



(EXPLORE)

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FIJI ISLANDS



(ADVANCE)

STUDYING BIOFUEL WITH
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(INDULGE)

VISITING ZURICH'S QUIRKY
WIDDER BAR



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FEBRUARY 2010

GATEWAY TO ANCIENT PERU

Exploring the ruins
beyond Machu Picchu



A stone pathway
outside the ruins of
the Kuélap fortress



In Peru,
Machu Picchu gets
most of the attention
and visitors, but many
other impressive ruins
are worth exploring

SITES TO BEHOLD

BY KEVIN RAUB • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAVIER PIERINI

The oval fortress sits majestically on a cloud-forested Peruvian hillside overlooking a verdant valley. Its imposing main gate, a narrow stone entryway that simultaneously entices and intimidates, stands nearly 65 feet high. As I ascended the passageway with my guide, I couldn't help but wonder what someone walking this same path some 1,100 years ago, when the pre-Columbian citadel thrived, would have experienced. For me, it was a little like being off to see the wizard. The stonework, which some historians believe features more stone than was used to construct the Great Pyramids of Egypt, is otherworldly in both its precision and its state of preservation.

On my visit, the monumental site was eerily quiet, save the faint whoosh of a damp and misty low-slung cloud closing in on the outer walls. As I entered the main ground, a thought immediately seized my consciousness: *Where are all the other visitors?* I knew that Kuélap was relatively overlooked — even though its only rival in Peru is Machu Picchu, the famous Incan citadel near Cuzco. But it was a pleasant surprise to find we had Kuélap all to ourselves.

Situated nearly 10,000 feet above sea level, Kuélap towers over the Utcubamba River in Peru's Northern Highlands. The site is fascinating, gorgeous, and, most of the time, nearly empty. Few travelers come to Kuélap, near the town of Chachapoyas, at least compared with other attractions in Peru. Why? When tourists land in Lima, 99 percent of them head south — to Cuzco, Arequipa, Lake Titicaca, the Nazca Lines, and, of course, Machu Picchu. As a result, the region north of Lima remains wonderfully undervisited.

Although it's exceptionally striking, Kuélap is hardly unique. Peru has more ruins and archeological sites than officials can even keep track of. Spend any time off the beaten path and you will stumble upon numerous unmarked ruins, just sitting there getting older, completely overlooked in the grand scheme of the country's lengthy history.

While Machu Picchu gets more crowded every day (see "Loving Machu Picchu to Pieces," page 28), Kuélap and a whole host of other magnificent ancient sites offer an experience akin to a private showing. You can hear a pisco sour spill. Having recently spent two months canvassing Peru for the upcoming 11th edition of Lonely Planet's *South America on a Shoestring* travel guide, here are my choices for the most interesting ruins not named Machu Picchu.

Kuélap

Construction on Kuélap began between AD 800 and 900. It was built by the Chachapoyan Cloud People, who sought to ward off an invasion by the Wari, a Middle Horizon civilization that ruled the Andes some 200 years longer than the later, more infamous Incas. The amazing thing is that the Chachapoyans built the site some 250 years before the Wari actually attacked. Perhaps more remarkable is that Kuélap was mostly overlooked by the outside world until 1843, when a Chachapoyan judge, Juan Crisóstomo Nieto, noted the site's grandeur.

At just 2,300 feet by 360 feet, Kuélap is far smaller than Machu Picchu. The site, accessed by three ingenious entryways that force all incomers into single-file lines, is divided



Clockwise from top left: a llama stands in the Kuélap ruins; a face carved on a tomb in one of the entrances to the site of the Kuélap ruins; a narrow path takes visitors across the Utcubamba River Valley at 10,000 feet above sea level.



into three levels that house about 400 circular dwellings, some of which are remarkably well preserved. Halfway through my tour of Kuélap, my guide pointed out a series of zigzag and rhomboid friezes, carved from stone, which decorate the sides of many of the structures. They are remarkable for both their artistry and mathematical precision.

The most puzzling structure in the fort is El Tintero (the Inkpot), a turret-shaped inverted cone that appears to defy gravity with its wide top and narrow base. Theories abound as to its purpose, from a site for animal sacrifices to a prison to an oracle. The reality is that not much is known about Kuélap, which may explain the relative lack of visitors (llamas notwithstanding).

