



Eugene Kaspersky

Muchas Pictures

An Unforgettable Trip
to the City of the Incas

From the Author

I made 100 flights in 2010. And though in 2011 my total came to just 94, I ended up spending so much time abroad that I nearly ceased to be a tax resident. It's true that running a large international business requires a lot – lots of flying, lots of driving, lots of talking, and lots of branding. But at least once a year I go on a trip of another kind – one for the soul. No meetings, no interviews, no conference calls, no presentations – nothing like that. Only nature and the astonishing experiences it can offer.

Machu Picchu had been on my must-see list for ages. And finally it came to pass! In November 2011 a small group of colleagues and I headed down to Peru. All the tales from the trip are in this here album.

Though this book will be a good introduction for anyone who's not been to Machu Picchu, tell you how to get there, and provide you with

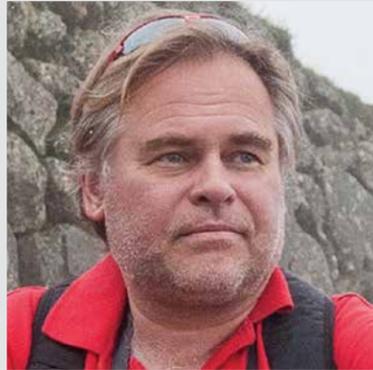
various insider tips, there's one thing I'd still recommend everyone after reading it: get to this place yourself! Machu Picchu is nothing less than mind-blowing, brain-bending, and tourism-format forgetting. It's a trip you'll never forget, and, like me, you'll never tire of telling folks about it. Of course, there are plenty of photos of the place and travelogues available – now including this one – but they're simply not good enough. You really have to see this place in the flesh to fully come to terms with just how special it is. At least once in a lifetime.

The main reason you need to see this “city in the clouds” is... to go back and see it again! Because on the last day of your stay there you realize there are masses of tasty tidbits and super-interesting places that still need seeing – no matter the burning equatorial sun on the back of your neck or the throbbing of your legs from tiredness.

Participants

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E.K. – your humble servant
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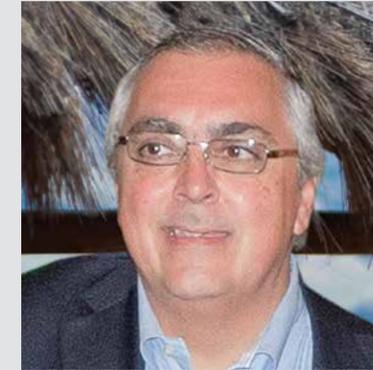
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Moscow to Cusco

The journey from Russia to Machu Picchu is both long and expensive, but also unusual and filled with surprises, so therefore most pleasant. Loads of airlines fly from Europe to Peru; however, we soon discovered that most of the flights for when we planned to travel were already fully booked up. So we had to opt for KLM. Not the best airline in the world, but what could we do?

By the way, you can congratulate me on a +1 to my list of visited countries of the world: this was my first time in Peru. Well, strictly speaking you could say I've been here before – but that was only for a few flight connections where I only got to see the inside of airports. They don't count: I didn't even get round to supping a beer. Anyway, now I've got 67 countries under my belt. Not so many, perhaps, considering there are around 200 countries in the world, but still – not bad IMHO.

The journey first takes you to Lima, the capital of Peru. The first thing we did here was buy some local SIM cards for 3G Internet. Our guide said we should go for SIMs of the Claro operator, which worked out at something like US\$ 20 for four days of unlimited calls + a deposit. We'd intended exchanging our dollars and euros for the local currency – the Nuevo Sol – but found we didn't have to – hard currency is accepted just about everywhere.

From Lima to Cusco there are flights practically every hour with both domestic carriers and the Chilean LAN Airlines. The flight takes just under an hour. The views from the plane windows are superb. I recommend having a camera at the ready for this journey.

The airport in Cusco is really something. First of all, any small maneuvers at all on its tarmac jolt the whole plane fairly violently and throw (un-

seatbelted) folks all over the place. It's worse than the Moscow metro when the driver's got a hangover (for non-Moscow experts: when he can't be bothered braking gently and smoothly). Apparently this unusual jerking about is caused by the habitual strong winds here. Secondly, it's rather a unique airport in that it's situated not well away from the city – as we've come to expect of just about any airport in the world. It's right bang in the middle of it!

On landing, M.V. made the mistake of placing his cell phone on his knee. When the next inevitable jolt came, said phone flew off down the aisle and into business class – where someone decided to pocket it! Classy, these business types. Poor M.V. had to get himself a new one upon his return to Moscow.

Cusco was the ancient capital of the Inca Empire. Legend states it was founded by the first Inca – Manco Cápac – in the 13th century, but according to architectural digs settlements existed here 3000 years ago. Today Cusco is the capital of both a Peruvian region and province of the same name, has been a UNESCO world heritage site since 1983, and is a tourist mecca in every sense of the term – visited by millions each year.

The city is situated 11,500 feet (3500 meters) above sea level in the very heart of the Andes. Though knowing this, visitors often make the mistake of both breathing and moving about at their usual tempo. However, the former needs to be faster and deeper; the latter – much, much slower. A spot of jogging in the thin air here brings on dizziness and nausea, and possibly even loss of consciousness. Not much good for sporty types, I admit.

The city center of Cusco is neat and tidy, all colonial in style, and very safe to walk around freely in – there are always plenty of police about. It's clear straight away that tourism is the main driver the local economy. However, if you drive out of the center you soon understand that the place is by far the most prosperous. The suburbs are made up of densely packed clay huts, the streets are littered with all sorts

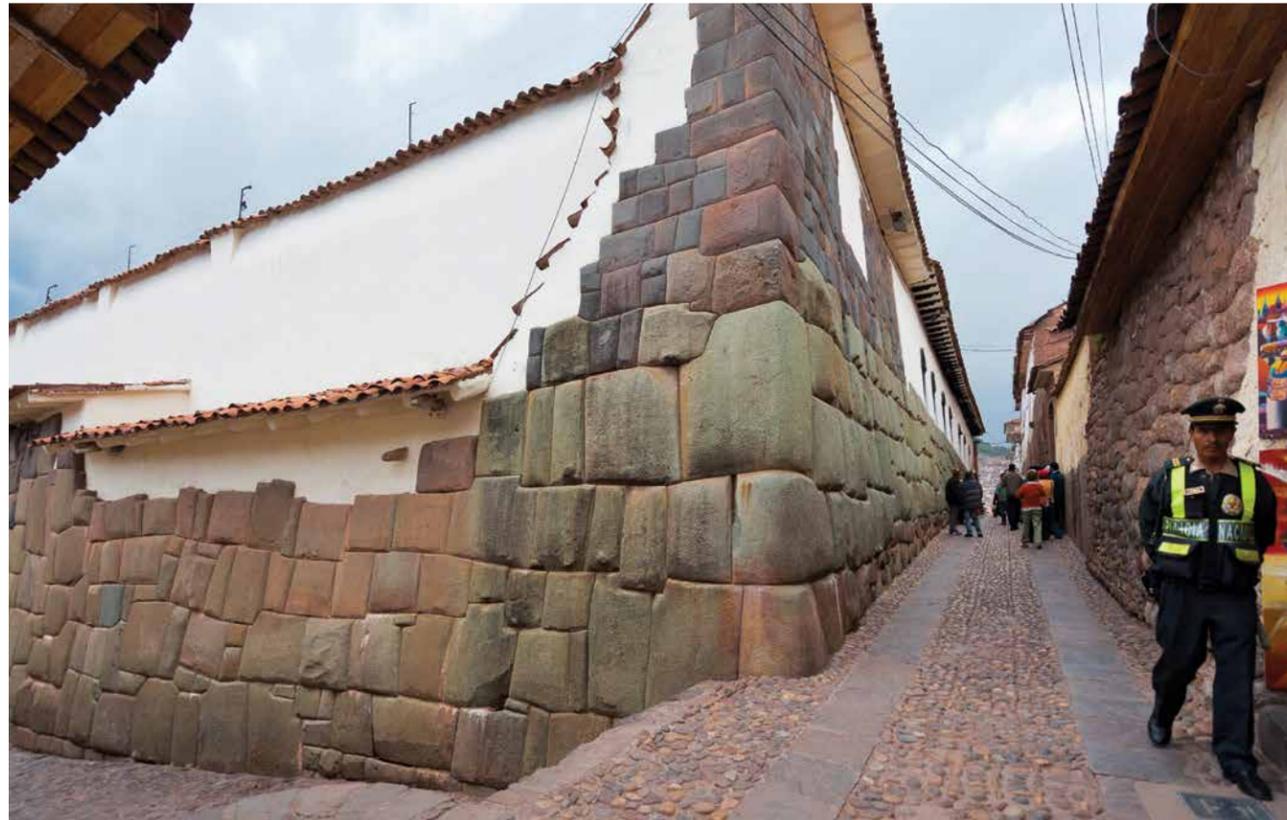
of garbage, and filthy kids play around in the filth getting more filthy – a far cry from downtown! At the same time, the indigenous ethnic Quéchua are mild and meek and very pleasant – nothing like boisterous Brazilians; while the suburbs here, though slums, are still by no means shanty towns.



CUSCO

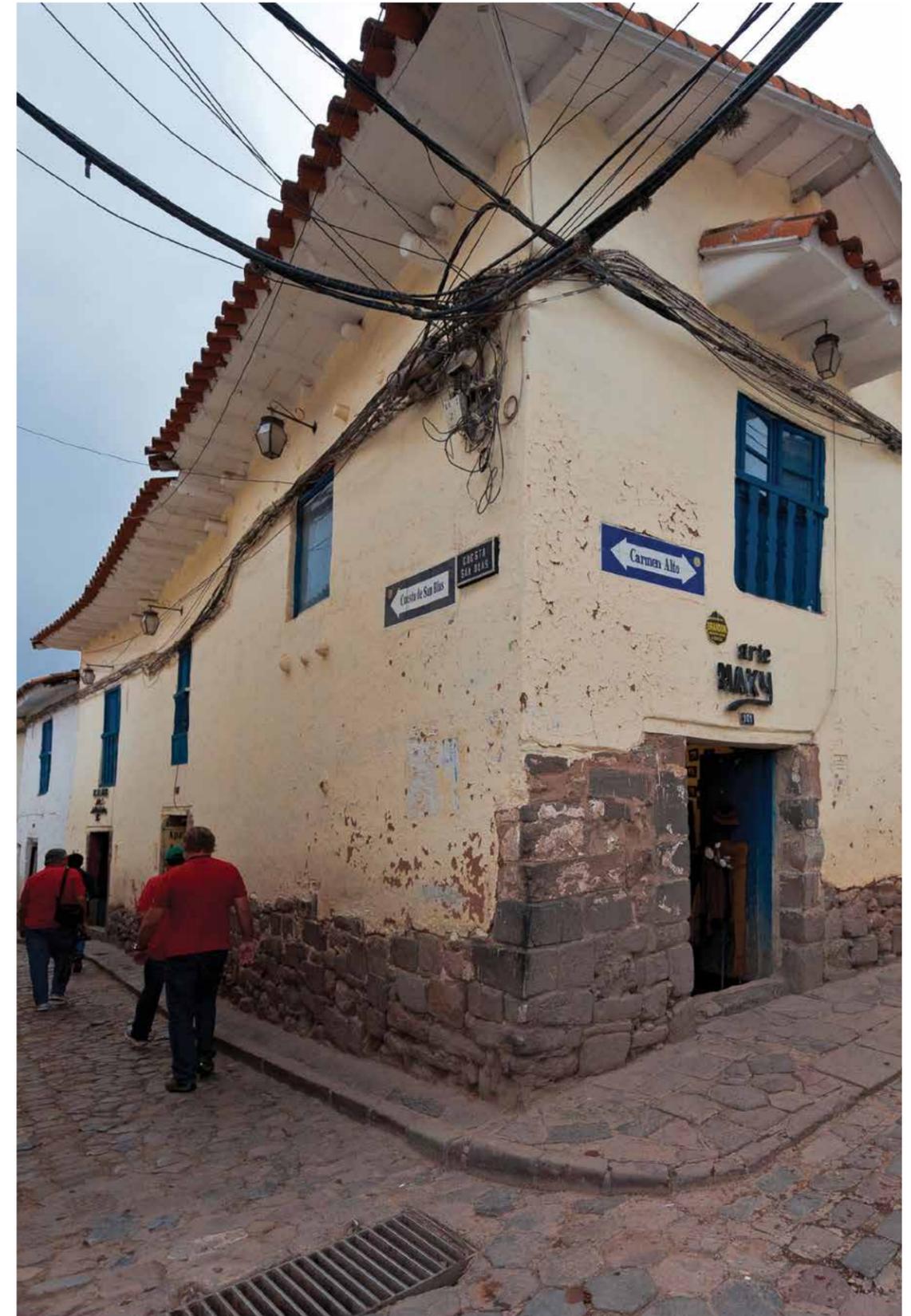
13° 31' 38" S, 71° 58' 17" W





Walking around Cusco for hours is pleasant and relaxing. There are all sorts of interesting buildings, monuments, small markets, quaint locals, and plenty of little eatery-stalls.

A PhD could be written on the local architecture. If I heard it right, the Spanish systematically destroyed the buildings of the Inca era and built their own – but on the Inca foundations. Whether the Spaniards were lazy or something I just don't know, but they sometimes didn't make it quite far down enough to reach the foundations, building above ground level on the existing walls. Still to this day you can see the result – half Inca, half Spanish!



Talk about well-fitting! You couldn't slip a needle between these stones. Experts say that without modern measuring instruments constructing such walls should have been impossible. Well, it was possible for the Incas, clearly. And the Incas knew nothing about the wheel, either. Enterprising lot!

