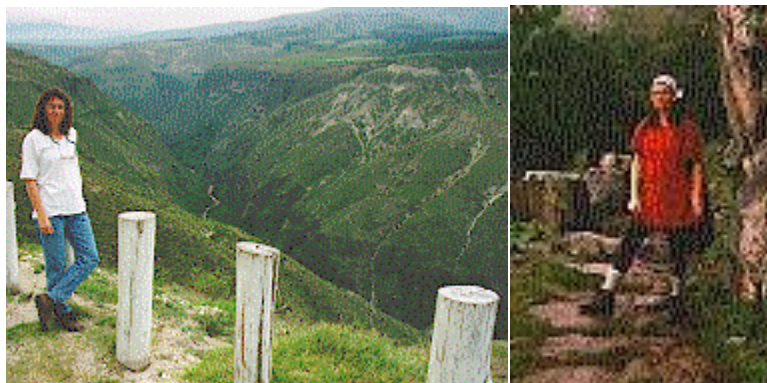


Hiking the Inca Trail



After spending Christmas in Cusco, my husband and I hiked thirty miles along the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. For months we had planned this hike, anticipating a week in the cool

rarefied air of the world's longest mountain range. We envisioned lush vegetation creeping over stone-cut ruins, gentle llamas grazing in mountain meadows, and the Andean condor soaring above the snowcapped peaks.

Because of our limited time, we opted to join an organized trekking group. Such tour arrangements are easy to make in Peru. Travel agents approach you at every airport or train station offering convenient tours. Actually, we met a fairly nice agent in Cusco. Alberto Filipe chauffeured us to our hotel from the airport and arranged for our trek on the Inca Trail, along with our train tickets to Lake Titicaca.

At the same time, Alberto Filipe assured us that the Inca Trail tour would consist of about twelve foreigners. Unfortunately, about thirty-five people from Israel, Germany, Denmark and other European countries joined our group. This surprise soared my blood pressure and by the end of the first day I desperately needed a flask of 100 proof. But we couldn't do much after our van, crammed full of travelers and unkempt porters with profuse body odor and cold sores, dropped us off at the trailhead miles from any town or bus station. We were stuck with the tour but made the best of the situation and hired our own personal porter for about twenty dollars to carry our sleeping bags and knapsacks. The trekking company had their own porters to carry the tents, food, and other supplies.

The thing was, I had grown so anxious about being packed together with so many people that I began yelling at the porter we personally hired because he was adding equipment from the tour group to his pack. I felt we had hired him to carry our things but it seemed the tour group leader simply added him to the rest of his porters. Anyway, I began yelling that he shouldn't take their equipment because my husband was still carrying his heavy knapsack. Our tour guide leader, a short Peruvian man oddly named Teddy, began yelling at me, "These people are a

friendly people. You must learn to be friendly to them” as if I were this big foreign oaf, the ugly American. Well, with thirty-five people silently staring at me, I drew back, longing for that flask even more.

Two major difficulties during the hike, Teddy and rainy weather aside, were the meals and lack of toilet facilities. The tour organized meals for the group, both vegetarian and omnivore, but what they offered rarely fit my strict vegan diet for which I had prearranged. So, this was more of a personal problem which I solved by carrying along my own loaf of whole wheat bread (purchased in Cusco from the Hare Krishna restaurant, Govinda) and Trader Joe's trail mixes and dried fruits. Because of the cold rainy mornings, and scarcity of foliage near our camp, finding a secluded place for toilet use proved cumbersome. With thousands of people hiking the trail each year, this dismal problem is on the increase unless Peru starts regulating the amount of people using the trail and providing sanitary facilities. Meanwhile, cemeteries and ruins serve as makeshift toilets. (“you didn't shit in a cemetery, did you?”)

On our first day we arrived at the trailhead by noon and reached camp at sunset. We hiked gradually uphill along the Rio Cusichara, a small stream gushing beside a deep crevice. Along the way, we viewed distant glacial peaks and prickly pear cacti, purple wild flowers and scrub brush similar to Arizona's. We also passed fields of potatoes and quinoa (a tiny aromatic grain native to the region), pastures where sheep grazed, grassy meadows, and thatched sod-brick farmhouses. At about sunset, after precariously crossing a crude and slippery log bridge, we reached our first night's camp at the fork of the Llullucha and Cusichara rivers, in the village of Huayllabamba, at about 9000 feet in elevation.

The tour provided us with flimsy tents which barely withstood the night's downpour. A lot of trekkers woke-up miserably grumpy after finding themselves drenched. For some reason, we were luckier and woke up merely damp.

