



The majestic Machu Picchu ruins became a sought-after tourist attraction after being rediscovered by explorer Hiram Bingham in 1911.
PHOTOGRAPH BY KAROL KOZLOWSKI, AWL IMAGES

How to plan the ultimate adventure to Peru, from the ancient Machu Picchu to the thermal waters of Cajamarca

From Andean peaks to Amazonian jungles and the ancient cities of the Incas, Peru offers the perfect base for an epic adventure.

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July 5, 2024



This article was produced by *National Geographic Traveller (UK)*.

A trip across Peru feels like passing through multiple countries and cultures merged into one. The topography is as diverse as it is dramatic; in just a few days, you can pass from the desert of the coastal lowlands to the saw-toothed, glacial peaks of the Andes Mountains and onwards to reach the emerald enclave of the world's largest tropical rainforest. En route are thousands of 16th-century towns, Indigenous communities and archaeological sites, relics of ancient civilisations that have managed to capture the collective imagination like few others around the world.

Chief among those civilisations is the Inca, a superpower that ruled in the 15th century from modern-day Ecuador in the north, down to the Chilean capital of Santiago. Itineraries for first-time visitors focus on the heart of their empire, the Andean highlands of southern Peru. Tack on an extra week and you can discover the other big-hitting wonders of the country's south, including Lake Titicaca, Arequipa city and the Nasca Lines. It's a journey from mountains to dusty lowland desert: along the way, gaze at the barren Altiplano from a classic Pullman train carriage; sleep in a one-of-a-kind reed B&B; and glide above colossal geoglyphs in the belly of a Cessna plane.

The Inca Empire was but a brief, 100-year chapter in the nation's millennia-old story. And the north proves just how unparalleled that history is. Those with the time and curiosity to head beyond the staples are justly rewarded. Dusty cities and cloud-forest-fringed valleys conceal archaeological sites predating the Inca by hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Hikers will also find some of South America's finest trails in the high altitudes surrounding Huaraz's glacier-studded national parks.

No matter where you go, Peruvian cuisine reflects this intersection of culture and nature. The gastronomy of Lima has risen to world-class status over the past two decades with dishes such as ceviche, where local fish is 'flash cooked' in lime juice — a form of marinating introduced by Japanese immigrants in the late 19th century. In the Andes, pachamanca is an ancient dish where potatoes and meat are still cooked by scorching hot stones.

Travel here is spectacular, but it can also be slow and, at times, frustrating. This is a country where distances are large and regional flights often require a connection through Lima. It's a place that demands patience but the payoff is worth it.



A gateway town to Machu Picchu, Ollantaytambo is rich in authentic Inca architecture.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUSTAVO MUNIZ, GETTY

Itinerary 1: The big hitters

The south is the tourism capital of Peru, and for good reason: it packs a punch while remaining easily navigable. This itinerary begins in the high elevations of Cusco, gateway to the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu. South east is Lake Titicaca, where the Indigenous Uros people constructed homes out of unlikely materials for survival. The white architecture of Arequipa, the country's second city, breaks up the journey from highlands to lowlands before you finish on the Pacific Coast, where the Nasca Lines reflect another of Peru's ingenious ancient peoples.

Along the way, you'll experience many different types of transport. Buses, flights and a handful of comfortable trains shuttle between destinations, all with the guarantee of superlative views. The high elevations along the way — peaking at 11,152ft in Cusco and 12,507ft at Lake Titicaca — are no holiday for your body or brain, so drink plenty of coca tea, a great local antidote to *soroche* (altitude sickness).

1. Cusco

Fly from Lima to Cusco, the former capital of the Inca Empire, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Spanish invaders built baroque churches and terracotta-roofed mansions over Inca palaces, but the Sacsayhuamán fortress has survived as one of the best displays of Inca architecture. Take a taxi to this archaeological site, located just above the city, where you'll find walls constructed from a perfect jigsaw of boulders weighing up to 120 tonnes apiece.

2. Sacred Valley

Named for its spiritual and agrarian importance to the Inca people, this valley remains the region's breadbasket. **Explore** Moray, where stepped, concentric terraces acted as a sophisticated agricultural laboratory for the Inca,

before heading to Chinchero market. Merchants gather here to sell handwoven llama and alpaca wool textiles, and you can sample roast guinea pig — a local delicacy. At the end of the day, head to the Inca town of Ollantaytambo, home to the ruins of an Inca fortress, and overnight at [El Albergue](#), a family-run B&B in a historic hacienda.

3. Machu Picchu

From Ollantaytambo, [PeruRail's](#) Vistadome train races to Aguas Calientes, the town right beneath Machu Picchu. Spend a day here, exploring the centre and stay at [Inkaterra](#), a hotel in 12 acres of cloud forest, home to 214 species of bird — including hummingbirds, the golden-headed quetzal and the iconic Andean cock-of-the-rock — and 372 of native orchid.

The next morning, head to [Machu Picchu](#), the ancient citadel that's become a symbol of the lost Inca Empire since being revealed to the wider world by explorer Hiram Bingham in 1911. Take the first bus to its entrance at 6am to watch the sun rise over its terraces and the brooding Huayna Picchu mountain.

4. Lake Titicaca

The ticket back from Aguas Calientes to Cusco with PeruRail covers both the train to Ollantaytambo and the onward bus trip. From Cusco, settle into the observation car to watch the grassy plains of the Altiplano whip past during the 10-hour train ride to Puno, the gateway town to [Lake Titicaca](#). Floating on its waters are the 120-or-so Uros Islands, feats of engineering first constructed from totora reeds by the Indigenous Uros over 500 years ago to escape Inca invasion. Uros people still live here and visitors can now overnight in their reed guesthouses. Book with All Ways Travel, whose profits go to local communities.

