



Machu Picchu Hike Trip Notes **November 13-27, 2012**

Remembering all my '100 Anniversary' coincidences for Stockholm, another coincidence that this is really Hiram Bingham's 100th anniversary of exploring Machu Picchu. He stumbled upon it 101 years ago but then returned for full review the following July.

It is downright painful to get to the area however; difficult flight, hoards of people, and the altitude starting at 11,500' are simply more than can be imagined. With the prior week hiking in Tucson at 5,000 to 7,000' you'd think that would have helped but my body was in major revolt upon arriving in Cusco. Cusco is generally the first stopping point of tour companies. Some trekking then goes up to 14,500' elevation. One acclimates (if that's possible) in Cusco with mini-hikes and a lot of hope along with a lot of coca tea (cocaine but miniscule); I had added Diamox as added precaution but it wasn't enough.



www.photosbymartin.com/south_america/peru_sacred_valley_pictures.htm

From CountryWalkers.com: *Few destinations on Earth are as legendary as Machu Picchu, yet your exploration of this hidden city in the clouds is just one highlight on a trip steeped in Peruvian magic. Led by guides with an infectious passion for the land and its people, you'll begin in the high-altitude city of Cusco, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Wind your way through the sacred Urubamba Valley to age-old burial sites built into steep cliffs, and visit mountain villages for meals and dancing with local families. Hearty lunches and savory traditional dinners fuel you for browsing Andean markets and exploring the 900-year-old Maras salt mines. With every step, you'll head deeper into a land of snow-mantled peaks, lush forests, and dramatic valley vistas whose many ancient Incan ruins are yours to wander. The challenge of the Inca Trail awaits those who choose. And when it's time to experience the full magnificence of Machu Picchu, you'll visit at off-peak hours and take paths less traveled to steer away from the crowds.*

Headlines! Aka Why Go?

- Arriving at a 7th Wonder of the World on your own feet via the Inca Trail and feeling like you OWN the view from up above.
- We had a 'private tour' of the ruins for about 3 hours before other tourists arrive. Our guide hired a 5am bus and only a few hearty hikers were in the ruins with us.
- To see the sunrise over Machu Picchu though apparently about 300 days a year it's too foggy! Yet that's just fine as the mystical nature of the ruins is elevated by the fog rolling in and out.
- Two unique and wonderful hotels with outstanding accommodations, gardens and location; I couldn't have been more pleased.
- Hiking from little village to village (with the llamas and NO tourists) and being invited into the huts; more educational than many tours; another time we were invited to a private home for dinner; still another was a country restaurant of a mere five tables run by a noted Lima chef friend of the tour guide.
- Cultural demonstrations: spinning and weaving; flute making and playing; potato farming; pottery.
- Visit to a school and fish farm built by Country Walkers.
- Markets and festivals seemingly only seen by locals as we never saw a tourist.
- Lima city and Miraflores Cliffside worth the trip despite my having been advised to forget Lima touring. I did two tours to include the historical center and then walked miles along the cliffs and through some local markets.

Difficulties

- I had been afraid of this trip due to the distance as well as the elevation; I had good reason to be leery of both.
- Arriving around midnight after a long flight (through Houston) requires an overnight in Lima which isn't sufficiently long to go to a hotel so one hangs out in a dead airport with no place but the floor to rest.
- Flight into the rotten 3rd world airport of Cusco was a pleasant beginning.
- Arriving at the hotel early morning before rooms were ready requiring sitting around the lobby in pain from the elevation coupled with the very long 24 hour trip.

Start in Cusco – get the pain over with!

Some start in other cities that are half way as high as Cusco's 11,500' elevation. I'm not so sure but what one may as well just do it all at once. I didn't have a choice as I had just returned from an Arizona hiking trip and came almost directly. (You'd think my 7500' hiking there might have helped.)

Top: Plaza de Armas, Middle left: Temple of Coricancha, Middle right: Aerial view of Cusco, Bottom left: Sacsayhuamán, Bottom right: Cathedral of Cusco



Cusco, or Cuzco, is in southeastern Peru in the Sacred Valley or home of the Urubamba River also known as the Andes mountain range and about a 1 ½ hour flight from Lima. Cusco has about one half million people and is mostly known as the historic capital of the Inca Empire. It's a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and gets at least 2 million visitors a year.

Main sights



The Sacsayhuaman Ruins were an early visit for us where we walked among the llamas, and then a last visit the last night with the night lights.

