A guide to the culturally rich and amazing world wonder of Machu Picchu, written by the travel experts at Peru For Less
Introduction to Machu Picchu

World renowned for breathtaking architecture and scenery, Machu Picchu is a must see for any visitor the country. Every corner of these beautiful ruins is filled with intrigue and display the brilliance of Inca imagination. They fit in perfectly with the towering green peaks that surround the citadel making its seclusion and serenity both humbling and thought provoking.

Machu Picchu has recently been voted as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World in recognition of this magnificent accomplishment of human endeavor. It now receives thousands of visitors every year who all clamor to see the citadel with their own eyes. Even after exploring the ruins it is difficult to imagine how they were ever constructed. This always leaves visitors with a great deal of dignified respect for the Inca Empire, which although crumbled in the wake of Spanish weapons and disease over four hundred years ago, still leaves its mark on the society and culture of modern day Peru. To see this Empire at its finest, make a tour of Machu Picchu a part of your South America vacation.
Machu Picchu Geography and Climate

Machu Picchu is situated in the convergence between mountain and jungle in the Cusco Province of Peru about 2,450 meters (7,710 feet) above sea level. The city rests between two mountains high above the Urubamba river valley. It is strategically located with steep slopes on all sides and an impassable mountain standing behind it. It was accessed by the Incas from Cusco using the Inca trail.

The Peruvian Andes and Amazon have 2 main seasons: the rainy season and the dry season. The rainy season is between October and April, with the dry season generally running between May and September. During the dry season, temperatures can run from anywhere between 12 C (50 F) at night to the mid 30’S C (Upper 80s F) during the day.

Not surprisingly the dry season is the best time to travel to Machu Picchu and this coincides with summer holidays in Europe and North America. July and August are the busiest months and to avoid large crowds, people should aim to travel to Machu Picchu outside of these months.

Machu Picchu Transportation

Aguas Calientes (Machu Picchu Pueblo)

For those looking to spend more time at Machu Picchu, or to arrive at the ruins early in the morning, a stop over at Aguas Calientes is almost indispensable. In fact, the town was built almost entirely for this very purpose and it is to here that all train services from Cusco and the Sacred Valley travel.
History of Machu Picchu

The date of Machu Picchu’s construction is thought to have been around 1430. Many theorists poise that it was abandoned less than 100 years afterwards and that the region was uninhabited by the time of the Spanish Conquest, perhaps a result of the onslaught of Small Pox that reached Peru before the Spaniards themselves. This depopulation would partly explain the inability of the conquistadores to easily track the site down and it remained untouched and unseen by Europeans for centuries. The fact that it was exempt from Spanish plunder makes it one of the most complete sets of Inca ruins in the country.

Machu Picchu Transport

There are various classes of trains that will take you from Cusco or Ollantaytambo to the station at Aguas Calientes; the journey usually lasts around 4 hours from Cusco and 2 hours from Ollantaytambo.

For those who like to travel from Cusco in style, the Hiram Bingham express is a marvelous engine complete with first class service. The interior is exquisitely decorated with polished wood and plush seating. The train includes two cars for dining, an Observation Bar and a Kitchen Car where delicious meals are prepared. This is definitely the most luxurious way to travel to Machu Picchu.

The alternative Vistadome service allows travelers to enjoy a spectacular panoramic view throughout their journey through large windows located on all sides of the carriages. Light snacks and refreshments are provided during the trip and there is also entertainment on offer.

A more affordable option is the Backpacker service which still has fantastic views although not with the same comfort and service.
Almost 400 years after the fall of the Incas, Yale scholar Hiram Bingham was led to the ruins by locals to the area during his search for the last Inca Outpost of Vilcabamba. At first he thought he had found his prize - and understandably so - but after further research it became apparent that this was not the case. Bingham had in fact already visited what is now believed to be Vilcabamba, but he had dismissed these ruins as he was not aware of their full extent, which today is still engulfed by thick jungle.

