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Best Sacred Valley Hikes for Baby Boomers

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"Way up there?" I asked Silver Ballón, our guide, who was pointing to the seemingly vertical 13,000 ft. summit.

"Don't worry. You don't have to go all the way up. There are amazing views all along the way." he replied.

I immediately thought it was a trick. And it was, but the very best kind.

Few places inspire people to hike – or dream about hiking – as the Sacred Valley of the Incas. The most famous hike, the Inca Trail is a multi-day arduous trek, with each

day ending at a camp site.

I'd seen a multitude of photos depicting stunning mountain vistas, but like most Baby Boomers, my backpacking and camping days were over, and gladly so. But I was not about to cross Machu Picchu and other Inca sites off my bucket list, so I found AdventureSmith Explorations, a small group eco-touring company that specializes in custom trips to Peru, including my [7-day Sacred Valley and Lares Adventure to Machu Picchu](#). I could choose from an easy, moderate, or extreme hike with a local guide during the day, and stay in a luxury lodge at night. Sound perfect? It was!

Right from the beginning, Silver demonstrated a keen assessment of our small group of Baby Boomer women – our desired itinerary and our level of fitness. Along with taking us to local villages to see real-time weaving, shopping in festive markets, and eating pachamanca – meat and potatoes cooked underground with hot stones – Silver created a daily hiking experience that perfectly suited our abilities. Well, maybe pushed us a little out of our comfort zone, but in a way that enabled us to embrace Peru most memorably.

And Silver's trick? Knowing how much Alison and I love our Instagram photo ops, he'd led us up some pretty steep paths, some of which had sections of roughly hewn and uneven stone steps. When we arrived at one of several viewpoints, he'd stop for us to rest and have water. But then he'd take our cameras and we'd go into auto-mode...you know, the Instagram jumps, the shot from the back looking at the scenery, the pretend-you're walking shot, etc. Our whole group would inevitably end up screeching with laughter, and the result was physical and emotional re-charge to continue higher.

"I never knew you were supposed to take pictures of your back," said Anne, who we nicknamed "the Aussie Gazelle" for her hiking prowess. Anne isn't on Instagram or Facebook, so we gave her a pass.

Some of the hikes were challenging, not because of the length of time, but because of the extreme altitude and steepness of the climb. But we did them all, and I believe anyone in relatively good health could do the same, taking as many stops as needed.

Here are hikes not to be missed for Baby Boomers in the Sacred Valley, from Cusco to Machu Picchu.

1. Ruins of Sacsayhuaman (elevation 12,142)

The city of Cusco is cradled by several Inca ruins, the most impressive of which is Sacsayhuamán. At an altitude of 12,142, the fortress which overlooks the city was thought to be impregnable, but Spanish conquistadors charged uphill and in an epic battle, defeated the Inca army. I can attest to what an extraordinary feat that must have been. Just climbing the multitude of steps to get to the top for the panorama left me breathless, gasping for air, and unable to talk (a rarity to say the least) on several occasions.

2. Pisac Architectural Site (elevation 11,500 ft.)

One of the most scenic Inca ruins in the Sacred Valley, the ruins at Pisac are a large array of terraces, remains of an ancient city, and jaw-dropping vistas. It was a misty day with very few hikers in sight. We trudged along a pressed dirt path with a rudimentary wooden rail due to the steep drop-off. I could understand why; the views along the way were mesmerizing and distracted from looking at the path beneath my feet. The landscape gave way to mammoth agricultural terraces gracing the side of the mountain, and then a rocky path led to the ruins of an Inca village of stone buildings and more impressive views.



3. Maras Salt Mines (elevation 11,089)

Getting to the salt mines was the easiest hike. Starting from the colonial village of Chinchero, this was our only downhill hike. It was an enjoyable couple of hours with incredible views all along the way. The path led directly to the Maras salt mines, used since Incan times. Exceedingly salty spring water is funneled into hand-built troughs, where the water eventually evaporates, leaving 100% natural unrefined salt in its place. We had seen bags of this salt in the marketplace, so it was fascinating to see where the natural process takes place.

