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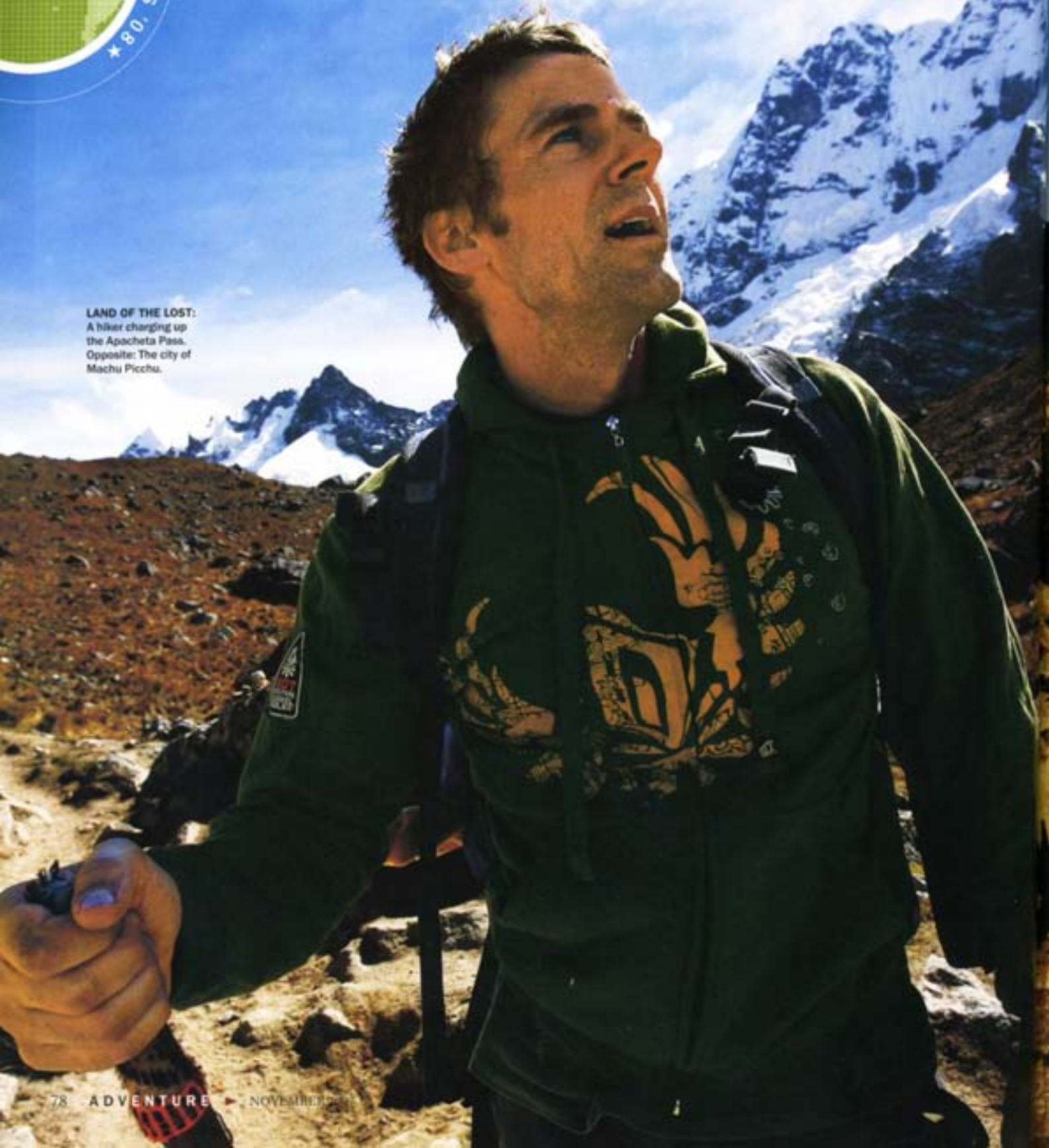
NOVEMBER 2007





LATIN AMERICA

LAND OF THE LOST:
A hiker charging up
the Apacheta Pass.
Opposite: The city of
Machu Picchu.



No crowds. Plush lodges. Jungles, glaciers,
and high Andean peaks. The Camino
Salcantay is the savvy traveler's alternative
to the Inca Trail. Never has the road to
ruins been so much fun.

