



# Machu Picchu Planning Guide

A Step-by-Step Guide for First-Time Visitors Traveling by Train

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# Welcome

Visiting Machu Picchu had been on our family's bucket list for years, and after finally experiencing it ourselves, I can honestly say it exceeded every expectation.

Planning the trip, however, was another story.

Between understanding the different ticket options, choosing a circuit, booking trains, figuring out where to stay, and deciding whether we needed a guide, there were a lot of moving pieces. I spent countless hours researching before our trip, and even then, there were several things I didn't fully understand until we were actually there.

That's why I created this guide.

Everything you'll find here is based on our firsthand experience visiting Machu Picchu by train during our two-week Peru adventure. My goal is to make planning your trip easier so you can spend less time stressing over logistics and more time getting excited about visiting one of the most incredible places on Earth.

Happy travels!

*Michelle*

Staying Blonde

# Is This Guide Right for You?

This guide is for travelers who are:

- Visiting Machu Picchu by train
- Planning their first visit
- Traveling independently
- Looking for a more relaxed itinerary
- Traveling as a couple, family, or solo traveler

 **Please note:** This guide is specifically for travelers visiting Machu Picchu by train. It does not cover hiking the Inca Trail.

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# Planning Timeline



## Four to Six Months Before Your Trip

- Purchase your Machu Picchu tickets
- Book your train tickets
- Purchase airfare
- Reserve your hotels



## One to Two Months Before

- Check your passport expiration date
- Purchase travel insurance
- Arrange transportation through the Sacred Valley
- Schedule an appointment with your doctor if you want to discuss altitude medication



## One Week Before

- Install your eSIM
- Download offline Google Maps
- Confirm your train, hotel, and entrance reservations
- Save digital copies of your tickets
- Begin packing

## CHAPTER TWO

# Tickets & Circuits

## Book Your Machu Picchu Tickets Early

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Machu Picchu tickets are timed and tied to a specific circuit and route. The most popular options can sell out months in advance, especially during Peru's busy dry season.

This is why I recommend booking Machu Picchu before finalizing the rest of your itinerary. Once you know your entrance dates and times, you can build your train reservations and hotel stays around them.

The current system includes three main circuits divided into several individual routes. Be sure to read the route description carefully before purchasing because your ticket determines which areas of Machu Picchu you can visit.

You can purchase directly through the [official Machu Picchu ticket website](#) — you'll choose your circuit and route during checkout.

## Last-Minute Tickets Are Available, but They Are Risky

It is possible to purchase a limited number of in-person Machu Picchu tickets in Aguas Calientes, also called Machu Picchu Pueblo. Peru's [Ministry of Culture](#) currently allocates up to 1,000 additional tickets per day for in-person sales.

However, I would treat this as a backup plan rather than your primary strategy.

Travelers may begin lining up well before tickets are distributed, and there is no guarantee that your preferred date, entrance time, circuit, or route will still be available. You may also need to remain in Aguas Calientes longer than planned if you cannot secure a ticket for the following day.

## Which Machu Picchu Circuit to Book?

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One of the most confusing parts of planning a trip to Machu Picchu is deciding which circuit to choose.

The current system has **three main circuits containing multiple individual routes**. The circuits determine whether you experience the upper panoramic viewpoints, walk through the archaeological site, or combine your visit with an additional hike.

## Circuit 1

### BEST FOR PANORAMIC VIEWS

If you've dreamed of standing above Machu Picchu and taking that iconic postcard photo, Circuit 1 is the best place to begin.

This circuit focuses on the upper terraces and panoramic viewpoints. It provides incredible views over the ancient city but includes less time walking through the main archaeological structures.

Best for:

- Iconic photography
- Panoramic viewpoints
- Travelers primarily interested in the classic Machu Picchu view
- Pairing with certain mountain hikes, depending on the route selected

**Our Experience:** We visited Circuit 1 on our first day and loved having time to take in the views without rushing.

[Book Circuit 1 on the official site →](#)

## Circuit 2

### BEST FOR EXPLORING THE CITADEL

Circuit 2 is generally the strongest choice for first-time visitors who want to walk through the archaeological site, experience more of Machu Picchu's structures, and still get that classic Machu Picchu photo.

Depending on the route purchased, this circuit takes visitors through terraces, plazas, temples, and residential areas within the ancient city.

