



BY BRIAN MAJOR

# HOW TO DO MACHU PICCHU

The area around Peru's mystical ruins has much to offer high-end clients

Machu Picchu is probably the most widely recognized symbol of the pre-Columbian Inca culture.

The very mention of Machu Picchu evokes a sense of regal mysticism. Even today, more than 600 years after the emperor Pachacuti built this sanctuary of polished dry stone as his exclusive estate (so it's believed), the mountaintop archaeological site retains a palatial mien.

Certainly its inspiring location—7,970 feet above sea level on a mountain ridge overlooking Peru's lush Urubamba Valley—is a key element in Machu Picchu's sacred bearing. The massive stone walls and embankments, some positioned to observe celestial events tracked by Inca astronomers, add to its sense of majesty and wonder. In 1983, UNESCO designated Machu Picchu a World Heritage Site, calling it "an absolute masterpiece of architecture and a unique testimony to the Inca civilization."

Yet for contemporary travelers, Machu Picchu, along with the Cusco region in which it's based, offers something beyond its present-day links to Peru's exotic history: an outstanding luxury vacation experience. Indeed, Machu Picchu vacations are decidedly upscale affairs. Five-star accommodations, high-end amenities, lavish facilities and personalized services are available throughout the Cusco region, as are gourmet restaurants and deluxe tour and excursion options.

The centerpiece of course, is the Machu Picchu site, officially referred to as the Machu Picchu Historical Sanctuary. Its existence became known to the Western world in 1911 when Yale University lecturer Hiram Bingham, led by Pablito Alvarez, a local 11-year-old, made the first recorded visit.

The area had been largely forgotten by all but a small group of people living in the immediate valley, and a few

Quechua (indigenous South American) people still lived in the original structures at Machu Picchu.

Historians believe the Incas started building the site around 1430, abandoning it 100 years later as the Spanish launched their conquest of the Inca Empire. The site was painstakingly hidden and religiously guarded, which is likely why Spanish conquistadors never found the site. Visitors had to hike long and winding mountain trails, and tramp through valleys filled with Inca check points and watch towers.

Bingham's subsequent expeditions, during which he collected artifacts on behalf of Yale, eventually popularized the Machu Picchu, and his 1948 book "Lost City of the Incas" became a bestseller.

Today, Machu Picchu is probably the most widely recognized symbol of the pre-Columbian Inca culture. Over the years, many of the site's outlying buildings were rebuilt to resemble their original appearance. By 1976, 30 percent of the site was restored, and work continues to this day.

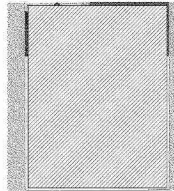
In many ways, the events surrounding the "discovery" of Machu Picchu are controversial. Other outsiders are said to have seen the site as early as 1874, prior to Bingham's arrival. Possible visits may have also occurred between 1901 and 1906. Peru has also long sought the return of artifacts, including mummies, ceramics and bones that Bingham excavated and exported from the Machu Picchu site. On September 14, 2007, an agreement was made between Yale University and the Peruvian government for the return of the objects. On April 12, 2008, the Peru government revised previous estimates of 4,000 pieces up to 40,000. The artifacts have yet to be returned.

Moreover, while knowledgeable present-day guides and other authorities adhere to the "Pachacuti" theory regarding Machu Picchu's origin, describing it as an estate and sanctuary for Inca elite, no person can yet say with certainty exactly what it was intended to be with regard to everyday Incan life.

Today's Machu Picchu-bound travelers typically start their journey in the Urubamba Valley area, popularly known as the Sacred Valley of the Inca, and in its day the center of the Incan empire. The valley offers a rolling landscape of soaring cliffs framing lush green plains fed by rivers descending throughout adjoining valleys and gorges. The Urubamba region includes the towns of Calca, Lamay, Písaq and Ollantaytambo, and features numerous archaeological remains, from hilltop ramparts to quaint, still-functioning villages.

The valley was revered by the Incas for geographical and climatic qualities that make it a rich source of agricultural and mineral resources. Today the valley offers a fascinating look into Peru's history as well as its contemporary people and culture. Písaq is one of several villages that feature sprawling outdoor markets where locals, dressed in traditional colorful attire, sell hand-made goods, craft items and produce for Peruvians as well as tourists.

The Sacred Valley also features a number of luxury hotels and resorts from which it's convenient to travel to the Machu Picchu site, as well as a fashionable option visitors can use to arrive there. Orient-Express ([www.orient-express.com](http://www.orient-express.com)) operates the Hiram Bingham, a deluxe train service that travels from stations in Cusco, Poroy and Ollantaytambo to Machu Picchu's Inca Citadel. The trip from Cusco takes



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PLACES



about three and one-half hours.

