



# Exploring Machu Picchu: The Mysterious Inca Pilgrimage



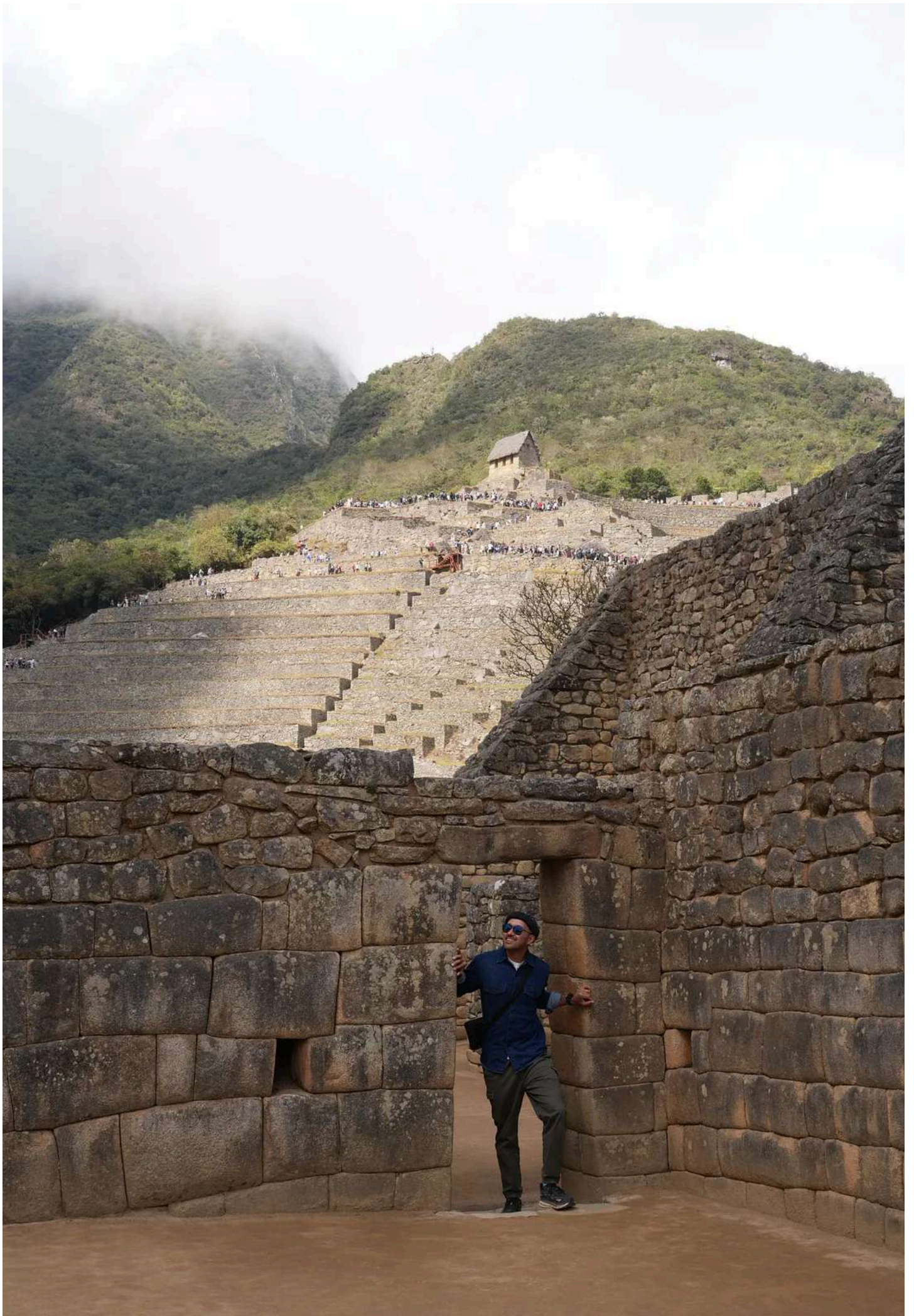
Akash Behl · [Follow](#)

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That's me! Get ready to see plenty more of my signature "poses" throughout the article.

## The Adventure Begins (Sort Of)

### Lima to Cusco: The Sky's the Limit!

First off, if you haven't booked a flight from Lima to Cusco yet, do it now. It's a short flight, but Cusco's altitude will smack you right in the lungs. *Pro tip*: spend about a week in Cusco to adjust and catch your breath before tackling any ruins. Your body will thank you. Plus, Cusco is basically the Inca Empire's version of Disneyland — minus the rides but *plus* the llamas. Bonus points for llama photobombs.

