

MACHU PICCHU. TO ME IT WAS A BUCKET LIST THING.

A dazzling, six-century old restored city of the Inca Empire.

Located in Peru where the very headwaters of the Amazon River tumble out of the Andes into the Amazonian jungle basin.

Built precariously on a mile-high, knife-like ridge, dropping precipitously thousands of feet into the crashing waters of the river surrounding it on three sides below.

A UNESCO World Heritage site, deemed one of the seven existing wonders of the world, and recently voted Trip Advisor's most beloved tourist site in the world.



No one who has ever seen this site pictured forgets it.



All of that, just in case you were going to ask, “Why was that on your bucket list?”

We were very lucky, at this age and stage, that Anne and I have each other and the mutual interest and ability to make such a trip. Truly serendipitous is that we shared the trip with four-decade long friends, Randy and Cathy Wert, travel-tested by extended backpack, canoe, rafting and skiing expeditions over these decades to be reliably, “muy amable”. They were eager compadres for this one.

In 2000, approximately 400,000 visitors toured Machu Picchu; by 2015, this exceeded 1,000,000 annual tourists. The Peruvian government is now struggling to maintain the integrity of this site, while preserving the huge economic impact which related tourism brings to the country. One can reach the site, and most of its million visitors per year do, via airlines into Cuzco, Peru, then a 5

hour bus and train trip to the base of its Machu Picchu Mountain, and then a 30 minute, very steep and winding shuttle bus to its very entrance.



Descending Warmiwanusca pass, 14,000 ft.

However, limited permits are given by the Peruvian government to about 15,000 visitors per year to trek to Machu Picchu along the trail built 600 years ago by the Incas to connect their capital at Cuzco, to Machu Picchu – a 30 mile trek that beelines through the center of the Andes, crossing mountain passes almost 3 miles high before dropping into this ancient city. The trekkers arrive at Machu Picchu, treading the same stones once trod once by Inca Kings in their arrival.

Once I learned of this approach, I resolved that if I were going to Machu Picchu, I darn sure was going to arrive like the Inca kings did. We thus booked a trek on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, half a year ahead of time to insure we drew some of the very limited permits. Booking through one of the permitted guide services, they

properly perceived we were interested in outdoor adventure, and our 4 day trek was expanded after some discussion to include a day of cross country biking and an overnight raft trip, filled in with 4 days in Cuzco around which our activities would center.

Oh! - And pronouncing the name correctly is critical; note and pronounce each of the double “C”s in “Picchu:” Machu (“Old”) Peek - chew (“Mountain”). Run ‘em together (“peecheu”), and you’ve got a very clear pronunciation of... “Old Penis”. In the Quechua language, of course.

GHOSTS OF THE INCA...

As early as 3500 B.C., before the pyramids were built, before the rise of Rome, about the time of the first civilization in Mesopotamia, civilization manifested itself in the Andes Mountains of

South America with the establishment of sedentary tribes which practiced agriculture and the domestication of animals. These civilizations developed fabrics and ceramics and constructed permanent urban areas with temples, houses, plazas, monumental architecture and irrigation, all pre-dating Roman civilization. They practiced religion and had structured government. Over the next 5,000 years, many of these South American civilizations flourished and perished, conquered and vanished, grew and disappeared. Many of their highly developed ruins are even now undiscovered, or just being recovered. The Incas were simply the last, and by far, the very greatest of these, before this march of civilization was cataclysmically exploded by the interposition of European civilization in 1532.

The story of the rise and fall of the Inca Empire is one of the greatest dramas of human history, amplified by its setting in the Andes Mountains.



Lima to Cuzco flight over the Andes

The Andes are twice as long, twice as high, and twice as wide as the Rocky Mountains, being a close second on earth only to the Himalayas. The average height of the Andes, at 13,000 feet above sea level, almost equals the tallest peak of the Rockies....



Veronica Glacier, from starting point of Inca trek

... and many glacier-covered peaks of the Andes reach to 4 miles above sea level. Their beauty is extraordinary and their imposition to human traverse is extreme.

Amazingly, the Incas flourished in the heart of the Andes. Perfect examples of evolution, Andean Indians' adaptation to the altitude led to distinctive physical developments. Short and stocky, men averaged 5'2" and women 4'9". The tallest of these elegant ladies below didn't reach Anne's shoulder.



Compared to other humans, the Incas have slower heart rates, almost one-third larger lung capacity, about 25% more blood volume, and double the amount of hemoglobin, which transfers oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body.

About 1300 A.D., when Europe was emerging from the dark ages, a small tribe of these Andean Indians migrated into the conjunction of two high mountain streams in the central Andes at about 12,000 feet above sea level, and settled into that valley suspended between mountain ranges surrounding it. There, they built a fine city.



For the next 100 years, they firmly established their roots, fought and conquered some local tribes, and expanded their little nation to about the size of Washington County, Arkansas. The city at the center of this tiny nation became Cuzco, capital of the Inca Empire.



The title given their succession of leaders, who claimed authority by divine right from Inti, the Sun God, was “Inca”, meaning “king” or “emperor”.

This title, “Inca”, became identified to them as a people, as well. Anthropologically, they were Quechua, and are more properly referred to as “Quechua” rather than “Inca.”



Pachacuti, Inca conqueror and his modern admirer

Then, exploding in the 1430's under a god-like hero, warrior, statesman, and ruler called Pachacutec, succeeded by 3 following, conquering Incas over the next 100 years, the Quechua conquered and governed western South America.

In some cases they accomplished their expansion by overpowering military force, terror and extermination, but in many more, they used only the threat of such force to diplomatically amalgamate and subjugate whole, intact civilizations.

By 1530, the Inca Empire spread across Southern Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Northern Chile, Bolivia, and upland Argentina. It stretched 3,400 miles north to south. East to west it stretched from the Amazon River Basin to the Pacific Ocean. It stretched further than the distance from Bangor, Maine to Mexico City; it was as big as five Californias, and if it were a country today, would be the 10th largest country in the world.

Such conquest and control occurred in less than a century accomplished by perhaps 40,000 Quechua, dominating some 12 million subjects speaking 30 different languages. It was accomplished with Roman-like efficiency, tying the vast Empire together in that relatively short period by the construction of over 40,000 miles of all weather, hard surface roads through the Andes, which provided rapid communications and effective mobility of the Inca's forces to maintain control and defense. While they used llamas for transporting goods, llamas cannot support a rider and the Inca had no horses; all movement was by foot.

Their hardy couriers, *Chaskis*, running relay-style from station to station could communicate messages from one end of the 3,400 mile Empire to the other in 24 days. The road system was also critical to the Empire's carefully designed social security from droughts,



floods, and famine. It served to provide essential deliveries of grain, foodstuffs, weapons and tools, which were massively and strategically warehoused throughout the Empire, to locales stricken by adverse conditions. Every governed person was thus guaranteed sufficient food, clothing and shelter. Common systems of tribute, governance and law were imposed, where basically each able-bodied man contributed a third of each year to the Empire: building, farming, fighting or otherwise serving. The Incas imposed their Quechua language on their Empire as a common, unifying language.

And they built in some of the most dramatic and difficult sites in the world, magnificent,



Ollantaytambo

masterpieces of craftsmanship and breathtaking structures; thus, Machu Picchu.

That, in 1530 A.D. was the growing scope of Inca civilization and its mighty Empire.

Regress from 1530 a few years, 38 to be exact, to when Columbus first set foot in the western hemisphere in 1492. A succession of explorers and conquistadores in the next 30 years brought smallpox to the

New World, which reached out ahead of the European expansion.



In 1527, Francisco Pizarro, a hardened Spanish conquistador of the Caribbean who was at Balboa's side when he discovered the Pacific Ocean, pushed his explorations of South America southward along its Pacific coast making the first meaningful European contact with the Inca Empire, and realized he had contacted a well-organized civilization with wealth to plunder.

During his two- year return to Spain seeking license from the Spanish Queen to conquer and rule Peru, smallpox arrived in Peru, decimating the Quechua nation, including killing its emperor, Inca Huayna Capac. His premature death left his succession between two competing sons unresolved: Atahualpa, a wise and seasoned general who had spent most of his life fighting on the

frontiers; and Huascar, a degenerate playboy who by virtue of his being imbedded in the Incan capital of Cuzco, controlled the central government and armies.

Huayna Capac's death threw the Inca Empire into a civil war, which in terms of its geographic scope, size of armies and battles, and combat deaths rivaled the American Civil War. As the Inca Empire was reeling from the one-two punch of smallpox and a genocidal civil war, Pizarro sailed back to the shores of Peru, licensed by the Spanish crown as "*The executor in the service of God our Lord and the Queen of Spain, to conquer and rule Peru and thereafter serve as governor and captain general of the Spanish Province of Peru.*"

Unfortunately, the Incas were ignorant of this single white man, and the royal license issued an unknown continent and ocean away.

As Pizarro arrived in Peru, Inca Atahualpa's armies were defeating Huascar's in decisive battles and Atahualpa, in anticipation of his final victory, began the thousand mile march south from Quito, Ecuador, at the far northern border of the Inca Empire, to the center of the Inca world and capital, Cuzco, intending there to conclusively defeat Huascar's remaining armies and formally seat himself as the *Sapa Inca*, king of kings, of the Inca Empire.

It was on this grand march, in the high Andean town of Cajamarca, that Pizarro, leading a total contingent of only 168 Spanish cavalry and infantry, caught up with Atahualpa and confronted him. Atahualpa, at the head of his northern army of 80,000, and facing a mere handful of strange, white skinned, bearded aliens, more out of curiosity than any fear or even concern, consented to meet Pizarro in the plaza of the walled Inca town of Cajamarca. There Atahualpa appeared, surrounded and protected by 6,000 nobles, retainers, bodyguards and soldiers. In the meantime, Pizarro had concealed his 168 fully armed and armored soldiers, mounted cavalry, and small cannons in buildings around the plaza.

In what was surely one of the most consequential failures to communicate in the history of the world, Atahualpa was approached by a Catholic Priest who, without benefit of effective interpretation, declared to Atahualpa (who considered himself the son of the supreme Sun God and ruled with absolute authority an Empire 3 times the size and twice the population of Spain) that Atahualpa was now a subject of the Queen of Spain and demanded that he accept her as his ruler and the Catholic God as his spiritual ruler. Almost certainly unaware of the message, in any event unimpressed, but curious as to the Bible the priest was invoking, Atahualpa asked for the Bible and finding nothing remarkable about its curiously marked pages, tossed it to the ground. This insulting sign of rejection and blasphemy was taken by Pizarro as an appropriate sign that the power of God and the Queen should be manifested, and he ordered the attack.

The Incas, who had never encountered horses, gunpowder, steel armor, nor razor sharp, heavy,



steel long-swords, found themselves in the middle of a violent and murderous tempest, Hell breaking loose upon them, as the Spaniards exploded from their hiding places with cannons, muskets, horses and steel

surrounding and crashing into the Incas. Within an hour, thousands had died, the majority from being trampled in the panicked effort to escape through the plaza's only two, narrow gates. But the Spanish were merciless in killing all they could with their deadly devices of war. The Spanish suffered not a single casualty.

Atahualpa, Emperor of Peru, king of kings, was now a captive.

Rightly perceiving that the Spanish were obsessed in their frenzied search for gold and silver, Atahualpa negotiated with Pizzaro to fill a designated room in Cajamarca, 22 by 17 feet and 8 feet high, to the ceiling with gold, and two like rooms to the ceiling with silver, in exchange for his release. Thus began an 8 month hostage and ransom period during which the Inca Empire stood still, paralyzed by its lack of an Inca emperor, as gold and silver were brought from throughout the Empire to secure their God-king's release. In one particularly extraordinary saga, three of the Spaniards, accompanied only by an emissary of Inca Atahualpa to insure their safety, traveled by foot the six hundred miles to Cuzco. There, they found Koriconcha, Temple of Inti the supreme Sun God, the walls of which were covered with solid gold sheets, 2 by 3 feet weighing about 4 ½ pounds each. To the outrage and dismay of the Incas, who considered this temple as sacred as the Vatican, the three Spaniards roughly crowbarred the sheets off, some 700 of them, about 3,000 pounds of solid gold. These were packed and returned by llama to the rooms at Cajamarca as ransom.