The sacred 13-cornered stone. It's strictly forbidden to touch it. But for a little cash you can take photos of it with the local Inca drag queen



Our red Ferrari polo shirts were visible from afar. That's the only way we were able to stay together and not get split up

In Cusco no one goes
anywhere too fast





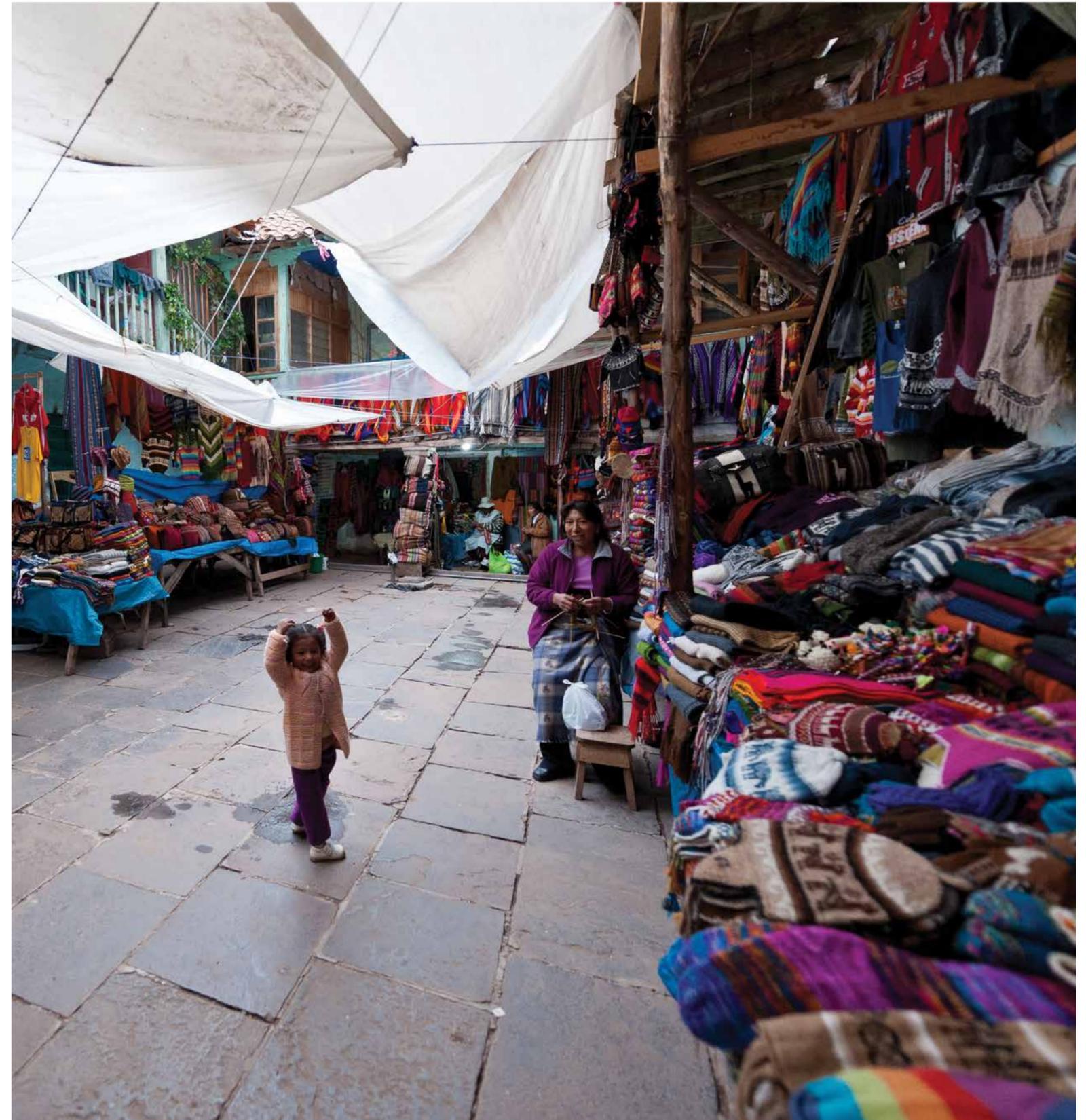
Look at the quality of the masonry of the entrance of the building on the right. The locals have a saying: "On the right - the work of the Incas; on the left - the work of the Incapables!"

The single slightly shady area in the city

A great many stalls and mini-markets are to be found in Cusco. The fastest moving goods are assorted wares made of silver, and textile items made of alpaca (wool)



Cusco



Anonymous' dream –
100% alpaca

D.Z. couldn't resist and
bought Cusco's take on
a Pussy Riot balaclava





The lobby of the Hotel Aranwa

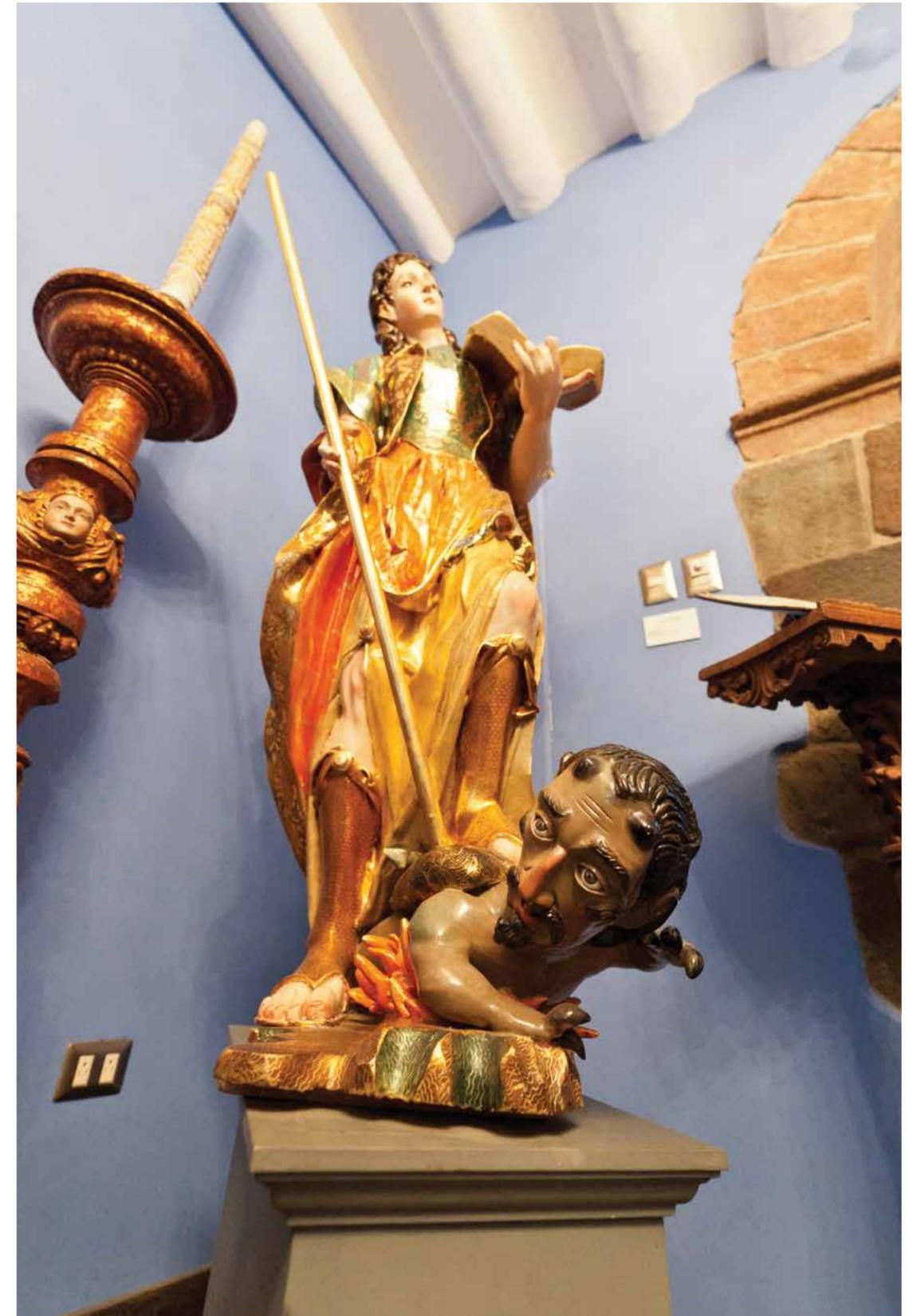
A cozy Spanish courtyard



There are a great many hotels in Cusco – and for all depths of pockets: from student hostels to five-star palaces. We stayed in the Aranwa – a cozy boutique hotel in colonial style with the inevitable Spanish courtyard.



Everywhere you look there's something colonial-Christian



The weather changes very quickly here, but we managed to miss the regular rains.





Dark clouds over Cusco's central square and a monumental Catholic cathedral

Stray animals roam freely and undisturbed in the center of town

Small hills surrounding the city? In actual fact they're huge mountains - 11,500 feet (3500 meters) above sea level. We were similarly deceived at the South Pole





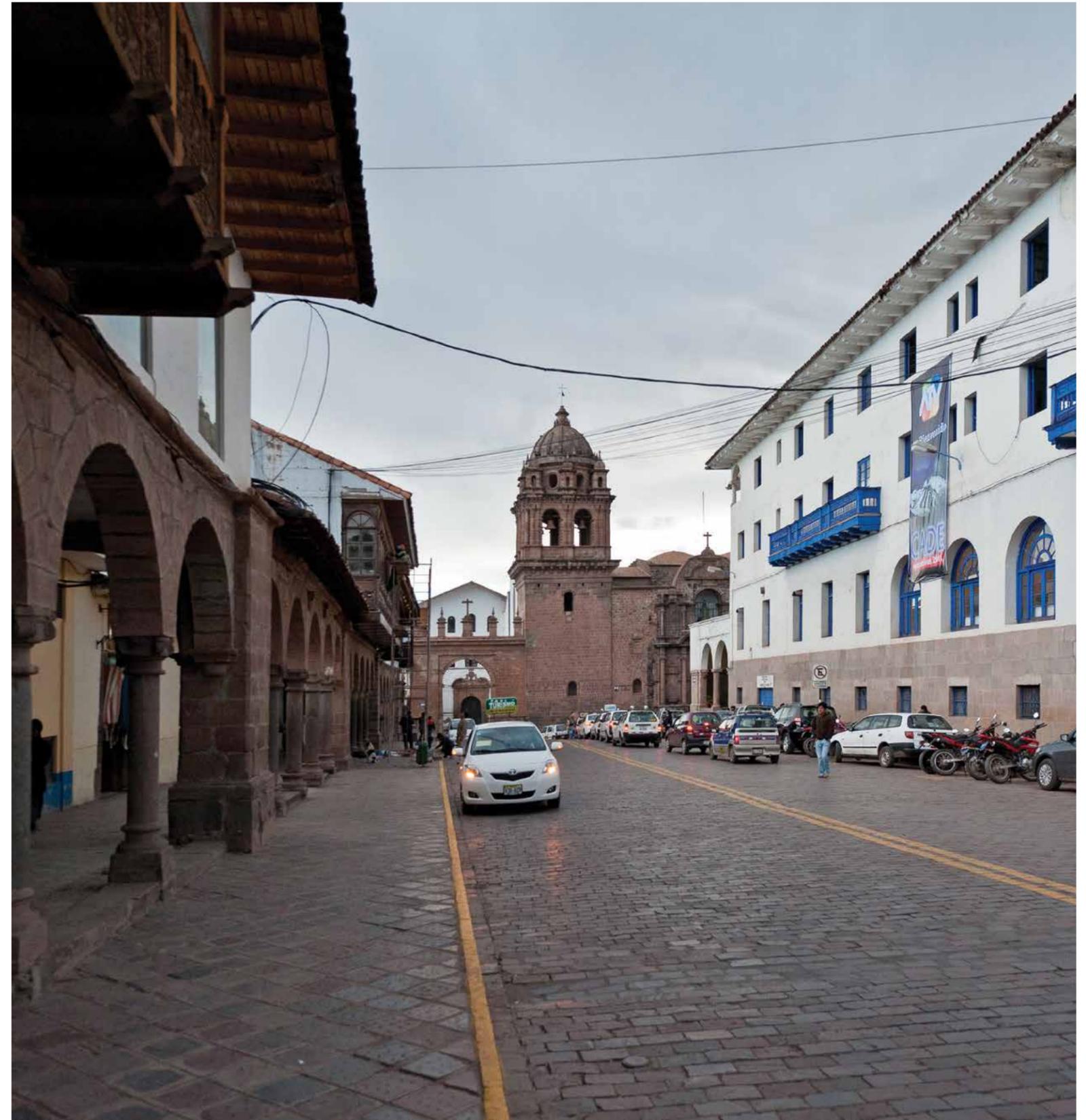
The Incas in Peru are both honored and respected. A monument to Manco Cápac, the first Inca

The central square

The traffic's lively – but no traffic jams or frayed nerves



Cusco



Cusco nightlife. Not quite Amsterdam, but those looking for action sure can find it





The rainbow flag is the official symbol of Cusco, and not only what you thought!

"Apartments for rent". Nice murals



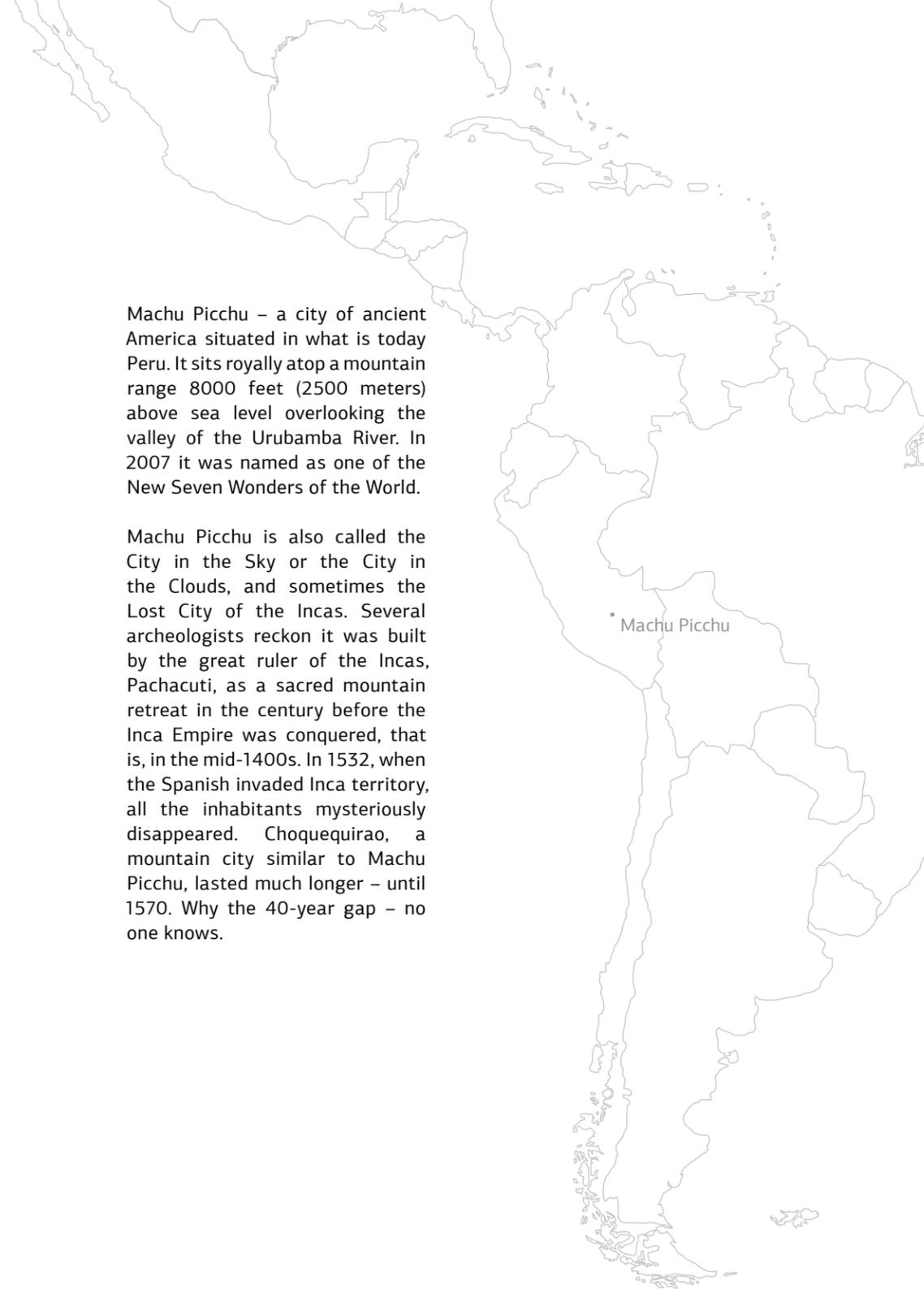
In all, there's plenty to see and do in Cusco. I'd recommend staying here five days or so to get a proper feel for the place. There are museums, cathedrals, and even a planetarium!

