

CUZCO

The Sacred City and its surrounding Areas

Located in the southeastern part of the Andes, Cuzco is Peru's main tourist destination and one of the most important in the Americas. Known by the Incas as the "home of gods", Cuzco became the capital of one of the largest pre-Columbian empires: the Tahuantinsuyo. Its name in Quechua, Qosqo means "Navel of the world", which derives from when the city served as a hub for a vast network of roads interconnecting virtually the whole of South America, from the southern part of present-day Colombia to the northern part of what is now Argentina.

Furthermore, Cuzco is also both a mestizo and colonial city, with splendid churches and manors built on foundations of elaborately carved stone. The local cuisine is also something for the traveler to look forward to, including superb combinations of typical Andean foods, such as corn, potatoes and chili pepper, with pork and mutton introduced by the Spanish. With its vast landscapes, rich history and fascinating geography, Cuzco is, without a doubt, something all travelers long to experience.

Legend and History

Although it was settled centuries before the Incas arrived, it was only during the period of Inca control (1438-1532 AD) that the Huatanay River basin, upon which Cuzco is built, reached its peak as an administrative, religious and military center. The origins of the city are shrouded in myth and legends which tell the tale of how the Inca empire came into being.

One of the most popular myths, from the chronicles kept by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, is that of a mythical couple, Manco Cápac and Mama Ocllo, who emerged from the waters of Lake Titicaca to found the city of Cuzco and teach its people how to cultivate the land. The city was divided into two sectors: an upper area, or Hanan, and a lower-lying area, or Hurin, references to both the geographical position of each area and the hierarchical position of their inhabitants. Moreover, it is also said that the outline of the first city had the shape of a puma with a falcon's head.

When the Spaniards arrived in 1533, many pre-Hispanic structures were destroyed or used as foundations for new structures, which included churches, convents and mansions built in Baroque or Renaissance styles. Since then, Cuzco has become one of the most representative expressions of mestizo culture anywhere in the Americas.

Climate and Access

The Cuzco region has two very distinct seasons. One of these is the rainy season, which runs from November to March with an average



*Church of The Compania, Cuzco
Carlos Sala / PromPerú*



*Pisac, Cuzco
Carlos Sala / PromPerú*

temperature of 12° Celsius. The dry season, which would be the recommended time to visit, is characterized by cold nights, sunny days and an average temperature of 9° Celsius. Due to the location of the city (3,250 masl), soroche, or altitude sickness, is something to be wary of. Rest and light food are recommended for the first day of your visit, and warm clothing is vital at night, as are sunscreen lotion and hats during the day.

Cuzco is easily accessible by air; commercial flights leave daily from Lima (55 minutes), Arequipa (30 min.) and Juliaca (30 min.). Access by road is also possible (1,050 km from Lima, 450 km from Arequipa).

Attractions in the city

The Main Square

Known in Inca times as Huacaypata, or “the warriors' square”, this was the scene for many key events in Cuzco's history: it was here that the conquistador Francisco Pizarro declared Cuzco under Spanish occupation; it was also here that Túpac Amaru I, leader of the indigenous resistance movement, was killed. The Main Square also hosted to the spectacular Inti Raymi, or festival of the Sun. With the arrival of the Spanish the plaza was fringed by beautiful stone arches which remain in place to this day. Across from the Main Square are the Cathedral and La Compañía church.



Inca trail, Cuzco
Alejandro Balaguer / PromPerú

The Cathedral

Built between 1560 and 1664 out of large slabs of red granite taken from the Inca fortress of Sacsayhuaman, the Cathedral is one of the most imposing structures in the city. Its façade, built in Renaissance style, contrasts with the Baroque and silver of its lavish interior. It also houses important collections of gold and silver work of the colonial period, elaborately engraved wooden altars and a beautiful collection of oil on canvas paintings from the Escuela Cuzqueña. On either side of the slabs of red granite are two small auxiliary chapels. One of these, the Del Triunfo church, in fact Cuzco's first Cathedral, was built in 1539 on top of the palace of Inca Wiracocha.

