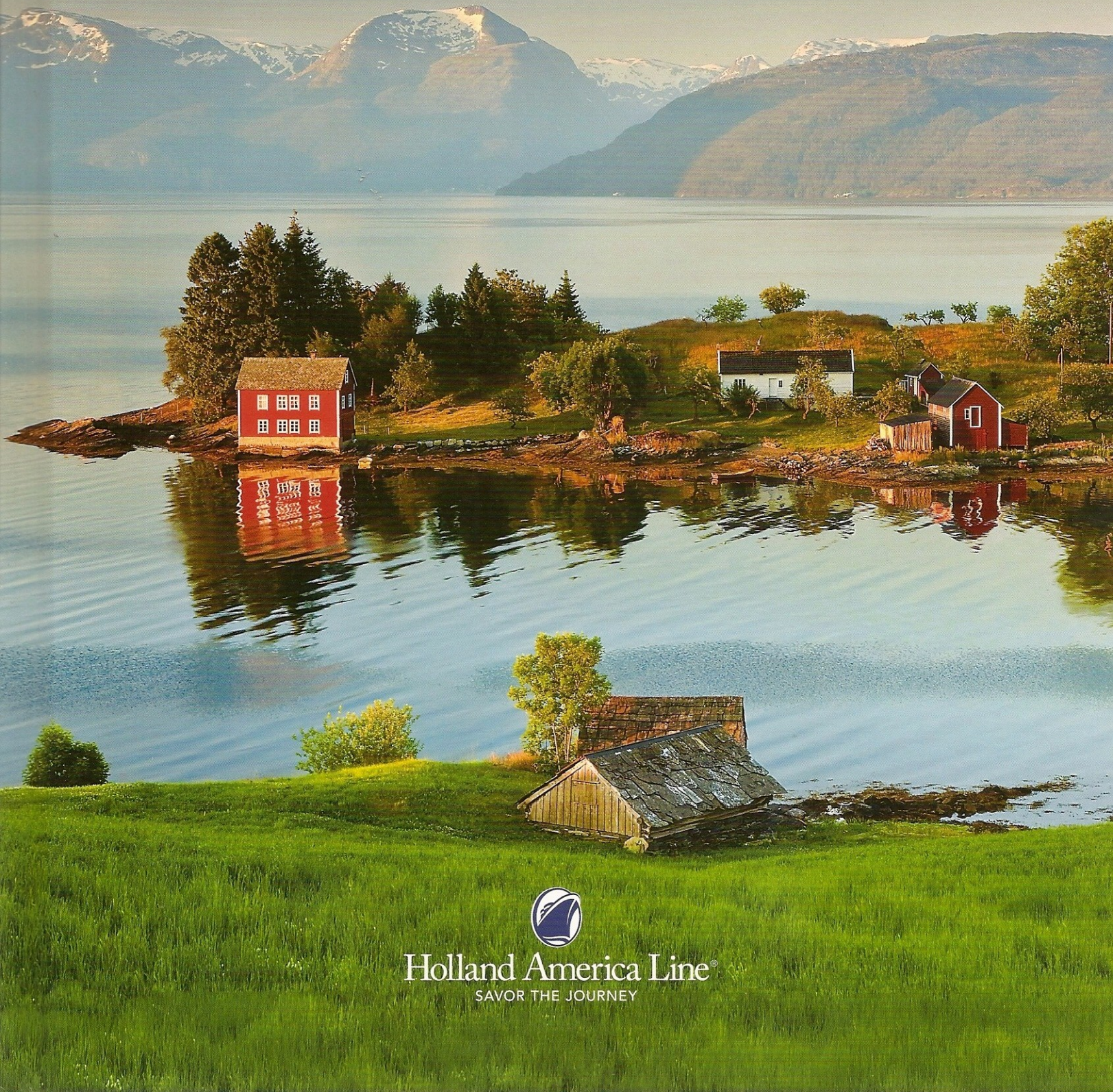


COMPASS

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SAVOR THE JOURNEY





BY RICHARD VARR

CITY OF STONE

*here in the clouds of Machu Picchu,
mountaintop monuments have stood
unchanged for centuries.*

It's 8 a.m., and the so-called Lost City in the Clouds is living up to its name.

