

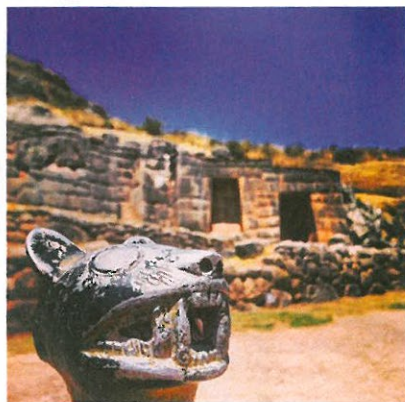
Passport To PERU

A 10-Day Magical Journey in South America

BY • HIKO MITSUZUKA

The rainbow flags threw me off. Once I landed in the city of Cuzco, the Incan capital of Peru, I was greeted by rainbow flags hanging above the doorways of several official-looking buildings and flapping in the high-altitude wind in the city's main square. Make no mistake, LGBT travelers: You haven't stumbled upon a plethora of gay-friendly hotspots. The rainbow flag is simply the Andean people's symbol of 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 third-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 in the Peruvian culture, especially when it comes to pleasing the gods with offerings and personal sacrifices. And since most of the nation sits 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 10-day excursion, 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 voilá—you have a natural remedy for those pesky headaches and sinus pressure (your 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 Cuzco, which was two blocks away from the only Starbucks we saw during 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.

GETTIN' ARCHAEOLOGICAL WITH IT

For adventure seekers and hiking enthusiasts, there's plenty to enjoy at nearby archaeological sites like Ollantaytambo, Pisac, the circles at Moray, the salt mines of Maras and, of course, the magnificent Machu Picchu (tour guide included,

of course). Equally breathtaking is Sacsayhuman, the royal house of the sun god, a vast canyon that is used every June 21 to kick off an annual festival that includes cleansing ceremonies loaded with jewels and various treasures from each province; it's a colorful gathering that makes San Francisco Pride look like a PTA meeting.

Lessons learned while touring these ancient Incan sites:

Llamas are gifts from the sun god.

Pack a roll of toilet paper in your backpack; most public restrooms here don't come equipped with any.

Alpaca meat tastes just like lamb.

The colorful clothes of Japanese tourists blend in nicely with the ancient Incan architecture.

The Incans knew how to do cardio! Try to climb the stairs at Ollantaytambo and you'll get the idea.

Placing a few chewed-on coca leaves under a rock—along with a silent prayer—is considered an offering to Pachamama (Mother Earth); I can now say I left some of my DNA under a stone on holy ground.

Tambomachay is a great site to haggle over prices on some handcrafted souvenirs.

End the day with a delicious meal with a side of aggravated assault: My buffet dinner at La Retama in Cuzco's Plaza de 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).

WILLKA T'IKA: A GREAT ESCAPE

Forget Palm Springs. Nestled in the Sacred Valley of Peru—about an hour's drive from Cuzco—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'd never heard of—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 isn't your cup of herbal





COZY COTTAGE

Willka T'ika not only offers lovely rooms, but equally beautiful gardens.

GRAND ESCAPES

Pisac and Machu Picchu (below) offer two of Peru's biggest tourist draws.

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. Picturing Jake Gyllenhaal rubbing me down during my full-body massage also helped.

ONE NIGHT IN LIMA

For my last night in Peru, I traded in the tranquil countryside for some

cosmopolitan delights in the capital city of Lima. Eddy, the driver who picked me up at the airport, turned out to be a fan of disco and was happy

to fill me in on Lima's growing economy, especially along the renovated waterfront where dozens of condos and beach parks are being developed and constructed. The traffic-clogged streets and highways reminded me of

L.A., and for a brief moment, I felt slightly homesick.

Upon checking into the Westin in the city's financial district, I was 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 was able to take in the blend of modern and Incan décor while learning about the hotel's recent brushes with celebrity (both Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato have been guests during their world tours). From there, I had an hour to kill before dinner at the magnificent Maras (try the sautéed goat meat), so naturally, I immersed myself in the serenity (and hot tubs) of Heavenly Spa on the hotel's concourse level.

During my stay I was also able to learn more about the city's gayborhood...or lack of one. The bars and "discoteques" are sporadic and spread out. Best bet: visit Miraflores, Lima's fabulous fashion district, and you're bound to bump into a good time. And now, it appears more good times are to be had in 2014; gay rights have begun to be addressed and discussed more than ever within Peru's Supreme Court.

Expect more rainbow flags—of a different variety.



WE LIKA WILLKA

For a more authentic feel, Willka T'ika offers travelers a great accommodation option.



LUXURY IN LIMA

The Westin Lima brings modern touches to Peru, with expansive rooms, sleek design and the Heavenly spa.



THE NITTY GRITTY

REST, RELAX, RECHARGE:

Willka T'ika
willkatika.com

The Westin Lima Hotel
westin.com/lima

Best Western
Los Andes de America
cuscoandes.com

EAT, DRINK, ENJOY:

Greens (Cuzco)
cuscorestaurants.com/
greens-organics

Maras (Lima)
marasrestaurant.com.pe

Lola Bar (Lima)
lolalimabar.com

SIGHTSEE, DROP JAW:

Machu Picchu
machupicchu.org

Ollantaytambo
ollantaytambo.org/en

SOAR IN STYLE:

LAN Airlines
lan.com

Magical Journey
magicaljourney.org