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Cheat sheet to:

# Machu Picchu

Dreaming of a trip to South America's iconic Incan citadel?

**Alicia Miller** reveals how to make the fantasy a reality

## Don't go in high season

Nearly 1.5 million people visit the Incan hilltop ruins of Machu Picchu every year. Most of them come during the Peruvian winter — June to August — when it's school holidays and the weather is generally crisp and clear. The busiest day is June 21, the summer solstice, when hordes arrive hoping to see the sun pouring through a perfectly aligned window at the Temple of the Sun.

But the peak-season crowds — up to 5,000 people a day — rob the place of its magic and trails are so jammed you can hardly walk, never mind get a good picture. You can wait hours for bus transfers and the weather may still disappoint — on more than one June 21, it's been too cloudy to get that iconic sun

shot. So, aim for quieter, warmer April, May or October. Try March, too: it's the rainy season, but showers are rarely heavy and local orchids are in bloom.

## Choose your entrance

There are two main ways to get to Machu Picchu. The best known is via the challenging Inca Trail, a trek of two to four days (depending where you start). It involves camping and hiking, at altitude, from outside Cuzco (about 45km at heights of up to 4,215m). Only 250 to 500 people are permitted each day, with licensed guides and porters — and you have to book with a tour operator about six months in advance.

A more practical and popular option is a two-hour journey by bus followed by

a scenic stretch by train from Cuzco (from £99 return; [perurail.com](http://perurail.com)), then a further 25-minute bus transfer (£19 return) up the mountain from Aguas Calientes, the nearest town. The only 'hiking' you'll have to do is around the citadel itself — and you can book your ticket (£36 from [machupicchu.gob.pe](http://machupicchu.gob.pe)) a few days ahead. If you're not up for the Inca Trail, but still want a dramatic entrance, skip the bus from Aguas Calientes and walk along the 90-minute trail up the mountain instead.

## Stay the night

It is possible to 'do' the citadel in a few hours, so some people try to fit it in on a day-trip from Cuzco. But beware: not only might you have to deal with sudden altitude sickness (especially if you're coming from sea-level Lima and haven't acclimatised in Cuzco first), but you'll be tired — a four-to-five-hour journey is an exhausting way to start a visit to one of the world's most iconic sights. So, stay at least one night — ideally two — in Aguas Calientes, with its lively market and mountain vistas.



There are some backpackery places to stay, but you needn't slum it: at deluxe Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo ([inkaterra.com](http://inkaterra.com); doubles from £391, B&B), you can spot rare orchids, neon-plumaged cock-of-the-rock birds and endangered Andean bears (the real Paddington). Its Café Inkaterra, which overlooks the rushing Vilcanota River and vintage-style railway, is the perfect place for a Pisco Sour-laced lunch after you've visited the ruins. Or stay at funkier, more affordable El Mapi by Inkaterra, with its whitewashed rooms and buzzy bar ([inkaterra.com](http://inkaterra.com); doubles from £173, B&B).

## Allow yourself a lie-in

Your entrance ticket is pegged to a specific day and time, between 6am and 2pm. But once you're in, you can stay as long as you like. While it's tempting to book the first entry slot to make the most of it, it's likely you'll want to leave before too long: eating inside is prohibited, there are no loos, and even with lots of stops and pausing to take pictures, most people complete the

circuit in about three hours. Early morning is the busiest time, too, so you'll encounter long queues and end up walking around the ruins with a crowd. Instead, arrive about 8.30am — you'll be starting as the first throngs are halfway round the route, but you'll still beat the Cuzco day-trippers who arrive between 10am and 12pm.

## Get a guide

If you try to navigate Machu Picchu on your own, you'll find yourself staring stupidly at a bunch of old rocks, as there are no signs. And with the epic views, photogenic llamas and pushy tourists, the last thing you want is to have your nose buried in a guidebook. Hire a guide, either through your hotel or at the site entrance — all guides in Machu Picchu must be licensed, and prices are fairly standardised (£5pp-£10pp for a group tour), so you needn't worry about being ripped off. If you're given the choice of a two-and-a-half-hour tour or a three-hour one, make it the latter — you don't want to be rushed around the circuit since all the best photo ops are at the

## get me there

Abercrombie & Kent ([abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)) has a nine-night Classic Peru trip that includes two nights' B&B at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo, plus flights, transfers and some guiding, from £3,295pp.

start. A good guide will also be able to lead you to quiet corners off the main track (such as the quarry) and can point out easily missed aqueducts, unique vantage points and key ruins — for example, the emperor's house.

## Go one step further

Machu Picchu's sights spread beyond its instantly recognisable citadel — you could fill several days in the area hiking local trails or exploring lesser-known ruins. But if you only have time for one more thing, make it the trek to Huayna Picchu, a 360m summit best known as the backdrop in those classic Machu Picchu in photographs. The walk starts inside the ruins (a £47 ticket includes citadel entrance; [machupicchu.gob.pe](http://machupicchu.gob.pe)) and gives you a superb alternative view over the site. You'll need to book far in advance — weeks, or even months ahead in busy periods — and allow about 90 minutes to reach the summit. Block out four hours if you want to carry on to the Incan Temple of the Moon (included on the ticket), at the far side of the mountain's base.

