

Valley of Incas beckons adventurous

Between Cusco and Machu Picchu, this stunning locale is full of beauty and mystique

By MARK SHAPIRO
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

What: Peru's Sacred Valley of the Incas. Nestled between the spiritual cores of Cusco and the breathtaking citadel of Machu Picchu, the Sacred Valley is a patchwork landscape of terraced farmland, vibrant markets and mystical Inca ruins.

Why go: Often overlooked on the road between two of South America's most visited yet touristy destinations, the Sacred Valley is an ideal base camp from which to enjoy Peru's bounty of natural splendor, cultural sites and outdoor recreation.

A rio runs through it: Divided by the rushing waters of the Rio Urubamba, the Sacred Valley is a fertile expanse with a moderate climate. Its productive soil yields abundant crops of fruits and vegetables, much of it grown on steep terraced slopes stretching upward toward snow-capped peaks.

Avoid headaches: All roads to Machu Picchu begin and end in Cusco, the fascinating capital of the Incas. With its winding streets, captivating plazas and baroque churches, it's a given that Cusco remains on your travel radar. Cusco also provides a vital introduction to the culture and traditions of the Inca empire. But in addition to snarling traffic, pollution and other issues that plague this bustling city, at 11,152 feet, Cusco's thin air can cause headaches. Literally. Take in the splendor of centuries-old Cusco and Sacsayhuamán, the spectacular fortress that overlooks

the city. But stay down in the Sacred Valley with its more agreeable altitude, gentle pace and proximity to attractions, including Machu Picchu.

Markets, grids, adobe: Many of the towns that hug the Rio Urubamba still enjoy traditions that pre-date the Spanish conquest in the 1530s. **Pisac** and others are fine examples of Andean villages that embrace the present and acknowledge the past. Adjacent to mesmerizing ruins, each offers its own specific charms.

Travelers are drawn to Pisac's multihued market on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays (the largest and best). Many artisans work on site and spread their wares on the ground, bartering and selling beautiful alpaca sweaters, blankets, jewelry and ceramics.

About 35 miles downriver — or 60 miles from Cusco — **Ollantaytambo** is built atop the foundation of a meticulously planned Inca settlement. Its quaint streets are laid out in strategic grids, framed by canals fed from the glaciers and rivers above. The neighboring temple-fortress, with its smooth, precisely cut stone walls, remains unfinished, an eerie reminder of the sudden arrival of Spanish conquerors.

To get a rich glimpse into the past, take a deep breath and on market day (Sunday) visit **Chincho**, where you'll be treated to a spectrum of colors from the produce, crafts and clothing of the Quechua-speaking locals. At more than

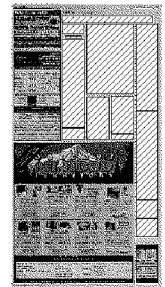
12,400 feet above sea level, **Chincho** offers spectacular views of the valley below. About 18 miles northwest of Cusco, the "Village of the Rainbow" is just a bit off the beaten path but a world away.

Looking for adventure: In addition to one- to four-day treks to Machu Picchu on the spectacular Inca Trail, some of Peru's most accessible outdoor recreational opportunities are right here in the valley. From the extreme to the casual, outdoor enthusiasts of all levels will find something enticing.

Options include mountain biking, climbing, horseback riding, motocross racing, backpacking and four-wheel off-roading. Several companies offer thrilling whitewater rafting trips on the Rio Urubamba during the dry season (April-November), with levels of difficulty ranging from Class I to Class V rapids.

Local outfitters also can arrange tandem paragliding trips for clients with no previous experience. Hovering in the winds over ruins and volcanoes is an otherworldly experience. **Cloudwalker Paragliding** (www.cloudwalkerparagliding.com) offers flights by appointment.

Companies such as **Inkaterra** (www.inkaterra.com), which has arranged reliable nature travel in the region for more than 30 years, also can customize itineraries combining historic and archaeological sites, including examples of living culture, nature and adventure activities that are safe and accessi-



ble. With a fleet of private Land Rovers, **Inkaterra** is convenient, flexible and has trained guide-interpreters who are passionate about their areas of expertise.