La Compañía Church

Considered one of the finest examples of colonial Baroque architecture in the Americas, the construction of this church was begun by the Jesuits in 1576 on what was the Amarucancha, or palace of Inca Huayna Cápac. The spectacular façade made of carved stone and its great altar, elaborately covered in cedar and gold leaf and built on top of an underground chapel, are among its most notable features. The church also houses a large collection of sculptures and paintings by the most renowned artists from the Escuela Cuzqueña. The church is flanked by the Lourdes chapel and the ancient oratory of San Ignacio de Loyola.

La Merced Convent and Church

Built in the sixteenth century and rebuilt on numerous occasions as a result of earthquakes which have leveled the city, the convent possesses one of the most beautiful Baroque-Renaissance cloisters in all Peru,

decorated with beautiful choir stalls built in the plateresque style, and numerous engravings. It also houses colonial paintings and a very distinctive piece: a tabernacle made of gold and precious stones measuring 1.3 m long and weighing 22 kg, studded with a giant mermaid-shaped pearl (the second-largest pearl in the world).

Koricancha and the Convent of Santo Domingo

The convent was built on the spectacular Koricancha (“site of gold”), the most important temple dedicated to the worship of the Sun and whose walls were plated with sheets of gold. The convent was built on a foundation of smoothed stone structures –the most finely crafted in Cuzco– taken from the Inca sanctuary. The façade of the convent is an excellent example of Renaissance art and its distinctive spire, built in Baroque style, stands out over the thatched roofs of the Cuzco skyline. Like the two churches mentioned above, it houses an impressive collection of canvas paintings from the Escuela Cuzqueña.



*Tambomachay, Cusco
Alejandro Balaguer / PromPerú*

San Blas Quarter

Also known as “the craftsmen’s district”, San Blas is one of the most picturesque parts of the city, with its long, inclined narrow streets that zigzag across old estates, which were built with Inca stones, and its tranquil squares. The church of San Blas, built in 1563, is the oldest parish church in Cuzco and has an impressive pulpit, considered to be the colonial period’s most outstanding example of engraved wood. Furthermore this district, with one of the finest views of the city, is home to the workshops and stores of the most renowned craftsmen in Cuzco, including Hilario Mendivil, Edilberto Mérida, Santiago Rojas and Maximiliana Palomino.

Hatun Rumiyoq Street

This is perhaps the best-known street in the city. One of its cut-stone walls, (which at present forms part of the Palace of the Archbishop) features the famous 12-cornered stone, which was once part of the ancient palace of Inca Roca, one of the rulers of Tahuantinsuyo or Incan Empire. This lively street is a gateway to the picturesque San Blas quarter.

Attractions Surrounding areas

Sacsayhuaman

An imposing example of Inca military architecture, the fortress of Sacsayhuaman was built using large slabs of granite to safeguard the city from attack by Antis, or invading forces from the East. Sacsayhuaman (“satisfied falcon” in Quechua) is made up of three large terraces which overlap in a zigzag formation surrounded by enormous stone ramparts of up to 300 meters in length. Its elevation and proximity to Cuzco, as well as the dimensions of the stones –up to 5 meters high and weighing up to 350 tons– made Sacsayhuaman a quarry for certain structures in colonial Cuzco.

Tampumachay

Also known as the “Baños del Inca” or the Inca baths, Tampumachay was apparently a site dedicated to the worship of water and a resting place for the Inca monarch. Among its most notable features are its system of aqueducts, canals and cascades carved in stone, designed to channel water flowing from a nearby spring. According to experts, Tampumachay was also a kind of royal garden, abounding in ornamental vegetation and fed by an intricate network of canals.

Kenko and Puca Pucara

Kenko is a ritual site built on a sole outcrop of limestone, with underground galleries and a semicircular amphitheater. Puca Pucara (in Quechua, “red fortress”), was a military installation made up of stairways, terraces and large walls which once formed part of the capital's defense system. Both structures are part of the archaeological circuit near the city of Cuzco.

Sacred Valley of the Incas

Just an hour's drive from Cuzco, the Urubamba Valley, or Sacred Valley of the Incas, is a setting of picturesque communities, impressive terraces and many important archaeological sites. Dominated by the imposing peaks of the Vilcanota mountain range, the valley has been the storehouse for agricultural products for the city of Cuzco since Inca times, and today is famous for being home to maize cobs with the largest kernels in the world. The valley includes the area between the Inca communities of Písac and Ollantaytambo. Its mild weather and particular geography make it ideal for outdoor sports enthusiasts to practice rafting, mountain bike-riding, hang-gliding and trekking.

