour and a half journey, pass-

ing spectacular mountain vistas and the beautiful Urubamba River to arrive at the foot of Machu Picchu. **Inkaterra Luxury Machu Picchu**, set in a cloud forest, looks like a sprawling Andean Village. This secluded, unique **Relais & Chateaux** 85-cottage hotel with stone pathways along terraced hills, lush gardens, waterfalls, river and mountain vistas, strikes the perfect balance between rustic luxury and nature.

Beautiful villas boast private terraces, plunge pools, fireplaces, marble bathrooms and butler service. Guests enjoy outdoor Jacuzzis, a superb Unu Spa, and tasty creative Peruvian dishes like Andean trout and beef tenderloin with vegetables and herbs fresh from the garden. Guided excursions include bird watching, nature walks and a twilight walk to sacred sites, like an ancient petroglyph. The hotel arranges visits by local musicians and shamans for celebratory ceremonies. Stop at the small



Top: Inkaterra La Casona in Cusco

Middle: Exterior view of the Aria

Bottom: Side profile of the Aria with views of passenger accommodations



built by the Incas. Don't miss textile village Chincero for beautiful hand made pieces by native women and demos of their living heritage - artisanal weaving. Afterwards indulge in a gastronomic lunch of Peruvian dishes like Andean soup and mouth watering roast pork at Parador de Moray.

CUSCO

Arrive at the vibrant capital and spiritual heart of the Inca Empire. In this fascinating city, you'll find the international smart set side by side with locals dressed in traditional garb. Take in Inca and colonial architecture and old world charm as you stroll cobble stone streets passing art galleries, restaurants galore and boutiques with artisanal goods and the finest alpaca and vicuna clothing. At the center is Plaza de Armas, gloriously illuminated at night, with Koricancha, once the richest temples of the Incas, now a cathedral. For standout Peruvian fare, head to Calle del Medio with the best ceviche and a huge selection of Pisco drinks.

nearby village with its colorful market of native handicrafts.

The highlight, of course, is the visit to Machu Picchu Citadel with a private guide provided by the hotel. One of the great wonders of the world, it's a 15 minute shuttle bus ride away. The spectacular beauty and majesty are exhilarating as you explore the magnificent ruins of this fabled Inca city. An architectural wonder, 8,000 feet high - its steep palaces, temples, gardens, baths and houses, miraculously appear to be carved out of the hillside. Immerse yourself in the mysti-

cal, spiritual energy of the Inca culture and take in the grandeur.

SPLendor IN THE ANDES

While traveling through the Sacred Valley by car, stop at the Andean village of Pisac and see the living Incas, called Quechuas. Glimpse women dressed in bright, multicolored shawls with full skirts and high straw hats, bowlers or fedoras. Visit the ancient Inca salt mines, the small town of Maras and the cosmic looking circular agricultural terraces at Moray,

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