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Salkantay Trek to Machu Picchu

BY TONY AND THOMAS ON SEP 20, 2017 | PERU

15 COMMENTS »



Many tourist brochures would have you believe that trekking options in the Cuzco region begin and end with the famous (perhaps overly famous) Inca Trail. Nothing could be further from the truth. Four-month waiting lists and packed campgrounds have left more spontaneous visitors to the Cuzco region searching for trekking alternatives which they can easily combine with a visit to Machu Picchu.

The rising star among these alternatives is the beautiful Salkantay trek to Machu Picchu, a unique option which takes trekkers on a world-class journey across the Salkantay Mountain and high-altitude Salkantay Pass and descends into the cloud forests surrounding Machu Picchu. Along the Salkantay trail, trekkers experience an extraordinary range of Andean mountain environments as well as remote Incan trade trails and rare views of the western side of Machu Picchu from the Llactapata ruins.



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Stay in a converted monastery

The gorgeous Belmond Hotel Monasterio is a 400-year-old monastery turned luxury hotel in the center of Cuzco.

Or stay in a charming boutique hotel

The beautiful El Mercado is part of Mountain Lodges of Peru. Located only two blocks from Plaza de Armas, all en-suite rooms feature original decor and individual touches.

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Many companies offer camping versions of the Salkantay Trek to Machu Picchu (see below under “Plan your Trip to Salkantay Mountain”), but only [Mountain Lodges of Peru](#) offers a luxury lodge-based extended version of the Salkantay trek. The seven-day itinerary offers reduced daily walking times as well as some very attractive side trips. Thomas and I were hiking late in the season, so those lodges (and Jacuzzis) provided a wonderful refuge from the occasional afternoon rain shower.

Salkantay Trek – Day 1: Mountain Peaks and Lakes



Our Salkantay trek began with a three-hour drive up into the arid western foothills of the Vilcabamba range just beyond the isolated town of Mollepata. The first day was quite easy and was designed to give trekkers time to acclimatize. Our attentive guide Whilder set a slow pace, which was perfect for those adjusting to altitude as well as those who wanted to photograph. The relatively gradual climb to Soraypampa followed an Inca-era aqueduct and provided spectacular views of the glistening, snow-covered peaks of Salkantay and Humantay in the distance.



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Along the path, we had time to get to know our fellow trekkers Nathan and Kate from Australia as well as Joe, Mary, Diane and Tim from Houston, Texas. Once again, we seriously lucked out by getting an exceptionally outgoing, fun-loving group of people. It was clear from the beginning that these six characters would be one of the major highlights of the Salkantay trek.



- Syria (1)
- Taiwan (1)
- Tanzania (1)
- Thailand (91)
- The Netherlands (3)
- The Vatican (1)
- Tibet (87)
- Turkey (11)
- United States (34)
- Uruguay (1)
- Vietnam (45)

The path to the first lodge, aptly named Salkantay Lodge, was full of small surprises including tons of colorful moths, soaring black vultures, a few hummingbirds and a range of dry-climate flowers. The closer we got to the Salkantay Lodge, the more impressive the views of the ice-covered mountain peaks and glaciers.

“The thatched eucalyptus sauna was the perfect place to sooth sore muscles.”

The lodge itself was quite an impressive construction and offered a standard of luxury which was rather unexpected in such an isolated valley. Each room was mercifully heated (making my shower a joy) and boasted an eye-popping view of the mountain wonderland beyond. Best of all, the outdoor Jacuzzi felt sinfully decadent. How often do you get to enjoy glacier views in your bathing suit? And the thatched eucalyptus sauna was the perfect place to sooth sore muscles. I had to drag Thomas out of there before he baked to death.



Dinners were equally luxurious at the Salkantay Lodge. We dined on pumpkin soup, trout and mashed sweet potatoes followed by a lucuma dessert as our trekking family contemplated the adventures to come. It may seem strange to place so much emphasis on the lodge experience in a Peru trekking post, but Mountain Lodges of Peru very consciously intends for their lodges to be an active part of the Salkantay trek. Each lodge has a masseuse and a full bar. This trip is definitely about more than just mountain scenery; it's about enjoying yourself and relaxing at the end of your Salkantay trekking day.



