

**Article and Photography
By Steven J. Storts**

At a Central Ohio art exhibit, an interested buyer of the framed photograph “Peruvian Allure” inquired if she could have some background information on the picture, including the general location, historical data, and regional geography. The article that follows is more than just a story behind a photograph; it is a modest introduction to an ancient time and culture that invites readers and would-be adventurers to lose themselves in legendary imagination.

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“Peruvian Allure”

A photograph taken from the Hotel Posada del Inca Yucay

What Lies Beyond ‘Peruvian Allure’

WHEN you arrive at the Hotel Posada del Inca in Yucay, Peru, your first reaction could easily be: “*Uh, I think there’s been a mistake! This can’t be my hotel. I was expecting something a little more . . . different.*”

Indeed, at first glance on the outside, the two-story structure is not all that inviting. Its combined adobe and stucco front, which is painted in two colors, canary yellow and pottery red, exudes few, if any, distinguishing characteristics. The outside windows are small, shutterless casements, scattered among the upper and lower levels. Even the name of the hotel is posted in basic black, nondescriptive lettering. A small, arched doorway serves as the only obvious connection to the Spanish colonial architecture that pervades much of the Peruvian landscape today.

However, just as the old saying teaches us that “appearances can be deceiving,” so, too, is the Hotel Posada del Inca Yucay. The building’s plain, austere exterior is reflective of what it once was, a small monastery founded in 1678 by monks of the Santa Catalina de Sena de Arequipa Order. Later, from 1870 to just a few decades ago, the monastery became the property of a number of affluent families until it was bought by Leoncio Arteaga, who turned



The Chapel of Yucay



The popular, Indian market at PISAQ draws local villagers as well as tourists. Dressed in bright, colorful garb, the women sell fresh fruits, vegetables, and poultry, in addition to blankets, coverlets, and ponchos woven on traditional, back-strap looms.



it into a hostel in 1982. In December 1995, the hotel was officially named the Posada del Inca Yucay.

Casting all deception aside, when you walk through that unassuming, arched doorway in the front, you are quickly whisked back several centuries to a time when

large, flowered courtyards; three-tiered fountains; intricately carved, wooden balustrades along walkways and balconies; colorfully painted, stuccoed walls and doorways; and tile roofs were the hallmark of Spanish colonial culture. Perhaps a bit unexpected, too, your first impression of the hotel suddenly becomes meaningless!

Today, located less than one hour from Cusco—the ancient capital of the fabled Inca Empire—the Hotel Posada del Inca Yucay houses 69 spacious rooms (single, double, triple, four-bed rooms and suites), all of which are equipped with modern conveniences. The facility regularly hosts weddings, congresses, and special events—complete with breakfast and lunch buffets and full-service dining. A local attraction, the Chapel of Yucay, is also located within the hotel’s perimeter. As you lie back on one of the comfortable beds, your eyes can’t help being drawn upward towards the ceiling to the exposed, rope-lashed, wooden beams that provide floor and roof support. The interior walls, finely plastered or stuccoed, are painted in various color combinations: tan, dark brown, yellow, white, and some occasional light reds and blues. The exterior walls are constructed from a combination of stone, adobe, and white stucco, accented with beautifully stained wooden balconies, walkways, and framed windows.

Still, even amidst the architectural beauty of the Hotel Posada del Inca Yucay, the true significance of this establishment lies within its location near the Urubamba River in the heart of the Sacred Valley of the Incas, a place where nature mixes with ancient culture. The hotel has often been considered a good focal point from which to begin an archaeological tour or practice adventure sports such as rafting, hiking, mountain biking, or horseback riding.

Convenience of Location

At about 7,700 feet above sea level (the ancient Inca city of Cusco has an altitude of around 11,000 feet), Yucay and other nearby rural villages—like Calca and Urubamba—make it ideal for travelers to get used to the high altitude before venturing to greater heights. Yucay has some fine remnants of Inca agricultural systems; Calca was the outpost for Manco Inca’s rebellion in 1536; and Urubamba still has



A view of the Urubamba Valley from the Inca fortress at Ollantaytambo



Much of the ancient Inca fortress structure at Ollantaytambo remains intact today, although the temple shrine was never completed. Various granites, limestone, basalt, and even sandstone can be found at the ruin site.



some remaining walls of a palace, Quispi' huanca, on the Huayna Capac country estate.