### The Great Journey to Aguas Calientes

Once you're ready to move on, hop on the bi-modal transport <[Train to Machu Picchu — Cusco — Aguas Calientes | Inca Rail](#)>. It's a fancy way of saying, "bus to Ollantaytambo, then train to Aguas Calientes." The **Inca Rail** 360-degree view? Pure gold. You'll be glued to the window the whole way. Seriously, try to avoid face-smudging the glass as you take in the scenery. (Easier said than done, I know.)







## Aguas Calientes: The Night Before the Big Day

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Spend a night in **Aguas Calientes**, a tiny town at the base of Machu Picchu. If you want to treat yourself (and why wouldn't you after surviving the journey?), check into **Inkaterra** <[Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#). [Best Peru Resorts](#). [Machu Picchu Tours](#)>. It's the kind of place where luxury meets nature. But a quick heads-up: free food doesn't always mean happy digestion. The free dinner had me sprinting to the nearest bathroom. Bring your meds, friends.





One of the many hidden spots @ Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, Aguas Calientes



To be honest, there's not a ton to do in Aguas Calientes, so a day is enough to wander around. You can check out the **Machu Picchu Museum** <[Machu Picchu Site Museum | Machupicchu Terra](#)> if you're feeling intellectual and want to "pre-game" your Machu Picchu adventure with a history lesson.

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## The Machu Picchu Showdown: Early Birds Catch the Ruins

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The moment you've been waiting for: Machu Picchu! Start the day with a **5 a.m.** wake-up call (because nothing says adventure like dragging yourself out of bed before sunrise). Have a light breakfast — trust me on this one — and pack light for the hike. The bus station is just a short 10-minute walk from most hotels. Brace yourself for the **km-long line**, but don't worry — it moves faster than you'd expect. The bonus of standing in line this early? You get to *slowly* wake up with everyone else.

A local guide approached us offering a tour for USD\$80. After some quick haggling, we knocked it down to USD\$60. Bargain of the day.

Pro tip: buy your **bus tickets** <[Consettur](#)> in advance and definitely pre-book your **Machu Picchu entry tickets** <[Llaqta Machupicchu | Tu Boleto \(cultura.pe\)](#)>. We snagged ours three months early like pros. We chose the **8 a.m. slot**, which has its perks — fewer tourists, more time to explore — but be warned: it can get misty, and Machu Picchu might play hide-and-seek behind the clouds for a bit. Also, we opted for *Llaqta de Machupicchu Circuit 1 or 2*, the basic tourist route, and it was more than enough.)

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## My Battle with the All-Inclusive Dinner (and the Lack of Toilets)

