

PERU 101

A FEW TIPS ON VISITING THE HEART OF THE INCA EMPIRE.

■ **Skip the rental car.** Instead, hire a driver, which hotels will often arrange. Taxis are inexpensive, but negotiate the fare before you get in. For short trips, try a mototaxi, a loud flimsy contraption that's part motorcycle, part ricksha.

■ Machu Picchu is not to be missed, but **planning a day trip**—which requires sorting out train, bus and entry tickets—can be challenging. Buy entry tickets, in particular, well in advance, especially during the busy summer season, because there's a 2,500-per-day cap on visitors, a tourism restriction designed to protect Machu Picchu. (Tourists started flocking to the remote spot after 1911, when American explorer Hiram Bingham brought world attention to the ruins.) Be forewarned: The official website to buy entry tickets is confusing. Some Sacred Valley hotels will buy them for you for a small commission.

■ **To beat the crowds**—at least for a while—arrive at Machu Picchu by about 6 a.m. Take the train the afternoon before to Aguas Calientes, the honky-tonk tourist town where buses leave for the short ride to Machu Picchu. We unexpectedly liked "Aguas"—thanks to Gringo Bill's Hotel (gringobills.com), with its fun restaurant and rooms that may feature amusingly risqué psychedelic murals.

■ **To avoid the debilitating headaches, fatigue and major stomach upset** of altitude sickness in Cuzco and environs, try the Peruvian herbal approach—chew coca leaves and drink coca tea. And yes, coca is related to cocaine but it's legal in Peru and doesn't produce a cocaine-like high (it left me with little beyond a bitter taste).

■ **To learn more about Peru** before your trip, check out these books: *Turn Right at Machu Picchu* (2011) by Mark Adams; *War by Candlelight: Stories* (2005) by Daniel Alarcón and *The Conquest of the Incas* (1970) by John Hemming.



village with narrow alleys and Moorish buildings painted in dazzling hues: burnt orange, deep rouge, bright yellow, dusty blue. Set aside several hours to roam through the monastery's restored living quarters, chapels and cloisters replete with murals, fountains and flowers.

Nearby, La Casa de Melgar (lacasademelgar.com), is an 18th-century former bishop's residence that has a similar feel, with a lush garden, vivid courtyards and rooms with vaulted ceilings, creamy stone walls, wooden antiques and folk art.

Although it's Peru's second-most populous city, Arequipa is smaller than Lima, with about 844,000 people. Locals and visitors alike are drawn daily to the main plaza to sit by the fountain, palm trees and garden that are surrounded by Arequipa's magnificent cathedral and colonial arcades. Nearby is the particularly lovely Iglesia de la Compañía, an Andean Baroque church completed in 1698 with a small chapel whose cupola is painted with beautiful tropical flowers, fruits and birds.

On a clear day, the plaza's stone buildings and the snow-capped volcano behind them shimmer in the sun. At night, be sure to climb up to the aptly named Restaurant on the Top for a mesmerizing rooftop view of the plaza's illuminated buildings. If it's cold, the restaurant may lend you a warm poncho.

THE SACRED VALLEY AND MACHU PICCHU

Flying low over sun-splashed craggy mountains, dappled with shadows, you land in alluring Cuzco. But follow the wise advice given to us—and force yourself to leave.

To avoid altitude sickness, a common affliction in Cuzco, which is 11,155 feet above sea level, newcomers are encouraged to first acclimatize for a few days in the lower elevation of the

nearby Sacred Valley, a 26-mile-long rural area with lush cornfields and simple farmhouses along the Urubamba River, surrounded by the Andes mountains and dotted with small towns and Inca sites.

Known for its Inca ruins and well-preserved Inca city planning, Ollantaytambo (at 9,186 feet) is a perfect home base for exploring the area. We loved burrowing in at Apu Lodge (apulodge.webs.com), a small hotel with a big view, located off a high-walled, cobblestone lane bordered by an ancient aqueduct full of rushing water. By spending a few nights in "Ollanta," you'll see a quieter side of this major Machu Picchu launch pad, which has a busy train station and lots of Inca Trail trekkers (the trail starts nearby). By day, huge tour buses occasionally rumble through the small plaza, past women and children wearing the colorful traditional dress of the Quechua people, an indigenous group that speaks the Inca Quechua language.

By night, Ollanta is peaceful. You can eat reasonably well here, too. Try the classy restaurant or casual café in the 1920s-era El Albergue Hotel and Restaurant (elalbergue.com). For a more remarkable meal, travel to nearby Urubamba and find El Huacatay, a hidden gem that serves complex concoctions such as shrimp sautéed in chili paste and served with mashed potatoes, oranges and avocado coated in Japanese panko and fried.

Touring one Sacred Valley ruin after another—led by English-speaking guides hired on-site—we were astonished not only by the Incas' design and engineering ingenuity but also by the brutal battles between the Incas and the Spanish. In Ollantaytambo, we huffed and puffed up steep terraces to a fortress made of huge blocks of stone that had been transported from miles away and fashioned to fit together precisely, with no mortar needed. We also learned how the Incas holed up at the fortress and fought off Spanish soldiers, who later returned and drove out the Incas.

A road trip into the mountains takes visitors to two ancient sites near the sleepy town of Maras: Salinas, where women still scrape salt out of soupy, white calcium-lined pools that form on the mountainside; and Moray, believed to be an Inca crop-testing area, where you can walk across circular stone agricultural terraces into a huge bowl-shaped dent in the earth. Another popular day trip is to the pretty village of Pisac for a tour of its Inca hilltop citadel and a hike down to the town's huge Sunday crafts market, past a cliff gouged with holes thought to be the ransacked graves of an Inca burial site.

Most impressive, hands down, is Machu Picchu, thanks to its sheer scale, dramatic setting and enduring mystery. Built around 1450, it was abandoned a century later when the Spanish arrived. Debate remains about whether it was a city, royal estate or religious site.

Our guide, Felix, showed us around two distinct maze-like sections surrounding a green grassy plaza with grazing llamas—one section with grand temples, the other with more humble buildings. Be sure to take a hike to the famed Sun Gate, or climb Wayna Picchu, the oft-photographed steep mountain looming above the ruins. Set aside time to wander and wonder, to be amazed by the place—and the fact that you're really there.

CUZCO

Even after a visit to Machu Picchu, Cuzco holds its own. You can easily spend days exploring this sophisticated modern city, with its glorious past as the 13th-century capital of what would become a vast Inca Empire of about 10 million people in present-day Peru and beyond.

From the charming, colonial-era Ninos Hotel (ninoshotel.com), which is also a nonprofit whose proceeds support poor children, we gravitated daily to the nearby main plaza. The plaza is as grand as Arequipa's but with

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Opposite page: La Casa de Melgar hotel in Arequipa. *Below:* A boy at a festival in Arequipa; The stunning spectacle of Machu Picchu.

