

Peru Travel Story, Nov. 2006

Background

A land of extremes, Peru consists of dry coastal desert, Amazon jungle in the Northeast, and a mountain range with peaks reaching over 22,000 feet. The highly diverse American Indians were not united into an Inca empire until the early 1400s. Only 100 years later were they conquered by the Spanish and subjugated. While the Incas were forced to become Catholics, many if not most, still practice their worship of the Sun and Mother Earth, speak Quechua, and practice Inca customs. The Spanish destroyed almost all of the buildings they could find, carrying huge amounts of gold back to Spain. Yet in the last 100 years archeologists have uncovered cities like Machu Picchu, hundreds of intact mummies in the dessert, and numerous artifacts of the Inca culture. Ironically the Inca knowledge was in some respects more advanced than the Europeans that conquered them.

Lima

Lima holds almost a third of Peru's 30 million people, which gives the city a crowded feeling. While most of the city may seem like any other large city in South America, the museums and cathedrals of the central city offer a unique mixture of Spanish heritage and Inca culture. This photo, taken by Evan from our hotel, shows Plaza Grau and the surrounding area.

Not far away is Lima's main square, Plaza Mayor, which includes the Lima Cathedral and the Presidential Palace. While we were wandering around the Plaza taking pictures, the president came out to listen to the band that was performing for the changing of the guard. We didn't see the president clearly but the band was more interesting anyway.



At Evan's request we went to the Museo de la Inquisicion about six blocks away from the Plaza. The museum sits on the location that prisoners were held and tortured during the 18th Century by the Spanish colonialists. People (native Peruvians and Jews) were tortured until they confessed to heresy or blasphemy, otherwise they were executed. Here you can see a model of the rack or stretching table intended to expand one's thinking.



Next we visited the Museo Nacional de Arqueología which arguably has the best collection of Inca and pre-Inca artifacts. I found the mummies of greatest interest. The mummies survived as much as 1,000 years not because of any chemicals but because they were buried in the extremely dry desert regions. Upon death

the bodies were put into a fetal position, dressed in favorite clothes and then wrapped with in tapestries along with jewelry and pots. These bundles then were buried with the wealthy buried much deeper than the poorer people. They buried their dead in fetal positions because they believed that people were re-born in the underworld after death. Thus life continued in the Pachamama (Mother Earth). The Inca believed in two other planes of life: life as we know it on the ground, and life in the heavens.

Miraflores is the inner suburb of Lima known for its concentration of high cost homes, high brow shopping, and expensive hotels. It reminded me of Miami Beach, but one notable difference is that most houses and apartment buildings have iron gates and windows covered with iron grates. We also saw quite a few police and guards in the vicinity.

Near the Marriott Hotel in Miraflores we discovered the Larcomar shopping center sitting at the top of huge cliffs hanging over the Pacific Ocean. Restaurants perched on the edge of cliffs with panoramic views made one quickly forget about shopping. A handful of para sailors swept back and forth over the shopping area. Occasionally they came very close and reminded us of annoying seagulls looking for food.

We toured Lima the day before the nationwide election of city mayors and learned that Peru outlaws the sale of alcoholic drinks for 2 days before an election through the day after. Next year will be the presidential elections, and every two years after that. Elections are a major event because everyone is required to vote. If some one does not vote, he or she has to pay a tax of about \$35, which is a lot of money for Peruvians. Another interesting election law is that members of the military are not allowed to vote. It surely would make sense to transfer their election system up here.

Cusco

From sea level in Lima we flew by a Peruvian airline to Cusco, which stands at 11,000 in the Andes. So as to minimize the effects of high altitude, we did not stay the first night in Cusco but drove about an hour down into the Sacred Valley to stay in the little town of Urubamba. Before leaving Cusco we walked around the main square, the Plaza de Armas, enjoying the people outfitted in brightly colored Inca clothing. During the 15th

and 16th Centuries Cusco was the capitol of the Inca Empire of some 13 million people. Cusco is now the center of tourism for the mountains of Peru. All Inca Trail tours (walking or running) and all tours of the Sacred Valley start in Cusco. With about one million people it is one of the biggest cities of Peru.

From Cusco to Machu Picchu is 70 miles, and in that general area are five mountain ranges with year-round glaciers. Peaks in two places rise over 20,000 feet. In the rainy season deep snow collects on these mountains adding to the beautiful of the unique area.



