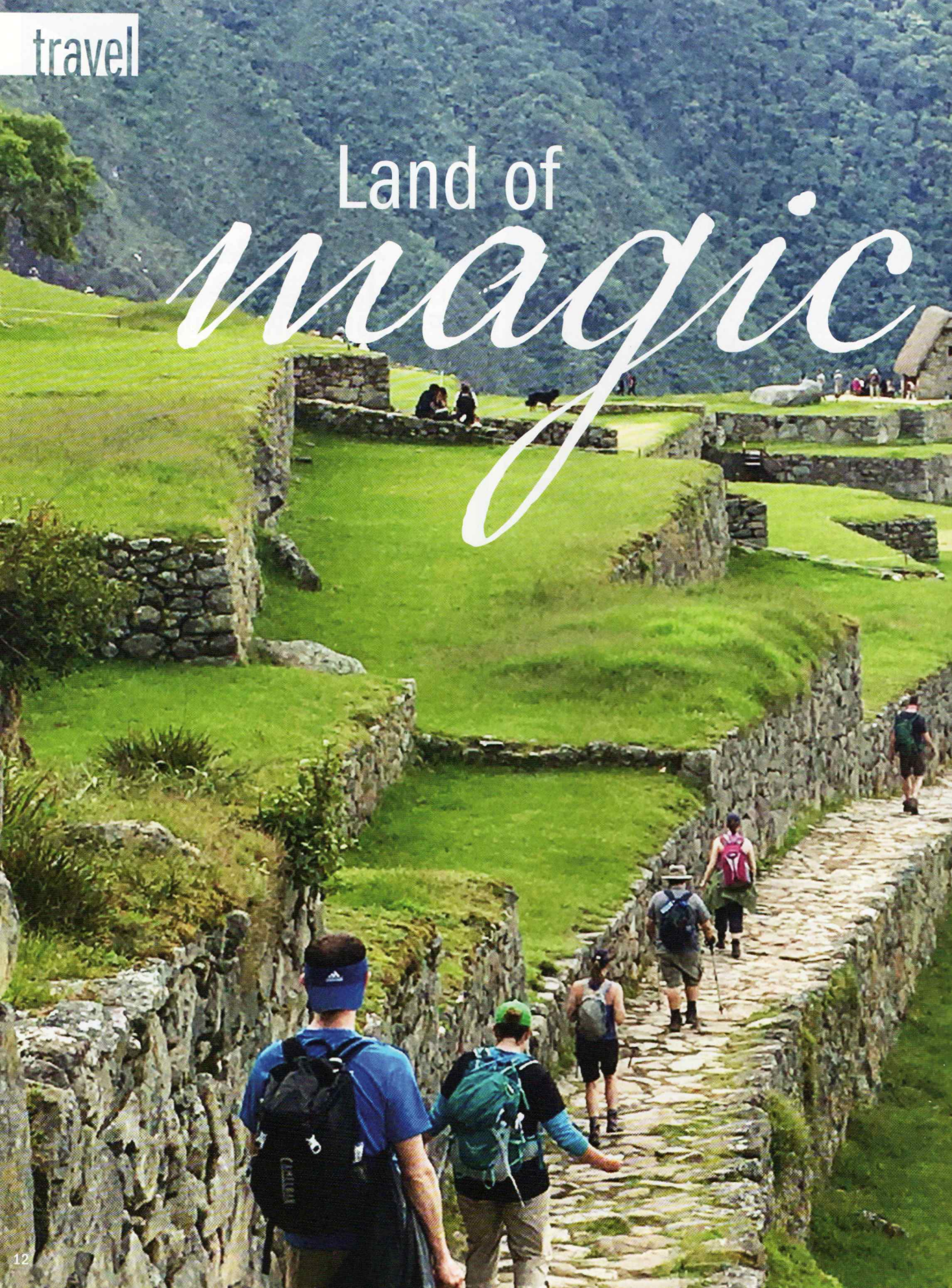


travel

Land of *magic*





Trekking the Inca Trail

Story and photos by Cris Cadiz

More StairMaster®! That is my advice to anyone who accepts the Inca Trail challenge. This ancient pathway through the Andes Mountains in Peru leads to the magical ruins of Machu Picchu. It is gorgeous, grueling and worth every breathless step.

I made this trip with 14 friends in April 2017. We used a tour operator who arranged all the details for our five-day trek, which started about 50 miles from Cusco next to the rushing, gray Urubamba River. Machu Picchu, the iconic 15th-century Inca ruins made famous by Yale historian and explorer Hiram Bingham in 1911, is the glorious reward at the end of this expedition. Gazing down upon the terraced stone citadel as you pass through the Sun Gate (Inti Punku) after 5 days of hiking is incomparable. But the journey itself is also priceless.

