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CITY GUIDE: CUSCO, PERU

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Deep in a highland valley in the South American Andes is the city of Cusco, Peru's most popular travel destination. Once the beating heart of the mighty Incan Empire, today Cusco is a launchpad for tourists to explore the historic villages and relics of the Sacred Valley, most notably the "lost" city of Machu Picchu.

But while the area surrounding Cusco offers a dizzying array of cultural excursions, treks and outdoor activities, the city itself is a joy to discover.

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Designed by the Incas in the shape of a puma, at Cusco's centre is the splendid Plaza de Armas, around which labyrinths of colourful cobbled streets beckon for exploration.

This is a city where ancient Andean history interweaves with colonial culture to create some of the most beautiful architecture in the country. You can dine like king (or queen) at a different restaurant every night, pose for pictures with baby alpacas in your arms, and spend hours browsing the vibrant markets full of traditional textiles and trinkets. Here's how to make the best of this spectacular sacred city.

TO STAY



Inkaterra La Casona

Located in a renovated colonial mansion just a few minutes from Cusco's Plaza de Armas, Inkaterra La Casona is considered one of the best hotels on the continent, not just in the country. Merging traditional charm with modern decadence, it offers guests luxurious rooms complemented by fireplaces to ward off cold Andean nights. The restaurant serves delicious Peruvian fare, and guests rising early for excursions don't have to miss out on the gourmet breakfast: the morning buffet opens at 5AM.

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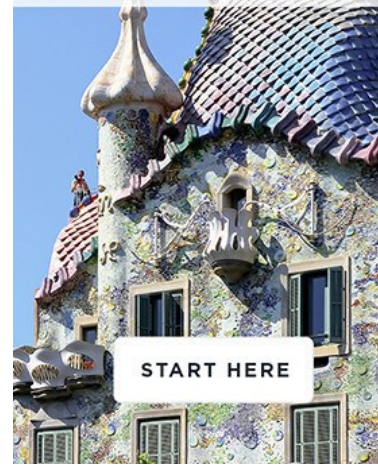
Plaza Las Nazarenas 211
08000 Cusco

Palacio del Inka Cusco

Another worthy splurge is the Palacio del Inka, located in Cusco's centre and offering guests a slice of history mixed into their luxury. The huge onsite spa offers a range of indigenous treatments that promise to "tap into the ancient mysticism of the Andes", while the Raymi restaurant provides a wide array of traditional Peruvian dishes alongside contemporary cuisine and international food. The hotel has 203 bedrooms, all of which blend modern amenities with authentic Inca-style decor.

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Niños Hotel

This is an excellent mid-range option. The hotel offers a real bang for your buck, and its charitable mission only strengthens its appeal: profits go to the Niños Unidos Peruanos Foundation, a charity that looks after disadvantaged children in Cusco. It's warm and friendly with amenities that defy its low price, and the restaurant serves food sourced from its own garden. The outside courtyard is a sun trap and perfect for lunch – or a pisco sour after a long day exploring.

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Amaru Hostal

One of the best budget options in Cusco is the Amaru Hostal, a friendly place that quite literally goes the extra mile, happily picking up its guests from the airport free of charge. With a decent breakfast included in the price and a pretty courtyard to enjoy it in, as well as a prime location just a few streets from the town centre, you'll wonder why your backpacking days weren't this easy.

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