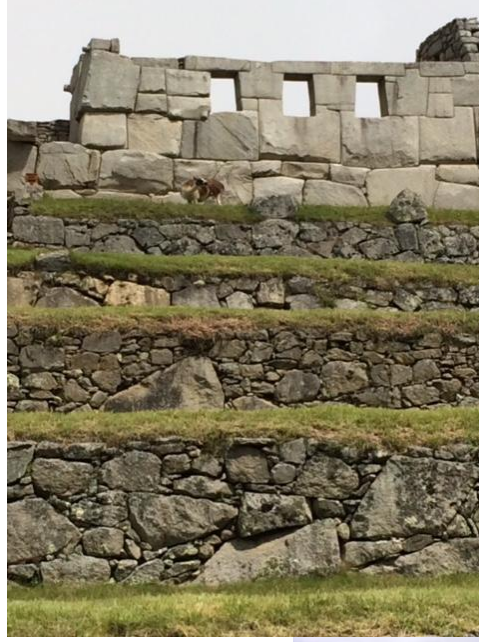


## MACHU PICCHU, PERU

History: The citadel of Machu Picchu was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and founded around 1450. The site was abandoned around 1570. Because of its remote location and very difficult access, Machu Picchu was unknown to the Spanish conquistadors, and thus left undisturbed for centuries. It was in 1911 that Hiram Bingham, an American professor and archaeologist at Yale University, led an expedition that discovered Machu Picchu, with the help of local guides. In subsequent years, there were several expeditions to clear the forest and rebuild and preserve the ruins – an effort that continues until today. Machu Picchu is a marvel of engineering, especially when you are on site and you see how difficult the access is. We do not know exactly what the purpose of Machu Picchu was. From most accounts, Machu Picchu was a religious, administrative, and trading center.



Visiting the site: Here are two main options:

1. Visit as a day trip. Although this is the most popular approach, I don't recommend it for several reasons: For starters, it is exhausting, as you have to get up very early from either Cuzco or your hotel in the Sacred Valley to catch the train to Aguas Calientes, then a 30 minute drive up the mountain to the main entrance. Secondly, you visit the site at peak occupancy. After your visit, you take a bus back down the mountain to Aguas Calientes, catch your train + transfer back to your hotel. I think it is too much to pack into 1 day. Finally, you now have to factor in that tickets are only good either in the morning (Until 12N) or in the afternoon (12N to 5pm), which adds another level of complexity. (I will cover this in more detail below).
2. Overnight in Aguas Calientes. This is my recommendation. First, you have 2 opportunities to visit the ruins, with more time to explore the site and nearby hikes. Secondly, the weather is unpredictable, so if you go on 2 different days you have 2 shots at being able to get great photos. When I visited, I had sunny weather on day 1 and



rain/clouds/mist and partial sun on day 2. You are also not as rushed. My advice is to take the morning train, have lunch at your hotel in Aguas Calientes ( the lunch options at the ruins are poor, crowded, and overpriced), then go up to the ruins around 2pm, when the day trippers start to leave. Stay until closing time at 530pm for great afternoon photos. The following morning, get up early, see the site early in the morning, and leave when the site starts to get crowded, take a train out in the afternoon.



**Admission to the ruins:** On any given day, up to 2,500 visitors enter Machu Picchu. To manage the demand, the Peruvian government started offering either morning or afternoon ticket options, as of 01JUL17. The morning ticket is good from 6am until 12noon, and the afternoon ticket is good from 12noon until 530pm, when the site closes.

**The ruins:** There are two main areas of the ruins, separated by a series of open grass plazas. Standout locations are the Intihuatana (hitching post of the sun), the Temple of the 3 windows, the temple of the sun (best photographed from above), the royal tomb, and the temple of the condor. Take time to wander around the areas where the nobility lived, and compare the sites and construction with the areas where the commoners and laborers lived.

**Hikes around Machu Picchu:** For the fit and intrepid, you have several options. The most famous is the hike up the Huayna Picchu (or 'Young Peak') the steep mountain in the back of the ruins. This is the most demanding hike up a steep and narrow path (not for anyone who suffers from vertigo), which takes about 1 hour each way. There are only 200 permits at 7am and another 200 at 10am, and you

have to buy a separate ticket. The second hike is all the way up to the Cerro Machu Picchu (you will also need a separate permit) which is tough, as you climb over 2,000 ft over sea level on a stone path. The third option, and the one I took, is to hike up to Intipunku, or the 'sun gate', which is the terminus of the Inca Trail. You do not need a separate permit for this hike, and you get a sense of the terrain and great vistas of the ruins from a distance.

**Elevation:** Many travelers do not know that Machu Picchu (elevation 7,900 ft. over sea level) is actually at a lower altitude than Cuzco, which is at 11,000 feet over sea level. Aguas Calientes, where the train drops you off, is at 6,693 ft. over sea level.

**Other practical advice when visiting Machu Picchu:**

- Bring a knapsack with water and snacks.
- Wear hiking shoes or comfortable walking shoes with good rubber soles
- Bring a hat and sunscreen
- Pack a small umbrella or rain jacket, especially October through May
- High season runs from June to September, normally cooler and drier than the rest of the year

- Dress in layers, as the weather is unpredictable. The trains to/from Aguas Calientes have very limited overhead or storage space. If you are spending the night, My recommendation is to pack a small overnight bag and leave your bigger suitcase at your hotel.
- Train service to/from Aguas Calientes: The only way to travel to Aguas Calientes is by train. Peru Rail offers 3 options: The most luxurious is the Hiram Bingham, which you can catch from either Poroy (near Cuzco) or Ollantaytambo. This is a deluxe experience, complete with meals, transfers, guided visit in Machu Picchu, the works. The second option is the Vistadome train, which you can catch at either Poroy or Ollantaytambo. Vistadome offers comfortable seats, free non alcoholic drinks, and multiple departure times. The third and less expensive option is the Expedition train, also available from Poroy or Ollantaytambo, a more basic rail service that is popular with budget travelers.



Where to stay: The only hotel at the ruins is the Belmond Sanctuary Lodge. This small (31 rooms), luxury hotel is right outside the main entrance of the ruins. Because of its location and services, this hotel is very popular and books months ahead of time.

In Aguas Calientes, there are 2 great options: The Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, a beautiful hotel hidden on the side of a mountain

surrounded by lush vegetation and tropical gardens, and consisting of 81 rooms spread out over 12 acres, walking distance to the main train station.



Finally, there is the Sumaq Machu Picchu Hotel, the newest of the 3, located on banks of the Urubamba river and offering 62 rooms and suites, also walking distance to the train station. Sumaq has the advantage of being in one building, so everything is easily accessible. The hotel offers spacious rooms, a great restaurant, and a small spa in the lower level.

