

**A Walk Through the Andes –Trailing the Ancient Incas**  
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**Cusco, Peru** – We have just returned to Cusco after four days of exploring the Sacred Valley of the Incas. We rafted down the Urubamba River, immersed ourselves in markets at Chincheros and Pisac and clamored over ruins and terraces at Ollyantatambo and Pisac. We have been cold, wet, hot, thirsty, elated, awed and confused.

Some of us have been sick from the altitude (11,500 feet), and some have been scared to death walking on a narrow ledge 1,000 feet above roaring rivers. We've been mystified by the vertical cities and fortifications that the Incas built hundreds of years ago. We've marveled at the 300 ton blocks they carried over 20 miles and carefully laid out in asymmetrical terraces, perfectly fitting walls, walks and dwellings.

During our first week in Peru, we have been constantly stimulated by the unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells of a country filled with surprises and a culture yet to be understood or adequately described. We have learned to expect the unexpected, and that there isn't necessarily a reason for everything.

Now we are back in our room at the cozy El Dorado Hotel. My two companions and I are surrounded by the spoils of the Andean markets and the streets of Cusco—hand-woven ponchos, belts, blankets, ancient vests, pots, dolls, fanciful jewelry and a variety of hats from different Indian villages.

All these treasures will be packed up and left in the hotel for a week while we travel by horseback along the Royal Road of the Inca through the Andes to Mach Picchu. Into canvas saddle bags will go down parkas, rainwear, long underwear, alpaca sweaters, first aid supplies, mosquito lotion, toilet paper, sunglasses and a newly acquired floppy felt hat that all the peasants wear. It is reversible, re-shapeable, foldable and waterproof. Each of us bought one and decorated it with colorful bands. Now we have our own tribal hat.

It is a crisp, cool 7 a.m. when we climb aboard the open-air truck that will take us to our trailhead. Bill Roberson, the owner of Inca Floats, is perched atop a helter-skelter pile of saddle bags, crates of cooking gear, food, tents, saddles, blankets, a collapsible dinner table and two guitars. His is the only outfit I know of that offers a seven-day trek/ride over 60 miles of Inca trail ending at Machu Picchu.

An exhilarating breeze carries the sharp odor of Scotch Broom, burning cedar and kerosene, as we speed along the Limatamba Valley. People are already out feeding pigs, chasing chickens, milking cows and carrying their produce down the road to the market town of Izuchaca, where we stop to refuel.

Once more we are flying across the open country. A patchwork of brown and yellow crops spreads over the undulating terrain in every direction. Far away, sunbeams play on clouds that slowly disperse, sift apart and suddenly reveal a majestic white mountain sitting astride the road. It's Alsongay, 19,000 feet high. On its right flank, an even greater massif emerges from a grey disguise. It is our first glimpse of Salcantay (the wild one, in Quechua), and in two more days we will humbly sit at its base.

For about an hour we rattle along a dirt road through hill country whose valleys are laden with citrus, avocados, walnut trees and tomatoes. We stop for lunch at a lonely ruin called "Tara Huasi" (old house). A long wall of lichen-covered stones stretches before us, their burnished bronze hues glowing in the midday sun. These stones are about

the size of watermelons, haphazard in shape and pattern. Nevertheless, they fit perfectly together.

After this pleasant break, our truck carries us upward over a dirt road that follows the contours of the mountain until we reach the village of Mollepata. Here, we load firewood in the truck and pick up an extra driver who will pilot us through the labyrinth of stone walls that mark the boundaries of fields and farm lands. Our horses, pack animals and *arrieros* (wranglers) will all come from this small village.

With a new driver at the wheel, we lurch and sway under low branches. The road becomes a cow-path and finally ends at our trailhead.

The next morning we are introduced to our horses by their owners. These valiant men will walk the entire trip in open-toed sandals. They will help us get on and off (sometimes), tighten cinches, and saddle and unsaddle the stock. They will follow us everywhere with watchful eyes, for these animals are their livelihood.

Antonín, an older *arriero*, leads our procession through a forest of Indian paintbrush and scotch broom. The trail winds back and forth over grassy turf, eventually becomes more rocky, steeper and finally so steep that we are signaled to get off and lead our horses around the edge of a cliff 3,000 feet above a river.

After a quick lunch in a rock strewn meadow at 12,000 feet, we don parkas and rain ponchos before continuing up the trail in a cold drizzle. Mt Soray looms up and broods above us on the horizon. Everyone fumbles for cameras, trying to capture its grey glacial splendor without dropping reins, gloves or getting tangled in a billowing poncho.