Travel Tip: *Kuélap is located approximately 13 miles southwest of Chachapoyas, which is serviced by bus from Lima (Movil Tours, moviltours.com.pe). For day tours from Chachapoyas, try Turismo Explorer (51.41.47.8162, turismoexplorerperu.com).*

Chan Chan

The largest adobe city in the world and the largest pre-Columbian city in the Americas, Chan Chan is the former stronghold of the Chimú Empire. At nearly 5,000 acres, the site dwarfs Machu Picchu. The mammoth metropolis of clay and dust, which blends almost seamlessly into the surrounding coastal landscape, flourished from its initial construction, around AD 1300, until 1470, when the Incas swooped in and took over.

Upon arriving at Chan Chan, a UNESCO World Heritage site, I was immediately struck by the uniqueness of the ruins. The mud-and-brick construction makes for an arresting contrast with the stone of many ancient sites. It looks and feels like an enormous maze made of sand. The narrow entrance leads to a labyrinth of narrow passageways that eventually empty into a series of ceremonial rooms, burial chambers, temples, reservoirs, and residences. For this reason, despite the presence of large tour groups, Chan Chan can seem nearly deserted — a feeling you can't experience at Machu Picchu.

In its heyday, Chan Chan was home to somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 people who lived in nine subcities, which are often described as royal compounds. Today, only the massive Tschudi complex — named for Johann Jakob von Tschudi, a Swiss naturalist who explored the area — is restored and open to visitors. A museum displays a collection of wealth (ceramics, gold, and silver) that was salvaged after looting by the Spanish invaders. Much like Machu Picchu, Chan Chan is under threat from nature. Erosion brought on by heavy rains, El Niño floods, and strong winds constantly wears at its structure.

Travel Tip: *Chan Chan is just outside Trujillo, Peru's third-largest city, 343 miles north of Lima. It's serviced by all major bus lines, and nearly every tour operator in Trujillo offers day tours. Consider Colonial Tours, attached to the Hostal Colonial (51.44.29.1034).*

Chavín de Huántar

Perched high in the Cordillera Blanca — a picturesque mountain range that's reportedly the site of the snowy peak depicted in the Paramount Pictures logo — the ceremonial complex of Chavín de Huántar was built around 800 BCE

In its heyday, Chan Chan was home to somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 people who lived in nine subcities, or royal compounds.



by one of the Western Hemisphere's oldest civilizations, the Chavín.

Though the structure itself, another UNESCO World Heritage site, is not as remarkably well preserved as many of Peru's other ruins, Chavín de Huántar is an impressive feat of engineering, with its maze of underground alleys, ducts, and chambers and other architectural oddities believed to have been used by priests to stun nonbelievers into acquiescence. Chavín de Huántar's *coup de maître*, however, is its highly stylized, ritualistic carvings of jungle cats, condors, snakes, and humans, including the site's lone intact *tenon*, a remarkably true-to-life keystone carving in the shape of a human head.

The impressive Museo Nacional Chavín, funded by the Japanese government and inaugurated in 2008, houses many of the site's important artifacts, including 19 *pututos* (shell trumpets) and 16 *tenons* that once graced the complex's outer walls. The museum also features the original Tello Obelisk, one of the most important pieces of Chavín art ever discovered in the Andes.

Travel Tip: *Chavín de Huántar, 24 miles southeast of Huaraz, is accessed most easily by buses from Lima and Peru's north coast. Try Cruz del Sur (cruzdelsur.com.pe) or Movil Tours (moviltours.com.pe). Day tours (in Spanish only) are offered by numerous agencies in central Huaraz, including Sechín Tours (51.43.48.7339, huaraz.info/sechintours).*

Caral

This ancient site supplanted Chavín de Huántar as the earliest known civilization in the Americas once its true age was determined by archeologist Ruth Shady Solís in 2001. Some 3,000 inhabitants lived here more than 4,000 years ago, between 2600 and 2000 BCE. Caral rose contemporaneously with Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and India as one of the world's first city-states, a so-called "mother city." The site was granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 2009.