BY TOM CLYNES

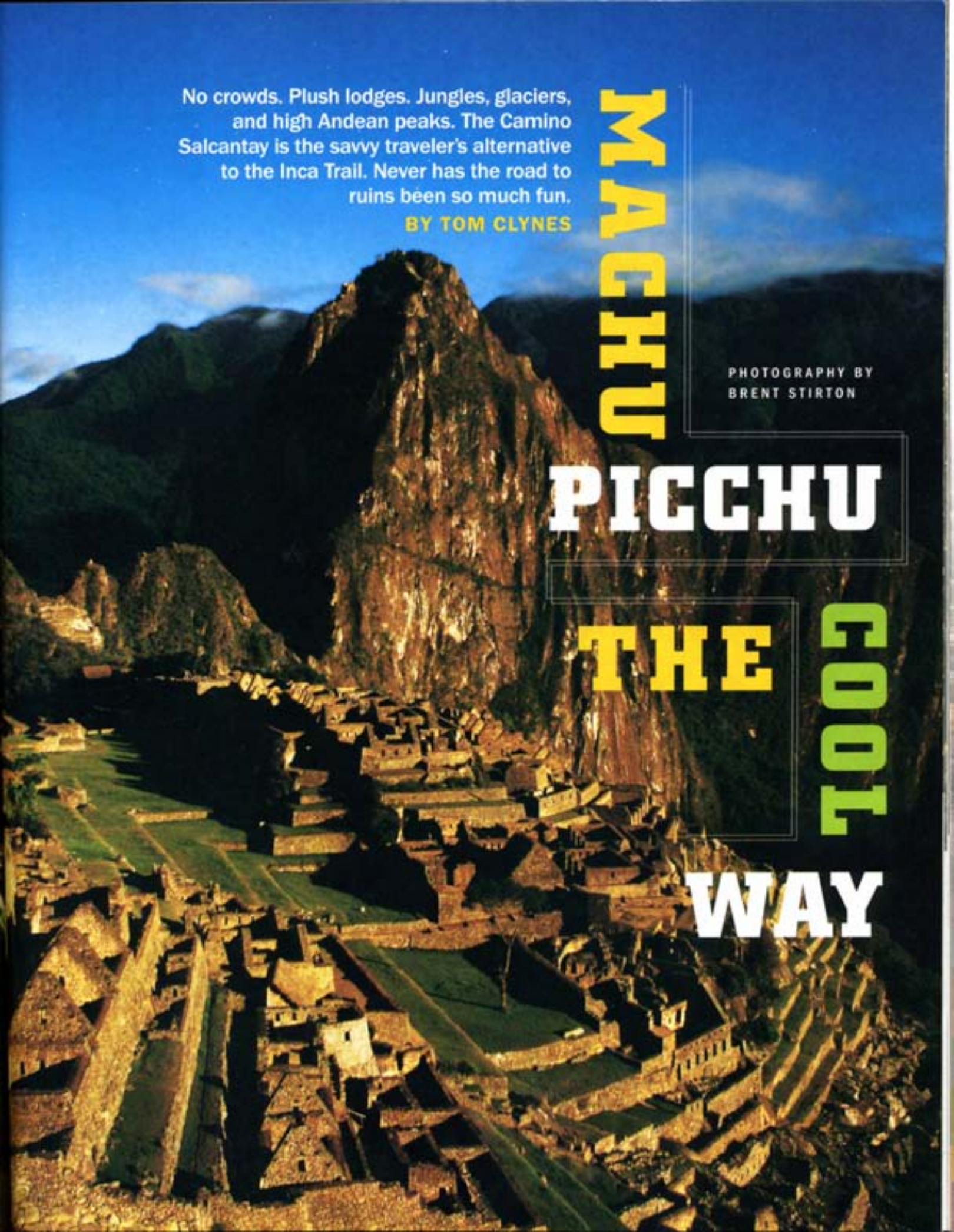
MACHU

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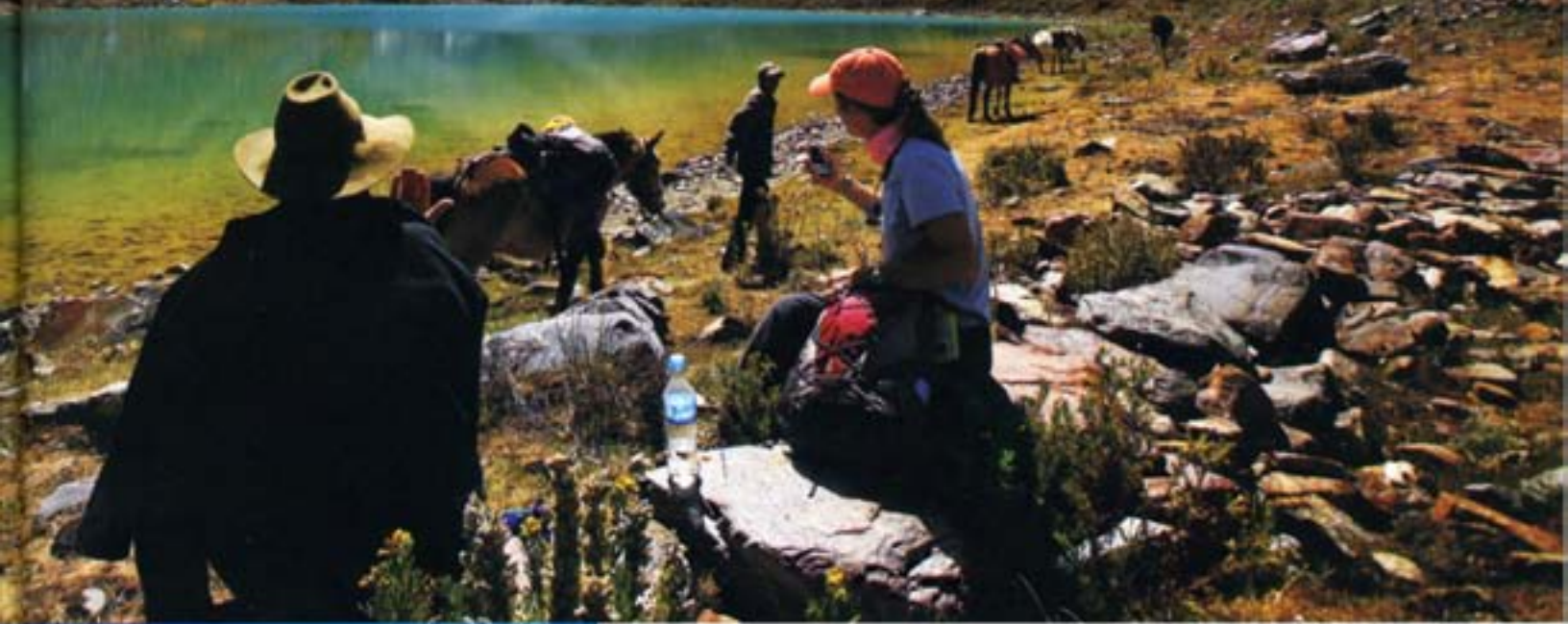
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We were halfway through our second platter of grilled guinea pigs when Enrique Umbert, Jr., came out to the terrace of the Colpa Lodge to break the news. ■ "I've just been on the satellite phone with my contact, who is highly placed in the tourism authority," said Umbert Jr., who at age 28 is the general manager of his family's nascent business, Mountain Lodges of Peru. "He said that what you want to do at Machu Picchu is not almost impossible. He said that it actually *is* impossible." ■ The news—that the Peruvian tourist authority wasn't about to let us prowl around the ancient Inca city after dark to photograph it under a

full moon—was not entirely unexpected. And, all things considered, the timing wasn't too bad. We had made it halfway to Machu Picchu, along the Camino Salcantay, a spectacular and less visited alternative to the famous Inca Trail. After four days of rough mountain trekking and three nights shivering in unfinished chalets, we had settled comfortably into the Colpa Lodge. With hot showers and cold Cusqueña beer, it was not an altogether terrible place to receive Umbert Jr.'s dispiriting news. Set on a plateau beneath Andean peaks, the lodge looked out over the confluence of three whitewater rivers cutting deeply through the Cordillera Vilcabamba, a collection of rugged mountains that served as a last redoubt of the Inca Empire.

Umbert's father, Enrique Umbert, Sr., 58, was seated at a table on the terrace, energetically carving a turkey. He tossed a juicy drumstick onto a platter already crowded with salted potatoes and giant ears of corn, and shook his head





ON INCA TIME Clockwise from above: Trekkers break at a glacial lake in Peru's Soraypampa region; Enrique Umberto, Sr., on his steed; the thatch-roof Salcantay Lodge; a coca farmer offers his wares to hikers.

also owns rice and sugar plantations and a Lima jazz club, he first hiked the Camino Salcantay in 2000. He was so taken with its scenic and cultural treasures that he immediately began talking real estate with local landowners. Umberto Sr. envisioned a string of upscale properties along the Salcantay route that would bring high-mountain

luxury to a path that has until now been solely the domain of local farmers and rough-and-tumble backpackers.