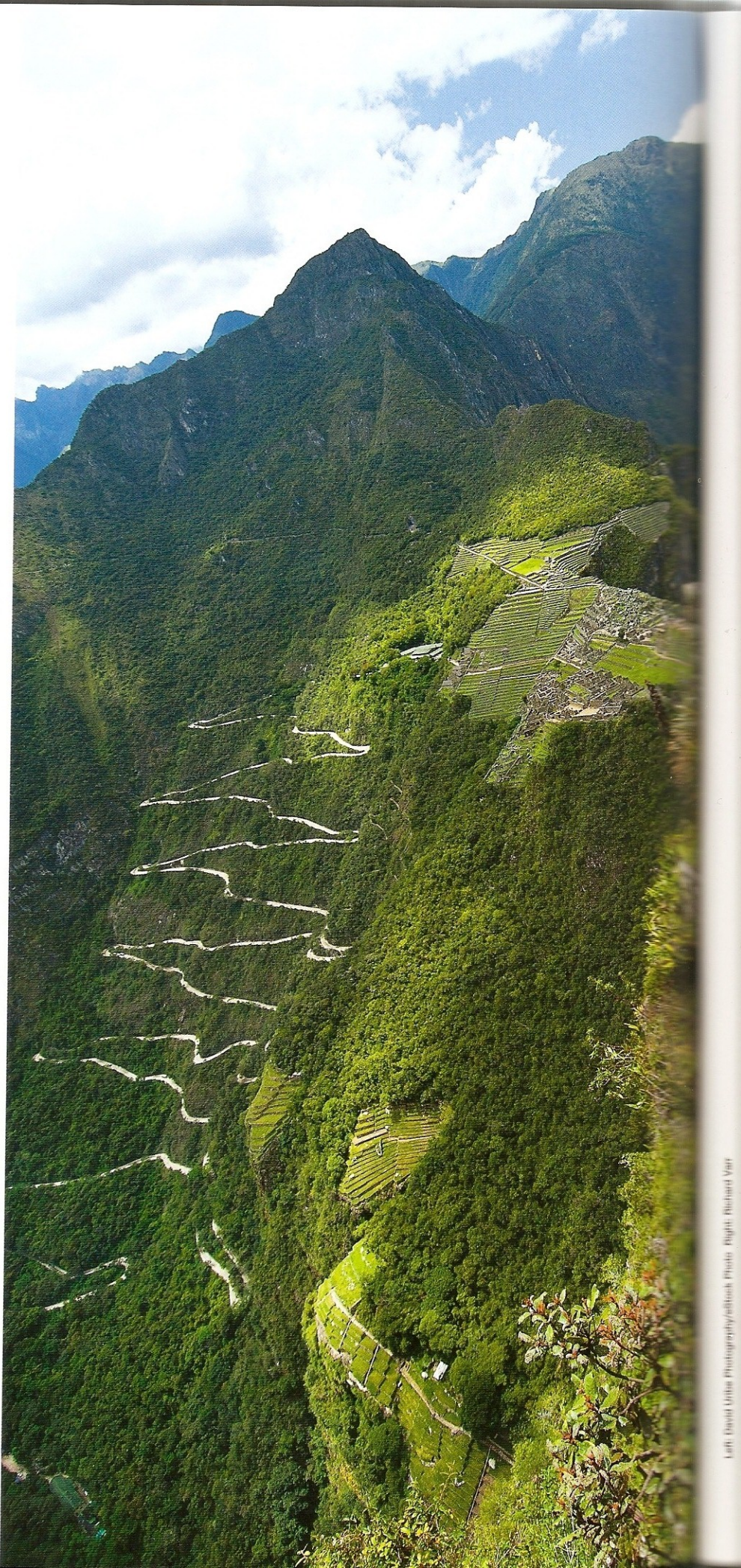
Raindrops splatter on my poncho as I ascend the steep mountainside, puffing with every step. The air is thin; the fog thick. The slicked stone stairwell twists upwards, with another set of jagged steps at every turn. I know the view of a lifetime is ahead of me, but will I ever see it through the haze?

