

Discovering Peru: The Lost City: Machu Picchu

by Douglas Famy, PassPorter Guest Contributor

There is a city tucked away between mountains 4,000 meters (13,000 feet) above sea level. It was constructed, occupied, and abandoned within 100 years. Mysteries surround the ceremonial and administrative center of an ancient empire just as the mist shrouds the complex today. From about the 1530s until 1911 it was forgotten and lost. Its name is Machu Picchu.

In October 2009 I went on an 11 day Peruvian adventure, the pinnacle of which was exploring Machu Picchu. In 1911, Hiram Bingham, a Yale graduate and later a United States Senator, took a narrow mule trail down the gorge of the Urubamba River with Melchor Arteaga, a local whom he met by chance. The jungle had reclaimed the area, but buried underneath was the complex I saw roughly 100 years later.

My guide emphasized the spiritual nature of Machu Picchu. When we first arrived it was lightly raining and the city was enveloped in fog and mist. As a 21st century traveler I was disappointed and thin on patience. I'm a big shutterbug. How can I take pictures with all of this fog, mist, and rain? One thing I had learned over the week leading up to my visit to Machu Picchu is that weather in Peru can change on a dime. My traveling companion and I climbed a zigzagging stone staircase up to the "Hut of the Caretaker of the Funerary Rock." The name is derived from the fact that Bingham had found numerous bones and mummies at this spot. We sat and waited and I discovered the spiritual nature of the place. Not many people were venturing up to this outpost. It was quiet and I was able to relax and meditate. As we waited, the fog gradually began to shift. The wind blew the mist away for moments at a time and we were treated to an incredible vista of the entire city.

I had heard of the Inca Trail. I thought there was only one. It turns out that the Incas had numerous trails that connected various destinations within an empire that spanned Peru, Bolivia, Columbia, and Chile. From Machu Picchu agricultural activities could be directed because it was here that astronomical knowledge could be gathered to inform the people of the proper times to plant and harvest.

The Inca culture demonstrated an incredible facility with stone masonry. The Temple of the Sun is an example; a round tapering tower that is constructed of perfectly selected stones that hold together without mortar. Even today it is not known how to construct buildings of

this nature. You wouldn't be able to force a knife blade between the stones. Peru over the centuries has been racked by major earthquakes, yet these stone edifices still stand. There are beautiful terraces for agriculture. Nearby the terraces are a series of 16 ceremonial baths that cascade across the ruins. There are a number of temples. My favorite was the Temple of the Condor which contains a carving of the head of a condor with the natural rocks forming the condor's wings and body behind it. The architectural ruins have over 140 buildings.

We had arrived early in the morning and were able to secure entrance to climb Huayna Picchu or "Young Peak." The ascent was at a hefty incline. The easy part is you are basically climbing stone stairs. The hard part is you are at a very high altitude. For those of us who live at sea level we are bound to be huffing and puffing a bit. Huayna Picchu is only open from 7:00 am to 1:00 pm and you must return by 4:00 pm. Get to Machu Picchu early so you can secure a spot if you want to climb this mountain that overlooks the Machu Picchu complex. In fact, just get there early to avoid the crowds of mid-day. While it was quite a work out, the experience was amazing. Since it had been raining earlier in the morning the steps were rather slick. I did have a little bit of difficulty trying to find our way down. The signage wasn't all that clear. Obviously, I eventually figured it out because, trust me, there ain't no wi-fi up there!

There are two seasons in Peru: dry and wet. The coldest, driest months are the most popular time to go. This is late May to early September. The rainy season is October to April. Of course, you have rainy days in dry season and dry days in rainy season. I went in mid-October and it was dry for all of half a day out of the 11 days I was in Peru.

All international travelers that fly enter Peru via Lima, the capitol. From Lima you can either fly, take the train or bus to Cusco. Cusco is the largest city near Machu Picchu.

Getting to Machu Picchu means either hiking or catching a train to Aguas Calientes. In fact, there is a super duper luxury train, the Hiram Bingham, run by the Orient Express company. Aguas Calientes, also known as Machu Picchu Pueblo, is a town that serves as a base of operations for visitors to Machu Picchu. It sits at the valley below the ancient ruins. From Aguas Calientes there are buses that shuttle people all day long back and forth to Machu Picchu.

I did a five-day hike through the Andes Mountains to get to Machu Picchu. The traditional hike is called the Inca Trail. I took an alternative route climbing around Mount Salkantay. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my entire life. If you are a fit individual I can

.....

not stress how wonderful it is to experience the environment of this part of the world. I saw waterfalls, banana plantations, snowy mountain peaks, butterflies, and condors. We camped along the way at designated camp sites. This is not for everyone. Should you decide to hike your way to Machu Picchu you would need to go with a licensed guide. No more than 200 hikers are allowed to start the trail per day. This includes your guides, porters, everyone entering the trail. The tour operator that I used was incredible. The guides were friendly and informative. The food was out of this world! I don't know how they made birthday cakes in the middle of the Andes Mountains, but they did! You can hike year round, except for February. February is the month they dedicate to cleanup and upkeep.

I used to believe that I couldn't afford to go to far-off destinations. Don't you bet on it! If you can afford a trip to Walt Disney World, you can afford a trip to Peru. I spent the same amount of money on an 11-day adventure in Peru that I would have for an 8 day stay at a value resort at Walt Disney World with a dining plan. The exchange rate is very favorable for the United States dollar. In fact, the Peruvian nuevo sole is based on the dollar. Go have the adventure of a lifetime as you follow in the footsteps of the Incas. For more detailed description of my Peruvian adventure you can find my trip report on the PassPorter message boards at [In the Footsteps of the Incas: From Mountains to Jungle to Ancient Ruins](#).

About The Author: Douglas Famy is an active member of the PassPorter message board community hailing from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is currently looking forward to a Western Caribbean Cruise with Honduras, Belize, and Cozumel, Mexico as ports of call followed by Halloween festivities in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Article last updated: 06-16-2010

View the latest version online at:

<http://www.passporter.com/articles/peru-machu-picchu.html>

Copyright by Douglas Famy. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this publication may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act. Resale of this guide is strictly prohibited without the copyright holder's permission. If you purchased this publication from someone other than PassPorter Travel Press, please call 877-929-3273.

View more PassPorter Articles online at <http://www.passporter.com/articles/>

.....