

Ancient attractions

Dr. Douglas Comer, Baltimore's own Indiana Jones, sees every vacation as a learning opportunity

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



An authentic Indiana Jones is alive and well, right here in town. Baltimore, meet Douglas Comer.

Operating rather inconspicuously from his Charles Village-based firm Cultural Site Research and Management, Comer has overseen some of the region's most important archaeological and historical preservation projects. That's when he's not spur-of-the-moment globetrotting to a newly discovered archaeology site or to play watchdog over the preservation of some of the Earth's most-treasured

archaeological finds.

Born in Michigan, Comer came to Maryland in 1972. "I was hired to assemble a team of archaeologists to perform archaeology excavation for restoring the C&O Canal after it had been destroyed by Hurricane Agnes," he says. Comer stayed on, guiding the project's evolution into an archaeology and historical research center for the U.S. National Park Service. Then he was named chairman of then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer's Commission on Archaeology, redesigning the state's program.

Baltimore became home when he married a Maryland native, also an archaeologist (Elizabeth Comer's firm recently performed excavation research for Baltimore's newest subway line). This year, Douglas Comer completed the first visitor experience plan for the Preservation Society of Fells Point, and performed excavations on the neighborhood's oldest structures.

As an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins University, Comer is leading a team of students in the applied mathematics and statistics department on a project with NASA and the Department of Defense: developing statistical protocols and models from aerial and satellite remote-sensing data to detect archaeological sites in the Mojave Desert.

But if his students just blink, their professor's jetting off to Hokkaido, Japan, to inspect findings from the ancient Jomon era, including some of the first pottery ever made. Another week he's gone again to Petra, Jordan, developing an operating plan with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. Then he's in Dakar, Senegal, to suggest which of Africa's ancient archaeological sites might be placed on the World Heritage List, in his position as co-president of International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management for International Council on Monuments and Sites, an adviser on global cultural heritage sites to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee.

Then, he's back in a flash, digging knee-deep at a site in Mason Neck, Va., seeking Revolutionary War campsites of Rochambeau, the general in charge of French forces aiding the Americans.

We caught up with him to chat about Peru, the travel destination he digs the most these days.

Constantly trekking the globe, you must have so many favorites spots. What do you look for in a vacation destination?

Every vacation is also a learning opportunity. If a place doesn't have much archaeologically or historically, we generally aren't interested. There's too many places in the world to see.

So what is your current favorite vacation spot?

These days, it's Peru.

What makes it a standout?

Peru [has] perhaps the largest number of archaeological sites in that hemisphere. Machu Picchu is a place everybody should see — it's magnificent, you can hardly believe it's real. Cuzco is magical, filled with colonial Spanish architecture, but all built on the foundation of Incan structures. The contrast is fascinating. There are many historic neighborhoods to explore.

Along the west coast is a totally different environment: a desert next to the ocean — like Southern California but drier.

Peruvians are really some of the nicest people. There are many very poor areas, so they enjoy having people come and stimulate their economy.

Can you suggest an itinerary?

It's easiest to fly into Lima, the capital. It's a very modern city; there's not a lot to see, historically.

[About two hours north], there's a site called Caral, with monumental architecture in a very sophisticated urban plan that is as old as the early cities in the Middle East, about 2600–2000 B.C. People didn't have any idea that that kind of elaborate urban architecture existed 4,500 years ago in the New World; it was very controversial.

Was the lifestyle as sophisticated as the architecture ... perhaps like Pompeii?

Yes, it was a different culture, but in many ways it was similar. They had pyramids and temples and buildings. But [archaeological] work in Caral began only about 30 years ago. People have been digging in Pompeii for over 250 years. A lot more is known about Pompeii because there are texts. You don't have that with the South American civilizations. People have not been excavating in South America for as long as they have in the classic world.

Where to then?

Flying is the only practical way to get around the country. From Lima, fly southeast to Cuzco. The Historic Center is gorgeous, full of sacred Inca places and local markets. The food is incredible. They're famous for ceviche — it's like a religion. The restaurants make it fresh every day; they compete with each other to make the best. There were days when I ate it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Peru has an incredible drink called the Pisco Sour, made with Peruvian rum, lime juice, egg whites, sugar. It takes about half an hour to make one. Cuzco has many trendy restaurants. There is a place called Fallen Angel. The tables are aquariums. You're munching on your dinner, and there's a fish swimming beneath your plate.

