



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.

We were given a brief demonstration on the construction process and invited to visit the homes – and of course there were local crafts for sale. The locals seemed very happy to see us and share as much as they could (their first language is not Spanish) about their life and history; a history that dates back before the Incas.

It was perhaps a little incongruous to see solar panels, cell phones and electricity but obviously the 21st century doesn't stop at the shoreline.



A few of us were able to take a short ride in one of their reed boats (shades of Kon Tiki) before visiting a second island and

then returning to the hotel after a very interesting three hours on a beautiful morning with blue skies and a temperature near 60F.



Map of Lake Titicaca, showing the border with Bolivia.

In Puno, we were considerably closer to the capital of Bolivia (La Paz) than to Lima, the capital of Peru.

After a short break there was an optional afternoon tour which we had opted for but Molly decided against it as there was to be a good deal of walking at an altitude of 13,000 feet. I did go, however, and had another interesting trip. We first took a bus to downtown Puno where we had sufficient time for lunch or, as in my case, a stroll around the city center. It did not compare with Cusco but there were a few Spanish colonial buildings and a rather magnificent cathedral on the main square.



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At 1:30 we drove about 45 minutes to the north west of town to visit the Sillistani Tombs. 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.



Sillistani Tombs



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.

This evening we took a taxi into town and had a very nice meal in a small café that I had seen at lunchtime and which some of our traveling companions had said was good for lunch. Both our dishes (beef for Molly, trout for me) were very good and, with the mushroom soup to start made for a very filling meal. An excellent espresso finished the evening before the 15 minute drive back to the hotel.

Around 10pm there was a tremendous thunderstorm (following an absolutely gorgeous, warm day, and some very heavy rain – none of which interfered with our sleep.



Thursday April 23

Today 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 and restrooms and we also were given a box lunch which we ate en route. 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. Again, it may seem disingenuous to Peru to make that comparison but that is exactly how both Molly and I saw it – right down to the dry stone walls and green hills.

The small villages and the homes that we saw were, of course, much cruder than those in Britain and were generally of adobe or stone. These 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, although we saw a few distant snow covered peaks, 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 restroom and coffee break 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 (but on generally very straight roads) 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 vicuña (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 tomorrow. 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 Calvey and the thousands of cultivated fields and terraces all the way down the walls. We stopped briefly in Calvey and spent a very pleasant 30 minutes in the local market before making the final nine mile drive to Colca Lodge – our home for the next two



nights. The lodge is on the opposite side of the river from the hill we had descended and sits on its own series of terraces. The reception and restaurant were in one central building and the rooms were in small blocks several hundred feet from the main building.

We arrived about 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.

Most of our 25 traveling companions as far as Puno were now on their way back to Lima and our remaining six were joined by four from another Gate I group, so we were now a rather exclusive team of ten.

We enjoyed dinner in the hotel restaurant with two young friends, Chris and Tessa, from Minnesota.



Friday April 24

We had a 5:30 wakeup call and were on the bus by 6:30 to visit more of Colca Canyon. We stopped briefly at a small village (Yanque) to watch some local dancing (school children, both boys and girls wearing dresses; there are several possible explanations as to why!) and then started up the road towards 12,000 feet and above. (The hotel is less than 11,000 we were told). 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.

Yes.... We did drive through!

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 wing-spans 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 flag carrier or 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, it probably sounds disingenuous to make this claim in the land that provides us with Machu Picchu, but 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.



We made our way down the hill to have lunch at a very nice local café, paid a short visit to a very nice church and then crossed the river to the Colca Lodge to relax for the afternoon.



Actually, a number of visitors took advantage of the hot springs that are a part of this resort. In the evening six of us went to dinner in the nearby village of Yanque and had a very pleasant meal.



Saturday April 25

We left Colca Canyon this morning 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 before 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.





Officially 4910 meters (16109 feet)

My phone altimeter: 16144 feet.

Either way, the highest point on our trip



*An amazing drive in
the Andes*



At our only other rest stop we could see a hillside of white volcanic ash and as we drove further towards Arequipa we passed a number of volcanoes, one of which was classed as active. All of them were snowcapped.



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.



