

# MACHU PICCHU

the mysteries of

For centuries  
this breathtaking **INCA CITY**  
lay deserted and forgotten  
in the mountains of **PERU**.

Rediscovered in 1911,  
it has tantalized visitors  
with unanswered questions  
ever since.

"WERE THE INCAS STUPID OR  
JUST CRAZY?" laughs an Australian  
after an hour-long climb up 700 vertical  
feet of slippery trail and narrow ledges.  
"Why would they build up here?" he

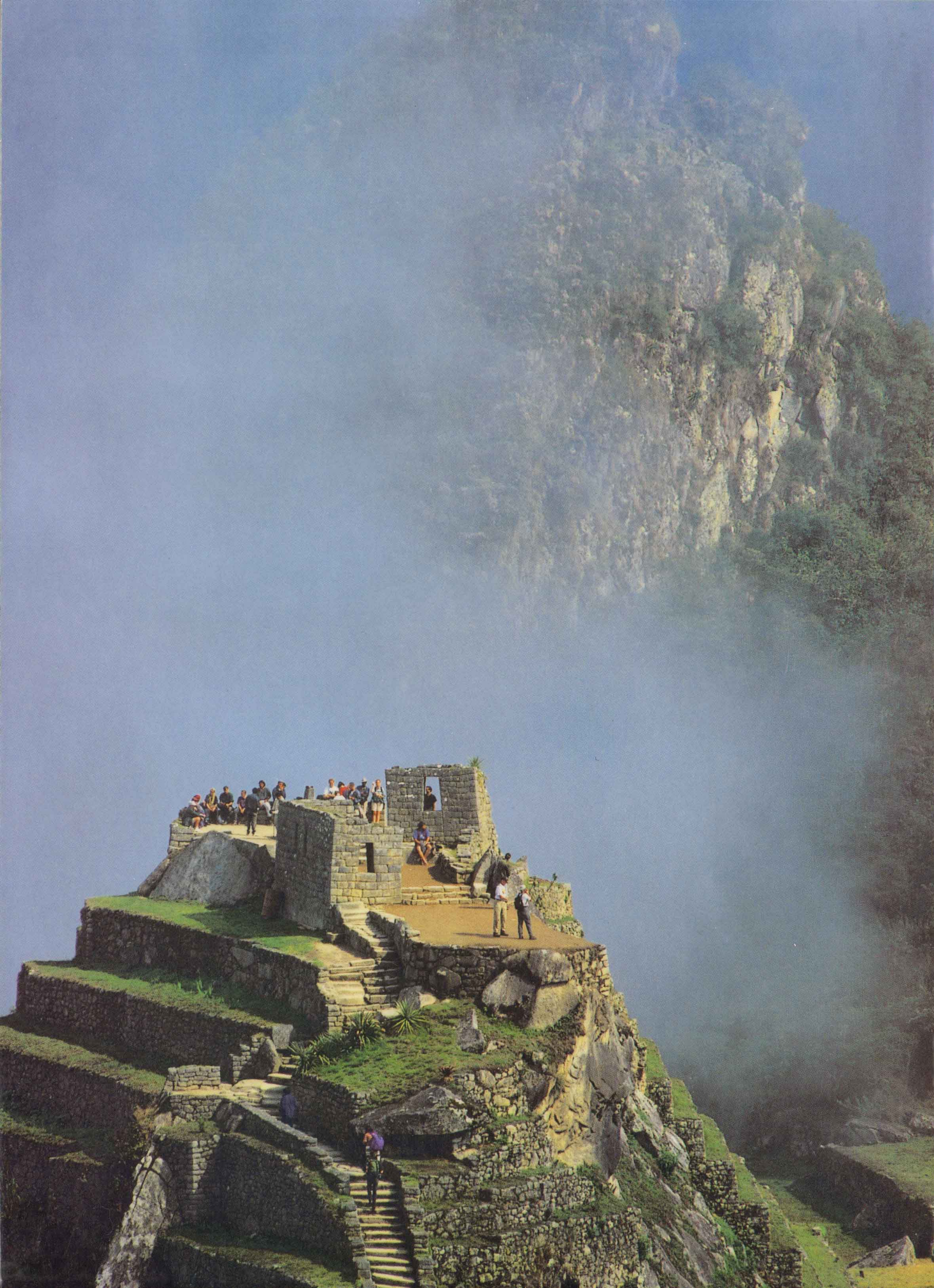
*Text and Photography by Randall Hyman*

asks between breaths. "They would  
have to carry everything!"

As he stands atop the terraced pinna-  
cle of Huayna Picchu, ringed by Peru's  
soaring Andean mountains and lush  
Amazon valleys, his remarks are irrever-  
ent, yet to the point. Other visitors  
squeezing onto the summit with him  
silently share his sentiments as they take

Machu Picchu's remote location—it sits a mile and a half above sea level in the Andes—protected the city from Spanish conquistadors. No one knows why it was abandoned.





in the scene, awestruck. Seven hundred feet below, perched above a plunging river canyon, lies the Inca city of Machu Picchu. Seen from above, it is a geometric maze of temples, stairways, houses and terraces—an ancient tapestry set in stone.