Since his discovery of Machu Picchu, the site has been cleared and has dramatically risen in profile. It is now considered to be the most important archeological site in the Americas, and one of the most significant in the world. Archeological discoveries continue to be made around the site, and its historical importance is recognized by UNESCO who declared it a World Heritage Site in 1983. It has also been named as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World and has become an extremely popular tourist destination drawing crowds of people every single day.

So why exactly was Machu Picchu built? A myriad of theories have been given in an attempt to answer this question. These range from it having importance as a sacred religious city to it being a high security prison. The most likely explanation, however, is that it was built as a spiritual and ceremonial retreat for the Inca Pachacutec during an expansionist period of the Inca Empire in the mid fifteenth century. At its height, it is even thought that this was the center of a buzzing economic region that could have been populated more than just within the city.
Machu Picchu Layout

Regardless of its purpose, what is clear is that a large degree of intelligence went into the careful planning and construction of the Inca citadel. Closer examination of the ruins reveals that much thought was given to the different elements of the city and their arrangement in relation both to one another and to the surrounding natural environment.

Machu Picchu is split into two sections by a grassy central plaza. Generally speaking, to the east of the plaza are a variety of religiously important structures. On the western side are mostly civil structures that would have been the living area of workers in the city.

Machu Picchu Religious Structures

One of the most fascinating aspects of the ruins is the high concentration of important religious structures. These indicate that the site almost certainly had some sort of religious significance. Most of the main structures are concentrated around the Sacred Plaza.

**Temple of The Sun**

The importance of this temple is apparent at first as it features the most immaculate and precise stone masonry to be found on the whole site and it is the only part of the ruin to feature a curved wall. The real significance of the sun temple however lies in its alignment with the heavens. The center stone of the temple is angled with an adjacent window in such a way that the light of the sunrise on the winter solstice in June illuminates it. This has led archeologists to believe that the temple may have acted as an astronomical observation center.

**Temple of The Three Windows**

Perhaps the most striking portion of the ruins, the temple of the Three Windows is another testament to the geometric precision of Inca architecture. It is also a wonderful example of how their architecture echoed the surrounding environment: each of the three gaping trapezoidal windows frames a separate peak on the horizon.

**Principal Temple**

This is named due to its size and complexity and that it stands above other areas of the citadel. A diamond shaped stone is incorporated in its center which is said to depict the Southern Cross constellation. It includes a sub temple called the Sacristy where it is believed that priests prepared before they performed sacred rites and ceremonies.

**Inihuatana**

Also known as “the hitching post of the sun”, this magnificent carved rock was symbolically tied to the sun on the winter solstice. This stone and others like it are thought to have been used for making astrological observations and for calculating important phases of the year. Archeologists continue to explore the various angles and surfaces of the rock to derive how this Inihuatana and others like it were used in this regard.
Machu Picchu Civil Structures

**Agricultural Sector**

Upon entry to the ruins, visitors are first greeted by the extensive Agricultural terracing that flank the southern side of Machu Picchu. These grand stone terraces would have been used to cultivate maize for consumption by the entire population of the city. Modern surveys reveal that the city would have sustained a population of 1,000 people through the crops that would have been grown here. The terracing is so durable that locals were still farming centuries later when Bingham arrived in 1913.

**Living Quarters**

A large part of the city acted as living quarters for the many people who permanently lived at the site, and several houses were constructed in this respect. The Eastern side of the ruins appears as a labyrinth of such buildings which include terraced housing alongside larger communal areas that were used for preparing food, cooking and dining.

There was also a section built to accommodate visiting Royalty; the royal quarters can be found amidst the cluster of religious structures on the western side of the ruins. These are distinguished by their spaciousness and by large stone lintels above the doors which it is known was a characteristic in the homes of more powerful people.
Huayna Picchu

Overlooking the ruins of Machu Picchu is the famous mountain Huayna Picchu, an important component of the site’s stunning visual location. The peak of this mountain is covered with a remarkable set of ruins that are believed to be a special retreat for privileged priests and religious figures. The narrow terracing here is thought to have contained a colorful floral arrangement that could be marveled at by people in the city below.

