



PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN GROUNDWATER



The road less travelled

Ben Groundwater OPTED TO TAKE A DIFFERENT ROUTE TO MACHU PICCHU AND SET OUT ON THE LONGER, MORE BEAUTIFUL, MORE LUXURIOUS, AND FAR QUIETER SALKANTAY TRAIL.

THE CONDORS OVERHEAD LOOK MINISCULE, these huge birds rendered as tiny dots by distance. They glide in and out of the clouds, circling, searching for food, making serene progress past mountains clipped with snow. It seems like another world up there, ghostly and forbidding, but that's when the realisation hits: I'll be up that high soon. I'll be hiking in those clouds; I'll be trekking those mountains. Soon.

It's the beginning of the Salkantay Trail, a six-day trek through the high Andes in Peru, and the scale of it is difficult to comprehend. Right now we're just past the town of Mollepata, the last slice of civilisation proper we'll see before we eventually stroll into a train station near the ruins of Machu Picchu in almost a week's time. By then we'll have gasped for air on mountain passes that sit higher than those condors circling above us now; we'll have slogged through cold rivers, enjoyed stunning scenery, been caught in a hail storm, swum in a glacial lake, made an offering to the mountain gods, and spent

five nights recovering from it all in the most improbably luxurious lodges set in the most improbably rugged, amazing locations.

For now, however, the condors just represent a challenge, a dream. They're up there four or five thousand metres above sea level – soon our band of 12 hikers will be too.

This is not the way most people get to Machu Picchu, that famous Incan mountain city. There are two well-known options: take the train from Cusco to the town of Aguas Calientes and then ride a bus up to the ruins; or hike the Inca Trail, a three-day trek that makes an appearance on many a bucket list. The Salkantay, however, is a different approach altogether.

This path approaches Machu Picchu from the opposite side to the Inca Trail, but it's longer, more challenging, more beautiful, more luxurious, and far quieter. There's not a soul about as we lace up our boots at the trailhead, lashing supplies to a couple of horses before setting out onwards and upwards. >>



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This is officially known as Mountain Lodges of Peru's "Lodge to Lodge" trek, and that's a key difference between this experience and the backpacker-style camping of the Inca Trail. Where those hikers will be bundling up below a thin synthetic roof each night, we'll be dining on three-course meals, drinking cocktails in hot-tubs and deciding whether it's worth indulging in another massage. The days are long and sometimes hard – the nights are warm and comfortable.

Day one's trek is a way of easing into high-altitude trekking, with a five-hour jaunt along an old dirt track from Mollepata to Salkantay Lodge, our first night's accommodation. It's a chance to take in the scenery: the steep hills cut by a rushing river, those condors circling the high peaks above, and there, far in the distance, the snow-covered majesty



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LODGE TO LODGE Clockwise from left: Local Quechuan shaman Victor makes an offering to the gods; Hikers cross a bridge near Colpa Lodge on day four of the trek; The first stop – Salkantay Lodge; A simple and stylish bedroom at Salkantay Lodge. Opposite page main image: Wayra Lodge, the most isolated of the five. Opposite page inset: A hiker rests at Salkantay pass on day three.

of the mountain that gives this trail its name, the Salkantay. It looks intimidating, but in two days time we'll be right there next to it.

Our guide is Javier, a local Peruvian with an adventuring history that stretches back decades. He once navigated the Amazon River from source to mouth with Jacques Cousteau; today, he settles for leading groups of all ages through his mountainous home. Our band of explorers is 12-strong, and of a variety of vintages. There are two German doctors in their 30s; an American couple with a 14-year-old son; and a group of American retirees, the oldest of which is 78. Javier's worried about how he'll fare, but he needn't – it turns out he's about the fittest of the lot of us.

If there's a feeling of isolation out here, of being the only people in the whole universe, it's tempered by our arrival at the Salkantay Lodge. There, staff wait to greet us with mugs of mint tea. "Just leave your boots outside," Javier says, wrenching his off on the front porch. "The staff will clean them and bring them inside."

This is how exploring should be done – a bed with views of the mountains, cold beer behind the bar, and a stone fireplace to gather around. We're in bed early tonight – aching limbs and the promise of more to come demand it.

The condors are out again as we leave the lodge the next morning, heading out for a half-day hike to further adjust to the altitude. The Salkantay peak looms ever-present, but today we're only going as far as a glacial lake set on a high pampa.

