

Peregrinations in Peru



Saturday, 6 April

Up and out in time for the 04.00 night bus to Edinburgh Airport; a light frost and thin snow falling to encourage us in the wish to be somewhere else. The early flight to Schiphol gives us plenty of time to sit around waiting for the flight to Lima and to enjoy the tinny latin music that a couple of fellow travellers insist on sharing from their beaten up boombox. The Lima flight is surprisingly full for so early in the season. Luckily the lady who was to have been sitting next to us is successful in requesting a seat with more leg room. Her medical conditions appear to extend rather beyond her legs when she demands that a cabin attendant throw another passenger off the flight because she thinks he has been rude to her (he asked her not to recline her seat before take-off). The rest of the flight is uneventful until towards the end we discover that the overhead locker is full of water. A passenger in the row in front of us explains to the cabin staff that he had packed ice into the locker – both he and they seem to think that this is entirely normal procedure.... After passing through *immigracion* and collecting our bags we spot our first guide, Alex, who ushers us into a waiting minibus. A whole – usually spanking new – minibus for two became the standard mode of travel for us. Lima Airport is in the port district of Callao and we set off into the Callao to Lima traffic. Who needs bullfighting when you have sport like this? To facilitate swift lane changes most

vehicles straddle the lane markers and seek any opportunity to jink into gaps while blocking the opposition - ie everyone else. Once safely at the hotel (how did that get managed in the carnage out there?) we are led to comfy chairs while Alex checks us in and arranges for our luggage to be taken to our room. I half wonder if he plans to brush our teeth and tuck us up in bed too...

Sunday, 7 April

A dreamless night seems to have got us more or less in synch with local time and after a very full breakfast we are ready to meet our second guide, Celestino, at 09.00 for the first part of our tour of Lima. Somehow he manages to provide a synoptic geography and history of Peru from the first arrival of human beings to the present day in the time it takes to get to the centre of the city.

Peru is about twice the size of Spain. 10% of the area is the Pacific Coast, including some of the major cities such as Lima. Nearly a third of the population lives here, with Lima having grown in 20 years from a population of 600,000 to over 10 million – mostly a result of people displaced from the agricultural communities in the highlands during the civil war with the Shining Path. Another 30% of the country is the Andean highlands and mountains and the high plateau of the *Altiplano* which lies between the coastal mountains and the mountains of the continental divide. The remaining 60% of the country is in the Amazon basin and it is said that 75% of this area is still unmapped and largely unexplored. The first cultures emerged on the north Pacific coast over 2,000 years before Christ and a succession of cultures (including the Chavin, the Lima Culture, the Moche, Wari, Nazca and Chimú) developed across the country in the time before the sudden huge expansion of the Inca Empire in the 15th century.

Indeed, the Incas had only really just got things started before Pizarro and his band of 167 men, 27 horses and one cannon arrived in 1537, conquered the country in less than no time and made it a vice-regency of Spain. How did this small group conquer an empire estimated to have a population of between 9 and 13 million people – and so quickly? The Inca Empire had already been riven by a civil war between two half brothers who both claimed the title of Sapa Inca (top man), the Spaniards were aided by the rapid transmission of diseases – including smallpox and typhus – that their compatriots had earlier introduced to the north of the continent and for which the natives had no natural resistance. And the Inca polity, which kept a small noble class rigidly apart from the rest, was very vulnerable to top-slicing. Pizarro had the luck to capture the victor of the civil war, Atahualpa, almost by accident early in his passage into the country; and after extracting an enormous ransom for the Sapa Inca in unimaginable quantities of gold and silver, Pizarro showed what an honourable chap he was

by having Atahualpa condemned and burned at the stake. A puppet emperor was appointed in his place and the Spaniards could pretty much say “mission accomplished”.

Pizarro founded Lima as the new capital (Cusco in the highlands was the original Inca capital) because he needed somewhere nearer the coast to ship out the huge quantities of gold and silver that the country produced and ship in the luxuries that his and his colleagues new status and riches demanded. Peru remained a Spanish colony until 1821 when Jose de San Martin, a *mestizo* from Argentina declared Peruvian independence and – helped by the ubiquitous Simon Bolivar – defeated the Royalist army in a series of battles. His statue now dominates the centre of Independence Square and the plinth is decorated with the image of the “Mother of the Country” whose streaming hair is bounded by a crown which was supposed to bear the flame of freedom on top. Of course, the instructions to the sculptor used the Spanish for flame – *llama* – so the Mother of the Country has a crown topped with the pack animal of freedom instead.

Pizarro’s house in Lima occupied a whole block on one side of what is now the Plaza de Armas. It is now the Presidential Palace. Across the street is the house that was given to his right-hand man Francisco Aliaga. The house has been continuously occupied by the Aliaga family ever since the conquest; they seem to have been adept at trimming their views to the currents of the time and remaining in the favour of whoever was in power (helped by being able to use their considerable wealth to support the right causes). The house is not open to the public but our tour company in Lima does have an arrangement for limited access so we were able to go inside. Cedar from Nicaragua makes up a sweeping staircase leading to panelled corridors, rooms with rich antique furniture and historic portraits, and flower filled courtyards with marble floors. The fact that the family’s 4x4 is garaged at the foot of the staircase and the passage of a chap laden with supermarket plastic bags down one of the corridors brought the 21st century back to the picture.



Aliaga House



Next stop was the Franciscan Monastery. As Celestino pointed out, the Franciscan vow of poverty wasn't much in evidence in the opulence of the decorations, particularly in the church. The walls of the cloisters were originally decorated with frescoes by local artists trained in European techniques which are now being rediscovered under the subsequent replacement oil paintings. The paintings often repeat the material of the underlying frescoes – classic Christian scenes re-interpreted with local colour. The Last Supper shows Christ and the apostles sitting before a meal of *cuy* (guinea pig) and chillies. Then a tour of the catacombs and the bone collections. People paid well for being buried under the church, ideally close to the altar; what they didn't know was that every so often, the monks collected up all the bones and piled them in large separate silos of skulls, ribs, long bones, pelvises etc to make room for more paying customers. The final treasure is the monastic library, a fabulous collection of books, not just theological, from the 16th and 17th centuries. Fund raising is currently underway to try to provide a preservative environment for this rich store which is currently still on open shelves in the airy space at the top of the monastery.

Back out on the Plaza we get a view of the structure of the cathedral. The Spaniards had three goes at erecting a European style basilica in stone. Each time the building was wrecked by earthquakes. Finally they called in local architects who used the traditional structure of wooden pillars and plaster infill to which a low frieze of stone has been added on the street side.

Next it's back to today's minibus to go across town and back in time to visit the *Huaca Pucllana*, a huge complex built of adobe bricks in the first 2 centuries AD by the Lima Culture, one of the many pre-Inca cultures in the country. The site contains a series of huge plazas bounded by adobe walls and an enormous stepped pyramid also built of adobe bricks. The construction shows careful provision of spacing to allow movement to absorb seismic

shocks and the use – long before the Incas - of what is called “the Inca Arch” a rhombus shape like a Greek letter theta that is ubiquitous in Inca architecture as the shape for doorways, windows, niches etc. There is evidence of later use of the site by the Wari culture, who made niches in the pyramid to insert their distinctive style of mummies.



Pucllana & Love Park

We get a break for lunch but after the large breakfast instead make use of the time to find (or not) some local caches to start our “bag” for Peru.

At 14.00 the minibus and Celestino are back to take us to the Gold Museum, a huge private collection of archaeological material (not all gold) from many of the Peruvian cultures. The organization of the material is neither historical nor grouped by culture but rather by kind of object and I found it a rather confusing assemblage. But some of the items are stunning – I was particularly struck by the collection of *Qipus*, webs of knotted and coloured strings which may be clerical and accounting records and possibly – according to some authorities – historical or dynastic records also.

In addition to accumulating the archaeological material, the collector had a serious military fetish and the Museum also houses an extensive collection of uniforms and armaments from around the world and – even more oddly – a huge collection of stirrups, spurs and walking sticks.

Our final visit is to a modern park on the coast. The area had become notorious for both suicides and squatters during the years of the civil war. The Mayor of the district decided to replace the run down strip with a new “Love Park” with some Gaudi-esque (actually not very!) decorations and a large sculpture of a kissing couple. Every Valentine’s Day, a competition is held for the longest kiss. The current record is 4 hours and 12 minutes.

After discovering that lots of the local restaurants close on Sunday, we get a table in the open at an eatery next to John F Kennedy park and try the classic Peruvian *ceviche* (lime

marinated raw fish) and stewed goat accompanied by local beer. Time to go and pack up for an early start to fly to Cusco....

Monday, 8 April

We are met again by Alex and reverse our trip from the airport. The traffic – despite the early hour – is as crazy as before. Alex continues to chaperone us attentively, getting our boarding cards and waiting with us in the bag drop queue to lead us to the security check where he explains how we should go through and board the plane. Somehow we manage to get on the plane without him to help. There is a breakfast service on the flight (including whisky if you want it) to supplement the breakfast we had at the hotel. Through the clouds, mountains start to appear and then we drop into the Cusco valley, circle round at the far end of the town and land on a runway which is pretty much in the town itself.

Our next guide is Miguel. He takes us to the inevitable shiny minibus and plies us with coca sweets to help us with the altitude. “Can you breathe?” he asks anxiously. Since he is understandably struggling with my surname, I invite him to use “Michael” – and instantly become “Mr Michael”. While I am away changing some dollars into soles, Sally talks with the driver. His geography is a bit shaky. He knows we come from Scotland – is that in Europe? And when Sally tells him that we have been to Venezuela and that I had been in Patagonia, he speculates that Patagonia is in Ecuador.

