

## Sacred Valley of the Incas

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*Boston Globe*

URUBAMBA, Peru –It is one of the most scenic, historic and accessible valleys in all of Peru. It basks in the sun between Cusco and Machu Picchu, protected on either side by two mountain ranges: both of which have snowy peaks and glaciers that at 19,000 feet seem to float above the clouds. It is the Sacred Valley of the Incas.

The Vilcanota River meanders in wide curves down the valley past centuries-old Inca villages and through cultivated fields until it disappears into a narrow canyon near the town of Ollyantambo. At that point the Vilcanota becomes the Urubamba -- a roaring torrent that thunders along in leaps and bounds, passing beneath Machu Picchu and the 4,000 foot cliffs that witness its race to the Apurímac, the Ucayali and finally the Amazon.

Near the towns of Pisac and Yucay, a careful observer can see the retaining walls that the Inca tribes of ancient Peru built to straighten out the river where it meandered recklessly through their fields. Since Inca times, the fertile alluvial soil of this valley has produced an abundance of fruits, vegetables, corn and grain. The terraces that the Incas built five centuries ago, rise two or three thousand feet up the mountainsides on either side, and they are still being cultivated.

It is only a 30-minute taxi ride from Cusco to the valley. You can also take a bus or go with a tour group. If you leave early, you can see most of it in a day, but you won't have time to savor the Indian markets or wander about the ruins.

Sunday is market day in **Chincheros**, so we headed down the valley and then climbed up over grassy fields, past alpine streams and brown clay houses to this ancient hill town. In the distance, the sparkling diamond peaks of the Urubamba range contrasted sharply with the patchwork fields that spread across the lower rolling hills.

We parked on the only level spot in sight and climbed a rocky path to the market place at 12,400 feet. Spread on a flat, grassy area, close in the shade of an Inca wall, were piles of fruits, vegetables, onions, potatoes, corn and coca leaves. There were rows of bright skeins of yarn, cotton and alpaca. Antique silver pins were displayed next to stacks of sweaters, hand-woven ponchos, hats and woven belts. I watched a young mother put her baby, some bananas, a clay pot and a bunch of coca leaves on a colorful shawl spread on the grass. Folding it like an envelope, she swung the whole thing up onto her back. I had expected the baby and bananas to go flying across the square. As in most market places, the people are often as curious as the things they sell.

All about us, the centuries-old activity of buying and selling, bartering, bribing and begging was being carried on in a melodic din of Quechua and Spanish. The women were dressed in full black skirts with many petticoats, and over white blouses they wore embroidered jackets -- some very old and faded, as if handed down through the family.. A little felt covered disc was balanced on their heads, with an intricately woven mass of braids streaming out below.

By noon, we managed to tear ourselves away from Chincheros, returning to the valley floor just in time for the last hours of the **Pisac** market. The town of Pisac is much larger than Chincheros and attracts many tourists as well as local residents. There are booths filled with weavings, handcrafts, rugs, sweaters and jewelry.

**Sunday costumes**

From a variety of Andean villages, people come to Pisac market wearing their Sunday costumes and hats. Some of the men wear brilliant red, orange and black ponchos and carry a carved wood and silver staff of office. They are “Varayocs” -- mayors from their respective villages. Their attire is a tradition carried on since Inca days.

Women in white-domed hats sit on little stools and stir vats of chicha, which looks like dirty dishwater. It is an alcohol made from fermented corn, and all market days seem to end with its consumption. As we left Pisac, many of the celebrants were lying under the flowering trees or were propped against the white adobe chicherías.

With hats, mantas, ponchos, rubber sandals and fresh Pisac bread stowed under the seats of the car, we left town and climbed to the ruins above. A narrow stone path with a steep flight of stairs winds along the contour of the mountain about 1,000 feet above the river. Terraces rise up on either side of the canyon-- as in most Inca fortresses, they were used both agriculturally and for defense. Clinging to the slope are the scattered remains of temples, houses, streets, baths and storage houses. Water still flows from a spring inside the mountain. The Incas devised elaborate systems of baths, fountains, sewers and irrigation, and the remnants of their work are still visible.

