

NEWS

19 Things to Know Before Your First Trip to Peru

by Eric Rosen

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Peru should be on every traveler's must-visit list. The museums and restaurants of Lima. The mystique of [Machu Picchu](#). The eye-catching handicrafts of the Sacred Valley and Lake Titicaca. The allure of the Amazon. There are so many incredible places to visit and experiences to be had. But, as with any exotic place, doing a bit of homework before your trip can help you make the experience that much more magical. Here are 19 things you should know before your first trip to this magnificent country.

1. You Don't Need a Visa

Unlike some other South American destinations, notably [Brazil](#), you don't need a visa to enter Peru as a US citizen. According to the [US State Department website](#), you just need a valid passport and evidence of onward or return travel, so no one-way tickets. You're usually allowed to stay for 90 days at a time.




US citizens don't need a visa to visit Peru. Image courtesy of Getty Images.

2. Book Your Airport Hotel Early

Many flights from the US to Lima arrive rather late at night, and folks on a tight schedule might want to take a connecting flight to another destination like Cusco or Iquitos early the following morning to get a jump on their itinerary. If that's the case for you, there is one hotel that's attached to Jorge Chávez International Airport (LIM), the Wyndham Costa del Sol. You can walk across a pedestrian bridge to it, making it an ideal base for a short

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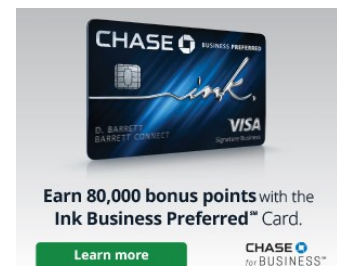


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overnight stop. By contrast, many of the city's other nice hotels are at least a 30-minute drive from the airport.

A couple quick caveats here: Because it's the only decent hotel close by, it tends to book up early, and rates range from \$120 per night up to more than \$200 per night the closer you book. And although Wyndham's site said the hotel was sold out for the one night I needed, I was actually able to grab a room through Booking.com and confirmed it directly with Wyndham. Though I passed up earning [Wyndham Rewards points](#) as a result of booking through the third-party site, it was worth it for me to be able to stay there on my eight-hour Lima layover and not have to deal with the hassle of going into the city itself. Speaking of which, there's another Wyndham Costa del Sol in the city several miles away, so don't get the two confused!



If you want to stay at the Wyndham Costa del Sol, book early! Image courtesy of Wyndham.

3. Don't Drink the Water

Peru is a developed nation, and as you fly into Lima, you'll see what an enormous city it is. Unfortunately, the country's public drinking water has not caught up to its tourism industry in terms of modernity, so avoid sipping the tap water. Most hotels will leave you bottles of water in the bathroom for brushing your teeth, but be sure to pick up more yourself in case you need it, and don't be afraid to ask for additional bottles either, since most hotels are happy to oblige. Take other related precautions as well, like ensuring that ice in your drink was made with purified water and washing any fruit yourself that you plan to eat. And don't even think about getting water in your mouth while in the shower.



Unfortunately, you've got to stick to bottled water during your Peru trip. Image courtesy of Getty Images.

4. Budget Extra Time and Money

Getting around Peru has never been easier or more budget-friendly. Once there, you can fly to major cities on LATAM, Avianca (though some planes are still painted with the TACA livery) and Peruvian Airlines. That said, if you're a foreigner or purchasing tickets outside the country, the fares will be much higher than what locals pay. For instance, my round-trip flight from Lima to Iquitos on a recent trip was coming up at around \$115 on [Google Flights](#), but when I clicked through to LATAM book it, the price shot up to around \$300!



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It's also important to realize that because the country's two major hubs are Jorge Chávez in Lima (LIM) and Alejandro Velasco Astete International Airport in Cusco (CUZ). If you are flying between other destinations, you will still likely have to connect in one or the other, which can add significantly to your travel time. For instance, if you're thinking about going from Juliaca (JUL), which is the gateway to Lake Titicaca, to Puerto Maldonado (PEM) in the Amazon, both of which are in the south and only about 200 miles apart, you'll have to fly through either or both Lima or Cusco. That can take 14 hours at the very least, factoring in layovers, which amounts to a wasted day. Instead, look into buses (some of which run overnight) to maximize your time in the country.



5. Use Your Miles

			
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6. Go to Machu Picchu Before Cusco

Though many traditional guidebooks suggest acclimating to the high altitude of the

Peruvian Andes in Cusco before heading to [Machu Picchu](#) since you have to fly into Cusco anyway, you're actually better off going straight to Machu Picchu. Cusco is 3,400 meters (11,150 feet) above sea level, while Machu Picchu is about 2,400 meters (7,900 feet), so you'll have a much easier time there before heading back up to Cusco.

