

The toughest experiences are the most rewarding.

I remind myself of this as I arrive at Lucma Lodge in Peru's Santa Teresa River Valley on New Year's Eve after a five-hour hike. I've survived five days of a seven-day trek to Machu Picchu, hiking an ancient Inca trail. After braving the elements and altitude, I feel like an intrepid traveller from the past discovering the region for the first time.

Over the past 10 days I've been on a Peruvian journey - exploring the culinary delights of Lima, cruising through the Pacaya-Saimiria National Reserve in the Amazon, visiting the Sacred Valley and Cusco, and now trekking with Mountain Lodges of Peru. Only two more days of hard trekking remain before I arrive at Machu Picchu.

FOLLOW THE AMAZON TO ITS SOURCE

Yvonne Verstandig TAKES A CULINARY TOUR OF PERU BEFORE CRUISING DOWN THE AMAZON
AND HIKING TO THE MAJESTIC PEAKS OF MACHU PICCHU.



This page:
The endangered
Emperor Tamarin
monkey.
Opposite page:
Cruising down the
Amazon onboard
the *Delfin 1*.



LIMA

Lima is a city experiencing a culinary renaissance, with growing local pride in its booming restaurant scene. There is a collective drive to create avant-garde Peruvian dishes with chefs dedicated to what is dubbed the “local radicalism” of gastronomy and food is a constant topic of conversation. New restaurants are opening on an almost daily basis featuring modern spins on classic dishes. One of Latin America’s most famous chefs, Gaston Acurio, has relocated his flagship restaurant to Casa Moreyra, a converted hacienda in the San Isidro district and offers a 29-course tasting menu. For respite from this marathon feast, which includes hairy crab with yellow chili pepper and sea urchins, guests can stroll through the hacienda gardens.

Hot at the moment is the Barranco district, its 19th-century townhouses transformed into art galleries and small luxury hotels such as Hotel B, the hippest boutique property in the city. This converted Belle Époque mansion features a mural above the bar by renowned Peruvian painter José Tola. I conclude my time in Lima at the house of a well-known chef. Having sampled some local specialties, I sip a pisco sour while watching the sun set over the Pacific and contemplating venturing into the Amazon basin.

AMAZON/DELFIN CRUISE

I fly into Iquitos, Peru’s major port on the Upper Amazon, which is surrounded by a vast blanket of jungle interrupted only by a labyrinth of channels feeding the mighty river. In the town of Nauta, 100 kilometres away, the *Delfin 1* awaits, my riverboat home for the next four days. I board the luxurious barge in the thick of night, the black river beckoning with whispers of surprises to come. When the rising sun beams through my floor-to-ceiling windows it reveals the most personalised vessel to ever sail the 20,000 square kilometer Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve. Each of the four polished-wood suites has a private balcony; two even have whirlpool spas.

It is December, wet season, and

water levels are at their highest with run-off from the Andean highlands. Gliding through the pristine jungle I spot pink Amazon dolphins among flooded treetops. I synchronise my early mornings to witness wildlife awake in the Mirrored Forest. As the sun rises, we skim across glass-like waterways by skiff in search of howler monkeys, sea cows, scarlet macaws, tamarins, sloths and anacondas.

During afternoon jungle walks, my naturalist guide hacks through the dense foliage with a machete as he spots hundreds of tropical birds.



BARRANCO DISTRICT



URUBUMBA MARKETS



CUSCO CATHEDRAL

He talks of traditional local villages and jungle secrets. Besides passing the occasional fisherman in a dug-out canoe, we don’t encounter another vessel during the entire four-day journey. In complete serenity, I kayak the peaceful Ucayali River, fish for piranhas, and in the height of the blazing sun dive into the Amazon to cool off. My final night is spent lounging on the upper deck, pisco sour in hand, listening to the *Delfin* crew entertain - Jose on guitar, Renny on the maracas and Mario on drums - while pink hues glisten over the Amazon.

SACRED VALLEY

The Urubamba Valley, Sacred Valley of the Incas, stretches the length of the Vilcanota River, and is the ideal place to acclimatise before climbing to the 3,300 metre altitude of Cusco. It is a valley of small towns, incredible ruins and colourful markets. A 400-year-old tree shades the main plaza in Pisac, Mother Nature’s reminder of the region’s ancient history.

Urubamba comes alive every Wednesday and Sunday morning with people coming from nearby villages bringing their crops to market. It’s a kaleidoscope of colour. In traditional dress with braided hair and sacks of flowers, corn or children strapped to their backs, women display their goods on rugs on the street and vigorous bartering ensues.

In the afternoon I visit Seminario, a pottery workshop where well-known local artist Pablo Seminario creates contemporary ceramic sculptures before my eyes. Back at Tambo del Inca, the sleek Starwood Luxury Collection property in the middle of town, I relax in the spa to prepare my muscles for the trek ahead.

CUSCO

Arriving in Cusco I’m quite breathless. Everything seems to move in slow motion at this altitude. The concierge at Belmond Palacio Nazarenas offers coca tea, a natural remedy for altitude sickness, and advises me to sip slowly. All suites at this hotel have oxygen added to the air-conditioning to help guests acclimatise. Cusco was the capital of

the Inca Empire and is possibly the oldest continually inhabited city in South America. I spend the day meandering through its ancient cobblestone streets, exploring the Mercado Central de San Pedro (market) and 15th-century Sacsayhuaman citadel, site of one of the bloodiest battles in the Spanish conquest.

Tomorrow I begin my trek to Machu Picchu - a week of traversing elevations of almost 5,000m, passing through nine different ecosystems to reach the Lost City of the Incas, Machu Picchu.

