Peru for Less

Peru Responsible Travel EBook

2000+ Testimonials

Learn, think, act, travel responsibly
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About our sustainable travel efforts

About our sustainable travel experts
We live in a time when air travel shrinks distances to provide unprecedented access to almost any place we want to visit. With sufficient time, effort and money, we can reach the most remote corners of the earth. But what are the impacts of quick access to areas that were previously difficult to visit? In South America specifically, what happens when year after year thousands of people hike to historic sites like Machu Picchu or when we venture to the deepest Amazon or when we visit a traditional community in search of authentic culture?

Responsible travel is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of sustainable, environmental, and culturally sensitive ways to practice tourism. The idea is that, rather than being a source of harm, tourism can be a tool for conservation and sustainable community development.

At Peru for Less we love to help fellow travelers plan their dream vacation to Peru and we find it only right to give back to the people and places that make this country so special. We feel that it is important to bring attention to and support the hard work of nonprofit organizations and eco-friendly businesses in Peru and to share some helpful tips for visiting Peru. By doing so, we hope to enable connections between conscious travelers and exciting sustainable efforts in Peru and to inspire everyone to travel responsibly.
TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY:
EASY AS
1, 2, 3
Responsible travel can take many forms, ranging from huge government initiatives to small personal decisions. At the level of the individual, traveling responsibly means being aware of the impacts of tourism and acting to make those impacts positive when possible. It’s about choosing where to travel (or not travel); what mode of transport to take; what to pack; where to buy, sleep, and eat. These are choices over which we have control. When we book with a travel agency or tour operator, it’s about ensuring that their policy is to educate travelers about the local culture and the environment, to give back to the communities they work in, to fulfill and exceed minimum workplace standards in their countries, and to support sustainability projects that intend to preserve the planet’s wonders for future generations.

Get off the big tour bus

In the long run, mass tourism is an unsustainable way to travel. Large packaged tours organize huge groups of travelers who move around in big buses, climb on and off to gawk at sights and snap photos, and interact only minimally with the people and culture of the host country. This mode of travel stretches the limits of natural resources, it dilutes authentic local traditions, and it often benefits a few big players at the expense of impacted communities.

When booking tours, it’s important to know whether the company employs local guides - people who grew up in the area can lend an insider perspective and a deeper understanding of the local culture and community.
Before you travel, take time to learn about the history of a place and some basic phrases in the local language. This will create a more meaningful travel experience and opportunities for connection and conversation. Pause to soak in a landscape; reflect and ask questions; absorb the local flavor and feel. Patronize locally owned and operated establishments. Getting off the beaten path is not just about seeking novel experiences, it’s about making real connections to the place we visit and the people who live there.

Local kids playing in Cusco - Ana Castañeda Cano/Peru for Less

Practical tips for responsible travel

Pre-trip pointers:

- Read about the place you’ll visit
- Ask your travel company about local guides, group sizes, and
accommodations

- Remove product packaging from things you buy in preparation for your trip and leave the trash at home
- Inquire about offsetting carbon emissions or carbon credit programs
- Research volunteer opportunities

During your trip trips:

- Recycle and never litter (even if the locals do)
- Conserve water and energy
- Buy local foods and souvenirs
- Respect local culture - ask first before shooting a photo
- Tread on marked trails only
- Take local transportation whenever possible
- Inquire about local sustainable projects

As conscious travelers, we can harness our love of travel to improve the places we visit for the people who live there and for future visitors.
The proposed construction of a new airport located in the Sacred Valley could quadruple the number of travelers able to witness the mystical ruins of Machu Picchu. On one hand this could stimulate the economy in an area of Peru still plagued by poverty. On the other, the concern that an eventual eight million travelers could threaten the preservation of famous ancient Inca ruins.

Currently, visitors to the former Inca civilization must first fly (or bus) to Cusco and then either take a four hour train to Aguas Calientes, the town nearest to the ruins, or trek the Inca Trail. Two million passengers fly into the Cusco airport annually. The new one, which crews would be constructed in the town of Chinchero, could handle as many as five million people by 2020, its projected opening date. In later years, upwards of eight million passengers would land on the runway each year.

“The airport would create a catalyst to bring in extra tourist dollars”, explained Fabricio Ortiz, the president of the Association of Tourist Guides in Machu Picchu (Asociación de Guías Profesionales en Turismo, Residentes de Machu Picchu). “Both the construction and completion phases of the airport itself would spawn job creation. The eight million travelers would need somewhere to sleep, eat and shop, and locals could fill that need, as well as their own financial needs, by working in the hotels, restaurants and stores that crop up”.

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But Ortiz, who also works as Peru for Less’ resident Machu Picchu expert and guide, also pointed out that while the development would quadruple the flow of finances through the Sacred Valley, he said it would also quadruple the number of people using the area’s resources, as well as the volume of pollutants pumped into the air and the foot traffic trekking through and on top of precious ruins. At risk is the delicate ecosystem as well as the locals who rely on it for their livelihoods.

“As a Cusqueño, I’m humbled that people from all over the world want to see Peru, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I am worried about the flood of tourists coming when the new airport is built,” said Ortiz. “Everything from the spike in visitors potentially harming the ruins to the infringing development inhibiting the local culture are concerns. And what about the flora and fauna here? Our ecosystem is incredibly delicate, so I worry about the impact of years of construction as well as the sharp increase in people coming in and out. The irony is, the ruins, local culture, and natural beauty are what sparked travel to Machu Picchu and they are what could end up being impacted the most.”
While the concerns surrounding a touristic boom are very real, Ortiz said a travelers' impact on Machu Picchu's ruin, ecosystem and people doesn’t have to be a negative one.

In Peru, tourism is a major economic driver. It not only creates jobs within the industry itself, but also within other industries through the “multiplier effect.” When hospitality workers, tour guides and travel agents earn money, they spend it in their local communities, which ends up creating more jobs, often times small-scale enterprises which benefit small or rural communities. And visits to hotels, airports and restaurants generate tax dollars which usually go back into the community via roads, schools and housing.

The economic benefits often spill over into social benefits. The money generated by tourism can improve an area’s access to clean drinking water, sanitation and medical care. In the Andes, tourism preserves the highland culture as locals feel not only encouraged but also proud to keep traditional cuisine, celebrations and handicrafts a part of everyday life. Additionally, tourism allows for an exchange between natives and foreigners that creates a better cultural understanding and raises awareness to societal issues like human rights and poverty.
Finally, while the tourism industry can pose a threat to the environment via the construction of hotels, restaurants, roads and airports like the one in the Sacred Valley, it can also work to protect Mother Earth. One example is tourism to the Manu Biosphere Reserve on the edge of the Amazon where travelers can witness first-hand the importance of protecting the plants and animals that inhabit it. On top of that, ecotourism creates jobs so locals have a means of income that goes beyond the detrimental activities that have plagued the jungle for decades like deforestation, illegal mining, poaching and over-fishing.

“Everything we do, no matter how big or small, makes an impact,” noted Ortiz. “While we have no control over the airport being built, we do have control over our day-to-day actions. When it comes to travel, it is each of our responsibilities to make sure the impact we are making is a positive one.”
Despite a long period of economic growth, non-urban Peru faces the problems common to developing countries, including some areas marked by notable poverty. According to the World Bank, Peru has a rural poverty rate of 18 percent (2012), though some sources estimate it is as high as 50 percent.

