

Walking the High Inca Trail

It's 100 years since explorer Hiram Bingham stumbled across Machu Picchu. **Chris Moss** commemorates his discovery by heading to Peru and taking a very long walk

Three thousand metres above sea level is where I began to regret smoking, snorting and general slobbering. The Spanish expression '*nunca más*' came to mind: 'never again'. I always think this at some stage during a tough hike.

When we reached the first night's campsite, I wasn't relieved; I was frightened. The next day I was to climb to a pass just shy of 5,000 metres, higher than I'd ever been without an aircraft around me.

The hike had begun optimistically at a town called Mollepata, three slow hours' drive from regional capital Cuzco. I'd joined a group walking the so called High Inca Trail, an extension of the classic route, and I was exhilarated to be embarking on an eight-day, 80-kilometre adventure on foot.

From the first second of the adventure, we were climbing, initially past houses and smallholdings, then across higher farmland given over to potato crops and grazing, and then into the rocky foothills of the Andes. Sweat increased, oxygen decreased.

I focused on the legs of the man in front, a Peruvian muleteer. In his classic 1951 book 'Lost City of the Incas', Hiram Bingham, the American explorer who stumbled into Machu Picchu in 1911, notes that Peruvian porters have splendid calves. I studied the muscular ovals of the chap in front of me and was reminded of the Marvel Comics superheroes that had given me vague homoerotic stirrings as a child. I looked down at my own legs – they were as smooth as skittles: girlish, the product of the city and the settee.

By 7.30pm, the temperature had plummeted to just above freezing and my tent, on a slope that turned

my sleeping mat into a slide, was less a homely refuge and more a sort of pre-ordeal incubation chamber. When I woke up, the entrance flap had frozen stiff.

The morning's ascent, from 3,500 to 4,500 metres, was hellish. In the UK (a lumpy lowland country), footpaths have been designed to make walkers look great. There are traverses, zigzags, restful downhill stretches, handy bridges and stiles. In the Inca heartland of the Vilcabamba and Urubamba valleys, there are just ascending exposed paths left behind by porters and herdsmen and their beasts of burden.

Nonetheless, I made it up to the pass, largely thanks to the crafty pacing of our guide Carlos Lechuga (in English, Charlie Lettuce) and his assistant, Jesus. For the final few metres, I let my group drift on ahead and made it all alone to 4,980 metres above sea level. The pass was called Incachiriasca, or 'Chilly Inca'. Even the hardest hardmen of the Andes had suffered a bit at this spot. I sat down beside my fellow walkers and silently took in the magnificent views of snow-capped Salkantay mountain.

The reasons we do adventure tourism are various. Oft-cited spurs are a mid-life crisis, emasculating lifestyle and plain old city-induced fatigue. This time round my trip was sparked by the centenary of Bingham's momentous 'discovery'. Even though I'd been to Machu Picchu once before, I'd never walked along the so called 'classic' Inca Trail; as it's one of the most popular hikes in the world, and its final destination Latin America's most iconic man-made sight, it seemed

about time I walked the walk. The extended 'High' trail meant I could compare a less-trodden path with the shorter, more famous one.

After the high pass, Carlos led us down through a beautiful, wide fertile valley, where we camped beside a canal built in Inca times. Here the horsemen created a burning pit full of stones known as a *pachamanca* and threw in potatoes and foil-wrapped lamb marinated in garlic and lime. The resulting dinner would have been a tastebud-teasing treat in a London restaurant, but after a day of tough walking it was God-given. I learned the Quechua word '*yapa*' – 'more' – and had three platefuls and a glass of wine from a Tetra Pak carton.