During one of his legendary runs to the shops, M.V. got acquainted with a couple of... Khabarovsk coppers! [Khabarovsk is on the eastern side of Russia – not far from Japan.] They told him he shouldn't miss Sacsayhuamán and Písac – ancient Inca walled-town ruins.

The center of Cusco is chock-full of Catholic heritage

Machu Picchu – a city of ancient America situated in what is today Peru. It sits royally atop a mountain range 8000 feet (2500 meters) above sea level overlooking the valley of the Urubamba River. In 2007 it was named as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.

Machu Picchu is also called the City in the Sky or the City in the Clouds, and sometimes the Lost City of the Incas. Several archeologists reckon it was built by the great ruler of the Incas, Pachacuti, as a sacred mountain retreat in the century before the Inca Empire was conquered, that is, in the mid-1400s. In 1532, when the Spanish invaded Inca territory, all the inhabitants mysteriously disappeared. Choquequirao, a mountain city similar to Machu Picchu, lasted much longer – until 1570. Why the 40-year gap – no one knows.



* Machu Picchu

Machu Picchu

13° 9' 47" S, 72° 32' 44" W





En route to Machu Picchu

After a few dozen miles the plateau dives into the Sacred Valley, then imposing 16,500 foot (5000-meter) mountains rise up ahead



Machu Picchu

First, Machu Picchu should be visited at a time when neither North Americans nor Europeans have any national holidays. Otherwise there's a good chance of hitting *eine kleine anschlag*, since access to the site is permitted to a limited number of visitors (now 2000, but UNESCO is lobbying to have that reduced to 800, while on the adjoining mountains at Huayna Picchu they allow only 400). In terms of timing your trip, there's never any need to consider the weather: the place is real near the equator so the only thing to worry about is not getting burned – no matter what time of year it is.

Second, to get as near to Machu Picchu as possible on means of transport from below you should definitely take the train. By car it takes forever and the road's horribly bumpy and bendy. The train to Aguas Calientes (the town at the foot of Machu Picchu) leaves from Poroy (a suburb of Cusco) and from Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley (90 minutes by car from Cusco). The train is a suitable option for all types of travelers and wallets. The backpackers' option costs \$30, while first class is \$300. We tried both! There's also the extreme option – by foot on the Inca Trail, but that takes about four days.

Third, all trips to Machu Picchu need to be planned and booked well in advance, since there are always plenty of Pichu-punters and there's always a chance it'll be overbooked if you turn up on the spur of the moment.

A local superstition: for domestic bliss and good luck to reign in a home, a pair of miniature bulls is installed on the roof. The more progressive Christian families swap one of the bulls for a cross.





The indigenous Quechua make up around 50% of the population of Peru. When the Spanish Conquistadors arrived the Quechua culture was more developed than that of both the Aztecs and the Maya. A very distinctive people.



Made in Peru!
Interesting Quechua
trinkets



The Ollantaytambo –
Aguas Calientes Express
is leaving!

Backpacker-class.
Not bad at all.



Machu Picchu

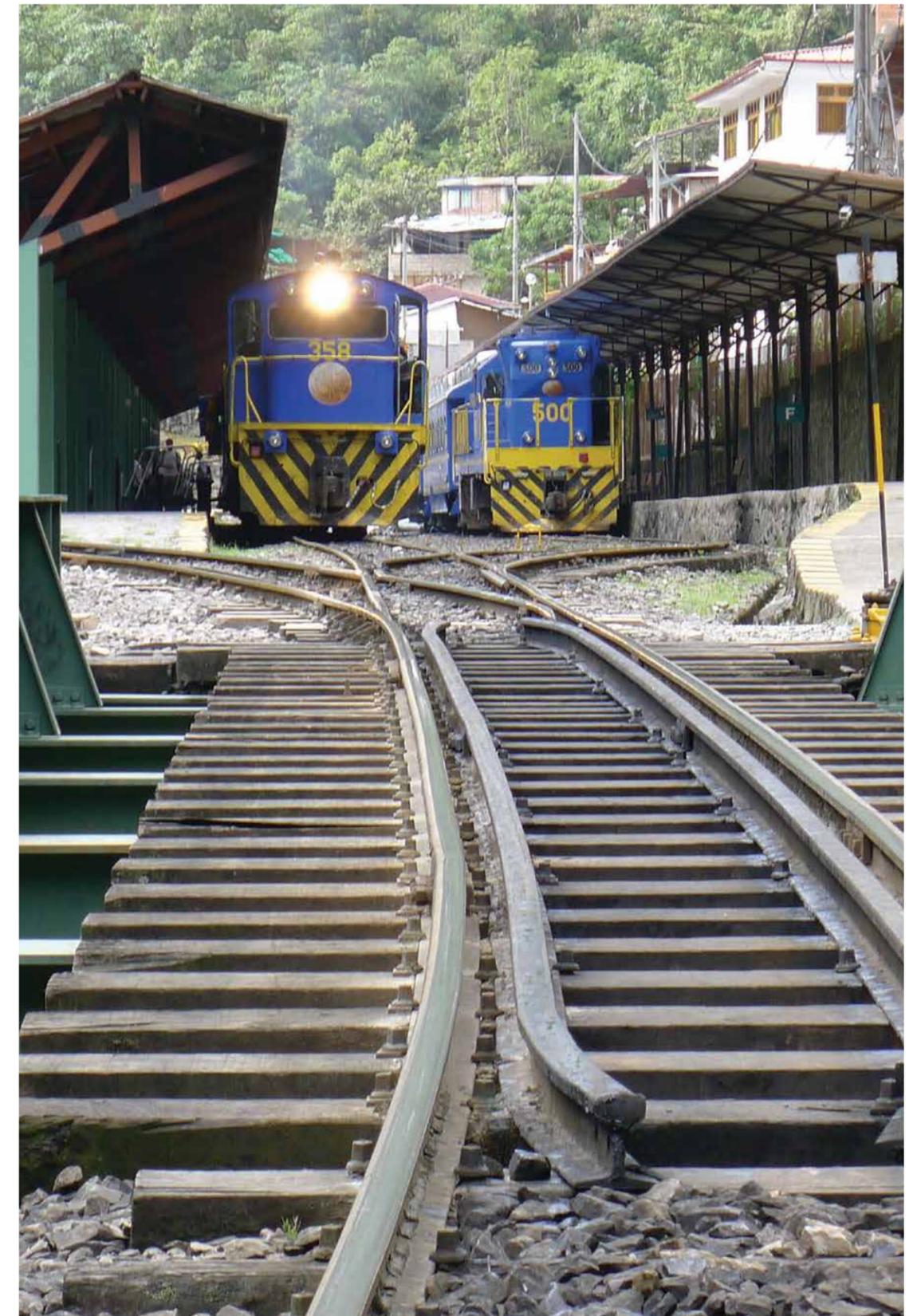
The journey to Aguas Calientes took around two and a half hours instead of the scheduled two and the ride was really bumpy and shaky. The delay may have been due to the train having to wait for ages on a siding to let an oncoming train through on the single-track railroad. This wait was made worse by the view from the windows being totally blocked by some something industrial and ugly. Killing the time, A.O. and M.V. chewed the fat with some really chatty Aussies – who then just wouldn't stop their chatter, meaning our two got zero sleep! Bizarrely enough we kept bumping into them – like, ten times – at Machu Picchu, which of course prompted the inevitable conspiracy theories.

We finally arrived around 11pm. Quite a long day considering we woke up at 4am and were city hopping all day (São Paulo – Lima – Cusco). A few of us got a bit of shut-eye on the train, but all the same everyone said it was straight to bed once we arrived. As it turned out we all emerged in the lobby later on and had a tasty midnight feast together, only to get to bed well after 1am.

We were staying at the Inkaterra hotel. Not the cheapest hotel in town, but that's to be expected when each room has a real fireplace, I guess.



Aguas Calientes station.
Single-track all the way!





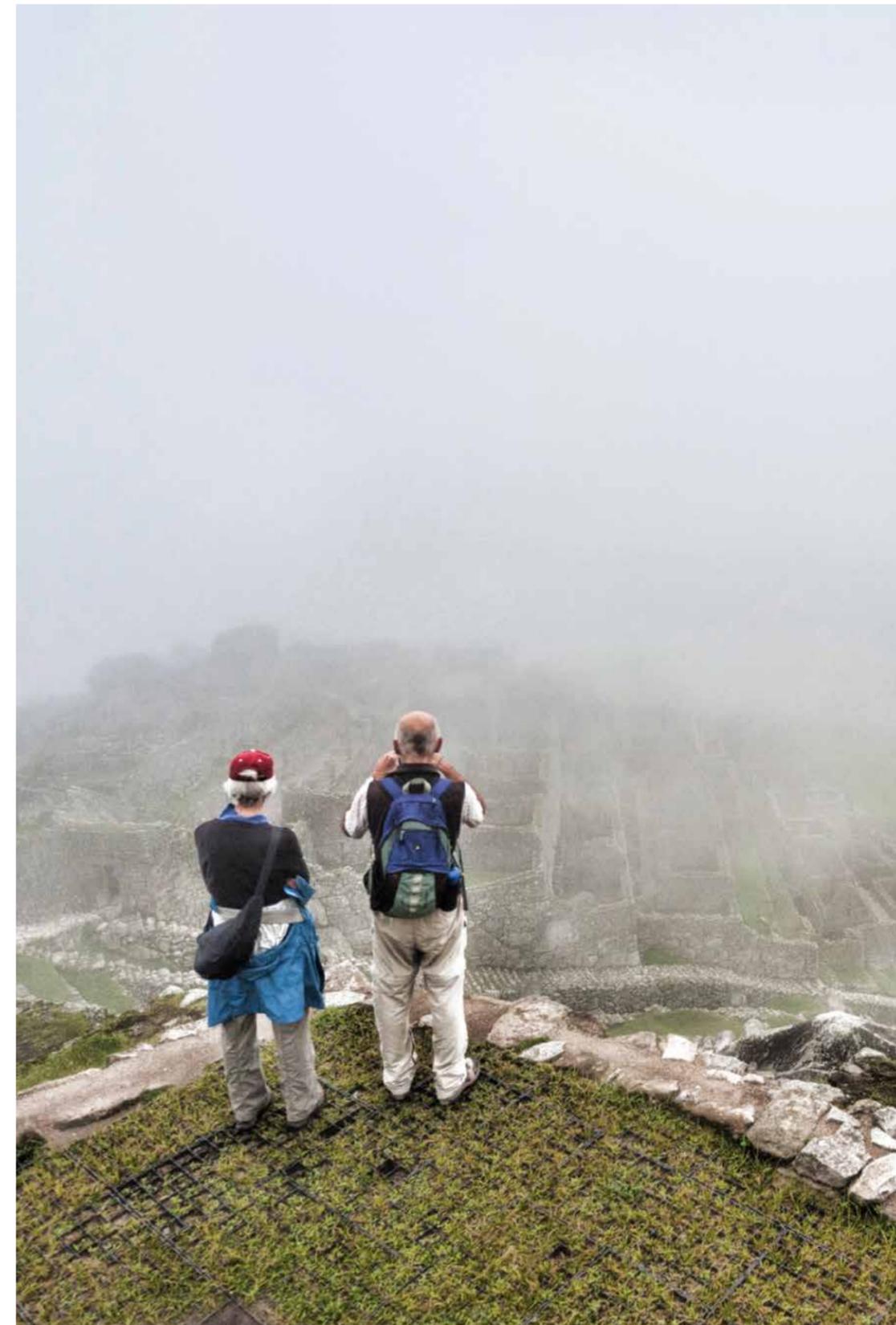
Good morning Aguas Calientes! The road to Machu Picchu

Busses leave Aguas Calientes for Machu Picchu every ten minutes

The checkpoint at the entrance to Machu Picchu



Machu Picchu



Our first day in Machu Picchu.

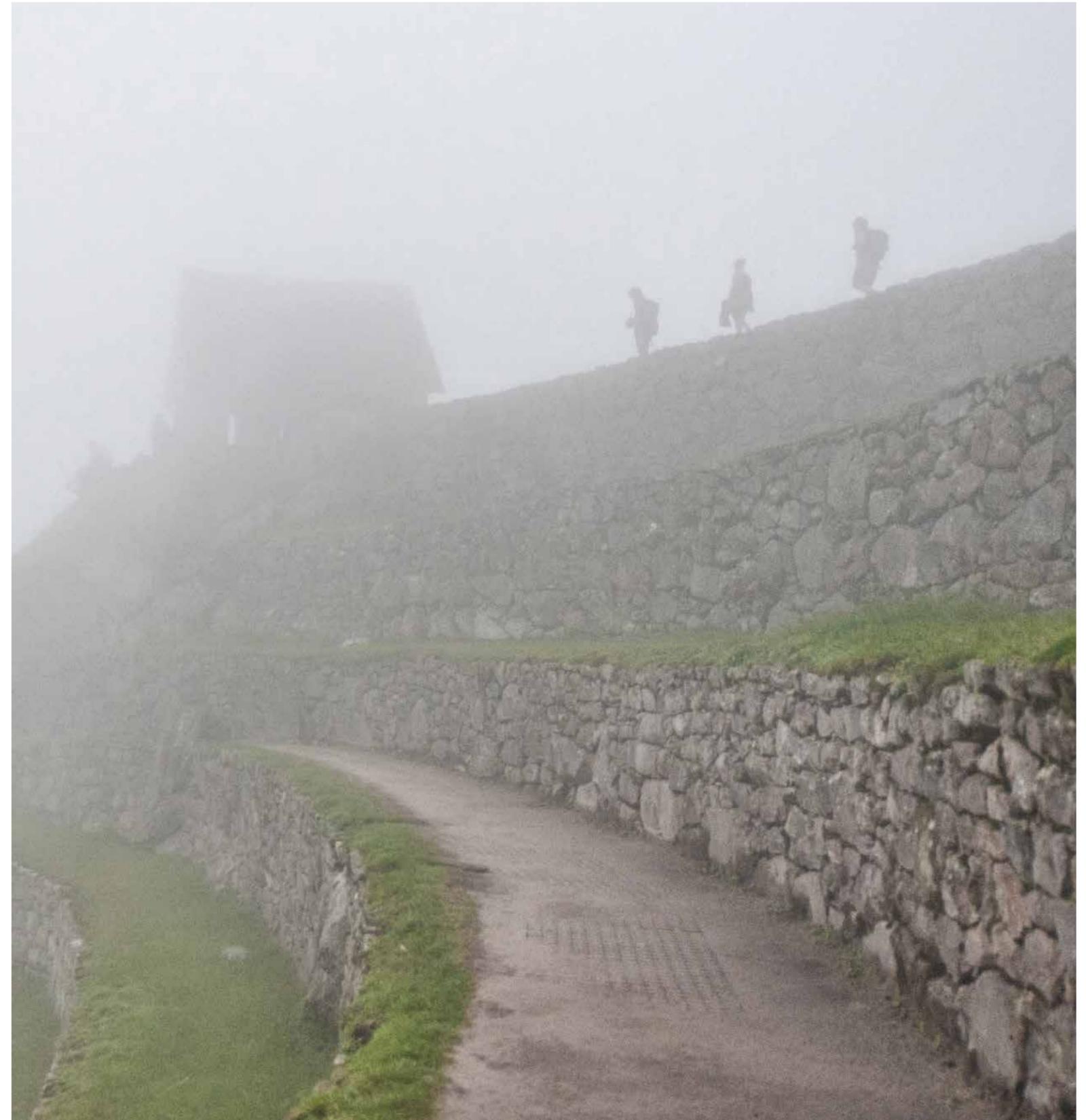
Up at 5am, we wolfed down a quick breakfast and rushed off to the bus station. But we needn't have bothered getting up at the crack of dawn: nine early mornings out of ten here there's nothing but a dense fog to be seen. We were stumbling around like the blind!

