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Make the most of Machu Picchu

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# Trip of a lifetime

## Seizing your moment at Machu Picchu

The draw of this 550-year-old Inca citadel is obvious, but careful planning is essential to ensure you get the most out of your visit

Chris Moss



Machu Picchu is so well-known and so certain to fill travellers with high expectations that you might think it's doomed to disappoint. No other South American archaeological site comes close when it comes to visitor numbers and broad appeal (coach tourists mingle with backpackers and hardcore hikers at the ruin every day of the year). Only Saqsayhuamán in Cuzco – which is usually part of a Machu Picchu itinerary – is comparable for sheer scale and architectural audacity.

But with a bit of careful planning and the right approach, you will find the site as enchanting and engaging as any on the planet. The draw of Machu Picchu (which, means "old mountain" in the Quechua language) is obvious: a 550-year old citadel built by the most advanced – and in Peru the very last – pre-Columbian society in the spectacular setting of a saddle between two forest-clad Andean peaks that has been preserved enough to be recognisable as a city. It is high: 7,972ft above sea level. It is large: the ruins are the size of a village, and combined with

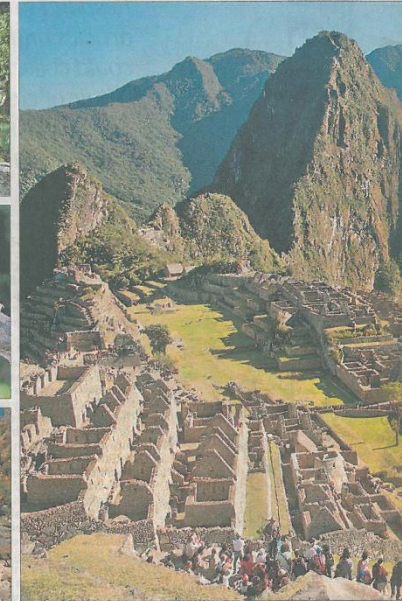
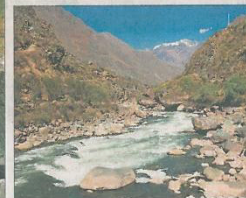
adjoining forest and wilderness park, the "historical sanctuary", as Unesco describes it, covers more than 116 square miles. It is also mysterious: we know its functions were partly residential and partly religious, but we are still guessing about its cosmic positioning and its academic importance to the Incas.

Machu Picchu is set in humid subtropical forests, providing a protected habitat for ferns and palms and several endangered species, notably the spectacled bear. Add in swirling clouds, llamas grazing on the terraces and the option to arrive following a hike on mountain trails and/or a train trip through the valley of the Urubamba River (aka the "Sacred Valley"), and you have a memorable trip that can last two, seven or 14 days. You just have to work out how to catch that quiet moment at the "hitching post of the sun" and find the right angle for a tourist-free photograph.

### When to travel?

Machu Picchu is busiest in July and August, the peak tourist season and also the not-quite-so-wet season. It is never totally dry in the Andean foothills and you'll probably get showers and mist clinging to the peaks at some stage of your visit.

November to April is the rainy season, with January and February the wettest months, so the shoulders



*'The High Inca Trail is only for those who trust their thighs and lungs'*

of these – the actual months of November and April – are ideal if you want to avoid the heaviest crowds and heaviest rains.

### How to book

**Packages or independent?** You can't walk the Inca Trail without a local guide. As numbers are limited on the trail (500 per day, about 300 of whom are porters and guides) and at the site (2,500 per day), it makes sense to book a package trip of some kind well in advance via a British-based tour operator. In theory, you can visit the ruins independently – entrance for one day costs £31 – but the government website, machupicchu.gov.pe, is refusing credit-card payments owing to fraud and bookings cannot be made at present for 2013. Note also that the Inca Trail closes every February for restoration work.

