Introduction

In April 2011, my family and I took a trip to Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley in Peru. Before we left, I searched for information on taking pictures of Machu Picchu. While I found many photographs of the ancient Incan ruins, I found few tips on how to photograph the site. What follows are things I learned which will help you shoot the best possible photos there.

I’m an amateur but dedicated photo enthusiast. The following tips are for serious photographers but also for beginners wanting to capture better images of Machu Picchu. For the advanced photographer, you’ll find specific details about Machu Picchu itself – timing, light, restrictions, filters, etc. For others, you’ll find additional tips for taking great travel photos... anywhere.
Tips for taking better photos of Machu Picchu: site-specific pointers

Know the rules. I had a vague idea of restrictions before arriving. And once there, however, what I had read and what I experienced there weren’t the same. Here’s what I learned:

- **Day Packs/Camera Bags:** Officially, you can’t carry in a pack bigger than a day pack (20L maximum) into the ruins. Backpacks must be stored at the entrance. I saw some good size day packs there and no one seemed to care.

- **Tripods:** You can’t use a large tripod. I have no idea what constitutes "large" but the general rule seems to be that if you appear to be a professional, they will charge you a steep fee. Thus, while I think a tripod is normally very helpful for the reasons noted later on, I didn’t use one while at Machu Picchu just to be safe.
  - Recommendation: Get a small gorilla or table-top tripod you can easily slip in and out of your pack. Set it up on the ground, a wall, a bench or any available surface and, if your camera has it, use the live-view mode to see your subject.

- **Lenses:** You’re not supposed to bring in a lens over 200 mm. I shot mostly with my travel lens, an 18mm-200mm zoom (27mm-300mm in 35mm equivalent on my DX DSLR) but I spent much more time at the wide-angle end trying to capture the vistas or close-quarter areas like the Temple of the Condor. So personally, I wouldn’t risk the longer lens because you likely won’t need it anyway.

Prepare for the light. A common reason you might want to use a tripod is to shoot in low light conditions or to steady increased depth of field shots. Regarding low light, I found four Web sites with four different times listed for the open hours at Machu Picchu. So it is best to ask for sure when you buy your entry tickets (which you cannot do on site). The site is open from either 6:00 a.m. or 6:30 a.m. and stays open until 5:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. with the last entry allowed at 4:00 p.m. depending on which website you believe!

Use the Magic Hours. Sunrise will be a challenge without a tripod but at other times you should get by with a handheld camera, especially if you have vibration reduction. (One trick I use is to set the shutter release to continuous then on low light shots, I hold it down to get a burst of two to three shots. Most times, the first will be blurry due to pushing down on the shutter release but the second or third aren’t. Try it.) If you stay until late afternoon, you may not get the full “Magic Hours” (dawn and dusk) for workable light (they will likely escort you out before twilight), but you’ll at least have time on site without the midday glare.

Rethink your midday shots: I heard that Machu Picchu has two types of weather: rainy/misty/cool and blazing hot/bright. We were blessed to have an initially misty but then bright morning until around 11:00 when it got drizzly. Some mornings the whole place will be fogged in. Other times the light will be so harsh that every shot looks as if it was taken at high noon. So try to do most of your shooting early or late and use the middle of the day for scouting shots, resting, taking a tour or hiking. Most of all, stay flexible and bring an umbrella or waterproof kit so that even if it is rainy, you can still take some shots. In fact, at Ollantaytambo (another set of ruins second only to Machu Picchu), my best photos were when it was raining because everyone else cleared out. Also, keep in mind we were there in early April – late summer in Peru and the tail end of the rainy season. Going then meant everything was much greener than during their winter, but also rather moist for part of each day.
Plan your timing. All of this advice is based on coming from Aguas Calientes and not hiking in from the Inca Trail. If you do the latter, you’ll arrive at the Sun Gate for sunrise then have an hour hike after that to get to Machu Picchu proper where you’ll either need to check your pack in order to explore the ruins or, depending on your tour, you may get a general overview and come back later.