Seven years later the Umberts are overseeing the finishing touches on their first four Mountain Lodges of Peru, constructed with materials ferried into the nearly roadless Vilcabamba region via some 3,500 mule trips. With his dream on the verge of becoming a reality, the elder Umberto had invited photographer Brent Stirton and me for a preopening trip.

A few days earlier I had flown into Cusco, the booming and well-preserved former capital of the Inca Empire. At 11,500 feet, Cusco has thinner air than the cabin of the Airbus that brought me there from Lima. As I walked up the stairs from the tarmac, my boots felt at least ten pounds heavier than they had at sea level.

I had timed my arrival to coincide with the Andean solstice, celebrated with

sympathetically. "People always complain about the tourism authority's corruption and incompetence," he said. "But maybe the bigger problem is simply their lack of imagination."

Imagination is something the elder Umberto seems to possess in abundance. A commodities trader who

a weeklong pageant that draws villagers from all over the region. When I arrived at the Plaza de Armas, the streets were overflowing with music and riotous dancing, fueled by prodigious quantities of *chicha*, a home-brewed corn beer. The festivities culminated at the Sacsahuamán ruins above town with Inti Raymi, a massive and tightly choreographed reenactment of the Inca Empire's most sacred rituals. Among the ancient rocks, modern-day Inca took on their ancestors' roles as kings, courtiers, provincial chiefs, and warriors, all of whom would travel from the far reaches of the empire to call Inti, the Inca sun god, back to the southern skies.

After nursing hangovers with adobo (a thick soup of pork, chicha, and chilies), our group of nine set off on the four-hour drive to the mountainside village of Mollepata, traveling northwest through the Rio Blanco Valley, past mud-brick hamlets perched on terraced hillsides. At the roadside, villagers roasted potatoes in *pachamanca* ovens shaped from muddy soil.

As we stopped to check out Inca ruins along the way, guide José-Luis "Pepe-Lucho" Corpancho would entertain local children with magic tricks. Folding his handkerchief into the shape of a small rodent, he tweaked it so that it appeared to jump up his forearm, making the kids squeal. Traveling with Corpancho was going to be interesting.

Our walk began after lunch, just above Mollepata. The six guys who passed us carrying a refrigerator up the path suggested that the Salkantay Lodge & Adventure Resort, which serves as the trek's base camp, might be less than ready for prime time. The Umberts, who greeted us in handwoven ponchos, were clearly not happy with the progress their construction crews had made. But the lack of amenities was overshadowed, quite literally, by the view from the lodge's floor-to-ceiling dining room window. In the distance, 20,574-foot Nevado Salkantay towered over the Soraypampa Plain like an enormous quartzite fang, glowing white and crimson in the late afternoon light.

At dinner the elder Umbert laid out a topo map of the Machu Picchu region and detailed his plans. He and his investors (who range from local mule drivers to Austrian millionaires) have already sunk \$3.1 million into the four Camino Salkantay lodges. Eventually they plan to invest another \$12 million in a 12-lodge resort network in the mostly roadless region surrounding Machu Picchu, allowing hikers to customize treks of nearly any length.

The Umberts have been working with area farmers to ensure a supply of

Among the ancient rocks, modern-day Inca took on their ancestors' roles as kings, courtiers, provincial chiefs, and warriors to call Inti, the Inca sun god, back to the southern skies.

fresh, sustainably grown food, and they've hired platoons of local guides, muleteers, waiters, cooks, and builders. They're also giving neighboring property owners the chance to buy into the operation, realizing, says Umbert Sr., "that people are more likely to protect what they own."

Umbert Sr. calls his resorts "ecolodges," and indeed, he had 43,000 board feet of sustainably harvested eucalyptus brought in so that no one would be tempted to sell him timber from native trees. Still, "ecolodge" seems a bit of a stretch. The lodges' off-the-grid locations would be ideal for renewable power, but there are no solar cells or wind turbines. The Umberts considered a microhydroelectric scheme but rejected it as too complicated and costly. Umbert Sr. said he plans to upgrade to more environmentally friendly approaches after the lodges are complete, but I got the sense that the steady hum of generators—fueled by canisters of propane packed in by mule team—would be part of the



ANDES ON HIGH Clockwise from above: An Israeli traveler stops for a harmonica break just below the 15,906-foot Apacheta Pass, the highest point on the Camino Salkantay; en route to the pass; looking back toward Soraypampa; the Peruvian version of trail mix.



