

Peru – The Inca Trail and Machu Picchu



Robert & Robin Charlton
September 2004

Cuzco

Drinking coca tea at 11,000 feet in America's oldest continuously inhabited city



The Sacred Valley

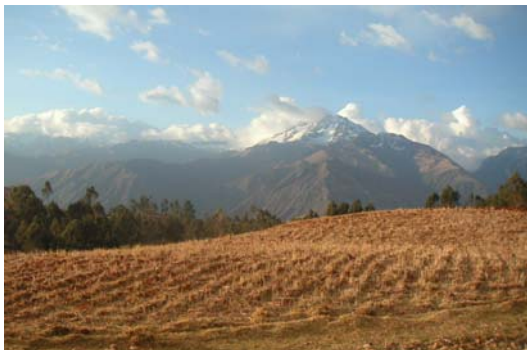
All-day tour of the fertile Sacred Valley of the Incas



Colorful Sunday market at Pisac



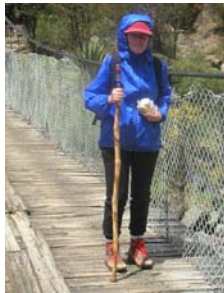
Fortress city of Ollantaytambo, where the Incas won a rare victory over the Spanish conquistadores



Beautiful altiplano (high plains) and small mountain town of Chinchero

The Inca Trail

Our four-day adventure along the ancient trail of the Incas begins



Inca Trail – The Challenging 2nd Day
4,000 feet of elevation gain to the top of aptly named “Dead Woman’s Pass”



Inca Trail

Celebrations and camaraderie at 13,776 feet – the high point of the Inca Trail



...and happily relaxing in our terraced tent city afterwards

Remarkable Ruins and “The Thousand Steps” Down, down, down (our poor knees) on the 3rd day of the Inca Trail



Mist...more the rule than the exception in the Peruvian Andes



Discovering well-preserved Incan ruins along the way adds a whole new dimension to hiking

