The Inca: A lost society

The Inca people were a small ethnic group, but they ruled an empire of more than 12 million people and dominated the Western South America in the 15th and 16th centuries. They were skilled craftsmen who were able to produce jewelry and textiles. Many villagers were so impressed by them that they thought of them as gods. The Inca were in many ways very tolerant and assimilated new groups of people, new cultures and even new religions into their own. Although the Inca had no written language and didn't even know of the existence of a wheel, within the space of a hundred years they built an empire that spanned some 2,500 miles across South America.

Amazingly, one Inca site remained undiscovered until 1911. It was the amazing Machu Picchu (meaning 'Old Peak' in the Quechua language). Historians believe that Machu Picchu was built at the height of the Inca Empire, but was abandoned about 100 years after its construction, probably around the time the Spanish began their conquest of the mighty pre-Columbian civilization in the 1530s. It is a fabulous ancient site of 5 square miles, which was turned by the Inca into an extraordinary city. Invisible from below, at the height of more than two thousand meters above the rumbling Urubamba River, it had over 170 buildings, several temples, thousands of stone steps and 16 fountains, all in a remarkable state of preservation. These structures, carved from the gray granite of the mountain top, are architectural and aesthetic wonders. Moreover, it had more than 600 agricultural terraces that served two purposes: to provide a place to grow crops and to keep the city from sliding off the mountain. They also helped to cope with 79 inches of annual rainfall.

One of Machu Picchu's primary functions was that of an astronomical observatory. The Intihuatana stone (meaning 'Hitching Post of the Sun') was a precise indicator of equinoxes (when day and night are of equal length) and other significant celestial periods. At midday on March 21st and September 21st, the sun stands almost directly above the pillar, creating no shadow at all. On these days, the Incas held ceremonies at the stone in which they "tied the sun" to halt its northward movement in the sky.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1983 and one of the New Seven Wonders of the World since 2007, Machu Picchu has been a source of national pride for Peru, as well as a valuable tourist attraction. There is a hotel with a restaurant, and thermal baths are at the nearby village. Although the Inca Bridge and other parts of Machu Picchu were damaged by a forest fire in August 1997, the restoration began immediately afterward.