In our case, we had planned on getting in line for the busses from Aguas Calientes to Machu Picchu at 5:00 a.m. to be there when it opened at 6:00 a.m. for both the light and also to register to climb Wayna Picchu (also spelled Huayna Picchu, the peak you see in the background of all those postcard shots of Machu Picchu). They cut off access to Wayna Picchu after 500 people register in two waves, 250 for the 7:00 to 8:00 a.m. slot and another 250 for the 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. slot. There’s also an additional fee. However, the owner of our hotel in Aguas Calientes was very helpful and gave us this advice:

- First, don’t go on the first busses. Everyone nowadays does and you end up being more tired (from getting up early) and standing in long lines to get the bus and then more long lines to enter Machu Picchu (and make sure you have your entry tickets before you get on the bus). Moreover, many mornings (and ours was one of those), Machu Picchu is fogged in until later in the morning anyway, so getting there early doesn’t help for photography purposes.

- Second, don’t worry about missing Wayna Picchu. Instead, climb Machu Picchu Mountain. It takes a bit longer since it is higher, but you don’t have the crowds, you don’t have to register and pay and you’ll get a more unique view of the ruins looking down at the front of them rather than from the rear as with Wayna Picchu.

We followed our host’s advice for the first part and arrived at Machu Picchu about 7:00 a.m. with no lines for the bus (get your bus tickets the evening before to expedite things). Once at Machu Picchu, we got our main overview photos while Wayna Picchu was still enveloped in the clouds, then made...
our way to the entrance of Wayna Picchu around 9:15 a.m. Just out of curiosity, I asked when they filled up that morning... and they hadn’t yet! So we were able to get some extra sleep, get some good light and still climb Wayna Picchu.

It took us about two hours round trip with a stop at the top for photos and to explore. Personally, while I liked the big picture perspective that climbing the mountain provided, I didn’t find it as valuable for photography. That’s just me. If I had a limited amount of time and wanted great shots of Machu Picchu, I would spend more time at the site itself and not climb either of the mountains. You can get good elevated shots at the ruins themselves. But if you have the time, it’s worth it more for the adventure than the images.

Just remember that without a long telephoto, your best shots of Machu Picchu itself will be as you are on the way up Wayna Picchu. The summit is great for context but not details of the ruins.

Schedule two days there. You can basically see all of the ruins in a half day or about six hours if you climb Wayna Picchu or seven or so for Machu Picchu Mountain. But you’re not here just to see it, are you? You’ll want more time to shoot and to wait for the warmer light of late afternoon. So if I had to
do it again and was coming here specifically to photograph Machu Picchu rather than to just take pictures while on a family vacation, I would do this:

- Take two days or rather, a day and a half. Arrive at Machu Picchu the afternoon of the first, scope out the place in a leisurely manner then get some late afternoon shots when the light isn't so harsh. Stay until closing for those sunset (or close to it) shots.

- The next morning, get up as early as you can to be one of the first people there. As I noted above, we lucked out by going slightly later, but unless you know from reports down in Aguas Calientes (at the base of Machu Picchu though the ruins are not visible from the town) that the weather is horrible (and they likely won't know first thing in the morning anyway), I would still get there no later than 7:00 a.m. – earlier if you do want to climb Wayna Picchu especially from June through September when more people are there (though remember the advice above about Machu Picchu Mountain as an alternative). Even if the weather is bad – unless it is horrible – still get up there in the morning and use the time to scout out more shots. Plus, be aware that the weather can change rapidly, so it is best to be there, ready. Review your shot list from the day before (you did make one, didn't you?). Shoot close-ups. Then get your postcard shots when it clears up. Otherwise, if the weather is good, start with the big shots (since they will look different in the morning light than in the afternoon), the expected ones before the crowds come, then spend the rest of the day getting the shots you didn't the day before.

- If you find you've shot all you can there, consider hiking out to the Sun Gate or the Inca bridge. In any case, stay until mid or late afternoon the second day. Yes, you have to pay for two days worth of entrance fees coming back the second day, but you've come all this way, so get the most out of it. You could go sunrise to sunset in one day, but you'll be very tired.

- Finally, consider hiring a guide if you don't already have one arranged. You can hire them at the entrance. Especially if you arrive in the afternoon and have most of the next day, it is worth the US$10 or so per hour for a guide who can provide insights, background, context, possible hidden gem shot ideas and even the names of the stones and buildings for your records (write them down or dictate them to tie to your EXIF data if your camera allows). I'm told that the quality of the guides there varies, so ask questions first to determine their language skills and knowledge of the place and history.

