

# Peru / Machu Picchu

*August 11-20*



*Llama and Machu Picchu*

## ***Introduction***

For the last several years I had been wanting to explore the ancient ruins in the city of Machu Picchu in Peru. Having just come back from a missions trip to South America in Ecuador about 6 months ago, I was eager to go back to South America. With the idea on my mind, whenever I would talk to friends who had been to Machu Picchu, it was only pique the desire that much more.

I went on a Compassion trip to Tanzania last year, and my roommate for the trip asked if I would be interested in joining him on an REI trip to Machu Picchu this summer - after a couple wonderful rafting trips down the Grand Canyon, I knew I enjoyed these kind of adventure trips – so I decided to sign up. The REI trip had a wonderful trek over the Salkantay pass and we would be staying in lodges on the way. It didn't take a lot of convincing to get me to go. This year is also the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hiram Bingham's discovery of Machu Picchu. I don't know how many more years I'll be healthy enough and have the time to make these kind of trips, so being an opportunist, I didn't want to miss it.

I had several friends who also expressed interest in going, but sadly none of them weren't able to go due to different reasons. And my friend from the Tanzania trip ended up changing his plans (going a few weeks later) so I would be on my own. Oh well – at least I'd be able to make new friends on the way. On our trip, we ended up having 11 people plus our guide Raul:

Andy and Nancy and Ken Hicks  
Arlen and Sharon  
Scott and Dana  
Patrick and Anna  
Jack and me

## *Travel to Peru*

I was relieved to find a couple people I felt I knew already on the trip - Anna and Patrick. Although we never met in person, I knew they were coming and suspected we might be on the same flight from SFO (they were from Carmichael near Sacramento). We met in the security line when they noticed my orange T-shirt from REI adventures and they asked if I was going to Peru. I said yes and was delighted to find they were too and indeed we were going to be traveling together the whole way! I had been a bit nervous about the whole trip - the bar was quite high with expectations, though I knew everyone who went in years past had a great time.

It was nice to have a direct flight from SFO to Lima - it was hard to believe we were finally in Peru! After many months of anticipation and years of hearing stories from friends who have been, it was finally my turn. We met about 4 other folks in Lima, making a group of 6 of us on the final flight to Cusco. It was nice to see the group slowly building itself together as we got closer!

We had a bit of a layover in Lima – luckily, being the middle of the night, the airport wasn't too crowded and we managed to curl up and nap for a couple hours. The flight to Cusco was only about an hour – as the sun was rising we climbed out of the foggy marine layer in Lima, caught glimpses of the wonderful snow-capped Andean peaks in the distance before landing in Cusco. Interestingly instead of my ears popping inwardly as we descended, they popped outwardly – the plane was pressurized to around 8000 ft at cruising altitude, but Cusco is 11,000 feet, with less air pressure than the cabin!



*Airport in Cusco*

In Cusco it was a short ride to the hotel by St Augustin, just a few blocks from the downtown square - the Plaza de Armas. Sipping cocoa tea (which is supposed to help us get used to the 11,000 ft elevation), it was nice to finally lounge for a while.

A small problem developed soon afterward, however, when we all went to check into our rooms, I thought we were all staying in the same hotel the first night. But my hotel (Andean Wings) was a different one down the street (and my room was already paid for). All the other folks they let through, but they stopped to ask me for my credit card, and I was puzzled. Fortunately after a bunch of phone calls and an almost-forgotten passport left on the front desk, I got a ride to my correct hotel. It was a bit bittersweet - I ended up being the only one in that hotel from our group. But I was lucky in that I

could check into my room right away (the others ended up having to wait in the lounge for several hours before checking in) – the cloud had a silver lining after all. And we'd all be moving to my hotel the next night anyway (so I wouldn't have to pack up and move like the others would).

I managed to check into the room by about 9 in the morning and promptly fell asleep - it felt so good! I didn't want to sleep too long though – it would throw my schedule all out of whack... It was nice that Peru was almost directly south of the US (in the central time zone), so there wasn't much jet-lag to deal with. We had all agreed to meet in the Plaza de Armas at 1:00 - when I woke up from my nap I realized I only had a little time to wake up and get a shower before meeting the others. I turned on the shower and after waiting perhaps 3-5 minutes for the hot water to kick in, I was ready to give up when one of the staff knocked on the door to introduce us to our room! She said the knobs were backwards and the water does indeed take several minutes to come on (the plumbing is a couple hundred years old). Whew - the hot shower was quite welcome!

I made it to the square a few minutes late but after waiting for about 1/2 hour, I never found the others (I found out later that they hadn't been able to get into their rooms until almost noon and they went to sleep and were still sleeping when I was waiting for them - oh well...) I ended up just exploring a bit on my own - touring the La Compania cathedral, shops around the Plaza de Armas and walking some of the steps on the streets to see where they went. I found Cusco to be a pretty friendly town - besides much of the economy of Peru is based on tourism, so it better be friendly!



*Fountain and La Compania Cathedral from Plaza de Armas*

Cusco used to be the capital of the Inca empire many centuries back, and it was interesting to see many of the more modern buildings still using the original Inca stonework. The narrow cobblestone streets seemed to bend around corners to hidden gems - street musicians were playing, jugglers and dancers were giving their shows. I felt like being a kid all over again, exploring around in the woods behind our neighborhood. This was like exploration on my own in its purest form - wandering with no agenda and where everything felt fresh and new.

The La Compañía cathedral was built in the late 1500's and was rebuilt after a major earthquake in 1650. The site was sacred - it was the location of an important ancient palace called the Inca Huayna Capac (some say it was the most beautiful of the Inca ruler palaces). The cathedral was splendid - like you would see in Venice or Barcelona or somewhere else in Europe. When the Spanish conquered the

Incas, they left many examples of wonderful Baroque style architecture. Although the church was a bit dark inside, the gold-plated altar and sculptures were magnificent. Photography wasn't officially allowed (though many tourists were taking pictures anyway - it didn't seem to be all that enforced). It was great to see that some of the work had been recently restored - the many centuries-old paintings and sculptures were starting to peel and develop a dark patina from age. I thought it would be really interesting to work on a restoration project sometime to bring some of the ancient artwork back to life. I knew it would be quite tedious work but I would think it to be so rewarding to see the original quality of the paintings and sculptures. I've been part of restoration projects in the past and in fact was planning on camping at Gilroy Hot Springs back near home to spend a weekend cleaning up and restoring some of the abandoned buildings and imagining life many years ago during simpler times (and spend many hours enjoying the hot springs as well!)

After about 1/2 hour of wandering through the cathedral I was about to leave when one of the guides asked "arriba?" - (go up?) I wondered where she meant, but I saw a narrow doorway with steps to the upper balconies (most cathedral balconies I've been to have been closed to the public, so I was surprised to see this one open!). I also discovered a narrow set of steps down, leading to the crypt. And below the crypt visible through a hole in the floor was even a lower layer where some of the original Inca stonework and tunnels (maybe from the ancient palace) was exposed. It was tempting to slither through the hole, hop down to the lower level and explore around (there wasn't anyone else in the room), but without a ladder it would have been a tricky climb back up... better not...

Overlooking Cusco is a large white marble statue of Christ with his arms stretched. Having been in Brazil a few years back, the statue was quite reminiscent to the famous Christ the Redeemer statue on Corcovado in Rio de Janeiro. Remembering the highlight in Rio and seeing the statue to only be about 1/2 mile away, I figured it would be a good walk. It took a bit longer than expected - there were so many distractions and other interesting sights in the ancient city that it was hard to stay focused. What was down this street? And around the corner to the next one? Some tropical fruit flavored ice cream and bananas made for a nice snack while letting my mind take a rest - I had been on a mental overload since the minute we landed! Although the path was pretty short to the statue, it was a huff and puff up to nearly 12,000 feet. But with each step, the view continued to open up with a panoramic sweep across Cusco, all the way to the 20,000 ft Ausangate mountain far behind. Christ sure had a great view!



*Christ the Redeemer overlooking Cusco and Ausangate*

At the base of the Christ statue was a man playing an interesting looking Celtic sounding instrument with many strings - it was like a mandolin but was rather unusual (I lost count of the strings so I had to take a picture and count later!). The rhythms and melodies were soothing as my mind was able to relax and process the fact that I was really in a faraway land - it felt like being in a fairy tale. I've found a test to see if things are real to be if my camera takes a picture properly - I've had many dreams where I would see something wonderful but wouldn't be able to get a photo due to some weird malfunction of the camera - and wouldn't be able to capture the moment (similar to the spinning top in Inception - will it fall?). But I was able to get pictures (and videos) no problem - yay it was real! (It was like the spinning-top experiment in Inception). I bought a CD of his music and saw the instrument was called a bandurria. The 10 soles (about \$4) for the CD would help me remember the moment for a long time.

Just a ways down from the Christ statue looked like some interesting Inca ruins - I knew there were numerous Inca ruins in and around Cusco (Cusco was the capital of the Inca empire back in the day). I wandered over to have a look and found the sign saying they were called Sacsayhuaman - I took a picture of the sign to help me remember the name. I hadn't paid close attention to our trip itinerary (it was fun to let most things be a surprise instead of studying it too much ahead of time - otherwise the trip would feel too predictable), and when I got back to the hotel I saw that the exact place was on the itinerary for the next day - oh well, wouldn't hurt to see it twice! But it was fun to "discover" it on my own by accident first, instead of just seeing it as we were touring.



*Sacsayhuaman*

The stones were magnificent - one of the signatures of Inca architecture was that the stones were all carved by hand, without mortar in a way they fit so snugly that you can't even stick a knife between the stones. Many of the walls were still intact, and even several doorways arches still had their lintels in place. After hundreds of years of weather, encroaching civilization, earthquakes and Spanish conquest, the stones still stood frozen in time. Strolling through the ancient paths and hallways I felt lost in time. It was late afternoon and many of the tourists had already left - it was getting chilly and the wind picked up so it felt rather lonely. I entered a moment of introspection - pondering the shortness of life and how many of my accomplishments would ever be remembered. Machu Picchu had become a ghost town and stood forgotten in time for many centuries - would the Silicon Valley and all of our accomplishments back home become a ghost town someday?

Some of the stones were enormous - even up to 30 tons! That was pretty marvelous for an ancient civilization that lacked a written language and didn't even know the wheel (the stones were moved on wooden rollers like how the pyramids in Egypt were built thousands of years earlier). I wondered why some civilizations could live in such isolation and it took so long to learn basic concepts such as the wheel. The book "Guns, Germs and Steel" gives an interesting oversight of how civilizations developed and what environmental factors would have contributed to advances in technology - I had only read a short bit, but became rapidly intrigued. Why are there still tribes living relatively "in the stone age" even in modern society?

Seeing the huge stones and ancient buildings reminded me of a tour I made about 10 years ago through Israel and the stones in Jerusalem. The part where Jesus predicts the destruction of the city hit home when he warned the people about "What massive stones, what magnificent buildings! They will all be destroyed and every stone will be thrown down". Even our greatest accomplishments would be long forgotten. It was humbling to see the great Inca architecture but was even further humbling to see how God is so much greater – our greatest works will return to the dust of the earth, but God's heavenly kingdom will last forever.



