

# Vacations & **Travel**



**Take the path less travelled to Machu Picchu**





*The Andean answer to Eden, the Lares trek explores Peru's spiritual Sacred Valley in style, using the path less travelled to reach Machu Picchu.*

There's a moment, as the sun begins to burn off low-hanging clouds blanketing Machu Picchu, when I begin to understand why the Incas believed the Gods lived in this pocket of the world. Head-scratching citadel aside, the Peruvian Andes is a picture of primal beauty: think, bubbling thermal waters, misty river valleys and jagged mountain ranges that zigzag across the horizon like a dragon's backbone.





Getting here is a rite of passage for everyone from history buffs to thrill seekers, many of whom sign up for a chest-beating hike along the Inca Trail. Capped at a capacity of 200 trekkers a day, this well-worn route requires hardy souls to bed down in tents, often in sub-zero temperatures, and forego showers for the duration of their walk. Still, it's a pilgrimage that many find life-changing, perhaps because of the physical feat – hiking at 4,000 metres takes your breath away, quite literally – or perhaps because of the jaw-dropping theatre of the Peruvian highlands. My passage to Machu Picchu proves just as scenic and equally spiritual as the original trail, but thanks to Mountain Lodges of Peru, it is much more comfortable.

Operating a number of lodge-to-lodge journeys through the Andes, Mountain Lodges of Peru escorts adventurers along lesser-known Inca tracks to the 15th-century ruins in the Urubamba River valley. My trail for five days curves through the mystical Sacred and Lares valleys, where I stay in smart bungalows with condor's-eye views. Sunshine hours are filled with high-altitude hiking, while evenings revolve around chef-prepared meals and long soaks in jacuzzis. I collapse into beds with 1000-thread count sheets, and then over breakfast meet Andean fortune tellers who read my aura with the help of coca leaves.



## Day one: Cusco to Lamay

There's no such thing as easing into an Andean hike; within an hour of leaving Cusco – once the capital of the Inca Empire – we're marching toward an altitude of 4,000 metres. My breath shortens and my heart rate begins to mimic the William Tell Overture, not only because of oxygen deprivation but also because of the end-of-earth scenery that unfolds: emerald valleys dotted with glacial lakes, steep mountain passes webbed with donkey trails, and rocky lookouts where doe-eyed llamas perch like Peruvian totems.

The high point is 4,300 metres, from where we descend into the tiny town of Viacha to learn about Andean artisanal farming. While we tour gardens, our guides prepare a hearty lunch of potatoes and whole chickens, baked in an earthen oven known as a *pachamanca*. They pour *chicha morada* (juice made from maize) and coca-leaf tea, to provide hiking energy and help with the dizziness.

Our lunchtime perch also comes with views of Písaq, a hilltop citadel known for its *intihuatana* (sundial). While around 1.6 million people descend on Machu Picchu annually, we have this 15th-century site almost entirely to ourselves. The *chicha morada* kicks in and I run along enormous terraces, jumping down each one to reach the excavated ruins: the Temple of the Sun, ancient baths, altars, a ceremonial platform. When I find the water fountain, I know I should be contemplating Pachacutec, Atahualpa and other Inca rulers. But the onetime bubbler has set my mind off course, and all I can think about is how good a hot bath would be right now. Thankfully, one is waiting for me when we reach Lamay Lodge, our earthen accommodation for the night in the heart of the Sacred Valley.

Encircling a flower-dotted garden, the lodge is everything you dream of when you're in your tent along the Inca Trail. There's a blister clinic, steamy showers, warming meals and the option to have dessert outside, either in the Jacuzzi or by the fire. When I go to bed, there's a hot water bottle between my sheets.







## Day two: Lamay to Huacawasi

More ruins are on the itinerary on day two, when we're given a private tour of the incredible Ancasmarcha archaeological site. If this were on the Inca Trail, we'd be jostling with hundreds of hikers but here, our small group is the only evidence of human life.

The road to Huacawasi is unforgiving, and we're soon walking amid clouds, traversing the Abra Huchuyccasa Pass at 4,414 metres. The sun shines as we scramble down the valley toward opalesque Qeywaqocha Lake for lunch. It's all the fuel we need to make it to Huacawasi village, where Mountain Lodges of Peru collaborated with the community to build our design-driven accommodation. As night falls, I slip into the bubbles of my personal hot tub, set alfresco on my balcony for supremely comfortable Southern Hemisphere stargazing.







## Day three: Huacawasi to Ollantaytambo

Our longest day sees us on the trail for six hours, by mid-morning reaching Ipsaycocha: a long saddle slung between two peaks at over 4,490 metres. Beyond the pass, a new world opens. Overseen by fresh ranges of mountains, a narrow valley falls away to what looks like the edge of the world. In the stillness of the immense vista, only the weather moves. Clouds tumble across mountain faces and sudden squalls of rain march around distant corners of the valley.

Tents are set up and waiting for us at Lake Ipsaycocha, where we share lunch with Andean geese, ducks and plovers. While we eat, locals from nearby villages spread out vibrant woven blankets and ponchos on the grass. They're too beautiful not to purchase.

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## Day four: Ollantaytambo to Aguas Calientes

Ollantaytambo is the starting point for hikes along the Inca Trail. But while others are untangling tent poles, we're sipping coca tea in the hotel's gardens, preparing for a short walk up Pinkuylluna Mountain for stellar views over the archaeological site. We lace up our boots and head north to witness the mountain's own incredible ruins, which include ancient Inca granaries etched into the cliffside.

In the afternoon we jump on a train bound for Aguas Calientes, steeling ourselves for the 1,000-plus steps that lead straight up to Machu Picchu.





## Day five: Aguas Calientes to Cusco

Nothing quite prepares you for the drama of Machu Picchu, with its sharp peaks backdropping polished-stone ruins built by order of the Inca ruler Pachacutec. A mind-bending feat of engineering, the World Heritage site was only populated for 80 years, at which time it was mysteriously abandoned. It's most definitely not abandoned today, although new rules now diffuse the 5,000 daily visitors in order to temper erosion from foot traffic and prevent damage to the ruins.

The site's ingenuity and architectural importance is undeniable. But for me, the real magic in this part of the world happens in the mountains.





# TRAVEL FACTS

## **Further information:**

Mountain Lodges of Peru operates five- and seven-day treks from Cusco through the Sacred Valley and Lares to Machu Picchu. Rates start from US\$1899 (about A\$2747) including on-trail accommodation, most meals, guides and transfers. –

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