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INSIDE THE LOST CITY

Join the celebration as Machu Picchu marks the 100th anniversary of its “rediscovery”

By Cristina Goyanes, Posted Date: December 6, 2011



The Inca emperor Pachacuti had an eye for real estate. That much is clear as our guide unravels the intricate history of his sprawling mountain estate, Machu Picchu, from one of the site’s high stone terraces. But as dawn

breaks over the surrounding mountaintops, chasing away the morning mist and illuminating the ruins below, the full grandeur of “The Lost City of The Incas” explodes into view. In an instant, any doubt as to why Pachacuti selected this fantastically inaccessible spot for the seat of his empire, or why modern scholars chose it as one of the New Wonders of the World, evaporates.

Perched atop an 8,000-foot-high ridge against a seemingly endless backdrop of ancient peaks and emerald jungle, the sacred site is really more of a small city than a royal refuge, encompassing upwards of 140 stone structures—from towering temples to simple hovels—that cling stolidly to a rocky crag above Peru’s Urubamba Valley. Looking down the precipitous mountainside, it’s also clear why this remote citadel eluded detection by conquistadores, explorers, and adventurers for nearly 500 years until historian Hiram Bingham “rediscovered” it in 1911 (it’s nearly invisible from below).

Not that it’s especially easy to appreciate that remoteness today. More than 700,000 people flocked to the UNESCO protected archeological site in 2010—a number that’s expected to jump 25 percent in 2011 with up to a million tourists converging on the ruins to celebrate the centennial anniversary their rediscovery. Indeed, Machu Picchu is receiving so much love that the Peruvian government recently set a daily cap of 2,500 visitors to prevent the growing foot traffic from causing irreparable damage.

What does that mean for you? Now’s the time to visit—and the sooner the better. The weather’s warm this time of year (daytime temps hover around 69 degrees December through April), the crowds are thinning, and, perhaps most important, Peru’s Ministry of Tourism and Foreign Trade is kicking around a plan to increase the daily visitor limit to 4,400—a move that conservationists believe could make the New World Wonder a little less wonderful. So pack a raincoat (brief, daily showers are the norm), and follow our tips for the ultimate Machu Picchu experience.

WHERE TO STAY

No matter how you choose to get to Machu Picchu—train, bus, horseback, or foot—everyone starts their journey in Cusco, same as Bingham. Spend a couple of nights in the former Inca capital to acclimate to the region’s dizzying altitude (11,000-plus feet) before making the 70-mile trek northwest to Aguas Calientes, the jumping off point for the ancient ruins.

Inkaterra La Casona (Cusco) This meticulously restored 16th century colonial manor was quite possibly the first Spanish construction in Cusco (and a favorite choice of passing conquistadors). Eleven elegant rooms flank an indoor courtyard, and its proximity to Plaza de Armas—the city’s main square—means easy access to Cusco’s best restaurants and shops. Be sure to check out the hotel’s “Vintage Cusco” package, which includes a two-night stay—plus breakfast, dinner, and guided tours of major attractions (ask for Hector)—for \$996 (booked individually, rooms start at \$418 per night, inkaterra.com).

Hotel Monasterio (Cusco) Originally built as a monastery by invading conquistadores, this 5-star boutique hotel oozes old world charm. It’s also a historic landmark with 126 colonial-Renaissance rooms, a central courtyard accented with stone arches (and a 300-year-old cedar tree), and a cozy lobby bar where you can sip pisco sours before dining at El Tupay, the French-Peruvian in-house restaurant. Hotel Monasterio shares the same plaza as Inkaterra La Casona and the Museo de Arte Precolombino (\$300 per night, monasteriohotel.com).

Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel (Machu Picchu Pueblo) Nestled into the foothills of the Andean mountains (and located just 100 meters southeast of the train station), this trendy eco-hotel is a favorite amongst nature lovers who also enjoy a taste of luxury (Demi Moore and Cameron Diaz among them). Eighty-five Andean-style casitas (luxury rooms) overlook orchid gardens teeming with hummingbirds, and a network of stone pathways wind through 12 acres of rainforest. If you can, book the “Last Minute Special,” which includes two nights accommodation, plus a massage and guided nature tours (keep an eye out for Andean spectacle bears, the only species native to South America). (\$776 per person, inkaterra.com)

Andina Luxury Hotel (Machu Picchu Pueblo) Although it lacks the charm of its Inkaterra neighbor, which oozes five-star luxury, this budget-conscious option offers 31 clean, spacious rooms, a third of which offer views of the fast-flowing Urubamba river. Breakfast included. (\$110 per night, peru-explorer.com)

El MaPi, Hotel Machu Picchu - byinkaterra (Machu Picchu Pueblo) Located just a few blocks from the Pueblo, this budget-friendly hotel is clean, contemporary, and strikingly Scandinavian in design, but its uncluttered, open spaces are purposely simple to make everyone feel at home. The hotel also houses one of the best restaurants in town (see “Where to Eat” below). (\$200 a night, elmapihotel.com)

WHERE TO EAT

There's more to Peruvian cuisine than ceviche and pisco sours. Centuries of inventive culinary fusion combined with the area's rich (and deliciously exotic) biodiversity have many of the world's top food critics hailing the country's budding gastronomic scene as the next big thing (including three-star Michelin chef Ferran Adria, who's making a documentary about it). But don't just take their words for it. Sample it for yourself.

