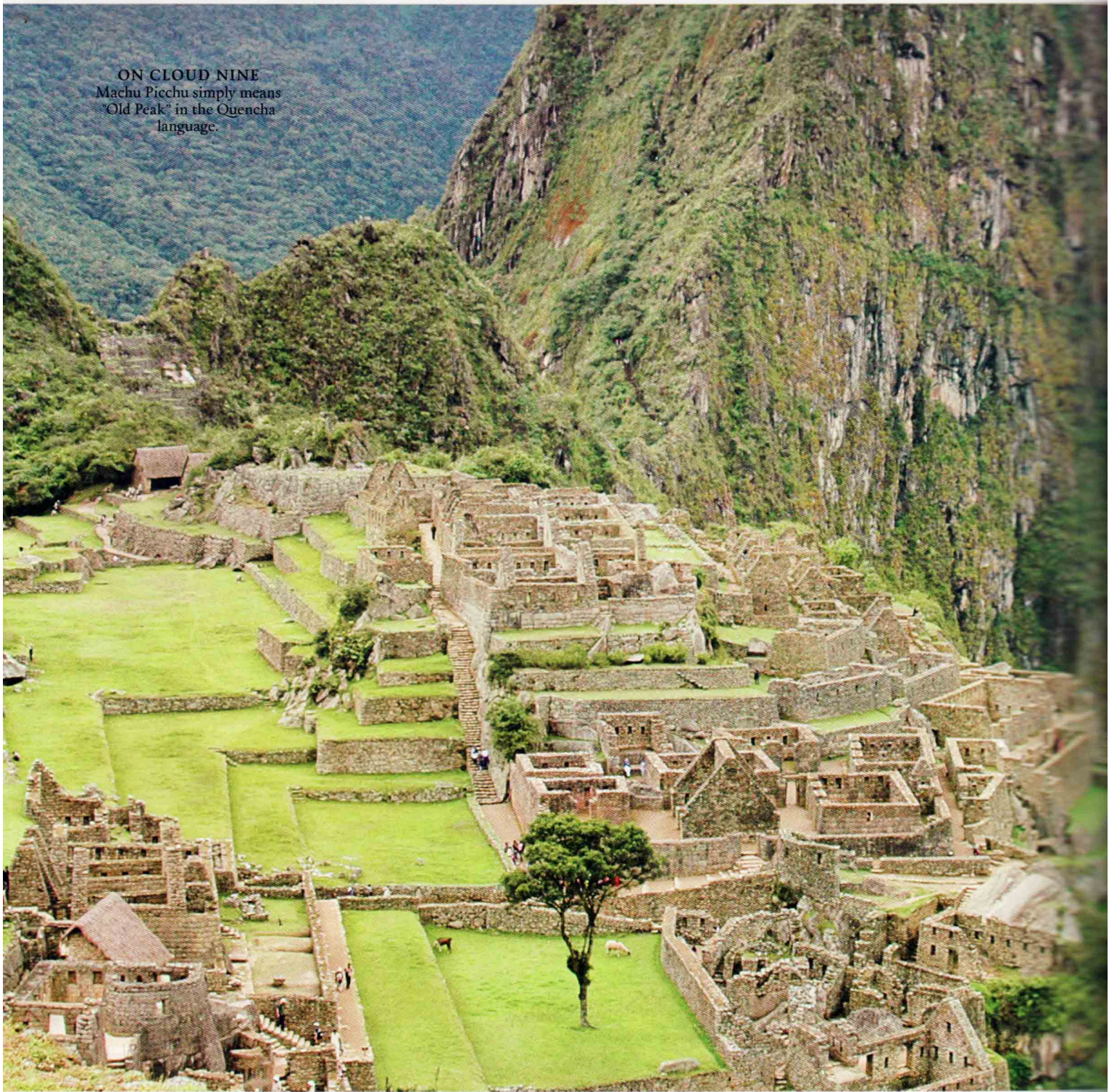


ON CLOUD NINE
Machu Picchu simply means
"Old Peak" in the Quechua
language.