After flying from Lima to Cusco we spent 2 nights there at about 11,000 feet altitude to prepare our bodies for trekking in the mountains. The Inca Trail starts in the Sacred Valley at roughly 9,000 feet and ascends to almost 14,000 feet at the highest point. Despite acclimatizing and the fact that porters carry most of your belongings and all the camping equipment, the altitude can make every step a chore. However, this trip's incredible scenery, history, culture, comradery, and peaceful vibe all are a balm for minor physical suffering.

Our co-ed group of friends and family (ages late twenties to mid-50s) trained mostly by hiking on weekends, doing our best to climb lots of hills. Regardless, you cannot replicate Peru's altitude in New England. Despite being in good physical shape, I found the hike challenging. My husband and I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro (19,300+ feet) in 2005. Yes, we had aged more than 10 years since that trip, but we thought that the Inca Trail was more difficult. My husband claims that except for the final difficult ascent to the peak, hiking Kili was like a nice walk with a paper bag over your head. I agreed.

Every day, we rose before dawn, rolled sleeping bags and repacked our bags, then ate a hot breakfast prepared and served by our camp chef and "kitchen" staff. Then, we gathered our day packs, filled water containers and set out to hike from 5 to 8 hours. This included resting when necessary, taking lots of photographs, and breaks to eat. Our journey started out as a pleasant walk on fairly level terrain along the river,

Our final destination, Machu Picchu.

passing occasional villages and farms still using the ancient Incan terraces to raise lush crops of corn, squash, potatoes, beans, and quinoa.

The first night we camped in a rain-soaked field, serenaded to sleep by the adjacent farm's donkey. In the morning, Karen--a member of our group who taught yoga--led us in sun salutations while mist slowly curled up the surrounding hillsides. Bemused porters watched us with sidelong glances as they packed up camp and we stretched and bowed in the wet grass.

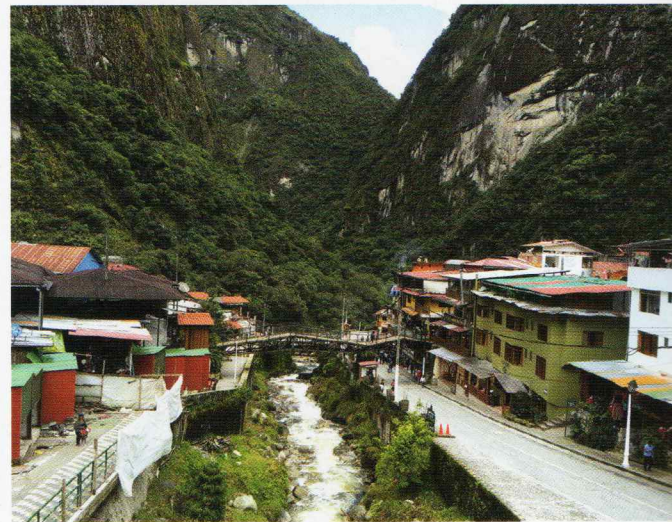
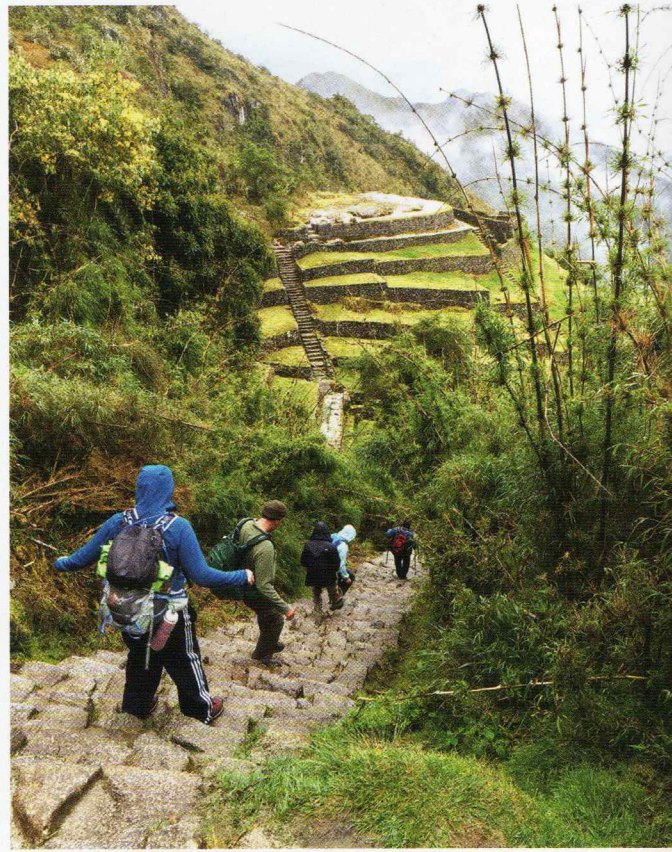
As our journey progressed, terrain became steeper and rougher and we worked harder. We were grateful for the mist, occasional rain and cool temperatures. Nights were chilly to downright cold, especially as we gained altitude.