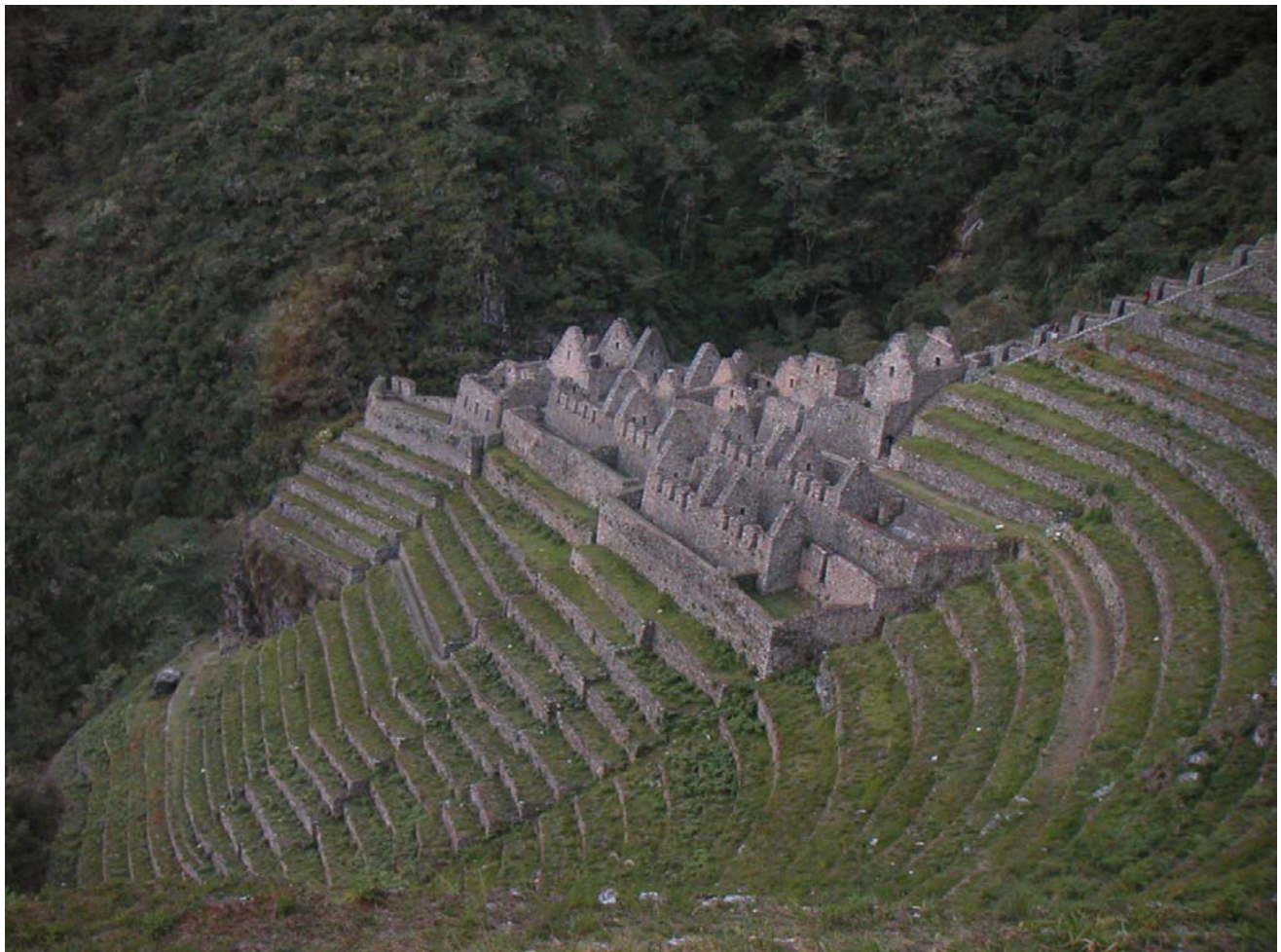


Our guide, Miguel, and his assistant, Luis, keep us entertained (that's Luis in the Inca bath)

The Incredible Variety and Beauty of the 3rd Day
Inca tunnels...cloudforests...solitary ruins...riotous foliage...snow-capped Andes



Winay Wayna
Our reward at the end of the 3rd day



Winay Wayna, last way station before Machu Picchu – a breathtaking sight at dusk

Dawn of the 4th Day



“Good morning, coca tea,” the porters call softly outside our tents. It’s 4 am. We’re tired and groggy. The tea helps a bit. We pack quickly, eat breakfast quickly, and begin hiking. Luis is up front, leading us at a fast clip. It’s dark enough for the first ten minutes that we use headlamps, then dawn arrives. The mountains are shrouded in mist, picture-perfect, but we’re hiking so fast it’s difficult to slow down enough to take a photo. I manage one shot. There’s a long line of hikers all moving towards the same destination and no one wants to lose their place. The trail contours a mountainside, drops into cloudforest. There are some really beautiful orchids here...” (Journal excerpt)



Machu Picchu!



“We come to an almost vertical flight of fifty steps. We climb it breathlessly. Another fifteen minutes brings us to a sharp turn, and around that turn is Intipunku, the Sun Gate, and our first fantastic view down onto Machu Picchu.

There it is—a magnificent city of stone situated on a high saddle among towering mountains. Ancient, mysterious, ethereal in the mist. And a bit forbidding. Row upon row of steep terraces descend in green steps from the city. There’s no sun for us at the Sun Gate, but there is a break in the swirling clouds that allows us to see Machu Picchu spread out before us.

Five minutes after we arrive, the mists become so dense that Machu Picchu vanishes...”

