

PERFECT HARMONY

Peruvian culture—language, food, music, religion and even its people—exists somewhere between ancient traditions and modern influences.

TRAVEL

THE POETRY OF PERU

Art curator HIMALI SINGH SOIN goes deep into the heart of the ancient Inca empire, returning with pictures and prose

Just the way that the word ‘Peru’—equal in vowel and consonant, equal in the horizontal and vertical lull of the lips—is poetic, the lilt of its language is everywhere here. Pachamama, Quechuan for Mother Earth, is worshipped, so that before any meal you feed a little of your plate to the earth. This reverence does not just personify the landscape, it animates it. The Peruvians found heaven on earth when they began calling the Urubamba river ‘Wilka Mayu’, meaning Milky Way, for the way the two reflect each other as they meander across their particular palette of soil and sky.

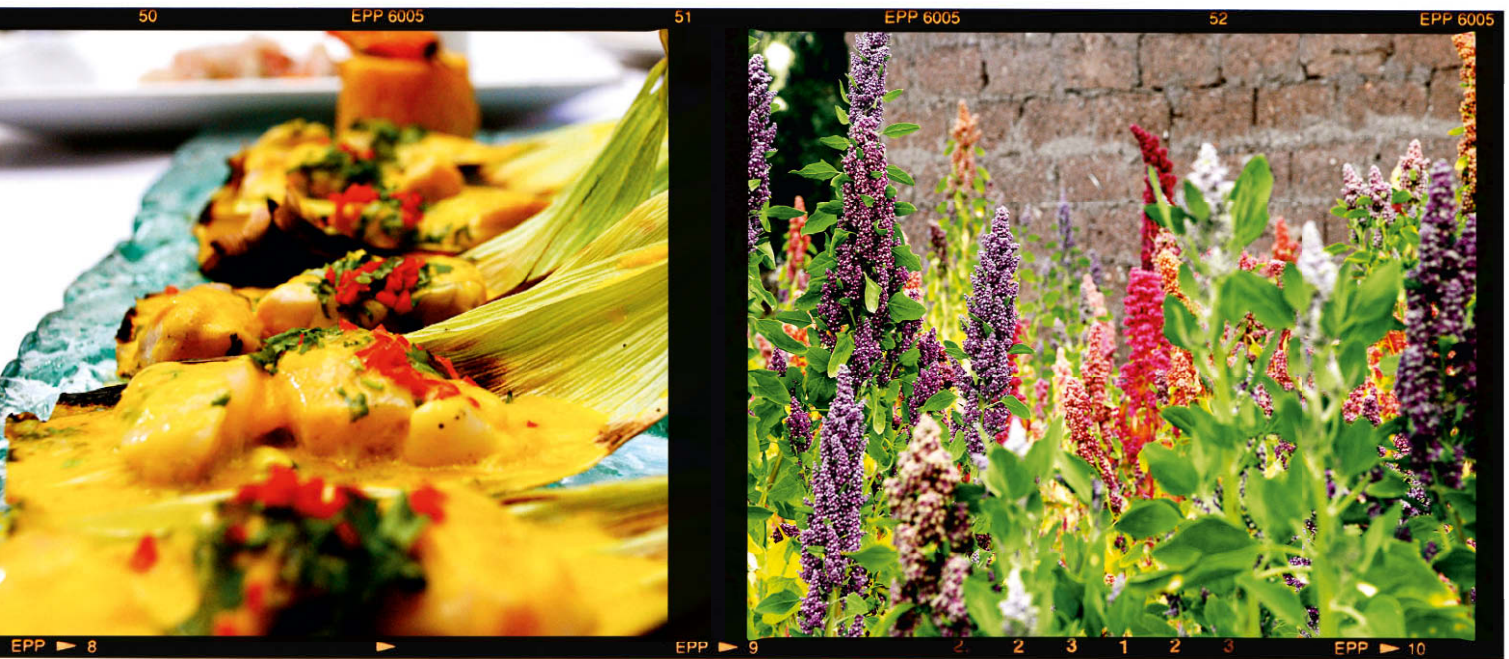
Lying on the north-west coast of South America, Peru has two vastly different but equally wondrous land-

scapes: the Amazon forest rolls across more than half the country and the Andes range inspires contemplation on how minute we really are. I travelled there last year, on an expedition with friends and family, with dreams of encountering a shaman who would tell me a secret about the world, or myself. In retrospect, having come away with a wealth of fables and folklore from my guides on each leg of the journey, perhaps *they* were my shamans. They led the way, physically in the present, as well as into an imagined past. What will happen afterwards, they all seemed to imply, was dependent on how closely I was listening then.

