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Peru's Legendary Inca Trail Falls Out of Favor - Or Does It?

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Mar 4, 2024



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Slice through lush jungle along age-old Incan roads until an awe-inspiring crescendo: the mysterious mountaintop citadel of Machu Picchu comes into view in the distance, robed in mist. It's an otherworldly experience that has made the Inca Trail one of the world's most well-known treks, drawing hiking pros and beginners alike to the verdant mountains of Peru.

While Peru's trekking routes were named among *Travel + Leisure's* prestigious list of the 50 best places to go in 2024, a mention of the famed Inca Trail, long considered one of the best experiences for travelers in Peru, was glaringly absent. Instead, alternative hiking trails seem to finally be getting their moment in the sun - whether the popularity of the Inca Trail wanes or not.

Trekking Peru



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The four-day, 26-mile Inca Trail has long attracted challengers the world over. However, the rise of alternative treks has diversified and expanded the hiking scene in this culturally rich region of Peru. Among newer favorites is the challenging Salkantay Trek, a four- or five-day, 46-mile trek that cuts past glaciers, snow-capped peaks, and high-altitude lakes that are usually only accessible with guides from nearby Cusco.

Even less famous, but by no means less impressive, the Lares Trek and Ausangate Trek routes cut through valleys surrounded by rainbow-colored mountains and long-hidden Incan temples and courtyards.

Like the classic Inca Trail, these routes all end with the same dramatic conclusion: the long-lost Incan citadel of Machu Picchu, one of the new Seven Wonders of the World. Though the journey is one of a kind, for most travelers, the bucket list destination is the highlight of the trip.

In addition to these trails that end in Machu Picchu, even more mysterious Incan ruins draw more intrepid explorers.

Another lost Incan city, Choquequirao, has drawn attention as a remarkable Machu Picchu "alternative" and was named among *National Geographic's* World's Best Destinations for Travelers in 2023. It's only accessible via a strenuous four-day trek and gets just a handful of visitors daily. Less taxing single-day treks are also among some of the most popular day trips from Cusco, a popular acclimatization trail for would-be hikers.

Getting off the Beaten Path — Literally

Beyond the beauty of these newly popular treks, there's a common desire: to appreciate a one-of-a-kind attraction without the crowds. "The rise in popularity of these new trekking routes in Peru, such as Salkantay, Ausangate, Lares, and Choquequirao, is due to the growing interest of travelers for off-the-beaten-path experiences, where natural beauty, ancient ruins, and cultural encounters blend, appealing to adventurers seeking more immersive explorations," says Caroline Pando Solano, Marketing Coordinator at Inkaterra Hotels, one of Peru's most respected luxury hotel groups.

Indeed, part of the route's appeal is how it grants behind-the-scenes access to places lost to history; it's hard to get that feeling when surrounded by a crowd. While access to the route is strictly regulated with permitting, up to 500 permits are issued daily on the Inca Trail. On

some of the newer trekking routes, you'll feel like the only person around for miles.

Luxury Travel Trekking

The broad appeal of trekking in Peru transforms the experience. What started as a backpacker mainstay now appeals to adventure-minded luxury travelers, elevating the classic experience in exciting ways.

Crafting a luxury experience from start to finish begins with acclimatizing to the altitude before hitting the trail. There's nowhere better than at the incomparable Inkaterra. The prestigious group's hotels include Inkaterra La Casona in historic Cusco, Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel in the shadow of Machu Picchu on the outskirts of tiny Aguas Calientes, and Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in the heart of the Sacred Valley.

"Inkaterra hotels offer luxurious and comfortable accommodation, ensuring an ideal base for acclimatization before treks or as a restful retreat after treks. These accommodations are designed to provide a perfect blend of luxury and natural surroundings," says Pando Solano.

For travelers staying at the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, that means access to a 12-acre property nestled in the cloud forest, home to the world's most extensive registered native orchid collection and 83 adobe casitas hide along garden paths. Treatments at the hotel's intimate Unu Spa use natural products derived from local ingredients, incorporating traditional Andean healing techniques.

Guests can also expect, "personalized services including private guides, customized itineraries, and attentive staff to enhance their trekking experience," according to Pando Solano. "Inkaterra's commitment to exceptional hospitality ensures that guests receive top-notch service throughout their trip. After a challenging day of trekking, travelers can indulge in wellness and relaxation services. Inkaterra hotels often provide spa facilities and other amenities to help guests rejuvenate and unwind."

It's an experience that can't compare to joining on a standard group trek that includes staying in makeshift camp tents.

Toward the Future

With many travelers having to book months in advance to secure a permit during the high travel season, it doesn't look like there will be any downturn in the popularity of the classic Inca Trail any time soon. New routes add a wealth of variety for travelers yearning for a more bespoke trekking experience.

With news that Machu Picchu is increasing daily visitor maximums, to the delight of the local tourism industry but the concern of preservation-minded historians, this newly diversifying Peruvian tourism experience is arriving at the perfect time.

Originally published on mediadecision.com, part of the BLOX Digital Content Exchange.