

# Under the Peruvian sky

TEXT LUCY CORNE

The winding roads of the Andes take you through Inca ruins, Latin American history, on towards the prize cache that is Machu Picchu.

The brochures had me at 'sunrise'. They gushed about the stunning views from the Sun Gate as the morning rays illuminated the 'Lost City of the Incas' – Machu Picchu. Unfortunately, life isn't a holiday brochure and on the day I climbed the steep steps to the Sun Gate, the sun didn't actually rise. Instead, an impenetrable mass of cloud and pre-dawn drizzle meant I not only missed the allegedly spectacular sunrise, but also my first mesmerising glimpse of the ruins I'd trekked up to see.

It's amazing to think that Machu Picchu was undiscovered by the modern world till 1911.



Above: The ancient stone steps leading to Machu Picchu.

Right: The astounding view of the terraces of the famed archaeological site, flanked by the Peruvian Andes.

It was always a gamble. I'd arrived in the former Inca capital of Cusco at the tail-end of the rainy season determined to beat the odds and hike the trail without getting drenched. Owing to my travel paranoia and Cusco's reputation for petty theft, I opted to stay at an accommodating convent, leaving my bags with the Mother Superior, only taking the bare necessities on the four-day bathroomless hike through the Peruvian Andes. You know you're getting an early start when you're up before the nuns and all was quiet as I stole though the spotless corridors to meet my 12-strong group and guide.

### WINDING ROADS

As panpipe pop played on the minibus radio, we wound our way up the mountain to the starting point of our hike, 82 km from Cusco. Three hours of winding roads, mountain scenery and eager chatting with fellow hikers passed all too quickly and the time had come to actually start doing some

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work ourselves. The hike, a route that was well trodden by the Incas 500 years ago is only 42-km-long, but the undulating paths and absence of rope bridges that most likely facilitated the route in Inca times make it a challenging trek, with Machu Picchu as the prize for finishing.

Lulling hikers into a false sense of security, day one was a pleasant introduction remarkably lacking in steep slopes. It was with surprise and a little relief that I arrived at our camp ahead of half the group, giving me time to enjoy the mountain calm as mists swirled above us and the sun began to lower. Of course, one has to be very careful about roaming these temporary campsites, for while we were the only group bedding down there that day, dozens of hikers sleep here every night. And with no bathrooms available, people will attend to business wherever they find a little privacy.

The following morning was similarly early, but sadly, not similarly gentle. More than once, as I fell to the back of the pack, I looked enviously at the goats and llamas making light work of their even steeper slopes across the valley. Despite vowing not to, I relented and paid an

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## Heritage

outlandish \$5 for a Snickers bar way past its best-before date, claiming it would be used as an energy bar (though really it was more of a 'carrot in front of a donkey' incentive for me to reach the top). The top was Warmihuañusca, or Dead Woman's Pass, the highest point of our hike at 4200m above sea level.

Despite my pre-trip fears, altitude sickness never took hold, though we lingered only briefly at the peak we'd had in our sights for the last six hours. To combat the effects of altitude you should descend before spending the night, so we began the even more arduous climb down to our second camp. With knees screaming after an hour of uneven steps, it was all I could do to wolf down dinner and turn in at sunset.

### EARLY NIGHTS, EARLY MORNINGS

And of course, an early night was needed since it was followed by a now predictably early morning. Miguel, our perpetually cheerful guide, roused us awake with talk of sweet tea and porridge before explaining the day's schedule to us. We were to spend the morning climbing and descending yet more of those knee-weakening steps, visiting the Sayacmarca, Phuyupatamarca and Wiñay Wayna ruins along the way. Bringing the ruins to life, Miguel acted out Inca history and folklore using his patrons as protagonists and soon other groups sauntered over to hear our superlative guide's explanations, having been deserted by their own tour leaders. A great guide can turn a wonderful experience into something truly unforgettable and while you could enjoy the Inca Trail on views alone, learning the significance of each set of ruins turned a pretty hike into an unmatched cultural wander.



The sometimes vertiginous path snaked through cloud forests that cooled us with their mists, into tunnels that cooled us with their shade and along narrow cliff-hugging paths that made us sweat with fear. Between the remarkable ruins sitting in the most unlikely spots, we passed colourful traders hauling Snickers bars, postcards and water that hikers can't resist, never tiring of photographing the rolling hills and craggy peaks surrounding us.

Until now, we'd somehow managed to avoid the tourist masses at night. By day the path was lined with walkers but scattered campsites afforded us a little night-time peace. Not so on the third and final night, when we reached the campsite shared with every hiker on the multi-day treks plus those choosing the easier two-day option. The campsite was packed and the promise of our first hot shower and first flushing toilet in three days was quickly snatched away as the water ran cold and the limited loos began to block through overuse.

