

Prompted by Megan Youngmee's recent publication, *The Day I Walked Into Machu Picchu Without a Ticket* (October 12, 2025), I have chosen to inscribe the following reflection—originally written in longhand, now updated, and drawn from a shared pilgrimage undertaken by Mother Teresa of Calcutta and myself on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1994. In light of *current* reports, it appears that little, if any, substantive progress has been made in the intervening years.

Shall we all pray for a genuine regeneration about which I have long written and published?

Part I of III: Summary — Machu Picchu's Nature

In 1994, Machu Picchu stood as a living threshold—where Inca architecture, ecological sanctity, and spiritual resonance converged. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it faced mounting pressures from tourism, infrastructure, and environmental threats. The sanctuary's dual soul—stone and forest—was tested by arrival and encroachment, yet it endured as a breathing ecology of memory. Each stone held its place by intention, not mortar. Machu Picchu invited not control, but reverence—asking its stewards to shift from consumption to communion, and to honor the site as a ceremonial axis beyond time:

My narrative for Part I of III

In the high cradle of the Andes, where stone breathes and cloud listens, Machu Picchu stood in 1994 not merely as a ruin, but as a living threshold—an altar of altitude where the Inca spirit whispered through lichen and light. It was a year of reckoning, a moment suspended between reverence and risk, as the world's gaze grew heavier and the sanctuary's silence more fragile.

The citadel, carved with celestial precision, had long been a ceremonial axis—where architecture aligned with solstice and stairways ascended not just terrain, but myth. Yet by 1994, the sacred geometry was shadowed by the weight of arrival: tourists in growing numbers traced the same paths once reserved for ritual procession, and the mountain began to echo with footsteps not always attuned to its pulse.

UNESCO had already named it a World Heritage Site, recognizing both its cultural and ecological sanctity. But designation alone could not shield it. The sanctuary's dual soul—stone and forest—faced encroachment. Infrastructure projects loomed like uninvited guests: power lines, dams, and urban sprawl threatened to fracture the corridor between past and presence. Fires licked at its edges. Inventories of flora and fauna remained incomplete, as if the sanctuary itself resisted being catalogued, preferring to remain partially veiled.

And yet, Machu Picchu endured—not as a monument, but as a breathing ecology of memory. Bromeliads clung to terraces like votive offerings. Spectacled bears moved through the cloud forest with the discretion of monks. The site’s spiritual architecture—its Intihuatana stone, its Temple of the Sun—remained intact, not just physically, but ceremonially. Each stone held its place not by mortar, but by intention.

In 1994, Machu Picchu was not merely visited—it was tested. It asked of its stewards a deeper listening, a slower gaze. It invited the world to move from consumption to communion. And in that invitation, it offered a lesson: that sanctuaries are not preserved by fences or funds alone, but by the dignity of approach.

To walk Machu Picchu in 1994 was to enter a corridor of thresholds—between empire and erosion, ritual and rush, silence and spectacle. It was to be reminded that some places do not belong to time, but to ceremony. And that the true nature of stewardship is not control, but reverence.

Part II of III: Summary — Machu Picchu’s Economics

In 1994, Machu Picchu was both a sacred sanctuary and a vital economic engine for Peru. Tourism surged, transforming local livelihoods and generating substantial revenue, yet infrastructure lagged and stewardship faltered. The site faced mounting pressures from mass visitation, uneven profit distribution, and ecological threats. UNESCO raised concerns over the lack of a management plan, warning that preservation was at risk. Machu Picchu became a paradox—where spiritual reverence funded secular progress, and each visitor marked both a blessing and a burden. It stood as a marketplace of meaning, demanding balance between memory and monetization

My narrative for Part II of III

By 1994, Machu Picchu had become more than a ceremonial relic—it was a cornerstone of Peru’s tourism economy, a site where spiritual reverence and fiscal necessity met in uneasy dialogue. The Inca citadel, once hidden in cloud and myth, now drew tens of thousands of visitors annually, each arrival a footstep in the ledger of national recovery.

