

MALDE



MONTAÑA

High in the mountains are some of the world's most beautiful places, but one bout of bad altitude sickness could ruin your trip altogether. Here, **Elizabeth Lavis**, avid mountain-goer and some-time sufferer of altitude sickness, advises on how to avoid it all together and what to do if you start feeling ill.





Taking a break in typical high mountain weather

"You're gonna want to sit down." My fellow traveler and new friend Freya spoke these words as she turned from the stove, gesturing to a chair at the exact moment a wave of exhaustion hit me. My legs and butt turned to jelly. I plopped into the seat behind me, gratefully taking the steaming mug from her hands, confused by my body's strange and sudden reaction.

I was fresh off the flight from Lima to Cusco, soaking in the warm, homey vibes of Alfons and Merry's shared Airbnb kitchen. It was my first day in the Sacred Valley, 3999m above sea level, and my first experience with altitude sickness. It wouldn't be the last. In the next several months I spent hiking through the Peruvian and Bolivian Andes, I'd become well acquainted with mal de montaña.

Cusco is the logical and lovely jumping-off point for hiking in the Peruvian Andes, thanks to its relative proximity to Machu Picchu, which sits at a humbler 2430m, and Vinicunca, more commonly known as the Rainbow Mountain, a pastel-streaked peak that's 5200m high. The Sacred Valley, also known as Urubamba Valley, is 2800m above sea level on average and affords hikers access to phenomenal spots like Ollantayambo, Mora, and Pisac- and all of their Incan ruins in exchange for headaches, dizziness, and shortness of breath, or if you're very lucky, nothing at all.

The High-Altitude Gamble

Altitude sickness occurs when the body is exposed to lower amounts of oxygen than it's used to. It manifests in various disagreeable ways, such as fatigue, nausea, and headaches. While there are certain factors that make some people more prone to altitude sickness, including pre-existing conditions like COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease), comparably healthy and fit people can and do develop it.

Unfortunately, there's no surefire way of knowing when or where it will hit. I was perfectly fine the first time I went to Bogota, Colombia, 2582m above sea level. The second time, I had a low-grade headache and couldn't concentrate for the better part of the day.

It's essential to distinguish between your garden-variety altitude sickness and something more serious. If you're still feeling sick, dizzy, confused, or suffering from severe headaches a few days after you arrive, it's best to get checked out.

Altitude sickness that escalates to HAPE, High Altitude Pulmonary Edema, or HACE, High Altitude Cerebral Edema, is very dangerous. Signs of HACE include being unable to move, walk, or physically function properly, hallucinations, and mental confusion. HAPE comes with extreme tiredness and difficulty breathing. Both of these conditions require immediate medical attention. If you have even the slightest inkling that you're experiencing a more advanced form of altitude sickness, seek help right away.

HAPE and HACE aside, mild altitude sickness is



Who's writing

Elizabeth Lavis is a travel journalist and author whose adventures at altitude include multi-day treks in the Upper Caucasus and Andes mountains. Her sea-level adventures include kayaking in the Pacific, jungle trekking, rock climbing, and surfing poorly. She's lived on three continents and currently calls Tbilisi, Georgia, home. If she's not scrambling up her next peak, you can find her relaxing and listening to podcasts with her two cats, Mika and Dink.

Crampons are necessary for the ice wall on Huayna Potosi



a fickle and insidious unpleasantness, but there are a few factors that you can mitigate to make it less likely to happen to you. Or, at least experience fewer side effects.

Acclimatization is Key

The most important thing you can do is to follow Freya's advice and sit down. Since you don't know how your body will react to a brave new altitude, cut yourself some slack and save the serious trekking until after you've properly adjusted to the oxygen levels, at least for the first two days. This type of acclimatization is especially important if you're on multi-day treks or if you're planning on quickly ascending to a higher altitude on one-day treks. Don't plan to climb Vinicunca the day after you fly into Cusco. You won't make it, and you'll be throwing up out of the colectivo (small shared Peruvian shuttle buses) on the road. Trust me. I've seen it.

Although acclimatization is one of the best ways to get your body used to higher altitudes, it's also important to follow the hike high, sleep low method of climbing when you're in the mountains. Aim to sleep at least 300 meters lower than the highest point you climbed to that day. I climbed Huayna Potosi, the 6088m ice mountain towering above La Paz, Bolivia, without following this advice and wound up severely sick at high camp. If you find yourself with a bout of serious altitude sickness in the mountains, or worse, HACE or HAPE, get to a lower elevation and seek help as quickly as possible.

