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By Lyndsey Matthews, Simon Willis, Kyana Moghadam • August 04, 2023

How to Experience Machu Picchu

Traveling to Peru's famed Inca citadel is an epic trip worth taking at least once in your life. Here's how to make the most of it, whether you're hiking or arriving in style on a luxury train.



Machu Picchu can only be accessed now via timed entry tickets purchased in advance. Photo by Lyndsey Matthews

One of the [New Seven Wonders of the World](#) and a UNESCO World Heritage site, Machu Picchu is practically synonymous with Peru. Built during the 15th century, this Inca citadel was abandoned sometime after the Spanish invasion and remained unexplored until 1911 when American scholar Hiram Bingham III and a team of Peruvian explorers stumbled upon it in the cloud forest about 50 miles northwest of Cusco. Why it was built and why it was abandoned are still mysteries. Here's what you need to know for your visit, including when to go, where to stay, and how to get there.

Best time to visit Machu Picchu

High season for Machu Picchu is its dry winter months from June to August. Since hotels in Aguas Calientes—the town at the base of Machu Picchu—book up months in advance and a limited number of tickets are available to enter the archeological site each day, it's smart to consider the shoulder season months of April, May, September, and October when there are fewer crowds and temperatures average in the 60s Fahrenheit.



Low season coincides with Machu Picchu's rainy summer season, which runs from November to March each year. Though the archeological site remains open year round, if you're planning a hiking trip, keep in mind the entire Inca Trail is closed each February due to harsh weather, safety issues, and planned annual maintenance work.



Rainy season is no joke at Machu Picchu—plan accordingly. Photo by Stock for you/Shutterstock

Getting acclimated to Machu Picchu's elevation

Machu Picchu is located at 7,972 feet above sea level and Cusco is located even higher (just over 11,000 feet). To avoid the effects of altitude sickness, which can include nausea and bad headaches, follow these tips:

- Consider flying into Cusco and heading straight to Aguas Calientes, since it's located around 6,700 feet, for a night or two to adjust to the high altitude before visiting Machu Picchu.
- Stay as hydrated as possible.
- Avoid alcohol and heavy exercise the first few days.

How to get from Cusco to Machu Picchu

Though Machu Picchu is only 50 miles from Cusco, there's no direct road between the two locations. The easiest way to get from Cusco to Machu Picchu is by taking a train from the San Pedro, Wánchaq, or Poroy stations in Cusco to the Machu Picchu Pueblo Station in Aguas Calientes. It takes just under four hours.



The main operators are [PeruRail](#) and [Inka Rail](#), which offer a variety of luxury and budget options. For example, [PeruRail](#) operates the luxury [Hiram Bingham, a Belmond Train](#) every Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday between the Poroy Station in Cusco, Ollantaytambo Station, and Machu Picchu Pueblo Station. Expect 1920s Pullman carriages with wood details and polished brass, an observatory car, plus live music and pisco sours in the bar car. Prices are steep—starting around \$1,000 for a round-trip ticket—but include the entrance ticket to Machu Picchu (with a guide), lunch and dinner on the train, and more.

If you choose to explore the Sacred Valley before heading to Machu Picchu, it's possible to get a train from [Ollantaytambo](#) (a small town with original houses, streets, and waterways preserved from Incan times) to Aguas Calientes, which takes about two hours. (Many trains from Cusco offer bimodal options, as well, which include a bus from Cusco to Ollantaytambo and the train from there to Aguas Calientes.)

From Aguas Calientes, Machu Picchu is a 30-minute bus-ride up the hill. Tickets cost [\\$15 round-trip for adults online](#), but many tour operators include the price of the bus ticket and entrance to Machu Picchu in their package. (It's also possible to hike up to Machu Picchu from Aguas Calientes and back down, but it's very steep and takes 90 minutes each way.)



Located in Peru's Sacred Valley, Ollantaytambo is the starting point for most Inca Trail hikes and has ruins of its own worth visiting. Photo by Lyndsey Matthews

How to hike to Machu Picchu



For an extra challenge, active travelers can also hike to Machu Picchu on a multi-day trek or a shorter day hike. (Whichever route you take, be sure to take a few days to acclimate to the elevation before setting out.)