ON A

Walking to Machu Picchu in the steps of the Incans, *Cecily Mabasa* finds the trek much easier to do in total luxury.



HIGH

GETTING HIGH

Catch a glimpse of snow-capped peaks in the Andes as you make your way up the Inca Trail; a few sights on the way.



GHOST TOWN
Though of more recent construction, some ruins line the way to the ancient city of Machu Picchu.



They say the journey is just as important as the destination. While it may not be true for some must-see places in the world, the Salkantay Inca Trail to Machu Picchu proves this right. It is one of the most popular trails to get to the marvelous castle-in-the-sky destination. For the longest time, a trip there had been on my bucket list, but I couldn't seem to cross it off. To get there, I knew I would have to rough it up in tents, with no toilets or showers to speak of. I didn't think I could until I came across a group that offered a more luxurious alternative.

The captivating Soraypampa served as the starting base of our Salkantay Inca Trail route. Being less crowded with trekkers, it allows a more private and scenic journey through the magnificent Salkantay Valley up to the snow-capped peaks of the Salkantay Massif than that of the classic Inca Trail.

Our great adventure moved up to a new level, far beyond comfortable with heated lodges in the middle of nowhere, outdoor Jacuzzi tubs, down comforters, gourmet meals, and great treks. It was a different kind of opportunity to get to discover more about ancient history, especially in the Land of the Incas. Instead of the usual trekking and camping however, we went from lodge to lodge—four mountain lodges in the Cordillera Vilcabamba, the famed Andean mountain range where Machu Picchu rests.

DAY 1: CUSCO TO SORAYPAMPA (3,869 METERS)

After enjoying a scrumptious breakfast at the historic Orient Express Monasterio Lodge, we were driven from our hotel to Marcocasa at an altitude of 3,300 meters, where the trail begins. There we met the rest of our group: three couples and a single college student from the U.S. Leading the group was a very

experienced guide and naturalist expert, Antonio (a dead ringer for the actor Tim Allen).

Over an hour later we stopped to view the Inca ruins of Tarawasi, near the town of Limatambo. Soon after we passed through the mountain village of Mollepata, where we had a short tea break, just before ascending a winding mountain road. From here, the real journey began with a five-hour long trek through beautiful mountain scenery to our lodge in Soraypampa at an altitude of 3,800 meters where we spent our first two nights. We took an old route called the Camino Real (Royal Path). This was a good opportunity for us to start acclimatizing to the higher-than-normal altitude, since the Salkantay stands at 6,270 meters, making it the highest peak in the region and also the second most sacred in Incan history. Halfway through the walk, I felt the altitude and my breathing was labored. Time to bring out my new best friend—Advil.

The first day of any traverse is always the hardest on me physically so I almost cried with joy when I caught sight of our beautiful lodge. After a warm welcome by our friendly staff, we were shown to our rooms and headed straight for a nice long hot shower. The rest of the afternoon was spent in leisure, adjusting to the altitude and soaking in the majestic views. We hung out by the fireplace, enjoying *aperitifs* and *canapes*. It was a great way to get to know our fellow adventurers. Our fellow adventurer Rick regaled us with stories of his latest adventure climbing Mt. Rainier. Something to add to my ever growing bucket list.

DAY 2: SORAYPAMPA

We woke up feeling much better and energized, lungs starting to adjust to the altitude.

It was an acclimatization day with a variety of activities at hand. We chose a half-day, four-hour hike to a glacier lake at an altitude of 4,200 meters to prepare ourselves for the next day's trek, and the first immersion into high-mountain trekking. The more adventurous in the group took a brief polar bear dip in the below-zero-degree lake. Their excited shrieks were heard all the way back to the lodge!

Before heading back, we were introduced to a sacred Incan blessing ceremony. Each of us got down on our knees and offered what I refer to as a "wish."

