

A person in a black yoga outfit is performing a tree pose (Vrikshasana) on a large, dark rock in the foreground. Their right leg is firmly planted on the rock, while their left leg is bent at the knee and lifted, with the foot resting on the right thigh. Their arms are extended upwards, with hands pressed together in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra). The background features a serene landscape with a calm, turquoise lake reflecting the sky. In the distance, majestic, forested mountains rise under a soft, hazy sky. The overall scene conveys a sense of peace, balance, and connection with nature.

FIFTY PLACES TO PRACTICE

YOGA

BEFORE YOU DIE

Yoga Experts Share
the World's Greatest Destinations

Chris Santella
and Diana Helmut

THE SACRED VALLEY

RECOMMENDED BY **Angel Lucia**



"I'm not 100 percent sure what led me to Peru," began Angel Lucia. "I typically don't go in for touristy places, but there's something very inspiring about the culture around Machu Picchu. Everything's coming from the ground and the earth and nature. This is a great place to get tuned into the natural world and let it inform your yoga practice."

The mystical Incan archaeological site of Machu Picchu has been attracting hikers, spiritual seekers, and explorers for hundreds of years. Archaeologists theorize that the Sapa Inca ("god emperor" of the Inca) may have had the city built around 1462 as a vacation retreat. Apparently abandoned a hundred years later, it luckily evaded discovery by Spanish conquistadors during the colonization of South America. The West would not be introduced to the ruined city until American expeditioner Henry Bingham came to Peru in 1911. (Despite the site's occasional nickname, "the Lost City," he found it inhabited by a handful of local farmers, indicating perhaps to the Peruvians it was never lost at all.)

Today, Machu Picchu is on the bucket list of nearly every world traveler, and for good reason. The World Heritage Site will please yogis eager for an experience with deep connections to the earth and who have an unquenchable love of heights. Famed as the site of a very powerful energy vortex (which some believe to be the same force the Incas referred to as "Pachamama"), it is the perfect place to connect to earth energies, but with some caveats. "You can't do yoga right on the rocks," noted Angel. "It's a protected site, often flocking with crowds, and tours must be booked well in advance." However, for yogis in the know, a rich, less-crowded experience awaits just below, in the Sacred Valley.

The Sacred Valley is a green enclave nourished by the Urubamba River at the foot of Machu Picchu. It is resplendent with historical sites and has small towns brimming with

OPPOSITE:

The Sacred Valley of the Incas below Machu Picchu offers magical gardens and opportunities to talk with local shamans.

local culture, space to explore and wander, and abundant flora. Yogis will find themselves warmly greeted at Willka T'ika, a sustainable, culturally responsible wellness retreat center that caters to yogis wishing to connect conscientiously to the landscape.

Founded in 1994, the center features a staff of local Quechua people, loyal yoga teachers, spiritual leaders, an abundant farm-to-table menu, and everything a visitor might need to relax and connect to the mountainscape. "The owner bought the land raw and created the whole center," recalled Angel. "She had a local Quechua shaman walk through the site with her, and he informed her, 'You have a very spiritual space here,' then took the time to educate her about what she should and should not do there."

Willka T'ika boasts numerous yoga shalas and workshops that blend yogic aesthetics and spirituality with Peruvian culture and magic. "There's a huge firepit in the garden, where we do koka leaf readings. Occasionally, shamans come in the evening to visit and give talks. You can learn so much about these elders who are still doing their magic. The shaman we met with spoke only Quechua, but there is a translator to help out. It's an incredible experience to be outside listening to the elders under the insanely bright stars," Angel reflected. "You feel like you're inside of the stars."

In addition to discussions with local leaders, visitors can meander through the meditation gardens representing the seven chakras, each one with flowers, colors, and energies representing the chakras. "The gardens are pure magic," Angel enthused. "They house the most beautiful flowers of every color along with clusters of large crystals. A labyrinth is placed within each garden to ensure you walk in a meditative manner, having time to reflect and feel the earth's energy. There is also an enormous lucuma tree at one end of the garden that has been there for hundreds of years. The local shaman who toured the site instructed the owner to keep it—it has its own special powers, its own energies. Being able to sit under this tree, surrounded in the gardens by all of these amazing plants, crystals, and incredible energy . . . I would go back just for that."

Of course, no trip to the Sacred Valley would be complete without visiting Machu Picchu itself. To reach the site, you can hike over several days, or, for those feeling a bit faint from the high-altitude plunging cliffs, a bus will happily ferry you. "If you get motion sick, you definitely want to take something," Angel cautioned. "And don't look over the edge! The coca leaves help—they really do—but it's still not for the faint of heart or anyone with a fear of heights." Once you reach Machu Picchu, you won't be alone, but there are some special, silent places to be found in the city of rocks. "Our

tour guide took us away from the more congested spots—it's great to work with a guide who really knows where to go," Angel advised. "When you step out of these little portals and see the clouds and the valley below, it simply takes your breath away. And, of course, we can't forget to mention the llamas and alpacas wandering around, hopping up and down on different terraces."

ANGEL LUCIA is an ERYT500, RYS200, and YACEP certified yoga teacher and teacher trainer, as well as a licensed massage therapist and certified holistic health counselor. She is the founder of Bindu Yoga Studio in West Palm Beach, Florida, and a former contributor on topics of mindfulness for West Palm Beach's Channel 12 news. Teaching yoga and guiding students deeper into their own mysteries for the past twenty-three years has been her greatest gift. Angel leads retreats in many different countries and has taught in American youth runaway shelters, homeless shelters, and centers for persons recovering from addiction. She has also worked with prominent athletes, political figures, and many high-profile clients. She wants to empower everyone to be their own true guru, and knows that traveling and experiencing different cultures and distant lands can allow us to understand one another better and see how interconnected we all are.

If You Go

- **Getting There:** Cusco is the nearest airport, but it is served only by South American carriers. International travelers will have to arrive in Lima and make a connection to Cusco. From there, either hop on a bus or into a collective van for the hour-and-a-half ride to Ollantaytambo. Private tours that include airport transfers and guides to Machu Picchu are also a popular option.
- **Best Time to Visit:** May through September are the driest and most popular months. October through December, while slightly rainier, afford fewer crowds.
- **Accommodations:** Willka T'ika (willkatika.com; 805-884-1121) is open year-round. Other accommodations in the Sacred Valley can be found with the Peruvian Exports and Tourism Board (peru.travel).