Then we found out we could have foregone the bus altogether and got to Machu Picchu on foot. Or climbed up to Huayna Picchu straight away while it was still cool (about this later).

Somewhere out there lurks Machu Picchu



The fog was reaaal thick. A warm waterproof coat is highly recommended



At the entrance to the ancient city





Telling the weather to sort itself out! [the thumb between the index and middle finger – a “fig” – is a Russian children’s gesture shown to convey something like, “to hell with you!”]

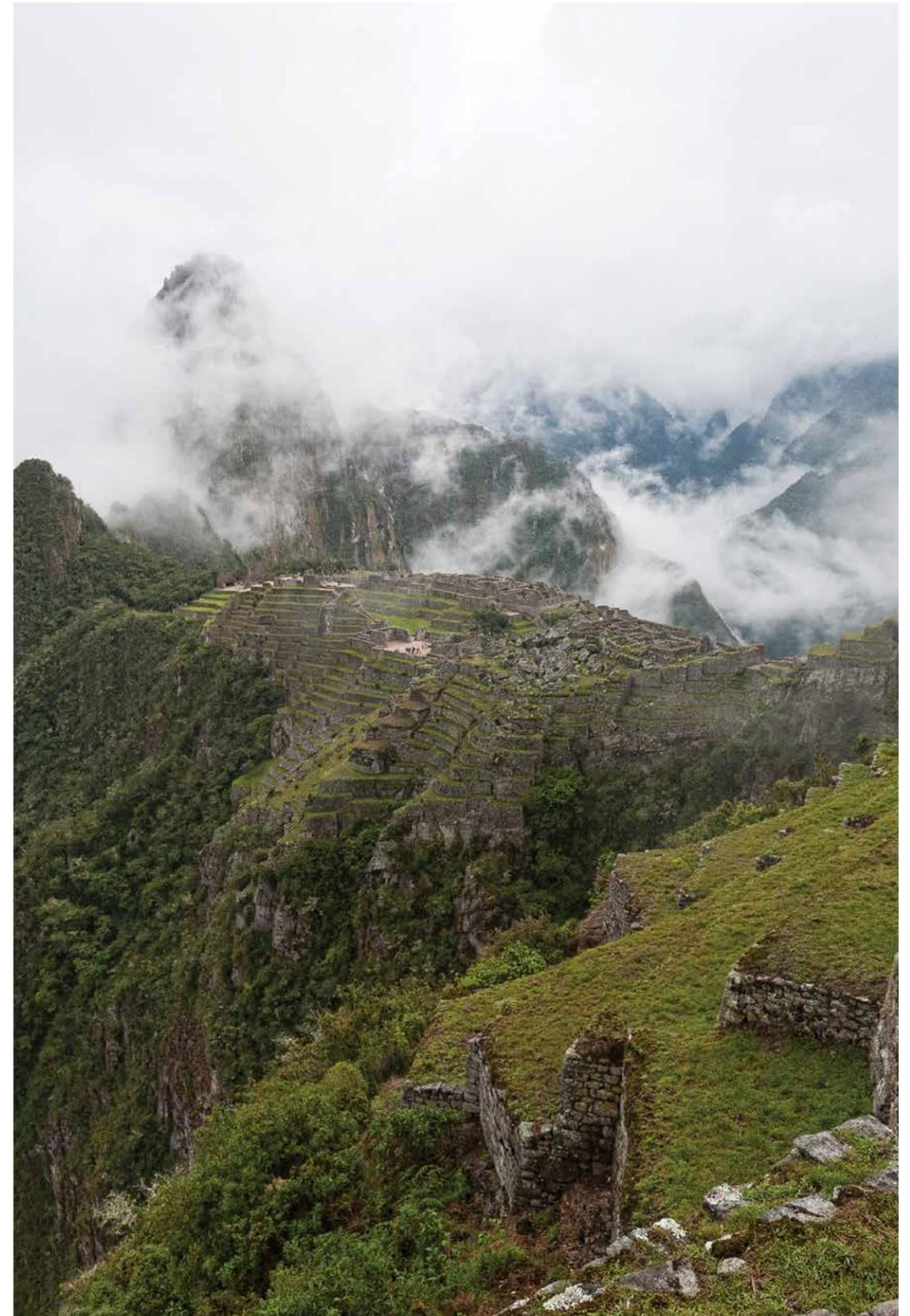
The City in the Clouds slowly emerges



Machu Picchu

When the rain started, we applied the tried and tested meteorological invocation otherwise known as “to fig with you”. Then suddenly...

...someone started to turn the fog on and off! When it lifted, before the posse had time to get out their expensive lenses for their special shots, the fog had already fallen again. Weird!

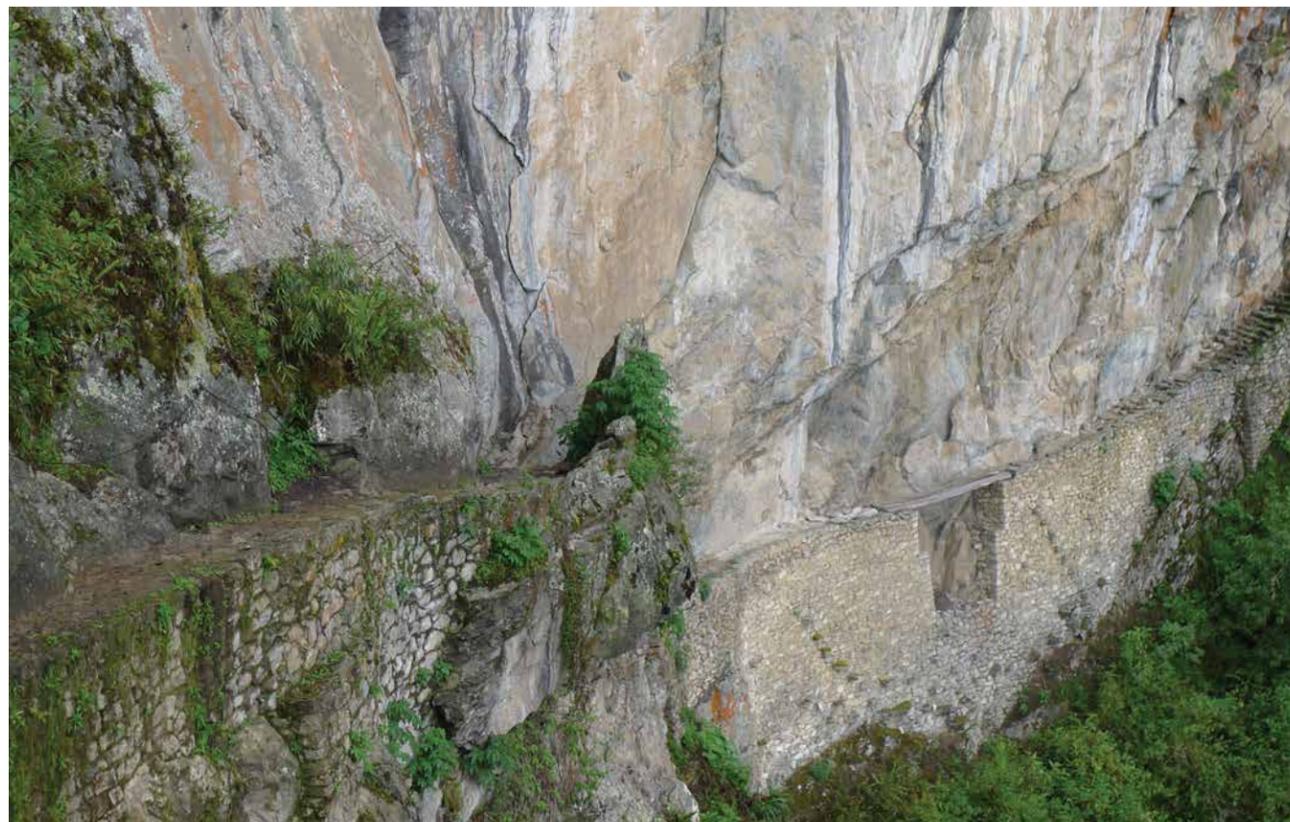


One of the best places for taking photos

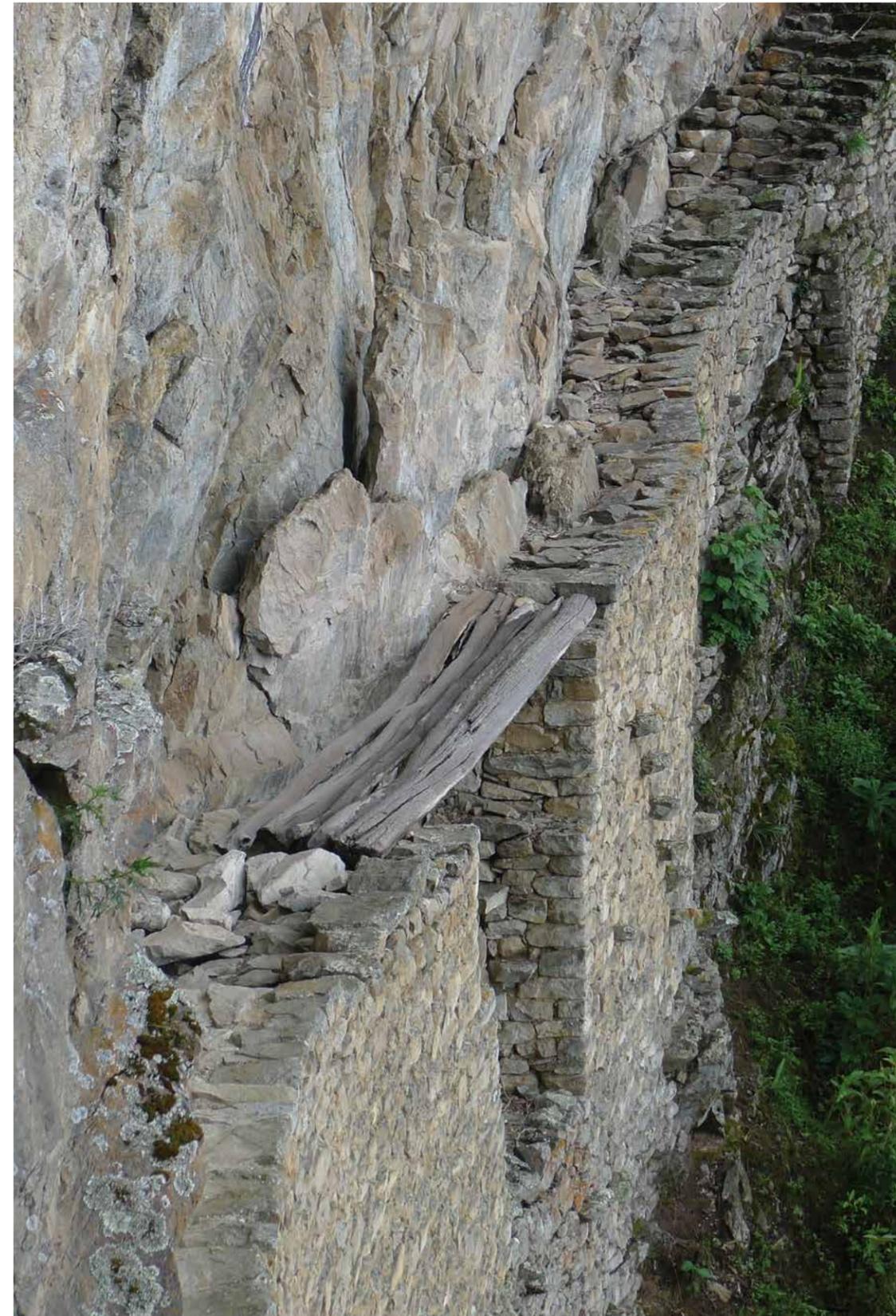


En route from Machu Picchu to Inca Bridge

Once upon a time, loaded up Incas and llamas trotted boldly along these precarious paths



Machu Picchu



We decided to check out a neighboring attraction – Inca Bridge.

A few words about the transportation system of this civilization. Not having horses, and using llamas for carrying heavy cargo just in the valleys, they moved about the mountains mostly on foot – along a national network of paths that crisscross the mountains far and wide. The total distance of all the paths of the Incas is approximately 25,000 miles (40,000 kilometers). To give you a better idea of how long that is, the total length of all the railroads in Russia – the largest country in the world – is around 50,000 miles (80,000 kilometers)!

It's forbidden to get any closer to the bridge. Nothing lost there though – it's scary enough from here!



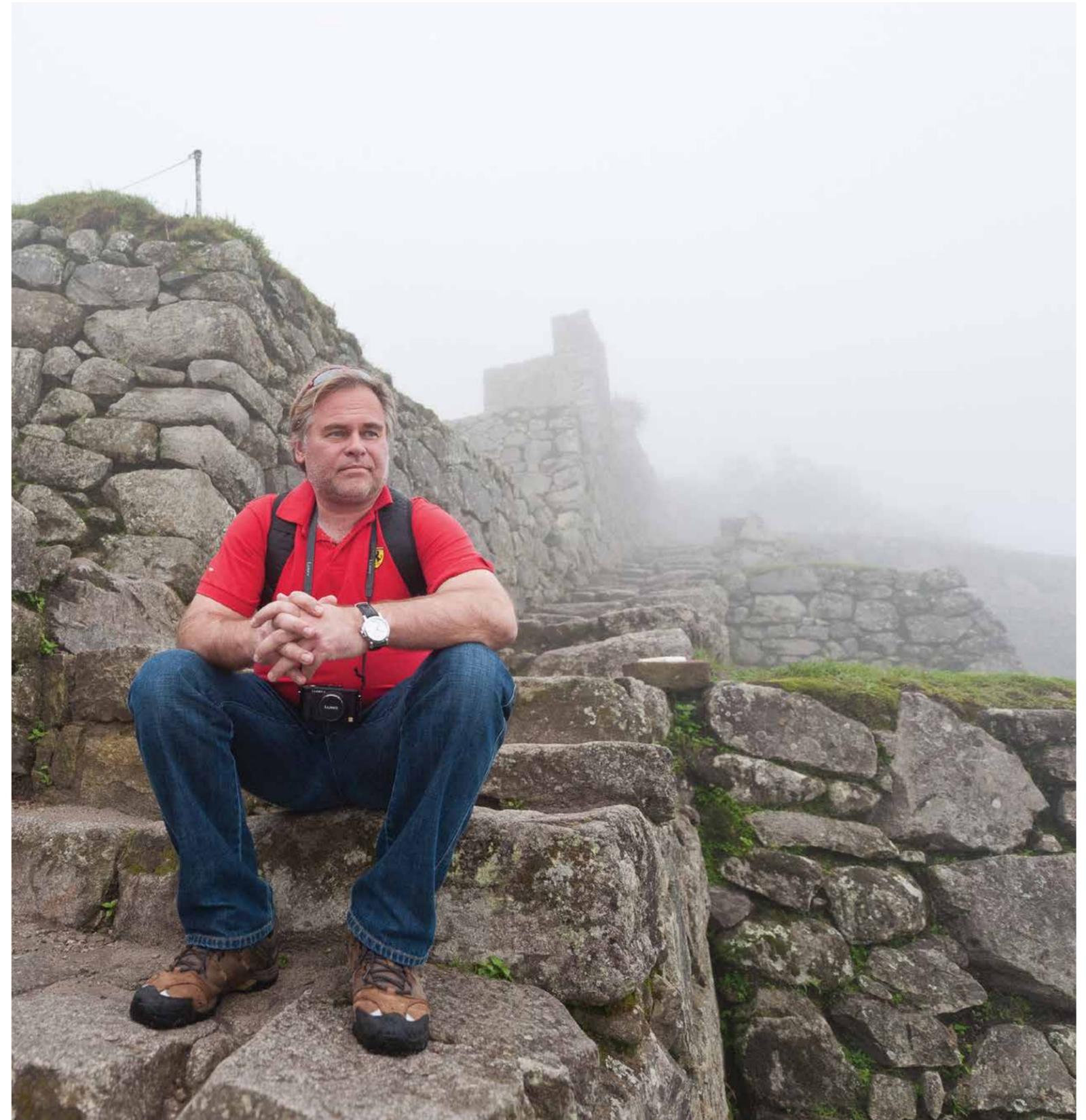
The green band across the cliff face is bushes on a half-ruined 1650-foot (500-meter) section of the transport artery that connected Machu Picchu and the neighboring town

Meanwhile our stern words with the weather appeared to have pulled off; it brightened up no end!