Písac

Písac lies 33 kilometers from the city of Cuzco by a paved road, and has an old quarter, an archaeological site considered one of the most important in Cuzco, and a modern quarter, dating from the colonial period. It also has a Sunday market which attracts thousands of visitors and people from remote communities, dressed in colorful, traditional attire. Every Sunday there is the procession of the varayocs, or mayors, who, at around 9:30 am, go to church to attend the traditional Mass held in Quechua.

Chinchoero

This community is located 28 km from Cuzco on the paved road to Urubamba. Here lie the remains of what was the royal hacienda of Túpac Inca Yupanqui, as well as a beautiful colonial temple built on Inca foundations. Its main attraction, however, is its Sunday market, which was originally dedicated to the barter of products by the people of the valley and the upper areas. Nowadays, the market is a real hub of activity, vibrant with color and movement which fascinates tourists with its range of handicrafts and textiles made in true pre-Columbian style.

Ollantaytambo

A typical Inca community located 21 km from Urubamba at 2,800 masl, named in honor of the chief Ollanta, who was famous for courting an Inca princess, daughter of Pachacútec. One of its best-preserved areas, known as Hanan Huacaypata lies north of the main square and contains 15 estates built with elegantly crafted stone walls. Ollantaytambo also features an extensive archaeological site located on the imposing hillside overlooking the town, containing structures such as the Temple of the Sun, and the Mañacaray or Royal Hall, the Incahuatana and the Baños de la Princesa. It also has hotels, restaurants and horses and mountain bikes for hire. A branch road leading from Ollantaytambo to the Málaga mountain pass (4,200 masl), goes through towns such as picturesque Huilloc, home to the renowned wayruros (porters).

Tipón

This picturesque set of terraces, long stairways and stone canals is located 20 km south of the city. Evidence suggests that Tipón was part of a royal hacienda belonging to Inca Yahuar Huaca, as well as a place of worship and agricultural research. An outstanding is the sense of harmony in the channeling of water via stone structures including aqueducts (some of which are underground), waterfalls and gullies, indicating the Incas' knowledge of hydraulics.

Moray

Moray (3,500 masl) lies just 7 km away from Maras, although the road to it is not always in good condition. This community is famous for its embedded amphitheater, formed by four circular terraces which seem to disappear into the interior of the puna, like an artificial crater. Evidence seems to suggest that Moray was an important center of Inca agricultural research on crops, which was carried out on different sized plots located at various altitudes (some of which were at more than 100 m underground). The Andean terraces, built on retaining walls filled with fertile soil and watered via a complex irrigation system, offer up more than 250 different types of vegetables and cereals, such as corn, quinoa and kiwicha.

The Inca Trail

At kilometer 88 of the Cuzco-Quillabamba railway line lies Qoryhuayrachina, the starting point for one of the most famous trekking trails in Peru. During the four-day trek, the hiker will cross through a number of altitudes and come across dozens of ecosystems situated between 2,800 and 4,000 masl. In addition, they will also be able to take in a splendid view from the imposing snow-capped mountains in the region. The Inca Trail visits the beautiful stone citadels of Phuyupatamarca and Wiñay Wayna, among 16 other archeological sites before ending at Machu Picchu. A relaxing bath at Aguas Calientes, 2 km from the train station, complements the 40 km circuit.



Machu Picchu, Cuzco
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Machu Picchu

The citadel of Machu Picchu is by far the most important tourist attraction in Cuzco, and is located three hours by train from the city, although it can be reached by helicopter (30 min.) or on foot (four days, via the Inca Trail). Discovered in 1911 by the American explorer Hiram Bingham, this citadel is considered to be one of the most extraordinary examples of landscape architecture in the world. Situated in an enclave on the saddle of a mountain overlooking the deep canyon of the Urubamba River, in an area of lush tropical forest, it served as a place of worship, a site for star-gazing and a private hacienda of the family of the Inca Pachacútec. It consists of two main areas: one agricultural, formed mainly by mountains and food stores; and the other urban, which is noted for its sacred zone, with its temples, squares and royal tombs built with consummate skill. The stairways and canals carved out of stone are recurrent throughout this remarkable archaeological site. Opposite the citadel is the Huayna Picchu mountain, which can be reached via a winding stone walkway. Necessary precautions must be taken during the rainy season (December through March).