City of Cusco

The Sacred Valley

The Urubamba River valley rests just north of Cusco and runs for about 50 miles along the River. The elevation of the valley drops from 1 to 2 thousand feet below Cusco, getting progressively lower as it nears to Machu Picchu and eventually the Amazon.

The Incas named the valley as sacred because it had such great fertility for growing corn, potatoes, and other crops. They developed over 100 varieties of corn and nearly that many types of potatoes. The people still continue to grow this huge variety of corn and potatoes.



The rich soil along the river did not supply enough food for the millions of people, so the Incas and the people before them developed the science of terrace farming. Using stones and rich soil carried long distances they built walls and terraces for planting up the sides of mountains. In addition, they engineered ingenious irrigation systems for capturing and

distributing the water from melting snow. Their highly sophisticated farming systems allowed them to feed millions of the Inca people.

Not all the soil in the Sacred Valley is fertile. They have their share of hard clay and sand. From such soil they manufactured large, red adobe bricks to build houses, and some continue to build their houses in the same way today. In higher elevations and where stones are available, they use small rocks for walls. Some of the mud walls last only a few years, others have stood for over 500 years. The roofs of the Inca period were built

with wood poles held together with strips of leather. On top of this frame they laid dried grasses. Some of the farmers still build their homes this way.

The people of the Andes have been domesticating llamas for over 5,000 years, using them for clothing, meat, shelter, fertilizer, and beasts of burden. The Spanish brought donkeys with them in the 1,500s and now they are very common. Apparently the donkeys have replaced the llamas and alpacas as beasts of burden. We actually saw very few llamas and alpacas anywhere in Peru.



Man Weaving Cloth from Llama or Alpaca Wool



It was not uncommon to see the indigent people making clothing. They (both men and women) would sit by the hour weaving colorful garments and tapestries. Incidentally the happy face on the right is an alpaca because its hair is curly and nose is short.

Sacsayhuaman

In the mountains overlooking Cusco are the ruins of Sacsayhuaman (pronounced sexy woman). The site is thought to have been a military base for as many as 10,000 soldiers as well as a ceremonial amphitheater. They still hold an annual festival-pageant here called the Inti Raymi festival when a “king” on his throne is carried out of a rock chamber. The stone work here is unbelievable.

Some of the rocks are 11 feet high and an estimated 300 tons. These were transported somehow over a distance of 20 miles. The rocks were shaped such that they fit tightly together without mortar. They were really interesting but we thought this picture of Evan with local ladies was more interesting.



Pisac

Few people visiting the Sacred Valley miss the easterly town of Pisac. It is famous for its market and for the vast Inca ruins nearby. The ruins consist of two communities, one a sacred city and the other a military fortress. In between are an unusually large number of agricultural terraces. The woman and baby in the picture were standing near the former fortress high above the valley and the town of Pisac below.



After seeing the ruins we hung around the market awhile to do a little shopping. I bought a cane for walking because my left leg was very painful from too much gardening, and what I would later learn was a bad case of shingles. Nancy found some silver goodies and Evan wandered around taking pictures and

smiling as the young women gaped at his blond dreads.

Moray

One very special, but quiet spot in the Sacred Valley is the agricultural experimental station at *Moray*. As you can see by the picture, the terraces were built on the side of a semi-arid mountain slope. The person at the bottom is Evan; he said it was more humid and hot down there.



The temperature varied considerably from the lower to the upper terraces. Likewise the humidity changed as well. The beautifully designed circles for cultivation allowed the

Incas to experiment in order to find the optimum locations to grow various types of crops. Their understanding of the effects of temperature, humidity, and irrigation may have surpassed the rest of the world.

Maras Salt-Flats



Another ingenious operation nearby Moray is the salt production valley called the Salineras de Maras. In the picture you can see little pools or pans where salty spring water sits while the salt settles. Built during Inca days this operation is still used for the production of high-quality salt. The

network of channels for routing the incoming spring water among thousands of little pools is most impressive. In the photo notice the irrigation channel just between us and the salt.

Ollantaytambo

This town sits in the western end of the Sacred Valley and is the last town in the Valley that can be accessed by road. The remainder of the journey to Machu Picchu must to be made by foot or by train. Ollantaytambo (pronounced oh-yahn-tay-tambo) is a favorite place to visit, not just for its train station, but for its ruins and for its ambiance as an old Inca town. These women in the picture below have just completed a pilgrimage to the temple-fortress at the top of the mountain.