The Incas too would have sat here 500 years earlier to take in the breathtaking view



Machu Picchu

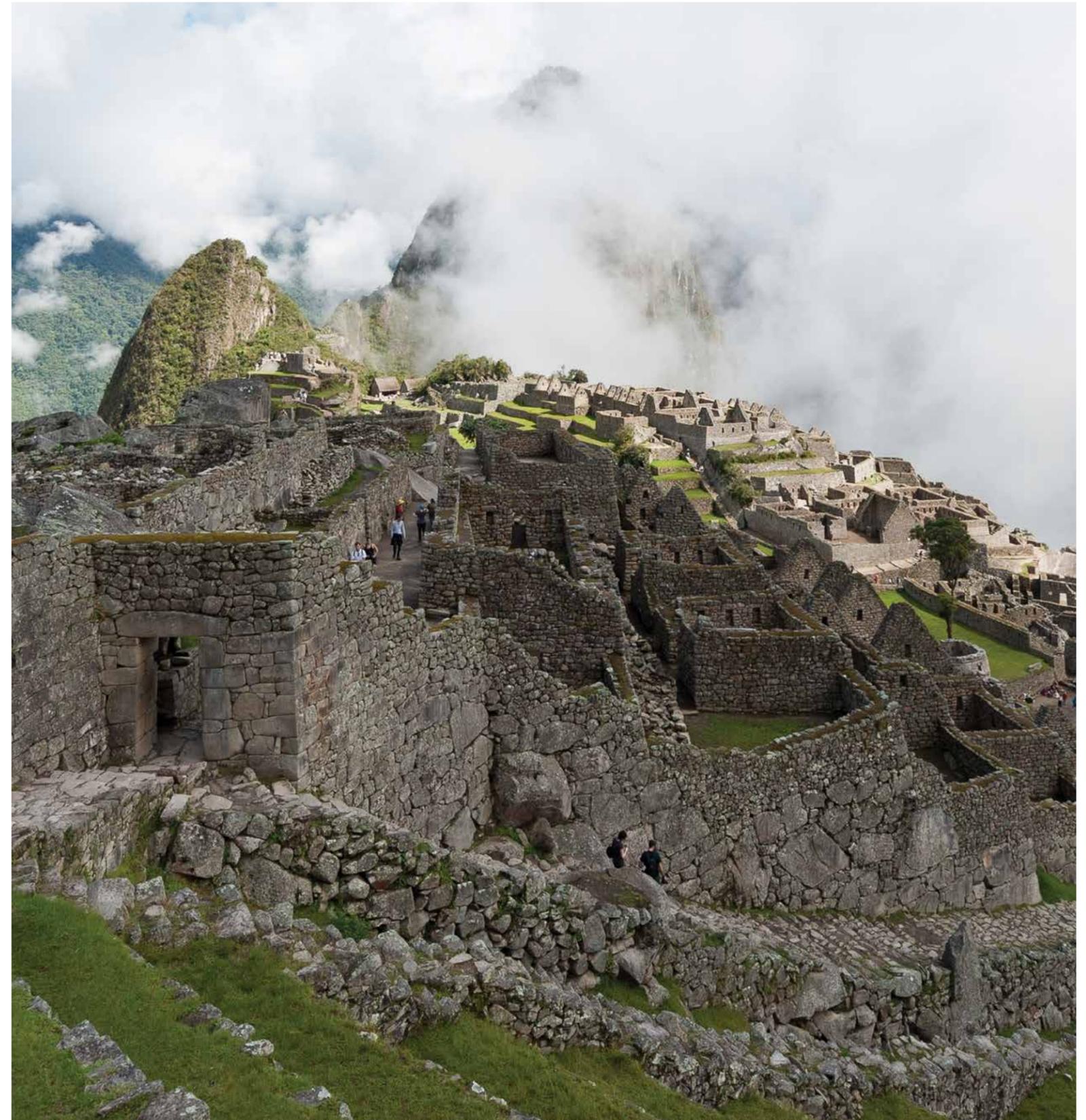


Machu Picchu – in the
flesh and in full effect!

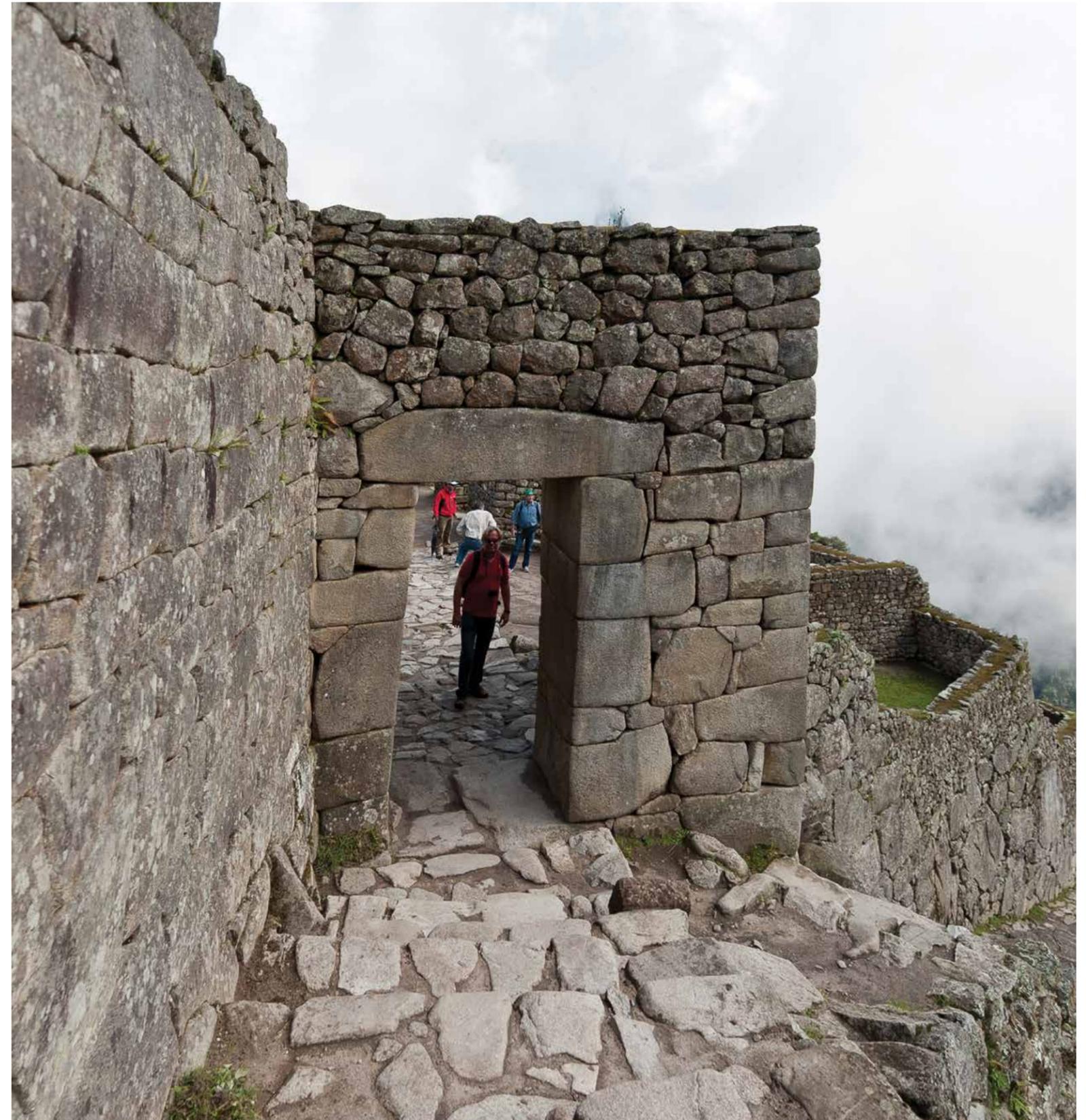




It's starting to get hot.
Equatorial sun does that



Cameras and camcorders managed to digitize the scene up here. D.Z.'s first memory card got filled up at this point



The mountains in the background – straight out of Avatar!