An Inca path leads up the side of Huayna Picchu that can be scaled in around an hour. Although the path is steep and narrow at times, this can still be completed by those travelers who don’t high levels of fitness. The view from the top of Huayna Picchu is well worth the climb; a fantastic aerial view of the entire Machu Picchu ruins and their surroundings can be admired, right down to the Urubamba River winding in the valley far below.

Currently, the only way to climb Huayna Picchu is to purchase a special ticket before you arrive at the site. It is recommended that you purchase your Huayna Picchu ticket jointly with your general Machu Picchu ticket. At the time of purchase, you will have to decide if you want to hike the trail at 7 a.m. or 10 a.m. Two hundred people are allowed to enter during each time slot, for a total of 400 visitors per day. Tickets that include Huayna Picchu access will be slightly more expensive than regular Machu Picchu entrance tickets.

Shopping in Machu Picchu

SHOPPING IN AGUAS CALIENTES AND MACHU PICCHU IS AGAIN RELATIVELY INFLATED IN COMPARISON TO OTHER PARTS OF PERU. SHOPPERS ARE ADVISED TO BUY SOUVENIRS IN THE SACRED VALLEY OR CUSCO WHERE THEY WILL USUALLY FIND FAIRER PRICES AND BETTER VALUE FOR MONEY.

That said, there are some good markets around the train station and along the Urubamba selling paraphernalia such as hand-woven Andean textiles, Alpaca sweaters and scarves, ponchos, handcrafts and the ubiquitous Andean Hat. Travelers can haggle with vendors to try and bring the prices down. Check out our newsletter article for some Haggling Tips.

Machu Picchu Hotels

On arrival at Aguas Calientes, busses await to transport travelers up a winding road to the entrance of Machu Picchu. For those who arrive at the town late in the day, a number of comfortable hotels have sprung up in the area to ensure that travelers can sleep within easy reach of the ruins.

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐ The Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel is a naturalist’s haven. Conveniently nestled in the verdant Andean cloud forest, this lovely hotel is the perfect place to catch a glimpse of the astonishing flora and fauna of the region. The eco-friendly hotel resembles an Andean village and is comprised of charming white-washed cottages decorated
with modern indigenous art as well as authentic pre-Columbian artifacts. With a commitment to indulging the whims of its guests, this luxury hotel expertly combines nature and comfort to create a one-of-a-kind Machu Picchu experience. Try some regional dishes at the excellent restaurant overlooking the Urubamba River.

★ ★ ★ ★
Ideally located near Aguas Calientes train station and close to where the buses depart for the short ride to Machu Picchu, the recently renovated **El Mapi Hotel** is perfect for travelers who want to catch the sunrise over the ruins. The modern and stylish hotel aims to be the best in its category and offers great value services and décor. It also boasts beautifully landscaped gardens and a hot tub where guests can relax at night with a cocktail after a delicious dinner.

Travelers looking for convenience and a touch of luxury during their Machu Picchu travels will be pleased with the excellent **Andina Luxury Hotel**. Situated just 200 meters from the train station this wonderfully appointed establishment boasts 31 fully-equipped and tastefully decorated rooms. Each accommodation features wooden furnishings, a large bed covered with comfortable bed linens, and some rooms even feature breathtaking views of the river. Three walls are an immaculate white, while one wall is left a natural exposed brick to give the room an elegant, but rustic appeal. Andean art adds the finishing touch to the room. All accommodations come with internet, an LCD screen cable television, and air-conditioning, while the hotel itself serves guests with a restaurant, bar, sauna, and gym. Guests cannot ask for more modern convenience and comfort during their Machu Picchu vacation.

**Machu Picchu Restaurants**

Aguas Calientes also hosts many good restaurants. Most are clustered around the old train station and on Av. Pachútec.
ToTo’s House, Av. Imperio de los Incas s/n, Aguas Calientes - $5-$20

The mammoth sized Toto’s House can fit a staggering 400 people and this scale is only matched by the variety of food on offer. The vast array of dishes are available through an all you can eat buffet and an a la carte menu. The Urubamba River flows outside remaining visible through all of the windows – its booming wake fits in nicely with the grandiose nature of Toto’s.