The next day we walked downwards until we hit a junction with the Inca Trail proper. Far from being a breeze, the classic hiking trail turned out to be a *déjà vu* experience. We were confronted by another horrendous high point – the Dead Woman's pass – and several inhumanly steep sections. The Inca civilisation that flourished between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries was brilliant at building, talented at farming, insightful at colonising and pitiless at demanding superhuman feats of its minions. Runners known as *chasquis* were obliged to use staircases to make their missive-bearing dashes from citadel to citadel that bit more challenging, and though they, like contemporary Peruvian Indians, rarely stood higher than five feet, these stairs were hewn for Goliath-sized strides. I'd realised on recent walks in gentler topographies that my knees aren't what they used to be, so I'd borrowed some poles for this trek – the first time I'd even considered adopting such geriatric supports. They really saved my joints, especially on the jolting descents.

The Inca heartland rewards all walkers with day-long wonders and sublime landscapes. As dawn rose each morning, we emerged from our tents to see mists drifting round mountain peaks, peasants heading out into lush agricultural land – still farmed without machines – and Inca

sites that get none of the attention of Machu Picchu. There were terraces, *tambos* (Inns), warehouses and roads. There were llamas, alpacas, condors and vultures. And, when night fell, the Milky Way – thought by the Incas to be a reflection of the valleys in which they lived – unfurled in the heavens.

When I finally made it to the fabled Sun Gate and saw Machu Picchu down on a mountain saddle below, I experienced a moment of regret that was twofold. For one, the afternoon heat haze obscured both the citadel and Huayna Picchu, the small mountain behind it. Worse still, there were Italian tourists sitting on a stone wall; I was back in the world of the mobile phone and the coach tour.

But these were unreflecting thoughts. Carlos took us down to Machu Picchu, stopping briefly to perform a coca-leaf ceremony on a wide altar. The following day we returned to do a half-day walking tour, and I learned about the Incas' genius for astronomy, pausing at a lump of rock known as the 'hitching post of the sun'; theirs was an empire that believed you could harness the cosmos and talk to the gods.

Gradually, the citadel came alive and I was able to make connections between the indigenous and Spanish narratives, and congratulate myself on walking there rather than jumping on a train and minibus. My calves felt firmer and my head clearer. In the evening I headed to the thermal baths to lie back like the Inca himself and soothe my sore muscles.

If you're stuck for a plan for 2011, read Bingham and get yourself out to Cuzco, and beyond, to the land of the sun, the steep staircase and the ice-covered tent. You won't say *yapa* at every turn but I challenge you to say *nunca más* at the end of your long walk.

Get packing



Go KLM flies London Heathrow to Lima via Amsterdam. Typical return price for January £657.66. www.klm.com

Tour Exodus's High Inca Trail 16-day hiking tour follows the route walked by Chris, and allows time for acclimatisation in Cuzco. From £2,509 per person including international and domestic flights, accommodation and most meals (seven nights' hotel on a B&B basis plus two lunches and seven nights' camping on full-board basis) and full portorage while trekking. The next departure is May 14 2011. www.exodus.co.uk

Stay Add on a few days in Cuzco and hide away at the **Inkaterra La Casona boutique hotel**. A colonial manor house, it has just 11 sumptuously decorated suites,

and everything, from the refurb work on the original masonry to the period fixtures and fittings, has been carefully conceived to make you feel like a *conquistador*. B&B from £288 per room. Book three nights and get a free dinner or spa treatment. www.inkaterra.com

Need to know The main Inca Trail is closed during February for repairs. From March to January, you can only walk the trail with a registered guide and just 500 walking permits are issued per day – slots fill up fast, so book ahead. For general information visit www.peru.info/en. To plan your walk, pick up the new Trailblazer guide, 'Inca Trail, Cusco & Machu Picchu' (fourth edition), available from January 2011 at £12.99.