From Cuzco, take a train through the Sacred Valley to Machu Picchu — about 2 1/2 hours. You'll pass a number of little towns and archaeological sites that would probably be famous in and of themselves if it weren't for Machu Picchu. Shirley MacLaine used to hang out there — she thought she could channel ancient spirits. It's got that kind of mystical ambience. It's an exciting train ride too, because they have to back up part of the way. People get off the train to see the sites or to hike the Inca Trail, which goes all the way through the Sacred Valley. The ideal experience is hiking it to Machu Picchu just as the sun is coming up over the sanctuary. There's lots of llamas walking around; you have to be careful on the narrow path because they'll try to crowd you off.

We stayed two nights in Aguas Calientes — at the base of the mountain where Machu Picchu is located. It's a crowded, touristy town with a lot of little hostels. Before dawn, we walked to where you first get a glimpse of the city and watched the sun come up. Then [we took] a bus up this road to the ruins — gorgeous architecture and stonework like you've never seen anywhere. Machu Picchu was a place where the ancient rulers probably met; something like Camp David, where they'd have ceremonies and meetings. From there, you can climb Huayna-Picchu — the peak you see in many photos of Machu Picchu — a challenging climb but worth the effort.

Where to after Cuzco?

A place near the Pacific coast city of Trujillo called Chan Chan, made of mud and red bricks. It was the

largest pre-Columbian city in South America. The bricks are very ornate with intricate designs; just beautiful.

Trujillo is a great base location because you can also visit Huanchaco, a coastal town where the fishermen still use reed-boats from ancient times. It's also this great surfing mecca. Our son was excited about that!

Nearby, are the Moche sites [along Peru's northern coast]. The Moche culture [A.D. 100-700] emphasized blood sacrifice; their god was a decapitator god. And the god was the cultural continuity throughout many [Moche] dynasties. There were tremendous riches; you see elaborate tombs where everyone was decked out with gold and jewels, buried with their slaves — stuff you see in National Geographic. But the civilizations would fall during periods of drought. The frustrated people would lose confidence in their leader and revolt: burn and destroy everything. Then there would be another dynasty. The decapitator god would reappear in a different form: a spider, a crab, a human holding a knife. He's always cutting people's head off. At a Moche site called El Brujo [it means The Wizard] are three pyramid sites with fascinating mural ornamentations. And there's still a lot of shamanistic activities. People visit the shaman if they are sick, or maybe if they want to cast a spell on someone they are quarreling with.

That's pretty exotic.

But not unusual. We excavated in Fells Point in Baltimore and we found paraphernalia associated with voodoo from 200 years ago and from the 1970s. So there's these cultural practices that continue — people might not talk about them outside of their communities.

What are your must-have travel items?

My computer and a camera. I use a digital Canon, and my iPhone — it has a mechanism that records where I took the picture. You get to a new location, take photos and later you can see the pattern of the sites — their proximity to each other, nearby a river, a mountain. It's actually quite a nice research tool. But you have to activate the location device.

What's next on your bucket list?

I haven't been to India yet, and that's a big oversight.

If you go

Getting there: Flying time to Lima, Peru from BWI through Miami can be as short as 10 hours for about \$900 round trip. Insiders recommend visiting in Peru's wintertime — May-October, the dry season.

Info: peru.travel/en

Lodging

Cuzco: Hotel Plaza de Armas is in the center city. Av. Portal Mantas 114, 51-84- 225959, cuscoplazadearmas.com from \$150.

Aguas Calientes: Terrazas del Inca has panoramic balcony views overlooking Machu Picchu. Calle Wiracocha M-18-4, 0051-84-211117 terrazasdelinca.com, from \$50.

Huanchaco: Hotel Bracamonte is an oceanfront hotel with a pool. Los Olivos 160, 51-44-461162, laspalmerasdehuanchaco.com, From \$60.

Dining

Cuzco: Fallen Angel Restaurant; entrees from \$13. Plazoleta Nazarenas 221, 5184258184, fallenangelincusco.com/TheRestaurant/TheRestaurant.html,

Aguas Calientes: Climb the stairs to the Tree House for innovative Peruvian fare and spectacular views. Entrees from \$12. Tree House, Calle Huancaure 180, 005184-791929, rupawasitreehouse.com/

Huanchacho: Oceanfront Big Ben serves local seafood. Entrees from \$10. Av. Larco 1182, Urb. El Boquerón, 044-431869, bigbenhuanchaco.com.

Don't miss

Cuzco's ancient San Blas Arts District, with its famous crafts market. Also visit the Koricancha Temple and Santo Domingo, the collusion of an ancient Incan Temple and a western convent. Plazoleta Santo Domingo, 084-222-071.

—*Stephanie Citron*

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