Given these facts, when travelers begin to prepare for a vacation in Peru, many feel motivated to help the people and communities they will encounter on their trip, and often ask, “What gifts can I bring?” The answer is not simple, and it raises a host of complex issues that underlay responsible gift-giving.

**Responsible gift-giving basics**

The basic rule of thumb for responsible gift-giving is to refrain from giving money or handouts directly to people, whether children or adults. In high tourism areas, even the most well-intentioned gift or cash donation can create a situation of dependence where locals come to rely on foreign visitors as sources of gifts.

The reality is that small gifts rarely result in any long-term improvement in people’s lives. If you want to take advantage of your trip to support local communities in Peru, the best strategy is to plan ahead and, working with a non-profit or locally-based organization, to identify exactly how you can offer assistance in a mutually-beneficial manner. The key is to give in a way that is sustainable and that has the broader effect of empowering local communities for the long-run.
Responsible gift-giving does not have to begin and end with your vacation. There are myriad long-term projects that you can get involved with – in housing, education, health care, conservation, and many other areas – that can make a huge impact on the things that really matter in people’s daily lives and that will give people the capacity to shape their own futures. In general, it pays to know that human interaction, compassion, understanding, and shared knowledge are far more valuable than your gifts. It’s about connection, and putting faces to places. It’s about mutual respect. Often, the best gift you can give is being there and making the effort to learn from one another.

So before you give a gift, enter these places with the honest, ambitious belief that maybe your desire to make a connection can make a difference, not just in the places you are visiting but also in yourself.

**Visiting local communities & programs**

The gift-giving question often arises when travelers arrange a homestay or book a tour or trek that will involve interactions with local communities. Naturally,
most of us want to provide some token of gratitude in exchange for the hospitality of a family or a community that receives us. In cases like this, ask your travel agency, tour operator, or guide to tell you exactly what gifts or items will be most useful to the host family or community.

Do some research on the community-based tours or programs in which you will be participating – it should be the community itself (not a foreigner or outside organization) that is determining its own needs and the extent of your participation in its projects. If the community has artisan traditions and textiles for sale, your purchase means that the money goes straight back to the artist and you’ll also get a one-of-a-kind souvenir.

**Giving goods**

In some cases, travelers do not directly participate in a community-based tourism project, but would still like to give something back. The same principles apply. Research and find a community-based organization or program that will accept contributions of money or supplies. Giving doesn’t have to be material – it can also involve ideas and talents. If you will be visiting a school, orphanage, or hospital, for instance, think about how you can contribute your specific skills or resources to a tangible project that they’ve developed.

School supplies are a universally useful gift throughout Peru. Pencils, pens, crayons, stickers, and notepads are all popular. Again, rather than giving to individuals at random, it is best to give to a school, organization, or teacher who can organize distribution based on need. Additionally, all cities and fair-sized towns in Peru have family-owned stores where you can buy items locally and at cheaper costs than back home. This brings two added bonuses: you can keep your commitment to packing light and you’ll also be supporting the local economy. Some items are best purchased once you’re in the country – for example, fresh fruits to bring to a host family in a remote region or new Spanish-language (or bilingual) books and educational materials.

It may not always be possible, but try to establish a relationship with the children, community, or organization that you will be giving to. Giving gifts as tokens of friendship or close association always has more value than trinkets given out of a sense of obligation.
Gift-giving guidelines

• Don’t give candy, cash, or handouts
• Don’t give trinkets unless they have some special significance to you (you made them or they are souvenirs that mark where you’re from)
• Don’t give books or other reading materials not in the native language
• Don’t give clothing – unless specifically requested; and never send secondhand underpants

*These are just guidelines. If in doubt, consult with your tour guide to get a deeper sense of the local situation and to decide whether or not to give.
From the iconic Inca Trail to the stunning Cordillera Blanca mountain range in the north, Peru is a wonderland of endless trekking opportunities. Yet, there’s a real risk of causing irreversible damage on the natural beauty with the increasing number of tourists visiting these areas every season. While most trekkers won’t hike independently in Peru, but with a guide, it’s still important to be aware of positive hiking and camping practices to keep the environment intact.

**Respect Mother Nature**

Andean waterways and lakes are fragile ecosystems and sources of drinking water for local people, so don’t be tempted to bathe or wash clothes en route. Most guided treks provide you with warm water at the start and end of each day to wash with; just make sure you dispose of used water carefully – at least 65 feet (20 m) from any natural water source. After all, part of the experience of an adventurous trek is to go a few days without a proper shower.

Stick to marked paths to avoid more erosion – tempting as shortcuts might look, trampling boots damage the fabric of the hillside.

The Cusco region is a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site famous for its species of rare flora and fauna – so leave them where they look best – in their natural homes.
Code green actions for campers

Be considerate when camping by leaving no sign you were there. Don’t camp in ruins as ancient walls could get damaged. Campfires are risky so stick to camping stoves for cooking and extra layers for keeping warm.

Carry all waste off the mountain and keep an eye on other members of your group and ensure they do the same.

Take plenty of waste bags to carry out trash; or even better, minimize the amount of waste you’ll produce by taking your food and drink in reusable containers.

Always use purpose-built toilets along trails, but if needed, make sure you’re at least 150 feet (45 m) from both the path and any water source, dig a small hole and bury well.

It’s important to be a conscientious outdoor adventurer. Follow these guidelines about trekking responsibly and keep the Peruvian landscapes pristine not just for future generations of travelers but also for the plants, animals, and people that call the region home.
As travelers, we know that reducing our collective carbon footprint is sometimes the last thing we think about when preparing for a trip. But in reality, being green is the most important thing you can do during your adventures.

Being an informed and environmentally conscious traveler is just one facet of promoting sustainability within the tourism industry in order to preserve and protect the environment as well as the local cultures.

Plastic is harmful to the health of land and sea life, so making a wholehearted effort to use less of it on your journey will make a big difference, especially to the local people you meet along the way. After all, your travel destination is their home. On your next vacation, consider these eco-friendly, plastic-reducing tips to ensure that you leave the tiniest, almost non-existent carbon footprint possible.

1. Bring a reusable water bottle

Unfortunately, consuming bottled water in Latin America is unavoidable. Because of the poor water sanitation infrastructure in many countries, it is inadvisable to drink water from the tap. But there are ways to reduce how many plastic bottles you consume throughout your trip.

First, bring a reusable water bottle, or purchase one at a local market. This will allow you to refill it an infinite number of times. Buy water in bulk and leave it in your hotel room for use throughout your stay. Many grocery and convenience stores sell bottled water by the liter or more, and often times an attendant will help you carry it a short distance for a few soles.
ABOUT PERU TOURIST WATER

Average number of tourists to Peru each year: 3,000,000
Average liters of water each drinks: 2
Average length of visit: 11 days

= 66,000,000 bottles each year

Earth is: 24,860 miles around pole-to-pole

Feet in a mile: 5,280 feet
24860 x 5280 x 12

= 1,575,129,600 inches

If each 1L bottle is 12 inches tall...
1,575,129,600 / 12 = 131,260,800
131260800 / 66,000,000

= 2

... you could wrap the plastic bottles (lined up end-to-end) around the earth twice.
2. Inquire about natural water purification techniques

This is very useful if you plan to do a lot of hiking during your trip. Water from the tap or fresh spring water can be made safe to drink through a variety of methods.