You can, though, visit the ruins without a guide, and there are frequent buses from Aguas Calientes, the closest town (and railway station). A return ticket costs £10.70 and the journey, up an impressive series of hairpin bends, takes 20 to 25 minutes. If you wish to do this, then book a tailor-made tour and ask your agent to get your

### Expert tips

- Explore the Sacred Valley: combine a visit to Pisac and Ollantaytambo with a stay in a luxury hotel such as the Tambo del Inka or the Rio Sagrado.
- Take binoculars and field guides so you can spot Machu Picchu's bird life – cock-of-the-rock, toucanets, motmots.
- Aguas Calientes is an ugly tourist hub; use it for a dip in the thermal baths but don't book a long stay in the town.

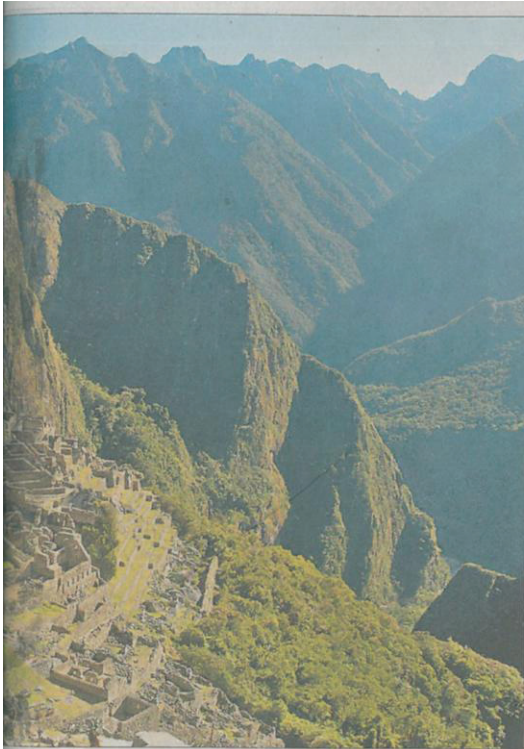
tickets but to leave you alone during your visit.

The key is to think about your approach to the site before talking to tour operators. Do you want a tough week-long trek on either the Choquequirao or Salkantay trail or a three-day trek, also quite challenging, on the so-called Classic Inca Trail, which is sure to be busier? Or do you want to catch a train and sleep at a smart hotel beside the national park and maybe spend a few days in a boutique hotel in the Sacred Valley? If so, do you want a budget deal on the basic Expedition train (peruall.com), or posh seats, pisco sours and live music on the Hiram Bingham luxury train, owned by the Orient-Express group? You could, of course, combine a short trek with a train trip; it's just a question of talking to a tour operator and surveying the range of group tours available; the



Latin American Travel Association's website, lata.org, has a full list of British tour operators.

**On a budget** Do an independent trip around Peru, visiting Lima and Cuzco, and then join an English-speaking group to walk the Classic



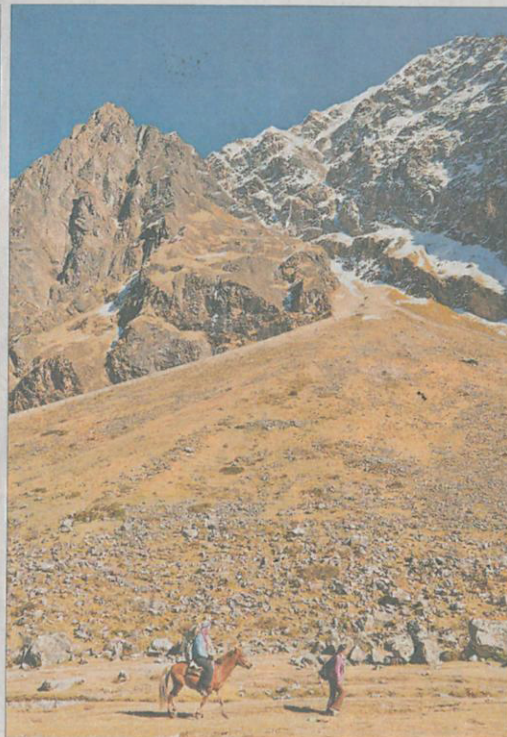
**Inca Trail.** With Journey Latin America (020 8747 8315; [journeylatinamerica.co.uk](http://journeylatinamerica.co.uk)), you get three nights on the trail, using tents and porters, crossing over the 13,780ft-high Dead Woman's Pass, and a fourth night near Machu Picchu, from £614 per person.