Machu Picchu is, above all else, a place of mystery. Huffing up its endless steps (there are 3,000 of them) and poking in and out of the labyrinth of alcoves, plazas and temples, you can easily imagine priests, royalty and commoners materializing from the 1400s and thatch roofs reappearing atop the naked stone walls. Though Machu Picchu is now the most visited archeological site in all of South America, answers to the questions of when the Incas built this sacred city and why and when they abandoned it remain hazy.

To answer the Australian's question, the Incas were far from stupid or crazy. One reason they chose to build at the site was precisely because it was so inaccessible. Invaders had no hope of approaching up the steep canyon walls or down the backdrop of ridges where only one narrow pass leads over the mountains to the city.

Modern visitors wanting a visceral taste of Machu Picchu's impregnability can hike 20 minutes past the city to a sheer granite cliff face. Public access beyond this point is prohibited, but the wooden barricade adorned with a *prohibido el paso* sign is only for the benefit of the insane. From here the trail threads its way down across the precipitous cliff face on a narrow ledge. The sight makes your skin crawl. Halfway across, stretched over thin air, is a large gap spanned by a few logs that Inca guards once slid back and forth as a "drawbridge" to control access. An invading army stood no chance.

But how did a civilization with no iron tools and no wheel manage to chisel and move huge 15-ton blocks along this Andean ridge? Large teams of men apparently dragged the boulders from nearby quarries, positioning them atop building walls via earthen ramps. Half-worked boulders at the small quarry inside Machu Picchu still bear notches where bronze chisels were inserted into cracks. Experts believe heat was then applied to help split boulders. The building blocks were sculpted to fit one another precisely, without mortar—no small task considering how many times the massive blocks had to be moved to get the right fit. Today,



HIRAM BINGHAM: YALE PEABODY MUSEUM/COURTESY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

even after centuries of earthquakes and weather, you can't slip a razor blade between the stones of some walls.

Archeologists speculate Machu Picchu was built in the 1400s as more than simply a citadel or fortress. Its alignment with sacred Inca mountains, rivers and astronomical points suggests agreement with celestial and terrestrial deities was at least as important as inaccessibility from invaders.

A short walk up the pyramidal mount called Intihuatana in the center of Machu Picchu gives visitors a vivid sense of the city's spiritual magnetism. At the top is a man-sized obelisk. It's said that Inca priests "lassoed" the sun to the obelisk at each winter solstice so it couldn't continue its northward retreat and leave them in darkness. In Quechuan, the language of the Incas,

*Intihuatana* is interpreted by some to mean "hitching post of the sun."

Near this obelisk is a carefully carved cluster of small boulders that silhouettes a distant mountain range. Many such homages to surrounding peaks are peppered throughout the city. The shape of the Intihuatana obelisk is itself suggestive of Huayna Picchu, the sacred peak toward which the entire city is oriented. The view east and west affords a wide vista for priests to observe the sun, the principal Inca deity.

THE SPANISH CONQUISTADORS who destroyed the Inca civilization in the 1500s never saw Machu Picchu.

Invisible from the river valley below, it escaped the slaughter and destruction the Spanish brought. But Machu Picchu's life as a city seems to have died out with the death of the civilization of which it was a part. Machu Picchu slept undisturbed for centuries, tucked away under a blanket of jungle, forgotten.

