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Great Escapes: Cusco, Peru's Charming Second City

By Brent Crane • Updated Nov. 23, 2018 6:02 p.m. ET



Plaza de Armas in Cusco, Peru, a budding tourism destination. GETTY IMAGES

Cusco will, figuratively and literally, take your breath away. Peru's second city, full of hilly cobblestones lanes, centuries-old cathedrals, and pleasant stone fountains, sits at nearly 11,000 feet. For visitors, breathlessness is a given, and a tour of Cusco, at least before your lungs

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acclimate, is best performed slowly.

But this city of roughly 435,000 people lends itself well to careful exploration. In its sprawling public squares, you'll want to sit and people watch. Your meals, especially if you order the wood-oven roasted cuy, or guinea pig, a local delicacy, will not come quickly. Its archeological ruins are massive, intricate, and impossible to rush through. Cusco, like its thin, pure air, is a place to absorb in deep, calm breaths.

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For its splendid charms and its proximity to Machu Picchu—about three hours by train—Cusco has established itself as one of South America's hottest tourist destinations. Its atmospheric Old Town is awash with hotels, bars, gift shops, and restaurants. Peruvian cuisine, led by a handful of passionate local chefs, has undergone a dramatic revival in recent decades, and while the capital city of Lima is the country's fine-dining hub, Cusco has not been ignored—there are some amazing meals to be had here. With exceptional things to eat, explore, and experience, Cusco is a world-class destination at the top of the world.

HISTORY

Before the Spaniards conquered it in the 16th century, Cusco was the capital of the Inca Empire, the largest of the pre-Columbian civilizations. The Incas were technologically, agriculturally, spiritually, and politically complex, all of which is apparent in Cusco. The city, which sits in a fertile, alluvial valley, was designed with specific administrative and religious functions.

It was well-planned with rectilinear streets. The residences of the area's elites were made of finely cut andesite or granite. It was from Cusco that the Incas exercised their control over much of the Andes, the world's longest mountain range.

Seizing control of Cusco, the Spaniards simply built over much of the preexisting structures, as they did elsewhere in Latin America, with Baroque churches and monasteries, white-walled squat houses, and palaces. Today, the city's original center, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is the epitome of Inca-Spanish fusion, with elements from both cultures coexisting and giving a personality not found anywhere else.



STAY

Cusco's two finest hotels include the [Belmond's Palacio Nazarenas](#), located inside a former convent with a spa and outdoor pool, and [Inkaterra La Casona](#), positioned next door in the same Plaza de las Nazarenas in a 16th century manor. The Belmond's spa offers "body wraps" with local remedies like maca, honey, and Muña (Peruvian mint), while the spa at La Casona offers "oxygen therapy": a foot massage enjoyed while wearing an oxygen mask. The Inkaterra hotel group, run by Peruvian conservationist José Koechlin, also runs [Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba](#), an hour and a half away in the Sacred Valley. Nestled in the hills, surrounded by green peaks, the eco-resort is the epitome of rustic luxury.

EAT

One of the finest meals to be had on Cusco's picturesque Plaza de Armas is at [LIMO](#), which serves Nikkei food, a fusion of Japanese and Peruvian cuisine that has contributed much to Peru's fine dining movement; Maido, a Nikkei restaurant in Lima, currently ranks 7th on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list. For those hankering to try the cuy, locals swear that the best is at [Pachapapa](#), up a hill in the San Blas arts district. Rotisserie'd in a clay oven, the guinea pig will take 45 minutes but is well worth the wait.

If staying in the Sacred Valley, or willing to do a day-trip from Cusco, make sure to visit [MIL](#), the brand new restaurant from world renowned chef Virgilio Martinez, of "Chef's Table" fame. The restaurant is rather remote, sitting atop the awe-inspiring Moray archeological site, and serves up Andean-inspired fare, using 100% strictly Andean-sourced ingredients. Reservations definitely required.

EXPLORE

Strolling Cusco's Centro Historico is a delight. The Plaza de Armas, and its 16th and 17th century cathedrals and Museum of Religious Art, is an easy morning. An afternoon can be spent at Sacsayhuaman, a sprawling Inca ruins site in the hills overlooking the city where, in 1536, Spanish forces battled Inca ones for control of the city. From the Plaza de Armas, it is about a twenty minute uphill walk (you can also hail a taxi).

When touring Cusco, remember that, though it can be quite warm in the sun during the day, the temperature quickly drops at nightfall. Altitude sickness is also sure to take effect in the beginning, with headaches, shortness of breath, and loss of appetite. Most hotels offer a tea brewed with coca leaves, which helps alleviate symptoms. For a fantastic customized itinerary of Cusco, contact [Aracari](#), a local luxury travel agency. Tours range from textiles shopping to chocolate-making workshops and pisco sour demonstrations, as well as meals at the city's best restaurants.

From Cusco, there are a few ways to reach Machu Picchu, a 15th century Inca citadel and UNESCO World Heritage Site open year-round. One can take a breathtaking 3.5 hour train from Poroy, a town nearby Cusco, to Machu Picchu Pueblo, the nearest town to the site, also known as Aguas Calientes. There are three train services to choose from: [Inca Rail](#), [Peru Rail](#), and the [Belmond Hiram Bingham train](#), the latter being the most luxurious option. There are also regular taxis and minivans to Aguas Calientes from Ollantaytambo, a town about an hour from Cusco. Most hotels can help in making travel arrangements.

The writer stayed as a guest of the Inkaterra hotel group.





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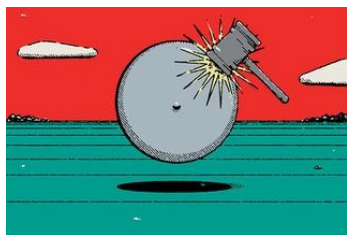
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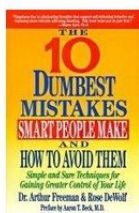
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