

In Peru with **INKATERRA**

We journey with Inkaterra to Peru, from the remote wilds of the rainforest to the Sacred Valley of the Incas and, of course, the magical, mystical Machu Picchu.

BY LINDSAY LAMBERT

We began our sub-equatorial experience with **Inkaterra** (www.inkaterra.com) at **Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica**, on the

banks of the Madre de Dios River deep in the heart of Peru's Amazon rainforest. Upon arriving at Puerto Maldonado Airport on our **LAN Airlines** (www.lan.com) flight, we were greeted by

Inkaterra staffers who helped us gather our gear, check in at Reserva's Puerto Maldonado office (the staff welcomed us with fresh passion-fruit juice and cold, scented towels) and board

the hotel's boat for a 30-minute ride to the property.

Reserva Amazónica comprises a series of freestanding, thatch-roof-stilted *cabanas* in four categories: Superior and Supe-



MACHU PICCHU springs to life in the early hours of the morning.
Photo by Lindsay Lambert

rior Río rooms and Amazónica and Inkaterra Suites. All have open floor plans, ceiling fans, interior relaxation areas with hammocks and twin-, queen- or king-size beds shrouded in frothy white mosquito netting. We settled into room 19, an Amazónica Suite just at the edge of the rainforest. While nightfall brought with it the soothing sounds of the forest, small-scale construction right outside our room made us long for a *cabana* on the quieter riverfront in the morning. Insiders say the project—a new plunge pool—is now complete, but, as the *cabanas* are enclosed only by screens and lightweight wood and are thus easily susceptible to noise, it's best to ask about any potential disturbances prior to booking to ensure a peaceful stay. Inkaterra Suites, numbers 23 and 27, have their own plunge pools and are the best bet for VIPs. Alternatively, Amazónica Suites include *cabanas* 10, 15 and 19.

Tip: Suggest your clients pack a separate bag with the essentials—lightweight, fast-drying clothing, insect repellent, sunscreen, binoculars—for their stay at Reserva and store the rest of their belongings back at the hotel's Puerto Maldonado office; electricity is limited (satellite signals even more so), which means that laptops, cell phones and BlackBerries are all but useless, and the intense humidity can dampen an entire suitcase full of cotton clothing.

Similar to a safari lodge, a stay at Reserva Amazónica revolves around wildlife and daily excursions,

RESERVA AMAZÓNICA guests stay in stilted cabanas in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon (top).

LAKE SANDOVAL teems with wildlife, best seen from the water (above). Photos by Lindsay Lambert



which are led by expert guides and last from a quarter-day to two days. We opted for the half-day excursion to Lake Sandoval (a 40-minute boat ride up the Madre de Dios takes guests to Tambopata National Reserve for a nearly two-mile hike to the lake), whose perimeter we paddled while observing red howler monkeys, toucans, parrots, macaws and other

colorful creatures. Daredevils won't want to miss the Inkaterra Canopy excursion, during which they'll traverse seven hanging bridges that span nearly 1,200 feet, stopping along the way to spy wildlife in the treetops. Tip: Request guides Efraim or Marco for your VIPs. Efraim's knowledge of plant, bird and animal life is extensive, and Marco's uncanny ability to sense the

presence of hidden critters on a nighttime rainforest trek had us truly impressed.

Following their dinner of Peruvian cuisine—the simple but tasty fare often includes fish, salads and soup—back at the Amazon Pavilion, suggest your clients wind down with an evening massage at ENA Spa; it's set on the banks of the river and faces Rolin Island, making for some seriously soothing sunset views. Several guests raved about the Reserva Amazónica Body Exfoliation treatment throughout our stay. On-site, clients can ask Resident Manager Alejandro Montoya or Reception Manager Daniela Villa for assistance with spa and other special arrangements.

June, July, August and October are peak season, so plan to book several weeks in advance.

Though loath to leave the remote, peaceful environs of the rainforest when our time at Reserva ran out, we felt instantly uplifted upon entering the Urubamba Valley, our next stop,



INKATERRA URUBAMBA VILLAS (Villa Sonia is shown here) have fireplaces and offer 24-hour maid service.

where we took up residence at **Inkaterra Urubamba Villas** (ask Inkaterra to arrange the transfer; in Puerto Maldonado, we hopped a 50-minute flight to Cusco and were transferred via private car to the villas, a 40-minute drive).

Tip: The scenic drive from Cusco between the massive, soaring mountains is enchanting, but a few fun stops along the way only add to the experience. Ask Inkaterra to schedule a visit to the **Awanakancha Alpaca Farm** (www.awanakancha.com), where guests hand-feed alfalfa to the frenzied creatures before perusing a pristine boutique stocked with alpaca clothing, textiles and toys. (Serious shoppers will want to pick up *vicuña* products; they're the softest and of the highest quality.) Just down the road, the village of **Pisac** is home to an artisans' market that's teeming with typical Peruvian goods like alpaca sweaters, hats and scarves.

Clients are sure to be awe-struck upon entering the secret-garden-style grounds of the Inkaterra Urubamba Villas. In the tiny hamlet of Higuspucro, the five adobe, Andean-style villas nestle among technicolor flowering shrubs and meticulous, emerald-green lawns at the base of a skyscraping mountain.