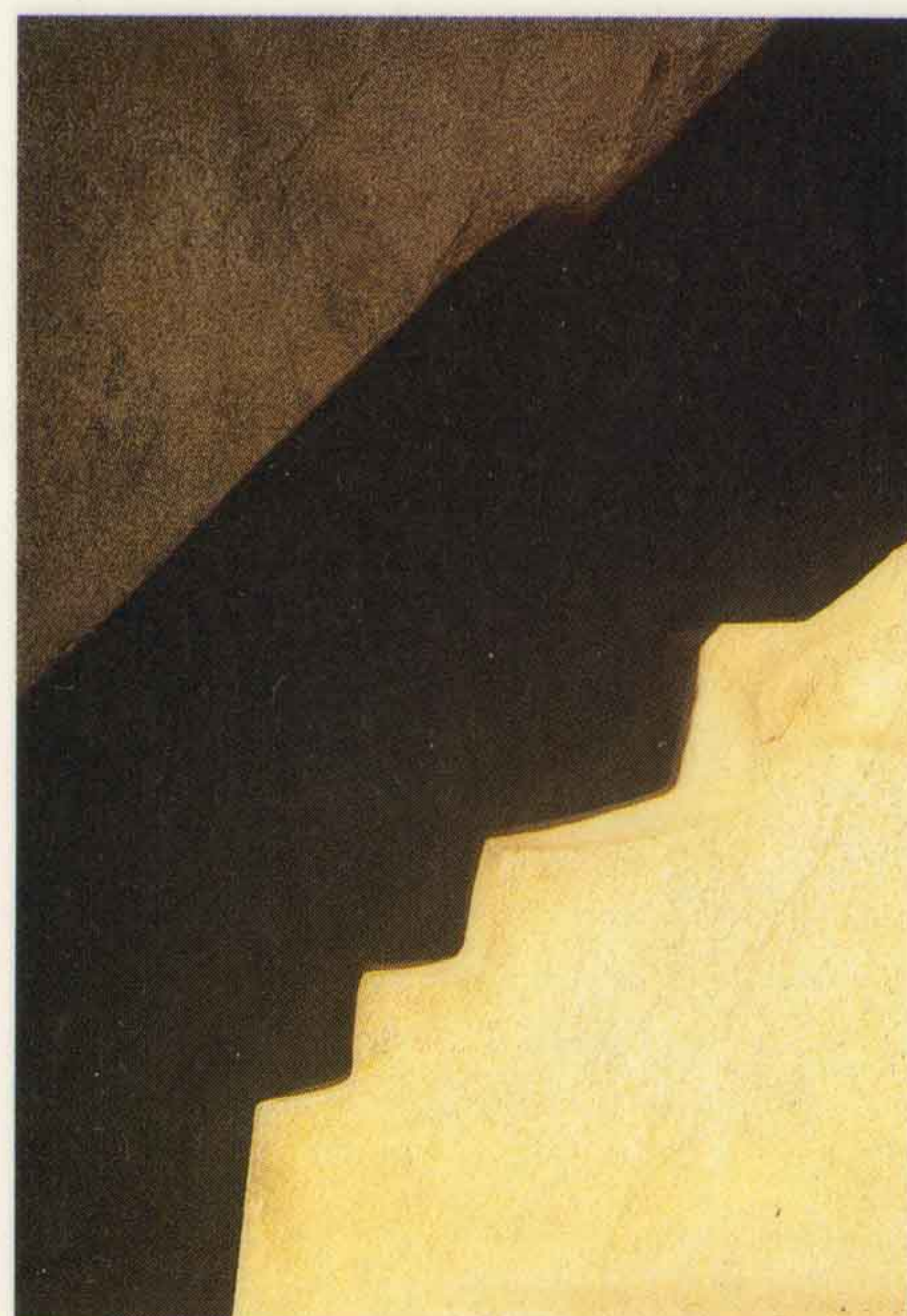
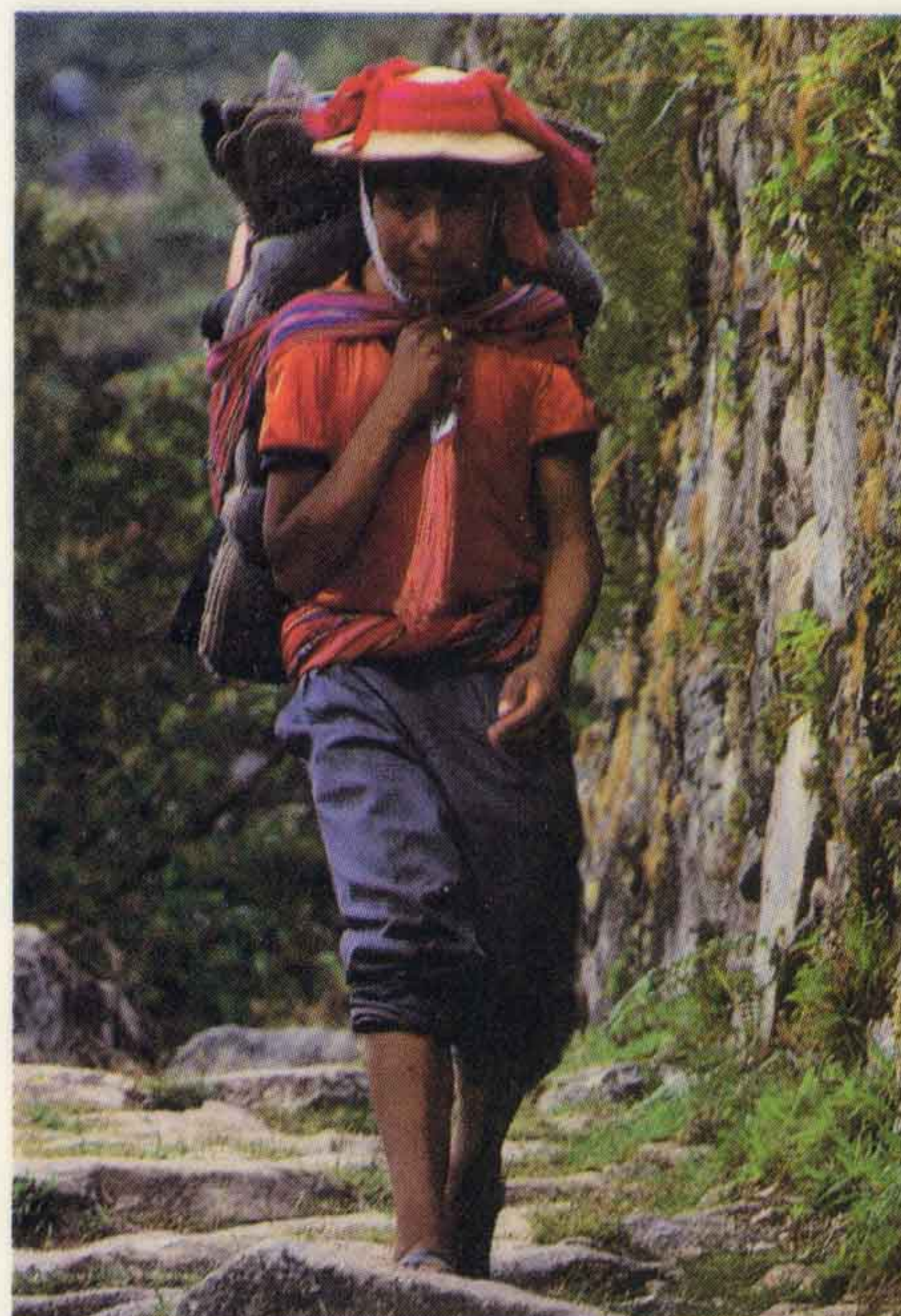
But a tenuous thread of memory clung to another Inca city, the legendary Vilcabamba, said to be a great city where the Incas had hid-

