

MACHU PICCHU EXTENSION JANUARY 21–28, 2017

By Doris Valencia

The Machu Picchu Extension to our Amazon River Cruise includes a wealth of natural and cultural attractions along the gorgeous Urubamba Valley, the high mountains of the Urubamba range, and the fabulous World Heritage Site of Machu Picchu, ending in the capital city of the Incas, Cusco.

Our first stop was the Wetlands of Huacarpay. Located 45 minutes from the airport, this site has been declared a RAMSAR site since 2006 and protects habitats for both local birds and migrants (boreal and austral). The various Andean species seen here are not particularly rare, but certainly added excitement to our first morning of birding in the Andes. We got excellent looks at the very secretive Plumbeous Rail various times as it ran in and out of the reeds. Puna Teal, Yellow-billed Pintail, Yellow-billed Teal, Cinnamon Teal, Andean Lapwing, Yellow-winged Blackbird, Puna Ibis, and others were very well seen through the scope, adding a nice selection of species for the day's list. A particular highlight of the morning were pretty good looks at a female Bearded Mountaineer, a Peru endemic, as it hovered over the yellow blossoms of the flowering tobacco bushes (*nicotiana sp*). As we made our way around the road that encircles the lagoon, we decided to explore the nearby hills and suddenly heard the endemic Rusty-fronted Canastero calling; we were up for it and got pretty decent looks at this wonderful little bird and its long rusty tail. Within the area of the Wetlands, the Wari, recognized as the first urban state level society in the Andean region, built a very large city called Pikillaqta, believed to represent a ritual facility for the practice of ancestor worship with important hydraulic works that connect the water resources of the site to terraces and cultivated fields, still in use by local people.



As our adventure continued, leaving the Cusco Valley behind, we entered the Urubamba Valley from the south; various other stops were made for Brown-bellied

Swallows and flying Andean Gulls. As we drove our way along the valley, we enjoyed great vistas of the super high mountains around us. PISAQ, a wonderful Inca site above the valley, was also visited. Some quality time was spent in a little ravine close to the site, adding excellent looks at a male Bearded Mountaineer, Andean Flicker, Ash-breasted Sierra-Finch, and Black-throated Flowerpiercer. Our days in the Urubamba Valley were spent in the charming community of Ollantaytambo where the Malaga Pass was reached at 14,200 ft, with an incredible set of habitats ranging from glacial river valleys, high elevation grasslands on the west side of the pass, and moist elfin, upper montane and tropical cloud forest on the east side. Various endemics such as Creamy-crested Spinetail, Chesnut-breasted Mountain-Finch, Inca Wren, and Green-and-white Hummingbirds were seen. A short visit to a local Project (Pacha Conservancy) that works with environmental education and reforestation with native species provided a nice lunch break and the opportunity for more birding. The highlights were Black-capped Tyrannulet, Pale-eyed Flycatcher, Gray-mantled Wren, Tricolored Brush-Finch, colorful tanagers, and more, as well as a migrant Blackburnian Warbler.

As for Machu Picchu, what a special place! The adventure starts with the train ride along the Urubamba Valley, which eventually gives way to a lush tropical forest along a very deep Andean canyon. Intrepid Torrent Ducks were seen resting on the rocks along the roaring Urubamba River. Our lovely Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel with wonderful gardens and bird feeders was excellent for colorful tanagers, Andean Cock-of-the-rock, hummingbirds, and many more. We managed to see three species of boreal migrants enjoying the grounds of the Pueblo Hotel: Blackburnian and Blackpoll warblers, and a new addition to the Machu Picchu official bird list, the American Redstart.

Machu Picchu is just breathtaking. Exploration of this fabulous site included visits to temples, regular housing, solar observatories, farming areas and more, surrounded by amazing mountain scenery and beautiful cloud forest. We even managed to see various Viscachas.

Cusco certainly captivates every visitor. The Koricancha Temple of Sun with its exquisite architecture, the various pieces of colonial art beautiful in their own right, the cobbled stone streets, and the colorful local people in their traditional dress will stay in our memories for a long time. This trip is a great combination of superb birding and cultural insight to a country of the extremes.

What a fantastic trip! I hope that you all enjoyed it as much as I did. Happy birding!