Salkantay experience for some time to come.

That's a shame, considering how hard Andean glaciers have been hit by global warming. Peru has 70 percent of the Earth's tropical glaciers, but experts predict that most of these below 18,000 feet will disappear by 2015—an alarming statistic, given that 98 percent of the country's water supply comes from glacial runoff. To stave off catastrophe, the Peruvian government is exploring schemes to desalinate seawater or build tunnels through the Andes to bring water from the rain-soaked Amazon Basin to the heavily populated west side of the continental divide.

The next day, Stirton and I got the chance to see some of the deglaciation firsthand, on an acclimatizing hike to the lake of Humantay. We traveled up through scree fields, until recently covered with ice, to the northern face of 19,413-foot Nevado Humantay. Just a few years ago this side of the mountain was white from the summit down to the lake, but now only a few patches of ice remain. At the calving face of the glacier, what was left of the ice mass was falling into the lagoon in tremendous chunks, at a pace that picked up as the sun rose higher in the sky.

The scene was breathtaking, made bittersweet by the knowledge that our generation would almost certainly be the last to see it.

IT WAS A RELIEF the following day that our first action on the Camino Salkantay was to hand off our large

packs to the *arrieros* (muleteers). Today would be our hardest: Over five miles, we would climb nearly 3,000 feet to 15,906-foot Apacheta Pass. Then we would cross into the Wayracmachay Valley and plunge more than 7,000 feet and 15 miles through pampa (high grassy plateau), cloud forest, and jungle, arriving four days later at the banks of the Río Urubamba, at the foot of Cerro Machupicchu.

We crunched through ice-crust mud puddles, making our way up the long valley that rises toward Nevado Salcantay. In the pink-tinted mist, we could hear snippets of German, Hebrew, and Australian-accented English as other gringos struck campsites and began climbing across Soraypampa Plain. As the morning fog cleared,

Salcantay and Humantay came into view, as did our fellow hikers, who included about a dozen super-fit Israelis just coming off tours of military duty.

"We heard this was a more adventurous and more beautiful way to Machu Picchu," a slender woman told Corpancho and me when we paused to rest a bit. "Plus, it seems to be almost impossible to get a place on the Inca Trail on short notice."

We watched her work her way up the switchbacks. I heard Corpancho mumble something as she left us in her dust. I asked him to repeat it. "Someone to drool over," he said.

With a history of more than 500 years of footfalls, the Camino Salcantay could hardly be called new. But only in the past five years or so has it hit the radar screens of backpackers, who typically make the trek in three or four days. Many find themselves on Salcantay as a Plan B, after discovering they've waited too long to get a slot on the Inca Trail, which enforces a strict 500-person daily limit.

But a growing number of Machu Picchu-bound hikers have made the Camino Salcantay their first choice, and not just because it's less crowded. What it lacks in ruins and the legendary paving stones that line more well-known Inca routes, it makes up for in natural beauty and diversity. In contrast to the Inca Trail, which meanders through the forests with only fleeting views of the surrounding high mountains, the Camino Salcantay offers

(Story continues on page 124; for trip details, turn the page)



ADVENTURE GUIDE

TREK THE CAMINO SALCANTAY

In the past five years, the Camino Salcantay has begun to emerge as a popular alternative to the Inca Trail, the classic four-day trek to Machu Picchu. In July a network of high-end lodges opened for business along the route. Whether you go it on your own, setting up tent camps, or book the lodges, indulging in a hot shower, Jacuzzi, and a home-cooked meal at the end of the day, the Camino Salcantay makes a perfect centerpiece to any Peru trip.



GETTING THERE: There are no direct flights to Cusco from North America, so you'll need to go through Lima. From there you can catch cheap flights to the Andean capital. LAN Airlines offers the most options (lan.com).

THE TREK: The Camino Salcantay runs approximately 20 miles through high Andean peaks, cloud forest, and steamy jungle. It can be done on your own or guided. The most comfortable (and newest) option is a seven-day trip with the Umberts' Mountain Lodges of Peru (\$2,500, including four to five days of trekking, food, transportation, and one-day ticket to Machu Picchu; mountainlodgesofperu.com). All have private bedrooms, Spanish showers, and outdoor hot tubs (except Lucma). Weekly departures run through December 2007 and from March to December 2008.

CAMPING: Backpackers typically hike from Mollepata to Aguas Calientes in three or four days. Buses to Mollepata depart Cusco at 5 a.m. and 1 p.m.; the three- to four-hour trip costs less than \$3. Among the many Cusco travel agencies touting fully catered and portered

tented treks, SAS Travel Peru is recommended and offers advance bookings (\$380; sastravelperu.com).