One of the easiest ways is by purchasing water purification tablets before your trip from a sporting goods store like REI or Big 5. Another option is a UV light stick that neutralizes harmful bacteria present in untreated water. Then there’s the old fashioned boiling technique.

3. Reusable bags are essential

One of the best ways to reduce your plastic consumption while traveling is to stash your stuff in reusable cotton or recycled plastic bags. Bring as many as you think you might need. You can also purchase a beautifully handcrafted bag along your journey to provide you with a tangible, lasting souvenir, as well as the warm fuzzy feeling of knowing that you contributed to the local economy and did Mother Nature a favor.

4. Reevaluate your toiletries

While travel size toiletries are convenient, they can come at the cost of the environment. Instead of buying lots of toiletries in small plastic bottles, consider making little switches in the products you decide to bring along. It can make a big difference for the environment. Try bringing bar soap in a reusable soap traveler container. This is not really a huge sacrifice because many body washes that are sold in plastic bottles also come in the bar form, such as Dove, Caress, or Lever. You can also bring a razor that uses refillable cartridges or that is electric, instead of using disposable ones. To go the extra mile, purchase biodegradable, chemical-free bath products.

5. Pack your own cutlery

Plastic eating utensils are one of the most harmful wastes for the environment and your health. Plastics cutlery and Styrofoam to-go containers are made from #6 PS (polystyrene) which is made from petroleum by-products. These products are made to be lightweight which means the wind can easily carry them into natural habitats like the ocean or other sensitive ecosystems. Pair that with the fact that they take millions of years to decompose and you’ve got a few environmental issues on (and
in) your hands. You reduce your plastic use during your travels by bringing your own set of eating utensils or requesting metal ones at the hotel.
Traveling to Peru can be an incredibly rewarding cultural experience, one that inspires many of us to want to give back to the local people that help make our trip so special. In a country with a rapidly growing, but still developing economy, there is plenty you can do to support the local communities that are most impacted by the booming tourism industry.

**Buy local**

Try buying Peruvian when in Peru. This includes everything from food, to clothes, to souvenirs. A fun way to support the local economy is by sampling the local cuisine rather than sticking to what’s familiar from home – chances are your favorite meal won’t taste the same anyway. Patronize independent, locally-owned businesses rather than chain establishments. You’ll be putting your money into local hands rather than those of distant global companies.

The same goes for souvenir-shopping – it’s much better to take home a genuine memento of the country, handcrafted in the place you visited, rather than a mass-produced trinket imported from China. Just double-check that what you’re buying isn’t plundered from the jungle, made from an endangered species, or illegal to buy and take home with you.

**Check credentials**

Make sure the company you’re booking a trek or tour with treats its guides and porters fairly and looks out for their welfare. Peruvian law states that porters should receive a minimum wage of S/.43 (~US$15) per day and should not carry
more than the maximum weight of 44 pounds (20 kg). Still some companies choose to take advantage of their porters by underpaying them and overworking them.

Before booking with a company, review the company’s website carefully and ask the right questions:

- Does the company follow the legal weight carry limits for porters?
- Are porters given the right equipment, clothing and shoes for the trek?
- How does the company respect the local culture and environments the tour will take you into?

**Sleep easy**

Peru’s growing number of eco-friendly lodges and hotels makes it easier to reduce your impact on the local environment when you travel. Accommodations that emphasize sustainability also tend to pay fair wages to their workers and utilize local resources and products, such as hand-made furniture or foods from nearby permaculture farms.

Ecotourism is most developed in Peru in the tourist hotspots of the Amazon and Andes regions.

Here are some of our favorite Amazon ecolodges:

- **Posada Amazonas** is a leading example of a responsible ecotourism project in the southern jungle region of Peru. The lodge is owned by the local Infierno community and managed with Rainforest Expeditions, a Peruvian company committed to combining tourism with environmental education. Travelers are not only given a chance to see jungle wildlife at Posada, but also give back to the community.

- Travelers don’t have to sacrifice comfort to travel responsibly in the jungle. **Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica** is a luxury ecolodge located in the heart of the lush Madre de Dios region in southern Peru that’s committed to ecological preservation. Enjoy the comforts of a thoughtfully designed jungle lodge, while also traveling responsibly.
Homestays are also a great way to ensure your money is going directly to local people – and you’ll get to experience staying with a family while learning firsthand about their life and culture.

**Get involved**

Your participation in community-based tourism projects has the effect of increasing demand for this type of vacation in Peru, so get involved when you can. Pair your own passions with the needs of Peru. Some examples are:

- Providing medical care and expertise
- Teaching English (or other language) at a school
- Helping unskilled workers with job training and professional development classes
From booking an outdoor excursion to enjoying 5-star luxury comforts, the decisions you make about what to do and where to stay on your vacation can help leave a positive impact on the places you visit. Here are 10 easy ways to be a responsible traveler.

**Unplug before you leave:** Unplug those energy-sucking appliances, including plasma televisions, video games, laptops, DVD players and cell phone chargers before leaving on your trip. Each year about 10 percent of all energy is wasted in the United States because appliances are left plugged-in when they’re not in use. It’s not only the environmentally friendly thing to do, but you’ll also see the savings on your next energy bill.

**Minimize your carbon footprint:** Cut your emissions and plan a travel itinerary with environment-friendly transportation: bike, walk and take public transit. These earth-friendly alternatives are often cheaper than paying for a cab or renting a car and offer a unique way to observe and interact with locals.

**Reuse & Reduce:** Carry your travel purchases and souvenirs in reusable bags to cut out waste so that less plastic packaging finds its way to the trash and landfills. Additionally, instead of printing out all your travel information on numerous pieces of paper, download maps and travel guides to your smartphone or tablet to reference throughout your trip. Most hotels, restaurants and cafes throughout Peru offer free wireless Internet, which means that your travel information will be at your fingertips whenever you need it.
Recycle: Think twice before throwing your recyclables into the trash even when you don’t see a recycling bin. Each city in Peru has different recycling resources so ask your hotel where you can deposit your recyclables.

Use water wisely: Stay hydrated during your trip by carrying a reusable water bottle that you can refill from a larger gallon source; smaller plastic water bottles create a lot of waste. Pack reusable containers to carry food and snacks to further reduce packaging.

Voluntourism: There are a huge number of nonprofit organizations in Peru that could benefit from your support. Before buying gifts to share, be sure to ask your travel agency or guide what items will be the most useful.

Respect nature: Environmental problems don’t go on vacation when you take a trip. In Peru, stay on marked trails while trekking in the Andes and stay with your guide on a visit to the jungle. Avoid disturbing the natural environment or interfering with natural behavior by feeding wild animals.
Responsible travel is not just about preserving the environment and supporting local communities, it’s also about experiencing a new culture, sharing and learning something new. Peru’s rich culture is one of the absolute highlights of traveling to this country. Some cultural aspects are plainly evident, while picking up on other practices requires a careful eye and ear for detail.

