

Along the Andes

December 2002 to February 2003

Atacama desert

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part II\)](#)



The low point was on 23rd December around 11am, somewhere along the Pan American Highway, in the Atacama Desert of northern Chile. The bus had broken down again and this time it looked terminal. The gears would not engage. The two drivers (when off-duty one of them slept in the sealed luggage compartment under the bus) had been working under it, emerging now and then to wipe their hands clean and frown, for more than an hour. Twice, other bus drivers had stopped on this lonely road to offer assistance, but had been declined. We were 1000 km south of the Peruvian border, with another 1000 km to go to reach Santiago de Chile. We had to catch a plane there in less than 24 hours. The bus was already five hours late and our margin of safety was shrinking. The next bus from this company would not appear on this road for another two or three days. There seemed to be no alternative except perhaps to flag down another bus.

Amazingly, the drivers fixed the gearbox half an hour later and we lost no further time en route. We completed the 38 hour bus journey (plus five hours waiting in Tacna, Peru, for the bus to arrive), arriving in Santiago at 2 am. We headed straight for the airport and lay on benches till we were able to board a flight at 7.30. We flew into the sun with a magnificent view of Aconcagua, before cloud covered the icecap all the way to Punta Arenas at the southern tip of the continent.

Yet every day has had its highlights, too. Even that tedious morning waiting for the bus in Tacna, we breakfasted on orange juice freshly squeezed before our eyes, and tolerable cheese buns, for 1.5 soles each (25p) at a stall where taxi drivers gather to wash their cars.

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Lima

(Watch the movie: [Along the Andes Part I](#))



We started in Lima, a huge sprawling low-rise city of 8 million. We arrived late at night and the taxi took us through what seemed to be miles of streets lined with fried chicken outlets and box-like houses crammed together and protected by metal grilles. Our hotel was in the middle class area of Miraflores, not too far from the colonial centre and the small high-rise central business district. We walked to the central squares through shabby, traffic-choked streets, to be rewarded by a smashing seafood lunch in an atmospheric old high-ceilinged tavern. We investigated the picturesque, but now defunct, railway station, but were shooed away by guards. We went down to say hullo to the Pacific and watched paragliders soaring off the high cliffs. Next day we took our first South American long-distance bus to Nazca.

South of Lima the Peruvian coast was a revelation. When the seedy suburbs are finally left behind you enter a vast desert, dotted now and then by a straggle of shacks enclosed in great rectangles of low walls. Some of these clusters are little beach resorts along great stretches of wild shoreline, but they appeared very empty in this summer holiday season. In this barren wasteland towns are hundreds of km apart, and there is a great sense of isolation. Now and then small rivers descend from the Andes and there is a fertile strip of green along their banks where people live and farm.

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Nazca, Arequipa and the Cañon de Colca

(Watch the movie: [Along the Andes Part I](#))



The purpose of the Nazca lines, huge, intricate and quite beautiful designs etched in the desert around the town of that name, is inscrutable. The people who made them 1500 years ago couldn't see them because there are no elevations in the area high enough, but these days a fleet of small planes allows tourists to view these strange designs.

Then an overnight bus journey to Arequipa, high in the Andes. It's Peru's second city, with one million inhabitants, but the old centre, built of white stone, preserves its Spanish colonial charm. We stayed in a guesthouse in a traditional building and sat in the central courtyard drinking coca tea. Coca is the plant from which cocaine is extracted. Coca tea is widely drunk throughout the Andes and is available in commercially made tea bags. It is supposed to help with altitude sickness. It didn't do the trick for Judith, but it is refreshing.

Arequipa is regarded as the intellectual centre of Peru. We saw a poster in a shop window advertising the local Monteverdi Choir's Christmas concert in the church of San Francisco. It said the concert began at 7.30, but when we turned up the church was empty but for a few smartly dressed couples and some officials decorating the seats with posies of white flowers. We wandered around, we asked in halting Spanish, we searched fruitlessly for the shop where we had seen the poster, we returned to the church in time to see a middle-aged couple proceeding up the aisle to 'Here comes the Bride', followed by two teenage girls in evening dress. A renewal of wedding vows? How long would that last? We went off to a bar and enjoyed a pisco sour or two. Peru's delicious cocktail is a mixture of pisco, lime, sugar syrup and a dash of Angostura with frothed up egg-white. Then we made one last effort to find the concert. Renewal of vows still in progress. We were about to give up when we saw a group of people, Indians, mestizos, Hispanics, all holding A4 leather folders, the sort singers keep their music in. Yes, they were the choir, and the con-

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cert would begin as soon as the vows were renewed, hours after the advertised time. Shortly, the couple, their daughters and their guests departed, and we entered the magnificent baroque church with its polychrome and gold angels and listened to the beautiful singing of both Christian carols and traditional Indian songs.

On the balconies of the colonnade surrounding the attractive Plaza de Armas we ate delicious ceviche – raw fish and seafood marinated in lemon juice – while being entertained by Andean instrumentalists, and on one dramatic occasion a ragtag uniformed band parading round the plaza unaccountably playing ‘Way down Upon the Swanee River’ and ‘The US Marine’s Hymn’. Chuck wished that his dad, so proud of his brief marine service in the First World War, had been there to hear it. We spent a delightful few hours, too, visiting the tranquil oasis of the convent of Santa Catalina, a secluded walled labyrinth of peace and colourful colonial architecture.

We wandered into the opening night of the local art college’s diploma show, held in the university, a rambling palace with mellow stone walls. Here the development of modern art has happily frozen about 70 years ago, at the time of Dali and Rothko. There was, thankfully, only one ‘installation’ in sight. Then we went on to a peña – club – and enjoyed more pisco sours and more Andean music.

Arequipa is the jumping-off point for the Cañon de Colca, said to be the world’s deepest, where there are settlements from the times of the Conquistadores and you can look down on condors floating on the thermals beneath you. The cañon and the little villages with their ancient churches are worth the trip, even if you are groggy with altitude sickness, and we shared our overnight minibus excursion with a Swiss couple who had been living in Miami, a Belgian who was working for the Red Cross in Afghanistan, and an English couple, late of Cairo, joining their daughter who was studying in Ecuador. After an evening of thermal baths and quinoa soup and Andean music we set out early for the cañon. But it was the mating season and we had only one fleeting glimpse of a far-away condor. After returning from our excursion 160 km into this savage wasteland we were hailed by a chap on a powerful motorbike. “Would you like to go to the Colca Cañon by motorbike?” Perhaps he only intended to take us to the outskirts of the city and empty our purses, but we were delighted that the thought we looked young and fit enough to undertake such a desperate expedition.

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Torres del Paine

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part II\)](#)



And so by bus into the Atacama desert and, two days later, a hard bench to sleep on in the airport of Santiago de Chile. From whence we arrived at Punta Arenas, and then the Torres del Paine National Park at the very south of mainland Chile. In Patagonia everything is expensive. A bottle of water costs \$3 to \$5. Even a dormitory bunk in a mountain refuge costs £21. At considerably greater cost we had booked into the Hostería Las Torres, one of a handful of luxury hotels (more like posh summer camps) in this huge area. There is no intermediate choice of accommodation. Yet it was worth it, and we stayed for six days. We hiked through a magnificent landscape of soaring mountains – the tail-end of the Andes, reaching over 3,000 meters, and around windswept glacial lakes. We took a boat cruise to view a glacier close up, and as we got there, the leaden clouds parted in a burst of spectacular shimmering sunlight. We hired ponies and cantered through fields of margueritas along a twisting milky green glacial river. Condors wheeled overhead; we saw 13 on one occasion. We ate slabs of rare filet steak and drank good Chilean merlot, cabernet sauvignon, shiraz and pinot noir.