As I reach an overlook, it seems Illapa, the Incan rain god, shows us mercy. The soaking downpour quickly diminishes into drizzle, and the fog begins to melt away. Breaks in the haze reveal row after row of Machu Picchu's roofless stone dwellings that have survived for more than five and a half centuries. It's a breathtaking view, now framed by wispy cloud bands drifting around the needle-like Huayna Picchu and baby Una Picchu mountains in the background — iconic landmarks so often seen in timeless photographs of the stone city.

As the sun finally peeks through, I'm so exhilarated that I forget we're nearly 8,000 feet high in the Peruvian Andes, the dizzying altitude where the Incas built one of the most important citadels of their empire. Spanish conquistadors never found Machu Picchu. The historic settlement was lost to the world until 1911, when American explorer Hiram Bingham followed up on a tip from a local farmer of hidden ruins in the clouds.

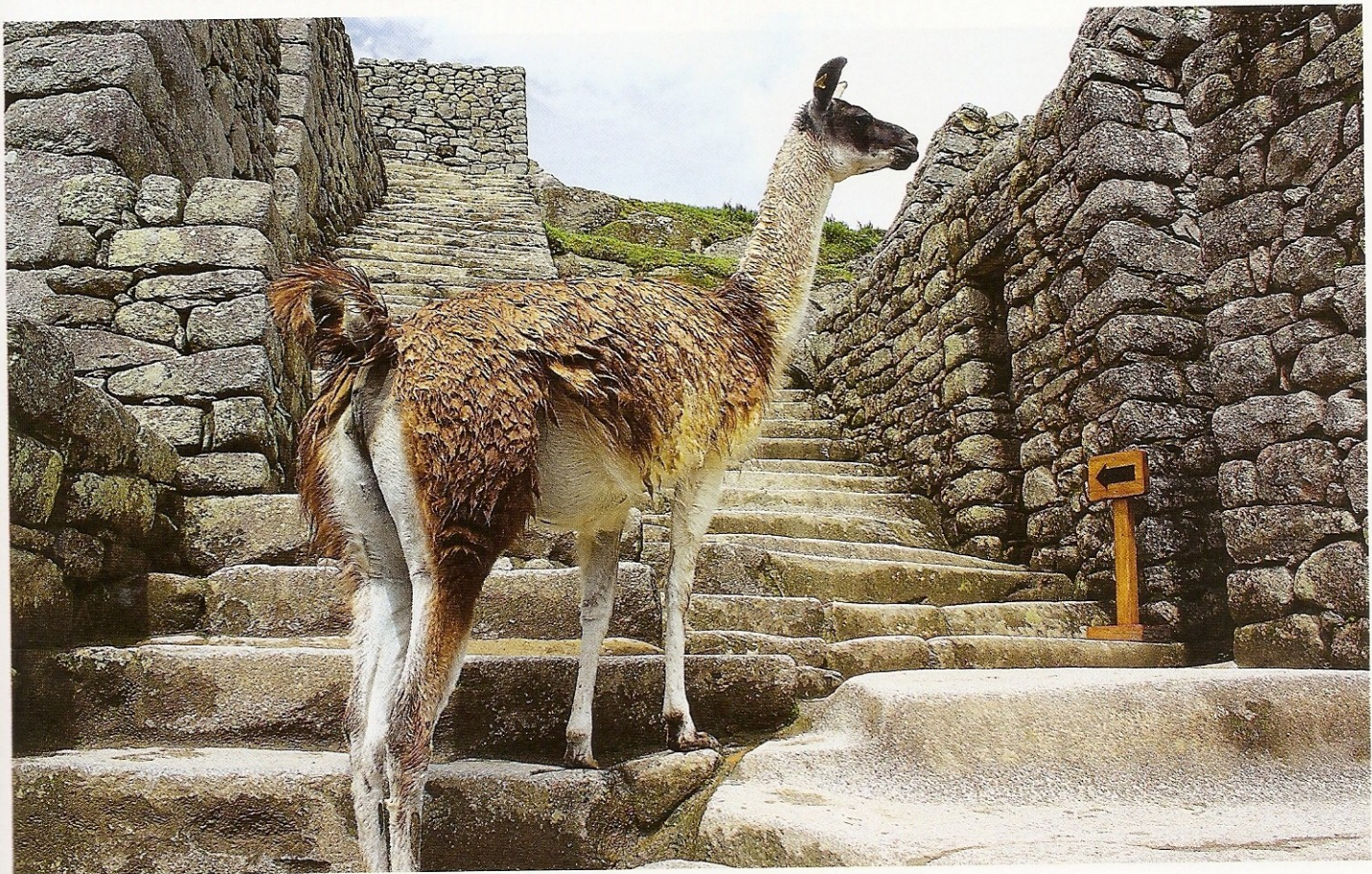
"The royalty chose this place to be close to the heavens so they could send offerings to the gods," our tour guide says as we begin our trek along steep steps overlooking plunging mountainsides. "Imagine an emperor lived in these spaces and a queen passed through here. We're walking through where the most important people passed through in Incan times."