*Giant stones of Sacsayhuaman*

Walking along the glacier-polished granite slabs across the field from the main 3 tiers of walls of Sacsayhuaman, I stumbled across what appeared to be an old staircase of precisely cut stones. I first thought it was a quarry where they cut the stones, but found out later it was an ancient calendar. They would measure the shadows at different times of each day throughout the year and could tell the seasons based on the angles of the sun. This seemed to be a common practice in many ancient civilizations - including the Mayans (the shadows on the great pyramid of Chichen Itza would look like a giant snake at certain times of year), in India (the staircases of Jantar Mantar would reveal shadows that aligned a certain way), and in England (in Stonehenge on the summer solstice, the sun would appear to balance on the "Heel Stone"). I even remember when I was a kid in Florida I would notice the angles of the shadows of the roof of our house when I got back from school. Astronomical observation appeared as something innate to mankind.

I realized how much of a tourist area I was in when I saw people lining up for photos with Quechua men and women with alpacas. I first thought they were just minding their own business until I saw they were there on purpose to sit around and look cute and collect a dollar or two just to have their picture taken with tourists - I guess it was a more efficient way of making money than panhandling on

the streets, but it still seemed sad that an economy had developed from foreign tourists desiring to take home a bit of "culture" in the form of those photos.



*Quechua women with alpacas*

Throughout the day, I exchanged cameras with other tourists a couple times to get each other's pictures - it was interesting to compare notes with the others and see what they were planning. But one of the times, I handed my camera to someone who wanted to get my photo. After the picture, I said thanks and was ready to get my camera back, but he insisted on getting another photo a little further down. OK - I could stay for a second picture, but I was good after that. But he still wouldn't hand the camera back - he insisted on yet another photo, then another, and another. It was getting a bit annoying. I realized I had been tricked - he wasn't really a tourist - he had sort of "hijacked" my camera and only after giving him 10 soles would he give it back! At least the pictures came out pretty good.

Back at the hotel my roommate for the trip finally appeared. Jack was an older guy, about in his 70's, but still with a good deal of energy and enthusiasm. I wasn't sure what to expect (in Tanzania last year, my roommate was about the same age), since they didn't give much information except people's names on our welcome packets (probably in this day and age of protecting people's privacy, they didn't want to risk a breach of "personal information"). We hung out in the bar, sipping Cusquena beers (from Cusco) with logos of Machu Picchu on the bottles. The bar had a nice coffee-table book full of pictures - this year was the 100th anniversary of Bingham's famous discovery. I knew Machu Picchu wasn't until the end of our trip, so I was a bit torn since I was anticipating it so much, but didn't want to skip over and miss the wonders during the rest of the trip!

We decided to "hit the town" for dinner by walking the 2 blocks to the Plaza de Armas nearby and checking out some of the restaurants. Of course all the restaurant owners wanted our business and even neighboring restaurant owners would squabble back and forth to try to win us over. We finally picked the Tunupa restaurant - the menu looked interesting, containing guinea pig, alpaca tenderloin and some nice desserts. I ended up taking the alpaca and so did Jack. The food was wonderful - I was a bit leery about taking anything too exotic at first but couldn't resist trying alpaca tenderloin, since I didn't want it to be hard on my stomach (though almost everyone throughout the trip had a bit of Montezuma's revenge eventually including me). About 1/2 way through our tasty meal, I started hearing music from what sounded like a place next door. It was hard to resist humming along - many of the tunes were familiar Beatles songs and American folk songs, but with an Andean beat.

After dinner I turned around to have a peek and saw that the band had come up just around the corner behind our table! We both got up from the table and got a wonderful show of Andean folk music - complete with guitars, panflutes, drums and bandurria. And then after a couple songs, a group of dancers in full costume came up and did a few numbers! I remember in Brazil a few years back seeing the elegantly clad Brazilian women doing their dances (and a lucky member of our group got invited to dance with them too!) But that was part of the "itinerary" - here we happened upon it by chance - a wonderful surprise! We even got to get pictures with the dancers when they were done! I was surprised though to see they were pretty short - about a foot shorter than us (in Brazil some of the women were taller than many of us), but they were just as finely dressed. After the photos, the waiter came by to remind us about our check - whoops we hadn't paid for the dinner! After being so distracted by the music, we completely forgot - but he didn't!



*Dinnertime entertainment*

### ***August 11 (official first day)***

I slept surprisingly well for my first night in an unfamiliar bed at over 11,000 feet. I had totally forgotten about the altitude - in Cusco I felt we were in some European city (which would be around sea level) instead of at a campsite high in the mountains. I only had a minor headache. They had a bottle of spare oxygen on our closet by the mini-bar - I guess in case some people had trouble with the altitude. I have a friend who seems to get sick even if we just drive up to 8,000-9,000 feet - I'm glad I was fine. I guess the cocoa tea was working. I would have to wait a few days though until we got up over 15,000 feet to see how I would do.

Our group wasn't scheduled to meet until around noon so we had time to check out the Inca museum just a few blocks from the hotel - it was nice to be pretty centrally located and have so many things nearby. I think we'd have to stay a week though to really see the sights even right in Cusco. Most of the museums required a "museum pass" which costs over \$60 - not worth it to spend just a couple hours in 1 or 2 museums. But the Inca museum wasn't part of the "museum pass" system - so for \$4, it made a worthy couple hours. Although the museum was only a few blocks away, it was slightly non-trivial to find - the streets seemed to change name every block or two! It was easier to just count the number of intersections we passed. I thought we would see a couple others from our group at the



museum (they had some packing to do and were going to join us a little later) - but unfortunately got turned around and actually never even found the museum - bummer.

The museum was actually quite overwhelming - seeing all the pre-Colombian history of Peru and how the Incas appeared in the 1400's and developed their vast civilization. The Inca empire was one of the largest empires at the time, encompassing much of South America, including Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and even parts of Colombia. A school group was in front of us all in their school uniforms - the instructor was explaining a tapestry, telling stories of battles and the brave warriors and their weapons. Although it was all in Spanish I could make out enough of the words to make out some of the stories. I didn't realize it, but "Inca" simply means ruler or lord in Quechua, and the Incas were the name of the ruling class. So calling all the people Incas is a bit of a misnomer - we must have picked it up when the Spanish came and conquered the Incas and they called all the subjects of the 4 kingdoms of the empire Incas.



*Sights in the Inca Museum*

The museum had an excellent display of how the traditional Quechua people made their weavings – the pieces were hand-made on simple looms but the colors and artistry was magnificent. An entire room was devoted to showing how the alpaca fur was dyed, woven into yarn and made into tapestries on large looms. A popular tapestry was of a calendar composed of 12 symbols – one for each month, symbolizing the harvest and seasons.

A wonderful diorama of Machu Picchu got us excited about what was to come later in our trip. I didn't want to spoil it by studying it too much ahead of time, but was still curious. Like the Egyptians the Incas believed in immortality and kept mummies. The museum housed a couple mummies in an eerie climate-controlled room bathed in red light to preserve the bodies from damage.

A fascinating aspect of the Inca culture was how the ancients moved the large stones without use of the wheel and how they shaped the stones precisely to fit together without mortar. They also shaped the walls at a slight angle tipping inward and included niches at regular intervals along the walls. Not only were the niches useful for placing artifacts and idols, they played a key role in protecting the walls against earthquakes by absorbing the shaking and distributing the displacement caused by the shifting earth.

Our group finally convened around lunchtime back at the hotel – we met our guide Raul who was going to be with us for the next 10 days or so. I was excited to finally be here, and with the group all together to start our adventure through the mountains to Machu Picchu. We did a short walking tour through Cusco – hitting some of the same places I had seen on my own the day before. But this time, our guide pointed out many things I had missed on my own.

We toured the main cathedral of Cusco, admiring the Spanish architecture and paintings depicting Biblical scenes throughout. Unfortunately no photos were allowed inside like the La Compania cathedral the previous day (and since there were a lot more people this time, nobody took any chances). The gilded altars and marble statues were magnificent, though also in need of some restoration. A striking element inside the church was the syncretism of Inca mythology with Catholic tradition – paintings would depict the Virgin Mary with pagan symbols of the sun and moon, for example. And a painting of the Last Supper showed the disciples around the table, but they were eating guinea pig (or chinchilla). The Spanish conquistador Pizarro was Judas in the painting. We also noticed that on many of the roofs of people's houses was a sculpture including 2 bulls and a cross – the bulls were a pagan symbol of good luck and fertility and the cross was the Catholic symbol of Jesus's crucifixion.



*Walking through the narrow stone streets of Cusco*

Following some of the narrow granite stone streets, we found the “12-sided stone”, an enormous stone carved to exactly fit around 12 other stones – it must have taken months of tedious manual labor to chip away the pieces just right. A little ways down the street was our restaurant – marked with beautiful blue painted doors. A harp was playing near our table and our food was prepared in a stone oven – we enjoyed our first pisco sour (traditional Andean drink) with lunch.

After lunch we went back up to Sacsayhuaman and nearby Q'enqo – admiring again the beautiful stonework, burial caves, and doorways. We started getting a feel of the Quechua traditional handicrafts – vendors were selling their work at just about every tourist site (I would wait until the end of the trip to decide what to buy though). The Quechua were also letting tourists pay for their photos – they were posing with alpacas and llamas. I could finally tell the difference - llamas were slightly larger and had their ears pointing up whereas alpacas were smaller, had whiter and softer fur, and their tails hung down.

On the way back, we toured the Temple of the Sun - with a blend of Inca, colonial and modern architecture. I found it striking how so many cultures considered the area sacred and added their contributions. In an area of great natural beauty, I could see why many people would believe that it was the domain of “the gods”.

Dinner was on our own – we again checked out a place near the Plaza de Armas – trying the beef tenderloin with wine this time. We were lucky and got the last table – since many people tend to dine later than in the US, we were able to eat and be finished before the late dinner crowd would come in.



*Dessert at Yajuu*

We stopped at a "Yajuu" parlour (sounds like Yahoo) ice cream parlor for dessert after dinner - I've always enjoyed tasting the different tropical fruit flavors. The lucuma was a bit tart but had great flavor. It was fun getting to know each other – since we would be together for the next 10 days. He was from the east coast and talked about many of his hiking trips in the Adirondacks in NY and I talked about some of my Sierra trips.

## *August 12*

We were all excited about finally getting to start our trek through the valleys and mountain passes of the high Andes on our way toward Machu Picchu. Starting at around 12,000 feet we were already been continuously amazed by the views as we hiked through meadows and pastures and ancient forests. Occasional ranchers lived in the highlands, tending their flocks and growing simple crops - only potatoes and a few other hardy crops can handle the high elevation and poor soil.

This would be the longest trek I've done and the highest elevation I've been to or stayed at. We'd be trekking for 6 days and hiking over 15,000 feet and staying in lodges just below 13,000 feet. I've been on a 9-day trip in the wilderness last year (rafting the lower half of the Grand Canyon) but the rafting was much easier than the high altitude trekking and much lower elevation! A couple weeks before this trip, I did a few trips to the Sierras to warm up and prepare for the trek - a day trip to South Lake Tahoe with a friend up Horsetail Falls (breaking in my new pair of hiking boots), a weekend in Sierra City at a friend's cabin where we climbed the Sierra Buttes (breaking in a new backpack), and a 3-day trip in the Mammoth Lakes area where we camped at Ediza lake and summited Banner Peak (about 13,000 ft). I

wondered how long the acclimatization would last, but it felt good being in better shape.



