

## Peru - Land of the Incas

By Paula G. Cullison



Discover Peru

Like many others, I too have had the desire to visit Peru and experience Machu Picchu.

You could say it was on my 'Bucket List', but I really don't have one.

As a solo traveler who relies on the internet to make my own arrangements and reservations, I was eager for another travel challenge. After two months of reading, searching and speaking with others who had recently been to Peru, I planned my trip around dates using a UNITED Airlines frequent flyer ticket. Fortunately, I was also able to secure a 17 day window for a trip that required only 40,000 miles R/T with only one change of planes (in Houston), a departure date at the end of August, and return date in mid-September 2011.

As the trip progressed, I would have the satisfaction of knowing that my knowledge of Spanish and Italian enabled me to manage pretty well. Using a pocket Spanish dictionary was helpful too. During my planning, I made contact with Karen and Kathy directors of AIESEC, an international exchange program that had accepted me for a work traineeship assignment to Zurich, Switzerland many years ago. I could then meet with some of the students currently working in Peru on AIESEC traineeships.

I also contacted and met with India, the Thunderbird School of Global Management Coordinator (here in AZ), regarding their Thunderbird for Good SWEP entrepreneurial women's project in Lima. She provided me with an introduction, so I could meet with Ximena, the program director of Mujeres Emprendadoras while I was in Lima.

Since the parents of our son's Peruvian neighbors in the US live in Lima. I planned to meet with Angela and Juan Manuel, as well. So the trip was taking on a whole new dimension. It was becoming less about Machu Picchu and more about the people whom I would meet on my journey.

Checking luggage is not on my list. As a seasoned traveler, I know that packing less requires planning, but it can be done. I was able to put everything into my backpack with wheels and an over the shoulder flight bag.

Arriving in the Lima airport is an experience. Hundreds come to meet the planes. Our flight arrived at 10:30pm. I was to have been met by the hotel's representative. Search as I might, my name did not appear on any of the signs. What a dilemma for a woman traveling alone! I was approached by a man wearing a badge who offered to help me. He phoned the hotel and located my driver who had my name spelled incorrectly on a small piece of paper. Upon entering his unmarked car, the driver asked me to put my handbag on the floor least someone break the window and steal it. OMG!! What was in for! I gave it all up to the Universe and rationalized that I had a good life and hoped that it wasn't over ... yet.

The Miramar Hotel, which I found through hotels.com, was centrally located in the Miraflores section of Lima. I spent the first four nights and the last night of my trip there. The room was comfortable, the breakfast buffet was plentiful, the lobby was attractive, the internet use was free, and the staff was accommodating. Although the rate was very reasonable, I would have been given an additional discount had I contacted them directly. I think this is pretty common.

During these first few nights I would have some very special experiences. One night my friend's mother Angela took me to dinner in the restaurant of the luxurious Los Delfines Hotel (in the San Isidro section). The buffet dinner offerings were absolutely delicious culinary delights, as was the Pisco Sour, a national drink. It was such a pleasure to have seen Angela again after our chance meeting Virginia. I had hoped to see her at the end of my trip, so that I would have had time to polish my Spanish speaking ability; but no matter, I muddled through.

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Another night was dinner with Justin, the AIESEC student from University of Michigan. The front desk suggested Las Brujas de Cachiche restaurant, an upscale and favorite of the locals located within walking distance of the hotel. I must note that the Cerviche was outstanding. Meeting with Justin was a pleasure. He is a very adaptable young man who seems at home in Lima. Proficient in Spanish, he has mastered the complex public bus system. The traineeship in Lima has been a great learning experience for him. Knowing that he is self-reliant and open to new experiences will enable him to succeed no matter where he goes next, especially since we live in a global society. For him as for other students, this is the best part of an AIESEC traineeship. Justin offered to make contact with the AIESEC Chapter in Cuzco, so I could meet with another student. I appreciated his willingness to help me.



Parque del Amor - Lima

Lima is the most populated city in Peru with 10 million people – home to one-third of the country's population of 30 million. Although Spanish is the official language, many still speak Quechua and Aymara along with a few other indigenous languages. I was surprised to learn that few of the younger generation were familiar with Yma Sumac, the songbird of the Incas. Before my trip, I listened to a CD of her remarkable voice.

