

Inca Trail Trekking Regulations 2004

In the year 2001 the Peruvian Government proposed many changes to the administration of the Inca Trail in a bid to protect its fragile eco-structure from over-use. Most of these proposals have been aimed at reducing the number of trekkers on the trail, improving the quality of the tour operators and offering a reservation system whereby trekkers will be forced to make these reservations many weeks (even months) in advance. Some of the proposals were introduced slowly throughout 2001 and 2002 but the Government started to enforce the majority of the regulations strictly in 2003. Further regulations have been introduced at the beginning of 2004 with the main aim of eliminating poor quality operators. All trekking companies that operate the Inca Trail must have an operating license which is issued every year at the end of February.

Summary:

In order to guarantee a trek permit for the Inca Trail you need to make a reservation and pay for your entrance fee well in advance. In the low season (Oct-Mar) we recommend making a reservation at least 5 weeks in advance. For the months of May and September we recommend making a reservation 6 weeks in advance and for the peak months of June, July and August we recommend a minimum of 9-10 weeks days in advance. If you haven't paid a trek deposit in advance it means that the tour operator hasn't bought your trek permits so you do not have a guaranteed reservation no matter what your tour operator tells you. Once your tour operator has confirmed your reservation then it can be very difficult to change the date of trek departure and prohibited to transfer the reservation to another person.

Any remaining spaces on the trek are offered on a first-come-first-served basis. If you turn up in Cusco 5-7 days prior to trek departure then you may still find space available with some agencies. However, during May 2004 there were many people who were disappointed not to find spaces available even arriving in Cusco 2 weeks in advance. We predict things to be even more difficult during June, July and August as more people make reservations in advance by internet.

A detailed account of the Inca Trail regulations can be found below:

1. Increase in entrance fee: Since January 2001 entrance fees for the Inca Trail were increased to US\$50 for adults. Students under 26 years old with a valid International Student Identity Card (ISIC) receive a US\$25 discount but you must inform the tour operator at the time of making your reservation and bring the card with you on the Inca Trail. No other forms of student identity are acceptable i.e. letters from college, international youth identity cards etc. Teenagers under the age of 15 years old also receive a US\$25 discount. If you are claiming the student discount then you must submit the original card to the trekking company at least 2 days prior to starting the trek. If you claim to be a student with an ISIC card when you make the trek reservation the trekking company will purchase a student trek permit for you. If when you arrive in Cusco you do not have a valid ISIC card your US\$25 entrance ticket will be invalid and you will have to pay an additional US\$50 for a standard entrance ticket (note that you will not be asked to just make up the difference in price, so be warned)

2. Restricted numbers of trekkers: Over the last five years Peru has become a more popular travel destination. There are many great treks throughout Peru but the Inca Trail is the most well known. During the peak season of 2000 many campsites became crowded and the trail became littered with rubbish. In early 2001 the Government proposed to reduce the number of people on the trail to 500 per day. This figure roughly comprises 200 tourists and 300 trekking staff (guides, cooks and porters). However this restriction wasn't enforced until June 2002 (if only very loosely). In 2003 the authorities started to strictly enforce these numbers and many of the better tour operators were fully booked well in advance. The figure of 200 tourists includes trekkers on both the 2-day and 4-day treks as well as the Salkantay 7-day trek. As an estimate we would say that a maximum number of 160 trekkers per day will be allowed on the 4-day trek, 25 on the 2 day trek and 15 on the Salkantay Trek. On 10 March 2004, 130 tour operators in Cusco were issued with licenses to operate the Inca Trail. It doesn't take much to realise that there will be some problems ahead !!

3. Booking requirements. Booking requirements for the Inca Trail have become very stringent due to the fact that there are too many trekkers and too few spaces especially during the months June, July, August and September. The UGM (Unidad de Gestion Machu Picchu - the regulatory body responsible for controlling access to Machu Picchu and the Inca Trail) has done its best to implement a reservation system that is both fair to tourists as well as to the various trekking companies all competing for spaces. Basically spaces are issued on a first-come-first-served basis.

Making an Inca Trail trek booking:

(1) Try to make a trek reservation as far ahead as possible. Reservations can be made as far in advance as 365 days! This allows overseas tour groups selling tour packages to reserve spaces for their groups well in advance. For couples and small groups we recommend that you try to make your Inca Trail booking between five and eight weeks in advance. You will need to send your name, nationality, age, passport number and whether you are a student to the tour operator at the time of booking. The tour operator will ask you to pay a trek deposit.

(2) If you have booked a private trek then the tour operator will submit your reservation details to the UGM and pay 50% of your entrance fee to guarantee a space. The remaining 50% has to be paid 15 days prior to trek departure. Once your trek permits have been purchased you cannot change the details (name, passport number, departure date or add additional group members or extra porters to the group). If you have booked a group/pool service trek, the tour operator faces a considerable dilemma. As described above, he has to submit the names and passport numbers of all the group to the UGM and pay 50% of all the entrance fees. The earlier he submits the list of names the better are their chances of being allocated spaces. However once he has submitted the list he cannot add any additional names to it. So the longer the tour operator waits to achieve a larger, more economical group size, the chances of being allocated spaces on the Inca Trail reduces. Many tour operators who have waited too long to "close" their groups have been caught out in 2004 and when they went to purchase the trek permits there were no spaces left!