Machu Picchu

Photos from the misty 4th day of our Inca Trail adventure



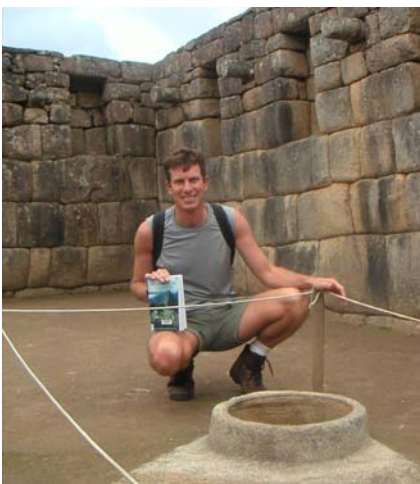
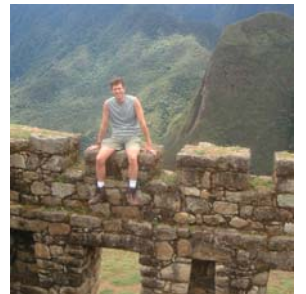
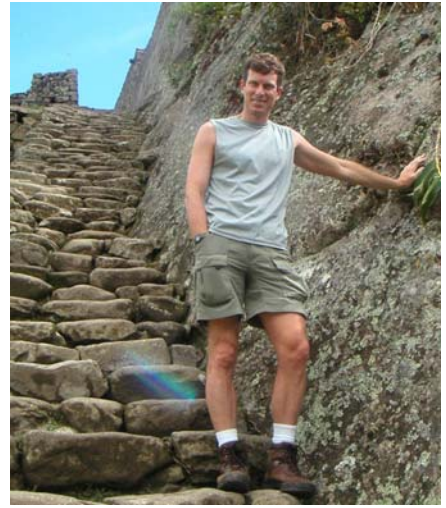
Machu Picchu

So glad we stayed the extra day!



Machu Picchu

We thoroughly explored the ruins on our "bonus day"



Cuzco City Tour

Cobbled streets, Inca walls, the Plaza de Armas – and Sacsayhuaman



“The Incan fortress of Sacsayhuaman (‘sexy woman,’ as every tour guide likes to joke) overlooks Cuzco. Our guide informs us that while Machu Picchu is magical, Sacsayhuaman is a miracle, because no one can explain exactly how the Incas constructed it. The blocks of stone are massive—the largest is 28 feet tall and weighs 140 metric tons. The stones fit so perfectly that no blade of grass or steel can slide between them. There is no mortar. They often join in complex and irregular surfaces that would appear to be a nightmare for the stonemason. With only natural fiber ropes, stone hammers, and bronze chisels, it must have been an enormous task. How did the Incas suspend such massive rocks? How did they get them to fit so perfectly? After all, they were too big to move in and out of place to “tailor” their fit. And there are tiny irregular corners that should have broken off when the stones were fitted into place, and yet they are intact. These remain mysteries to this day...” (Journal excerpt)

Trip to Peru – Cuzco, the Inca Trail, and Machu Picchu

September 2004

Fantastic trip to an exotic locale, Machu Picchu, ancient Incan city of mystery. Of course, we do it the hard way, hiking for four days along the Inca Trail to reach the city on dawn of the fourth day. The mist-enshrouded city is magical. We also spend two days before and two days after our Inca Trail adventure in the oldest continuously inhabited city in the Americas, Cuzco.

Sep 3 (Fri) – Fly to Lima. Our trip begins with an all-day flying fest from Denver to Atlanta to Lima. We get up before 5 am to catch our 8:30 am flight to Atlanta. We finally arrive in Lima at 10:30 pm. Fortunately I've passed most of the day reading a great book called *Conquest of the Incas* by John Hemming, which gets me even more excited about our trip. Robin spends her time reading about Peru and the places we'll be visiting. By the time we pick up our luggage (which, frighteningly, is the last off the baggage claim carousel), change \$100 over to Peruvian soles (we receive about 330 soles), and get through customs, it is after midnight.