Supposedly founded in the 11th century, scholars now believe the Inca did not occupy the area until after 1200 AD. Before them the Killke built this complex about 1100 AD to include a major temple. Aqueducts and connecting roadways have recently been found. Pizarro the Spaniard sacked much of the Inca city in the 1500s leaving only remains of the palace of the Incas, the Temple of the Sun, and the Temple of the Virgins of the Sun standing. Interesting, Inca buildings and foundations have proved to be stronger than the foundations built in present-day Peru with examples such as the Cathedral where earthquakes removed Spanish coverings leaving the Inca structure standing.



Machu Picchu of course which can be reached by foot via the Inca Trail or by train, and the fortress of Ollantaytambo – also called Hikers Village because the train begins from there. We would visit with a combination of train and foot. I'm happy with that choice.



Convent of Santo Domingo, Choquequirao, Moray salt mines, etc. The area is heavy with gold, silver and salt mining, and agriculture including corn, barley, quinoa, tea and coffee. Because of its antiquity and importance, the center of the city retains many buildings, plazas and streets of pre-Columbian times and colonial buildings. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Preserved are:



Barrio de San Blas – I'd walked up here my first day then returned with the guide. It houses artisans, workshops and craft shops and is a picturesque site with steep and narrow streets with old houses built by the Spanish over important Inca foundations. It has an attractive square with a fountain and the oldest parish church in Cuzco, built in 1563, which has a carved wooden pulpit considered the epitome of Colonial era woodwork in Cuzco.

Calle Hatun Rumiyuq

This is a main tourist street meaning "Of the Old Rock" with the palace of Inca Roca which was converted to the Archbishop's residence. I spent a lot of time inside this old palace. This street runs from the *Plaza de Armas* to the *Barrio de San Blas*, where there's the Stone of Twelve Angles which is viewed as marvel of ancient stonework and has become emblematic of the city's history. We would see an overview of the city both from the weaver's factory and on the last night from high up on the hill underneath the Christ statue.

Convent and Church of la Merced

Its foundation dates from 1536. The first complex was destroyed by the earthquake of 1650 and the rebuilding of the church and convent was completed soon after. It is now a popular museum. It seems there is a church on every street corner.

Cathedral of Santo Domingo

The first cathedral built in Cuzco is the *Iglesia del Triunfo*, built in 1500s on the foundations of an Inca Palace. Stone was used as the main material, which was extracted from nearby quarries, although some blocks of red granite were taken from Sacsayhuaman. It is full of gold work. The cathedral is known for a Cuzco School painting of the Last Supper feasting on guinea pig. Such a mixture of Catholics and Andean culture! The cathedral is the seat of the Archdiocese and the uncle of our guide Juan Carlos once held that position so his portrait is there.



Plaza de Armas



The Plaza de Armas at night. Known as the "Square of the warrior" in the Inca era, this plaza has been the scene of several important events in the history of the city, such as the proclamation by Pizarro in the conquest of Cuzco. It was also the scene of the death of Tupac Amaru considered the indigenous leader of the resistance. The Spanish built stone arcades around the plaza which remain.

Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesus

This church (Church of the Society of Jesus), whose construction was initiated by the Jesuits in 1576 on the foundations of the *Amarucancha* or the palace of the Inca ruler Huayna Capac. It is considered one of the best examples of colonial baroque style in the Americas. Its façade is carved in stone and its main altar is made of carved wood covered with gold leaf. It was built over an underground chapel and has a valuable collection of colonial paintings of the Cusco School.

Novatel Hotel in Cusco had the monastery open look but I think it was a 16th century hacienda. Many things to include its location were good and my first room was quite nice whereas my room the

last night on our return was hugely smaller. They need management training; I suspect Country Walkers will be changing hotels.

Yucay – our second destination



The hotel gardens were worthy of the trip, with high mountains surrounding the hotel's area on three sides. Everywhere you looked were different gardens; out my front window; out the bathroom window. Everything was right about this place which is run by Sonesta. There were old hacienda items left but modernization added.

