

PASSPORT TO PERU:

The Great South American Adventure

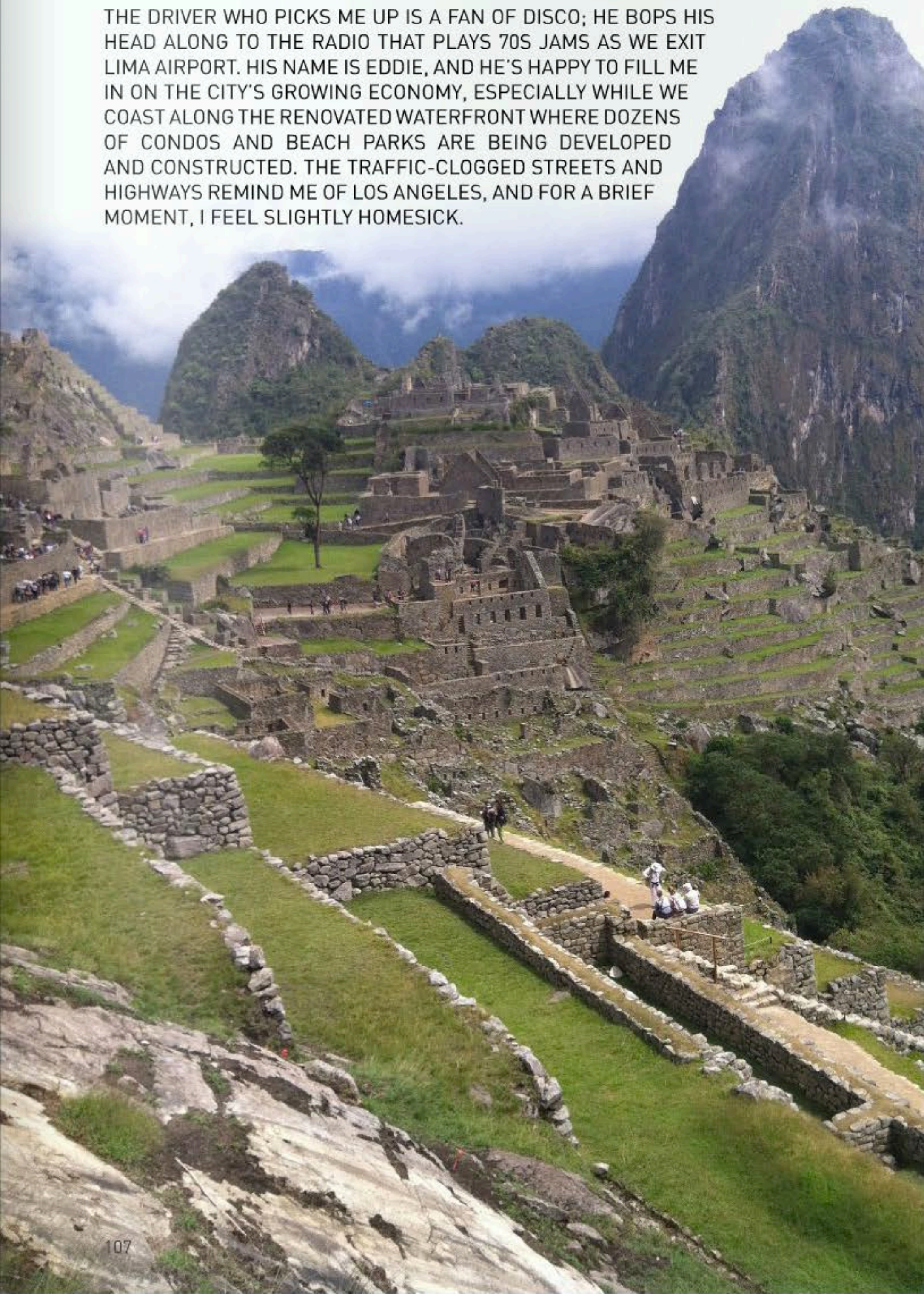
BY HIKO MITSUZUKA

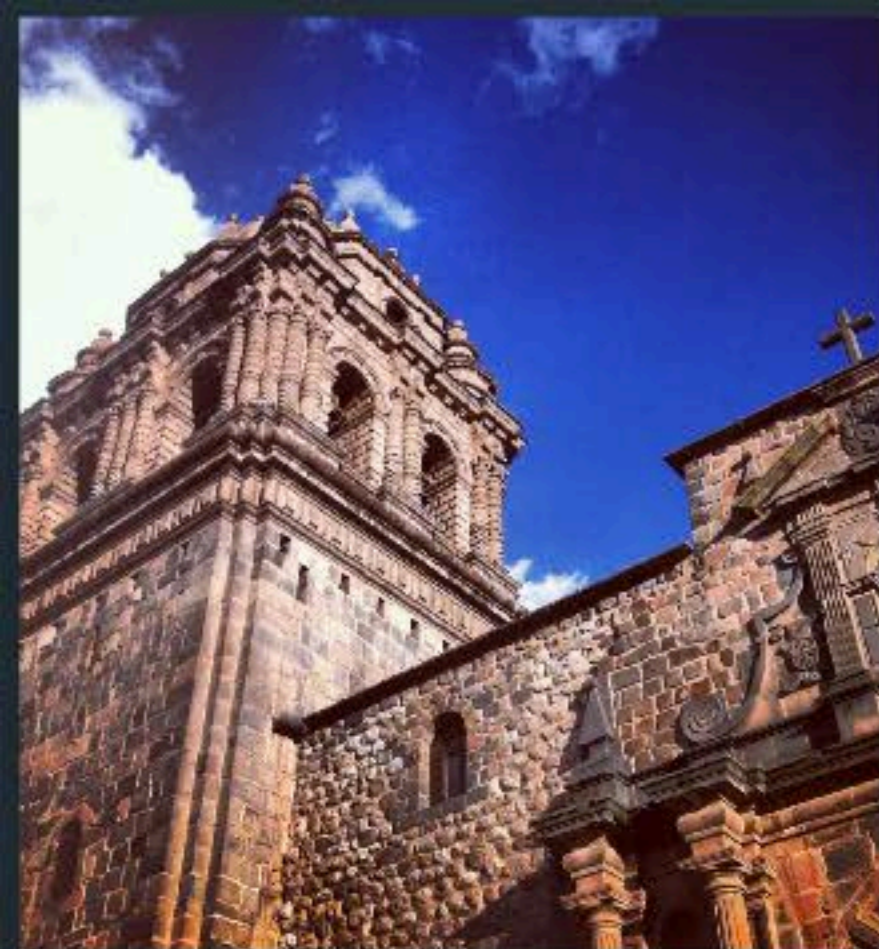
THE DRIVER WHO PICKS ME UP IS A FAN OF DISCO; HE BOPS HIS HEAD ALONG TO THE RADIO THAT PLAYS 70S JAMS AS WE EXIT LIMA AIRPORT. HIS NAME IS EDDIE, AND HE'S HAPPY TO FILL ME IN ON THE CITY'S GROWING ECONOMY, ESPECIALLY WHILE WE COAST ALONG THE RENOVATED WATERFRONT WHERE DOZENS OF CONDOS AND BEACH PARKS ARE BEING DEVELOPED AND CONSTRUCTED. THE TRAFFIC-CLOGGED STREETS AND HIGHWAYS REMIND ME OF LOS ANGELES, AND FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, I FEEL SLIGHTLY HOMESICK.

This is my last night in Peru, and the commute to my hotel allows me some time to reflect on this magical journey that is coming to an end. So excuse me while I rewind back to the beginning of my 10-day excursion...

Nine days earlier, I landed in the city of Cusco, the Incan capital of Peru. I was greeted by rainbow flags hanging above the doorways of several government-looking buildings and flapping in the high-altitude wind in the city's main square. LGBT travelers may think they've stumbled upon a plethora of gay-friendly hotspots, but the rainbow flag is simply the Andean people's symbol representing the legacy of the Inca Empire. Also, rainbows are signs of fertility, and the locals here are all about keeping their land as lush as possible.