Hiking the Inca Trail felt like a trip back in time, with no cell phones, vehicles, power lines or other reminders of modern world. On the trail, we encountered locals still using it as intended, a highway—but one like we first worlders have never seen. The Inca created a sophisticated transportation network throughout Peru, formed by stone stairs, flagstone paved walkways, dirt and gravel paths. Here, in the Sacred Valley, it was used to reach important points such as temples, supply houses, rest stops for travelers and message runners. Along our trek we saw many of these ruins, roofless stone structures, remnants of a disappeared but not forgotten culture. Machu Picchu, the terminus of the trail we followed, is thought to have been a royal estate, a grand vacation resort that housed Inca nobles and hundreds of servants.

Although the historic needs for the path are long gone, the Inca Trail still has some "traffic." Besides tourists like us in our bright, technical hiking ensembles and our entourage of porters carrying huge packs, local women use the trail, many wearing surprising, even fancy dresses. With skirts fluffed out by petticoats and glossy black braids hanging down their backs, they carry loads or small children tucked into colorful striped blankets fashioned into backpacks. We also encountered people on donkeys and horses, old men with leathery faces and hands gnarled from age and labor, kids walking hand-in-hand with mothers or grandmothers.

On the Inca Trail, you are surrounded every moment by incredible natural beauty: precipitous green hillsides, snow and glacier draped mountain peaks, herds of grazing llama and alpaca, hummingbirds, wildflowers, orchids. Ancient manmade structures also inspire awe: foot-worn stone staircases, centuries-old terraces still being farmed, castle-like ruins perched on mountainsides, stone tunnels carved through cliffs.

With no written language, Incan life is a mystery, recorded mostly through the documents and artwork of European missionaries and conquistadors. What we know, we





LEFT TOP: Our careful descent to the Phuyupatamarca ruins.

LEFT CENTER: End of our trek: Aguas Caliente, the modern town near Machu Picchu.

BOVE TOP: The Urubamba River flowing through the Sacred Valley.

BOVE: Agricultural terraces of Q'oriwayrachina, the first archaeological site on our journey.

ELOW: The central plaza of Cusco, Peru.



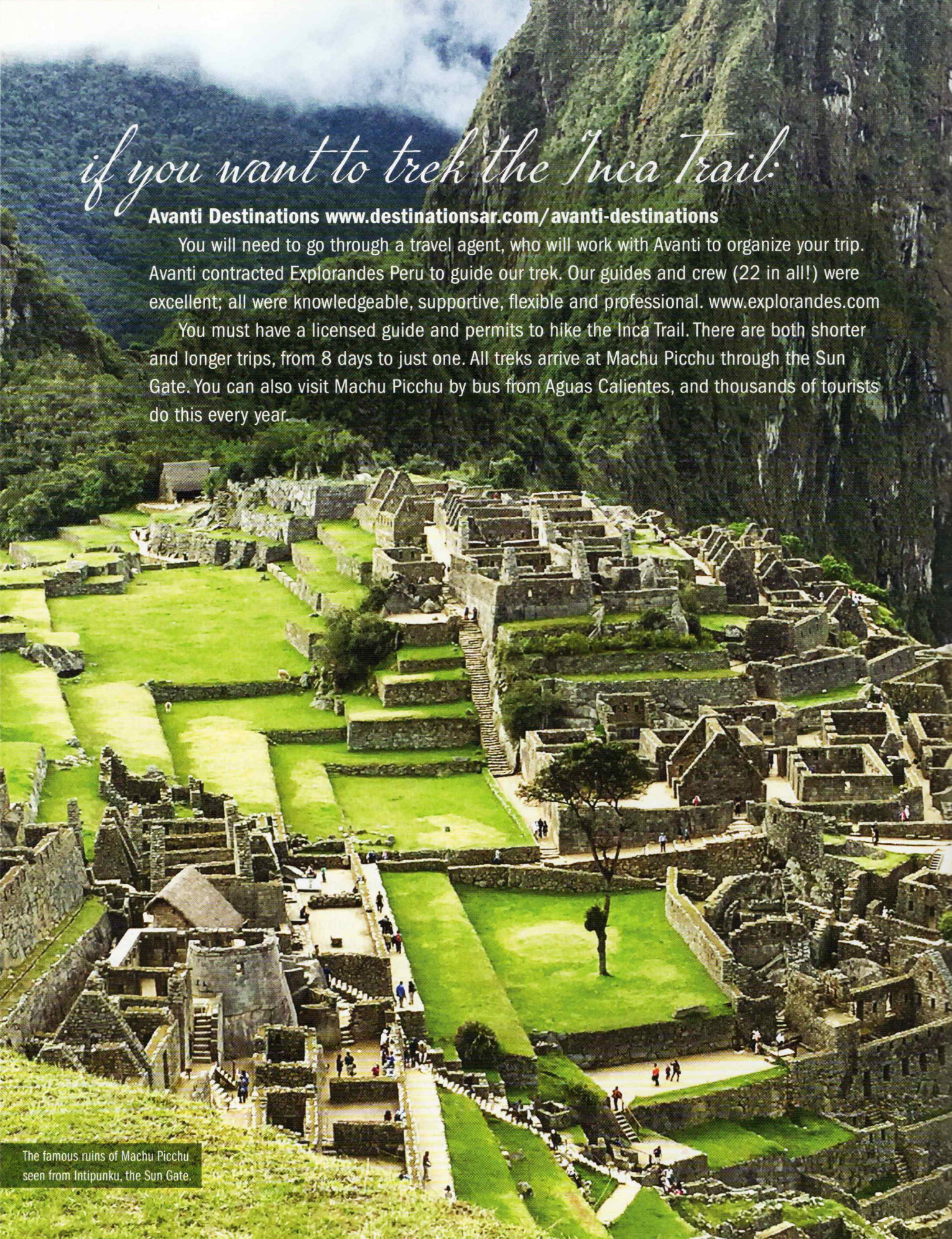
have also learned from the Inca's lasting stone structures. They were masters of architecture using natural stone for storage buildings, corrals, living chambers, terraces, fountains, irrigation, and erosion control. The quality of the stonework reflects the status of the building's inhabitants, precise and smooth for royalty and worship, rough and rugged for common people and tasks.