den a vast store of treasures. In search of Vilcabamba, a young American historian named Hiram Bingham set out in 1911 from Cuzco, once the center of Inca civilization and now one of Peru's principal cities. Though many explorers preceded Bingham, none had his good luck and timing. All the other expeditions from Cuzco had been forced to follow the arduous route farmers took over the Andes, going around the impassable canyon of



Opposite: Visitors atop the Intihuatana pyramid are dwarfed by the mountain peaks that surround them. Top: Historian Hiram Bingham thought he'd discovered the legendary city of Vilcabamba when a local boy led him up the mountainside to Machu Picchu in 1911. Above: Local Quechuan women cooking breakfast along the sidewalk in the town of Aguas Calientes, in the canyon below Machu Picchu, are descended from the Incas.





Above, from left: The Incas laboriously constructed stone terraces to make farming possible on the steep mountain slopes. A Quechuan teen backpack hikers' belongings on a four-day trek along the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. Detail of royal tomb steps silhouetted against a grotto. Below: The obelisk on Intihuatana pyramid is said to be the "hitching post of the sun." Opposite, top: Miss Peru, Natali Sacco Angelas, poses in Inca costume at the edge of Machu Picchu's Sacred Plaza. Opposite, bottom: Granite steps leading out of a grotto are the last leg of the trail to the top of Huayna Picchu, one of the mountains looming above Machu Picchu.



the Urubamba to get to the lush Amazon piedmont. Bingham's route led down a new trail the Peruvian government had just blasted along the Urubamba River to open up commerce to the remote region.

Fifty miles northwest of Cuzco, Bingham met a farmer who knew of some ruins nearby. Bingham was mildly intrigued. The next day the man led Bingham 2,000 feet up a slippery, jungle-clad canyon wall to a couple of Quechuan natives farming maize on ancient stone Inca terraces at the top. While the men sat and chatted, a young boy bounded ahead to show Bingham the piles of stone blocks he used as a playground.

The boy led him along a short path to what Bingham described in his book, *Lost City of the Incas*, as "a great flight of beautifully constructed stone-faced terraces, perhaps a hundred of them, each hundreds of feet long and ten feet high."

Bingham was unprepared for what followed. "Suddenly I found myself confronted with the walls of ruined houses built of the finest quality of Inca stonework. It was hard to see them for they were partly covered with trees and moss, the growth of centuries, but in the dense shadow, hiding in bamboo thickets and tangled vines, appeared here and there walls of white

granite ashlar carefully cut and exquisitely fitted together."

Climbing up a series of steps to what is now called the Sacred Plaza, Bingham discovered two temples. "[T]he walls contained blocks of Cyclopean size, higher than a man. The sight held me spellbound . . . I could scarcely believe my senses . . . Would anyone believe what I had found?"

Bingham was convinced he had found the lost city of Vilcabamba, and many believed him. Within a few







found it hard to imagine why the Incas left such a paradise. Food, water and clothing must have been plentiful. Potatoes, corn and quinoa, a high-protein grain, were grown on the terraces. The meat of choice was *cuy*, guinea pigs who lived in the people's houses until sud-

bright burst on the radar screen of history. Though it lasted less than 100 years, it was the largest and most advanced civilization of the Americas before the European conquest. To some historians, the Incas are an anomaly, a set of contradictions. They were a people

had forged an empire stretching over half the length of South America was defeated by barely 200 Spanish conquistadors in their first battle.