Pikillacta and Lake Lucre

Built at the peak of the Wari culture (500-900 AD), this large urban and ceremonial center of almost two square kilometers was built as a massive set of stone and mud structures on a hill overlooking the beautiful Lake Lucre or Huacarpay. Pikillacta, or “city of fleas”, is perhaps the largest pre-Inca urban center in the area. It gets its name from its numerous enclosures (measuring just 4 meters each) which, it would seem, were part of a garrison constructed to protect the site.

The Machu Picchu Historical Sanctuary

This Historical Sanctuary, which was established in January 1981 and covers an area of 35,592 hectares, is much more than a collection of archaeological sites located in a misty tropical setting. Due to its strategic location, on the eastern slope of the Andes, it extends across one of

the most extraordinary sectors in the country. The geographical location also allows it to protect, in an area covering just 20 square kilometers, ecosystems varying from the year-round snow found at 6,000 masl, to the steamy tropical jungles to be found at just above 1,700 masl. This sanctuary is home to a number of spectacular species, such as the Peruvian Cock-of-the-rocks (national bird); the spectacled Andean bear (also called the ucumari), which is the only bear species in South America; the small deer, or sachacabra; the tanka taruca; and over 300 species of birds. Furthermore, over 200 species of orchid have been found, many of which grow only in the sanctuary. Seen from the air, the sanctuary is shaped like a half-open book, with the mighty Urubamba River flowing in a northwesterly direction through the middle, and two giant mountain ranges, the Urubamba and Vilcanota, forming a deep valley covered with tropical vegetation. The two most important peaks in this valley are the Wekey Willka, or Veronica (5,750 masl) and the majestic Salkantay (6,271 masl), which are considered to be the Apus, or guardians spirits of the region.

Paucartambo

This typical colonial town in the Paucartambo valley, southeast of Cuzco, is characterized by its narrow cobblestone streets, white mansions and bright blue balconies and is also known for the celebrations held in honor of the Virgen del Carmen (July 16). During these celebrations the habitual tranquility of this Andean town is all but forgotten in a lively display of color, music, dancing and colorful processions. Also renowned are the masks and typical costumes worn during the Catholic celebrations held in honor of the Corpus Christi. During the Incan Empire or Tawantinsuyo, Paucartambo was an important military supply center and later in the Colonial period (XVI-XIX centuries) it became an important mestizo commercial center in the southern Andes.

San Pedro de Andahuaylillas

One of the most beautiful colonial towns in the region, has a picturesque main square with leafy pisonay trees hanging overhead, which is surrounded by old estates. Its main attraction is its distinctive church, San Pedro de Andahuaylillas, which was built in the seventeenth century and is considered to be a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Its interior, elaborately decorated with paintings, is simply breathtaking. It also houses oil on canvas paintings from the Escuela Cuzqueña and Baroque altars made of carved

Maras

Maras is a small community 40 kilometers from the city of Cuzco, on a turnoff from the road to the town of Urubamba. Its main attraction, apart from its church, that dates from the colonial period, are the salt mines located near the town which captivate sightseers and, in particular, photographers. Salt is extracted from mines which have been in use since pre-Columbian times. The extraction method employed involves using an ancient drying process, whereby salt-water, flowing from an underground stream, is left in the sun in thousands of wells until it has evaporated, leaving behind only the salt, which is then ready to be sold or exchanged for provisions. During the summer months

(April – October) the shimmering spectacle offered by the pools is incomparable. wood.

Tres Cruces and Kosñipata Valley

From Paucartambo, a narrow rough grade road snakes up towards the Acjanaco ountain pass (3.800 masl) and the scenic overlook of Lookout of Tres Cruces, a natural balcony facing the Amazon region. Here, one can witness an optical effect caused by the sunlight bouncing off the clouds covering the tropical forest below, making for one of the world's most unique sunrises. From Tres Cruces the road continues toward the deep valley of Kosñipata and the Alto Madre de Dios River, that passes through the lush cloud forests of the Manu National Park, one of the world's most diverse paradises.

