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GALÁPAGOS

Sea-Going Lizards:
Galápagos marine iguanas

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Above the Clouds

Embark on a once-in-a-lifetime journey to Machu Picchu.

BY MARY MELNICK

To the Top:
(Left to right) Train to Machu Picchu, Inca ruins and llama, fog lifting, and Temple of the Sun

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A trip to Machu Picchu, one of the new Seven Wonders of the World, might seem far out of reach, but once you do a little planning, the dream journey slowly becomes reality.

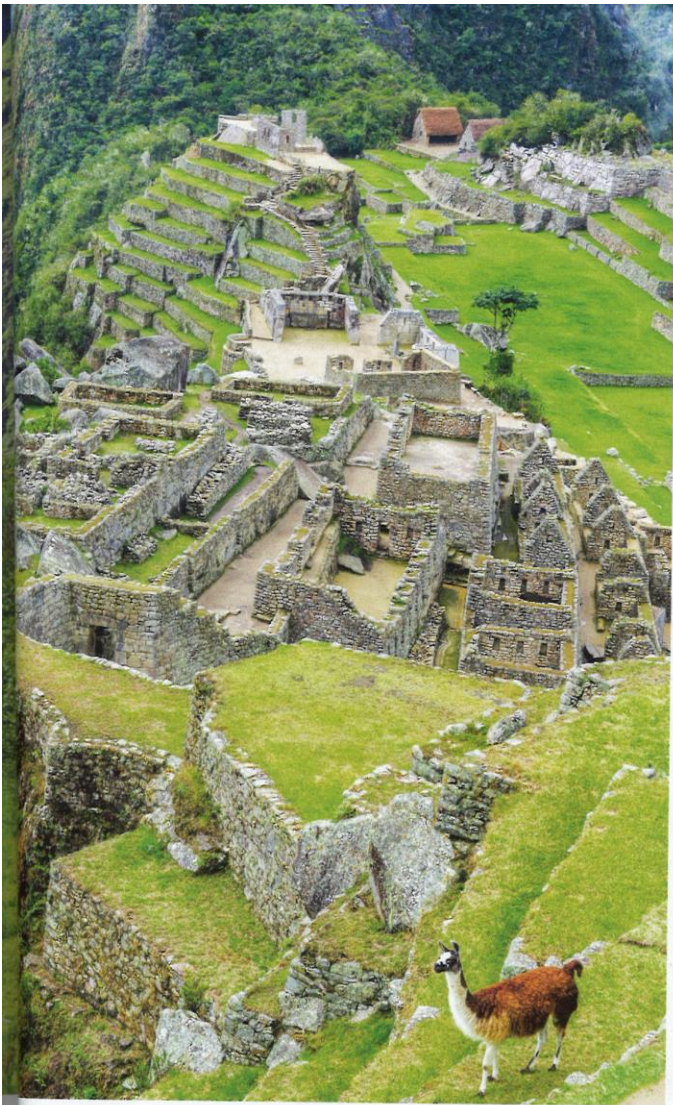
To find the perfect way to get to and explore Machu Picchu, you have to do the research. If you are looking for a challenge, consider trekking the Inca Trail for a two- to five-day excursion along the ancient hiking trail, ending at the famous landmark. Alternatively, take the train to Aguas Calientes, the town nestled in the valley below Machu Picchu and the main gateway for visitors.

Most visitors get to Aguas Calientes via PeruRail or Inca Rail from the Ollantaytambo Train Station. I recommend riding

PeruRail at least one way, as it offers an experience within itself. Purchase tickets in the Vistadome or Observatory Vistadome car. Each section features panoramic windows allowing the best views of the surrounding nature and mountains. Guests in each car receive a snack box featuring local treats and the choice of coffee or tea. Once the ride is in full swing, all passengers are invited to the last car for a traditional show with dance, music, storytelling and sometimes alpaca fashion shows.

Before heading to the destination, you should decide whether you want to make it a daytrip or spend the night in Aguas Calientes. Most tour companies offer a daytrip which includes the early morning train ride, a bus ride to the entrance of Machu Picchu, time to explore the attraction and the train ride back to Ollantaytambo or Cusco. If you choose to spend the night and explore the local town, you'll find plenty of hotel options for a great stay. I highly recommend Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, offering a Machu Picchu excursion experience you can add to your itinerary. The excursion includes an expert guide to accompany you throughout your time at Machu Picchu.

Next, choose whether you want to take a three-hour hike or



one of the continuous 30-minute bus rides up to the Machu Picchu entrance. The last decision to make is which circuit of Machu Picchu you want to explore. Circuit 1, Panoramic, offers picture-perfect views and access to Machu Picchu. Circuit 2, Classic, proves to be the most popular, offering a comprehensive tour of the main city, upper terraces, temples and agriculture areas; and Circuit 3, Royalty, includes an exploration of the lower city's royal buildings and challenging hikes.

After making all the decisions and securing the tickets, it's time to explore this extraordinary attraction. On our visit we stayed at Inkaterra and had an expert guide accompany us on our excursion. We decided to take one of the first buses up to the entrance, hoping to beat the flood of travelers heading there for the day. After many stops to catch our breath while climbing to the viewing terrace, we finally reached the top. It was a cloudy and foggy day, so we decided to wait at the terrace for the sky to clear.

While we waited, our knowledgeable guide shared information about how the ruins were discovered, what life was like when the Inca settlers lived there and other fascinating facts. Once the clouds cleared and the fog lifted, the views were one-of-a-kind — I couldn't believe I was actually there.

After soaking up the views and getting all the pictures we wanted, our guide took us through the main city, upper terraces and other areas we could access through our circuit — we even saw llamas and alpacas roaming freely. I recommend having a tour guide with you throughout the excursion. Our guide explained everything we saw and the purpose of each ruin or area. He even shared reference pictures of what the ruins looked like in the past. I could tell some other travelers who had no guide didn't appreciate the visit as much as we did with all the relevant information we received.

No matter which way you choose to experience Machu Picchu, you are in for a real treat at the top!

INFO TO GO

Currently, travelers must fly into Alejandro Velasco Astete International Airport in Cusco to visit Machu Picchu. Few international destinations offer direct flights to the Cusco airport, so most travelers fly directly to New Jorge Chávez International Airport in Lima before hopping on a connecting flight to Cusco. However, expect a dramatic change when the new Chinchero International Airport opens in late 2027 just outside of Cusco with more direct flight options, making it easier for travelers from around the world to reach the popular heritage site. Both airports still require a bit of a journey to Machu Picchu, so expect to rely on cabs, ride shares or public transportation like the train to get to Ollantaytambo Train Station.