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Machu Picchu Q&A

Backgrounder for Machu Picchu: Unveiling the Mystery of the Inca

Who were the Inca?

The Inca people originated in the Cuzco valley of what is now modern-day Peru around 1000 AD.

By its height in the 1520s, it stretched 3,500 miles from what is now modern Columbia to central Chile and also incorporated substantial portions of Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and Peru. Although the Inca people only numbered about 100,000, they ruled over 10 million people from dozens of ethnic groups.

What does Machu Picchu mean?

Roughly translated from Quechua, the language of the Inca, Machu Picchu means "Old Mountain Peak."

Who built Machu Picchu and when?

The second Inca (king) Pachacuti built Machu Picchu more than 500 years ago.

Where is Machu Picchu?

Machu Picchu lies the jungle in the Urubamba Valley – known as the Sacred Valley of the Incas – in the Andes mountains of Peru. It is about 4 hours by train (or a 4-day walk) from the ancient Inca capital of Cuzco.

Why is it called a "lost city?"

When Yale explorer Hiram Bingham "rediscovered" Machu Picchu in 1911, he was the first person from North America to see the ruins, which had literally been swallowed by the jungle. When all of the overgrown vegetation was removed, the five-square-mile complex of ruins was revealed.

Why do some people believe Machu Picchu is a sacred place?

Machu Picchu is surrounded by high mountain peaks and rushing waters, features that were sacred to the Inca. While more than half the buildings on the site were used for religious purposes, recent research reveals Machu Picchu was a retreat or vacation spot for Inca royalty, rather than a sacred "city." Anyone who

visits Machu Picchu today will no doubt appreciate the beauty of this mountain-top retreat. Whether or not it is still a sacred place is left up to personal interpretation.

Who lived at Machu Picchu, and what did they do?

Most of the people who lived at Machu Picchu full time were probably servants and farmers who served the Inca rulers. Metal workers, artisans, and other specialized crafts people also lived there. The Inca ruler, his family and entourage may have spent weeks or months at a time at Machu Picchu.

Why did the Inca leave Machu Picchu?

Researchers aren't exactly sure when the retreat was abandoned, but it was probably well before the Spanish conquered the Incas in the mid-1500's. The descendants of the second Inca (who built Machu Picchu), may not have been able to keep it up or it may have been too far from Cuzco for them to continue visiting.

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Museum Background

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is a national leader in research, exhibitions and education. Founded in 1913, it is one of the preeminent natural and cultural history museums in the United States, safeguarding more than 33 million specimens and artifacts in its collections. The kid-friendly Discovery Center welcomes children and families with hands-on natural history specimens. The accompanying Insect Zoo, the largest in the Western United States, features live insects from around the world. Permanent exhibit halls include dramatic collections of fossils and dinosaurs, exquisite gems and minerals, grand animal dioramas, a California history hall, and a stunning Native American hall, along with ever-changing special exhibitions. For further information about the Museum, visit the Museum's website at www.nhm.org or call (213) 763-DINO.

The mission of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is to inspire wonder, discovery and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds.

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