

MACHU PICCHU AND THE INCA TRAIL 2017

In June of 2017 I traveled to the country of Peru to hike one of the Inca Trails to Machu Picchu high up in the Andes and to take an excursion into the Amazon jungle.



After flying to Lima, we took another flight to Cusco, the ancient Inca capital city. The city of half a million people has a distinct Spanish influence, most notably all the clay tile roofs on all of the houses. Cusco is at 11,000 feet in the Andes.



The original city square houses two Catholic churches which date back several hundred years. In the older section of Cusco the streets are narrow and the homes and businesses resemble a European style from the 16th century. Street vendors, mostly women, dress in original costumes. This woman was selling carved gourds; I purchased the owl she is holding. I also paid her extra so I could take this picture since she is so short.

Most of the women wear hats. Men usually do not. Each town has it's own style...the lady above looks like she's wearing a lampshade. The Peruvian people love bright colors.



We learned how yarn is made from Alpaca wool, then dyed with pigments derived from plants and minerals in the Amazon region. Peruvian women are excellent weavers. Many of the woven items are produced in mass and sold to tourists in gift shops like this one all over the country.



There are open street markets in every town with varieties of fruits and vegetables I'd never seen before. Meat is cooked as well, including 'Cuy', the local name for guinea pig. I didn't eat this one, but I did

order it at an upscale restaurant. It's a Peruvian delicacy and has a gamey taste. Picture of guinea pigs being raised in a home for food.



The Incas ruled Peru and the surrounding countries 600-900 years ago. They were defeated by a relatively few Spanish conquistadors in the 1500's who succeeded by killing off the emperor, high priests, and the upper class of their society. The Inca warriors were also no match for the Spanish armor, steel swords, and horses. The Spaniards came for Inca gold and silver, colonial expansion, and to convert the native Indians to Catholicism. In the process they destroyed the Inca empire and their society. Archeological sites of Inca ruins can be found throughout the country, high up in the Andes. This temple and palace complex is called Sacssayhuaman. It is known for its huge stone walls.



Some of the largest chiseled boulders weigh over 50 tons. Stone masons using only bronze tools spent their entire lives shaping and smoothing out quarried rock. It's mystifying how the Inca architects and engineers fit them together so precisely. The unfinished sculptured stones (to the right) have probably remained in place since the Spanish invasion.



This site is known as Moray. It is thought to be an Inca 'experimental' farm, terraced from a sloping ravine at 12,000 feet elevation. Each terrace is filled with topsoil and irrigated underground. Protruding flat slabs of rock serve as ladders to get from one level to the next.



Peru looks beautiful from afar.



However on closer inspection, one can see the poverty of the place.



Many structures remain unfinished. Peru is one of the poorest countries in South America.



Many families have subsistence farms on the side of mountains. Potatoes and corn are the primary crops. One can literally fall out of a garden plot and break a leg. Notice the extensive terracing on this hill.



Our group of 14 hikers trekked the Salkantay trail, one of the several routes collectively known as the 'Inca Trail.' Mt Salkantay is 20,700 feet high and snow-capped year round. We hiked adjacent to this mountain over a 15,000 foot pass.

Hikers must travel with a tour company. Ours was called Culturas Peru Travel Services. This is Marco, our head guide and owner of the company. They provide mule drivers and horses to carry all the gear, cooks to prepare and serve all our meals, and additional guides and porters who set up the campsite each night and cater to our needs.

All we had to do was carry a day pack and just walk, take pictures, and be astonished by the beauty all around us.



We were offered Coca leaves (far right) each day to help alleviate altitude sickness. The leaves can either be chewed or added to hot water to make tea. You can't get a 'cocaine' high from these leaves.

In June it's winter in Peru. Plus we were high in the mountains. Even though we were close to the equator, it's still cold. Daytime highs were in the 40's and 50's, nights were in the 30's. We had to dress appropriately.



On the second day of hiking we headed towards the pass. Two white horses were constantly at our rear in case someone needed assistance due to injury or the altitude. Since I was usually last in line, the guides kept asking if I needed a ride...no way!



We are approaching the pass, known as a 'saddle.' We all made it to the highest point and posed for a group picture.



