**Motorcycling Peru: A thrill ride to see Machu Picchu, Cusco and the Sacred Valley**

[**[Portrait of Ray Stern](https://www.azcentral.com/staff/8247717002/ray-stern/)Ray Stern**](https://www.azcentral.com/staff/8247717002/ray-stern/)

Arizona Republic

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AI-assisted summary

* Two friends embarked on a motorcycle adventure through Peru's Sacred Valley, encountering challenging roads and breathtaking scenery.
* They navigated treacherous stream crossings, dense fog and narrow mountain passes en route to Machu Picchu.
* The journey included navigating a challenging dirt road and appreciating local culture and hospitality.

The culture and history of Peru are magnificent, but were not the main reason my longtime friend Mike and I decided to go in December 2024. Our priority was the motorcycle adventure.

We've enjoyed many travels, including a 2012 group hiking trip in the Alps and long motorcycle rides together in Arizona. We planned to ride in Italy and Sicily in early 2020. Bad timing! Everything got canceled amid the pandemic.

Last September we could not wait any longer and scheduled a trip in early December. It would be too cold in Italy but not in South America, where it would be late spring. We settled on spending a week in the Sacred Valley of the Incas.

Peru draws motorcyclists from around the world because of its often excellent roads, amazing scenery and welcoming people. We looked forward to the challenges, too.

**Why we wanted to motorcycle in Peru**

It turned out to be everything we had imagined and so much more.

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Alpacas on the highway. Treacherous stream crossings. Rain. Fog. Fresh rockslides. And lots of mud. We felt like we earned our Peru badges, for sure.

Along the way to Machu Picchu we met kind people who have built a tourist infrastructure to share the treasures of their history even as political mayhem compounds the developing nation's relative poverty. Three former presidents are currently in prison — and we'll leave the politics there.

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Using motorcycles as transportation is a great way to explore the Cusco region, a beautiful and rugged land that was home base to one of the greatest ancient empires in world history. Where its roads are good, they’re fabulous. Where they’re not, cuidado.

Navigation on mobile phones, which found a strong signal in most areas, makes this kind of trip much easier for foreign visitors than it was in 1952 for "Motorcycle Diaries" author and Marxist rebel Che Guevara.

But pack your best skill set. You're going to need it.

**Can you ride a motorcycle to Machu Picchu?**

You can’t drive all the way to Machu Picchu. Most visitors take a train or bus from Cusco to historic Ollantaytambo, then take another train, bus or car to Aguas Calientes, the little tourist town in the mountains that’s the launching point for the bus trip or hike to the famous hilltop and ruins.

More adventurous types can take a multiday Inca Trail hike or take to the roads on two wheels.

Here's how we did it.

First, you have to get from Lima to Cusco. It’s a one-hour flight but driving there takes 20 hours, according to my iPhone map. We flew.

Cusco, elevation 11,000 feet-plus, harbors more than a dozen moto rental shops. We reserved a couple of Suzuki DR650 hybrid on- and off-road bikes with [Peru Moto Tours](https://www.perumototours.com/en/) for five days, which cost $105 per day including helmets. No matter where you rent, you’ll need a valid driver's license with a motorcycle endorsement. Most places offer options like hiring a guide or going with a group.

The road ends more than 10 kilometers shy of Aguas Calientes at the tiny town of Hidroeléctrica. Once there, a person of average fitness can walk to Aguas Calientes along train tracks through a junglelike landscape next to the roaring, not-for-tubing Urubamba River, a magical journey in itself by which walkers also return.

Motorcyclists can park their bikes in Hidroeléctrica or stop and spend the night in nearby Santa Teresa, leaving the bikes there and taking a 20-minute taxi ride in the morning, as we did.

Machu Picchu was the perfect destination for us. Riders with more time can take a number of popular routes from Cusco to other spectacular destinations.

**Waterfalls and rockslides on the highway from Cusco to Santa Teresa**

We took two days to make the 150-mile trip from Cusco to Santa Teresa on Peru's notorious 28B highway through the Andes mountains. Peru Moto Tours gave us a repair kit with oil, chain lube, inner tubes and patches. We didn't need the kit, thankfully. But we did make frequent use of our layered warm clothes and rain gear.

While we did get occasionally drenched, the South American late spring — a month into the area’s rainy season — has several good qualities for motorcyclists. The temperature was perfect except in the high mountains, and the highway traffic fairly light.