Getting back from a challenging trek—due to the altitude more than the terrain or distance—I soaked in the outdoor Jacuzzi, a welcome relief for my aching muscles. And then I treated myself to a relaxing massage.

We planted trees before sundown, giving back to the community that welcomed us with open arms.

In the evening, Antonio entertained us with tales of his past trekking experiences and stories about the Incas over delicious Andean dishes.

DAY 3: SORAYPAMPA TO HUAYRACCMACHAY (3,906 METERS)

This was the biggest day of our Inca Trail experience: the core of the trek toward Machu Picchu. It was set to be the most challenging of the whole expedition. About



DAY 1

Our trip begins near Marcocasa and ends in Soraypampa.

Sahuayaco
(La Playa)
2000m

Lluscaymo
(Hatun Poochos)

Santa Teresa
River

Huamantay
Glacier
5917m

Huacmachay
3780m

Siete Cuernos
(7 Snakes)

Tacaruay
Glacier

Pampa
Salkantay



DAY 2

We climb up to 4,200 meters to get to a glacier lake.



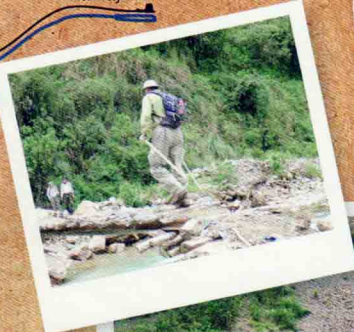
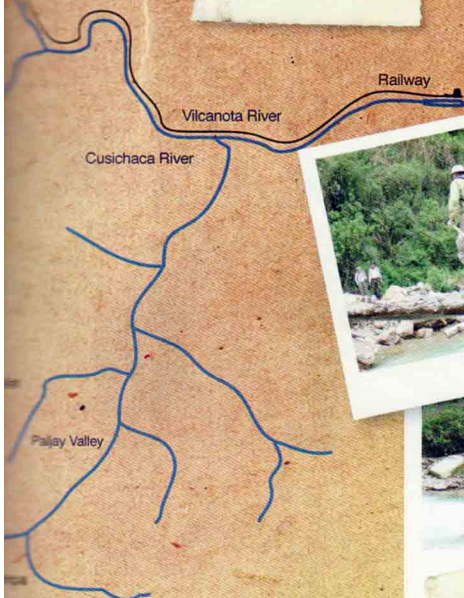
DAY 3

At the highest point of the trek: 4,638 meters high!



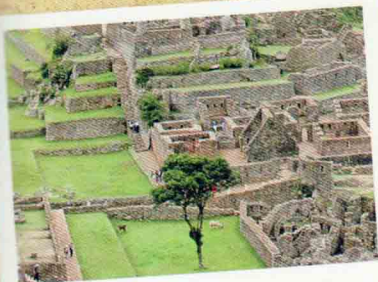
DAY 4

We trek for four hours through the rainforest, and have a sumptuous lunch.



DAY 5

Today, we walk through organic coffee plantations and jungles.



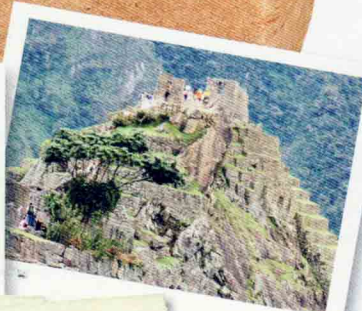
DAY 6

From the Llactapata Pass we get a different view of Machu Picchu.



DAY 7

We're finally here: Machu Picchu up close.



five to six steep uphill ascents to conquer and several switchbacks as the altitude increases, I was psyched!