Ultimately, the three rooms were filled with gold and silver entitling Atahualpa to his release. Instead, Pizarro had him garroted to death.

For the next 40 years, in a complex, bloody, desperate struggle that makes *Gone With The Wind* seem like a Goldilocks fairy novel, the ever dwindling Inca Empire fought against both the Spanish and themselves to re-establish their eminence, as the Spanish fought not only the Incas, but bitterly and hugely among themselves to determine who, indeed, would have Peru and the wealth of the Inca Empire. Finally, by 1572, Inca Tupac Amaru, the last ruler of the vastly diminished Empire was pursued for months through the Amazonian jungles before being captured and returned to Cuzco where he was beheaded, viewed by thousands of vociferously grieving Quechuas. Peru was finally a fully subjugated Spanish Colony under the singular rule of a Spanish Viceroy. Thus ended the Inca Empire; and began a long, colonial Spanish reign.

That was not the end of the Quechuas. It is a point of pride in Peru today for those who can and do trace their lineage back to show that they are descended from the Incas themselves, rather than any of the 30 other tribes and 12 million Indians they ruled. A majority of Peruvians still speak Quechua; in fact 30% of the population speaks only Quechua, and not Spanish. That would be equivalent today of a majority of Americans speaking Iroquois, and 30% speaking only Iroquois. Peru's major roads are mostly built on the tracks of the original Inca trails, and tens of thousands of miles of those trails remain intact, used by subsistence farmers or hidden beneath overgrown jungle.

200 years after the beheading of the last Inca, a major rebellion against Spanish rule re-ignited in the late 1700's, led by Tupac Amaru II, claiming he was a direct descendant of the last Inca. Over a hundred thousand died in that post-death quiver of the Inca Empire before its leader was publicly

drawn and quartered in the Cuzco Plaza. Even today among our well-spoken and well educated Indian guides, there was inherent dissatisfaction with what they believe to be the corrupt and illegitimate political leadership of the country, largely composed of Spanish descendants.

In Peru, one cannot escape the ghosts of the great Inca Empire, the blood and conflict that felled it, and its remnant spirits; it is imbedded in the religion, the language, the names, the mountains, rivers and stones, in the cities and towns with their one-llama streets, with the tightly fitting Inca stonework still forming the foundation of the ancient indigenous structures, many of which still serve as homes, businesses, and churches.



note large, irregular Inca-fitted stones in the foundation of these still inhabited rowhouses.

We were filled with this omnipresent, lingering shadow of the Inca Empire as we undertook to travel Peru for two weeks.

ARRIVING IN PERU...

...on May 4, 2016, and facing a 30 mile trek that ranged rigorously from 8,500 to 14,000 feet above sea level, we were obliged by our outfitter, Amazonas Explorer to acclimate for several days in Cuzco, which at over 11,000 feet is a mile higher than Denver.



First Impressions: Upon our arrival in Cuzco, around 8 a.m. following an all-night and happily unremarkable flight from Dallas connecting through Lima to Cuzco, we were greeted by a brisk, fresh, sunshiny day that felt like early summer in Colorado. No change in time zone at all...all we needed was a good nap sometime this arrival date to make up for a fitful night of sleep on last night's air travel to adjust our hours.

Santiago, the friendly and fluent representative from our outfitter, Amazonas Explorer, was there at the airport with driver to pick us up and drop us at Quinto San Blas - our cozy boutique hotel in the original part of the city with maybe 20 rooms, surrounding two small plazas - to freshen up before he led us on a relaxed and interesting walking tour of the city center. Santiago, we also learned, would be our guide for the raft trip. We united there with the Werts, now on their 3rd week of a South American sojourn.





Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús

The Cuzco tour revolved around the city's central Plaza de Las Armas, dating back over 600 years to its Inca establishment as the civic center. The Plaza at one time was bounded by the by palaces of the Inca rulers and their large families:

Incas were bound by tradition to marry a full sister, but by custom also maintained concubines and “second wives” by the dozen and children by the scores, requiring expansive accommodations.



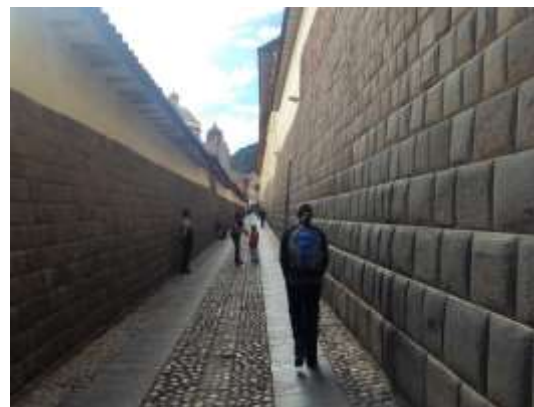
La Catedral

The Spanish wasted no time destroying the Inca palaces down to their foundation walls, and then using those and the pillaged stones to re-erect a number of classic Catholic Cathedrals, now centuries-old icons themselves.



We cruised by Koriconcha, the Inca Sun God temple which had been stripped 4 centuries earlier of its ton of gold by Pizarro's ransom gathering robbers, re-constructed as the Church of Santa Domingo on the Inca foundations laid for Koriconcha.

The fitting of the Inca stonework is so precise, that no mortar was used and the joints are so fine it is impossible now even centuries later to insert even a needle into many of the seams. As shown in this doorway and wall below, walls, doors, windows were built in a trapezoidal fashion, leaning in:



In epochal earthquakes of 1650 and 1950, the expertly built cathedrals of the Spanish came toppling down; the Inca structures held firm.

Released after a couple of hours by our guide to our own devices, off we went. We found Cuzco delightfully inexpensive; a Peruvian Sol equaled about a third of an American dollar, but bought almost as much as a dollar.

Peru, as Arkansas is unified about its Razorbacks, was solidly unified about its national food, national drink, and national beer.



The national food of Peru is oven roasted guinea pig (Cuy al horno). Domesticated thousands of years ago, they are even today raised in the rural and lower class homes much as a convenient flock of chickens, living inside where they scurry around the floor, eating whatever falls their way, multiplying prodigiously, growing to eating size quickly. The natives do not name or play with them lest relationships with supper become too personal.

[domestic herd of cuy in local home we visited](#)

In Quechua, by which everyone refers to them, they are “Cuy”. Quechua is an onomatopoeic language, and standing in this room full of cuys ripe for the harvest, that’s exactly how they sounded: “cuy, cuy, cuy”.



They are roasted trout-like, i.e with the heads and tails (and little feetsies) all still on; and eat about like a well fried squirrel: So many little bones, it’s hard to get a good bite of meat; but for the spirit of the thing, we won’t do it again.



As for their drink: Pisco. They use their grapes to make this 80 proof liquor, which tastes like tequila, but everyone we met and every establishment we entered bragged on their Pisco Sour recipe, which is something like a cross between a frozen margarita and a whiskey sour, all proudly claiming their unique dash of something different made theirs the best – we found all quite drIncable and pleasantly potent. No one offered, ordered, drank or discussed any other liquor to our observations.

National beer: Cuzquena, comes in four iterations: Dorado (golden lager), Roja(red lager), Trigo (wheat) and Negra (dark lager). It appeared to be the only brand sold or offered. All very good, and they like to serve it very cold. Not much confusion or indecision on beer selection from the menu or at the neighborhood market!





In a city of 500,000, there was no leash law, dogs aplenty roamed free without collars. The many we encountered were friendly, apparently well kept, and displayed a large array of breeds, leading us to wonder how the unmanaged dog population had managed to avoid merging into a single, unremarkable Heinz 57 version of mutt.

The city is honeycombed with shops and restaurants off

of every street, and we returned several times to the city's primary open market, Mercado de San Pedro, vibrant with color and activity.



The traffic was insane, horns honking constantly, no apparent rules of the road other than "chicken" as to who went first in merging and turning. In the one-llama-wide streets of the ancient Inca-built part of the city, being a pedestrian and sharing the street that was a foot wider than the cars speeding past made an urban stroll an adrenaline-laden expedition. Sometimes making a turn on such narrow corners required our van to back and fill several times just to turn right or left. None of these single lane streets were designated as "One Way", and it was not unusual for us to find two cars deadlocked in the middle of a block facing each other, each backed up by 3 or 4 more cars and

honking persistently as if that would dissolve the dilemma...I never discovered what the protocol for resolving these was...maybe on our next visit.



The Peruvians love parties, fireworks, and parades, in no particular order. They are a happy, friendly people. I never got used to the fireworks, being mostly clusters of the ear busting “mortar shell” type blowing off unexpectedly several times every day with no clue who was celebrating what or where. It was hard to spend more than an hour in urban walks, without encountering a parade: they parade to Mass, to weddings, to public school events, to labor union meetings, for visiting dignitaries and for political rallies – usually with a 4 or 5 piece thin-sounding band composed of a bass and snare drum, trumpet, tuba and odds and ends of whatever they could gather.



On a steep hill overlooking the city we received our first introduction to the jaw dropping version of Inca construction: the massive city-protecting fortress of Sacsaywamón (our guide instructed, “you can remember it this way: ‘sexy woman’”). As massive as it was, it is a shadow of its former self. The Spaniards destroyed more than half of it for materials to rebuild Cuzco below to their taste. These stones reaching upwards of 20 tons or more and 20 feet on a side, were quarried and brought solely by manpower from about 3 miles away, and then tooled to precisely and uniquely join as many 14 adjacent stones, with an outward facing beveled edge, creating a 3 tiered, walled fortress about 50 feet high. Anne and I are posed at the bottom for scale.



Our guide to this venue also taught us the proper blessing and consuming of Coco leaves, which being the source of cocaine when vastly distilled and processed, have mild doses of stimulants to enhance stamina and mood while reducing hunger and thirst. A great aid when running up and down multi-thousand foot mountain passes. Peru is the only country in the world that permits possession and use of these, based upon universal religious and practical usage predating arrival of the Europeans. After an apt blessing (blow across three leaves representing the condor, puma and snake while facing in turn four *Apu*'s – glacier-covered mountain gods – anchoring each of the four cardinal directions) he stuffed almost the entire contents of our just-bought bag from the San Pedro Market in his mouth and began chewing, leaving us but a dab in the bottom of the bag we'd bought for our own sampling! Apparently Bogarting the coco leaves is acceptable social behavior.

We found Cuzco to be friendly, colorful, unthreatenly busy, fascinating in its history and structures, near exotic, charming, and inexpensive.

AND THE ADVENTURE BEGINS: DOWN THE APURIMAC...

I've always loved going down rivers. When we inquired of options for an add-on float trip, there was the relatively accessible, tame, and somewhat polluted Urubamba River flowing genteelly through the broad farmlands and villages constituting the Sacred Valley of the Incas; or there was the Apurimac.

Less than 100 miles from the Pacific Ocean, the Apurimac begins high in the Peruvian Andes on the slope of 18,363-foot-high Nevado Mismi in Southern Peru, as a thin sheet of crystal water flowing down the side of a rock face. By the time its journey ends in the Atlantic Ocean some 3,900 miles away, it has become the world's largest river and possibly its longest: the mighty Amazon. The Apurimac has been verified by a five-nation National Geographic Society expedition as the longest and highest tributary of the Amazon. We were starting, quite literally, "at the top".

If I was going to see Machu Picchu, it would be in the steps of Inca kings. If I was going to go down a river in Peru, this was the one. Its valley pierces the Andes west of Cuzco, rushing its way through cataracts 10,000 feet below the overlooking rim (twice as deep as the Grand Canyon). It has always been very much a Rubicon for any army undertaking to cross it for conquests beyond, simply because retreating across it was not an option.

