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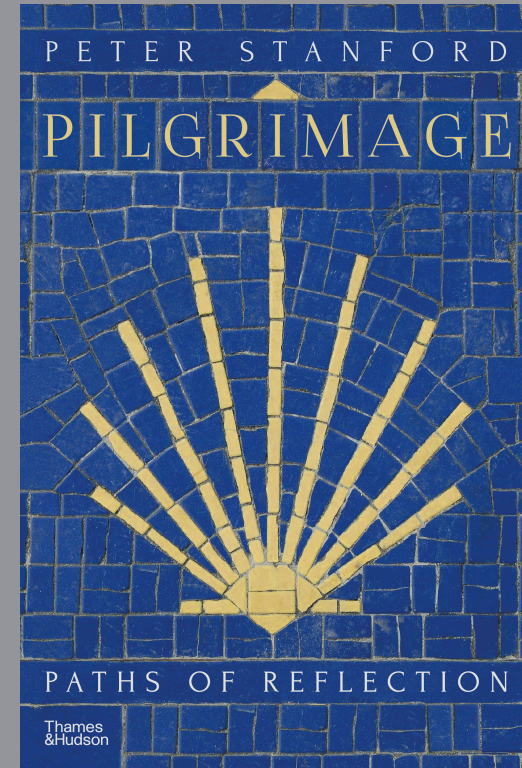
# Pilgrimage

## Paths of Reflection

Peter Stanford

A thought-provoking reflection on pilgrimage past and present,  
and a compelling exploration of its relevance today

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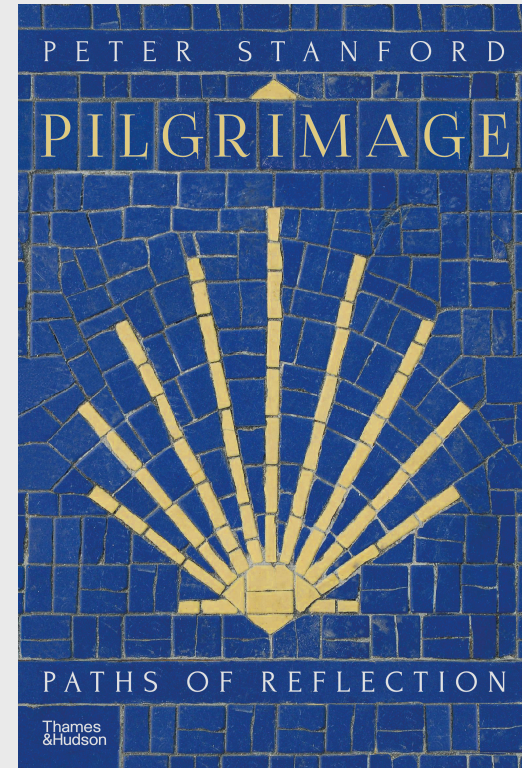
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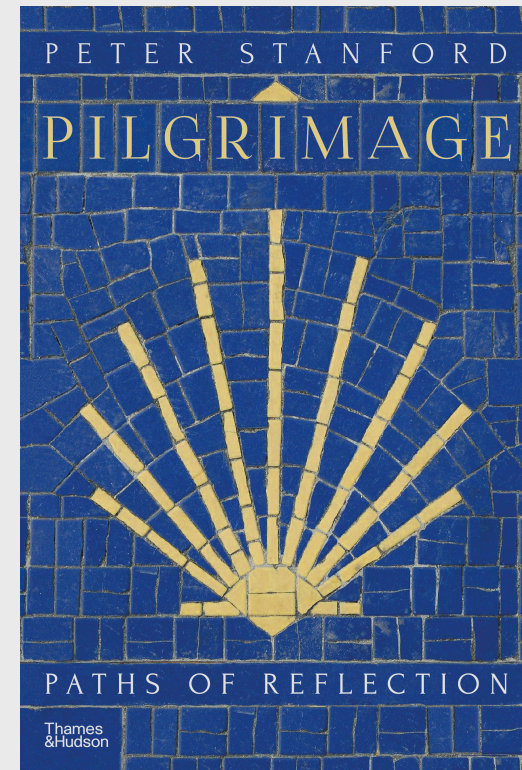
## Praise for *Pilgrimage*

'There is no better navigator through the space in which art, culture and spirituality meet than Peter Stanford'  
*Independent on Sunday*



# Key Sales Points

- Peter Stanford is a brilliant journalist and writer of popular history – the bestselling author of *Angels: A Visible and Invisible History* and *The Devil: A Biography*.
- Combines a personal story with the wider social and political contexts of the reasons people have had for undertaking pilgrimages: the author has walked along many of these pilgrimage routes himself and brings his first-hand experience into his vivid narration.
- Illustrated with the powerful iconography of pilgrimage: images of illuminated manuscripts, antique maps and sacred artifacts.



