

PERU TO A THRILL

The soaring surreal beauty of Mount Ausangate in the Peruvian Andes leaves James Henderson **breathless** as he treks a lesser-known lodge circuit in unexpected comfort

Someone once said the past is a foreign country. Presumably then, when it comes to the distant past in a foreign country, the weight of separation must be multiplied. So how differently, for instance, did an Andean person do things from the way we might do them now in Peru? It's an admittedly odd question that came to me in a slightly delirious moment while hiking in the rare air of the Peruvian Andes.

Mount Ausangate (pictured on this page and final pages) rises to a spectacular snow-topped 6,384m in the Cordillera Vilcanota in southern Peru. But as Apu Ausangate, it is sacred to Andean people to this day (apu loosely translates as god), the father-protector and a source of water for the entire Cusco Valley. Andean

Lodges' five-day trek routes through the magnificent high meadows and exposed rock of its flanks. This is hiking at considerable altitude (some of the route is higher than the summit of Mont Blanc, though lying so close to the equator, the climate is benign by comparison) in a truly spectacular location.

First, though, you must acclimatise – a process of rest and hydration to allow bodily systems to adjust. If your red blood cells can fix only 85 per cent of normal oxygen levels (that's what's in the air), then you must create more of them. It takes at least three or four days. Drugs help, Diamox especially. As does, I learn, coca tea. I was handed a cup on arrival in Cusco and drank rather a lot of it during the following week.

Cusco has sprawled into chaotic, tatty suburbs that extend along the valley floor and up the hillsides

around the alluring, atmospheric Spanish colonial centre, with wool shops everywhere (the slopes provide some of the finest alpaca and vicuña grazing). But look beneath the surface and you'll realise that the town is more than an emporium. Once it was the centre of an Inca empire that stretched a distance equal to that between modern-day Madrid and Moscow. The Inca architecture is covered by later Spanish colonial building, but be sure to look out for the mortarless stone walls that are all that remain of their temples; they are incredibly finely carved. Blocks at the site known as Sacsayhuaman weigh over 100 tonnes, and yet their joints are millimetre-perfect.

Cusco developed its own artistic style early on in the Spanish colonial period – naïve, highly ornate and regularly draped with gold leaf. But Andean beliefs are

Looking out across Peru's
Ausangate mountain range



Clockwise from left:
Machuraccay Tambo Lodge at
the foot of Mt Ausangate. An
Andean woman weaving in the
Sacred Valley. A bedroom at
Huampococha Tambo Lodge,
overlooking El Nevado del Inca



The Ausangate circuit was conceived as a tourism project in association with the local communities - and at the request of the villagers

number of herdsmen (horses and llamas would carry our equipment and food from one lodge to the next each day). And the ever jolly Nellie, whose job was housekeeping but who proved to be most memorable for her fits of laughter. She also sang for us that night, galloping vocals accompanying an *arpa jarocha*, a harp with a triangular soundbox.

The cheery mood-setting was welcome, because the next morning the hiking began in earnest. We struck out towards the head of the valley, skirting around slopes that would have been a mere hop and a skip at sea level. As we climbed, the grass cover found itself stretched thin and then ripped by bare rock. Sedimentary strata protruded through the valley walls; higher up, volcanic extrusions burst and soared into irregular peaks.

Exclusive treks like this can have something of a random aspect; you never quite know who you'll get as far as travelling companions. But our very small group – Erik, Josephine from Germany and myself – muddled along fine. We were a living, breathing (with varying degrees of effort) lesson in how different an effect altitude can have on people of seemingly equal fitness levels. Oddly, while I felt steadily worse with the climb, it was clear that the redoubtable Josephine was finding the whole exercise correspondingly easy: 4,000m? She had barely noticed it, she said apologetically.

But rest and comfort were close at hand. We scrambled over a lip into a higher valley, where a tent was erected for lunch. Here, a domain of bare rock soared around us, flanks covered with broken boulders and scree, and eventually snow. Our afternoon route crossed an ancient moraine, shoved aside by a forgotten glacier. And to our left, a strange, coloured slope came into view, the first of many – smooth and a rich, deep red, angled like a blanket on furniture. It was the

barely concealed: in Cusco cathedral you'll see the Virgin represented wearing a pyramid-shaped dress. In classic syncretic style, this was Andean painters managing to sneak the shape of their deity mountains into ostensibly Catholic altarpieces.

Apu Ausangate is, on a very clear day, visible from the city. You'll get gasps of admiration when you mention that you're walking there. And it's certainly no slouch of a trek; but Andean Lodges, which arranges both the guided hike and accommodation, has managed something extremely comfortable in the remote circumstances.

Day one began with a four-hour transfer at 9am. We made a couple of stops en route; in a market I caught sight of two alpacas standing neck to neck, dainty-toed, staring quizzically around them. At Chelacupe we turned into the Ausangate Valley (pictured on previous pages), passing increasingly small Andean villages, eventually stopping for lunch in a stand of eucalyptus. At Chillca, at 4,300m, the walk itself commenced. Erik, our Peruvian guide, led us into a gully from which the main valley opened out and we entered high meadows, grassland hemmed by massive hills. The llama and alpaca were returning to the homesteads for the night; more quizzical faces – them eyeing us this time. The first lodge, which had been hovering in the clear air ahead, drew steadily nearer.