Best for:

- First-time visitors
- Exploring the archaeological site
- Learning about Machu Picchu's history
- Hiring a guide

**Our Experience:** We explored Circuit 2 on our second day and hired a guide. It gave us a much deeper understanding of Machu Picchu and ended up being one of the highlights of our visit.

[Book Circuit 2 on the official site →](#)



## Circuit 3

### BEST FOR LOWER ROUTES AND SELECT HIKES

Circuit 3 concentrates on the lower portion of Machu Picchu and includes several route combinations, some of which are paired with hikes such as Huayna Picchu.

It offers a different perspective from Circuits 1 and 2, but it does not provide the same classic upper panoramic views.

Best for:

- Travelers booking one of the associated hikes
- Repeat visitors
- Exploring lower areas of the archaeological site
- Travelers whose preferred Circuit 1 or Circuit 2 route is unavailable

[Book Circuit 3 on the official site →](#)

## Which Circuit Should You Choose?

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*A beautiful view*



| Circuit   | Best For                        | Panoramic Views               | Archaeological Site | Our Choice |
|-----------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Circuit 1 | Iconic views and photography    | Excellent                     | Limited             | Day One    |
| Circuit 2 | First-time visitors and history | Very good, depending on route | Excellent           | Day Two    |
| Circuit 3 | Lower routes and select hikes   | Limited                       | Varies by route     | Optional   |

## Our Recommendation

If your schedule allows, spend **two days at Machu Picchu**.

### DAY ONE

- Explore Circuit 1
- Enjoy the panoramic viewpoints
- Take your iconic Machu Picchu photos
- Explore Aguas Calientes before or after your visit

### DAY TWO

- Hire a guide
- Explore Circuit 2
- Learn about the history, architecture, and engineering of the ancient city

This is exactly how our family experienced Machu Picchu, and we wouldn't change a thing.

## CHAPTER THREE

# The Train

## Booking Your Train Tickets

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Once you've secured your Machu Picchu entrance tickets, the **very next thing you should book is your train**.

Like Machu Picchu tickets, train seats can sell out weeks or even months in advance, especially during Peru's busy travel season. I recommend booking your train tickets **at the same time** you reserve your Machu Picchu entrance tickets so your train schedule matches your entrance time.

For our trip, we traveled from **Ollantaytambo to Aguas Calientes**, spent the night, visited Machu Picchu over two days, and then returned to Ollantaytambo by train.

### Is the Train Worth It?

I'll be honest...the train tickets gave us a little sticker shock.

They're one of the biggest expenses of visiting Machu Picchu, especially if you're traveling as a family. At first, I questioned whether they were really worth the price.

The reality is, there isn't another practical way to reach Machu Picchu unless you're hiking the Inca Trail. Once we accepted that the train was simply part of the overall cost of visiting one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, it became much easier to budget for.

The good news? The train ride is beautiful.

As you wind through the Sacred Valley alongside the Urubamba River, surrounded by towering mountains, you quickly realize this isn't just transportation. It's part of the experience.

♥ **My advice:** Budget for the train from the beginning so it doesn't come as a surprise later in the planning process.

### Pack Light for the Train

One thing that surprised us: large suitcases are not allowed on the train. Both PeruRail and Inca Rail limit you to one small carry-on bag or backpack per person, so you can only bring what you can comfortably carry.

This is easier than it sounds. Because you'll only be in Aguas Calientes for a night or two, you really just need an overnight bag. Most travelers leave their large suitcases behind at their hotel in Ollantaytambo or Cusco and pick them up on the way back.

♥ **Michelle's Tip:** Ask your hotel about storing your big luggage while you visit Machu Picchu. Ours held our suitcases at no charge, so we only carried a small bag on the train.

## Choosing a Train Company

There are two primary train companies that serve Machu Picchu: **PeruRail** and **Inca Rail**. Both travel between Ollantaytambo and Aguas Calientes, and both offer several classes of service, from standard seating to luxury experiences.

### OUR PICK

#### PeruRail

We chose **PeruRail** and had a wonderful experience.

Our train was clean, comfortable, and featured large panoramic windows that made the scenery just as memorable as the destination. Boarding was organized, the staff was friendly, and everything ran smoothly.

##### Why We Recommend PeruRail

- Comfortable seating
- Large panoramic windows
- Multiple daily departures
- Easy online booking
- Great option for families

 [Book PeruRail Here](#)

### ALSO GREAT

#### Inca Rail

Inca Rail is the other major train company serving Machu Picchu and offers a similar experience with several different service levels.