Lima is busy with activity. It was difficult to breathe at times, as the constant flow of city buses (always at or near capacity) emits a great amount of exhaust diesel fuel. With a struggling economy, environmental concerns don't get priority. The sky tended to be overcast because of this.

Putting that aside, Lima is a lively city dotted with small well-maintained city parks and a beautiful walkway along the beach front area. I found that the Malecon de La Molina along the Costa Verde is the best walk in the city. There you can enjoy Parque del Amor with its huge statue of a couple embracing and its colorful mosaic benches reminiscent of Antonio Gaudi's Parque Guell in Barcelona. Further along, one can see a green plant version of the Nasca Lines with fascinating animal and bird designs.

Fairly central to the city is Parque Kennedy which I found to be a green and flower laden oasis in the midst of this congested city. Here locals sit and relax, have their shoes shined, watch children at play, and a few feed the many cats. Arts & Craft fairs are held frequently. Apparently, it was named in honor of the US President who never visited the city. There is however a small bronze bust dedicated to him.

I visited to the Museo Arqueologico Rafael Larco Herrera which houses the world's largest private collection of Pre-Colombian art; it is a must. Iglesia de San Francisco Monastery and its catacombs dating back to the 17th Century, was another highlight of my visit. I was fascinated by the underground tunnels which house the bones of 75,000.

The archeological site of Pachacamac, which dates back to the first century, is a maze of plazas, palaces, pyramids and centers of worship. A stronghold of the Huari people who worshipped Pachacamac, the creator of the world, it was captured by the Incas in the 15th century and later plundered by the Spanish in the mid 1500's. I took one of the organized tours from Lima which also included a visit to Barranco, a delightful Bohemian area filled with cafes. There we walked across the Puente de los Suspiros where we saw the statue to Chabuca Granda, a famous singer and composer.

Next to the hotel was Scotia Bank where I withdrew money (Nuevo Soles). The service was courteous and fast. I always prefer to use local currency and not my credit card.

One afternoon, I walked along Avenida Jose Pardo to the Star Peru office to reconfirm my flight from Lima to Cusco. The representative was very helpful and found that when I purchased the ticket online (in Spanish) I had reversed my name: first/family. So I was incorrectly entered into

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Transportation to the airport was arranged by the hotel; this is the safest option at a reasonable price.

At the airport in Cusco, I was met by Fernando, a representative from the Terra Andina Hotel where I stayed for four nights before Machu Picchu and one night upon my return. I selected this hotel because several years ago I met the hotel director who was attending a travel conference here in Phoenix. I kept her business card ... just in case. The hotel had a lovely enclosed courtyard where breakfast and other meals were served. The staff was very attentive. They asked Fernando to wait in line for me to get the entrance passes for Machu Picchu. What a nice surprise! Mate Coca tea was always available in the Lobby. I drank plenty of tea and also took my altitude pills (diomox), since we were now at an elevation of 10,800 feet. No sense taking a chance!

During my stay in Cusco, I visited the local market and took in the sights. The trolley ride from the Plaza de Armas passed the ruins of Sacsayhuaman to Q'enko where the white statue of Christ oversees the city. This city highpoint gave us a great view of the city below. Housed in the former Admirals Palace, the Museo INKA is filled with objects and information. It was most interesting, for me especially since I met and spoke with the granddaughter of a contemporary weaver whose work was on display. In the courtyard, I saw two Inca women (in their traditional dress) weaving textiles. In Cusco, one has a better chance of seeing people (especially women) wearing their traditional clothing, especially at the local markets.

The Plaza de Armas park in front of the Cathedral had plenty of benches for relaxing and people watching. And that I did! It was certainly the place to meet and greet. I also discovered that the jewelry shops around the perimeter had ATM machines which were never out of currency and the fee was nominal. To be on the safe side, I always use my ATM card when the bank is open (and never on Sunday), just in case the card gets stuck in the machine.

