

# The lost Inca trail

A new cable car is opening up one of Peru's most underrated sites, set to challenge the popularity of Machu Picchu. **Sarah Marshall** finds the ancient cloud forest citadel of Kuelap

**C**ascading bromeliads weigh heavy on near-horizontal tree trunks, like garish jewels dragging at the strained necks of stooped old ladies. As persistent drizzle becomes unrelenting, heavy rain, they glisten with bygone beauty.

Plumes of mist wisp from imaginary chimneys in roofless houses once belonging to noble families, the rubble of stone buildings now suspended in a blank, shapeless cloud and lost in time.

Peru's ancient civilisations had a habit of building sky-high, altitude-busting citadels, safe from enemy eyes. Machu Picchu is of course the most famous site of all, but further north in the cloud forests of Amazonas is a place far grander in age and scale. Yet few travellers even know it's there.

Built in 500AD by the Chachapoyas people, high-walled fortress town Kuelap predates Peru's Inca big hitter by 900 years.

Sixteenth century chronicles written by Spanish conquistadors speak of Amazonas — a region of tumbling rivers, steep gorges and mountains quilted with frog green forests — as being one of the hardest regions to reach. One modern guidebook warns: you never know what time you'll arrive in main city Chachapoyas.

Up until now, that was the case.

But the opening of an airport at Jaen, in the neighbouring Cajamarca region, has greatly eased access, with 90-minute flights

operating from **Lima**.

A big fuss is also being made about the new 24 million-dollar cable car connecting Kuelap to the small village of Nuevo Tingo, turning a one and a half hour stomach-spinning drive around hairpin bends into an easy 20-minute glide.

In truth, the time saved isn't particularly significant, but the government project, designed to ease crowd pressure on Machu Picchu by opening up new archaeological areas, has brought international attention to this under-appreciated corner of Peru.

Entering through a narrow, tapering entrance, I clamber over slippery limestone rocks to find the remains of 400-plus houses — round, windowless buildings which once had conical thatched roofs.

Decorations include diamond shapes inspired by feline eyes, and the unexplained relief of a stunned face staring from a temple wall. Slowly disintegrating bones are visible in some crevices, belonging to the 1,000-plus bodies buried in Kuelap's walls.

Only a third of the site, eventually infiltrated by Incas in the late 1400s, has been excavated since being rediscovered in 1843. Efforts are currently underway to reverse some crude reconstructions in a bid to earn Unesco World Heritage status, and when I visit, workmen are hurriedly banging nails into walkways in preparation for an influx of tourists.



Numbers are expected to rise from 40,000 per year to 120,000, compared to the million-plus visitors Machu Picchu receives.

All over Amazonas, ancient sites paint a picture of Chachapoyas' life and — even more fascinating — death.

Hewn into vertical cliff faces, high above ground, sarcophagi (stone coffins) in the shape of giant heads are topped with the prized skulls of warlords conquered by the warriors within.

There are more than 30 burial sites; one of the best is at Karajia, in the north.

But I choose to visit the mausoleums at Revash (a two-hour drive south of Kuelap, followed by a short trek), where small triangular-roofed houses embedded in the rocks feature ruby red paintings of pumas and the Southern Cross.

Only nesting vultures can flit through the T-shaped windows, but looters have still managed to pillage 80% of the contents. Sadly, it's the same story all over the region.

More than 200 Inca and Chachapoyas mummies are safeguarded in a controlled chamber at the excellent community-run Leymebamba museum, a 75-minute drive from Revash.

Small muslin bundles bound up with rope and daubed with simple circular faces sit on dusty shelves like cocooned, incubating pupae, although none will flourish with life again.

Elbows and knees were originally broken to create the shrunken packages, and intestines removed through the rectum.

Some of the compressed cadavers are exposed, saggy skin intact and surprisingly gleaming white sets of teeth lining their sunken jaws.

Still relatively new to tourism, Amazonas has few high-end accommodation options.

I choose to stay at the idyllic Gocta Natura Cabins, an hour's drive north from Chachapoyas, tracing the route of the Utcubamba River.

Leaving a job at the World Bank in Lima behind her, lithe and energetic conservationist Rocio Florez has opened an eco-lodge of five standalone cabins set within reforested terraces, attracting endemic birds to the area for the first time in decades.

Until 2005, when German Stefan Ziemendorff measured the two-drop cataract as one of the tallest in the world (at 771m), the residents of Coachimba village were terrified

of the myth-laden site supposedly filled with irresistible gold treasures.

"Many people are still convinced they'll get sick if they touch certain rocks in the forest," Rocio tells me.

I wonder what mind-altering substances those ancestors must have been smoking, but find no magic plants on my sweaty, undulating 5km trail to the Falls. Overcoming their fears, local villagers have made a good business in guiding tourists, perhaps finally finding their pot of gold.

Along with archaeology, environment is one of the key pillars for future tourism in Amazonas and almost half of Peru's Private Conservation Areas can be found in the region.

Biologist Perico Heredia is an advocate of the system, which allows individuals to request government recognition of their land as an important ecosystem.

The 50-something leads me through a tangled trail of rare orchids, ancient Inca stones and newly-recognised cedar trees, while excitedly regaling sightings of "small cats" caught on his camera traps.

He's currently extending the guest house at his Milpuj property a few kilometres from Kuelap.

Like everywhere in Amazonas, there's a sense so much is waiting to be discovered.

## TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

■ Sarah Marshall was a guest of The Ultimate Travel Company ([www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk](http://www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk); 020 3051 8098) who tailor a ten-day Northern Peru experience from £2,950 per person, visiting

Lima, Gocta Falls, Chiclayo and Trujillo. Most meals during the trip are included, as well as international and domestic flights, private guided sightseeing and private transfers throughout.



**NEW HEIGHTS:**  
visitors entering the Kuelap archaeological complex and (below) the Gocta Natura Cabins