However, if one were to make some kind of rainbow connection between the fifth largest country in South America and the gay community, chew on this: there's an Incan philosophy that resembles the theme song of a certain transsexual character from the Tony Award-winning *Rent*: "Today for you, tomorrow for me." Reciprocity is big with the Peruvian culture, especially when it comes to pleasing the gods with offerings and personal sacrifices. And since most of the nation





is established at a high altitude, the people of Peru feel that much closer to The Powers That Be.

Speaking of altitude, while stepping off my LAN Airlines flight, I braced myself for a sudden rush to the head. During the weeks leading up to my Great South American Adventure, I had been forewarned about the effects of being in a place thousands and thousands of feet above sea level.

Cut to me consuming as many coca leaves as possible. Nestle a few small pieces on the inside of your cheek, and voila, you have a natural remedy for those pesky headaches and sinus pressure (the saliva gets infused with vitamins and minerals that'll help you adjust to the climate). However, those multiple cardio sessions at the gym will do nothing to prepare you for the shortness of breath you'll experience after walking up just one flight of stairs.

Our hotel in Cusco, which was two blocks away from the only Starbucks we saw throughout our trip (P.S. – they don't do self-serve counters with cream and sugar; ask for "leche" or "crema," or else you'll get a Venti black), welcomed us with a lovely spread of coca leaves and tea bags to sample. And for those with severe cases of altitude sickness, they have oxygen tanks on standby.

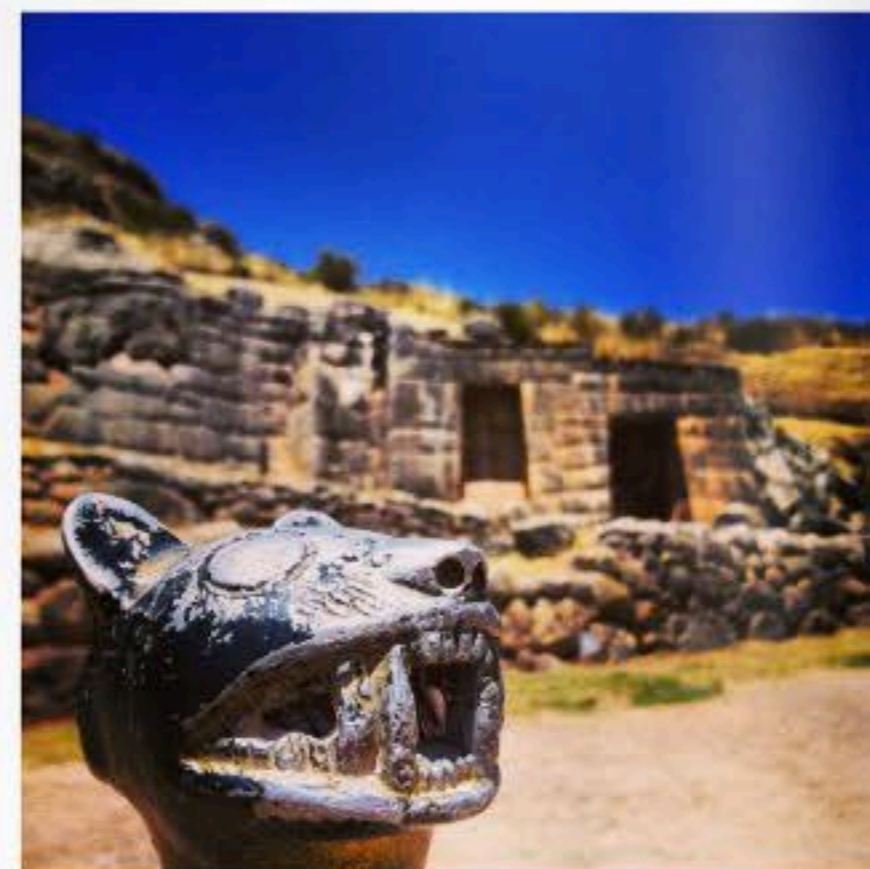
ARCHAEOLOGY 101

For adventure seekers and hiking enthusiasts, there's plenty to enjoy at nearby archaeological sites like Ollantaytambo, P'isaq, the circles at Moray, the salt mines of Maras, and of course, the magnificent Machu Picchu (tour guide included, of course). Equally breathtaking is Saqsaywaman, the Royal House of the Sun God, a vast canyon that is used every 21st of June to kick off an annual festival, which includes cleansing ceremonies loaded with jewels and various treasures from each province.