The Indio Feliz, Lloque Yupanqui 4-12, Aguas Calientes - $8-$18

The Indio Feliz (happy Indian) may not be the best description of how the Spanish treated the Incas during the conquest. Nevertheless, Aguas Calientes’s best restaurant would be sure to make any reveler happy. This is a delightful upscale restaurant which offers great value for money. Verdant plant decorations adorn the interior making it almost feel adjoined to the jungle outside. The restaurant offers an a la carte menu but much better value is the Peruvian criollo menu which includes many national favorites sopa a la criolla and trout seasoned with garlic and lemon.

Pueblo Viejo, Av. Pachacútec 108, Aguas Calientes - $5-$15

The cozy Pueblo Viejo stands out firstly for its lively appearance yet it retains a more subdued and relaxing dining
atmosphere on the interior. This is complimented by a roaring fire and live Andean music, both of which spread the warmth of Peruvian hospitality. The house specialty is parrilladas (barbeques) on which are thrown lamb, pork, alpaca and trout (the local favorite). This is a much more affordable option with various Peruvian menu options and courses and delicious pizza is also on offer.

Chez Maggie, Av. Pachacútec 156, Aguas Calientes - $5-$10

This is a branch of the friendly and popular Chez Maggy in Cusco and stays true to the brand with a relaxing atmosphere to enjoy a tasty home cooked pizza accompanied with a cold cuzqueña beer. Alongside the popular Italian favorites of pizza and pasta is a whole range of typical Peruvian dishes and also Mexican. The pizza is definitely the hot favorite here though.

Machu Picchu Nightlife

There is a scattering of bars and even a nightclub in Aguas Calientes for those who can’t resist a quick boogie. Nothing is particularly spectacular however and the prices can be much steeper than in other parts of Peru.

Machu Picchu Sports Activities

Although the national sport of Peru remains soccer, the country’s diverse terrain and climate offer an increasing variety of entertaining outdoor activities ranging from the tame to the extreme. An added bonus of many of the activities is that they are available for a range of different athletic levels and travel types, from families to individuals, and from novice to expert.

Popular team games in Peru other than soccer include volleyball, tennis, and golf. Extreme sports available to the more adventurous traveler in regions throughout the country include surfing, mountain biking, paragliding, trekking, horseback riding, and river rafting.

Multi-Sport Machu Picchu

This four-day/three-night multisport tour in the Sacred Valley to Machu Picchu is ideal for travelers looking to add a touch of adventure to their Peru vacation. The itinerary includes mountain biking Cusco to Santa Maria, hiking Santa Maria to Santa Teresa, hiking Patallacta, taking a train to Aguas Calientes, visiting Machu Picchu and returning to Cusco.

For more information about this tour follow this link: Peru Adventure Tours: Multisport Machu Picchu.
Machu Picchu Health and Safety

It is best to drink bottled water while traveling to Machu Picchu as with anywhere through South America to prevent contracting any harmful parasites or water-borne illnesses. If no bottled water is available, be sure to travel with water purification tablets or boil water for 15 minutes to eliminate any harmful bacteria.

Many travelers are affected by the high altitude in the region. It is best to avoid caffeine, smoking, or alcohol as this will amplify the effect of dehydration that altitude often induces – be sure to drink lots of water as well. Munching on coca leaves or drinking coca tea is a good remedy for soroche (Altitude sickness).

Although Aguas Calientes isn’t too bad for crime (it is virtually non-existent in Machu Picchu), travelers should always remain wary of thieves. This particularly applies when in large crowds of people such as at the train station where bag-slashing or pick pocketing can be easily concealed. Store valuable items in your hotel safe and always keep an eye on your bags – never leave bags unattended.

Contact us at any time, on travel@peruforless.com or 1-877-269-0309