

Travel: Peru

Savor the site on top of the world at Machu Picchu in Peru



By Lori Erickson, correspondent

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In 1911, Yale professor Hiram Bingham III made a discovery that catapulted him to international fame and put a remote site in the Peruvian Andes on the bucket list of generations of travelers. On the trail of ruins from the Inca Empire, he came across a site locals called Machu Picchu, or “old peak” in the native Quechua language.

Bingham in one sense didn’t discover Machu Picchu, for its location had long been known to the natives of the region, as well as to a few Europeans who had trekked through the surrounding jungle. But he was the one who brought the site to the world’s attention (and later became the inspiration for the movie character Indiana Jones).

Given the rigors of Bingham’s initial journey, I’m a bit embarrassed by how little effort I expended to get to Machu Picchu. The classic journey there is by the Inca Trail, a challenging multiday hike. Instead, I took a bus and train from Cusco, the ancient Inca capital, and then a bus to the promontory where Machu Picchu sits. But no matter how you arrive at Machu Picchu, your reaction is likely to be the same: awe. That’s a word that gets tossed around so much that it’s lost much of its original meaning. To be awe-struck means to be filled with a mixture of reverential respect, wonder and a little bit of fear. As I rounded the corner and got my first full view of Machu Picchu, those emotions flooded over me. The site’s visual impact felt almost physical in its force.

A light rain was falling and clouds swirled around the buildings and the terraces that are cut into the steep hillsides like stairways for giants. It seemed almost impossible that human hands could have built this grand settlement in such an isolated spot, particularly before the age of modern technology.

While much is known about Machu Picchu, many mysteries remain. It was built in the 15th century during the glory years of the Inca Empire, most likely by

Pachacuti, the greatest of its rulers. Its physical location is remarkable, occupying a narrow promontory of land surrounded by mountain peaks and encircled on three sides by a loop of the Urubamba River. It's been called the world's most perfect blend of architectural and natural beauty.

The site's buildings fill much of the space between two peaks: Machu Picchu and Huayna Picchu (meaning "young peak"). About 60 percent of its structures are original, while the rest have been rebuilt. The hilltop settlement includes three main areas: a royal and sacred section, a secular quarter where workers lived, and more than 100 terraces where crops were grown. Machu Picchu is a marvel of civil engineering, linked by staircases and kept dry in the frequent rains of the cloud forest by an intricate drainage system. Its construction methods showcase the highest standards of Inca masons, with its huge building blocks shaped so precisely they needed no mortar.

One of the puzzles of Machu Picchu is that it did not have any obvious military or strategic use. Some scholars speculate that it was the equivalent of Camp David for the U.S. president — a royal retreat away from Cusco, which lies 50 miles to the southeast. The site was occupied for only about a century and then was abandoned after the Conquistadors took control of the Inca Empire. It was never discovered by the Spanish during the Colonial Era, and gradually jungle vegetation grew over much of it.

More than physical beauty draws people to Machu Picchu, I think, for there is ample evidence that from its very beginning, Machu Picchu had great spiritual significance. Its location was likely chosen in part because of its proximity to mountains and a river considered sacred by the Incas. Its plazas include multiple shrines, temples and carved stones, some of which are oriented to astronomical events such as the winter and summer solstices and spring and fall equinoxes.

A sculpted block of granite known as the Intihuatana is arguably the most sacred spot at Machu Picchu. Its position and careful shaping suggest that this stone was considered highly significant by its creators. Its name means "tether of the sun," but it was given long after the Inca period and the stone's exact purpose is not known.

One of the most intriguing theories about Machu Picchu has been advanced by the scholar and explorer Johan Reinhard, who believes that for the people who built it, Machu Picchu was the cosmological and sacred center of a vast region. It was the hub of a spiritual web, connected to other holy sites in the region and to celestial bodies in the sky, surrounded by deities who lived in the surrounding

mountain peaks and the river far below. Perhaps that's why it's easy to feel the pull of the sacred at Machu Picchu, as if you are also being drawn into that web.

There are only a few sites in the world where so many factors come together: physical grandeur, architectural beauty, and an interweaving of sky, mountains, jungle, river and clouds. That is Machu Picchu, as dazzling now as when it was a jewel in the crown of the Inca Empire.

If you go

International travelers fly into Lima and then to Cusco. From there, you can travel to Machu Picchu either by train or by hiking. Hikers must go with a licensed guide and make reservations well in advance. Access to the Inca Trail is limited to 500 hikers a day. The classic route is a five-day expedition, but shorter options are also possible.

The Inca Train leads to Aguas Calientes, the small town at the base of Machu Picchu. There, the [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#) has a lovely forest setting and has received awards for its commitment to ecologically sustainable practices. The next morning, take an early morning bus to the summit to avoid the crowds. The busiest season at Machu Picchu is June to September, and visiting during the shoulder seasons of April-May and September-October is highly recommended.

For more information contact the [Peru Office of Tourism](#).