### WONDROUS MACHU PICCHU

Somewhere around 4 am, Miguel nudged everyone awake and found us a much easier bunch to wake than on other mornings. We didn't even need to be lured from our sleeping bags with the usual bait of coca tea – a foul-tasting brew meant to ward off the effects of high altitude. We forewent breakfast at Miguel's suggestion in order to get a head start on the scores of other hikers, all aiming for the famed Sun Gate before dawn. The mists and cloud that



Above: Pick up some souvenirs and basic supplies from the Inca trek at roadside shops.

Below: Porters at the Morena Camp near the Chopicalqui Peak, on the way to the top.

Below left: Locals dressed in typical Peruvian attire and sunflower hats in the Ausangate mountain region.



Above: The statue of an Inca god stands sentry at the entrance of Machu Picchu. Bottom: There are various theories relating to Machu Picchu's origins—from royal residence to prison.

had been providing an atmospheric backdrop for our photos finally gave way to rain and we trudged along increasingly muddy paths and up steep steps to the sacred spot promising a magical sunrise. In time we realised that daylight had arrived, bringing nothing resembling a sunrise with it. Admitting defeat we descended the ruins for our 8 o'clock rendezvous with Miguel. Suddenly the clouds lifted and there it was—the perfectly preserved remains of the 15th-century structure that lay abandoned and undiscovered until 1911.

Along with the army of hikers who had emerged while we waited for dawn, I charged back up to the Sun Gate determined to snap at least one decent

### UNEXPLAINED ORIGINS

Mystery shrouds Machu Picchu (Old Mountain) just as much as the mists that perpetually swirl, spoiling tourists' photos. Perched precariously on an Andean hilltop 2430m above sea level, this complex of what appear to be houses, temples and sacred shrines was started around 1400AD and probably built over the course of several decades. Theories abound on its original purpose—a royal residence, a lowly prison or an abode built for the gods are some suggestions. One thing that is known though, is that although the site was most likely abandoned a century later when the Spanish arrived, Machu Picchu remained untouched by the Conquistadors while Inca structures across Peru were plundered and defaced. It lay hidden under tangled jungle until 1911 when Hiram Bingham, an American historian, found the ruins and revealed them to the world. These days the 'Lost City of the Incas' is anything but—featuring prominently on any traveller's Peruvian itinerary as much for its mysterious origins as for its magical hilltop setting.



Machu Picchu shot, but it seemed someone in our midst had offended the Inca gods and when I reached the stone structure the mists were once more obscuring the view. The rain was getting heavier and Miguel, between explanations of the sacred spots and possible uses of Machu Picchu, apologised for his country's weather in a manner so dispirited that it made me feel worse for him than for my own tired and soggy self.

As if planned, almost the second his stories came to an end the rain stopped, giving us the chance to whizz around to each site in the complex retaking every photo we'd already snapped in the rain. The descent to Aguas Calientes (Hot Waters), a town 400m below Machu Picchu in the verdant Urubamba Valley, was hell on already aching legs, but the cold bottles of Cusqueña beer washed away all pains. The Sun Gate might not have lived up to its name, but the town did and it was with a mix of exhaustion and satisfaction that I washed away four days of mud and sweat before snuggling into bed.

## QUICK FACTS

### GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily direct flights to New York and Newark from Brussels, Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai. Onward flights to Peru are available with our codeshare partners American Airlines. All Inca Trail operators include transfers from Cusco to the start of the hike.

### ACCOMMODATION

Backpackers will find clean and friendly hostels while those seeking a deeper insight into local life can opt for a homestay. Five-star options abound and if you fancy sampling historical Cusco in luxury, the Hotel Monasterio is an upmarket option based in a 16th-century monastery. Along the Inca Trail it's camping all the way, though levels of luxury vary depending on the operator.

### TRAVEL TIPS

**Do:** Pack waterproofs and thermal underwear. Rain can envelop the mountains at any time of year, though the official rainy season runs from October to April and the altitude makes nights chilly.

**Don't:** Visit in February – the Inca Trail closes for the whole month.

### Permits

You require a permit to hike the Inca Trail, but these are almost always included in the tour fee (something that hikers should check when booking). Because there are a limited number of trekkers allowed each day, advance booking is absolutely essential. Check availability on [www.incatrailreservations.com](http://www.incatrailreservations.com).

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to [www.perutourism.com](http://www.perutourism.com)