

## Cusco to Araquipa

Continuing our trip in Peru, on Tuesday (April 21) we left the beautiful city of Cusco and had a long (10 hours) drive to Puno on Lake Titicaca.

I had imagined the drive to the Lake as being essentially on a ridge with perhaps a valley to the right side (west) and the snow-capped Andes to the left. For the first 2-3 hours there were indeed glimpses of the highest peaks (with snow) but they were in the distance across a wide valley or perhaps beyond much smaller hills. To the right it was generally farmland and both sides of the road were very green. The latter half of the journey was essentially across a very wide valley (5-10 miles?) and the hills were green and lush to the tops – maybe 1000-2000 feet above the road.

Interestingly, as we drove this long stretch towards Puno, the impressions were of the Scottish Highlands, the Lake District of England (exactly the same colors) and even parts of the Yorkshire Dales with dry stone walls in some areas. The difference, of course, was that the road we were on was not at sea level or a few hundred feet but ranged from 12,000 to 15,000 feet. In addition, the distances across the valleys and the heights of the hills were different – perhaps by a factor of three. Most of the land was farmed (wheat and quinoa) with some cattle and sheep roaming in areas; closer to Puno, these were replaced by llama and alpaca. There were a few small villages – generally set back from the road – and we passed through two towns with significant population, the second of which had sprung up in recent years and was fundamentally a black market and narcotics town set up on the main routes from Columbia to Bolivia (which was not far away as the crow flies). There had been some mining here and some still existed but, if we understood our guide

correctly, the commerce was less than totally above board. He didn't seem to regard this as corruption (in the same sense that the word had been used for the politics in Lima) but rather a way of life to take advantage of the traffic route in a remote location.

Along the way we visited a site on the border between Cusco and Puno "provinces" which had been a major Inca and indeed pre-Inca settlement. There were some Inca walls still standing as well as a few pre-Inca columns which we were told had been a part of a major temple. In addition to the buildings the settlement had been a major agricultural region and we saw evidence of huge granaries and vegetable storage houses. Apparently in Inca times (and maybe even before the 12<sup>th</sup> century) there had been a network of these major settlements joined by Inca trails such that transport – even of fish



from the ocean- was relatively rapid and supplied the needs of the rulers as well as the peasant population.

After ten hours on the road, we caught our first glimpse of Lake Titicaca as we descended through the city of Puno. Mem-



ories of grammar school 3<sup>rd</sup> Form Geography came flooding back after 60 years just at the sound of this most famous lake, the largest fresh water lake in South America and certainly the biggest in the world at this elevation of almost 13,000 feet. Not that I can remember anything of that geography lesson (I failed Geography!) but the name simply conjures up unclear but magical memories.



On Wednesday morning we walked a couple of hundred yards to take a boat into Lake Titicaca to visit a series of floating islands. Lake Titicaca is 103 miles north-south and about 40 miles east-west, 60% of it being in Peru, the rest part of Bolivia. Clearly on our short trip today we weren't going to see much of the

lake and indeed we spent the whole 2 hours in an inlet close to Puno.

The floating islands are built from reed and provide homes for a few thousand people. There are between 80 and 90 such islands, although an exact count is difficult as occasionally they split and may later re-join. In any event, each is built and owned by an extended family, apart from a few communal islands



providing schools, churches, social and sports gathering places. (Oddly enough, there are no Catholic churches on these islands but there are Seventh Day Adventists and Mormon churches since these faiths decided to reach out and join the community.

The islands are tethered to the lake bed by anchor lines that may stretch quite some distance as the islands may be in 60 feet of water but the anchor points are less than ten feet deep.

As we stepped from our boat to visit the first island, the first thought was that at any moment our feet could push through the reed layers and we would be pulled through to the water. However, despite a feeling of dampness and softness underfoot, the islands are quite sturdy structures and many have several feet of interwoven layers of reed. The small homes were raised perhaps another foot above “street level” to provide a little more insulation and, presumably, dryness.

It was perhaps a little incongruous to see solar panels, cell phones and electricity but obviously the 21<sup>st</sup> century doesn't stop at the shoreline. building and a rather magnificent cathedral on the main square.

In the afternoon we visited the Sillistani Tombs outside Puno. This is a huge burial ground dating from pre-Inca times and sits in a beautiful location about 200 feet above a lake. The tombs were not below ground but rather in circular towers of varying sophistication and size





depending on the rank of the occupant(s). The guide explained that many commoners might be buried in one small tower whereas kings and their families (and sometimes their servants) would be entombed in very tall structures and would be of a much finer construction, particularly in Inca times.

