

Trip Review



Secret Paths of the Incas

A JOURNEYS Peru Trip Review

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In June 2007 a group of 16 JOURNEYS travelers joined us for a 12-day exploration of Cusco, Machu Picchu and Peru's Urubamba River Valley (also known as The Sacred Valley) in the Andes of southern Peru. Inca ruins, trails and architecture are inextricably part of any Peru cultural trip, and all visitors can enjoy local markets and dazzling colors. However, in contrast to most tourist itineraries, our trip plan was unique for its unhurried pace, exceptional lodging, spectacular optional hiking opportunities and engagement with communities well off the typical visitors' paths. Seven of us continued for one week of "community-based tourism." We were hosted by families in Raqchi village, in Llachon on the shores of Lake Titicaca, and on Taquile Island.



Getting to Inca Country

The land of the Incas leaves you literally breathless. Most travelers arrive in sea-level Lima during the night, and then continue the following morning on a flight to Cusco at about 11,000'. Unless you are accustomed to these altitudes from a recent Himalayan trek or Kilimanjaro climb, you will be well advised to go slow, eat light, and sip coca tea during your first couple of days up in the Andes. If your personal schedule allows you to arrive a day or two early, all the better. You can admire the ancient Inca stone walls of your hotel, and take pictures of all the sights that just wander by your park bench on the plaza, while your body acclimatizes.



Sometimes Warm, Sometimes Cold, Always Sunny

Peru is not far from the Equator, but she is well in the southern hemisphere. Her six-month dry season begins in April and encompasses the winter months of June, July and August. At this time of year, skies are blue, rains are rare, and sunshine is abundant. Daytime temperatures in the Andes may be in the delightful 70s, but they drop suddenly and dramatically about 5 p.m. Dressing in layers is the key to comfort. If you don't bring all the layers you need from home, rest assured: everywhere there are great deals on beautiful alpaca sweaters, gloves, socks, caps, and shawls. Also at this time of year Peru is especially festive. Some visitors time their trips to coincide with the huge Inti Raimi festival at the time of the solstice. We were in Cusco and the Sacred Valley just ahead of the festival, but we encountered street parades everywhere.

Choose How Much to Hike, Choose How Much to Take Home, Choose Your Favorite Hat

Our trip was designed with options scalable to our group members' preferences. Exploring Inca ruins requires walking and mounting steps, but you don't really have to hike distances to appreciate the magnificent mountain landscapes, the open vistas, the astounding history. However, if you do hike a bit, you can soon leave most other tourists behind and feel that much closer to sacred glacial peaks, startling sunrises, and star-filled heavens. Our trip included two optional full-day hikes on ancient Inca paths still used by local Quechua people. Our hikes from Chincheros to Huchuy Qosco, and from the Railway's Kilometer 84 to Machu Picchu's Sun Gate took us back to a time where we might imagine meeting an Inca trail messenger or looking out over the deep valley to a mounted force of conquistadors!



For less ambitious hikers, there was always more than enough to do. Those who skipped the difficult hike from Chincheros instead visited a small orphanage in Calca where the children serenaded us in Spanish and Quechua, and then sang with us as we improvised Spanish translations of Old MacDonald (Senor McDonald tenia una finca...) and other simple favorites.

Local markets and village weaving cooperatives were a treat, especially for the textile enthusiasts, musicians and photographers among us. There are so many hundreds of varieties of corn and potatoes, such a range of beautiful sounds made by pan flutes and engraved gourds, so many colorful hues produced by natural dyes and such intricate patterns woven on backstrap looms. And everywhere -- on the babies and elderly, on the men and women, for sale in the markets -- are the hats! Patterned knit hats with ear flaps, top hats, bowler hats, cowboy hats, pom pommed hats, frilled hats and baseball caps. We have visited many dozens of countries on all continents, but we've found no country that rivals Peru when it comes to hats!

