

Dreaming about Peru and the Inca civilisation since he was a boy, former Cairns businessman Simon Corcoran's passion for a Peruvian-specialised tour company is fast becoming a reality. KYLIE REGHENZANI met the man behind Kutimunki Peru Tours

# Peruvian dream

**E**ight suitcases, \$1000 and a one-way ticket to Peru was not how Simon Corcoran imagined leaving Sydney in 2006.

With his wife and five-year-old daughter by his side, he was bound for South America to start a lifelong dream of establishing a specialised Peruvian tour company.

But there was one problem.

The airline, LAN Chile, had told Simon he had to pay \$1500 in excess baggage, money he did not have.

"All our worldly possessions were in those bags," Simon says.

"But we didn't win the battle with LAN so we went back to our hotel and got the housemaids to take some of the stuff and repack it.

"We got on the plane with six bags."

Simon, now 42, grew up in Adelaide before living at Kewarra Beach and left home at 18, dabbling in various hospitality jobs at Port Douglas and the Daintree and always dreamed of visiting Peru to pursue his childhood fascination with the Inca civilisation.

It wasn't until his study break during his Bachelor of Social Science degree at James Cook University in 1998 that he took the plunge and travelled to Peru.

Simon arrived at Lima International Airport and for three weeks he toured with a well-known global company, falling in love with more than the country's rich culture.

"I had lost a bag and was three hours late," he says.

"I couldn't speak the language, it was 2am in the pouring rain and a woman named Claudia was there to pick me up."

Twelve years later and a stint back in Australia, he is living with his family in Urubamba Valley, known as the Sacred Valley of the Incas.

But back in 1998, it was his introduction to the national drink, pisco sour, that was most memorable.

"I was a naive Australian and got lost in the crowds and at 4pm I decided to phone Claudia for help," Simon says.

"She was having heart attacks as I had found myself in a dangerous market, but she guided me out on the phone."

In the meantime, Claudia managed to track down Simon's lost bag and being a "good Aussie bloke", Simon wanted to buy her a drink.

"From that moment, we hit it off and I didn't want to leave Peru," he says.

But at the end of his holiday, that's exactly what he had to do.

Simon reluctantly took his flight back to Australia and the couple emailed each other for four months.

"I managed to organise a visa for Claudia after a \$5000 bond to get her into the country and she stayed four months in Cairns with me, but after her time was up, the government kicked her out," he says.

And that was when Simon quit university and worked hard in hospitality to fund his return to Peru in 1999, where he lived with Claudia.

"She was brought up in a very good



**Welcome to Peru:** Former Cairns businessman Simon Corcoran, his wife Claudia and their daughter Bianca from Kutimunki Peru Tours, which features treks to Machu Picchu (main), a historic Inca site above Urubamba Valley in Cuzco, and Ollantaytambo (below), a town and Inca archaeological site northwest of Cuzco.

Pictures: KYLIE REGHENZANI



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Spanish Catholic family," he says.

"Her dad told me there was to be no creeping around at night and we had to sleep in separate beds.

"And he checked too!

"I picked up every bit of Spanish I could and, before I knew it, I was speaking fluently."

After marrying that same year, the couple taught English to school children but his dream of having his own tour company was still etched in his mind.

In 2007, Simon was contacted by an old school friend in Lima asking him to manage a new olive farm export venture in southern Peru.

"I accepted on the grounds that there would still be time allowed for us to pursue our dream of setting up our tour company, to be called Kutimunki," Simon says.

He accepted and went to southern Peru to meet the principal investor while Claudia prepared for a move from Arequipa to their new home at Ica.

"For one year, I was involved in the implementation of systems in compliance with Peruvian employment, construction and operational laws whilst reporting to investors in Australia," he says.

"Millions of dollars in investment passed through my hands as the olive project began to take shape in the sandy deserts of Ica."

Unfortunately, there was no time for Kutimunki and the Corcoran's dream.

"We took the decision to take a week off and travel to the Sacred Valley with the attitude that if we found a place to stay and a school for our daughter, Bianca, Kutimunki was meant to be," Simon says.

"Within two days, we found what we were looking for.

"The olive farm investors were confused by our decision to leave all the money, house, cars and materialism to pursue our dream in the mountains for what they described as a waste of time as we

would never succeed."

Kutimunki Peru Tours was founded in 2007.

Derived from the ancient Quechua language of the Andes, Kutimunki means "you'll be back", a notion which Simon strives to deliver to travellers.

"What I love about Peru is that you can open a door and you'd never know what was on the other side," he says.

"Peru is very diverse. Here in the valley, the people are very different in the way they wear their tall hats and the way they make their chicha (Peru's indigenous drink)."

In 2009, Claudia's mother lent Simon money to travel to Australia where he presented Kutimunki Peru Tours at trade fairs.

"I knocked on doors for five weeks to get this new product known," he says.

"The bookings started rolling in – until landslides through the valley made global news."

And to add to the tragedy, in 2010, two Australian women died in a rafting accident in southern Peru.

"That was followed by more cancellations," he says.

"The devastation and media coverage smashed the industry, but we kept our heads up and battled on."

His struggle to get people to have faith in his Kutimunki dream of Peru-specific tours is slowly reaping rewards.

Simon and his family have been living in Peru for six years. And his dream has changed just a little. He now aims to have his business well established enough that he and his family can spend two months in Australia every year.

"It is only a matter of time until we and the people of Peru see the rewards for our persistence and self belief and our dream becomes a reality," Simon says.

"Our plan is to keep pursuing Kutimunki. But if we return to Australia, it will be Cairns."