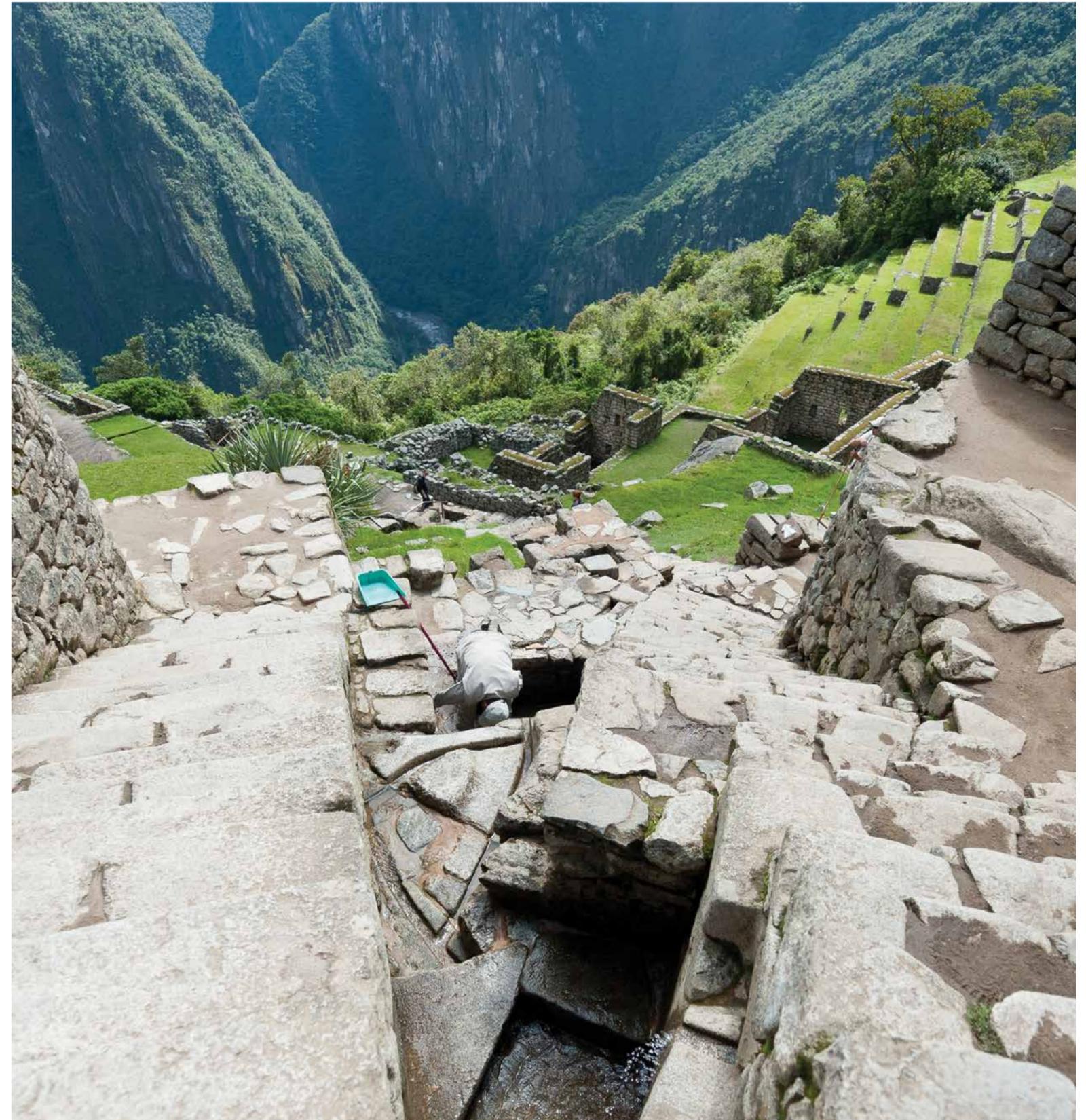


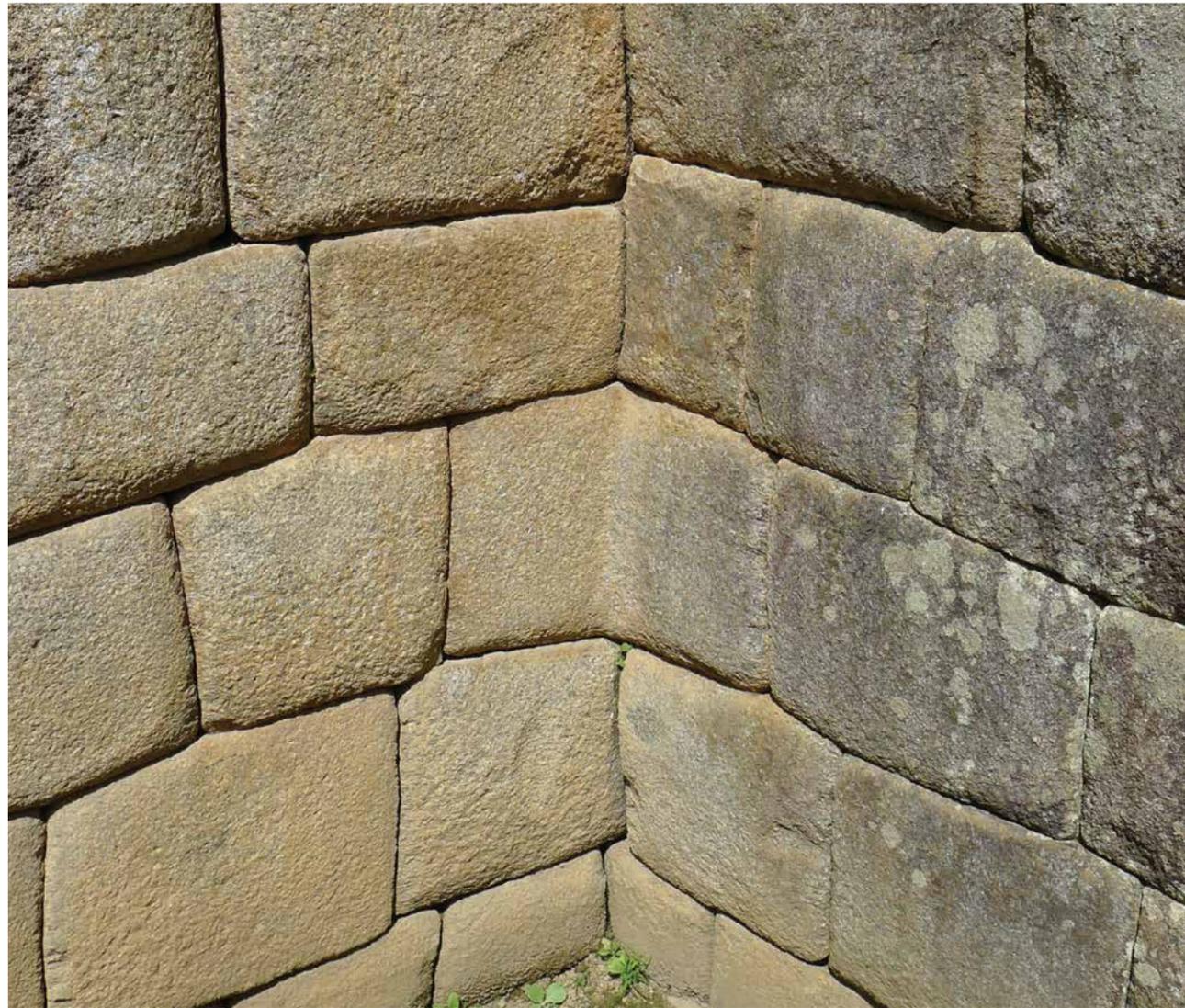


The roofless D-shaped construction is the Temple of the Sun

An intricate web of drainage and irrigation channels runs throughout the whole of Machu Picchu

It's said that despite the abundance of terrace-gardens Machu Picchu still didn't provide itself with food, which instead had to be brought in from outside



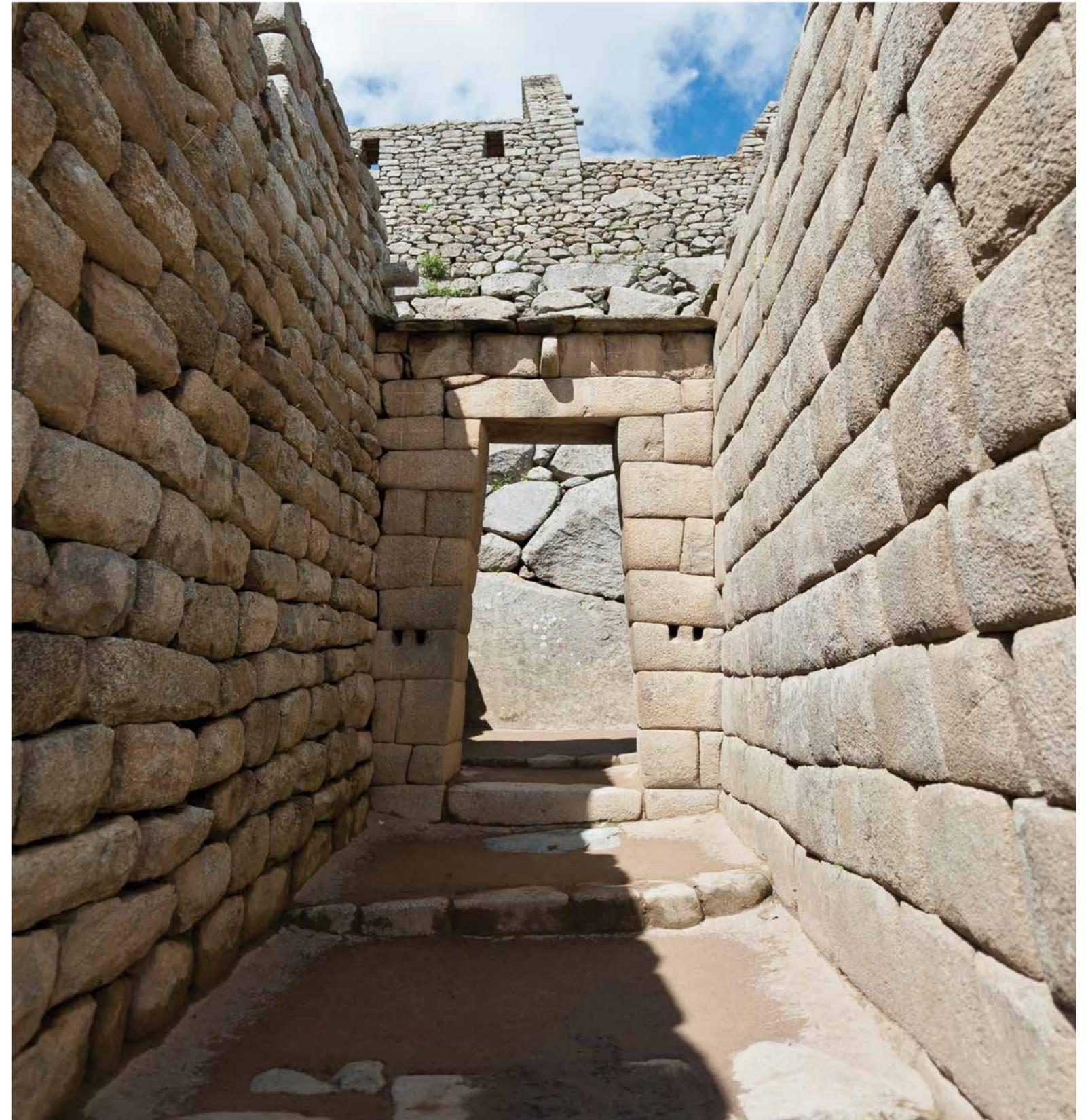
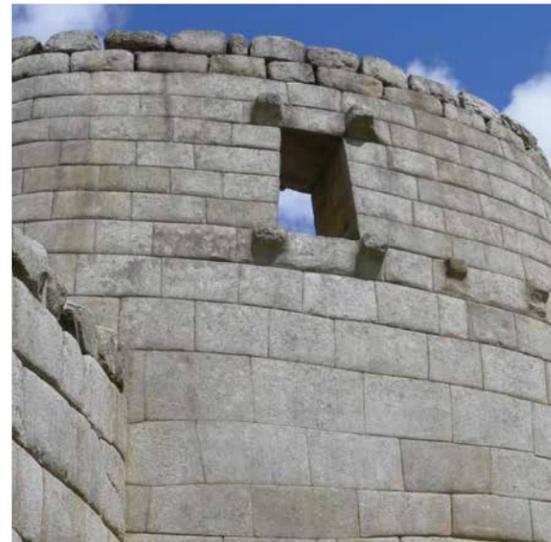


There are millions of photos of Machu Picchu on the Internet, but some of the fascinating detail is nonetheless missed in them – for example, this one-piece cornerstone. Now that’s how corner work needs doing!

The architecture of the Incas was all about adapting to nature – harmoniously. Just look at this art form

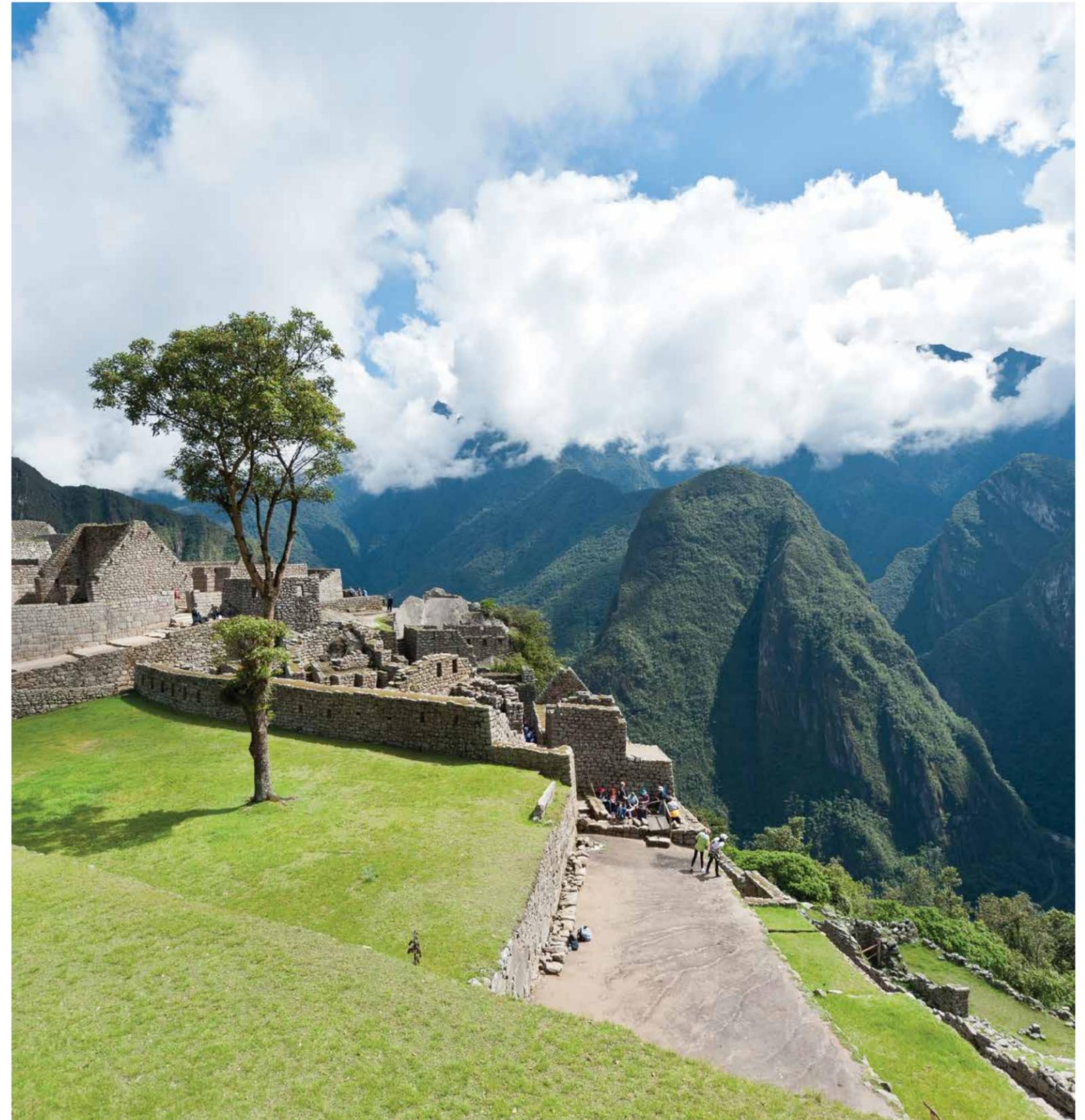
Trapezoid “windows” and doorways helped the stability of the walls

Of course, not all the stonework here is super special; just most of it





We continued our tour.
We took oodles of really nice pics



The Andenes – stepped terraces enabling farming



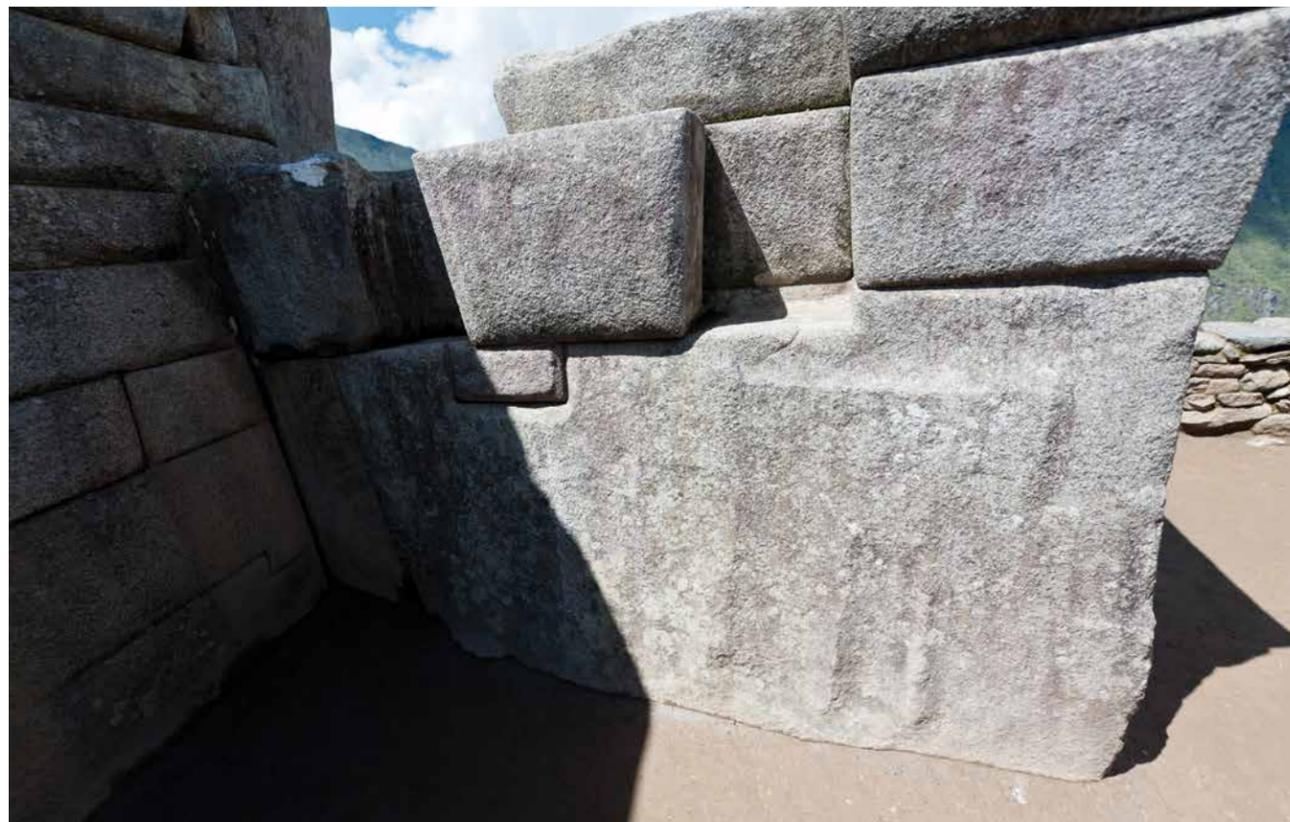


Some kind of sacril stone. I don't quite remember the legend, but it's something to do with the natural elements and a mystical connection with the cosmos. It's strictly forbidden to touch it these days. Several years ago a heavy camera rig fell on it (they were shooting an advertisement) and a part of the stone was knocked off. The country (understandably) went into mourning

Another example of Inca stone laying. A 12-cornered stone

The mountain in the background is Huayna Picchu. It's really worth a climb. What you'll need if doing so: well worn-in hiking boots and the highest factor sun cream you can find

Machu Picchu



A brief respite before
the dash up Huayna
Picchu

And off we go!