Our first stop was at an overlook where we could see the center of the city and the nearest volcano with its high peak and snow covered top – not unlike Mt Fuji in Japan. Then it was time for a huge lunch served in an outdoor restaurant, complete with local Peruvian music while we ate. 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, which is a huge complex just two blocks from the main square of the city. The first thing we learned was that a monastery (whether for monks or nuns) is for life, while a convent requires only a shorter term commitment. The second was that this particular monastery (for nuns) 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. So, they live a life of celibacy but in quite luxurious surroundings. A widow could bring one child (aged between 6 and 16) and a married woman could, with her husband's permission, take on this new life. As our guide said, this was a unique monastery!



Living Quarters in the Santa Catalina Monastery; far from modest surroundings



Later we walked to the main square with its magnificent cathedral along one face and a church at every corner, or so it seemed. We spent about 40 minutes in a Jesuit church built in the 17th 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.



Arequipa



Around 4pm we walked to our hotel which is right on this square, so we were right in the middle of this Spanish town. Molly and I took a short walk around the area after checking in and it was very pleasant to take in these “European” surroundings. The building style and the dress were quite different from that we had seen over the past week; it seems that the typical Andean dress has given way already to what we could describe as Western.

Tonight we walked a couple of blocks to the Chicha restaurant which is part of the same small chain that we had enjoyed in Lima. Again it was an excellent meal with superb service.

Sunday April 26

We had breakfast sitting on the veranda of the hotel overlooking the main square on a warm and sunny morning.

At 8:30 we left for the airport and got our flight back to Lima. From there we were taken to the hotel (the same one that we had started in 10 days ago) and relaxed for the afternoon. This evening we had our farewell dinner for the group and said goodbye to our tour guide and the new friends we had made on the trip. We were in bed before 10pm in preparation for our early morning drive to the Nazca Lines tomorrow.



Monday April 27

We were up at 5:15 and had checked out and were ready for our driver when he arrived at 6:45. The drive to Pisco (where we would get our flight over the Nazca Lines) took about 3 ½ hours and was primarily along the Pan American Highway running south along the Pacific coast.

The drive was a total distance of about 250 Km and half of it was along an expressway – the first we had seen in Peru. This allowed our driver (who knew little English and was therefore not very communicative) to travel at up to 100 mph, despite a posted speed limit of 65 maximum. Once we were out of greater Lima we passed through desert to our left and the Pacific to our right with little change until we were almost in Pisco when a few fruit plantations and vineyards appeared. The scenery was interesting if not spectacular and the drive seemed to go by very quickly.

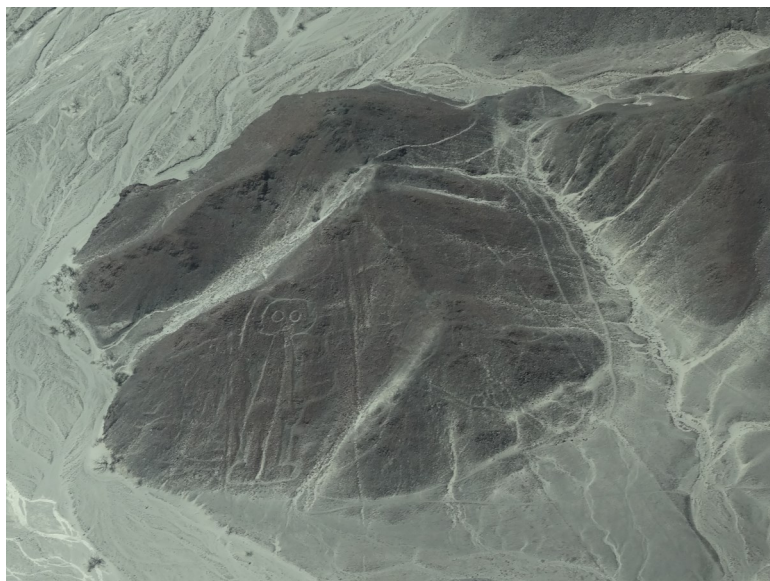
Once at Pisco airport (which serves as both a commercial airport for domestic flights as well as the starting point for Nazca flights) we checked in, were weighed and after a short wait were driven to our Cessna 12 passenger aircraft.