Salkantay Trek – Day 2: Acclimatization and Blessing by a Shaman

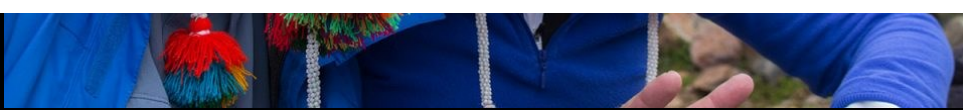
But don't worry, if it's primarily mountain scenery you're after, you'll enjoy every step along the way. Mountain Lodges of

Peru's seven-day itinerary is longer than many other Salkantay treks. The relaxed trekking schedule means you have time to enjoy the views, spot wildlife, photograph, and take it all in. Day two of our Salkantay trek was set aside for a trip up a gorgeous side valley to the powder-blue Laguna de Humantay, a picturesque lake nestled at the base of the Humantay glacier. The entire trip to the lake was spent in the phenomenal shadow of the towering snow-covered peaks of Humantay. Photogenic is an understatement.



On the shore of Laguna de Humantay, we participated in a traditional offering to Apu Salkantay. A shaman brought in from the highlands prepared offerings, chanted, and blessed each of us in preparation for the journey over Salkantay Pass. Our offering seemed especially opulent with coca leaves, Pisco, choclo (type of corn), candy, sugar, confetti... the list goes on. It was a cool cultural experience and everyone looked especially groovy in their rainbow-colored hats covered in intricate shell beadwork.





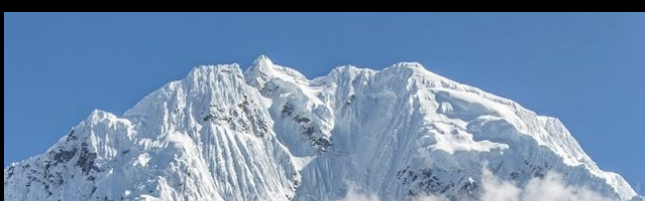
When we got back to the Salkantay Lodge, Whilder surprised us with another bit of Peruvian culture: how to make Pisco Sours. Thomas was chosen to play bartender; everyone agreed that he mixed and shook just like a pro. Well, Joe might have had a few critiques to offer up to Thomas, but was anyone really listening to those? 😏

Salkantay Trek – Day 3: Crossing Salkantay Pass



“A condor, a condor,” cried Mary again. She pulled out the hand-made condor Christmas ornament she had bought in Mollepata and mockingly fluttered it in my face. It was a running joke and a comment on the fact that we did not really expect to see condors on the Salkantay trek. Or was Mary secretly using her magic powers to summon the condors from beyond the peaks?

Because just minutes later, Whilder started pointing to the sky. One, two, three, four... condors everywhere circling in the sky above. In all, we counted a total of seven. Was it Mary’s magic... simple luck... or the dead cow we found on the path to Laguna de Humantay? Whatever the reason, it was a great omen on day three of the Salkantay trek as we slowly climbed towards Salkantay Pass.





Considering that we were trekking quite late in the season, we had exceptional luck with the weather. Blue skies backed lumbering, ice-covered Salkantay Mountain as we wound our way across Salkantay Pampa up the Rio Blanco Valley towards Soyrococha. The icy peaks and glaciers of Humantay towered off to our left. Caravans of horses passed us carrying supplies to the lodges or returning from camping treks. The raging Rio Blanco flowed down the center of the valley, crashing water echoed off the rocky walls.

“Considering that we were trekking quite late in the season, we had exceptional luck with the weather.”

Clouds gathered as we approached Salkantay Pass, which obscured views of Salkantay near the top. I wasn't too disappointed because we had been staring at clear views of the mountain for hours. Luckily, we still got a close up look at the glaciers, lakes and moraines. The winds picked up and the temperatures dropped – the pass was really the only place where I had to wear my down jacket and I never used my shell. Apparently, hiking up to 4,600 m (15,090 ft) heats you up. 😊 We celebrated reaching Salkantay Pass with a round of group pictures.





Descending through a surreal landscape of massive boulders and mountain streams, there were occasional glimpses of Tucurhuay and Huayracmachay. We made our way to Ichupata where we discovered that Mountain Lodges of Peru had set up an elaborate tented lunch area complete with tented storage and toilets. If you follow our blog on a regular basis, you might know that **we have had exceptional luck at stepping into lunch tents** at the precise moment it starts raining. It happened yet again on the Salkantay trek. Were we having some sort of supernatural help? Maybe it was that elaborate offering we made to Apu Salkantay.