We awoke on New Year's Day 2003 in Puerto Natales, and it seemed the world had ended while we slept. There was no-one abroad in this shabby little town of wooden houses, their paint wind-blasted and peeling (redolent of a neglected 1950s USA seaport, but where they speak Spanish), plonked down in a majestic panorama of wind-whipped harbour and snow-capped mountains and glaciers. It is midsummer day here, but the wind is icy and the intermittent sun is chilly. This is Seno Última Esperanza, Last Hope Sound, named by Spanish sailors desperate to find which of the dozens of fjords would allow them a way out to the Pacific Ocean. Tomorrow we will be nosing into the sound on a ferry which threads its way up through the fjords of southern Chile for four days to Puerto Montt. Belatedly we have discovered that it is a national holiday. Happily in the early afternoon the locals started to recover from their new year celebrations and began to drift into the streets. We found a restaurant open, and after not quite demolishing a hearty bowl of seafood dredged from the Sound, we discovered an internet place with open doors. So we thought we would wish you 'prospero año Nuevo.'

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Southern Chile to the Chilean Lakes

(Watch the movie: [Along the Andes Part II](#))



Despite all the useful information they offer the guidebooks never seem to prepare us for the feel of a place; a new town is always a surprise. After three days and four nights navigating northwards through the desolate labyrinth of Chile's Patagonian coastline, we did not expect to arrive at a small city, but that's what Puerto Montt is. The journey from Puerto Natales traverses 10 degrees of latitude, from 52 degrees South to 42 degrees. Along the way - apart from channel markers and the occasional lighthouse, we saw only one sign of human presence: the fishing settlement of Puerto Eden, whose population includes a handful of survivors of the original indians, depends on twice-weekly visits from the coastal ferry. It must be one of the most isolated towns on earth, with no living person within hundreds of miles in any direction except across the Andes. It is inaccessible except by boat; there are no roads in Chile between the 51st and 48th parallel South.

There are countless uninhabited islands along this coastline and the route through the channels is so intricate one marvels at the perseverance of the early explorers who could sail only before the wind, and relied on a plumb-line to sound the depths. The narrowest passage is 80 metres, a tight squeeze for our roll-on, roll-off ferry with its load of tourists, livestock and articulated lorries. We had booked this journey back in Blighty because it's the high season and we splurged on a AAA cabin so we would not have to share. As it turned out the ferry was half-empty and there was only one other couple in the top class accommodation. We ate separately from the hoi polloi in the ship's officers' mess, where we were provided with lashings of wine and a panoramic view over the bow. For the first day-and-a-half there was little to see except forbidding rocky islands rising from a surly grey sea under lowering grey clouds. Spray and rain lashed the decks and the wind lifted the girls' long hair straight up into the air. Then the clouds parted and we could sit in the sun and see the distant tips of glaciers and the perfect snow-covered volcano pyramids rising across sparkling waters. We were escorted by dipping shearwaters and petrels and frolicking dolphins. For ten hours the ship ventures out from these sheltered waters to cross the Golfo de Penas. We were rolled by a long Pacific swell, but fortunately continued to eat and drink well.

Three volcanoes surround Puerto Varas, just twenty km north of Puerto Montt, where we quickly hitched a ride in a shared taxi. This is another surprise: a tidy modern little resort town of steep-roofed, wood-trimmed hotels and shops hugging a beautiful lake - Lago Llanique, the largest in Chile. You could be on the shore of the Bodensee, except that an enormous white volcano is pasted

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on the skyline at the other end of the lake. The old folk speak German here, and there is a German Club where they serve bratwurst and bratkartoffeln. We gave this a miss in favour of a fish restaurant in the local market which offered the local speciality, congria - or conger eel - in various tasty combinations. We drank glasses of raspberry juice but resisted the Chilean custom of 'las onces'; elevenses, taken in the afternoon. Accommodation was scarce and we stayed in a hospedaje, or B&B, a modest wooden-shingled house with lace curtains where the old lady who ran it served kuchen baked in her cast-iron range as a breakfast treat.

Across the Andes from Chile to Argentina

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part III\)](#)



Puerto Varas has been on the tourist trail for 100 years. In 1903 a route was pioneered across the Andes to Bariloche in Argentina. It follows a low pass around the Orsono volcano and is only about 100 km, but involves crossing three remote lakes. We traversed this route in four buses and three catamarans. On the day of departure when we woke up and peered through our lace curtains, Orsono had disappeared. If we hadn't seen its perfect snow-capped cone across the lake the day before, we wouldn't have believed that it existed. The bus circumnavigated the lake and we stopped at a waterfall. We were greeted by some other visitors – the Swiss couple from our Colca Cañon expedition. By the time we had reached the embarkation point on the next lake we were blessed with a sparkling day and the views of the volcanoes which drop straight into the deep green water were staggering. The lake ports are just small clusters of buildings or a single hotel complex. The only fly in this paradise is the tábano, a huge horse fly. Swarms of them pester you to the point of driving all but the most determined inside. Otherwise these lakes are almost completely deserted. Occasionally a remote lodge comes into view, and whoever lives here depends on the passing catamaran. The drill is to row out in a skiff, throw a line to the passing boat, which slows but doesn't stop, and hand over parcels. On one marvelous occasion we witnessed the classic mariner's embarrassment: the line was thrown from the skiff, but not tethered at the end, so the deckhand was left holding a dangling line while the skiff receded in the ship's wake. The border crossing is a hut on a dusty unmade road through the thick forest; you don't get your passport stamped until the next lake port. And when we checked our passports, we found that they hadn't got round to changing the year in their stamp.

Bariloche was another surprise. It's a popular Argentinian mountain resort and so we had called ahead to book a room. Chuck was so pleased to have managed this in Spanish, speaking over a

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wonky line to an Argentinian who typically pronounced no consonants, that he did not get a firm idea of the price. He knew it was 75, but failed to ask 75 what. Hotels catering to the international tourist market sometimes quote in dollars. Or it might be the Argentine peso. Carlos Menem had pegged this equivalent to the dollar. But since the economy went into freefall a couple of years ago, we had no idea what the exchange rate was. When we arrived at ten pm, an hour after sunset, apart from its large lake Bariloche looked remarkably like Zermatt. Smart hotels, restaurants and shops in cosy Alpine architecture. We saw no sign of a depressed economy; everything looked extremely posh. This must be atypical - a plum for the wealthy few, who, whatever the catastrophe, are always with us. We joined them happily. We had a wonderful meal that night - wild boar, venison, and a superb special reserve cabernet sauvignon - without knowing what it was going to cost. We didn't find out till we changed some money the next morning that, for the tourist, Argentina is a lotus land. The exchange rate is 3.22 pesos to the dollar, so our three-star hotel room cost around \$22. The highest-priced item on the menu, the venison steak with trimmings - was \$6. The excellent wine was \$7- the range started below \$3.

We walked out to the railway station, now used only by trains taking tourists a few km down the line. In the 1950s Che Guevara spent the night on the platform trying to recover from an asthma attack. We crossed the road to the bus station and headed north for Mendoza, a 19-hour bus trip into the wine-growing districts between the Andes and the pampas. We journeyed over a vast semi-arid desert with nodding donkey engines silhouetted on the ridges in the setting sun. At dawn, the peak of Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the western hemisphere, glinted rosy on the horizon. At Mendoza, because it was still early morning, we pushed on another couple of hours to San Juan. Northwards from Bariloche no one speaks English, not even in the tourist trade. The tourists in this part of south America are mostly Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking.