*Autorickshaws (called tuk-tuks) on the way to Mollepata*

It was about a 3-hour ride to Mollepata – our trailhead where we would be starting our 6-day trek through the high Andes to Aguas Calientes. Along the way we stopped at Limatambo, a small Inca ruin showing the classic architecture of cut stones, doorways and niches. A group of archeologists were doing a dig there, meticulously digging, cleaning, and documenting what they found in several small plots.

Near Mollepata, we stopped at a small village with alpaca handicrafts dyed with some of the local materials. The purple color is obtained through some small berries – I made the mistake in my curiosity to pick up a couple of the berries and paid the price. The purple spots were on my hands for several days – the dye really worked! Next to the handicraft shop was a “Turista” restaurant (for tourists?) - with a bathroom (1 sol fee required). The door to the kitchen for the restaurant was open and we saw a bunch of cute guinea pigs running around – some of them were going to be cooked as meals for tourists. In second grade, we had guinea pigs in class and we would hold them feed them each morning – I felt terrible that the cute animals were being raised as food to be eaten. I had guinea pig in Ecuador a few months back but was fairly disconnected from where they are cooked – they didn't look so cute on your plate anymore!

Back on the bumpy road up the mountain, our van slowly wended its way onward and upward. At last we came to an open pull-out where the van could turn around – that was actually the trailhead. There was no sign – the guides just knew where to go! After greasing up with plenty of sunscreen (definitely necessary at 12,000 feet!) putting our boots on and getting our day-packs ready, we were ready to hit the trail.

It was great knowing that our luggage was going to be waiting for us at the lodge when we got there in the evening - we were just carrying day packs with water, cameras (my SLR camera, point-and-shoot camera and cell phone), fleece and a snack. We had a couple pack animals following us - carrying our lunches (we didn't even need to carry our sandwiches and fruit!), medical supplies (in case anyone fell sick due to the altitude or something else), and just being there in case someone was sick or hurt and couldn't hike for a stretch. Being in a fairly remote area, that was reassuring.

We followed a water canal for many miles our first day as we made our way to the Salkantay lodge in Soray. We marveled at the engineering of the canal - the way they dug the canal for many miles in the rocky soil above 12,000 feet and how the path climbed at a very consistent pace for the water to flow evenly. We were still huffing and puffing a bit, having come from sea level just a couple days ago and I couldn't think of digging (by hand) and shoveling the rock to build the canal! It was completed around 1940 and stretched for 30 km - the water got its source from the massive glaciers flowing off the mountains and it flowed all the way through several towns. I felt following the canal was a perfect warm-up – it guaranteed the trail never got too steep the first day!



*On the trail*

As the path wound its way around a bend, the views started to open up toward what was ahead. Snow-capped peaks seemed to rise up all around. I knew the fabled Salkantay mountain was in that direction (they said the lodge had a great view), and I was delighted to finally be seeing the great mountain. It looked impossibly high and difficult to climb - the cliffs were thousands of feet high, climbing to the snowy heights. After months of anticipation we were finally there!

Lunch was simple - just a couple sandwiches with fruit and chocolate, but it came as a very welcome treat. My stomach was a bit numb and I didn't feel so hungry (as often happens in high altitude), but once I started eating I realized how grateful my body was for nutrition! Nearby were some nice wildflowers - lupines and lady slippers that managed to survive and bloom at the high altitude. Just behind us were some mint bushes - the leaves were tasty to chew on! We'd actually be having tea later in the trip using those some kind of mint leaves.

The mountains still looked so close even though we had been hiking for several hours - the sense of scale was totally lost. I figured we'd be getting to our cabin just a little while after lunch. But my attention was about to be diverted yet again in an incredible way. Just past the enormous snowy mountains ahead was what appeared to be shimmering white clouds, but as we continued along the trail I noticed the clouds weren't blowing around or moving. And then I realized they weren't clouds at all! It was actually another mountain completely clad in snowy white! What I had thought was Salkantay mountain was actually just one of the smaller mountains in front of Salkantay.

Just a few more minutes along the trail we came past some bushes and around a small hill and suddenly there was a beautiful lodge! We had finally reached our lodge at Salkantay - a miniature version of the

Ahwanee (the grand hotel in Yosemite), clad in beautiful wood and stone. What a location! It was small with just 12 rooms but cozy and well built! This was the first of the "Mountain lodges of Peru" - they were only finished a couple years ago along the Salkantay route to Machu Picchu. It was a wonderful idea to have a set of lodges built within a day's walk of each other - we could enjoy the trek without the backpacks and knowing we'd have a warm bed waiting for us each night! And great food too!



*Salkantay Lodge*

We'd be staying at the first lodge for 2 nights - it worked well since our group would use 6 rooms and another group could use the other 6 rooms. And while we stayed for 2 days the other group would switch. Groups would alternate taking half the rooms - they had this all figured out! After checking in and getting our rooms (our beds even had a "towel sculpture" like you'd find on a cruise), it was wonderful to just relax for a bit - soaking in the views all around us. Visible through the windows included towering Salkantay mountain (over 20,000 feet) on the right and Humantay (almost 20,000 feet) on the left. Our route in a couple days would go through the pass between the two mountains.

One of my favorite parts of the whole trip was just relaxing in the lounge with one of the large coffee-table books and sipping pisco sours (a frozen drink with pisco, sugar juice and lime) - the drinks were one of the signature drinks in Peru (like caiparinhas in Brazil and sake in Japan). Our group seemed to be getting along quite well - it was great hanging out with Patrick and Anna (who I had met in the airport back in SFO at the very beginning of the trip!) and the new friends made along the way.

Dinner was going to be at 6:30, just a bit after sunset. I figured what better way was there to enjoy the sunset than from our outdoor hot tub! A couple folks from the other group were already there - they had taken horses to a beautiful glacial blue lake and up to a 15,000 ft peak marked with an Andean cross. August was the month of many Incan festivals and they did a little ceremony at the cross. I didn't ask too many questions about the lake - I figured that was where we were going the next day and I didn't want to spoil the surprise! I just wanted to live in the moment, soaking in the view of the alpenglow of the sunset on the snowy peaks around us. A chill started to form in the evening air - I had to hunker down in the hot water a little more, and I knew it would be that much harder to get out!

We were having near perfect weather - so far so good! Of course August is the high season in Peru -

that's why our plane tickets were around \$1800 and probably why many of the festivals happen in August. It was worth the wait for the good weather - I've seen many ads for trips to Machu Picchu during other times of the year for discounts, and one of my friends who had been there in the rainy season said he got there and it was quite misty and rainy, obscuring many of the views. Of course that had its own charm, but after seeing many post-card pictures of Machu Picchu in clear weather, I think I would have been disappointed to see it shrouded in a bunch of misty rain clouds.



*Hot tub and Salkantay mountain*

After sunset, it was time for dinner - a feast of artistically displayed trout and salmon and white wine in the elegant dining room - good times indeed! The food was tasty and didn't seem too spicy or hard on my stomach - I didn't want to risk uneasiness in my stomach during the difficult part of the trek. After dinner some people were checking email (some even brought their laptops on the trip!), but I was happy to just relax and soak in the experience and be disconnected from issues at work and back home. I knew our database at work had some issues with bad data right before I left, but I trusted that the others would know what to do - there was no sense in worrying about it!

### ***August 13***

Breakfast was simple but tasty at the lodge - tropical fruits and eggs and coffee. Even though we were high in the mountains, the tropics were only about 50 miles away where wonderful coffee and mango and papaya is grown! The morning was crisp and cool - not a cloud in the sky! I'm glad we were doing the hike in the morning, before the afternoon clouds and possibly rain showers built up. The weather can be quite unpredictable in the high mountains.

The hike for the day was pretty short - about 6 miles, but going up to just under 14,000 feet to a couple wonderful lakes - a great way to acclimate for the big day the next day where we would cross the high Salkantay pass at over 15,000 feet. The highest lake I had ever seen was Tulainyo lake in the high Sierra near Mt Whitney which is over 12,000 feet - we were already above that at our lodge! I hadn't brought trekking poles to Peru so it was a nice surprise to see a basket of spare poles at the door of our lodge - they were nice sturdy wooden poles with little finger puppets of different animals - condors, penguins and lions and many others. I opted for the roaring lion...

Heading up the trail, we passed through a number of farms and pastures - a few hardy folks living in stone huts had small farms of potatoes and vegetables and several cows and chickens and had been

living there for generations. An austere lifestyle, but with a grand view! Raul our guide said hi to a couple of the locals - I'm sure they are happy to see company.

We passed a couple other groups who were camping in tents - when I signed up for the lodge-to-lodge trek along the Salkantay route I knew there were other companies that did the same trek but with camping instead. It was a few hundred dollars cheaper, but after a night in the lodge and compared with the camping option (albeit the tents were nice and I'm sure they had good food too), I'm really glad I opted with the lodge option! A couple backpackers also passed us - carrying all their gear on their backs (no 911 and 912 donkeys in case they needed them!).



*On the trail*

We worked our way steadily uphill through open meadows as we crossed well above the tree line. The mountains must make an interesting array of micro-climates - we passed several patches of cactus bushes and century plants on one side but crossed a blue glacial stream and walked through cow pastures on our way up to the glaciers around the mountains. It was a bit of a huff-and-puff as we got used to the high altitude but once we crossed a large rocky terminal moraine, an incredible view opened in front of us. A dazzling blue lake was nestled between two high ridges and flanked by a glacier coming from the 19,000 ft Humantay mountain. The ridges were several hundred feet high - enormous lateral moraines that told of the immensity of the ice that had flowed through at one time.



*Glacial blue lake*



Across the lake was the highest wall I've probably ever seen - a near vertical wall of rock and ice that reached almost 6000 feet above the lake, stretching to the icy fluted summit of Humantay. A few of us walked down, following the lake shore toward the glacier for a closer look. We could see some footprints from the group the previous day who went out on the ice to look around. Our guide warned against it - the ice was steep and there was quite a bit of rock / ice fall. In fact when we were there we saw several large chunks falling and splashing in the lake!

The lake was actually almost 2 twin lakes - separated by an underwater moraine with a narrow channel that split the moraine. It was a majestic experience being right in front of the 6000 foot high wall of mountain right there! The glacier just barely reached the water - you could see where chunks had calved recently. Raul said about 10 years ago the glacier was noticeably larger, covering the inner part of the lake. I wonder if in 10 more years the glacier would even be still touching the water? Or maybe it would be gone altogether? Not many people have climbed Humantay recently, with its rugged slopes and frequent rock / ice fall, it's been considered too dangerous. It was fun to study the mountain anyway and imagine what routes there might be.

I went up a couple hundred feet on one of the lateral moraines to get a birds-eye view of the place. The water was a deep blue, reminding me of Moraine Lake in the Canadian Rockies (Nisha called it the "lake of paradise") - it was so blue! A couple brave folks went for a quick polar-bear dip in the icy water (I knew better than to try the swim so that's why I went up to get pictures instead!) - it may have looked like a Hawaii tropical blue, but was sure not Hawaiian temperature!