It takes time to get out of Cusco – the city is built on the original Inca foundations and, lacking the wheel or any form of transport other than the llama and shanks’ pony (and litters for the heid bummers), the Incas didn’t need to make wide roads. So a van dropping off supplies of beer to a number of places along the road out of town effectively blocks progress until he moves on. Then we climb out and over the pass into the Sacred Valley of the Urubamba, an area the Incas regarded as particularly valuable because of its fertility and overlooked by several glaciers which supply water and which are regarded as *Apus*, guardian spirits or demi-gods. The Incas, and no doubt their predecessors (the Incas were inveterate borrowers) and now their successors, make use of the various levels of the valley as microclimates suited to different types of crop. Corn (maize, in many varieties including a dark purple cob), barley, carrots, onions, potatoes (5,000 varieties it is alleged), fava beans and lupins (which are grown as a food crop). The slopes are terraced to provide cultivable areas and the retaining walls of the Inca terraces which remain are marvels of stonework.

The continuing presence of “the Andean religion” – effectively the cosmology of the Incas - alongside Catholicism attested by the attribution of god-like status to the mountains and glaciers, is repeated in the architecture of the rural houses. The three stepped pattern (or two of them base to base forming the *Chakana* or “Inca cross”) is repeated in stonework, plasterwork and painting on facades. The steps represent the three levels of reality, the

underworld (symbolised by the snake), the middle world (symbolised by the puma) and the upper world (symbolised by the condor). On roof ridges everywhere there are clay animals which are mechanisms for offerings to Inti (the Sun God). Originally these were llamas but, out of deference to the Spanish are now usually bulls and out of additional deference to Catholicism they usually carry a Christian cross. But they also have a large cup on their backs which is filled with *chicha* (beer fermented from corn cobs) for the Sun. Inti obligingly drinks the beer by evaporation.

Our base in the Sacred Valley is called *Sol y Luna*, a very beautiful large garden estate, full of tropical plants, humming birds and butterflies with the accommodation being separate *casitas* – effectively small (and some not so small) houses. There is also a show ranch and two restaurants, in one of which you can eat and/or drink and watch equestrian displays by sombrero clad riders and some very glossy and well-schooled horses. And after settling in, a couple of pisco sours while watching the horses seems like a very good idea. And after that another couple of pisco sours and some dinner – including the first guinea pig of the trip – seems like a second good idea. The food – as almost everywhere on our trip – is extremely good. It's as if the whole of Peru is engaged in a big Master Chef competition.



Sol y Luna

Tuesday, 9 April

Breakfast done, another guide and minibus arrive. The tour guides' training in politeness must be rigorous. Despite encouragement, she can't get past "Sir" and "Madam" and looks genuinely distressed when we ask her to use our first names – she never did.

First stop is Pisac, the Inca “city” at the south end of the valley. *Pisac* means partridge in Qechua, which was the official language of the Empire. Some authorities say the name comes from the shape of the complex, others that many partridges were found buried around it. Both could be true. The siting of the complex, high up on the corner of the hillside is strategic. It looks out to the main passes to and from Cusco, the jungle territories across the mountains and the route south to Lake Titicaca. There is a long winding road up from the valley and once the minibus can go no further a long climb up through the terraces which provided the food for the complex to the buildings that would be occupied by the noble caste and priests. The difference between the levels is marked by a sudden shift in architectural style. The lower orders have walls made of stones held together by mortar and clay. The upper caste buildings are in classic Inca Imperial style, with precisely shaped blocks interlocking without mortar. At the most exposed points among the terraces are storehouses which were built with large open windows and raised floors to allow crops to be stored dry and partly refrigerated by the winds. Roofs were thatched and water-proofed with animal fat. In the hillside behind the complex are steep slopes which are peppered with hundreds of holes, some elaborated with stonework. It is a vast, semi-vertical cemetery sadly long since pillaged by Spaniards and grave robbers. The slope faces into the rising sun and the traditional burial was in the foetal position, awaiting rebirth by the power of *Inti*.

The worship of *Inti*, his sister the moon and the mother earth and the use of the Qechua language were requirements for all those taken into the Empire. With no system of writing a common spoken language was essential to the functioning of a vast and populous group of territories along with a shared ideology and belief system. The Inca “commandments” were few and positive – “work hard, be honest, respect others” – which was also the standard greeting. Spanish commentators made a version more like the negative form of the Christian commandments they were used to, and which is more often quoted: “don’t be lazy, don’t lie, don’t steal”.

The obvious question is how the Incan Empire grew so large so quickly. The Inca myth begins with a hero Manco Capac and his sister Mama Ocllo rising from the waters of Lake Titicaca and being given a gold staff by *Inti* which Manco Capac had to carry until he found a place where it could be pushed into the earth. In the swampy land of the Cusco valley, the staff sank straight in and he founded the city (which in Qechua means “navel of the world”). There is in fact some archaeological evidence that a pre-Inca people whose monuments resemble some Inca buildings did migrate from the Titicaca region when an extended *El Nino* event disturbed the local climate. Whatever the origins, an Inca kingdom existed in the Cusco valley for many generations until Pachacutec, the 9th Sapa Inca whose reign began in 1438, decided that it was time for dramatic expansion. The name he chose for himself is appropriate – it means something like “Earthshaker” or “Transformer of the World”. His technique for expansion – continued by his son – was to use spies to find out as much as

possible about neighbouring cultures and then to make an offer to their top people that they would be better off as part of the Inca Empire. The rulers would become *Apus* of their territories (the same word as for the mountain gods – so quite a tempting offer) with significant autonomy to run their own lands provided that Qechua and the Inca religion were adopted. All the benefits the Inca had accrued from studious borrowing of techniques from other cultures – particularly in agriculture, stonework and decorative arts, textiles and metalwork would be shared. And anything new the target culture had to offer would no doubt be assimilated into the Inca pattern, too. Just to make this an offer you genuinely couldn't refuse, it was backed up by the promise of war in the event of any unfortunate difference of opinion. It seems that the military option was not much required, although Pachacutec's son conducted a long and ultimately successful campaign against the Chimu, who otherwise really didn't seem to get it.

In just over two generations, the Incan Empire extended from Colombia to Chile and from the Pacific coast into the Amazon. It was divided in four main areas corresponding to the points of the compass and with the centre in Cusco.

Lunch was an elaborate buffet in a former Hacienda – the home of a Spanish family who owned most of the land in the valley of the Urubamba before land reform in the period of military government. The exotic and excellent food (featuring carpaccio of alpaca and wild tomato cheesecake among other delights) was accompanied by Andean musicians playing keyboards and panpipes. Their rather moody, ambient sounding opening number quickly gave way to renditions of old Beatles numbers and – very bizarrely – “Don't Cry for me, Argentina”. Surprisingly, they were selling quite a few CDs.

The afternoon visit was to the northern end of the valley and the town (and Inca site) of Ollantaytambo. The town is a pleasing grid iron built on the original Inca plan and using the original foundations and quite a lot of the original Inca walls. The streets, of course, are very narrow and there are police boxes at intersections where the local police try, more or less successfully, to stop vehicles from crashing into each other on a minute by minute basis at the blind corners.



Ollantaytambo

Beyond the town and rising up the hillside is the site of what is often called “the fortress of Ollantaytambo”. It was not a fortress - that title comes from the fact that it was the location of a briefly successful Inca resistance to the Spanish advance - but a “resting place” (which is what “tambo” means) on the route through the Sacred Valley from Cusco to Machu Pic’chu and the Amazon territory. There are what may be royal bathing chambers at the river level with complex systems of drainage channels to bring water into the chambers and a system of agricultural terraces and storehouses on the hillside and a large Temple of the Sun above it all overlooking the routes into and out of this end of the Sacred Valley. The Temple and some of the other construction was incomplete when the Spaniards arrived and was never finished. Huge stones (with weights in excess of 20 tons) have been transported and beautifully crafted into place but still others lie in, or on the way from, the quarry on the mountainside two miles away across the Urubamba River.

Wednesday, 10 April

The purpose of our visit to the Sacred Valley was two-fold. The exploration of Pisac and Ollantaytambo and a stage in our acclimatization to altitude before returning to Cusco to spend time there at over 3,500m and then going on to our trek across the Andes which would take us close to 5,000m. I mentioned the coca sweets we were given when we arrived on the flight into Cusco. Coca is everywhere in the highlands, although it can only be grown in the humid areas of the rainforest across the mountains. It is offered by vendors as bags of leaves or sweets and is freely available in hotel lobbies as coca tea and in hotel bedrooms as one of the herbal sachets accompanying the packs of coffee and creamer by the kettle. Local people in the fields use coca daily to get through the working day. After breakfast they don’t eat

again until the evening; the wad of coca in their cheeks keeps them free from hunger and fatigue. Coca is, anyone will tell you indignantly, absolutely not a drug. It is a sacred leaf with many healing properties. For visitors it is the generally recommended specific against *soroche* – altitude sickness.

A later pick-up today and a leisurely run back to Cusco with Miguel. On the way we take the opportunity to catch some of the details of daily life in the valley. Women in traditional wide skirts, short jackets and felt hats who carry varied burdens in the blankets slung on their backs. For younger women it may be a child, for others firewood or a bundle of corn stalks and cobs or other produce for the market, for some goats or chickens. It seems to be wash day and there is a large group of men and women washing clothes and blankets in a tributary of the Urubamba. Miguel tells us that his family (he comes from the jungle region originally) used to wash their clothes in the river in an animal hide. Passing through the village of Cilca, there is a backpacker's hostel with a large sign painted on the wall: "We KEEP your bag". The "keep" is emphasized by being in green not red like the rest. Presumably it means that they will look after your spare baggage while you go trekking on the Inca Trail; but it sounds rather threatening. We are also introduced to the signs for *cicherias* – houses which supply home-brewed corn beer. A bamboo pole is placed at an angle from the building out towards the road. The free end is adorned with one or more plastic bags wrapped round the pole. Red bags mean that *chicha* is for sale, red and yellow bags together mean you can get both *chicha* and commercially produced beer, and an added blue bag to either sign means that food is also available. Once you know the signs, they are everywhere.