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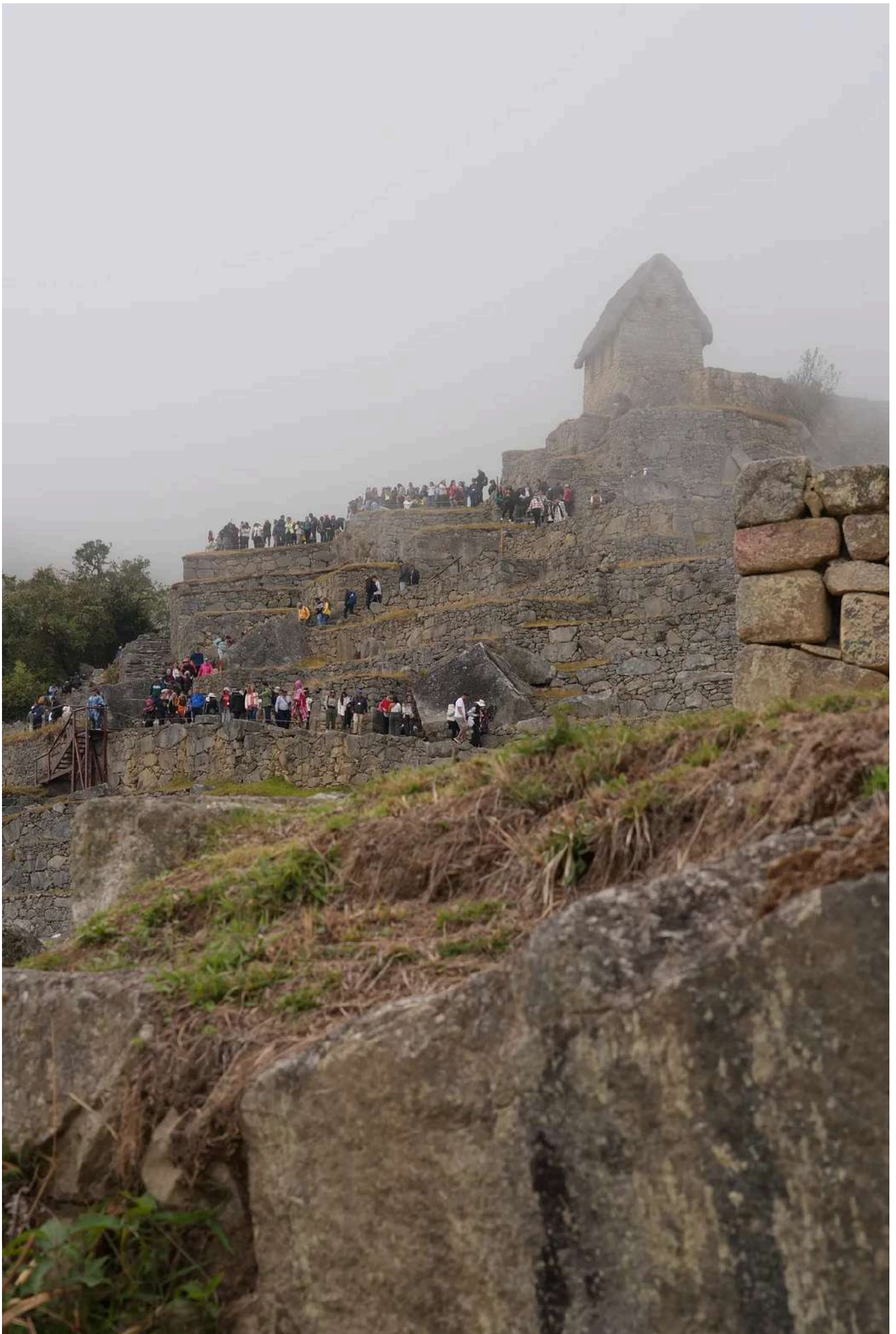
Remember that all-inclusive dinner the night before? Yeah, so did my stomach — *very vividly*. I barely slept that night. And here's where things get dicey: Machu Picchu has no restrooms inside the site. Why? Because, years ago, some well-meaning tourist (*cough* a U.S. tourist *cough*) decided to *bless* the sacred grounds in a very unholy way. Thanks to them, we now have to make it through the entire site restroom-free.

I spent the entire morning stressing over one thing: *surviving without a toilet*. But fear not! Enter the hero of the day: "Brakke," a miracle tablet (a potent blend of Ofloxacin and Oridazole). It was the *only* medicine I packed, and it was like destiny had put it there just for this leg of the trip.



The 20-minute bus ride up felt like an eternity. My first order of business? The washroom. Fortunately, there's a set of bathrooms just before the entrance. You bet I gave them a good visit before heading in to face the ruins. Crisis averted. Now, we were ready.

After what felt like a travel marathon, we finally made it to the “*Old Mountain*” — Machu Picchu. *Cue dramatic music.*