At the hotel, I met people from all over the world coming and going to Machu Picchu. I also met Robert and Daniel, two American businessmen, who were building a hotel (Condor Inca Hotel) across the street. Just to give you an idea of how hospitable and accommodating the Peruvians are, the Terra Andina had given them access to the internet (which was free to all guests). Robert married a Peruvian and left New Jersey to settle in Cusco.

During my stay in Cusco, I needed to do the laundry. Dotted around the city are entrepreneurs with one washer and one dryer who only do laundry. The modest fee is calculated by the kilo. Near the hotel there was such a business. On my way there, I asked a local if they did a good job. With assurance, I walked in. Much to my amazement, a young girl about 9 or 10 years of age took my order. When I asked if her parent was in the back, she said that she was alone. When I returned 5 hours later to pick up my laundry, her mother was there. I asked why her daughter was not in school. Her reply was that she needed her 'oldest' daughter to work, as she also had a five year old and a three month old; both of whom were then at the hovel of a store. I mentioned to her that education was so very important if she wanted her children to do well. I paid and thanked her.

I later learned that although Peru has a stated literacy rate of 70%, it only means that the population reads at the fourth grade level.





La Catedral - Plaza de Armas - Cusco

On to Machu Picchu: I purchased the Vista Dome train tickets online through go2peru.com, as there was a major problem with the Peruvian train internet site. The train departure time was 7am and the hotel arranged for a driver to take me to the train station which is about 20 minutes on the outskirts of Cusco.

The train ride was awesome; the scenery was idyllic. The views of the Andes and the green land below were such a stark contrast to the cities. The service on the train was great. I sat in a four seated section with an Ecuadorian couple and a Polish woman who was a speech therapist. The three hour trip was very relaxing and the day was perfect.

Arriving in Aguas Calientes, the town outside of Machu Picchu, I noticed that the train station was adjacent to the arts and crafts market place. This is very clever! There are no vehicles here except for the coach buses which transport the tourists to the entrance of Machu Picchu. All luggage is transported via hand carts. The town is very hilly, so everyone seems to be in great shape. The hotel which I found on the internet was about a ten minute walk away. The new Green Nature Hotel, where I stayed for three nights, was owned by a young couple. The reasonable rate also included breakfast buffet and free internet access. I liked this town very much. It was apparent that everyone knew everyone; the children were well behaved and respectful and the inhabitants took pride in their town.

Steps away from the Green Nature Hotel is a highly rated and very expensive Inkaterra eco-lodge. One day, I took a walk around the property which hosts a tropical garden in the cloud forrest with plenty of plants and birds. It was beautiful to be sure; however, I was pleased to have saved the money. I found my stay through hotels.com

My strategy was to visit Machu Picchu two days in a row (Sept7 and Sept8) from Noon until 5pm. This would allow me to enjoy a leisurely visit ... after morning coffee and breakfast. As noted, Fernando secured my admission tickets when I was in Cusco. You cannot buy admission tickets at the site. I also saw the ridiculously expensive lodge at the entrance. What a rip-off!

I had great weather on the trip and the days at Machu Picchu were no exception. The air-conditioned coach buses from Aguas Calientes to Machu Picchu leave often. The fare for the 15 minute ride is a nominal amount. No worries here.



Machu Picchu - Panorama

Arriving at 11:30am enabled me to grab a sandwich and coffee, and talk with the other visitors, before I enjoyed my first leisurely day hiking about the ruins. As you can imagine, I took plenty of photos of the site and some of the other tourists.

One of the NEW Seven Wonders of the World as designated in 2007, Machu Picchu (Old Rock in Quechua) is a magical place. It is a true Pre-Colombian 15th century marvel. I read that most archeologists believe that it was built as an estate for the Inca Emperor Pachacuti. This 'City of the Incas' is a familiar symbol. It is incomprehensible how this site with its complex maze of passages and rooms was created by using manual labor to strategically position huge rocks. A higher purpose must have driven the inhabitants to design and complete such a special place.

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Moreover, its location was in a mountainous area sacred to the Incas.

The Intihuatana ("hitching post of the sun") is believed to have been designed as an astronomic clock or calendar by the Incas.

