



## PERU: Machu Picchu, Lost City in the Clouds; Cusco and Lima

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Machu Picchu. Photo by Richard Varr

### Machu Picchu: Ruins in the Clouds

By Richard Varr

I walk through the maze of stone, climbing the cloud-draped hillside along the walled ruins of Machu Picchu. It's 8 a.m. and the rain is finally stopping, and to my delight, the foggy haze that has made this morning so inspiring and beautiful will eventually burn off to yield a sunlit day – one that will make this life experience all the more exhilarating.

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Photo by Richard Varr

The rocks are slippery, with many steep steps overlooking scary steep slopes into the valley below. It was a mountaintop home of the Incas – one that wasn't discovered until 1911, when explorer Hiram Bingham followed up on a tip from a local farmer of hidden ruins in the clouds.



Photo by Richard Varr

“The Incas lived here because it was close to the heavens to send offering to the gods,” says local tour guide Alejandro Vargas Diaz. “For me, it’s one of the most beautiful experiences. Our ancestors lived in this breathtaking place and I’m very proud to share these experiences with visitors.”

I’m surprised to learn that Machu Picchu is directly over a seismic fault line, with some ruins showing cracks in the structures from past earthquakes. Llamas still roam the grounds, just as they did in Inca times. And at many turns, there are drains and fountains the

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Incas built to aid in water drainage in this often rainy environment.

Some of the highlights include the rounded tower and stone huts of the Temple of the Sun, with its Window for the Solstices that marked the shortest and longest days of winter and summer. The Temple of the Three Windows offers a splendid view over the grassy Sacred Plaza below, where rituals were held. In the Royal Sector are bigger living spaces where the emperor and other members of the Inca court stayed when visiting. And the rows of mountainside ledges are where farming took place.



Photo by Richard Varr

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View from the Temple of Three Windows. Photo by Richard Varr

Getting to Machu Picchu isn't easy. From Lima, we flew to Cusco where trains are available for the three-plus hour trip to Aguas Calientes (called Machu Picchu Pueblo), a town below Machu Picchu. Then a local bus climbs the winding road up the mountain. Of course some people opt for hiking several days up the Inca Trail, where other ruins sit along the way.



On the grounds of the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Photo by Richard Varr

While in Machu Picchu Village, I spent two nights at the **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel**, a beautiful 12-acre property within bio-diverse private gardens at the foot of Machu Picchu Mountain. Stone pathways within the cloud forest connect upscale bungalows. The luxury property includes a spa and offers traditional Peruvian cuisine in a world-class restaurant with splendid views of the rushing Vilcanota River. According to its website, Inkaterra is a Peruvian organization celebrating nearly 40 years of experience in sustainable tourism initiatives, focusing on preserving Peru's nature and cultures and sharing them with the world. For more information: [www.inkaterra.com](http://www.inkaterra.com)

**VIDEOS** — Below are two short videos I shot at Machu Picchu:

## CUSCO: The Inca and Colonial Capital



In Cusco, traditional garb. Photo by Richard Varr

While in Peru, I also spent a full day exploring Cusco with its many churches adorned with gold and silver alters. I was very impressed with the Cusco Cathedral with its Bolivian silver alter, and the more than 400 Cusco School biblical and conquistador-inspired paintings dating mostly from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. I strolled within central Plaza de Armas alongside buildings with colonial Spanish architecture, and also walked the narrow streets of the artist-rich San Blas neighborhood, home to workshops of painters, sculptors, canvas makers and artisans making decorative pottery.



Cusco Cathedral. Photo by Richard Varr

Cusco was the Inca capital from the 13<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> centuries before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. The stone ruins of the Qorinkancha, once the most important temple of the Inca Empire, still lie within the Convent of Santo Domingo just off the Plaza de Armas. The Spanish built the convent with its arched walkways flanking the cloister directly over the historic Inca site. Both are a must see when visiting Cusco.



Qorinkancha Inca Temple ruins. Photo by Richard Varr

A quick word about the altitude... I didn't think it would but the 11,000 feet elevation did affect me. During my first night there, I woke up maybe three times finding it a bit hard to breathe. I elevated my head with an extra pillow which seemed to help. Some of my colleagues needed oxygen, which was available in the hotel. But the next day, I felt fine, walking at least a few miles within the city. The only time I really felt winded on that day was when climbing steps in the San Blas district.



San Blas alleyway. Photo by Richard Varr

### LIMA: Port City of the Conquistadors



Lima Cathedral and Plaza Mayor. Photo by Richard Varr

I was also very impressed with Lima, a massive pulsing city with a population of up to 10 million people. Traffic is a real problem, but its many historic squares, colonial churches and Inca ruins make it a great place to explore. I spent three days there, touring the Plaza Mayor with its Government Palace and Cathedral, where the marble sarcophagus of conquistador Francisco Pizarro sits in a side chapel. Many of the buildings have decorative carved wooden balconies adorning its facades.



Exterior of Monasterio de San Francisco. Photo by Richard Varr

A must see is the Monasterio de San Francisco with its underground catacombs of human bones. Once Lima's main cemetery from colonial days until 1821, bones are now neatly arranged in crypts below the monastery's main church. I took a tour of the impressive colonial-era church and convent complex with its yellow façade and glazed-tile cloister. "Everyone could be buried here – not only religious people, but common people as well," says tour guide Jesus Torres. "In those days, people thought they'd be closer to God if they were buried directly under the church."



Pizarro Sarcophagus. Photo by Richard Varr

To learn more about Peru's ancient cultures, I visited Lima's Larco Museum with its collections of 45,000 pre-Columbian artifacts. They include Andean gold and silver masks, jewelry, stone figurines and more showcasing Peru's civilizations through five millennia of history including the Incan Empire.



Great views of the Pacific Ocean can be seen from the cliff tops in the upscale Miraflores neighborhood, where biking and walking trails are filled with locals and tourists. I also visited Barranco, a more bohemian, artist-filled neighborhood with cafes and restaurants. I walked over the footbridge called the Puente de los Suspiros, where legend dictates that those making a wish while crossing the bridge for the first time and holding their breath will have their wish granted.

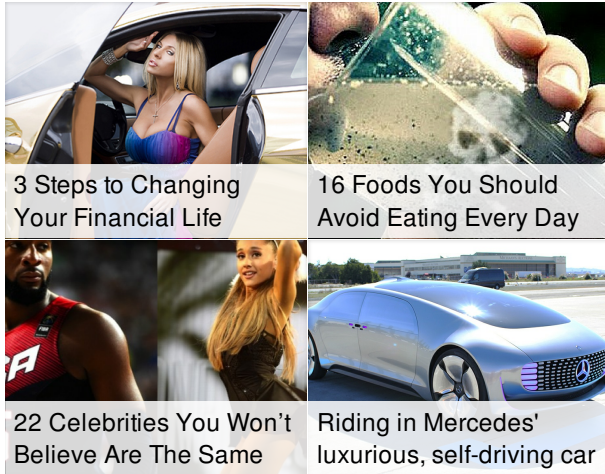


Lima Clifftops. Photo by Richard Varr

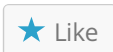


Archbishop's Palace with carved wooden balconies. Photo by Richard Varr

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