

Travel/Peru: A visit to the Sacred Valley

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By **KAREN WALKER**

On every list of sites you must see in your lifetime is the ancient city of Machu Picchu in the Andes Mountains. It's not the only reason to visit this part of Peru, though. The region along the Urubamba River — called the Sacred Valley — abounds with other sites that rival the mystery and splendor of the famous Incan citadel.

Many tourists use Cuzco, which is 11,140 feet above sea level, as a base. To better acclimate to the altitude, we chose to stay 2,000 feet lower in Ollantaytambo. Our room at the Hostal Izkay overlooked the Ollantaytambo Fortress, a massive Incan religious center built into a steep hillside. A climb to the top of its stone terraces offers a spectacular view of the village and countryside.

Another archeological gem is at Pisac. Colectivos (shared mini-buses) provide inexpensive transportation between villages but leave only when they have a full load of passengers, so we took a taxi. After a scenic drive to the peak, we bought a boleto turistico (a pass to many historic sites) and hired a guide at the entrance.

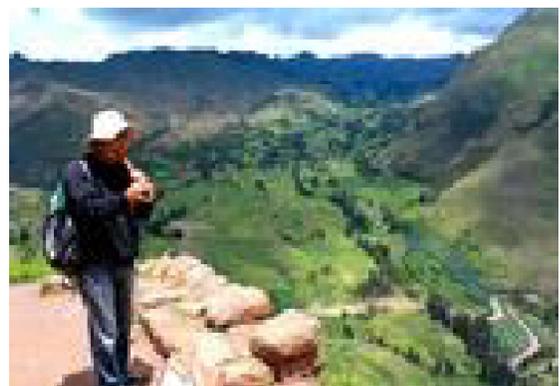
The Pisac ruins are dominated by sweeping agricultural terraces that are still in use. The site also features cliff-hugging footpaths, burial caves, aqueducts, ceremonial baths and a large temple complex of carved pink granite.

Instead of taking a taxi back down the mountain, we followed an old Inca trail past more ruins. It was steep and sometimes a bit treacherous, but two hours later, we were finally back in Pisac, where it was market day. We explored the craft booths and were soon found by our taxi driver, who had waited all day to take us back to Ollantaytambo.

In addition to their engineering feats, the Incas were innovative farmers. Near Moray is a deep pit that resembles an amphitheatre. It has an irrigation system and circular terraces that go down almost 100 feet, creating a temperature difference of up to 27F between the top and bottom.



Photo by: Provided by Karen Walker
Karen Walker and her husband, Mike Halvorsen, at Machu Picchu.



Archaeologists believe it was an experiment station for studying the effects of climate on crops.

From Moray, we rode 7 miles on horseback to Salinas de Maras — a terraced field of interlocking earthen ponds that produce salt. Since pre-Inca times, local families have used the ponds to evaporate salt water from a subterranean stream. Visitors can walk (carefully) along the rims and watch workers scrape and bag the salt.

Early the next morning, we began the two-hour journey by train and bus to Machu Picchu. The entrance to the ruins is through a narrow passageway that opens to a stunning view — a panorama of stone walls and grass terraces, framed by steep gorges, the mountains beyond and a veil of clouds.

No one knows the exact purpose of the citadel or why the Incas abandoned it in the 16th century, 100 years after it was built. Many of the stone structures were temples, and some have astronomical alignments.

An even greater mystery is how the massive stones, some weighing up to 50 tons, were transported to the mountaintop. The stones are fitted without mortar and cut so precisely that not even a knife blade can penetrate the seams.

Our Sacred Valley trip ended in the 2-mile-high city of Cuzco. We felt no signs of altitude sickness, perhaps because we drank coca tea, which is a popular antidote. Our hotel, the Tierra Viva, served the tea when we checked in. We also tried the chewable leaves offered in shops and restaurants.

Once the capital of the Incan empire, Cuzco is a charming, walkable city. We enjoyed visiting the Qoricancha temple, an art colony and Sacsayhuaman (pronounced "sexy woman"), which was a center for sun worship. We took a taxi up to the ruins and, undeterred by the rigors of our hike from Pisac, chose the footpath to return to town. It was an easy 20-minute walk to our hotel.

Packaged tours to the Sacred Valley are widely available, but we found it easy and affordable to book our own guides and hotels. Our only regret was that we couldn't stay longer to discover more of the history, mystery and natural beauty of the Incas' ancient homeland.

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