

Sacred Journeys To Peru and Chile

By Maxine Albert, JAXFAX, October 2011

Peru's fabled city of Machu Picchu, its magnificent ruins perched 8,000 feet above sea level, high in the cloud forest where the Andes meet the Amazon basin, is one of the great mysteries of the world. Its massive stones fit together flawlessly without mortar, this architectural wonder was built, occupied and abandoned within one hundred years. To this day, no one knows why this extraordinary city, invisible from below, was created and deserted so quickly. Another



enigma is how these colossal rocks were carved from the mountain, fit together with such an exactitude and transported. Dubbed "The Lost City of the Incas", it was missed by the plundering conquistadors and remained hidden from Western eyes until 1911 when American explorer Hiram Bingham re-discovered it.

This dream-like city, swathed in clouds with the Urubamba River winding below, is accessible by train or foot. The four-day hike on the stone path of the famous Inca Trail is part trek, part spiritual pilgrimage. You are sharing a path with a history to arrive at Machu Picchu as the Incas did, traveling from windswept mountains to lush cloud forest with hummingbirds, wild orchids and stunning archeological sites along the way.

The sensation of walking over the ridge and catching the first glimpse of the mystical city below as the dawn casts its golden glow on the stones is an indescribable thrill of a lifetime. Steep terraces, palaces, temples, gardens, baths and houses miraculously appear to be carved directly out of the hillside embody the sun worshipping Incas' reverence for nature and celestial bodies. These structures embody the natural phenomenon like the sun, moon, water and earth that were sacred to the Inca. The high energy makes this a powerful meditation place.



The spectacular beauty, majesty and sweep are exhilarating as you explore the ruins and travel back in time to this ancient kingdom of Inca emperors and rituals. Mysteries shroud the actual functions of the stupendous structures.

A few of the can't-miss attractions, of which there are hundreds, include the Chamber of the Princess, Principle Temple and Royal Tomb. Impressively large trapezoidal windows of The Three Windowed Temple frame the mountains. Temple of The Condor, the fantastic centerpiece, a carving of the head of a condor – has rocks behind it resembling the bird's outstretched wings. Temple of the Sun, with superb interlacing masonry, is the only round edifice. Two small openings in the tapering tower ingeniously align with the movement of the sun. The famed Fountains, sixteen small waterfalls, are believed to have been used for water worship rituals. Experts still debate whether the main shrine, Intihuatana, was a sundial, sacrificial altar or temple to the mountain god. The consensus is that somehow this carved rock was used by

the priest astronomers to track constellations and calculate the seasons. This beautiful, spiritual stone was most sacred to the Inca. According to shamanic legend, if it touches your forehead, your vision to the spirit world opens. Temple of the The Moon, which may have been a goddess site, eerily radiates with moonlight at night. Legend has it that the ghosts of the Incas roam in the foggy ruins.



Besides its architectural genius and spiritual atmosphere, perhaps the most alluring aspect of Machu Picchu is its ambiguous character.

Was this awe-inspiring creation a site of religious and ceremonial functions, a citadel, a refuge for Virgins of the Sun, a sanctuary for training brides for the nobility, a retreat for emperors or an Andean Shangri-La? Decide for yourself first-hand and take in the mystifying grandeur of this ancient city in the sky. Machu Picchu, with its immense power and aesthetic splendor, is definitely one of the new Seven Wonders of the World.

Easter Island

Magical, evocative and culturally fascinating – Easter Island is like no other place on earth. Most people are drawn here by the strikingly enigmatic moai – the giant monolithic stone statues. Some four hundred moai, squat figures with oversize heads all carved in the same highly stylized manner, punctuate the island like giant exclamation points. They represent important ancestors, like chiefs and priests, and according to the islanders, transmit their mana (power) to the living chief of the family. It is said that they may start walking anytime.



In addition to the moai, Easter Island has extinct volcanoes, silken sands, cobalt blue water and brightly colored fish. As a special territory of Chile, the population is an intriguing blend of two-thirds Polynesian natives and one-third Chileans.

The island is a veritable open-air museum. It has been classified as a national park with its ahu (ceremonial platforms), moai, cave paintings and petroglyphs. Highlights include Rano Kau, a huge volcanic crater and site of the ceremonial village of Orongo; the Rano Raraku quarry where most of the moai were carved; and the awe inspiring Ahu Tongariki which boasts fifteen moai standing side by side, their backs to the sea. This is a spectacular place to watch the sun rise as it illuminates these arresting figures bearing mute testimony to an ancient mystery.



On Easter Sunday 1722, Dutch commander Jacob Roggeveen became the first European to land on the island. His notes of finding a mixed race of dark and light skinned people, some with red hair, still

confound historians. He described a heavily tattooed people who worshipped the giant statues and performed ceremonies before them.

It is still a mystery as to how these colossal structures, made of volcanic rock, were transported over rugged terrain and hoisted onto massive platforms without use of wheels or draft animals and without damage. According to oral history, they walked to their ahu. Many were toppled and have fallen. No one knows why. How such an isolated people created these monuments is amazing. These intriguing mysteries add to Easter Island's cachet. It is said that the original colonizer, Hotu Matu'a, followed a prophecy and set sail for the island, which he later governed as a shaman. French missionaries found wooden tablets



covered with hieroglyphics in 1864. They still have not been deciphered. To learn about the rich cultural history, visit the Museo Antropologico Sebastian Englert, north of town www.museorapanui.cl.

To experience the culture at its best, time your visit to coincide with one of the festivals. The premier Tapati Rapa Nui, when the whole island parties, last about two weeks in February. This colorful and engaging extravaganza revolves around music, dance and cultural events between two clans competing for "Queen of the Festival". Body painted males in loincloths race down a volcano, feet first, in a luge like device made of banana tree logs lashed together. Equally exciting is the triathlon where contestants speed around a volcanic crater lake carrying banana bunches on their shoulders. Floats and costumed figures celebrate the last day. It's a great way to immerse yourself in the island's rich traditions – and get fantastic photos.