Our guide knew a local Peruvian Shaman who performed a traditional ceremony for our group to offer solitudes and gifts to the mountain to grant us safe passage and good health on our hike. Each hiker was given a few coca leaves. After a time of meditation, the leaves were placed in a parchment to which colored cloth and other trinkets were added. This was folded up and then the Shaman placed it on each person and said a few words of prayer and blessing. Then the parchment was burned as a gift to the mountain. It must have worked...nothing bad happened to anyone.



This is my favorite picture. The two white horses with our fearless leader (Dave Crooks) crossing over the Salkantay pass.



This is the view behind our campsite on the second morning. The sun rise is just illuminating the mountain's pyramidal point. Awesome!



We then did a long, gradual descent of over 7000 feet, moving from a barren landscape into an area of small shrubs and bushes, and finally into a lush cloud forest. Horses, empty loaded, slowly made their way back to the trail head to pick up gear for another hiking party.



Unusual flowers and orchids were abundant. We saw epiphytes growing on larger trees. It's looking more tropical



Peruvian rural living...notice the solar panels. On our last night we camped at a coffee plantation. The owner took us up the side of the mountain into his grove of small coffee trees where we all got to pick coffee beans. We saw how the skin is removed and the beans are dried. Later that night we all got to roast some dry beans over a wood fire. He then ground them and made up fresh espresso!



The next morning we saw this Starbucks sign on the path.



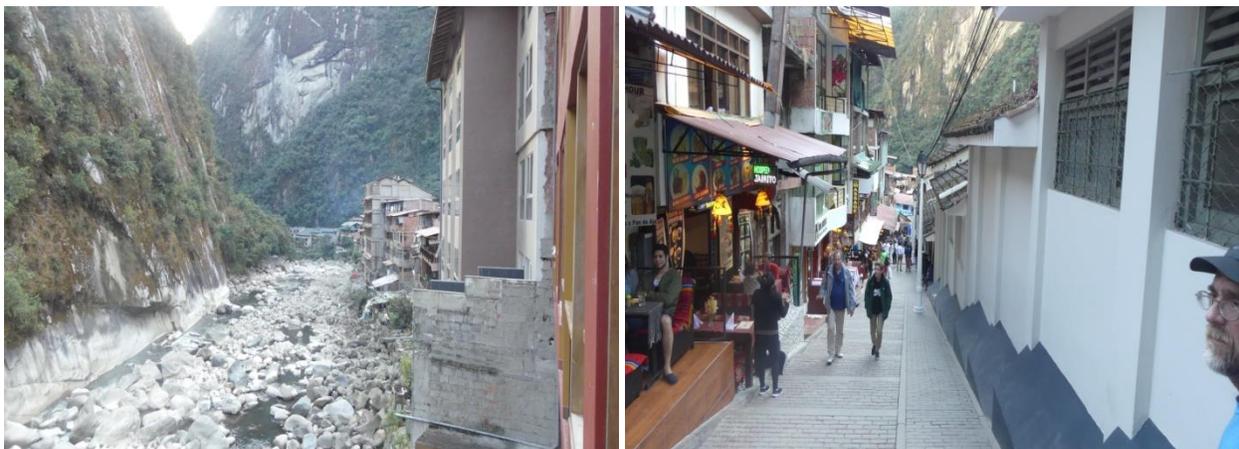
Coffee stands started appearing alongside the trail where the owner would brew fresh coffee, or offer cocoa tea, soft drinks, and water to thirsty hikers.



Our last ascent was up a mountain ridge called Mt Mirador (9450 feet) We had beautiful views down the river valley as we climbed upward. As we descended on the other side, we got our first glimpse of Huayna Picchu, the iconic mountain that sits behind the ruins of Machu Picchu.

