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How to Travel to Machu Picchu, Peru

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Don't get lost when you visit the Lost City of the Incas. T+L's comprehensive tip sheet for traveling to Machu Picchu in Peru will help you make the most of your time at this iconic Incan archaeological site.

Every year, millions of people visit the imposing and mysterious Incan citadel of Machu Picchu in Peru. But getting to the massive agricultural terraces, intricate stone constructions, and epic hilltop views of this UNESCO World Heritage site isn't cheap, and it involves some trickier-than-usual logistics. Here's how to expertly navigate your way to Peru's most famous destination.

When to Go

Machu Picchu is open year-round. October through April is the official rainy season, but it can rain at any time. And while peak season is July and August, you should always expect

crowds. Sundays can be the most crowded, because that's when people who live in the Cusco province are allowed into the site for free, in addition to the daily quota of 5,200 paying visitors.

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How To Get Acclimated

Wherever you're coming from is probably much, much lower than Cusco (11,000 feet) or Machu Picchu (just shy of 8,000 feet). Unless you've booked a trip to Machu Picchu that requires an overnight stay in Cusco, we recommend immediately taking the train from Cusco to Machu Picchu Pueblo (colloquially called Aguas Calientes), the town nearest Machu Picchu (see Getting to Machu Picchu, below). Spend a night or two getting used to the relatively low altitude of Aguas Calientes, at about 6,700 feet, then explore Machu Picchu before returning to Cusco. This will help minimize the unpleasant or even dangerous effects of altitude, which commonly include headache, fatigue, and nausea. Avoid alcohol and physical exertion while acclimatizing and drink as much water or tea as you can stand to help your body slowly adjust to the thinner air.

Getting from Cusco to Machu Picchu

The easiest way to get to from Cusco to Machu Picchu is to take the train to Aguas Calientes (the town located a few miles from the site). It's a scenic 3.5-hour trip each way along tracks that run right along the Urubamba River in the Sacred Valley, with dramatic canyon walls on either side.

Some train tips:

The so-called Cusco train station is actually in the nearby town of Poroy. It's a cheap taxi ride, but give yourself at least an hour to get from central Cusco to the train station. Traffic in Cusco can be brutal and seemingly never-ending road work makes things even more congested.

There are three train companies to choose from: Inca Rail, Peru Rail, and the Belmond Hiram Bingham train. The Hiram Bingham service is on a gorgeous train gleaming with brass and polished wood and includes a white tablecloth meal with wine during your journey. It's also much more expensive than Inca Rail or Peru Rail, both of which offer comfortable passage on different types of trains-including ones designed with extra windows for an additional fee.

Whichever train you choose, book as far in advance as possible. Tickets sell out weeks ahead in some months.

If train tickets from Cusco are sold out, all is not lost. Try to buy a ticket to Aguas Calientes that departs from the town of Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley, or vice versa. Taxis and mini vans between Ollantaytambo and Cusco (just over an hour each way) are plentiful. If you have the time, plan an overnight in Ollantaytambo to check out the town, which still features many Incan-built streets and buildings, as well as the archaeological site of the same name. Arrive as early as possible to the site to enjoy sunrise light and beat the tour buses.

If you do stay in Ollantaytambo, the Aranwa hotel comes highly recommended. It's not luxurious, but the most charming hotel in Ollantaytambo is El Albergue. Located right at the train station, this petite B&B has Incan terraces right on the property. The current owners still farm the terraces as part of their organic garden.

Machu Picchu Tours

The other way to get from Cusco to Machu Picchu is to walk as part of a multi-day Machu Picchu tour. Thousands of people hike to Machu Picchu each year. Here's how.

The most famous way to hike to Machu Picchu is along a section of one of the hundreds of Incan roads built as the empire expanded. Dozens of tour operators offer Inca Trail hikes to Machu Picchu, with varying durations and levels of comfort (though all require camping). Note that the Inca Trail leading to Machu Picchu is closed for the entire month of February every year.

For those who would like a less crowded experience, or are looking to see and experience other aspects of Peru on their way to Machu Picchu, there are a number of diverse hiking alternatives: the second most popular way to hike to Machu Picchu is around massive Salkantay Mountain, one of the most imposing peaks in the Peruvian Andes at 20,569 feet. Many tour companies offer Salkantay Treks, but Apus Peru, an established and well-regarded Cusco tour company with a focus on sustainable and responsible tourism, offers the Expreso Salkantay Trek, which shaves a day off the normal itinerary for those who want to push their physical limits on their way to Machu Picchu.