**Andean tradition**

On a trip to Peru you’ll likely come across the word *Quechua*. The Quechua are described as the direct descendants of the Incas, but in the present-day, they comprise several indigenous groups scattered throughout South America. The Quechua culture is still very prevalent in the music, dance, dress, food, and language of the Andean region in Peru.

The vibrant textiles sold in artisan shops in Peru have become a staple souvenir among travelers and play an important economic and cultural role in many Andean communities. Women generally wear skirts and petticoats, while men typically wear multicolored ponchos. To make these textiles, the wool of llamas, alpacas and sheep is spun, dyed, and woven into beautiful blankets and clothing. These textiles display intricate patterns and designs that communicate symbols and myths that are locally important.
Andean culture is also reflected in the local cuisine. The appearance of cuy, or guinea pig, on a restaurant menu may come as a shock to unprepared travelers. Guinea pigs are not considered pets in Peru, but rather a delicious food delicacy. Eating cuy is a tradition from Inca times, when the rodent was typically eaten by royalty. Today guinea pig can be ordered grilled, roasted or deep fried, served whole or chopped into smaller pieces, and the dish is still reserved for special occasions.

The spiritual beliefs of modern Peruvians, especially those of who are raised in traditional Andean communities, have deep roots in Inca mythology. One example is the continuing reverence shown to high mountain peaks, which are considered sacred and believed to be the dwelling places of powerful spirits called apus. Today people make offerings to the apus by gathering food, drink, coca leaves, and other plants as a symbol of gratitude for all that the spirits provide.

Cusco, the former Inca capital, has twelve sacred apus – one of which is Machu Picchu. Many travelers come to Peru to see these impressive Inca ruins but it’s important to remember that for locals, these are more than just ruins, they are sacred, historical places. Being environmentally friendly is not just common sense, it’s also a way to demonstrate cultural awareness and sensitivity.
Operating on “Peruvian time”

When it comes to social events, it may be helpful to know that many people from Peru operate on *la hora peruana* or “Peruvian time.” In other words, the cultural norm is to arrive late. If you make plans to meet your new Peruvian friends for dinner at 7:30 p.m., chances are they will show up closer to 8 p.m. One important exception to Peruvian time is for official business or travel matters, such as a flights, bus departures, or tour schedules, and it’s best to show up on time.

Common courtesy

The real cultural experience begins when you encounter a language barrier. Spanish is the official language of Peru, and the local people you encounter will most likely speak little or no English. Before your trip it’s a good idea to familiarize yourself with some Spanish phrases and carry a travel-size dictionary on your trip. Raising your voice while repeating your question to a Spanish speaking audience won’t help the situation. Patience and a little non-verbal communication – hand gestures, facial expressions and writing down the names of destinations – can usually do the trick and most people are happy to try to help you out.

In general, Peru is a conservative country and as a traveler it’s best to dress the part. What you consider a cute little outfit might be culturally offensive and risqué to some people in Peru, especially in churches. When in doubt, cover more skin to avoid drawing attention.

In Cusco you will see local women wearing bright local textiles against spectacular scenes right out of National Geographic and you’ll likely want to take a picture to capture the moment. Be respectful and make sure you ask before taking pictures of people, especially if you sense they’re uncomfortable with your attention. Some families pose for pictures with travelers as a source of income. Be prepared to pay a tip of S/.1-3 for an impromptu photoshoot with locals.

There’s something to learn with every new, strange or exciting cultural encounter. Educate yourself about the local ways in Peru and then soak up the experience: You’ll return home with more than just pictures.
Machu Picchu is one of those places that makes the top 10 of almost every bucket list. It’s not just the ruins that call curious travelers from nearly every corner of the world, but also the robust culture, beautiful landscapes and endless sense of adventure.

But, with millions of travelers visiting every single year, Machu Picchu and the surrounding area are at risk, both environmentally and culturally speaking.

That’s why we at Peru for Less sat down with our resident Machu Picchu expert, Fabricio Ortiz, to get tips and tricks on what steps visitors can take to preserve Machu Picchu, along with the ecosystem, customs and lesser-known ruins that surround the Inca citadel.

1. DON’T get naked

Over the past decade, Machu Picchu and Cusco have become havens for traveler from all over the world, and in some cases there have been visitors who have been less than respectful of the sacred ruins. In March of 2014, a number of young tourists decided to strip naked and expose themselves during their visit to Machu Picchu as part of the “naked tourism” fad. While streaking in some parts of the world can make for a good story and interesting pictures, doing it in Peru can make for some serious trouble, especially now that the government is cracking down on those who expose their cracks. Their obscene act ended in detainment and eviction from Cusco.
2. **DO stay on the trail**

The trail that winds through Machu Picchu not only protects the ruins, but also the people visiting. At more than five centuries old, some of the structure is worn, cracked and deteriorating. Meandering from the set path could not only further damage the walls and flooring, but also lead to a visitor hurting themselves. After all, the citadel is on the side of a mountain and it’s a long way to the bottom.

3. **DON’T touch the ruins**

While it’s tempting to touch the massive rocks chiseled by the hands of the Incas, it’s a bad idea. Lotions, sunscreens and bug sprays all contain chemicals that can damaged the rock surface. Additionally, thousands visit Machu Picchu every single day; imagine the wear and tear that would take place if each of them dragged their fingers along the citadel’s surfaces.
4. **DO keep distance from the llamas**

Although they are cute, snuggly looking and incredibly used to humans, llamas are known to spit, charge and even bite if they feel threatened. The llamas, who the Incas openly worshipped, call Machu Picchu home — be sure to respect them on their turf. On top of that, they aren’t always the cleanest animals and carry disease, fleas and mites.

5. **DON’T pollute**

This not only goes for waste pollution, such as bags and bottles, but also noise pollution. It not only disturbs the plant and animal life, but also the experience for other travelers. Many of them have traveled great distances to experience Machu Picchu, and some even view the sacred site as a spiritual one.

6. **DO keep the entrance ticket**

Watching the sun appear over the horizon, followed by the fog and clouds dissipating into thin air and finally, witnessing the sun set into the majestic mountains makes for a very long day at Machu Picchu. Eating and going to the bathroom inside the ruins are strictly prohibited. Luckily, there are a couple of restaurant choices and clean restrooms just outside the gates. Head there to relieve hunger (or yourself). Keeping the ticket ensures re-entrance.
7. **DON’T litter**

This goes for not only items like plastic bottles and wrappers, but also fruit and vegetable waste like apple cores, as well as cigarette butts and chewing gum. Don’t throw anything on the ground of Machu Picchu that you wouldn’t want on the floor of your own home.

8. **DO bring a reusable water bottle**

All trash, including plastic drinking bottles, has to be shipped from Machu Picchu to Cusco City via train. Help reduce waste by carrying water in a bottle that doesn’t get tossed when emptied.
9. DON’T buy products made from protected animals

Peru is home to dozens of endangered or protected plant and animal species, including jaguars, pumas, caymans and monkeys. Never buy a product made of a threatened plant or animal species.

