


Mar 15, 2021, 07:01pm EST | 1,435 views

Skipping This Might Be The Biggest Mistake Of Your Peru Vacation



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Machu Picchu is a bucket list item for many, and for good reason. But too many people just travel through the **Sacred Valley** to get to the famous Inca ruins. Those who take the time to stop are rewarded with some of Peru's best sites and can minimize the effects of the region's significant altitude while doing it. As you plan your post-pandemic trip to Peru, be sure to include a few days in the Sacred Valley.

Getting to Machu Picchu

The 60-mile corridor between Cusco and Machu Picchu is called the Sacred Valley of the Incas. In order to get to Machu Picchu, you need to drive or take the train through it. The last town accessible by road from Cusco is called Ollantaytambo. Everyone going to Machu Picchu must take the train from there to Aguas Calientes—also called Machu Picchu Pueblo—the base town for Machu Picchu.



A llama at Machu Picchu. JOHANNA READ, TRAVELEATER.NET

Altitude mistakes

Most people who want to visit Machu Picchu fly into Cusco from the sea-level city of Lima. Many take a day or two in Cusco first to adjust to the altitude. This is a mistake.

Cusco is 11,150 feet above sea level, well within the altitude sickness zone: [altitude sickness is possible above 8,000 feet](#). Unless you've acclimatized well, you will feel the altitude's effects and are at risk of heart failure, cerebral or pulmonary edema, and more minor symptoms like vomiting or distorted vision. Most people who go to Cusco experience headache, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, and huff and puff while they climb stairs or walk any distance.

An easy way to avoid the effects of altitude is to put Machu Picchu first on your Peruvian Andes itinerary, and then make your way slowly back up the Sacred Valley before exploring Cusco.

Where to stay: ease of access and to minimize the altitude's effects

Altitude-wise, the best town to stay in is Aguas Calientes. It's at 6,700 feet above sea level, below the altitude sickness zone. The levels of oxyhaemoglobin in your blood begin to drop at 7,000 feet above sea level, so sleeping in Aguas Calientes, 300 feet lower, isn't dangerous to your health.



A pedestrian bridge over the river in Aguas Calientes. JOHANNA READ, TRAVELEATER.NET

The main parts of Machu Picchu itself are at 7,972 feet, just below the altitude sickness zone. Walking around the site isn't as easy as it would be sea level, but most people manage it just fine without taking Diamox or any other altitude medication.

Those who want to spend only an afternoon exploring the site can easily stay in one of the Sacred Valley towns and just take the train in the morning. However, if you want to see the sun rise over the Temple of the Sun at Machu Picchu or have an early morning ticket, you need to spend the night before in Aguas Calientes.

The challenge is that, aside from being the gateway to Machu Picchu, Aguas Calientes holds little charm. Plus, there are often tiny no-see-um insects that find ankles extremely tasty. You won't notice them biting, but many people have a strong allergic reaction and have painful swollen ankles and red-dotted legs for days afterward. Wear bug spray and, preferably, keep your legs covered, especially in town but also at Machu Picchu itself.

If you do stay in Aguas Calientes, your best choices are [Sumaq Machu Picchu Hotel](#) which has a great restaurant and spa, as well as [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#) and, closer to the Machu Picchu gate, [Belmond Sanctuary Lodge](#).

Where to stay after you've seen Machu Picchu

After you've seen Machu Picchu, take the train back toward Cusco. But before you subject your body to this sky-high city, relax in the lower elevations of the Sacred Valley and explore its sites. You'll need a ticket—Boleto Turistica del Cusco—to see many of them. Choose between the full ticket, valid for 10 days and providing access to 16 sites, or one of the partial tickets, valid for one to two days with access to four or eight sites.

A favorite town is **Urubamba**, which is 9,420 feet above sea level. The best places to stay are [Tambo del Inka, a Luxury Collection Resort & Spa](#) (with a spectacular indoor-outdoor pool and spa next to the Urubamba River) and the [Soly y Luna Relais & Châteaux](#). If you only want to visit Machu Picchu in the afternoon, Tambo del Inka is ideal because it has a private train station where you can catch the train to and from Aguas Calientes, with just a few steps for your sore feet to walk at the end of the day. Urubamba has a large market, a public square ideal for people watching, and is the jumping off point for several nearby tours and sites.



At Sumaq Machu Picchu, bartenders have perfected the pisco sour. JOHANNA READ, TRAVELEATER.NET



Tambo del Inka's indoor-outdoor pool. JOHANNA READ, TRAVELEATER.NET

Another spot to stay (or to visit on a day trip from Urubamba) is **Ollantaytambo**. The town is laid out much as it was during the times of the Inca and the ruins here are well worth exploring.

Don't miss climbing the terraces at Ollantaytambo. Guides will explain how the Inca pushed the huge stone blocks that form the terraces down from one mountain where they were hewn, across the river, and up again to the top of the mountain on which the terraces were built. The people who lived in pre-Colombian Mesoamerica didn't use the wheel as they had no draft animals, so they supposedly moved all the building materials for their intricate architecture on slippery paths of llama fat.



Ruínas Incas em Ollantaytambo no Peru GETTY

Other Incan sites in the Sacred Valley to explore (most included in the Sacred Valley partial ticket) are:

- Moray, an agricultural “laboratory” of terraced fields in concentric circles, where it's thought that the Inca tested plants to determine which varieties grew best in the various conditions throughout their empire (nearby, without requirement for a ticket, are the terraced salt fields of Salineras).
- Pisac, with ruins in the Machu Picchu model, which also has a market (Sundays are best).
- Tipon, which shows the Incan ingenuity for water management and agricultural terraces.



Moray, the Incan agricultural laboratory at Sacred Valley of the Incas in Peru GETTY

After you've acclimatized in the Sacred Valley for a few days, you'll be ready to tackle Cusco's 11,150 feet and all the wonderful sites there.