**Take your time.** Machu Picchu looks much bigger in photos than it actually is. As noted, you can see most things in three to four hours if you don't doddle. If you arrive in the early morning, capture that postcard shot from up near the Watchman’s Hut (go left when you arrive inside) or just go straight in for another view. Then, see as much as you can before the crowds arrive. After that, go back and really get to know the place. If it is crowded – and it will be by 10:30 a.m. or so – just pause in some places to wait for people to get out of your shot. Taking your time also allows you to appreciate what you're seeing. Find an interesting subject like the Inti-Huatana or the “sacred rock” or even better, some lesser known corner of the site, then think through how many ways you can shoot it.
General tips for taking great travel photographs: Machu Picchu examples

Provide context. Just as you should include some people or animals for scale, include broader shots so viewers can get a fuller perspective on what you saw. For example, in this photo, notice the river to the left. I never realized it was there before I arrived. Most of your viewers won’t either because the typical shots just cover the ruins. Also, photographing the signs there can provide context and help you remember details later.

Use a tripod. Though I didn’t use a tripod at Machu Picchu for the reasons noted above, here are three situations for locations similar to Machu Picchu where I would want to have at least a table-top or mini if not a full-size tripod (and don’t forget that cable release or remote shutter release though in a pinch, I often use the two-second delay on my camera's self-timer to release the shutter when using a tripod):

- HDR (High Dynamic Range) – If you don’t know what this is, there are some great sites like [www.stuckincustoms.com](http://www.stuckincustoms.com) to explain it to you. Simplistically, it’s like bracketing your shots – take one at normal exposure, one overexposed two stops and one underexposed by two stops – then blend the three using HDR software. At Machu Picchu, this can be really useful given times when the sky is extremely bright due to the sun at the higher altitude reflecting off the frequent mist/clouds. Without HDR, you’ll either blow out the sky (overexpose it) or get the sky right and have blackened interiors of some of the buildings. I actually was only beginning to learn HDR when we were in Machu Picchu, so I didn’t avail myself of it then, but I definitely would if I went back. HDR is best done with a tripod but you can get by without one at Machu Picchu if your camera allows auto-bracketing and you have a steady hand.

- Self-portrait – You do want to show your friends you were there, don’t you? The easy way is to hand your camera to a fellow tourist. But if you want a more formal self-portrait that you compose yourself, a tripod is very helpful. But so is a bean bag that can support your camera on one of the many stone walls (and I know of no bean bag restrictions there!).
• Water shots – The Incas were famous for how they used water for both aesthetic and practical purposes. The stone baths is one of many places where you might want a tripod to capture a slow-shutter-speed shot of the water pouring over the stonework. However, I did find that with many of the fountains, the water flow is so limited that it didn’t show up that well against the stone background. And unless you’re there early in the morning, late in the afternoon or use a filter to reduce the light, you may find it too bright to slow down the shutter speed enough to capture the flow of the water in that nice blur look. I had better results with the Princess Fountain and others at Ollantaytambo (see below right).

Use a polarizing and/or graduated neutral-density (grad) filter. A polarizing filter can be very helpful at the higher altitude with the often blaring midday light. However – full disclosure – I didn’t use mine once when we were there, mostly due to the angle of the sun when it was out. But I did use a number 2 grad filter all morning due to the bright sun/sky and the shadows inside the buildings. The grad filter darkens the sky while keeping the buildings properly exposed. I highly recommend bringing both if you have them (even with HDR and Photoshop filters).

Make the rounds. Revisit places like the Torreon (shown below, the one curved wall at Machu Picchu) throughout the day since the light dramatically changes its appearance. You’ll be surprised how the stonework looks completely different from hour to hour.
Get high. No, I’m not talking about the coca leaves there. Wayna Picchu gives you a birds-eye view of the ruins of Machu Picchu below, but be sure to stop and take shots as you go up or you will need that long telephoto lens after all because you get surprisingly high above the ruins and they look very, very tiny from that height. In addition, get your main overview shots from up near the Watchman’s Hut when you first arrive at Machu Picchu (assuming the clouds are favoring you) and throughout the ruins, seek those top-down views.

Also, consider hiking out toward the Sun Gate or climbing Machu Picchu mountain to get a different big picture view. Conversely, go as far down the terraces as you can and shoot upward for some less obvious shots. Mostly, look up repeatedly as you go throughout the ruins since your perspective on Machu Picchu can change dramatically as you ascend or descend the main terraces. Look for new angles, storylines, themes and insights. Explore everywhere they allow. Keep looking and stay curious.
**Shoot the details.** Get close-ups of details there. Everyone shoots the big vistas. Get personal and close up. For some, just do macro shots with a non-descript background. For other shots, use a low F-stop to lower the depth of field and blur the background (my 35mm f1.8 lens was really useful for this) but capture some of the ruins in that background for added interest and context.