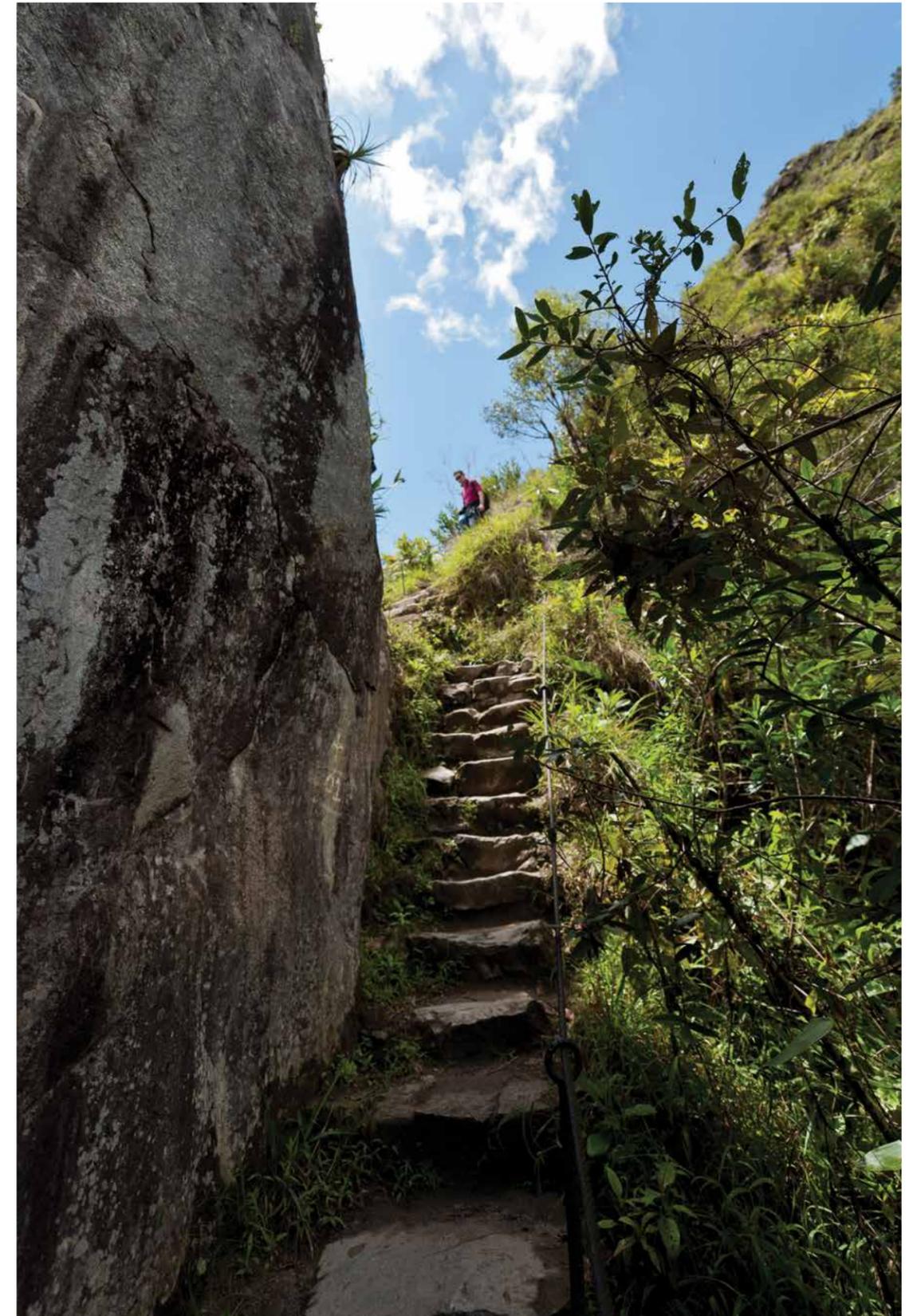


Machu Picchu

After more than an hour at Machu Picchu we decided to quick-march to Huayna Picchu, the mountain opposite. Its peak is 8850 feet (2700 meters) above sea level. For those planning a trip here, I recommend preparing really well – especially in terms of footwear and water supplies: there'll be lots of hopping over rocks and risking your life, and it gets hellishly hot. If possible, go up Huayna Picchu early in the morning while it's still cool, before you go up Machu.

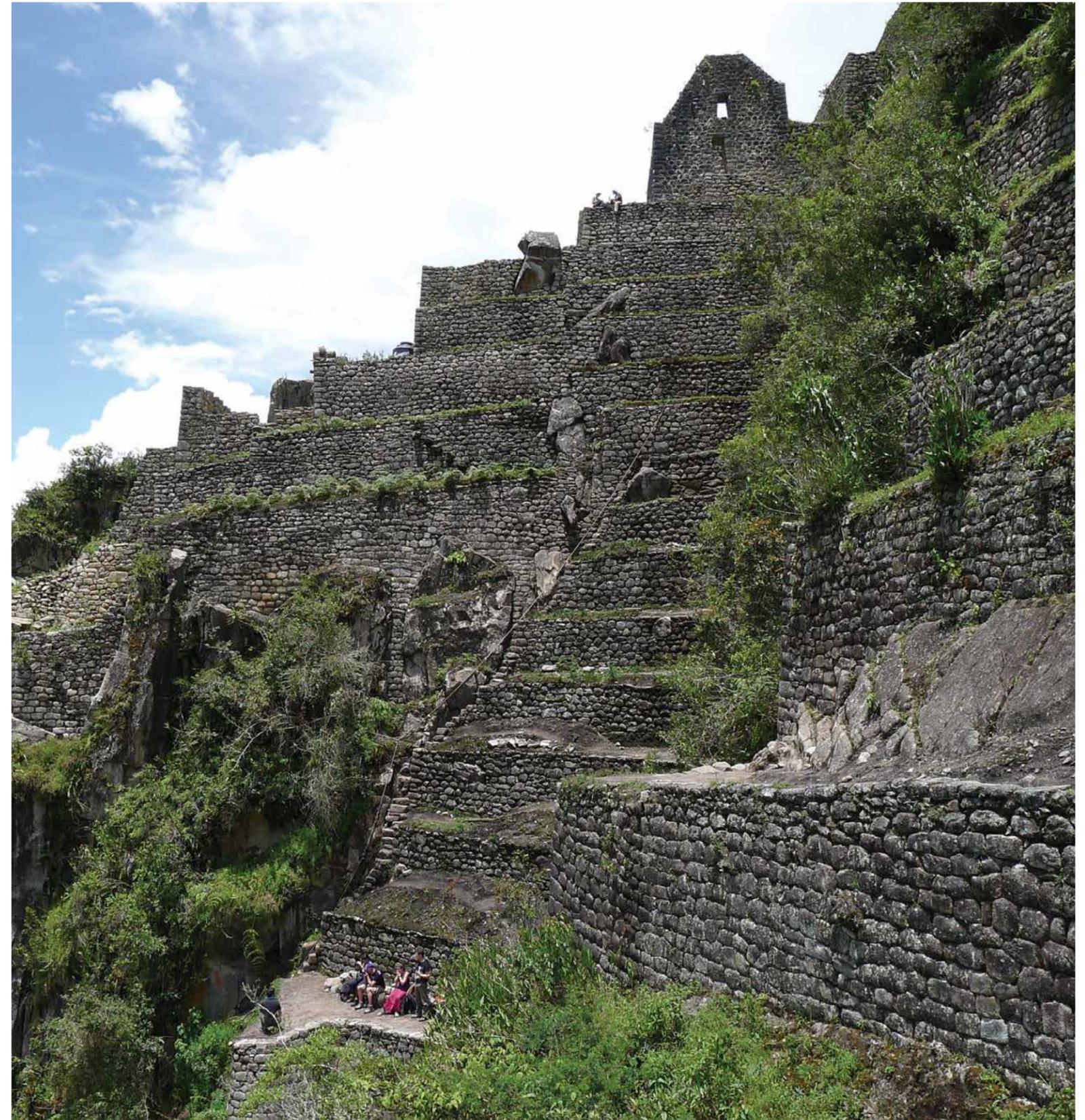
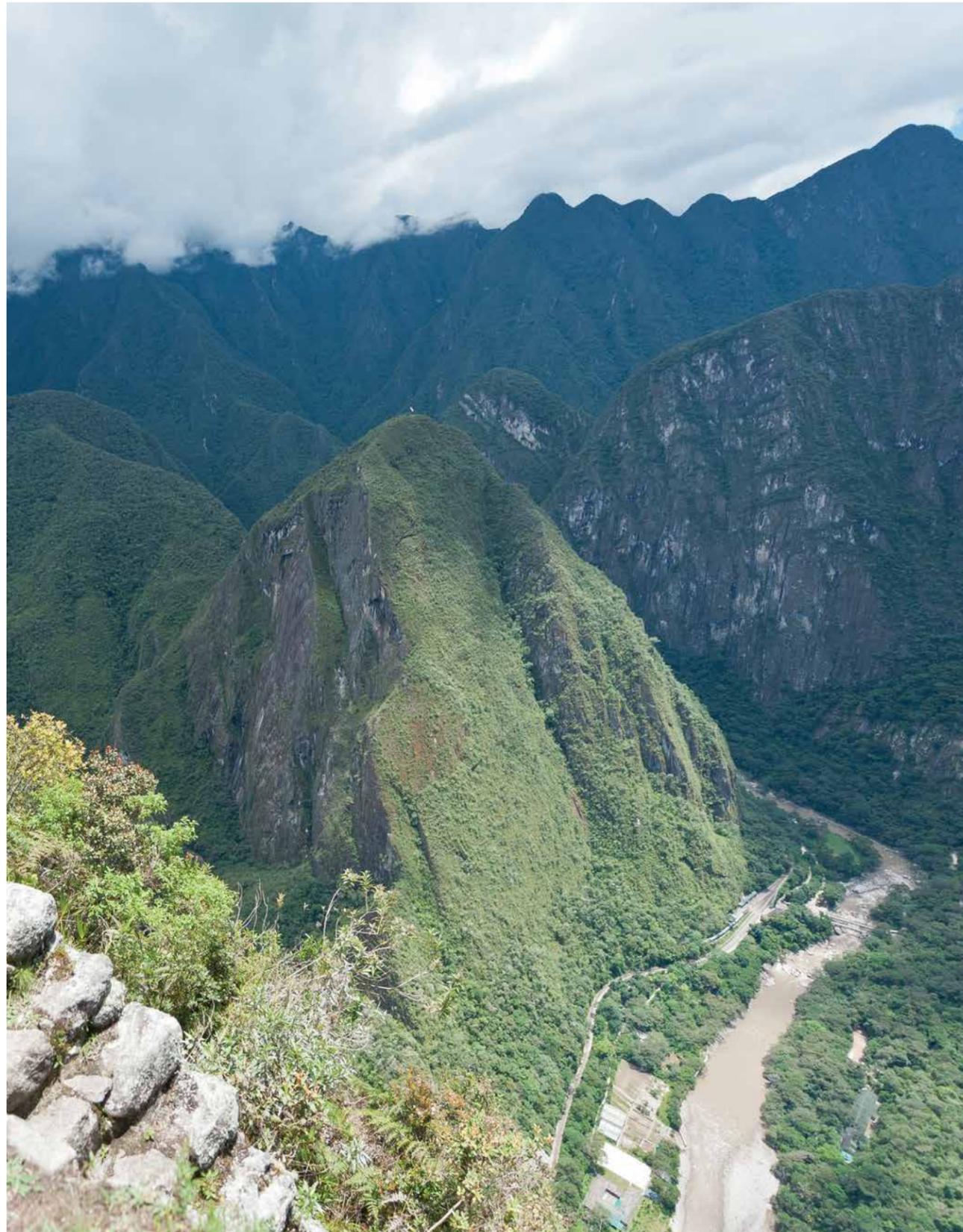
At the Huayna checkpoint we write down our names and the time, and assure the guard we'll return. Soon after that most of us got sunburnt – applying cream too late in the day, I guess. L.G. decides to wait below. D.Z. gallops quickly up the hill, despite the heavy rucksack on his back with lots of photo and video gear in it; impressive. M.V., A.O. and I slowly but steadily move forward and upward, M.V. humming away to himself.

Machu Fitness



You can get lost for hours on Huayna Picchu. Many actually do

Huayna Picchu is covered with Inca constructions. We never ceased to be amazed by the perseverance and hard work of these mysterious people



And this is what Machu Picchu looks like from Huayna Picchu. The serpentine path on the left leads to Aguas Calientes and the railroad. The river on the right is the Urubamba

