

Day 1: Lima, Peru

Arrive in Peru's capital where your journey to Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley begins. For travelers extending to Machu Picchu before or after a Galapagos trip or our Great Amazon River Expedition, you will be met on arrival at the airport in Lima where our representative will be waiting just outside baggage claim to assist you with your transfer to our hotel, conveniently located nearby.

Day 2: Cusco / Sacred Valley—Pisac / Huayllabamba

Fly this morning to Cusco, heart of the once-grand Inca Empire, and meet your Expedition Leader on arrival. From the indigenous Quechua word *qosq'o*, Cusco means the “navel of the earth.” Set in a high Andean valley, Cusco was founded in the 12th century and thrived until Spanish conquistadors destroyed the Inca civilization in their 16th-century colonial quest. From the Cusco airport, we head to the town of Pisac in the Sacred Valley, where we stop to have lunch and explore the 16th-century village during the market town’s quieter afternoon hours. This community on the Vilcanota River and its famous Inca ruins are surrounded by ancient agricultural terraces that remain in use to this day. As the sun begins to set, settle in to our luxurious hacienda-style hotel near Huayllabamba to spend two nights in the heart of the Sacred Valley.

Day 3: Exploring the Sacred Valley of the Incas

The treasures of the Sacred Valley unfold today as we follow the Urubamba River past tawny hillsides dotted with traditional villages, small farms and Incan architectural ruins. The original vast empire of the Incas was connected by a network of 10,000 miles of stone roads woven through the imposing terrain of the Andes. Suspension bridges spanned rivers and aqueducts carried water from mountain streams to irrigate terraced fields of crops, vestiges of which we see on our journey today, backdropped by knife-edged peaks.

On a visit to Maras, witness pre-Incan salt flats where salt has been harvested for over a thousand years. The intricate network of shallow pools carved into the hillside glistens in the sun as mineral-rich water from subterranean streams fills the pans and eventually evaporates, leaving behind crystalline layers of fine salt. We then head to a hummingbird sanctuary for a picnic lunch. The Ensifera hummingbird garden was created by local people to provide a birdwatching opportunity for nature enthusiasts, and our visit includes a talk by a local expert. We may also stop at the agricultural terraces in Yucay or have a chance to meet a local shepherd. Later this afternoon, there's time to relax at our hotel before dinner, drinking in views of the valley and imposing green mountains.

Day 4: Train to Aguas Calientes / Machu Picchu

This morning we board the train at Ollantaytambo for a 1-1/2-hour journey along the Urubamba River, which narrows into turbulent whitewater as we travel deeper into the mountains. At the village of Aguas Calientes, we disembark and board a bus for the short remaining drive to Machu Picchu. Little prepares one for the spectacle that awaits. As we ascend into the ruins, there’s a sense of wandering through a mystical city in the sky, surrounded by green mountain ramparts that soar into the clouds. A local Machu Picchu tour guide joins us to help interpret all we see as we explore the labyrinth of granite houses, temples, walls and cisterns. Llamas wander among terraced steps that once grew maize and potatoes for some 1,200 inhabitants. Archaeologists believe

Machu Picchu may have been a royal estate and religious retreat, based on its sacred geography and astronomical orientation. Important ceremonies were conducted here, including a winter solstice rite at which a priest would “tie the sun” to a hitching post stone to prevent it from disappearing altogether.

Stay tonight at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel in private casitas built of stone, tile and cedar, surrounded by the thick greenery of the cloud forest. More than 300 varieties of orchids grace the grounds of this secluded luxury retreat on the river, and a network of trails on the grounds invites a serene stroll.

Day 5: Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel Gardens / Wayna Picchu

This morning we explore the lush gardens and grounds around our hotel, a haven for wildlife. The property is renowned in Peru for its commitment to preserving nature and sustainability and has long been a leader in the ecotourism space. More than 1,500 plant species are found on the premises, including three new types of orchid found here in 2023 alone. We’ll see a great variety of flora and fauna on a naturalist-guided tour around the property’s expansive 11 acres.

Later this morning, return to Machu Picchu for further exploration on a walking circuit revealing different portions of the complex from those we saw yesterday. Among the ruins, take the opportunity to ponder, in Hiram Bingham’s words, the “bewildering romance” of a place that “appears to have been expressly designed by nature as a sanctuary for the oppressed.” Those who wish may hike to the top of Wayna Picchu, the imposing mountain that provides the famous backdrop for the Lost City in classic photos. The Incas constructed the original trail to the top, where they built temples and farming terraces. Local myth holds that the summit of Wayna Picchu was the residence for the high priest of the ancient city. This challenging hike takes 2-3 hours and climbs approximately 1,200 feet from the base at Machu Picchu, ascending a steep face using stairs and cables for support. The hike is not recommended for guests with physical limitations or those with a fear of heights. Guests who do not wish to tackle Wayna Picchu will explore elsewhere with a local guide, visiting additional temples we didn’t see earlier. Should entrance tickets for Wayna Picchu be sold out, an equally challenging hike to the top of Machu Picchu Mountain will be available.

Day 6: Cusco—City Tour

This morning, make the return journey back to Cusco by train and bus. After lunch, we explore the city of Cusco on a guided immersion into its tapestry of cultural heritage, focused on its impressive architecture set against the backdrop of the Andes. As the former capital of the Inca Empire, Cusco is the main gateway to the ruins of Machu Picchu and other important Sacred Valley sites, but it also stands alone as a trove of historic treasures. Strolling through its cobblestone streets, we encounter the fusion of Incan and Spanish colonial architecture, most notably the iconic Qorikancha Temple and the Cathedral of Santo Domingo. Local markets hum with activity, with traditional textiles and handicrafts for sale, while the savory aromas of local food fill the air. This evening, we enjoy a farewell dinner together at our hotel.

Day 7: Sacsayhuaman / Lima / Depart

This morning, head just outside Cusco to explore the ruins at Sacsayhuaman, where we witness one of the most impressive examples of Inca walls found in the region. The site is still enveloped in mystery, and we ponder how the Incas moved these enormous stones to this site without the advantage of wheeled carts, and how they managed to fit such large, perfectly honed granite stones together so tightly that a pocketknife blade cannot be

inserted between them. We'll have lunch back in Cusco, then fly to Lima late this afternoon where you will either meet your homeward flight this evening, or transfer to our airport hotel to spend the night prior to the start of your Galapagos or Amazon adventure.