The whole flight was a total of 1 ½ hours but it took about 30 minutes to get to the major point of interest. The flight itself was interesting as we passed over desert, some partially irrigated, and 2000 feet high mountains before reaching the Nazca Lines.



At this point the plane descended to a few hundred feet above the ground so that we could get a good view of these ancient “drawings” on the desert sand and rock. There were about a dozen figures and shapes of varying clarity and each was pointed out by the pilot as we flew with them first on one side of the plane and then on the other. Consequently, every passenger got as good a view as possible.

It was sometimes a little difficult to make out the shapes and figures (birds, dog, triangles, “astronaut”, etc) but we soon got our perspective and were able to pick out most with some degree of certainty. Taking pictures at the same time, however, was another story and I was able to capture only one recognizable shape. I think on reflection it would have been better to simply enjoy the view and ponder how, when and why these shapes were produced in this somewhat remote location. Better pictures must surely be available in postcards or online!



My attempts at photography:

Top left: The astronaut

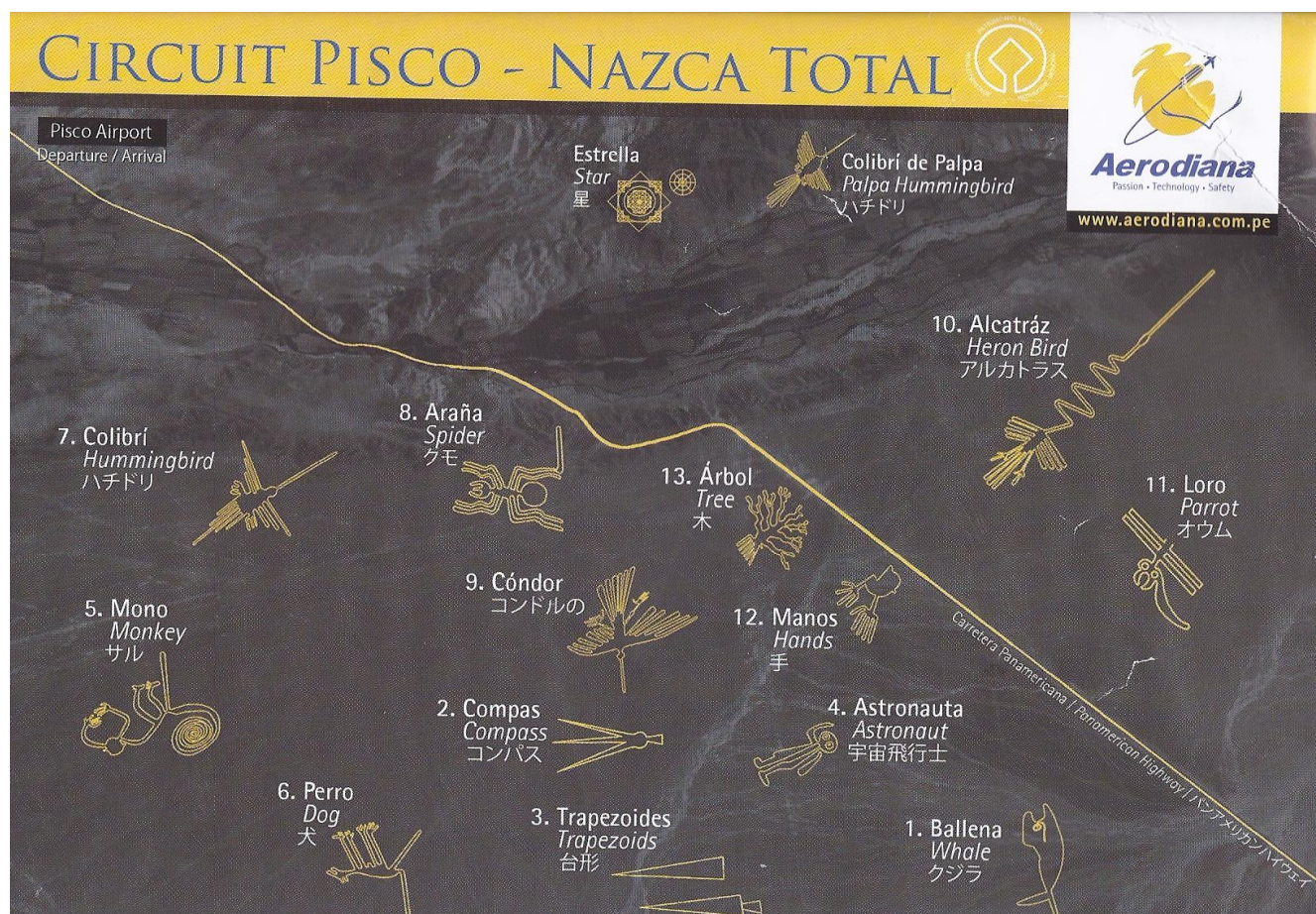
Top right: Hummingbird

Center left: Hand (?)

Above: Trapezoid

Left: Condor (Professional)

The Flight Path over the Lines (in the numbered sequence) is shown on the next page



After about 25 minutes of zig-zag flying at very low altitude, we climbed again and returned to Pisco after a memorable and interesting journey.

We were once again met by our driver, taken to a coastal village for lunch and then the four hour journey back to our hotel in Lima. Here we rested in the lobby for a while before walking to a nearby restaurant for dinner. This turned out to be a wonderful way to conclude our trip. The restaurant was called Vivaldi and was about as Italian as you could get outside of Florence; beautifully decorated, impeccably clad wait staff and very relaxed service. The menu was extensive and a combination of European and Peruvian dishes, so it took us a while to work our way through it.



The "work" was worth it, however, and the whole meal took a total of three hours, including some musical entertainment (piano and violin) for the final 30 minutes. With two enormous courses, dessert, espresso, wine and grappa the whole bill was just under \$100 – an amazing value and a great way to say farewell to Peru.