Later that afternoon, we reached Wayra Lodge, a beautiful single-level stone retreat which blended beautifully into the rocky landscape. Although the lodge was a bit smaller, many in our group seemed to agree that this lodge had an especially cozy vibe. After a long day on the Salkantay trail, the bubbling Jacuzzi was too good to pass up. This time, it was Thomas


who had to drag me out before the water turned to Tony soup. (I'm going to have to figure out how to fit a Jacuzzi into my backpack for future treks.)

Salkantay Trek – Day 4: Descending into the Jungle



From Wayra Lodge, we continued across the boulder-strewn landscape taking a moment to stop and visit a traditional Quechua house. Actually, I thought it was a genius move by Whilder to introduce luxury trekkers on the Salkantay trek to the average living standards of highland Peruvians. Not every guide does that. The small adobe house had a dirt floor, a basic table and an open fire used to cook. A dozen free-roaming guinea pigs had gathered around the burnt-out fire desperately soaking up any heat from the coals. Apparently, they had no idea that they were destined to become dinner one day. The house visit was an important eye-opener for many of the trekkers who hadn't had the opportunity to experience local life in Peru.





Continuing on through the rocky landscape, the Salkantay trail quickly descended into stunning cloud forest. The path entered a deep valley filled with lush vegetation, a raging river ran far below us. We started to spot jungle flowers including a variety of beautiful orchids. At points, huge numbers of butterflies gathered on the path. It was quite an extraordinary sight.

“At points, huge numbers of butterflies gathered on the path. It was quite an extraordinary sight.”

We wound our way along the slopes passing through a forest of gnarled moss-covered limbs. The further we walked, the larger the trees became. At moments the clouds cleared to reveal snow-capped peaks and glaciers high above the jungle.



“What’s that... over there?” whispered Tim loudly pointing into the bushes, “It’s some kind of cat.” We all scanned the forest just in time to witness a mountain lion disappearing into the trees. Wow, an Andean puma!!! I was raised in an area where mountain lions are as common as they get in the U.S. (which is still rare), and I have never seen a mountain lion in my life. What an exceptional stroke of luck. First a jaguar and an ocelot in Tambopata and then a puma on the Salkantay trek. Peru is shaping up to be one heck of a big cat destination.

Dazed and thrilled by our wildlife victory, we continued on

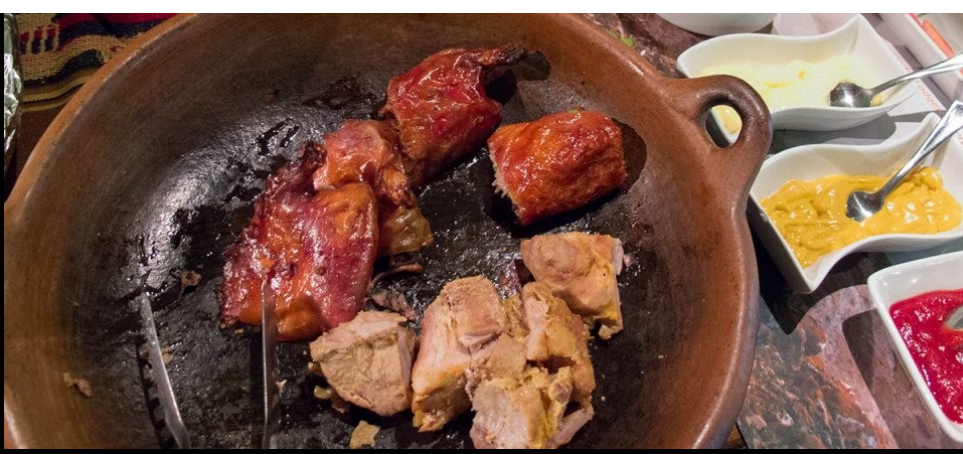
through the jungle, made our way down to the raging river and climbed – amid a flurry of butterflies – to our next lodge on the opposite side of the valley.