Most major archaeological attractions are just one-half hour to less than two hours away—by car, bus, or train—from the hotel in any direction. Ollantaytambo (an Inca settlement built for agricultural, administrative, and military purposes); Písaq (a popular Indian market surrounded by Inca ruins and terraced agricultural fields with impressive irrigation systems); Chinchero (an old agricultural site in the Urubamba Valley still inhabited and maintained by Indian villages); Salinas of Maras (salt mines offering an incredible, overhead, picturesque view); and, of course, Machu Picchu (the renowned Inca city resting on a lower valley plateau of the Andes) are just a few of the prominent sites that offer days of archaeological adventure.



Traveling through the Urubamba Valley (particularly, going over the mountains to Cusco) is one of the most exhilarating, visual experiences you'll ever encounter. The rose, steel-blue, and white granite peaks and foothills of the Andes are beyond description in their beauty and majesty, and the small, terraced farms on the sides of the mountains provide a patchwork-quilt backdrop that is rarely seen elsewhere. As you witness this valley's splendor, you'll see very little mechanized farm machinery, except for an occasional tractor that is shared among local farmers. Considered one of the most fertile agricultural areas in Peru, the Urubamba Valley supports numerous farms that are built on the foothills of mountains. Because of the rough, craggy terrain, farming plots tend to be of smaller scale and are easier to maintain with foot plows, rather than heavy farm equipment.

An Ancient Fortress

Within a short distance of the Hotel Posada del Inca Yucay lies one of the most frequented archaeological sites, Ollantaytambo, an original Inca village whose streets are still partially paved in cobblestone and lined by an array of town structures built on massive stone foundations. Water channels developed by the Incas that traverse the region's agricultural beauty are also still visible. The small town is host to an ancient fortress that sits atop a commanding position overlooking the east bank of the Vilcanota River at the lower end of the Urubamba Valley, where the river's name changes to Urubamba before its descent to the Amazonian forests. Prickly pear cactus and giant yuccas, both used as food sources throughout the valley, randomly dot this ruin that was once used as both a temple and military outpost.

One of the more formidable structures of the Ollantaytambo fortress is the steep slope that was fashioned into a series of 17 stone terraces—each level nearly a story high—leading upwards to a summit and temple shrine. The elevation not only provides a panoramic view of the valley but affords a long-range glimpse at the snow-capped Andes rising above the Amazon basin. One of the central walls of the shrine consists of six large blocks of stone carved in shallow relief in geometric patterns and animal figures. The Incas, however, never actually completed the fortress structure and temple, finally retreating as the Spanish expanded their conquest of the region around 1537.

Remnants of the retreat are easily visible today on the fortress summit where massive stones, some weighing five tons or more, still lie where they were last moved. Many of these, made primarily of rose and white granite and basalt, were hauled from mountains located across the river, brought on sledges and ramps. Some archaeologists theorize that the Incas actually rerouted parts of the river to accommodate the building of the fortress.

Venerable Mach Picchu

About an hour northwest of Ollantaytambo lies one of the premiere civilization ruins in the Western Hemisphere, Machu Picchu. Chronicled in the 16th century as “The Lost City of the Incas” but long-considered only a legend, the site was later discovered—or rather uncovered—in 1911 by a young American explorer, Hiram Bingham, and his expedition party.

Bingham, however, was probably not the first to stumble upon the ruins. It has been documented that at least one, and perhaps as many as three, European travelers had been there earlier, and that an itinerant Peruvian trader, Agustin Lizarraga, had visited the ruins in 1902 and with charcoal had scrawled his name and date on one of the walls. Moreover, local farmers had been living around the ruins for generations when Bingham found them, although they were unaware of the rare significance of the ancient site. There is one generally accepted premise among historians, however. If the Spanish were aware of Machu Picchu



Sunrise at Machu Picchu casts an amber glow.



Wayna Picchu is an inviting challenge to climbers.