**Fancy a workout?** The High Inca Trail is only for those who trust their thighs, lungs and sleep patterns to cope with a tough mountain hike. The itinerary offered by Exodus (0845 863 9600; [exodus.co.uk](http://exodus.co.uk)) includes stays in Cuzco and in Ollantaytambo and Pisac in the Sacred Valley and a lung-busting seven-day hike along the so-called Salkantay path, using tents, horses and porters. This walk joins the latter part of the Classic Inca Trail. The 16-day package starts from £2,379 per person, including flights.

**Like an Inca** Stay in the opulent Palacio Nazarenas in Cuzco and at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo close to the ruins and ride back on the Hiram Bingham train. A 10-day itinerary with Wexas Travel (020 7590 0610; [wexas.com](http://wexas.com)) costs from £4,745 per person, excluding flights.

#### Your tips

- Have you been to see Machu Picchu? If so, and you have tips to pass on, please email [travelviews@telegraph.co.uk](mailto:travelviews@telegraph.co.uk), or write to Travel Views, *The Daily Telegraph*, 111 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0DT.
- Planning your own "Trip of a lifetime"? Which place or experience would you like us to offer advice on?



your guide too. By working your way backwards, you'll enter the site in the same way as those who have trekked one of the trails – and you get the panoramic view first and all the details later.

If you are intrepid – and fit – enough to join the 400 climbers a day who scale Machu Picchu's 8,923ft-high neighbour, Huayna Picchu ("Young Mountain"), you'll have to get up early. This means spending the night before in Aguas Calientes or in the pricey Sanctuary Lodge ([sanctuarylodgehotel.com](http://sanctuarylodgehotel.com)), the only hotel located at the gates to the site. Be warned: some sections of the path are slippery – the mountain is sometimes closed during heavy rain – and you will have to use steel cables on the steepest slopes. Entrance to the site, including Huayna Picchu, costs £37. It's best to set this up in advance – from Britain, Lima or Cuzco.

#### Before you go

Check that your travel insurance covers you for treks at altitude (see [telegraph.co.uk/activity/insurance](http://telegraph.co.uk/activity/insurance)). On the reading front, Hiram Bingham's *The Lost City of the Incas* (1948) is the classic work about Machu Picchu, even if full of archaeological suppositions that have since been proven specious. For context and contemporary analysis, pick up Hugh Thomson's *The White Rock*, which combines a history of the last days of the Incas with a gripping story about the search for lost cities buried in uncharted corners of the Sacred Valley. See also Footprint's *Cuzco and the Inca Heartland* guidebook and, for general information, the official tourist website [peru.travel](http://peru.travel).

#### What to take/pack

As a result of the high altitude, temperatures at Machu Picchu can be cool, and it is useful to have a decent sweater as well as rainproof gear. There are sandflies around the site, so a good repellent is essential. Otherwise, as with any subtropical country, take a hat, sunglasses and high-factor/sun protection.

If you're walking one of the trails, your operator will tell you what you need, but if you are wandering around this region for any length of time, pick up a good woollen hat, gloves, a scarf, a water bottle, antiseptic hand gel and loo paper. And don't forget your trunks as there are thermal baths around these parts.

#### Tactics

Timing-wise, it is crucial to avoid the 11am-3pm madness, when hordes of visitors arrive by bus and train – so go early or late in the day. In the morning you'll share the site with anyone arriving on the various Inca trails. At dusk you'll get a laid-back meditative crowd. From a photographer's point of view, the light tends to be best at these times.

Equally importantly, allow at least four hours at the site and, if you can, visit twice. In that way you're more likely to see it in a range of light and weather conditions – the site can be bewitching in the mist, but can also be completely shrouded.

As most people are guided in progression from the main entrance, you can avoid unwanted company by heading right up to the Intipunku (Sun Gate), above the citadel. If you're being privately guided, take

**One option is to stay at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, (top left), close to the ruins. Take binoculars and field guides to spot Machu Picchu's bird life. You can hike to the site through the valley of the Urubamba River (bottom left), or trek by mule along the Salkantay trail (above)**

ALEX PAVANIS/ALAMY