

TRIPS OF A LIFETIME

20
OF THE
BEST

FROM ANGKOR WAT,
TO PETRA AND
THE TAJMAHAL

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
TRAVELLER



14 Machu Picchu

Banish all notions of the famed Inca city from books, television and the back of cereal boxes — nothing prepares you for the first glimpse of this dramatic New Wonder of the World

WORDS PAT RIDDELL

The 11.15 Inca Rail train rumbles towards Machu Picchu from Ollantaytambo, a quaint town that's overlooked by an Inca fortress at the western end of the Sacred Valley. The railway follows the Urubamba River down the valley with vast mountains rising on both sides and a variety of colours splashed across the landscape.

The train — now with stunning 360-degree viewing carriages since March — might be considered cheating by some, but it's an extremely civilised way to see Machu Picchu in a day. A picoso sour on boarding and a three-course lunch with wine is setting me up nicely to view the scenery.

Early on, there are still signs of life visible from the train — villages, electricity cables, farming. But suddenly everything feels very remote; the lush green vegetation remains, but there are no villages or buildings, just the odd Inca Trail sign to indicate our whereabouts. And then, as we turn a bend in the valley, Inca terraces emerge on the slope while the white waters of the river rush past.

As we drop to around 6,700ft, from 9,800ft in Ollantaytambo, we arrive into Machu Picchu Pueblo (formerly known as Aguas Calientes)

station just 90 minutes later. I hadn't actually thought the train would take us all the way, but this small town in the valley happens to be the gateway for the ruins.

Here we join the non-stop procession of minibuses, making the 40-minute journey up and down the winding road to Machu Picchu all day long. The anticipation on the bus, zig-zagging up the mountain, is palpable. When will we see it? How will it reveal itself? There's a sneaky glimpse that disappears around a bend. The drama of the tree-covered mountain on all sides is immense.

"Follow me. Walk quickly! Don't stop to look... I know the best spot." Reluctantly I obey my guide, Willfredo, and ignore the first opportunity to see Machu Picchu. Striding past a tour group, we reach a vantage point where suddenly it's there — right in front of us.

From a vantage point of 8,000ft above sea level, the valley on both sides of the mountain opens up to us — and in this remote, tranquil part of the Andes we're staring at one of the New Wonders of the World. The grass is greener than I imagined, the ruins more dramatic than I ever thought they