*To Kit – the best of pilgrimage companions*

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## CONTENTS

Introduction The New Geography of Spiritual Power	7
1 Santiago de Compostela: The Camino	18
2 Jerusalem: The Promised Land	38
3 Rome: Seeing is Believing	61
4 Mecca: A World Apart	77
5 Lalibela: Unearthing a Mystery	95
6 Lourdes, Medjugorje and the Marian Shrines: Mary and the Miracles	111
7 The North Wales Pilgrim's Way: Celtic Revival	129
8 Kumbh Mela: The World's Largest Pilgrimage	142
9 The Buddha Trail: The Peripatetic Pilgrim	156
10 Shikoku: 88 Temples in the Footsteps of the Great Master	173
11 North America: Optimistic Hiking	187
12 Machu Picchu: Power Places	204
Epilogue To Arrive Where We Started	218
NOTES	225
FURTHER READING	229
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	231
PICTURE CREDITS	232
INDEX	233

## CHAPTER 1

SANTIAGO DE  
COMPOSTELA:  
THE CAMINO

*'The Camino isn't a speed competition or a race/Rather it's a pathway of brotherhood and universality.'*

PILGRIM INSCRIPTION IN TRIACASTELA CHURCH ON THE CAMINO<sup>1</sup>

'I'm taking a really long walk.' That is how Martin Sheen's character, bluff eye-doctor Tom Avery, explains away his out-of-the-blue decision to follow the ancient Camino from the French Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain in the popular 2010 film, *The Way*. His real reason, though, lies in the trauma of the death of his only son while himself undertaking the Camino. And then there are Tom's three fellow travellers, all of whom he meets on the pilgrim route. This unlikely trio is trying to get away from troubles in their own lives, but simultaneously hoping that the experience will help them find new ways of coping when they return: one a writer who can no longer write; another a Dutchman keen to lose weight to rescue his relationship; and the third a fragile free spirit nowhere near as resourceful as she appears.

It takes each of them the length of the 800-kilometre section of the trail they walk to come to understand the others and themselves, in part through the away-from-the-real-world atmosphere on the Camino and constant exposure to others on parallel searches, but also through the lightly worn spiritual resonances that are part and parcel of this pilgrimage.

The commercial success of the film owed much to its release coinciding with annual numbers of *peregrinos* on the Camino that year reaching a record modern-day high of 300,000. At the time, it felt like a milestone. Such had been the rapid revival of interest in this medieval pilgrim route that it was being talked about as one of the great European cultural events of the last years of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first.

The early decades of the twentieth century had witnessed a steep decline in Santiago's fortunes, mirroring those of the predominantly farming-and-fishing Galicia region in general that saw over a million people leave for a better life in the Americas. After his victory in Spain's civil war of the 1930s, the dictator General Francisco Franco – himself a native of Galicia – tried to breathe new life into the Route of Saint James, as the Camino is often known in more overtly religious circles. One motive was boosting the local economy, but part too linked in with a wider project of his to harness Spanish nationalism and a conservative variety of Catholicism to the task of sustaining his own fascist ideology and hence his stranglehold on power. With Franco's death in 1975, and the return to democracy and pluralism in Spain, that driver, however, evaporated, and Santiago was once more in the doldrums.

By 1986, the year that post-Franco Spain signalled a new political dawn by joining the European Union, the Pilgrims' Bureau in Santiago – the place that issues the certificates, still written in Latin

and known as '*compostelas*', to everyone who has completed more than 100 kilometres of the route – handed out just 1,800 over the entire course of a year. New EU investment, however, was targeted at modernizing tourism infrastructure all the way along the route – secured as much by French efforts to bolster their end of the trail that they know as the *Camino Frances* or 'French Way' as by Spanish enthusiasm. As a result, by the late 1980s, numbers on the Camino had been showing a marked rise, with the new generation of *peregrinos* an intriguing mix. That is what *The Way* captured so well. Some may have had some sort of claim to the traditional prerequisite of being Catholic (the actor, Martin Sheen, is himself a devout Catholic), albeit that many now regarded the Church of their upbringing as benignly irrelevant, or worse. Many more had no formal connection at all to any form of organized religion. So what was attracting them?

