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Inca Empire, apart from the



Machu Picchu as seen from Waynapicchu, on a tour by Mountain Lodges of Peru. *Photo Credit: Mark Edward Harris*

With Machu Picchu as the magnet that attracts thousands of visitors on a daily basis to Cusco, Peru, then on to the Unesco World Heritage Site, it can feel as though one is on a magnificent excursion to Disneyland, Peruvian-style. But off-the-beaten-track experiences can be had not only on Machu Picchu but throughout the land of the Inca.

The Lares Adventure to Machu Picchu created by Mountain Lodges of Peru offers the perfect combination of adventure travel and cultural immersion. Their five- and seven-day lodge-to-lodge journeys combine treks through magnificent landscapes and explorations of remote Andean villages and historical sites with luxury accommodations in mountain lodges and Sacred Valley of the Inca hotels.

After two nights at the five-star JW Marriott Lima, it was time to board the 80-minute flight to Cusco, capital of the Inca Empire and gateway to Machu Picchu.

A night at the four-star boutique El Mercado Tunqui Hotel, a picnic lunch in the hills above the city and tours of the Sacsayhuaman complex, the Koricancha temple and Cusco's Main Square gave our small group a chance to acclimate to Cusco's 11,200-foot altitude.

Dawn comes early up in the high Andes, and by 7 a.m. we were on the road for the town of Písaq, then onto the small community of Amaru, to begin the first trek of the tour. Our lungs told us that the air was definitely thinning as we made our way up to 14,200-foot Challwacasa Pass. The group was in agreement that the magnificent view of the Sacred Valley of the Incas far below made every labored step worth the effort. The descent to the local community of Viacha for lunch alfresco, passing grazing llama and sheep along the way, then continuing down to the Písaq archaeological site was equally rewarding. While these ruins in the Sacred Valley are on the tourism radar, they're seldom approached from above. Our accommodations for the night, the well-appointed Lamay Lodge (elevation: 9,705 feet), was a welcome sight after a day of en pied exploration. A massage helped soothe the muscles that had been put to the test at elevations they had never before experienced.

The Lares Adventure to Machu Picchu tour offers its clients alternatives to the daily treks that are the mainstay of its packages.

After a morning exploring the town of Ancasmarca, followed by lunch in the town of Lares, I opted to visit Choquecancha to meet with weavers and townspeople, many of whom spoke only the indigenous language of Quechua. Hiking options included a two-hour trek from Quelqena to Huacahuasi or the longer (3.5- to four-hour) and higher (up to 13,838 feet) hike from Cuncani to Huacahuasi. Our group reconvened at the Huacahuasi Lodge, located at 12,585 feet. Its isolation and elevation were the perfect combination for an incredible view of the night sky from the Jacuzzis located on the patios outside each room.



The archaeological site of Ancasmarca. *Photo Credit: Mark Edward Harris*

The next morning, options were a seven-hour hike from Huacahuasi to Patacancha, which included traversing a 14,646-foot mountain pass, or a bike tour of Ollantaytambo and its environs. I chose the latter, watching people going about their daily lives in the Sacred Valley. The group reconvened to swap stories and share pictures over dinner at the five-star Tambo Del Inka Hotel.

In the wee hours of the next morning I headed with Andres Adasme Tapia, the adventure, exploration and product developer for Mountain Lodges of Peru, for a climb up Pinkuylluna Mountain to explore the ruins there and at the same time get a great vantage point for photographing the archaeological site of Ollantaytambo.

Since there are no roads between Ollantaytambo and Aguas Calientes, the disembarkation point for Machu Picchu, in the early

afternoon we boarded the well-appointed Inca Rail dining car for a 90-minute journey. Over a Peruvian lunch and pisco sours we watched the beautiful landscape go by. This form of transportation seemed like a particularly good alternative to taking on the Inca Trail to complete the journey, especially with the five-star Inkaterra Pueblo Hotel awaiting us at the end of the line.

American archaeologist Hiram Bingham, who "discovered" Machu Picchu just over a century ago, could probably not fathom how the place he exposed to the world has become a mecca for thousands of both serious and casual explorers. Even here among the throng of visitors — the first time we had encountered tourism en masse on our trip — our guides were able to navigate us to roads less traveled, first to the Sun Gate and then up the Huayna Picchu Mountain trail. While its 8,924-foot elevation was not an issue for us, having just hiked to elevations of 14,000 feet plus, the cliff-hugging route was definitely not for those prone to acrophobia. The descent from the peak includes an ancient stone staircase with no ropes or chains to hold onto and no margin for error.

The journey back to Cusco via rail from Aguas Calientes to Ollantaytambo, then a van to Cusco, was full of both exhausted hikers and fantastic memories. We celebrated our achievements over an elegant dinner at Pirqa in the JW Marriott el Convento, then cocktails at our hotel for the night, the five-star Palacio del Inka, once part of the Inka Temple of the Sun. Along with the Belmond Hotel Monasterio, a former monastery and national monument dating from 1592, these former houses of worship have been transformed into magnificent hotels through meticulous preservation and thoughtful interior design to retain a direct visual and spiritual connection to their pasts. This last night on the Lares Adventure to Machu Picchu was additional confirmation of the travel expression, "The journey is the destination."

See www.mountainlodgesofperu.com.