10. DO respect locals

Make sure you are asking for permission before snapping a shot of the locals clad in intricately sewn outfits or of government workers like soldiers and police officers. Additionally, locals follow Catholicism, *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) or a hybrid of the two. Observe the sanctity of their religion. When the town are celebrating their patron saint or other religious festivals, make sure to be respectful during the street processions and moments of silence.

11. DON’T steal

This goes for pieces of the ruins and the natural flora and fauna that call them home.
As a responsible traveler, it’s your initiative to ask the right questions and work with a trekking company that treats its porters fairly. As Peru’s most sought after trek, the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu does not permit pack animals, so local porters are contracted to carry the camping equipment and personal belongings of each trekking group. Unfortunately, licensed companies still fall short of satisfying legal standards to protect porter welfare and “too good to be true” prices come at the expense of unfairly low wages.

Porter welfare at a glance

Choosing a reputable tour operator for your Inca Trail adventure begins with an understanding of the unfair treatment and work conditions experienced by some porters.

The Peruvian government introduced the Porter Law in 2003 that set work standards. Among these legal requirements, porters should carry a load weighing no more than 44 pounds (20 kg) and receive a minimum wage of S/.45 (~US$16) per day.
To enforce Porter Law standards, the pack of each porter is weighed at the beginning of the Inca Trail and again at a second checkpoint. If the pack exceeds 44 pounds (20 kg), the tour operator receives a fine and too many notifications will result in the company losing their license for the Inca Trail. Some operators cut expenses by using fewer porters, resulting in unfair treatment. These companies might ask trekkers to carry their own bags across the checkpoints so that their pack weight isn’t considered. Then, after the checkpoint the trekker’s pack weight is distributed and loaded to the bags of the porters whose own bags temporarily satisfied regulation. Additionally, of the 44 pounds (20 kg) of pack weight, 11 pounds (5 kg) are permitted by law for the personal equipment of the porter. Companies can also limit the personal weight of each porter so that there’s room for more group camping equipment: such action often results in porters not having adequate clothing and personal gear to keep them warm at such high altitudes.

Many porters are also landowners who farm crops or raise animals and earn money working the Inca Trail to support their families. By law they should earn at least S/.45 (≈US$16) a day, an amount slightly higher than Peru’s legal minimum wage. Licensed tour operators sometimes reward the hard work of their porters with higher wages, but porters are often paid much less. Many porters don’t complain and settle for wages as low as S/.30 (≈US$11) per day while signing payment receipts for S/.45 (≈US$16) because they don’t want to lose their jobs.

Find a reputable tour operator
Every year the Peruvian government grants or renews a certain number of Peruvian-owned trekking companies with licenses to take groups on the Inca Trail. Just because a company has a license doesn’t mean they treat their porters fairly.

As you narrow down your Inca Trail options, apply your knowledge of Peru’s Porter Law to judge a company’s ethical practices. Compare tour operator websites and read for any mention of legal standards and involvement with local Andean communities. Read client testimonials from additional online sources and ask seasoned Inca Trail trekkers about their own experience and recommendations.

Of the companies licensed to work the Inca Trail, Wayki Trek is a good go-to provider. Wayki Trek is a pioneer of sustainable tourism in Peru that prides itself in working with rural communities so that local businesses benefit directly. Among many social projects, the Wayki team has established communal libraries, workshops that help preserve local identity and culture, and a medical center that serves a remote Andean village.

Questions to consider:

Consider the following details to ensure porter welfare before booking your reservations for the Inca Trail:

Why is this price so much lower? “To good to be true prices” are a red flag for porter welfare. Often companies offering severely reduced prices do so because they cut corners with weight restrictions and pay their porters very low wages. It’s unlikely that porter welfare is high on a company’s list if they charge under US$500 (2014) for a four-day Inca Trail trek.

How many porters will be accompanying your group on the Inca Trail? The number of porters on a trek depends on the size of the group. Responsible tour operators generally use about three porters for every two trekkers.

Who are you booking your Inca Trail tour with? A limited number of Peruvian-owned trekking companies can lead groups on the Inca Trail. For this reason, it’s not uncommon for tour companies selling package deals and customized trips to partner with these licenses trekking companies when offering travelers the Inca Trail trek. Tell a tour company representative that porter welfare is important to you. Inquire about the accommodations the trekking company provides its porters on the Inca Trail and ask how they comply with legal standards.
Thank your porters

Porters are a trekkers best friend on the Inca Trail and showing your appreciation is important.

During the trek: Interact with the porters on your trek. Take the initiative to spark up a conversation and learn about their life in the Andes. If you don’t speak Spanish, a smile and simple gracias will show your gratitude for their help.

After the trek: Tipping is a nice way to thank your porter for a job well done. The amount is up to your discretion, but most Inca Trail operators suggest a collective S/.50-60 (~US$18-22) tip for each porter from the group. This may not seem like much by western standards, but the amount should be seen in perspective to country standards. Tipping too much might encourage some porters to celebrate by spend their additional cash on drinks after the trek. This obviously is not the case for all porters, but it does happen. Donations, such as clothing and school supplies, are universally useful and a nice way to thank your porters in addition to a standard tip.

Ethical trekking is becoming an increasingly important issue in Peru. Support these important efforts by looking out for porter welfare and choose a reputable tour operator for your adventurous trek on the Inca Trail.
The **International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD)** is a global network of organizations that works with rural communities in developing countries to improve their access to mobility and other services.

In Peru, researchers for IFRTD have been working with indigenous communities along the Cenepa River. Located 40 miles (~65 km) from the border with Ecuador in the far northern province of Amazonas, the Cenepa district is home to indigenous Awajun and Wampi communities who depend on the river for their primary mode of transport. While Peru has one of the fastest-growing economies in South America, indigenous Amazonian populations like the Awajun and the Wampi have been left behind. According to Peruvian government statistics, these communities live in extreme poverty.

**Complex concerns, innovative solutions**

The villages of the Awajun and Wampi are scattered along the Cenepa River and are almost totally isolated. To access health services, the villagers must travel to health centers in larger towns downriver. But river transport – by canoe, peque peque, skiff, motor boat, or cargo boat – is slow and unreliable. It can take hours, sometimes days, to reach the nearest town. Even when transport is available, people rarely have money to pay for services or the high costs of fuel and they must go into debt or negotiate an exchange to obtain mobility. In the rainy season, river travel becomes unsafe for smaller vessels and flooding often destroys the makeshift ports and jetties.
The economic restrictions on mobility inhibit the capacity of patients to seek attention for an injury or illness, and by the same token, it restricts the ability of doctors, nurses, and other medically trained staff to get to isolated communities to provide even routine care. There are 12 health posts and one health center in the capital to serve the communities, but these are ill-equipped and patients in need of greater intervention must travel four hours by river from the health center in Huampani to the closest hospital in Santa María de Nieva.

The Peruvian government provides small rations of gasoline to transport patients and to aid medical staff visits to local communities, but this is rarely enough to satisfy actual needs. This confluence of factors – poverty, the high cost of fuel, lack of transport services, lack of funding, and geographical distance – is producing deadly consequences.