Once bridged in various places by handmade Indian swinging suspension bridges of braided grass stretching hundreds of feet across and hundreds of feet above the torrent, only a single such span remains in current times, as its Quechua habitants annually renew the handmade span across it, renewing a tradition centuries old.

It and its Inca suspension bridges inspired the Pulitzer Prize winning "Bridge at San Luis Rey", by Thornton Wilder.

This, indeed, was a river worth traveling to Peru to float.

The river day started at 6 a.m. in the tiny 500-year-old "street" outside our Cuzco hotel on Calle Carmen Alto, where the four of us (Randy, Cathy, Jack and Anne) loaded into the Amazonas-provided van with Santiago our guide, Miguel our driver, and our random rafting mate Jason Mulvaney, a young Brit. We are immediately informed that a mere 3 hour drive is required to reach the put-in, with two days of whitewater awaiting us.

It was indeed a drive! After climbing steeply out of Cuzco's valley through its slums (our several guides noted that in Cuzco, contrary to world culture, the poorer one was, the higher on the hills they lived), there was no transition from urban, to suburban, to rural. As we topped out high above the city, the crowded buildings of the city slums abruptly ended, open countryside was before us, and our paved street immediately became to a one lane, rough dirt road. If there was a flat place in Peru that is not an airplane runway or football pitch, we never saw it.



I had armed myself with a map to track our progress and noted that the road we were on was going to be extremely curvy, and ended at the village of Ccorca (yes, double c's at the beginning, it's a Quechua thing). After 20 minutes of tortuous winding, downshifting, upshifting and discomforting views out the left or right windows into an abyss without intervening curb, shoulder, or guardrail, I was relieved to see the sign, "Ccorca 18 KM." "Whew," I thought, "Since the road

obviously stops there, we can get out of this wild monkey ride and on the River." Ccorca came, as duly reflected on the map after some amazing hairpin turns, had about as many buildings as there were dots on the map, and was suddenly in our rear view mirror. No river in sight, still careening along at roller coaster speeds and terrain.

"How much further?" I asked Santiago...

"about 80 kilometers" ---

"wha...? This map doesn't show a road!"

"Oh yes, there's a road - we're on it."

And we stayed on the road, such as it was, for the next 2 ½ hours, seeing nothing more than a few gatherings of houses, mostly lost outposts. The people living here are indigenous Indian farmers, whose lives have changed little in hundreds of years. They survive without money in a subsistence economy, families and villages gathering to put in and harvest the crops on tiny terraces of steep sided mountains, using mostly manpower, if lucky, oxen and horses, to work the soil.

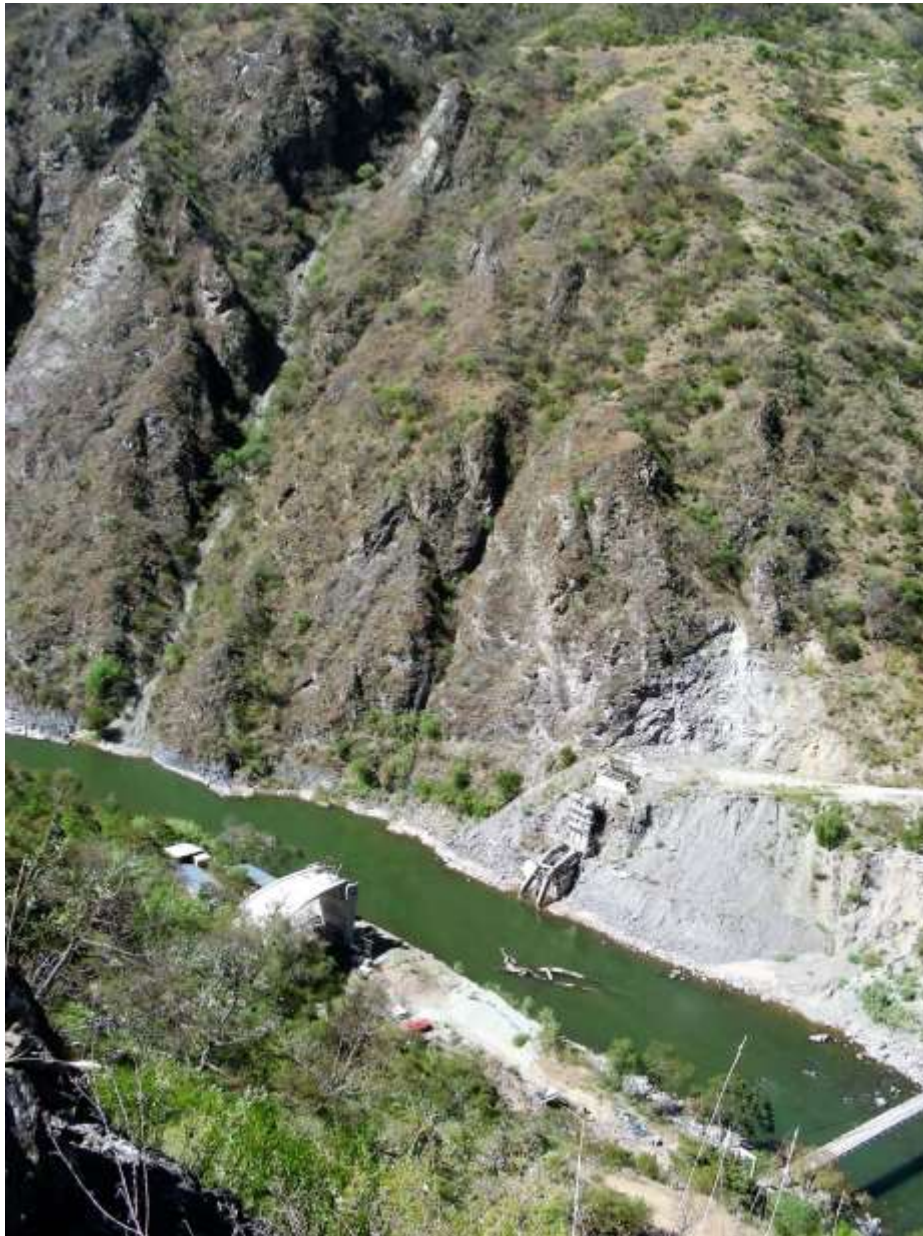
The views, including the Vilcanota snow fields, were stunning and the "road" terrifying, Miguel displaying his shifting, steering and dodging skills every kilometer of the way. We already agree that the excursion is a terrific investment and we have not yet seen water.



After encountering only 3 vehicles, rural delivery trucks, in the intervening 80 kilometres of one lane, steep, curvy, dirt road we begin our 10,000 foot descent to the Apurimac. I had already long since counted over 100 switchbacks so extreme the long church van could barely make its way around them.

But now it got steep...really, really steep off the downhill side of the van as we would peer down thousands of feet to the river below.





We learn as we descend we are on a road to nowhere. At one time the government tried to bridge the river here to, as the chicken wanted, get to the other side; but the bridge washed out, and all that can cross the flimsy suspension bridge at the bottom are pedestrians, llamas and motorcycles. Our van has nowhere to go, once we reach the bottom, than to backtrack 3 hours and 100 km to Cuzco. Santiago informs us that Amazonas only runs half a dozen trips a year on this river section, which is probably as many as all the other outfitters combined. We are fricking at the end of nowhere! And we will certainly be the only people on this river.

By and by we arrive riverside where we find an entire crew of Amazonas Explorer folks with two 18' rafts already outfitted and a kayak emitting a somewhat ominous vibe. Shortly we are fitted for full wetsuit, neoprene booties, helmet, waterproof jacket, dry bag and the crash course in river technique and commands by Santiago. Our intrepid girls are becoming trepid.

As two empty vans and drivers start their long way back to Cuzco, only to return tomorrow 20 miles downriver on this river with no civilized access to retrieve us in the interim, it occurs to me that my penny-pinching self had chafed in the planning stage about what these two days would cost. But as I counted our three support staff for the river, two van drivers and their vans, 400 miles of driving over these goat-trail roads to drop and fetch us and the fully provisioned rafts and kayak, I exulted in what an incredible bargain this deal was!

And then, we're off! Jason the professional photographer with Jonathan the second guide in the "freighter raft," Victor the scout and rescue auxiliary in his green kayak, and the four of us in

Santiago's blue raft, Santiago wielding 12 foot oars perched on the rear, the four of us pitching in on his command with our paddles. It is noon.

To say the Apurimac is a wild and scenic river is to demean it. Surrounded by steep, 10,000 foot-high escarpments and filled every 200 yards with fast, green, clear whitewater, the "A" is a jewel. Santiago is clearly skilled, in control, communicative, experienced and fun. We stroke with our paddles when told, Butts left, Werts right, but the only thing we really need to know is "get down and hang on." We quickly master this. Our confidence builds as we learn Santiago has guided white water in Switzerland, Canada, and New Zealand, and this two day section of the Apurimac is the "easy" one. He gives a bit of his history; raised in a large farm family, he didn't take well to farming, and was angled by a brother/policeman towards the military, but somehow fell into rafting and apparently makes a good middle class living as a guide. "You know", he said, "it is not what you do, but how happy you are doing it; I am a king on this River." Amen to the lessons from a wise man.

Quiet Jason, it turns out, is a photo journalist contracted by Amazonas to produce promotional material for their website and randomly assigned to our flotilla. Score! He comes equipped with an array of lenses and cameras and — wait for it! — a DRONE! After we get past our fascination with this toy, we begin to recognize the implications of the gizmo. Even if we drown, we'll be movie stars!



We blast through cataract after rapid, always getting wet and occasionally nearly losing crew. But it is sunny, low 70s, and Victor, when not playing in an eddy or surfing a wave, is ready in his kayak to rescue. Oh, we were also briefed on this. Briefly.



We get lunch at some point, prepared by the Amazonas team and absurdly delicious given our surroundings and circumstances.....embellished exquisitely with ice-cold Cuzquena wheat beer.



After a couple more hours, and maybe 10 kilometers, we beach at a spectacular campsite within earshot of a long, roaring set of rapids.

We are informed that tomorrow will be “a big day.” The girls process this news haltingly. At the end of the day, opting to walk out would be akin to joining Lewis and Clark somewhere in Idaho.



Very quickly, tents go up, sleeping bags appear, our second flight of cold beer for the day, as always, Cusqueña, Pride of Cuzco, emerges, and the “freighter” becomes empty. Jason entertains us with spectacular demos of his video-game-like flying device, and we want one. The sun disappears behind the ridge, but the show is only beginning.



Act 1 entails Santiago making “Pisco Sours.” Pisco is the national velvet hammer of Peru, kind of like jet fuel at altitude. A Pisco Sour entails Pisco, duh, sugar mix, lemon, egg whites and crushed ice. Remember now, we are 50 miles from anything but goat trails, but Santi produces a hand crank blender. A nickel for every time we could have used a HCB on riverside camps!

Needless to say, Pisco Sours are killer, and kill them we did. And off-handedly we mention that a fire would be nice.



Presto. Perfect campfire, courtesy of Amazonas.

Act 2 emerges as out of the dark comes dinner, “Lomo Saltado,” a Peruvian specialty involving tasty beef, fresh veggies, and other good stuff, all cooked from scratch and served *al fresco*. Delicious! Oh, and red wine! Then, Act 3.

The stars. OMG, the stars. There is no, zero, zilch, nada, ambient light, the atmosphere is crystal clear, and this must be what it’s like to star gaze on LSD...am I squinting because they are so bright!? The Milky Way. Stars with which we are not familiar adorn the southern hemispheric sky. So humbling. What? Dessert, too?! On the river? Yes. To tent!

Apurimac, day 2, Saturday, May 7

The boys present a great breakfast, coffee, too.



Then we break down camp, marveling at the efficiency and precision with which the freighter regains its burden.

By nine or so we are packed, geared up and on the “A”. And a “big day” starts quickly. Large boulders and steep drops come one after another. Granite Canyon is the real deal! Fortunately, we have sunshine again as we are continuously doused.