It was a really neat experience being in a lesser traveled part of Peru and off the main touristy part of the Inca trail - we could still imagine what it was like to be one of the original explorers in the area and seeing the immense landscape for the first time. After many trips to the Sierras and studying the detailed topographic maps and seeing the trails and reading about routes up many of the mountain peaks, it was another whole universe being in Peru with few established trekking routes, scarce detailed maps and many unclimbed peaks.

On our way back to the lodge we noticed an unusual sight - one of the cows just off the trail had just given birth! We saw a cow nuzzling its nose next to a baby calf, stroking it and starting to help it to its feet for the first time! After a few minutes the calf managed to stand on its own - amazing! And it would be able to walk just a little while later! The calf still had its umbilical cord hanging - we had just witnessed a new life being brought to this world - a beautiful sight.

Back at the lodge several of us opted for massages since we had the afternoon free. A 30 minute soak in the hot tub followed by a 60 minute massage was the perfect way to unwind after the hike to the lake and down the steep trail - also I needed to make sure my legs were loose to get over the high pass the next day... a pisco sour and some time to relax before dinner - good times!

At the bar, they were getting ready to set up a pisco sour demonstration – since pisco sour is one of the traditional drinks in Peru and pretty easy to make, they let one of us make it. I was the one “volunteered” to be the bartender – they put a colorful alpaca cap on me and made me the star for a moment! I was a bit clumsy, not quite an expert at balancing the gallon jug of pisco on one arm, but still managing to get it poured. The recipe was pretty simple -

3 oz pisco  
1 oz sugar syrup  
1 oz lime juice

1 egg white  
mix with ice  
3 drops bitters  
1 lime slice



*Making pisco sours*

It takes a bit of shaking – everybody got a turn to shake my concoction to blend the ingredients! When it came back to me I got the first taste – it seemed fine to me so I gave the thumbs-up! Success!

We all enjoyed a couple more pisco sours (though done with the blender – cheating but a bit faster) and had a nice pasta dinner to load up some carbohydrates for the big hike the next day.

### ***August 14***

This was one of the most anticipated days of the whole trip - where we would be trekking over the high pass at 15,200 feet. We hit the trail early - we knew we had a long day ahead of us. A chill was in the air and there was a hint of frost as we got going. The trail was about 10 miles, starting from our lodge around 12,700 feet, going over the pass and ending up at the Wayra lodge at around 12,900 feet.

A few patches of snow from a storm about a week ago still lingered near the trail - though it was quite hard and icy. We had been lucky with the weather - mostly sunny every day. And today was shaping up to be a good day too. (that was about to change but we relished the sunshine while we had it). At one of our rest stops I saw a cloud in front of one of the mountains I hadn't noticed a minute earlier. Then when I looked again, it had moved downward and formed another cloud. Then came a distant "BOOM" - although it was far away, you could appreciate the energy of the sound. The BOOM didn't happen for several seconds after the avalanche - sound takes some time to travel the enormous distance, and the distances were more than we realized - all our sense of scale was lost in the enormity of the landscape around us. I had noticed large cracks in the glaciers from the hot tub the previous night and wondered how prone the ice was to calving and forming an avalanche - now we knew!

As we came up to around 14,500 feet, we reached a broad meadow surrounded by the glacier covered peaks all around. Even though it looked like we were just at the base of the mountains, we were indeed as high as the summit of Mt Whitney - the highest peak in the continental US! I stood on a

small stone laying in the grass and put my arms up saying "I just climbed Mt Whitney!" - since I was indeed at the same elevation – ha ha!

But we still had a fairly steep 700 feet to go to get up and over the pass. A sign in the meadow indicated we were at 4200 m (around 14,000 ft) - but someone had scratched "no es posible!" and overwritten 4200 with 4400 (a little more accurate)! Raul's GPS indicated about 4450 m, so the sign was indeed wrong (not sure why they would "deny" us the elevation by low-balling the elevation!). We ran across several more signs that low-balled the elevation by a couple hundred meters.



*On the trail*

It was warm and sunny and a great time just to lie down in the grass and stare up at the sky. We spent probably 1/2 hour just relaxing. One of the older guys was having a little trouble with diarrhea and fatigue (not sure if it was the altitude or just the unfamiliar food, but of course the high altitude didn't help). We offered him 911 or 912 to get him over the pass, but after a bit of rest and some medicine (we had 3 nurses in our group), he was doing much better - he only had to put his day-pack on 911 and he was able to walk on his own just fine - whew!

We were getting ready to climb the final part to the pass - a beautiful tarn filled a small valley, casting a mirror-like reflection of the icy peaks all around. It was a wonderful experience being out there - I could tell based on the density of photos being taken and how much I enjoyed chatting on the way (even though I think some folks were getting a bit annoyed since they were just focusing on the mechanics of the hiking and catching their breath, and not being very responsive to my comments - they complained that I was being too "chatty"...) )

The trail got rather rocky as it ascended far above the treeline and through the desolate tundra above 15,000 feet. Enormous glacial moraines sliced through the landscape - evidence that much of the area was under ice long ago. But today the trail was pretty straightforward, just a wide fire road all the way up - not much different than the road up most of Mission Peak (but 13,000 feet higher!). I didn't notice too much difficulty in breathing - but maybe that's because we were moving slow and stopping all the time for pictures! I felt like I could totally lose myself in the experience of being there - all the worries back home and at work seemed a million miles away.

The pass was marked by an array of tall cairns and an enormous boulder indicating "Bienvenidos a Alta Salkantay" - welcome to high Salkantay pass! The sign there said we were indeed at 4600 m which

was much more satisfying than the signs earlier. And Raul's GPS confirmed the result too. The wind was starting to pick up and a few clouds were blowing around - pretty normal for our elevation. I'm glad we were getting through the pass when we did - it was still mostly sunny but clouds obscured some of the peaks around us. Amazingly we saw a guy selling alpaca hats and clothes at the pass - you could get those souvenirs almost anywhere in Peru! I guess it would make a cool conversation piece to be wearing one of those hats and be able to say you bought it at 15,000 feet at the Salkantay pass in the Andes.

I enjoyed knowing we were getting to the famous Machu Picchu city through a back way, avoiding the hordes of tourists on the main Inca Trail. A friend from my Bible study a few years back had gone this same route, piquing my interest. I heard there are other even more obscure routes to Machu Picchu, one that goes around Salkantay on the other side, eventually crossing a 17,000 foot pass (almost 2000 feet higher) where maybe even crampons / ice axe might be required depending on the snow conditions. I'm not sure if 911 / 912 could make it though! I think the 15,000 ft pass was ambitious enough for our first time.



*Group at the pass*

I'm glad my body handled well with the elevation - I've been wanting to visit Nepal or Tibet sometime (going to even higher elevations) and maybe Mt Kilimanjaro or the volcanoes in Ecuador (we were there on a missions trip a few months back), all involving elevations in the 18,000-19,000 ft range. I managed to crunch down about ½ of a frozen energy bar - I knew eating and drinking enough was important, even if I didn't feel hungry or thirsty. Everyone else in the group seemed to be managing pretty well, smiling and taking photos. I was glad since otherwise it could make it tough for everyone. I knew this would be a moment to remember.

On the backside of the pass, I started to notice things I hadn't thought about on the way up - I think we were all pretty preoccupied about just getting over the pass. Flowers of many different colors managed to find a tenuous foothold amidst the craggy rocks and even a few birds flew around - it's amazing how life can find its way in such inhospitable climates. Then suddenly behind us I heard Raul shouting "condor! condor!" - we all frantically started looking around... Condors are known to frequent the skies around the high peaks and we saw many pictures in the books, but when we looked at Raul, he was holding his little condor finger puppet from his hiking stick - aw shucks! ha ha! The only "condors" we ended up seeing was his finger puppet (he tricked us more than once too!) Shortly after I heard a loud cricket chirping - hmmm where could that be? It was actually Raul's cell phone ring-tone

(I think he was making sure lunch was coordinated for a little later) - maybe I should change my generic iPhone ring-tone to something more interesting so it doesn't sound like everybody else's?

The breathing was getting easier again as we reached the "thicker" air at 13,000 feet. I took notice of the thickness of the immense glaciers high above us - I wonder if anyone had ever gone up to check them out or climb any of the easier peaks around. You could tell that the ice has been melting for some time and that the ice looked "old" - it was bare and a dense blue in many places with large fractures and caves where it had started to peel back from the rock. I wonder how much of the ice would be still around in the next 50 years. It had been a good year in the Sierra this year with above 200% of normal snowfall in many places, replenishing the snowpack, reservoirs and glaciers. But in other parts of the world maybe they haven't been as fortunate.

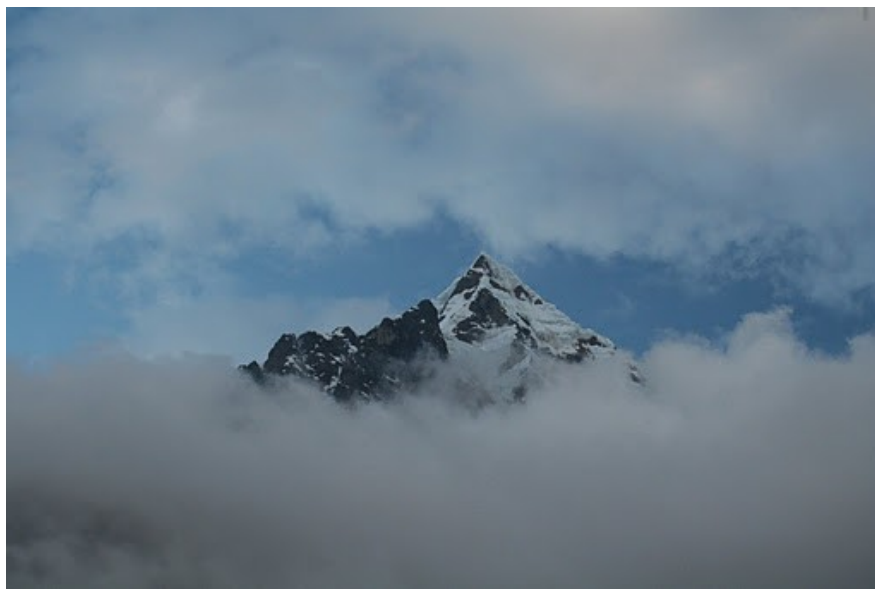
A very welcome sight was just ahead - a large blue and yellow tent where we would be having lunch at Ichupata. A large table was spread inside the tent with all our place settings - real dishes and silverware - nice! Nearby was another tent - the "kitchen" tent with full-size stove and oven. Garlic bread was baking and the pasta was almost done. It smelled so good and was a wonderful surprise. Although on many occasions I probably take food for granted and even get frustrated when it's not quite what I want, here it was like a Thanksgiving dinner! The aroma stimulated my senses, revitalizing my body. The wind was starting to pick up some more - they said there might be rain coming, so it felt even more cozy inside the warm tent as we feasted on pasta, cocoa tea and buttery garlic bread.