In Cusco, Miguel checks us into our hotel, organizes the delivery of luggage and offers us coca tea from the urn in the lobby. The hotel is three colonial houses knocked together with a profusion of courtyards and stairways. Like everything else in central Cusco it is built on original Inca foundations and surrounded by the narrow streets between Inca walled spaces adapted originally in the colonial period and now used for shops, restaurants and so on. We set out into the streets in search of caches, one multi taking us on a tour of the town's squares and finally up to a viewpoint in the outskirts. It's hot and the altitude definitely tells – particularly when going uphill. Later we have an excellent meal with a very good bottle of wine for a very modest price. The renaissance of Peruvian cooking as advertised in the airline magazines has been certainly borne out thus far.

Thursday, 11 April

Except that Sally wakes up with a definite tummy upset. It's not altitude related as far as we can tell (the symptoms are wrong) so it's probably something picked up somewhere but nothing in last night's menu seems a likely suspect. Happily things improve for her through the day (my turn is to come...)

After meeting our guide (the same lady as took us round the Sacred Valley) the first stop is Qoricancha, just a short walk away. This was built in the time of Pachacutec as the very centre of the Inca universe – the Temple of the Sun at the centre of Cusco. The Temple complex still substantially remains, shorn naturally of the original huge plates of gold and silver that once lined the walls of incredibly precise stonework. To emphasise their conquest, the Spaniards used the temple as a base on which to erect a cathedral and partially incorporated the rest of the complex into Dominican convent attached to the church – incorporated it because the construction was so solid they couldn't demolish it. The convent is no longer a functioning religious house and is now a showcase for the Inca building within it and home to displays explaining the complex Inca cosmology and interpretations of the night sky (they identified shapes in both constellations of stars and in “dark constellations”, the apparently starless spaces laced into the Milky Way. Who won in the end?

Then a minibus arrives for us to travel out of town to Puka Pukara (the Red Fortress). This is a complex which straddles the road into Cusco from the south and west. It was probably a checkpoint and customs post. It could have housed a fairly sizeable garrison – there are baths and plazas as well as accommodation and a system of covered water channels and aqueducts to bring a reliable supply from a lake some 5 kilometres away.

From there to Q'enco, a temple complex with a natural cave system beside it. The cave has been extended and reworked to provide a narrow winding through route with a large slab whose surface has been leveled and cut with channels in the central space. There is a cleft in the rock above the channel which has been worked to allow light to be reflected (probably in a polished gold mirror) onto the slab. The archaeological interpretation is that the cave was a ritual space for the mummification of priests and other VIPs whose remains were interred in niches in the temple walls. The passage through the cave complex was in itself symbolic of rebirth from Mother Earth. There is a cache nearby in need of maintenance and we take a few minutes to find, repair and replace it.

Our next stop is Saqsayhuamana on a large hilltop overlooking the city. Like Ollantaytambo this is sometimes referred to as a Fortress – which is a very unlikely use for the site, despite its admittedly hugely massive walls. These are built in a series of zigzags and assembled out of truly gigantic stones. It is still not fully understood how the largest stones were transported to the site (apart from using simply fantastic quantities of human labour – which is, of course, probably the answer to the riddle). The whole complex, supported by a wide surround of terraces, was probably a vast ritual and meeting space. It is unlikely to have been permanently occupied by large numbers of people or have been a defensive military position because there is no substantial water supply. Incan Cusco, defined by the traces of its city walls and the Saqsayhuamana complex, is said to have taken the shape of a giant puma stretched across the valley. The puma's head is the hill of Saqsayhuamana with the fur,

ears and ear of its head picked out by the buildings and the zigzag walls. The puma is an important symbolic animal. Was the outline of the puma “discovered” *post hoc* or deliberately created, including the building of those massive walls? Discuss.



Saksayhuamana

On the same hilltop is a natural rock formation which the Incas regarded as sacred in itself – its presence may be part of the reason for the location of the complex. A huge sheet of rock is exposed, rising in a large domed ridge and deeply riven by parallel striations. On the side away from the complex the striations are so deep and the angle of the rock so steep that they form natural slides used by kids (and the occasional adult...)

Back into Cusco, we run into streets clogged with teams of dancers in flamboyant costumes who are making their way in succession to the Plaza de Armas. Since that's our destination it makes sense to debus and enjoy the festivities on foot. There are dancers from most of the various regions of Peru, all in distinctive costumes. Some of the male dancers in one troupe are wearing long false noses; our guide tells us that they represent Chileans – still traditionally “bad guys” because of the result of the 19th century Pacific War in which Chile gave both Peru and Bolivia a hiding, taking territory from both and leaving Bolivia landlocked.



Cusco

The main square of Cusco was once the location of the Royal Palace of the Sapa Inca. In another of those “we’re the boss of you now” gestures, the Spaniards razed the palace and built the main cathedral of Cusco on its foundations using stone looted from Saqsayhuamana. The church doors now look across to a large gold statue of Pachacutec in the centre of the Plaza....What goes around...

The cathedral feels like a celebration of the ways in which contemporary European styles and catholic symbolism got absorbed and reinterpreted by the Andean sensibility of the local artists employed to build and decorate it. Although the Spaniards trained the locals in European techniques of stonework, woodwork and oil painting, they didn’t drive out the underlying Inca cosmology. So images of Christ are laden with motifs of the sun and Mary the moon. There are symbols of Pachamama -Mother Earth - carved into the choir stalls and the huge canvas of the Last Supper centres on a plate of roasted guinea pig with Christ (or is it Inti?) holding a corn cake in place of bread. Superficially the stonework looks baroque but the repeated motifs are corn cobs, symbols of sun, moon, and Pachamama: indeed, the style is formally known as “Cusco baroque”. To a native visitor at the time – and perhaps even now – Catholicism must have seemed not to have replaced but to have been subsumed into the existing Andean beliefs.

Somehow by the time we bid our guide farewell it is still the middle of the day. Sally is sufficiently recovered to be interested in finding a decent *helado* – there are plenty of shops offering Walls style wrapped choc ices but our ambition is to find a proper *heladateria*. Hens’ teeth might be an easier target.

Before we find the ice cream we are at the underground museum below the Qoricaancha and our all-encompassing Cusco tourist ticket gives us entry. There are some interesting pieces but after a packed morning my brain is pretty much full and the hilarious English captions on the exhibits are what mainly catch my attention. And it is pleasantly cool. As we emerge into the light and heat again, across the road we spot what claims to be the best *heladateria* in Cusco (it may actually be the only one). Thankfully, the claim seems to be justified absolutely and not just relatively.

In the evening we are to meet our guides and fellow trekkers for the walk across the Andes to Machu Pic'chu (the apostrophe is important). The other trekkers are all female and mostly north Americans, a mixture of US and Canadian and mostly of a certain age or older. There are two younger women from Australia (although one is an American working there) and a younger Chinese Canadian travelling alone. The guides provide a briefing on what the trek will involve and arrangements for the pick up the following morning. The senior guide in particular inspires confidence that we will be in good hands and have a good time. As well as briefing the guides are also keen to find out our views on "the Korean war" (for a moment I thought I must have missed the news of an escalation from demented sabre-rattling to actual conflict). They are genuinely very anxious that large numbers of Americans and – slightly less improbably – Japanese will make their way to Peru to escape the metaphorical and possibly literal fall-out.

By the time we get to eat I am getting signals that it's my turn to have the tummy bug and neither of us has much appetite. Timing could be better...

onions, beans, and different types of corn from yellow through orange to a purple that is almost black; there are (literally it seems) thousands of different types of potato as well as piles of sweet potatoes; there are cages and squirming bags variously full of chickens or guinea pigs; there are goats, mules and horses – including one which is purposefully moving from stall to stall to sniff the goods on offer; and there is a large field filling with cattle – apparently I can have a calf for 385 *soles* (about £90).

A little further on we stop again to visit a site known as Tarawasi a *tambo* or stopping place on the road from Chinchaysuyo. It is centered on a great square platform with walls of interlocking granite blocks with regular niches about 7 feet high in the Inca arch shape. Mummies were placed in the niches, unusually in an upright rather than foetal position. The granite blocks are many sided and – once it is pointed out – you can see that they are grouped in two distinct repeated shapes: one like a section through a corn cob, the other an undulating snake-like line. The site also includes an altar of rock or *usnu* and agricultural terraces with their own water sources and irrigation channels. It is called a ruin – although in fact the stonework is completely intact and the irrigation channels still functional. Fittingly, the colonial period hacienda built on part of the site really is a ruin.

After crossing another pass we head off the Lima highway and start to climb the hairpins of a dirt road up to the town of Mollepata at 2,857m where a new high school is under construction. School education is both compulsory and free (higher education is also free) but many children in the rural areas have to walk for more than an hour to get to school; this, coupled with the cost of uniforms and books (which are not free) for what may be 6 or 8 children in a family - and the loss of their labour, means that poorer children may not get their entitlement. The town is also home to a women's weaving collective, the lady coordinating it saying that the women are pleased to get some financial independence through selling their work. It is baking hot and I seek shelter of the shade trees in the square. After picking up some water (and, thankfully, having the much-needed use of a baño) at a local café, we drive further up the winding and increasingly rough track. At 3,350m we leave the vehicle, pick up a huge packed lunch and begin to walk.

Between the heat and the altitude and the revolution going on inside me, it feels like very hard work despite a pretty gentle-seeming gradient (in fact we are to climb over 500m in a couple of hours). But there is much to distract us from that: humming birds, orchids and bromeliads to remind you that Peru is 60% jungle. Soon we have climbed high enough to be out of the tropical vegetation and into the mountain landscape of grass and rock, with the Rio Blanco foaming off the glaciers running below us and the white triangular face of Salkantay, the highest peak in the Vilcabamba range, dominating the view ahead.

In a grassy plain below Salkantay and its neighbor Humantay we reach the first of the four lodges of the trek. It is sympathetically designed into the landscape, built of local stone and thatch – and is about as far from a Scottish mountain bothy as it is possible to imagine. We remove our boots at the entrance, from where they are taken away to be cleaned. The staff greet us warmly with mugs of *muna* (wild mint) tea and warm flannels aromatized with cinnamon to wipe away the dust of the trail. Our bags have already arrived (on horseback) and are awaiting us in our luxurious room with a balcony facing out towards Salkantay.



