

PREPARING FOR YOUR INCA TRAIL HIKING EXPERIENCE

by Elizabeth Smith published in USA Today

The popular Inca Trail hike, which culminates at the spectacular Machu Picchu Incan ruins, is a 30-mile hike through the Andes Mountains. The hike takes place at high altitude, topping out at around 13,750 feet above sea level. Along the trail, the terrain itself is challenging, and the altitude makes breathing more difficult and the physical effort more strenuous. In order to make hiking at elevation more comfortable and less exhausting, it is important to train both physically and mentally before your trip to Peru.

Step 1

Build your aerobic fitness. If you aren't already participating in regular aerobic exercise, start a training program as far in advance of the Inca Trail trip as possible. Anything that elevates the heart rate for a sustained period of time will do: running, step aerobics and swimming are all good options. According to Mountain Travel Sobek, "The level of fitness needed for a trekking adventure requires regular aerobic exercise for at least one hour 4-5 times a week." The earlier you begin an exercise regimen, the more time your heart and lungs will have to get stronger and more efficient, which is what you want when you're hiking at altitude.

Step 2

Train for strength, focusing on the legs and core. The muscles most obviously used during a hike on the Inca trail are those in the legs, but the core is also important for maintaining form and stabilizing your body. Because the trail is rocky and uneven in many places and requires the use of more muscle groups than traditional exercise, choose a training program that focuses on developing the full range of leg and core muscles. To balance out your conditioning work, add in some arm, back, and shoulder exercises. One good program is the Body Results regimen for hiking, trekking and backpacking.

Step 3

Practice hiking with a weighted pack. Although most Inca Trail hiking groups will have porters to carry large bags (our AJ trip does provide porters), you will need to carry a day pack. An important part of training is to load a full day pack -- or a larger pack for even greater benefit -- and hike up any hill you can find. In the summer, ski hills are a good choice. The Inca Trail Reservations website recommends hiking in the boots you will wear on the Inca Trail to break them in.

Step 4

Do some backcountry hiking. One of the challenges of a multi-day hike is the mental aspect of being on your feet for days at a time, away from computers, cell phones and television. To get an idea of the effects of strenuous physical exertion combined with the mental impact of being separated from civilization, plan to do one or two backcountry hikes before your Inca Trail trip. Spend at least one night on the trail, and plan a route that involves significant uphill hiking. If you head into the Inca Trail hike with an understanding of what to expect, it will be less of a shock to your system.

Step 5

Acclimatize to the elevation. The Inca Trail hike takes place high in the Andes Mountains and it is important to allow your body to get used to the thinner air before starting the hike. All trekkers should plan to spend three days in Cuzco before the trek to acclimatize. In addition, spending time at altitude before you head to Peru will allow you to become familiar with your body's specific reactions, which is crucial to avoiding severe complications due to altitude sickness. According to Britain's National Health Service, the symptoms of altitude sickness begin to manifest themselves between 8,000 and 12,000 feet above sea level. If at all possible, plan a weekend trip or two to a high-elevation location and be as active as possible.