The town sits in a beautiful spot at the base of a high mountain gorge. At the top of the ruins on one side of the gorge are the ruins of a temple-fortress. On the other side are stone terraces and a rock called Tunupa, which is a 140 meter face carved into the mountain. The face is reminiscent of the presidents of Mount Rushmore, but about 8 times bigger. It is incredible to imagine how the Incas of 600 years ago could have done such a feat.



The Sacred Trail

There are actually a number of sacred trails, but the most popular trail goes from a point near Ollantaytambo to the top of the Machu Picchu Mountain. This trail of 50 km (31 miles) takes about 4 days of walking or 18 hours of running in a guided tour. On an average day about 400 walkers and runners reach the end of the Trail at Machu Picchu. Because the Trail was getting damaged, Sacred Trail walkers (and runners) now must have an official guide.

When walking, a tour makes a camp each night. The trail mostly consists of walking or running up and down steep rocky terrain. It includes four mountain passes, one of which is over 16,000 elevation. In the Inca period the Trail was the basis of their postal service. Apparently it was considered sacred because it reached toward the heavens and was their only means of distance communication and transport. Now a Sacred Trail race is held every year; the record so far is slightly less than 4 hours, which is truly amazing.

Aguas Calientes

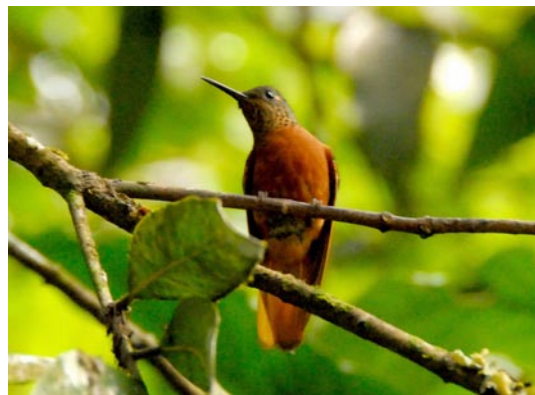
About 1,000 people a day arrive in the Machu Picchu area by train. The train stops in the tiny town of Aguas Calientes, and then one can take a 20 minute bus ride to the entrance to Machu Picchu. We took the train and spent two nights in Aguas Calientes to make sure we got to the ruins when it was not raining.



Aguas Calientes has no roads for cars as the only way to get there is by foot or by train. The town is not at all typical because it emerged only to take advantage of (I meant serve) the incoming tourists. Nonetheless, it was fun to walk around and see the people and their little shops. Our most favorite place there by far was the jungle garden associated with the Inkaterra Hotel.

We wandered around for two hours taking pictures of the orchids and other flowers and watching the hummingbirds. Here is a picture of a hummingbird, of which there were quite a few esoteric varieties.

Machu Picchu and Aguas Calientes rest on the boundary of the desert and the high jungle



although Machu Picchu is about 8,500 feet and Aguas Calientes 7,000. This combination of environmental conditions yields flowers and plants unlike anywhere else in the world.

Machu Picchu



This is arguably the most popular destination in South America for both tourists and pilgrims. Machu Picchu is an ancient Inca city at the top of steep mountain peaks. Both the dramatic mountains and the aesthetically arranged ruins have a dreamlike quality to them. The natural site

itself captivates visitors but the principle attraction is that none of the city had been destroyed by the Spanish. It is located in such a remote place that the Spanish never found it. It was not discovered by the modern world until 1911.

We arrived at Machu Picchu at 6 am with low clouds and mist covering parts of the mountain. This only added to the mysteriousness of what used to be a sacred city of about 1,000 people. The ancient city had buildings on both sides of the mountain peak. This photograph shows many of the buildings on the north side of the mountain with the Huayna Picchu mountain peak in the back drop.

Evan scrambled up this mountain peak and back in about an hour but Nancy and I were already sore from mountain hiking. In the picture above you can see green tinted terraces, some of which were for agriculture. The other side of the city had far more terraces. Several clusters of buildings seem to have been industrial areas for manufacturing. Some of the stones were carved to function as sun dials and as devices that marked the solstices. It is generally agreed that Inca had a calendar based on the observation of both the Sun and the Moon, and their relationship to the stars. Names of 12 lunar months are recorded, as well as their association with festivities of the agricultural cycle.