From the web: *A beautifully restored hacienda with colonial architecture and expansive gardens, located at the base of the Andes. Sonesta Posadas del Inca Yucay is located in the heart of the Sacred Valley of the Incas, a one-hour drive from the ancient Inca capital of Cusco and close to Machu Picchu. The Sacred Valley produces an idyllic year-round climate of moderate warm weather with abundant sunshine and fresh air. The area is a perfect setting for horseback riding, hiking, rafting and other activities. Near the Sonesta Posada are the craft markets of Pisac and Chincheros, the Salt Mines of Maras, the town of Moray, Ollantaytambo ruins and Machu Picchu.*

Aguas Calientes – our third destination

This is the closest town to Machu Picchu and the only way to stay closer is at The Sanctuary on the site which is said to be terribly overpriced at the \$800 a night range. We ate breakfast at The Sanctuary one day after arriving super early for a private tour, and ate lunch there after 7-8 hours of touring. We stayed a short (and curvy) bus ride away in Aguas Calientes in an amazing nature resort with lovely casitas that were just perfect. Large rooms with old style doorways and ceiling beams yet modern spa walk in shower and big sink area. Hot water bottles were placed in our bed at night. There were waterways throughout giving the effect of Machu Picchu's water canals. This resort deserves its awards and high ratings. I managed two of the four or five tours offered in



this nature preserve that has more orchid varieties than anywhere in the Americas and three that were found only here.

From the web about Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel also known as Inca Terra: *A Travel + Leisure "World's Best Hotel."* *A unique eco-boutique hotel with extensive grounds including cloud-forest gardens, medicinal plants, orchids, and a panoramic riverfront restaurant.*

The Inca Trail – hiking for one tough day

I love it –Wikipedia suggests what we did was a TWO day trek. We did it in about 8 hours. *“Trekking normally take four or five days to complete the "Classic Inca Trail" but a two day trek from Km 104 is also possible.”*

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inca_Trail_to_Machu_Picchu for pictures of the trail. We came from Km 104 through the Sun Gate overlooking Machu Picchu and then proceeded to miss the turn to the bus and pleasantly toured much of the border trails.



We started on a suspension bridge at the train drop off location called KM 104. There were more bridges, very narrow trails with steep drop off cliffs. It's not that this was my more difficult trail, it was not, but it was full of changes, high and low elevations, and weird carved steps.



We found at least four 'huts' for resting and I would have 'rested' more often but the boys kept going. See how narrow some of the trail became? A wide person would get stuck. There were piece meal broken down bridges that would never fly in the U.S.



The steps are sometimes carved from a single piece of granite. They are always uneven, either very tall or very short, and sometimes too narrow for a food. Here is where we stopped for lunch. You see Bill, Phyllis, Ilene and guide Juan Carlos. Having lunch was a mistake because 400 steps all at once were just beginning.



Everywhere, every direction, were photo opportunities. Or one could call them breathing opportunities. We were all out of breath continuously. Put some snow on these peaks and you'd call them the Alps except the Andes are probably much larger, taller, and more numerous.



In Winay Wayna near to the 400 steps. We carried our passports and showed them often. I expected this 'gate' to be a checkpoint but it was not so I don't know why it was there. We were within about 4 miles of Machu Picchu but remember that many of our 'miles' took over an hour to traverse.



This was a spot for campers. See that nice trail? The original Inca Trail was of this type of stone and about 4' wide. Not much of that left. The irregular stone stairs was more common.



From the Sun Gate overlooking Machu Picchu. That's the guard house. Surprisingly the Sun Gate is at the same elevation as the top of the observatory at Huayna Picchu.



From one doorway to another

There is only one true entry into Machu Picchu and we got to it the first day – because we missed the turn off to the bus. This was good as it would have been hard to go direct to the hotel and miss getting an overview of Machu Picchu. Next is the bridge in town taking us into our resort complex and then the first dwelling we came across – a restaurant with thatched roof sitting on the edge of a roaring river and under major peaks on three sides of the valley.