For such eminent inhabitants, Incan architects constructed sturdy walls in and around natural rocky outcrops, breaking down boulders along their natural fractures with rock hammers and bronze chisels. Fragments were then carved and polished into the building blocks of the Inca city. "They moved the rocks with stone rollers and ropes,"





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Left: David White Photography/istock Photo Right: Richard Varr



Expert masons often sliced stone blocks to fit flawlessly together without mortar.



explains our guide. “The people worked hard for the emperor because it was an honor for them. And you can see their faith moved mountains — literally — to construct this city in front of us.”

We walk along narrow passageways, in between stone huts once used as stables for llamas and storehouses for Andean corn harvests. Catching my eye below is the distinctive rounded tower of the Temple of the Sun, Machu Picchu’s only curved structure. At the base of the temple, a giant rock slab slants over “The Royal Tomb,” a natural cave decorated with carved Inca symbols. Bingham believed this was the tomb of the ninth Inca emperor, Pachacútec.

Our attention turns to the tower’s Window for the Solstices, which precisely aligns with the sunrise on the longest and shortest days of the year, and our guide tells us the temple was likely an astronomical observatory. “A rock inside the temple was used to project shadows in a puma shape marking the beginning of the winter solstice.”

Winter solstice’s sunrise also illuminates the Temple of the Three Windows — a three-walled structure with trapezoid-shaped openings outlined by huge stone blocks. The view from here overlooks Machu Picchu’s grassy Main Plaza, while the temple’s open end faces the smaller Sacred Plaza, centered on an unusual kite-shaped rock. “This carved and polished rock looks like a diamond and points to where ancient astronomers saw the Southern Cross constellation,” our guide says. “It’s believed they copied the shape because the Southern Cross looks like a diamond, too.”

Machu Picchu’s most famous rock, however, sits atop the stepped Intihuatana Pyramid just a short hike up from the Sacred Plaza. Carved from a natural formation, this rock rests on a stubby pillar. It’s believed to have been used as a sundial marking the hours of the day and the passing of the solstices and equinoxes.

The Incas’ skill at merging natural stone with their architecture can be seen in the Temple of the Condor, named for two mineral-streaked, rocky slabs angled like mighty wings in flight. A carved rock on the ground depicts an Andean condor’s head and pointed beak. The Incas worshipped the condor, and the temple and surrounding stone structures housed mummy-filled compartments thought to be sites of ceremonial llama sacrifices.

Expert masons often sliced stone blocks to fit flawlessly together without mortar. Examples include rectangular blocks supporting the lower walls of the Temple of the Sun and Royal Palace, the multiroom complex where the emperor’s court resided. Stone blocks are perfectly angled with no spaces.

Before hopping on a bus to head down the zigzagging road to Aguas Calientes, the town at the foot of Machu Picchu Mountain, I walk the stone paths for the last time and recall what our guide told me just a few moments earlier. “It’s so special to me here because I’m from Cuzco, the most important Inca city,” he says. “I can feel the power of the people who moved huge rocks, and I imagine it was very special for them as it is for us today.”

“My ancestors lived in this breathtaking place, and it’s my pleasure to share it with you.”