Before my journey, I purchased *Stone Offerings*, a book of photography by Mike Torrey with introduction by Peruvian born Marie Arana. This is a must have for anyone planning a trip to Machu Picchu. It enabled me to feel familiar with the incredible 'terraces of enlightenment', as Mike calls them. The wonderment of it all needs to be experienced and digested; one needs time.

I felt sorry for the visitors who were hurried through by their tour guides – never to return.

The first day Noon- 5pm, I devoted to the West section and on the second day also Noon - 5pm to the East section. The two sections are divided by wide open areas. The vistas were spectacular from every spot. Yes, there was plenty of climbing, so I suggest you get in shape before you go.

However, it was all very doable – even at 7,970 feet. I did not hike Huayna Picchu. That would have required another day, so as not to have felt rushed and stressed. I am not the 'been there / done that' type of person. Also, only a limited number of hikers are allowed on the Huayna Picchu trail each day (400) with two designated climb times.

Hiking the steps up and down the terraces, marveling at the aqueducts and various temples, especially the Temple of the Condor, as well as the Sacred Plaza, I was happy that I was able to experience this wonderful place at my own pace. I highly recommend two full days; even three if you can.

In spite of the numbers of visitors each day (2,500), Machu Picchu is well-maintained under the ever watchful eyes of guards. This is quite the under-taking. To make the visit official, passports can be stamped at the exit.



Ollantaytambo - Samanapaq in the Sacred Valley

The Vistadome train took me from Aguas Calientes to the heart of the Sacred Valley. Having wanted to spend time in the Sacred Valley, I found the Samanapaq Hostal in Ollantaytambo (found on [expedia.com](http://expedia.com)). Contrary to the connotation of its name, it was a beautiful sanctuary. This gem is an old villa owned by a retired Peruvian lawyer and his lovely wife. They also offer pottery classes. Had I known ahead of time, I would have spent more time there. Hours relaxing in the hammock, as I glazed at the Andes Mountains, were heavenly. The next day instead of taking the train, I took a private car with them to Cusco since they were going to a wedding. Talk about luck!

That evening at the Terra Andina Hotel, I met with Milton, the President of the AIESEC chapter in Cusco, and current University student. Milton has lived in Cusco all his life and is thrilled to be associated with an international organization. It has literally opened a whole new world up for him. He is hopeful that he will receive a traineeship, provided that he can receive some funding. Of course a Spanish speaking country would be best, as Milton does not speak or understand any

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Islas Ballestas - Paracas

My Star Peru flight from Cusco to Lima was at 9am, so my departure was early. I developed a fondness for Cusco and its people, so I was a bit sorry to leave.

Upon arrival in Lima, I looked for the Green Taxi booth. In this way, I was guaranteed that there would be no problem. I confirmed the rate and paid. My destination was the Cruz del Sur bus station for the 1:30pm bus to Paracas. I had decided to spend a few days south of Lima in this small coastal town. To this end, I located Hotel El Mirador ([go2peru.com](http://go2peru.com)), a budget priced hotel with a lovely pool and within walking distance from the bus and boat stations. Although the hotel could use a coat of fresh paint, it suited my needs. The morning coffee and rolls were most enjoyable. The couple at the front desk was charming.

The main attraction is Islas Ballestas and La Reserva. The former is Peru's mini-Galapagos and the latter reminded me of the great sand dunes of New Mexico.

I was so enthralled with the boat ride to Islas Ballestas that I went again the next day. The boat holds about 30 people and life vests were provided for all. I purchased a hat before getting on the boat....just in case bird droppings might fall from the sky (and they did). The guide spoke both Spanish and English with a little French thrown in.

Known for the abundance of guano, the island is a valuable source on income for Peru. Only the workers are allowed on the island which is home to thousands of birds including: the Humboldt penguin, cormorants, boobies and pelicans, seagulls, as well as sea lions. One can also see dolphins and whales swimming alongside the boats. At one time the US and Britain lent a substantial sum of money to Peru, using guano as collateral. Guano continues to be a main export to Europe where it is used for fertilizer.

