

## TRAVEL



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From left: an entrance to the Kuélap ruins in northern Peru; the courtyard at the Casa Hacienda Achamaqui; coca tea at a restaurant.

## A still-hidden alternative to Machu Picchu

THE 52 PLACES TRAVELER

Pre-Incan ruins of Kuélap share similarities with their more famous cousin

BY JADA YUAN

I was standing in a cloud forest in northern Peru, 10,000 feet above sea level. Quiet cloaked the more than 400 cylindrical homes and ceremonial buildings that make up the most important settlement of the Chachapoyas, or “Cloud Warrior” culture. Farther out were limestone walls up to 65 feet high. Tropical greenery sprang through cracks in the stone, while red bromeliads clung to moss-covered trees. In every direction was a backdrop of patchwork farmland clinging to the sides of mountains, above the Utcubamba River Valley.

This visit to the pre-Incan ruins of Kuélap was the first time on my year-

long trek through every destination on the 52 Places to Go in 2018 list that I’d had company — two female colleagues from New York. And for several hours wandering through those ruins in the mist, we barely spoke. None of us cared that we were drenched in rain that hadn’t stopped since our arrival.

“I think I like this better than Machu Picchu. Way better,” said one of my companions. Part of me worries about ruining a good thing by recounting that.

There are indeed some parallels. Both sites were homes to ancient civilizations, and both are high in the Andean mountains in verdant, dramatically craggy country. But even though Kuélap, which The Times had named No. 29 on the list, sometimes is referred to as “the Machu Picchu of the North,” it had 60,000 visitors last year, up from 30,000 in 2009. Machu Picchu had a record 1.4 million in 2016 and has had to restrict its entrance policies. Think of Kuélap as a similar kind of spiritual space, minus the lines and the aggressive souvenir hawkers.

That said, don’t skip one of the New Seven Wonders of the World just to be different or to deal with smaller crowds. Kuélap may be best appreciated on a second Peruvian visit; getting there can be a herculean effort, and signage is so minimal you’ll need a guide to understand what you’re looking at. Archaeologists have explored only 20 percent of the site, at most — and tourism here didn’t begin in earnest until around 2012.

Getting there can be a bit of a slog. Budget travelers typically make their way to the city of Chiclayo, on the country’s northwestern coast, and then take a 10-hour overnight bus through the mountains. Low on time and worried about bus robberies we had been warned about, we instead flew into the jungle town of Jaén, where the airport recently started receiving one LATAM flight from Lima per day. From there, we still had a three-and-a-half-hour car ride through the Andes to our year-old hotel, Casa Hacienda Achamaqui, a colonial villa nestled in a river valley.

Another 50-minute car ride on a mostly unpaved road got us to the tiny town of Nuevo Tingo, where a cable car to the base of Kuélap opened in 2017. It took us 20 vertigo-inducing minutes to go two and a half miles across multiple ravines, a distance that used to require a two-hour drive or a four-hour hike. From there — from there! — we had a 15-minute horseback ride up a muddy mountain path to the ruins themselves. The indigenous woman who was guiding my horse tackled the mud barefoot. When I asked her if my horse was feeling O.K., she laughed and responded, “He doesn’t talk! He’s a horse!”

Outside the walls, locals had set up booths selling grilled plantains filled with cheese. Inside, we spotted one of three llamas, which our guide, Michel Richard Feijóo Aguilar, told us had been brought in around five years ago for the sake of tourists. He pointed out diamond-shaped stone patterns that he said represented the eyes of sacred animals such as jaguars, serpents and condors, and showed us how to spot human

bones placed in the walls of homes. “The Chachapoyas liked to share their spaces with their ancestors,” he said. The most important discovery among those bones has been evidence that the Chachapoyas performed trepanation, a form of brain surgery that involved drilling into the skull to relieve pressure after warriors received bangs to their heads.

Archaeologists believe Kuélap was populated from 500 to 1570. The Chachapoyas survived an Inca occupation in the late 1400s, but abandoned the settlement after the Spanish Viceroy Francisco Álvarez de Toledo introduced an evangelical program that forced the displacement of indigenous populations from their native communities and into colonial towns. The site has remained largely untouched ever since. Spaniards never lived there, and the remaining Chachapoyas returned only to bury their dead. “Kuélap is a big cemetery,” said Mr. Feijóo Aguilar. (Los Sarcófagos de Karajía, consisting of seven anthropomorphic funerary sculptures contain-

ing mummies in a remote river gorge, is another area draw.)

The region’s capital city of Chachapoyas may seem like an ideal base, but we much preferred Achamaqui. Meals got boring since our hotel had the only restaurant for miles around, but we had breakfast every morning in view of a river, and even treated ourselves to massages for around \$30.

Those massages proved to be essential after a six-hour, seven-and-a-half-mile round-trip hike we took to the Gocta waterfalls, also in torrential rain, through mud, mud and more mud. Technically two falls, they are among the highest in the world.

I spent three uphill hours of the return hike moaning “I’ve lost all motivation!” and the next three days was barely able to walk because my calves were so sore. But I wouldn’t trade a year of comfort at home for what it felt like to be there, unable to hear anything but the roar of water, twirling around what looked like the inside of a cloud at the end of the world.