

We are traveling again abroad after a two month hiatus and this time we are in the South American country of Peru. We arrived in Lima very late on Wednesday night (April 15) are currently in Cusco , about 700 miles southeast and inland from the capital. We were joining a group tour of the country but had decided to arrive a day early to get acclimatized and rested before what we assumed would be a hectic 12 days.

On our solo day we walked near the hotel and saw our first Inca pyramid , two churches and a very pleasant park which contained an ancient olive grove, now designated a National Monument. Lima is a city of 10 million people and walking seems to be the quickest way of getting around. They have no subway system, many buses and thousands of cars! So, dinner that first evening was just a couple of blocks away—and excellent. We later learned it is one of the best in Lima.

On Friday, our first day with the group, we were taken on a city tour of Lima.

We were driven (slowly, in this city of 10 million with no subway or rail service) through the San Isidro district and into the central downtown area. The city of Lima is divided into 43 separate districts, each with its own mayor and high level of bureaucracy, and a “super mayor” who adds another level. According to our local guide, this creates a good deal of corruption and difficulties in coordinating public services and many of these (such as the bus service) are operated privately, with little or no regulation.

However, the city has a long tradition of Inca, colonialization and republic history and a wide variety of architecture as a result. Today, the variety is not as prevalent as it might be as the city is quite frequently rocked

by significant earthquakes and many older buildings have been destroyed. In addition, the Spanish conquerors had a nasty habit of replacing the Inca buildings with those of a more European style, although for quite some time they didn't know how to build to withstand the frequent tremors.

The country gained its independence in 1821 and for a while its Spanish heritage was scorned. This resulted in a prevalent French influence on architecture which is still predominant in many public buildings to this day.

Our first stop was at a Franciscan monastery which, although partly occupied by monks even today, is largely kept up as a museum. There was no photography allowed inside so our hour long visit was spent in listening to the guide and admiring



the many different features of the church, its courtyard and its catacombs. There are remnants of frescoes from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and a number of huge paintings throughout as well as a magnificent refectory, which we were told was in daily use until the 1970s. It is still used by the monks on high feast days.

Our only other stop was in the major square of the city. This is a huge European-looking plaza with a cathedral, the President's official resi-

dence and other civic buildings on all four sides. It is the place where independence was declared and celebrated and the site of major civic and community activities for several centuries. We were told that present-day Peru is the oldest of the Spanish settlements in South America, so there has been a European influence here for about 500 years.

In the evening we were taken to a dinner and dance function which seems to be a feature of organized tours. As with most that we have experienced, the food was medi-



ocre (although plentiful) and the dancing was interesting but would have sufficed with perhaps one half of the hour long show. The costumes were very colorful, the music was loud and the whole thing was done under very bright strobe lighting. The final set was perhaps most interesting – a dance done by men, carrying scissors and doing some spectacular acrobatics, much of which was reminiscent of Cossack dancing.

On Saturday we flew to Cusco, which has a population of 500,000 and there is a lot of new construction on the outskirts of the old town. Our hotel was right in the middle of the Historic Area, next to the Temple of The Sun and only three blocks from the main square.

After checking in and getting our first cups of Coca tea (it helps with altitude sickness—Cusco is over 10,000 feet), we walked with our guide to

the main square. Here is the Cathedral which sits on one side of the enormous plaza; other magnificent old buildings adorn the other sides and a green area adds color to the whole scene. After a little time in the square, Molly and I had coffee (Starbucks!) and then did little until we walked for dinner, again on the main square.

Our first impressions of Cusco were very favorable. The architecture, some dating back over 500 years, is magnificent and the historical area – in fact, the whole city – is surrounded by green hills that climb perhaps another 1000 to 2000 feet above street level. Not that there is a level street! Cusco is on a slope no matter where you go. This adds to its charm as well as to its demand on the lungs!

Sunday was our day to visit Machu Picchu, probably the most famous Inca site and one of the UNESCO World Heritage sites..

The day started with our 4am walk-up call, a quick breakfast and on to the first bus of the day by 4:40. We left Cusco and climbed to an elevation over 12,000 feet before descending quite rapidly into the Sacred Valley which is predominantly below 7000 feet. The land is so fertile and the climate sufficiently wet and warm that crops are grown here on a year round basis.

After a little over 1 ½ hours (by which time it was fully light) we arrived at the town of Ollanta from where we would take the train to Machu Picchu. Our group



had elected the Vista dome version (a mid-level between the Excursion train and the Hiram Bingham deluxe) and we were soon boarded on the two car, quite comfortable train and on our way for another 1 ½ hours.



▾ The weather now was quite clear at ground level but the surrounding mountains were shrouded in mist and cloud. However, as we slowly made our way down the valley we were running alongside a river that seemed to be in full flood and provided some magnificent rapids. This river is a major

tributary of the Amazon and one of only a few in Peru that finds its way to the Atlantic Ocean. The Continental Divide for South America (unlike in North America) is very close to the west coast and most rainfall and snow melt in Peru ends up in the Pacific Ocean.

From the train and saw the start of the main Inca Trail leading to Machu Picchu. As one might expect there are dozens of trails in this part of South America that owe their origins to the Incas (and even pre-Inca times) but the one we ran alongside for a while is the trail that we hear about most. It is a very popular way to reach Machu Picchu (for the fit) and can be done in 3-5 days on a well-marked path which goes up and down in elevation between about 6000 feet and over 13,000 feet. The Peruvian government regulates the movement along the trail, prescribing not only the total numbers but the required ratio of “Sherpa” to

walker. Camp sites with varying degrees of amenities are provided along the route and 300 to 500 intrepid hikers follow the 26 mile trail on any given day. The total distance also lends itself well to a marathon – which apparently is also available!

