

YOLO

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PERU

MACHU PICCHU

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An incoming train whistle blew in the remote Peruvian outpost of Ollantaytambo as I walked past a line of food vendors toward the station platform. Steep green foothills encased in mist seemed to rise straight from the tracks, and a wild energy surrounded the depot. Onboard, the observation cars of the PeruRail train let all the drama in as we began our slow journey along the Urubamba River, windows framing engorged rapids, dense jungle, and cattle grazing among old agricultural terraces.

I'd spent a lifetime seeing photos of Machu Picchu, and I usually avoid places that feel over-mythologized. But as the train followed the surging river and slipped deeper into the Peruvian cloud forest—past rustic depots and terrain so steep my neck ached from trying to

glimpse the ridgeline—I felt myself tuning into the wildness of the landscape. Even though the ancient citadel was likely built not as a religious site but as a luxurious estate for the Inca emperor Pachacuti, the spiritual energy was palpable.

Arriving in Aguas Calientes, at 8,038 feet, the atmosphere shifted again. A manic feeling surged through the town: streets teeming with international tourists, locals in colorful dress, and street dogs under a constant smattering of rain. Steam escaped from an idling train as we crossed the tracks to Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, climbing stone steps through dense foliage—home to more than 350 species of orchids. Birds flitted overhead, the bright red flash of the Andean cock-of-the-rock catching us by surprise. Inside, the check-in area's cozy library, shaded >





lamps, and Peruvian prints heightened the sense of arrival. Adobe casitas were scattered along the river, nature and architecture blending seamlessly. My room was built into a boulder, its rough stone sheltering the patio from rain, a wood-burning fireplace making it feel cocooning.

The next morning began with a 5:00 a.m. wake-up call to catch the earliest timed entry to the citadel. This, our guide explained, gave us the best chance of seeing Machu Picchu before the day's crowds—up to 6,000 visitors in high season—filtered down into the ruins. We queued in the dark at the bus depot, the edge-of-the-world feeling amplified by the darkened city below.

The winding bus ride ended at an outdoor entry, where a festive atmosphere prevailed as

thronged waited for the gates to open. Inside, we began climbing what felt like millions of stairs, the 20-minute ascent broken by pauses on lush agricultural terraces, excitement building as we caught our breath in the thin air and gazed toward the unseen vista.

The clouds refused to lift, frustrating many fellow travelers. Yet I felt nothing but awe: sharp peaks plunging into a lush, river-cut gorge; clouds reshaping endlessly, like an eddying river of mist and smoke. I felt connected—not only to the ancient site, but to the fast, animate landscape holding it.

And then the clouds shifted and the citadel revealed itself—goosebumps. The iconic peak appeared, mist swirling around it, exposing sections of the city and closing in again. When

the clouds finally parted, a visible ripple of excitement moved through the crowd. We did get our photos of a near-empty site, though the sun remained hidden; our guide explained it usually broke through around 8:00 a.m. We wandered deeper into the ancient city, along terraces carpeted in native grasses and flowers, and paused at the Temple of Three Windows, which represents Incan cosmology: the world above (Hanan Pacha), the world of the living (Kay Pacha), and the world below (Uku Pacha). Pressing my hand against the cold stone, I could feel the presence not just of gods, but of the citizens of this city who once lived and worshipped here. Finally reaching the floor of the ancient city, the sun burst through the clouds in dazzling brilliance. I looked at my watch: exactly 8:00 a.m.

Later, back at the hotel, I sank into the Andean sauna—a candlelit, thatched structure warmed by heated river stones and draped with eucalyptus leaves. Outside were tiers of hot and cold spring-fed pools. I moved between extremes, from frigid to scalding, staying until sunset, as torches flickered on across the property, clouds settled back over the mountains, and the birds staged their final performance of the day.

I felt a mad desire to return to this place—not to revisit Machu Picchu, but to linger in its orbit. To write, walk the forest paths, sit in the springs, and listen to the river. While the citadel hadn't been the sole reason for my trip to Peru, it had anchored something much deeper and lasting.

