

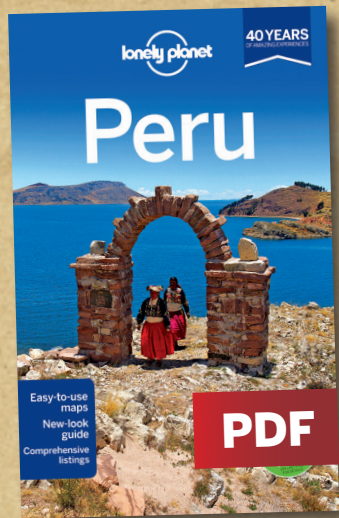
Peru

Machu Picchu (Highlight)

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Machu Picchu

This great 15th century Inca citadel sits at 2430m on a narrow ridge top above the Río Urubamba. Traditionally considered a political, religious and administrative center, new theories suggest that it was a royal estate designed by Pachacutec, the Inca ruler whose military conquests transformed the empire. Trails linked it to the Inca capital of Cuzco and important sites in the jungle. As invading Spaniards never discovered it, experts still dispute when the site was abandoned and why.

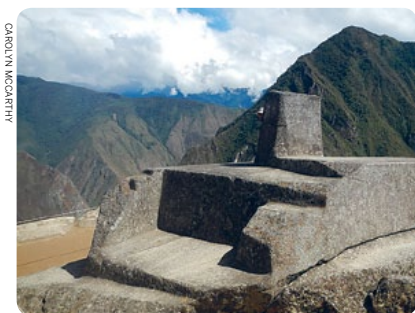
At its peak, Machu Picchu was thought to have some 500 inhabitants. An engineering marvel, its famous Inca walls have polished stone fitted to stone, with no mortar in between. The citadel took thousands of laborers 50 years to build – today its cost of construction would exceed a billion US dollars.

Making it inhabitable required leveling the site, channeling water from high mountain streams through stone canals and building vertical contention walls that became agricultural terraces for corn, potatoes and coca. The drainage system also helped combat heavy rains (diverting them for irrigation), while east-facing rooftops and farming terraces took advantage of maximum sun exposure.

The site is a magnet to mystics, adventurers and students of history alike. While its function remains hotly debated, the essential grandeur of Machu Picchu is indisputable.

TOP TIPS

- » **Visit** before mid-morning crowds
- » **Allow** at least three hours to visit
- » **Wear** walking shoes and a hat
- » **Bring** drinking water
- » **Gain** perspective walking the lead-in trails



Intihuatana

'Hitching Post of the Sun', this exquisitely carved rock was likely used by Inca astronomers to predict solstices. It's a rare survivor since invading Spaniards destroyed *intihuatanas* throughout the kingdom to eradicate pagan blasphemy.



Temple of the Three Windows

Enjoy the commanding views of the plaza below through the huge trapezoidal windows framed by three-ton lintels. Rare in Inca architecture, the presence of three windows may indicate special significance.



Wayna Picchu

This 2720m peak with ladders, caves and a small temple can be climbed in a 45- to 90-minute scramble. Take care, the steep steps are slippery when wet. Purchase a coveted permit ahead with admission.

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Central Plaza

This sprawling green area with grazing llamas separates the ceremonial sector of Machu Picchu from the more mundane residential and industrial sectors.



Temple of the Sun

This off-limits rounded tower is best viewed from above. Featuring the site's finest stonework, an altar and trapezoidal windows, it may have been used for astronomical purposes.

Royal Tomb

Speculated to have special ceremonial significance, a natural rock cave sits below the Temple of the Sun. Though off-limits, visitors can view its steplike altar and sacred niches from the entrance.

Temple of the Condor

Check out the condor head carving with rock outcrops that resemble outstretched wings. Behind, an off-limits cavity reaches a tiny underground cell that may only be entered by bending double.



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