Limo (Cusco) Start your tasting tour of the city at this avant-garde novo-Andean eatery located above a small art gallery (and, ironically, McDonalds) with commanding views of the Plaza de Armas. Sushi is one of the main attractions here (try the Acevichado, a popular roll doused with “tiger's milk,” which is actually a not-so-scary citrus marinade), but the Aji de Gallina—a traditional dish of shredded chicken in a spicy sauce—is not to be missed. If you have room for dessert, order the suspiro, a very sweet, creamy dulce de leche custard topped with a meringue cloud. (inkagrillcusco.com/eng/limo.php)

Chicha por Gaston Acurio (Cusco) Situated on the second floor of an airy colonial building overlooking the cozy Plaza Regocijo (a ten-minute walk from Inkaterra La Casona), Chicha focuses on contemporary and innovative dishes using traditional local ingredients. Try the Degustacion de 4 Causas, a dish featuring four regional potatoes (the country grows 4,000 varieties!) topped with smoked trout, avocado tartar, prawn and octopus. If you feel daring, order the Cuy Pequines, a surprisingly flavorful guinea pig crepe that goes perfectly with a pisco sour (or three). (chicha.com.pe)

Tree House Restaurant (Aguas Calientes) Although not a true tree house, this trendy “novoandina” bistro has all the trappings of one—from a tree-canopy locale to an interior made almost entirely of smooth, dark-colored wood. The glazed guinea pig (a local delicacy normally reserved for weddings) is a perennial favorite here, as is the alpaca loin infused with bacon and chimichurri (a rich, green herb sauce). Love your meal? Learn to make it and other traditional recipes in a cooking class held every day at 5pm (\$35 per person). The restaurant also offers boxed lunches—perfect for day trips to Machu Picchu. (rupawasitreehouse.com)

Tinkuy Buffet Restaurant (Machu Picchu) Located in the Sanctuary Lodge—the only hotel adjacent to the ancient Inca citadel—Tinkuy serves up a lunch buffet of international and Peruvian dishes that's well worth the \$29 price tag (there's also a separate dining room with a la carte options starting at \$40). On a budget? Check out the El Mirador snack bar just outside the entrance to Machu Picchu for burgers, sandwiches, and views of the ancient ruins themselves. Just remember to bring cash (there are no ATMs on site).

(sanctuarylodgehotel.com)

WHAT TO DO

From Aguas Calientes, the easiest way to get to Machu Picchu is by bus (\$6 one-way, 30 minutes)—that is, if you're not adverse to long lines (often up to 2 hours) and have a strong stomach (the dirt road follows a series of steep switchbacks). Otherwise, it's about an hour and a half walk along a well-marked (albeit breathtakingly precipitous) hiking trail. Either way, you'll need to purchase your entrance ticket beforehand at the Machu Picchu Cultural Center in Aguas Calientes (currently \$55, and rising steadily). You'll also receive an official Institute of National Culture map, which provides the name of each section of the ruins, but no detailed explanations. For that, you'll need a good guidebook, or an English-speaking guide, which can be arranged on-site for around \$30. Here are some other ways to travel to, and explore, the New World Wonder.

Inca Trail (Cusco to Machu Picchu) If the hike from Aguas Calientes to Machu Picchu sounds too easy, start your trek in Cusco. In its entirety, the Inca Trail stretches 14,000 miles from Ecuador to Chile, but the 28-mile strip from Cusco to the Sun Gate (Machu Picchu's main entrance) is among the most scenic. To walk it, you'll need to book a guided tour through an authorized trekking agency (no solo hikes allowed). Our pick: REI guides, which offers an all-inclusive, lodge-based, seven-day trip for \$2,560 (rei.com/adventures). If you're not keen on walking, you can traverse the same route on horseback (\$2,950, mountainlodgesofperu.com).

Wayna Picchu (Machu Picchu) Escape the crowds by ascending the huge outcrop that looms nearly 1,000 feet above Machu Picchu. The path begins at the back of the ruins, and although the way up looks forbidding, anyone in reasonable shape can tackle it in about an hour. Only 400 people per day are permitted to make the climb, however, so arrive early (guards in a small booth will have you sign in and out). Want a more challenging hike? Tackle the slightly longer (three-hour) Apu Machu Picchu Trail on the opposite side of the archeological site for bird's eye views of Machu Picchu and other ruins in the area, as well as Wayna Picchu, Salkantay mountain, and the Vilcanota River.

Hot Springs (Aguas Calientes) After a day of hiking and sightseeing, soak your tired muscles in the naturally heated thermal pools, from which Aguas Calientes draws its name. Located about a half mile from Pueblo Hotel, they're open to the public, cost about \$2 to enjoy, and are tremendously restorative (if not somewhat lacking in the hygiene department). Also check out the open-air market in the center of town to pick up souvenirs and gifts. The American dollar goes a long way in Peru (\$1 is equal to about 2.70 soles), which means that a beautifully-patterned alpaca blanket will set you back just \$25, and traditional Andean wool hats and gloves can be had for as little as \$3. Also keep your eye out for pairs of tiny ceramic bulls, which are said to bring good luck, robust health, and lifelong abundance.

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