Part of the renaissance was that walkers – and the growing number who covered most of the route by bike – were drawn by the 1,000-year history of the Camino. This was also a time when television audiences were flocking to documentaries by a new breed of walking/talking history dons with a knack for bringing the past to life. The walk across northern Spain, then, became an activity holiday which included the chance to experience medieval history first-hand. But the revival was also fed by deeper anxieties. 'When pilgrims begin to walk,' suggests the writer Nancy Louise Frey of her observations on the Camino, 'several things start to happen to their perceptions of the world, which continue over the course of the journey: they develop a changing sense of time, a heightening of the senses, and a new awareness of their bodies and the landscape ... A young German man expressed it this way: "In the experience of walking, each step is a thought. You can't escape yourself."<sup>2</sup>

Once they start thinking in such terms while on a track with a long history of being a place 'where prayer has been valid', as T. S. Eliot memorably put it in *Little Gidding* (inspired by his 1936 pilgrimage to what had once been a high-minded seventeenth-century religious community), the walkers couldn't so easily disentangle the spiritual from the history and health elements, the pleasure of companionship with strangers in a shared endeavour, and the spectacular landscape.

There followed many published accounts of this 'new era' on the Camino that chronicle how its original religious purpose somehow resonated with the new generation of walkers, and how they then shaped that experience into 57 varieties of bespoke spirituality. In 1987, *O Diário de um Mago* (entitled *The Pilgrimage* in English), a novel by the global bestselling Brazilian esoteric writer Paulo Coelho, set the ball rolling. Based on his time on the Camino, he successfully gave the whole undertaking a makeover for his New Age-inclined audience.

This broadening impetus further accelerated in 1993 – the date chosen as the 1,000th anniversary of the rediscovery of the tomb of Saint James (Sant'iago in Spanish, hence the city's name) – when the route was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As a result, its hostels and footpaths were given a major overhaul, with distinctive yellow signage branded with the ancient pilgrims' symbol, the scallop shell. Annual numbers of walkers continued to climb, as did the quantity of popular accounts that contributed to widening its appeal. In her 2000 memoir, *The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit*, the Oscar-winning American actress and New Age guru Shirley MacLaine framed her time in Spain not as a religious pilgrimage but 'a mythological and imaginative experience'. It was, she wrote, essentially a 'walking meditation', along what she said were the ley lines that the route followed, which communicated the spiritual

## PILGRIMAGE

Prophet's burial place in Medina – and gives the city of Jerusalem such significance for Muslim pilgrims. A prayer in the Al-Aqsa is said to be worth 500 prayers in any other mosque than Mecca and Medina. In Islamic tradition, so important is this site that Muhammad led prayers facing towards Jerusalem in the period straight after his first revelation, until Allah directed him to turn instead towards the Ka'bah in Mecca – symbolically breaking the link with Judeo-Christianity, which had been present in Arabia, and establishing Islam as a religion in its own right.