CUSCO: You could keep yourself fascinated for days exploring Cusco's puma-shaped huddle of cobbled streets, walled with Inca and colonial architecture that stands little changed since Peru gained its independence from Spain in 1821. The plaza in front of Cusco Cathedral is always a hive of activity, bustling with vendors or festival celebrants.

>Choquequirao has been called "Machu Picchu's sacred sister," due to its similar design and architecture, but these recently rediscovered ruins are more remote and less developed. Perched 5,000 feet above the roaring Rio Apurimac, they can be reached only on foot or on horseback. Mountain Lodges of Peru plans to expand its network to include lodge-to-lodge treks to Choquequirao; in the meantime, several Cusco operators offer five-day camping treks starting at around \$300.

>Urubamba Valley, the Sacred Valley of the Inca near Cusco, is a repository of traditional Andean villages and ancient Inca ruins. Visit on Sunday, when campesinos pour in for handicraft markets. Peru Treks & Adventure offers day trips from Cusco to the Inca ruins of Ollantaytambo and Chinchero within the valley (\$15; perutreks.com).

>For rafters, some of Peru's best whitewater is found near Cusco. Options range from one-day trips on the tame Urubamba (year-round) to three-day expeditions



on the remote Apurimac (May to December only). Mayuc Expeditions runs trips on both rivers (\$35 for Urubamba, \$180 for Apurimac; mayuc.com).



PERU PLAN Clockwise from left: At the Inti Raymi festival in Cusco; inside the Salcantay Lodge; all lodge food is locally sourced.

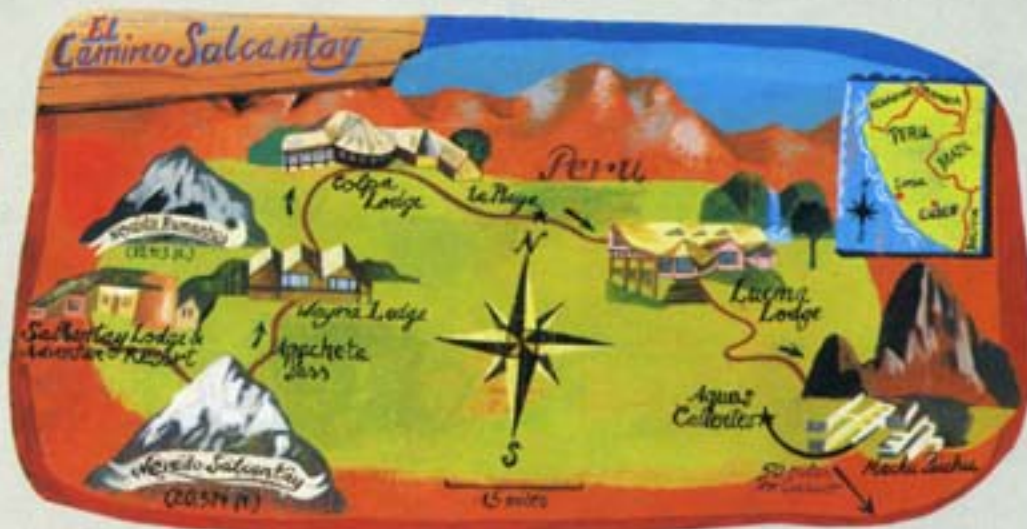
FESTIVALS: Though the Inca Empire has been reduced to history books, these three festivals reclaim a bit of what was lost.

>Day of the Kings (January 6) As Indian dancers reenact events from Inca history, others stage dramatic depictions of the early events in Christ's life.

>Easter Week (March/April) Revelers carry the statue of the Lord of the Earthquakes through Cusco on a carpet of red flowers.

>Inti Raymi (June 24) Costumed participants dance in praise of the sun, accompanied by flutes, conch-shell horns, and drums.

LODGING: In Cusco consider the Hotel Monasterio, a refurbished monastery built in 1592 (\$470; monasterio.orient-express.com). The Inkaterra Machu Picchu Hotel in Aguas Calientes offers bungalow cabins and extensive gardens (\$220; 800-442-5042). —T.C.



MACHU PICCHU

(Continued from page 83)

top-of-the-world vistas along much of the route.

By midmorning the trail had steepened. Teams of mules carrying our duffels hoofed past us as we labored up a series of switchbacks leading toward the pass. Stirton and I stopped to catch our breath, dipping into my stash of coca leaves, the Inca remedy for both fatigue and altitude sickness.