Almost as soon as we get to the room, we are asleep and an hour passes in an instant. On waking, I feel very much better and actually look forward to the tea, sandwiches and cakes which have been laid out in the sitting room. Between tea, reading emails (there is satellite internet access in all the lodges) and watching the setting sun reflecting off the Salkantay glaciers it is a very pleasant end to the day.

As well as the guides and the wranglers to manage the pack horses, we are accompanied on the trek by a chef and sous chef (no, really) and they have been busy in the kitchen since we arrived. And they produce a three course meal (pumpkin soup, trout panfried with sweet

caper sauce, passion fruit mousse) of restaurant quality. Unfortunately, the appetite suppression effect of altitude has now kicked in and a few mouthfuls leave us feeling very full. Armed with more *muna* tea we head back to the room, where the beds have been turned down, towels have been folded in fancy shapes and hot water bottles in alpaca wraps slipped between the sheets. By 8.30 pm we can't keep our eyes open and they stay firmly shut for the next ten hours.

Saturday, 13 April

The first day from the Lodge is an acclimatization walk up to the glacial lake of Humantay at 4,221m. Some of the party have found the walk to the Lodge and the altitude there already a bit too much. One stays at the Lodge for the day, having been on oxygen the night before. Two others are shuttled up to the lake by mule. The rest of us walk, accompanied by the guides and for local colour a *Q'ero* Indian in traditional dress leading a llama (with purple threads woven into its ears) and playing pan pipes – thankfully traditional music, not hits from the shows.



The first part of the route is relatively flat and a pleasant stroll. When we turn uphill, it is a different story: heart pumping and breath heaving. But we make it and the startlingly blue lake beneath the glacier riven face of Humantay is well worth the labour. The presence of condors circling against the mountain faces is a bonus. The head guide, Manolo, becomes quite solemn as he tells us about the importance to him and the local people of the spirits or gods in the mountains – despite their otherwise sincere Catholicism. It all seems very genuine, particularly when you notice that later, before he drinks from his bottle of Inka Cola, he discreetly pours a little on the ground behind him as an offering (behind because you aren't supposed to watch the spirits enjoy what you offer). Inka Cola, incidentally, is a sort of Peruvian analogy to Irn Bru – viciously sweet and violently coloured (an acid green) with entirely artificial ingredients. You might reasonably wonder what any respectable mountain spirit would make of it as an offering.

Downhill is bliss. Suddenly I don't feel an incapacitated old wreck! Then, as we pass an area fenced with thornsticks where Andean grass is drying to be used as thatch (thatch needs to be replaced every six months to keep it waterproof) we get the first rain of our trip. Quickly building from the first drops into a full-on mountain downpour, it carries on with tropical vigour into the night. But by then we are back at the lodge, changed and dry and being fed quinoa salad, *lomo saltado* (strips of beef panfried with peppers and soy sauce) and fruit salad – and that was just the late lunch! Another instant oblivion nap uses up an hour or so before we need to prepare our kit for an early start next day, have a demonstration on the mixing of the perfect pisco sour and peck at another excellent dinner. I also get given a tube of cortisol cream to deal with an insect bite (amazingly I had only two the whole trip) on my left hand which has swollen up significantly and is very hot. I am advised to watch out for other symptoms, including blood in my urine – which all sounds alarming but there is no further problem, the cortisol does its work over the next couple of days and I can put my ring and watch on again. It also seems to have improved the nodes in my hands from Dupuytren's disease. Or maybe it's the altitude. Or something.

Sunday, 14 April

The rain has cleared overnight and it is another perfect day. We start early to head up to the pass by the Salkantay glacier – another 800m higher than the lodge. Some of the group have taken the alternative of hiring horses to get them up there and they will start later. We are more or less following the course of the Rio Blanco again and the going is not too bad until we get below the huge moraines left by the glacier's retreat. A series of long zigzags (supposedly 49, although I'm sure I counted several hundred more) gets us onto the ridge of the northernmost moraine and we follow that up to a small glacial lake where we have a very welcome break. The last climb to the pass is hard; each step seems to need its own laboured breath. I was in classic head down mountain mode (don't look ahead: you'll see how far and

steep it is and get depressed) when I felt the welcome chill of a head wind and knew that we were close to the top. And then there we were, in a land of ice and scoured rock and dry, thin scrubby grass.



Looking back down to Salkantay Lodge

There is a cache close to the trail over the pass and we set out for it. Despite the nearly 5,000m of altitude, going nearly horizontal is a welcome change from the slog uphill. That is likely to stand as our highest-ever find for a long time!

Downhill is even more pleasant than horizontal. After an hour and a 500m drop in height we reach a small plateau called Ichupata and find a large mess tent, a cook tent, a toilet tent and a tent to store rucksacks in case of rain. Our chef and sous chef with supplies on horse back have preceded us and, even here, have produced an excellent three course meal – including pear poached in red wine with star anise...



Those who came up by horse are now on foot and several who walked up are feeling the effects, so Manolo divides the group and leads the younger Canadian woman, Sally and me down at light infantry pace while the assistant guide brings the others in more leisurely style. And so by mid afternoon we reach Wayra Lodge, high in the mountains, looking back at Saltankay's eastern flank and down into the hills of Amazonian Peru. Once again our boots are taken away (mine have never been so clean since they came out of the box) and we have tea and flannels and find our luggage has somehow again preceded us, then shower and wash some kit and use the wifi before yet another excellent meal and oblivion shortly after 8.00pm.



Wayra Lodge

Monday, 15 April

At some point in the night I was aware of thunder and rain, but by 6.00 am it has cleared. Today is all downhill – about a vertical kilometer to drop. It is surprising how quickly the bare mountain scenery turns to cloud forest, orchids, bromeliads and bamboo with humming birds, several species of tyrant (a thrush sized bird with a bad reputation) and huge Morphos butterflies which change instantaneously from yellow or electric blue depending how the light strikes them. The overnight rain has left a few deeply muddy sections in the trail – particularly where horses have churned it up – and the steep drop to the Huamantay river below is often accentuated by areas where landslips have cut into the trail side. One member of the group has a dramatic lesson in the looseness of the trail edge and finds herself suddenly on the downslope, on her back, upside down and with her head pointing to the river. Thankfully, Joseph, the assistant guide is able to get her back on the trail and on her feet.

As we get lower, the forest once again starts to be dominated – as everywhere in Peru - by tall stands of eucalyptus trees. The non-native eucalypts are a gift from British railway engineers. In the 19th and early 20th century Peru became rich from the exploitation of the huge deposits of guano from seabirds on the Pacific islands. Some of the guano wealth was used to fund the building of an extensive rail network for which British engineers were imported. They needed a reliable and plentiful source of hard wood for the railway sleepers and the quick-growing, iron-hard eucalypts were introduced – and rapidly spread like weeds. They are a mixed blessing – the wood is extensively used as fuel and for a myriad other purposes (including anchoring floating islands...but we'll get to that later) but the trees are also greedy for water and this, coupled with their wide root systems, makes them a plague in some agricultural settings.

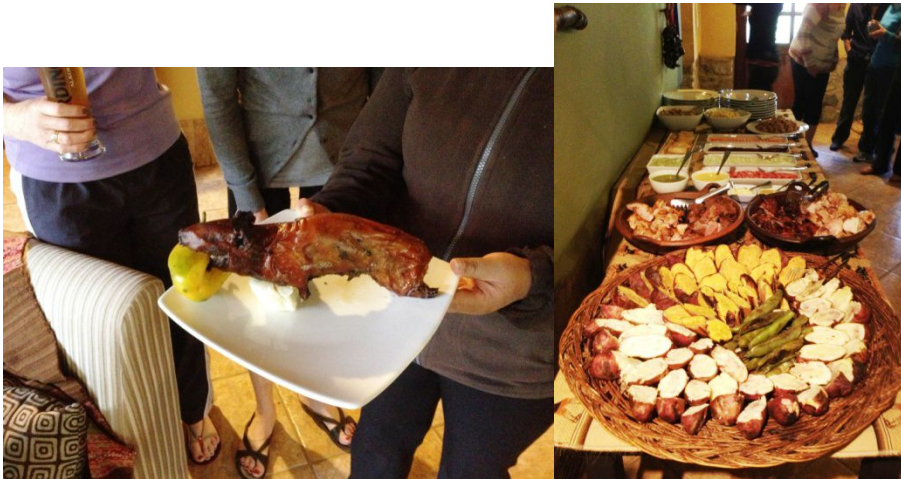
After all the downhill there is a short, sharp scramble up a muddy track from the river to Colpa Lodge where we are greeted with flannels and *chicha morada*, a non-alcoholic version of *chicha* made from the purple corn and which tastes vaguely of blackcurrant. Set on a flat area above a bend in the Santa Teresa river (where it is joined by the Huamantay) the Lodge has, among its other amenities, a jacuzzi on a grassy terrace in front of the Lodge which has an astonishing view east across the river, north down river and south up the valley of the Chaullay river, which runs into the Santa Teresa just above the Huamantay. Did I mention that all the Lodges have a jacuzzi? They do, but Colpa's definitely steals the show.



Jacuzzi in Cloud Forest

We are in time to watch our lunch being prepared in Pachamanka style. The *pachamanka* is a traditional earth oven. You dig a hole in the ground and fill it with firewood. Getting a good blaze going and really hot embers glowing, you pile the whole thing over with rocks which you leave for several hours to get very hot. (This had all been done while we were en route.) Then you roll the hot rocks away, dig out the embers and push some of the rocks back into the hole. You add potatoes, sweet potatoes and more rocks, then plantain, fava beans, corn

and various meats wrapped in plantain leaves (or nowadays foil). The whole lot is then covered with more leaves (for which now read blue plastic sheeting) and piled with earth and left for 30 minutes or so before excavating the food. It is a good deal of very hard work and all this rolling about of seriously hot rocks is self-evidently a risky business. The results are served as a buffet along with a guinea pig that has been oven-roasted whole.



