



The **Magic** of
**MACHU
PICCHU**

During a trek up to this
“Lost City of the Incas,”
Margie Goldsmith discovers
something no one expected.

Photo by YoTut

Magic MACHU PICCHU

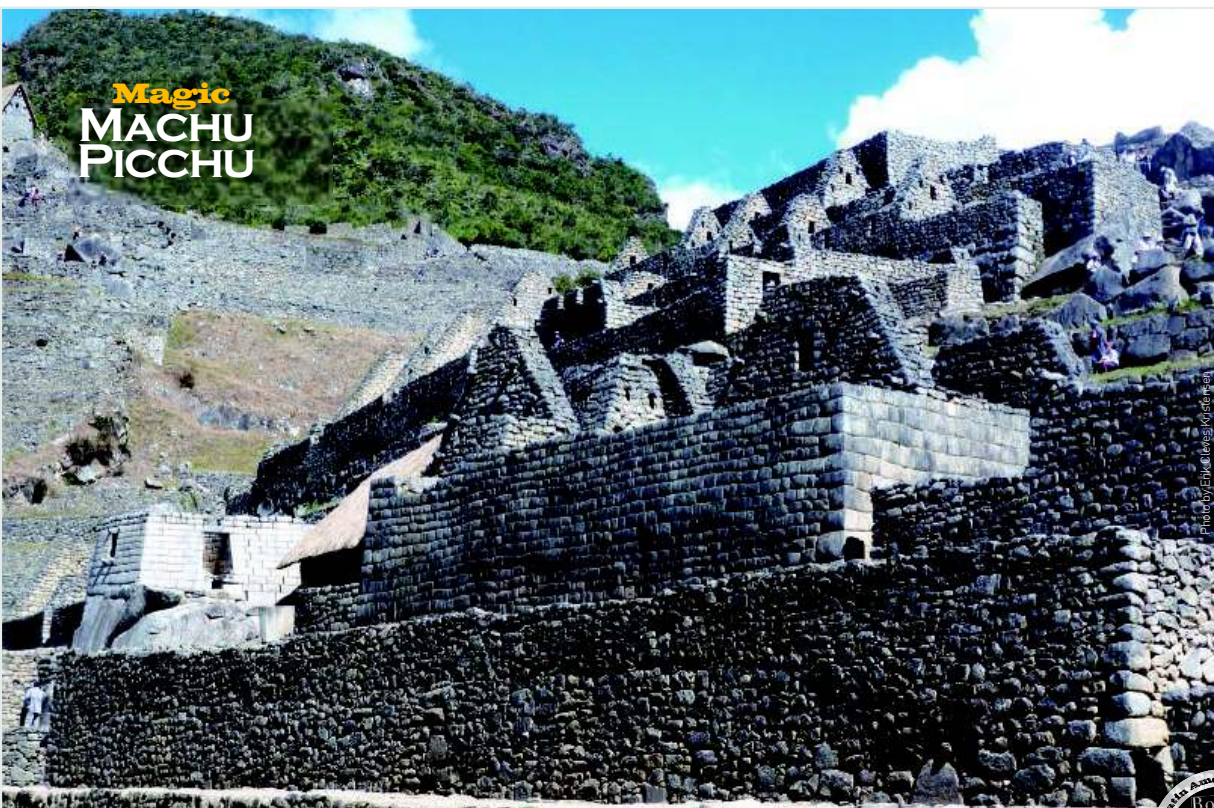


Photo by Elyse Vogel/istockphoto



Photo by David Berkowitz

The Amazon is responsible for about 20% of the world's oxygen



Photo by iStockphoto

Rodeo is the national sport of Chile

As the train chugs past the hills and racing river of the sacred Urubamba Valley leading to Machu Picchu, I can't help but wonder how an entire city could be built on top of a 9,060-foot high mountain. Four hours later I arrive in Aguas Calientes, the closest access point to Machu Picchu and where, I learn you have to take the bus to get to the famous archeological site. I change into my hiking shoes and board a rickety, rusty school bus with no air conditioning and with windows that open only a crack. I grip my seat tightly as we ascend the first of 14 exposed hairpin turns, sure the bus will careen off the mountain.