Chilling out in San Juan, Argentina

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part III\)](#)



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San Juan lies in a sunny valley in the foothills of steep mountain ranges, about two-thirds up the length of the country. It is a pleasant and apparently prosperous town of broad streets shaded by young plane trees, but the buildings are modern. We are travelling along the breaklines of the continental plates and this town was completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1944.

We booked an overnight minibus tour to two remarkable geological features: Ischigualasto (the valley of the moon) and another national park at Talampaya. Our accommodation in San Augustin de Valle Fertil, a green oasis in the immense scrubland, was another surprise.: a modern hilltop four-star hotel was included in this rather cheap tour. The sites were rewarding. The valley of the moon is a fantastic eroded landscape of painted desert with abundant fossil remains. At Talampaya we boarded a 4WD pick-up to explore a huge canyon. At first we thought the guanaco posted so picturesquely on the skyline above the twisted red chimneys was a model. But this is Argentina, not Orlando, and it moved.

By one calculation, we have spent too much time in San Juan. We could have caught the late night bus last night after returning from the tour, but it had been a grueling 600 km round trip. So we are sitting in the shaded central Plaza de Mayo 25 listening to the splash of a fountain. It is two pm and it is very hot. Almost nothing is open, not even the churches. Packs of dogs patrol the deserted pedestrian mall. Almost no one is abroad, apart from a few dozing taxistas and some blue-uniformed policemen sitting on benches with huge plastic bottles of Coca-Cola at their feet. Our bus for Salta in the north-west corner of Argentina does not leave until almost midnight. Which leaves plenty of time to find an outdoor cafe and have a snack of empanadas (Cornish pasties but with a light pastry and stuffed with good ground beef and chopped olives), a cerveza or a huge glass of jugo de naranja fresca and afterwards have a good siesta in the hotel with the shutters open to catch the breeze . . . before the shops open in the cool of the evening and we can send this email.

Through Northwest Argentina

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part III\)](#)

In South America, unlike India, long-distance bus travel is comfortable, even a trifle luxurious. While India depends on its rail network and the USA on air traffic, in South America most people cross the great spaces in modern double-decker buses. Often these follow routes along railway lines, most of which are now sadly defunct. The buses are air-conditioned, the seats recline into 'semi-beds', and there are stewards who serve soft drinks and snacks (usually the abominable cardboard ham-and-cheese in a bun, but once in a while something more interesting - like a warm steak sandwich). All included in the modest price, together with, alas, more or less constant videos. These are so distracting it's almost impossible to keep your eyes from flicking up to them away from the scenery. So we've glimpsed portions of several numb-witted action hero adventures - some of them more than once, though it's hard to be sure. At the end of the journey you stumble out, sleep-deprived, your bleary brain teeming with manic images of violence and stunned by the crash of multiple explosions. The only reward is that the sub-titles or voice tracks are a good way to improve your Spanish.

The jocular steward also conducts a bingo game, which involves a lengthy explanation of how to play and a single, mercifully short game. It's best not to win, because then you have to get up and sing a song. A German victor sang, in his own tongue, "Deutschland über Alles». In-between these entertainments there is non-stop music, which, when it's traditional, rather than heavy-metal, adds a music track to the vast vistas of mountains, deserts, or grasslands unreeling in the picture windows.

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To reach the Bolivian border from Punta Arenas at the southern tip of the continent we travelled 5,000 km by boat and bus. The only hitch was at a provincial town in Argentina where we were told there would be a halt of 15 minutes. This was about the time it took for Judith to find a heladería and decide which exotic flavours of ice cream to have in her cone (Argentines take ice cream very seriously). Back at the station, our bus was gone. Chuck's frantic queries elicited a reply something like «Viene cinco minutos», which a panicky mind translated as «It left five minutes ago». Actually it means «It's coming in five minutes,» as was demonstrated when the bus returned from refuelling or whatever forty minutes later.

Salta, capital of a north-western province of Argentina, is an agreeable small city set in a 2,000 metre high bowl rimmed by higher mountain ranges. Because it has never suffered an earthquake - a fact attributed inevitably to some miraculous holy intervention - its centre contains several good examples of Spanish-Colonial architecture, and an attractive square. A lush valley of vineyards and tobacco fields yields to a severe rocky desert, and local entrepreneurs have developed interesting excursions to explore this strange country. We spent one busy day on a jeep trip. We traversed deep canyons and explored dramatic fissures in the red rocks. In one such fissure a guy was playing an Andean flute; the sound echoed around the chimney. Our fellow passengers included a honeymoon couple from Concepción in Chile; she stepped into the centre of the chimney and sang, memorably. At the top of the gorge, we reached the reconstructed ruins of an ancient Indian settlement destroyed first by the Incas and then by Spaniards. Also oases where wines are pressed from grapes grown at 3,500 to 4,500 metres. Apparently, the closer to the sun, the richer the wine. We tasted some excellent white wine from the local grape, the torrontés, and red cabernet. But the highlight was when we discovered a heladería which sold ice-cream in both of these flavours. Something to try out in the kitchen of 12 Hill Road.

Another 6am departure the next day took us up over 4,000 metres into the grim Altiplano under a burning sun. The vehicle was as exciting as the scenery. It was a huge Mercedes truck, specially fitted out with panelled galley and toilet, with collapsible tables and seating for 20 people. When the sun came out, the top rolled down and we stood on the seats with our faces in the wind. We traversed the vast, shimmering white salt lakes, where the crust sets in a crystalline pattern of large pentagonal paving blocks. Each winter the rains pour down from the mountains to form shallow lakes; in summer they evaporate but the saline water stays a few inches below the surface. Working under the boiling sun at an altitude where climbing up into the truck makes you gasp for breath, local peons cut trenches to form pools, then shovel out the salt. They earn a few pesos a week - perhaps two or three dollars.

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There is the occasional wandering Australian or Hollander, but most our companions on these tours are Argentinians. It is no longer economically feasible for the middle-class vacationers to travel outside their own country, except perhaps to Bolivia and Peru, which are poorer. Many have lost their savings in the banking collapse, yet inflation continues to increase - as much as three times on certain basic commodities such as milk and petrol, over the past year. There is an insufficient supply of national currency; counterfeiting is rife and many provinces issues their own paper money, which is useless outside Argentina. We managed to pass the last of these, spliced with sellotape, to a taxi driver on the day we left the country.

The salt lake tour in the massive open-topped vehicle peaked at 4,100 metres, before swinging back to Salta. We baled out at its northernmost point, to save retracing our journey 100 km or so the next day. We found lodgings in Purmamarca (altitude 2,200 metres), a scruffy village built largely of mud bricks, in a spectacular setting. It is called "the seven colours" because the surrounding cliffs are striped in every colour of the rainbow. It attracts squadrons of young Argentinian backpackers; they are not serious trekkers, but spend their time lying about in the dirt, draining two-litre bottles of Fanta. Chuck had a touch of altitude sickness here, which lasted only an hour.