It was only a couple more miles through gently downhill meadows to our next lodge - the Wayra lodge just under 13,000 feet. Flanked by a deep river canyon on one side, it sat on a large "pampa" a green meadow. Just behind our lodge was the pointed summit of Humantay - the same mountain we had hiked by to the lake the previous day. A few wisps of clouds were obscuring parts of the peaks giving them an ethereal perspective. I began to notice the "mile markers" along the trail - there was one about every 100m so the sign saying 15 +700 indicated 15 km, 700 m to the end (which would eventually go to Machu Picchu - all roads go to Machu Picchu). Since now the big hurdle was past us, we started setting our sights on our final goal! I was amazed to find out there were actually around 18,000 miles of Inca trails all throughout the Andes, including Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia. The "Inca Trail" is just a small piece of the entire trail system



*Wayra lodge and Humantay*

The lodge was just as beautiful as the Salkantay lodge - though only about 1/2 the size. It had just 6 rooms - and with 2 to a room, just enough room for our group. I marveled at how they got all the construction materials up to almost 13,000 feet to build the fine wood and stone lodge. Without using helicopters, they had to haul the loads of stone and wood using mule trains (many many trips!) We relaxed by the fire, enjoying a much deserved rest after the long hike. The hot tub was even more wonderful - the soak was almost as good as the massage the previous day!



*Humantay in the clouds*

I looked out the window just before dinner to behold a magnificent sight - the top 1/3 of Humantay was visible between decks of clouds, making it appear to be floating in the heavens! It looked like the peak was 50,000 feet high. I could see why the ancient peoples believed the gods lived high in the mountains - seeing the mountain brought me to worship God not only that He made the wonderful mountains and gave us this opportunity to see His wonders, but also that we have access to Him everyday through prayer even in mundane everyday life, without having to climb a high mountain to reach Him.

Dinner was a treat - beef tenderloin and pasta, wine and dessert. And with entertainment too - a couple folks were performing a traditional Andean dance with costumes and masks, the guy acting drunk and fooling around and the girl trying to slap him back to order - very humorous indeed! And a pisco sour for a treat after dinner as we were lounging and reading and relaxing. Shortly after dinner, however a flash caught my eye - I thought it was just someone taking a picture, but a few seconds later I heard a distant rumble outside. And then another flash followed by a slightly louder rumble... a thunderstorm was starting to roll in - we could hear the rain pelting on the roof and blowing against the windows. I'm glad we made it over the pass when we did and didn't get caught in the pouring rain and lightning!

I had to wake up in the middle of the night that night to go use the bathroom - and since there was no power in the middle of the night (they shut off the noisy generator for a few hours), it was pitch-dark and we had to do our business with headlamp. After a minute or two, I realized it wasn't as dark outside as I had expected - the moon was shining very brightly against the snowy mountains. I decided to fumble with my camera gear and set up my mini-tripod for a few 30 second full-moon shots - it was fantastic. The mountains gleamed surprisingly bright white in the moonlight, and I managed to photograph Humantay poking through the clouds, flanked by a background of brilliant stars.

## *August 15*

When I woke up in the morning, I recalled a strange "dream" of mountains floating on clouds around us as if we were in the Disneyland castle, and I was trying to get pictures. But I've had dreams about seeing wonderful things and not being able to take pictures (something strange would always go wrong with the camera in those dreams). This time, however I realized it actually wasn't a dream - I picked up my camera and reviewed the most recent pictures, and there they were - the photos from my "dream" last night - it was real! It passed my "Inception" test. It was straight from something out of Lord of the Rings - it looked like Minas Tirith had to be hiding in there somewhere.



*It snowed overnight*

When I looked outside, I realized why the mountains were so bright last night - it had actually snowed and all the mountains were glazed with a fresh dusting of snow. The white dazzled in the moonlight the previous night. It snowed to almost the level of our lodge - probably just a few hundred feet above us there was snow. But for us today, we would be hiking downhill to the lower elevations - would not need to worry too much. Raul said there was a storm a couple years back and there was 18 inches at the pass for a couple days, and the whole trip for some groups had to be re-routed. I wonder how much snow there was up there now, and if more was on the way.

We got a leisurely start for the day - we only had about 5 miles to go today. The clouds were starting to roll back in, obscuring many of the peaks in a grey ceiling about 1500 ft above us. The hot tea and coffee were very much appreciated at the lodge! We started the hike around 8:30 under misty skies - it was raining lightly but I didn't mind so much - our "big hike" day was over and it was all downhill from here. It was refreshing to continue downhill to the lower elevations where the vegetation increased again. We had gone from the alpine tundra to the high pasture (jalica) and were going to go through the homes and hamlets (wayq'o) and down through the valley (queshua) and forest (monte).

The flowers smelled sweet - numerous species of orchids and ferns and other tropical flowers were blooming. A couple sapphire-wing butterflies fluttered by. We plodded along rather slowly - the trail was a bit muddy and we were still tired from the previous day, but the pressure was off. Lunch was a casual picnic - we stumbled across a nice gazebo in Rayampata, surrounded by chickens, dogs and a couple mooing cows nearby! Only a couple miles from the barren tundra in the mountains was a bucolic farming community. I felt we were starting to come back to some "civilization" again. I was surprised to hear we were still above 11,000 feet - it looked so lush and tropical again.

As we descended we met some more village folks tending their animals and crops - in many cases the farmhouse would be a basic wood and sheet metal structure, but the sturdiest building in their land was actually their outhouse! After a recent wave of evangelism about sanitation and water health and safety, many folks were busy building outhouses that could be well maintained. It was encouraging to see that health and sanitation was becoming a priority since many water-borne diseases are passed

through poor sanitation. Having clean water is one thing, but the way it is managed is equally important.



*Lunch stop*

Back on the trail, we continued descending through periodic rain showers and thickening rainforest vegetation. In just 5 miles I felt we went from the arctic to the jungles in Costa Rica! It was noticeably warmer by the time we reached the river just outside our next lodge. A temporary bridge got us across - the sturdy concrete one was in shambles, washed out by some big floods around last January (the same floods had washed out parts of the railway tracks near Machu Picchu, closing the sacred site for several weeks).

Climbing the stairs up the steep embankment on the other side, we caught sight of the next lodge - the Colpa lodge. At around 9,000 feet it was surrounded by lush rainforest, orchid gardens and green lawns. We were greeted with hot towels to clean our sweat and grime, and glasses of fresh chichi morado juice (made from a purple species of corn) - nice! The rain had let up and some of the clouds were even starting to break up, slowly revealing higher and higher slopes of the mountains around us. Raul said there were snowy peaks here too, though it was hard to believe...



*Pachamanca meal*



In front of the lodge, we saw some folks preparing a pachamanca meal. Pachamanca is a traditional Peruvian form of cooking underground where meat and potatoes would be buried with hot rocks for several hours - all the flavors get to blend together and the meat would just fall off the bones after stewing for a long time. I was surprised at all the different potatoes - the small ones grew at the highest elevations and the sweeter and larger ones grew farther down.

Seeing this kind of underground cooking made me think of our trip to Hawaii we were planning a couple months later. I was anticipating the luau - where they bury a pig, let it cook underground all day, and unearth it and have a wonderful meal. It also made me think of the times when I was a kid and we would have campfires at our lake house at Deep Creek Lake, MD. We would bury a bunch of potatoes and wrap fish in tin foil and bury it in the fire, let everything cook for a while and then "unearth" it before dinner - good times.

It would be a few hours before the food would be ready - perfect time for a nice nap and soak in the hot tub. I felt we were really on vacation at this point - just enjoying each day as they came. I knew I would have more pictures and memories than I could deal with, but so what – memory was cheap, batteries could be recharged and I would have time later to process everything. The dinner buffet was wonderful - fresh pork, lamb, chicken, guinea pig and several types of potatoes. And the table was spread out nicely with the food presented before an interesting artistic display of traditional Andean masks used in various festivals throughout the year. One mask had a guy laughing, one with a guy frowning, one was smiling and just being silly and one had a nose about 8 inches long!

### *August 16*

It was another leisurely day, again just a few more miles downhill as we worked our way toward the lush Urubamba valley at the base of Machu Picchu. I'm glad it wasn't going to be too difficult - at this point a couple people either had a bit of food poisoning or maybe their stomachs were just getting "tired" from processing the unfamiliar foods. Arlen was struggling a bit the previous day, but was feeling much better. But Jack my roommate was suffering from a round II of Montezuma's revenge (evident from the near-full trash bin of toilet paper in the bathroom - we weren't supposed to flush the paper, just throw it away). I still felt fine, but kept reminding myself to be careful of what I'm eating and drinking and not brushing my teeth with tap water just in case.



*Following the Santa Teresa river*

The sky had cleared wonderfully overnight - row upon row of peaks were visible all around us, leading all the way up to dazzling white glacier-covered peaks high above. With the low clouds the previous day, the mountains were out of sight, out of mind, but now everything was out in the open. After being used to the limited visibility, we didn't realize what all we were missing!

We passed through a couple lonely villages far from civilization - people were living a simple life. At one house, they had just slaughtered a pig - hmmm if they buried and cooked it pachamanca style, maybe they would be having a luau! Some of the children were curious and wondering what us outsiders were doing. The innocent faces of the kids were gazed in wonder as we passed by - I almost wished we could stop and say hi for a short while, but we had to keep moving. A little ways down the street was the "El Paraisio" restaurant and next door was a billboard advertising bicycles for rent! I was tempted to call the phone number (if I had reception!).



*Sights along the trail*

A new road had just opened for this year - a wide fire road on the opposite side of the river valley as the old trail. A landslide (probably from the heavy rains last January) had covered part of the trail, making passage difficult. Construction of the new road must have been a valiant effort, however, since some of the switch-backs were flanked by steep, nearly vertical cliffs in the crumbly rock. I wondered how the new road would fare after a couple rainy seasons though. We took the new wide trail instead of the potential dangerous original trail.

The river below us was bordered by a set of hot-springs pools - travertine formations had developed in many interesting shapes, forming grottos, pools and flowstone cliffs. I think the hot springs used to be popular with the locals (even indicated as an attraction on the tourist map), but with the recent road construction, the water flow had been diverted, abandoning the pools and leaving them to dry up and be forgotten. I feel the road was built a little carelessly and could have been a little better thought out - oh well. I know much of the slash-and-burn farming techniques had been done rather carelessly as well, leading to extensive erosion. Farmers would clear an entire part of a hillside to plant crops, and the soil would be exhausted after just a couple years, forcing the farmers to move on and use up more land. Meanwhile the soil where the crops had been planted would no longer be suitable for the native vegetation to take root for many years, and the lack of vegetation would lead to erosion.

Many of the original forests in Peru had been cut down for hundreds of years greatly altering the landscape - the native trees grew very slowly and could not keep pace with the demands of the growing population. Over the years reforestation efforts to re-plant trees had been somewhat successful - many

acres of eucalyptus trees had been planted. The eucalyptus grows quickly and the trees are straight, but they had gotten invasive quickly, harming the soil and altering the ecosystem.

As we steadily descended, we started hearing toucanettes - smaller cousins of the beautiful tropical toucans. Their chirps were quite loud and obnoxious, giving them away, but they shuttled back and forth a bit too quick for any photos. Purple and orange butterflies passed back and forth as we stopped for a snack overlooking about a 500 ft high waterfall. The falls was tucked back in an indentation along the river valley, making them only visible when you got very close - it was a wonderful surprise! And since we were on the wide trail on the other side of the river, we had a full-on view from across the river instead of being directly under the falls (which we would be if we had taken the original trail).

