

SUNDAY TIMES TRAVEL
24th April 2011



**TWO TOUR OPERATORS,
ONE PHONE CALL, NO SECOND CHANCES**



July 24 marks the 100th anniversary of the “rediscovery” of the lost Inca citadel of Machu Picchu, but the chances are that Hiram Bingham was beaten to the Andean tourist magnet by three Peruvians, an Englishman and a German. Now, 500 hikers a day cross the Urubamba River to start the Inca Trail, and if you think that’s busy, wait until you get to Machu Picchu itself. There must be an alternative to the tourist trail — something similarly strenuous but far from the hordes and with a suitably satisfying climax?

Exodus: “I would recommend a hike to the lost city of Choquequirao,” said the chap at Exodus (0845 805 7241, exodus.co.uk). Choquewhat? “It’s another Inca city, but it’s nowhere near as touristy as Machu Picchu.” Have you been there? “No, but I’ve heard good

things. It’s a lot tougher than the classic Inca Trail — longer and higher, with camping en route, but you will not see other tourists.” Is it pretty? “It’s very quiet and peaceful with cloud forest and ruins.” The 16-day trip, departing on September 10,

is £2,575pp, including flights.

Wilderness Journeys: “Try the Salkantay Trail,” suggests Wilderness Journeys (0131 625 6635, wildernessjourneys.com). “It’s a bit tougher — 15,000ft is the highest you go — but a lot more civilised. You’re still passing through spectacular mountain scenery with waterfalls and ruins, but you’re sleeping in lodges with proper beds and outdoor hot tubs.” Is it busy? “With locals, yes, but it’s not touristy. You get a good view of Machu Picchu from Lactapata on the last day of the trek, and you can take the bus from Aguas Calientes early the next morning to get into the citadel before the crowds.” A 10-day trip departing from Cusco on September 14 is £1,995pp. Add another £950 for return flights sourced through Skyscanner.net.

The referee’s decision, from Miguel Angel Gongora, professional guide and co-founder of the Cusco Inca Trail and Mountain Guides Association: “If you’re trying to avoid the crowds, then staying at the luxury lodges around the Salkantay Trail won’t help you. Sometimes during the high

season there are a couple of hundred people who are unable to get permits for the Inca Trail, so they hike this route as their best alternative. Perhaps the view of Machu Picchu from Lactapata will serve as a consolation prize for all of that.

“The Choquequirao trek is not only very challenging, it is also barely visited by tourists. It has much greater ecological diversity than Salkantay — from the high *puna* of Yanama to the depths of the Apurimac River — and you are far more likely to see the fauna of the Andean mountains. Add the road trip to Huancacalle, the ruins of Nusta Hispana and Choquequirao itself, and the result is that Exodus is the easy winner.”