

# DEMYSTIFYING *Machu Picchu*

Whether you approach by bus, train, or foot, Machu Picchu, improbably balanced on a green-carpeted ridge, always inspires awe. No longer the overgrown lost city that explorer Hiram Bingham located a century ago this year, the ruins now draw visitors in droves. Don't miss these must-see sites. **By Rebecca Dalzell**



**UNFINISHED BUSINESS** The city was abandoned in the mid 1500's after the Spanish conquered the Incan empire. Construction was still clearly under way at the Sacred Plaza, where gables are incomplete and a stray slab lies in the center. The perfectly fitted stones on the Temple of Three Windows remain impressive.

**BEST PHOTO OP** Allow at least two hours for the climb from the ruins to the peak that towers over them, also called Machu Picchu. You'll be practically alone as you ascend up to 10,000 feet above sea level, where views stretch over the ancient city to the river and snowcapped mountains.

**HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT** At first, the quarry looks like an unremarkable pile of granite, but the abundance of stone may have been a reason the Incas chose this location to build an estate for their emperor. Poke around to catch their work—halted in mid-chisel—and find the boulder with serpents carved on top.

**ROAD LESS TRAVELED** Entry to Huayna Picchu, the familiar rounded peak in the north, requires a ticket; only 400 are handed out daily (beat the lines by buying ahead on machupicchu.gob.pe). Climb down the mountain instead of up it. This spectacular (if sometimes slippery) walk leads to the lesser-known Temple of the Moon, the city's northern gateway.

\* **T+L POLL**  
PERU RECEIVED  
25 PERCENT MORE  
VOTES THAN  
BOTH BRAZIL AND  
ECUADOR.

**AGAINST THE TIDE** Trekkers on the Inca Trail pass through Intipunku (the Sun Gate) at sunrise, but head there when it clears out by late morning and you'll be able to enjoy the landscape in peace. It's an easy 1¼-mile walk south from the main site on a forested path.

**PEACE AND QUIET** The eastern urban section is the least visited of Machu Picchu's residential core. Look for the two so-called mortars: carved bowls that still baffle archaeologists. The latest theory is that they were filled with water to reflect the stars.

## THE GUIDE

**Peter Frost**  
Private Guide, Aracari Travel Consulting

There are no tourist signs displayed at Machu Picchu, so a guide is essential. Frost is a writer and expert who has explored the Andes for more than 30 years. He regularly leads scholarly tours of the Sacred Valley; his custom itineraries include visits to private residences and adventures tailored to guests' experience levels. 312/239-8726; aracari.com; three-day trips from \$300 per person.

**WHEN TO GO** Visit in April, May, September, or October to avoid the busy summer season.

### GETTING THERE

**PeruRail** ([perurail.com](http://perurail.com)) trains regularly make the four-hour trip between the colonial city of Cuzco and Aguas Calientes, the closest town to the site. Book tickets in advance (at least two months in summer). Buses

depart frequently from Aguas Calientes for the 25-minute journey to Machu Picchu. To travel on foot, as the Incas did, secure a permit in Cuzco and take a train to Km 104, arriving no later than 10 a.m. for access. The five-hour hike will get you to Machu Picchu after the crowds depart but with enough time to explore before dark.

**WHERE TO STAY** Plan to spend a night in Aguas Calientes to see the site after 3:30 p.m., when day-trippers depart, and again in the tranquil early morning. **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel** (800/442-5042; [inkaterra.com](http://inkaterra.com); doubles from \$547) is a peaceful 85-room retreat within walking distance of traditional Peruvian restaurants.