The conquistadors were ruthless and avaricious in their destruction of this culture. Anything made of gold



Left, from top: Dancers perform at the October dance festival in Moray, Peru. The dancers' amphitheater was formed by Incan farming terraces. A girl in a beribboned derby waits to perform. Right: A llama gets into the picture at Machu Picchu; the animal's ancestors were around when the city was new.

decades of his startling discovery the canyon trail was replaced by a narrow-gauge railroad transporting an endless stream of tourists to Machu Picchu. The line is still in operation today, a mere four-hour excursion from Cuzco and the only way to Machu Picchu through the last two hours of roadless canyon.

In 1964, American explorer Gene Savoy discovered the real Vilcabamba in total decay at a far less impressive site northwest of Machu Picchu, but Machu Picchu persisted in the public's mind as the legendary lost city. Bingham had actually been at Vilcabamba after he left Machu Picchu but failed to recognize it.

Why Machu Picchu was abandoned in such pristine condition is a mystery. During excavation Bingham found scores of skeletal remains, mostly female. Perhaps war called away the men, leaving behind their wives and the so-called "chosen women" who served as nuns of the sun god and concubines of the royalty.

Contemplating the breathtaking views from the Temple of the Three Windows and walking beside the aqueduct that gurgles down the Stairway of the Fountains, I

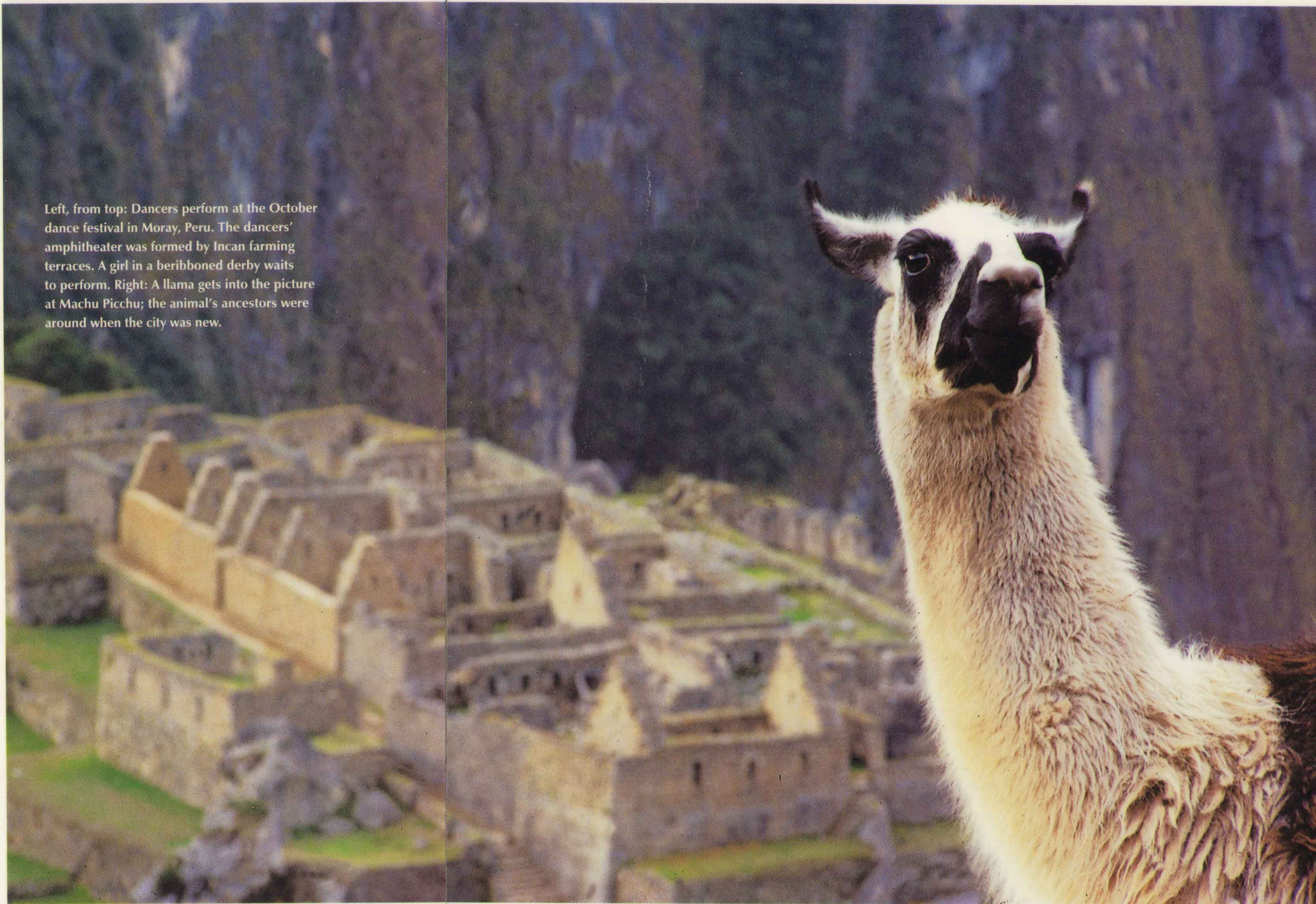


denly invited for dinner. Wool came from llamas whose descendants still wander among the ruins, so tame they tolerate petting. For outside commerce, residents relied on a path over the mountains, a favorite hike backpackers now call the Inca Trail, that connected with the Inca's version of an interstate highway system.