Inca Marvels, Quechua Pride

The Inca profoundly imprinted the landscape with terraces, buildings, temples and stone staircases. These structures built 500-600 years ago were so well conceived and executed that they stand today more durably and majestically than any colonial or contemporary structure. Canals and fountains still flow with water. Terraces still resist flooding, landslides and earthquakes. Sun and moon temples still accurately mark and measure the passage of each solstice and equinox.

Cusco was the Inca capital of an enormous empire when the Spanish arrived in 1531. Stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Amazon, and from Colombia in the north to central Chile in the south, the Inca empire was the largest in the world at the time. It was a work in progress, just a hundred years old, founded on the ideas and cultures of more than 3000 years of civilization in the Andes. The Incas were better builders, managers and warriors than those who came before them. At the time of the Spanish arrival they believed all external enemies had been subdued and subsumed. They were, however, engaged in a bitter battle of dynastic succession and dominance, which was probably the key to their defeat by an almost infinitesimal Spanish force led by Ferdinand Pizarro.



The large Quechua population of the Andes are descendants of the Inca. There is burgeoning pride among the Quechua in their Inca legacy, especially as archaeologists and historians continue to learn and write about the Inca accomplishments. Our guide Cristobal Cuba was a gentle, eloquent, well-educated Quechua man in his late twenties, fluent in Quechua, Spanish and English. He thoroughly enjoyed sharing both his academic knowledge and his personal insight about Quechua customs and values; and he was equally comfortable on the high trails, in the local villages and at the archaeological sites.

So Many Ways to Be Comfortable

On the 12-day trip, we stayed in the loveliest of four and five-star accommodations. We had three nights at the architecturally exquisite Libertador in Cusco, five nights at the serene and florally bedecked Sol y Luna Lodge in the Sacred Valley, and two nights at the lush Machu Picchu El Pueblo. We dined well.



Those of us who continued on to the Lake Titicaca extension accepted simple, home-style (too cold to shower), accommodations in exchange for extraordinary hospitality and cultural insight. We "went local". In Raqchi, Lampa, and Llachon, and on Taquile Island in Lake Titicaca, we slept in clean beds in unheated rooms with minimal electricity and shared bathrooms. We witnessed a traditional ceremony at the edge of a volcanic caldera. We had hosts who dressed us up in their style of clothing and coaxed us into dancing. We were the only non-Peruvians in the crowd watching a folk dance competition on the shores of Lake Titicaca. Uros fishermen who live on a floating island poled their

reed boat with us as their passengers. And then, we enjoyed our own sleek form of water transport when we kayaked from the Capachica Peninsula to Taquile Island.

We joked about the “star rating” of our accommodations. We agreed that combining the core trip and extension meant we stayed in lodging ranging from five stars to no stars. But truly, we felt equally cared for the whole way. Our guide for the extension, Javier Ramos, was as impressive as Cristobal.

Tips for your visit:

- ◆Bring or buy warm clothes locally
- ◆Hand Sanitizer is useful
- ◆Prepare for high altitude, & arrive early if you can
- ◆Bring Diamox and sleep aids
- ◆Drink plenty of fluids
- ◆Prepare for bright sun most of the time
- ◆A flashlight is very useful in villages
- ◆Fruit, chocolate, nuts, bakery are abundant in Peru
- ◆Peru may be in the tropics, but the Andes are cool, even frosty, in June
- ◆Bring lots of water & sunscreen
- ◆Binoculars are worth the weight

Seven Wonders Never Cease

We learned after our trip that Machu Picchu had just been voted one of the New Seven Wonders of the Modern World. This amused us, since we were witnesses to the intense lobbying by Peru Tourism. Visitors were strongly encouraged to use the electronic voting kiosks right there at the entrance to the ruins. No doubt the same kind of campaign was waged at the other contending sites. But it did not take much arm twisting to convince the many visitors that Machu Picchu and, indeed, all of Peru, is a world wonder.