Later we stop in an eddy and have a snack by a waterfall, this to put us in the proper frame of mind for The Big Finish.



This section of the Apurimac is all Class III and IV water – per the International Scale of River Difficulty, Class I being “easy”, VI being un-runnable certain death, Class IV is defined as *“Difficult – Long rapids; waves powerful, irregular; dangerous rocks; boiling eddies; powerful and precise maneuvering required. Have an experienced guide.”*

..

The Big Ass Rock seemed like a true class V. Santiago entered nicely, as always sideways, perhaps for better line of sight, then with a last-second pivot to true the course downriver. The plan was left of B.A.R., but his right oar caught the gap of some submerged rocks and his plan evaporated. “Paddle BACK!” was delivered with surprise urgency as Santiago attempted recovery with a wounded oar. We took B.A.R. head on, the downriver tube of the raft rising as it washed into the almost vertical B.A.R., the stern pivoting right, exposing the port, upstream pontoon to driving current and wave. Instantly we are both sideways and vertical, neither planned nor positive.

River enters from pretty much all points of the compass, but soon we regain balance or rather, the self-bailing raft does, and the cataract spits us out. All hands are still on deck, and pulses

struggle to return to low triple digits. The “A” has flexed her muscles, and we have crushed the “hold rope.” Wow!



We finish more rollercoaster rapids, occasionally waiting while Jason deploys his toy downstream of us. We aren't sure if we should ignore its camera, or play to it like so many yah- hoos. But we are sure its rolling!

By midday we beach river right, greatly relieved to find Miguel and other Amazonas folks having successfully returned to Cuzco the day before, to now be back riverside to ferry us home.

Santiago's team deftly carries the gear up a steep rocky hill, and once we are out of wetsuits and through one Cusqueña, we jump into Miguel's van and head for Cuzco by a different route. What a 24 hours!



However, our rafting adventure was not yet done. After about 45 minutes of insane switchback ascent, we top out and stop at a pinnacle-like spot for lunch!



While the team prepares it, we amble a few hundred feet out to the point, positive that Julie Andrews would appear any moment. We may be on top of the world.

The “A” far below, snow-capped mountains all around, and I swear, Russia. Digital shutter sounds pierce the solitude.

Lunch, under a handy sun tarp, is of course delicious. A fresh salad and choice of two quiches, chocolate ice cream with pineapple! And Cusqueña, natch.



We have many sharp curves and harrowing cliffs to negotiate to Cuzco, but in Miguel we trust. Class III water, but Class V road! Santiago finds his “off” switch, finally, and dozes in shotgun. For maybe 5 minutes. It is dark when we arrive at our cozy hotel Quinta San Blas, but there is no time to shower or calm our nerves with wine. For we have mountain biking and the Inca Trail trek looming and we must be briefed. Which means we must meet R-r-r-r-ruben. “Chino.”

We have made it back to our hotel just in time to join for orientation in the little dining room of the hotel the seven other Machu Picchu trekkers in our group and our guide. Ruben, who will have our lives in his hands for the Machu Picchu Trek, insists we call him Chino and thankfully speaks good English. Paying attention best I could in my road weary, river tired, dirty and -- despite sunblock and bug repellent-- somewhat sunburned and itchy condition, I pick up that the trek is not a race...we are going to stick together at a reasonable pace; that there is going to be one day when we hit the trail before first daylight and hike until after dark to cross two 14,000 foot high passes in a 12 mile day (I am not a morning person and this is not a happy vibe); and that we should tip our

porters heavily because they are literally angels, whom we will not demean by calling them porters, but rather we will call them “Waykis” (“angels” in Quechua). It’s all a little bossy and presumptive that we’ll feel like tipping. But the big concern is that the 11 of us are staying tonight at 5 different venues and going on 4 different excursions tomorrow and Chino’s data on where we are staying tomorrow night before the trek starts the next day appears to have people spread from Cuzco fifty miles all the way to Ollantaytambo, in places none of us have heard of nor show on our carefully planned itineraries. “Don’t worry, *my dear friends* (this phrase he had already addressed us with 40 times in the 40 minute briefing - disharmonious among the strangers we were when we sat down to be briefed) we’ll work this all out tomorrow.” Maybe I’m just tired and fussy from a long day in the sun and on the road.

We trudge off to shower and sleep, not altogether buzzed that Amazonas’ heretofore demonstrated perfection will continue.

Sunday, May 8 Cuzco to Pisac to Maras to Ollentaytambo, Peru

It’s Domingo in Peru. What else to do but take a mountain bike excursion? We are not entirely sure where we are bunking tonight.

We meet in the morning and head with Vicky & Tim toward the Sacred Valley of the Incas in a van with 8 bikes on the roof and bike guide Miguel (Mickey), our driver Juan, and “Miguel Dos”, a 16- year-old nationally competitive mountain bike stud who will ride at the rear.



Vicky we learn over the next several days is a bookkeeper, Tim a dentist, from a town in Minnesota we aren’t familiar with. Younger by ten years give or take, apparently fit, quite cordial, they were quite a pleasant addition, taking our heretofore turista foursome to a sixsome.

First stop, 40 miles eastward over a pass into the Urubamba River Valley, Sacred Valley of the



Incas, to Pisac, home of second-largest market in Cuzco Department. It was also the Hamptons/Aspen/ Cabo san Lucas for Inca royalty who centuries ago vacationed and retired there from Cuzco, building some stunning terraces and palaces which still look out from their mountain-side perches onto the Sacred Valley and the Urubamba. But we will not see those in today's itinerary. We are going to work our way

Inca terraces and palaces above Pisac

north and downriver today through the

Sacred Valley, gaining ground toward Machu Picchu which from here is about 75 miles downstream sitting on a high ridge above the Urubamba.



In the Pisac market, the Werts complete their trek kit with warm Andean ear - flap knitted hats, equipping them for high altitude camping. Anne and I bought some little frogs and turtles carved from local, multi-colored and hand-polished stone to populate our outdoor fountain at home. Miguel helps all of us bargain

down substantially from the market asking price, but before departing he helps the Werts with an artisan selling her handmade weaving. She supports her paralyzed son, and the \$15 for a beautiful table runner may equate to more than a few weeks' wage. Good vibes.



Pisac Market scene



Just another llama in the living room (Pisac)



By 11 AM we are in front of the very modest village church on the tiny town square of a farming village, unloading the bike-laden van. We are fitted for helmets and bike seats and waste no time heading on our bikes down an unpaved road along the river Urubamba, which courses the length of the Sacred Valley.

This well dressed local chico was friendly, and got a big kick out of photobombing us, making our bike trip departure picture all the more memorable.





The valley farms, farming villages, Urubamba River and surrounding mountains are out of a postcard, as advertised.



But high adventure it is not, and when we ascertain at lunch that the afternoon entails just a bit more of the same, after a focused war counsel among us peeps, we respectfully request change of venue to the salt pans of Maras.



Passing the hat for extra gas money, we are soon several thousand feet higher in the foothills,



And ultimately arrive in the town square of the Village of Maras.



A quick tutorial on single track riding and encouraged to walk where necessary, we set off. The going is rutted and sometimes steep. By trial and error we get to an approach that mostly works. The girls are freaking, but game.



Soon we arrive at the salt pans, an ugly canyon containing 3,000 shallow man-made basins which are flooded with saline spring water from the mountaintop, and through evaporation have been producing several varieties of salt for centuries. It is a study in lore, adaptation, creativity and simplicity. And owned, not by a big company, but by the families of two small local towns.



Maras Salt Pans



Done with the gawking, Guide Mickey now describes without alarm our final descent. “A little steeper,” he explains, “a little more technical, narrow in spots and a little rocky.” The analogy would be to take a beginner snow skier to a steep, treed, deep powder ski-run and advise, “nothing to worry about in there, point ‘em downhill and go!”

It was harrowing.

Stee p , rocky face left, precipitous cliff right, ruts, rocks and gravel under wheel. Cathy wisely dismounted and walked, no picnic either with braking the heavy bike downhill while walking beside on sketchy footing. But doable.





Anne, on the other hand, became bored, impatient or insane and mounted up. Shortly, deciding to stop and dismount on a steep and slippery pitch, she squeezed front brake rather than rear, vaulting the handlebars like Mary Lou Retton but landing like Raggedy Anne. While serving as a landing pad for the bike. Witness to the performance, Cathy is quivering and ultimately decides to scamper down the hill ahead for Mickey the guide who is waiting with me and the rest of the pack for the slower bikers shepherded by Miguel Dos who was riding clean-up at the end. Cathy's breathless and excited report is, "Anne wrecked, she's not doing well!!", upon which Mickey and I sprint back up the steep trail. Well, at least I started to sprint, but carrying 40 years, about 40 pounds, and a few thousand feet of new-to-the lungs altitude all in excess of Mickey, quickly fell behind. In the meantime, Miguel Dos, with zero English, and left alone with a 60-something year old Gringo lady

gasping for breath against the pain of bruised ribs, pantomimes to Anne midwife-quality instructions to remain calm. Recovering her breath and inventorying body parts, Anne arises and proceeds just as I arrive.

So many ways this could have ended badly (see rocks and cliffs, above). And, we leave in the morning for a four-day, 30 mile trek over two quite high ridges to Machu Picchu! Anne is, simply, tough.

Happily, it's only several hundred yards to the end of the course, mostly rideable, where we are pleased to find our sag wagon waiting. Anne's bruised ribs live for the rest of the adventure wrapped in an Ace bandage.



We later learned that Mickey had never taken clients down that track. Isn't it always better to be more lucky than good???!!!!

The sag wagon van loads us and our bikes and makes its way down the broad Valley of the Incas to Ollantaytambo. Harking back to the Chaskis, or foot messengers who



Pony- Express style kept the Empire linked via the 40,000 miles of handbuilt roads, at intervals, say, of 30 Km, “Tambos” — places of rest — were built along the Inca roads for chaskis to recharge. The Inca gave one such tambo to his retiring loyal and successful general, Ollentay. Hence, Ollentaytambo. Cool, these Quechua.

And as promised the night before, we did have lodging as planned in Ollantayambo, a beautiful little lodge in a beautiful little town squeezed

into the narrow valley of the Urubamba River between overarching Andes peaks, under the guard of massive Inca-built terraces and fortress walls.

Showered and relaxed for the evening as apparently the only guests in the inn, we drifted with our wine between two very cozy bars and finally into a dining room, where we bump into two more of our trek group, Gary and Elaine, we recognize from the briefing last night. We gather up with them for dinner, find them most convivial companions, semi-retired Brits, SCUBA wonks who have just finished a week of extraordinary diving in the Galapagos. We confirm again no broken ribs, and sleep. Camino Inca awaits.



Monday, May 9 Onto the Inca Trail

We are to meet Ruben at 10 a.m. at our Inn, giving Randy and I just enough time to explore the fortress Ollantaytambo. Impressive. Stonework cranes would struggle with. Architecture literate societies cannot master, practical design and use of space that city planners would envy. In short, while Ollantaytambo seems but a waypoint enroute to Machu Picchu, its restorations are themselves worthy of studied visit.



Hillside granaries, cooled by mountain streams diverted through their floors



terraces leading to Ollantaytambo fortress walls

It was the site of the only major Spanish defeat at the hands of the Inca. The charging conquistadors could not mount the steep terraces with their cavalry, and fell victim to the large stones rolled from above into their attack and showers of arrows from Amazonian Indian allies of the Incas, all being protected by the steep terraces and fortress walls from which they fought. In retreating, the conquistadors encountered an impassible swamp created by the Incas from diverting two rivers to flood the

Spaniards' avenues of retreat that neither man nor horse could readily pass. While the Incas were themselves sometimes barbaric in the treatment of their many enemies, I cheered to myself in reading this history of a crushing victory of the Inca over the Spanish conquistadors.