Festivities Calendar

January

1 Entrega de Varas

(Cuzco and surrounding areas)

A Ceremony in each village dating back to the pre-Hispanic era to commemorate the assumption of power by the highest authority, or Varayoc, who receives a scepter from his predecessor symbolizing power. The scepters, made of native wood species such as tucuma, black hualtaco (tagetes minuta), huallacán or quince, measure approximately 1 meter in length and have silver and gold inlays.

20 Chiaraje (Canas)

A war game, or pucllay, in which the peace-loving members of the community do battle to enhance the fertility of the soil. Those who occupy the largest area of land and force the enemy to retreat, win. The war game takes place on the Chiaraje plains (4,700 masl) in Canas province, which is accessible by road.

March – April

Easter Monday

Señor de los Temblores (Cuzco)

Worship of the effigy of Taitacha Temblores (Lord of Earthquakes). This ceremony is an expression of Andean-Christian syncretism. The effigy is taken out in a procession from the Cathedral of Cuzco, which was built on top of the temple of the god Wiracocha, and is paraded around the streets of the city as the faithful throw ñucchu flowers –in ancient times used as an offering to the Inca gods– symbolizing the blood of Christ.

May

5 Fiesta de las Cruces

(Cuzco and surrounding areas)

A ceremony in which each community decorates the cross of its church and prepares it for its procession to churches in neighboring communities. This celebration, held in gratitude to pre-Hispanic gods for bountiful harvests, also serves as a setting for folklore shows.

Date Varies

Qoyllur Rit'i Pilgrimage (Ocongate, Quispicanchis)

The largest native Indian festival in the Americas. In this mass pil-

grimage to the sanctuary of Sinakara, on the day of the Holy Trinity, a group of villagers climbs snow-capped Mount Ausangate (6,362 masl) in search of the Estrella de Nieve (Snow Star) resting in large blocks of ice, that will then be taken by the villagers, on their backs to their communities, to irrigate their land.

June

24 Inti Raymi (Cuzco)

An Inca festival dedicated to the Sun god, Inti Raymi is held at the beginning of the Winter Solstice. It is one of the Andean events par excellence and is held on the esplanade of the fortress of Sacsayhuaman, where over 500 participants re-enact the ritual Sun worship. The celebration begins with the arrival of the Inca at Sacsayhuaman who, after having been carried in a throne from Koricancha, in Cuzco, presides in his regal glory until sunset.

Date Varies

The Corpus Christi (Cuzco)

A Catholic feast of the Eucharist dating back to the colonial period, that follows the custom of parading the mummified remains of past Inca rulers. The pilgrimage is made 60 days after Easter Sunday, when the images of 15 saints and virgins from the various districts of Cuzco arrive in procession at the Cathedral to "greet" the body of Christ, which is kept in a spectacular gold tabernacle weighing 26 kilograms and measuring 1.2 meters tall.

July

15, 16 Virgen del Carmen (Paucartambo)

Festival of Mamacha Carmen, patron saint of the mestizos. The effigy of the Virgin is carried in a procession to bless those in attendance, who sing in Quechua, and to ward off demons. Those in attendance, while wearing traditional Inca and colonial garb, perform gymnastics and daring maneuvers on the rooftops of houses. At the end of the procession, a war is waged against the demons, from which the faithful emerge triumphant.

October

10 Virgen del Rosario (Quispicanchis and Canchis)

In the districts of Urcos (province of Quispicanchis), as well as Combate and Checaupe (province of Canchis), homage is paid to the patron saint of the town with processions, fairs, bullfights and hearty pachamancas, meals prepared in shallow holes in the ground and cooked over hot stones.

December

24 Santuranticuy (The Sale of Saints)

A festival dating back to the colonial period, it now ranks as one of the largest handicrafts fairs in Peru. It is held every year in Cuzco's Main Square, where the painters of religious images and artesans offer a wide range of Christmas figurines to go with the Nativity scenes found in homes and chapels across Cuzco.

Cuzco Tourist Pass

Ideal for tourists, these passes can be bought at the Cuzco offices of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura, in the executive offices of the Tourist Pass Committee, and at the entrance to most points of interest (archaeological sites and historical monuments). The Pass costs US\$10 per person, and is valid for access to all main attractions in Cuzco (churches, convents, museums and archaeological sites).

Tourism destinations in Peru

A traveler's guide

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