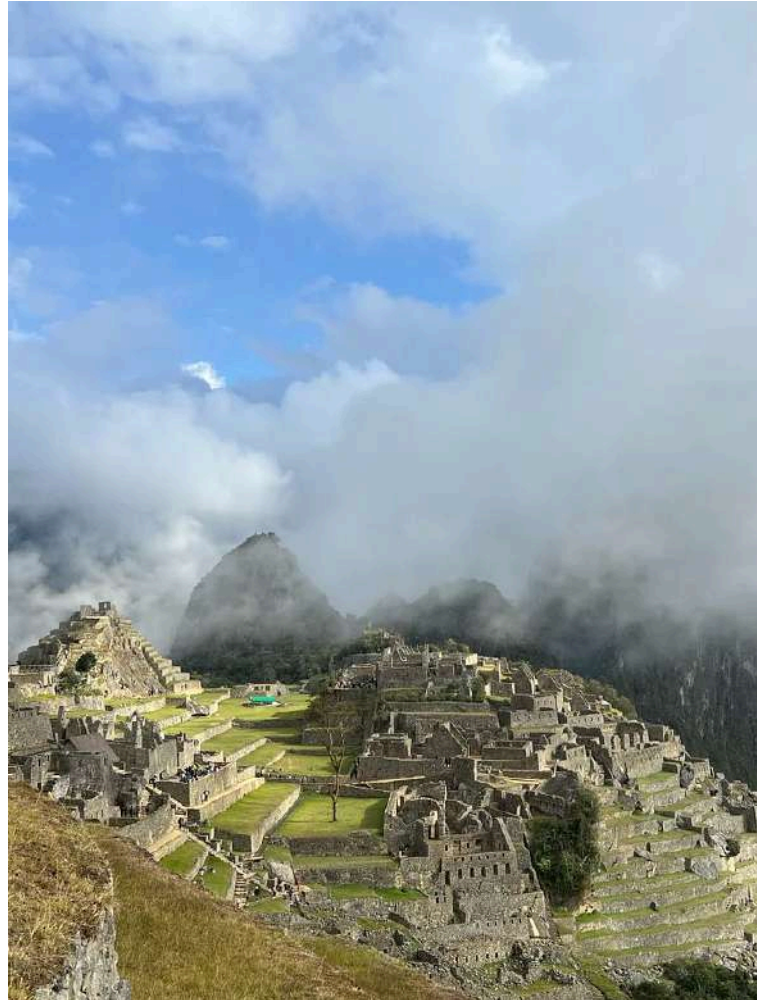


Humans. Yes, we are everywhere.



When I finally reached the top, I could hardly believe what I was seeing. An entire city sprawled out atop a cliff, constructed without a trace of cement or mortar — just stones stacked together like some ancient, perfectly designed Lego set, standing the test of time for centuries. The ever-shifting mist and clouds wrapped around the site, adding an enchanting allure to Machu Picchu that made it feel even more magical.

Sharing some moody and misty pics:



Mist, mist, and more mist.

You had to be quick to snap a shot before everything disappeared again. Add a crowd of tourists into the mix, and getting the perfect photo was like a tactical mission. I've come to think of Huayna Picchu as the shy mountain — hiding behind the clouds, only revealing itself when you truly, genuinely *willed* it to.





A picture with just me (almost).



## My Top Ten Machu Picchu Highlights

*The Magma Rocks:* The stones that make up Machu Picchu? Oh, they've been through quite a journey — literally. Born from ancient magma, these granite rocks were quarried and shaped with jaw-dropping precision by the Incas (who didn't even have iron tools, mind you). They used a method called **ashlar masonry**, where the stones fit together so snugly, you can't even slip a piece of paper between them. Some of these bad boys weigh several tons, yet they were transported through sheer human effort. So yeah, these volcanic rocks didn't just build Machu Picchu — they are the backbone of the entire site, proof that the Incas were way ahead of their time when it came to working with the Earth itself.



The Magma Rocks that were used to build Machu Picchu.

*The Temple of the Sun/ Intihuatana/ The Torreón:* Now that's where things get celestial. Imagine a semi-circular tower built right on top of a massive rock, crafted with such precision it would make modern architects sweat. The Incas used it for some serious stargazing — especially to track the movement of their all-important sun god, **Inti**. During the winter solstice, the sun aligns perfectly through its windows, like some cosmic spotlight. Below the temple is a sacred cave, thought to be a royal tomb — because apparently, even the afterlife needed the sun's approval.

This temple wasn't just built for show; it's a beautiful **mashup of astronomy, religion, and royal vibes**, all rolled into one timeless structure. I

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*It is believed that the Torreón was designed to symbolize the Koricancha sun temple in Cusco, which was the holiest structure in the most significant city of the Inca Empire.*

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The Semi-circular Structure in the center of the picture is the Temple of the Sun.



*The Terraces:* They are like the Inca version of multitasking. Sure, they're stunning — carving the mountainside into these massive green steps that wrap around the site like nature's stadium seating. But they weren't just for looks. These terraces were ingeniously designed to grow crops, turning impossibly steep terrain into fertile farmland. Potatoes, maize — you name it, they had it. Plus, the terraces helped prevent landslides, keeping Machu Picchu from tumbling down the mountain. So, they were basically **landscape architects, engineers, and farmers**, all in one go. And did I mention how photogenic they are? Seriously, those green steps are Instagram gold.



*The Principal Temple/ Pukara:* This isn't just any regular ol' temple; it's like the VIP room of Machu Picchu. Massive stones perfectly fitted together without a drop of mortar (because who needs that, right?) give it an almost regal presence. It was a sacred place for important ceremonies and rituals, likely dedicated to Inti, the Sun God. What makes it extra fascinating is its location — the **Sacred Plaza**, where you'd also find the **Temple of the Three Windows**, all aligned to give you mind-blowing views of the mountains. So imagine: ancient rituals with a view — talk about a setting that takes your spiritual game up a notch!





Inca Sites are known to be Earthquake-proof so it must have some real badass earthquake(s) to have caused this site to buckle.