Tourism, the new tributary, flowed into the Sacred Valley with increasing force. Local communities, once sustained by subsistence agriculture and ancestral rituals, began to pivot toward hospitality, guiding, and artisanal commerce. The railway to Aguas Calientes, once a lifeline for pilgrims, became a conduit for economic transformation. Hotels, eateries, and tour agencies emerged like orchids after rain—fragile, beautiful, and dependent on the seasonality of global attention.

Yet this economic bloom came with thorns. **The Peruvian state, burdened by debt and destabilized by the Shining Path insurgency in the previous decade**, had withdrawn from direct investment in tourism infrastructure. In its place, grassroots entrepreneurship and foreign backpackers reshaped the region's fiscal landscape. Adventure tourism—trekking, hiking, and spiritual retreats—became the new currency of exchange, often bypassing traditional channels and challenging regulatory oversight.

UNESCO's concern in 1994 was not just cultural, but economic. The site's integrity was threatened by massification: too many visitors, too few controls. The lack of a comprehensive management plan meant that tourism revenue, while substantial, risked being unevenly distributed and unsustainably extracted². Infrastructure projects—dams, power lines, urban expansion—were proposed in the name of development, yet they imperiled the sanctuary's ecological and spiritual balance².

Still, Machu Picchu remained a paradox: **a sacred site funding secular progress**, a ruin whose stones paid for roads, schools, and civic pride. It was a place where the past financed the future, and where every ticket sold was both a gift and a gamble.

- In 1994, to walk Machu Picchu was to enter an economy of memory—where reverence was monetized, and preservation depended on the very forces that threatened it. The sanctuary stood not just as a monument, but as a marketplace of meaning, asking its stewards to balance the ledger with care.

Part III of Part III Summary — Individual Daily Income

In 1994, local workers at Machu Picchu—guides, porters, artisans, and hospitality staff—earned between \$10 and \$25 USD per day, depending on role, season, and tourist access. These modest incomes were vital in a recovering Peruvian economy, though disparities persisted, with foreign operators often claiming the bulk of profits. For Quechua-speaking stewards, each dollar was a thread in the sanctuary's economic tapestry—an exchange marked by resilience, reverence, and uneven reward

My narrative of Part III of III

Beneath the grandeur of the Inca citadel and the rising tide of global tourism, the daily lives of Machu Picchu's human stewards unfolded in quiet economic rhythms. For local workers—guides, porters, cooks, textile vendors, and hostel keepers—the sanctuary was not just a monument, but a livelihood.

- **Local guides**, often multilingual and deeply knowledgeable, earned between *\$15 and \$25 USD per day*, depending on group size and language fluency. Those affiliated with foreign tour operators could earn more, though often with less autonomy.
- **Porters and cooks** supporting trekking routes like the Inca Trail typically earned *\$10 to \$20 USD daily*, with income fluctuating based on season and tipping culture.
- **Artisans and vendors**, selling textiles, carvings, and coca tea in Aguas Calientes or Cusco markets, earned *\$5 to \$15 USD per day*, often relying on volume and tourist generosity.
- **Hostel and guesthouse staff**, many of whom were family members of owners, earned modest wages—sometimes *\$10 to \$20 USD daily*, supplemented by meals or barter.

These earnings, while modest by international standards, were significant in a Peruvian economy still recovering from hyperinflation and internal conflict. Yet disparities persisted: foreign-owned agencies often captured the lion's share of profits, while Quechua-speaking locals—keepers of ancestral knowledge—received only fragments.

The sanctuary's economic breath was uneven but vital. Each dollar earned was a thread in the tapestry of survival, each transaction a quiet ceremony of exchange. In 1994, Machu Picchu's daily economy was not just measured in revenue, but in resilience.

Now updated to include Hyperlinks to:

Megan's story:

https://open.substack.com/pub/meganyoungmee/p/the-day-i-walked-into-machu-picchu?r=3ea8ga&utm_medium=ios

—

My reflection as stated above:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1G1Kag96SStC_wUN84weEnjM2sYvpMUm08HtNAqMWa/vw/edit?usp=drivesdk
