

Visitor Management at Machu Picchu: Managing a World Heritage Icon Under Pressure

Introduction to the Site

Machu Picchu, a 15th-century Inca citadel perched at approximately 2,500 metres in the Peruvian Andes, is one of the world's most iconic archaeological sites. Inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, it attracts roughly 1.6 million visitors annually and serves as the cornerstone of Peru's tourism economy.

Visitor Management Challenges

Peru's Ministry of Culture has established a daily visitor cap of 4,500 during low season and 5,600 during high season. Tickets are sold through the state-run platform [TuBoleto.cultura.pe](https://tuboleta.cultura.pe), with visitors required to follow designated circuits.

However, a 2026 audit by Peru's Comptroller General revealed systemic failures in enforcement. Between August 2024 and December 2025, over 91,000 visitors entered without being counted against capacity. Several categories of entrants bypassed the registration system entirely: Cusco residents entering through free Sunday admission and an agreement with regional authorities, delegations of Peruvian school students, visitors arriving via the Inca Trail Network, and tour guides. An internal document even declared that guide entries "do not affect visitor capacity," a position the audit found lacked technical or legal basis. On peak days, excesses reached 1,138 visitors (20 October 2024) and 1,040 (20 April 2025). UNESCO expressed concern over current visitor levels at its 2025 World Heritage Committee session.

Potential Impacts

On the Site: Auditors inspecting the three tourist circuits documented wear on original flooring, loss of surface coverage, erosion of pre-Hispanic platform surfaces, and degradation of stone stairways from heavy foot traffic. The Comptroller's Office warned that overcapacity has caused "progressive deterioration" of the sanctuary, posing a threat to conservation and even risking loss of UNESCO World Heritage status.

On the Local Community: The town of Machu Picchu Pueblo (Aguas Calientes) has experienced rising costs and tensions over tourism revenue distribution. In September 2025, protests over bus concession contracts blocked railway access, stranding visitors and exposing structural conflicts between tourism operators and residents.

On Visitor Experience: The anticipated sense of discovery and tranquillity is increasingly undermined by congestion on narrow site pathways, diminishing the quality of the experience that draws millions to the citadel each year.

Machu Picchu's predicament illustrates a global heritage management paradox: when visitor numbers become an economic lifeline, technical failures in capacity management are not merely administrative oversights but a test of governance will.