Our camp spread across a tramped earth plaza near a barn-like shelter and huge garbage pit, just across from a cemetery edging the river valley. During the night, someone prowled around the tents and stole two bottles of water I had purchased from a village kiosk. I had placed these bottles just outside the front door of our tent to make as much room as possible inside. (We had three people crammed in a two-person tent, another surprise.) After discovering my water was gone, I reasoned that either one of the trekkers desperately needed drinking water, or some enterprising villager found himself resale merchandise. In either case, I had read that thieves often prowl around the gringo camps sometimes even slitting tents in search of valuables.

On the second day of the trek, my husband and I hired two scrawny pitiful horses from one of the villagers along the trail. We needed to reserve our energy during the long steep climb to Dead Woman's Pass or Warmiwanusca. During the four-hour climb we spent an hour wandering through a cloud forest where bromeliads dotted moss covered trees like a fantasy forest leading to a Wizard's castle.

Occasionally, my horse plodded up a narrow rocky portion of the trail that uncomfortably rimmed precipitous slopes. In places, the stream and trail merged and I had to dismount and clamber uphill. During these short climbs in the high altitude, each burdensome step took away my breath and pained my chest as if something were pinching the air from me. Ideally, a person should spend two weeks acclimatizing before the trek but that's rarely possible when on a time-limited vacation.

At the same time, most of the young Olympic trekkers in our group hiked up the pass without horses, which amazed me. And some of them even smoked when pausing along the trail. Makes you wonder.

A lot of gringos chewed coca leaves (cocaine is a derivative) or drank the coca tea (coca de mate) which the native Quechua people use for energy and to combat symptoms of high altitude (nausea, headaches, and shortness of breath). I did find the leaves energizing, somewhat like drinking a strong cup of double espresso after going off caffeine for a month, or like chewing a betel nut (Indian pan).

For lunch, about an hour's climb before reaching Dead Woman's Pass, our group stopped beside the Llulluchayoc Stream which tumbled over lichenized rocks and a mossy clearing on its way toward Huayllabamba Village. Behind the village loomed beautiful and majestic snowcapped mountains enshrined in sheer mist. Fortunately, the sun peered out from beneath the clouds during our lunch break and porters hurriedly unfolded everyone's tents and sleeping bags to quickly dry in the high-altitude air.

Because of the rarefied atmosphere, it was necessary to smear large doses of sun block on all exposed skin, especially the lips and nose. Even the hairline part could easily burn so a hat was essential.

The porters along the trail astonished me. Many were mere boys of about fifteen although some were men who looked old but were probably younger than my forty years. They were short and stocky Quechuas who spoke the ancient dialect of the Andes (one spoken by Inca nobility, rather like French was spoken in the English court after the Norman conquest). Using rope, they fastened tarp covered gear on their backs and actually sprinted along the trail uphill and downhill. Many carried the load with a band around their foreheads while holding up the bottom

with their hands. Most wore rubber sandals, possibly made from old tires; their toes and feet were thickly callused and blackened. I never witnessed a porter stumble or move slowly along the trail. They were as sure footed as mountain goats, reaching our camps and lunch sites hours before the most durable tourist trekker among us.

At last, we reached Warmiwanusca at 13,770 feet in elevation. This highest pass on the trail is named after a rock-formations which, from a certain vantage point in the valley, resembles a reclined dead woman. (I never observed this.) From Warmiwanusca we viewed Rio Pacamayo or Sunrise River at the bottom of the steep mountain incline opposite Huayllabamba Village. Above the river, we spotted our first ruins—Runturacay--and more incredible glacial peaks.

Before making the long descent to our camp, we had to leave our horses and their owners, a Quechua couple probably in their twenties who had hiked up to the pass leading the horses along with their two boys of seven and nine and two dogs who happily pranced along the entire way. The handsome and sturdy Quechua woman leading my horse walked without any sign of breathlessness. She had long thick black braids joined together at the small of her back and she wore an alpaca sweater with a knee length fanned skirt, and a felt bowler hat. Here and there, she and her husband who led my husband's horse, exchanged a few casual words in Quechua. No Spanish. I wondered what they were saying and gathered at a few points they were arguing. Before we left them, she asked me for a tip. I happily gave her ten dollars because her work had seemed so strenuous. But I wished the money went to taking better care of the poor animals. Sure, I felt guilty about riding on that scrawny horse's back but I sensed these creatures would be worse off if their owners weren't profiting from tourists.

From Dead Woman's Pass the actual Inca Trail began, that is, the trail the ancient Incas built with stones carefully placed on the path (the Incas had a proclivity for placing stones so close together it's amazing!). The steep descent strained my knees and by the time I reached our camp beside the Rio Pacamayo, in soggy black mud at the valley floor, I was more than ready for the ordeal to end. But we had three more days to go! Despite the rain, which lasted until the next morning, everyone eagerly washed up in the cool narrow stream that swept through tall reeds and thick clumps of grass. Most trekkers used iodine tablets to purify their water but wisely I had brought along a filter.