Terrain and climate on the Inca Trail vary with elevation, from rich, green farmland bordering the river to cloud forest populated by gnarled, moss-draped trees to jungle-like areas filled with ferns and epiphytes. We even meandered through a towering Eucalyptus forest alongside neat stone irrigation ditches. These aromatic groves were originally planted to provide firewood for the train that runs along the Urubamba River.

Every day on the trail felt like an amazing event, but there were definite highlights. Reaching Dead Woman's Pass (Warmi Wañusqa) on day 3 was a great accomplishment for everyone. After catching my breath from the long, high-altitude climb, the panoramic view at almost 14,000 feet made me turn in a circle and marvel. After this pass slick stone steps descend steeply into a valley fringed with waterfalls. Watching our porters jog past us and then race each other down these steps with towering loads on their backs was humbling. After lunch in the valley, we ascended again to 12,000 feet and camped near Phuyupatamarca ("Cloud-level Town"). Another physical challenge was the "Gringo Killer," a series of incredibly steep stone stairs one must climb on the last day as you approach the Sun Gate. At one point, I used my hands to help me with this trial. We all shared big high fives at the top.

Finally, after five days we emerged between the stone pillars of the Sun Gate, to see Machu Picchu as the Inca would have approached it hundreds of years ago. Clean, nice smelling tourists who took the bus from Aguas Calientes milled around us, asking questions about our journey. It was culture shock to see so many people and ride the tourist coach bus down the switchbacks to town and cold beer, hot showers and comfy beds.

Peru is diverse and fascinating in its natural beauty, history and modern culture. You cannot experience it all in a short period of time. Some of our group spent another week visiting Lake Titicaca, Colca Canyon and Arequipa before flying home from Lima. We visited intricately painted churches and more stone ruins, a floating village made of reeds on the world's highest lake, a city made of white stone watched over by three volcanoes. We saw condors soar above a gorge deeper than the Grand Canyon, baby alpaca grazing near an alpine lake, a vast desolate landscape of wind sculpted stone and volcanoes. But all that is another story...

An aerial photograph of the ancient Inca city of Machu Picchu, showing the stone ruins of buildings, terraces, and a central plaza, surrounded by lush green mountains and a cloudy sky.

if you want to trek the Inca Trail:

Avanti Destinations www.destinationsar.com/avanti-destinations

You will need to go through a travel agent, who will work with Avanti to organize your trip. Avanti contracted Explorandes Peru to guide our trek. Our guides and crew (22 in all!) were excellent; all were knowledgeable, supportive, flexible and professional. www.explorandes.com

You must have a licensed guide and permits to hike the Inca Trail. There are both shorter and longer trips, from 8 days to just one. All treks arrive at Machu Picchu through the Sun Gate. You can also visit Machu Picchu by bus from Aguas Calientes, and thousands of tourists do this every year.

The famous ruins of Machu Picchu
seen from Intipunku, the Sun Gate.