When we arrived at Colpa Lodge, we discovered the cooks were preparing an elaborate pachamanca. They carefully arranged beef, chicken, pork, potatoes, and other vegetables over a pile of hot stones. The food was covered, buried in a pile of dirt, and left to cook while we all luxuriated in the Jacuzzi staring out the jungle-covered mountains around us. When we emerged from our relaxing soak, we found the cooks had also prepared roasted guinea pig, known locally as cuy. Our feast was much appreciated after several days on the Salkantay trek. Thomas thought the cuy was quite good (maybe he was Peruvian in a past life), but the rest of us focused on the other specialties.

One of the highlights of staying in the lodges during the Salkantay trek were the great common rooms where we trekkers could hang out and swap stories. We especially enjoyed discussing life in Australia with Nathan and Kate, talking politics with Tim and Diane, and learning to play “Mexican Train Dominos” with Mary and Joe. (Seriously, who came up with the name “Mexican Train Dominos”?) We can’t emphasize enough how happy we were to have ended up with such an exceptional group.





Salkantay Trek – Day 5: Coffee with a Dash of Ruins

From Collpapampa, we descended along an extremely steep (and beautiful) jungle path to the Santa Teresa River. Where our trail first met the river, we discovered a set of hot springs that are in the process of being constructed. I hope the hot springs are incorporated into the itinerary when the pools and facilities are completed because they occupy an insanely gorgeous spot. If the pools are properly maintained, this will certainly become a major attraction along the Salkantay trek to Machu Picchu.



Most of the morning was spent following the course of the Santa Teresa River. It's a stunning stretch of cloud forest filled with orchids and butterflies as well as picturesque waterfalls. Scanning the rocky path, we found two amazing, giant black beetles, which almost looked like little plastic toys, so keep your eyes peeled for those. We were also surprised to see large flocks of parrots and parakeets as well as some oropendolas. Again, if weather permits, you may catch a glimpse of an icy peak rising behind the jungle-covered mountains. So

spectacular.



As we continued further downriver, the jungle gave way to some local farms growing granadilla (like passion fruit), bananas and avocados. Abruptly the trail came to a road, but the Salkantay trek wasn't over yet. Mountain Lodges of Peru provided a bus transfer from the end of the river trail across the agricultural area around Playa to the beginning of the Llaqta Inca trail. This transfer might annoy some hardcore walkers who insist on walking the whole way, but we were quite happy to skip the dusty road and the associated trucks and colectivos.





The Llactapata Inca trail was only uncovered quite recently. Unlike the narrower, more famous Inca Trail into Machu Picchu, the Llactapata Inca trail is broader and was specifically designed to allow llama caravans to bring supplies into Machu Picchu from the west. The stone-paved path led up through coffee plantations where we stopped at a small organic coffee farm for a roasting demonstration and, of course, some samples. (After five days on the Salkantay trek, a strong coffee is just what the doctor ordered.) Of course, trekkers can buy a few bags for themselves and throw them on the back of the horses – which several members of our group did.



We overnighted in the stunning stone Lucma Lodge, which sat just above the coffee farms before continuing up the Inca trail to the newly restored Llactapata ruins. While the ruins themselves were quite minor, the real attraction SHOULD HAVE BEEN the stupendous and rarely seen western view of Machu Picchu. Unfortunately for us, October is the season when local farmers burn off their fields, so what we saw instead was a panorama of smoke. It is shocking that field burn-off would be allowed anywhere near Machu Picchu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and New World Wonder – one strong wind and Peru's greatest treasure could be devastated. Ugh.

Luckily for us, Mountain Lodges of Peru had organized a lunch at the restaurant below Llactapata overlooking what we were told was Machu Picchu. I volunteered to sit with my back to the

window because – well – we couldn't see anything. (Isn't that generous?) While I was focused on my delicious trout lunch, a strong wind blew much of the smoke further down the valley. When I turned around that magical view had suddenly emerged from the smoke. Yay!!! Our group's first glimpse of Machu Picchu. 😊

Salkantay Trek – Day 6: Vistadome Train to Aguas Calientes



From Llactapata we descended via a very steep jungle trail towards the Rio Aobamba. The entire way down, the views of Machu Picchu and the surrounding mountains continued to improve as the smoke cleared. The trail also provided exceptional views of the towering waterfall on the opposite side of the valley. The landscape around Machu Picchu is beyond surreal and would surely be an attraction even without the famous ruins.

“The landscape around Machu Picchu is beyond surreal.”