The most famous trek is the **Inca Trail**, a centuries-old route that leads from the Sacred Valley up into the Andes Mountains to elevations over 13,000 feet. A permit and an official guide are required to hike the trail, so it's easiest to book both through a tour operator. The most classic route is a four-day/three-night trek that departs from Ollantaytambo and includes porters to carry packs and set up camp, as well as cooks who prepare three meals a day.

The Peruvian government limits Inca Trail access to 500 people per day, including porters. This regulation protects the local ecosystem and the delicate ruins, and it ensures that the trail won't be too crowded. However, if permits for the peak summer season sell out, never fear: Various other trails lead to Machu Picchu. Here are some recommendations for classic Inca Trail trips to book, plus a few lesser-known treks that also include visits to Machu Picchu.



The classic Inca Trail route takes four days and three nights to reach Machu Picchu. Photo by Lyndsey Matthews

Luxury Inca Trail with Alpaca Expeditions

Book now: from \$2,695, alpacaxpeditions.com



Alpaca Expeditions is a 100 percent Peruvian Indigenous-owned company. It offers a [classic four-day/three-night trek](#) on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu starting at \$750 per person, but the luxury version of this trip includes, among other things, upgraded tents with air mattresses and camping cots outfitted with feather duvets and cotton sheets (no BYO sleeping bag here).

Alpaca Expeditions will arrange for transport from Cusco, Urubamba, or Ollantaytambo to the Km 82 trailhead on the first day. For the return trip to Cusco, it also includes tickets on the luxury Hiram Bingham, a Belmond Train, from Aguas Calientes.

Peru Inca Trail Trekking Tour with Mountain Travel Sobek

Book now: from \$3,795, [mtsobek.com](#)

Before setting off on a four-day, three-night trek on the Inca Trail, MT Sobek's tour begins with two nights in the Sacred Valley at the new [Las Qolqas](#) eco-resort, set in a beautiful garden complex just outside the town of Ollantaytambo. Once travelers are acclimatized to the elevation, they'll cross the Urubamba River to begin the Inca Trail hike starting at Km 88 instead of the Km 82, where most groups begin, for a more isolated experience. After three nights of tent camping, the trip culminates with sunrise views of Machu Picchu, plus another full day at the archaeological site before returning to Cusco.

Day Hike on the Inca Trail with Modern Adventure

Book now: from \$8,000, [modernadventure.com](#)

For less ambitious hikers, Modern Adventure's food-focused tours of Peru offer an optional day hike on a 6.8-mile portion of the Inca Trail as part of its larger seven-day trip. After taking the train from Ollantaytambo part of the way to Aguas Calientes in the morning, hikers disembark along the Urubamba River and start their journey up into the Andes past archaeological sites like Chachabamba and Winaywayna before descending to Machu Picchu through the Sun Gate in the late afternoon. Guests who opt out of the hike will take the train directly to Aguas Calientes and visit Machu Picchu the following day.

>> *Read more: [What It's Like to Go on a Modern Adventure Tour of Machu Picchu](#)*





The sights along the Salkantay Trek rival the views at Machu Picchu, dare we say. Photo by Andrew Clifforth/Shutterstock

The Salkantay Trek to Machu Picchu with Mountain Lodges of Peru

Book now: from \$3,300, [mountainlodgesofperu.com](https://www.mountainlodgesofperu.com)

Though the **50-mile Salkantay Trek** is considered to be a more challenging alternative to the Inca Trail, it's a little easier to take on knowing that each day of luxury outfitter **Mountain Lodges of Peru** (MLP)'s seven-day **lodge-to-lodge trip** culminates with a night at its proprietary hotels—the Salkantay Lodge, Wayra Lodge, Colpa Lodge, and Lucma Lodge. After days of exploring archaeological sites like Quillarumiyoc and crossing the Salkantay Pass (15,213 feet elevation), travelers get to enjoy a gourmet dinner, a soak in a Jacuzzi, and possibly spa treatments, too. The final day of the trek includes a morning at Machu Picchu before heading back to Cusco in the afternoon.

