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How I conquered the Inca Trail at 60

The path to Machu Picchu is a bucket-list adventure like no other, but also a daunting prospect. Just how fit does a 60-year-old need to be?





Writer Kath Brown hiked Machu Picchu as a complete novice

Kath Brown

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Comeback

Uno vuelve donde fue feliz, volvimos con

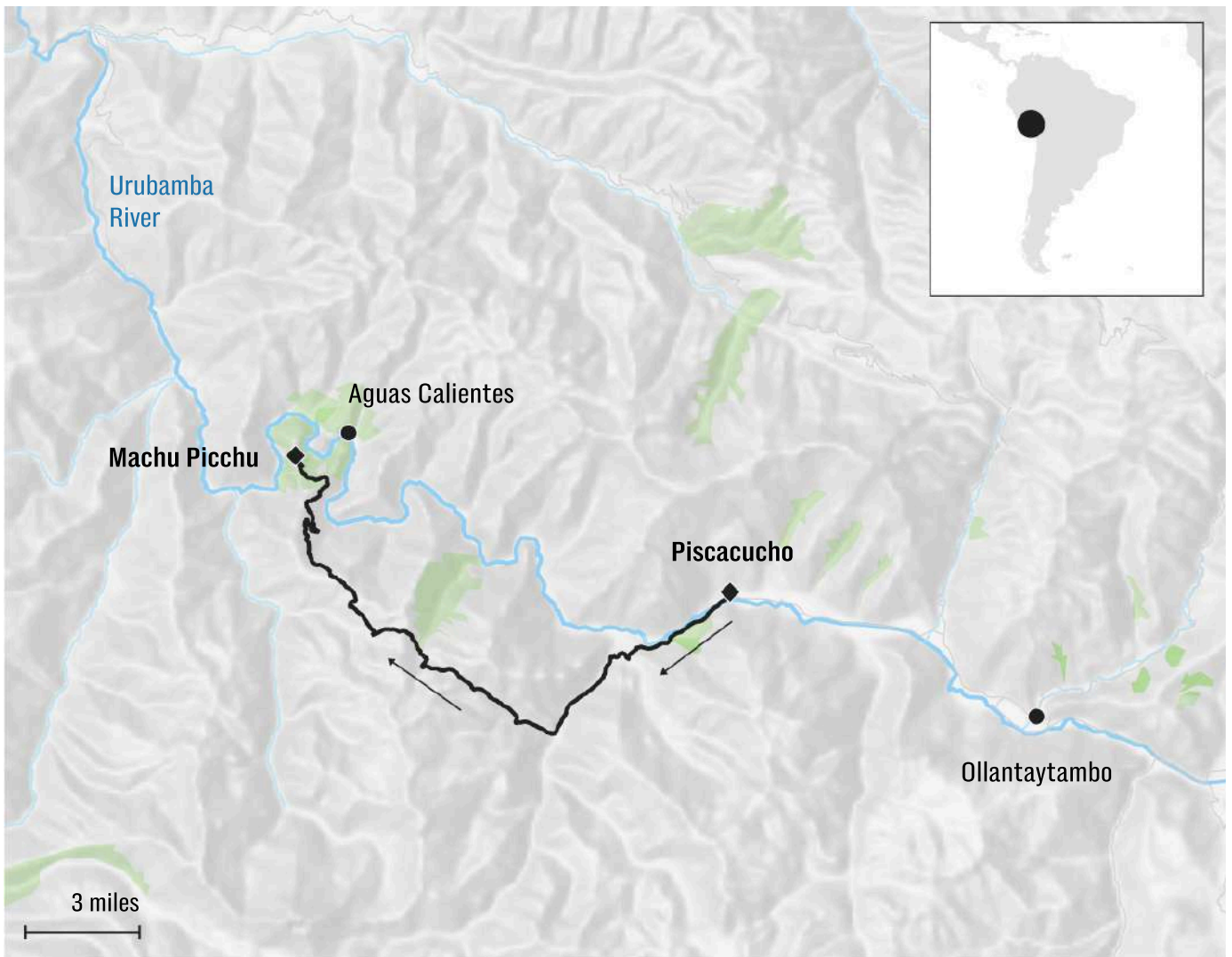
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You wouldn't, I hope, describe me and my husband, Adrian, as a lazy couple. We've always been busy with work and the general mayhem of family life, and we have two dogs that need to be walked every day. However, I freely confess that I'd got to the age of 60 without ever owning a pair of hiking boots, and earlier this year I suddenly found it hard to motivate Adrian to get off the sofa. We are also classic empty-nesters, with more time on our hands now that our two children are doing their own thing. So I decided we needed an adventure: something to get him off the couch, and me into hiking gear.



