

The Inca Experience

There is more to Machu Picchu than the awe-inspiring stone walls and terraces – part of its allure is the adventure of getting there

BY THOMAS KAMRATH



Shrouded in mystery and steeped in culture, Peru is best described as a land of contrasts, a place where arid deserts, charming fishing villages and lush rainforests co-exist in a mosaic of environmental diversity. There is something here for everyone: visitors can explore Peru's vast jungle region or cruise the mighty Amazon River. For serious

trekkers, the Peruvian Andes are a challenging yet scenic expedition, and for history buffs, Cuzco is the country's archeological heart. But perhaps the biggest draw of South America's third-largest country is the famed Machu Picchu Trail. This 45-kilometre hike from Cuzco to Machu Picchu traverses majestic mountain passes and stunning tropical cloudforests. We join travel writer Thomas Kamrath on day five as his group makes the final trek to the Lost City.

IT'S 4:30 A.M. ON DAY FIVE. THE porters have just come to our tent to wake us. No coffee or tea this morning – we need to get moving to reach Intipunku, the Sun Gate, by 7 a.m., or we will miss the sunrise over Machu Picchu.

The fabled pre-Columbian town of Machu Picchu, which is thought to have been built by the Incas around 1440 A.D. and was inhabited until the Spanish conquered Peru in 1532 A.D., is located on a ridge between the mountains of Machu Picchu and Huayna Picchu in the Peruvian Andes, at an elevation of about 6,750 feet (2,057 m) above the Urubamba Valley. Unknown to the outside world until 1911, the original purpose of the Lost City is still being debated. There are two plausible theories that historians believe could be true: It was an agricultural site, maximizing the valuable growing region between the jungle and high valleys. Or, it was a large observatory. There are a multitude of ruins that are related to the observation of the sky: the Torreón, where the sun shines through a window opening at



Visitors to Machu Picchu enjoy navigating the narrow corridors of the Lost City.

dawn of the winter solstice (June 21 on the southern hemisphere), highlighting the rock in the middle of the temple; Intihuatana (Hitching Post of the Sun), where the sun could be ceremonially tied and prevented from falling lower in the sky in winter; and the Temple of the Moon, located on the far side of Huayna Picchu.

After our early

morning wake-up, we are still a couple of hours away from the overlook. It is pitch black. I can feel the heavy humid fog left behind by last night's rain. This is why the tour dossier listed "flashlight." Unfortunately, my brand-new battery-operated purchase only lasted one pre-trip check. Fortunately, Dave, my travelling partner, has a spare keychain light that provides me with a shadowed view of the ground in front of me. The majority of our nine-