

Holidays Peru

Peru is a country of mystique, mentioned in films and books to induce intrigue and for many it remains such.

The iconic sites such as Machu Picchu and flights over the Nazca lines draw tourists from across the World and yet there is more to hidden Peru that can only be reached, and accepted, on horseback.

EXPLORING PERU

Andean Adventure

Anna Bruce learns of rural Peruvian culture when exploring the little known Vinak region on horseback.

Mountain Lodges of Peru offers 'soft adventure', a rewarding comfortable bed, hot shower, excellent food and a window into the real lives of rural Peruvians without reducing Western standards.

The company's founding Lodge lies in Vinak, a town of few souls that forms the central control for some 100,000 hectares of Andean mountainside.

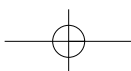
In total approximately 20,000 people from the outlying homesteads and hamlets call Vinak their home.

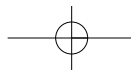
So unknown, conversations to tour guides and taxi drivers draw a blank when I mention it as my destination.

In fact, I discover many city dwellers do not see the staggeringly beautiful Andean mountains as viable holiday destinations and instead they choose the neon-lit party atmospheres of the coast's desert resorts complete with sand dunes and surfing.

My journey takes place in June, the Peruvian winter,

**WHAT APPEARED UNINHABITABLE SHOWED ITSELF TO BE A HOME
EVERY DAY A NEW VANTAGE POINT REACHED, A NEW DISCOVERY MADE**





Riding Holidays

and these abandoned ghost towns look ugly to my eye.

Yet the Peruvians are not wrong in their expectation and after a five hour drive, including the final 38km in a sturdy pickup truck that cannot be driven out of first or second gear along the winding dirt road, I feel my confidence sapping in equal contrast to the adrenaline buzzing through my veins.

We pass through the horn-beeping, jay-walking, and literally frightening town of Canute, and take a 'new' road that is too narrow for two vehicles such that girls in orange act as traffic lights, relaying commands to their fellows further along the roadside.

Waddling bamboo bushes, with the head, tail and lower limbs of the donkeys thus laden, continue unguided in front or behind us.

Dogs repeatedly leap out and chase the vehicle intent on biting the wheels.

Children sit by the roadside - their round faces keeping watch over a collection of sheep,

chickens, goats and cows.

The deeper into the mountains we go from the dry hillsides sprinkled with cactus plants, to the Andean terraces that look as if lifted straight out of the pages of a National Geographic magazine so I realise this is the real world.

Chipboard shelters stamped with European Union flags are reminders of a recent earthquake, the aid offered seeming unsuitable until one realises these approximate 10' square boxes are perhaps the best shelter available.

What I thought were destroyed, abandoned buildings, prove to be homes as yet unfinished due to finances and the sight of

an outside loo, an electricity wire or a roof marks a serious step up in standards.

In fact, electricity only reached Vinak in 2001, and it was this that led the founder of Mountain Lodges of Peru, Enrique Umbert, to open his doors to a wider audience.

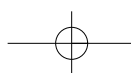
In bright yellow and incorporating a glass walled dining room, Vinak Lodge and its gardens should stick out like a sore thumb amid its flat-roofed, grey, concrete or mud brick neighbours yet somehow it softens their facades.

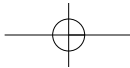
In the vehicle I witnessed all with a tourists eyes, fascinated, in awe and quite separate from my surroundings.



WHAT TO WEAR

Riding gear is advised because rides vary in duration up to approximately nine hours. I wore a collection of clothing from Musto, Toggi, Charles Owen, Harry Hall and Mark Todd with my Drizabone waterproof luggage from www.cavaletticlothing.com Rain is rare, but at night it can get very cold, so warm clothing is advised and despite offering a luxury dining experience the atmosphere at Mountain Lodges of Peru is informal so smart clothes are not required.





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THE LOCALS WERE ALWAYS FRIENDLY AND PLEASED TO SEE US



A 'HOOF-PICK' MOMENT.

Riding Quarter Horses, Rumba and then Puca, with a spell on a native Paso Del Mont to experience its smooth gait and feisty nature, these sure-footed, sensible creatures were perfectly suited to the winding high altitude trails and impressed immediately at their capacity to carry me over tricky terrain and their willingness to do so.

On horseback however, such feelings transferred to becoming a part of the region.

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When not enjoying a blasting gallop along a wider trail comfortable in the American Endurance saddle, their steady gait opened up the brown mountainsides to reveal the handkerchief-sized pockets of pasture, of cultivated land, of wild flowers in blues and pinks and yellows; of life.

One's eyes adjusted to soon pick out the shape of a cow, sheep, donkey or goat grazing and the figure of the shepherd sitting nearby.

