

# Sacred Valley of the Incas



Hiking the Inca Trail

## BY ANDREW FORBES

Carved through the Andes by the Urubamba River, Peru's remarkable Sacred Valley was at the heart of the Inca Empire. This fertile region lies between the city of Cusco, and the country's most iconic attraction, the imperial Inca city of Machu Picchu.

For generations it has been popular for hiking visitors exploring the famous Inca Trail (see pages in the valley's fascinating villages and towns and the many exceptional archaeological sites. In recent years it has also emerged as a luxury holiday destination, with upscale resorts and mountain lodges opening along the established rail route from Cusco to the Inca city of Machu Picchu.

## STAY:

Meet a visitor's accommodation is within a 30-45 minute transfer from the train stations of Urubamba and Ollantaytambo on the line that runs through the valley from Peru's most iconic attraction, the imperial Inca city of Machu Picchu.

### Skydodge Adventure Salas

A truly unique experience, these transparent sleeping pods (2.5m x 2.5m), complete with tea, are suspended 400 metres above the valley, secured to the 'hoes of the mountain'. The views are clearly panoramic, but access is not for the faint-hearted, as you have to climb up and down using metal steps, the 'Via Ferrata'. Available to rent through Nana's Cave, who also offers zip-line adventure activities. [Info@nauarivivo.com](http://info@nauarivivo.com)



Local dried corn

### Hotel Rio Sagrado

This is a new upscale hotel, operated by the world-class hospitality group, Belmond. Built in the style of an Andean village, the resort offers luxury accommodation including 4 suites, 10 rooms and 2 villas. There is a spa, indoor and outdoor pools, and children's activities for family visitors. [www.belmond.com/hotel-rio-sagrado-sacred-valley](http://www.belmond.com/hotel-rio-sagrado-sacred-valley)

### Tambo del Inka

This Luxury Collection property is exceptional. Located on the river Urubamba, the Tambo del Inka offers beautiful accommodation built with local materials and decorated in a contemporary style with Andean fabrics. There's an impressive spa, a fine-dining restaurant and an elegant bar where one should try Peru's famous cocktail, the pisco sour. The hotel also boasts its own private train station on the route to Machu Picchu. [www.tambodelinkaresort.com](http://www.tambodelinkaresort.com)

### Aranwa Hotel & Wellness Centre

Built on the banks of Villacota River, about half an hour from the train station in Ollantaytambo. In addition to the resort's wellness spa, the property also features a Peruvian museum and art gallery. [www.aranwahotels.com/hotel-villa-sagrada](http://www.aranwahotels.com/hotel-villa-sagrada)

### Solytuna

This family-run hotel offers pet-friendly 'boutique' accommodation. The property's philosophy is to respect and integrate with the local environment and community. The hotel can arrange excursions in the valley, including horse riding. [www.hotelolytuna.com](http://www.hotelolytuna.com)

## EAT:

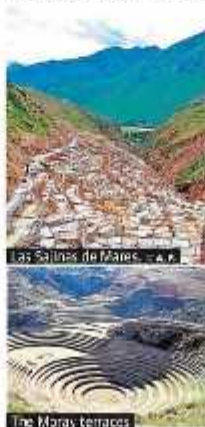
Peruvian cuisine is a superb, enthralling but also demanding sensory feast and fine dining. The main places to eat other than in one's hotel or lodge are in the towns of Ollantaytambo and Urubamba.