Precise joints in carved stone fortress walls

After our short morning tour, we gather with our entire trekking troop at the Inn. There are 11 of us. Seven Yanks, 3 Brits, and a Guernsey-er. I guess. Four men, 7 gals, huh?! Chino vans us up to the town square for an hour or two walkabout of the old Inca town, including a detailed perspective of living as a

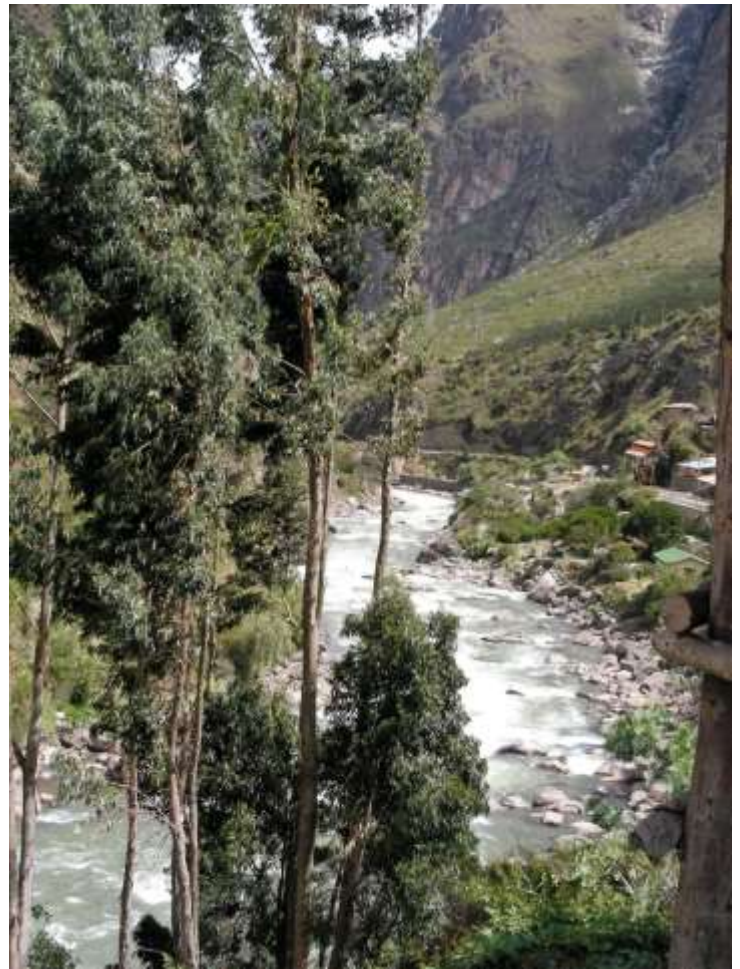
Quechua as we tour with him a house in which, 500 years ago, Quechua lived and in which today they still live, maintaining much of the same lifestyle.



Ollantaytambo terraces and fortresses

Back to our little Inn, into a van, and on to the iconic “KM 82” as measured on the rail line from Cuzco: The point at which the epic Inca Trail Trek to Machu Picchu starts.

At Km 82, the Urubamba valley has narrowed into a whitewater cataract, the road ends, and only a rail line makes its way down the sheer sided river valley another 40 miles or so to Aguas Calientes, the village at the base of Machu Picchu.



We unload into the dooryard of a thatch-roofed country tavern which apparently has a busy but limited business providing a last pre-trek meal to Machu Picchu trekkers and a place to stage their gear and packs. All of us peeps have a

light duty day-pack (water, fleece, rain gear) , plus a duffel limited to 6 kg. - Thirteen pounds - and a sleeping bag. We will not carry the duffels or sleeping bags. Enter the “angels.”

So we are introduced to the Waykis, 15 native porters who will carry our duffels, and our sleeping bags, and our tents, pads, tarps, dining tent, chairs, plates, utensils, cookware, toilet, toilet tent, water and all of our food for four days. Oh, and their stuff, too! Twenty-five kg, 55 pounds, per man. They are mostly just over 5 feet tall, weigh less than 140 pounds, ox strong, not



young, poorly or not educated, and largely wearing sandals made of tire tread. They are Wayki.



Proud, smiling, solicitous and working like dogs. We also meet assistant guide, Enrique, (“Kike”) who will ride tail on the trail.

We mask our concern that perhaps we overstuffed our duffels, exceeding the limit to get that extra dab of stuff in, but even after weighing the duffels (government “OSHA” rule) they proceed without comment or objection to load the gear into larger duffels. Later in the week, seeing these tiny men heft their loads, we are guilt-stricken to have been so cavalier about packing light. We justify by noting that soon the weight will be reduced by the consumption of 2 half pints of Pisco and the Malbec split smuggled aboard.

As we lunch at KM 82,



the gear disappears into large, cylindrical stuff bags with straps, supervised by head Wayki Tomas and off go the Waykis.

We finish lunch, mount up, walk a short way, present our tickets and passports to a park entrance station (this whole massive hundreds of square mile area of trails, ruins and Machu Picchu is a National Park with controlled entrances), then assemble for group photos for the record.



Machu Picchu National Park entry station





Three nights on The Trail ahead. Here's how it will work: Waykis pack up after we have departed, then pass us on the trail, often running, to arrive first at our next stop, lunch or overnight. They set everything up, including the toilet tent (that's Felipe), and eventually we arrive.

So we settle into what will become our rhythm. Single file or two-by-two as the trail permits, Ruben — Chino — leading, Enrique — Kiki — following behind. The lead among the tourist/trekkers immediately

behind Chino changes hands frequently: this is not a competition, Chino gently prods. Chino is a fascinating character. Cuzco native, university educated with a History major and teaching experience, 18 years guiding, smallishly lithe, good English and a font of knowledge on Quechua culture, flora and fauna, geography, politics and ancient Peruvian history. It is clear he fully intends to share all of it with his new "dear friends."

Chino made the point at his orientation meeting that, as a group, we would need to "cooperate." As an example, after any arduous stretch of trail he would pause the walking, disguising allowing the stragglers to catch up as a lesson in some arcane wildlife info or native term for



this or that.

Somewhere during the first afternoon, Chino's moniker for us morphed from "my dear friends" to "Family." It sounded to us a bit bogus and presumptuous but, Ok.

After checking through the entrance station we traipsed across the Urubamba via footbridge and climbed steadily on a single track trail for a couple of hours,

as the River and its roar faded below us.



Indeed, the whole trip we would find to be climbing, or descending; there was not enough “level” in this 30 miles of Inca Trail to make two football fields.

Having topped out along one of the foothills after a couple of hours of “up”, we approached an apparent bluff with Chino declaring a break. Immediately he called us to attention: “Family!” asking us to line up facing away from the bluff, linking arms. So we, the 11, did so. His request was to take 3 steps back. Okay, but what about the cliff just behind our backs? Chino, grinning devilishly, insisted that we a) trust him and b) NOT Look Back!

We did “a” haltingly, and “b” reluctantly. Then Chino asks for 3 more steps backwards. Uh, O-K. Women cried out. Men chuckled nervously. Our steps rearward were tiny shuffles. Oh, 3 more?!!!! Zen master Chino was in charge. We were powerless to refuse.

Chino’s next instruction was to close our eyes and jump backwards into the void. Just kidding!!! “Close your eyes and turn around. Don’t open your eyes! OK, NOW!”

Something approximating squeals, gasps and gleeful cries filled the vastness before us as a magnificent ruin — I mean, “archeological site” — appeared almost a mile beneath us. It was our first on the trek, and far from our last. It was sublime.



Llaqapata



Looking back, this may have been the moment that Chino’s “Family” forecast took root. Chino knew a thing or two. Eighteen years, after all.



Taken most pleasantly aback by this awesome vista of Inca handiwork, as we undertook the very steep descent, we then noted next to it, as tiny specks in the valley, 8 perfectly pitched blue tents along the site...that was our camp, awaiting us at the bottom of a couple of kilometers back down into the valley. Fun!

Perhaps it was this intermittent cycling of hiking and history, but the 7 Km distance for the first afternoon

went effortlessly and by late afternoon we were arrived at Camp 1, our tents already erected on lush green terraces by not only a roaring river, but also this massive Quechua “archeological site.” (Please. we do not say “ruins”). It is Llaqtapata. We had begun the day at 1 pm at 2667 M with a net gain of only 100 M, but had gone up, and then down again (rather steeply into Llaqtapata) a couple of thousand feet.

The Waykis are lined up to greet us and toss their caps into the air and cheer. We pass by single file and someone high fives them so we all do. This will become SOP.

This area is a national park in Peru, and only 500



descent into Llaqtapata

trekkers, (including guides and Wayki) are permitted on the entire length of the trail per day. We in Chino's band had this camp to ourselves. We claimed our duffels and were assigned identical Eureka! tents — sleeping pads already in place — 1 thru 7 While we are arranging our

little nylon sanctuary, 2 basins of hot water and soap appear outside the tent flap. Man, do our dusty legs need that!

Lower third soaped and rinsed, the rest swabbed with wet wipes, we are out of our boots and into camp duds. It is not hot or humid, so that's not an issue. Chino had given the schedule: 5:30 tea, 6:30 dinner. So we dutifully gather on time in the dining tent (which will shelter 9 Waykis overnight) and compare our Day 1 impressions.



And are introduced to all of the Waykis by name, meeting “Puma”, our chef. Yes, in the garb and all. And Julio Cesar, assistant chef and waiter. We do in fact have tea, and cookies, and we are now pretty positive that this is going to be worth every nickel, and every step.

Later, Julio Cesar shuttles our dinner in plates two at a time,

freshly cooked courses from Puma's cooking tent. We sit around collapsible tables on camp stools, the Family, joined by Kiké and Chino. We are shown the “standard portion” and informed that it is not cool, and in fact insulting, to send back food on one's plate. I mean, hey. They are humping this cuisine on their backs all day every day!

Dessert is demolished, dinner ends, Chino spells out the morning schedule and camp is completely lights out by 9 PM.

But not before the light show. Many Family incur stiff necks being regaled by the stars; we see the upside down Big Dipper, Jupiter, Saturn, Southern Cross, etc. etc. An I-phone SkyMap app helps, justifying packing along the otherwise useless phone. Then sleep. Wakeup call is 6.

Tuesday, May 10 Inca Trail, Day 2, 12 Kilometers

Wake up call is accompanied by cups of hot coco tea and the little washbowl of hot water delivered to the tent. That does the head, a generous baby wipe to all of the other places works for the morning shower. Breakfast is 6:30, and it is eggs on toast with hollandaise and bacon. He knows we will be climbing today.



Realizing we aren't going to take a group tour of the Llactapata ruins, I rise early for a little explore of my own of the cascade surrounding it on three sides, the irrigation channels and the amazing terraces:



Our target to break camp is 7 am, but the queue at the baño tent isn't letting that happen. Felipé, no lie, stands a respectful piece away with toilet paper reinforcements. Any hint of unpleasantness in Felipe's tent yields to relief. There are no potties on The Inca Trail.

As we break camp, water bottles are filled, and a box of wrapped candy bars is offered for us to load the snacks into our packs for the trail.



We are gathering the back stories on our little posse. Injured Anne, bruises yellowing, willingly plays caboose, which means that Jack will be doing Inca Trail Q&A and brushing up on his Spanish with Kiké, the guide riding tail. The very fit Brits, Gary and Elaine, drift forward, chatting with

Chino (him) and anyone nearby (her). Tim and Victoria of Minnesota are at the younger end of our spectrum and gobble up the distance without strain. Sally, from Guernsey Isle, is game and in South America for more than a month. She's trekked the Himalayas twice for weeks. Fauzia, Brit by way of Pakistan is loud, fun, "no filter" and energetic. Beth, the Mississippi nurse practitioner in pink trainers with a minimalist yellow rucksack, is a triathlete and just churns out the miles. I know if I focus on those pink lowcuts, I won't be left behind! We note among ourselves it is comforting that though we



don't have a trauma doctor in our group, a nurse practitioner and a dentist are pretty good health care if something crazy happens.