Inside our villa (nicknamed Berta after its charming mistress, who tended to our every need), we cozied up next to a crackling fire nightly and felt perfectly at home in its three bedrooms—one features two sets of bunk beds, perfect for kids, while the master has a queen-size bed and its own bathroom. Neighboring Villa Sonia has two bedrooms and a terrace with an outdoor grill. Guests in both villas enjoy 24/7 maid service, though a private car with driver/guide and nanny and in-house spa services can be arranged via housekeeper Angel

Caceres (51-84-9837-3602) or with the Inkaterra main office when the reservation is made.

Meal time here is truly a treat; we awoke daily to find Berta toiling away in the kitchen, preparing fresh, hot coffee, a spread of cereals, fruit and cheese and, our favorite, *quinoa* pancakes. For dinner, we sat down to meals of savory soup, fish and risotto.

When your clients finally decide to extract themselves from the cozy comfort of their villa, suggest they explore the valley's wonderful offerings. We elected for a visit to the magnificent, ancient salt mines in the nearby town of Maras, and, in Moray, a descent into the massive, circular agricultural terraces built by the Incas in natural sinkholes on a limestone plateau overlooking the Urubamba Valley.

Note: Witnessing local culture in the Sacred Valley is a special experience; its population largely

comprises half-Incan, half-Spanish mestizos who still honor traditional dress and rely on the land for sustenance and income. Advise clients that while capturing snapshots of this local way of life is generally accepted, it's respectful (and often expected) to thank anyone whose photo they snap with a few coins of the local currency, the Nuevo Sol.

We capped off our morning in Maras and Moray with a lively lunch at **Los Tres Keros** (Avenida Sr. de Torrechayoc No. 1; 51-84-20-17-01), where proprietor and sometime chef Ricardo presents an array of home-style dishes. Be sure to advise clients who desire a truly local-style gourmet experience to try the roasted guinea pig, a Peruvian staple.

The third and most highly anticipated leg of our journey took us from the town of Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley (a 30-minute drive from our



INKATERRA MACHU PICCHU guest rooms feature colonial Andean décor and views of the surrounding cloud forest (left).

THE AWANAKANCHA ALPACA FARM is a riotously fun stopping point for visitors en route to the Urubamba Valley (bottom). Photo by Lindsay Lambert



villa; leave enough time to wander the old town's cobblestone streets before moving on) to Aguas Calientes via **PeruRail's Vistadome** (www.orient-express.com/web/tper/journeys/4_53409.jsp). In Aguas Calientes, we checked in at **Inkaterra Machu Picchu**, deep in the lush Andean cloud forest in the heart of the Machu Picchu Historical Sanctuary.

Rooms and suites at the hotel, a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, are tucked away in clusters on a wooded hillside overlooking the train station and the town itself. Insiders say that, just days before our arrival, Cameron Diaz overnighted in one of Inkaterra Machu Picchu's palatial villas. We took a look around the villa, which comprises two adjoining suites, and could imagine the sanguine star stretched across the outdoor canopied daybed or soaking in the plunge pool on the patio. Fellow former guest Bill Gates likely appreciated the private entrance, gardens and 24/7 butler.

Though not quite the same caliber, we were nonetheless enamored of our Superior Deluxe Room, number 45, just below the pool area and overlooking the train tracks and Vilcanota River through a beautiful bay window. Tip: Though they don't connect, book rooms 44, 45, 46 and 47 together, as we did, for an exclusive-feeling enclave that's perfect for a small group.

If your clients are like us, they won't want to waste any time getting up to **Machu Picchu** (www.machupicchu.org). For the most thrilling experience, suggest they rise around 4 a.m., allowing plenty of time for breakfast and the 25-minute bus ride to the top. If the weather is right, they'll arrive with time to spare before

the day's first rays of sunlight break over the massive, mystical ruins, a sight we'll surely never forget. (Crowds are sparse and the ruins less congested this time of day.)

Tip: The hike to the top of Wayna Picchu (the iconic emerald peak that towers over the ruins) was the toughest—and most rewarding, considering the heart-stopping views—we've ever done. Only 400 climbers are permitted to ascend the peak each day, so an early start is advisable. Note: Private Inkaterra guides are assigned to hotel guests upon request; contact Luciana Martinez (51-84-211-122), who looks after VIPs on-site. Martinez can also set up treatments at Unu Spa (don't miss the Andean sauna) or meals at Café Inkaterra or the hotel's main dining room. Hint: At Café Inkaterra, we loved the wheat risotto, but perhaps not as much as we loved the restaurant's signature soundtrack.

Tip: One of the best ways to enjoy the hotel's hauntingly beautiful grounds is via its Orchid Walk (best enjoyed during the wetter months of November through April, a.k.a. "orchid season") or a guided Twilight Walk through the cloud forest.

Booking tips: Peru's dry/peak season runs from May to October; plan to book at least one to two months in advance. Inkaterra Operations Manager Nora Espinoza (800-442-5042) handles VIP reservations and advance special requests for all three properties.

Stay tuned: Inkaterra will unveil **Titilaka Inkaterra**, along Lake Titicaca in Puno, in November, followed by **La Casona Inkaterra** in Cusco in December, and a third property, in Lima, in March 2008. ■