Pachamanka

Later, the jacuzzi had to be visited and the steam rising from it confirmed that it was not only the view that would be worthwhile. A lengthy dip followed by a cold beer led to the pre-dinner talk. The first part was a description of the Mountain Lodge company's commitment to social programmes in the areas where their lodges are placed in co-operation with an NGO called Yanapana Peru Social and Environmental Responsibility Organisation. The lodges themselves employ only local people and, as our experience demonstrated, give them excellent training. They also support community development, for example by supporting or helping to build schools and by helping to create local business initiatives such as the weaving collective at Mollepata. This was as background to a description of the local school which we were to visit on the morrow. The second part was a description of Andean traditions by Joseph which was extremely enthusiastic, but sadly mostly unintelligible.

Tuesday, 16 April

Getting to Manchayhuaycco Elementary School took us a couple of hours up the valley of the Chaullay river. It was sobering to know that several of the pupils make the same journey to get to school for an 8.20 am start on a daily basis (and that it doesn't take them as long as it did us to get there). Two teachers travel in weekly from the town of Santa Teresa – and must make the same trek from Collpapampa. The dozen or so pupils are aged from 3 to 13 and are divided into two multi-stage classes. They get the full Peruvian elementary curriculum in Spanish and Qechua and this is supplemented by an agricultural curriculum with practical work raising vegetables and herbs in a hothouse and guinea pigs and chickens

in sheds. The kids were lively and engaging and the adobe classrooms were colourful with posters and wall charts – very like kids and schoolrooms at home (except there the guinea pigs would be pets, not lunch...) The kids all told us what they wanted to do as grown ups and, despite the agricultural curriculum, none wanted to farm – they were budding soldiers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers (only girls professing that ambition) and a couple of would-be guides. We hoped that some would get their wish.

Having reversed our route to school we picked up a minibus on the road. The next stage had to be driven on the road to the east of the Santa Teresa river as the trail on the west side had suffered some major landslips during the wet season. It was a hair-raising drive: the rough dirt road is a one-vehicle wide series of dramatic bends, dips and river fords with a rock wall on one side and a precipitous drop to the river on the other. And the wet season had been none too kind to it either: in several places chunks of the road on the river side simply were not there and at times it was not entirely clear what, if anything, was under the wheels on that side. But we made it unscathed to the point where we could leave the bus at the head of the restored Inca Lllactapata trail.



Lucma Lodge

The steps and terraces of the trail lead up through coffee plantations and an avocado orchard to the Lucma Lodge, the last Lodge of our trek where we are greeted with the now customary

boot removal and flannels, supplemented this time by fresh passion juice. After a large late lunch, some of us walk down through the coffee bushes to the kitchen of one of the coffee growers. While we sit against the adobe walls with the inevitable guinea pigs running around our feet (their bed is in the larder, naturally) the ample lady of the house stokes an adobe oven with eucalyptus sticks and heats a clay pot designed for roasting coffee beans. The Qechua name of this style of pot is apparently also used to describe a man too fond of the ladies, which may be something to do with the protuberant handle; or perhaps it's better not to speculate. She encourages the fire by blowing into it through something like a kazoo. (One imagines that remembering to take the tube out the mouth before breathing in is an important part of the process.) Once a good glowing burn is going she puts dried coffee beans into the pot and shakes and stirs it over the fire. In a short time the beans are turning from khaki to a shiny dark chocolate brown and the smell is getting toothsome. Using a hand grinder she crushes the beans and uses a metal filter and water boiled on the stove to fill small espresso cups with a rich black brew. The area is supposed to produce the best organic coffee in the world and this sample is pretty persuasive: at any rate we are eager to order a bag of her home roasted beans which are to be delivered before we leave the next morning.



Peruvian coffee making

In the evening Manolo delivers a diplomatic but very effective description of the rigours and the timetable for tomorrow's last day of trekking. He points out that there is an option to make the last leg by road and the 80 dollar cost of the minibus will get cheaper for each

passenger the fuller the bus becomes. By the time he has finished the cost per passenger has become 10 dollars. The other 6 of us will be walking...

Wednesday, 17 April

Another upside of the bus option is that you can stay in your bed while the hiking party stumbles about in the early light to be up for a 6.00am breakfast. We should have thought of that last night: too late now.

After collecting our coffee beans – the lady was as good as her word – we set off with Manolo (he has delegated the job of accompanying the bus trip to Joseph) up the remaining length of the Llacatapata trail. It rises up past the plantations and into the jungle on the hillside above the Santa Teresa valley giving great views as the morning mists rise and the sun starts to burn off the clouds. There are exotic jungle noises and flights of parakeets, passing butterflies and humming birds. A short steeper section takes us up to the pass. The high point is at 2,800m from where we have to drop more than a vertical kilometre to the Vilcanota river.

Emerging from the jungle below the pass into a level clearing we are at the Llacatapata site. Some of the buildings have been cleared and restored, others are still covered in bushes and creepers – the state Machu Pic'chu was in when Hiram Bingham “discovered” it in 1911. The purpose of the site is uncertain, most of the buildings appear to be temples and it looks directly south west across the Aobamba valley to the terraces of Machu Pic'chu. Unfortunately at the moment the valley is full of a sea of cloud...There are bees and other insects buzzing around the flowers in the grass; the term “other” includes the *mina mina*, a large wasp which has the unpleasant trait of laying its eggs in a living tarantula to provide a fresh food source for the emerging larvae.

Dropping down through the jungle again we emerge onto another level cleared area. There is a wooden hut for a toilet which presumably conceals an earth closet – except that when you go in there is a pristine piece of Armitage Shanks sanitary ware, and even more incredibly it is plumbed (to what?) and flushes. The rather Alice in Wonderland atmosphere continues. There is also another long low wooden building with large windows facing across the valley towards Machu Pic'chu and a long table. This is our lunch stop – at 10.30 am. The “kitchen” is simply a wood fire but the patron manages somehow to conjure up an avocado salad, trout pan fried with garlic and apricots poached with cinnamon which he serves wearing a royal blue mess jacket with gilt buttons.



Lunch view across to Macchu Pic'chu

As the meal proceeds the cloud filling the valley is breaking up, partly burning off, partly being shredded by the wind. And we start to get glimpses and finally a full-on view of the terraces of Machu Pic'chu. Because we are looking from the south-west it is not the customary image which makes it all the more gob-smacking: a precise series of walls and buildings floating high among range after range of emerald green mountains. I am suddenly aware that tears are running down my cheeks: what's that all about? Gradually I work out that I had seen fuzzy images of Machu Pic'chu in the newspapers in the late 1950s or early '60s when for a young boy places like this were as exotic and – for all practical purposes – as far away as the moon, only to be seen in the young David Attenborough's "Zoo Quest" books. There was a deep and long-forgotten wish to go there for myself and now I was actually here, and there it was in front of me.

Only there was the small matter of the Vilcanota valley between us and it. So after lunch (it was still only 11.00 am) we began the long, steep, winding and occasionally very muddy and slippery descent through the jungle towards the Rio Aobamba which floods down from the

Salkantay glacier to join the Rio Vilcanota, the two rivers forming a loop which surrounds the mountains of Machu Pic'chu like a moat. Two hours of tough going on a narrow and eroded trail with high temperature and humidity brought us sweatily to the swaying suspension bridge that crosses the river. Once on the eastern side, Monolo announced that we were well ahead of schedule and we made use of the time to cool down at the margins of the rushing torrent, paddling in the small pools was a quick cooler – it feels as if the water is only kept from freezing by its frantic motion.

After the jungle and the Inca buildings, the next stage of the journey takes us through the large construction site of phase 2 of the Vilcanota hydro-electric plant. Not the prettiest part of the trek but it has the advantage of taking us to the railhead on a spur of the Cusco to Aguas Calientes line built to service the plant. The final stretch along the Vilcanota to Aguas Calientes (the town below Machu Pic'chu will be a train ride. Passing a line of stalls put up against the track we make our way into the station restaurant and beer is consumed - in some quantity. But we have a long way to go to catch up with our colleagues from the bus tour who arrive a little later obviously very well refreshed indeed, shrieking loudly about the entertainment they have had on the way. (It is alleged that this included Joseph removing his t-shirt for some part of the day. This may well be true as it is certainly now on both back to front and inside out.)

Drops of rain were falling as we crossed from the restaurant to the train. By the time our comfortable, air conditioned but rather shoochy ride to Aguas Calientes is finished, it has become a full-on tropical downpour. The rail track is the main thoroughfare of the town with shops and stalls lining both sides. The station is confusingly accessed through a large craft market but staff from the Hotel Inkaterra meet us with trollies for the luggage and brollies for the downpour and guide us through the maze into the hotel complex. Even with the brollies we are soaked by the time we get to the reception building after which we make another dash through the rain to our room. Actually it is not a room but a casa, as the hotel is built over a large area in the form of a traditional village. The interior, happily is entirely modern and the large shower is also very hot. Bliss.

We dine as a group in one of the two hotel restaurants; the "Inkaterra Café" is in a promontory between two rail lines, one which takes trains from Cusco into the town and the other, lower line takes trains returning that way. There is a complimentary pisco sour to start the meal and Joseph, already more than merry, has his regularly topped up along with beer. Towards the end of the meal one of his visits to the toilet becomes very extended and it transpires that he has fallen asleep in there. Not his finest hour as an aspiring professional guide....

Thursday, 18 April

Up at 04.30 for an early breakfast and an attempt to be on one of the earliest buses that carry visitors up 400 vertical metres via a monumental system of hairpins to Machu Pic'chu. Manolo has arranged for one of the site guides to meet us at reception who usefully explains the complicated bus ticketing system. Without the explanation it would be all too easy to find yourself without the all important return part of the ticket; and tickets are only available in the town, not at the site itself. It would be a long walk down. Actually, this was the most useful role the guide played – possibly apart from offering to take pictures of his charges as we went around the site. He didn't appear to know a great deal and mostly relayed conventional fanciful tales and - perhaps because our group was predominantly female – majored on the Bingham “Machu Pic'chu as Female University” theory of the site. Luckily for me (and unluckily for readers that have struggled this far and who, if they continue, are going to get condensed slabs of my evening researches) I had several books of varying scholarly quality, including Bingham's, on my iPad.