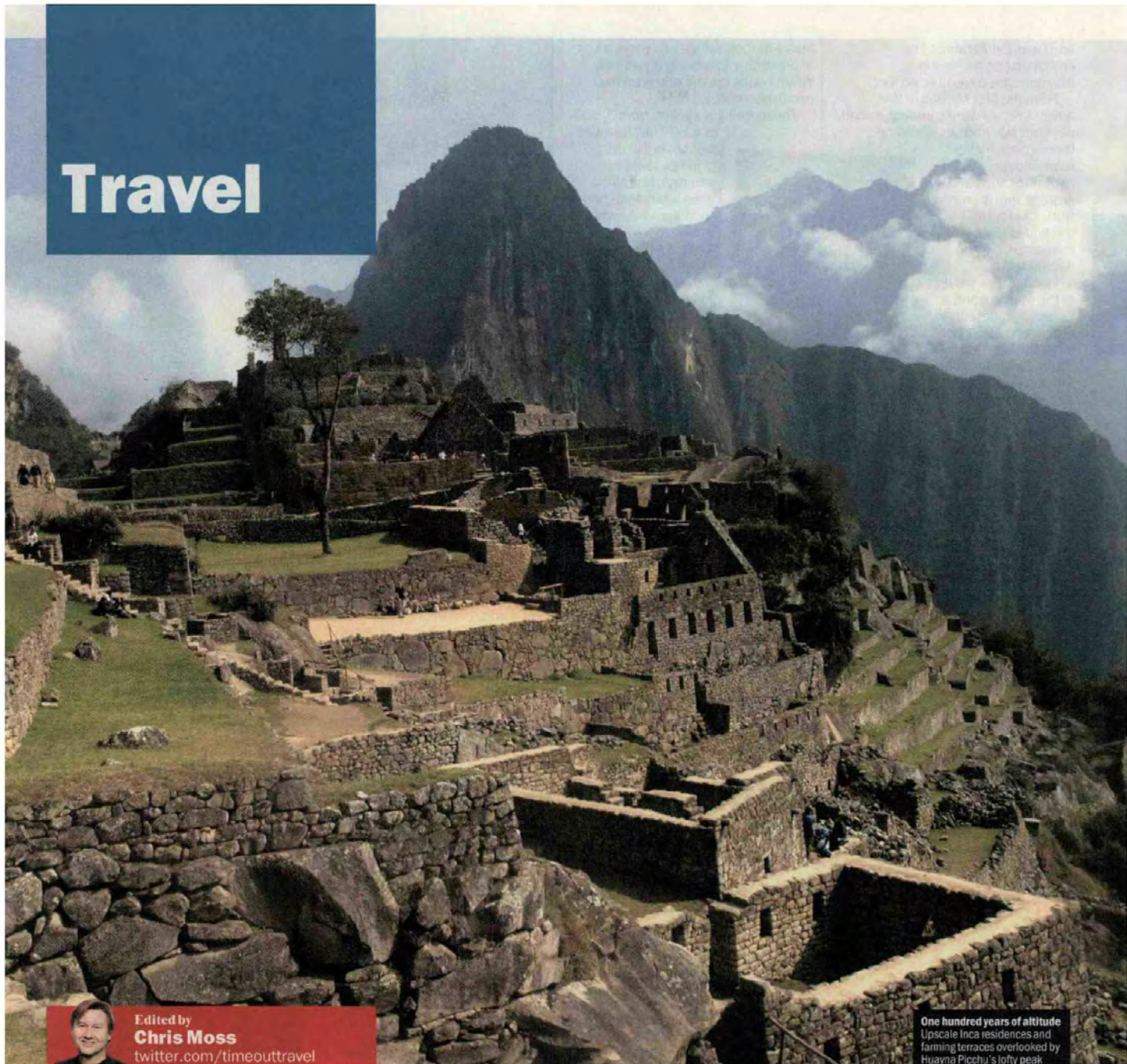


The Inca heartland rewards walkers with sublime

wonders and landscapes

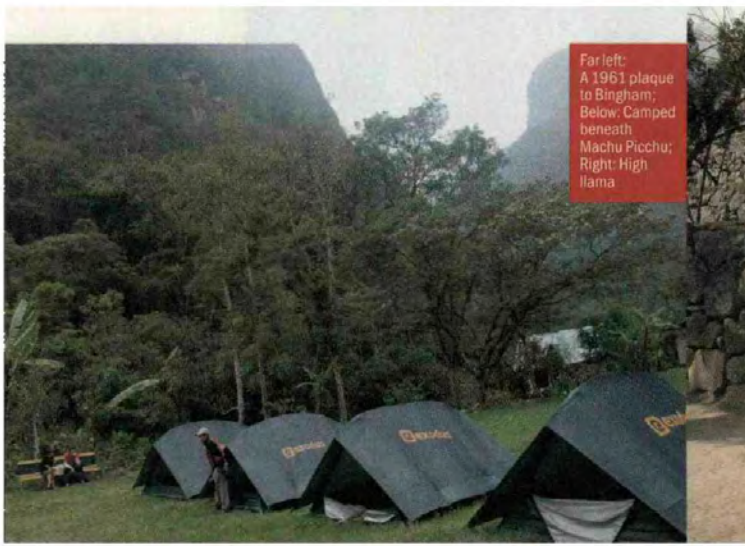


Travel

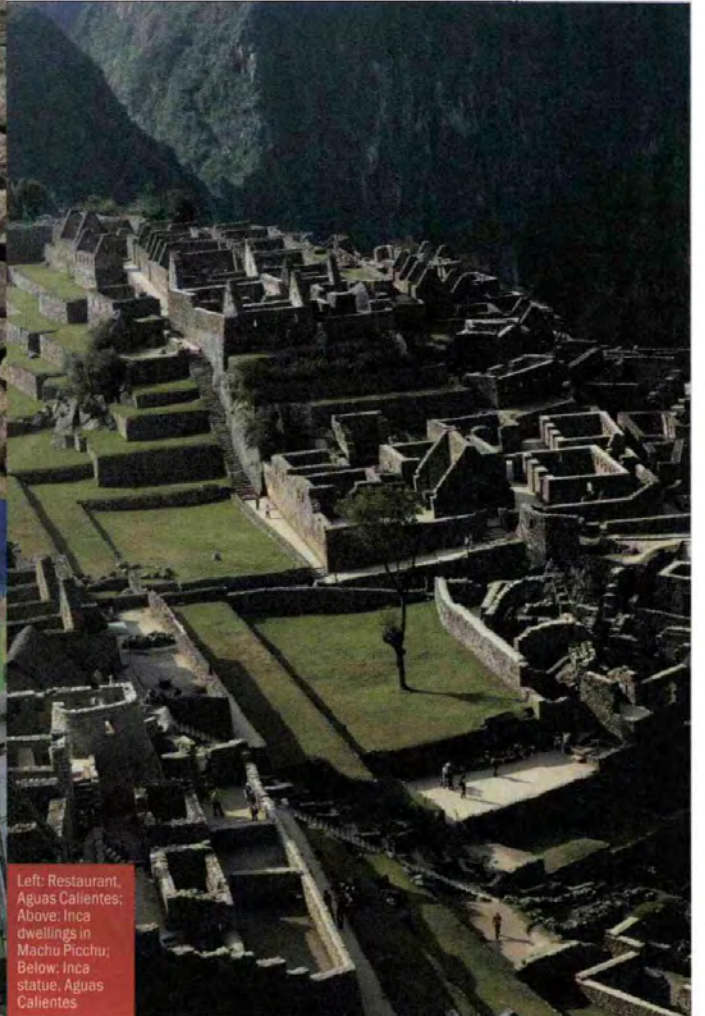
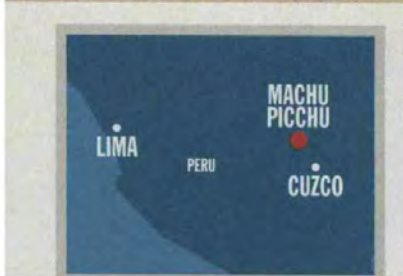


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One hundred years of altitude
Upscale Inca residences and
farming terraces overlooked by
Huayna Picchu's lofty peak.



Farleft:
A 1961 plaque
to Bingham;
Below: Camped
beneath
Machu Picchu;
Right: High
llama



Left: Restaurant,
Aguas Calientes;
Above: Inca
dwellings in
Machu Picchu;
Below: Inca
statue, Aguas
Calientes