Shortly after noon, we reached the boulder-strewn saddle between the Salcantay and Humantay glaciers, along with Leo Le Bon, who at 73 was among the strongest of the climbers in our group. Le Bon has trekked through every major mountain range in the world. He first hiked the Camino Salcantay in 1976.

"Peru and Nepal," he said, nodding at the stunning array of 19,000-foot mountains stretching along the Cordillera Vilcabamba. "There are a lot of great ones, but in my opinion these two countries have the most impressive mountains. Only here and in Nepal do you get these deep-cut valleys, these impossibly steep peaks, this infinite sky."

At the top of Apacheta Pass, a party atmosphere prevailed as about 30 trekkers snacked and congratulated one another on

having made it to the highest point on the trail. As the mule teams passed through, arrieros stopped to tuck offerings of coca leaves into the dozens of *apachetas* (cairns) erected to pay tribute to the *apus*, or spirits, who live among the mountains and rivers.

Stirton and I lingered atop the pass for close to two hours, socializing with hikers and watching a pair of condors circling the top of Humantay. Then we took our first downward steps toward Machu Picchu, following a team of mules whose packsaddles were piled high with two-liter bottles of Coke and Fanta, bound for that night's destination, Wayra Lodge.



WAYRACCMACHAY MEANS "where the wind lives" in Quechua, but the calm, humid air that greeted us on our second day seemed to concentrate, not diffuse, the spicy scents of orchids and other blooming flowers that crowded the trail. We had descended to the cloud forest that Peruvians call *ceja de selva*, or eyebrow of the jungle. With the snowcapped Andes still visible over our shoulders, we walked along braided streams, passing ancient stone corrals

and the knuckled spurs of low mountains.

"Gravity is good," Le Bon said as he and his wife, Nadia, passed us. The trail dipped down and kissed the Rio Salcantay, then climbed back up a mountainside, only to dip down again. As we continued to lose altitude, small villages began to appear. Stirton and I stopped often and chatted with locals, many of whom invited us into their homes.

Unlike the Inca Trail, where commerce is tightly controlled and freight-carrying mules are not allowed, the Salcantay route is developing its own grassroots economy, with little stores springing up every few miles, catering to both tourists and those who serve them. So far the effect has been positive for this long-depressed region.

"Little by little over the past five years, we're seeing more people and more business," said one shopkeeper, Vicentina Guierrez Escovedo. Next to the store, Corpancho was busy entertaining a group of children, balancing a mattock on his chin. One of the little girls, who remembered him from his last pass-through, asked him if it was true that he could hypnotize a rooster. Corpancho just smiled, but among


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our group, a seed had been planted. This was something we had to see.

While we stopped for lunch by the river, a local man approached the elder Umberto about a job. "I've heard you pay well and you treat your people well," he said. Later that day a villager would ask Umberto Sr. to be his newborn child's godfather. The following weekend he would

One by one, the members of our group arrived, each gasping as Machu Picchu came into view across a gaping valley. The city seemed suspended in the clouds, tucked among a tremendous array of jagged peaks.

return to the area to be the best man in the wedding of the self-professed "ugliest man in the valley."

"I'm learning that I can't stay too long in one place," Umberto Sr. told me. "I get too many requests."

But not everyone is happy with the idea of luxury lodges cropping up along a trail that had previously drawn only local travelers and the low-budget backpackers whom Peruvians refer to as *chacabacos*.

"These huge lodges are too much," said Frida Hanco Huaman, a guide with Amazin Adventures, a Cusco-based company that offers all-inclusive Camino Salcantay camping treks. "I would have liked them to use local materials, to make the lodges blend into the environment. Instead, they're using a lot of cement and brick and big power systems. It's not natural. They have a different vision, and we're afraid they're going to push us out."

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, as we walked up the spur of the trail that leads to Colpa Lodge, Umberto introduced me to Paulino Holgado, the mule driver who sold the property to the Umberts. Holgado told us that a spectacled bear had wandered onto the lodge grounds a few days earlier.

"What did it taste like?" Corpancho joked.

A few minutes later we were on Colpa's terrace, enjoying what has to be one of the most exquisite views on Earth and munching on ears of *choclo*, the massive Peruvian corn-on-steroids. We gringos were working hard to persuade Corpancho to demonstrate his rooster-hypnotizing trick.