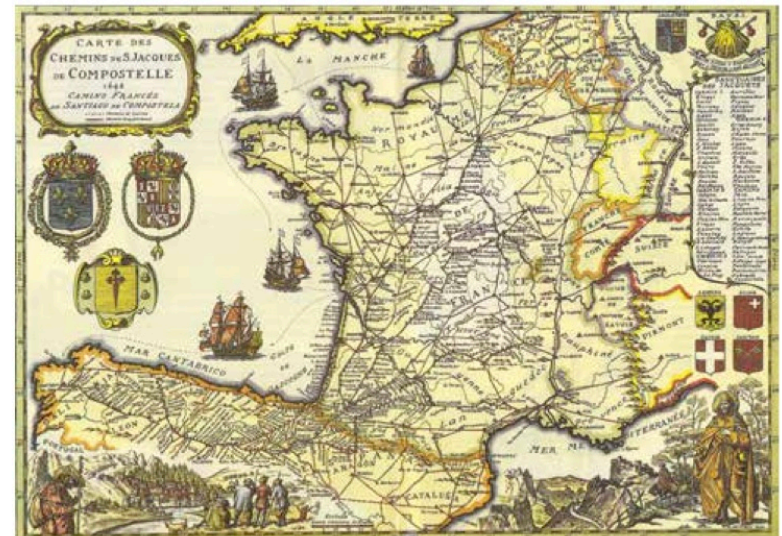
Despite their separate identities, then, the juxtaposition of major Jewish and Muslim shrines in Jerusalem, with a third, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at such close quarters through the cramped streets of the Old City, makes the place more than an irresistible pilgrimage destination. It has repeatedly been a flashpoint in the febrile political, cultural and religious conflict for control of the city that stretches from those Babylonian invaders in the sixth century BCE through the various (some of them successful) attempts by Christian Crusaders in the Middle Ages to install themselves as its rulers, right up to the Israeli-Palestinian/Jewish-Muslim stand-off of today. Past and present tensions and bloodshed merge to make a place of pilgrimage into a place of danger – a combination that some medieval Christian pilgrims, believing themselves under God's protection as they travelled thousands of kilometres there on foot through inhospitable terrain, found irresistible.



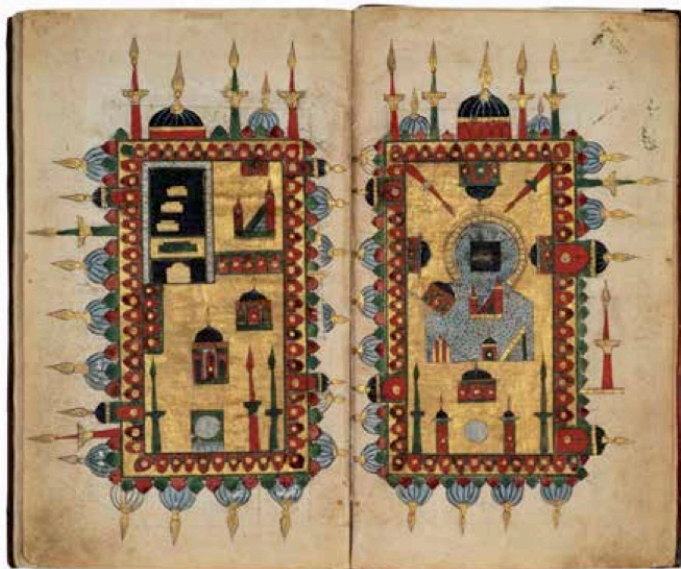
Empress Helena proved to be a trendsetter, inspiring others to follow in her footsteps and make the pilgrimage from Europe to Jerusalem. Among them, in the 680s, was a French monk, Arculf. On his return journey, his ship was blown off course and he washed



1 The body of Saint James being taken to Spain, painted by the Master of Raigern, c. 1425



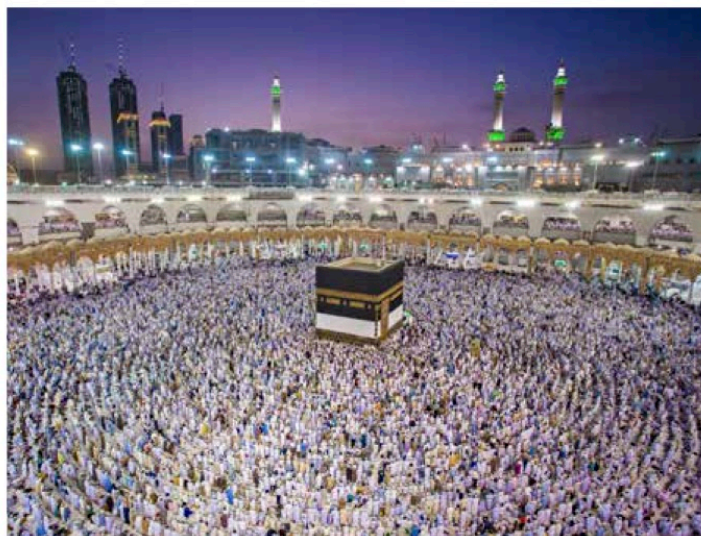
2 A map by Daniel Derveaux showing the Camino routes to Santiago, 1648