*Temple of Three Windows/ Wasi qollqa:* These three large trapezoidal windows perfectly frame the Andes, giving you that “I’m living the dream” moment long before hashtags were a thing. The windows, they say, represent the three realms of Incan cosmology:

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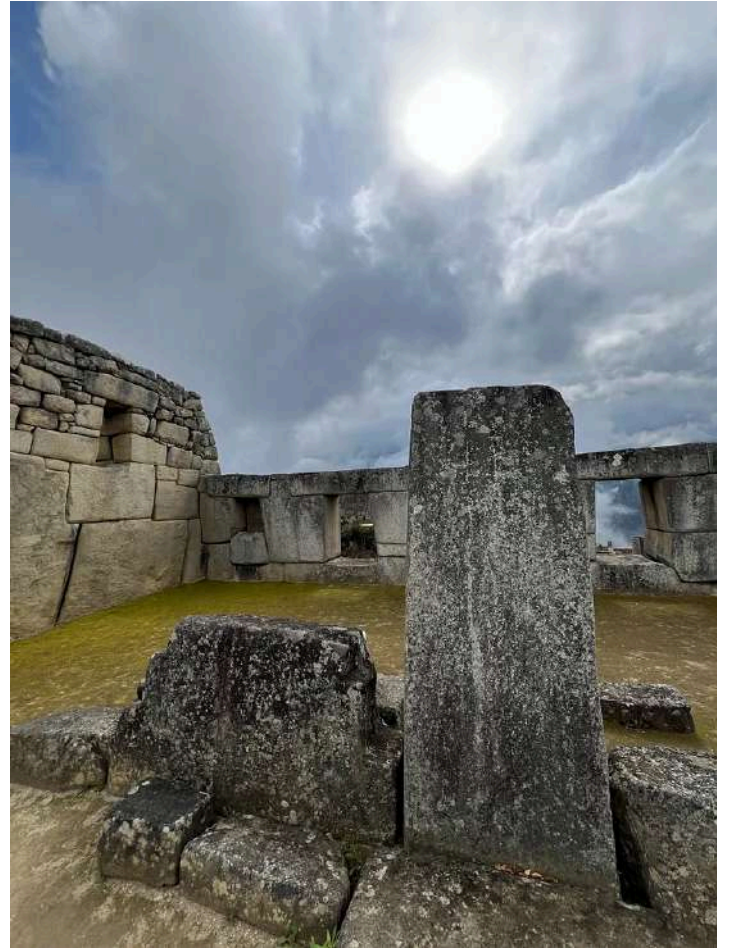
*The Underworld (represented by the snake)*