There must be some sort of telepathic communication between the drivers of the ascending and descending buses as they pull over on the single track roadway to let one another pass while the approaching vehicle is still invisible around a bend above or below. The early start is essential. Already the buses are packed and when the first trains roll in from the Cusco direction and the trekkers on the classic Inca Trail start arriving the site gets completely packed. To see it at its best, go early and leave at noon is the advice. Entry is complicated; both a valid ticket and a passport are necessary (you can stamp your passport with a “visa” for the world heritage site once through the gate). From the entry point a terraced path leads around a corner to a stunning view that is at once fabulous and very familiar, the classic view across the main spine of the site to the peak of Huayna Pic'chu – “young mountain”.

The site lies between this peak and the higher peak of Machu Pic'chu – “old mountain”. As mentioned rather gnomically earlier on, the apostrophes are important as in Quecha “pic'chu”(pik chew) means “mountain” (and also “bird”), whereas the usual form “pichu” (pee chew) means “penis”. No-one knows what the actual name of the site was when it was constructed; it has simply taken on the name of the larger of the two mountains between which it is suspended.

And no-one knows what it was for. There is evidence of occupation at the site well before the Inca period and some of the ceremonial areas which Bingham and others thought of as Inca may actually date from two much older prior civilizations. But the bulk of the site is definitely from the latter part of the Inca period and construction was probably ordered by

Pachahutec. It was still incomplete when it was abandoned after about twenty years of occupation and perhaps eighty years from the start of construction, possibly as a result of the Spanish conquest. The “lost city” theory, that it was a refuge from the Spanish, doesn’t stack up. The conquest was so quick that there was no opportunity to build “refuges”. And while some of the highland towns were centres of the last resistance to the Spanish, Machu Pic’chu was abandoned by then. Given that the pre-existing works on the site appear to have a ceremonial and religious function, was it principally a religious site? Even for the Incas it has an extravagantly large number of religious and ceremonial buildings compared to the quantity of housing and agricultural terraces. Bingham said that the majority of the mummified bodies and skeletons he cavalierly removed from the site to the Yale Peabody museum were, in his analysis, female. He posited that the site was a convent or a centre of higher education for women (or both). Subsequent analysis has shown that he was just not very good at judging gender and the bodies are now said to be about equally divided between the sexes. Was it a fortification, a show of power in a conquered area? It lies close to the furthest extremity of Inca penetration into the Amazon territory. The position between the two peaks is wonderfully prominent but also highly defensible. The mountains fall steeply away on three sides and the river curls around the base of the mountain walls. The main access from the Cusco direction is a made Inca road from that city by way of the Sacred Valley and Ollantaytambo (the last stretch of which is now the classic “Inca trail”) and this enters the site through the famous Sun gate which is clearly fortified and has provision for a substantial garrison force to man it. The only other way in or out is a narrow trail clinging vertiginously to the three thousand metre cliffs above the Vilcanota and Aobamba Rivers. It is a trail that can only be used in single file and there is a deliberately constructed gap in the middle of the cliffs whose plank bridge could be quickly withdrawn. Another proposition is that it was the equivalent of Camp David; a retreat from the Sapa Inca and his chief advisers away from the political hotbed of Cusco. If that was the case, how do we explain the relative absence of “Imperial style” (the classic Inca close meshed stonework) in the buildings; only the Sun Temple (which is probably pre-Inca anyway) is built in a way that resembles Imperial style.

Whatever its purpose, it is a miracle of engineering. The saddle between the two peaks was first leveled by building a longitudinal terrace. Walls were constructed either side of the spine of the saddle and then infilled with earth and rocks to create an initial platform for the main buildings of the complex. Further terraces extended the complex on both sides in a series of levels the length of the saddle and reaching into the various folds of the mountains’ sides. The lower terraces along the spine contain housing and agricultural spaces; the higher terraces contain a variety of ceremonial and civic spaces; the areas around the edge of the complex on all sides are filled with many-levelled agricultural terraces with steep (and rather terrifying!) access steps between them.



Our first approach was to turn sharp left and make the long climb up the steps to the guardhouse on the flank of Machu Pic'chu, an overwatch position along the main spine of the complex. The first ceremonial building we entered was the "humming chamber" a space whose acoustics seem to have been precisely calculated so that a sustained low pitched hum from me and our guide into each of two recesses in the end wall produce an amplified and oscillating reverberation which fills the chamber. It may have been a space for preparation before taking the steps up to the Intihuatana.

The steps lead to an open area at pretty much the highest point of the main part of the complex in the middle of which is a large exposure of the mountain bedrock. It has been carved so that a squared pillar of rock leans up from a surrounding flattened bed at a very precise angle. This is the Intihuatana, "the hitching post of the sun". The pillar leans at an angle calculated to the degree of latitude at which Machu Pic'chu sits, accordingly it casts a perfectly vertical shadow from the tropical sun. The shadow moves across the open area as the sun makes its seasonal movement and at each of the solstices, for three days around the

22nd of June and December, the shadow is stationary before beginning to move in the reverse direction. At a purely practical level this makes for clear identification of the solstice, the point between the wet and dry seasons and the key to Inca (and still Andean) agricultural practice. The flattened bed from which the pillar rises has also been precisely worked into an overall rectangular alignment. Each of its corners (and the corners of the Intihuatana) point to the geographic cardinal points of the compass and in each of the cardinal directions from the Intihuatana there is a mountain peak visible across the surrounding valleys. On each of those peaks is another Intihuatana. A final remarkable point about the Intihuatana is that the northern corner of the pillar has a mark worked into the upper edge which points to magnetic north.

It is likely that the Intihuatana and its neighbours are pre-Inca (from a culture which one writer calls Naupaq Rumi from the style of its stonework) and that its presence here was a reason for founding Machu Pic'chu around it. That would certainly fit with the Incas' penchant for inspired borrowing.

Following the rigidly enforced one way circuit (when the complex fills up towards the middle of the day, you appreciate the need for it) we dropped down to the central courtyard. One side of the plaza is dominated by a large outcrop of bedrock in the form of a long, tall but narrow slab surrounded by a precisely built low wall. At first sight, the slab looks purely natural but its profile may have been worked to enhance further its fortuitous mirroring of the shape of the mountain behind it across the Vilcanota.

The plaza gives access to the 2000 steps which climb up (and occasionally through) Huyana Pic'chu. At first sight this is simply a dramatic pinnacle rising above the north end of the complex. In fact the top of the peak has a series of houses and agricultural terraces and the mountain is also home to the Temple of the Moon. From the top of the mountain the panorama of Machu Pic'chu below shows that the overall site is built (by design or happy accident?) in the stylized shape of an enormous condor.

By another accident (or design?) the next building reached on the circuit from the plaza is the Temple of the Condor. Here a low outcrop of rock on the floor of the space has been worked to make the body and head of a condor with curved stones added to mark the white ring around the bird's neck. The natural rock walls at the back of the space rise up as the outspread wings of the bird, whose head faces east into the sunrise through an opening at the foot of the wall built opposite the "wings".

We climbed up from the Condor Temple to the Temple of the Sun which has a finely made circular stone wall surrounding a curiously carved slab of bedrock. The slab has a groove running longitudinally which faces a window on the east side of the wall. At the time of the solstices the sun rise strikes directly through this window and along the groove. Beneath the

temple is a natural cave, part of the rock obscuring the opening into which is carved into a stair shaped wall. The space beneath the temple was a mausoleum, one of the sources of the mummies which Bingham transferred to Yale. The stair pattern is definitely not Inca and , as with the Condor Temple and the Intihuantana, it seems likely that the Temple of the Sun was also pre-Inca and another reason for Pachahutec's choice of the site.

The last target for the visit was to walk up to the Sun Gate, the Intipunku, with a cache on the way and another supposedly at the gate itself. On the way up to the Gate you could see where further development of the complex was planned but had never been completed. And from the Gate itself another fine view back over the site to Huyana Pic'chu. We couldn't find the cache near the gate – indeed, from previous logs we expected it would be missing. But Sally had brought a replacement so we found that instead!

Although there was still a lot to see (and to wish to revisit) the site was now heaving with more visitors arriving every few minutes as the trains rolled in from Cusco and sweaty backpackers came in from the Sun Gate. Increasingly, the many stretches of steep and lengthy stairs were becoming horribly slow going as the fat and the unfit among the train travelers gasped, puffed and halted for frequent rests. Time to head back down to Aguas Callientes and lunch.

We lunched as a group before the majority of the party and Manolo headed for the station. Joseph was not with us – he was in disgrace with his boss (and probably had a raging hangover into the bargain). We had arranged to stay an extra night and have an additional morning in Machu Pic'chu as had Melissa. Fond farewells said, the three of us took a walk (with a cache en route) around Aguas Callientes. Apart from the hot springs for which it is named and a string of back-packer hostels there is not much to the town apart from the railway and the Hotel Inkaterra complex – which, we discovered, was bigger than the rest of the town put together. The railway is the town's lifeline in every way, it brings in the tourists and it also carries in everything the town needs to survive from bags of cement, canisters of gas, foodstuffs, bottled water – and Inka Kola. We watched huge quantities of stuff being off-loaded from an enormously long goods train and trollyed into the (very few) surrounding streets.

A walk through the Inkaterra grounds took a lot longer than the walk around the town. There was a lot to explore and humming birds to watch at feeding stations along the way. Indeed, we began to be concerned that it would be dark before we got back to inhabited part of the "hotel". But we made it and were in good time for dinner with Melissa in the second and rather grander of the two restaurants. It was here that we discovered that, as well as the very impressive SLR camera she carried on the trek and our visit to Machu Pic'chu, Melissa also

carried a small point and shoot digital camera that she kept for photographing her meals, course by course.