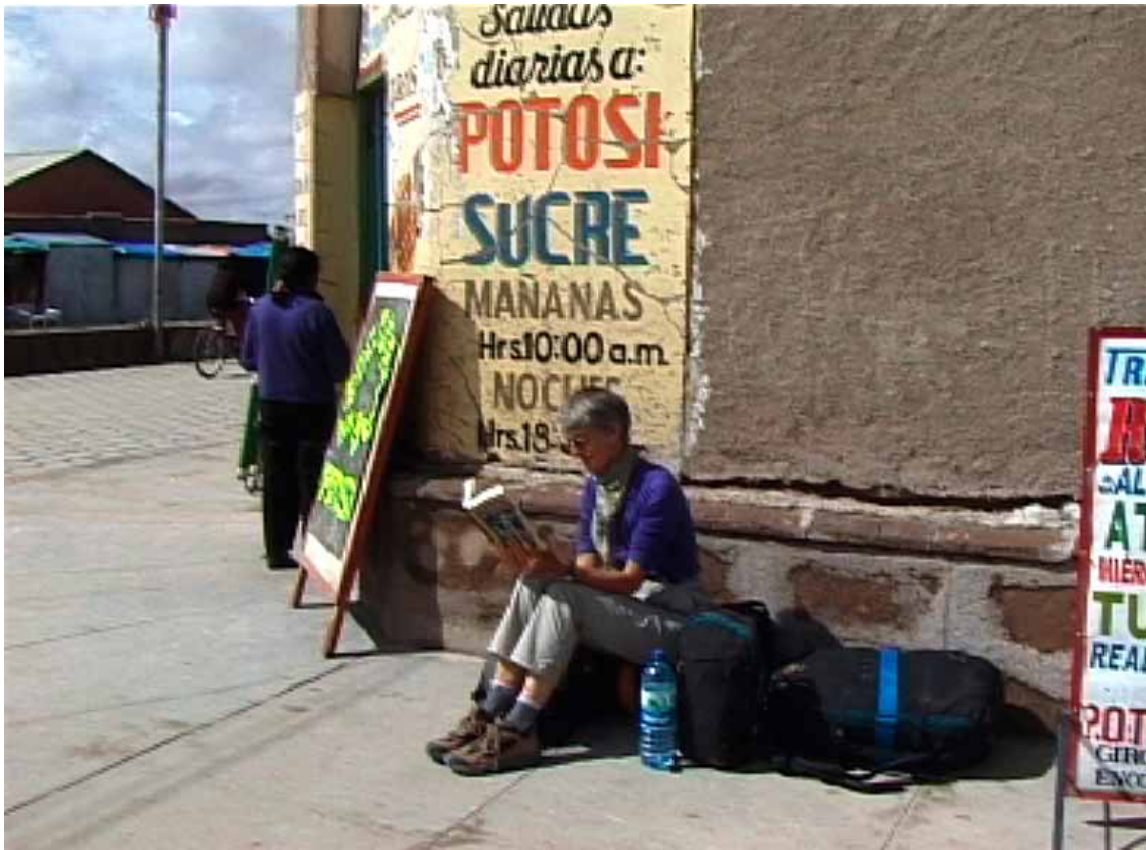
Our progress slowed for the next few days as we took to local buses - rattletraps, but happily no videos - onwards and upward into the north-west corner of Argentina. First a 27 km hop to Tilcara (2,500 metres) where there's another ruined Indian city on a hill where two vast canyons meet. While squatting at the bus station waiting for the next hop another 80 km up the valley we had one of those curious travellers' surprises. A young girl walked up and said hello. It was Paula, an art student from Columbia, a companion on our bus journey down from Peru, last seen three weeks ago at the bus station in Santiago, clenched in the arms of her Chilean boy friend. Since then we had travelled about 8,000 km down and up the continent while she had been partying in Valparaiso. But she still had the same boy friend in tow.

We overnighted at Humahuaca, at 3,000 metres, a mostly Quechua Indian village of stone streets and mud-brick dwellings. The most exciting thing that happens here occurs twice-daily, at noon and midnight. A life-size figure of a saint emerges briefly from a clock tower to bless the throng of backpackers assembled in the village square. Another 200 km up a desert landscape brought us 500 metres higher to La Quiaca, at 3,500 meters. This is a dreary town, streets lined with warehouses full of packaged foods, but with hardly a restaurant. We decamped as soon as we could, walking across the bridge to Villazón in Bolivia.

Bolivia

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part III\)](#)

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After Guyana, Bolivia is the second poorest country in South America, and it shows. Villazón is a tumble-down collection of small shops and dirty cafes lining broad, dusty and rubbish-strewn boulevards. The one thing they do have is plenty of space. Everyone now looks Indian; for 80% of the Bolivian population, Spanish is a second language. We chose this route for one reason: twice-weekly a train departs deep up into the Altiplano. Tickets for the “Expreso del Sur” are in great demand by locals as well as tourists, so although the train doesn’t leave until mid-afternoon we headed straight for the station early in the morning. Negotiations took longer than the formalities of crossing the border, but we managed to get two of the last four tickets available for the ‘Ejecutivo’ (first class) service to Uyuni, 250 km northeast. We whiled away the intervening hours in the only centre of activity in Villazón, the Internet cafe, which was thronged with keen Andean youth extending their limited horizons to the world which lies beyond this godforsaken place.

The eight-hour journey in comfortable carriages cost \$15 and included snacks and hot drinks. A proper dining car service was also available but we could not face the platters laden with meat and potatoes. The diet in this part of the world is totally meat-based. As well as choice beef, we have enjoyed alpaca - a very acceptable substitute, and llama, which is indistinguishable from veal in a bread-crumbed ‘Milanese’ cutlet and contains more protein and less fat than any conventional meat one eats. The Argentinian speciality, ‘dulce de leche’ was a welcome discovery - a sophisticated sweet caramel used for biscuit fillings, ice creams and dessert sauces. And have we mentioned the famous Pisco Sours of Peru and Chile? At long last an alcoholic beverage that Judith will happily belt down! (Peruvian pisco sours are better! - J)

But we digress. Our railway route crossed high deserts, then wended for hours through a dramatic green-floored valley lying along a roiling chocolate-brown river under bleak red cliffs. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid spent their final months in these canyons. The train was delayed and it was just before midnight when we were decanted onto the Uyuni platform. At 3,700 meters and unsheltered by any surrounding cliffs, this is, according to our guidebook, a bitterly cold and windswept place at any time of year. We found it only a little chilly, and hurried into the dark in

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search of a hotel. Again according to the guidebook, the modest establishments in Uyuni keep their doors open for the arrival of the semi-weekly train. It was wrong about this, too. The first hotel we came to was dark and locked. We rang the bell, but the only response was the church bell tolling midnight. Another ring or two produced a man in an upstairs window to say he had no rooms. We hurried through the deserted streets to the next hostel on our short list. There is a chilling moment in the computer mystery-solving game 'Riven'. If you knock five times on the wooden door of a primitive house, a panel in the door opens and a strange swarthy face appears briefly. In Uyuni it happens on the second knock. The panel closed again, the door creaked open and an Indian lady with a noble face led us into a bedroom where a man wrapped in sweaters lay in a bed watching television. We negotiated a room and flopped thankfully into a bed of our own.

The next morning the broad, empty streets were puddled, but the skies were clear and we could breakfast outdoors in the sun, watching the citizens of Uyuni – the women in their layers of skirts and bowler hats – going about their business. By 10 am we were on a local bus, jolting over an unsurfaced dirt track to our key destination, the ancient treasure chest of the Conquistadores, the silver-mine city of Potosí, which lies 250 km to the northeast. Over eight hours we traversed a series of ridges through an amazing variety of topography - red-rocked mountains, sand dunes, mineral-streaked cliffs, dry canyons, and, occasionally threaded through this barren landscape, a green oasis along the banks of a meandering river. On one immense high plateau a sparse covering of tough grass attracted herds of llama, alpaca, burros, cows and pigs grazing together.