We walked back to the hotel, retrieved our cases and took a taxi back to Lima airport for our 1am (Tuesday) flight to Atlanta. Check-in and Security went relatively smoothly and we had an hour in the lounge before boarding.

Tuesday April 28

The overnight flight to Atlanta and the subsequent late morning flight onto Cincinnati were uneventful, as was the Customs and Immigration process. We arrived in Cincinnati about 1:30pm after a wonderful trip. We had seen a wide range of cultural and historic sights and had traveled through some of the most magnificent scenery we had ever experienced. Peru has a lot to offer.

Postscript

Machu Picchu was everything that we had expected (perhaps even more, since we felt as though we “knew” it from travel programs and others’ visits) but the rest of the country was much more than we had anticipated. Lima is a large city with some fine examples of Spanish architecture, but the much smaller cities of Cusco and Arequipa provided a far better picture of the colonial influence and, in the case of Cusco, the Inca and pre-Inca buildings. Both were beautiful cities set in some magnificent mountainous countryside.

Lake Titicaca was much more than the Third Form Geography “lake on top of the world” and, although we didn’t see much of its 100 mile length nor its clear deep waters, we were fascinated by the floating islands close to the shore at Puno. In addition, Lake Titicaca was the starting point for a three day drive through some of the most magnificent scenery that we have ever enjoyed as we climbed over 16,000 feet before entering the Colca Canyon. This vast area was perhaps the highlight of the entire trip and we are pleased that we chose the 12 day rather than 9 day version of the tour.

Finally, the flight over the Nazca Lines (of which we had heard nothing until we started planning the trip) was interesting and provided a fascinating way to end our visit. As we said earlier, aerial photography was difficult and largely ineffective. Simply sitting back and enjoying the flight and really observing the figures (and buying souvenir postcards later) might have been more rewarding. Next time!

Spending over a week at an elevation of 10,000 feet and higher caused us little pain although any exercise was taxing. Molly in particular easily got breathless and opted out of one of the more strenuous excursions. Both of us, however, were able to see everything that Peru had to offer and—as with every trip we take—would not hesitate to go back at any time. A little breathlessness is a small price to pay for such magnificent scenery, over a thousand years of history and culture and an extremely friendly people.