9 The Prophet's tomb in Medina (left) and the Ka'bah in Mecca (right), from a Collection of Prayers, Morocco, 16th century



11 The rock-cut church of Bet Giyorgis (House of Saint George), Lalibela, Ethiopia



10 Muslim pilgrims doing tawaf around the Ka'bah in Mecca during hajj.



12 Marija Pavlovic (left), one of the original visionaries, prays in Saint James's Church, Medjugorje, 15 August 1987



## CHAPTER EIGHT

KUMBH MELA: THE  
WORLD'S LARGEST  
PILGRIMAGE

*'It is difficult, if not impossible, to say to what extent  
this kind of faith uplifts the soul.'*

MAHATMA GANDHI, ATTENDING KUMBH MELA IN 1915

In the *Mahabharata*, one of the seminal texts of Hinduism – with 100,000 couplets, sometimes referred to as the longest poem ever written – the story is told of Yudhishtira, a handsome, fair-skinned, lotus-eyed prince, born thanks to divine intervention after his mother, Queen Kunti, could not bear her husband, King Pandu, an heir. It is a moral tale about the human cost of jealousy and rivalry, in this case between Yudhishtira's clan, the Pandavas, and their royal cousins the Kauravas over control the kingdom of Kuru, the dominant political power in northern India around 1000 BCE.

Though he emerges victorious in the ensuing bloody struggle, Yudhishtira – described as a strong but humble man – is tormented by his deeds on the battlefield, especially the memory of his kin that he has slain. He seeks the counsel of two wise sages

on how to make atonement. They send him on a pilgrimage. In the Sanskrit original of the *Mahabharata*, which covers a period from roughly the eleventh century BCE to the fourth CE, the word used for pilgrimage is *tirtha*, meaning a crossing, a ford or a bridge over a river. And it is to rivers – sacred in the Vedas, these holy texts that are the foundation stones of Hinduism – that Yudhishtira travels so as to make repentance for his sins and seek spiritual cleansing.

Accompanied on the route by a faithful dog, he reaches the end of his pilgrimage at the gate of heaven in the Himalayas (mountains are also regarded as sacred by Hindus). At this point, his four-legged friend turns out to be the god who is his birth father. Through divine intervention, Yudhishtira is reunited with his dead cousins, his self-abasement during his pilgrimage proving sufficient to bring them all back to the right moral path after the diversion of their earthly madness. It is the link between rivers and pilgrimage, though, that is most significant to our story.

Principal among the rivers that Yudhishtira visits on his *tirtha* is the Ganges (or Ganga), today regarded as a goddess in its own right by 1.1 billion Hindus (15 per cent of the world's population). He comes to its banks at Prayag, meaning 'place of sacrifice'. Later known as Allahabad and more recently as Prayagraj, it is today a city of over one million inhabitants in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. But, for Hindus, it is first and foremost a sacred place, mentioned in another ancient canonical text, the Rig Veda, as where Brahma, the creator god, performed the very first *yajna* – or sacrifice.

Prayag is where the Ganges meets the Yaruma as well as the mystical, invisible Sarasvati river, their confluence referred to as the *Triveni Sangam*. It is one of the four sites which, in a twelve-year cycle, host Kumbh Mela, the world's largest gathering of pilgrims by some distance, attracting 120 million in 2019. So huge was the crowd

## CHAPTER NINE

# THE BUDDHA TRAIL: THE PERIPATETIC PILGRIM



*'It is in Bodh Gaya that the traveller will find something  
to equal the object of his pilgrimage.'*

JEET THAYIL, AWARD-WINNING INDIAN POET AND NOVELIST<sup>1</sup>

Each morning, at dawn, before pilgrims arrive in their coaches, a rag-tag army of local children are busy under the sprawling branches of the giant, banyan tree at Bodh Gaya. Known to the world's 550 million Buddhists as the Bodhi Tree, it is said to be the place where the Buddha first achieved enlightenment 2,500 years ago. In his subsequent writings, he directed his followers to come here to find inspiration in their lives, but these local youngsters' motives are more earthy. Bihar, the state in which Bodh Gaya is located, is one of India's poorest. They are scrambling on the ground to gather any leaves that have fallen overnight, which can then be sold to the visitors who come to seek serenity in the Buddha's footsteps.