A side trip to La Reserva was most interesting, as this vast area of sand dunes ends at a lovely bay popular for summertime swims. The rock outcroppings (especially Cathedral Rock) form an artistic pattern against the water and sand. The hotel made arrangements for the tours. There were only three of us on the La Reserva tour.

During my stay I decided to walk along the beach until I arrived at the new luxury Paracas Hotel, which is absolutely gorgeous! I had coffee in the lounge area. It was apparent that I was the only one there, so the servants asked me to help them with their English. I had no agenda, so I obliged. I wrote some key sentences for them, e.g. Would you like another drink? Here is your check. It was so much fun that I decided walk around the property and then have lunch in their restaurant (where I found only two other tables occupied). Word must have gotten out, because the restaurant staff also asked for help with their English.

As I enjoyed my Cerviche and Pisco Sour, I gave a few more lessons. In appreciation, the chef sent out a complimentary sampler plate of desserts. By the time I left, I was stuffed... for sure. My guess is that most tourist groups arrive late at night, have breakfast, take the boat ride to Islas Ballestas, and leave; thus allowing them little time to enjoy the resort.

On the last day, while sitting by the pool of El Mirador, I was approached by Cesar who was doing some public relations work for the local office of tourism. He asked me some questions and then introduced me to the owner of the hotel. Cesar took a photo of us which he was going to use to promote the hotel! Remember that all of this is in Spanish, as few locals speak English.

Throughout this trip, I continued to meet people from all over the world. Waiting at the Cruz del Sur 'station' for the return bus to Lima was no exception. There I met a group from Argentina and a few other South Americans. Although the coach buses are very comfortable, they show terrible American films with only one audio system for the entire bus. I should have taken my noise cancelling head-set and I-pod, as it was a 3 hour bus ride. Somehow the man across the aisle from me was able to sleep. Oh Well!

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Pisco Sour - the National Drink of Peru

Arriving back in Lima was like returning home. I took a taxi and headed for the Miramar Hotel; they offered me a 20% discount for my last night's stay. Fortunately, my return flight to the US was at 11pm. This gave me plenty of time for a few remaining projects. I met with Ximena, coordinator of Emprendadores project; had a visit with Angela and Juan Manuel who treated me to breakfast and brought me to their lovely condo in San Isidro; and then I took a tour to the ancient city of Pachacamac with LimaVision (as previously noted).

At the meeting with Ximena, I was to learn that the greatest need for these emprendadores (female entrepreneurs who were mostly sole proprietors) was for mentors. The light bulb went on! Through e-mails I introduced Ximena to Rosenel, President of the AIESEC Alumni group in Lima. They did not know each other or of each other's projects. As the Alums are all business professionals, I am hopeful that this was a mutually beneficial connection. I also suggested to Rosenel that the AIESEC Alums raise funds to provide scholarships for current students like Milton who are eager to accept an international traineeship.

It was such an honor for me to have been invited to Angel and Juan Manuel's home. They had already framed and displayed the photo I had given them of our respective grandchildren in their Halloween costumes. As a token of our new friendship, they presented me with a lovely ring which I wear often, a reminder of my wonderful trip and their kindness.

On the way to the airport, I noticed that the driver was playing songs from a Beatles CD. I ask him if he liked that music. He was excited to tell me that he had seen Paul McCartney a few years ago when he performed in Lima. His daughter had bought the tickets as a surprise birthday gift. He told me that the concert was a dream come true for him and that his life was now complete and he would die in peace. Well, I certainly hoped that that night wasn't it, as I had 'miles to go' before I slept. I wonder if Robert Frost would have appreciated the use of his words in this context.

Throughout this trip, I continuously inquired about Yma Sumac, the songbird of the Andes, and was saddened to learn that the younger generation does not know of her and her lovely songs.  
Que lastima!

Perhaps there will be a resurgence of interest in the indigenous cultures of Peru.

Anyhow, it was an awesome trip to the Land of the Incas. I hope you too will journey there.

Hasta Luego ... buen viaje!

<http://www.slowtrav.com/tr/tripreport.asp?tripid=2008>