Friday, 19 April

Another 04.30 start. Today's plan was again to be early birds at Mach Pic'chu and to spend part of the morning climbing the eponymous mountain. Manolo had left us tickets for the site and detailed instructions about the return journey to Cusco along with his mobile number in case we ran into difficulties. We collected these along with the box lunches we had ordered the previous evening. They were huge – one would probably have served for all three of us.

Yesterday's arrival at the site had been in full sun. Today the valley and the climb up was shrouded in dense mist (all the more reason to be thankful for the bus drivers' telepathy). It was still thick as we went through the entry gates and along the terraced path and the site was under a blanket of white with Huyana Pic'chu soaring out of it. We sat for some time in the sun above the cloud, watching as it shredded and blew off, revealing the view bit by bit and occasionally teasing by covering parts again as more cloud blew in across the valley. And finally it was clear and the sun was very hot.

So we set off to begin the climb up Machu Pic'chu. Our itinerary clearly stated "This morning you have entry arranged to climb Mount Machu Picchu." This turned out to be wrong in two trivial ways and one important way. Fellow pedants will have noticed the absence of the apostrophe and the presence of the pleonastic "Mount". More important though was the discovery at the control point on the trail to the climb that the tickets Manolo had left us did not have the permit for the climb. If we wanted to do it we would have to return to Aguas Calientes and purchase new tickets and come back up. That wasn't a practical option – time wouldn't allow it and there was no guarantee that the limited number of mountain permits for the day wouldn't be exhausted by the time we got to the head of the queue. After a rather half-hearted and completely unsuccessful attempt to bribe the man at the control point we decided to make the best of it and go for the other option – a walk out to the Inca Bridge.

If the Intipunku was the formal front entrance, this narrow trail was the back door of Machu Pic'chu and possibly built as an escape route in the case of some disaster or other. It is an airy wee stroll, with the cliff wall on one side and a thousand metres of nothing between you and the Vilcanota river on the other. Before starting on the Inkipunku trail you have to sign in to a large register book (and sign back out on the return). The rubric makes clear that you

have also signed a large disclaimer of responsibility on behalf of the world heritage site authorities. It makes you think, as they say.

The trail follows a natural line of weakness more or less horizontally across the cliff face of the western mountainside. Parts of it are deliberately constructed with underpinning walls to make an otherwise discontinuous line whole. You wind around the line of the cliffs, gradually getting used to the exposure and finally reach a section, perhaps half a kilometre long which traverses a completely bare rock wall. In the middle of this section there is a deliberately constructed gap about 3 or 4 metres wide, with a drop of about 3 metres on each side to the underpinning wall. The gap is bridged by a sagging wooden plank. Happily for those of a nervous disposition there is a barrier before you reach the gap and the plank and notices sternly warn that further progress is forbidden. (The last person known to have tried the plank walk was a Belgian. “Was” is the operative word.) If the plank was withdrawn, anyone trying to progress along the trail would have to climb down into the gap and then climb up the other side. As there is space for only one person to make the crossing at a time, it is easy to imagine that a couple of Inca warriors armed with not much more than pointy sticks could have held up an army here.



Inca Bridge

Safely back at the site we ate surprisingly large amounts of our lunches and took several more memory cards worth of photographs. Then took an unguided tour of the main complex, visiting a lot of the non-ceremonial buildings and some of the civic buildings that we had missed on our original visit. One, the huge “Building of Three Portals” had one entrance with recesses in the uprights. If you put your hand inside you could grasp a stone cylinder that turned. It was probably a sophisticated hinge mechanism but it felt like something out of Tomb Raider. As no hidden door swung open we had reluctantly to face the fact that it was time to leave.

We cleaned up and headed for the station through the craft market. By now we had our bearings and needed neither guide nor ball of wool to get us through the maze. The hotel staff had already trollyed our luggage down, so we had simply to collect our bags and wait a few minutes for the train. It would be hard work to catch the wrong train here. The only access to the platform is through the waiting room and the door is shut until a train arrives. You can't get on to the platform without having your ticket checked to make sure you are heading for the correct train. Apart from the annoying behavior of a young American who wanted everyone to change seats so that he could both sit next to his wife and face forwards to take pictures, the journey was a positive joy. There was the scenery and then there was a complimentary food and drinks service, musicians, dancers and even a fashion show (all the things you can make from alpaca wool). At this early stage of the dry season the rail line to Cusco is still not cleared of wet season rock and mud slides beyond Ollantaytambo at the far end of the Sacred Valley. So we detrained there and were met by our driver for the remainder of the journey to Cusco and the Casa Andina whence we had set off a week ago. The bag we had left behind at the start of the trek was already in the room for us. Our "room" this time turned out to be an enormous suite, with a sitting room intervening between the huge bedroom and the cavernous bathroom. As each was on a slightly different level, I was slightly worried that a nocturnal toilet trip might prove altogether too challenging.

A quick shower and change and we met up again with Melissa to revisit Baco for dinner. After which we repacked with the belongings we had left in the care of the hotel and were rapidly deeply unconscious.

Saturday, 20 April

Today was the day for the train journey from Cusco across the Altiplano to Puno on the shore of Lake Titicaca. "A dreamed of train journey" said our itinerary. One of our dreams had been excited by a line in a Fodor's guide saying that thefts of luggage from trains was a problem in Peru. So we had prepared for the day long journey by bringing cable locks with us to fasten our bags to the luggage racks and thwart the would-be thieves. Dream on! The Andean Explorer was not exactly the kind of train that we had planned for...

Back in the caring arms of Lima Tours, it was Miguel who met us at the hotel after breakfast with another shiny minibus to take us to the station (which was well within easy walking distance). Looking his usual slightly worried self, Miguel ceremoniously hands us our tickets for the trip when we arrive at the dedicated waiting room, where there are musicians and coffee urns, bringing us coffee he then takes the tickets back from us and saying "I am going to speak to a person", heads off to book us in. He returns with a porter who takes our bags; there is a special locked wagon for the luggage so our cable locks are going to be very redundant.

By now it is beginning to dawn on us that the Andean Explorer is not your run of the mill train. The fact that it is operated by the Orient Express company is a bit of a clue. As is the large contingent of smartly uniformed staff. When we make our way through to the platform (Miguel almost beside himself that he cannot personally accompany us to our seats) it is confirmed, a decorative stairway to each door of the gleamingly restored Pullman coaches with someone to show you to your armchair seat by a table topped with starched linen and trademark polished brass lamp. It looks just like the Pullman coach I had with my Hornby train set. The only down side is the presence of a group of very aged French travelers, accompanied by a French guide who very loudly (given the average age of his audience probably he has to speak loudly but it doesn't make it any less annoying) explains, in the words of Lesley Stephen, "that one and two are three, lakes damp, grass green and mountains steep". But he pipes down as we pull out of Cusco and we can enjoy the rest of the trip *sans* commentary.

There are two coaches behind the engine and luggage van and a classic walnut, mahogany and brass observation car at the rear, with a bar and seating area and an open platform at the tail end. Between service of morning coffee, three course lunch with wine, pisco sours in the observation car and afternoon tea back at our table it is an extremely agreeable way to travel. Further enhanced by the musicians and dancers and the alpaca wool fashion show which seem to be *de rigueur* on Peruvian trains. The alpaca goods include a very elegant lace wrap that Sally wisely can't resist.



Andean Explorer

The real star of the show is of course the altiplano itself. It is a long and almost imperceptible climb from Cusco to the highest point at 4319 metres. Out of Cusco you enter a sequence of

terrains. First, farm land where all the work is by hand, small fields with conical stooks of grain hand-gathered, ground being prepared using mattocks. Second, it is guinea pig country with large boards proclaiming the Association of Cuy Producers. Then it is flat rough grazing with herds of llama and alpaca being herded by men on horse back and then cattle country and finally wild land with thin rough reedy grass and the snow line of the Andes behind. Standing on the platform at the rear of the train leaning on the brass rail you can watch the tracks stretching out straight as a die behind you until they vanish on the horizon.



As we approach the lake, the train goes through Juliacca and to get to the station we pass through kilometres of stalls built against the tracks. There seems to be a rigid sequence of types of goods from the industrial to the domestic. It starts with piles of recycled metal, girders, metal sheets, corrugated iron, steel girders, vehicle parts, vehicle accessories, heavy tools, chains, ropes – including cables that would grace a tanker, then office and stationery supplies, home furnishings, fabrics and finally meat, grains, fruit and vegetables. On the way out the other side of the station we pass a large sign announcing “2013: International Year of Quinoa”. Skirting the edge of the lake towards Puno, night is falling and there are shapes of reed boats on the shore. At the station our luggage is restored to us (without the benefit of cable locks) and we meet Aydee our next guide who leads us to the inevitable shiny minibus for two and we drive the short distance through downtown (and rather run down) Puno to a causeway that leads onto the small island of St Esteve most of which is occupied by the Hotel Libertador. It is modern and shiny with huge public areas but disappointingly small rooms and – unlike anywhere else we have been in Peru – very ordinary and very expensive food.

Sunday, 21 April

Not a good night for Sally and she is feeling very rough as rosy fingered dawn does its Homeric stuff. It is another tummy upset and pretty Homeric in its own right it seems. I seem to have escaped whatever bug it was that laid her low and breakfast alone (the food is no better than it was at dinner). By the time I get back to the room, she has bravely got up and dressed and is determined not to miss out on the day on the lake.

Aydee is – sensibly enough – concerned about her client’s condition when we meet in the lobby but Sally convinces her that it will be alright and we set off for the port. Moored alongside are two late nineteenth century steamers, Clyde-built then disassembled and carried to the lake in pieces to be rebuilt and launched anew. They have been acquired from genteel decay by the Orient Express company and are being reconditioned to travel the lake in style again.