If you climb to the very top, you will find a maze of trapezoidal doorways that lead you into chambers of lichen-covered red stones -- all fitting perfectly together. At the very top is the Inti Huaytana – the hitching post of the sun. From here, the Incas could observe much of the Sacred Valley as well as guard the road from Cusco. Both a fortress and a sanctuary, hundreds of people could live here indefinitely. Although no battle was known to have taken place at Pisac, the Incas must have considered it an important location, for it is one of the largest citadels in all of the Americas.

On our way back down the valley, we stopped in Yucay at the Alhambra Inn (now the Posada del Inka), our final destination for the day. The showers were hot, the beds firm and the pisco sours divine. Fresh trout was the special that night, served with rice and fresh vegetables from the garden behind the inn. After a few glasses of Chilean white wine, I could have slept on an Inca rock.

Formerly a monastery, the inn is situated next to the remains of the summer palace of Huayna Capac, last king of the Incas. When the Spaniards arrived in Cusco in 1533, Capac’s son, Manco, chose to live peacefully with his conquerors, and they allowed him to remain as puppet Inca. After about three years, he no longer could bear seeing his temples pillaged, his palaces stripped of their gold ornaments and his people treated like slaves; so he began to plot a rebellion.

He obtained permission from Pizarro to visit Yucay on the pretense that he would return with a life-size gold statue of Huayna Capac. Instead, he returned to Cusco with 100,000 warriors. Hurling flaming arrows on the thatched roofs and wooden structures of Cusco, everything that wasn’t stone burned in a day. Manco’s troops held the Spanish at bay for about a year, while attacking relief missions and settlements all over Peru. In spite of their numbers, cunning and courage, the Incas could not defeat their conquerors, and after many bloody battles, Manco eventually was forced to retreat to Vilcabamba deep in the jungle.

Much of the land around Yucay was granted to Manco’s son, Sayri Tupac. At a banquet commemorating this event, Tupac is said to have yanked a thread from the tablecloth and declared that this thread was to the cloth as the land grant was to all the lands of his forefathers.

## **Houses on cliffs**

The next morning, we drove down the valley to where the road ends at **Ollyantatambo**. As we approached the town, I could see the remains of watch stations and storage houses perched on cliffs 3,000 feet above. A tree-lined road of inlaid stones led us to the Plaza, and from there we set out to explore this extraordinary example of Incan urban planning.

Ollyantatambo appears today much as it was centuries before the Spanish conquests, when the Incas laid it out in the shape of a trapezoid on a gentle slope by the Patacancha River. The streets are straight and only about 5 feet wide.

Rising above the town on a steep mountain spur lies the citadel of Ollyantatambo, its magnificent stonework still intact. The entrance is through a trapezoidal gateway at least 10 feet high with a solid lintel placed across the top. This seems a fitting start for the 200 steps one must climb to get halfway into the ruins.

When Pizarro arrived at this spot with his army to end Manco's rebellion in 1536, he was fiercely attacked with arrows, javelins, slingshots and falling boulders. Unable to scale the walls or find a way into the fortress, he led his army into the plain below to regroup. Meanwhile, through a previously devised system of channels and ditches, the Indians had diverted the Patacancha River to flood the plain, cutting off Pizarro and his men. They eventually retreated to Cusco.

As you trudge up the steps of this vertical community, you can't help but marvel at the solid symmetrical terraces, the elaborate canals and baths, lovely temples and ample storage areas. As a city, it was productive, functional, safe, economical of space and dramatically beautiful. As a fortress, it was impregnable.

The skill and ingenuity that built the Inca cities are awesome; but this city is especially impressive, when you consider that mere men, without benefit of horse or cart, transported 300 ton blocks from a quarry 20 miles away. They had to cross a hanging bridge over the wild Urubamba and then climb a steep trail and descend the other side. Near the top of the ruins stands a wall of six megaliths. Each one is 12 feet high and 6 feet wide. How did they get there?

Exploring the ruins and the cities of this valley presents many unsolved mysteries, and mere speculation on them is a challenge and source of endless curiosity.

As I stood at the top of Ollyantatambo, I could see a little train disappearing into the narrow canyon of the Urubamba on its way to Machu Picchu and the jungle ... and more mysteries.