

3·7 Phuyupatamarca to Machu Picchu

Classic • Mollepata • Shortest

Time (average) 5–6 hours

Altitude lost 1200 m/4000 ft

Terrain Inca road with steep staircases and undulations

Summary a day of steep descent, culminating in your first glimpse of Machu Picchu, from Intipunku, the 'gate of the sun'



After camping, most people visit Phuyupatamarca's ruins the next morning. The design demonstrates the Inca passion for closely fitting the built environment to the natural contours of the site. Sinuous curves and serpentine terraces may suggest Gaudi's 20th-century architecture in Barcelona more than late 15th-century Peru. Although Bingham discovered this site, he left most of it still covered by jungle. In the 1940s the Fejos team uncovered the rest and gave the site its name: 'cloudy place'.

The five fountains were used for religious rituals as well as domestic purposes. There is an altar for llama sacrifice. The Incas worshipped water as the symbol of life, and Phuyupatamarca probably had key religious and ceremonial functions, especially for travellers on their way to Machu Picchu.

Phuyupatamarca ruins, with Machu Picchu mountain at upper centre and Intipata to its left



After the ruins, the trail heads downhill as an irregular staircase that drops 500 m (1640 ft) of altitude in 1300-1500 steps (estimates differ). As you descend, the forest becomes denser, the vegetation more lush and the butterflies and birds more plentiful.

After 2-3 hours, you will reach a large pylon which marks a choice point. Ahead you will be able to see Intipata ('sunny place') – an extensive set of agricultural terraces that follow the convex contours of their spur. The site grew food (potatoes, maize, fruit and sweet potato) for Machu Picchu. Keep straight on to visit Intipata, and return afterwards to this pylon.

To continue the trail, turn right at the pylon and follow the steep downhill path towards the buildings of Wiñaywayna. The campsite here is always busy because it is the last one before Machu Picchu. There is a restaurant, hostel, proper toilets and a museum of a sort (stuffed animals). Once refreshed, take a ten-minute walk towards the beautiful ruins of Wiñaywayna (2650 m/8700 ft), overlooking the Urubamba gorge. The concave terraces cling to the precipitous hillside with waterfalls beyond. 'Wiñaywayna' means 'forever young', and is also the name of a pink orchid found around the site: see page 37.

Like nearby Intipata, this site was agricultural, but Wiñaywayna was clearly more important. It has more buildings, finer stonework and its long flight of fountains was probably used in water ritual and worship. No irrigation was needed here, because of the rain-forest climate. Wiñaywayna is the last set of ruins before you reach Intipunku, and it marks where the Shortest Trail joins the Classic and Mollepata Trails.

Wiñaywayna ruins



To continue towards Machu Picchu, return to the hostel and follow the trail for up to two hours (six km). You are already at about the same altitude as Intipunku, but the trail undulates steeply in places. A flight of about 20 very steep steps announces that you are nearly there. After rounding a corner and climbing some gentler steps you reach Intipunku, the 'gate of the sun': see arrow in the photograph below. From here, you look down on the awesome mystery of Machu Picchu, clinging to its steep hillside.

After this it is downhill all the way, with your destination in clear view. The path winds around the shoulder of Machu Picchu mountain, finally reaching the entrance booths and the exclusive Sanctuary Lodge Hotel, restaurant and outdoor café. From here you will either visit the ruins, or, if overnighting in Aguas Calientes, catch the bus down the hairpins of the Hiram Bingham road.

Aim for an early start next day: in 2011, the first group of buses left Aguas Calientes at 05.20 and the ruins opened at 06.00. Early morning is cooler, with lower risk of clouds and rain, and avoids the crowds of day-trippers who arrive later by train. If you want to climb Wayna Picchu, an early start is essential: see page 60. You can no longer buy tickets to Machu Picchu at its entrance, and like bus tickets, they are best bought the day before in Aguas Calientes. Have the exact money: in 2010 the entrance ticket cost 126 soles (about 50 dollars) with a 50% discount for students with valid ISIC cards.

The Inca Trail descends to Machu Picchu ruins from Intipunku (see arrow)

