



A Graceful Flower Grows

ONE WOMAN'S MISSION FLOURISHES, CREATING NOT ONLY A RETREAT IN PARADISE, BUT EDUCATION FOR THE AREA'S ISOLATED CHILDREN.

Carol Cumes arrived in the Andean Mountains 26 years ago with a simple mission: to work with plants that provide the medicinal herbs and bark used by traditional healers. But once in Peru's Sacred Valley, Cumes' vision expanded. "I fell in love with the snow peaks, fertile valleys, spectacular scenery, and, most of all, the gentle Quechua-speaking people of the Peruvian Andes," she says

She stayed, and eventually created a garden guesthouse with a handful of rooms, designed for visitors to the nearby world wonder that is Machu Picchu. Over the years, Cumes' guesthouse, named Willka T'ika ('graceful flower' in Quechua), grew into a luxury retreat that nestles between the glacier-covered sacred mountains of Peru's high Andes. Today, it can accommodate up to 55 guests.

Willka T'ika—constructed of locally sourced materials and heated by solar energy—draws people on yoga retreats, as well as photography groups, artists, writers, and people studying the Andean culture. Hikers explore winding rivers, quaint villages, and the high mountain meadows where llama and alpaca graze. "We cater to guests who wish to explore the spirituality and unique culture and traditions of the Quechua people," Cumes says.

The aroma of sweet orange blossom trees pervades the grounds; lush hues from vibrant gardens soothe the eyes. Seven gardens evoke the chakras, or energy centers, of the human body. Each contains the colors, symbols, and medicinal plants that correspond to one of the chakras.

In the Andean spa at Willka T'ika, guests can get cocoa-leaf readings, body-work sessions, or a rebalancing on the crystal

healing bed. Specially designed indoor and outdoor meditation areas dot the property. The day ends with a glowing night sky, as seen from the solar sunken baths in private corners of the gardens.

While Cumes' aim is to provide visitors with a memorable, often spiritual, respite, her mission goes beyond that. In 1995, she founded the non-profit Willka T'ika Children's Fund, which raises money to build and operate schools in nearby mountain communities. "I wanted to give something back to isolated Andean communities that have no outside help, even to this day," she says. She was especially moved by Quechua-speaking teachers' efforts and dedication to their young students.

Today, Cumes' fund, a 501(c)(3), operates four schools, all in isolated areas. Over the years that fund has helped construct buildings, provided desks, supplies, libraries, and books. When food is scarce during Andean winters, hot lunches for up to 600 children are served.

All group-retreat participants to Willka T'ika are invited to visit the schools, and what they see is love in action, as well as gratitude. Carol is greeted by children offering smiles, fresh flowers, and hugs. "The Quechua live, work, drink, pray, and play in a universe governed by ayni, the Quechua principle of reciprocity," Cumes says.

And, as Willka T'ika guests can see, she abides by it as well. www.willkatika.com

—Evelyn Theiss