The Inca empire was brilliant and short-lived, a

who built thousands of miles of paved "highways" throughout the Andes and down to the coast, yet they possessed no wheel. Their empire was highly organized, yet they had no written language. They were an agrarian civilization, but they inhabited some of the least arable land on the continent, from coastal deserts to icy tundra. And perhaps most puzzling, the Inca army that

or silver, regardless of its beauty or sacredness, was melted into ingots. The elite "chosen women" were raped, defiled and bartered away. Royalty was disgraced, tortured and executed in public. Eventually the conquistadors began murdering one another, and little was left of a once-glorious civilization by the time Spain established civil order. And though it took the white





## The Inca people acquired their name

from the succession of monarchs who ruled them, each bearing the title Inca, meaning king in the Quechuan language.

Historians rank Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui (circa 1391-1471) with the greatest conquerors and rulers of all time. He was the eighth Inca, and before his rule Quechuans were just one of scores of tribes throughout the Andes.



After winning a critical battle against a powerful tribe about to invade Cuzco in 1438, Pachacuti engaged in a dazzling burst of imperial expansion and built a 700-mile-long Andean kingdom. Centralizing his government in Cuzco, he launched massive building projects and revamped every aspect of social and religious life. He forced all tribes to speak Quechuan and worship the new state religion and named himself the divine descendant of Viracocha, the creator of all life. He virtually eliminated local warfare and established an unprecedented program of food sharing through an extensive system of warehouse outposts. Under subsequent Incas, the empire eventually stretched from northern Chile to southern Ecuador, from the Pacific to the Andes and the Amazon. Citizens owned little, but they were well fed and clothed.

The price for security was oppression. The people were required to surrender their infants for sacrifices, their sons as warriors and their most beautiful daughters as "chosen women" who served the Inca, his officials or the deities. Popular discontent bolstered a civil war between two Inca sons, one at Quito and the other at Cuzco, each vying for his father's throne. (The leader had died in a smallpox epidemic spread from Panama by Spaniards, making him the first Inca king to fall "victim" of the conquistadors.)

In 1532, Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro arrived amid this Incan war with a small battalion—64 horsemen and 104 infantrymen. Five years earlier Pizarro and his men had been greeted by coastal tribes as demigods who, local legend said, had once walked off across the ocean and would return someday. Finding a crumbling empire upon his second arrival, Pizarro marched straight for the Andes and easily vanquished the royals, leaving their army leaderless.

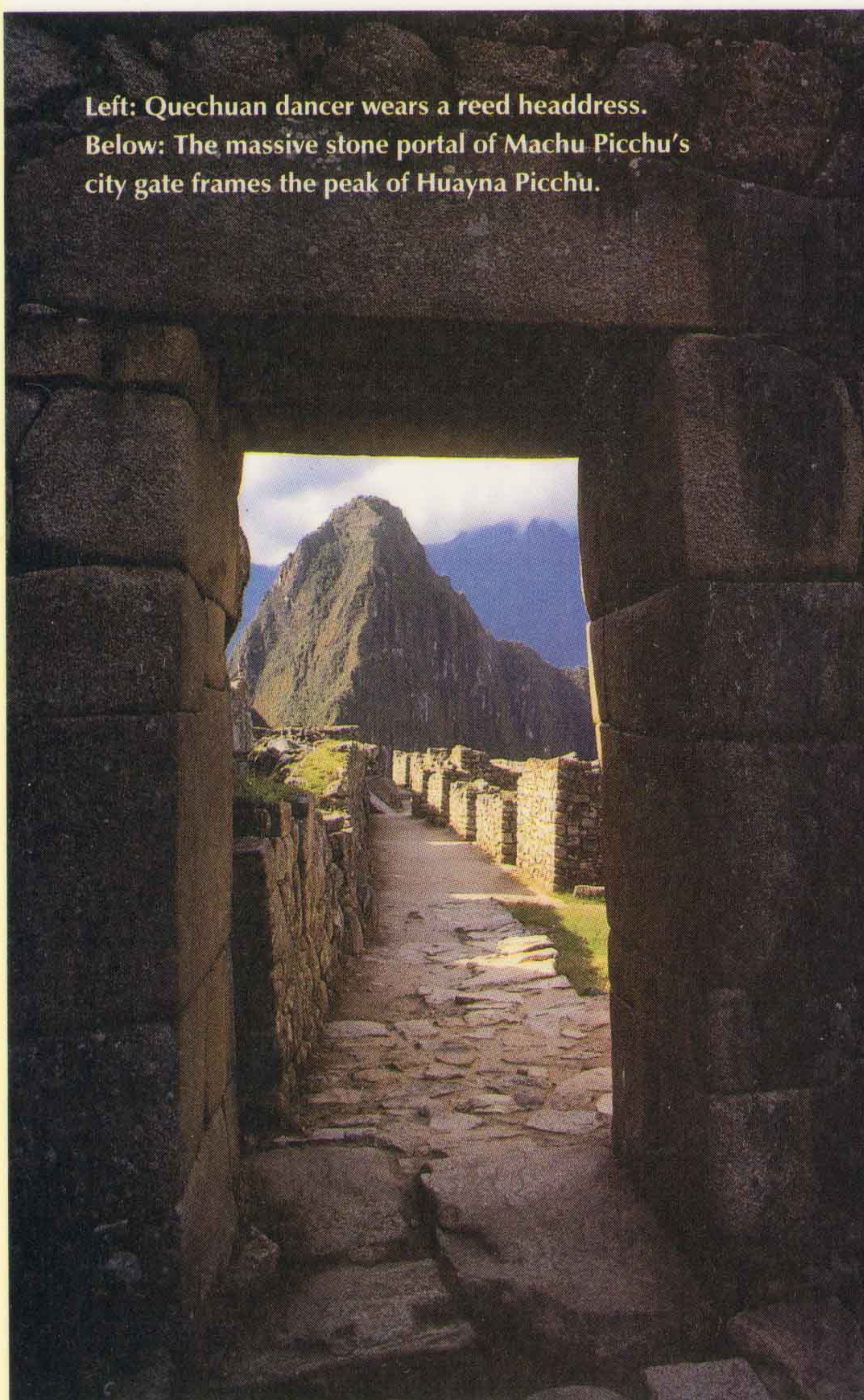
The harshness of Inca rule paled compared to Spanish cruelty, and several unsuccessful rebellions ensued. Finally Manco Inca, a disillusioned puppet ruler installed by the Spanish, retreated with his sons in the late 1530s into the Amazon piedmont, launching guerrilla strikes for years along the highways. Their empire was eventually reduced to an enclave in the Amazon headwaters.