Aranwa Hotel



Hiram Bingham train



The Moray terraces

### El Huacapistay - Urubamba

This charming, welcoming period property is home to a restaurant that over the years has developed a reputation for a creative menu, created by owner and chef Pío Vásquez de Vásquez. Dishes fuse local produce with Mediterranean and Asian influences. [www.elhuacapistay.com](http://www.elhuacapistay.com)

### El Albergue - Ollantaytambo

This organic farm offers accommodation and a restaurant. Each day the restaurant offers a traditional Peruvian lunch, where the meat is prepared on hot stones. Dishes served with Andean sweet potatoes as well as a local drink called chicha morada, made from purple maize. [www.elalbergue.com](http://www.elalbergue.com)

### Tres Keros - Urubamba

Well positioned for guests of the Tambo del Inka and Hotel Rio Sagrado, this fine-dining restaurant created by chef Ricardo Behar is a collaboration of both modern and traditional Peruvian cuisine. Choose meat dishes from the wood-burning oven, seasonal vegetable dishes or indulge in the tasting menu. [trespkeros.wordpress.com](http://trespkeros.wordpress.com)

## DO:

### Inca Trail

One of the most famous hiking routes in the world, the Inca Trail runs through the valley to Machu Picchu. It is now strictly limited to 500 people a day including guides, cooks, porters etc. So it's important to plan ahead and book a permit with the regular national departure, or an approved agent. [www.machuqichu.com.pe](http://www.machuqichu.com.pe)

### Machu Picchu

This iconic site offers entrance to an ancient Inca city and original stone in the Sacred Valley of the Inca in Cusco. You can buy it at the tourist office in Cusco or at any of the participating sites and it makes a good way to make in the rich cultural, historical and archaeological wonders of Cusco and the Sacred Valley, including the fascinating Inca ruins, the remarkable Inca site of Saqsaywaman (built with intricately cut boulders), the terraces and temple at Ollantaytambo, and the amazing walk found in the mountain village of Chich...



One of the Skydodge Adventure Salas pods. [www.nauarivivo.com](http://www.nauarivivo.com)

ros. Many of the sites are near historic villages and towns where one finds interesting cafes, restaurants and markets. The ticket is presently around 45 euros. [www.cosituc.gob.pe](http://www.cosituc.gob.pe)

### Hiram Bingham train

This luxury train with its beautiful vintage Pullman-style carriages, offers a unique way to reach Machu Picchu. Named after the American explorer, who in 1911, guided by local indigenous farmers, rediscovered the citadel, the train offers a gourmet brunch on the way to the citadel, and then fine dining on the way back at the end of the day. [www.belmond.com/hiiram-bingham-train](http://www.belmond.com/hiiram-bingham-train)

### Vista Drome train

Special opening this special train service, with carriages with panoramic glass windows including the roof, offering spectacular views of the valley as it heads to Machu Picchu. [www.perairail.com/trains/vista-drome/](http://www.perairail.com/trains/vista-drome/)

### Andean artisan market

Visiting the local market is a must-do in the Sacred Valley. From some of the best known, but just as soon when you are buying is better at the very best farmers. There can be factory-made, imported fabrics on sale disguised as artisan.

### Las Salinas de Maras

The terraced salt mine evaporation pools found at Maras date back to Inca times. Salt has been collected from the mineral rich water of these

valley hills for thousands of years and the many salt pits here remain in use; although it seems that the salt works now earn far more from tourism than from the unique salt they produce.

### Many archaeological terraces

Access to these fascinating terraces is not included in the general tourist ticket, but is well worth it.

### Machu Picchu

Not discovered until the beginning of the 20th century, this UNESCO World heritage Inca site, considered one of the New Seven Wonders of the World escaped damage by the imperial Spanish conquistadors. It's all here to explore, the Inca Wintana, Temple of the Sun, the Temple of the Three Windows, and more. Although visited by thousands of people each day, the site is vast, so sometimes it doesn't feel too crowded. The setting, upon a 2,430 metre high ridge is breathtaking, surrounded by tropical forest.

The train arrives at Aguas Calientes, a town only 100m from the valley. It is a beautiful scene, not just with its rocky public art and ever-present sales people, on each street corner offering everything from massages to fast-food meals. From here one can take the mini buses up to the Inca city - a scary ride up the narrow, stony road. The alternative is to hike the last bit up through the forest.

All the effort to get to Machu Picchu is more than rewarded by the experience. [www.dtc-cusco.gob.pe](http://www.dtc-cusco.gob.pe)