EXPLORING PERU'S SACRED VALLEY & BEYOND

If you're looking for breathtaking landscapes and are curious about the ancient Incans, then Machu Picchu and Peru's Sacred Valley should be your next vacation destination.

WORDS MICHELE KOH MOROLLO
PHOTOS RICHARD JAMES TAYLOR, GENIUS LOCI, ADRIAN HOUSTON, DREAMSTIME, UNSPLASH

The Sacred Valley in the Peruvian Andes has long fascinated archaeologists, anthropologists, and those interested in Peru's ancient Incan history. The Incan civilisation, which flourished sometime between 1400 and 1533 AD, was the largest empire in the Americas at the time, and at its peak, was the biggest in the world. Its legacy includes spectacular architecture, terraces, highways, towns, bridges, and art that continue to fascinate visitors today.

Together with the city of Cusco, the Sacred Valley is the gateway to the famous Incan citadel of Machu Picchu — one of the world's most visited UNESCO World Heritage sites. Running along the Urubamba River from Pisac in the east to Machu Picchu in the west, the valley also includes majestic Incan ruins in the towns of Ollantaytambo, Moray, Maras, and Chinchero.

If you are planning a longer stay in the Peruvian Andes and are looking for adventures beyond the valley, head south of Cusco to the hamlet of Huinchiri, where you can see the Q'eswachaka Rope Bridge, an Incan suspension bridge that has more than 500 years of history, or arrange to trek up the beautiful Rainbow Mountain in the district of Pitumarca.

IN AND AROUND CUSCO

Begin your journey in Cusco, a city that was once the capital of the Incan Empire. Head to Santo Domingo Plaza, where you'll find Qorikancha — the ruins of the Incan temple of the sun god, and one of the most sacred sites of Incan worship. Walk around the city's main square, Plaza De Armas, and pick up souvenirs at shops selling embroidery, alpaca wool clothing and accessories, chocolate, coffee, or Pisco Sour — the national liquor of Peru. In the Plaza, look out for iconic Spanish colonial buildings like the Cusco Cathedral and the Jesuit Church of Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús. Then, take a stroll through San Pedro Market. In this lively, sheltered outdoor market, you can enjoy fresh fruit and juices, local breads and pastries, or — if you are culinarily adventurous enough — local snacks of roast guinea pig and pickled snake.

A short walk from the market will take you to the Museo Inka and the Museum of Pre-Columbian Art, where you can learn more about the Incans as you view their artworks and artefacts. From the museum, a 15-minute walk will take you to Sacsayhuamán, the ruins of a hilltop citadel that's famous for its massive stone terrace walls — a true feat of ancient masonry as these walls were assembled without mortar. A good choice for accommodation in Cusco is the elegant Palacio del Inka Hotel, which is conveniently located close to all the city's main attractions. While you're in Cusco, be sure you make time to enjoy delicious Peruvian cuisine at restaurants like Chicha or Morena Peruvian Kitchen.

(Facing page, clockwise from top) The awe-inspiring Incan citadel of Machu Picchu is even more stunning in the early morning light; the temple of Qorikancha, which was the most important place of worship in the Incan Empire; when in Cusco, make time for a stroll through its colourful streets.

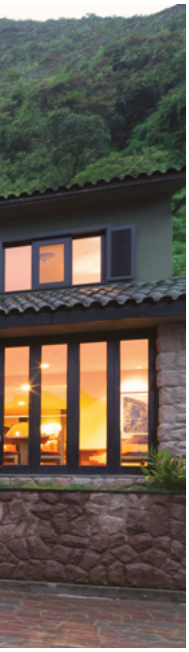
THE SACRED VALLEY

A drive or bus ride to the northwest of Cusco will take you to the Sacred Valley, an area of farmlands and countryside that stretches approximately 60km along the Peruvian Andean highlands. Here, you can visit the high-altitude village of Chinchero, known for its skilled weaving community, and the charming town of Pisac, which is famous for its craft market selling alpaca sweaters, hand-woven llama wool scarves, and colourful bags.

