

INTO THE LAND OF THE INCAS

Machu Picchu may be Peru's must-see, but CHARUKESIRAMADURAI is always game to explore other unexpected discoveries — including the Nazca Lines and a visit with the penguins



A PELICAN COLONY ON THE BALLESTAS ISLANDS. OPPOSITE PAGE: LIKE THE NAZCA LINES, THE CANDELABRA GEOGLYPH IN THE PARACAS SURVIVED UP TO 1,500 YEARS DUE TO THE ALMOST-COMplete ABSENCE OF RAIN

IT IS A GIVEN that any mention of Peru immediately conjures up the image of Machu Picchu. So, I am not surprised to find several puzzled comments from friends on social media when they realise that after four days in this South American country, I have not set eyes on that icon. What else are you doing there, they seem to wonder.

Like everyone else making the dream trip to Peru, Machu Picchu is the official highlight of my itinerary. It is just that thanks to suggestions from local friends, I have an itinerary that takes me beyond the 15th-century UNESCO Incan citadel. And I am determined to savour the unexpected discoveries fully before heading on to more obvious ones.

After a couple of days wearing out my walking shoes in the historical centre of the capital city Lima, I make my way towards Paracas, my base town for exploring the Ballestas Islands and the Nazca Lines, both

in the neighbourhood. Ballestas Islands, a quick boat ride away from the bay, has been cleverly marketed by the local tourism machinery as the Peruvian answer to Galapagos Islands. But I have kept my expectations low, ready to be thrilled with sightings of any birdlife this group of small islands is really known for.

Ballestas turns out to be a delightful surprise: Hundreds of Peruvian pelicans and boobies have blanketed themselves on every available inch of space on the isles, while groups of sea lions have emerged from the water to sunbathe peacefully on the craggy rocks, without a care in the world. In the middle of all this, I am greeted by a line of Humboldt penguins tottering down the slopes towards the water, solemn as a bunch of British butlers in their natural black-and-white outfits.

While the morning passes by in a blur of feathers and wings, we take the rest of the day off, venturing out only to view a multicoloured sunset on the sand dunes just outside town.

It is again an early start the next morning, as we drive to the neighbouring town of Ica for our flight over the mysterious Nazca Lines. Soon, our small group is ensconced inside the 12-seater Cessna aircraft, peering at another UNESCO

wonder of Peru more than 3,000 feet below.

The Nazca Lines collectively refers to the inscriptions of hundreds of geometric designs, animal and bird figures, mythical images and plain straight lines criss-crossing the arid desert. Although there is some consensus now that the Nazca Lines were created by a civilisation that came before the Incas, broadly at some point of time between 500BC and 500AD, nothing more is known. Why were these elaborate and sophisticated etchings — visible only from the air — made in the middle of this desert?

This flight takes us around more than a dozen such drawings, which we try to spot with the help of a rough paper map and the incoherent commentary of the guide: A sprawling tree that cuts right through the modern highway; the monkey with a spiral tail nearly 274 metres in length, and the hummingbird



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A STREET VENDOR IN LIMA SELLING SNACKS AND TRINKETS TO TOURISTS; CUSCO'S CENTRAL PLAZA; A QUECHUA WOMAN AND HER LLAMA IN THE URUBAMBA VALLEY



with a wingspan stretching 94m and beyond.

My next flight takes me to Cusco, the gateway city to Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley that contains hundreds of ancient cultural and archaeological sites. In the local Quechua language, Cusco means "navel of the world", a sign of the significance this town enjoyed through the ebb and flow of civilisations that held sway in this part of the earth. Surely enough, Cusco is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in South America, dating back more than 3,000 years.

The minute I set foot in the heart of old Cusco, I am utterly charmed by its laid-back European vibe and the beauty of its Spanish colonial architecture: Think cobblestoned lanes, baroque cathedrals and al fresco cafes that stay open late into the night. And amid eager tourists who throng its streets in homey T-shirts and shorts, local Quechua women in rainbow-coloured skirts and shawls lead their baby alpacas and llamas by the rope, willing to pose for photographs in exchange for a paltry dollar or two. Like

everything else I have seen in Peru so far, the new and the old, the modern and the traditional mingle in a mesmerising dance in Cusco.

Cusco is also the perfect spot to get acclimatised to the high altitude, to take in deep breaths before heading on to where mountain air gets thinner. And so, I spend my day taking in the most impressive locations in town, starting with the massive Qorikancha temple, the name of which literally means "golden enclosure". Although this Temple of the Sun supposedly contained gold and riches beyond imagination, it stands defiantly bare today after being looted by Spanish invaders a few hundred years ago.

The other stunner within Cusco is the main Cathedral, which reflects the fusion that emerged between local Quechua and colonial Spanish cultural sensibilities. My favourite spot inside the church is the art gallery, with its painting of a very Peruvian version of *The Last Supper* by Quechua artist Marcos Zapata, with the local cuy (or guinea pig), in place of the fish on the table.

The next morning, I spend some time people-watching at the weekly market in the village of Chinchero in



MACHU PICCHU, A 15TH-CENTURY INCAN CITADEL, REMAINED FORGOTTEN UNTIL THE EARLY PART OF THE 20TH CENTURY

the Sacred Valley. Time seems to have stood still at both the informal stalls on the streets and inside the Centre for Weavers, where 20-year old Milagros welcomes us with a shy smile. Milagros is an old hand at the traditional dyeing and weaving techniques of the Andes, having done this since she was a child.

She performs a quick and fascinating demonstration of the art. Describing the process of extracting dyes from natural

materials, she applies a patch of cochineal red on her lips, and coyly declares, "This colour will stay for 24 hours and 100 kisses!"

Finally, it is time for Machu Picchu. From Cusco, I take the luxurious Belmond Hiram Bingham train all the way to Aguas Calientes, the railway station at the base of this mountain. As the plush train rolls past the raw and beautiful Peruvian countryside, I can feel my excitement mounting.

A short bus ride up to the base of the tourist complex later, I am huffing and puffing my way on the bulky stone steps leading towards the Sentry's Hut, the first viewpoint of the

ruins. Machu Picchu appears in front of me, holding its own against the imposing Andean mountains. I remember just then its UNESCO description, that "the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu is among the greatest artistic, architectural and land use achievements anywhere and the most significant tangible legacy of the Inca civilization".

Not just the Inca, but any kind of civilisation, I think, before I get busy clicking selfies for posterity. ■