*The Earthly World (the puma)*

*The Heavens (the condor)*

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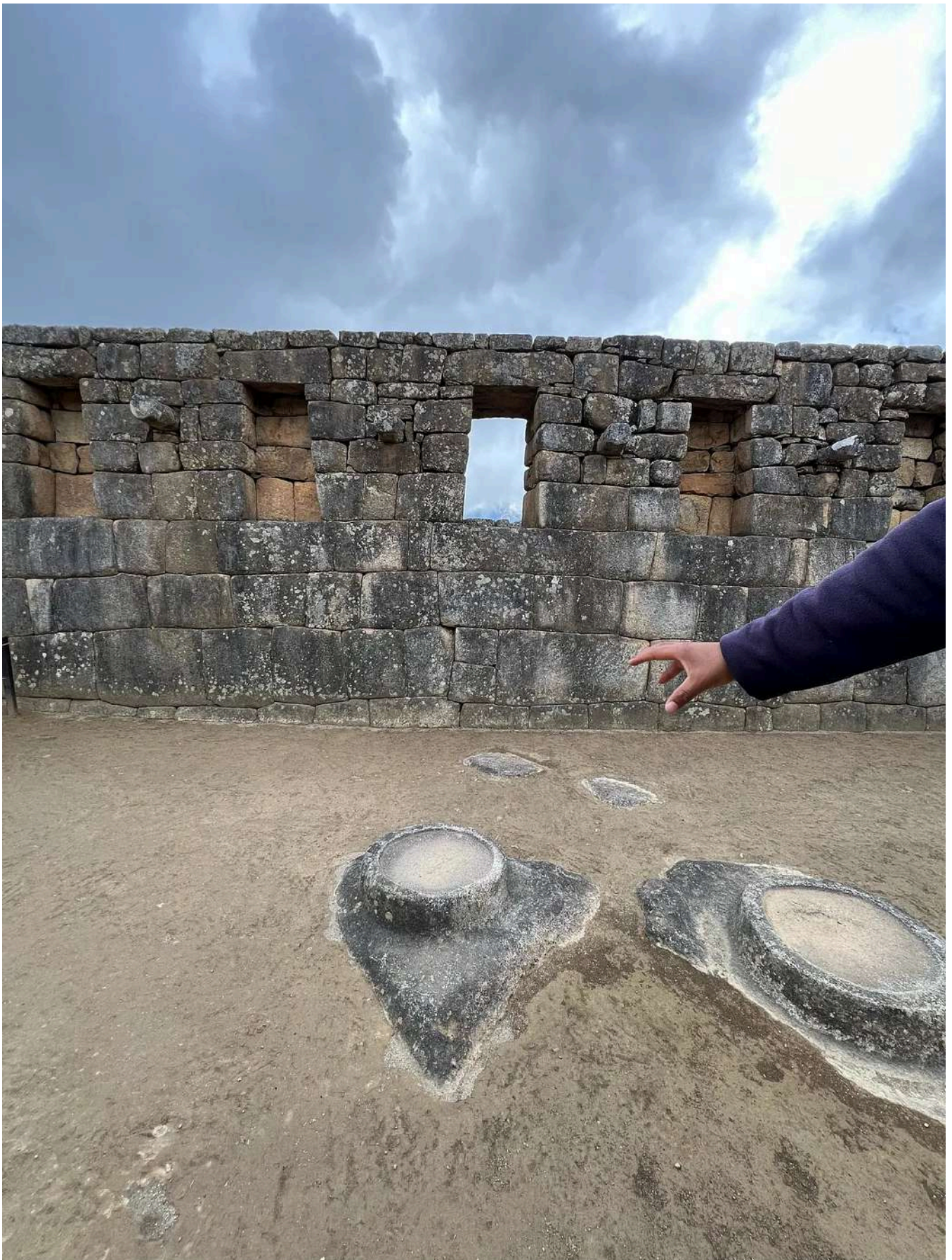
It’s like the ultimate Inca trifecta, with views to match. Plus, when you stand there, staring out through these windows, you can’t help but wonder what ancient Inca ceremonies took place with that epic backdrop. It’s spiritual, it’s scenic, and it’s seriously cool.



Believe me, there are three windows. I just couldn't capture them all in one frame.

*Water Mirrors/ Q'iswagocha:* They were like ancient Incan telescopes, reflecting the sky's wonders to help the Incas keep track of celestial events. With their shiny surfaces, these mirrors allowed astronomers to observe the positions of the sun, moon, and stars, giving them insights into seasonal changes and agricultural cycles. As the sun danced across the sky, these mirrors became crucial for tracking **equinoxes and solstices**, ensuring that the Incas could time their festivals and farming activities perfectly. So, as you gaze into these serene reflections, remember that they were not just pretty ponds — they were the Incas' window to the universe!