But my jittery nerves calm down as I stand in awe, gazing at the mysterious ancient metropolis. Stone houses and staircases are everywhere. Two llamas eye me guardedly as I walk toward a ruin and run my palms over the smooth, chiseled surface. **The Incas didn't have tools, they didn't have the wheel, and yet the stones have been cut and placed perfectly.** Smaller stones are used for the terraced agricultural sector, larger rocks for the common houses and massive boulders for the rulers' houses. This is an engineering feat beyond comprehension, carefully planned, including the doors that are wider on the bottom in anticipation of



Photo by Ivan Milmanic

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Photo by Cameron King

Latin America Facts
Cuy, or guinea pig, is a staple food in many Andean regions such as Ecuador.



Photo by Erik Ojeda Krass

earthquakes. One thing is certain: This city was built to last.

I try to imagine what it must have been like for Yale professor Hiram Bingham when he discovered this city, which had been hidden from the outside world for centuries, on July 24, 1911. Four years later, the dense vegetation was finally cleared, revealing 216 stone homes and 3,000 stone steps. This summer marks the 100th anniversary of Bingham's discovery, now the most visited attraction in South America and one of the most enigmatic ancient sites in the world.

I circle the Temple of the Sun, built in such a way that when the sun of the winter solstice enters the central window, it falls directly on the massive ceremonial stone in the center. I wander around the buildings for a few hours when a sign leading to the Intipunta trail, Gate of the Sun, catches my eye. It is one of two hikes within Machu Picchu, along with Huayna Picchu, a four-hour hike to the summit, from which every iconic photograph is taken. The Intipunta hike is much shorter and less steep, part of the Inca trail. I wanted a gentle hike for my first day in the thin air, but this isn't easy. **The altitude turns it into a long breathless slog and when I finally arrive at the summit, my legs feel like Gumby.** I sit on a rock, catch my breath and look out at Machu Picchu below me. I don't know if it is the altitude or the sun god, but suddenly I feel a calming presence, a peacefulness,

which stays with me, all the way back down.

The next morning, I am on the first bus up the switchbacks. **Only 400 people are allowed to climb Huayna Picchu each day, and I don't want to miss the opportunity.** The Huayna Picchu trail is dangerous; at least two people die each year because there are places where one wrong step can mean certain death. But I haven't come all the way to Machu Picchu to miss the best view of the sacred city.

As I sign my name in the logbook, I see that 20 people have already hit the trailhead. I hook up with three intrepid adventurers from California whose pace matches mine. The trail is steep, muddy and, in many places, exposed. At one point, the trail turns to stone and we burrow through a dark cave so narrow I have to take off my daypack. As we continue up the muddy path, we pass two hikers on their way down. "It's not worth it," one says. "It's completely soaked in with fog." We debate