The last Inca, Manco's son Tupac Amaru, was finally captured deep in the rain forest in 1572 after he had torched and abandoned the final royal capital of Vilcabamba, the famed "lost city" still confused with Machu Picchu.

man centuries to appreciate the value of another treasure the Incas left the world, a little white tuber first bred by pre-Columbian Andeans saved much of Europe from famine. It has been said that all the gold and silver plundered from the Incas would still not equal the world's annual potato harvest. In spite of all they gave, the Incas' only reward was oblivion.

On an early morning at Machu Picchu, as the chill from the Andes mingles with the damp breath of the Amazon, all these cruelties seem remote. Clouds roil up from the sweeping Urubamba river valley and begin to

Left: Quechuan dancer wears a reed headdress.  
Below: The massive stone portal of Machu Picchu's city gate frames the peak of Huayna Picchu.



lift off the mountains, revealing a city of gold bathed in shimmering sunlight. Where better to worship the sun and the earth? For all that has been lost and for all that is unknown about Machu Picchu, the world seems a better place with such mysteries. **HT**

RANDALL HYMAN is a writer and photographer whose photographs have appeared in many *Historic Traveler* articles. He's done stories on history, nature and travel worldwide for such magazines as *Smithsonian* and *International Wildlife*. This is the first story he's written for *HT*.

# MACHU PICCHU

trip planner



Peru's international telephone code is **51**; from the U.S., dial **011-51** before the Peru numbers listed here.

## INFORMATION PLEASE

The **Peru Tourism Board** (Foptur) is on the web at <http://www.foptur.gob.pe/>. A web-site tour of Machu Picchu is at <http://161.132.89.11/FOPTUR/cusco/ciudad1-i.htm> (note that the last character of "ciudad1" is the number one). These are in English. You can Email Foptur at [postmaster@foptur.gob.pe](mailto:postmaster@foptur.gob.pe). There is no general Peru tourism contact in the U.S., but the **Peruvian Embassy** is at 1700 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20036, telephone (202) 833-9860, fax (202) 785-0933, and the **Peruvian Consulate** is at 444 Brickell Ave., Suite M-135, Miami, FL 33131, telephone (305) 374-1407 or 374-1305, fax (305) 381-6027.

## GETTING THERE

Machu Picchu is in southern Peru near Cuzco and is open from sunrise to sunset daily. Numerous airlines serve the Peruvian capital of Lima from Miami, Houston and Los Angeles, including United, American, Continental and Aero Peru. There are several flights per day from Lima to Cuzco, the regional Andean capital, and it is a four-hour train excursion from there to Machu Picchu. Many U.S. travel agencies and airlines offer package tours.

## GETTING AROUND

Travelers can buy their own tickets to Machu Picchu at the Cuzco train station or at the many travel agencies in the city's main square. Luxurious one-way travel in the **Autovagon** costs about \$25.00. More economical tickets in the Pullman (semi-private) and Tourist classes are \$12.00 and \$4.00. The cheaper the ticket, the less comfortable, more crowded and more adventurous the ride. Cuzco travel agencies offer package tours that cover either Machu Picchu alone or include the entire Sacred Valley region. Packages often include hotel pick-up and drop-off.

