



Roads Traveled: Machu Picchu trek a pilgrimage



MARY BERGIN 2:22 p.m. CDT March 20, 2015



(Photo: Mary Bergin photo)

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When pelting rain wakes me at 4 a.m. on a Monday, about all I can do is listen and wonder. The closest weather forecast online is for a city 70 miles away and 3,300 feet higher in elevation.

This is the day. There is no rain date. Our train leaves in mid afternoon.

What sounds like a deluge softens to a shower by the time I start walking three hours later. A bumpy bus ride of hairpin turns on narrow dirt and cobblestone pavement lasts 30 minutes, long enough for the downpour to thin to a drizzle, then a mist.

By 11 a.m., I have shed layers, applied sunscreen and witnessed the quick shift in a shroud of clouds, magically revealing remnants of a lush and mystical village.

This is Peru's Machu Picchu during the rainy season — typically November to April — the time when fewer people visit. The Inca city, built in the Andes Mountains as a retreat for nobility in 1438, was not discovered until 1911 and in 2007 was deemed one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Ambitious hikers, guides with slow-moving flocks of tourists and an occasional grazing alpaca explore Machu Picchu every day of the year. Thousands of stone steps lead to 170 granite structures built on 600 terraces smartly designed to grow crops and prevent erosion.

Shells of buildings remain intact despite earthquakes and torrential rain (upwards of 70 inches per year). Walls carved from and with stones, not iron chisels, fit together so precisely that a credit card won't fit between blocks. One part ingenious engineering and one part miracle, it seems.

A visit goes beyond sightseeing. It is a pilgrimage. Challenge, intent and impact make this so.

Some travelers arrive with prayers, burdens and hopes. You can read it in their eyes. Some use walking sticks to slowly navigate steps and paths, especially on this slick day. All seem awestruck by Inca ingenuity and are reminded that history and science cannot explain everything in this world.

You don't get here by accident. The trek takes the better part of a day: Fly one hour from Lima to Cusco, then ride a bus to catch a train into Aguas Calientes, also known as Machu Picchu Pueblo. That prelude, for me, began with a 2:30 a.m. wake-up call and ended a couple hours before sunset.

A more arduous alternative is to hike in, which takes multiple days at high altitude. Even the easiest hiking option, to forgo the final bus ride from Aguas Calientes, is an uphill climb of more than three miles and 1,100 feet in elevation.

Although the UNESCO World Heritage Site is officially limited to 2,500 visitors per day, almost 1.2 million visited Machu Picchu in 2014. The showing of a pre-arranged ticket and passport are required for entry, but then visitors historically have roamed on their own and/or in a group with a guide from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Stricter limits on access are expected this year because of new rules that will require foreign visitors to tour with a hired, approved guide and follow one of three routes. The park will introduce time limits for lingering at popular points of interest to prevent a bottleneck of tourists.

Rick Vecchio, a former Associated Press reporter in Peru, notes the need to control tourism in order to maintain Machu Picchu's structural integrity.

"Our problem is overuse and a lack of infrastructure," he says of the site, which is Peru's top tourist destination.

Officials already have increased surveillance, prohibited onsite camping and stepped up enforcement of respectful behavior (after a rash of streaking incidents because of

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a 2013 episode that went viral on YouTube).

The journalist, now with the tour operator Fertur Peru Travel, says the popularity of Machu Picchu means fewer resources available to preserve, protect and promote other significant archeological sites in Peru. That includes the 13-tower Chankillo, a 2,300-year-old solar observatory and ceremonial center on the country's coast, and the 5,000-year-old Caral-Supe settlement north of Lima, "on par with Mesopotamia" because "it helps validate Peru as a cradle of civilization."

•For more about tourism in the country: peru.travel, 511-574-8000.

Orchid collection

My trip to Machu Picchu, the second in less than two years, included an overnight at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, an ecologically astute property and home to the world's largest private collection of orchids (372 species). Rates start at \$319 per person, which includes dinner, breakfast and an on-campus guided excursion. inkaterra.com

Train travel began at Ollantaytambo, on Inca Rail, whose roundtrip rates start around \$100. incarail.com Arrangements were handled by Condor Travel, which organizes trips throughout Peru: Amazon rainforest to floating reed islands of Lake Titicaca.

•To learn more, visit condortravel.com.

Seven Wonders

Machu Picchu became one of the new Seven Wonders of the World in 2007 after a global poll of 100 million votes via Internet.

The private initiative noted that only one of the longstanding seven ancient wonders (Egypt's Giza Pyramids, from 2589 B.C.) still stands, and this site was an automatic addition to the new list. These locations also made the final cut.

•Petra, Jordan, 312 B.C., visitpetra.jo

•Rome's Colosseum, Italy, 70 A.D., turismoroma.it

•Chichen Itza, Mexico, 600, chichenitza.inah.gob.mx

•Great Wall of China, 700, ctno.org/unesco-sites/great-wall-2

•Taj Mahal, India, 1632, tajmahal.gov.in.

•Christ the Redeemer statue, Brazil, 1931, brazil.org.za/corcovado-mountain.html.

Since each is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, additional details are at whc.unesco.org.

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