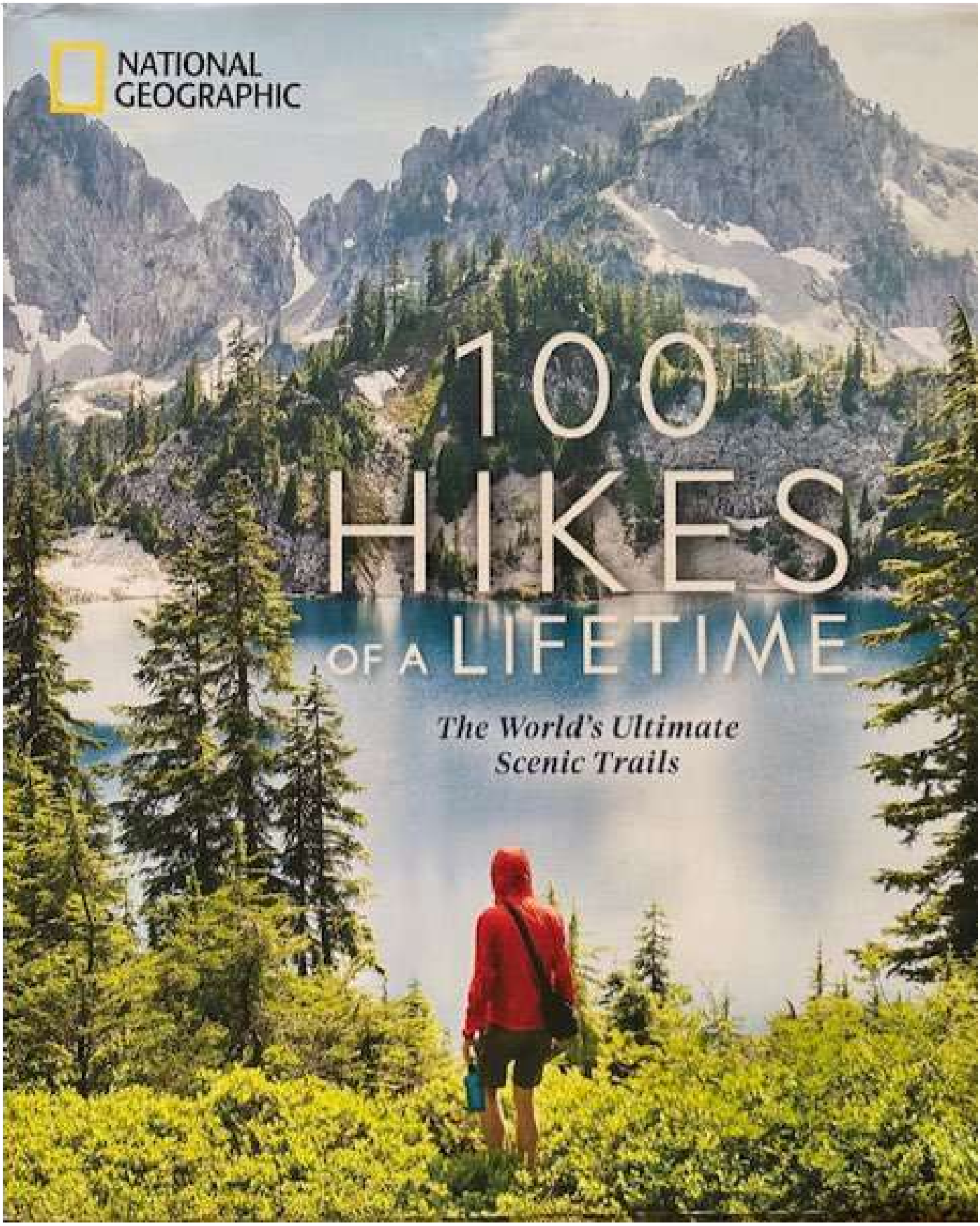

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
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PERU

SALKANTAY TREK

The Alternative Route to Machu Picchu

DISTANCE: 46 miles (74 km) point to point **LENGTH OF TRIP:** 4 to 6 days
BEST TIME TO GO: Austral fall through spring **DIFFICULTY:** Strenuous

