



## Experience: Seizing Sideline Charms in Peru's Sacred Valley

- Johanna Read, TravelEater.net

Machu Picchu is a bucket list item for many, and for good reason. Even I, the jaded travel writer, had tears come to my eyes the first time I set eyes on the Incan ruins peeking out from beneath the clouds. But too many travelers skip over the nearby Sacred Valley of the Incas, the beautiful corridor between Cusco and Machu Picchu.

Skipping the Sacred Valley not only means missing some beautiful sites and a spectacular hotel; you put yourself at risk of altitude sickness if you move too quickly from Machu Picchu to the heights of Cusco.

Starting your trip to the Peruvian Andes at Machu Picchu is wise. Many people start in Cusco, thinking that they'll rest a little after getting off the plane from Lima. But because Cusco is 3,400 meters above sea level, you will not rest well. Altitude sickness is possible above 2,438 meters and unless you've acclimatized you will feel its effects. Instead, upon arrival at the Cusco airport, train or a taxi to the Sacred Valley.

Altitude-wise, the best place to start your stay is in Aguas Calientes, which is at 2,042 meters. Sometimes called Machu Picchu Pueblo, Aguas Calientes is Machu Picchu's base town. If you want to see the sun rise over the Temple of the Sun, you need to spend the night before in Aguas Calientes.



You can only get there by train, which you can board at Ollantaytambo (the last town accessible by road), in Cusco, and at several points along the Sacred Valley. To get up to Machu Picchu itself, you need to take a bus.

In Aguas Calientes, [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#) and [Belmond Sanctuary Lodge](#) both provide luxurious rooms and premium service.

Aside from those accommodations and being the gateway to Machu Picchu, Aguas Calientes holds little charm. So after you've seen Machu Picchu and had a good night's sleep, take the train back toward Cusco. I recommend making Urubamba, at 2,863 meters, your base to explore the rest of the Sacred Valley and acclimatize in preparation for Cusco.

In Urubamba, I stayed at [Tambo del Inka](#), part of Starwood's Luxury Collection. I loved my stay there so much it was difficult to leave the hotel to explore the many ruins in the Sacred Valley. The altitude also slowed me down which encouraged late mornings in my comfortable king bed, lingering over the best breakfast I found in Peru, perusing at length the spa menu, and admiring the view from the indoor/outdoor pool.



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If you can drag yourself outside the hotel, take the train or a taxi back to Ollantaytambo for a day trip. The town is laid out much as it was during the times of the Inca and the ruins here are great. Guides will point out the nearby mountain from which some of the stone is hewn. Supposedly the Inca pushed the huge stone blocks down a road, across the river, and up again to the top of the Ollantaytambo terraces, facilitated by a slippery path of llama fat. You need a multi-site ticket to see these ruins, but if you're up for a hike you can climb for free to Pinkullyuna, ruins of ancient storehouses with spectacular views of Ollantaytambo.



Other Sacred Valley Incan sites included in the ticket are:

- Tipón, a site showing the Incan ingenuity for water management and agricultural terraces, still in very good condition.
- Moray, an agricultural laboratory of terraced fields in concentric circles, where it is thought that the Inca tested plants to determine which varieties grew best in the various conditions throughout their empire; and the nearby (no ticket needed) terraced salt fields of Salineras.
- Pisac, with ruins in the Machu Picchu model, which also has a market (Sundays are best).

After you've acclimatized in the Sacred Valley for a few days, you'll be ready to tackle Cusco and its sites.

*Johanna Read is a Canadian freelance writer and photographer specializing in travel and food. She's been to 48 countries (and counting) and in the past year has been on six continents. Follow Johanna on Instagram [@TravelEaterJohanna](#) and on Twitter [@TravelEater](#). Check out all her travels at [TravelEater.net](#).*