The whole archeological site was of interest and gave another insight into Inca culture but it was the setting that really made the visit special.



On Thursday we left Puno and Lake Titicaca and had another long drive to the Colca Canyon, about 200km to the southwest. The drive took almost eight hours – including several stops for photo opportunities. The eight hours went by very quickly, however, as the scenery was the most spectacular we have seen so far and the day was probably the best we have had on the trip. It almost seems sacrilegious to put anything above Machu Picchu while in Peru, but this day was at least as interesting and certainly had a larger variety of landscape.



The terrain and landscape were very roughly divided into three types as we drove from Lake Titicaca and the weather could also be sub-divided similarly. The first 1 ½ hours out of Puno were similar to the final 2 hours coming into that City from Cusco – a three times “life-size” of

Scotland, the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District. The few homes were almost exclusively occupied by farmers and we saw cultivated fields as well as cattle, sheep, pigs and llama or alpaca. Overall, however, we felt very much at home in this type of countryside – and it was easy to forget (until starting some exercise) that we were traveling at 12,000 to 14,000 feet.

From the “British countryside” we move very abruptly into the Western States of the US as we climbed now to an average of over 14,000 feet elevation. Here we were definitely in desert, with what could have been sage brush or similar for vegetation in a vast landscape of various colored sands and soft rock. The hills were either rounded or mesa-like and we could easily have been in New Mexico or Nevada. What livestock and other forms of habitation there was consisted of llama and the occasional farm house – and many of these looked abandoned. It was on this stretch that the weather changed dramatically also – from the cloudy with occasional sun of the first two hours to periods of heavy rain and a brief but intense hailstorm.



At our final stop we picked up a local Araquipa guide. The area we were now in was part of a huge national park (Peru seems to be very progressive in its preservation of the national heritage and culture) and he would be with us for the rest of the time in this area. It was now that we entered the third and final geography for the day as we ascended steeply

to peak at an elevation of 16,200, We saw some rain (yes, rain not snow even at this elevation) and there was considerable cloud but now we could occasionally catch glimpses of jagged peaks covered in snow. These we were told were over 20,000 feet but here were the Andes that I had expected and which we had seen up close on a visit to Chile several years ago.

Generally, however, we were still on lush green land and alpaca, llama (both domesticated) and bicuna (wild and protected) were seen on both sides of the road. Again there was the odd homestead but for the most part it was rugged, isolated countryside not unlike some of the Rocky



Mountain States but with less snow to be seen. It is worth remembering that Peru is only 13 to 15 degrees south of the Equator so, despite the impressive heights of the Andes, the snow never gets below 12,000 feet and generally is above 16,000 feet in the middle of winter (June).

This part of the country is also volcanic and part of our drive took us in a sweeping semi-circle that actually went across one end of a huge caldera. There was nearby evidence of volcanic peaks and, of course, we now saw a lot of volcanic rock rather than the granite of Cusco or the limestone and sandstone of earlier in the day.

Our destination was the Colca Canyon, said to be twice as deep as the Grand Canyon and where we would spend the full day on Friday. We first



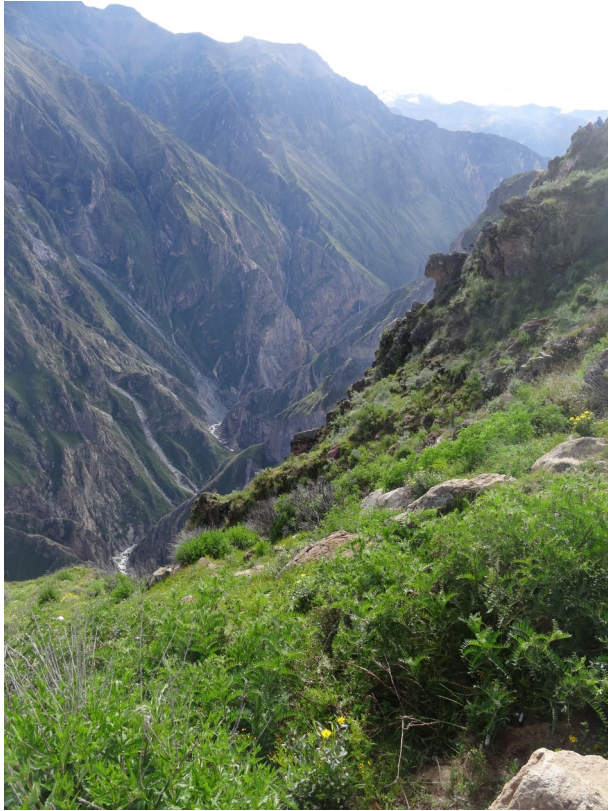
saw the canyon from an elevation of 16,000 feet and could clearly see the Colca River over 5000 feet below at the bottom of a rift that appeared much wider than that cut by the Colorado. The most amazing part, however, was that we were to drive that drop in elevation on a giant switchback road, most of which we could see from our starting point. It was a long and steep drive down with fantastic views of the canyon, its major (only) town of Calvay and the thousands of cultivated fields and terraces all the way down the walls.