If you have time, consider staying somewhere in the Sacred Valley like Tambo del Inka (which is a Starwood property) or Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, which are at about 9,400 feet above sea level, before going back to Cusco. There are plenty of [cultural and adventure activities](#) to keep you busy, and you'll have a better time adjusting to the thin air gradually.

7. Stay Overnight Near Machu Picchu

Though the town of Aguas Calientes outside Machu Picchu is a tourist trap, think about spending a night there before your visit to the mysterious citadel. There's one good reason to do so: In the morning, you'll beat the day-tripping crowds taking the train in from Cusco, and it will be much less crowded for the first hour or two of your visit.



Head to Machu Picchu before Cusco to acclimate to the Altitude. Image by the author.

8. Book Your Train and Machu Picchu Tickets Ahead of Time

There are only a set number of trains running from Ollantaytambo and Urubamba to Machu Picchu and they can sell out in high season (July through September). Take the stress out of it by purchasing your fare from PeruRail ahead of time and just picking up the ticket from one of the company's offices at either the Lima or Cusco airport when you get to Peru.

For the same reason, reserve your Machu Picchu tickets ahead of time. A day ticket will cost you 152 Peruvian Sol (about \$47) — note that the [ministry of culture's website](#) is a bit of a dinosaur and only accepts Visa. But you don't want to take any chances by buying your ticket at an unofficial source. Scams abound and if you don't have a legitimate ticket when you turn up at the gate, you'll have to buy a new one at best or be turned away altogether at worst.

Many hotels in Aguas Calientes can also arrange the purchase for you if provided with your passport information. They also will hire a guide on your behalf as well, then you can just pay at the hotel when you arrive. Keep in mind that the day you visit Machu Picchu, you'll need to show your passport to get in.





Book your PeruRail tickets to Machu Picchu ahead of time then pick them up when you arrive. Image by the author.

9. Try the Coca Tea — But Don't Bring It Back

Peruvians and their forebears have used coca leaves to counteract altitude sickness for centuries, if not millennia. Locals chew the leaves or make a tea from it, which you will undoubtedly be offered many times while there. It is definitely worth trying, if only for the cultural significance the plant holds in this part of the world. So have a cup and see if you like it — just don't try it too close to bedtime because it's a stimulant and might keep you awake. Instead, try some Andean mint tea in the evening. Not only is it tasty and soothing, but it has many of the same altitude-easing properties as coca. Finally, don't try to bring a box of coca tea bags (or the leaves themselves!) back to the US with you — it's illegal.



By all means, try the coca tea... but don't try to bring it home. Image courtesy of Getty Images.

10. Stock Up at the Pharmacy

Speaking of the altitude, you might want to visit a doctor before your trip for a few reasons. He or she might prescribe you altitude medication, but if you plan to visit the Amazon regions in the country's north and south surrounding Iquitos and Puerto Maldonado respectively, you might want to consider bringing antimalarial medication with you and possibly getting a shot for yellow fever or typhoid. Just like heading to other exotic places, consult the [CDC page on travel to Peru](#) and look at the maps to determine if you might need any shots or medications for where you plan to visit, then discuss the options with your healthcare professional.

11. Keep Small Change on You

Though it's good to have a few bills and coins in small denominations in case you want to buy souvenirs here or there, there's one main reason you want to have some change: to use the bathroom. Public bathrooms at historical sites and even Machu Picchu require a fee, usually one or two soles, to use. Often that includes a ration of toilet paper and paper towel to wash your hands, but if you've got room, pack some tissues as well just to be safe.

12. Ask Before Photographing People

Especially near the main tourist sights like the Plaza de Armas in Cusco, you'll see women and children dressed in traditional garb and posing with llamas or alpacas. These folks make their living by charging tourists for photos, so don't snap any pictures of them unless you want to be harangued into paying. On a related note, if you visit local communities, such as the Uros people of the floating islands in Lake Titicaca, even on a prepaid tour, you'll be expected to buy a handicraft item or two as a goodwill gesture.



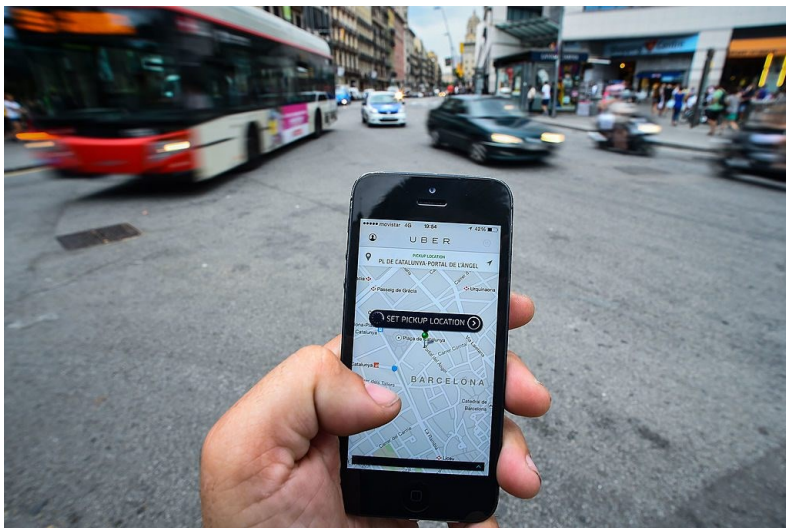
Ask before snapping any photos. It's polite, plus, you don't want to be charged for it after the fact! Image courtesy of Getty Images.