Kath and Adrian needed a challenge to get them off the sofa

Visiting Peru – and specifically walking the Inca Trail – had been a vague aspiration of mine for years. Suddenly it felt like exactly the sort of shared challenge that would force us into fitness mode. However, it was only when I started to research the difficulty level and the challenges posed by trekking at high altitude that I realised our training would have to begin in earnest. The five-day route necessitates up to 10 hours walking a day, at altitudes of nearly 14,000ft. There was clearly no way we'd be able to do that from a standing start.



So we joined a gym, for the first time since our 20s. We followed programmes from a personal trainer, who suggested we focus on cardiovascular fitness, stamina and weights to build up muscle, particularly in our legs. The first time we started on the Stairmaster we were huffing and puffing after a few minutes and Adrian had to reach for his asthma inhaler. We also struggled at first with the gentle inclines on the North Downs, where we started doing regular hikes. But gradually, over the course of four months, we started to feel fitter. We could both do at least half an hour on the Stairmaster – only boredom prevented us from doing more – and we could approach the gradients on our walks with a bit more gusto.



Kath and Adrian built up to their Peruvian adventure with hikes around the North Downs

Finally... It was time. In a slight panic, I bought us both Garmin watches so that we could track our altitude and heart rate: surely the sort of vital information that would save us from really overdoing it. Kitted out in hiking boots and trousers, we boarded our plane to the Peruvian capital, Lima, and then onwards to Cusco: once the capital of the Inca Empire, still the gateway to Machu Picchu and itself a breathless 11,200ft above sea level.

In an attempt to acclimatise, we headed to the lower level of the Sacred Valley, which follows the course of the Urubamba river from the town of Pisac, just north of Cusco, to Machu Picchu itself, 62 miles to the west. But the next day, I had my first shock while walking up the short slope to the hotel car park and

found myself seriously out of breath. It was a weird feeling – I wanted to breathe deeply but couldn't seem to get enough air into my lungs.

It became worse. With an altitude of less than 10,000ft, we thought climbing to the top of the Ollantaytambo archaeological site would be relatively easy, but Inca steps are steep and Adrian was panting so much I started to worry that my elaborate plan to get him off the couch was a terrible mistake.

Back at the hotel, I spoke to one of the guides about our fitness concerns. “If it's a struggle to get from reception to the car park, should we be attempting a five-day hike to Machu Picchu?” I asked.

We were advised not to panic and to step up our acclimatisation efforts by doing a short hike at high altitude. So, bright and early the next day, we started our ascent up an agricultural track with sweeping views of snow-capped mountains above the village of Chinchero. I'm not sure our guide, Henri, was banking on us being quite so plodding – we literally had to stop and catch our breath every two minutes – but he seemed to be quite relaxed about our snail-like pace. When we reached the highest peak of just over 13,000ft, I felt faint and had to sit down, but Henri talked us through breathing techniques and encouraged us to sip water to deal with the altitude sickness.



Kath and Adrian initially struggled with hiking at a high altitude

After four days of acclimatisation at altitude, we got to the point where our watches were displaying 22,000 steps per day (not bad for a couple who usually spend their holidays on a sunlounger), and we met our Inca Trail guide, Ruben, as well as our fellow trekkers. They included Howard and Terry from Adelaide, their friend Pam from Michigan (all in their 60s like us), and a younger couple, Antonio from Spain and Line from Denmark, both 36. The day of reckoning had arrived.