Here are some "detail" examples I found interesting:

- Dew on some of the exotic (to me!) plants, grasses and flowers
- A snail, lizard and a millipede at various points on the stone walls
- The faces and even eyes, ears, hooves or other parts of the llamas.
- The thatch used for the roofs (particularly after it rains or is misty where you capture the trickles of moisture)
- The joints between stones
- Various stairways and steps, especially the carved ones
- Multi-angle stones or unique stone shapes like the stone ring or bar-hold
- Waterways and fountains

**Frame your shots.** The trapezoidal doors and windows of the Incas make wonderful framing devices for shots of the ruins. Be creative with these and other stonework to provide interesting frames or balance points for otherwise more ordinary shots. Using the stonework as a frame rather than a subject will help keep you from overdoing the stone shots that may mean a great deal to you but won't translate to others who haven't been there.

**Get personal.** Add shots of friends and/or family members but do so in interesting ways rather than the standard stand-at-attention tourist shot.

**Consider black and white.** When the midday light gets too harsh, think of what some images would look like in black and white. The good news is that with digital cameras, you can make that choice once you get home but looking for shots that would make great black and white prints is important to consider while there.
Consider black and white and get natural, not posed shots of family/friends

**Define what matters to you.** First, ask yourself how you will use your photos. For a blog? A scrapbook? To exhibit? To post on Facebook or Flickr? Each will dictate the way you shoot, the resolution or image size and how you think about your audiences and how that influences your choice of subjects. Second, think about what excites you visually. The combination of location, clouds, grass and stonework at Machu Picchu is amazing even if you never paid attention to rocks before in your life. Capture your own sense of wonder there in trying to define what it is that interests you: shape, color, light, contrast, texture, people, history, flora, fauna, other influences, a combination of factors etc.

**Use the Rule of Thirds.** Especially at someplace like Machu Picchu which is so architecturally-oriented, try not to center your subject either horizontally or vertically in the middle of your viewfinder. Instead, keep your main object either one third or two thirds of the way in from the left or right or top or bottom of the frame. This will add a greater dynamic element to your shots and prevent them from looking like snapshots. Also, try to keep you backgrounds clean so they don't distract from your main object. In the llama photo on the bottom left of the next page where I've added grid lines to explain this idea of thirds, a better composition would have been to simplify the background and get the llama’s eye at the intersection of the top left grid lines. Alas, the llama wasn't cooperating...
**Look for themes or collections.** I have multiple photo “collections” including images of doors and windows among others. It gives me something to look for and you'll find many opportunities for some of these and others at Machu Picchu. If I were to do it over, I might make a collection of stones with more than eight sides. It not only makes an interesting photo collection (or a very boring one if they all look the same!), but it turns your trip into a kind of treasure hunt as you look around specifically for those types of stones. Even better, think about a theme. Themes give you a way to tell a story. For example, I would love to have shot a series on “A Llama’s View of Machu Picchu” which would have tried to capture the site from the animal’s perspective including shots of people taking shots of them. Another theme might be “Discovering Machu Picchu” and shooting it from the perspective of what it might have been like for Hiram Bingham and how he might have first approached it (granted, he had more vegetation to clear). Maybe you could do a “Water and Life” theme and capture all the various fountains and waterways throughout the ruins. The point is to tell a story with your photos. Don’t just shoot what everyone else has already shot hundreds of times before.

By most accounts, this shot to the left is a bad photo. The llama is out of focus and the whole image slightly soft. But it tells a story of how the woman in the background is trying to photograph the llama even as I am. We both have nice shots of each other...and lousy ones of the llama!

Compare this to the two photos below. The one on the lower left was taken seconds after the one directly to the left but at least it’s sharp (though it violates the Rule of Thirds). The shot below right is a better one of a llama but lacks any narrative value if I were shooting the theme of "A Llama's View of Machu Picchu."
Avoid people in some shots, but include them in others. For the classic shots, getting there early avoids the crowds and you can get almost pristine-seeming images without a trace (or a minimal one) of other tourists. However, include people in other shots for several reasons.