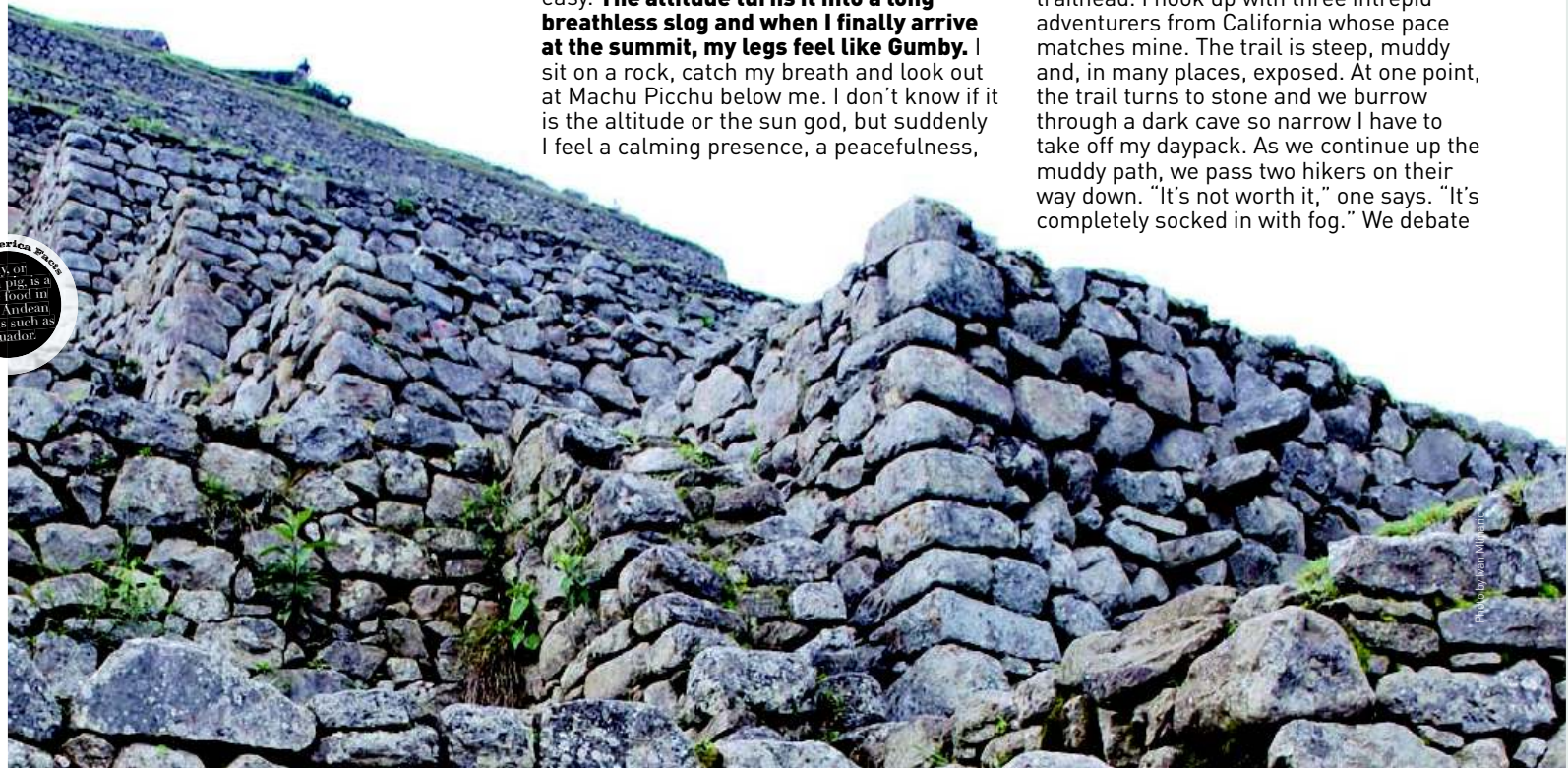



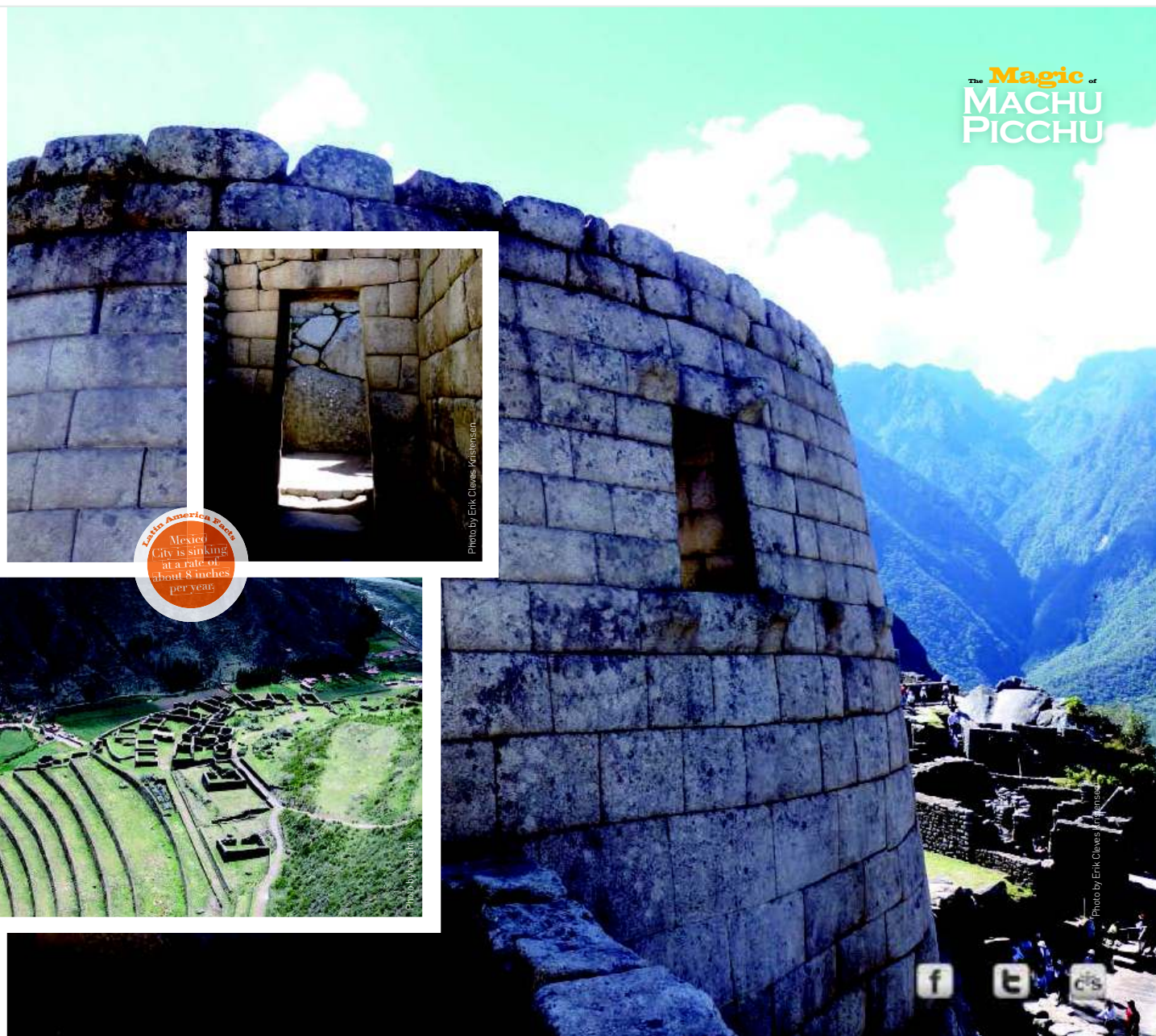
Photo by Ivan Ballant

turning back, but choose to keep going, hoping the fog will lift.

After about 45 minutes, we come to a small hand-written sign with an arrow: Temple of the Moon. The fog shows no signs of letting up, so we decide to explore this detour and begin descending a new trail covered with dead leaves. I can tell that no one has been here in a long time. We continue down as monkeys squeal in the trees above us. Suddenly, I stop dead in my tracks. Just ahead are walls made from perfectly cut boulders, covered in dense shrubbery. Cautiously, we push the brush aside and enter a doorway. Directly in front of us is a massive white stone shaped like a throne. Was this the ruler's house? This must have been exactly what Machu Picchu looked like to Brigham. **We wander through a maze of rooms with stone seating areas and altars. What was this place? Why was it not excavated?**

A tiny patch of blue sky pokes through the fog layer, so we hustle back up the path to rejoin the Huayna Picchu trail. In some particularly steep places we have to climb rickety ladders made of tree branches lashed together. Finally, two hours from the time we'd started out, we arrive exhausted and breathless at the summit. It is much colder up here and I shiver as the wind blows through my sweaty T-shirt. Worse, that patch of blue sky that we'd seen earlier had merely been a sucker cloud. Machu Picchu is now completely socked in with fog. We can't see anything.

Disappointed, we prepare to descend when suddenly the veil of mist begins to lift. I watch, mesmerized. As more and more terraced hills and stone buildings below reveal themselves, I breathe in the sacred air of the greatest mystery of the Inca Empire. 



Latin America Focus
Mexico City is sinking at a rate of about 8 inches per year.