



# TREKKING TO MACHU PICCHU

By: Doug Klostermann

Just ahead of me, around a bend, I heard my companion exclaim in exasperation, "You have GOT to be kidding me!" After three long, but exhilarating days of hiking, we were finally at the point where the next turn could be the one--the one that brought us to Inti Punku, the Sun Gate, the one that revealed Machu Picchu, bathed in the rising sun. But

this turn had only brought another challenge, this time in the form of nearly vertical stone stairs.



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We had begun the Classic Inca Trail trek at Km. 88--so named for its distance from Cusco on the train line. Our group had bonded over the previous few days as we toured the Sacred Valley, so we confidently set off together, new walking sticks in hand. High altitude and harsh sun soon proved everyone wasn't quite as prepared as they had hoped, but the first day was forgiving.

The ascent was gradual, and there were breaks to view the Inca ruins at Llaqtapata and for lunch. Trekking ended for the day at our campsite, already expertly prepared by the porters, with tents in a row and cooking underway. The site was adjacent to a local family's fields, and several kids came to meet us. We played cards and shared snacks, but as soon as our feet began to thank us, the kids coaxed us into putting our boots back on and playing a spirited soccer game.

The second day commenced with hot cups of coca tea brought to our tent, and an overcast sky. Soon there was steady rain, but the weather couldn't dampen the group's spirit as our guide Percy led his poncho clad followers on the ascent towards Warmihuausca, Dead Woman's Pass. At 13,800 feet (4,215 m) above sea level, it is the highest pass on the trail, and made for the most challenging day. We advanced through changing habitats of cloud forests with rushing streams, and open valleys grazed by llamas and alpacas. The trail, we concluded, should be named the Inca Steps. Many of the trail's original ancient Inca stones are still in place, and while steps sound like a convenient way to climb a mountain, when they are twice as high as usual, they make for an exhausting ascent. By the time I neared the summit, I could take just two steps before needing a rest. After triumphant photos at the pinnacle, we discovered that descending the steps was just as difficult.



The sun returned on the third day to display wide vistas of Andean peaks. Since the trail often dropped off precipitously on one side, Percy advised that we step to the inside each time a porter passed. Despite bearing dozens of pounds of food and gear, the porters moved quickly and confidently past their clients who were gasping for air and pausing for energy bars. We encountered the distinctive circular ruins of

Runkuracay, thought to be a rest stop for ancient travelers, and ducked through stone tunnels carved out by the Inca trail builders. Lush vegetation surrounded the trail as it passed through the edge of the Amazon jungle. We ended the day near the terraced ruins of Wiay Wayna, at a campsite offering hot showers and cold Cusquea beer. The next day would be the final leg, so hoping to reach the Sun Gate by sunrise, we prepared for an early wake up call.

As we gathered in early morning darkness at the control point, one of our companions brought out his iPod and speakers, and we enthusiastically sang "The Final Countdown." As soon as the gates opened, we rushed forward, all hoping to be the first to view Machu Picchu. Although I was soon exhausted, the excitement kept me moving.

And then we reached the stairs.

But that ascent paid off, as it led directly to the Sun Gate. Hikers gathered atop the ruins and we watched the morning sky illuminate the Inca citadel below. The feeling of accomplishment was immense, and the reward of Machu Picchu, we realized to our own surprise, was secondary to the pride gained from climbing over mountains to reach it.



**INTIHUATANA STONE: THE HEART OF MACHU PICCHU**

CREDIT PHOTO - Wikipedia = Jordan Klein

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### SOME USEFUL INFORMATION BEFORE YOU GO:

The Inca Trail is strictly regulated--the number of tourists is limited to about 200 per day (this doesn't include the 300 porters/guides), with groups of sixteen maximum. One must have a guide and porters, and book through a licensed tour company. A non-transferable permit must be obtained in advance. Permits are in high demand year-round, especially June through September, and should be booked at least four months in advance. There are several alternate treks including the two day Inca Trail, Lares and Salcantay. Differences in prices may reflect quality of food, equipment, and treatment of porters, so research in guidebooks and online forums to find recommended companies. We traveled with Adventure Life which can be found at [www.adventure-life.com](http://www.adventure-life.com).