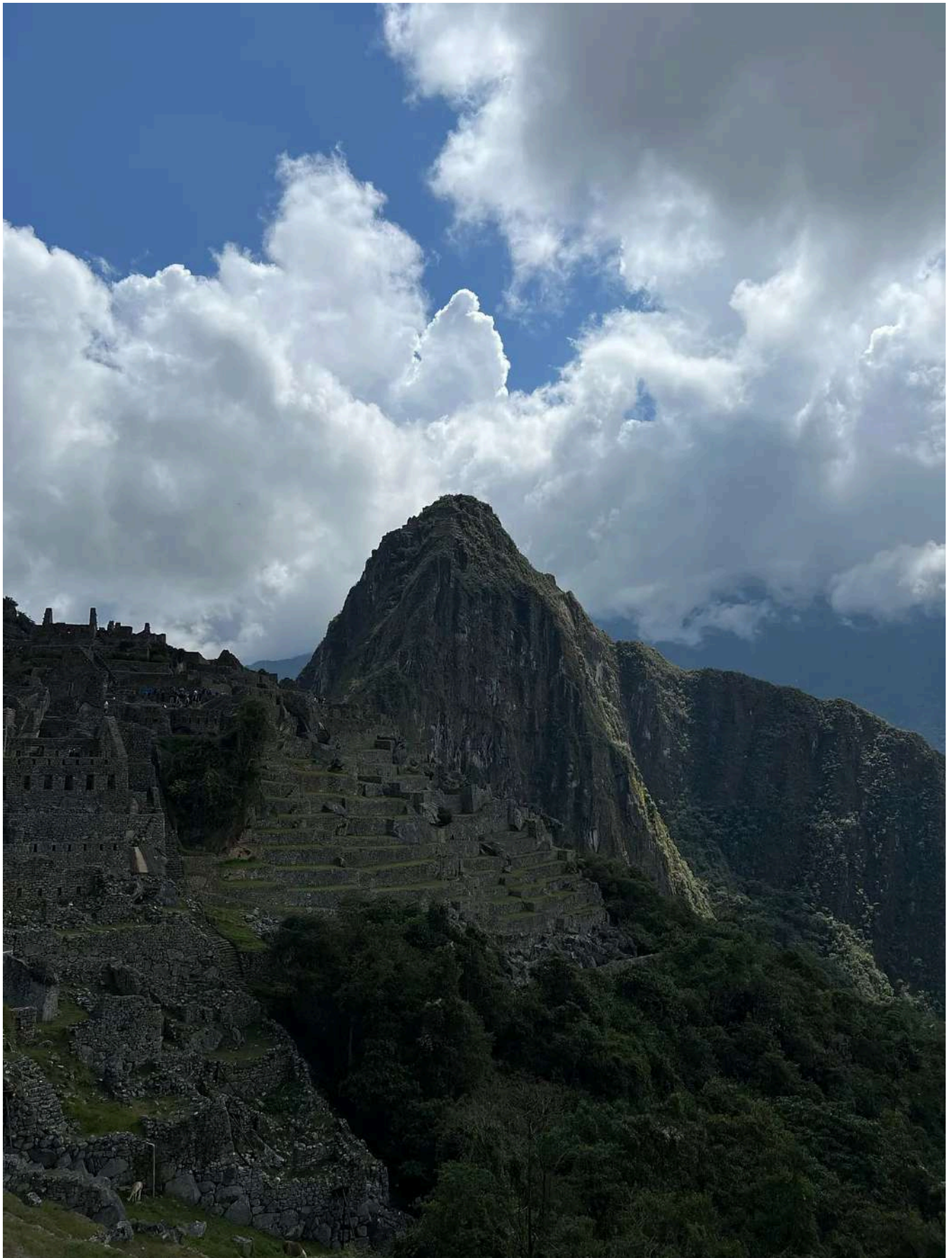




*The New Mountain/ Huayna Picchu:* Didn't climb it. Didn't want to tempt fate, but it looked like a beast. Towering over the site like it's just waiting to steal the spotlight, this peak has a personality all its own. Shrouded in mist half the time, it's like that



introverted friend who only shows up when they feel like it. But when it does appear, wow — what a reveal!



When the Clouds came together to mimic the Mountain



*The Sacred Rock/ Wank'a:* It is like Machu Picchu's very own mystical anchor, steeped in spirituality and reverence. This impressive boulder, with its natural contours, is believed to have held significant religious importance for the Incas. Locals often view it as a representation of the Earth Mother, **Pachamama**, and a symbol of fertility and sustenance. Its presence at the site adds an element of wonder, as it seemingly bridges the gap between the earthly realm and the spiritual.

*The Sacred Rock serves not only as a striking natural feature but also as a reminder of the deep connection the Incas had with their environment, where every stone, every peak, and every river held stories waiting to be told. So, as you stand before it, you can't help but feel the weight of history and the whispers of ancient rituals echoing through the ages.*



*The Urubamba:* The winding ribbon of life that embraces Machu Picchu, as it snakes through the valley, it's like the Inca's very own water feature, effortlessly connecting the ancient citadel to the lush surroundings. From the terraces of Machu Picchu, you can catch glimpses of this majestic river, a constant reminder of the natural forces that shaped both the land and the civilization that once thrived here. It's a symbol of vitality, nourishing both the crops and the spirit of the Incas, and watching it flow is like witnessing history itself, timeless and ever-changing.



**Llamas:** Ah, the llamas of Machu Picchu — the real rock stars of the ancient Inca citadel! If you thought the breathtaking views and intricate stonework were the main attractions, think again! These fluffy, four-legged guardians of the ruins are the unsung heroes of the site, strutting around with an air of indifference as if they own the place.

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*With their big, soulful eyes and regal posture, llamas seem to ponder the mysteries of the universe, or perhaps just whether it's time for their next snack. You'll often find them munching on the grass, casting judgmental glances at tourists who dare to invade their personal space. If you happen to catch one mid-chew, don't be surprised if it seems to mock your efforts at capturing the perfect Instagram shot.*

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And let's not forget their dramatic personalities! Llamas are notorious for their sassy attitude. Just try to take a selfie with one — they might turn away or, if you're really unlucky, spit at you as if to say, "Not today, human!"

These majestic creatures have been roaming the sacred grounds for centuries, serving not just as charming companions but also as an eco-friendly lawnmower



service, keeping the ancient terraces in check. So, as you stroll through Machu Picchu, be sure to pay your respects to the real keepers of the ancient wisdom — those fabulous llamas!



