



## LESSER KNOWN SITES

*Off the Beaten Path*

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TOM BILLINGE

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PERU IS HUGEY POPULAR WITH VISITORS from all over the world, and with good reason. The incredible heritage sites surrounding the Sacred Valley of the Incas are world-class tourism destinations. While travellers to the country are well aware of Machu Picchu and the sites around Cuzco and the huacas in Lima, most are in the dark about the other superb ancient places to see in Peru. If we look outside the main tourist haunts, we can find some exceptional sites that, while under the radar for the majority of visitors, are fascinating and spiritually potent. There are scores of wonderful places to see all over Peru, but a handful of these more obscure sites rival any of the major ones favoured by mass tourism.

### KUELAP

Located on a ridge in the Utcubamba Valley in North Peru, Kuelap, a superb Chachapoya settlement is a much under-visited ancient site. Founded in the 6th century AD, the site was occupied by the Chachapoya people until the mid-16th century. The Chachapoya are also known for the purunmachus (sarcophagi) at Carajía. There, seven human-form coffins look out from the cliffside.

Kuelap is a huge site, one of the biggest in the Americas. Inside the defensive wall, built to protect the Chachapoya people from the Wari tribes, are the remains of more than 400 structures. Eventually subjugated by Tupac Inca Yupanqui in about 1475 AD, the walls couldn't hold back the powerful Inca forever.

Among the buildings at Kuelap, El Tintero, an inverted conical platform is a stand out. While its exact function is unknown, the unique structure seems to have been a place to make offerings and was ceremonially significant. Another awe-inspiring feature of the site is the main portal. The tall entrance tapers in an unusual manner and at its narrowest point, only one person can pass. It possibly represents the vulva and symbolic rebirth.

### HUACAS DEL SOL Y DE LA LUNA

Built by the Moche civilisation in several phases between 100 and 450 AD, the Huaca del Sol and the Huaca de la Luna are two huge adobe temples in the arid Moche Valley near Trujillo. The Huaca del Sol, or Temple of the Sun, originally had four layers and was 50 metres tall. The massive edifice was a ceremonial centre that dominated the skyline of Cerro Blanco, capital city of the Moche people.

The Moche people were a coastal Peruvian civilisation that thrived from 100 to 800 AD in northern Peru. The sun worshippers are famed for their advanced ceramics that show vividly realistic portraiture skills. Moche rituals centred on the elite who performed spectacles including human sacrifice and consumption of blood at the huaca sites. They may have consumed some of the flesh of the victims and a key patron deity called Ai Apaec was known as the Decapitator. His name means 'doer' and he was a creation god who required offerings of human heads.

Rituals like these would have taken place at the huacas. The Huaca de la Luna is smaller, yet more intact than the its neighbour, and is ornately decorated and has detailed murals covering large parts of the remains. Ai Apaec features in a number of places on the Temple of the Moon. His fanged head suggests grim sacrificial activities occurred on the huaca several centuries ago.

### CHAN CHAN

Another stunning ancient city site that does not get the attention it deserves, is the superb coastal city of Chan Chan, near Trujillo. It was once the great capital of the Chimú people, who rose from the remnants of the Moche in around 850 AD, occupying their old territory. They expanded their Chimor Empire by conquering the lands of the Sicán people of the Lima area before finally being subjugated by the Inca in about 1470.

Chan Chan, which means “sun sun”, was at one point the largest city in the Americas with an area of 20 square kilometres and a population of up to 60,000 people. Within the city are the remains of ten palatial enclosures, known as *cuidadelas*, alongside humbler residential structures. There are also four ceremonial huacas. Huaca Obispo, Huaca Toledo and Huaca Las Conchas occupy the north and east of the site, while Huaca Olvido is in the centre of the city surrounded by the ten *cuidadelas*.

The *cuidadelas* were residential complexes of the Chimú elite. Their relationship to the huacas in the heart of Chan Chan and their highly ornate nature betray an ideal of the elite being spiritually and economically potent. The complexes also contain *audiencias*, walled courts that contain ancestral burials. These are located near to storage facilities. The ancestral lineage of the elite class held influence over harvests and supplies for each *cuidadela* and, by extension, the Chimú as a whole, as the elites had control over distribution.

## CHOQUEQUIRAO

The 15th century Inca settlement of Choquequirao does not receive many visitors, as it is a two-day hike from Cuzco. The superb mountain site is similar in many ways to Machu Picchu. It was possibly built under orders from the ruler Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui, builder of Machu Picchu. Choquequirao, which means Golden Cradle, was then remodelled by his son, Túpac Inca Yupanqui. The site has architectural features that suggest Túpac used subjugated Chachapoya workers. Choquequirao was one of the last bastions of Inca resistance to the Spaniards. Manco Inca Yupanqui fled there in 1535 after trying to take power back from his European overlords in Cuzco.

