

# THE APOLOBAMBA TREK VS THE INCA TRAIL

*The masterwork of the Inca Empire is an enormous 22,530-km (14,000-mile) network of roads built eight centuries ago. Trekkers have thoroughly tramped the 40-km (25-mile) section leading to Machu Picchu – it's time to discover the rest of the route*

## NEED TO KNOW



**LOCATION** The Cordillera Apolobamba is in western Bolivia, north of Lake Titicaca and near the Peruvian border.

**VISITORS PER YEAR** Even the most popular trek in the area is undertaken by fewer than 500 people every year.

**CLIMATE** You're in the tropics, but at this elevation it's chilly all year, with sub-arctic conditions higher up.

Once the largest nation on earth, the Inca Empire stretched for 4,000 km (2,500 miles) along South America's Andean backbone. Its ancient highways, many of which cross mountain passes over 5,000 m (16,000 ft) high, were superbly successful in nurturing trade and communications throughout the far-flung empire. If you long to explore this ancient road network without the crowds of the Inca Trail, then head to Bolivia's Cordillera Apolobamba, which will lead you across high terrain and into the remarkably unchanged world of today's Inca descendants.

## FORGET THE INCA TRAIL?

**THE BUILD-UP** Peru's legendary Inca Trail starts in the Sacred Valley of the Urubamba river and culminates with the descent into the magnificent ruins of Machu Picchu. There is some outstanding Andean scenery and mountainous jungle trekking along the way, but the major draw is Machu Picchu.

**THE LETDOWN** Now so heavily travelled that you need a reservation months in advance just to get your foot on the path, the trail is overrun with as many tour guides and operators as hikers, and its camp sites are crowded and dirty – hardly a wilderness experience. The constant influx has led the government to impose a limit of 400 visitors per day and hefty entrance fees.

**GOING ANYWAY?** Consider a day-long trek to Machu Picchu beginning at Kilometer 104 on the railway line. You'll pass the breathtaking ruins at Wiñay Wayna and the dramatic Sun Gate along the way, and still have a day or more to explore Machu Picchu. If you opt for this route, you won't have to stay at any of the trail's crowded camp sites.



**ABOVE** A tour group arriving at Machu Picchu on the Inca Trail, Peru.

The Cordillera Apolobamba is a national protected area of Bolivia, established to conserve the natural and cultural diversity of the region. Of the various trekking routes that traverse the range, the most popular is a 5-day trek connecting the villages of Curva and Pelechuco, through Andean highlands where the Kallawayas, a group of traditional healers who performed brain surgery 1,000 years ago and were the first in the world to use penicillin and quinine, still practise their healing craft and rituals.

After leaving the picturesque hilltop village of Curva, views of Akamani, the sacred mountain of the Kallawayas, loom large. From here the elevation of the trek stays almost entirely above 4,000 m (13,125 ft) and the stunning mountain views are accompanied by beautiful waterfalls and glacial lakes. Domesticated alpacas and llamas graze the high grasslands and sightings of wild vicuñas, viscachas and condors are expected. Elusive pumas and spectacled bears still roam the most remote regions of the Apolobamba range. The settlement at Jatumpampa, inhabited by three families and their sheep, alpacas and horses, is a convenient

stopover where trekkers can catch trout for their supper barehanded in the Atumpampa river.

Although this 115-km (71-mile) trek can be tackled in either direction, the south-to-north option offers great views that improve daily and passes that increase in elevation, with the Sunchuli pass, the highest of the whole trek at 5,060 m (16,600 ft), coming near the end of the journey. Soon after this you'll come to the village of Pelechuco, which was founded in 1560 by Jesuit missionaries and still relies on small-scale gold-mining as its economic base. While most guides treat Pelechuco as the end of the trek, another hour on to Agua Blanca will take you to the ruins of Huatara and a comfortable hostel for the final night. Although the trek covers wild and remote terrain, the route is well marked and promoted in sufficient detail that it can be done independently. But for a small additional cost, you can arrange to have a well-informed local guide and an *arriero* (muleteer) to tend to the pack animals. Using these local guides, who operate under the auspices of the park, also provides needed employment and economic benefit to the isolated communities of the Cordillera Apolobamba.

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### Getting There and Around

From La Paz, a bus runs three times a week on a 12-hour trip to the Curva starting point and returns daily from Pelechuco. A private 4WD vehicle and driver can also be arranged in La Paz at a significantly higher cost.

### Where to Stay

Community-run hostels in Lagavilla (10 minutes on foot from Curva) and Agua Blanca (an hour on foot from Pelechuco) offer simple, comfortable dormitory accommodation, hot showers and meals. Neither hostel has a website or requires a reservation, so just pitch up if you need a bed for the night.

### Where to Eat

Your most rewarding meal will come at the end of a trek in front of the fireplace at the Agua Blanca hostel. The menu depends on what arrives by bus, but generally includes llama or lamb.

### When to Go

Trekking is great here at any time of year, but the mildest, driest weather is from January to April and in October and November.

### Budget per Day for Two

Less than \$40 including a guide, pack burros, accommodation and transport to and from La Paz.

### Website

[www.trekapolobamba.com](http://www.trekapolobamba.com)



**MAIN IMAGE** The snowcapped peaks of the Cordillera Apolobamba. **BELOW (left to right)** The village of Curva shrouded in mist; indigenous Kallawayas women; vicuñas on a mountain slope; Cordillera Apolobamba.

