

# The Path to Machu Picchu



The Wiñay Wayna terraces

*Joanna Brown, an Audley client, recounts her experiences visiting the old Inca citadel.*

A visit to Machu Picchu is normally top of the list of 'must do' activities for anyone planning a trip to Peru. The most famous of the Inca sites in an all-dominating position at the top of a mountain, Machu Picchu is the stuff of dreams.

Access to Machu Picchu in Inca times was via a path, now commonly known as the Inca Trail, but since Hiram Bingham re-discovered the site in 1912 and it was opened up to tourism in the 1960s, most visitors have journeyed by train and bus from the town of Cuzco. This route is quick, convenient and reliable but it does involve travelling with the crowds and approaching Machu Picchu from below, whereas walking the Inca Trail gives the opportunity to approach Machu Picchu the way that the Incas did, from above, via the traditional entrance known as the Sun Gate.

Not everybody, however, has the fitness, time, or the inclination for a four day trek,

*Standing there, with Machu Picchu almost deserted and shimmering below us in the late afternoon sunshine, I wouldn't have done it any other way.*

including camping and no hot showers, but this does not mean that the train and bus is the only other option available to visitors. There is a third option which is a 'one-day Inca Trail' commonly known as the KM104 trail. This option entails catching the train most of the way and then when the train stops at a non-existent station, no platform, you just clamber down some portable steps, you follow the path to the

top of the ridge where you join the Inca trail. It is only eight kilometres from the railway stop to the Sun Gate but the first half is a tough climb so it is expected that most visitors take between seven and eight hours to complete it.

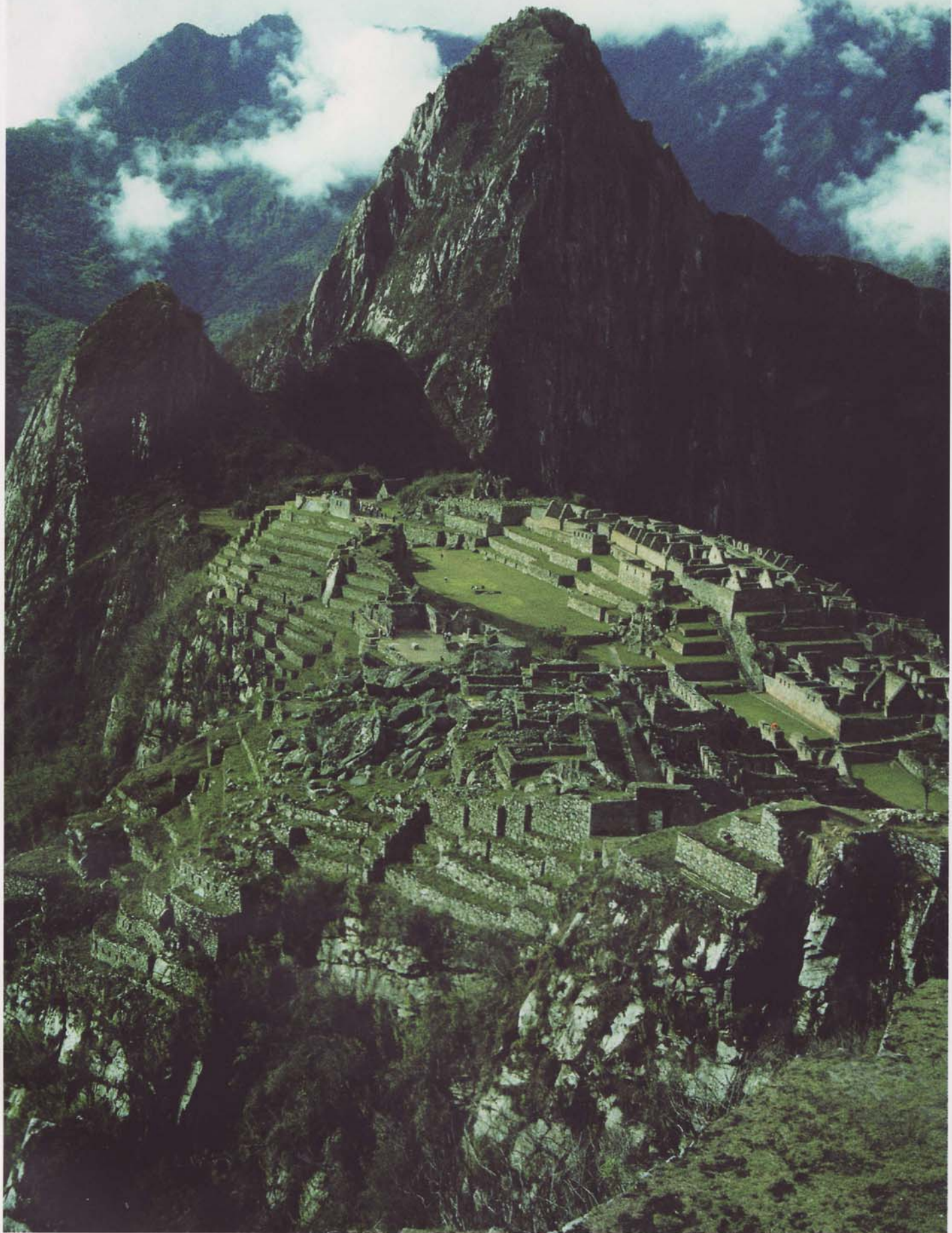
On the day in late May that we walked the trail it was very hot and as the path is cut into the hillside it is in the full glare of the sun. The altitude is also not insignificant, starting at 2,100 metres at the railway line with Wiñay Wayna, the Inca site six kilometres away and 600 metres higher. The trail starts comfortably enough with a moderate climb but the incline increases significantly after the first couple of kilometres. The toughest part was between the fourth and sixth kilometres where we climbed 250 metres, although the large drop in the middle to one of the most beautiful waterfalls I have ever seen, meant in real terms we climbed much further. My fitness level, which allows me to comfortably complete occasional walks of up to ten miles, provided they are predominantly on the flat, was not really up to the task and our wonderful guide, Lucho, ended up carrying my day pack, bribing and cajoling me along the way.

The last major climb was through the terraces of Wiñay Wayna (a sight missed by the coach and rail travellers), another impressive Inca site cut into the side of the hill at the junction of the KM104 and Inca trails, its inaccessibility ensuring it was almost empty of visitors despite having a proper restaurant and shop selling supplies. Our guide had insisted that the next part, along the Inca Trail itself, would be easier and as the trail was relatively flat and passed through cool woodland our spirits lifted and we managed to walk at a reasonable speed. A mere two hours later we climbed the steep steps of the 'Stairway to Heaven' and walked the final stretch to the Sun Gate. Standing there, with Machu Picchu almost deserted and shimmering below us in the late afternoon sunshine, the aches in our legs almost faded to nothing and in retrospect I wouldn't have done it any other way.



## Travel file

A typical 12-night tour of Peru including the walk along KM104, costs from £2,095 per person based on twin share. Please call our Peru specialists: Matthew, Rhian, Vicky, Nick and Paula on 01869 276 210 to discuss the options.



*Walk the Inca Trail and you approach Machu Picchu the way that the Incas did, from above, via the traditional entrance known as the Sun Gate.*