Many travelers choose Inca Rail for its modern trains, excellent customer service, and premium upgrade options.

##### Why Travelers Love Inca Rail

- Modern train cars
- Premium service options
- Comfortable seating
- Flexible departure times

 [Book Inca Rail Here](#)

## Which Train Company Should You Choose?

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Honestly, I don't think you can go wrong with either company.

Both provide a comfortable, scenic ride through the Sacred Valley, and both have excellent reputations. I recommend comparing schedules, prices, and departure times to see which one works best with your Machu Picchu entrance ticket.

**Our Choice:** PeruRail

We'd happily ride with them again.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Getting There & On-Site

## Getting to Machu Picchu

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People stress over this more than almost anything else.

### Step 1: Fly into Cusco

Most travelers will arrive at Alejandro Velasco Astete International Airport (CUS) in Cusco.

Because of the altitude, we **didn't stay in Cusco first**. Instead, we headed straight to the Sacred Valley to acclimate.

### Step 2: Travel to Ollantaytambo

We used **Taxidatum**, and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend them.

They offer private transfers from the Cusco airport directly to Ollantaytambo at very reasonable prices. After a long travel day, having a driver waiting for us made getting to the Sacred Valley incredibly easy.

We stayed in Ollantaytambo for three nights. This gave us time to acclimate and explore the Sacred Valley before heading to Machu Picchu.

♥ **Michelle's Tip:** We booked our transfer in advance, and our driver was waiting for us at the airport when we landed. It made arriving in Peru completely stress-free.

### Step 3: Take the Train to Aguas Calientes

You'll board the train in Ollantaytambo.

Both **PeruRail** and **Inca Rail** offer comfortable service to Aguas Calientes. (See **Booking Your Train Tickets** above for how we chose and what to expect.)

### Step 4: Take the Shuttle Bus

Once you arrive in Aguas Calientes, you'll take the shuttle bus up to Machu Picchu.

We purchased our shuttle tickets the day before our visit in town and had no problems. If you're visiting during peak season, buying them ahead of time may give you extra peace of mind.

## After Visiting Machu Picchu

After our second day at Machu Picchu, we took the train back to Ollantaytambo.

From there, we took a taxi to [Aranwa Sacred Valley Hotel & Wellness](#) in Urubamba, where we spent two relaxing nights enjoying the spa and pool before continuing on to Cusco.

Looking back, it was the perfect way to recharge after several active days of sightseeing.

If you're short on time, you can absolutely head straight from Ollantaytambo to Cusco instead to maximize your time exploring the city.