We arrived at the Colca Lodge around 5pm after one of the most magnificent days we have ever spent and were certainly pleased that we had opted for this add-on portion to the main tour.



On Friday we had a 5:30 wakeup call and were on the bus by 6:30 to visit more of Colca Canyon from an elevation of 12,000 feet and above. The drive was on paved and dirt road and we stopped several times for photo shoots and some of the most incredible scenery we have ever seen.

The canyon is much wider (and deeper) than the Grand Canyon and was initially formed by “a crack in the earth”, presumably an earthquake or a separation of plates. This latter would explain why the side opposite the one we were on was perhaps two thousand feet higher and both sides, although steep, were not anywhere near vertical. After this separation,



the river dug the lower reaches to form the somewhat steeper sides nearer the river.

A very interesting aspect of the canyon is that it is, and has been for 2000 years, farmed at much of the lower elevations, perhaps up to 1000 feet above the river.



Hundreds of terraces have been formed by direct manual labor to provide row upon row of flat “fields” on which a host of crops

are grown – from corn to potatoes. These crops provide several additional dimensions of color to the greens and grays of the undisturbed land and form a stunning picture. Finally, the 20,000 foot peaks of the main Andean chain provide a backdrop of white. We were very fortunate once again that the weather was good and there were no clouds at our level and only a few at the highest elevations.

The main reason for driving this road for 25 miles (and for our early start) was to visit a lookout at a point where the South American Condor can often be seen as it starts its day by catching the thermals as the depths of the canyon see a little sun. These birds are considerably larger than



the California condor (which we have also seen) and have wingspans of ten feet or more.

We (and perhaps 300 more tourists) arrived at this vantage point around 8:30 and were told we would stay for an hour – and hope! Before 9 o'clock we were rewarded by our first sighting – a brown (juvenile) condor silently flew up the canyon wall and right past our

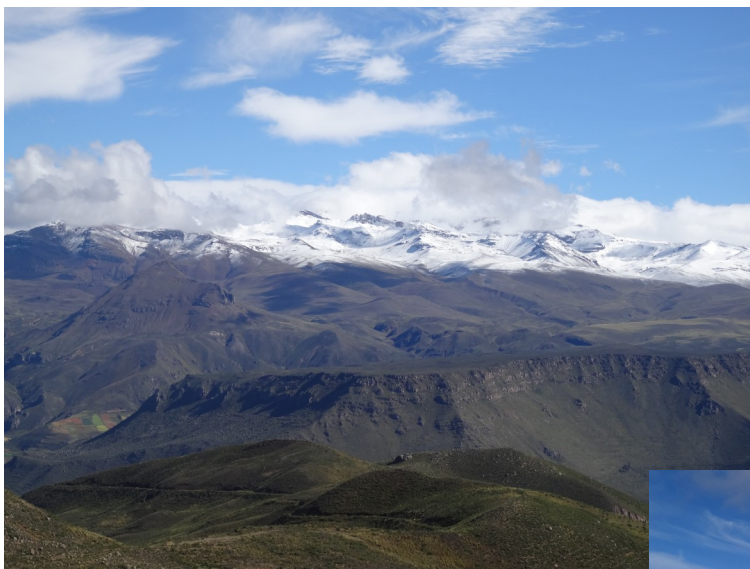


viewpoint. It was as though he was the lead in a parade and was making sure that we were all prepared for the main show. We were, and we were not disappointed. Before 9:15, four large birds

had glided past our position, slowing rising from below in a tacking motion until they disappeared into the blue sky and to the snow covered higher elevations. Everyone was given a chance to not only see these huge black and white birds but, with a little patience and luck (and a few blank canvasses) get some great photographs.