As we were coming to our next lodge at Lucma, the cricket-chirp of Raul's phone went off again - this time we were being invited to a coffee demonstration at a local house! It was a nice surprise - getting to meet one of the local families and see how they ran their small coffee business and tasting some of the coffee. We soon checked into our lodge and got to relax for a bit, reading stories about mountain climbers in the nearby Cordillera Blanca – I was already thinking about my next trip to Peru. The clouds had cleared, showing 18,000 Abuela peak in vivid fashion at the headwaters of the Santa Teresa river.



*Lucma lodge*

We were surrounded by coffee plantations - we were at the right elevation where the temperature and humidity were just right. Many of the beans were coming ripe - the bright red beans were clearly visible in clumps amid the green leafy bushes. The coffee beans were picked and husked to remove the outer shell. Then they were placed in a concrete tub filled with water to let the bitterness dissolve away, soften the inner skin and ferment the beans a bit. After this they were laid out in the sun to dry for a few days (sometimes forming a warm bed where we would see roosters sleeping!) Tropical fruit trees abounded in the area as well - bananas, passion fruit, avocado and many others. We came up to some passion fruit trees and found some of the bright yellow fruit was quite ripe. Biting off the outer shell, we could suck on the pulpy and seedy interior, making a wonderful sweet snack.

After heading down a short trail, we found ourselves at a small hut with a wood-burning stove - an old lady was roasting coffee inside. The fresh roasted beans smelled better than any Starbucks back in the US! Raul being our translator relayed the woman's story of how she would take the dried coffee beans from outside and roast them for several minutes in a large iron skillet until they would start popping

like popcorn. The inner shells would fall off and the beans would be ready to grind and brew into fresh coffee. Oh it tasted so good! The beans were ground pretty finely, making for quite a strong espresso-like coffee. I could tell that her business was starting to cater more toward tourists (with the main trail nearby and the recently-built Lucma lodge within walking distance) - as she passed the small cups for all of us to taste the coffee. A poster of Machu Picchu reminded us of where we were headed in 2 more days. Guinea pigs were scurrying around under our benches - maybe one would become dinner that night?



*Preparing coffee*

I enjoyed seeing the small business she was running - how out of basic materials, she could grow the coffee plants, build a small house and stone fireplace for cooking, grind the beans and sell it. I bought a bag of coffee as a gift - my family appreciates coffee from around the world, and I enjoy being able to patronize local businesses.

### *August 17*

Today would be one of the longer hiking days - climbing up about 1000 feet to a pass and then working our way down to the Urubamba river and train station to Aguas Calientes at the base of Machu Picchu. Raul warned us about the uphill stretches on the mostly downhill day, but the uphills always seemed so much longer when you didn't expect them! At least it seemed the trail was constructed in a way that they put the uphill parts more in the shady forest and the flat areas in the open (as long as you hiked toward the river!) And we were treated once again to some amazing views of the snowy peaks all around.

As we crested the pass, we re-entered the dense jungle vegetation - quite a contrast to the open grassland and shrubs from the other side. Mossy trees covered with orchids and vines and even other trees emerged, indicating the prevailing flow of moisture in the atmosphere. A few of us took turns playing our Tarzan moves on the vines hanging - quite a contrast to the snow all around us just a couple days ago!

Our lunch stop was near Llactapata, an overlook where we got our first glimpse of Machu Picchu. A bunch of only recently discovered ruins lay there, with a prominent doorway and path pointing directly to the center of Machu Picchu. The stones and doorways were still in remarkable shape - the precisely cut stones were without mortar and arranged in precise fashion. The Incas were very careful astronomical observers and their architecture was built with that same level of care. The stones had

been buried under dense vegetation for hundreds of years - luckily this has also preserved much of the structures - security by obscurity!



*Ruins at Llactapata*

We saw that only part of the ruins had been excavated - it was fascinating to see what might still be hidden. We had seen in the museum back in Cusco some of the artifacts that had been found and extracted from the ancient Inca cities. Perhaps ancient stone jars and gold jewelry or artifacts still lay hidden. I felt like how Hiram Bingham must have felt when he first stumbled across the ancient city of Machu Picchu 100 years ago. Much of the city was covered in vegetation - only traces of the buildings and terraces were still visible. I went back a couple rows of walls, carefully climbing over the dense brush (trying to avoid the stinging nettles and thorns) and finding a hidden wall with niches and a doorway. Although it was similar to the walls already excavated it was eye-opening to see what they would have looked like having been abandoned for centuries, still waiting discovery. I would love to have a few hours with a machete (and plenty of mosquito repellent!) to clear some of the brush and see what else was back there. We only had about 15 minutes to wander around and by the time I came back to where the group was hanging out, they had already left - I had to run to catch up again!



*View from Llactapata*

Lunch was at a wonderful small restaurant overlooking the deep Urubamba river valley - meadows with horses and gardens surrounded the screened-in porch where our table was set up. The food was interesting but quite tasty - avocado "sandwiches" with peas inside. A resourceful use of the food that could be grown right there (I don't imagine they get too much imported food, being in quite a remote location). I often feel guilty when shopping back in the US - so much of our food is highly processed and trucked from all around the country and even the world. I enjoy being able to buy and eat local - the food is often that much more fresh and plus you get to help the local economy by patronizing the local people.

After lunch, the trail headed steadily and often steeply downhill through coffee plantations, grasslands and small villages. We came at last to the broad river, crossed a long suspension bridge (that swayed – so we had to go one at a time), and came to an enormous waterfall. Raul said the falls didn't use to be there – interesting... Looking more carefully, I saw the water at the top of the falls was actually coming from what looked like an enormous cave – actually it was a tunnel from a hydroelectric plant nearby. Although it wasn't totally natural, it was still a beautiful sight.

I felt as if we were passing through a military checkpoint when we got near the train station at the end of the line, taking us to Aguas Calientes. Guards wanted to make sure we were legitimate – since the large hydroelectric plant was nearby and maybe they wanted to make sure we weren't going to do something to it? I felt we were coming in "the back way" through a construction zone - but once we got to the train station, it was flooded with tourists. Our luggage was waiting for us right by the platform!



*Ready to board the train*

We had about an hour to board our blue PeruRail train - they've been running trains on the 3-ft narrow-gauge rails for over 50 years. Rail is actually the only way in and out of Machu Picchu - there are no roads in the rugged mountainous terrain and it is too dangerous for helicopters to fly (they used to have them until enough people complained). It made for a more peaceful setting, kind of like transporting back in time.

At the station, we celebrated the finish of our trek with ice cream and a Cusquena beer (again with the 100 year anniversary label showing Machu Picchu). A group of French backpackers had also just finished the trek over the Salkantay pass - they did it in 3 days from Soray (we did ours in 5 with a layover day at Salkantay and a little slower on the backside of the pass). They hit the pass the day after

we did, and so hit the snowstorm and got to climb the pass in the snow! Exchanging pictures, we got to compare what the conditions were like - what a difference a day makes! They went up to 15,000 feet in zero visibility and about 4 inches of snow on the ground, often slipping on the icy trail. They made it just fine, but it was cold and kind of miserable - that's probably part of why they decided to push through and finish in 3 days instead of 4. We were lucky with the weather (the rain was on our shortest day on the trail and we were past the most scenic part anyway).

The train was about to depart - we collected our bags and got on board. What a beautiful ride! We followed the river the whole way, surrounded by sheer granite cliffs probably 1000 feet high on both sides. I felt they had built a train through Yosemite Valley - the clear water tumbled over the large boulders in sweet cascades, inviting a fresh swim. The cliffs were studded with jungle vegetation - it was as if Yosemite valley was placed in Costa Rica. We watched through the large windows in the sides and roof of the train car as we clacked along the tracks toward Aguas Calientes.

It was a short ride to our hotel in town - the Incaterra hotel. Studded in beautiful tropical vegetation, orchid gardens and with natural hot springs, it was an idyllic setting. We enjoyed complimentary pisco sours and snacks when we checked in. Elegant decorations, masks and bull statues adorned the lounge, and the rooms were wonderful - we even had heavy metal keys like from 100 years ago, not the cheap electronic plastic ones that always seem to get reprogrammed or demagnetized every other day, locking us out of our room! The only thing we had to pay attention to (besides losing the key) was there was only 1 for the both of us and the door locks automatically!

The contrast from our resort and the neighboring town of Aguas Calientes was striking - the town was typical of a 3rd-world country small town with basic shops, markets, kids in school uniforms coming back from school, kicking soccer balls in the street, and construction going around in many places. Many of the shops were tourist shops selling cheap T-shirts made in the Philippines with slogans like "I conquered Machu Picchu" or Simpsons or Harry Potter knock-offs of things in Peru - one boasted of a "llamaha motorcycle" - the silliness that apparently sells shirts and makes money!



*Sights around our hotel*

Dinner in the restaurant at the Incaterra was quite fancy - a very rich and spicy beef tenderloin, potatoes, pisco sour and chocolate dessert. After dinner we got to have a nice soak in the hot waters (Aguas Calientes translates to "hot waters"). There were 3 pools - one very hot, one medium hot, and a large cold pool - you could go to the hot one for a few minutes until you couldn't stand it anymore, then

jump in the freezing cold pool until your muscles tingled and you couldn't stand it anymore, then jump back in the hot one and repeat. We met some folks who had just finished the traditional 4-day "Inca trail", culminating at the Sun Gate and were staying at the hotel. It's always fun to compare notes with our itineraries. They were going to climb Huyana picchu the next day (getting up at 6 am to try to beat the crowds). I mentioned they would probably be coming back down by the time we were going up (we planned to start around 9 am). I was a little nervous - mostly from the anticipation. The bar was extremely high (I had seen tons of wonderful pictures) and I didn't want to be disappointed... Luckily I would be far from disappointed the next day.

### *August 18*

This was one of the most anticipated days of the whole trip and I was excited. Unfortunately my turn for Montezuma's revenge came the last night (Jack was on about his 3rd episode by now). I could barely eat anything for breakfast and food was the last thing on my mind. Part of me just wanted to go back to bed - but I was going to try my hardest to keep in good sprits and not miss anything. I managed to finish a couple pieces of fruit and I took a muffin for later in case I felt better later and got hungry again.

I just tried to keep my eyes pointed forward as our bus wined it way 2000 feet up the steep switchbacking road from Aguas Calientes to the entrance gate at Machu Picchu. I was feeling a little better - maybe the excitement and anticipation of the day drowned out any uneasy feelings. I hadn't thought of taking my passport on the bus, but thanks to Raul's reminders we all had ours - they were required for entrance at the gate.



*Finally in Machu Picchu*

We made a bee-line across the main ruins of Machu Picchu (we would have plenty of time to go back and see them in detail later) since we were on a "mission" to climb Huyana Picchu (also called Wayna Picchu, but Spanish doesn't have a letter W). Huyana Picchu, which means Young Peak in Quechua, rises about 1000 feet beyond and above Machu Picchu - they said on a good day you can clearly see the valleys all around and even the snowy cap of Salkantay mountain maybe 30 miles away! I would call the hike up Huyana Picchu the "stairmasters from hell" - I was surprised that they could even put a trail all the way up there, sometimes climbing slopes of 45-50 degrees seemingly straight up. Fortunately they had sturdy chains and ropes along the way to guide our steps.