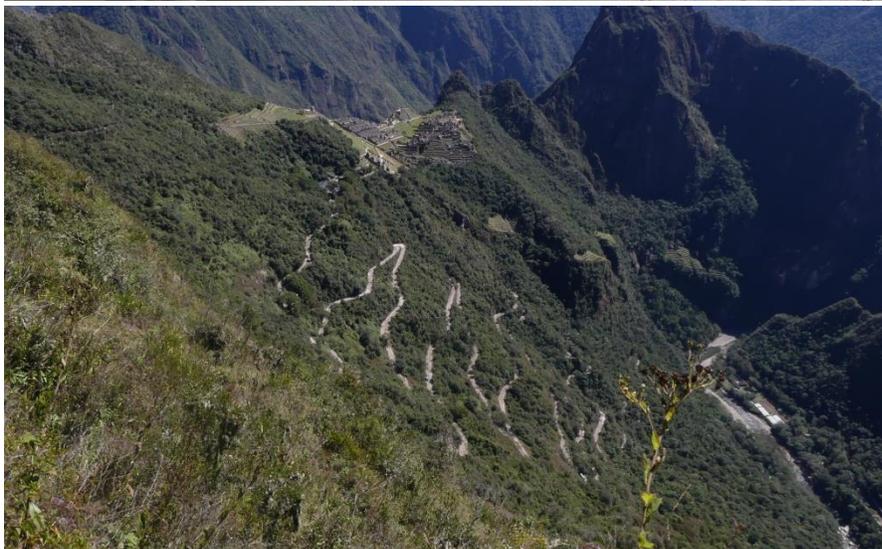


At the bottom of the mountain we crossed over the Urubamba river on a long suspension bridge. Then a mile long walk down a gravel road to a station where we boarded a train that took us to the town of Aguas Calientes. The back side of this town looks shabby and depressing, but the front side is a tourist paradise of nice hotels, restaurants, and endless gift shops. Almost everyone will spend the night here before traveling up to Machu Picchu.





At 6 AM the next morning people start lining up in very long lines to board one of 25 buses that will shuttle tourists to and from the ruins all day long.



Machu Picchu is located on a high ridge 2500 feet above Aguas Calientes. A very curvy, scary road winds up the mountain.



Tourists are unloaded at the entrance gate. As many as 5000 people a day visit the site. It is one of the most popular attractions in South America.



As you enter the ruins, you walk up 75+ tall stone steps to get to the place where this iconic picture can be taken.

Machu Picchu was thought to have been built in the 1400's as an 'estate' for the Inca Emperor, Pachacuti. It was abandoned in the 1500's during the Spanish invasion. Although known locally, it was not known to the Spanish during the colonial period or thereafter. The surrounding cloud forest reclaimed the land, hiding the site for 400 years. It was rediscovered by the explorer and adventurer Hiram Bingham in 1911. The character Indian Jones was based on him.



The surrounding area is enclosed by high mountains covered by cloud forest which even today hinders easy access.