- The people who work there do some fascinating things keeping the site clean and preserved. Look for guys on ladders (as in the photo below) replacing numbered stones or doing other maintenance work. These add a human interest and the people can be fascinating in where and how they work.
- Human beings (and the llamas that inhabit the place) provide scale. Some of those stone walls or rooms aren’t very impressive in a photo without a visual reference to their actual size.
- Even at Machu Picchu where stone is king, get close-ups of people’s faces to capture emotions and show the more human side of the place. Be sure to ask first.
- People do funny things, especially around the llamas. Take time and just wait focusing on some llamas and I guarantee you’ll get some tourists trying to photograph them, woo them over, pet them, etc. as in the photos above. Some of the human antics are far funnier than that of the animals.

Make a shot list. Even before you arrive, you should consider what shots are “must haves.” These could include an overview of all the ruins from the main entrance and further to the left as you arrive, from up near the Watchman’s Hut. Other ones might include the Three Windows Wall, the Torreon and Royal Mausoleum and Condor Stone. But more than these “documentary” images, what else is important to you? We got a family photo taken by some kind tourists near the entrance, but I had neglected to note on my shot list a panorama of the whole place with our family in it. So we missed that. Similarly, I didn’t get a shot of the Inca Trail leading into the sanctuary. Your shot list will relate
to your themes or collections if you go that route, but while it might seem like a hassle, you’ll really appreciate having a written list to check off as you go especially as you start to forget all you had planned because you get lost in the wonder of the place.

**Shoot RAW.** On the day we were at Machu Picchu, I started shooting RAW then worried I’d run short on memory cards so I switched to JPEG images. Bad move. For me the main reason for RAW is that even with a grad filter on, the light differential from the brightest part of the picture to the darkest exceeded what my sensor could handle. With RAW, I exposed so as not to blow out the highlights (never letting my histogram fall off the right side) and then rescuing the detail from the dark areas in Photoshop. With the JPEGs, since they capture less data, it was harder to do that.

Shoot panoramas. If you can, set your camera to manual exposure to lock in the same exposure for each image so when they are stitched together later in your software, you won’t have the sky in various shades of blue or gray. Remember, you can also take panoramas vertically, like capturing Wayna Picchu or the terraces from the bottom looking up. Also, try this trick I read in a Scott Kelby book: Before your first shot of the panorama, take a photo of your own hand holding up one finger. Then when you’re done shooting, hold up and photograph two fingers. That way when you get home and you’re wondering what all these odd shots are, you’ll know they were part of the panorama.
Prepare well. Hopefully, these tips should give you a good sense of what to expect or do photo-wise at Machu Picchu, but here are some other sources of help:

- Check out some of the many guidebooks and web sites – Lonely Planet, Trip Advisor, Fodors, Rough Guide, Moon, Frommers, etc. for info on entry fees, bus tickets from Aquas Calientes and train tickets from Cusco, Ollyantaytambo or other places (since Peru Rail is not your only option any more). I found that some of the online forums were the most helpful for details like the size of your pack, etc. Here’s a site I found useful for getting an overall sense of what to expect: [http://www.andeantravelweb.com/peru/destinations/machupicchu/index.html](http://www.andeantravelweb.com/peru/destinations/machupicchu/index.html) and a related site for advice on tickets: [http://www.machupicchutickets.com/](http://www.machupicchutickets.com/)

- Use Google Earth to visualize the area around Machu Picchu and get the lay of the land (literally and figuratively).

- Visit Flickr, iStockPhoto and other professional sites (just Google the words “Machu Picchu photos” for various sources) to see what others have shot. You don’t want to copy these, but they can inspire you and give you some ideas of what to look for.

- Check out books of photographs from your local library. I found two excellent ones that both gave me shot ideas, but more importantly, provided me with background details and maps so I understood better what I was shooting:
  - Monuments of the Incas by John Hemming and Edward Ranney, revised edition 2010, Thames and Hudson. This is a great overview of all the Inca sites with maps, plans and early 20th century photos of the site in addition to Ranney’s beautiful black and white images.
  - Stone Offerings by Mike Torrey, 2009, Lightpoint Press. Here you can see color images from Torrey’s two trips to the site.

- Similarly, check out some travel photography books that give you tips on how to improve your photos while traveling. Many of the points above started as tips I read in these and other books. Three of my favorite are:
  - Ultimate Field Guide to Travel Photography by Scott S. Stuckey, National Geographic Society, 2010
  - 101 Tips for Travel Photographers by Bob Krist, 2008, PhotoSecrets
  - Travel Photography Masterclass, edited by Ailsa McWhinnie, 2010, Argentum

- And of course, keep visiting [http://www.TheMeaningfulTraveler.com](http://www.TheMeaningfulTraveler.com) for ongoing insights on how to make any trip more meaningful...