MOUNTAIN LODGES OF PERU
TREK TO MACHU PICCHU

The altitude wins on Day 1, no question. But the first lodge’s view of Mt Salkantay, the second-most sacred peak in Inca mythology, makes the breathlessness worthwhile.

The next day after a four-hour trek up to 4,200 metres, the reward at the top is Lake Humantay, where I brave a dip in the glacial water.

The third day is the most difficult. We climb to the highest point of the Rio Bianco Valley, circling Humantay Peak and crossing the Salkantay Pass at 4,600 metres while rain and sleet turn to snow. Then we descend through green valleys to Wayra Lodge.

The drastic temperature increase on Day 4 is welcome as we head due south into the Cloud Forest, warm air rising from the jungle below accompanied by colourful butterflies. Spectacular orchids abound.

At each lodge we are welcomed with a glass of hot mint tea or chicha morada (sweet purple corn juice), and a steaming towel. Muddy boots



MACHU PICCHU



are whisked away to be cleaned and heated overnight. The chef accompanying our group creates gourmet meals and there are informative presentations each night. We learn the history of the Andes, longest continental mountain range in the world, and get a demonstration of Peruvian cooking over hot stones.

It is New Year’s Eve when we arrive at Lucma Lodge on our second-to-last night. The staff has decorated the lodge in traditional yellow streamers. There are hats and masks, yellow castanets and yellow glasses. I can’t think of a better place to ring in the New Year.

On Day 6, after five hours trekking, I catch my first glimpse of Machu Picchu Sanctuary. We explore the Llastapata Ruins then begin the final descent to the Aobamba River through lush bamboo forest. Aguas Calientes, the nearest town to Machu Picchu, is a short train ride away, the surrounding jagged mountains visible through the glass-domed ceilings of the carriage.

On the final day, we rise before the sun to tackle the steep, three-hour climb to Huayna Picchu. Our reward is an amazing view over the eastern side of the ruins. The steps seem endless – and there is no handrail despite the sheer drop on one side. We have to crawl like crabs through two small caves. I catch my breath at the same time as the moment takes my breath away. The view from the summit towards Machu Picchu is extraordinary. With shaking legs and weary muscles, I stand in awe in the shadow of the Lost City of the Incas.

For the full tour itinerary of Peru please turn to page 107

LAKE TITICACA

Hike, mountain-bike or kayak in the world’s highest navigable lake at an altitude of some 3,800 metres. Lake Titicaca is about culture and nature more than ruins. Discover people living as generations before them have, proud of their customs, dress and traditions. In stark contrast to the modernity and cosmopolitan Limeñan lifestyle of the capital, Lake Titicaca is the ideal place to end a Peruvian experience.

Relais & Chateaux property Titilaka sits on a remote part of Lake Titicaca on a private peninsula. Wake up feeling like you are floating over the lake. Ignacio Masias built the 18-room luxury property because there was no proper infrastructure for high-end visitors to explore the area. “I wanted to create the perfect hub for the sophisticated traveller to settle in when visiting the area,” says Masias. “A place that captures the magic, mystery and amazing views of the lake, which gives visitors the sense of being on top of the world and closer to the sky.”



TITILAKA

FOLLOW THE AMAZON TO ITS SOURCE

21-night itinerary

THE ITINERARY

Lima (2 nights)

Witness a lively clash of history and cosmopolitan living.

Amazon River/Delfin Cruise

(4 nights)

Voyage to the headwaters of the mighty Amazon aboard the elegant and intimate luxury riverboat *Delfin 1*.

Lima (1 night)

Sacred Valley (2 nights)

Start altitude acclimation with a touch of real Andean life visiting bustling local markets and villages.

Cusco (2 nights)

Rest well and eat well. Explore Cusco through your camera lens on a unique expedition only a local knows how to find.

Salkantay trek (6 nights)

The ultimate test of endurance on a six-night lodge-to-lodge trek with Mountain Lodges of Peru to Machu Picchu.

Cusco (1 night)

Lake Titicaca (3 nights)

Hike, mountain-bike or kayak in the world's highest navigable lake, then lunch with a local family on Taquile Island.

HOTELS

Delfin 1 Amazon cruise

Whirlpool Suite

Hotel B – Aposento Room

Tambo Del Inka Luxury Collection

Deluxe Room

Mountain Lodges of Peru

Palacio Nazarenas – Suite

Titilaka – Dawn Room

TRAVEL DATES

Peru is a year-round destination.

COSTS

US\$16,735 (about A\$21,212) per person based on twin-share (high season).

*Itinerary can be customised to suit individual needs.

INCLUDED

All breakfasts, selected lunches and dinners

Full board basis on *Delfin*,

Mountain Lodges and Titilaka

Noted entrances to sites

Domestic flights

All private transfers

All services with private guide.

English speaking (other languages

available upon request).

EXCLUSIONS

International flights, gratuities and travel insurance.

To see a detailed itinerary of the *Luxury Travel* magazine/Executive Edge 'Follow the Amazon to its Source' itinerary, visit luxurytravelmag.com.au/itineraries or call +61 03 9519 7777.



EXECUTIVE EDGE

Yvonne, Gary Reichenberg and Sally Bird established Executive Edge 15 years ago, a privately owned boutique travel agency based in Melbourne delivering bespoke services for cultured leisure travellers and global corporates. Yvonne leads the leisure team focusing on experiential, adventure, super-luxe travel. Sally specialises in Africa, Europe and family holidays. executiveedge.com.au