We plod upward, regaining the verticals we lost yesterday evening descending into Llaqtapata, ascending the cascading tributary of the Urubamba, the Cusichaca River, along which we slept last night, into the higher



mountains. It creates its own narrow, tillable valley with small terraced fields of maize, potatoes and quinoa . We are headed for the upland village of Wayllabamba.

Though no vehicles are permitted in the National Park, this ancient yet viable Indian village and several farmsteads along its path have been permitted to remain, and its inhabitants are permitted to use their horses and oxen to access the

village and work their fields. We pass kids walking the dusty path several miles steeply downhill to school, and they will return via foot steeply up late that afternoon. We also pass or are passed by, several pack trains of horses, donkeys, and their Indian wranglers taking supplies and goods to and from the remote Wayllabamba village and its attendant farmsteads.



It is in these terraced fields that we see big flocks of large, iridescent green parrots circling the waste grain; shrieking, and eye-popping in their brilliant coloration, they add an exclamation point to the exotic feeling as we trek back in time through these ancient Indian farms.





Morning is punctuated by many breaks, much history and Quechua pronunciation, and a snack. There we meet Sublime Bars. Offered in the pile of snacks as we left camp this morning, those lucky enough to have naively grabbed these foiled wrapped chocolate taste explosions (over the more mundane fig and granola bars) realized now that they were holding taste-bud gold. Trading occurred, competition was fierce and bids high to nab one of these newly discovered and much cherished Peruvian taste treats.

The Waykis, having cleaned up, broken camp and packed after we left, now pass us, jogging by uphill with their 55 pound loads. Amazing.

Up, up and up; We take a break late morning upon reaching Wayllabamba, having climbed about a thousand feet in 7 kilometers (4.3 miles) since last night's camp.





It is as rustic a village as I have ever seen. We can buy there if we want – last chance - refrigerated drinks and packaged foods. Past here, permanent inhabitants, horses, mules and oxen are forbidden; we are passing the last outpost of civilization for the next 3 days.

We now turn north, ascending the smaller tributary cascade of Rio Llullucha. For the next 22 miles, there are at most only 500 of us on the 30-

mile trail at any given time in this multi-hundred square mile National Park, each making our way in little trekking groups towards Machu Picchu.



We are relieved to arrive mid-day at Wayki mini-camp where lunch is served. The dining, cooking and toilet tents have been erected, to include a dining table with tablecloth. Soup with chicken, then pork cutlet with mashed potatoes, and pears.

5000 varieties of potatoes are born in Peru, targeted to grow in different soils, exposures, and altitudes. When drought hit Europe in the 1820s and triggered famine on the continent (Irish potato famine), Peruvian potatoes came to the rescue. Man are these people proud of their potatoes. Oh, and quinoa. 2800 varieties of that!





We're back hiking now, the valley is narrower, the trail is steeper, almost all awkward stone steps.

We cross through new climate zones of humid mountain rainforest where we see hummingbirds and walk in the deep shade of many layers of fauna.





A steadily steep, uphill slog, It's tough going and we are heavy-legged from such a large lunch.

The Veronica Glacier is now fully in sight behind us. By and by the Waykis, having cleaned up, dissembled and packed the lunch site, again zoom by as we shout "Hola Waykis!" After almost 2 hours of grinding ascent, we arrive at Camp 2, already fully outfitted by the Waykis, of course.

Camp 2 is at 3800 M, 12,500 feet above sea level, quite high. We have traversed 12 kilometers/7.5 miles today, and climbed 2,600 feet since our morning break in the terminal village of Wayllabamba. We are camped at Llulluchupampa.



It is situated on the edge of a precipice with a wonderful view of a glacier-capped peak. Chino jokes that he has two wives, one who awaits at home, and this beautiful peak, with which he has spent a great deal of time in his 18 years of guiding. We go thru our post-hike drill, hot wash water basins, etc. Then tea and cookies. It is dark now and chilly at this altitude. It will be a cold night so we dress accordingly: silly flap hats, gloves, heavy socks, etc.

It seems typical for South American Spanish speakers to roll their “Rs.” Chino elevates this, in the spirit, I guess, of authenticity, to a theatrical level. Thus the pronunciation of Randy’s name, “R-r-r-r-r-randy” becomes a farce of percussive staccato well before arriving at the “...andy” part. Before long the Family playfully begins to follow suit, trying the rolling trill out with all kinds of “r-starting” words.

It’s r-r-r-really chilling down now and it’s not even fun to star gaze. Chino has warned of a long, arduous Day 3 – we know from the briefing it will be our longest day at 12 miles, having to ascend two passes approaching 14,000 feet. Reveille will be 5 am and trail at 6, just after first light. The Waykis fill our empty drinking bottles with hot water, an innovation for camping that guarantees warm toes in the bags. The dread is the prospect of having to visit Felipe’s tent at 3 am . . . Zero C or a bit lower is expected. In the bags at 8 pm. Some serious uphill in the morning.

Wednesday, May 11 Inca Trail, Day 3, 18 Kilometers

We hit the trail with a hearty “Haku! (Quechua for “Let’s go”) at 6 a.m. Cathy and I load up our cheeks with coco leaves, hoping to gain some turbo zip on the big, early morning climb.



It's up....

Up....



Up, for almost 3 hours.



By 8:20 AM, we reach Dead Woman's Pass (Warmiwañusca) and, at 4215 M/13,828 ft., a ridiculous, top-of-the-world view (Pumahuanca). Cathy peaks first and over the next 30 minutes the Family staggers in, herded by Kiké, all gasping at both the altitude and the vista. It's another "this is SO worth it" moment. Advised this is a 40th anniversary celebration trip for us, Chino insists we seal the deal at the pass.



and right on our heels are the Waykis. The triangle of well-lit ground at the very center of this picture is where we camped last night and began climbing 2 ½ hours earlier. Whew! And Whoopee!





We can't hang here though because we have another pass to climb to before lunch. Chino points at a far ridge which we must cross before lunch and the intervening valley to cross before we even start climbing again.

What goes up must come down, so we descend, knowing that every meter we yield must be regained later this morning. Keke and I mostly pulled up the rear, here descending from Warmiwañusca pass.



These stairs coming down, undoubtedly better on these steep and rough slopes than no stairs, are quite steep, of varying sizes of both tread and drop, and are not friendly to the skeletal joints of our Over-Fifty-Fun-Club, all the way from the ankles to our necks and all in between. The trekking poles are earning their keep.

Looking down about a thousand feet, we can see our mid-morning snack stop where we will start back up the trail on the other side, heading for Runquaray pass.

We pause around 10:30 when we reach the bottom of the valley, the established campsite of Paq'amayo where our Waykis who have set up for snack before our second climb. We are burning calories!

Boosted from this mid-morning break, we “haku” up to the 3990 M/13,090 Ft. second pass, Runkuraqay; again, up...



Up, climbing more steeply.



Enroute up, we pass and tour the Incan watch tower of Runkuraqay.

More awesome scenery of hulking peaks, snow covered and spawning many glaciers. The glaciers, Chino tells us to sadness but not surprise, are shrinking. This worries Chino greatly as those snowfields are the clean water source for much of the country, especially the tens of thousands of subsistence farmers who work the same lands, on the same terraces using the same methods for the same crops as their Quechua ancestors have for 500 years. These type of thoughts actually bring lighthearted, positive, “perrrrrrfecto” Chino to pause, and it seems almost lend his tears to recognize his people’s pain. Quechua are very spiritual — long before Spanish Catholicism — and Chino is no exception. He is nothing if not genuine, and he loves his people, their story, the land, the waters, the air, the creatures, the trees; and tells us all about them, always commencing with

“Family!” This is so much more than a walk in the mountains. And he has molded us into a sort of Family. “Cooperation,” remember? And we r-r-r-respect him for this.

Pausing before they top out, Anne and Beth look back at our morning’s work, coming over Warmiwanusca pass before dropping and regaining lots of altitude to the second pass...



before we pop over the second pass, cresting around 12:30 after 6 steady hours of hiking,



to find another very steeply staged downgrade. Now it’s up and down, still working our way towards lunch.





Deep now in Inca territory, we pass the Sites of Sayakmarka



And Qonchamarka, getting Chino's commentary as we cruise through.

However, a disquieting theme has developed. In our orientation meeting, Chino challenged us to consider, as we immersed ourselves in the trail and edifices of this Inca Empire, why did they build all of this; what did they do here? And why did they abandon them?

We are learning that the names for all of these sites are not what the Incas actually called them, but much later descriptive designations given by the Quechua to the Spanish or later archeologists to simply describe them: “High place on the mountain.” The actual names are lost to history.

And we want our historian/Peruvian/guide Chino to tell us exactly why they were built here in this way, for what purposes, and how were they used, and when and why did they stop being used?

Chino doesn’t answer; he replies with questions, Socratic-method style (had more than enough of that in law school!) “What do *you* think, Jack, this beautiful set of windows in this beautiful wall were put here for?” We guessed endlessly, but he never verified that any of our conclusions were right, and gave none himself. And it gradually dawns on us, over these five days, about these sites and Machu Picchu itself, as we pass the days staring in wonder and awe and pushing Chino for “the answer”: **Nobody really knows.** It is a great mystery, a studied guess, which the great explorers, archeologists and anthropologists of the world are still struggling to unravel.

Because the Inca had no written language, their scribes used complex systems of knotted strings, coupled with long oral apprenticeship, to measure and record the size, makeup, wealth, history, and society of the Inca Empire. The Spanish systematically rooted out and destroyed this competing society. They destroyed the knotted strings, and killed, banished or punished the scribes who could interpret them, along with the Inca kings who would have inspired and required that such scribes be trained – it was not a job of such intrinsic value to a leaderless society as to compel continuing in the face of prohibition, torture or death. Thus expired completely any recorded history of the Inca.

The Spanish sought out the temples, and fortresses, and watchposts as places to loot wealth, and defeat any remaining vestige of Inca government, religion, or opposition. Any items of interest or value were looted or destroyed, and any apparent caretaker, defender or denizen of these beautiful mountain-enveloped edifices were killed, punished or chased off. An Inca temple, fortress or royal estate became a place for the Incas to flee and avoid, rather than to cherish, inhabit, and defend.

The Incas themselves purposefully destroyed tens of miles of the royal Inca road leading from Cuzco to Machu Picchu, to preclude the Spanish from finding it. With the *Sapa Inca* dead or hiding, his political, religious and military retainers lost their *Raison d’Etre* and presumably abandoned the temples, fortresses, watchtowers and palaces they occupied in his support and which he would have normally defended. This damning information that they had about themselves and their civilization was suicidal to share with the conquistadors.

The Spanish had no interest in who built what, how, and why and to the extent that information was or could have been known to them it was not recorded. Their only interest in these structures was to pillage wealth and the already gathered and cut stones to rebuild into European style edifices.

So history is left with these stunning edifices and nothing more than imagination and common sense to try to figure out, “What was going on here?” There is simply no hard fact about any of it. Chino prefaced his every statement or response about these magnificent sites, with “in my opinion...,” because there is no definitive conclusion about any of this. One simply looks in awe and wonders.

At this point on day 3, we have started at 6 a.m., climbed two major passes, booked thousands of vertical feet up and down, trekked and toured through three stunning sites, covered about 9 miles, and not yet had lunch.

Since arriving in Cuzco, we have had six straight sunny, dry, coolish days. Colorado Mountain summer weather. Thank God, because the going is tough. But around 2 pm, walking gets easier as we join the original Inca Trail. It is smoother, more consistent, and inspirational. The Incas' web of roads linked everything, north/south for administering the sprawling kingdom, east/west for trade between the mountains and the sea. Others were paths to the sacred places. Over time, the natives destroyed much of this network to prevent the Spaniards with



their horses from using it. We had been traversing an inferior reconstruction and/or bypass. This, now, was a sacred way. Now we walk where the Incas walked. This is way cool.