It is a great joy to see our last name on a sign at the Lima airport. A driver from our hotel named Jose is there to pick us up as planned. He takes us through some very scary streets (the kind you keep your doors locked for) until we reach the Miraflores district about twenty minutes later. This is the most upscale district in Lima. It is a foggy night, as are most nights in Lima this time of year. We stay at the Hotel San Antonio Abad, a pleasant inn that costs us \$55, a relatively small amount for us but an expensive inn to most Peruvians. We go straight to bed, exhausted just at the thought of having to get up before 5 am again to catch our flight to Cuzco.

Sep 4 (Sat) – Arrive in Cuzco. We manage a quick breakfast at the inn before Jose drives us back to the airport. What we see of Lima doesn't impress us. Later, when we talk to other members of our Inca Trail group, we discover that none of them think much of Lima either: it's just a city you have to pass through on your way to more interesting sights in Peru. After an hour in the air, our LanPeru flight touches down at 11 am, and at last we are here, in Cuzco, "the navel of the world" according to the ancient Incans. A local band plays Peruvian music at the airport, and this is enough to make Robin teary-eyed, she's so happy to be starting this adventure.

A taxi from our hotel picks us up and whisks us through town to our hotel, called the Rumi Punku, which means "door of stones" in Quechuan. Indeed, we enter through an actual Incan doorway, a characteristic trapezoidal stone entryway. The double jamb indicates it was once the entrance to a sacred place, although in this case the original purpose is unknown.

The Rumi Punku becomes our home away from home for four days of our trip—two days before and two days after our Inca Trail adventure. It is a peaceful oasis in a busy city, with colonial buildings inside the locked front gate. The main courtyard inside is a pleasant tiled square with hanging plants and a birdcage full of happily chirping parakeets. In the back, facing a beautiful Inca wall, is a peaceful garden with a large stone urn. The Rumi Punku is located in old town Cuzco on a quiet street called Choquechaca, just two blocks from the Plaza de Armas, the main square, so it offers easy access to the city's historic sites.

After throwing our bags into our room, we are treated to a cup of coca tea in the breakfast room. Coca tea is made from whole coca leaves, the same leaves used to make cocaine. But in their natural state, they are only a mild narcotic—akin to the caffeine in coffee, I would guess. The green-leaf tea is actually quite tasty, somewhat like Chinese tea. We drink a lot of coca tea over the next few days, because it is said to help with altitude sickness and is also one of the characteristic drinks of the region.

We have three things we need to accomplish on our first day in Cuzco. The first is to pick up the "Boleto Turistico," or Cuzco tourist ticket, which costs \$10 and allows you access to 16 different sites in and around town. Next we go to Peru Treks, our Inca Trail trekking company, and make our final payment of \$400. It feels good to get some of that cash off our hands—I have more than \$1000 stuffed in a security belt around my waist, and I feel a bit vulnerable as a result. Peru Treks informs us that Q'ente tours will actually be running our trip, which is okay, since Q'ente is a highly respected name. Since the Peruvian government strictly limits the number of people who can go on the Inca Trail on any given day, it's not unusual for companies to combine their groups in this way. We learn there are 16 people in our group—the maximum number—not to mention two tour guides, 18 porters, and a cook (a very good cook, as it turns out). At another office in town, we prepay our hotel in Aguas Calientes, the town just below Machu Picchu. We also prepay our entire stay at the Rumi Punku. So now that moneybelt around my waist isn't quite so heavy, and I feel a little less vulnerable. We celebrate with a tasty chorizo and sausage pizza at a comfortable trattoria just off the Plaza de Armas.