The station in the “city of Machu Picchu “ is at an elevation of a little over 6000 feet so to reach the site itself we had almost 2000 feet further to climb. This was accomplished in a 30 passenger bus which climbed the switchback dirt road in under 30 minutes and took us right to the site entrance.



The weather had cleared considerably by now but there was still considerable mist hanging to the higher elevations. The views of the Inca city, however, were perfectly clear and the wisps of cloud just added to the magical appearance. As we said,

this is certainly the most famous of the Inca cities (named after the “Old Mountain” nearby) but the How, Why and When of its building and abandonment have been the subject of conjecture since it was re-



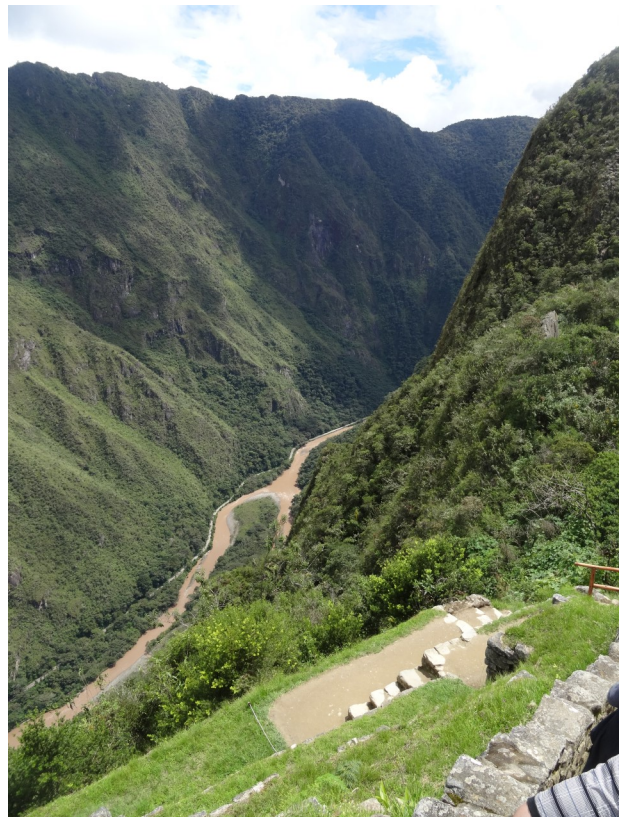
discovered by Hiram Bingham just over a hundred years ago. Actually, even that “fact” is probably incorrect as he was taken to the site by local farmers who had been living there for some years, almost certainly taking advantage of the well-established terraces that had been there for centuries.



How many centuries is one of the unanswered questions, although our guide was convinced that the city was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, probably around 1430. The Quechua peoples (incorrectly named the Incas – only the King was Inca) had inhabited this region for several centuries and others pre-Incas) before them. During that time they had built many

cities and become very powerful in Peru and other parts of the region and it is thought that Machu Picchu is just one (the last?) of those built as more and more territory was acquired and settled.

As with most civilizations, power led to in-fighting and the need for more pow-



er as demonstrated in goods and the grandeur of their settlements. Hence, it is felt that Machu Picchu was built to satisfy the needs of the King and was occupied only by a few hundred nobles once it was habituated. To get to that point, however, several thousand craftsmen and laborers must have been employed to build this massive terraced facility.



The natural resources were at hand – the granite rock from the mountains themselves – and water for irrigation and drinking was abundant at this elevation. In fact, a very complex and well-engineered aqueduct and channeling system was built not only to supply water but to facilitate its runoff so that the buildings would not be undermined or washed

away.

We were shown many examples of structures (temples, sundials, orientation stones, etc) which suggested a sophisticated knowledge of the seasons, the stars and geology and of their importance in the daily and ceremonial life of the Quechua. As just one example, the Temple of the Sun contains a window that projects a beam of light directly on to a specific stone on the Winter Solstice (remember, this is the Southern hemisphere) in much the same way as other structures from many ancient civilizations around the world.

“How” this huge site was built is also a subject of great debate. It is assumed that the builders had little help from strong beasts (the llama is predominant here), did not know of the wheel and had relatively simple tools made from hematite rock found in the area. So, as with Stonehenge, the pyramids and many South and Central American structures of similar complexity, the question as to exactly how it was built remains. But why was Machu Picchu abandoned (after only about 100 years it is thought) and left to the wilderness for almost 400 years? Again, a number of theories have been proposed (wars, overpopulation, disease) but the one that seems most logical is related to the conquering of Peru by the Spanish. This began in 1532 and by 1533 they had conquered many cities in the country, including nearby Cusco. The conquerors (as, sadly, with most colonization through the ages) were determined to establish their culture and religion on the locals and had been successful in this endeavor to point. It is theorized that the Inca King in Machu Picchu was not about to let this happen to his city, so he organized the complete abandonment and headed further

along the Sacred Valley – away from the advancing Spanish. The process took a number of years but – presumably as a result of its remote location – the city was never found by the Spanish and it soon became part of the wilderness. It remained “The Lost City of the Incas” until 1911.

So, today we can see what a civilization of 600 years ago was able to build, we can learn some of the reasons for its location and use and we can marvel and wonder as to



the “truth”. Or, we can simply admire the site for what it is..... a wonderful terraced formation set among beautiful green mountains in one of the most recognizable and mystical places on earth.

Today (Monday) we are visiting the Cathedral, the temple of the Sun and more of the major beautiful architectural sites in Cusco before leaving tomorrow for Lake Titicaca. The elevation there is another 2000+ feet higher than Cusco, so it remains to be seen how well we fare. More later—assuming we are not too dizzy!