Lessons learned while touring these ancient Incan sites:

1. Llamas are gifts from the sun god.
2. Pack a roll of toilet paper in your backpack; most public restrooms here don't come equipped with any.
3. Alpaca meat tastes just like lamb.
4. The colorful clothes of Japanese tourists blend in nicely with the ancient Incan architecture.
5. The Incans knew how to do cardio. Try to climb the stairs at Ollantaytambo, and you'll get the idea.

6. Placing a few chewed-up coca leaves under a rock – along with a silent prayer – is considered an offering to Pachamama (Mother Earth); I can now say I left behind my DNA under a stone on holy ground.
7. End the day with a delicious dinner with a side of faux sexual assault: My buffet dinner at La Retama in Cusco's Plaza de Las Armas included a mating dance in which two young men whip each other to grab the attention of girls they wish to kiss (it's not as BDSM-esque as it sounds).



THE WONDERS OF WILLKA T'IKA

Forget Palm Springs.

Nestled in the Sacred Valley of Peru – about an hour's drive from Cusco – is one of the best getaways I've ever experienced. Willka T'ika is a luxury garden retreat for anyone looking for some spiritual replenishment, good yoga, a meditation session, or some simple peace and quiet while reconnecting with Pachamama.

Founded by author Carol Cumes, Willka T'ika (which translates as "sacred flower") is a breathtaking haven surrounded by natural beauty and healing energies that will have you forgetting all your troubles the moment you arrive. It was easy for us to leave the big-city hustle and bustle behind as soon as we stepped foot on the premises. Meals, which are included, consist of scrumptious vegetarian recipes we've never heard of – with ingredients straight from the gardens – and our taste buds savored every



morsel (our mouths still water thinking about the homemade soups that came with every dinner).

The property, which is divided into gardens representing each one of the seven chakras, is something to behold. Don't let the dirt road to the gates fool you; once they pass through the entrance, guests are immediately greeted by the floral scents of the lush foliage that surround the rustic guesthouses and facilities.

If yoga and meditation aren't your cup of herbal tea, you won't have any problem decompressing in one of the outdoor solar baths at night (the stars make for a beautiful ceiling). For those looking to further unplug and unwind, there are plenty of other spa treatments to choose from. My crystal bed therapy session proved to be quite an emotional one as I bid adieu to all those nasty toxins and negative thoughts in my head.



STAY:

Willka T'ika
Willkatika.com

The Westin Lima Hotel
Westin.com/Lima

Best Western Los Andes de America
Cuscoandes.com

DINE:

Greens (in Cusco)
cuscorestaurants.com/greens-organics

Maras (in Lima)
marasrestaurante.com.pe

Lola Bar (in Lima)
Lolalimabar.com

SEE:

Machu Picchu
Machupicchu.org

Ollantaytambo
Ollantaytambo.org/en

SOAR:

LAN Airlines
Lan.com

Magical Journey
Magicaljourney.org

ONE NIGHT IN LIMA

For my last night in Peru, I have traded in the tranquil countryside for some cosmopolitan delights in the capital city of Lima.

Upon checking into the Westin in the city's financial district, I am immediately treated to my first Pisco sour, Peru's signature cocktail, a combination of Pisco, passion fruit, syrup, and egg whites (for you protein junkies). Lounging in the sleek, Sergio Echeverria-designed lobby, I am able to take in the blend of modern and Incan décor while learning about the hotel's recent brushes with celebrities (both Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato have been guests during their world tours). I later have an hour to kill before dinner at the magnificent Maras (try the sautéed goat meat), so naturally, I immerse myself in the serenity (and hot tubs) of Heavenly Spa on the hotel's concourse level.

The overwhelming sense of gratitude I soon feel is beyond words.