The leading causes of death among Awajun and Wampi are diseases that can be easily treated in most other parts of Peru, including acute diarrhea, respiratory illness, typhoid, and intestinal parasites. Among women, childbirth is a leading cause of death due to lack of midwives and/or inadequate medical equipment. The ingestion of detergents by young women with the intent of suicide is also a disturbing trend in Cenepa.
Messages from Amazonas, a social media project

In 2009, IFRTD armed villagers with mobile phones, camcorders, and wind-up chargers. According to Matt Barker, a volunteer with IFRTD, the idea is to use social media to “overcome the enormous distances between the community, the outside world, and the policymakers who can improve their quality of life.” Equipped with the proper tools, the villagers can explain in their own words the dire problems that they face. The stories are then broadcast to a global public on blogs, Facebook, and YouTube.

The videos are filmed against the backdrop of the rainforest, with green jungle growth all around and a cacophonous symphony of chirps, trills, and twitters as the soundtrack. The self-selected interviewees share heart-wrenching accounts of how this health crisis affects them. In the video messages, the speakers testify in voices that are tentative, low with sadness, sometimes strident with anger. “We are timid,” says one Awajun man.

The villagers recall the illness of a wife, the death of a son, the suicide of a daughter. Their words palpably convey the frustration of being thwarted and unable to take action to help a loved one. “I think we should be able to save children’s lives,” Rafael Ukuncham says in his testimonial. “We die quickly because we don’t know how to prevent or treat illness.”

ITRFD argues that, given the situation of extreme poverty in these communities, local and regional governments should recognize the lack of mobility and access to health care as basic problems that need real solutions. The videos provide a call to action to policy-makers in Peru to take responsibility for providing adequate access to medical services.

In her video testimonial, Delicia Santiak talks about her daughter. The young woman had an argument with her husband. Disconsolate and depressed, she ingested a toxic plant. The family was unable to find a motorboat or even a canoe to take her to a health center and the daughter died. Later, Delicia was told that the health center would not have been able to treat her daughter anyway because they are not supplied with the right medicines. At the end of her message, Delicia states, “I share my story with you in the hope that someone takes notice and can help us.”
Not far from Cusco, the Vilcanota River winds its way through the Sacred Valley of the Incas, all the way to Machu Picchu. Some of the villages here are rather well-known – Pisac for its traditional market, Ollantaytambo for its monolithic ruins – but venture off the beaten path, climb up the hills that overlook the valley and you’ll find incredible places that rarely make it into the guidebooks.

**Wisdom from the Andes**

In the Sacred Valley of Peru, eight Quechua-speaking communities have come together to form an association called [La Tierra de los Yachaqs](https://www.latierradelosyachaqs.com). With training and guidance from Codespa, an NGO based in Spain, the communities have opened their doors to visitors interested in rural community-based tourism. All profits generated from tours, hikes, and homestays go directly back to community households. The additional income enables families to develop sustainable community projects while also allowing them to conserve their cultural heritage.

The Quechua word *yachaq*, similar to *sabio* in Spanish, refers to someone who possesses extraordinary knowledge about the world. The Andean communities of the Sacred Valley refer to themselves as *los yachaqs* because they have learned to live from and with the earth without taxing natural resources. Over many generations, they have developed myths and legends about how the world works, stories that explain how to balance what we take from the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) with what we give back. This ancient wisdom is applied to all areas of life, including textile arts, ceramics, and handicrafts, food preparation, agriculture, ceremonies and rituals.
The eight communities that form the association are spread out in the area between Pisac and Ollantaytambo. A few communities maintain the traditional organizational structure of Inca times, with a varayoc, or maximum authority, who is elected every two years and who sounds a pututo, or conch shell, to summon the village for gatherings.

The communities subsist mostly by pasturing llamas, alpacas, and sheep, and by cultivating crops of corn, potatoes, beans, quinoa, and tarwi. They use the traditional agriculture tools of their ancestors, like the chaquitaclla, a type of foot plow. For planting and harvesting, they carefully monitor calendar cycles and, when the time is right, they perform rituals and make offerings to the Pachamama and to the apus (mountain spirits). For communities that literally live off the seeds that they sow, ancestral knowledge is more than just a link between the past and the present; it is what sustains them.

**Experience La Tierra de los Yachaqs**

To participate in one of La Tierra de los Yachaqs’ programs is to experience the Andes in a way few people do, seen from the perspective of peoples who have
been rooted here since time immemorial. Plants, animals, and even the ancestral paths that wind their way up and down the slopes of mountains – all of these acquire new dimensions, properties that remain unseen unless you know what to look for.

Excursions and activities are organized around themes such as Andean textiles and handicrafts, ethnobotany, agriculture and animal husbandry. Most activities are carried out in Quechua, the first language of the communities, but an interpreter is always available to translate. With every activity, visitors gain tremendous insight into how these communities use ancestral knowledge to forge relationships with the nature that surrounds them.

To give one example, “Unveiling Andean Textiles” is taught by weavers who explain the iconography of textiles and who share the stories that are woven into every garment and piece of cloth. The weavers also demonstrate the process of making textiles from start to finish: shearing wool, coloring with natural plant dyes, spinning, weaving, creating shapes and patterns that represent cultural knowledge. This is the process for making the bright clothing that has become a distinctive symbol of Peru’s living indigenous heritage.

Additional activities include learning agricultural techniques from farmers, hiking on the mountainside in search of plants, or climbing to highest altitude pastures to see flocks of camelids grazing among the clouds. Other hikes go between destinations of great local importance, such as Huchuy Qosqo, the Perolniyoc waterfalls, and the Inca quarries at Cachiccata. Homestays are also offered on a limited basis.

For the Yachaqs, the connection to nature is not automatic. Rituals and daily practices are required to maintain and refresh the link. It involves the work of sorting through a pouch of coca leaves to find the three, perfectly shaped, blemish-free leaves needed for a K’intu, a giving of thanks to the Pachamama for all that she provides.
Laura Bennett is the Programs Director for Awamaki, a nonprofit organization based in Ollantaytambo, a small town in Peru’s Sacred Valley that’s best known for housing the railway station you’re sure to pass through on a trip to or from Machu Picchu. We caught up with Laura to glean some of her insights about the organization and to learn how you can get involved.

**PFL: Firstly, how would you introduce Awamaki to people unfamiliar with the organization?**

**Laura:** Awamaki is a Peruvian-American non-profit organization working in and around Ollantaytambo. We run three programs in women’s fair trade artisan cooperatives, sustainable tourism, and community capacity-building, and we believe in using a social enterprise model to achieve our goals.

At the heart of Awamaki is our work with five women’s artisan cooperatives, providing them with skills-based trainings and most importantly, connecting them to global markets, enabling them to earn an income to invest in their families and transform their communities. The women in these five cooperatives make all the woven and knitted products such as hats, gloves, scarves, baby booties and legwarmers that we sell in our fair trade store in Ollantaytambo as well as to a number of international clients. We sell woven textiles straight from the loom, and we also sell fashionable products that feature the textiles, for example shoulder bags, purses, and iPod cases.
Our sustainable tourism program grew out people’s desire to see where the beautiful textiles of Peru are made, who makes them, and how. We offer a variety of tours out to local communities and in Ollantaytambo itself, we run workshops and have a small Language Centre, where visitors can take lessons in Spanish or Quechua.