Our support team was there to greet us when we arrived some hours later: Miguel, the chef, and a

beginnings of the eternal battle of mineral oxides, mainly iron and copper, played out in these parts.

Towards late afternoon, the second lodge. Phew. The four lodges are mostly built to the same plan – suites with private bathrooms and, although no electricity, hot showers on arrival. The main lounge invariably had a warm fire, a lovely drink and a staggering view. In the afternoon sunlight the glacier of Santa Catalina glowed above us, its front edge discoloured like frozen nougat, cracked and poised to drop into the lake below.

The Ausangate circuit was conceived as a tourism project by Andean Lodges, in association with the local communities of Chillca and Osefina. Besides providing significant comfort in the difficult location, it's clear that the operation is carefully managed; out on the treks, the horses and llamas bearing supplies follow a different route wherever possible, to maintain the hikers' sense of total solitude in the mountains. Meals are light and as fresh as possible, and as you retire at night Nellie has left an artisanal chocolate on your pillow along with the hot-water bottle under the duvet.

But there's also something heartfelt going on here. The project was created at the request of the villagers themselves. Time was, they lived quite well, using their llamas to transport dried animal dung for fertiliser down to the Transandean valleys and the jungle for barter and returning with coca leaves, which they then part-exchanged in the lower mountains for dried meats and goods. But government roads built in the 1960s undercut their trade, which rendered the pack animals they relied on redundant. This hike enables them to earn and to maintain their livestock, and thus their traditional way of life. It is genuinely sustainable tourism, with monies earned by the project reinvested specifically in education.

Next morning, it was a novelty – as a person for whom the world is generally no more spiritual than cold air and concrete – to be holding up three coca leaves, invoking the apu. We were now headed under the skirts

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From top: trekkers near the summit of Mt Ausangate. Llamas and their herders in the Ausangate range

We followed the llamas, who trotted purposefully, through high meadows, to a summer farm, then to a final, lovely lunch at the pristine riverside



of Ausangate itself, and making an appeal to the gods for good walking with the llamas. A bundle with sugary gifts and llama fat was dedicated and burned.

After an initial climb we entered a vast rocky valley, its moraine walls hanging with rubble rock. Around us, the silence was rent from time to time by the clatter of rockslides and cracking in the glaciers. Eventually we reached a lake where we were told shamans complete their spiritual initiation. Beneath here was the “mouth of the mountain”, the spring that marks the source for the valley.

That evening, conversation turned to the mountains’ spiritual power, and to the landslides caused, I learnt, by *condenados* – lost souls, possibly Catholic, possibly earlier, who are forced to wander the mountain as punishment for a lifetime of cruelty. This was the point that it occurred to me how different life was for pre-Colombian Andean people. Their god, I was told, had to be appeased but was benignly father-like, rather than loaded with complicated notions such as original sin. But suddenly I was out of breath again: though I was sitting down, we were high enough that even this extended conversation had left me puffed, my surplus oxygen dissipated by the effort. How odd to be so close to the chemistry of life.

“Day four is everyone’s favourite,” said Erik. It proved to be true. We passed through a moonscape, a valley with no growth at all, just mountainsides of mineral rock that ranged in size from sand to pebbles. The colours shone; the usual red and green were now interspersed with stretches of white, yellow, peppermint-grey and vermilion – a single hill was as multihued as a striped camel blanket. In such an untouched environment, we immediately spotted an unaccustomed scar on the hillside opposite. It had been cut for quad bikes to explore for mining interests. This, with all its attendant politics, will begin to raise its head even here in the

remotest reaches of the Andes, no doubt; but such development in an area this striking really would be a travesty. Once disturbed the area will never be the same.

On our final morning we were woken by peals of hysterical laughter. Nellie had the giggles again. Soon enough, delicious quinoa porridge was on the table – and then the final climb. Beyond the pass the slopes had reverted to their default red and green; an emerald boulder dripped stone tears – tiny shards of eroded rock that spilled delicately down the hillside in the red.

All morning we followed the llamas, who trotted purposefully downhill, their ears threaded with colourful wool to mark them against the herds, down through high meadows, to a summer farm, and eventually to a village, and then a final, lovely lunch at the pristine riverside.

I’ll confess to some relief as the air thickened on the way back to Cusco, though I can’t say that I felt a spiritual presence as some other people do – certainly as the pre-Columbian Inca no doubt did, in that past that is another country. But to walk in a place as spectacular as the Ausangate is profoundly moving. Perhaps it’s close to the equivalent of divine for those who, like me, inhabit a world of cold air and concrete. ♦

FINE AND ANDES

James Henderson travelled as a guest of **Aracari Travel** (+511-651 2424; www.aracari.com), which offers the four-night Ausangate Lodge-to-Lodge Trek, plus three days in Cusco (to acclimatise) staying at Palacio Manco Capac and Casa Cartegena Boutique Hotel and Spa, and including flights with British Airways and internal flights and transfers, from £3,857 per person based on two sharing. **Casa Cartagena Boutique Hotel**, Calle Pumacurco 336, Centro Histórico, Cusco (+5184-224 356; www.casacartagena.com), from \$355. **Palacio Manco Capac**, Quinta Qolqampata, San Cristóbal, Cusco (+511-421 7790; www.ananay-hotels.com), from \$180. **British Airways** (www.ba.com; 0344-493 0787) flies daily from London Gatwick to Lima via Madrid, from £678 return.

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