By late afternoon, we are riding solemnly in a single file across an open field. The only sound is the sharp click of horses' hooves on cold stones. One of our group has had a painful fall from her horse, and we are all subdued by a sudden awareness of our vulnerability in this wild and remote country. Tonight we will sleep at 14,000 feet while rain falls softly on our tents.

Early the next morning, I crawl out of the tent and hike up to an open field where the horses are grazing. Two great mountains – each about 20,000 feet—tower above me, patiently waiting to be illuminated by the first rays of morning light. As I sit on a rock gazing at their solitary splendor, the sun hits the uppermost spires of Humantay. In minutes they are sparkling in a pale sky, like a crown atop a sleeping giant. Now the distant snowfields of Salcantay shimmer above the grey glacier. I want to photograph everything, but how can I possibly capture the shades of light, the enormity of the mountains, the solitude of the meadow?

At last the sun is high in a blue sky; our belongings are loaded on frisky horses, and we are ready to “hit the Inca Trail.” Slowly, beneath the awesome white brilliance of Salcantay, we make our way across the meadow and up into steep, rocky terrain. The horses slip, stumble and pick their way up the slick granite.

By noon we have reached a small plateau flanked by a high lateral terrain that runs straight to the bottom of the mountain. Boulders, the size of small houses, are scattered about and give welcome protection from a cold wind. The temperature varies madly as clouds steal the warmth from the sun and send us digging in our packs for vests and parkas. After a quick snow flurry, the sun returns. It's hot again, so we take everything off and put it back in the pack.

Lunch is followed by a short climb to the top of Inachilaska Pass. We are at 16,000 feet. For a moment the entire white massif of Salcantay fills the limitless sky. Then it

vanishes behind swirling clouds that drift over the sharp crags, deep crevasses and shimmering snowfields. We dismount and clamor over the giant boulders this mighty mountain has deposited at its base for us to sit on. With a low rumble and a thunderous crash, a glacier breaks off and tumbles in a shower of sparkling snow and ice into the cold blue chasm below.

With the knowledge that I have never seen anything so big, so powerful or so beautiful, I return satisfied to my horse, and we begin the arduous descent into the upper Amazon basin.

This steep rocky trail was once the pride of Inca road builders, and I can see the remnants of ancient interlocking blocks and carefully laid steps that time and frequent travelers have reduced to a crumbling hazard and a nuisance. This road was (and still is) part of a magnificent highway system that criss-crossed Peru for thousands of miles. Pizarro called it, "A thing worthy of being seen," and he said, "Such beautiful roads could not, in truth, be found anywhere in Christendom."

We arrive at dusk, having led our horses over much of the rough terrain. Salcantay is high above us, her bare flanks bathed in the rose amber rays of sunset.

We eat dinner close to the fire. In the flickering shadows that play upon the barren slope beyond, six arrieros sit hunched like mushrooms under their brown ponchos. Dark shapeless hats shade their faces, and only the black pupils in their eyes move as they watch us. When Bill invites them to share our fire, and offers them cigarettes, they move silently forward and extend brown leathery hands over the flames.

At last, our final descent leads us down a steep trail into a narrow canyon where we find a campsite on a promontory at the confluence of two raging rivers. As soon as our tents are up, we are in the Hot Springs. What a luxury—standing in the mud of the Inca trail in our underwear with 107-degree water washing over dirty hair and tire limbs.

The next day is a layover, and some of us decide to hike to a small settlement we passed through the day before. In 20 minutes we are out of the canyon and find ourselves on a grassy plain that lies uninterrupted for a mile, and then is swallowed up by the mountainous jungle. A lonely white peak sits above all else in the blue Andean sky.

The following morning we are up before the sun touches our dewy camp. Damp clothes are stuffed in packs. Tents are struck; burros are blindfolded and loaded, and soon Antonin is leading us down a narrow trail into the jungle.

Suddenly we are motioned to halt. A pack animal has gone over the edge. I can barely see through the thick foliage down the cliff to the river. Evidently one animal tried to pass another on the narrow trail, and his protruding pack crowded the unfortunate one over the edge. Soon the orange boxes appear in the underbrush, and the sandal-footed arrieros push them over the top and onto the trail. They return for their wounded animal, and after much thrashing about with ropes and machetes, he too, is delivered to the trail with only cuts and bruises.

We arrive at our campsite with mixed emotions. It has been an eventful day, and most of us are looking forward to our last day on the trail. We are to catch the 12 o'clock train to Machu Picchu, where we will enjoy not only the wonders of that illustrious site, but also be served food in a restaurant, sit in chairs, sleep in beds and take long showers.