Look at those cuties!

*In conclusion, the site truly possesses an enchanting magic. I strongly recommend doing a bit of homework — hit the books, visit a museum, or, better yet, snag a guide (trust me, you'll want a guide) before you head out. The architecture alone doesn't quite spill the beans on the purpose and significance of these structures. When the mist finally clears, you'll notice that Machu Picchu is enveloped by sacred mountains ("apus") in every cardinal direction, which sheds light on why such effort was made to build this site here, of all places. Once you grasp that connection, everything starts to click. Machu Picchu feels like the Inca cosmos intricately etched into the landscape. The real question isn't why Pachakuti chose this location for Machu Picchu, but rather how he could have possibly selected anywhere else. You can't appreciate Machu Picchu in isolation; it's essential to see it in the broader context of the sacred sites that lead up to it.*

### **The Moral of the Story**

- Always pack extra meds (or in my case, remember to pack *any* meds at all).
- Machu Picchu is breathtaking, even with digestive issues.
- And finally, a little patience goes a long way — trust me, the mist will lift, unveiling something as breathtaking as the majestic Machu Picchu itself.





The Mist vanishes to reveal the site in its full glory!

**For those of you who stuck around until the end, here are some quick facts about the site:**

- Constructed around 1450 during the reign of Inca Emperor Pachacuti.



- Located around **2,430 meters (7,970 feet)** above sea level.
- Over **3,000 stone steps** throughout the site, connecting the various terraces and temples.
- Covers an area of about **32,592 hectares (80,536 acres)**.
- Around **200 buildings**, including temples, residences, storage rooms, and more.
- **60 percent** of the construction done at Machu Picchu was underground. So, what you see on top is really just the tip of the iceberg.
- Built without the use of mortar, metal tools, or the wheel, the Construction Stones weighed over **50 tons**, and they were moved using simple tools and manpower.

### **\$\$\$ & Handy Links:**

- **Machu Picchu Tickets:** You'll need to snag a ticket to **Llaqta de Machupicchu** (Circuit 1 or 2) for **152 soles**. Think of it as your golden ticket to the ancient wonderland. Get yours here: [[Llaqta Machupicchu](#) | [Tu Boleto \(cultura.pe\)](#)].
- **Inca Rail:** Bi-modal, bi-fun! Get from **Cusco to Aguas Calientes via Ollantaytambo** with the **360-degree view** (seriously, all the mountains you can handle) for a cool **US\$ 159**. Round trip, of course, because we're not walking back. Check it out here: [[Train to Machu Picchu — Cusco — Aguas Calientes](#) | [Inca Rail](#)].
- **InkaTerra Stay:** Sure, it'll set you back **US\$ 500 per night**, but trust me, it's worth every penny — just maybe skip that free dinner. Your digestive system will thank me later. Room for two, here's the link: [[Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Best Peru Resorts. Machu Picchu Tours](#)].
- **InkaTerra Dinner:** It's included with the stay, but let's be real: while the meal may not cost you a dime, your stomach might end up footing the bill. In retrospect, it probably wasn't the food itself... more like the questionable amount I decided to devour that led to my unfortunate digestive disaster. (#LooseMotionsLife)
- **Bus to the Site:** Grab your seat on the Machu Picchu Express (aka bus) for **US\$ 24**. It's the smoothest 20-minute ride up those mountains you'll ever experience. Details here: [[Consettur](#)].

- **Guide at the Site:** For the full story of Machu Picchu, you'll need an **English-speaking guide**. And here's the hack: split the **US\$ 60** guide fee with another couple! The more, the merrier — and cheaper.
- This book kept me company: [Turn Right at Machu Picchu: Rediscovering the Lost City One Step at a Time by Mark Adams | Goodreads](#). Now, it could get a bit insensitive at times but if you are okay to tread past them, it is a very good travel companion during your trip to Peru and also great to know what Machu Picchu really is!
- This book was my trusty companion: [[Turn Right at Machu Picchu: Rediscovering the Lost City One Step at a Time by Mark Adams | Goodreads](#)]. While it occasionally veers into somewhat insensitive territory, if you can look past that, it's a fantastic travel buddy for your Peru adventure. Plus, it offers great insights into the true essence of Machu Picchu!

*Oh, and just a quick heads-up: the correct pronunciation is Ma·chu Pic·chu [mäCHōō 'pi(k)CHōō], not Pichoo like I kept saying during the trip. Yay for finally getting it right!*

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