

Hiking the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu (by AFM's own, Monica Hand!)

My friend Erin had dreamed of hiking the Inca Trail since childhood. When she mentioned she was planning the trip to me, I was immediately on board. If you don't know, the Inca Trail is the famous Peruvian trail leading to Machu Picchu. It's 26 miles of rigorous, steep climbs and descents with the highest altitude being over 13,000 feet above sea level. It is by far the toughest and most awe-inspiring hike I have ever been on — but it's still at the low end of the toughest hikes out there.



Photo by Monica Hand.

Throughout the four days on the trail (or seven days, depending on your level and pace), you're immersed in rainforests, green meadows and peaks in the clouds. I think it's safe to say that all three of us on the trip found parts of ourselves we didn't know existed as we were forced to dig deep, power through long days of only going straight up and balance on the slippery, ancient paths. The views are stunning, the people you meet on the trail are inspired and the history you're surrounded by makes the trek feel like going back in time.

Although the end goal is obviously seeing Machu Picchu, there are all sorts of ruins along the trail that are honestly just as breathtaking and provocative. With a guide, you learn the history of the Incan peoples, their fascinating ancient civilization and the country's fervent preservation efforts.

The biggest challenge for anyone coming from Austin will be the altitude. If you arrive in Cusco a few days before you're scheduled to take off, you should be able to allow your body to adjust to the increased altitude while you explore the historical city and even hike up and around the town.

I would recommend this trek to anyone and everyone, no matter your ability. There were people on the trail over 70 making their way through at their own pace. It is an accessible fitness destination because with your guide, you're able to plan out how fast your group should be going and what your goals are. Just be prepared for grueling hours of hard, but rewarding, work.