Stop at the villages of Moray and Maras, and marvel at the Incan agricultural infrastructure. Moray is home to the famous Incan *muyus* — three massive, ancient agricultural terraces, the deepest of which descends for 150m. Maras is home to magnificent saltpans — geometrically-shaped pools that have been used to harvest salt since the time of the Incans.

If you're up for watersports, head to tranquil Lake Huaypo for paddleboarding or Lake Piuray for kayaking. For more of an adrenaline rush, join a whitewater rafting tour near Ollantaytambo village along the Urubamba River. While you're in the Sacred Valley, you might spot llamas and alpacas — these animals have become cultural symbols of Peru because they are essential to the country's woollen textile industry. Learn more about these fascinating creatures at farms such as Awana Kancha, where you can arrange to join guided farm tours and cultural workshops. For a luxurious base to explore the Sacred Valley, check into Tambo del Inka in the town of Urubamba, where rooms and suites offer dramatic views of the Andes Mountains and Vilcanota River from private balconies.

(This spread, clockwise from top left) Visit the village of Chinchero to see its skilled weaving community at work; the saltpans of Maras have been used to harvest salt since the time of the Incans; one of three ancient agricultural terraces in Moray; at Belmond's Sanctuary Lodge, experience the Pachamama ceremony, a traditional blessing ritual; the Sanctuary Lodge is a luxurious hotel located right next to Machu Picchu.



MACHU PICCHU

In between the Peruvian Andes and the Amazon Basin, standing more than 2,400m above sea level and looking out to breathtaking views, is Machu Picchu, the awe-inspiring historic Incan city that was built in the 15th century. Discovered by American explorer Hiram Bingham III in 1911, this UNESCO heritage archeological complex has about 200 structures, and is the grandest artistic and architectural legacy of the Incan civilisation. From Cusco, you can do a day trip to Machu Picchu by train with Inca Rail. Alternatively, if you're geared up for outdoor adventures, join a tour for a two, four, five, or seven-day trek along the Inca Trail to get to the complex. When in Machu Picchu, be sure to visit the Central Plaza, where the Incans used to gather for celebrations. This site is surrounded by steep green terraces and roofless stone structures, and is the best spot to view the Huayna Picchu mountain. Other sites that ought not to be missed include the Temple of the Sun, the Sun Gate, the Temple of the Condor, the Watchman's Hut, and the Royal Tomb.

To really soak up the magnificent landscapes and atmosphere of this mythical place, set aside around three hours to hike up the Huayna or Machu Picchu mountains and back down again. For a good post-hike feast, get a table at Full House in the riverside town of Aguas Calientes, and order the signature Peruvian dish of trout or seafood ceviche. To explore Machu Picchu at your own leisure, stay at Belmond's Sanctuary Lodge, the hotel that's closest to the UNESCO site. The Sanctuary Lodge also offers unique local ceremonial experiences like cocoa leaf divination and a Pachamama ceremony, where an Andean shaman will conduct a traditional blessing ritual with songs and gifts to pay tribute to Mother Earth.

MORE TO EXPLORE

If you have more time, arrange a hike up Rainbow Mountain with tour operators Rainbow Mountain Travels. Also known as Vinicunca, this mountain is around a three-hour drive south from Cusco, but is only accessible if you join an official tour company. It received its nickname because of its surreal, multi-coloured striations that are created by different mineral sediments.

Another site that's easy enough to get to from Cusco is Q'eswachaka Rope Bridge near the town of Huinchiri. Set 36m above a steep canyon, made of handwoven grass and renewed every year using traditional techniques and materials, this rope bridge is the last remaining Incan bridge in Peru and yet another testament to the ancient civilisation's creativity and technological sophistication. Rainstorms during Peru's wet season can certainly put a damper on outdoor activities, so the best time to visit the Andean region of Peru is between the months of April and October when you can enjoy clear skies and sunny days. ■

BRAZIL IS ON SINGAPORE AIRLINES' REGULAR FLIGHT NETWORK. FROM THERE, TAKE A CONNECTING FLIGHT TO CUSCO. SCAN THE QR CODE ON THE LEFT FOR THE LATEST AVAILABLE SCHEDULES.

(From top) Multi-coloured bands of mineral sediments give Rainbow Mountain its name; Q'eswachaka Rope Bridge is the last remaining Incan bridge in Peru.