In the midst of this sere wilderness Potosí suddenly appeared, dwarfed by the austere red pyramid of the Cerro Rico, which produced the silver that maintained the Spanish empire for centuries. At 4,100 metres, Potosí is the highest city in the world; dragging our rucksacks up from the bus station to the old city centre in the rain was not an option. But taxis passed us by, full. Suddenly, one pulled up, with two people already in it. You are not going to believe this, but it was Paula and her boyfriend, who welcomed us aboard with screams of laughter. They had just arrived at the same spot by a totally different route.

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Potosí – The campesinos are revolting

(Watch the movie: [Along the Andes Part III](#))



Potosí, the world's highest city, was once also one of the world's largest. In the late 16th century it was larger than London; its population of 160,000 was exceeded only by Paris, Venice and Naples. Almost all of these people, of course, were Indians forced to work the silver mines in the great red mountain which towers over the southern aspect of the city, the Cerro Rico. The workers were treated with appalling cruelty and the human cost of supplying Spain with treasure to sustain its imperial ambitions over the next three centuries has been estimated as high as nine million lives.

A rough stone arch still marks the separation of the central hilltop section of Potosí, where the Spaniards lived in splendid mansions, from the surrounding Indian hovels. The demarcation continues today: a sprawl of workers' quarters of mud bricks and stone encloses a core of grand colonial buildings, maintained by UNESCO as a world heritage site. There are two small historic squares, several grand churches - some crumbling, others restored - and narrow cobble streets lined with colonial villas offering glimpses of leafy courtyards through great wooden doors. The Royal Mint still stands with its silent machinery where countless tons of silver torn from the Cerro Rico were pressed into ingots and coins. Amongst the riches displayed here and in many of the churches are the portraits of haughty nobles and sanctimonious saints pleading eyes-upward to heaven. There also the images of the evil which sustained this hypocrisy: frequently the Madonna is portrayed in the Inca fashion, in a voluminous dress glittering with gold and gems, in the shape of the distinctive pyramid of the Cerro Rico.

The silver was exhausted centuries ago, but tin is still mined here by Indians. The government of Bolivia invested in a modern tin processing plant a decade or so ago, just in time to coincide with the collapse of the world tin market. The plant never functioned, but the workers formed a co-operative which still manages to extract a mean living from the soil. You can visit these mines

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on guided tours, which first stop at the local market so you can buy gifts of coca leaves, cigarettes or dynamite for the miners. The tour companies also donate 15% of the price to the miners' cooperative. We hovered between two conflicting attitudes: was such a visit an act of voyeurism of an exploited people, or had the workers cleverly embraced tourism as a means of survival? In the end we copped out: we decided not to crawl through the dirty and dangerous tunnels because we had just had our clothes washed.

With all its wonders Potosí is a heritage site far more colourful and interesting, say, than Trinidad in Cuba, and, on a lesser scale, on a par with Havana. Yet, apart from a handful of backpackers it was strangely void of tourists. Postcards, for example, were difficult to obtain. Judith discovered a selection in one tour agent's shop, locked in a glass cabinet. When the keys could not be found the managers obligingly attempted to lever off two padlocks with large screwdrivers, but as the glass case seemed about to shatter we begged them to desist: «No vale la pena!». True, it was the rainy season (though we had fair skies and warm sunshine); nevertheless the city does not seem to have the feel of a prime tourist destination. This sullied jewel is set in the midst of a barren treeless wasteland at an altitude of 4,100 metres, and is difficult to reach. There is no commercial airport, and to get here from the nearest rail station we had travelled eight hours by bus over a rough dirt road, meeting only ten vehicles along the way. Only the road to the east, to Sucre, the administrative capital of Bolivia, is paved, and that, we had heard; had been blocked by landslides. Nevertheless, that was our next destination, and after lingering in Potosí for three days we went down to the bus station after lunch to catch one of the frequent buses or 'collectivo' cars for the three-hour journey.

Twenty minutes later we were back up by the main square, whiling away the day in an Internet cafe. The road to Sucre was closed, not by a landslide, but by the Bolivian peasantry, who were protesting against the government's crackdown on the cultivation of the coca plant - which produces cocaine of course but also the leaves which everyone chews and the mate tea we drink. («Coke» has not contained the real stuff since 1915, but a great volume is still purchased annually by the Coca-Cola company for «flavouring».) The Spaniards had encouraged these habits because they rendered the Indians numb to the pain and hunger of their working conditions, but the U.S. government has pressured the Bolivians to pursue the hopeless strategy of attempting to eradicate the supply, rather than decreasing the demand. The coca plant is easy to grow on the eastern slopes of the Andes and the farmers have few other options.

Without retracing our steps, our only escape route was a night bus for La Paz, 250 km northeast over the altiplano - provided that the campesinos were not also shifting boulders across that rough track. As we respectively sipped tea and swilled beer and ate llama steaks in the funky comfort of what was billed as the world's highest internet cafe, the heavens opened. Hail hammered down upon the galvanised roof of its balcony and buckets were set out to catch the cascades pouring through it. The street below became a stream of muddy water six inches deep swirling around the corner from the central square

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La Paz

(Watch the movie: [Along the Andes Part IV](#))



Sleep was impossible for most of that night. We kept warm wrapped up in our sleeping bags as the old bus ground slowly through the mountains. It halted frequently and lights blazed through the windows. Each time we expected to see a throng of angry peasants, but there were only road crews repairing flood damage. After five hours, at two in the morning, we reached a paved road, and under a clear black sky emblazoned with the southern cross, rattled on at a good pace. After dawn we saw peasants trudging across the altiplano, the women carrying large bangles on their backs. Then without warning you come to La Paz. It lies inside a steep-sided bowl, its lip encrusted with slums, against a background of soaring, snow-capped peaks wreathed in cloud, and after miles of driving across the flat altiplano the bus suddenly starts a winding descent into the bottom of the bowl. We were amazed to see snow in the streets, and discovered it was the residue of a hailstorm which had battered the city about the same time that we had been snuggled down in the Potosí internet cafe. The roads had turned to rivers, water rushed down into the bowl, four people were swept to their deaths and several injured. We passed small crowds staring at collapsed buildings and ruptured roadways.

Having arrived bedraggled at 7.00am, we splashed out on a classic hotel, the Paris, on the main square. For \$90 per night we secured a massive first floor corner suite with tall windows opening onto four balconies. The only discordant note was the extraordinary number of armed policemen clustered beneath them - small stocky men in bile-green uniforms, wearing visored helmets and wielding riot shields and grease-guns half their height. We would have had a prime view of the riot which was dispersed with tear gas beneath our balconies that lunchtime, but regrettably we were abroad just then trying to find a lavandería which still had a water supply to wash our clothes. The cause of the disturbance seemed to be a general resentment that, although it had been in office six months, the current government had not changed the world. Would that the British had such short-fused temperaments!

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The armed police huddled in doorways and the swarm of shoeshine boys wearing balaclava masks - as a street fashion, or to protect their identities - give La Paz a menacing air. We were struck, too, by a singular street enterprise: youths with cellphones strapped to their wrists on long leashes, performing as human mobile phones. We visited the Coca Museum and learned a lot about coca, and explored the witch's market. Judith enquired whether among their llama foetuses and dried roots they had a remedy for Chuck's persistent cough. All regretfully shook their heads. Perhaps they are more honest about their powers than many NHS GPs.