4. Ancasmarca (elevation 13,000 ft.)

This was perhaps my favorite hike. Aside from our little band, there was not another soul in sight. Although the ruins are not as impressive as some other sights, the panoramic views are unparalleled. Built into the mountainside are remains of circular stone structures that the Incas used for storage houses. As you get closer to the top, the path is stepped and the incline increases until you feel the burn – in your thighs and your lungs. Silver offered us some coca leaves to chew on, for "energy and altitude sickness." I was the only taker, however they were so bitter I spit them out when he wasn't looking.

At this height, the cliff drops were precarious – open and unprotected. One of our group, who had a fear of heights, had to stop partially up and wait for us. That's how steep it was.

"Just up at that next landing, the views are even better," said Silver. Truth be told, he said that several times. He was right though. The 360° views were impressive.

We spent a lot of time at the very top taking photos (read catching our breath).

5. Huacahuasi Waterfall (elevation 12,585 ft.)

From our lodge perched atop a steep ledge, we hiked down into the village of Huacahuasi where we interacted with the village children. We were invited into one of the humble farmhouses where a village woman told us about her daily life, heritage, and culture. From there we embarked on an easy but scenic hike, about 2 hours, to a set of waterfalls. I was ahead of the rest of the group, and as I rounded the path, I was surprised to be joined by a herd of alpacas who were grazing directly next to the path. They were just as curious about me as I was about them!

6. Part of the Inca Trail

It came as a surprise when Silver announced one morning that we would be hiking a portion of the Inca Trail. I was elated! Seeing that I was not willing to do the multi-day hike and camping of the “official” Inca Trail, I didn’t think I’d have a chance to walk in the footsteps of the Incas of old. The morning mist soon turned into a bone-chilling rain, but I didn’t care. The scenic path swath through the towering mountains was stunning. We walked on Inca stones, crossed several creeks, past lush terraced hillsides, and through heavenly-smelling eucalyptus forests, and stone bridges.

7. Ollantaytambo (elevation 9,100 ft.)

The quaint pre-Columbian town of Ollantaytambo is one of the best-preserved and most picturesque in Peru. It’s a labyrinth of narrow cobblestone alleys, sitting in the shadow of the towering Inca fortress ruins and agricultural terraces that wrap around the mountainside. The temple at the top was constructed from massive stones fit together without mortar.

It was pouring down rain the morning of our hike up to the top of the ruins, so two of our group of four opted out. I told Silver I probably wouldn’t go all the way to the top, but just part way to get a closer look and see the views.

Snuggled against the drops in my hooded raincoat, I climbed step after step and struggled to pull myself up some of the gigantic stone steps. Because the stones were slippery, I was focused on the path directly in front of me.

“You made it – this is the top!” said Silver, with Aussie Gazelle right beside him. I’m not sure how long they’d waited for me – I was distracted by the vista of the ancient Inca city below and Ollantaytambo village beyond that.

8. Machu Picchu

Naturally, the pièce de résistance to hiking in Peru is the magnificent Machu Picchu. It’s the reason for my trip. The first ten minutes are a killer – a nearly vertical climb to the money shot. Yes, that iconic shot you see in all the travel magazines. And it’s even more magnificent in person.



Hiking beyond that first unforgettable landing, we got to the second spectacular viewpoint. Only this one had the added attraction of wild (but acclimated to humans) llamas. Just when I thought the photo ops couldn’t get any better!

The hike through Machu Picchu takes around three hours, and with the new regulations, you must do it with a local guide. There is a portion of the Inca trail right inside the ruins, and a multitude of interesting spots in the

lower section of the citadel. Visitors can also do separate hikes to the Sun Gate and Huayna Picchu – the mountain that towers over the citadel.

About the Author



[Patti Morrow](#) is a freelance travel writer and founder of the award-winning international blog **Luggage and Lipstick** and the southern travel blog **Gone to Carolinas**. *TripAdvisor* called her one of the “[20 Baby Boomer Travel Bloggers Having More Fun Than Millennials](#)” and she was named one of the “[Top 35 Travel Blogs](#)” in the world.

She is also the star of the upcoming TV series “[Destination Takeover](#)” which is scheduled to premiere in the next few months.

Patti is the author of the book “*Girls Go Solo: Tips for Women Traveling Alone*,” and has over 150 bylines in 40 print and online publications, including *The Huffington Post*, *International Living Magazine*, *Washington Post Sunday Travel*, *Travel Girl*, *Travel Play Live Magazine*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. She has traveled extensively through six continents looking for fabulous destinations, exotic beaches, and adventure activities for her Baby Boomer tribe.