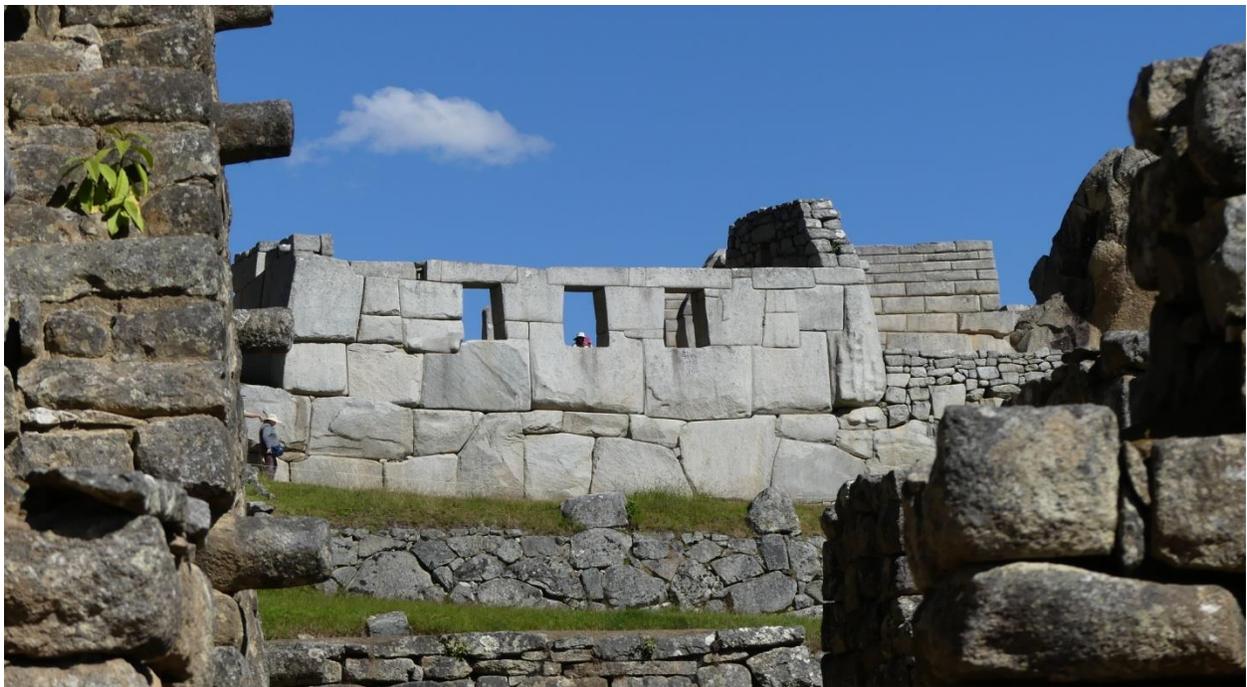


The words Machu Picchu means Old Mountain and actually refers to the peak seen above, that overlooks the site.

Farming, primarily corn and potatoes, was done on hundreds of well constructed terraces, some of which are shown above. They were engineered to allow for good drainage of abundant rainfall and to prevent erosion and landslides on the mountainside. It is thought that no more than 750 people lived here at any one time. Most were probably servants to the emperor and other upper class Incas who were visiting and religious priests.



The central, important buildings (i.e. temples) were constructed using the classical Inca style of polished stone walls of regular shape. This technique is called ashlar, in which blocks of stone are cut to fit tightly together without using mortar. This technique was used to build the temple of three windows, as shown below, although the stone are irregular in shape. Huge rocks used for building construction came from a quarry on site. Servants' quarters (above right) were made using 'rubble masonry' which employs irregularly shaped, smaller stones, which are minimally worked and set in mortar.



We climbed Mt Machu Picchu during our visit. Ancient Inca stone stairways (which have been rebuilt) lead to the summit. There is a panoramic view of the ruins from the top. A little nerve wracking on the way down...no railings and long plummet if you fall.



The Inca Bridge is part of a mountain trail that heads west from Machu Picchu high up in the Andes.



It was built by the Incas as a secret entrance (or exit) for the Inca army. The trail is a stone path, part of which was cut into a cliff face



A twenty foot section is open and bridged by two cut pieces of timbers. When removed, the trail is impassable



The drop from the path by the bridge is 1900 feet straight down. I walked out on the path but held tight to the rope railing!



A trip to Machu Picchu should be on every world traveler's bucket list. This was a fabulous trip

More than half of Peru consists of Amazon rainforest. Manu National Park is one of the largest jungle reserves on the planet. We started our adventure by leaving from Cusco by minibus and driving a day and a half, up, and then down the

Eastern slopes of the Andes, from 13,000 feet elevation to less than 1000 feet. We descended thru cloud forest with lush vegetation. Along the way we stopped at a bird observation area to see the bright orange colored Cock-of-the-Rock, the unofficial national bird of Peru. Our first night we stayed at a very nice lodge (with cabins) that had all the desired amenities. Hummingbirds and other small softbills were flirting all about at the feeders that were set up.

As we continued our drive the next morning on the narrow gravel road, we stopped frequently to look for birds and other creatures....such as this large weasel that was hunting in the river below. The forest alongside the river was looking more and more like a real jungle.

We spotted an Owl Butterfly on the road. Six inches across, it was violet on the top side and brownish on the underside with the large intimidating eye spot.

We finally arrived at our destination...the river Madre de Dios (Mother of God). This is one of several large rivers that will eventually converge and form the Amazon river. Our river transportation was a 40 foot long wooden boat, outfitted with comfortable seats and a canopy overhead. However one literally had to 'walk the plank' to get in and out.

The boat was motorized and came with a crew of two. In addition to Larry Ring, my only traveling companion, we had two guides and a cook. So we were a party of 7.

Much of the tour was by boat. From the Madre de Dios, we eventually arrived at the slightly smaller Manu river, where