Destino Perú
EL MUNDO ES TUYO

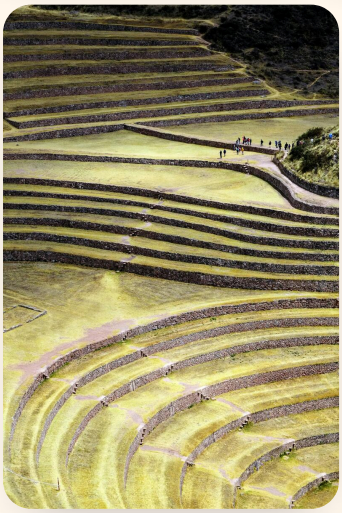
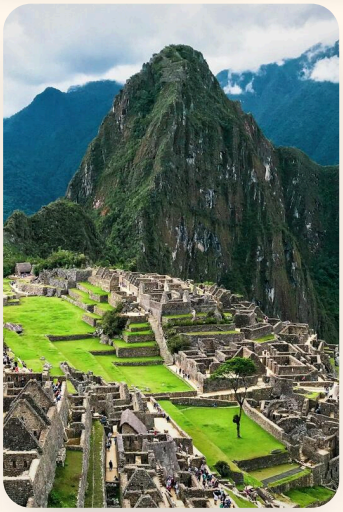
CUSCO · SACRED VALLEY · MACHU PICCHU

Altitude in Cusco & Machu Picchu

How to avoid soroche and enjoy the Andes from day one

Cusco sits at 3,399 m. Most travellers feel the thin air for a day or two and then feel fine. This guide explains what to expect, how high each stop really is, and the simple plan that keeps soroche small.

Symptoms & timeline | Altitude of every stop | Prevention plan | When to see a doctor



SOROCHE

What altitude sickness is

Above about 2,500 m each breath carries less oxygen. The body adapts on its own, but it needs a few days. Until it does, many people get a mild form of **acute mountain sickness**, called **soroche** in Peru. It is common, it is usually mild, and it passes.

WHERE IT STARTS
From about 2,500 m. Cusco (3,399 m) and Puno (3,827 m) are well above that line.

WHO GETS IT
Anyone. Fitness does not protect you; going up too fast is the main cause.

WHEN IT APPEARS
Usually 6 to 24 hours after arriving, often during the first night.

HOW LONG IT LASTS
Mild soroche usually eases in 1 to 3 days if you do not go higher.

1. **The first hours**
   Shortness of breath on stairs, a faster heartbeat, a slight light-headedness. Normal at altitude, not a sign of illness.
2. **The first night and day**
   This is when soroche shows: a headache, tiredness, less appetite or nausea, and light, broken sleep.
3. **Days 2 and 3**
   With rest, water and an easy pace, most people feel clearly better. Walking uphill is still slow, and that is fine.
4. **From day 3 or 4**
   You are acclimatised to that height and ready for more: a long day of walking, or a higher excursion.



Cusco · 3,399 m: take the first afternoon slowly



The Sacred Valley, about 500 m lower: the easy first stop

Not medical advice. This guide is general travel information. If you have a heart or lung condition, are pregnant, or take regular medication, check with your doctor before travelling to altitude.

HOW HIGH

The altitude of each stop

Machu Picchu is actually **lower than Cusco**, and so is the Sacred Valley. That is the key to a gentle start. What matters most is where you **sleep**: a day trip higher is fine once you have slept a few nights at altitude.

Common stops, lowest to highest

PLACE	ALTITUDE	HOW IT FEELS
Lima	Sea level	No effect
Arequipa	2,335 m	Mild
Aguas Calientes	≈ 2,040 m	Mild
Machu Picchu	2,430 m	Mild
Ollantaytambo	2,792 m	Mild
Sacred Valley (Urubamba)	≈ 2,870 m	Mild
Cusco	3,399 m	Noticeable
Chivay (Colca Canyon)	≈ 3,640 m	Noticeable
Puno · Lake Titicaca	3,827 m	Noticeable
Humantay Lake	≈ 4,200 m	High · day trip
Patapampa pass (Arequipa–Colca road)	≈ 4,900 m	Very high · short stop
Vinicunca · Rainbow Mountain	≈ 5,000 m	Very high · day trip

Altitudes rounded; town figures are for the centre. Vinicunca: the viewpoint where most visitors stop is about 5,000 m; the summit is given as 5,200 m.