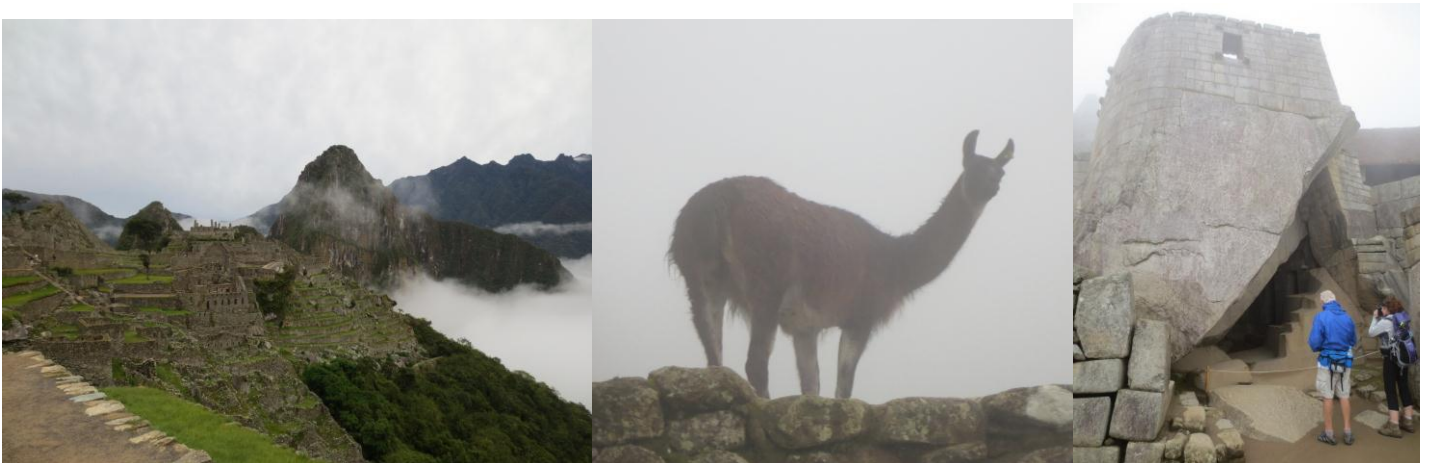
My little casita set among this cloud forest. It was perfect with the sounds of water out my window and inside one of the nicer hotel rooms I can remember complete with big spa bathroom, fireplace set to go, easy chairs, and later hot water bottles stuffed into our beds. We ate in both of the two restaurants on premises and both were hanging over the roaring river and most delightful. Every evening we were offered pisco sours.

Coming up: the biggest reason for the trip! Machu Picchu for the day

Yet I might admit to the fact that the trip until now was well worth it. Even worth the altitude sickness. Even worth the long and pricey flight. I even had thoughts of maybe wishing I had hiked the entire Inca Trail but that passed quickly and was only a momentary or flinging idea. It takes giving up a bed and a hair dryer.



We left the hotel at 5am walking into town where Juan Carlos had arranged a private bus. That got us to the entry gate of Machu Picchu well before other's on buses and before the hikers who come straight up the hillside via foot. We watched the dancing clouds from what felt like a private tour. The clouds came in and out, changed, wrapped around mountains then left only to come again. We sat in meditation on a very empty terrace for some time watching the magic.



Animals were more frequent before the crowds showed up at about 10am. The misty llama shows how foggy and mystical it was. Most tourists come for day trips and thus only see about 2 hours of Machu Picchu and that in the busiest and most crowded time of the day. We all continually commented how blessed we felt to have Machu Picchu practically to ourselves – and the llamas. And the unusual squirrels.



When the Japanese tour group came along, they surrounded the llamas that then ran away.



There is much more of Machu Picchu for the archeologists to uncover but the incentive is not there since they can't accommodate all the tourists anyway. Plus it is primarily foreign sponsors who do the excavations so again no particular incentive. I'm told that over the years that there has been considerable clean-up and uncovering. Remembering the story that when Hiram Bingham returned 100 years ago, only one year after his discovery, that the jungle had overtaken the ruins? That makes clear what a jungle this would be without constant tending.



Before crawling up to the trail for the Inca Bridge, we sat on the terrace and watched the crowds below who had come in since we walked the ruins. We are far enough UP in this picture that you can't even see the people but the outline of the unfinished 'village' i.e., ruins would be familiar as it's under the two famous peaks. Then to the Inca Bridge trail -- in some cases it was too narrow for two feet and with big drop offs. At the very last before the actual bridge there were cables to hold onto. See the small drawbridge? Wood would be lifted up so no one could enter. At the end of this report

is a description by Ellen of how magical the Inca Bridge was for her, years ago when it was overgrown with bamboo.



Here we are back at Machu Picchu Inca Terra Resort with walkways, stairways, and sitting areas in all sorts of hidden spots. I was envious of the young couple I met who were staying here for five days.



The resort has an orchid garden with tours given. There are more orchids identified here than anywhere in the Americas. Three new ones have been found here. This last one that looks like a pink 'tear' was voted most beautiful.



Some varieties require magnifiers to see. Some grow out of leaves and are the tiniest of specimens.



We'd seen the Giant Hummingbird Patagonia but these probably are not them. They were however most willing to pose for a picture.



Yes, that is a real caterpillar in the center though yes it looked artificial.



The tour included their "Tea House" where they grow, produce and package their own tea. Then the herb gardens before going onto the coffee plants where they also produce their own coffee.



Here is a view out the train's explorer window before we got to Hikers Village, also known for their ruins and the village name of Ollantayambo, and where we'd meet our van and driver. I loved our van and driver named Leon and was oftentimes grateful to him for being not only conscientious but every time we re-entered the van it was made like new and clean again. He kept us supplied with water too.