Lake Titicaca

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part IV\)](#)

After lunching in a cafe populated by sinister elderly men in black leather jackets and dark glasses drinking German beer, we booked a tour which would take us across part of Lake Titicaca and then onwards across the Peruvian border to Puno. Having agreed the details, we were suddenly informed that the trip was impossible because the campesinos had now blocked the road to the lake. While we were wondering what the escape route was - were there flights to Cusco? - fresher intelligence suggested that the road was still open. The next day our minibus had to swerve through a couple of patches of rocks strewn across the tarmac by the disgruntled peons, but the only violence we suffered was when Chuck attempted to photograph the marketplace in lakeside Copacabana, and was assaulted by a shrieking crone wielding a bunch of onions.



As we were the only persons on our particular tour, and our guide spoke reasonable English, it was more like an outing with a knowledgeable friend. Lake Titicaca has a mythological status, and not just for the local Aymaras, but we learned that wealthy Paceños have second homes on the lakeside. After overnighting on the Isla del Sol, dramatically situated in the deep blue waters of the lake and looking towards the snowcapped cordillera to the east, we arrived in Copacabana with great good fortune on the 26th of January. This is the annual Feria de Alasitas. On this day people pay homage to Ekeko, the household god of abundance. The Catholic church cleverly has assimilated this festival, as it has so many other rituals of the Inca faith, and so the celebration takes place in the grounds of the local church. Market stalls are set up to sell flimsy miniatures as symbols of aspiration - toy cars, model homes, play money - even mock passports and tiny rolls of loo paper for would-be travellers. These must be blessed at noon by the priest, with holy water, and for good measure, by a local shaman with incense and smoke. We bought a tiny mock-up of a computer for son Jon, and Judith endured a wetting and a smoking to assure him continued success as a graphic designer in the coming year.

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Crossing into Peru at a remote border post we surprised the immigration official as he was about to bite into an ice cream cone. After he tried unsuccessfully to wedge it upright between his typewriter keys, Chuck offered to hold it for him while he fiddled with his stamps. After we received our passports back, Chuck said «Gracias, adiós», and cheekily turned away with the cone. Fortunately he received a wry smile, not a bullet in the back.

Peru: Cuzco and Machu Picchu

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part IV\)](#)

We rose at four a.m. and were on the trail by five. It was still dark and many of us carried torches. There were perhaps a hundred of us, almost all under thirty, and the pace was brisk. No one voiced the thought - there was only the dense chatter of crickets and the crunch of boots on wet rock and gravel - but you could sense a group urge to reach the final ridge before sunrise. We were on the final leg of the Inca trail to the ruined city of Machu Picchu.



This famous site actually lies about 1,000 metres below Cuzco (3,500m) and you reach it by following the valley of the broad Rio Urubamba downhill about 120 km, where it accelerates into a muddy torrent raging between steep cliffs. Here the transition from cool Andes highlands to steamy jungle has already begun and the vegetation grows thick and semi-tropical.

These days you cannot walk the Inca trail except in a guided group. There are three ways to do it. The easy option is to take the five-hour train journey to Aguas Calientes, the tourist village at the end of the line, and then make a short bus hop up to the site. The hard way is to get off the train partway down the valley and then trek up and down the ridges for four days, sleeping in tents and eating meals prepared by the guides. It's a tough climb at altitude, and an unattractive prospect for Oldies in the rainy season. So we chose the middle way. We were decanted from the train

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at kilometre 104, then hiked for five hours under blue skies and blazing sun up 600 metres on the original Inca stone pathways and steps and past dramatic Inca ruins to a refuge, where bunks, meals and showers were available. Those who take the hard way camp outside, and so it was that the conjoined flood of eager trekkers poured down the final path before dawn.

It was mostly downhill, but there were some heart-stopping short steep upward staircases, too. These spread out the line of walkers as light crept into the sky and banners of cloud emerged streaming from the mountain tops. The crickets fell abruptly silent and birdsong as quickly took up the chorus. After two hours we crested the saddle to stand on the ruined walls perched on Intipata, "the sun ridge", from which that spectacular view of Machu Picchu which you have probably seen is photographed. We saw nothing but cloud. The crowd of dejected walkers collected here, hoping for a break in the clouds, but after a while it began to rain and we all straggled down the final hour's descent to the site.

But this magnificent ruin transcends the weather. Through a light drizzle we wandered dreamily about its huge expanse. There are ranks of steep terraces, mighty walls, towers, temples, dwellings and sacred caves. Its age and origins are unknown, but it is thought to have housed about 800 people, segregated into different neighbourhoods inhabited by nobles, artisans and labourers. The site was discovered in 1911 and after the vegetation on this vast slope was cleared way not a great deal of restoration was required; the structures of finest coursed but unmortared masonry is 80 per cent original. We were right to have chosen to struggle over the mountain. In the early morning, before the busloads arrive from below, the vertical city, guarded by two steep pinnacles, has a serene and haunting quality. We roamed through the stone mazes for four hours, while the clouds drew apart. As the sun finally emerged and the day grew hot, we headed down the steep track for another hour or so to find a welcome lunch at the railhead village, before the train journey back to Cuzco. A staggering day in both senses.

When we crossed into Peru from Bolivia we had hoped to journey from Puno, on Lake Titicaca, to Cuzco by rail. But not for the first time, as independent travellers we were frustrated by the power of the mass travel tourist agencies. The train, which allegedly runs three days a week, does not run at all unless it has a block booking of at least 50 passengers. This self-defeating "Beeching" strategy has deprived the region of an important bit of infrastructure. The approach link from Arequipa to Puno has as a consequence already closed and soon these tracks, too, will fall to rust as the tour buses thunder by on the same route.

We stayed in Puno only long enough to visit the unique floating reed islands; arriving late in the afternoon we chartered a boat on our own, which gave us the luxury of directing it where to go. Only a few families live on these islands, in thatched huts, earning a living by selling trinkets to tourists. We invested in a ride from one island to another in a reed boat (directing our motor transport to follow). This craft was surprisingly heavy and stable, and buoyed up, we learned, by 250 sealed plastic bottles of air buried within it. What the antecedent of this technology was 1,000 years ago we failed to discover. The islands are quite squishy, like treading on a spring mattress, and distinctly moist; Chuck had a wet sock to prove it.

The tour bus ride to Cuzco consumed a whole day, with several sight-seeing stops. We admired a crumbling colonial church with a highly decorative ceiling and instructive murals depicting the rewards of heaven and hell. Hell was demonic but exciting; heaven seemed a dreary Sunday afternoon sort of place where ladies walked in manicured parks under parasols. The most imposing Inca ruin was a sturdy wall of huge stones which once blocked the high pass leading to the city. It was largely intact, and with a little more spadework could effectively seal the passage today.

Arriving in Cuzco in the midst of a sudden rainstorm, we sought the Hotel Las Marquesas, near

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the central Plaza de Armas, which, according to our guidebook, promised lodgings of character. This it delivered in spades. There was no sign outside, just a huge double gate. This led into the balconied open courtyard of a decaying 17th century manor house with rain gushing down from every corner; a similar open courtyard lay behind. Both were deserted. While Chuck kept guard on the luggage and fended off the efforts of our two-man taxi-driver team to deliver us somewhere else entirely, Judith wandered around the rickety galleries of this ghostly building, peering through the portes-cocheres in the huge carved double doors of each room, expecting to find Miss Havisham within, and shouting "Hola". She finally unearthed someone, and negotiated the price of a double bedroom down from \$35 to \$25. This was a large first floor room with a 20-foot high raftered ceiling and two shuttered windows overlooking the street. It held a huge brass bed, a sofa and some chairs, but no cupboard or chest for clothing. A bathroom had been erected in one corner and there was a trickle of hot water; if you ran it for an hour you could have a bath.