We begin to get a sense of the city as we run these errands. The streets are cobbled, quaint, narrow, and usually fairly steep. Cars and taxis tear up and down them with abandon, beeping lightly but repeatedly to warn pedestrians to get back on the narrow sidewalks if they're not there already. Dogs trot about on their

own recognizance, apparently ownerless, clearly savvy about cars. Cute Peruvian kids abound, many dressed in traditional Incan garb. Some hold lambs and are obviously dressed up for the tourists who want to take their pictures. Others try to sell you postcards of Cuzco or animal hand puppets or other trinkets. They can be quite persistent. “Why you no want to buy from me? Why?” they ask, apparently hurt by your indifference. When we say “Gracias, no,” they say “Maybe later, okay? You remember me, okay? My name Tom Cruise.” Several young boys use the “Tom Cruise” line. One young boy manages to give us an unplanned tour of a section of Incan wall, pointing out a condor shape in the stones, and thus receives a small tip of a few soles. A sol is about thirty cents, not much to us but a lot to them.

We get used to saying no a lot. When we walk along the fashionable streets surrounding the Plaza de Armas, we are inundated by young men and women hired for the express purpose of getting us to eat in the upscale restaurants they represent. Three or four people hover around us, showing us the menus, jabbering about why their restaurant is the best, how they have a balcony, how they offer free pisco sours, and so on. Some claim they have a balcony, then you walk inside and there isn’t one. But all the pestering is done with a pleasant smile, and if you take it in the right spirit, it can be fun. For a real adventure, take a walk up Avenida Procuradores, better known as Gringo Alley. This short, steep street is literally lined with restaurants, and if you want the ultimate in attention, this is the place to go. Halfway up the street I’m laughing out loud because of all the people trying to sell us stuff at the same time. “Estoy lleno” (“I’m full”), I learn to say, indicating we’ve already eaten, then they leave us alone, at least until the next block of restaurants.

Shops catering to tourists line the streets. Every other store sells bottled water, and every other store from that sells baby alpaca sweaters and blankets. Some of the stores are upscale and expensive, selling only handmade products, others are dark holes in the wall that you feel a little afraid to enter, but most are in between, typically staffed by Peruvian women who are gracious and eager for your business. You get the best prices as you radiate outward from the Plaza de Armas. On the side streets, you find many street vendors, typically Peruvian women with their children, who sit right on the sidewalks (which explains why you have to venture out onto the streets sometimes and play chicken with the taxis). They display their wares on colorful blankets laid out on the sidewalks—scarves, sweaters, colorful textiles of all types, intricate wooden carvings, puppets, silver jewelry. We

see little outright begging in Cuzco but much selling of textiles, ceramics, and postcards.

We pay a brief visit to the Plaza de Armas. This large, tiled central square is the heart of the city of Cuzco. The Cathedral dominates the northeast side of the plaza. A central fountain and grassy triangles with garden plots soften the plaza and make it a pleasant place to relax. Benches line the walkways, and on sunny days, they are full of Peruvians and tourists enjoying the ambiance.

On our way back to the hotel, we walk up a street called Hatunrumyoc and discover a beautiful Incan wall with enormous granite blocks of all shapes and sizes carefully fitted together without mortar. It turns out this is one of the best examples of polygonal Incan masonry in the city, and it is such a pleasure to walk along that we make it our usual route to and from the Plaza de Armas. There is one famous polygonal stone in this wall that all the tourists come to see, because it contains twelve points, or corners, each fitted perfectly to the other stones around it. When you consider that the Incans had no iron tools, and were essentially chipping stone using other, harder stones, it makes you shake your head at the perfection they achieved. Earthquakes have destroyed most of the original Spanish colonial architecture in Cuzco, but they have left these unmortared Incan walls unscathed.

Back in our room, we realize it’s a bit chilly and look for the heater. There is none. We go back down to the office and rent a portable heater for \$3 a night. We consider it money well spent and keep our room nice and toasty from then on. Cuzco’s elevation is nearly 11,000 feet, so the air is thin and it gets quite chilly at night. During the day, when the sun is shining, it’s comfortable wandering around in shorts and a t-shirt, but that all changes once the sun disappears. I find I’m one of the few people in Cuzco wearing shorts. Later on, on the Inca trail, the guides and other people in our group find it amusing that Robin and I wear shorts while hiking, but it seems natural to us who are from Colorado. We keep layers handy to keep warm as needed, but find it more comfortable to start light.