The sacredness of the ancient city is revealed by several temples, one is the Temple of the Sun, another a temple to worship the moon, and another was the Temple of the Condor, which symbolizes the realm of the heavens. Machu Picchu also seemed to be something like a retreat for the Inca royalty. The residences at the top of the mountain are relatively large and the further down the mountain side one goes the smaller they get.

An Aside on Stress and Health Care in the Peruvian Highlands

A few days before our trip I sprained my leg while planting trees and other heavy yard work. My knee, thigh, and knee all felt sore and painful. A small red rash appeared on my knee. On the day before our trip I went to my doctor and he took x-rays, gave me some pain killers and sent me on my way.

By the third day of our trip the red rash covered my entire leg and lower back. My thigh and knee became swollen and intensely painful. I walked with a limp and could only handle stairs very slowly. Finally the pain drove me to seek a doctor. Our hotel in Cusco sent their doctor to see me. He was an internist and seemed very competent. He heard about Nancy's stomach problems and immediately prescribed 7 minutes of oxygen. Her altitude sickness was cured almost instantly.

The doctor quickly determined that I had shingles (Herpes Zoster), which is a virus of the nerves. It attacks adults who have had chickenpox as children because the virus remains dormant for many years, sometimes waking up when one suffers from stress. For several days my leg felt excruciatingly painful. The doctor said that people with the shingles virus report the pain to be like that of rubbing red pepper powder over a cut in the skin. I can't disagree. Now that I'm home, the pain has subsided but is still substantial, especially when I don't take any pain medication. My neurologist here says that the pain might last a few more weeks or even a year. In any event, I sometimes view it as an special opportunity to develop empathy for those suffering from chronic pain.

General Impressions and Final Thoughts on Peru

Peru struck us as a very tourist-friendly country despite its status as a third world country. Not only were the people friendly but the hotels and museums (and their restrooms) were clean. We found the tour guides to be very competent and helpful. Most businesses took US dollars as well as Peru Soles, and the prices of most things are relatively low.



Our five days in Cusco and the Sacred Valley left us in awe of the many remains of the Inca civilization. Ironically most of the remains are rocks. Upon leaving Cusco Nancy remarked that she had seen enough rocks for awhile. It gave us a new perspective on “rocky vacations.” But that is only part of the story. The rocks also help produce great beauty. An especially obvious example of that is the wide variety of flowers that grow wild out of the cracks between the rocks. Here is a sample from Machu Picchu.

The Inca civilization of 600 years ago got a bad reputation for practicing human sacrifice. These sacrifices were made as a token of their prayers to God, who supposedly resided principally in the Sun and the earth, but secondarily in the moon and stars. The human sacrifices were performed in times of stress like famine. Families considered it an honor to donate a child for potential sacrifice because only the most perfect were sacrifices. After hearing this story, I concluded that the Inca's sacrifices were not that much different than our nation's sacrifice of 100s of people to Katrina only because the feds said fixing the New Orleans levees was not important enough to include in the budget. And arguably the Inca's human sacrifices were more humane than the slaughtering of 1,000s of Incas by the Spanish.

To go into the Machu Picchu ruins one must have a guide. We had arranged for a guide in Cusco who went with us on the train and otherwise arranged for our transportation by mini-van. At least 90% of the tourists visit the area in groups of 10 to 30, coming mainly from the EU, the US, and Japan. It was more flexible and convenient to have our own guide, however it took a huge amount of time for me to plan the trip ahead of time. It was especially time consuming because some reservations did not work on the web, so they had to be supplemented by phone calls.

The Andes people are mostly very short but also very strong. A five foot man carried 100 pounds of luggage like it was nothing, but I've never seen a taxi driver or porter do that in the US or Europe. The Inca's ancestors carried backloads of stones and soil for 25 miles to and from Machu Picchu to build the sacred city. Over time they have built up tremendous strength and stamina.

Peru has taught us many things. It was not an easy trip, but we will have many fond memories of Peru for many years to come.



**Little Girl Enjoying Mountain Sun
in Sacred Valley Town of Maras**



**Guinea Pig Asking Not to be Eaten --
(They are a favorite food in Peru)**