The Vilcabamba Trail with Kandoo Adventures

Book now: from \$1,685, [kandooadventures.com](https://www.kandooadventures.com)

When Hiram Bingham and a team of Peruvian explorers stumbled upon Machu Picchu, they were actually looking for the city of Vilcabamba. With Kandoo Adventures, hikers will spend two days in Cusco to acclimate, then head out on a five-day trek into the Sacred Valley. One of the most scenic and remote routes, the Vilcabamba Trail follows the Cordillera de Vilcabamba and promises solitude and a serious workout before ending with a visit to Machu Picchu on the last day.



The Huchuy Qosqo Trek with Llama Path

Book now: from \$599, llamapath.com

The first two days of this three-day trek that begins in Cusco are dedicated to visiting the historic Inca site of Huchuy Qosqo and to getting to know the history and some of the people who live in the area. The last night is spent in the town of Aguas Calientes before the Llama Path team takes you up to Machu Picchu.

Of course, plenty of tours to Machu Picchu don't require multi-day hikes. Though tour operators like [G Adventures](#) and [Intrepid](#) both offer Inca Trail treks, travelers can also book trips through them that skip the trails and include a visit to Machu Picchu by the train and bus combo described earlier.



Llamas are allowed to roam freely around Machu Picchu, but humans aren't, so it's important to obey the rules. Photo by Lyndsey Matthews

Machu Picchu tickets (and other tips for visiting the site)

Machu Picchu is open every day from 6 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and tickets for international adults start at 152 Peruvian soles (at US\$42). Most treks and tours include entrance tickets to Machu Picchu itself in their cost. If you're traveling

independently from a group tour, keep in mind that [advance timed entry tickets are required](#) and you must hire a certified guide. (Guides are available at the entrance.) Also, don't forget your passport, which you'll need to verify the name on your ticket.

In addition to establishing [five one-way circuits](#) to help with crowd control, Machu Picchu has added strict limits to the number of visitors it allows each day. (You'll want to choose [circuit one](#) or [circuit two](#) if you want to snap that classic postcard view of Machu Picchu.) Currently, just under 3,000 tickets are available for the main citadel each day, so be sure to purchase your ticket as early as possible. There's even less availability if you want to hike Huayna Picchu, the peak in that signature view of Machu Picchu. (Only 200 people are allowed to hike each day.)

The best time of day to visit Machu Picchu: Arrive the night before to Aguas Calientes, and get on the first bus that leaves at 5:30 a.m. so you can be one of the first people on site. Similarly, if you visit in the late afternoon before it closes, you'll encounter fewer crowds.

What to wear (and what to leave at home): The sun is also very strong at altitude, so hats and sunscreen are a must. But no matter how sunny it is, it's also smart to bring a rain jacket in case of rogue showers since umbrellas aren't allowed into the site.

Rules to follow: After a [German tourist fell to his death in 2016](#), the park now forbids jumping photos and strictly enforces it. Other big no-nos include eating in nondesignated food areas, sitting on the sacred ruins, and touching their stone surfaces.

Where to stay near Machu Picchu

[The Sanctuary Lodge, a Belmond Hotel](#), is located right at the gate to Machu Picchu, allowing the best access to the site. The 31 rooms and suites come with comfy beds and marble bathrooms, and some have terraces and mountain views. There's not much to do other than eat and drink at the hotel itself—unless you want to take the 30-minute bus ride down to Aguas Calientes—but after a long train ride or hike, relaxation might be all that's on your mind before an early bedtime.

For those planning on staying more than one night, it's best to book in Aguas Calientes for easy access to the markets and restaurants located there. One of the best—and most beautiful—options in town is the [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#). It has 83 rustic adobe casitas set among 12 acres within a cloud forest next to the Urubamba River that's home to 214 bird species and even more varieties of native orchids.

Lyndsey Matthews

Lyndsey Matthews is the senior commerce editor at AFAR who covers travel gear, packing advice, and points and loyalty.





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