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Travelers interested in archaeology should consider the Choquequirao Tour with a Machu Picchu extension. This itinerary includes spectacular (but very tough) hiking in the steep Apurimac Canyon and exploration of the Choquequirao archaeological site before arriving to Aguas Calientes and then exploring Machu Picchu.

The Lares Adventure from Mountain Lodges of Peru offers a great combination of Andean hiking and cultural encounters within Quechua communities before arriving in Aguas Calientes to explore the citadel. Other tour companies offer treks through the Lares region, but only this itinerary includes luxury accommodation in their own lodges and full service along the way.

The Inca Jungle Tour (also known as Tropical Inca Trail) combines hiking, biking, rafting and zip-lining on your way to Machu Picchu.

Luxury tour operator and Beyond has recently expanded into South America and will begin offering several Machu Picchu itineraries starting in October 2016.

You can also drive (most of the way) to Machu Picchu from Cusco to the town of Hydroelectrico (there's a hydroelectric plant there). From there it's a three hour hike up to Aguas Calientes and then on to Machu Picchu. Many tour companies in Cusco offer this route as a one- or two-day trip using private vans.

Where to Stay in Aguas Calientes

Hands-down, the best place to stay in Aguas Calientes is the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. It's a sprawling resort set on the edge of town, away from the crowds and abutting the forest. Narrow stone paths cut through thick greenery and lead you past colorful birds, blooming orchids, a pool and an outdoor Jacuzzi. The spacious rooms feel very local and come with fireplaces to warm up the Andean evenings. Public spaces include cozy alcoves and a warm ambience that extends to the capable staff. The price includes a full breakfast buffet as well as a choice of several on-property excursions with the resort's naturalists.

For something more affordable, check out El MaPi, also an Inkaterra property but with a younger, more casual, design-driven vibe.

You could also spend the night at the Machu Picchu gates. The appeal is obvious: to be one of the first ones in and last ones out, with no long bus lines. But to do that, you have only one option: the small Belmond Sanctuary Lodge. As you might imagine, access like that is not cheap. Room rates are in the four figures.

Where to Eat in Aguas Calientes

Aguas Calientes isn't exactly on the cutting edge of Peruvian cuisine. But walk down Av. Pachacutec and you'll find several decent, quaint restaurants, some serving a selection of Peru's growing crop of craft beers. You can also eat at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel even if you're not a guest. There are two restaurants at the hotel, including a more casual option that's located by the train tracks, which provides dramatic entertainment when a train comes into the station during your meal.

Things to Do in Aguas Calientes

Aguas Calientes was named after the thermal springs in town. They're open to the public from 5:00 am to 8:00 pm (entrance is 20 soles/\$6).

Machu Picchu: Tips for Visiting

Entrance tickets: If you're traveling independently, you can buy individual Machu Picchu entrance tickets here (152 soles/\$45 per person). There are also official ticket offices in Cusco and an office in Aguas Calientes where tickets can be purchased in person the day before you wish to enter.

Bring: Water and a rain jacket, even if it looks like a beautiful sunny day. And speaking of sun, remember that the ozone layer over Peru is compromised. That, combined with the altitude, makes the sun extremely strong here so wear a hat and use plenty of high SPF sunscreen. Bring insect repellent as well. And keep some one soles coins in your pocket. You'll need them to access the lone bathroom at the entrance to the site. To use the bathroom or grab food, you'll have to exit the gates, so bring your passport and hang onto your ticket. You'll need to show both to re-enter the citadel.

Don't bring: Drones, umbrellas, or walking sticks or trekking poles since they're all

prohibited at Machu Picchu. Travelers who require sticks or poles for mobility can bring them in but only with protective rubber tips over the ends.

Don't miss: Just outside the entrance gates, there's a barely marked station where you can get the novelty Machu Picchu stamp in your passport.

Bus: You can walk up to the citadel from Aguas Calientes (at least 90 minutes) or you can take a 20-minute bus ride. Buses operate every 15 minutes starting at 5:30 a.m. (\$24 adult round trip, \$12 child round trip), and people start lining up well before that. Lines to board will be long in both directions.

Ditch the crowds: When you arrive at the citadel in the morning, peel away from the throngs streaming toward the main structures and head for the Guard House instead. This is an area slightly above the main part of the site and it's usually less crowded up there as people rush to the heart of the site. Pause here to enjoy the lovely overview of the citadel and to get your bearings.