The incredible site is built on several levels, with the normal organisational structure that Inca settlements employed. Rich in symbolism, Choquequirao was dedicated to Inti, the sun god, as well as to earth and water divinities. The higher levels of Choquequirao contain the majority of the



CHOQUEQUIRAO, PERU

Photograph by Antonio Torres  
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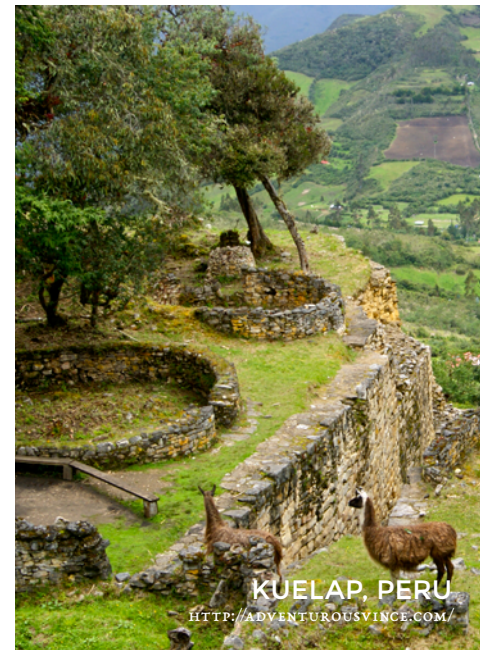
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HUACAS DEL SOL  
 Y DE LA LUNA



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temples, huacas and ceremonial platforms. The lower levels are geared more towards agriculture with irrigated terraces taking up a lot of the space. Here, fabulous stone llamas and other figures are used to decorate the terrace walls. Interestingly, the site features two huacas and multiple water shrines that lie much lower than the other ritual parts of Choquequirao, highlighting the spiritual significance of water and agriculture to the Inca people.

### CHAVÍN DE HUÁNTAR

The ancient site of Chavín de Huántar is one of the oldest in the Americas, possibly occupied from 3000 BC. It was used ceremonially from at least 1200

BC until around 400 BC. When the Chavín people occupied it in around 1000 BC, it became their spiritual centre. Impressive monumental architecture can be found at Chavín de Huántar, testifying to the power that was once contained there.

The Chavín people travelled from all over their territory to come and participate in ritual and cult activities at the site which fell into decline in around 500 BC. The ritual activity originally centred around the sunken circular plaza, as it is bound on three sides by the Old Temple. Pilgrims, under the influence of the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus, were led through the dark labyrinthine passageways of the Old Temple to see the main deity

of the Chavín, the Lanzón. The 4.5-metre-high stone sculpture, named after its lance-like shape, is a fanged deity that represents fertility, dualism, and man's interaction with nature. Also known as the Smiling God, the experience of seeing El Lanzón, an anthropomorphic human-feline, in the narrow tunnels would have been awe-inspiring for the Chavín.

Over time, the site was expanded and a large plaza added along with the New Temple, which was extended from the side of the Old Temple. The New Temple has a relief carving of the Lanzón holding a Strombus and Spondylus shell in each hand, representing the duality of the sexes. Chavín de Huántar does not attract the crowds that other places in Peru do, but it is one of the most spectacular and powerful sites in the country.

## SIPÁN

Located in the Lambayeque Valley, the Moche site of Sipán has a number of burials that are a window into the life of the elite. In 1987, a group of looters found gold in the Huaca Rajada at Sipán, but were subsequently raided by the police. This led to archaeologists excavating the huaca and finding a total of 14 tombs. The first was the main tomb, discovered by the tomb robbers, containing a mummy called El Señor de Sipán. The Lord of Sipán's tomb was filled with gold and silver artefacts. The Lord was wearing a half gold and half

silver peanut necklace representing the male sun god and female moon goddess, as well as the earth in the form of the peanuts. He was buried with an entourage of people and animals too, including warriors with their feet amputated to stop them leaving the tomb.

Other tombs on the site include the Lord's ancestor, known as the Old Lord and also that of a Moche priest. The priest was buried wearing a copper crown with the image of an owl, wings spread, showing him to have been a priest of the moon. The platforms of the huaca date from 300 AD, but in 700 AD pyramid structures were built above them. This reuse of a potent site is common and is echoed in the huaca in other parts of Peru, particularly those in Lima.

While the major sites in Peru are spectacular, the lesser known are supremely rewarding for the more intrepid traveller. The Incas get most of the limelight, but by through these other great places, a visitor can see some of the diverse history of Peru's civilisations. The ancient cultures of Peru are some of the most fascinating, yet enigmatic in the Americas. Rather than simply following the crowds, take the less-well-trodden path and see the spectacular ancient centres that are devoid of the tour groups. Connect with the sites that maintain their aura of primeval power, imprinted on them by centuries of ceremonial use.