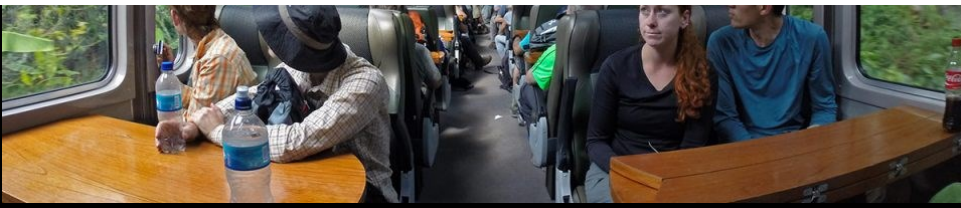
Having made our way to the valley floor, one by one we crossed a wobbly suspension bridge and followed a dirt road to the small train station at Hidroelectrica, a lesser known access point to Aguas Calientes. In essence, the train station marked the end of the actual Salkantay trek, but Mountain Lodges of Peru's itinerary also includes a day visit to Machu Picchu as part of the package.



In Hidroelectrica, we boarded one of the glass-topped Vistadome trains and slowly wound our way along the Urubamba River through the exceptionally steep-walled canyons that surround the Machu Picchu archaeological park. After a series of switchbacks that carry the train over the hydroelectric dam, the train gently followed the curve of the gorge past one particularly sheer wall. Look up and scan the wall for remnants of the Inca trail that leads to the famous Inca Bridge, a must visit attraction located within the Machu Picchu archaeological site. Eagle-eyed trekkers will also notice terraces and other minor ruins as well as some impressive birdlife along the way. There's even the possibility that you might spot **the elusive Cock-of-the-rock** – we, however, weren't that fortunate. Ahhh, poor us, as if condors and a mountain lion weren't enough? 😊

The train journey and the gorgeous views up through the roof of the sharp peaks and sheer walls are an attraction in themselves. The slow ride to Aguas Calientes was quite enjoyable and we spent much of the time reminiscing with our trekking family about our Salkantay trek adventures.





To be honest, Aguas Calientes does not have the best reputation among travelers. We certainly didn't fall in love with the town the first time we visited a few months earlier. However, our experience with Mountain Lodges of Peru was ENTIRELY different.

Their guests stay in the gorgeous [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#), a not-so-small piece of paradise built on the edge of town. The lodge is well known among birders due to their extraordinarily manicured jungle grounds which have been specifically designed to attract birds.

Within minutes we spotted oropendolas, parrots and parakeets galore, and several varieties of hummingbirds. We could have easily spent a week here birdwatching and taking the naturalist day walks offered by the hotel. We didn't step out of the hotel grounds into Aguas Calientes for even one second during our stay. Our sensational room featured a glassed-in sitting area overlooking the trees where we could just kick back and watch the birds fly by.



Our last dinner together at Cafe Inkaterra was equally impressive. I started with a stuffed pepper on a bed of quinoa. My main was a phenomenal lamb dish with sides of mashed fava beans and fried sweet potatoes. Dessert was a delicious elderberry cheesecake.

Joe and Mary generously flooded the table with bottles of wine leaving everyone quite happy... and tipsy. And our incredible guide Whilder surprised Nathan with a cake to celebrate his coming birthday. Very cool. This was definitely the best meal we had in Peru's Andean region. (Lima is the food capital of South America, so there is some serious competition in this country.)

Salkantay Trek – Day 7: Machu Picchu, Here We Come!

But the Salkantay trek adventure wasn't over yet... Machu Picchu was still to come. South America's most famous monument and legendary Incan city certainly deserves a post and a video of its own, right? So, here it is: [Machu Picchu](#). Click through this link to see our full coverage of Machu Picchu. (We loved it so much, we actually went twice within a four-month period.)



More Information about the Salkantay Trek to Machu Picchu

Many trekkers choose to stay at the [El Mercado](#) in Cuzco, which is owned by Mountain Lodges of Peru, before and after the Salkantay trek. This is also the location of the briefing held the evening before departure where trekkers receive more detailed information on the itinerary as well as the horse duffel bags used to transport clothing and personal items during the trek. Be aware that the bags are of limited size due to baggage limitations on the trains to and from Aguas Calientes.