Early the next morning, through the relentless downpour and wafts of musty smells, we slogged our way down a thick mud bank to some make-shift shelter where our tour group offered us popcorn for breakfast. We could not believe it. Several other tour groups were also hovering under this shelter. In fact, there were so many gringos in my group that I found myself amid another group, thinking it was my group until a rather rude French lady said, as I was helping myself to a cup of instant coffee, "You might ask first." "Oh? You're not in my group?" I innocently asked feeling totally confused until some gallant young man standing by clued me in. "Just drink it," he suggested about the coffee. I did then wandered over to where my husband was picking at a bowl of popcorn.

At this point, I realized that other groups were much better off than ours. They provided their members with instant coffee and coca leaves to chew or they made them the coca de mate tea. And their groups were much smaller than ours, averaging about twelve foreigners.

The trail from Pacamayo river steeply ascended the mountain. Behind the oval-shaped ruins of Runturacay, where some trekkers had pitched tents, stood more snowcaps peering above a veil of clouds. We then had a three hour climb through fog banks to the second pass. Along the

way we passed two glassy vaporizing lakes in a tundra like setting of moss, boulders and lichen. A tight sensation continued to burn in my chest but I was solemnly rewarded on top of the 13,113 foot pass with another spectacular view of Cordillera Vilcabamba--staunch glacial peaks rising amid an ever present wisp of clouds.

Further along the trail we spotted the next set of ruins, Sayacmarca or Dominant Town, perched on a narrow mountain ridge. A steep staircase led to these ruins from where we slogged up another bank to enjoy, while standing on shaky knees because there was no place to sit except in the thick mud, a pasta lunch along with some sweet fruit drink with odd things floating in it (a Quechua drink?).

From Dominant Town, the trail wound through an Inca tunnel, a narrow passage cut from hard granite cliffs, and continued down to Rio Aobambo and on to a slight climb reaching the third pass at 12,136 feet. Here we caught our first glimpse of the brown Urubamba River surging across the valley and bringing power to its inhabitants and mysticism to its visitors.

About three hours from Sayacmarca we reached the ruins of Phuyupatamarca or Town Above the Clouds, at 11,972 feet. Phuyupatamarca featured a series of well-preserved Inca baths where flowing water offered us a place to refresh after sweating for hours under thick plastic ponchos.

Hundreds of steps steeply descended Phuyupatamarca, too narrow in places for the smoking Olympian trekkers to scurry past (although we always made room for the porters once they set out on their rush down the trail, rather like making way for the mule team on a Grand Canyon hike).

In another hour, after an exhausting day, we finally reached the lengthy switchback descent to a hostel and lodge built on the hillside near massive powerlines from the Urubamba

River. This part of the trail seemed almost as long as the rest of the day's hike in part because by now my legs ached from the difficult descents. At each corner of the zigzag, I continually spotted the hostel while noting that it seemed to grow more and more distant the farther I descended.

To keep my soiled, sore, and exhausted body going, I envisioned a comfortable room or at least a dry bunk bed and a hot shower. (Actually, I pictured a Best Western room.) But as expected, the hostel had nothing available because it was swarming with trekkers and porters. In fact, another rude woman, this time an Aussi, asked me, after I wandered into the woman's dorm looking for the front office desk, "What are you doing in here?"

Fortunately, our porters had already set up our tents and I rested and rubbed my sore muscles before heading to the lodge for dinner. And, the lodge had one sit-down toilet that flushed, a treasure everyone relished after days of discomfort along the trail. (Even though it was a rather filthy sight.)

Before retiring to bed, my husband and I passed up our tour group's dinner and went to the lodge restaurant (a mess-hall like place teeming with inquisitive porters and smoking European trekkers enthusiastically discussing their adventure). We wolfed down a few beers and feasted on a plate of oily fries which I couldn't finish and gave what remained to a porter boy hovering over me like a vulture awaiting its turn at the carrion. That night, many trekkers opted to sleep on the dirty concrete floor of the lodge because they were presumably tired of sleeping in damp musty tents.

On day four of the hike, we headed across the valley floor to the Sun Gate or Intipunku which marks the end of the Inca Trail. This point is both the last place trekkers are allowed to camp and it offers the first glimpse of Machu Picchu ruins pillaring in the mist and flanked by green peaks.

Further down the trail past Intipunku we reached agricultural terraces where a lone brown llama with long black lashes adorning large dark eyes was gracefully kneeling and grazing on the grass. We then climbed a long staircase up a hill beside the ruins for another spectacular view of Machu Picchu. On this hill stood the Hut of the Caretaker of the Funerary Rock a restored building with a thatched roof. Here, the Incas purportedly mummified their nobility.

In 1911, Machu Picchu came to the world's attention when American historian Hiram Bingham stumbled on it while searching for the lost city of Vilcabamba, the last Inca stronghold against the devastating Spanish invasion. Because about 80 % of the skeletons found among the ruins were female, Hiram theorized that the site had been a city of chosen women, a virgin convent of some sort.