13. Tips are Always Welcome

Tipping is typical in Peru, though perhaps not quite up to US expectations. Plan to dole out about 10% of your final tab in tips and add on a few extra bucks if the service is exceptional.

14. Uber is an Option Here

Though taxis are still a good way to get around Lima, Uber works very well there. The drivers are courteous and prompt, and the fares are often about 50-75% of what a taxi will cost. Plus, you don't have to worry about having cash on hand. If you have a credit card like the [Chase Sapphire Preferred Card](#) or [Citi ThankYou Premier Card](#), you'll even earn bonus points on the purchase.



Uber works well in Lima and is cheaper than the taxis. Image by the author.

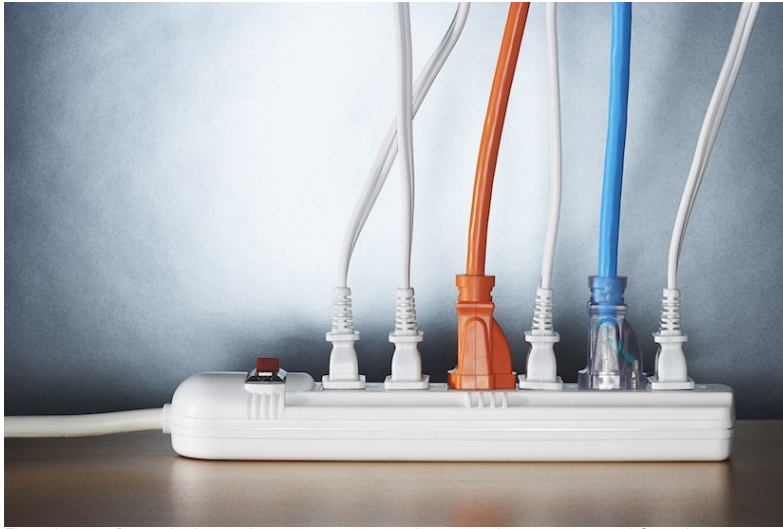
15. Hire an Airport Taxi

When you land in [Lima](#), after you collect your checked bags but before you get to the arrivals hall, there are a few taxi service desks that will vie for your business. Whereas these kinds of services tend to offer inflated prices in other destinations, the ones here are quite reasonable and within a few Peruvian Sol of the price you'll get haggling with an individual taxi driver after you exit. Getting from the airport to Miraflores, San Isidro or Barranco should cost you about \$20. So save yourself the time and trouble of negotiating and just order a taxi here, because you can pay with a credit card and earn any travel-related bonus points your credit-card accrues.

16. The Voltage Is Higher Here

US electrical sockets are 120 volts while those in Peru are 220 volts. While that shouldn't make a difference for most electronics, which tend to be compatible with a range of voltages, it does still bear consideration. On the plus side, your iPhone will charge a lot

faster, but you might also notice it heating up while doing so. To be safe, be sure to charge up your devices when you need to and unplug when you're done so you as not to stress the circuitry.



The voltage in Peru is higher, so keep an eye on your electronics. Image courtesy of Getty Images.

17. Ensure That You're Insured

As with any big international trip, you might want to consider travel insurance for a trip to Peru. The country is quite safe in general, but if you plan to head to any remote destinations or partake in any (sane) adventure activities, it could be a good idea to [insure yourself](#) in the case of a mishap where you might require medical care or a costly transfer to Lima or back to the US. As always, read the fine print of any policy you purchase so you understand what circumstances are and aren't covered.

18. Using Credit Cards Is Easy

Merchants, restaurants and even hotels used to charge a few percentage points in fees each time you used your credit card in Peru, but that doesn't seem to be the case any longer in many places. I didn't pay a single surcharge at hotels or restaurants during my trip, for instance. Of course, be sure to bring [a credit card that doesn't levy foreign-transaction fees](#) and with which you will earn bonus points for your purchases, like 3x points per dollar at restaurants with the [Chase Sapphire Reserve](#), or 2x points on entertainment including museums with the [Citi Prestige Card](#).

19. Bring School Supplies

If you plan to visit indigenous communities in the Amazon or the Andes, bring along some school supplies for the children. Before your trip, call your hotel or tour operator and ask if there are any village visits planned and what supplies might be good to tote along. You can also check out charities like [Pack for a Purpose](#) to see which hotels they work with in Peru, and pack the supplies they suggest. Even bringing a few notebooks and packs of pens can make an impact.