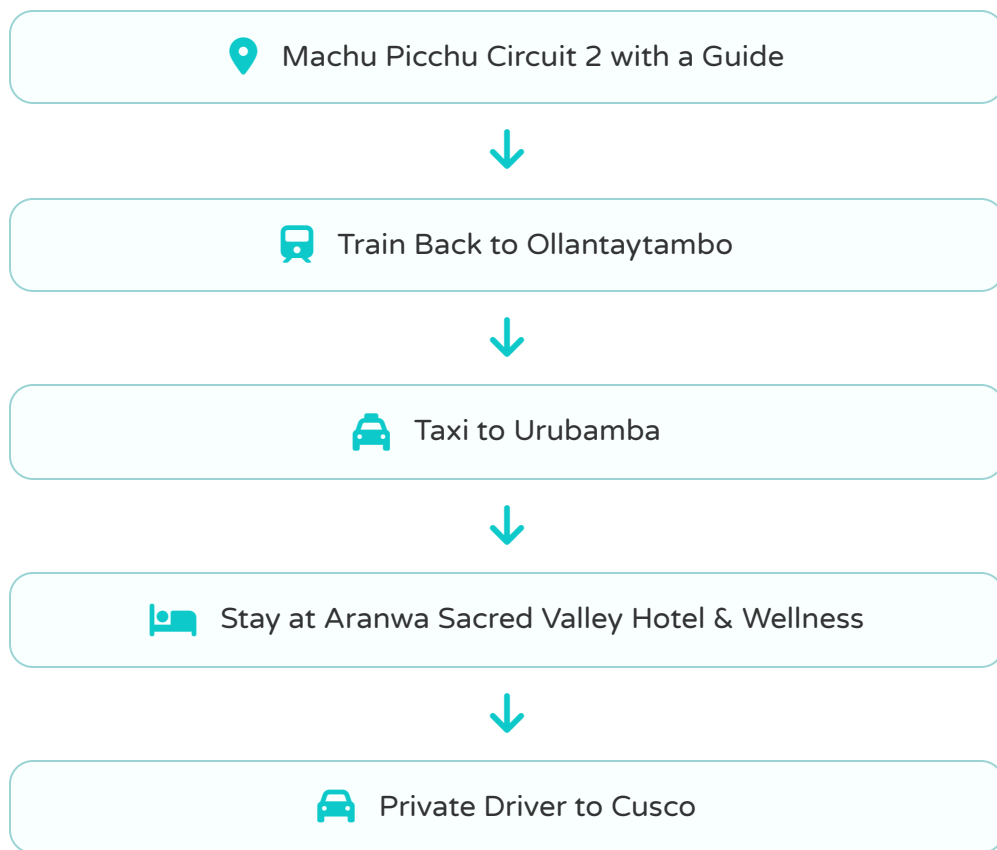
## Our Route to Machu Picchu

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Our actual route looked like this:







*One night in Cusco at Rumi Wasi Hotel*

This route gave us time to experience Machu Picchu without rushing and provided a relaxing break before continuing to Cusco.

## Spend the Night in Aguas Calientes

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Although it is possible to visit Machu Picchu on a long day trip, staying overnight in Aguas Calientes made our experience much more relaxing.

We didn't have to squeeze the train, shuttle bus, Machu Picchu, and return journey into one exhausting day. Staying in town also allowed us to visit Machu Picchu twice and experience two different circuits.

Aguas Calientes is compact and walkable, with restaurants, shops, hotels, and the shuttle bus departure area all located fairly close together.

For us, the overnight stay was absolutely worthwhile.

## Getting from Aguas Calientes to Machu Picchu

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Shuttle buses travel between Aguas Calientes and the Machu Picchu entrance throughout the day.

We purchased our shuttle tickets in Aguas Calientes the day before our visit and found the process straightforward. During especially busy periods, purchasing them earlier may provide additional peace of mind.

Allow enough time to get in line, board the bus, and travel up the winding mountain road before your scheduled entrance time.

## Hiring a Guide

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We explored Circuit 1 on our own but hired a guide for Circuit 2.

It was one of the best decisions we made.

Our guide explained the history, architecture, engineering, and stories behind Machu Picchu that we would have completely missed on our own.

We hired a licensed guide directly outside the entrance on the morning of our visit. There were several guides available during our trip, so we did not need to make an advance reservation.

**Cost:** Approximately **\$70 USD for our family of four**

Travelers visiting during the busiest months may prefer to arrange a guide in advance, particularly if they want a private tour at a specific time.

 [Book a Machu Picchu Guided Tour](#)

## You Must Bring Your Passport

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Do not leave your passport at the hotel.

You must have the original identification document associated with your Machu Picchu ticket when entering the site. For most international visitors, this means carrying the same passport used when purchasing the ticket.

Make sure the name and passport number on your reservation are correct, and keep your passport somewhere secure but easily accessible on the morning of your visit.

A photograph or photocopy may not be accepted in place of the original document, so this is one item you do not want to forget.



**Michelle's Tip:** Put everyone's passports and entrance tickets together the night before. This eliminates the frantic pre-coffee passport hunt in the morning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Where to Stay

We intentionally chose comfortable, affordable hotels in excellent locations that included breakfast. This allowed us to spend more of our budget on experiences while still enjoying clean, charming, and convenient accommodations.

For travelers looking for a more upscale experience, I've also included additional options in each destination.

## Ollantaytambo

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### WHERE WE STAYED

#### Hotel Intitambo

**Approx. \$50/night (including breakfast)**

This charming family-run hotel was one of our favorite finds.

#### Why We Loved It

- Fantastic location in the heart of town
- Walkable to restaurants, shops, and the train station
- Friendly staff
- Delicious breakfast included
- Incredible value

[🔗 Check Availability](#)

UPSCALE PICK

## Las Qolqas Eco Resort

Known as one of the top eco-luxury stays in the Sacred Valley, Las Qolqas features beautiful private cabins surrounded by lush gardens while embracing sustainable practices.