Limit the Booze and Coffee

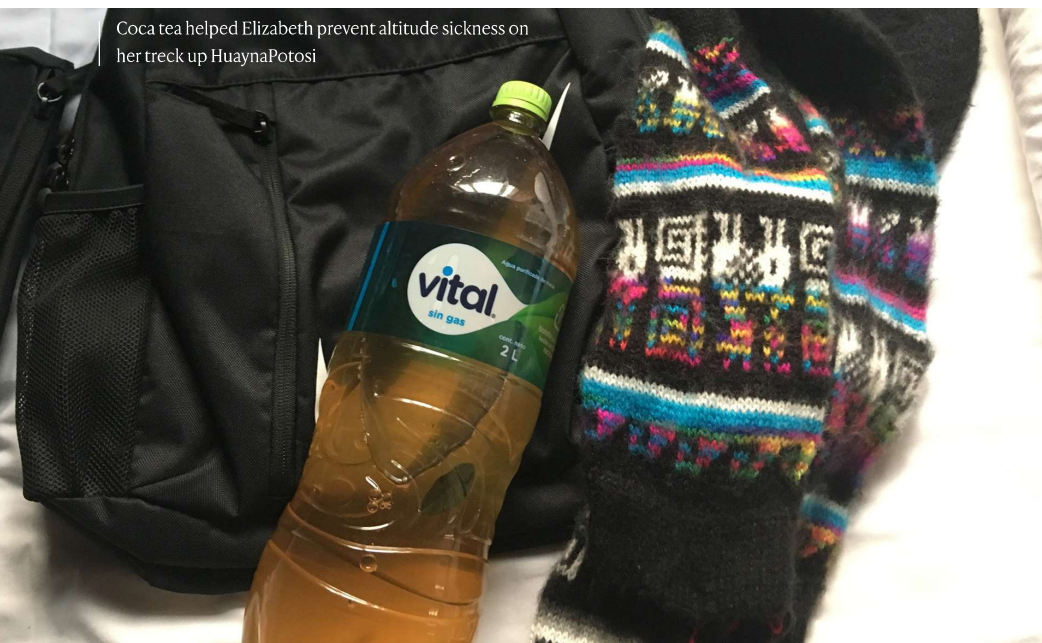
Reducing or eliminating your alcohol consumption at higher altitudes is a smart way to stay hydrated. It's also a good way to know if you're starting to get sick, as hangovers can come on strong with headaches, fatigue, and confusion. I've also found that drinking even one beer at higher altitudes hits me harder than it does closer to sea level, so I cut out alcohol altogether if I'm above 3000m.

Caffeine is another notorious dehydrator. Cut back your coffee consumption, or at least balance it with more water than you think you'll realistically need. One vice you can enthusiastically embrace in the mountains is dark chocolate. The sugar will give you a boost on the trail and between 30 minutes to an hour of extra energy, and the chocolate itself can help tame altitude sickness thanks to the flavonoids.

Sip the Tea

You'll find coca tea from Iquitos to La Paz, and it's a fine idea to sip plenty of it if you want to prevent altitude sickness the tried-and-true Incan way. There is one huge caveat that comes with coca tea, though; it's produced from the same leaves that are used to make cocaine. It will not get you high and it's not dangerous, but trace amounts of coca could show up on a drug test for up to three days

Coca tea helped Elizabeth prevent altitude sickness on her trek up HuaynaPotosi



Close to the high summit of Huayna Potosi



after you've ingested it. If you're concerned about this, stick to water.

If you're not, embrace the tea. People have been drinking it for centuries and you can get it literally everywhere. You'll also find bags of coca leaves in any market. Some hikers prefer to chew on these as they trek along. Personally, I find them bitter, but it's another option to stave off altitude sickness naturally.

If You Get Sick

If you get a mild form of altitude sickness, rest, hydration, and an over-the-counter medicine like Diamox can help you get back on your feet. You can also take paracetamol, which may be called acetaminophen in some parts of the world. You can find it at most pharmacies, and in Latin America's major metropolitan areas like Cusco, Lima, La Paz or Arequipa, the pharmacist will likely speak some English.

Severe altitude sickness, HACE, or HAPE require medical attention. If your symptoms don't go away, especially after rest, hydration, and over-the-counter medicine, it's wise to see a doctor. If you're not in a city, you can always take any number of buses, trains, vans, colectivos, or taxis to get to the closest area and seek help. While it's undeniably annoying to postpone your next trek or even cut your vacation a bit short, it's better to err on the side of professional care.

Adventuring at altitude can be a thrilling experience as long as you take the proper care to recognize, prevent, and treat altitude sickness. That way, you can enjoy every peak, grassy glen, clandestine waterfall, panoramic viewpoint, and fascinating ruin with a clear head and a steady stride. [w](#)

Below

Huayna Potosi in the background of a high altitude graveyard

Right

The llamas are always ready to greet you at one of South America's most popular climbs; Macchu Picchu

