

Machu Picchu for Muchachas

Take a gay excursion to this mystical city, or do it yourself.

BY ANDE WANDERER



Market in Lima, catch your breath in Machu Picchu

Five hundred years ago, it was a retreat where the Chosen Women were worshipped and mummified after death. Today, Machu Picchu remains a mystical destination for a fit couple or a group of girlfriends seeking more from a vacation than a beach chair in the sun.

The Lost City of Incas wasn't discovered by explorers until 1911. High in the Andes, it is possible to get to the ruins by rail and road, but many choose to go the hard way: by hiking on one of the many trails over breathtaking passes. The most popular route is the exhilarating **Camino Inca** (Inca Trail). The best time of year to go is during the dry season from May to December, though June and August are the busiest tourist months. If you go in the off season, you'll get to explore the ruins without a crowd, but you will get wet.

There are a number of companies with tours to Peru designed for queer travelers. **Mariah Wilderness Expeditions** (800-369-1073) offers two-week tours specifically for women for under

\$3,000. **Footprints Travel** (416-962-8111) offers two-week whirlwind tours for men and woman that kick off in La Paz, Lake Titicaca, the Amazon river, and Machu Picchu. Another tour company, **Spirit Journeys** (828-258-8880), has a metaphysical slant, but skips the Inca Trail trek and just takes travelers directly to the ruins. For a custom-designed expedition, the lesbian-friendly **Nomad Travel Planners** (888-345-0313) can arrange tours for a group of eight to 20 people.

Those traveling on a shoestring budget might want to do an independent trek. To do it yourself, get prepared in the fascinating Inca capital or **Cuzco**. It's also a good idea to stay here a couple of days to get used to the altitude of nearly 11,000 feet. Once you're ready, jump on the Machu Picchu bound train that snakes along the Urumba river. After a few hours, jump off at Kilometer 88 (friendly locals will show you where.) After registering and paying a nominal fee for the trek, you're on your way.

Bring a water purifier or, if you can tolerate the taste, water purifying tablets.

The beginning part of the trail is reminiscent of a fairy tale: fields, flowers, and birds. It's not until you start going over the mountains that your workout begins. The second and third days take you over high mountain passes. If it's harder than you thought, it's still possible to hire a local as an aperture on the way. Though the friendly locals who live along the trails speak Quechua as their first language most can speak a little Spanish, so it helps to have someone in your party who does, too. The trek can take anywhere from three to six days; you'll know you're close to your goal when you reach the sun gate, **Intipunka**. After exploring the labyrinth of the ancient ruins, a great reward awaits you in the nearby *agua calientes*, natural hot springs, located in the nearby village by the same name.

If you stop off in the capital of Lima you can check out the local queer scene in the adventure-filled neighborhood of Mira Flores at clubs like *Twist*, *Voglia*, *Gitano 2050*, or the women-only club, *Private*. ☺