

Higher and higher

Want to hike in style? No prob-llama, says Meera Dattani, as she ditches tents and shared toilets for a luxury lodge-to-lodge trek

Hiking may never be the same again. At the end of each day of this week-long trek, a hot tub awaits. And a masseuse. Oh, and a three-course gourmet meal. Plus, faster Wi-Fi than I get in London. It's surreal, given I'm in the middle of what feels like nowhere.

"You can do it, just a few minutes more," our guide Wilfredo tells us, as we drag our now-heavy legs along the final stretch to the lodge, tantalisingly in sight. The staff, all smiles, hand us cold towels, while we peel off our layers. I don't think this is how my friends hiked to Machu Picchu.

It's our second day on the Salkantay Trail and Peru's

highlands look glorious as we hike up (and up, and up) for a view over bright-blue Lake Humantay, before descending towards the shores of this feat of nature at the foot of a glacier.

This 46-mile trek is a lot less well known than the Inca Trail but no less spectacular, passing through 15 ecosystems, from cloud forest to tropical jungle.

Unlike the Inca Trail, it doesn't end in Machu Picchu itself, but for many, the idea of lodge-to-lodge trekking will far outweigh that - and separate morning treks into the citadel can be organised. As things stand, Mountain Lodges of Peru is the only company that offers treks along the Salkantay

and Lares trails - in the Sacred Valley, around Cusco - with luxury lodge accommodation. Getting to the region has also become simpler; Colombian carrier Avianca flies from London to Cusco, via Bogotá, while customers taking a direct BA flight to Lima just need change to a regional carrier to reach Cusco.

▶ HIGHLAND BEAUTY: HIKING THE SALKANTAY

These trails also provide a solution, of sorts, to the overcrowded Inca Trail and associated issues such as overflowing toilets and excess litter (although permit numbers have, at least, been curtailed).

Little chance of crowds here though - we barely see another hiker. "That's the beauty of the Salkantay," says Wilfredo. "You feel you're in the highlands on your own."

While it's a longer route than the Inca Trail, it's hiked at a manageable pace over six days, with day seven at Machu Picchu. And if it ever doesn't feel manageable, cue the emergency horse; always cantering behind the group, he's water-carrier, safe space and safety net in one.

He certainly proves useful on day three, when a 20-minute trot is enough to revive me for the ascent to the trail's highest point, the 4,600-metre Salkantay Pass. →



LEFT:
Machu Picchu



RIGHT:
Wayra Lodge

→ As well as horse riding along the trail, cycling and zip-wires are options available in some sections. Cultural elements are also woven in; the drive from Cusco to the start of the trail includes stops at a women's craft cooperative, a colonial farmhouse and Inca ruins, and an organic farm.

All Mountain Lodges of Peru's properties are community-run, managed and staffed by Quechua people. Many of them speak English, although attempts at Spanish are still warmly welcomed.

Each lodge has its own character. Salkantay Lodge is the largest of the five, with log fires, an igloo sauna and mountain-view hot tub. At Wayra Lodge, a courtyard tub and homemade pizzas are well received; Colpa's traditional pachamanca meal, cooked under hot stones, is a lunchtime treat; while the valley views from Lucma Lodge are wonderful.

But it's the scenery that makes this trail so special. As we walk, Wilfredo points out the wildflowers, the bright purple lupin that pop up at every opportunity, and the vegetation, which changes as we move through the ecosystems.

And that's not to mention the almost overwhelmingly beautiful sights of Peru's highlands, such as soaring Mount Salkantay, the Salkantay Pass and the descent into tropical climes.

The luxury lodges are more than places to bed down. They are where we make pisco sours with the staff, pore over coffee-table books about Incan sacrifice, and over dinner, listen



At the luxury lodges, we make pisco sours with the staff and pore over coffee-table books about Incan sacrifice

to Wilfredo's tales and passion for Incan archaeology.

Talented chefs serve delicious Peruvian dishes, from ceviche to inventive potato dishes (thousands of varieties of the vegetable grow here) to local speciality cuy (guinea pig).