It was a slow climb up the steep stairs - my stomach was still quite tired and slowing me down (more than the tiredness of my legs). I think my system purged itself of whatever food it didn't like, but the lingering pain and discomfort was still passing. I popped another Immodium for a little extra insurance. Plus being nearly at 9000 feet slowed me down (though we had been at altitude for about a week now). I was surprised that they still let people up there - in places the steps were probably only about 4 inches wide and maybe 8-9 inches high. I'm really glad it was warm and sunny - if the steps were wet, the going could have been pretty treacherous - even with the chains and railings. I wonder if this kind of trail was back in the US if it would have been closed long ago due to somebody getting hurt and threatening lawsuits. The main pyramid at Chitzen Itza had to be closed a few years ago for that same reason (I was there just a year or two before the closure so I was lucky).



*Climbing Huyana Picchu*

The climb was a bit of an adventure - reminding me of the hike from Havasu falls to Mooney falls down Havasu canyon in AZ. The trail wound its way through several tunnels and caves in the travertine, ending with a climb down a bunch of metal pegs and a hanging chain for safety. At Huyana Picchu, the trail was built hundreds of years ago, following many flights of steep steps (even steps through a cave where we had to stoop for a stretch), and ending with a couple ladders going up to the summit rocks. I had to stop so many times (excuses for more pictures!) but I eventually made it up in about an hour - whew!

We ran into Jack who had forgotten his ticket, had to go back down to the room and get it and go back up! He wasn't originally going to try Huyana Picchu, but got convinced when he finally got into Machu Picchu (we all had been given special passes to Huyana Picchu since admission is now limited to just 200 per time block per day - 400 total, same as Half Dome in Yosemite). I'm glad I made it to Huyana Picchu - I've often found I regretted not trying something much more than trying it and failing. Jack must have felt the same way, and I was really glad to see him on the trail - what a trooper!

The view was magnificent - we could really appreciate the setting all around Machu Picchu, nestled in steep mountain peaks all around. We did indeed get to see the snowy cap of Salkantay to the south. I

first thought it was a brilliant white cloud until I peeked through the binoculars to see it was actually a mountain. I could see that Machu Picchu should be considered a wonder of the world not just for its own construction (the people didn't have a written language, didn't have the wheel and yet were impressive architects and astronomical observers), but the setting where it is located. I've heard stories that Machu Picchu could not have been built by the Incas - that aliens must have come to earth hundreds of years ago and built it - it was one giant conspiracy theory! Also when you hear how the Incas were so easily conquered by Pizarro and the Spaniards in the 1500's, it makes one wonder how they could have created these great civilizations by themselves.

The construction seemed "insane" - so not practical! Steps, walls, terraces and buildings constructed on nearly sheer granite cliffs - it was definitely not the place for folks afraid of heights. Machu Picchu was clearly a very sacred site - in many places rocks had been set aside as "holy" in their size and the way they mirrored the shapes of the surrounding mountains. We were able to just barely see through the binoculars the site where we had been a couple days ago at Llactapata where we had our first glimpse of Machu Picchu. The shapes of the mountains were quite distinct and I could see how the ancient people could regard the mountains as holy and to be worshipped.



*Summit of Huyana Picchu*

I made sure to get my pictures of the summit marker pin and my "hero shots" to capture the moment - even though I was still not feeling very well - I tried to not look it in the pictures! I was glad to be able to start coming down. The trail made a loop around the Huyana Picchu summit - in places we slid down our butts down some steep slabs (class 3), slithered along some narrow ledges and made our way to the flights of steep stairs leading to a few levels of buildings just below the summit. The stone arches and windows framed the landscape like a beautiful picture. The trip down the stairs was pretty quick - grabbing the thick rope, I let it slide through my hands while hopping down the steps (and getting a bit of rope-burn) until I reached the lower platform. Looking back up the steps I was surprised I made it up there!

We were back at the Huyana Picchu gate in about 1/2 hour - about twice as fast as going up. We had the option to hike an extra couple hours to the Gran Caverna and Temple of the Moon, but I'd have to save those for the next trip - I wanted to just relax and tour the rest of the city in the afternoon. I was glad to get a bird's-eye view of Machu Picchu before wandering through in the afternoon - it gave a good sense of perspective of the whole setting, so I could appreciate the construction overall. A giant tree was growing on one of the central lawns - a beautiful shade of green surrounded by the grey

granite stones all around. I've seen historic pictures of Machu Picchu and could guess their age by the size of the central tree in those photos.



*Ancient stone walls*

We stopped for lunch at a restaurant by the hotel just outside the main Machu Picchu gate (the only option instead of taking the bus all the way down to town and back up for the afternoon). It was a simple buffet and cafeteria - nothing too fancy, so I wasn't missing much when I still couldn't eat much. A couple glasses of Sprite settled my stomach and I started feeling a lot better after about an hour - whew! I wonder if it was either the ice in the drink last night (maybe not made from filtered water?), or having the very rich red meat and my system wasn't used to dealing with the heavy food? But at least I felt like I was getting over it. An Andean band was playing - panflutes, guitars and singing and dancing - a welcome and festive surprise. Like the Maasai culture in eastern Africa, I felt the Quechua culture was still quite active and they made sure to keep passing along their heritage. With the Westernization of many cultures as we enter the digital age, many cultures are being lost due to promises of better prosperity in learning English and people moving away from their native homelands.



*Sun Temple*

After lunch we wandered through the ancient stone streets, admiring the Inca construction and the precision of the stonework and advanced technology they employed while designing the city. Drainage and irrigation was built right into the stones - using gutters and troughs cut right into the solid rock. The terraces were used for farming - there weren't many other options in the steep mountains. We wandered through the "residential" section - a couple houses had their thatch roofs restored (you could see the stone rings in the other houses where the wood beams were once placed). We toured the Three Windows and the Temple of the Sun, admiring the precision stonework and how they measured the angles of the sun at different times of year. The Intihuatana (sun-tier) was like a sundial, keeping track of the angle of the sun. Without digital clocks and calendars, measuring the angle of the sun was important to keep track of the growing seasons and when to expect the rains to come.



*Beautiful stonework*

I was surprised at the number of farming terraces - dozens were visible - all about 5 feet high. Connecting these terraces were the main flights of steps forming central pathways as well as "staircases" of individual stones about 6 inches long, sticking out of the terraces provided access from one terrace to the next. They definitely didn't need stairmaster machines for exercise in Machu Picchu - there were steps everywhere, and even the main "street" through "town" was a continuous flight of steps, climbing several hundred feet. More terraces were visible several hundred feet below, supposedly only excavated recently. Perhaps dozens of more terraces are still hidden in the thick jungle vegetation, waiting to be excavated.

Most of the group left around 4:00 to head back to the hotel, but I was finally feeling totally better and stayed for another hour or so to explore on my own. I still had my muffin from breakfast and was finally hungry enough to eat it - yay! I felt like a kid in an enormous fun-house to explore. Some of the stone corridors were only about 2 feet wide with 15-foot high walls. Several caves tunneled underneath the walls, connecting to stone passages on the other side. Another cave was carved out of the solid rock, containing several niches where mummies were kept. A path led to the highest point in the city by the guardhouse. A bunch of llamas were grazing along the grassy terraces - acting very photogenic indeed. My favorite photo of the whole trip was probably the view from the guard house (the classic postcard view), with a llama in the corner looking toward the center. The late afternoon sunlight cast the perfect kind of lighting for a striking picture.

On the bus ride back to Aguas Calientes, a few bars of the Lacrymosa movement of the Mozart requiem were going through my head. I was in a sort of melancholy mood after experiencing the

climax of our wonderful trip to Peru - it was sad to be heading back down already (even though we were coming back the next day for a few hours). We were going to be performing the Mozart Requiem on 9/11 at Stanford Memorial church for the 10th anniversary shortly after getting back home - maybe that's how it came up. It had definitely been a day of extreme fluctuations of emotions - from the frustration of stomach illness to the elation of reaching Huyana Picchu to the wonder of exploring the narrow streets of Machu Picchu. I guess I could say I've crossed off a "bucket-list" item as well. My mind and emotions were just tired now that we were going back home.



*Afternoon view of Machu Picchu*

I got to enjoy a nice pasta dinner and chocolate dessert when we got back to the hotel - it was nice to just relax for a while. A good soak in the hot springs was well-deserved. We even ran across the same people we had seen the previous night, and they indeed also made it up to Huyana Picchu. It was fun comparing notes with what we did. They were going out the next day and heading south to Puno and Lake Titicaca and staying another week in Peru - I wish we could stay also!

### ***August 19***

We had another opportunity to go up to Machu Picchu and explore a bit on our own. We had a bunch of choices depending on our level of ambition - get up early and hike Machu Picchu mountain (over 10,000 ft summit) which takes several hours, hike the Sun Gate (about 1.5 hrs), hike the Inca bridge (about 1 hr), or just wander through more of Machu Picchu again. I was intrigued about going up to the high summit since my stomach was a lot better, but I wasn't quite so keen on waking up at 6 am (and neither was anyone else!). I talked to some folks who had been to the Inca bridge the previous day and they were a bit disappointed (it is currently just a couple planks along a steep cliff). A bunch of us ended up deciding to go the Sun Gate - Raul recommended this hike as well, so we were game. Even though we all had tickets for going back to Machu Picchu, some folks decided to just sleep in and relax at the hotel. But I didn't want to miss anything!

The trail to the Sun Gate followed the classic "Inca Trail" of stone pavement the whole way. Most folks do the hike the other way, hiking the 4-day Inca trail and seeing Machu Picchu for the first time at the Sun Gate, but for us, the gate was like our way of saying farewell. And a wonderful farewell indeed - looking back over Machu Picchu (the Sun Gate is about 1000 feet higher), we could see over one surrounding mountain range to a valley filled with clouds and the tops of the peaks of another further mountain range behind.

The Sun Gate (known as Intipuncu in Quechua) was a set of giant stone pillars framing Machu Picchu - at certain times of year, the sun would rise through the gate and land right in the middle of the city. I'm glad Andy and Nancy were up for the hike as well. Jack ended up coming along later (we met him on our way back!)



*Machu Picchu from the Sun Gate*

Back in Aguas Calientes, we checked out and got on our train to head back to Cusco. Rail is the only way out - there are no roads. I liked it that way - the train was a great way to relax for going back to Cusco. I guess some hardy folks would hike the 4 days back along the Inca trail, but we had enough hiking over the last 6 days! As we left Aguas Calientes, we had to make several switch-backs on the train. The slope is too steep for the train to pass (most trains can't go above about 4% grade), so we went forward for a couple thousand feet, then stopped, heard some clacking of tracks switching, then we went backward, stopped, heard some more clacking of tracks, then went forward again. Extensive reconstruction around the tracks was visible around Aguas Calientes from the destructive floods from January the previous year (which actually closed Machu Picchu to tourists for several weeks since the trains could not run).

It was a peaceful and serene setting watching the giant granite cliffs go by through the numerous windows as we made our way toward the Sacred Valley. I enjoyed that they had a festive culture in Peru - a costumed "devil" clad with jingling bangles and sequins was going through the train, performing a traditional dance. A couple folks were also running a "fashion show" of different traditional Quechua garb, including suits and alpaca sweaters (a couple folks in our group picked up a couple items!)