Judith had ensured that breakfast was included in the price, but finding it was another matter. We had been told that we would have to go outside to a nearby hole-in-the-wall cafe, but the next morning we were ushered into a palatial dining room for our tea and rolls. On a bureau was a collection of silver trophies; sad-eyed Arnaldo, who said he was a descendant of the mestizo family which had owned this house for 300 years, explained that his brother had been an international racing driver. The following morning the dining room table was bare and a child was dispatched to escort us to the hole-in-the-wall and pay a couple of soles for our juice and rolls; the tea we had to buy ourselves. We stayed another couple of days, and without our asking, the price was reduced to \$20. But we rose too early for breakfast at either of the previous venues, and indulged ourselves in a balcony cafe overlooking the Plaza de Armas. This is a very beautiful square, with three adjacent churches. The cathedral with its huge pillars, massive gold altars and walls covered with paintings seems designed to prove to the local population the might of Spain and the supremacy of its god. Yet all these buildings are sustained by the original Inca walls of massive blocks. Regular coursed rows or random polygons ingeniously fitted together without mortar appear in every lane. Much of modern Cuzco is built upon them, and though the newer structures regularly succumb to earthquakes, their massive underpinnings remain.

From our explorations of the treasures of the churches and museums, a few items stand out. One is a dramatic painting of a 17th century earthquake which sent buildings tumbling and all the residents pouring into the streets and immediately setting about erecting new homages to a merciful God. Another was an ingenious early piece of advertising, probably the world's first travelling "road show". It is a large portable cupboard that unfolds to present dozens of scenes from the Bible in a panorama peopled by small three dimensional images of people, saints and animals. It was carried about by donkey into the provinces to enlighten the native population. And we were amused by the carved wooden arms of the monks' pews in the coro – the inner sanctum of the cathedral. They feature maidens whose naked breasts have been worn smooth by centuries of fondling.

The Inca ruins immediately surrounding the city are best seen on horseback. A lad trots along on foot to show you the way. The Incas revered random outcrops of rock, carving and channeling them for sacred purposes. We finished at Sacsayhuaman, the impressive fortification on the hill just above Cuzco, where the Incas suffered a decisive defeat in their siege to retake the city. Its three tiers of walls of massive stones are each 20 metres high and set in a zig-zag profile, so that invaders are exposed on their flanks. It is hard to credit that fewer than a hundred Spaniards managed to scale these walls and annihilate the ten thousand Indians defending it, particularly since the overpowering advantage of the Spanish, the mounted horsemen, would have been of no use here. The answer lies perhaps in a combination of factors: the invaders' suits of armour were impervious to the crude Indian weapons of hurled stones and stone axes, a stealthy assault using the European device of scaling ladders, and not least, the sheer bravado of the Spaniards, who

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exhibited a heedless valour to match their cruelty.

Meanwhile, back at the ramshackle Hotel Las Marquesas . . . while we journeyed to Machu Picchu we left the bulk of our luggage in their care, reserving and paying for the same room on the night of our return. When we arrived, tired, dirty and hungry, there was no one about but some children playing with balloons in the courtyard. A girl of ten showed us into another room, but it had only a shower - and what we wanted more than anything was a good warm soak, even if it took an hour for the bath to fill up. Our original room had been let to someone else. Moreover, one of our bags was missing. It was, we were told in the room of the ten-year-old's sister, who was out. We asked for our money back - we would decamp. No luck. The adult with the key to the money box was also out on the town. Trying to negotiate with an earnest but impotent ten-year-old girl in broken Spanish, we were completely flummoxed.

You are not going to believe this, but . . . as we explained our problem to a sympathetic chap who happened by, a Swiss who spoke neither English nor German, he suddenly said, "Why don't we exchange rooms?" He had recently moved into our original room, and unceremoniously evacuated his Peruvian wife and son from it. All we had to do was go chasing after the ten-year-old again to secure some fresh towels - a mere matter of another twenty minutes or so.

Cajamarca, Pimentel and Huanchaco

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part IV\)](#)



We flew to Lima the next day, en route for Trujillo in the north. We had a five hour wait, which we thought we might spend pleasantly in the airport complex or nearby. But we were firmly escorted through security into a woebegone domestic flight wing, which was empty of all comforts save plastic chairs and a sandwich bar. When we tried to get back out we were told that, as we had been through security, we would have to stay there, unless we applied to a representative of our

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airline. There was of course no such person within our prison – there was no one else at all except the disgruntled girl behind the sandwich bar. The security guards spoke no English, but eventually we gained access to “El Jefe”, and making a huge and unaccustomed effort at humble supplication, in broken Spanish, Chuck managed to secure our release. Like kids released into a pleasure park, we reveled in the simple delights of the airport waiting lounge – hamburgers, beer, and a lengthy session at the Internet.

The policeman behind the rickety deal desk in Pimentel had three strips on his epaulettes, suggesting he was ‘el jefe’. This was clearly the most engrossing police matter that would occur in the ramshackle beach resort of Pimentel that night, and so he was sympathetic and listened attentively. “Deseo presentar una denuncia” has a ring of the Inquisition, but it simply means “I want to report an offence”.

When the bus left Cajamarca, Judith’s daypack was on the shelf over our heads. Two hours later, when the bus stopped for lunch, it was gone. How? The caramel salesman, we and our fellow passengers reckoned. Throughout South America buses are boarded by itinerants who slip the driver and his assistant samples of the product, harangue the passengers for an extended period, sell a few items, then drop off the bus again. We had closed our minds to the scruffy man with the caramels, concentrating on the vertiginous views of the Andean valleys, and he must have taken his revenge. We were at the front and recalled that he seemed to leave abruptly. We lost a fine pair of binoculars, an anorak, a Swiss Army Knife, a torch and four books, including our guides to Peru and Ecuador. It could have been a lot worse. Invariably, Judith had placed her daypack securely on the floor beneath her feet, while Chuck always put his on the overhead shelf. His pack contains the video camera, airline tickets, spare credit card and travellers’ cheques. On this day only, we had reversed the usual procedure.

Five hours after the incident we descended from the Andes to Chiclayo, a commercial town of no great interest, which lay on our route. On impulse we took a taxi 10km to the coast. So our first opportunity to report our loss was at the police station in sleepy Pimentel, 200km from where the theft took place. We explained that to claim on our insurance we needed a police report.

Yes, he could help us, the policemen agreed. But there were problems. The incident had occurred well outside his jurisdiction: it should have been reported in Cajamarca. Therefore the matter would have to be handled delicately. It would involve quite a lot of paperwork. It would have to be done as a favour. We began to get the drift, and when the clerk who would have to do the paperwork was produced – a chap in civilian clothes called Orlando – we asked how much. The answer was 60 soles, which was more Peruvian currency than we cared to part with at the moment, but Orlando agreed to accept the equivalent – \$15. I handed him a 20-dollar bill which he slipped into his breast pocket with practiced ease.