Day 1: From Piscacucho to Chamana



Trains passing alongside the Urubamba river

Distance travelled: 3.7 miles Highest point: 8,580ft Elevation change: 328ft descent Peak heart rate: 152bpm Personal fitness rating: 5/5

Setting off from the trailhead at Piscacucho just after lunch, I felt less anxious than I had for days. We'd done all we could to acclimatise, and our co-hikers all admitted that they were just as nervous about their fitness as we were. What a relief. I had imagined struggling to keep up with a team of super-hikers. Pam seemed particularly worried about the inclines and we vowed to stick together if the going got tough.

Our first day started at a fairly gentle pace, with a starting altitude of only 8,500ft. After a few hours we stopped for a snack of dried fruit and chocolate and marvelled at the Urubamba river and passing trains below, with the spectacular mountain backdrop of the Andes.

Ruben explained that a total of 17 porters – amazingly fit guys carrying 20kg on their backs – would be supporting our adventure. He asked us to call them *waykis* (which means both “my brother” and “my friend” in Quechua, the language of the indigenous people) as a mark of solidarity and respect. As we arrived at our first camp in Chamana, where our tents were already set up alongside the archeological site of Llactapata, they lined up to greet us, and

then – much to our mutual amusement – joined us in a group session of yoga stretches.



Kath's group was joined by several porters for an evening yoga session

Trail accommodation of a two-person tent was pretty basic, but I was pleasantly surprised to be given an inflatable mattress and a bowl of warm water to wash in. Once we had settled in, we joined the others in the big mess tent for a dinner of chicken soup and rolled trout, the first of many impressive meals created by chef Paulino.

Day 2: From Chamana to Llulluchupampa



The first part of the route passed through areas of cloud forest

Distance travelled: 5.6 miles **Highest point:** 12,467ft **Elevation change:** 3,937ft ascent **Peak heart rate:** 160bpm **Personal fitness rating:** 3/5

Over a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs – and a round of coca tea, which helps with altitude sickness – Ruben told us to be prepared for a tougher day ahead.

After a tour around Llactapata, one of many Inca and pre Inca settlements along the trail, we started our ascent. When going uphill, the youngsters, Antonio and Line, tended to lead with Ruben. However, Adrian and I managed to keep up so long as we could stop every 10 minutes or so. Ruben pointed out various bits of flora and fauna along the way, including native lupins, orchids and mesmerising hummingbirds.

The first part of the Inca Trail is also a route used by Quechuan locals going about their daily lives: we regularly encountered people dressed in traditional embroidered clothes, the women in tall hats, leading donkeys and cattle or taking their children to school. Once we had gone through the hamlet of Huayllabamba, the last inhabited place on the trail, the ascent became steeper as it passed through beautiful cloud forest leading up to the bare mountainside of Llulluchupampa.

Diverting though it was, our group's slow pace meant we only just made it to our camp before dark. As we gathered for a delicious dinner of Lomo Saltado, a beef stir-fry dish, Ruben broke the news that we'd have to set off before daybreak the next morning to give ourselves enough time to cover the long distance on the itinerary.



On the second evening of the trek, Kath's group camped at Llulluchupampa

Day 3: From Llulluchupampa to Chaquicocha



The third day of hiking took Kath and Adrian to altitudes of nearly 14,000ft

Distance travelled: 7.3 miles **Highest point:** 13,780 ft **Elevation change:** 2,297 ft ascent/3,281 ft descent **Peak heart rate:** 151 bpm **Personal fitness rating:** 4/5

We woke up at 4.45am. My watch told me I needed more sleep. But today we were due to climb to the alarmingly named Dead Woman's Pass, the highest point on our route at nearly 14,000ft. It was pouring with rain and freezing cold, the wind was whipping around us, the view was obscured by clouds and there was talk of snow as the temperature dropped below freezing. "This is tough but it makes you feel alive, right?" exclaimed Howard as we steadily pushed upwards. Astonishing as it may seem, we all agreed.