We passed several other Inca ruins on the train ride back along the Urubamba river - it would be impossible to stop and see them all! Snow capped mountains rose above the plains on both sides of the train as we reached the Sacred Valley near Ollantaytambo (where a bunch of the Inca granaries were kept). We got off the train in Ollantaytambo and switched to a bus - the connecting train wouldn't leave for several more hours. We said good-bye there to Raul our guide - he was wonderful! He'd probably be busy with the next tour group in a few days. It was a beautiful drive through Chinchero, the farmlands, a lake, and down the winding road back to the Cusco valley.

We enjoyed a leisurely evening back in Cusco - just winding down, getting caught up on email and

Facebook (with the free hotel wi-fi), and wandering through town. It would have been nice to spend a bit more time in the Sacred Valley on our way back, but I was glad to just relax - my senses had been on overload for many days, and it was hard to think about seeing more places right away! Walking through town we saw about every 3rd or 4th shop was a travel place organizing tours to Machu Picchu, Puno / Lake Titicaca (I thought of the folks in the hot tub the night before), bungee jumping (we passed the crane on the way back to Cusco where they do it), and zip-line tours. Tourism is defiantly the main industry in Peru. There had been rumors about closing Machu Picchu or severely limiting tourists to minimize the damage and wear to the site, but I can't imagine that actually happening - it would devastate the economy!



*View on the way back from the Sacred Valley*

It was finally time to go shopping and pick up all the gifts and personal things I had been wanting to get. I normally wait until the end of a trip to do that kind of shopping - by the end I've finally figured out what I want to get and what is worth getting, and I don't have to worry about carrying it around or losing it during the rest of the trip. I haggled for a couple alpaca hats, Inca calendar plate and a nice weaving (the lady showed us the loom in the back of the store where she made the weavings, and I wanted to get one anyway, so I felt obliged!) Using a combination of Peruvian and American currency I managed to get the price knocked down about 30 % (though I had to be careful in which American currency to use. they refused to take any bills that are "cortado" or "roto" - (cut or ripped in any way). Luckily I had enough good bills in my wallet I could still use.

Dinner was at a fairly simple pizza place, though it felt we were in one of the old parts of Italy - they cooked the pizzas in brick ovens, and the stone walls of the restaurant were 4 feet thick, built on the original Inca stonework that was laid maybe 500 years ago! I brought my camera to dinner and while we were waiting for the meal, it was fun to start reminiscing about the trip, flipping through the pictures. It felt like the trek was months ago already - even though we had gone over the Salkantay pass just a few days ago! With the mind being constantly stretched by varying experiences in many directions, time feels stretched.

### ***August 20***

It was sad that our tour was officially finished - it had been wonderful. I was sort of dreading the last day, knowing we had many plane connections to make and a couple long lay-overs. My mind was worn-out and numb by the last day - I almost didn't care if we really did anything. I had gotten home-

sick quite suddenly and I just wanted to get back, now that the tour was "over".

But we actually made the best of our time - having a nice breakfast of eggs, toast, coffee and watermelon juice before checking out of the hotel. We managed to see a few sights in town before getting on our airport shuttle. We peeked in the chocolate museum just a few blocks from the hotel and toured a beautiful Catholic church, full of centuries-old paintings, sculptures, hallways with beautiful blue ceilings, an old pipe organ and a beautiful courtyard with gardens. In the crypt downstairs, the frescoed walls depicted Biblical scenes and images honoring the dead. A few of us were there, and at one point I hid in one of the niches around the corner and stunned the others by popping out like a mummy and howling some zombie yells - fun times!

Next door to the church, we could hear a marching band playing. After wandering through a bunch of streets to find the parade, we had been unsuccessful - maybe it was just coming through a bunch of speakers or something? But in the church, we saw a back gate that was opened and a couple people walking back through it. Going through the gate, we heard the music louder. Following the sound through a hallway and up a staircase, we saw a bunch of open windows overlooking a courtyard. A bunch of bands were playing in the courtyard (not visible from the street) - mystery solved! A bunch of Olympic flags were displayed - it looked like it was a band competition for who's going to represent Peru in the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics. The kids seemed to be of all ages, high school kids to little kids who could barely handle their instruments!



*Band competition*

It was getting time to head back - we picked up a few snacks from a supermarket, shopping like the locals. We wanted to use up our last few soles, picking up some ice cream and snacks for our long plane ride we anticipated getting back to the US. I've always enjoyed shopping in supermarkets around the world - seeing what the local people would eat. The cereal boxes were familiar - some were about the same cereal, just with labels in Spanish. Chocolate, kinder eggs, and cookies would make some good snacks.

It was a short ride to the airport - we were finally starting our journey back home. It was bittersweet. It was sad to be leaving the beautiful country of Peru, but we were ready to get back to friends back home as well as our activities and routines. I had been out of the Voices in Harmony choir for a while, and I was looking forward to re-joining when I got back - we had a good chance of taking the gold medal in Fresno in the district competition a couple months later and I hoped to be able to be part of that.



Cusco was enveloped in clouds and rain showers by the time we took off - the only other rainy day of the whole trip besides the one day on our trek. We were leaving just in time! We would have a long lay-over in Lima though to get back to the US. I think the airlines prefer running flights earlier in the day out of Cusco, before afternoon thunderstorms would build up and cause potential delays. And many flights from Lima are long and airlines prefer doing them as overnight flights. I expected many inconveniences flying back to the US, and the experience was quite reminiscent of my flight back from Brazil a few years back when it took us about 2.5 days to get back (after 2 cancelled flights, being grounded due to fog in Sao Paulo and thunderstorms and airport closures in Miami).

The views were quite socked in for about half the flight over the Andes, but cleared up as we neared the coast. It looked similar to flying back to CA after a trip to the east coast - thunderstorms over the Sierra and fog over the Bay Area. Dense fog covered the coast around Lima up to about 2000 feet. I kept my fingers crossed it wouldn't cause any problems.

We landed just fine, even a bit early. Most folks decided to just wait out the 6-hr layover in Lima, napping in the airport or just getting caught up with work and email (a couple people were "married" to their laptops during the trip and were working on presentations and doing emails so they would be ready to hit the ground running on Monday morning. I thought about bringing my work laptop as well, but didn't want it to spoil the vacation - it's too hard to enjoy time away if work is constantly nagging in the back of my mind).

A few of us - me, Patrick and Anna, didn't feel like moping around in the airport - so we decided to venture out on our own. With just our carry-on bags, we looked at the taxi options to the sights in Lima. The main ones were Miraflores by the coast and downtown by the Governor's palace. Since it looked a bit cold and foggy to be at the coast, we opted for downtown. Taxi drivers saw we were tourists looking around for a way to kill a few hours (they are probably used to many passengers having long layovers there!), so we haggled a deal for about \$40 to get to downtown.



*Cathedral in Lima*

I feel on many trips I've been on we've been more like "tourists", going from one established destination to another, following a set plan. But now we were being "travelers", deciding and figuring out places on our own. Our only constraint is we had to be back at the airport in about 4 hours - should be plenty of time to experience a few things in downtown. The cab ride was about 20 minutes -

passing a fair number of industrial sections of town and poor neighborhoods. I heard parts of the city are nice, but you had to be careful to avoid other areas (I guess that's true of any major city - you had to be on your guard and pay attention). Cusco is primarily a tourist destination and most of the city is safe, but Lima is more industrial, and although there are many tourists, most are just passing through.

We were dropped off right by the Plaza de Armas - the main city square. Very similar to the Plaza de Armas in Cusco, it had wonderful gardens and fountains, was surrounded by cathedrals and baroque Spanish architecture, and was one of the main centers of activity. The Governor's palace was on one side and the Iglesia La Catedral was on the other. A wedding was just finishing in the cathedral - we saw the couple just outside getting ready to get a ride in a beautiful horse and carriage.

Although the city was full of tourists, it seemed most of the them were locals. Maybe most of them decided to just stay in the airport, waiting for their flights. I figured it would be worth getting out for a few hours, even if we didn't do much in the city - it would be better than just sitting around in the uncomfortable benches of the airport (where the arms don't go up so you can't lay down!). We were just looking for a nice place to get dinner, but as we wandered, we got to witness a changing of the guard at the governor's palace, a street dance festival, and a parade with marching band!

We ended up getting dinner at a cooking festival - about 25 chefs were lined up with a long table, each chef showing off his dish. You would go and see all the dishes, find one you like, go to the caja (cashier) to buy a ticket for that dish (about \$4), go back and get your dish. It was fun ordering dishes by looking at them (and smelling them) first! I got a simple arroz con pollo – chicken with rice (making sure everything was cooked OK) - I wasn't sure about the sanitation so didn't get too adventurous... The street band was playing in the distance, providing some mealtime entertainment.



*Cooking festival*

After dinner we wandered a couple more streets, checking out the sculptures (trying to figure out what the "modern" ones were), poking in a couple churches (one was founded in 1551 - over 450 years old), and seeing the blend of cultures around us. One street looked a bit like Hong Kong - bustling with shoppers and advertisements and shops, one street was like somewhere in Spain (with the Spanish colonial architecture), and some street looked like what you would find back in America. Old American pop hits from the 1980's were playing in many of the shops. Lima, being the capital of Peru was a melting-pot of cultures. We saw a movie poster for "Los Pitufos" - the Smurfs! The little blue guys would be hitting the theater screen in Peru the same day they showed back in the US.

It was getting late and we hailed a cab back to the airport. We had an overnight flight to Miami and then back to SFO. Back at the airport, we saw the others who had been sitting the whole time - I'm glad we had our little adventure. Looking at the monitor, all the flights indicated on time, but there was just one indicating "demorado" - delayed - it was ours to MIA - bummer. It appeared to be MIA as well - no time was given for the length of the delay. I hope it wasn't the fog in Lima (it was pretty damp outside but at least it wasn't raining and the visibility on the ground was OK). They announced over the loudspeaker they thought it would be about 1 hour, but they never updated the monitor. I was dreading a repeat of the adventure getting back from Sao Paulo a few years back (but in Brazil, the announcements were far and few between, and most of them were in Portuguese, leaving us in the dark for many hours). At least in Peru, they kept us a bit more informed.

Thankfully, the delay wasn't much more than 1 hour and our incoming plane was rolling into the gate. We had a few hours in Miami, so no worries. It was a mostly uneventful flight through the darkness of night - I managed to snooze off and on, leaning against the arm-rest (I was stuck in a middle seat). I was glad to be back in the US - though I still wished we had a direct flight back to SFO like our flight to Peru. Taking my phone out of "airplane mode" after we landed, it chimed with a half-dozen voicemails and a bunch of emails. I had left it in airplane mode the whole trip to avoid international roaming charges (after a trip to Russia a couple years back, one of the folks got hit was a surprise \$400 dollar phone bill since his phone had been downloading data and syncing itself continuously during the trip - luckily he was able to fight it with the phone company and get most of the money back). I was glad to be able to check email with wi-fi occasionally during the trip, but it was great to start returning calls and hear people's voices again.

It was a scenic flight back - following the sun westward. We were treated to seeing a rainbow below us over western Florida, a great view over the Mississippi river, and canyon country in the southwest. We could clearly see the Very Large Array (VLA) in New Mexico, where they studied gamma-ray bursts at the edge of the known universe, the Meteor Crater near Flagstaff, and a panoramic view over the High Sierra around the Palisade crest as we flew over. Rarely on commercial flights can you identify individual landmarks on the ground, but on this flight we could see many of them quite clearly. Icing on the cake for a great trip!



*Meteor crater from the air*

**-THE END-**