1450

Originally built

1911

Rediscovered by Hiram Bingham

1983

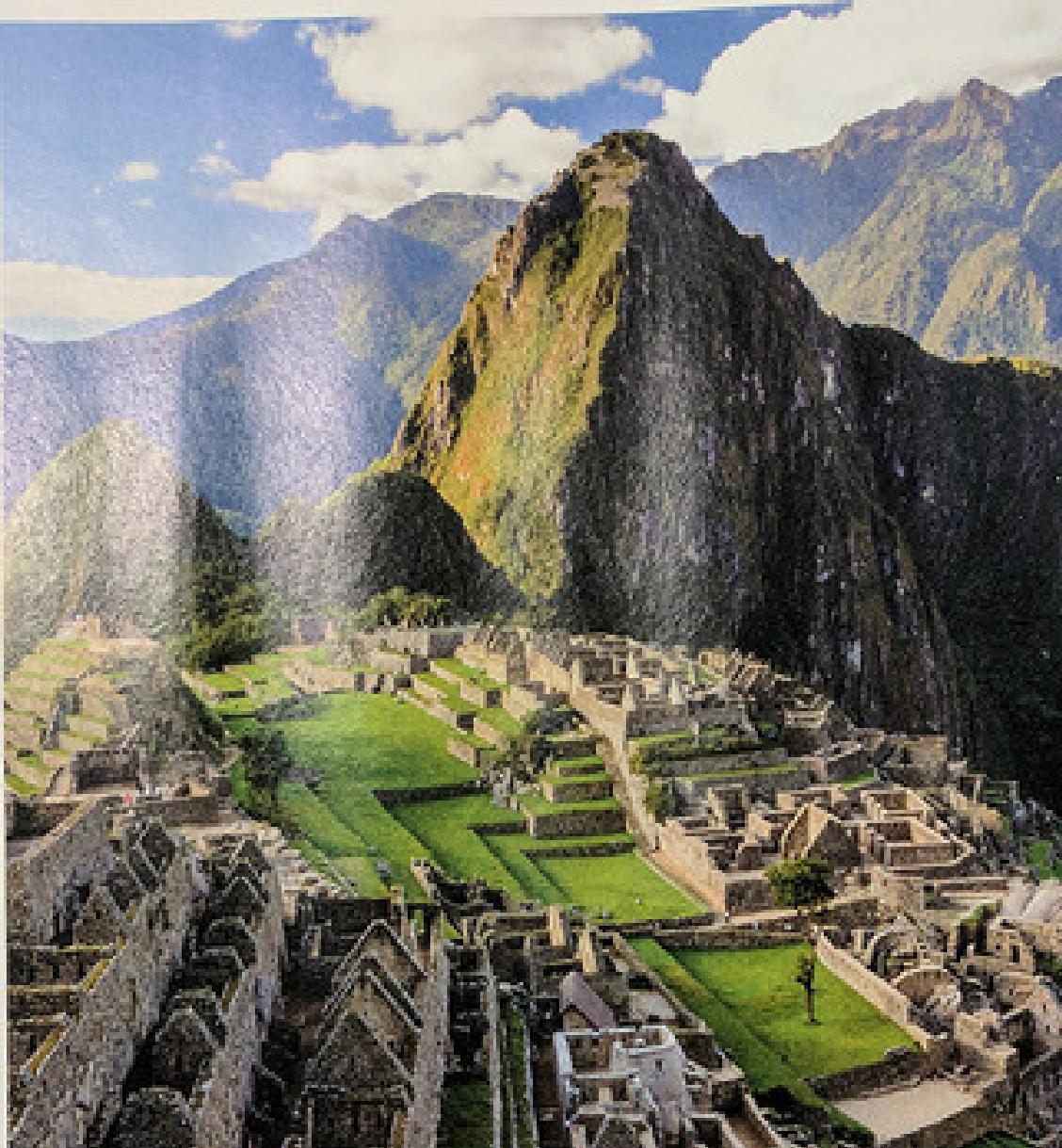
UNESCO inscription

7,979ft

Above sea level

5,940

Daily visitors



As we make our way around the site, Wilfredo shows us black-and-white photos from Bingham's early explorations. What's revealing is how well preserved the ruins are — Bingham's pictures show very little has been restored; cut-back overgrowth is the only real difference. And UNESCO recognition in 1983 has meant no actual restoration has taken place in over 30 years.

The tour reveals a whole city — palaces, houses, temples, ceramic 'factories', storerooms — with over 200 structures split into a lower and upper part, separating farming from residential areas with a large square between the two. The site itself is a staggering feat of engineering — the irrigation is typical of how the Incas mastered the land to suit their agricultural needs. I take in polished dry-stone walls, interlinking blocks of perfectly chiselled granite... the geometry and precision is astounding up close — and all the more impressive given that stone hammers were one of the few tools available.

The importance of astronomy, meanwhile, is evident at the main sights, where the sun and stars interact with the buildings. The Temple of the Sun, for example, has a window that catches the sun on

the winter solstice every year, while Intimachay, 'cave of the sun', has a *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-esque light show as the sun shines through a window the 10 days before and after the summer solstice.

Outside of the peak season of July and August, in early October, there are times when it feels like we have the place entirely to ourselves — apart from the llamas that amble carefree around the site, of course. There are, in fact, thousands of people visiting every day — in strict morning and afternoon timings. But I forget about the crowds during those moments when I want to pinch myself after spending 30 years waiting to recreate the picture I saw on a cereal box as a child. peru.travel/en-uk incorail.com □

ABOVE:
View over
Machu Picchu

HOW TO DO IT

JOURNEY LATIN AMERICA offers a nine-day trip to Peru visiting Cusco, the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu from £2,645 per person. The price includes flights, private transfers, private excursions, breakfast and first-class accommodation throughout including hotel Sol y Luna in the Sacred Valley. journeylatinamerica.co.uk