At last, early afternoon, we arrive at a large, level campground, and find the Waykis, who sped by us an hour after our morning snack, have arrayed our bathroom tent, cooking tent, and dining tent with hot food ready to serve. Lunch occurs, along with a very welcome, short nap afterwards before the final push to Camp 3.

Despite our persistent awe of this place, there is no “plain” part of this trail. The trail goes through caves where sheer faces would have blocked it,



Then passes stunning vistas and waterfalls, edges along vast precipices, and continues its up and down demands on our tired selves.







At 5:30 we come to Camp 3. Chino had prepared us to arrive by headlamp beams, in darkness. That would have sucked. This is Phuyupatamarca. The “Place above the clouds,” 3650 M/11,975 Ft above sea level. But the Family has consistently beaten the timeline today and we have time to high five the Waykis, wash up, change, gawk at the view and get to dinner as daylight fades. I don’t remember the menu, but Puma did it again. We are giddy about our power-driven day and the second bottle of Pisco comes out and goes quickly. Gracias Wayki! Cathy has her Malbec and all is right on the mountaintop, including the glacier-draped peak that we can almost reach out and touch. It is Salkantay, 6200 M/20,341 Ft above sea level - a major *Apu*, mountain god or spirit, to the Quechua.

We have become so invested in the trek, and are so taken by the scenery and solitude, that we are practically insulted to have to share Camp 3 with other parties. “Get off my lawn” almost. But the camp is terraced, all keep to themselves, and we are sufficiently beat that the available energy goes to stargazing and turning in.

Thursday, May 12 Inca Trail, Day 4, 17 Km to Sun Gate

Today will be a largely downhill day, which sounds great except it is mostly very big, very steep steps, and thighs tend to balk at that after an hour or two. Accordingly, expecting slow progress, wakeup is set for 5, breakfast 5:30, and trail at 6, daylight.

At 4:50 am, our weather luck is flushed. Biblical rain falls and the schedule is pushed back 30 minutes. Our tent leaks a bit. Felipe’s potty tent is floating. But magically it stops, and the mist begins to lift. We’ll still be downhill, but only on wet steps, not rainy ones.

Our coca-leaf tea arrives via Julio Cesar and we pack our belongings. Our “angels” will deal with the wet gear. For today we arrive at Machu Picchu, “Old Mountain.”

Our Waykis will have lunch waiting for us, but it will be a brief meeting. We take this opportunity to bestow group-gathered tips on them which we all hope will be perceived as bounteous; my parsimony evoked at the orientation meeting at lavishly tipping has totally vanished, as I have come to heartily appreciate these happy, incredibly hard working and humble gentlemen, who have made our trek through otherwise impossible territory a luxury stroll. We take group pictures, and depart for **Machu Picchu!**





Other than a net downward progress on this last day, I wasn't sure what to expect. ***It was magnificent***... exceeding the prior three days in vistas, Inca sites and steepness of our path through the mountains.

First we went down steps almost steep enough to cause us to slide butt-wise or turn and ladder like climb down them to pass through the Inca fortress of Phuyupatamarca.

Throughout the day, we were in the clouds which persistently enveloped us and then disappeared, creating an aura of surrealism to the already fantasy-like landscape and structures.





Pressing downward,

downward,



downward, into and through the cloud
forest rain jungle again,





Always with stunning views of the Andes.





The Urubamba River which we climbed several thousands feet up from 3 days ago, hoves into sight again, now thousands of feet below us, just before we emerge at the top of the **Intipata** site, which was my favorite. We came around a corner and **boom!** There it was, commanding a breathtaking view of the Urubamba River and its valley; we were at the top, and the trail led down, right square through the middle of these awesome terraces.



But not before we encountered, as though they had been trained and paid to be there, 3, most placid my dear friends, llamas sunning themselves on these heights, patient and docile enough to pose for perhaps 200 exposures of every conceivable arrangement of our group and its various members. Sublime. Simply sublime.



And thence down and across, down and across, we went,





leaving our friendly llamas behind,

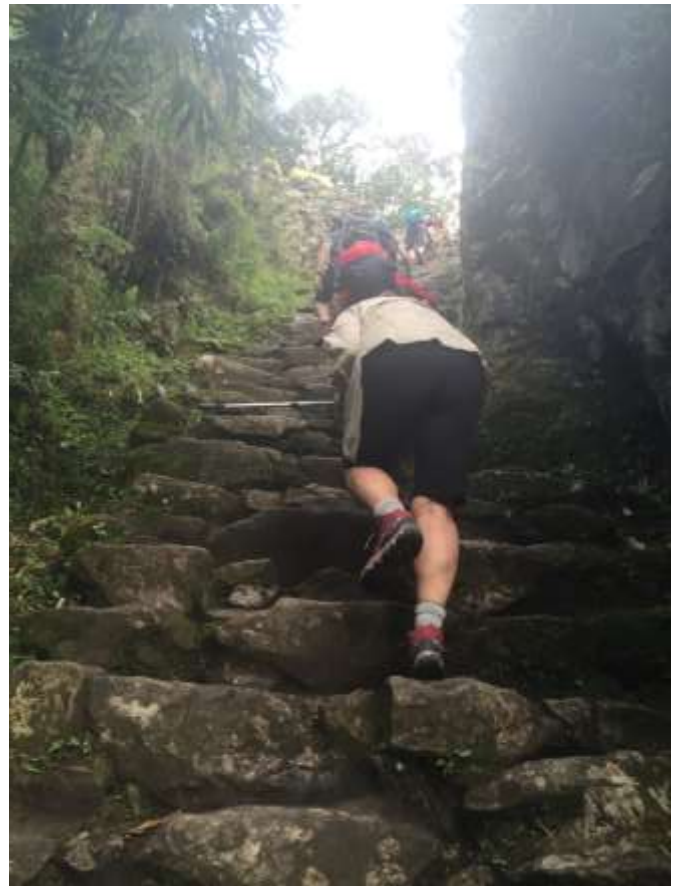




until we achieved the bottom of this awesome site.



Shortly after, we arrive for our last Wayki catered lunch, at the Wiñay Wayna site. This was indeed our last contact with our Waykis. We gifted our un-needed Dollar Store ponchos to Chino who, by lottery, handed them to deliriously excited Wayki. They — no BS — reacted as though they had won the lottery. The actual lottery. Touching. And off we went, the last couple of miles.



We were not to achieve the journey's goal without a last burn, the steepest steps of the trip challenged us before we emerged through the SunGate, Intipunku,

which looks commandingly down about a thousand feet and a mile away to....Machu Picchu.
Three pics of the same thing below, to honor the 3 sets of dynamics; a forty year anniversary with my still young, always fun, most lovely, and always there-with-me bride; thirty-odd years of great outdoor adventures with the Werts; and a wonderful group of strangers *cum* “family” with whom we have made this bucket-list-fulfilling trip:



The Sun Gate was indeed a beautifully crafted stone gate with about a hundred-foot square accumulation of walls and rooms to presumably house those who guarded access to Machu Picchu from those coming via the royal Inca Trail and Cuzco. It sat astride a smallish gap in the huge mountain shoulder through which we popped from steeply climbing, into a full view of Machu Picchu. It was built to align with the summer and winter solstice.

After 4 solitary days on the trail, instead of being a special culmination of our trek, we found it a jarring reunion with civilization. It was crowded and noisy with some couple hundred of the tourists who had bused up Machu Picchu that day, thence undertaking the short excursion up from MP to see this adjunct. The Sun Gate is mobbed. We are stunned and, frankly, repulsed by the crowd endlessly posing for cheesy selfies; “I own it!” stuff. There was hardly a place to sit or stand, much less take a photo not crowded with strange faces clad with in tourist t-shirts and flip-flops. Though we tried, it was disappointingly not a suitable place to sit in solitude and contemplate the end of our pilgrimage.

We actually had to stand in line for a bit to access the suitable place to pose with Machu Picchu as background for our “summit” picture. We shoot our share and gear up. Chino then walked us down the trail a few hundred yards to find a place quiet enough to give us his introduction to what we were seeing.



And he shared this: Little of the complete story of the sacred city Machu Picchu is known. Theorists coming from several directions have coalesced on the conclusion, not certain, that Pachakutec built it in the almost inaccessible mountains as both an exclusive royal retreat, and

the most intensely religious center of the Inca Empire. Most towns or temples surviving from the Inca Empire show evidence of worshiping only one or two of the many nature-inspired Gods. Machu Picchu has ornate, exquisite temples honoring 16 different gods. Kind of a Mecca, Vatican, Jerusalem, Rome and Riviera rolled into one.

It was abandoned by the Incas during the Spanish conquest, the Spaniards never found it, and it was “lost” for hundreds of years, thereby substantially preserved in its 15th century condition.

Chino gives Yale professor/explorer/trust fund baby/U.S. Senator Hiram Bingham a lot of credit regarding Machu Picchu but refuses to say that Bingham “discovered” it. “He was the first tourist” to visit Machu Picchu, when he clambered with a local native boy up its almost vertical slopes in 1911 chasing yet another of dozens of rumors he had pursued for the “lost city of the Incas.” He found living there 3 humble subsistence Indian farm families, and buried in 400 years of jungle growth, an unscathed Inca site of exquisite design and craftsmanship. They did not consider him the discoverer of Machu Picchu. Call him what you will, without Bingham, we might not be anticipating today’s payoff.

As mentioned above, Quechua were spiritual and connected to their physical world. Almost oddly, Quechua theology also incorporated both a cross and a “trilogy.” But theirs was 100% of the natural world. And hierarchical. It is represented in the Inca Cross. You’ve seen it. The hierarchy is, top to bottom, condor (representing the sky), puma (for the earth) and serpent (the underworld). The empty circle in the center is emblematic of Cuzco, the center of Quechua life and Empire.



Ever heard the Simon and Garfunkel song “El Condor Pasa?” It is Quechua inspired. The Spaniards were butchers, driven by the perfect storm of greed, evangelism and an empty royal treasury. They systematically looted the Inca Empire of gold and silver, which had zero monetary significance for the Quechua, but rather symbolized the sun and moon, respectively.

Every single guide, historian or docent we engaged in Peru steadfastly deny that the Conquistadors EVER conquered the Quechua, that they simply conducted an elaborate 300- year resistance. The last revolt was led, in the late 1700s, by Tupac Amaru, ultimately tortured and murdered before his family in Lima’s Plaza de Armas. He is the inspiration and namesake of rapper Tupac Shakur. Look it up!

This overview given, downward we trekked again, We have another kilometer or so to descend to conquer what stands between us and a hot shower: the crazy, 8 Km bus ride down the “old mountain” to Aguas Calientes, “Machu Picchu town.”



Most entertainingly, on a relatively narrow section of the trail as we approached Machu Picchu, we encounter free range llamas coming up the trail. Instructed in their passivity by our first photographic experience with them at Intipata, we stand aside to let them pass, completely unwary that their constant close passage with all of these peeps has apparently alarmed one of them to a common, llama defense action. The second

llama in line, in passing Anne, vomits and spits with considerable velocity directly at her face, from only a few feet away, a softball-size gob of gooey, green, half digested cud. Anne's luck has changed for the better since her bike wreck, as the projectile divides mid-air into pieces and goes everywhere except onto her...making this much more of a laughing matter than it could have been!

Passing through the outskirts of the site to its entry station, we board the shuttles for Aguas Caliente and our room for the night.

We will go down, up and again down this astounding people-moving relay. Twice Fauzia selects "shotgun" on a 60-person Mercedes coach, and twice comes perhaps a Mercedes medallion from a nose-to-nose hairpin bus encounter. Yes, another "Class V" road.



Well obviously we survived the last 8 Km via bus, and we walked up the hill a short way to our hotel, Casa Andina. Five minutes later we were sucking Cuzco Department dry of hot water. M-m-m-m-m-m. OMG. Clean!