"Ay, Dios," he said finally. He put down

his beer and stood up. "OK," he said, raising an eyebrow, Belushi-style, toward the village. "Let's do this thing."

It doesn't take long to find a rooster in a Peruvian village, and with the aid of several children, we hauled one in. Corpancho held it close to his chest and covered its eyes. He cooed into its ear, stroking its head. Within a few seconds, the rooster had relaxed and

gone limp. Corpancho held it upside down, then flipped it around; nothing could wake it. Finally, he set the rooster down and clapped his hands. The bird woke up, cast a bewildered eye toward Corpancho, and wobbled away.

BY THE NEXT DAY I had come up with a new plan to see Machu Picchu under the full moon. Stirton and I would sprint out in front of the group and enter the park a day early. Assuming we could get in before closing time, we would climb up the big mountain above the ruins, hide out until dark, then sneak back down. I ran the idea past Corpancho, who was dubious that it would work.

"Are the ruins heavily guarded?" I asked.
"Does the pope kiss runways? Yes, especially on the full moon. Don't think that you're the first to have the idea. Still . . ." he said, "if you get in there early enough, and if you manage to climb high enough up the mountain and hide yourself well, there's some possibility it could work."

On our last day on the trail, we followed a high path above the Río Santa Teresa, which roared down through fields of coffee, banana, and avocado. In contrast to the chilly, arid tundra above us, the air here was hot and fattened with humidity, and the jungle teemed with lizards, parrots, and hummingbirds. At trailside, farmers harvested and crushed red coffee beans. We followed a well-constructed Inca-era path over the Paltallacta Pass, then descended to the Lactapata ruins, where we caught our first glimpse of our destination.

One by one, the members of our group arrived, each gasping as the object of our



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MACHU PICCHU

quest came into view across a gaping valley. Perhaps five miles away as the crow flies, the city seemed suspended in the clouds, tucked among a tremendous array of jagged peaks.

While others took pictures, Corpancho took me aside.

"You know, the ancient Inca were always trying to read the future, in coca leaves, in chicha, in flowing water, in the blood of sacrificed animals. But I'm having trouble predicting your chances of getting into the ruins at night. All I can tell you is that this plan you have . . . it is a little . . . uh, I'm not sure how to say it in English."

"Try Spanish," I suggested.

"Loco," he said.

ON THE FINAL DAY of our trek, the plan was to hike to the hydroelectric station on the Río Urubamba, then catch the train into Aguas Calientes, the town that serves Machu Picchu with buses. The hitch was that the day's only train would deliver us to Aguas Calientes too late to make it to the ruins. To get there in time to hide out for the full moon, we would have to hike into town along the train tracks and quickly grab a bus up to the mountaintop.

After 11 hours of walking, we arrived at Machu Picchu's gate an hour before closing time—too late, the guards said, to enter. We managed to talk ourselves in, then climbed high into the terraces, finally sitting down to take it all in.

There are some iconic places that you've heard about all your life, but when you get there you find them vaguely disappointing—a bummer that's usually unspoken if you've spent thousands of dollars and burned through a year's worth of vacation time to get there. And then there are places like Machu Picchu that really do live up to the hype.

Stirton and I sat for a few minutes, admiring the Inca's inspired geometry. We listened to the muted soundscape of tourists and watched llamas graze on impossibly green grass. Around us, snapshot takers milled among the ruins of a lost city whose history and architecture—so impressive in scale and detail—will likely never be fully understood.

As the sun sank in the sky, Stirton and I finalized our plan—still not entirely certain we would go through with it. We would climb one of the paths up Cerro Machupicchu, the larger of the two peaks flanking the ruins. If

we heard footfalls, we would duck into the bushes, wait for the coast to clear, then climb some more. Once satisfied there were no others above us, we would hunker down, watching the light fall away until all that remained were the streetlamps of Aguas Calientes far below us and the glow of Nevado Salcantay far above.

The astronomer-architects who built Machu Picchu could probably have told us exactly when the moon would rise that night to the minute, but we had no idea. We would have to lie low until the first stars appeared, then creep down through the blackness, feeling our way along a trail of ancient stones. If we waited until the moon came up, our shadows projected along the walls might catch the attention of a roaming guard. Trespassing was not part of our assignment in Peru, nor was landing in a South American jail.

With the mist settling into the valleys below, it was time to make our move. A passing cloud darkened Nevado Salcantay momentarily, stirring its brow into a questioning frown. Would we lose our nerve and fall in with the crowds descending to the Machu Picchu gates? Or would the lost city be ours that night, and ours alone? ▲



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