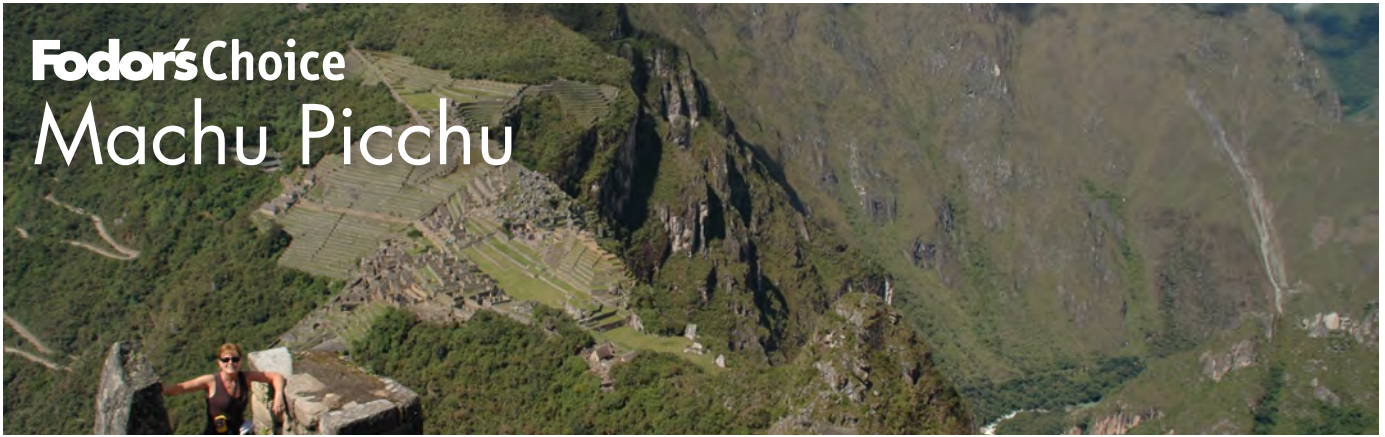


Fodor's Choice Machu Picchu



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The exquisite architecture of the massive Inca stone structures, the formidable backdrop of steep sugarloaf hills, and the Urubamba River winding far below have made Machu Picchu the iconic symbol of Peru. It's a mystical city, the most famous archaeological site in South America, and one of the world's must-see destinations.

NEED TO KNOW

Tickets: You must buy your ticket (about \$44) in Aguas Calientes or in Cusco. Tickets are valid for three days, but you can use each only once.

Transportation: Trains run regularly between Cusco and Aguas Calientes. Buses leave Aguas Calientes for the ruins beginning at 6:30 AM and continue hourly until 1 PM. Return trips operate from 11:30 to 5:40. If you're heading back to Cusco, get back at least an hour before your train departs.

On-site amenities: There's a snack bar near where the buses deposit you, and the Machu Picchu sanctuary lodge has a lunch buffet. Bathrooms cost a small fee, and toilet paper is provided. There are no bathrooms inside the ruins.

Machu Picchu's history has been debated ever since Yale university historian Hiram Bingham announced that he had discovered the site in 1911. It probably had some 200 homes and 1,000 residents, with agricultural terraces (corn was the likely crop) and a strategic position that overlooked—but could not be seen from—the valley floor. Indeed this “lost city of the Inca” was missed by the ravaging conquistadors and survived untouched until the beginning of the 20th century.

You'll be acutely aware that the world has found Machu Picchu if you visit in high season (June–mid-September). A day trip gives you about four hours at the site. If you stay overnight at the hotel near the entrance or in Aguas Calientes, you can wander the ruins after most visitors have gone.

EXPLORING

The Guardhouse is the first structure you encounter upon entering. Work your way up through the agricultural areas to the urban sectors. The House of the Terrace Caretaker and Funeral Rock—a 20-minute walk up to the left of the entrance—provide the quintessential Machu Picchu vista. Bodies of nobles likely lay in state here, where they would have been eviscerated, dried, and prepared for mummification.

On June 22 (winter solstice in the southern hemisphere), sunlight shines through a small trapezoidal window in the Temple of the Sun and onto the middle of a large, flat granite stone presumed to be an Inca calendar. Looking out the window, astronomers saw the constellation Pleiades, revered as a symbol of crop fertility.

This site also has 16 small fountains, linked to the Inca worship of water, and the Palace of the Princess, a two-story building that adjoins the temple. A stone staircase leads to the three-walled Temple of the Three Windows, whose east wall is hewn from a single rock with trapezoidal windows cut into it.

Another three-walled structure is the Principal Temple, a masterpiece of mortarless stone construction. Abutting it is the Sacristy, where priests may have prepared themselves for ceremonies.

Onward is a hillock that leads to the Intihuatana (Hitching Post of the Sun). Every Inca center had one of these vertical stone columns (gnomons), but their function is unknown. The Spaniards destroyed most of the columns, as they were considered pagan objects. Machu Picchu's is one of the few to survive, partially at least. Its top was accidentally knocked off in 2001 during the filming of a Cusqueña beer commercial.

Cross a large grassy plaza toward a collection of less-elaborate buildings and huts known as the Common Area. Here you'll find the Sacred Rock, a miniature version of the mountain range visible behind it. Little is known of its purpose.

A staircase leads to the Temple of the Condor, so named because the positioning of the stones resembles a giant condor, the symbol of heaven in the Inca cosmos. The structure's many small chambers led Bingham to dub it a prison, a concept that likely did not exist in Inca society.

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