On paths that seemed improbable we would pass

elderly ladies carrying loads of firewood and children standing on the cliff-top edge, clad in their smart school uniforms all quick to say 'good morning' or 'good afternoon'.

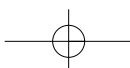
What appeared uninhabitable showed itself to be a home.

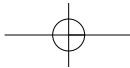
The mountainside is silent though; the views so gobsmacking that I was rendered speechless, birdsong rare and but for the beats and scrapings of our horses hooves over stony paths, the sound of the clear air filling my lungs and the occasional roar of the river below or bubbling of a brook from an ancient irrigation channel would have been my sole audible companion.

Every day a new vantage point reached, a new discovery made.

The ecological and social impact of the existing cultures, of tourism, of westernisation including the potential creation of an asphalt road, and the need

THE RIDES WENT HIGHER AND HIGHER INTO THE MOUNTAINS





Riding Holidays

for synergy between all became clear.

With Mountain Lodges of Peru aware of the delicate balance therein, it is encouraging to discover the social and ecological programmes they are presenting to the community; creating understanding between cultures.

For instance, during my visit, Corpus Christi is being celebrated - a catholic fete that in the mountains includes reference to past cultures from even pre-Inca times though I was welcomed to join the song and dance of the drunken villagers – drunk on a mixture of methylated spirits and local herbs since alcohol is too expensive.

Stories that the villagers believed Vinak Lodge was built to steal organs from the recent dead are still recalled though thankfully, such fears have abated.

It's a difficult situation and yet, inevitable that Western culture will both reach these regions just as the villagers regularly desert their homes in

hope of work in Canete or even in Peru's capital city, Lima.

Their leaving, I suspect, is like taking a lamb into a den of lions and I cannot imagine their resolve yet the existing lifestyle, with survival its only ambition, is also untenable and problems of domestic violence to premature death symptoms of such.

Through tourism and community programmes such as those created by Mountain Lodges of Peru and authorised by the Mayor, Governor and judge of Vinak, I believe all parties have a future - for it would be sad to lose the essence of the Andean mountain culture, and worse to exploit it.

Yet on horseback you become not just a witness to this way of life but can gain a sense of the community, achieving mutual respect with the people and the horses while enjoying some of the most fabulous riding ever imaginable.



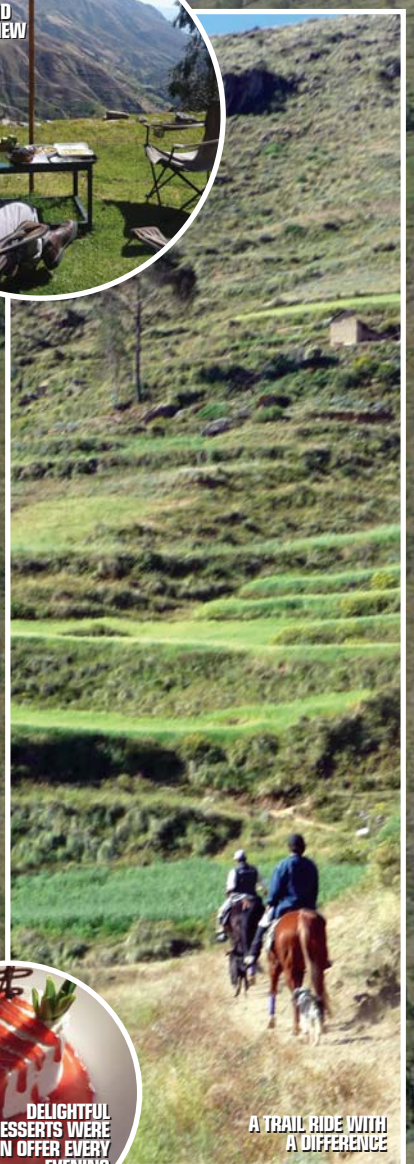
LAY BACK AND ENJOY THE VIEW



VINAK LODGE - HOME FROM HOME



DELICIOUS DESSERTS WERE ON OFFER EVERY EVENING



A TRAIL RIDE WITH A DIFFERENCE

MOUNTAIN LODGES

Mountain Lodges of Peru operates trekking, mountain-biking and horse-riding adventures in Peru.

Anna's visit to Vinak was an insight into the early stages of the 'Down the Coast' programme that also includes beach rides, desert rides and a flight over the Nazca Lines.

Flights from Heathrow to Lima take approximately 17hrs but typically include one stop - a chance to break the journey and stretch your legs.

Visit www.mountainlodgesofperu.com

Bookings can be made through www.theridingcompany.com
T 0207 917 9880 E Rachel@theridingcompany.com



ENJOYING A MOUNTAIN RIDE WITH ENRIQUE, THE FOUNDER OF THE MOUNTAIN LODGES OF PERU.