Carnival atmosphere: During Carnival in February, many Sacred Valley towns have their own celebrations, with parades and processions often spilling out into the streets providing a unique explosion of color. The live music and dancing is a festival for the eyes.

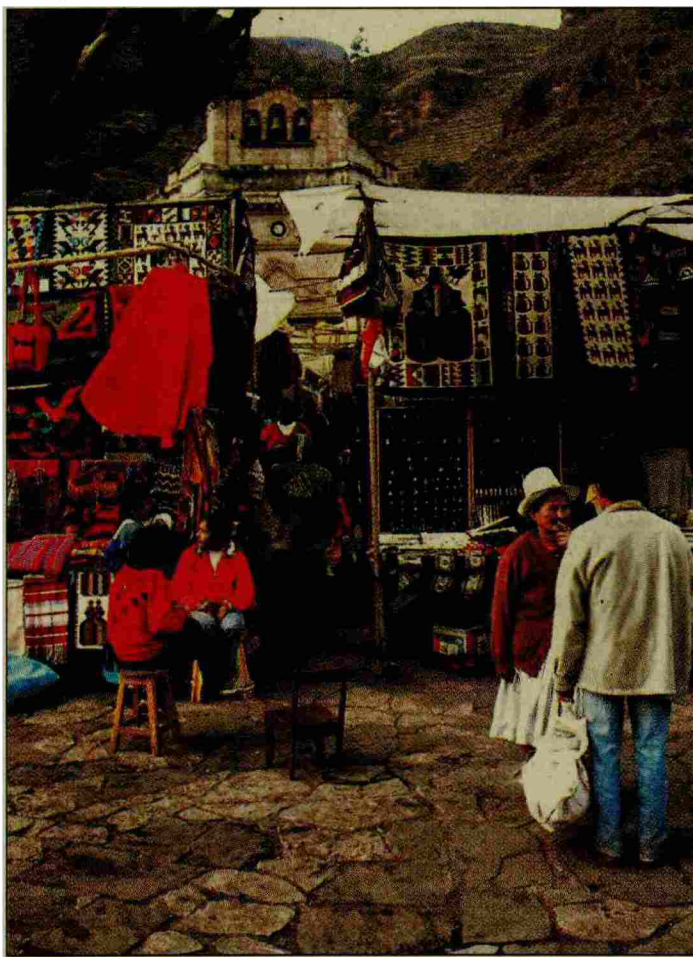
Where to stay: A number of quality country inns and cozy lodgings are beginning to sprout up all over the region. Accommodations range from budget to the quaint to the more elaborate, including guest houses such as Villa Berta and Villa Sonia, private two-story modern homes that sleep up to eight for \$150 a person or \$640 for the entire traditional adobe house, which features indigenous art, fireplaces and authentic decor. Price includes breakfast and dinner cooked by a private chef who prepares regional cuisine. The staff also arranges private shuttle service to and from the Cusco airport as well as transport to the Machu Picchu railway station at Ollantaytambo, about 25 minutes away. More info: www.inkaterra.com/villas-sacred-valley.

Book early: While many travel agencies around Cusco's Plaza de Armas offer itineraries into the Sacred Valley, the trick is to find a reputable source that will take you beyond the rudimentary one-day whirlwind tour on the way to Machu Picchu. Re-

serve your Sacred Valley tour before arriving in Peru and spend a few days poking around. Lodging tends to fill up quickly. Budget travelers can hop local buses to Machu Picchu, and while it's not the most comfortable way to get there, for just a few dollars, it's interesting and downright cheap.

Hiring a taxi is another option, though more expensive. However, be sure to make arrangements for the return trip to Cusco because taxis often are scarce outside the larger towns.

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Pisac's central square market bustles with activity three days a week. Vendors sell and barter handicrafts, fruits and vegetables.