

# The Kingdom *of the* INCAS

*GABRIEL O'RORKE* walks to wellness in Peru, sharing space in the rainforest with a host of animal companions before exploring the ancient wonder that is Machu Picchu

**I**t may seem a little contradictory to begin a healthy holiday by eating your way around a food festival. However, our weekend at Lima's Hotel B in September just so happens to coincide with South America's biggest food festival, Mistura, and it seems rude not to check it out. Stretching along the coast, wonderful smells rise from a labyrinth of stalls selling everything from barbecued pork to corn-on-the-cob, coffee, chocolate and ceviche (as it's fish marinated in lime with chili and coriander, it doesn't get much healthier than this). Full to the brim we roll back to Hotel B in time for tea. The Belle Epoque-style townhouse, built in 1914, has been transformed into a boutique hotel with an ornate white façade complete with pillars and balconies.

The next morning we leave Lima behind and head for Puerto Maldonado, quite literally landing on nothing more than a strip in the middle of the Amazon Rainforest. Stepping out of the plane, the warmth and humidity envelop us and we're grateful for the breeze as we head up-river in a motorised canoe. If only all airport transfers were like this. Our destination is Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, a medical missionary's home turned jungle lodge with just eight rooms in the main building and seven stand-alone stilted cabanas. Inkaterra is a unique travel organisation in terms of its sustainability; it was Peru's first carbon neutral company, conserving 42,000 acres of rainforest and supporting local communities.

The first thing that strikes us when kicking back in our cabana is the noise. It's laughably loud. Tweets, squawks, flutters, croaks, some indignant, others urgent and some completely alien; every millimetre of foliage around us seems to be alive and with lots to say about the matter. Further proof that we're guests in this jungle-like terrain comes when we take a boat safari up the river that night. Caimans (four-legged reptiles of the alligator family which can grow to a terrifying six metres in length) slither down the riverbed and disappear into the muddy water. A capybara, the world's largest rodent (like a cross between a giant guinea pig and a Moomin) munches on electric green grass and monkeys chatter in the trees.

The next morning we're in for a rather ruder awakening, as the exercise starts. This is not bootcamp but Amazonian life means following the sun so it's a 5am wake-up call, fruit salad and omelette for breakfast, and off up the river to Lake Sandoval. After an hour-long hike along flat, muddy terrain we reach the lake. Along the way we see wonderful red, yellow and blue Scarlet Macaws, woodpeckers and hundreds of ants. "When bullet ants bite the pain lasts 30 minutes!" Lisbet our guide kindly informs us. "They eat animals, insects and flesh!"

Grateful to leave flesh-eating insects behind, we board the canoe and Lisbet paddles through a swamp ▶



► out onto Lake Sandoval. It's all very peaceful until she tells us the waters below are "filled with three different types of piranhas, anacondas and six-metre black caimans". We make it safely into open waters and are applauded by the bark of river otters and call of capuchin monkeys. By the time we hike back to the canoe, breakfast feels like a distant memory. It's remarkable how much you can do before 11am when you rise before the sun. Alas, lunch is not next on the agenda; instead we board the canoe and are transferred upriver to Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica.

Based in a 40-square-mile private reserve, this is arguably the most luxurious lodge in the Peruvian Amazon. Whilst Hacienda Concepcion is great for families, the remote Reserva Amazonica is romantic, exclusive and very civilised; there are white table cloths, à la carte dining, stand-alone cabanas and a spa. After lunch of *causa* (a typical Peruvian dish of mashed potato, topped with avocado) and Amazon fish cooked in lemongrass and ginger, we're in need of a siesta.

Our afternoon activity is a canopy walkway high up in the trees and I must be honest; it's pretty terrifying. My legs tremble as I climb up the wooden fort and cross a quarter of a mile's worth of swing bridges suspended 100 feet above the jungle floor. "85 percent of animals in the rainforest are edible, even sloths," said Lisbet, momentarily distracting me from my vertigo. Those looking for a night with the monkeys can sleep overnight in a tree house at the end of the canopy walkway. I, however, happily head back down to solid (if ant-ridden) ground to hike back to the lodge.

That night the skies open and bright flashes of lightning light up the jungle. Snuggling up with hot water bottles, we feel smug about our decision to dedicate the next day to spa treatments. The ritualistic-sounding Amazonian Purification massage begins with lymphatic drainage using an Amazonian plant called Cat's Claw, before a full-body gel mask (also using Cat's Claw) and a massage to finish. We lie back, content, on massage beds overlooking the soporific Madre de Dios River and, feeling light as feathers, we float out of the spa in time for happy hour; each evening the lodge has two-for-one Pisco Sours, a famously strong cocktail which is even more potent after exercise and spa treatments.

From the Amazon we fly to Cusco and board a train to the village of Aguas Calientes below the famous 15th-century Lost City of the Incas. Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel is made up from a collection of colonial-style cottages, some with open fires, nestled in 12 acres of orchid-filled gardens. 5am wake-ups have become

the norm and this time the prospect of a day exploring Machu Picchu pulls us from our beds. After solid rain the day before, the gods shine down on us, flooding the ruins in bright sunshine. "Love, work and learning were the three laws of Inca life," says Percy our guide as we trek up the steep stairs of the citadel, our accelerated pulses beating in recognition of the altitude – Machu Picchu sits at 2,430 metres above sea level.

Another vertigo-inducing view plunges down the valley to the Urubamba River, the main source of the Amazon. "You can say the Amazon begins in Machu Picchu," agrees Percy. As a reward for a hard day's hiking, we return to the hotel for a late lunch in the Inkaterra Café

before making a beeline for the Unu Spa for de-stress massages with mountain lemon oils. Then it's time to leave, but part of the magic of Machu Picchu certainly comes from travelling there and back by train; our return journey to Cusco takes in fascinating, lesser known Inca ruins as well as idyllic rural scenes of the Sacred Valley.

Arriving on the cobbled streets of Cusco, once the capital of the Inca Empire, we check into La Casona, a boutique hotel with 11 suites based around a charming internal courtyard. Peru's first Relais & Chateaux hotel, La Casona has a very impressive history; this 16th century colonial house was built over the palace of Manco Capac, legendary founder of the Inca kingdom. It was then lived in by Spanish conquistador Diego de Almagro and later by Simon Bolivar the general who liberated Latin America from Spanish control.

Our last day comes around all too soon. We explore the streets of this UNESCO World Heritage Site (which at 3,400 metres above sea level really takes it out of you) and I treat myself to one more spa treatment, an exotic hot Andean gemstone massage using coca leaf oil. "It smells like Coca-Cola," laughs the masseuse as I lie back, wishing fervently I didn't have to go home. ■

## "Love, work and learning were the laws of Inca life," says our guide as we trek up Machu Picchu

### MORE INFORMATION

Rainbow Tours offer the Inkaterra Walking to Wellness package as part of a 16-day itinerary in Peru from £6,135 per person, including international and domestic flights, transfers and rail travel. Accommodation includes Hotel B, Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo and Inkaterra La Casona, plus excursions and activities  
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