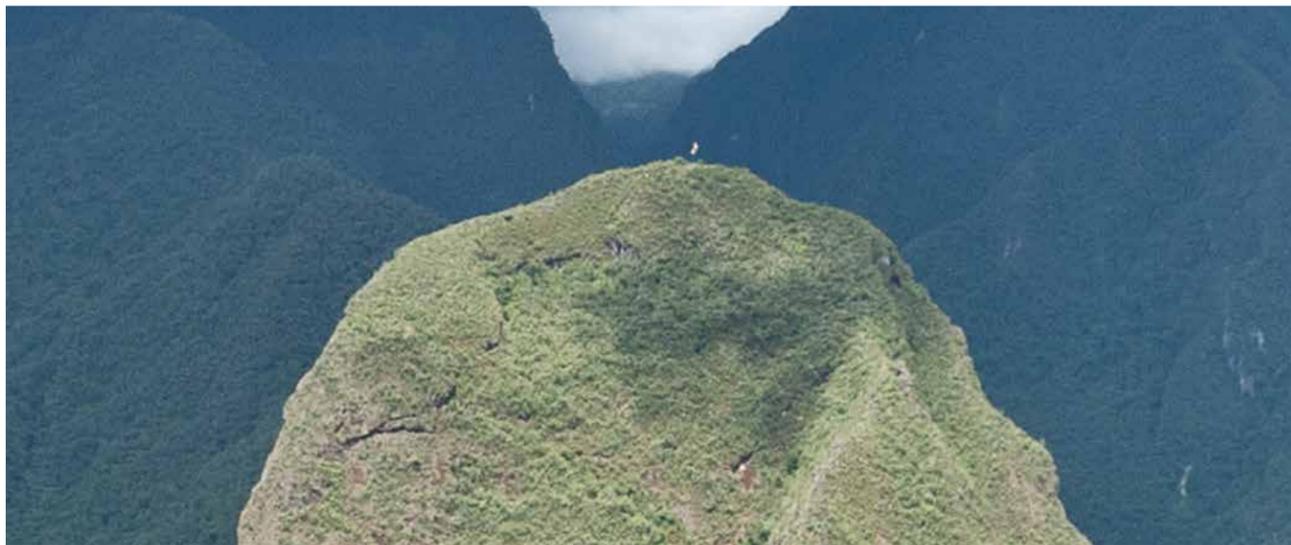




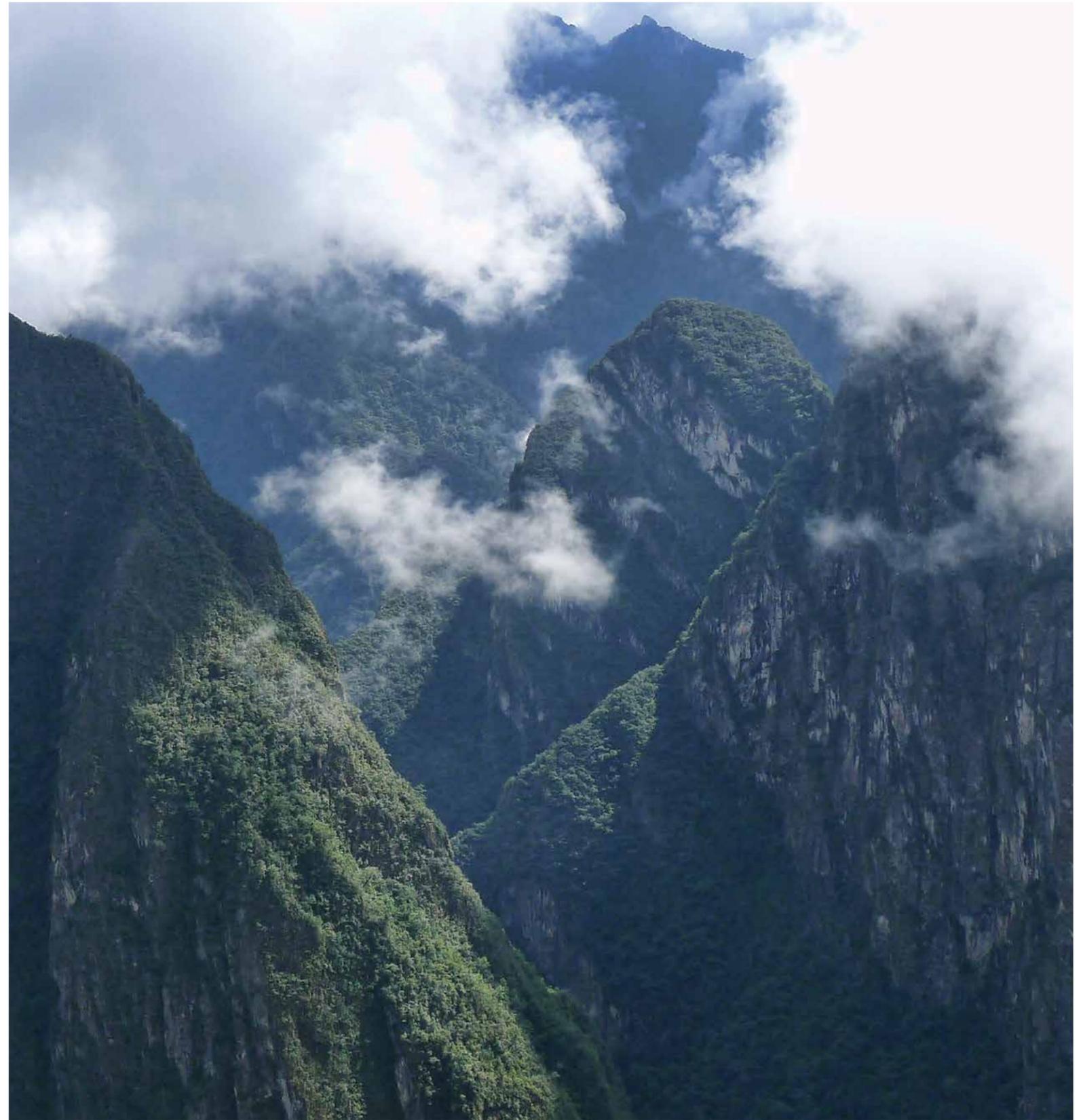
At the top of Huayna Picchu. A brief high-altitude equatorial rain is about to fall

Avatar's Pandora again!

And here come the Na'vi on the backs of their flying dragons

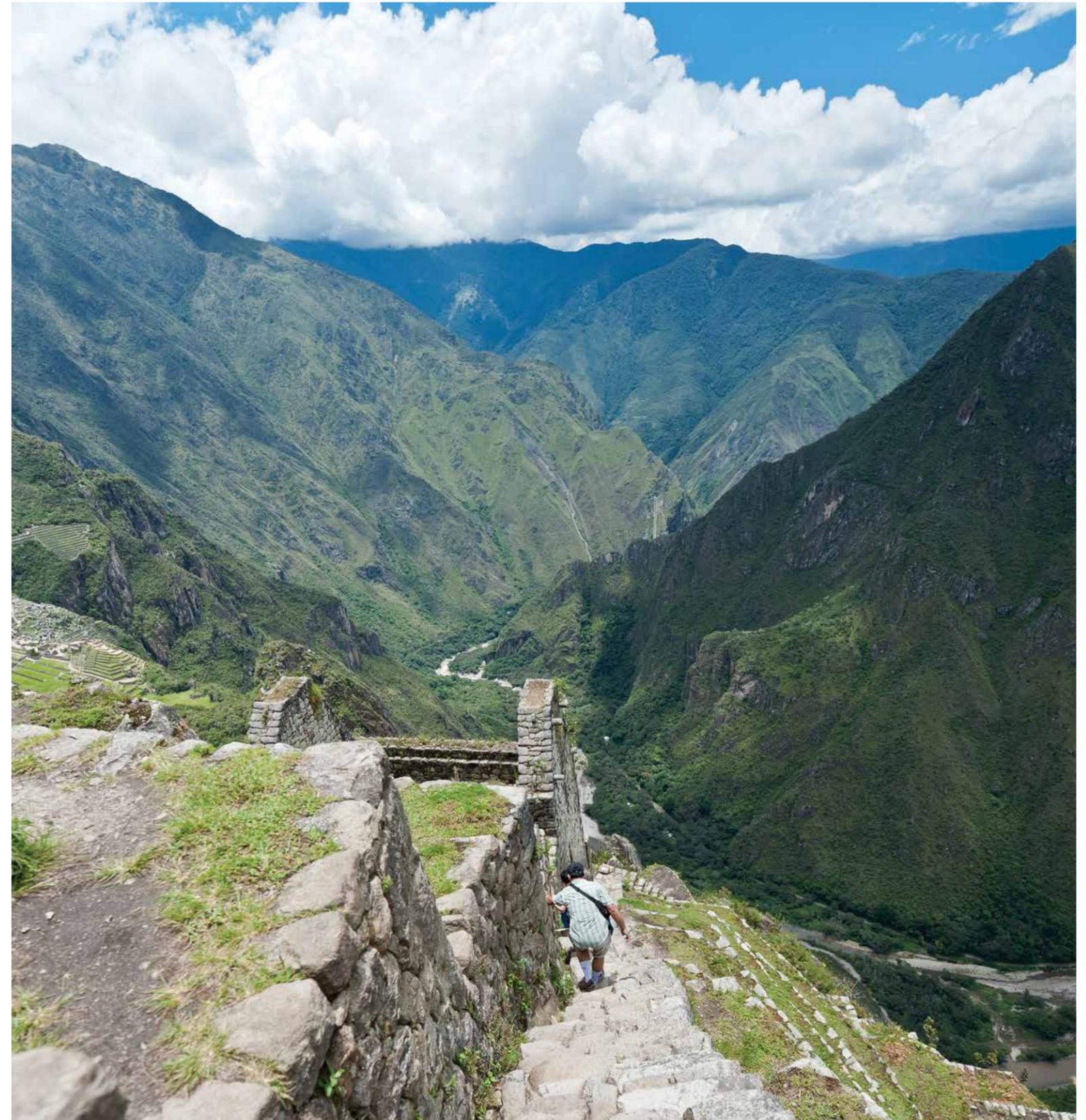


Machu Picchu





We descend. I wonder how many tourists trip and fall a year. None, I hope



The vale of the river Urubamba is called the Sacred Valley of the Incas, running between two high mountain ridges. It was considered both the heart and breadbasket of the Empire of the Incas. The valley is home to a copious quantity of all kinds of cultural attractions, and even has its own unique microclimate.

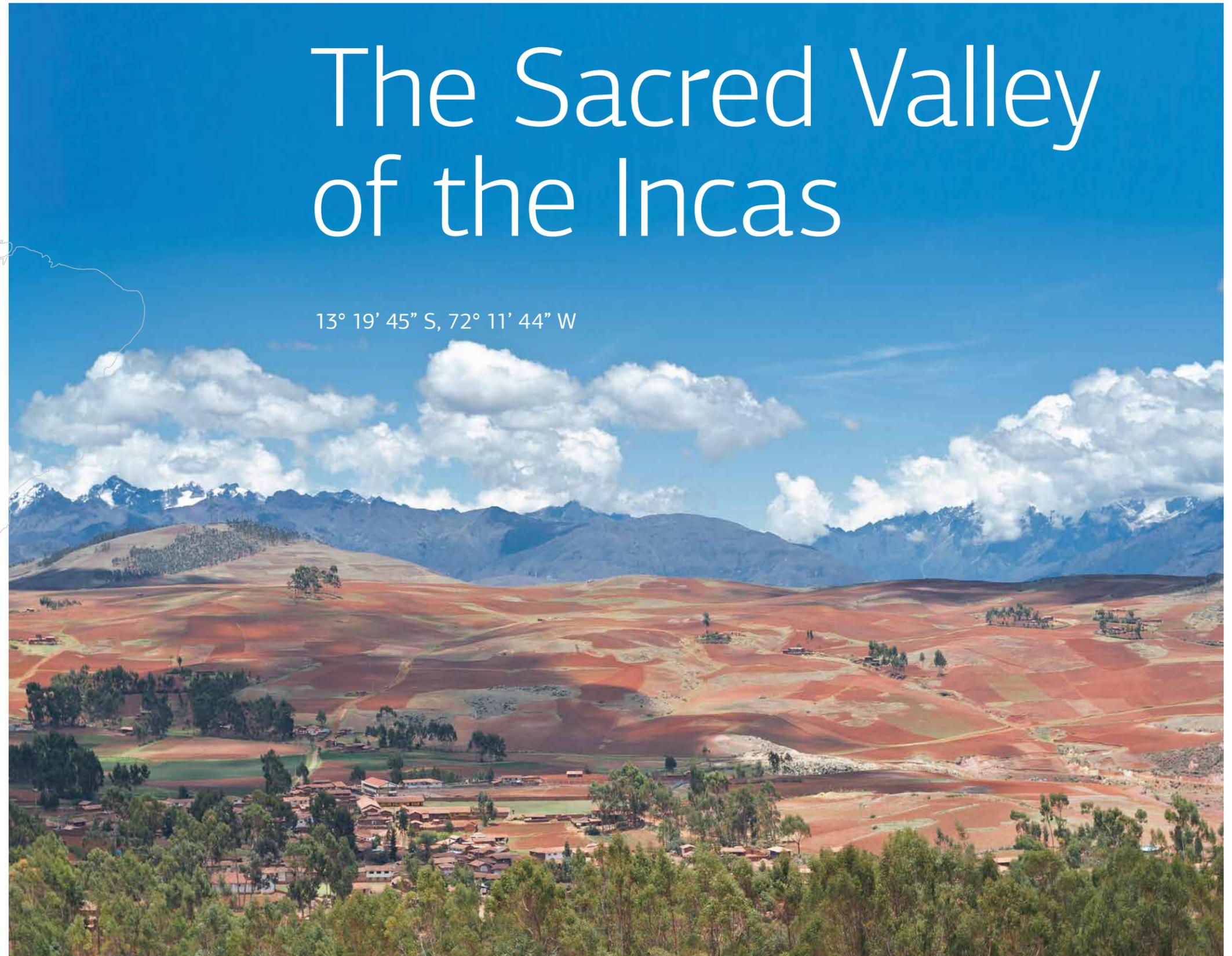
To this day the valley is the main center of corn production in Peru, and the locals still use the Incas' Andenes up the sides of the valley to assist them in their farming.

Among the most well-known and impressive natural monuments of the valley are the salt marshes near the small town of Maras.

• The Sacred Valley of the Incas

The Sacred Valley of the Incas

13° 19' 45" S, 72° 11' 44" W





At first sight the scale of the salt farming going on here seems staggering. Then it turns out that the majority of the salt beds are abandoned

Out of all the beds we counted only ten actually being used



The Sacred Valley of the Incas

Maras is a unique town. Salt is extracted here as per an ancient – pre-Inca – method. The locals “tamed” the Maras salt source around two thousand years ago.

The extraction method goes like this: they siphon off water from a tiny salty stream and make it flow into several hundred beds. The water is evaporated in the hot sun, and then the product is collected and put into bags. In a season from one such bed they get around 33 pounds (15 kg) of the white seasoning. And it’s all done by hand – from the regulation of the water supply to the beds, to the gathering and transportation of the product. The season ends in December with the onset of the rains.



And here’s the little salt-stream source. Doesn’t look much, but it’s been putting bread – and salt – on the locals’ tables for more than two thousand years



Along the valley a few artisan miners can be seen. Business not going so well, it seems

We had to applaud their daring as they strolled effortlessly and deftly along the skinny slippery paths that divide the beds. We had a go, but gave it up pretty quickly as a bad idea. No one wanted to risk salty-wet feet with all the walking we had ahead



The Sacred Valley of the Incas



The salt economy functions like this: anyone can lease a salt bed from the local cooperative and then extract the white crystals from it for a small fee. But willing lessees are few and far between; therefore, many beds lie dormant.

A day's catch for the salt cooperative



Every salt bed has its own channel running to it – carefully carved out eons ago

Just like 2K years ago



The Sacred Valley of the Incas

Agave plants flower just once in their lifetime. The two with the high stems in the photo – these are Agave plants. It's a real trooper of a versatile plant, getting dissembled down into its various "spare parts" to the extreme: from the leaves they make string and textiles, from the thorns – hooks, from the core – tequila and mescal (a type of vodka), and from offcuts – paper! They also use it in medicine – for synthesis of steroids, as an antiseptic, for homeopathy, and even as a contraceptive!



Regarding sartorial selection, there's just one thing to remember: cover up! And any skin left unexposed needs a thick layer of high-factor sun cream smeared onto it. And don't forget about ample water supplies, either. The thirst you work up here can get extreme



The Sacred Valley of the Incas



The Urubamba River

Ever since ancient times here there've been "tambos" all along the valley - something like postal stations, where travelers can take time out to chill a bit and get refreshed. We took advantage of one such tambo before heading back to Cusco



The tambo's garden had three types of llama grazing in it: Guanako, Alpaca and Vicuña

The Sacred Valley of the Incas



This poor parrot gets pestered by every single visitor to the tambo; that is, apart from those doing a red-tee-shirt/shades combo



Time to go home...

Though I managed to accumulate a mass of unforgettable impressions in just three days, I'd have stayed another week with relish. That way I wouldn't have had to rush my stone-gazing and inspecting all the other fascinating stuff here. I'd also have been able to fit in having the mind blown on the other nearby mountains, and maybe even taking a chance on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu!

Tired but very contented, the next day we completed a protracted intercontinental leap across the world: Cusco – Lima – Amsterdam – Moscow. It turned out to be a real zig-zaggy route of connections – door-to-door around 30 hours...

... still – small price after such a fantastic time in Peru!

Eugene Kaspersky

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An Unforgettable Trip
to the City of the Incas

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