Highway 28B northwest of Ollantaytambo has maybe 100 or more hairpin turns that we traversed carefully. As elevation increased before reaching a 14,200-foot pass, light rain fell steadily and sometimes the fog was too thick to see more than a few yards in front of us. Often, we had to maneuver around fresh rockfall.

A heavy stream of water flowed down from the mountaintop perpendicular to the road, creating numerous daunting obstacles that had to be crossed. I counted 17, three of which were fairly serious with rushing water pushing thick detritus and overtopping our boots as we went through. They induced a dread sensation as I’d round another switchback, wondering if the next stream crossing would be worse than the last.

A line of about 10 cars and buses had stopped at the worst one, their drivers contemplating the situation. One man was in the fast-flowing stream up to his shins, moving basketball-size boulders to make a path.

As I slowed down, wondering how I could possibly cross it, Mike came up from behind and plowed through it without hesitating, his rear wheel sliding precariously as he hit the other side and popped out. I had little choice but to repeat what he did as the locals watched.

**Navigating the cliff-hugging dirt road from Santa Maria**

Then came the toughest part: Camino a Santa Teresa, a 14-mile stretch of cliff-hugging, one-lane dirt road that continues south from Santa Maria like a longer, wetter, muddier version of Arizona's Apache Trail with fewer guardrails.

When I could look around instead of concentrating on the road, when the fog and low clouds would clear, I saw some of the most incredible scenic vistas of my life: tall green hills dotted with Inca structures, and the foothills and peak of Mount Veronica, which stands over 19,000 feet in elevation, higher than any mountain in the continental U.S.

Road construction on this part meant sharing the narrow space with big trucks and other equipment next to massive drop-offs. We got off our bikes at one of the brief road closures we got caught at and watched the Urubamba River water crash into boulders, then were astonished to see a couple of people crossing it in a tiny handcart suspended by a high rope. Just another afternoon for those people, apparently.

It took about three hours to get to Ollantaytambo, including a lunch stop, and almost six hours the next day from there to Santa Teresa, with several stops.

After our day of hiking and visiting Machu Picchu we rode back to Cusco on the same route, except for an excursion to the Inca terraces in Pisac. Fortunately, the stream crossings had waned by then.

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**Indigenous culture and charming hospitality in Cusco**

The modernity of Lima vanished in Cusco, a centuries-old city that 500,000 people call home. Here we met some of the country's Indigenous Quechua people dressed in colorful clothing and chullo hats as they sold trinkets or offered up baby alpacas for photographs. Along the road we saw many Quechua people in remote areas.

On the open road and old towns outside of Cusco, the landscape felt more like the 1920s than 2020s. Brightly colored tuk-tuks, (small enclosed three-wheeled vehicles) were everywhere, working as taxis in the little towns.

In centuries-old Ollantaytambo, we navigated over cobblestones and through alley-like passageways. The town's layout and architecture are a mix of ancient Inca, 1500s Spain and a touch of modern times, with jaw-dropping Inca terraces and buildings rising up over 100 feet above the town. Researchers believe they were constructed in the 1400s under the reign of Pachacuti, the Inca leader who had Machu Picchu built.

Everywhere we went, leashless dogs rested in the middle of the highway. We asked a hotel owner about that. She said the dogs are abandoned pets who had given up on life. We didn’t argue with her. Several times, dogs ran up to our motorcycles, barking or growling as they charged.



Suddenly seeing two children on the highway in the mountain fog was one of our most unforgettable sights. The boy and girl were maybe 9 or 10 years old, dressed in Indigenous clothing and dancing and laughing in the middle of the oncoming lane, a small herd of alpacas near them on the roadside.

The hospitality we were shown by Peruvian hotel and eatery operators also seemed from a different time. Staff at the first hotel we stayed at in Ollantaytambo invited us to drive our motorcycles through the front door, down a few steps and into their open-air courtyard for the night.

We were very grateful for the folks who took care of us as we walked half-frozen into their cozy coffeehouse at the top of the 14,000-foot-plus Abra Malaga pass, which has a much-appreciated, indoor wood-burning oven and 1800s vibe.

Yet Peru is a developing nation in real time: The robust level of construction work going on there now, whether on the area’s homes or infrastructure, and the relatively young population putting it together, evoke a sense of a rising country overflowing with hope and dreams.

If you want to experience Peru the way locals do, get your motorcycle boots on.

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