In Peru, the natural world is embedded in stories from a reconstituted

past, while the architectural world exists in perfect geometry. Together, they are metaphors for the inner workings of the cosmic psyche. The people of the Inca civilisation, which arose from the highlands of Peru, believed that gold was the sweat of the sun and silver was the tears of the moon. Here, the mystical and the biotic are entwined in symbiosis. The culture exists somewhere in between ancient folktales and modern norms.

This visual log is of a journey along the Amazon river—through forests where rain seems to fall from the ground—and into the Andes, lived through folk tales and the common imagination, in search of the spirit which connects us with our environment. >



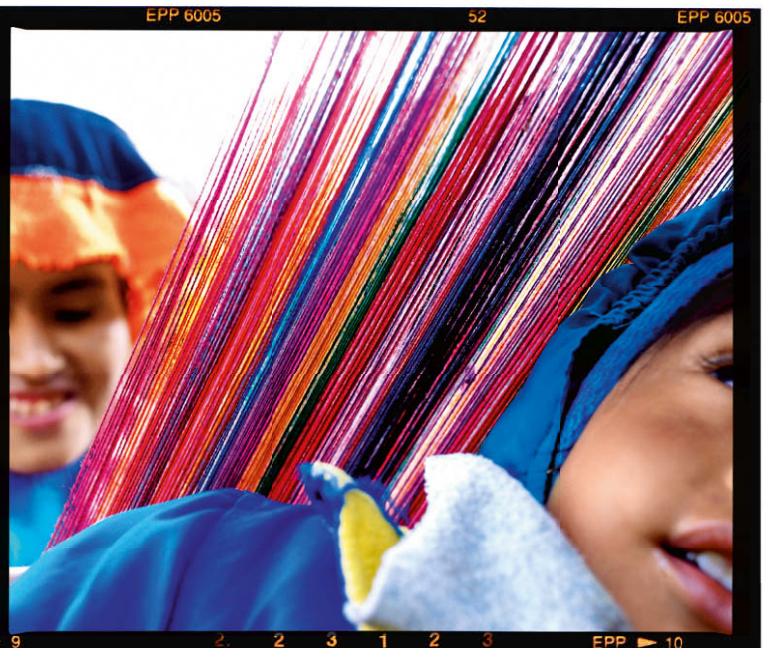
SOUL FOOD AND A SYMPHONY OF QUINOA *Left:* Grilled grouper ceviche served on corn leaves at Fiesta, a restaurant in Lima (Restaurantfiestagourmet.com). *Right:* Quinoa growing in the villages of the Amaru Andeans. A staple of the Peruvian diet, this is what it looks like before it turns into the thready brown grain we are familiar with. We walked through the fields, as the local community accompanied us with a flute and a drum. For me, now, music and quinoa are forever and inextricably linked.



OLD NOTES *Left:* Besides the regular function of music at celebrations and funerals, people in Peru also play music to please the mountains. *Right:* Musicians during the Corpus Christi festival form a line, with sheet music clipped on to their backs with clothespins, each musician becoming a place stand for the band mate behind, resulting in a quirky visual.



THE MEASURES OF MACHU PICCHU *Left:* From the sundials that tell time to the gardens planted on concave stones to receive maximum sunlight, the mathematics of this ancient city constructed in the 15th century, at a time when our bodies were our only instruments of measure, is astounding. *Right:* The country straddles several ideologies. Corpus Christi, a post-colonial Catholic tradition, was merged with pre-Columbian worshipping traditions. Thus, Christianity alloyed with nature worship so that while Christ is god in the human image, the sun, moon, thunder, snakes, condors and pumas are equally revered.



THE PATIENCE OF PATTERN Numerous plants are utilised for dyes, medicine and food. I spent a glorious afternoon playing with a little boy as the elders literally spun yarns about their life in the high Andes. Archaeologists have likened the worth of Peruvian textiles to gold, possibly because they were found in ancient Andean tombs. But they also signify an individual's social position (priest, king, high-ranked officer, commoner). Here, at the source, these balls of colour lay, if only for that day, without any social or economic meaning. ■