We hiked up the Rio Blanco Valley before rising to the Salkantay pass at an altitude of 4,600 meters. What a challenge. I was literally huffing and puffing on the switchback, taking a rest every 10 to 15 minutes to catch my breath and rehydrate. It's a good thing that the night before, Rick and Sue, one of the couples on our trek, gave me a tip: Always look straight ahead and focus on the next step instead of thinking about how far the top still is. Avoid looking up toward the top of the mountain. Another thing that helped was this mantra Sue taught me to whisper to myself: "I am strong, and I will make it to the top." It worked.

As I was the last to reach the top, the entire group was there offering congratulatory hugs and high fives. Here, at the highest point of the trek, we took in views of the snow-capped mountain range of Vilcabamba. It was 4,638 meters high and the southern part of Salkantay towered above us.

With everyone in a jovial mood, we descended toward our lunch stop as dark clouds rolled in and the winds picked up. By the time we got to our lunch stop we were shivering. Julie passed around heating pads and we inhaled our freshly cooked warm soup.

Finally, we arrived at Wayra Lodge, where we kept warm in the heavenly fireplace until the next day.

DAY 4: HUAYRACCMACHAY TO COLLAPAMPA (2,870 METERS)

After a leisurely breakfast we went ahead with ease. With the hardest part of the trek done, we had more time in our hands and an easier day ahead. We left the mountains behind as we descended through the cloudforest to Collpapampa at an altitude of 2,800 meters, about three to four hours of hiking.

We trekked downhill the next leg, just above the Salkantay River, through jungles and rainforests. Getting to the lodge just before lunch, we were surprised with a cooking demonstration done the local way. Lamb, chicken, and suckling pig (their version of *lechon*) were wrapped in leaves, then thrown in a dugout pit lined in hot coal. Sand was then thrown over the pit to seal in the heat. It was delicious! The sand was flavored with herbs and the smoke blended with the flavor, leaving the food with a smoky taste. It was a succulent welcome to the wonderful world of Peruvian cuisine.

DAY 5: COLLAPAMPA TO LUCMABAMBA (2,135 METERS)

We left our lodge quite early to head down the Santa Teresa River Valley through more populated areas. There was an increasingly greener scenery, and we basically trekked through jungles and rainforests, passing through orchards of banana and avocado. We also made our way through coffee plantations where one of the richest organic coffee beans in the world are produced.



We took a break just by the river where we enjoyed a picnic lunch and a little resting time before trekking for another 30 minutes. A private vehicle was waiting to take us to the base of the Llactapata Inca Trail. We drove for 30 minutes before arriving at the area; it was still a short climb to Lucma Lodge, set in an avocado orchard, and our accommodations for our fifth night.

I again treated myself to a long massage to ease out the knots in my back.

DAY 6: LUCMABAMBA TO AGUAS CALIENTES (1,900 METERS)

We set off on the last day of our trek after a hearty breakfast. Trekking uphill toward the Llactapata Pass at 2,736 meters, we came across an extraordinary perspective of Machu Picchu from the southwest part. Not a lot of trekkers have had the opportunity to be awed from this viewpoint. We also managed to get up close to the Llactapata Ruins, the little visited site of the newly discovered Inca settlement of Llactapata.

Antonio surprised us with a seafood lunch at an observatory overlooking Machu Picchu. For our final descent, we headed toward the Aobamba River and went through a lavish bamboo forest and a few more coffee plantations before arriving at the train depot. Our last stop before our goal destination was Aguas Calientes, which was a train ride away. Before parting ways, the group enjoyed a farewell dinner of veal and lamb and as we relished memories of our trek.

DAY 7: MACHU PICCHU (2,400 METERS)

This was it, the day we would finally see the historic sanctuary of Machu Picchu. There are different gates to the Inca Trail, but I am so glad I decided on the Salkantay Inca Trail route. We woke up early to make our way to the station, where the bus took us to the ancient ruins of the Incas. The UNESCO World Heritage Site is the most significant and most preserved relic of Incan civilization. We stood in silent reverence as we basked in its majestic and mysterious presence.



Sue taught me to whisper to myself: "I am strong, and I will make it to the top."

