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Stay nearby to truly enjoy a visit to Machu Picchu

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Staying nearby Machu Picchu allows for more time to explore and enjoy this ancient wonder. Credit: Larissa Milne.

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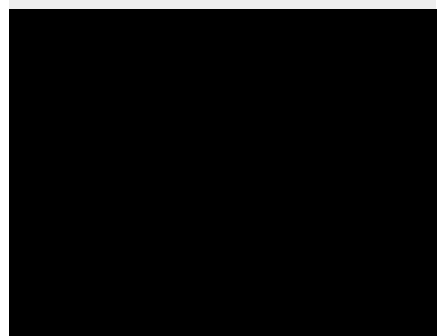
Machu Picchu is a must-see attraction for anyone who loves ancient culture. The remains of a lost 15th-century city perched atop an isolated mountain look like something out of an Indiana Jones movie and are truly a sight to behold.

But getting up to the Andes Mountains in Peru isn't easy, and visiting a place that's almost 8,000 feet above sea level requires stamina, as well as adjustment to the altitude. When planning a trip to this world wonder, it's wise to build in some extra time and take a few precautions.

The main access point for a trip to Machu Picchu is the ancient city of Cusco, Peru - at an even higher altitude, approximately 11,000 feet. Altitude sickness is a real threat at

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Cusco and Machu Picchu; it's important to allow sufficient time to acclimate, which includes drinking copious amounts of (bottled) water to avoid dehydration.

Many tours try to cram a visit to the ancient ruins into a day trip from Cusco, which we wouldn't recommend. The trip takes about four hours each way via a combination of bus and train, a grueling schedule that requires departing from Cusco at 4 or 5 a.m. and returning well after dark.

A more relaxing alternative is to spend a night or two near the entrance to the Peruvian national park at Machupicchu Pueblo, a hamlet at the base of the mountain where the park is, which exists mainly to serve tourists. Along with a local craft market, there is lodging in all price ranges, from simple hostels to the luxurious Inkaterra Hotel, a full-service eco resort.

The ruins are open from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. and require a 20-minute shuttle bus ride that climbs the 800 or so feet to the park entrance. By spending the night before and/or after nearby, you can explore during less-crowded times, while being well rested and better able to appreciate this ancient wonder.

Award-winning travel writers Larissa and Michael Milne have been global nomads for more than four years. Follow their blog at www.ChangesInLongitude.com for information about historic, quirky, and tasty destinations.

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