The Inca ruins of the **Sacred Valley** are well worth seeing and include **Sacsayhuaman**, the monolithic fortress above Cuzco; **Pisac**, the expansive terraced farm of the royals (the town's flea market is a tourist favorite); and **Ollantaytambo**, a royal retreat above a rustic, unspoiled town. A \$25.00 blanket ticket covers admission to all ruins in the Sacred Valley except Machu Picchu, plus several museums and churches in Cuzco.

From Machu Picchu's depot town of

Aguas Calientes, roundtrip bus fare of \$6.00 takes you on the 6-mile, 2000-vertical-foot journey to Machu Picchu. There is a very steep hiking trail that avoids the 20-minute bus trip, but give yourself an extra hour and a half in each direction. Daily admission to the ruins is \$10.00 the first day, \$5.00 every day thereafter.

## LODGING AND DINING

Make hotel reservations well in advance and get written confirmation (via fax). Mail is unreliable, so call or fax ahead. Many people visit Machu Picchu in one day, leaving Cuzco at dawn and returning at night. However, **Aguas Calientes**, the small town below Machu Picchu, has good accommodations at a fair price. (Aguas Calientes has no addresses as such; ask for directions at the train station.) **Gringo Bill's** (\$20 double), 84-21-1046 (phone and fax), offers basic, clean rooms. Grab the "Americano" breakfast at Gringo Bill's at 5:30 a.m., then the first bus of the day at 6:30 a.m. in order to catch the magic of morning at the ruins. Gringo Bill's also offers box lunches to take up to the ruins to avoid hefty prices at the ruins' cafe. Numerous other hotels offer less expensive though less attractive lodging (shared bathrooms, bare bulbs and bare rooms). More affluent travelers can stay at the **Machu Picchu Pueblo** (\$173 single or double, including tax), reservations 1-422 6574, fax 1-422 4701, down the tracks from the Puente Ruinas station, or at Machu Picchu's only on-site hotel, the **Ruinas Hotel**



(\$160 single, \$192 double, including tax), reservations 1-221-0826 or 1-440-8043, fax 1-440 6197. **Inka's Pizza** bakes in a hearth oven as does **Chez Maggi**—try the fresh Andean trout in garlic sauce straight from the hearth! **Urubamba Restaurant** has great fruit pancakes for breakfast.

Like Aguas Calientes, **Cuzco** offers a full

range of hotels, from luxurious to modest. In the city square next to the main cathedral are dozens of restaurants and cafes. If stopping over at **Ollantaytambo**, you'll find **El Albergue**, a charming inn run by an American expatriot, right on the train platform, 84-204014.

## INSIDERS' TIPS

The language of Peru is Spanish. Take along an English-Spanish dictionary.

Bottled water, the safest kind to drink in Peru, can be ordered by the liter and half-liter in all restaurants and hotels. Try Inca Kola. It tastes like a banana popsicle!

Time to travel: November-April is rainy season; May-August has clear weather but heavy foreign tourism; September-October has clear skies and fewer foreigners, but Peruvian high schoolers invade on graduation trips.

Altitude sickness (*soroche*) is more bark than bite; at 11,000 feet, Cuzco is the only spot to worry about (coca-leaf tea's alleged relief is minimal).

No visa or shots are required.

High altitude + equatorial latitudes = fast sunburn; use hat and sunscreen!

Bring rain gear. Machu Picchu is in a cloud forest and rain is always likely.

Aguas Calientes has delightful hot baths; water is changed every 3-4 days, so check the schedule with the baths attendant if you're picky.

Change your money at the Lima airport; rates are good, lines are short and the counter is open 24 hours a day (Cuzco banks are a hassle).

The unit of currency is the **sole**. At press time, one sole equalled about 40¢ U.S.

Cuzco-Machu Picchu train tickets are full price even if you stop midway at the Ollantaytambo ruins for a day, so you must purchase another full-fare ticket the next day to go the second half of the way to Machu Picchu.

## READING UP

*Machu Picchu*, by John Hemming (Newsweek Book Division's Wonders of Man series, 1981): scholarly, entertaining text about the ruins and Inca history.

*Lost City of the Incas* by Hiram Bingham (Greenwood Press, 1948): Bingham's own story of the discovery and excavation of Machu Picchu.

*Machu Picchu: The Sacred Center* by Johan Reinhard (Nuevas Imagenes; available in Cuzco bookstores): discussion of the so-called sacred geography of the ruins.

*A Walking Tour of Machu Picchu* by Pedro Suel do Nava (Ecosetur; available in Cuzco bookstores): step-by-step tour of the ruins with explanations of each site.

1997 *South American Handbook*, 73rd Edition, by Ben Box (NTC Publishing Group, 1996).

*Peru Travel Guide*, 3rd Edition, by Rob Rachowiecki (Lonely Planet Publications, 1996).