We board one of the lake cruisers along with about twenty other people. Although there is a guide on the boat who addresses the assembled company, each couple or small group also has their own guide – as do we - who stands beside them and supplements the overall commentary. After leaving the harbour we travel to the floating islands. Built along the fringes of the offshore reed beds at the mouth of the inner Puno bay, the islands are home to the ancestors of people who left the lake shore to live among the reeds to get away from the unwanted attentions of other peoples – including the Inca who came later to Titicaca than to other parts of their empire. The distinctive identity of the floating island people is shown by the fact that they speak Aymari and were not absorbed in the Incas Quechua linguistic

hegemony. They wear a recognisable version of traditional Andean dress, the women in many layered dresses and short jackets with a “bowler” style hat with upturned brim, the men in colourful waistcoats and trousers that are cuffed at the ankle.

There existence is almost wholly reed based. The islands are constructed by digging out sections of the reed root mat from the lake bed; these individual sections freed from the bed are buoyant and float a little below the surface. Several sections are tied together and tethered in place. Cut reed stems are then tied in large bundles and piled on top, followed by more and more reed bundles to make a platform. Finally loose reeds are piled on top of that to form a floor which is periodically renewed – every two weeks or so - as it gets worn and soiled. The whole structure is around three metres deep and the substantial archipelago of islands floats at moorings in thirteen metres of water. “Substantial archipelago” means what it says; the islands vary in size from one family affairs to structures big enough to house the local elementary school and health clinic. Most islands accommodate six to eight families, who elect one of the men to be their island’s Presidente. If families on the island fall out, the island can be divided with the warring factions each given their portion.

The single room buildings, each of which accommodates a full family, are made from bunched reeds and roofed with still more reeds. They are light enough to be lifted up to allow a new layer of reed flooring to be placed underneath during the fortnightly refresh. The islanders travel in reed boats. They even eat the lower portion of the reed stems which are soft and white and apparently taste good when boiled. About the only thing that is not reed-built is the slab of flat stone on which each family’s clay cooking stove is placed (fuelled with dried reeds, naturally). Fire is an obvious hazard but at least there is a ready supply of water should a fire take hold. About the only concessions to no-reed based technology were the solar panels on the roofs that powered a light bulb, small tv and radio.

Some crops and flowers are grown in raised beds (made of reeds) and the small evil looking lake fish form a staple part of the diet – the proportion of flesh to bone must make each fish little more than a mouthful. For everything they cannot provide for themselves, there is a floating shop that travels from island to island.

Most of the islanders’ income comes from the tourists they encourage to visit and they receive a levy from the lake tour companies for each visiting boat. To ensure a reasonably equitable distribution of the income, there is a rota system for the visits. Some visitors have complained that the whole experience is a bit “touristy”. It could hardly be otherwise but the families we talked to seemed genuinely glad to have our visit and were very welcoming. Their main and understandable concern was that the community was aging and shrinking as young people left for Puno to go to High School and University and were reluctant to return to live on the islands.



Despite the welcome, Sally was flagging and spent quite a bit of the visit sitting on a (reed) bench. She was nevertheless able to board our next mode of transport, a “wedding boat”. This was two reed boats tied into a sort of catamaran arrangement with a two deck wooden superstructure powered by two ladies with short paddles one sitting at the prow of each reed boat. The wedding boat took us rather erratically (because some of the visitors were taking a shot at the paddles) across the channel to an island which housed the local café and (Sally was pleased to hear) banos. Mine host on hearing that her tummy was out of sorts prepared a medicinal brew of muna, ruda (rue) and a large helping of the ubiquitous coca. This she carried and occasionally topped up with fresh hot water. Not a miracle cure but it seemed to help.

Titicaca is a huge lake. This evident fact was born in by the hour and a quarter run at high speed which took us only a little way down the north end of the lake, hardly out of the larger Puno bay. Our destination was Taquile an island with another distinct culture. If the floating islands had a reed-based culture, Taquile’s culture has a strong knitted and woven component; and while the spoken language is Quechua, the other language on the island is the language of hats.

Titicaca is not only a huge lake, it is supposed, in outline, to resemble a puma catching a guinea pig. That’s what its name means. How anyone could get such a perspective on the shape of the lake without being in near Earth orbit is entirely beyond me. I can see the

fanciful resemblance when looking at a map of most of the south American continent. From any high point in or around the lake, it is clearly impossible. But if they could do the kind of detailed astronomy that was done many centuries – maybe millennia - before the Inca, who is to say that the indigenous people could not map an area this large?

Unlike the floating islands, Taquile is big and fertile enough to provide a varied agricultural environment to supplement fishing with cultivated animals and crops. But it, too, relies on tourists as an income source. The six districts of the island each elect a council annually with a mayor elected in each district for four years. Collectively, the mayors have agreed a way of sharing out tourist income: visitors land in small groups from the tourist boats at a number of points around the island and make their separate ways across the island to disembarkation quays. Each visitor pays a small “visa fee” on landing and all the restaurants (private houses run their own) serve an identical menu – quinoa soup, trout or omelette with rice or chips and muna and coca tea – at a common price. We disembarked on the north side of the island with Aydee, and Sally was happy, or at least, relieved, to find that there were banos on the quayside (with a small boy to take the one sole fee for the use thereof). We then walked, at a gentle pace, across the island to our departure point on the west coast, while others came the same route but in reverse.

Taquile culture involves a division of gender roles. Men knit; women weave. Neither is a simple process. The male knitting involves the creation of the Taquile hats – a complex five needle business which the men do not only while sitting at their ease but also while on the move. Deploying five needles while trotting up and down the steep slopes of the island is definitely non-trivial knitting. Meanwhile the women are not only weaving household textiles but the married or to be married among them are working on the complex and colourful belts worn by their men-folk and the “back belts” that they wear underneath the decorative belts; complicated mini-corsets woven from months worth of collections of both partners’ hair.

The language of hats is complex. Women don’t speak it: they wear shawls and do not expect to be spoken to in any language. My reflexively polite “bon dia” to a young lady we passed early in our transit produced a sufficiently accurate impression of a startled fawn to convince me to be more careful for the rest of the visit. Hats are largely man talk. The substantial knitted cones rise and topple slightly, topped with chubby pom-poms. A white hat signifies a young unmarried man in search of a wife (had Jane Austen lived on Taquile we might be reading “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a young man in a white hat...”). Once married, the hat is red. In either married or unmarried state, the pom-pom is eloquent: worn forwards or to one side it indicates that the wearer is prepared to engage in general banter or social intercourse; flipped to the back it says “on business – do not disturb”. Small children wear gendered versions of the male hat (boys white, girls brown) until puberty when boys

continue with the hat while girls assume the shawl. The hat and belts (and pouches as below) are worn over black breeches, a white shirt and black waistcoat. Women are more indistinctly dressed; the peahens of Taquile.



Taquile hats

Over the woven hair and decorative belt, men wear a highly decorative pouch on their left hip. This contains coca leaves and the traditional form of greeting is for each to search his pouch for the least blemished leaf and to offer it to his interlocutor; a version of polite handshaking, I guess. After a stop in the civic square of northern Taquile district, we drop down to a restaurant offering the standard menu, and a hot water top up for the non-eating member of the party. After which it is all downhill to our departure point at a quayside where the local mayor is awaiting a visit to Puno. His hat is inscrutable.

Once aboard the boat, Sally reclines in the stern, looking serene. She resembles Shakespeare's version of Cleopatra, "the barge she sat in.." etc. Those few of us who know the truth of her heroic struggle through the day, recognise that she is in fact fast asleep and Lethe is doing her work of reconstitution. And it continues: returned by Aydee and the

minibus to Hotel Libertador, Sally takes to her bed and sleeps through to the following morning. I meantime go for the circular walk around the island of St Esteve.



Well worth it, it is. The island is a bird sanctuary and there are herons, ducks, grebes, and then lots of birds I can't pigeon-hole (sorry!), big black waders with long curved red bills and black and white hawks with red ruffs prominent among them. There are viacoccia, wild guinea pigs and alpaca. Sadly, I am still on my own for a mediocre dinner – at least the pisco sour beforehand wasn't all bad.

Monday, 22 April

Up and out at 07.00 to make the most of our last day. We were to end up at the airport at Juliacca and fly on to Lima and then via Amsterdam home. But first stop was the funerary towers of Silustani. For generations, the local custom was to inter the ashes and later the mummies of important local folk in increasingly tall towers, built like chimneys on the island of Silustani in a small lake north of Puno. Archaeologically the first burials on the site were pit burials, then pit burials with stone domes over the top. Eventually this evolved into rubble built "towers" with mummies inside. When the Inca took control of the area, they did their usual routine of borrowing the local customs and adding the best of their borrowings from other cultures. And so it was that the stonework of the towers of Silustani became ever more sophisticated (and the apertures ever lower and more narrow) with some towers having banded black and white granite and others with inverse profiles so they appear a little like mushrooms. The exposed nature of the site and the presence of metal in still unexcavated grave goods have meant that there is a serious risk from lightning strikes, so many of the standing towers have been equipped with lighting conductors.



Silustani

And so on to Juliacca, past fields that still use the Inca waru-warú irrigation system, with channels conducting water round beds raised above the rainy season water level. Through the maze of the town thronged with moto-tricycle taxis to the smallest international airport with possibly the longest name: Manco Capac Inca International Airport, Juliacca, which has all of two flights leaving this morning. We have time to spare after check-in and it is rapidly exhausted inside the international complex, even after a leisurely coffee. So we take a turn outside and admire the gilded statue of Manco Capac with his magic staff held at his hip. Until we realise that the sculptor has not really paid proper attention to either the position or angle of the magic staff and the whole image begins to look really rather embarrassing.

From Juliacca to Lima where we are met by a Lima Tours trainee who is hopelessly out of his depth. Thankfully we can soon put him and us out his misery and after passing through the KLM check-in (a small masterpiece of “this is for the convenience of the staff and the misery of customers” made tolerable by the fact that its principal target is a group of Germans who have done the traditional national thing of putting down towels, or at least a pile of suitcases, in front of the desk they thought was going to open only to be moved three times ending up at the back of the finally revealed real queue location) we swan off to the VIP lounge to be fed and watered (and pisco soured) before our flight back to Schiphol and thence Edinburgh. Where no luggage appears... but that is another story....



Hummingbird Aguas Calientes



Can you see the snake?