

Machu Picchu, Peru in September 2024

Although retired for a while, we are still in the “go-go” phase of frequent travel. We had a semi-formed idea of the special places around the world that we could visit while we were still able, mainly in Europe and the Near East: Sicily, Poland, Turkey, Russia (while it was still open,) Egypt, Jordan. Lately after a lifetime of incuriosity about South America, we have been going below the equator to the Galapagos, Ecuador, Patagonia, and coming soon, the Amazon. In September 2024 we toured the archeological sites of the coast north of Lima, Peru, and thence, up to Cusco and Machu Picchu.

Twenty years or more too late for Machu Picchu.

The site of Machu Picchu is truly spectacular. The archeological site sits on top of an incredibly steep mountain top, overlooking a deeply carved river valley. The surrounding mountains are covered with jungle - the cloud forest - as Machu Picchu is on the eastern, Amazonian side of the Andes. “Discovered” or rediscovered by Hiram Bingham in 1911, the small city was a vacation estate for the Incan Emperor Pachacutec, built in the mid 1400’s, less than 100 years before the Spanish arrived. The Spanish never found the citadel, or they would have destroyed it. The jungle overgrowth hid it from subsequent generations, more or less intact. But the experience of getting there was a major drag.

If you love crowds, this would be the trip for you. The nearby town, Machu Picchu Pueblo, is accessible only by train, which run packed almost every hour delivering the masses to the Town.

The town itself is fully a tourist joint, with tacky shops, restaurants (some serving alpaca and guinea pig) massage parlors, hostels and hotels. If you are not on an organized tour, you stand in long lines to get timed entry tickets, which then require you to be in an ad hoc group with a guide. No individual touring of the site. The next day, you wait in line for up to an hour to get on one of the fleet of shuttle busses running up to the site. Our tour director told us we were lucky to have “only” a 45 minute wait. The busses charge up the many dizzying switchbacks of the narrow road to the bus turnaround area near the entrance to the site.

After admission, you need to choose one of three separate paths, which you must stay on. Once you choose one; you cannot visit the full site at once...to see the full Machu Picchu site you need to repeat the process a separate day or two. Your group has timed entry and must have entirely departed with your guide by a certain time.

Our first day we took trail one, which leads to the iconic overlook over the entire site. Jammed with people, and some llamas and alpacas for character, it was a series of terraces, big enough to allow each person to get photographed against the famous backdrop. Time’s up! Then we were hustled back to the bus turnaround for another 45 minute wait to get on the crowded bus back to the village.

On day two, rinse and repeat for waiting lines to and from and packed busses for timed entry to trail two, which takes you through most of the Machu Picchu site in a pressured Conga line of tourists. If you truly loved the experience, you could do trail three on day three.

So, to avoid the throngs, I suggest you visit 20 years ago.

PS: a full report of our Peru trip is coming, and we'll submit to the Travel Reports part of the Class website.