Most theories about the ruins are mere speculations because the Incas didn't leave any written documents describing the site. Occasionally, a Spaniard wrote down his biased opinion of the Inca civilization and the Incas themselves left these elaborate knotted strings called quipus which haven't been fully interpreted and that's about the extent of our knowledge of the Incas.

On the way to the ticket gate, we passed a series of connected ceremonial baths cascading through the ruins along a flight of stairs. Near the baths stood the round Temple of the Sun with its finely crafted stone masonry (more stones so close together, it's amazing!). First, we had to purchase our tickets at the ticket house near the Machu Picchu Hotel which is outside the park beside the road where tour buses arrive. Coming from the Inca Trail, we had already entered the park, but guards check everyone wandering the ruins and steeply fined anyone without a ticket. In other words, we had to exit the park, purchase our tickets and re-enter to wander among the ruins.

Ticket in hand, I walked through a maze-like entrance, followed a foot path, and entered the main area of Machu Picchu. Agricultural terraces lay among the ruins and six white llamas grazed on the green lawn of the Central Plaza. Already a few tourists were wandering about, most from the Inca Trail and a few overnight guests at the hotel. Some large German tourists were taking pictures of the llamas; a man was posing with them, pretending to jump on the back of one. The llamas continued to graze, ignoring the idiocy around them.

After the long arduous hike, I didn't care to spend my time listening to our tour guide Teddy recite everything he had learned about the ruins. How could it matter what some academic has interpreted this or that to be? I would not spend my time sitting in those ruins analyzing every stone structure. Rather, I was high in the mountains, the Andes, and had to be alone to experience its serenity and absorb what Machu Picchu really had to offer.

I walked alone beyond the llamas to sit among the ancient stonework and view the plaza and terraced slopes. After finding a perfect place at the far end of the plaza, away from tour groups and crowds, I deeply inhaled the cool mountain air. This is my reward, I thought, this beautiful sanctuary high in the Andes. As I breathed in the reassuring solitude, I could hear songbirds in the nearby forest. The llamas continued to graze before me, unmolested for now. One seemed to look up at me out of curiosity.

I could have sat there all morning. Never exploring any of the ruins. And that would have been all right. My thoughts envisioned a mighty Andean condor, its wings spanning ten feet as it effortlessly soared among the snowcapped Andes above the ruins. My own spirit soared high. I felt so intimately connected to the Earth, not just to the Andes, or anywhere else, but interconnected with the mountains and deserts alike, with the oceans, the animals, as though I were a hub for the life and geology surrounding me.

In about an hour, swarms of tourists invaded the ruins so I returned to the hotel restaurant where I met my husband. Astonishingly, there were no tour buses parked outside the hotel and I learned that the road had washed out in a massive landslide a few days before. Consequently, the tour buses were dropping people off at the bottom of the mountainside and tourists were hiking up to the ruins. None of them had been warned, it seemed, because most wore inappropriate shoes (sandals, heels, or sneakers). When they started their ascent from the bus, they had no clue that the trek up the slope would take three to four hours and that they'd be slogging up a muddy, rocky path, over huge boulders and through thick bristly foliage. A few older tourists had hired boys to hold their hands and help them negotiate the steep climb. Hundreds of travelers couldn't possibly make the climb and had to sit in their buses. I can hardly imagine their disappointment.

As for us, hiking down the mountainside, passing these poor weary tourists was merely a small, though difficult, jaunt after four days on the Inca Trail. At the bottom of the mountain lay the Urubamba River treacherously plunging over boulders and passing mud cliffs on its northward journey to the Amazon.

In the town of Aguas Calientes we were herded aboard a Pullman on the train back to Cusco, along with a frightful number of other gringos rushing for their already assigned seat. It was so chaotic that my husband had to jostle and argue with an obstinate gringo who took his seat and refused to move. This was all we needed after one of the most enduring adventures of our lives.

At midnight, our friend Alberto met us at the Cusco train station and saw us back to our hotel. We meekly mentioned our disappointment in the number of trekkers in our group, because sheer exhaustion prevented us from squeaking out more than a few words.

In retrospect, the trek through the Andes to Machu Picchu stands out as one of the most marvelous experiences of my life. Despite all the drudgery, the sloshing through mud, the achy muscles and breathless climbs, I would do it again although not with a tour group. Instead, I would hire my own porters to carry my food and camping equipment. I would also include in my pack biodegradable toilet paper, mole skin, rain gear, dry socks, wipe-ups, triple antibiotic ointment, and of course a flask of 100 proof. Really, there is nothing as spectacular as being atop the mystical Andes soaring high in the clouds where mighty condors flew in abundance before all the people arrived.