It was indeed a lot of work. The uniformed policeman laboriously recorded the inventory of our loss in a large ledger. He did not ask about what had happened on the bus, but pressed us for details of our brief subsequent taxi journey from Chiclayo. Did the driver wear epaulettes like his own? We were completely bewildered by this line of inquiry and could only smile and shrug. Orlando then fetched an ancient portable typewriter and pecked away, transcribing what the police officer had written. Other policemen drifted in and out of the tiny office, were introduced, and made polite conversation and suggested where we might eat that evening. One of them paged carefully through Chuck’s passport, doubtless dreaming enviously of places with strange-sounding names far away from Pimentel. Eventually, Orlando produced an impressive document with lots of official stamps, with a carbon copy for us. Chuck had to sign this document and add his fingerprint to the original ledger. Handing Chuck’s passport back, Orlando commented that he looked twenty years younger than the stated age. Chuck was so delighted with this that he decid-

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ed to forego asking for his \$5 change, a subject which had not been mentioned in any case. Amazingly, we even received a receipt for 60 soles. We parted with smiles and handshakes all round.

It was not until we later read the document that we appreciated the true delicacy of the task with which we had confronted these police officers. According to their account, our daypack had been stolen by the taxi driver who had driven us here, within the jurisdiction of the Pimentel police force. The significance of the epaulettes also sank in. We had earlier read in the local newspaper that an estimated 1,500 taxis were working illegally in the Chiclayo area – and most of them were owned and operated by off-duty policemen. Presumably they don't bother to change out of uniform, and our chums were keen to gild the lily by implicating some of their errant colleagues. We applauded this creative solution to a problem that would have confounded a less flexible police authority.

Pimentel is an odd resort – surrounded by desert, a fringe of upmarket villas and apartment blocks front the beach with the usual scruffy adobe village a block behind. There are only two shabby hotels and the beach shack restaurants close and everyone goes to sleep at about 9pm.

It was totally different from our recent previous beach experience. Arriving in Trujillo by plane from Lima we had discovered that the airport was close to the beach and the immense eroded pre-Inca ruins of Chan Chan, so we had diverted to the beach resort of Huanchaco. This, too, was plonked down in the desert, but was much more demotic; bathers and surfers thronged the immense beach and there were plenty of small hotels and seafront restaurants. The Humboldt Current lies inshore here and the water is cold. It's still a fishing village, and narrow, heavy one-man reed boats bob out over the surf to cast their nets. For four days we ate nothing but seafood fresh from the Pacific Ocean.

Have we told you about ceviche? It's the pride of Peruvian cuisine: slices of raw fish are marinated in lemon juice and chili, which chemical 'cooks' the flesh white. We also enjoyed it made with langoustine and prawns. Absolutely delicious (if you are fond of lemon) and served with the peculiar Peruvian chewy large-kernel maize and with sweet potato. The potato was first grown in Peru and is the country's real treasure; there are over 200 varieties and the value of this humble vegetable over the centuries has probably exceeded in value the plunder of Inca gold and silver.

From sea level we had journeyed back again into the Andes to Cajamarca. Here Pizarro first confronted the Incas, ambushed and captured their haughty ruler, Atahualpa, and after extorting a fabulous ransom – a large room filled eight foot high with crushed gold objects – callously executed him. Today, one Inca building survives in which Atahualpa allegedly was imprisoned, there is a pretty square enclosed by low buildings, and, in the hills above, the working remains of an impressive Inca aqueduct system, hewn from stone, which links the Atlantic and the Pacific watersheds of the Andes. Another major attraction was the journey itself; in seven hours the bus route passed through four distinct topographic zones: first along the endless Peruvian coastal desert, then turning inland up an idyllic fertile river valley, through plantations of bananas and mangoes, sugar cane, rice paddies and fields of maize, then the river grows turbulent and the road climbs through barren foothills, emerging eventually onto a high plateau where cattle and sheep graze, with the town clasped within a green bowl. We had expected to make this journey only once, but the guidebook was in error: there are no flights out of Cajamarca except back to Lima. And so we took the bus again back down to the coast and up to Chiclayo – and lost a daypack.

We no longer had the guidebook, but it was wrong again about flights out of Chiclayo – once again there are none except to Lima – so it was back on the bus for the nine-hour trip up to the Ecuadorean border at Aguas Verdes. We left the Peruvian coastal desert one evening and nine hours later awoke to see that the desert at this latitude has given way to green mangrove swamps. At

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the border we fell victim to one of those minor scams which imperil the tired independent traveler. When the bus stopped briefly at Tumbes, still 20km short of the border, early in the morning, we were accosted by a plausible chap who advised us that our passports had to be stamped at the police station here in Tumbes. Having lost our guidebook we could not verify this, but such procedures are not uncommon. So we hauled our backpacks off the bus and followed him. Unsurprisingly, he turned out to be a taxista. As we drove past the Tumbes police station he advised us that we would only have to stop there if we intended returning to Peru. Whether any of this tale was true we did not know but before he had finished his escort duty he had managed to extract our last 60 soles (\$15) from us. Nevertheless, he did deliver a service: a comfortable 20 km ride, and he took us to the Peruvian border station which was remote from the bus stop, then through Ecuadorean immigration service, and carried Judith's backpack several hundred metres to the Ecuadorean bus station. Throughout he was pleasant and efficient and in the end we viewed this entrepreneurial scam without regret as a kind of involuntary charity.

Ecuador

[\(Watch the movie: Along the Andes Part IV\)](#)



Surprisingly, Ecuador seems far more developed than Peru. It's not just that children wear school uniforms and there's a Macdonald's in Quito. There are habitations everywhere – not just isolated communities hundreds of kilometers apart. The houses look European – not mud-brick, but built of breezeblocks with plastered and painted exteriors. Sophisticated Cuenca, with its elegant Spanish colonial architecture, seems a quarter of old Madrid. On weekends it is somnolent, the quiet broken by marauding children hurling water-filled balloons at passers-by and into open bus windows from doorways, balconies and passing motor cars; water-bombing seems to be a national pastime. Quito is an amazing sprawl along a volcano-ringed valley, 20km from end to end. Between these two very different cities we spent a couple of days relaxing in Baños, named for its hot-water springs in which we soaked after a ramble up the mountain on horses even painfully

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thinner than those we had ridden in Cuzco.

Progressing northwards on this final stage of our South American odyssey, we remarked on the changes in the costumes worn by the women – particularly the headgear – from bowlers and stovepipe hats in Bolivia to snappy fedoras, huge sombreros, flowered straw hats and upended bowls with tiny brims throughout Peru. We will also fondly remember three remarkable establishments. One was the colonial restaurant in Huanchaco – an old villa where we twice ate marvelous seafood in an open courtyard in solitary splendor and admired the Humboldt penguins in the overgrown garden. A second was the Café Eucalyptus in Cuenca, virtually the only eatery open at the weekend, and, like its namesake a foreign transplant: with exquisite taste a British/American couple have transformed an old Spanish building into a balconied, glass-roofed haven serving good wine, draft beer and a menu of 100 tapas. Finally the Café Cultura in Quito. An old villa formally the French cultural centre has been transformed into a charming hotel with idiosyncratic rooms and impeccable service from friendly young staff. Although Quito is virtually on the equator, and it is high summer, the city lies at 2,800 metres and one of the Café Cultura's many attractions is the roaring log fires lit every night.

Good preparation for the conclusion of our trip – ten days in the appropriately named Alta Peruvian Lodge a few thousand kilometers further north but at about the same altitude in the skiing resort of Alta, Utah, where we were reunited with old friends – and with our skiing clothing which we had sent out by sea mail some months ago, so we could finish our trip gliding down the powder snow of the Rockies.

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