Sacred Valley · ≈ 2,800–2,900 m: the gentle place to start



Vinicunca · ≈ 5,000 m: save it for day 4 or later

PREVENTION

The plan that keeps soroche small

GO UP GENTLY: THE ORDER WE RECOMMEND

1. **Fly to Cusco**
   Do not stay: drive straight down
2. **Sacred Valley**
   2 nights at ≈ 2,800 m
3. **Machu Picchu**
   Lower still, an easy visit
4. **Cusco, then higher**
   Acclimatised for 3,400 m and above

Drink water

The air is dry and you breathe faster, so you lose more water. Sip regularly through the day; pale urine is a good sign.

Try coca tea

Mate de coca is the Andean custom and many travellers find it soothing. Enjoy it there; do not take coca leaves home, they are illegal in Europe.

No alcohol the first day

Alcohol dehydrates and makes the first night's sleep worse. Leave the pisco sour for day two or three.

Eat light

Smaller meals, rich in carbohydrates (rice, potatoes, soups) are easier to digest at altitude than heavy dinners.

Rest on arrival

Take the first afternoon slowly: a short walk, a nap, an early night. Hurrying up stairs is the classic mistake.

Sun and cold

The sun burns fast at altitude and nights are cold. Sunscreen, a hat and warm layers help you feel well too.

Going higher, or trekking? Once above 3,000 m, the usual rule is to sleep no more than about 500 m higher each night, with a rest day every three or four days. On the Inca Trail or Salkantay, start after two or three nights in Cusco or the Sacred Valley.

Medication

Acetazolamide (Diamox) can help prevent soroche, but it is a prescription medicine with side effects: take it **only on your doctor's advice**. For a mild headache, ordinary paracetamol or ibuprofen usually helps.

Oxygen

Many hotels in Cusco and Puno have oxygen for guests, and good tour vehicles to high places carry it. It relieves symptoms quickly, but it does not replace rest or going down if you feel unwell.

SAFETY

Normal, or time to see a doctor?

Normal soroche

- Mild headache that eases with rest or paracetamol
- Breathless when walking uphill
- Tiredness, less appetite, poor sleep
- Getting better day by day

See a doctor now

- Breathless **at rest**, a wet cough or chest tightness
- Severe headache that medicine does not touch, or vomiting
- Confusion, unusual drowsiness, walking unsteadily
- Symptoms getting worse instead of better

The red-flag signs can mean fluid on the lungs (HAPE) or the brain (HACE). They are rare, but serious. The treatment is to go down, even a few hundred metres, and get medical help; oxygen helps on the way. Never go higher with symptoms. Cusco has clinics used to treating travellers, and your guide knows where they are.

Travel insurance

Choose a policy that covers medical care and evacuation **at altitude**, and treks if you plan one (Inca Trail, Salkantay, Rainbow Mountain). Some policies set a height limit: check it is above 5,000 m.

How we plan your trip

We start low in the Sacred Valley, keep the first day easy, place Humantay or Rainbow Mountain after a few nights at altitude, and go up gradually (Arequipa, Colca, then Puno) when the route allows. Tell us about any health concern and we adapt.



Plan a trip that acclimatises with you

Tell us your dates and what you want to see: we build the route so the altitude comes gently. Ask us for a quote.

WhatsApp ES +34 644 389 992

WhatsApp PE (+51) 964 086 480

info@destinoperu.net

destinoperu.net/travel-guide/altitude/

General travel information following common travel-medicine guidance (CDC Yellow Book, NHS), not medical advice. Altitudes rounded, checked on 23 October 2026. Photos from Wikimedia Commons, see destinoperu.net.