And while the prospect of seeing Machu Picchu is exciting, there's an air of wistfulness on the final morning, when no more will we wake up to these valley views. The hike ends at Llactapata Pass, from where groups catch the luxury PeruRail train to Aguas Calientes/Machu Picchu Pueblo, where a night at the beautiful Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel awaits, ahead of the holy grail the following day. →



An 11-night Salkantay Lodge to Lodge Adventure with Mountain Lodges of Peru starts at £2,345. The six-night Lares Adventure costs from £1,885. Prices are based on two sharing, on a full-board basis during the trek and on a B&B basis in Cusco, and include transfers, entrance fees, tips (excluding the guide), Wi-Fi, permits to Machu Picchu, and a bilingual guide. mountainlodgesofperu.com

Cusco

Most people start trekking from Cusco. No matter their level of fitness, emphasise the importance of acclimatising for two to three nights. Suggest they take it easy on day one, stay well hydrated and have altitude-sickness tablets on hand.

It's worth factoring in time to enjoy Cusco, before or after a trek. Atmospheric, interesting and fun, many leave too little time for it. Whether it's for the impressive Sacsayhuaman archaeological site, numerous top-notch restaurants, shopping for alpaca scarves and Peruvian crafts, or visiting its museums, Cusco is a sight in itself.

Accommodation is plentiful. If you're booking guests on a Mountain Lodges of



Peru trip, the company owns two hotels, El Retablo and El Mercado, which come highly recommended. El Mercado (pictured) is a more contemporary but still Peruvian-inspired property with an excellent restaurant, large terrace and evening campfire.

LATIN AMERICA DESTINATIONS



PICTURES: MOUNTAIN LODGES OF PERU/ALEJANDRO MULLER

ABOVE: The Lares Trek

▶ THE DUAL-PURPOSE TRAIL: LARES TREK

While the beauty of Peru's mountains can't be overstated, not everyone wants to hike every day. This is where the five or seven-day Lares Trek comes into its own, each day offering a cultural activity, an easy to moderate hike and a challenging one. They all end at a Mountain Lodges of Peru property, with its signature combo of excellent food, Wi-Fi and, in most cases, massage and hot tub, too.

The itinerary features a trip to Awanakancha, a weaving and exhibition centre where visitors can get up close to llamas and alpacas, and meet local weavers. Lunch is cooked by a family from the Choquecancha community, which is followed by a ceremony thanking Mother Earth for its bounties, then bartering for scarves in the market town of Pisac.

When you're not trekking, there are genuine opportunities to understand Andean life in the communities of the Sacred Valley between the towns of Urubamba and Ollantaytambo.

Impressive Ollantaytambo is the valley's best-preserved Incan town, with its masterful ruins towering over the streets below. The lodges on the trek are




Machu Picchu is staggering in its size, location, architectural mastery and longevity

excellent. Particularly memorable is Huacahuasi Lodge, located at an altitude of 12,470ft, where every room features a balcony hot tub.

The hikes are also unforgettable, criss-crossing the terraced valleys of the highlands, passing farming communities and Andean villages. One of the most scenic is the final one from the Lares Pass along an old Inca route and into Tortora village.

Both the Salkantay and Lares treks spend their final day at the 13th-century citadel of Machu Picchu. Whether it's viewed after six days of hiking or as a day trip from Cusco, it is staggering in its size, location, architectural mastery and longevity. Undiscovered by the Spanish colonialists, it's preserved to a remarkable degree.

Wilfredo's facts, stats and stories from the past few days now swirl together to form one majestic story that culminates here. For many people, this really will be the hike of their life. 

LATIN  ROUTES

Truly individual holidays to
Latin America

**VOTE
FOR US!**

Vote for AL and the Latin Routes team at the Globe Travel Awards 2019!

GLOBE
TRAVEL AWARDS 2019

Nominated for "Best Long-Haul Specialist Operator"

To vote, visit globetravelawards.co.uk

WIN
an 'AL' of your own!

Simply join 'Latin Routes Agents' on Facebook to win!

 /LatinRoutesAgents

Join our Facebook page for:

- ✓ News
- ✓ Offers
- ✓ Incentives
- ✓ Fam trips
- ✓ Marketing material including videos and itineraries to share
- ✓ Details of the Training Academy 2019

0208 546 6222 | www.latinroutes.co.uk