During opening hours, the tree is perpetually encircled by three impenetrable concentric rings. Working outwards, first there is

the tall brick wall that stops too-eager hands from clawing away at bits of its trunk. Next come the security guards who prevent the more determined pilgrims from snapping off twigs that will be more relic than souvenir when they get it back home. And finally, there is the crowd of visitors who gather round as part of immersing themselves in the whole complex at Bodh Gaya. They will have stepped inside the elaborately carved, pyramidal sixth-century CE, colossus of the Mahabodhi Temple, and been awe-struck in front of the much more recent (1989) 25-metre tall statue of the 'Great Buddha'. Above all, though, they will want to stand in the shadow of a tree that is the centrepiece of the holiest site in world Buddhism.

At this early hour, with the sky still a lemony pink, such obstacles have yet to appear. So the children have free rein to pick up and bag any leaves they can find. Clear plastic envelopes, containing a single leaf from what is arguably the most famous tree in the world command quite a premium as licit relics among the estimated two million pilgrims who come here each year. The foreigners are reputedly the most susceptible, many of them Buddhists from Southeast Asian countries on a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage on the 'Buddha Trail'. It consists, depending on the length of their itinerary, of a circuit of four major sites (Bodh Gaya being the principal among them), plus – for those with more time and resources – four minor ones. Among overseas visitors coming to India each year, an estimated 7 per cent arrive on such Buddhist pilgrimages.

Quite what the Buddha himself would make of it all is hard to decide. Throughout his life, he pointedly and repeatedly shrugged off any cult of personality. It was not, he stressed to his *bhikkhus* (disciples, now used to mean monks and nuns), all about him, where he went, or the events of his life, but rather his teachings about *dhamma*, 'right life', which he described as a path of great

## CHAPTER 12

MACHU PICCHU:  
POWER PLACES

*'In the nineteenth century, it was London, Paris, Rome, and Greece. Today it's a global buffet: a safari in Africa, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, Machu Picchu, and the Carnival, in Brazil.'*

PAUL THEROUX<sup>1</sup>

'We rounded the promontory and were confronted by an unexpected sight,' writes the Yale University historian and swashbuckling explorer Hiram Bingham of the moment, on the morning of 24 July 1911, when he followed a local guide, 11-year-old Pablito Alvarez, through a rainforest, up a mountain and stumbled into the 'lost' Inca citadel that he named Machu Picchu after the cloud-fringed crag in whose shadow it stood. Before his eyes, he recalled, was spread out 'a great flight of beautifully constructed stone-faced terraces, perhaps a hundred of them, each hundreds of feet long and ten feet high [and] the walls of ruined houses built of the finest quality Inca stone work... partly covered with trees and moss, the growth of centuries... The sight held me spellbound... It seemed like an unbelievable dream. What could this place be?'<sup>2</sup>

What was laid out before him in such an unlikely location was sufficient to make his head spin, though the high altitude, 2,500 metres up in the Peruvian Andes, where the air is thin, may have played a part. The same sensation is now experienced every day by the 5,000 visitors who hike up in the high season between May and August to Machu Picchu (their number capped to prevent further damage to what is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Yet their trailblazer, Professor Bingham, his publicity picture in wide-brimmed hat, neckerchief and khaki 'jungle' clothes said to have been the inspiration for Hollywood's favourite adventurer, Indiana Jones, may have allowed a note of hyperbole to creep into his breathless account. For this was, it turned out decades later, not the lost Inca city of Vilcabamba, the final stronghold of the last emperor, Mancho Inca, for which Bingham had been searching. That was subsequently unearthed in 1964 on a site he had visited prior to Machu Picchu, but dismissed.

And neither had Machu Picchu – 'old peak' in the local Quechua language of the Andean highlands – ever really been lost. Though long deserted, it had certainly remained hidden from the Spanish conquistadors who came in the sixteenth century (there are no accounts of anything resembling Machu Picchu in any of the much-studied chronicles of the Spanish invasion and occupation). Locals, however, always knew it was up there, invisible from below in its bird's nest perch on a narrow saddle of land between two peaks and protected from below by the Urubamba River that coils round its base like a snake. They are thought to have taken other adventurers up there in the late nineteenth century, but these guests lacked Bingham's knack for turning his discovery into international headlines via a spread in *National Geographic Magazine*. When young Pablito led Bingham up there, some of the local farmers were even using parts of the original, intricate,