Morning? Afternoon? Both? Your ticket allows you to enter the citadel multiple times between from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. (the site closes at 5 p.m. when everyone must exit), but there is no perfect time to visit Machu Picchu. These days the site is crowded at all hours and weather is unpredictable. However, during the rainy season the mornings are most likely to be foggy. Depending on your disposition, fog ruins the view or adds a patina of mystery to it. Afternoons can be slightly less crowded as day-trippers return to the train station for their trip back to Cusco.

Huayna Picchu peak: You'll need a separate ticket to climb this peak at the site, and you need to book in advance-there are a limited number of tickets. The view looking down on the Incan ruins is a highlight for many but be aware that some sections of this strenuous trail are very narrow and steep. You'll have the choice of starting your climb at 7 a.m. or 10 a.m. Go at 10 a.m.; there's a better chance any clouds will have lifted by then (48 soles/\$15 per person).

Machu Picchu peak This also requires a separate ticket-and good knees. The trail is almost entirely stairs. You'll have the choice of starting your climb at 7 a.m. or 9 a.m. (48 soles/\$15 per person).

Free hikes at the citadel: Though Huayna Picchu and Machu Picchu both require additional tickets, anyone can walk up to the Sun Gate (about two hours round trip along a relatively gentle trail with few stairs) for fantastic views of the overall site. You can also make the short walk to the Incan Bridge (less than an hour round trip along a mostly flat trail) to check out a precarious section of trail, now closed, which the Incas built along a rock face.

Guides: Machu Picchu can certainly be seen with just a detailed guidebook. But don't underestimate what a good guide can add: local perspective, as well as all the historical, architectural, and biological info you'd expect. If you're not on an organized visit with your own guide, you can book a guide in town, or find one at the entrance to the site.

Stay for lunch: There's a casual café and bar with a lovely deck just outside the entrance gates, but the Sanctuary Lodge's buffet lunch is your only sit-down-restaurant option. It's very good, if pricey (\$40 per person).

Cusco Travel Tips

Don't skip Cusco. Its pre-Columbian buildings have given this city UNESCO World Heritage status, and its cobblestoned streets, great hotels, museums, nearby archaeological sites, and relaxed atmosphere make it worth spending at least a couple days here.

Where to Stay in Cusco

Cusco has more than its share of large, full-service hotels including:

Inkaterra La Casona: Rap on the hotel's wooden door with a big iron knocker and someone greets you by name-just one sign of the kind of intimacy an 11-suite hotel affords you. Full of stone and wood, the hotel, built in a 16th-century mansion, has a baronial feel, though bathrooms are thoroughly modern. It's no surprise that this was the first Relais & Châteaux property in Peru.

Belmond Hotel Monasterio: This 16th-century former Jesuit seminary, still feels very much like a monastery, complete with Baroque chapel. The 126 rooms maintain the feel with antique-style furniture. And be sure to have a drink in the barrel-vaulted bar. Order a chilcano (pisco, ginger ale and lime on the rocks), not a pisco sour, if you don't want to scream "tourist."

Other highly rated large scale hotels in Cusco include: Palacio del Inka, the JW Marriott and the Palacio Nazarenas.

If boutique is more your style, try the following:

El Mercado is a place where playful design and amazing attention to detail merge among the restored stone columns of a former market building. Suites and junior suites have fireplaces and jetted tubs.

Atiq Hotel Boutique has nine rooms, including a suite with a furnished patio which looks down on Qorikancha, a site that many consider to have been the most important Incan temple of the empire. No other hotel in the city can claim such a view. Heated towel racks, fresh-cut flowers and 500 thread count sheets ensure a comfortable stay.

Where to Eat in Cusco

Cicciolina is a classic which feels very much like a local hangout, serving international and Andean dishes out of an open kitchen. At the tapas bar you can order from both the tapas and dining room menus.

Kion, from the growing Cusco Restaurants group, is a stylish place to enjoy Cantonese cuisine. The décor is Chinese vintage, flavors are subtle and the atmosphere is festive.

Chicha is the first restaurant in Cusco from Peruvian superstar chef Gaston Acurio of Astrid y Gaston fame. Located on the second floor of a Colonial building, the restaurant offers haute Andean cuisine (alpaca carpaccio, quinoa with duck) in an airy, bright, and well-lit space.

Where to Drink in Cusco

Cholos pub, near the main plaza, keeps around a dozen different Peruvian craft beers on tap and the Peruvian owner Rodrigo Cardenas is passionate and knowledgeable about all of them.

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