Perfect for travelers looking for a peaceful retreat with upscale amenities.

[↗ Check Availability](#)

BOUTIQUE PICK

## El Albergue Ollantaytambo

Built in 1925 directly beside the Ollantaytambo train station, El Albergue is one of the area's most iconic boutique hotels.

Guests love its renowned organic restaurant, coffee roastery, traditional cañazo distillery, and beautiful gardens.

[↗ Check Availability](#)

# Aguas Calientes

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## WHERE WE STAYED

### Panorama B&B

**Approx. \$100/night (including breakfast)**

We loved staying here because it was comfortable, affordable, and within easy walking distance of both the train station and shuttle buses.

#### Why We Loved It

- Excellent location
- Comfortable rooms
- Breakfast included
- Great value
- Perfect for an overnight stay before visiting Machu Picchu

[↗ Check Availability](#)

## UPSCALE PICK

### Sumaq Machu Picchu Hotel

A beautiful riverside hotel featuring spacious rooms, outstanding service, excellent dining, and spa amenities.

[↗ Check Availability](#)

## LUXURY PICK

### Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel

One of Peru's most iconic luxury hotels, Inkaterra sits within a stunning cloud forest filled with orchids, hummingbirds, and beautiful walking paths.

If you're celebrating a special occasion, this is an unforgettable place to stay.

[↗ Check Availability](#)

## Cusco

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### WHERE WE STAYED

#### Rumi Wasi Boutique Hotel

**Approx. \$100/night (including breakfast)**

This beautiful boutique hotel is located in the charming San Blas neighborhood inside a restored 17th-century building.

#### Why We Loved It

- Fantastic location
- Beautiful historic character
- Breakfast included
- Comfortable rooms
- Easy walk to Plaza de Armas

[↗ Check Availability](#)

### UPSCALE PICK

#### Antigua Casona San Blas

An elegant boutique hotel known for exceptional service, beautiful courtyards, cozy fireplaces, and an excellent breakfast.

[↗ Check Availability](#)

### LUXURY PICK

#### Palacio del Inka, a Luxury Collection Hotel

One of Cusco's most famous luxury hotels, Palacio del Inka combines colonial architecture, rich history, fine dining, and five-star accommodations in an unbeatable location.

[↗ Check Availability](#)



# Final Prep & Farewell

## Packing Checklist

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Don't forget:

- |                                                    |                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Passport                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Hat                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Machu Picchu tickets      | <input type="checkbox"/> Refillable water bottle |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comfortable walking shoes | <input type="checkbox"/> Portable charger        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Layers                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Camera                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lightweight rain jacket   | <input type="checkbox"/> Airalo eSIM             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sunscreen                 |                                                  |

## Michelle's Tips

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- ♥ Stay overnight in Aguas Calientes if your schedule allows. It makes the entire experience much more enjoyable.
- ♥ Hire a guide for Circuit 2. You'll gain a much deeper appreciation for Machu Picchu's history.
- ♥ Buy your shuttle bus tickets in Aguas Calientes. We purchased ours the day before with no issues.
- ♥ Bring small bills for tips and souvenirs.
- ♥ Mornings can be surprisingly chilly, even during the dry season.
- ♥ Don't rush through Aguas Calientes. It's a fun little town to explore.
- ♥ If someone hands you a baby llama for a photo, be prepared to leave a tip afterward.
- ♥ Be sure to see more of the Sacred Valley. [A day tour to Maras, Moray, and Chinchero](#) is a great option.

## Helpful Resources

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For even more Peru travel inspiration, be sure to check out these Staying Blonde guides:

- [Our 14-Day Peru Itinerary](#)
- [14 Peru Travel Tips Every First-Time Visitor Should Know](#)
- [Posada Amazonas Review](#)

Additional resources:

- [Airalo eSIM Recommendation](#)
- [Official Machu Picchu Ticket Website](#)
- [PeruRail](#)
- [Inca Rail](#)

## See You in Peru!

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I hope this guide helps make planning your Machu Picchu adventure a little easier. Visiting this incredible place was truly one of the highlights of our family's travels, and I hope it becomes one of yours too.

If you found this guide helpful, be sure to visit [StayingBlonde.com](https://stayingblonde.com) for more Peru travel guides, family travel inspiration, and destination tips from our adventures around the world.

Happy travels!

*Michelle*



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