Again, with no disrespect to Mach Picchu we felt that this visit up the canyon and the drive getting us here yesterday must be the highlight of our visit to Peru. The fact that the weather was perfect (as indeed it was at Machu Picchu) certainly added to our enjoyment but we can't think of anywhere that we have visited that provided us with such amazing scenery on such a scale.





Today (Saturday) we left Colca Canyon and set out on a four hour drive to Arequipa. For the first two hours we retraced our route of two days ago, rising to an elevation of 16,200 feet be-

fore starting down the other side. If anything, the scenery was even more spectacular than on the way out because it was a perfect day – blue skies, a few white clouds and clear views of the distant peaks.



We entered the outskirts of Arequipa which started with a shanty town (apparently the city is attracting many immigrants from other parts of Peru and beyond) and gradually became more prosperous-looking, but not before we had driven through several miles of dusty, industrial area. However, as we entered the older part of the city, its billing as one of the most beautiful in Peru became much more obvious.

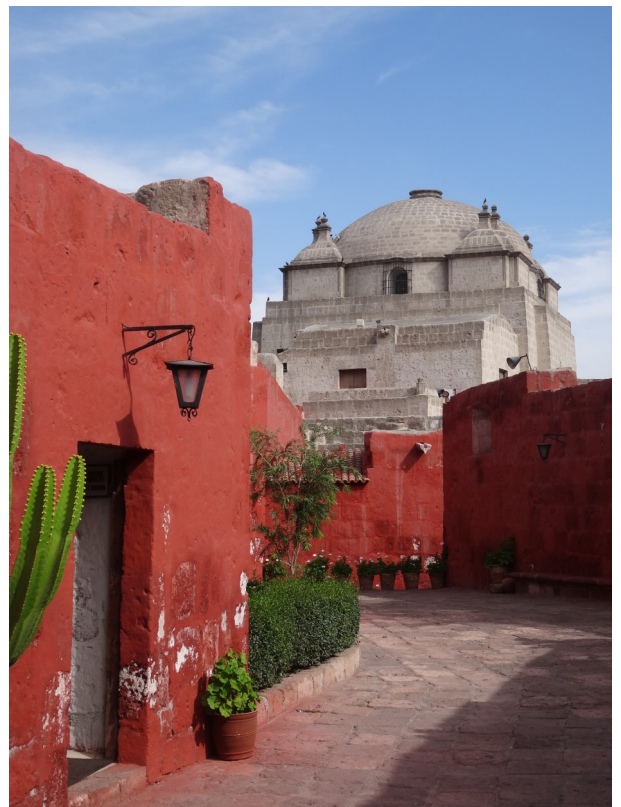
The center of town is built in the typical European style and has many fantastic Spanish colonial churches, civic buildings and, of course, a huge main square. Certainly this is the most Spanish looking of all the cities we have visited in Peru and every street seemed to boast three

to four hundred year old structures, each decorated in a mixture of Spanish (actually with a very strong Moorish influence) and Pre-colonial facades.

We should point out that we were now below 8000 feet in elevation and, not only was walking much easier than at any time over the past week, but we were now in a much warmer climate. In fact, the whole of the region around the city of Arequipa is part of the Sechura Desert.

In the afternoon we did a walking tour of the historical district, starting at the Santa Catalina Monastery. This is an interesting monastery (for nuns) which was built in early colonial times and was only for rich Spanish ladies – and their slaves, servants and, in some cases, one of their children! Apparently the founder, a widow of a rich colonial, decided that rather than give all her late husband's money to the king or state (as was the custom) she would found a monastery for ladies who had access to large amounts of money but who wanted to spend a more spiritual life. Consequently, the ladies paid a huge “dowry” and could build their new homes within the monastery and, after a period as a novice, could “step over the line” to their new quarters – never to set foot outside the walls again.

Later we walked to the main square with its magnificent cathedral along one face and beautiful civic buildings all around. We spent about 40







minutes in a Jesuit church built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century which had a spectacular nave and a very ornate and colorful sanctuary. The latter, as well as many paintings throughout the church, incorporated a good deal of the Inca or Andean culture in the paintings

which covered all the walls and ceiling.

So, we are almost at the end of a great visit to an amazing country which has far more to see than we had ever imagined. Obviously Machu Picchu is its most well known highlight but there is so much more to see—Lake



Titicaca, the colonial cities of Arequipa and Cusco and the amazing Colca Canyon.

Tomorrow we fly back to Lima to end the tour. However, on Monday Molly and I are taking a small plane flight over the Nazca Lines in the Nazca Desert before flying home on Tuesday—so there may be one more brief post after that trip.

Molly and Bob