Next stop would be where I'd guess all tours go – Pablo Seminario's pottery. The inside courtyard was lovely with big parrots and giant plants. We watched a film which was helpful to understand his pottery baking and creative methods. Most of us bought a little something: I have a picture frame. I've never learned an appreciation of Incan or Spanish colorful art though I do believe I saw a lot and tried

Still with Machu Picchu on my mind – the site

Picture is worth a thousand words? Not enough in this case. A magical and mythical place where nature and mysticism are combined, where goose bumps erupt and tears come for happiness at being in this place that you can't describe. It is mist-cloaked most of the time and certainly the most famous site in all of South America. It's on a 7700 foot cliff, in the saddle of a mountain surrounded by much higher cliff tops and sheer drops with the Urubamba River snaking around down below. Exquisite stone work that seems impossible to have achieved. It was never finished. No one knows for sure the purpose of this cliff village.

It's remarkably preserved because it was hidden under the jungle of time. It is linked by scores of stone stairways and paths, and watered by natural springs flowing through the village. No other civilization has managed to assemble so many colossal stone blocks and so seamlessly being rubbed and merged together.

It is mystically connected to the universe. There are windows aligned to the points where the sun rises on the summer and winter solstices. Stones are placed as to indicate precise dates of the equinoxes and other astronomical periods. Imagine the Intihuatana (stone) being not completely vertical but knowingly 13 degrees to the north which is the village's latitude.



From Ping Talks - 10 Interesting Machu Picchu Facts

Machu Picchu is a symbol of the Incan Empire and built around 1450AD, and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983 and named one of the

New Seven Wonders of the World in 2007. More than 7,000 feet above sea level in the Andes Mountains, it is the most visited tourist destination in Peru.

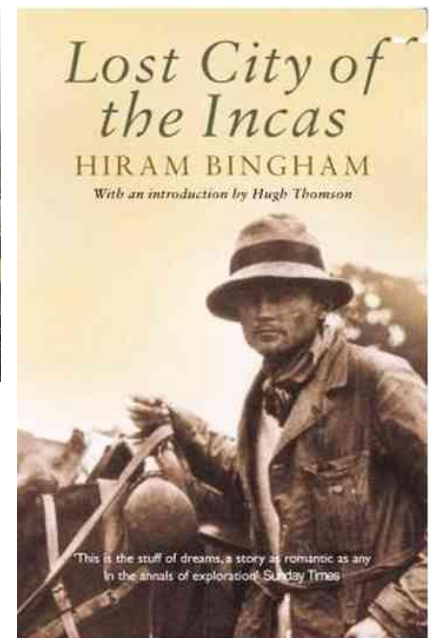
1. In the Quechua Indian language, “Machu Picchu” means “Old Peak” or “Old Mountain.”
2. Machu Picchu is made up of more than 150 buildings ranging from baths and houses to temples and sanctuaries.

3. The compound contains more than 100 separate flights of stairs. Most of the individual staircases were carved from one slab of stone.

4. Although many of the stones that were used to build the city were many tons in weight, it’s believed that no wheels were used to transport these rocks up the mountain. Rather, it is thought that hundreds of men pushed the heavy rocks up the steep mountain side.



5. Many different theories exist about Machu Picchu’s purpose – a royal estate and a secret ceremonial center among them.



6. The Incas were some of the best masons in the world. The structures were so well built with a technique called ashlar (stones that are cut to fit together without mortar) that not even a knife blade can fit in between stones. (Some theories are most amusing such as that the Incas had a method of softening rocks so they could be formed and there is a bit of science to this.)

7. Machu Picchu was only known locally until Yale Professor Hiram Bingham re-discovered the site in 1911. His book, The Lost City of the Incas, was based on his findings. (I read his “Lost City” book and about seven more books plus the recent “Turn Right at Machu Picchu” which was an amusing recount of when an unadventurous adventure writer tries to re-create the original expedition.)



8. A long-standing dispute between Peru and Yale University has existed over the artifacts collected by Bingham during his exploration of the site. Yale maintains that they own the items while Peru insists they were given on loan. (This year Yale has returned the items to Peru with Yale having some guidance and control over how they will be showcased in a museum.)

9. Machu Picchu was an astronomical observatory, and its sacred Intihuatana stone accurately indicates the two equinoxes. Twice a year, the sun sits directly over the stone creating no shadow.

10. Unfortunately, most cities built by the Inca civilization were destroyed by the Spanish conquest. Machu Picchu was in a hidden location and not found, making it one of the most well-preserved Inca cities and an archeological gem.



See part 2