Since it was rediscovered by Hiram Bingham in 1911, the ancient Inca city of Machu Picchu has inspired mystical reverence and spurred many starry-eyed history buffs to pilgrimage to the site over the decades. So many, in fact, that the Inca Trail, which leads to these ruins—perched scenically between two peaks at about 7,700 feet (2,300 m) in the Cordillera de Vilcabamba of the Peruvian Andes—has become clogged with tourists. Now, the Peruvian government hands out "only" 500 permits to hikers each day. As a result, a small cottage industry of alternative routes has sprouted in the region around Cusco and the Sacred Valley, including the stunning Salkantay Trek.

Travelers typically fly into Cusco, once the capital of the Inca civilization and considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the hemisphere. Situated at about 11,000 feet (3,400 m), it also makes a good place to acclimate for a few days. Check out centuries-old stone walls, and meet local people dressed in colorful woven attire.

The Salkantay Trek starts from a trailhead outside of Soraypampa, about a couple hours' drive from Cusco, through a parade of mountains, passes, and more than a dozen different ecosystems to end at a station where a train whisks hikers to Aguas Calientes, the gateway to Machu Picchu. Along the way, hikers are struck by the immensity of the peaks and glaciers, the

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

If you'd like to follow in the Inca's footsteps, you'll probably be topping out at well over 10,000 feet (3,000 m). It's wise to set aside a few days to acclimate during your trip and stay well hydrated. Be aware of the symptoms of altitude sickness—headache, nausea, dizziness, fatigue—and always descend if they worsen.

OPPOSITE: A rocky path leads to the Inca ruins of Ollantaytambo.

NEXT PAGE: Along the Salkantay Trek, Humantay Lake is a great spot to stop for lunch.



WHAT YOU'LL SEE: Inca ruins (Machu Picchu) | Cloud forest | Bamboo | Glacier | Humantay Lake | Coffee and fruit plantations | Hummingbirds | Butterflies

warmth of the people who dwell in these mountains, and the wide diversity of landscapes: from high alpine zones to cloud forests and stands of bamboo. As the days pass, hikers also stop at various archaeological sites and at Humantay Lake with its brilliant turquoise hue. While it's possible to camp, many choose to stay in a string of swanky high-altitude ecolodges situated a day's walk apart and run by Mountain Lodges of Peru. (No doubt, some creature comforts are enticing after days walking above 12,000 feet/3,600 m). The most challenging part of the trek is generally considered to be Salkantay Pass, which looms over 15,000 feet (4,600 m). After that, the trek heads downhill for some time, plowing through boulder fields, rolling hills, river valleys, and cloud forests. Before reaching Aguas Calientes, hikers climb and descend Llactapata Pass and the

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE

Another alternative to the Inca Trail is the Lares Trek, which is typically done in three to four days. Hikers schlep over several high passes—the highest tops 14,000 feet (4,300 m)—and glance up at views of toothy Ausangate. Weave through remote mountain communities, past small lakes and agricultural fields and herds of grazing alpacas before reaching the ruins of Ollantaytambo and transferring by train and bus to Machu Picchu.



ABOVE: Reaching Machu Picchu, trekkers find Inca ruins including stone terraces and a watcher's hut.

OPPOSITE: Hikers are often welcomed by the local people who dwell in the mountains that they ascend along the trail.

eponymous ruins, from which one can see a unique backdoor view of Machu Picchu.

"There are so many highlights along the trail that it's hard to say which is my favorite," says Andres Adasme, a program developer for Mountain Lodges of Peru. "It is probably the majesty of the beautiful Salkantay mountain or the pristine waters of the sacred Humantay Lake. Some will say it is the amazing contrasts and diversity you can experience, from glaciers to high cloud forest—or just to feel the sensation of having your feet over an ancient Inca trail."

And, naturally, Machu Picchu itself is a fitting reward. Situated in a narrow saddle between steep green thumbs, it is among the few pre-Columbian ruins that remains virtually entirely intact. It's not hard to imagine what it must have been like to live here centuries ago perched high in these sacred mountains, ensconced in visiting clouds.