At almost 14,000ft, Dead Woman's Pass was the highest point on the route

Our next challenge was a precarious descent into the Pacaymayu valley. I found hiking downwards surprisingly tricky, as it puts strain on your knees; Pam and Line also struggled. While the rest of us were taking it slow, Adrian came into his own and was able to march down the steep steps at pace with Ruben. Howard declared that the highlight of his day was seeing “couch potato Adrian leading the pack”. Despite our best efforts, however, we didn't make it to the planned camp on time, which meant another early start the next morning – and a much harder last hiking day than expected.

Day 4: From Chaquicocha to Machu Picchu and Aguas Calientes (also known as Machu Picchu Town)



Kath and Adrian at the Sun Gate, a popular viewpoint over the site of Machu Pacchu

Distance travelled: 9.5 miles **Highest point:** 11,811ft **Elevation change:** 3,937ft descent/350 ft ascent **Peak heart rate:** 142bpm **Personal fitness rating:** 3/5

There was a team talk from Ruben over a breakfast of pancakes and coca tea. We had a lot of ground to cover in order to reach Machu Picchu in time to get the last bus at 5pm, which would take us to our hotel in Aguas Calientes. The biggest advantage of doing the five-day trail, as opposed to four (apart from being able to take it slow and avoid other trekkers), is that you arrive in the late afternoon, when most of the tourists have left. Then you stay in a hotel, have a shower and get some sleep, returning to the site the next morning for a leisurely tour. Ruben said we would have to walk quicker, suggesting we chat less to conserve our energy. “Think of the pisco sours we’ll be celebrating with this evening,” he declared as we began the first ascent of the day. By this stage our knees were really feeling the strain, especially on the downhill parts. The incredible vistas as the sun passed over the mountains, and the panoramic views of the Urubamba Valley, provided the inspiration to keep us going.



Kath found the sweeping views to be every bit as beautiful as the brochures

We reached the celebrated “gringo killer” steps just after 4pm and scrambled up to the Sun Gate, with the splendour of Machu Picchu below in all its glory. It’s as beautiful as those South American travel brochures paint it: the grassy terraces grazed by llamas, the startling semicircular Temple of the Sun, the heavenly orientation of the Intihuatana sacred stone. Royal retreat? Religious centre? A place of learning? The mystery surrounding its construction in the 14th century only adds to the thrill of being there. By 6pm we were raising our pisco sours in celebration – by far the best drink of our lives.

Day 5: From our hotel in Aguas Calientes to Machu Picchu



Kath and Adrian spent their final morning on a guided tour of Machu Picchu

Distance travelled: 1.5 miles walking around site **Highest point:** 8,000ft **Peak heart rate:** 134bpm **Personal fitness rating:** 2/5 (my legs were killing me!)

After we had spent the morning on a guided tour of the site, Ruben booked a final lunch in Aguas Calientes for our little group: a wonderful chance for us all to thank him for his knowledge, encouragement and humour. Adrian and I were exhausted and the muscles in our legs felt like we'd done the biggest workout of our lives, but we were so proud of ourselves for getting fit enough at the age of 60 to hike at high altitude. The highlights, apart from appreciating the power of my lungs and realising I can easily last four days without a shower or a mirror, were being immersed in a fascinating new culture, meeting a brilliant bunch of people – and that both of us had been able to laugh all the way as we took on the challenge together.

My advice? If you're in reasonable health and relatively fit, you can do it. And the effects could last. If you want proof, at the hotel breakfast buffet on the day after the hike, I noticed Adrian choosing fruit and cereal rather than the fry-up he'd usually pile his plate with. My plan had clearly worked.



One of the highlights of the trip for Kath was meeting 'brilliant' people, including the 'waykis' and the people in her tour group

Travel essentials

Journey Latin America (journeylatinamerica.com) offers a 15-day holiday in Peru walking the classic Inca Trail to Machu Picchu with hotel stays at Casa Andina Select in Lima, Explora Sacred Valley (explora.com), Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo and Palacio del Inca, A Luxury Collection Hotel in Cusco. The holiday costs from £6,200 per person and includes domestic flights in Peru, transfers, daily guided excursions, camping equipment for the Inca Trail, full board during the Inca Trail and at Explora, where alcoholic drinks are also included, and breakfast daily.

For more information on Peru, see promperu.uk

See our Trip of a Lifetime for [Machu Picchu](#)