Caral appeals for one reason in particular: it's one of the few ancient sites in Peru that offers signage in both English and Spanish. The site features six stone-built pyramids, all with



EARTHLY TREASURE

Loving Machu Picchu to Pieces

None of these sites is as transcendent, well preserved, or generally jaw-dropping as Machu Picchu. The ancient Incan citadel may be the most spectacular attraction in all of South America, but it's under threat.

In 1992, only 9,000 people visited the site, but by 2008, that number had skyrocketed to 616,000. Today, an average of 4,000 people per day descend on the ruins. Dealing with the site's surging popularity, while preserving its delicate features, is Peru's chief challenge, especially when weighed against the significant cash flow that tourism brings. There have been major snags along the way: In the 1980s, a large rock was moved to accommodate a helipad. And in 2000, a chunk of the ritual Intihuatana stone, one of the site's showpieces, was chipped off when a film crew shooting a beer commercial smashed a crane into it.

Before 2001, the Inca Trail, the traditional four-day trek to Machu Picchu, was a come-one, come-all rite of passage, to the dismay of scientists, conservationists, and academics. Those groups didn't much care for the five-star Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge, either. Opened in 1999, it's the only hotel adjacent to the citadel. As a result of these and other tourism-based pressures, Machu Picchu was placed on the World Monuments Fund's Watch List for the second time in 2008, and it has remained there since.

Peru's National Institute of Culture (INC), the government entity in charge of regulating the country's historic sites, has made concessions to preservationists. It now limits Inca Trail permits to 500 per day (300 of which go to guides, cooks, and porters). Plans to build a cable car to the summit were scrapped, and helicopter over-flights were discontinued in 2006.

— K.R.



Clockwise from top left: the tomb of a military chief and warrior in the Sipán ruins; two eroded pyramids with the Andes in the background; Lord of Sipán gold ritual waist rattle represents supreme divinity. Opposite page: a sundial structure in Caral.

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ornaments), an accompanying photo essay illustrates the excavation and restoration process. It adds valuable context and shows the painstaking and time-consuming work involved in preserving ancient relics.

The story of Sipán could give Indiana Jones a run for his money. Buried treasure, grave robbers, police, archeologists, and a murder are all components of the plot. Archeologist Walter Alva unearthed the tomb of the Lord of Sipán, a heralded warrior of Peru's Moche civilization (AD 100 to 800), in 1987 after he noticed an odd surge of priceless

staircases to the top. I had read in my Lonely Planet guide that you can climb to the top for expansive views over northern Peru's stark desertscape, but that is no longer the case.

Caral is in remarkable shape given its age. It's especially pretty when lit burnt-orange by a fiery sunset. My one regret was that my visit did not take place October 24–31, when the site celebrates the anniversary of the beginning of its archeological preservation. A special nighttime ceremony offers a unique display as fire is used to outline the shapes of the buildings.

Travel Tip: Caral is located 200 miles north of Lima, and 15 miles inland from Barranca. *Proyecto Especial Arqueológico Caral-Supe/INC* (51.14.95.1515, caralperu.gob.pe) runs educational day trips from Lima every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Sipán

My favorite Peruvian ruins are undoubtedly the Royal Tombs of Sipán. But oddly enough, the attraction here is not the ruins themselves. The pride of northern Peru is actually the museum housing the Lord of Sipán, along with all of his booty salvaged from the ruins, located seven miles north Chiclayo in Lambayeque. The world-class Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán offers something unique for this sort of venue. For every ornate treasure found at the site (jewelry, emblems,

Moche wares on the black market. It's considered one of the most important archeological finds of the past 30 years, because the tomb itself was intact and the burial booty — some 400 jewels in all, not including Lord Sipán's elaborate necklaces, bracelets, and other ornaments — had eluded thieves despite widespread ransacking in the general vicinity. At least one *huaquero* (grave robber) was shot and killed by police in the initial struggle over control of the ruins.

The site itself is worth a visit for perspective. Several earthen hills — once mighty pyramids — dot the site, along with a few reconstructed tombs filled with replicated treasure.

Travel Tip: Sipán is located 16 miles southeast of Chiclayo on Peru's northern coast. Most major bus lines serve Chiclayo. *Moche Tours* (51.44.29.1957, mochetours.com) is a reliable, Chiclayo-based operator offering tours that take in both the site and museum.

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Getting there: Continental offers nonstop daily service to Lima from its hubs in Houston and New York/Newark.