

An eco-lodge grows in the
**PERUVIAN
ANDES**

By Suzanne Gerber

I'm nursing yet another chai latte in the Jorge Chávez airport, waiting for my connecting flight to Cusco. For an international hub, Lima doesn't have much to offer a weary traveler in the way of amenities. Beyond the requisite Starbucks and chair massage are a handful of fast food restaurants and a smattering of overpriced shops, but not much else.

This being my ninth orbit of the Lima airport in just over a year, I know the terrain a little too well. That's why I practically spill my latte scrambling to finally board. I am happier still as the snow-capped Andes draw scarily closer as we approach the "gateway to Machu Picchu." The adjustment to 11,000 feet always takes a bit of jaw jangling (and coco-leaf chewing), but everything about this former Incan capital is so breathtaking, you almost don't notice. Or care.

Quickly the tedium and grime of travel fall away as we wend our way through the Andes to the calm, quiet oasis that awaits us in Urubamba, a small town of a few thousand souls in the center of the Sacred Valley. (Urubamba, in case this ever comes up, means "flat land of spiders" in Quechua.) My sister and I are greeted at our lodge's door by our hosts, Robert Pryor and Barbara Bonelli. As I peer beyond the entrance, I don't actually turn to my sister and say, "Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore." But the thought does cross my mind.

A Breath of Very Fresh Air

Casa Colibri is the perfect antidote to hectic travel, specifically to crowded, dirty cities — which is precisely why we chose it for our short but eagerly anticipated trip through the Sacred Valley. It's an eco-lodge with 10 charming casitas tucked in among sustainable, live gardens of trees, bushes and countless and mostly unnamable (by me, anyway) flowers and herbs, plus the birds and butterflies they were planted to attract.

Over the next several days, we'd come to identify abutilons, nasturtium, scabiosas, fuchsias, marmalade bushes, queñua trees and kantu amarillo, a plant the Incas worshipped and offered to the sun. We'd also learn that the grounds are irrigated by gray water from the bathrooms, which is important because Casa Colibri ("Hummingbird House") is situated at the foot of the Pumahuanca Valley. The locals' primary water source, the Pumahuanca Glacier, isn't expected to survive more than another 50 years. "Hence the pressing need for water conservation," Robert says.

Urubamba has several very good restaurants, but Colibri's dinner menu that night looked so tempting, we couldn't resist. It included a local cheese plate, along with quinoa soup, home-grown green salad, free-range chicken, and ice cream (or maracuya pie), all complemented by an earthy Chilean red wine. By the time we tumbled into our cozy beds, memories of Jorge Chávez were as distant as my fifth-grade report on the Incas.

How Sacred Is My Valley

Urubamba, Chinchero, Maras, Moray, Ollantaytambo: The names alone make you feel like you're *really* somewhere sacred. My sister and I had both been here before, so we didn't overschedule ourselves. And Blue Parallel was the perfect tour company to indulge us. We set the pace. The guide spoke flaw-

less English. Water and snacks were ever-present. And the driver could stop on a dime when we simply *needed* to snap a shot.

Though geographically close, Moray and Maras are worlds apart. Moray, an archeological site comprising dozens of rings of depressed circular terraces, remains a mystery. Historians speculate that it was an experimental agricultural station. The first time I visited, I was pressed for time and yearning for more, so we allotted several hours for this visit. We also hired a neighbor of Barbara and Robert's, a shaman, to add a spiritual dimension to our experience, which we did in a private ceremony that further fueled my fascination with Peruvian traditions.

As we stood at the base of this sacred site, we each set an intention for something we wanted to accomplish in our lives. We silently focused on that, then spun around for 32 rotations, which was supposed to help us manifest our goals. I'm not sure it shifted anything, yet being so inwardly focused at that spot certainly helped me quiet my mind and be present in the moment.

From there we drove to Maras, a town in the Sacred Valley with an extraordinary natural salt depository, whose evaporation ponds have been in use since Incan times. I wanted to soak in the ambiance, and so we slowly, quietly, spent an unhurried two hours trekking around the salt ponds, taking cool photos and munching on local *canchas* (toasted oversize corn kernels dusted with Maras salt).

But having had a taste of Colibri, we knew exactly where and how we wanted to spend the dwindling hours of the day's sunlight: with a bottle of Chilean wine in the gardens, while butterflies and birds encircled us.

Dinner choices in Urubamba are an embarrassment of riches. Aside from Colibri, there are at least three other amazing places. El Huacatay and the restaurant at Posada Del Inca, a renovated former convent a ways out of town, are high-end (yet affordable) dining. Kaia is organic and veg-friendly. (Note: reservations are highly recommended, and Kaia is cash only.)