We have a special guide for this adventure, a local Quechuan shaman named Victor who is here not only to lead us to the lake but to then give an offering to the mountain gods to secure our safe passage through the area. It sounds a little corny, but it's a perfect fit for this land – the mountains are so steep and imposing, the weather so unpredictable and savage that it feels right to offer something



One moment we're down on the pampa, the next I look up and the Salkantay is just above us, so close I could almost touch it.

to whoever might be in charge up there.

Breath comes short today. The slope is gentle but at almost 4,000 metres above sea level there's not much oxygen in the air. It doesn't, however, bother Victor, who skips ahead of the group, playing a wooden flute as he charges up the mountain. Up at the lake, a beautiful expanse of water below the crushing weight of a glacier, Victor settles on a rug and lays out his offering of all the things the mountain gods like best: sweets, beans, gold dust, biscuits...and a llama fetus. Sounds odd, but it works – aside from a short storm the next day, we'll have perfectly blue skies for the rest of our journey.

That journey proper begins the next day, with our trek to the Salkantay, the



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impossibly distant peak that looms on the horizon as we lace up boots, grip hiking poles and set off on the muddy path. This is the day people both dread and look forward to, an eight-hour mission that will take us to the highest point on the whole trek, the 4,600 metre Salkantay pass, before plunging us into a moss-covered valley on the other side.

"The secret today," Javier says, "is the pilgrim walk. Don't try to take big steps – just one foot in front of the other, and keep going."

It works, too. One moment we're down on the pampa, the next I look up and the Salkantay is just above us, so close I could almost touch it. Those condors aren't small dots any more, they're winged, feathered birds. Reaching the >>



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Machu Picchu is awe-inspiring, beautiful. But it's not what has made this journey unique... That'll be those mountains, those rivers, the natural beauty, and the condors circling high above.

pass an hour later feels like a major achievement – suddenly you can understand why mountaineers go through so much pain to scale those peaks. Even a minor victory like this feels significant.

Unlike the mountaineers, however, there's a warm bed, a jacuzzi and a three-course dinner awaiting us tonight at Wayra Lodge. This is the most isolated of all the lodges, built high in the mountains and often surrounded by cloud. It feels like a real adventure up here – the only way out is on foot, or horseback; it's just us and the mountain gods tonight. Well, the mountain gods and the chef and the masseuse.

The next few days pass relatively comfortably, with half-day hikes followed by afternoons of relaxation. By day five, the end is in sight. This is when the trail we've been following intersects with an ancient pathway, one built by the Incas to lead them to the sacred city of Machu Picchu. The famous Inca Trail isn't the only path built by that ancient civilisation – it's one of nine that have been found so far. The Salkantay trail is another one, and we'll

be following it to the end of our journey.

Today's hike is up through a "cloud forest", a rainforest that hugs the top of a mountainside, before we descend a few hundred metres to some Incan ruins and what will be our first glimpse of Machu Picchu – from the reverse side that most people spy it. Are the mountain gods with us? It doesn't seem that way as we round the corner and find a large bank of clouds blocking our line of sight to the ruins. "Just wait," Javier assures us. "I've never missed out on this view." Sure enough, within five minutes the fog begins to disperse and there, off in the distance, is the reason we're all here, the reason we've been slogging away these past five days, the reason we've trekked through mountains and rivers and snow and mud to get here: Machu Picchu.

It's awe-inspiring, beautiful. But it's not what has made this journey unique, what we'll go home telling everyone about. That'll be those mountains, those rivers, the feeling of isolation, the natural beauty, and the condors circling high above.

THE TREK

The Classic Safari Company offers the Lodge to Lodge Trek in Peru with prices starting from US\$2,690 (about A\$2,579) per person in low season and US\$3,290 (about A\$3,155) per person in high season. Prices include transfers from Cusco, six days of trekking, six nights accommodation in luxury lodges, all meals, two local guides, plus entry into and a guided tour of Machu Picchu. classicsafaricompany.com.au

WHEN TO GO

The Lodge to Lodge Trek runs from April to December, with departures almost daily. Expect some rain early and late in the season – June to August is the most popular time to visit and has the best weather.

GETTING THERE

LAN Airlines flies from Sydney to Cusco, via Santiago, Chile and Lima. Flights are also available from Melbourne and Brisbane through codeshare partners flying via Los Angeles. Return economy fares start from A\$3,303 and business class fares (not available on the Lima to Cusco leg) from A\$10,083. Total flight time is around 30 hours including stopovers. lan.com

WHERE TO STAY

All accommodation on the trek is taken care of. In Cusco, the Inkaterra La Casona has beautiful rooms from A\$418 per night. inkaterra.com/en/cusco