Before dispersing to various hotels we had, at Chino's urging, agreed to meet two hours hence in the Plaza de Armas of Aguas Calientes. Which, of course, contains a giant statue of Pachakutec. Chino led the giddy Family one block up the hill to a gorgeous but empty native cuisine place, Inca Wasi. It was clear the fix was in and Chino was in as well. Comp Pisco Sours appeared, a ceremonial guinea pig, "cuy al horno," was served, and Family-sized sighs of relief found lubrication.

Then, a 3-piece Peruvian band materialized next to us, serenading us through dinner with a pan flute-based repertoire of tunes, “El Condor Pasa,” old Beatles as well as Quechua traditionals. They were terrific! Interesting instruments, arrangements and musicianship. Suddenly, Chino has joined the band, “sitting in” to feature on pan flute. Wow. We knew he had chops on this typical Peruvian instrument, but this was burning down the house. The Family went crazy and proceeded to dance the entire Beatles set. Elaine in particular impresses with her barefoot beach shimmy, only to be eclipsed by Jack and Anne’s swung/shag punctuated by Anne’s wine-fueled and probably medically unwise leg kicks, for which she would pay a heavy rib setback price Friday. Nope, we don’t learn!

Toasts are made to Chino; he was special and well-appreciated by all. The Family disperses with an aggressive plan to meet in the Plaza at 6 AM to have Chino conduct our up close and personal tour of Machu Picchu on the morn.

On our short walk to Casa Andina we approach the plaza only to witness the most odd and — to someone! — significant Catholic pageant. It’s a Thursday night in May!? Another parade, of course, leading the way. Descriptions and adjectives fail. Costumes, music, choreography, virgin Mary, fireworks, church dignitaries, chitza (native beer). Mardi Gras, Junkanoo and the Grambling Marching Band rolled into Catholicism. Man, I need sleep!

Friday, May 13 Machu Picchu

High drama right off the bat. Chino reminded us at dinner to meet in the square at 6 AM. The better to beat maybe 30% of the crowd to the Mercedes Deathwish Bus queue.

Except that it’s now 6:20; we eleven peeps are all timely standing tall and, well, no Chino. “Did he say 6?” Confirmed. “Did he say the Plaza?” Confirmed. This is very unusual. Beth calls Chino’s mobile, twice, before confirming that he is, um, not close the joining us in the plaza. Within a half hour we are in a long bus line with hungover, well, actually still polluted Chino. The end of our dinner was the kickoff to his evening! Haku!

As we inched closer to the boarding area, a misty, grey day turns to rain. Wow. Didn’t we have ponchos like 24 hours ago? Well, a little rain ain’t stopping this parade, so we board and marvel at the driver who engages neither wipers nor windscreen defogger on the way up the multiple switchbacks. Fauzia, what ARE you doing in the front seat again?!

Chino guides us through the entry process, super ball-size wad of coca leaf in his cheek. And here I thought always of aspirin! Then, the Family is IN!

Chino leads us on a reasonably crowd-avoiding tour of several highlights. Temples, dwellings, construction, architecture, Bingham stuff, etc. He is struggling with brain fog and English, and talking through a softball-size mouthful of coca leaves. Wonder if he properly blessed them before bringing them on board? He attempts to mask his dullness by taking his customary Socratic method of interaction to an annoying, pointless level. “Just tell us!” come the cries from the soaked Family. “Please!” “In the name of Puchakutec!” I made that last part up.

Rain or not, polluted Chino or not, we are shown some amazing highlights, and gain much information from Chino. Lost for 500 years, Machu Picchu's secrets are largely the stuff of conjecture and hypothesis, which Chino posits with "Possibly, in my opinion" For me, I like his version. It is romantic and consistent with his commentary all week. Mostly, though, the impressions today are visual.



Joints at the Temple of the Condor



Astrally aligned reflecting pools to study the heavens?



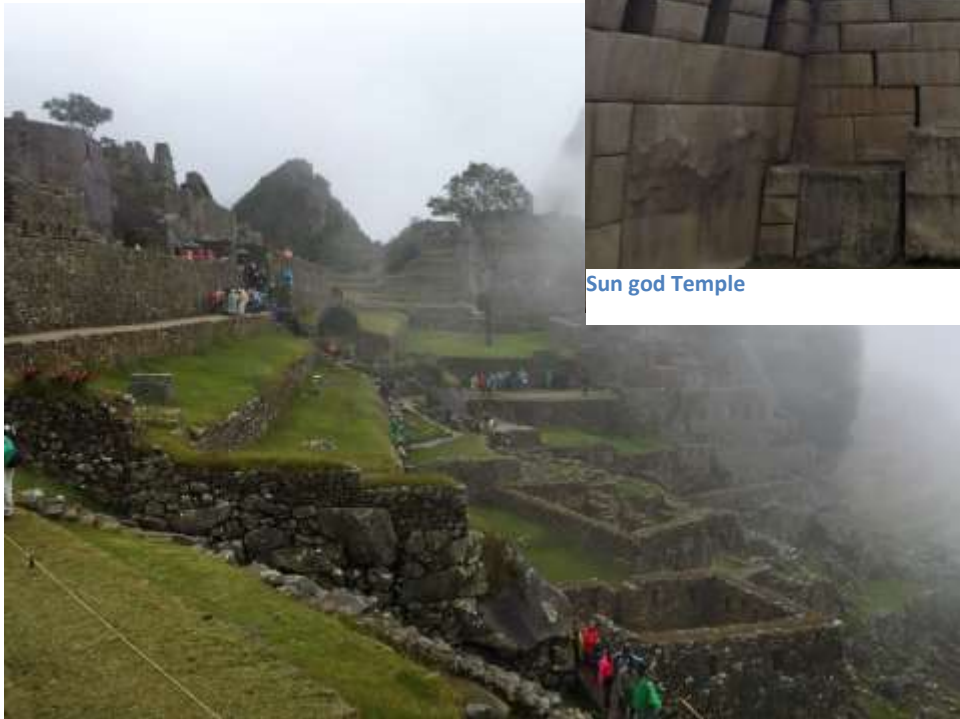
Some of hundreds of terraces for... agriculture? landslide prevention? religious purposes? aesthetics? All of the above? None of the above?



Central plaza



Sun god Temple





Pacha Mama, "earth mother" temple



Granaries



Wings on Temple of the Condor

The place is huge and once supported thousands. Just this: How could a people without an alphabet or written word conceive, plan, map and build such a seamless, perfectly-sited and functional metropolis? Possibly. In my opinion.

Oh, then there is the “aliens” theory. Ok, Chino, knock it off. We are soaked and chilled.

Chino leaves us to wander after 2-3 hours, as planned. He’s going back to bed. We take advantage of a letup to climb and explore and photograph. God there are a lot of visitors. Never saw so many conehead ponchos.

After an hour wait for the downhill suicide bus, Butts and Werts go directly to a restaurant with a table by the wood-fired, warm pizza and cuy oven, and order Cusqueña. Cozy. Our only remaining responsibility today is to meet Chino on the Plaza that night and follow him to the train for Cuzco.



This time the rendezvous goes smoothly and the appropriately chastened Chino produces a pink make-up carnation for each of the gals. Gary mock grouses that men get squat. Again.



Once aboard Perurail an interesting day becomes bizarre. After drinks and snacks are served and cleared, one of the 3-person attendant crew proceeds to entertain us with a costumed, devil-worship musical carnival floor show. Satan, or whomever, entreats female passengers to dance with him/it, and several do. Then, the other two helpers proceed to strut the aisle modeling various alpaca garments, for men and women! It’s like a Fellini movie. Elaine is so entranced she joins in, modeling a convertible alpaca smock-y dress number. Many approve, so she buys it!

Tim offers dryly, “Interesting resume: take tickets, serve drinks, bus tables, model.” It’s all really odd. We laugh; Randy is not amused, claims he never got Fellini anyway.

Unhappily, it turns dark as the train leaves the Aguas Calientes station heading upriver in the Urubamba River Valley. I'd very much anticipated the vista from the canyon bottom, but alas, it was dark. An hour or two later we disembark at Ollantaytambo, transferring to a couple of the vans for the two-three hour drive back to Cuzco. We arrive late, and beat.

Saturday, May 14 Again Cuzco

This will be recovery day. We need laundry done and find that the best way to low-key the day is to shop. And Cuzco is great for that with everything close and walkable. Postcards home!

Throw in a lovely lunch at El Cuadro on a minor plaza, Cusqueñas, and we are ready to rehash the trail.

Naps ensue and later, with the assistance of Carlos at the Quinta, we wrangle a reso at a fine Italian dinner spot for supper. The recounting over a well-served dinner of what we've seen and done takes on the cocktail warmed glow of an epic journey with forever memories.

Sunday, May 15 Adios Peru

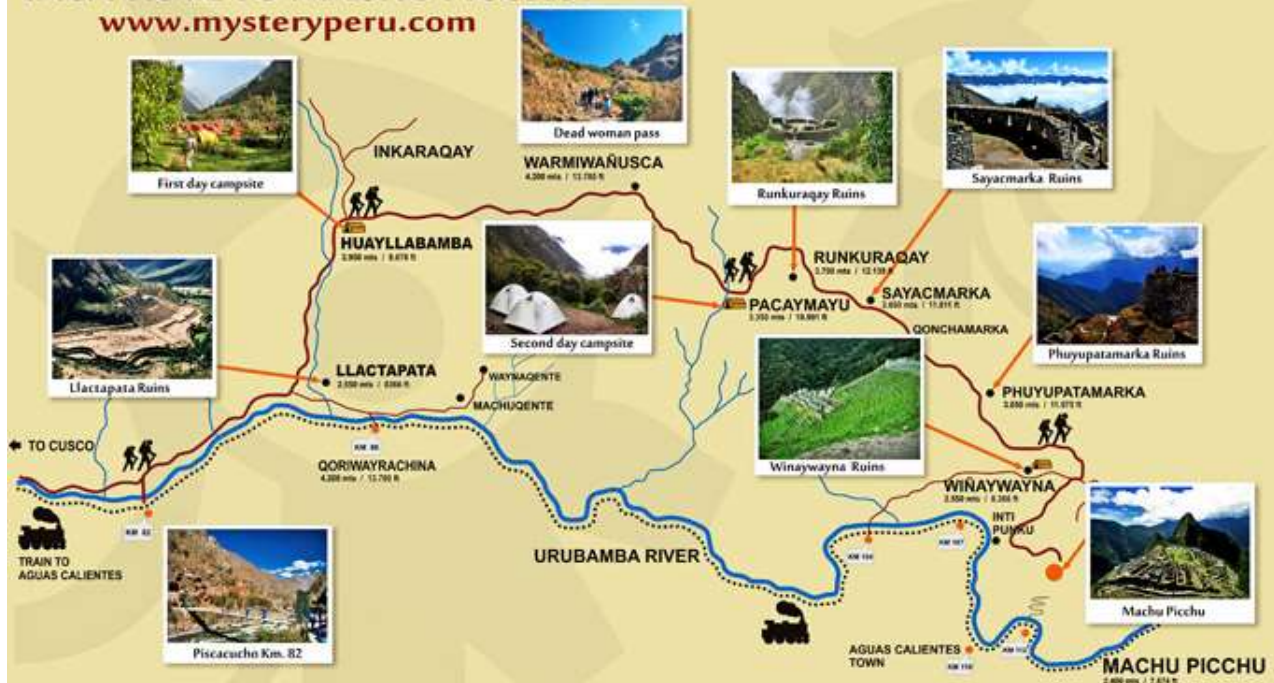
Butts and Werts must make their way to the Cuzco airport today, but not before the neighborhood Catholics parade to Plaza San Blas and morning mass accompanied by a 5-piece marching band and the de rigeur Cuzco firecrackers. These pageants! And fireworks at 6:30 am?

Love Cuzco.

Happily, again overnight flight to Dallas was unremarkable, followed by the drive back to Fayetteville. That was indeed, well worth the bucket listing!!

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