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Hatching a Dream

As we saw it, Casa Colibri has but one flaw: It's so delightful that you're willing to cut short touring time to simply hang out in the gardens. Compounding that is how warm, generous, funny and interesting the proprietors are.

The two met in the early '80s in Cambridge, England, where Robert, a native, was teaching English, and Barbara (born and bred in Lima) was one of his students. Love and a sense of adventure — and language — took the pair to Saudi Arabia, where she taught at the British Council Women's Centre and tutored wealthy princesses. Robert was teaching Saudi Air Force officer cadets who needed English to learn to fly.



PHOTOS: 1. BY NICK PYE 2. MATT HOLLINGSWORTH 3. COURTESY CASA COLIBRI 4. ALAN ROTHSTEIN 5. COURTESY CASA COLIBRI 6. 7. BY ALAN ROTHSTEIN

“Saudi Arabia puts excess and waste in your face,” Robert explained. “We became more aware of environmental degradation, consumerism and globalization on a serious scale. When we hit 50, we began to question our lifestyle and wanted to try a radical change.”

One perk of their jobs was a lot of vacation time, and the couple often returned to Peru. “We became aware of the beauty and the fragility of the Andean landscape,” says Barbara. “We realized that environmental damage was already happening in the Sacred Valley: habitat loss, bird species being affected... And we slowly developed the idea of a sustainable lodge that would offer quality accommodations, use resources as sustainably as possible, provide employment for the host community and be a haven for wildlife.”

Since opening their doors in 2010, their green vision has only widened. There are no fireplaces in the casitas because by eliminating that option, they don't contribute to deforestation practices, which negatively impact wildlife habitat and increase the danger of landslides. Honoring the preciousness of water, showers have flow-reduction valves. Eco toilets, which use the least possible amount to flush, were installed, and guests are encouraged to refill their water bottles from large purified jugs.

Barbara and Robert grow their own greens, herbs and some vegetables. The rest comes from neighbors and the market — a local, organic, sustainable *bioferia*. And since recycling technology isn't yet available, they've made “reuse” and “repurpose” their watchwords.

When You Gotta Go

The last day dawned bright yet sad. We lingered over breakfast, delaying the inevitable departure as long as possible. We were still a bit sore from a major hike in the Pisac Ruins the day before, so we kept the itinerary mellow: the deservedly popular market at Chincherro, followed by lunch in Cusco at the mostly organic, veg-friendly restaurant, Greens Organic.

I've been back from Peru several weeks now, and the memories tug at me like a petulant child. “When can we go back?” they whine. Hey, I tell them, I'd go in a heartbeat. Next time I

might mix it up and see some new places. But I'll probably make a stop at my home away from home in the Sacred Valley.

PERU 411

Casa Colibri, Urubamba Hosts Robert and Barbara can arrange airport transfers, day trips and more. April to December. Breakfast included, dinner available. \$137-\$243/night. casacolibriecolodge.com

Blue Parallel Tailor-made private touring for discriminating travelers, offering everything from one-day trips to extended excursions. Can arrange bespoke accommodations, meals and exclusive access to experts. Prices vary. www.blueparallel.com

Monasterio Hotel, Cusco If you're only going to come here once, stay at this magnificent five-star hotel, two blocks off the main square. Built on the site of a former Inca palace in 1595 and packed with 17th-century art, antiques and Inca artifacts, it's a throwback to another era. The breakfast buffet alone is worth the stay. Rates start at \$350/night www.belmond.com/hotel-monasterio-cusco

Inkaterra Hotel, Urubamba Machu Picchu is the jewel in the Sacred Valley crown, but this exquisitely restored 16th-century mansion a short bus ride away gives that Wonder of the World a run for its money. From its landscaped grounds to the richly appointed rooms to the meals, Inkaterra is note-perfect. From around \$500/night. www.inkaterra.com/inkaterra/inkaterra-machu-picchu-pueblo-hotel

The Spa at Tambo del Inka hotel is one of the delights of the “Valle Sagrado.” It's worth skipping a day of touring to luxuriate in its two heated pools, sauna and steam room, and melt into a Yucamani Stones Massage. Facials utilize indigenous ingredients, like cocoa, Mt. Misti mud and quinoa. And where else can you get a “24K Gold from the Gods” facial? www.libertador.com.pe



Above: The Maras salt ponds. Previous page: Bienvenidos to Casa Colibri. Opposite page from top left: 1. Andean family in traditional garb 2. Magical Machu Picchu 3. Casa Colibri's namesake: hummingbirds 4. Andean mother and child, a familiar sight in the Sacred Valley. 5. Fresh produce from Colibri's gardens. 6. Native plants enshrouded in Andes mist. 7. The author's sister and traveling companion, aglow after a shamanic ceremony at Moray.