Our community education program is the hub of all of the many capacity-building workshops that we provide for the more than 150 women that we work with. We give intensive capacity building in technical, administrative and leadership skills – everything from knitting or hosting tourists in their homes, to business administration skills. We provide English and computer classes to local people in Ollantaytambo, many of whom work in the tourism industry and for whom these skills are vital. We also carry out regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure that we are having a positive impact through our work.

**PFL: What part do you play in the organization?**

**Laura:** As the program’s director, my role is to manage the staff here in Ollantaytambo and ensure that the programmatic work we do stays on mission and
true to the vision of Awamaki. A large part of my role is day to day troubleshooting and problem solving, whether that is something as simple as contracting an electrician to fix a broken light, or decision-making in more complex areas such as how to best assist our cooperative members affected by flooding during the rainy season. I also play an active role in the Network of NGOs in the Sacred Valley, and I act as the representative for Awamaki for any visitors or potential collaborators.

**PFL: Which is your personal favorite Awamaki project and why?**

**Laura:** My favorite Awamaki project is our Cooperative of Spanish teachers. We worked with Fair Services in Cusco (an established Spanish school) to develop a specific six-month training program for the women, many of who are young single mothers, with minimal formal education or training and who would otherwise struggle for an income. The women have since then been very successfully teaching one-on-one lessons to Awamaki volunteers and tourists.

The reason that they are my favorite group is due to their passion for learning and self-development, and the amazing personal connections that they make with the volunteers and tourists. They have even given up their own spare time to paint the walls and varnish the floors!

**PFL: What’s next for Awamaki?**

**Laura:** We have worked very hard on building what we do, so now we’re turning our focus to how we do it. In other words, we are continuing to improve the quality of what we do across all programs. In the Women’s Cooperatives program, this has meant working with all of our women’s cooperatives to improve the quality of the products they are making, whether that is through workshops in measurements for our weavers; or taking our knitters to visit other cooperatives that are at a more advanced stage of exporting internationally so that they can really understand the importance of producing high quality products; or training our artisans in Ollantaytambo based on tourists’ feedback so that they can constantly improve their workshops.

With an improvement in the quality of our offerings across the board, we hope to be in a position to further promote Awamaki so that we can place more income in the hands of the women that we support.
**PFL: How can travelers get involved in Awamaki’s work in the Sacred Valley – from quick ‘n’ easy options to bigger commitments?**

**Laura:** There are many ways to get involved with Awamaki’s work! If you’re passing through Ollantaytambo, visit our Fair Trade store and buy one of the beautiful handmade products. The majority of the proceeds from the sale go straight back to the very same woman who made the product. Or sign up for a day workshop in Peruvian cooking, wood carving, basket weaving, or pottery, all led by local artisans. Or go on one of our Quechua Community Visits where you can see our women weavers at work, and even learn to weave your own bracelet to take home.

To immerse yourself longer in the culture, opt for one of our homestays in Ollantaytambo – a real chance to interact with a local family. You might even learn some Quechua over the dinner table!

If you have a month or so to spare, take part in our Service Travel program that combines tourism activities with service projects through Awamaki and some of our partner NGOs. This is a great way to fit in all the amazing touristic experiences available while also giving something back to the community through voluntary projects. And for people who really want to get involved at the deepest level, we have a fantastic volunteer program for 12 weeks, 6 months or even longer.
Voluntourism is a great way to obtain a rich cultural experience while giving back to the local community. There are several nonprofit organizations throughout Peru doing amazing work, each offering a unique volunteer experience.

Combine her passions for travel and giving back is what brought Brynna B. to Peru. The enriching trip and the people that Brynna worked with during her time left a lasting impression on her and marked a shift from wanting not just to travel, but to live and work abroad. In our interview with Brynna, she shares her experience of working with local women in Puno, gives us some advice about volunteering and describes what it was like to dance in a Peruvian festival.

**PFL:** What sparked your interest in volunteering in Peru?

**Brynna:** I studied abroad in Costa Rica during my junior year in college and decided that I absolutely wanted to go abroad again so I starting looking for ways to travel and still get school credit. While I was in Costa Rica I watched the movie “Motorcycle Diaries” and decided that my next trip abroad would be Peru and from there I started looking for internship opportunities in Peru.

I originally looked at opportunities in Cusco, but ultimately ended up going with [FSD](#) who only worked in Puno. They provide microfinance loans to various women’s groups in Puno and they also offer different types of workshops on reproductive health, nutrition, budgeting, and basic accounting. I was able to use the internship to get credit for my Sociology degree and went to Puno for my winter semester in 2007. When I signed up for my internship, I knew absolutely nothing about Puno (and not very much about Peru), but I bought a bunch of guidebooks and started reading up.

**PFL:** What type of work did you do?
Brynna: Half my time as a volunteer was spent organizing the nonprofit's micro-finance documents and accounts. I passed handwritten records into computer files and trained the staff to access all of the account information in Excel files.

The remainder of my work was to meet with and monitor the various women’s groups in different neighborhoods in Puno. Each group had monthly meeting to review their microcredit accounts. The group acted as a “backer” to the individual women that took out loans, in that the women would have to be part of one of the groups we worked with and receive training on how to use and budget the money. Most of the loans were pretty small (S/. 400, or less than US$145) and the payment schedule was based on the amount of the loan. In some cases one of the women would be behind on loan payments and the entire group would need to pitch in to cover the payment cost, so the group made sure that its members came to the meetings, paid on time and that their businesses were going well.

During the monthly loan meetings, we would also talk with the women about what kind of trainings they were interested in or needed and then I would prepare a workshop and schedule a time to provide the training. A lot of the trainings were related to women’s health (especially reproductive health and regular health screenings). We also did trainings on budgeting, basic account keeping and basic business planning, so that the women could make the best use of their micro-credit loans and make sure that they knew how to keep their own records, grow their small businesses and be able to make loan repayments on time.

PFL: What was the most rewarding part of your experience?

Brynna: As a volunteer or intern, you always imagine that you will be doing “life changing” work and often go in to your experience looking to make a difference in a big way. While some volunteers may be fortunate enough to literally save lives, but in most cases it’s important to adjust your perspective and realize how even seemingly small actions can make a big difference.
At first I was disappointed that I would only be preparing and presenting workshops on health, nutrition and other training points. With a few hours of internet research I was able to prepare all the presentation information and felt like I should be tackling much bigger issues. Then I realized that while reproductive health or basic nutrition was something that I could easily research and present, most of the women I was presenting to didn’t have the time, resources or (or in many cases) the basic education required to gather this information on their own. Creating presentations was something that I was able to do because I had received education in how to search for, summarize and communicate ideas clearly – and this isn’t something that people “just know how to do.”

PFL: What’s your fondest memory of being a volunteer?

Brynna: I don’t have one specific memory that stands out, but my time as an intern was definitely a life changing experience. As an intern I came to realize people – across cultures, languages, clothing and life experiences – have much more in common than we tend to realize. It amazed me that I could feel “at home” thousands of miles away from my home in the United States in a setting that was so different from anything I had experienced before.
**PFL:** Can you tell us about an interesting cultural experience you had?