White and rose granite, limestone, and even basalt were the primary building materials used by the Incas to construct Machu Picchu. Precisely measured and intricately cut, these irregular building blocks were fitted together without any mortar. Not surprising, either, water still flows through a network of fountains, believed to have been used for ceremonial and ritual purification.

as a major settlement, they never chronicled it or even explored its possibility. If they had visited the site, more than likely, there would have been widespread plundering and destruction of the principal shrines and temples, much as they did elsewhere in Peru. In fact, the only visible deterioration of the ruin has been the result of time, the elements of nature, and a few earthquakes and shifting faults along the mountainside. Nevertheless, even with some physical weathering, Machu Picchu still exhibits the same distinguishing, architectural characteristics that are present at Ollantaytambo and other scattered Inca sites throughout Peru: trapezoid designs in wall, window, and doorway structures and icon niches; and fine, mortarless stonework.



A steep, downward path into a small valley along the north flank of Wayna Picchu leads to the Temple of the Moon, comprising several structures built within caves or resting on massive stone and volcanic formations.

Upon its unveiling in the early 1900s, Machu Picchu was thought to be an isolated site, severed from all communications outside its own valley summit. More recently, however, archaeologists contend that the legendary ruin was actually the epicenter of a larger, more populated Inca province whose geographic diversity ranged from dense tropical forests to glacial peaks. As dramatic as Machu Picchu first appears when you take a bus or hike upwards from Aguas Calientes, the town located about 1,500 feet below the ruin, most visitors witness only a portion of what the Inca settlement truly was. Five hundred years ago, observers would have seen a vast region studded with strategically placed settlements of white granite highlighted by agricultural terracing and irrigated



The elaborate terracing of stone and earth for agricultural uses and to preserve construction integrity was a hallmark of Inca civilization and can be observed up close throughout much of Machu Picchu.

fields—all brought together by an elaborate transportation network. Eight Inca roads, each made of stone, once converged at Mach Picchu.



Excitement of Exploration

Today, those large areas of agricultural terracing and various satellite sites remain obscured beneath dense vegetation or lie beyond the scope of the daytime tourist. However, those who hike the historical 25-mile Inca Trail have the opportunity of seeing more of the once-expansive Inca province. And for those who opt to climb the 6,000-foot Wayna Picchu (the steep mountain in the background of many classical pictures of Machu Picchu) on a clear day, a unique vantage point awaits from which to view the architectural layout of the Inca city below. Though perhaps not as challenging as an icy slope or 90° angle to professional climbers, scaling Wayna Picchu is not something for the foolhardy or out-of-shape, either. One should be dexterous, in good physical condition, and not afraid of heights, as there have been recorded cases of amateur climbers losing consciousness, incurring injury, and even falling to their death.

Due to the quality of their engineering and construction, most of the Inca sites located in and around Machu Picchu are extraordinarily well preserved. Visitors have the luxury of admiring a cultural region virtually intact, including the environment. The Inca province has now been recognized worldwide not only for its network of ancient roadways and archaeological sites, but also as a region of exemplary natural beauty and ecological diversity, containing habitats for numerous rare plants and native animals. Perhaps more noteworthy, the innocent discovery of Machu Picchu that began in 1911 still exists today in the adventuresome spirit of those who seek to uncover a civilization's hidden past, while showing reverence for cultural tradition.



Generally foggy or misty, the summit of Wayna Picchu still reveals scattered ruins and stone stairways along the cliffs.

Although the Incas are believed to have inhabited Peru and parts of Bolivia as early as the 13th century, the major expansion of the Inca Empire occurred between the mid-15th and early 16th centuries, up until Spanish colonization took a giant foothold. The Incas were profoundly spiritual, believing that unforeseen forces ruled their world, and they spent much of their time in different forms of worship—often related to agricultural cycles, the forces of nature, sacred wildlife (snakes, pumas, and condors in particular) or natural landscape features such as mountains, rivers, artesian springs, and unusual rock formations. These venerable icons were considered to be deities, who could bestow favor or disaster upon civilizations at will. Some of these ancestral beliefs still ring true as modern-day Peruvians continue to show reverence for the land through annual observances that celebrate and give thanks to Pacha Mama (Mother Earth).