In addition to the Salkantay trek, Mountain Lodges of Peru

offers two additional high-end lodge-based Lares trek adventures. The 7-day **Sacred Valley & Lares Adventure** combines the cultural exploration of the Sacred Valley (including Machu Picchu) with a hike in the less visited Lares region. The 10-day **Grand Andean Experience** goes deeper into the ancient cultures and stunning landscapes by combining the Sacred Valley, the Lares mountains, and the Salkantay trek.



Salkantay Trek Tips

- Use insect repellent and wear long pants and long-sleeve shirts. Many trekkers along the Salkantay trail complain about sand flies, which can inflict itchy, long-lasting bites. We didn't have any issues during our lodge-to-lodge Salkantay trek. However, we noticed that many camping trekkers were badly chewed up. Antihistamine tablets or creams might be a good options to treat your bites.
- Bring clothing for all climates and dress in layers. The Salkantay trek takes you from the high Andes into the humid cloud forests of Peru. When dressing for the day, consider that the weather can change by the minute.
- Consider bringing **Diamox** to prevent and treat altitude sickness. The Salkantay trek involves serious elevation gains, with the Salkantay Pass being the highest point at 4,600 m (15,090 ft). The best way to prevent altitude sickness is by acclimating properly. Some people, however, still experience altitude sickness. Ask your travel clinic about Diamox and whether this medication is right for you.

[Plan your Trip to Salkantay Mountain](#)

When to Go – Best time for the Salkantay trek is May through September, during winter in the Southern Hemisphere. Days tend to be dry, sunny, and clear. Nights can be chilly, especially in higher elevations. April and October fall into the shoulder season, and are both good months to do the Salkantay trek. We actually went in October and were very lucky with the weather.

Book Your Trip – We highly recommend that you book the Salkantay trek to Machu Picchu far in advance. You can either buy the 7-day lodge-to-lodge trek online through [Mountain Lodges of Peru](#), or you can [book the extended 10-day trek through REI](#). This way, you will have an extra day at Machu Picchu (which we highly recommend) and two extra days in Cuzco, one before and one after your trek. [REI also offers an extended 10-day Sacred Valley & Lares Adventure](#).

As mentioned before, the Salkantay trek to Machu Picchu can also be done as a camping adventure, either independently or as part of a tour. Because the trek requires quite a bit of organizing and you having to carry your own camping equipment, food and cooking setup, it makes a lot of sense to go by tour. If cost is an issue, the camping tours are also much cheaper than the lodge-to-lodge Salkantay trek. [Viator's five-day camping trek](#) is a great alternative.

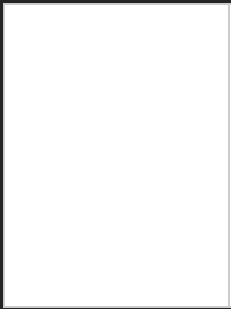
Accommodation – Most visitors stay in vibrant Cuzco or relaxed [Ollantaytambo](#) before or after their Salkantay trek to Machu Picchu. Both towns are a great base for exploring the gorgeous [Sacred Valley](#); in addition, they have plenty of accommodation options. To find great hotel deals, [check out Hotelscombined.com](#), a site which offers the best deals across numerous top hotel booking sites, including [booking.com](#) and [agoda](#).

Guidebooks – We normally travel with a Lonely Planet guide book. During our six months in Peru, we used the [Lonely Planet Peru guidebook](#) and quite liked it. It's great for cultural and historical info, hiking tours, maps, itineraries, and also includes highlights such as [Lake Titicaca](#), the [Peruvian Amazon](#), [Apu Ausangate](#), [Machu Picchu](#), [Colca Canyon](#), and many others. For a more visual guidebook, we recommend the [DK Eyewitness Travel](#)

Guide: Peru. All guidebooks can be conveniently purchased on Amazon.

Travel Gear – One piece of equipment we highly recommend for exploring Southern Peru is an **action camera such as the GoPro** to capture everything on film. We also recommend a comfortable backpack such as the **Deuter daypack** and good **trekking poles**; they will be one of your best investments for your knees and back. And since you will be trekking with poles, a **GoPro head strap** may be useful.

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Disclosure: While doing the Salkantay trek, we were guests of **Mountain Lodges of Peru**. However, all of the opinions expressed here are our own. In addition, the article contains links that help us earn a small commission at no extra cost to you. Thank you for your support!

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15 responses to “Salkantay Trek to Machu Picchu”



George November 24, 2014 at 11:23 am