**Brynna:** Dancing in the Virgin de la Candelaria celebration was probably my most interesting experience. The annual celebration takes place in early February, which was about a month after I arrived in Puno. There were two other volunteers in my program at the time, and we were invited to dance with the Lacustre, one of the local groups that participates in Candelaria.

It was interesting to go from a spectator of the dances and parades, to an actual participant for the Candelaria celebration. There are several different types of dances that are presented in Candelaria, from traditional dances that are performed by people from Taquile Island to very colorful and modern dances, like Diablada, that come from Bolivia. The Lacustre group dances *Sicuris*, which is much less intricate (more free style) dance accompanied by *zampoñas* (wood flutes) and percussion instruments. In my case, I wore a Xena Warrior Princess costume.

The entire event was the craziest, most unique thing that I have ever experienced and I am very glad to have had the opportunity to participate.

**PFL:** What are some tips for a volunteer that doesn’t speak Spanish?

**Brynna:** I majored in Spanish and had already spent 9 months in Costa Rica before I went to Puno, so luckily I didn’t have too many problems with the language during my internship. For volunteers that don’t speak Spanish, I would recommend looking for volunteer opportunities where speaking the language isn’t as important. Working with children, for example, is something that doesn’t require speaking the local language. Even speaking a minimal amount of the local language and making an effort to communicate however possible makes a big difference in the quality of experience that the volunteer has.
Posada Amazonas is conveniently located just 45 minutes by boat from the town of Puerto Maldonado in Peru’s southern jungle region. The ecolodge began operation in 1998 as a partnership between the local community of Infierno (the owners) and the Peruvian ecotourism company Rainforest Expeditions (the operators). Today, the lodge is a shining example of a profitable, environmentally sustainable project in Peru that involves the local affected community in essential ways.

An English-speaking guide from Posada will meet you at the airport and accompany your group to the Port of Infierno where you take a boat the rest of the way to the lodge. This part of the journey also provides the first introduction to jungle cuisine: I was given a snack of locally grown Brazil nuts and bananas, and lunch was wrapped in a large banana leaf. It was a short walk to the lodge after the boat docked on the river shore.

The open-air design of the lodge is evident when you enter the main lobby, where your guide will explain the details of your stay. Among its many environmentally-friendly measures, Posada Amazonas provides guests with biodegradable soap and shampoo, lights rooms with kerosene lamps and candles instead of electric bulbs, and uses locally grown products to cook flavorful meals.
You’ll have time to settle into your room before departing on a jungle excursion. Thirty spacious bedrooms, each with a private bathroom, are separated by light cane fencing. While rooms are private, they are not soundproof and guests are asked to reduce volumes at night. Each room has three walls with a windowless veranda that opens into the surrounding jungle for safe, yet close contact with the environment. Given the exposure, using the mosquito netting over each bed is recommended at night.

Daily excursions at Posada Amazonas are organized around the best times to see different types of wildlife, usually in the early morning and evening hours. All of the excursions are a short 10 to 15 minute boat ride away or depart directly from the lodge into the jungle.

The lake excursion to Tres Chimbates was my favorite. It was worth the early morning wake-up call to see the resident family of giant river otters, a caiman, piranhas, and several species of birds.
The canopy tower at Posada Amazonas juts into the sky and the long climb to the top offers a rewarding vista over the tallest jungle trees. The vast expanse of green vegetation and the Tambopata River stretches as far as the eye can see. My group didn’t spot any toucans or parrots, but the sound of nearby howler monkeys accompanied our great view.

Other activities at the ecolodge include a trip to the macaw clay lick, a visit to a local working farm and a night hike. Kayaking, mountain biking, canopy climbing and treatments at the Kuaii Wellness Center can be enjoyed for an extra fee.

My group’s wildlife-spotting experience was greatly enhanced thanks to good weather, luck, and the expertise of our guide, Luis. Like nearly all of the employees at Posada Amazonas, Luis is from the local community of Infierno that owns the lodge. His knowledge of native vegetation and his ability to spot hidden, skills he learned from growing up in the area, made him an excellent guide. He enthusiastically answered our questions and told us about illegal gold mining and logging in the region surrounding the Tambopata National Reserve that continues to destroy parts of the jungle.
The local community of Infierno owns a territory of 9,558 hectares (23,618 acres) of the jungle where Posada Amazonas is located. The ecolodge is not only a source of livelihood for the community of 600 people, but has helped to spread awareness about the need to protect this fragile ecosystem from further destruction. So, when planning your jungle adventure to Peru, stay at an ecolodge like Posada Amazonas to help preserve the environment and support the local community.
Peru for Less is doing its part to make sure our impact on the places we travel to is a positive one. We work with hotels and tour operators in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Peru who make conservation, sustainability and community development a priority. Because we work directly with locally owned companies who employ the people who live there, the money spent by our clients stays within the community. Our providers are involved in reforestation projects, conservation initiatives and low-ecological footprint programs like incorporating recycling, biodegradable cleaning and bath products and low to no energy devices to power their day-to-day operations.

At Peru for Less, our top priority is to provide travelers with an experience that connects them to a culture, a country and an environment different from their own while also empowering local communities. After all, our responsibility is not just to curious travelers, but also the people and places they are going to see.
Anabel Mota

Anabel spent three full years exploring the length and width of South America and is currently honing her wanderer chops in Southeast Asia. She believes that the key to better travel is to travel with a conscious. It takes a bit more time and research to travel responsibly, but the rewards - real connections with the people and places you visit - make it all worth it. When not writing about travel and Latin America, you can find Anabel setting out to see and do the things she's only read about in books.

Britt Fracolli

Britt is a lover of travel with a soft spot for yummy cuisine and destinations enveloped by mountains. A few years ago, the sweet whispers of wanderlust coaxed her to South America in company of her backpack. Britt now happily lives and works in Peru, a country rich in culture and full of natural gems that she wants future generations to enjoy.
Kathleen McAfee

Kathleen is an avid traveler with a passion for discovering new places and cultures. As a staff member at Peru for Less, she works diligently to inform and engage the travel community on the importance of responsible travel and sustainable tourism in order to preserve the world's most precious and awe-inspiring attractions for generations to come. Kathleen looks forward to seeing this topic gain more support and influence in the tourism industry, especially in Peru, as it is a leader in promoting responsible travel initiatives in Latin America.

Rachel Ricks

Rachel has always loved traveling, and following some adventurous trips at a young age, it was little surprise that she ended up writing about it for a living. Having spent eight years living and working in London, Rachel set off to Peru with no plans other than to try living in a different country. In addition to traveling around South America and – of course – writing about her experiences, she set off determined to learn Spanish and get to know a different culture.
Before she was even born, Terra was destined to have a love affair with this amazing planet we called home. The proof is in her name: Terra Felicia, which means "Happy Earth" in Latin. One way Terra tries to keep the earth “happy” and healthy is by practicing what she preaches by traveling with a conscience. When she’s not globetrotting (or telling people about it in her work), Terra likes to plan her next big adventure.