The time is quite well spent as Hiram Bingham passengers travel in a manner that evokes Roaring Twenties high style. Passengers travel in cozy booths of polished brass and wood, with etched glass partitions and linden-shaded table lamps.

The railroad winds through the fascinating Andes Mountains landscape, and guests on the three-hour trip from Cusco to the Sanctuary enjoy brunch. Travelers have access to an exclusive entrance into the site upon arrival, where guided tours of the Citadel are available. Returns to Cusco depart at 5:50 p.m., when the train turns into a clubby private lounge on rails, as passengers sip cocktails and enjoy live entertainment, followed by a four-course gourmet meal.

#### PLACES TO STAY

There are several outstanding upscale hotel properties in the Cusco/Machu Picchu region. The 128-room **Tambo del Inka** resort ([www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)) is nestled deep within the Urubamba's awesome peaks, and offers a tastefully refined contemporary property set amidst an emerald lagoon and blooming riverside gardens.

Accommodations offer views of the Andes and the Vilcanota River, and are highlighted by floor-to-ceiling windows. Beds are equipped with 400-thread linens, and all rooms feature contemporary marble baths, 32-inch LCD televisions, work spaces, complimentary Wi-Fi and high-speed Internet connectivity, and individually controlled air-conditioning.

Tambo del Inka's 5,905-square-foot Spa at Valle Sagrado offers treatments and therapies that utilize ancestral Incan ingredients, including quinoa (an indigenous grain used routinely in Peruvian cuisine) and various other regional fruits and produce. The hotel also offers a full-day "Quinoa Trail at Tambo del Inka" excursion featuring quinoa-themed inclusions and activities.

**Inkaterra** ([www.inkaterra.com](http://www.inkaterra.com)), a highly regarded Peru-based luxury hotelier, last year opened the **El MaPi Hotel** ([www.elmapihotel.com](http://www.elmapihotel.com)) in Aguas Calientes, the Machu Picchu village at the foot of the site. The 48-room boutique property features high ceilings and panoramic windows, with amenities like cozy duvets, robes and branded toiletries. All rooms are equipped with DirecTV, telephones and reading lights;



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and train station transfers, luggage storage and Wi-Fi are included in hotel rates. Inkaterra also operates the **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel** and **Inkaterra La Casona**, a new 11-suite boutique hotel in Cusco.

The **Sumaq Machu Picchu** ([www.machupicchuhotels-sumaq.com](http://www.machupicchuhotels-sumaq.com)) is a five-star hotel located at the foot of the mountains surrounding the Sanctuary site, by the banks of the Vilcanota River. The 60-room luxury property features deluxe, junior suite and suite accommodations with hypo-allergenic pillows, alpaca-wool-fiber blankets, sheep-wool comforters, box-spring mattresses, and thermal heat. Junior suites also feature sitting areas, balconies hydromassage tubs, DVD players and MP3 radios.

In Cusco, the 55-room **Palacio Nazarenas**, like many Cusco structures built upon original Inca walls, is scheduled to open in June. The property is owned by Orient-Express, which also operates five other Peruvian properties in addition to the Hiram Bingham train.

Located directly in the Urubamba Valley along the banks of the eponymous river, Orient Express' **Rio Sagrado** ([www.riosagrado.com/web/ouru/rio\\_sagrado\\_hotel.jsp](http://www.riosagrado.com/web/ouru/rio_sagrado_hotel.jsp)) uses natural materials in a design that evokes an authentic Andean village. Like any Cusco-based property, it provides a good base from which to explore the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu. Accommodations include deluxe rooms, suites and villas. The El Huerto res-

## In 1983, UNESCO called Machu Picchu "an absolute masterpiece of architecture and a unique testimony to the Inca civilization."

Suites offer fireplaces and balconies, plus king-size beds with high thread-count cotton sheets, hypo-allergenic and latex pillow "clouds," and comforters made of llama, sheep and alpaca wool. Suites are also equipped with Jacuzzis, LCD flat screen TVs, DVD players and MP3 radios.

taurant features Peruvian cuisine created from locally sourced ingredients including organic vegetables, spices and fruits from the hotel's onsite garden. @

For more information, visit [www.machu-picchu.info](http://www.machu-picchu.info), [www.visitperu.com](http://www.visitperu.com) and [www.peru.travel/en](http://www.peru.travel/en).