5. Arequipa

A six-hour [bus](#) journey from Lake Titicaca, Arequipa is nicknamed White City for the volcanic sillar used to construct its baroque architecture. Arequipeño gastronomy is a source of pride, so head to a traditional picantería restaurant to sample rocoto relleno, a spicy stuffed pepper dish filled with meat, cheese and eggs, cooked over a wood fire.

7. Nasca lines

A final eight-hour bus journey takes you down from the mountains and along the coast to reach the town of Nasca. Here, a [tour](#) by light aircraft gives you the best views of the Nasca Lines, giant geoglyphs showing hummingbirds, monkeys and other shapes etched into the desert over 2,000 years ago — although how, or why, remains a mystery.

Itinerary 2: Highlights of the North

Witnessing little international attention, northern Peru receives just a fraction of the visitors of the better-known south. Yet it's home to some of the country's richest archaeological sites, as well as natural wonders you're likely to have to yourself.

Start in the Cordillera Blanca, an Andean sub-range of sky-reaching peaks, before making your way to the coast. Pre-Columbian artefacts abound outside the metropolises of Chiclayo and Trujillo, where museums are stacked to the rafters with gold, and adobe pyramids built between 100 and 800 CE still stand proud. Then, from the city of Cajamarca — where you can soak in thermal waters once frequented by Inca emperors — a road traces through the mountains to the green Amazonas region for the last stops on this itinerary.

Tourism is nascent in the north and the infrastructure reflects this. Domestic flights are either non-existent or require a stopover in Lima, so bus journeys often offer the most direct transit between destinations. They can be long, slow and occasionally hair-raising — but as you whizz past adobe villages tucked into mountain passes and career alongside yawning valleys, you'll feel like you're travelling through time, too.



Located in the western city of Trujillo, the Cathedral Basilica of St Mary is one of the oldest Catholic structures in Peru.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICHOLAS TINELLI, AWL IMAGES

1. Huaraz

From Lima, buses take around nine hours to reach this high-altitude city. Give yourself two days to acclimatise with short hikes around the surrounding Cordillera Blanca, then join [Turismo Andino](#) on a two-day trek to Lake 69 in Huascarán National Park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. You'll clamber high into glacier-sheathed mountains and through valleys splashed with crystalline lakes — and stay overnight in a rustic lodge with pisco sours on tap.

2. Trujillo

It's a seven-hour bus ride to the dusty, 16th-century city of [Trujillo](#). A local highlight is Huaca de la Luna, an adobe pyramid built by the pre-Incan [Moche](#) civilisation, whose use of human sacrifices is recorded in grisly friezes. Next, catch some waves at the nearby beach town of Huanchaco aboard a caballito de totora, reed boats first used by fishermen 3,000 years ago and considered by some to be the predecessors of modern surfboards.

3. Cajamarca

Second only to Cusco for its elegant architecture and a six-hour bus journey inland, Cajamarca is where the fate of the Inca was sealed. To secure his release after having been imprisoned by the Spanish, final Inca leader Atahualpa supposedly called for his subjects across the empire to send enough gold and silver to fill a room, but was executed regardless in 1533. [Los Baños del Inca](#), said to have been his favourite thermal waters, are just a few miles away and still open to visitors.



Tortora reed fishing rafts are in abundance in the coastal village of Pimentel.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICHOLAS GILL, ALAMY

4. Gocta Falls

Bring earplugs, an eye mask and a jumper for the long, 12-hour bus ride to Cajamarca: temperatures on board tend to be either glacial or sweltering. The six-hour hike to the base of Gocta Falls is worth the mud: one of the world's tallest single-drop waterfalls, it plunges 2,530ft from clifftop to cloud-forested valley floor. Spend the night in a cabin with a view at [Gocta Natura Reserve](#).

5. Chiclayo

There's more history on display a four-hour bus journey away, inside Chiclayo's under-the-radar [Museo de Tumbas Reales del Señor de Sipán](#). A 20-minute taxi ride from the city centre, it has a staggering, three-floor collection showcasing gold artefacts discovered in the tombs of a nearby Moche site. Afterwards, get lost in Mercado de Brujos (Witch Doctors' Market), where you can find folk remedies said to help mend a broken heart, charms to attract wealth and everything in between.

6. Utcubamba Valley

Finish your trip with a two-hour bus ride through the Utcubamba Valley and Leymebamba town, where the namesake museum features 200 mummies discovered in a local cave in 1997. They belong to the Chachapoya, warrior people who predate the Inca by over six centuries. Learn more about them at their walled city of Kuélap, where 400 circular houses are built on a high ridge.

How to do it:

[Explore's](#) 14-day Simple Peru itinerary takes in all the big hitter highlights and costs start from £1,390 per person, excluding flights.

Alternatively, [Journey Latin America's](#) 14-day Tico Tico: Culture of the Northern Andes tour visits all the northern highlights except Huaraz from £3,100 per person, excluding international flights.

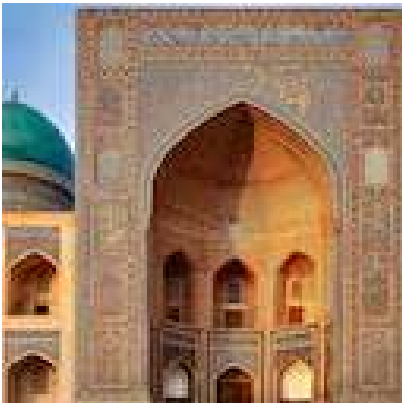
Published in the Jul/Aug 2024 issue of *National Geographic Traveller (UK)*.

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