(3) Reservations made between 30 and 5 days in advance are considered late bookings and will be issued on a first come first served basis.

(4) The implications of this booking system for tour operators and tourists are just beginning to be seen. A tour operator, that in the past has managed to find 16 persons to make up group may now be lucky to find 6 or 7 persons 30 days in advance. If the tour operator waits longer he risks the chance that there won't be space available. His options are to combine with other companies in the same situation (more likely) or to depart with a small group and probably lose money. In the year 2004 we are likely to see many companies forge alliances and combine their groups together well in advance. Very few tour operators will be left actually operating the trek and next year we will probably see companies dramatically raise their prices (again!) and depart with much smaller groups. Anyone just turning up in Cusco hoping to make a last minute reservation is likely to be disappointed particularly during the busy month of May to September.

4. Independent Trekkers: Since June 2001 trekking independently on the Inca Trail has been prohibited. Regulations state that each trekker must be accompanied on the Inca Trail by a professionally qualified guide. Trying to organize a guide in advance is difficult since tour agencies just aren't interested in hiring out their guides. If you wait until you arrive in Cusco to arrange a guide then you are liable to be left with only the worst guides and the possibility that all the spaces on the trail are fully booked. If you want to get away from it all and trek on your own then there are some excellent alternative treks such as Lares Valley, Choquequirao or Ausangate. If you do manage to organize a guide for the Inca Trail in advance you cannot have a group greater than 7 persons and you can't employ the services of other trekking staff such as cooks or porters.

5. Maximum Group Size: The maximum allowable group size is 16 persons. For groups larger than 8 persons there must be 2 guides. (on the shorter 2 day trek there must be 2 guides for groups larger than 07 persons)

6. Porters Working Conditions In April 2002 a new law was introduced to set minimum wages for all porters on the Inca Trail. This has followed years of exploitation. This wage is about US\$10 per day. It may not seem a lot but wages are all relative to living costs. To put things in perspective teachers earn between US\$150 and US\$200 per month. Even though the law exists many of the tour operators are still not respecting it. In 2002 the maximum weight that a porter can carry was limited to 25kg (20kg load + 5kg personal items). Many porters have their weight checked by government officials at the start of the trail. Tour Operators receive a fairly heavy fine if they overload their porters and if they persist they can have their license removed temporarily or even permanently. These two regulations have dramatically improved the porters working conditions. However some of the cheaper companies do not provide their porters with adequate meals or sleeping accommodation. When deciding on a tour company ask them what their policy is towards looking after their porters.

6. Inca Trail Closure during the month of February: The Inca Trail will be closed each year during the month of February to allow conservation projects to be undertaken as well as giving the vegetation a chance to recover. This is a good month to close the trail since it is also the wettest month of the year. Machu Picchu and the shorter 2-day trail will remain open as usual.

7. Licensed trek operators: The UGM (Unidad de Gestion Machu Picchu) is the regulatory body responsible for controlling access to Machu Picchu and the Inca Trail. In order to operate the Inca Trail companies must meet certain basic requirements proving that they have professional guides and good camping equipment, radio communications and emergency first aid including oxygen. The license to operate the Inca Trail is renewed each year in early March. Due to legal problems the Government has found it hard to withdraw licenses from poor performing companies and every tour operator that has satisfied the basic requirements has been given a license. Legislation is likely to be introduced during this year to give more power to the Ministry of Tourism and allow them to fine, suspend or close badly performing companies.

Additional useful Information

When you arrive in Peru:

- (1) Never buy tours or treks from salespersons at airports or from taxi drivers.
- (2) Never buy tours or treks from salespersons at airports or from taxi drivers. (We can't emphasize this point enough)
- (3) Never reveal your name and personal details to anyone unless it is really necessary. Don't give away information about your tour itinerary to anyone that doesn't need to know. When you book your flights or when you arrive at your hotel in Lima people may ask you which trekking company you have booked with. When you arrive in Cusco you may be surprised to find someone waiting for you at the airport with a sign with your name on it. This person may claim to be from the trekking company and kindly offer to take you to your hotel where they will ask you to pay the trek balance! Yes you've guessed it, someone from Lima phoned them through your details and flight times, and the person who met you at the airport wasn't working for the trekking company at all! whoops! Where did that money go so quickly? Always pay the balance of the trek in the office of the trekking company.
- (4) Always pay for your trek in the office of the tour operator (I've said it again) and obtain a written receipt. Ensure that the name of the office is actually written outside of the office and that the receipt has the same name as the company. Never pay money to people who pick you up at the airport.
- (5) Try to avoid "too good to be true" offers. A cheap tour price usually means a cheap service. An unbelievably cheap price usually means no service at all!

Problems with service? If you have paid for a trek and the service promised doesn't materialize then you can take your complaint to a government tourist protection body called INDECOPI. Just mentioning their name is usually enough to frighten a company into taking your complaint seriously. However your complaint should first be brought to the attention of the guide during the trek so it gives him/her opportunity to sort the problem out. If things don't improve then ask to see the manager in the office when you return. It helps if you have a receipt with the name and address of the office and a list of what was included in the trek. It also helps if you bought the trek with a company in Cusco and not in Lima or some other part of Peru. INDECOPI have an office in the main plaza in Cusco. Don't go to them unless the complaint is serious and you have given the company the opportunity to sort it out first.

Information updated: 21 May 2004