After a pleasant nap with our heater blasting, snuggled under warm alpaca blankets, we go to dinner at the Andean Grill, with a prime location on the Plaza de Armas. We sit at a table for two on the second floor, with a beautiful open window overlooking the plaza, and feel like we’ve gotten the best seats in the house. It’s evening and a misty rain is falling. The plaza, the cathedral, and the monastery are bathed in soft light that makes them even more beautiful. We order the Incan Platter for two and dine on roasted *cuy* (guinea pig, an Incan delicacy), grilled alpaca (delicious), calf’s heart (overcooked and tough), quinoa (a traditional

Incan grain similar to couscous), red potato (appropriate since Peru is the original home of the potato), and stuffed pepper (extra-hot). Neither of us is wild about the guinea pig—there's very little meat on it, and it's gamy—but at least we've tried it. The quinoa mixed with cheese is fantastic. We wash it all down with some Cusqueña beer. We're also served an aperitif called "coca sour," similar to a pisco sour, sweet and sour at once.

We walk back along the Plaza de Armas. It's a chilly evening, and Robin gets a hankering for hot cocoa. We ask at a pastry shop along the plaza if they have hot cocoa to go. "Sure," the waiter says, smiling and ushering us in. He seats us. We reiterate we want it to go, and, still smiling amiably, he says, "No, here," and we laugh and give up and take our seats. The hot cocoa is made with real chocolate, what we've come to think of as "Mexican style," and is wonderful.

We poke in and out of a few shops along the plaza. Nearly everyone is glued to their TVs, watching a soccer game between Peru and Venezuela. As we head back outside, enjoying the pleasant evening, we hear a huge roar and see people on the plaza scattering this way and that, trying to get to the nearest TV. Peru has just scored a goal!

Back in our room, it's so warm and toasty that we decide to stay in for the rest of the evening. We have a tour that starts early tomorrow morning and lasts all day, so a little extra sleep isn't a bad idea.

Sep 5 (Sun) – Sacred Valley Tour. We begin our day with a complimentary breakfast in our hotel—thick homemade bread and jam, fresh orange juice and papaya juice mixed together, and, of course, coca tea. At 8:30 sharp our phone rings in our room: a driver has arrived to pick us up for our full-day Sacred Valley tour. The driver drops us off at a bus. We sit in the very back of the bus, where the seats are raised, giving us a view out the front window. Also in the back row are Leon and Yvette, a young couple from Houston who we quickly become fast friends with, especially when we learn they are also beginning their Inca Trail hike tomorrow with Q'ente.

The Sacred Valley tour takes us to sites along the fertile valley that stretches out from Cuzco along the Urubamba River (or Wilkamayu River in Quechuan). This entire region was the heart of the Inca civilization from the 14th to the 15th centuries.

Our first stop, the Pisac market, is huge and colorful. Each Sunday, villagers from miles around gather to barter and sell their produce—and hundreds of tourists arrive to soak up some of the local charm. You can buy a wide variety of handicrafts at the seemingly endless rows of crisscrossing stalls hung

with colorful blankets—knitted hats, chess sets, stone figurines, brightly decorated ceramic pots, colored beads, alpaca products of every kind. We buy a baby alpaca sweater for me and two for Robin for \$15 each (we've realized by now we'll need them to keep warm at night during our Inca trail hike), a small chess set with Inca warriors, and a knitted cap with the word "Cuzco" around the rim. I wander over to the produce section of the market and find a huge assortment of brightly colored fruits and vegetables I can't even begin to identify.

The next stop is lunch in the tiny town of Urubamba. We and our new friends eat at a buffet restaurant serving Peruvian food. The cost is \$7 each—pretty steep by Peruvian standards, but hey, we're on vacation. Once again we chow down on quinoa, alpaca, calf's heart, potato dishes, and more. Dessert is flan and "mais morado," or "purple corn," a corn-based pudding that tastes nothing like corn and quite a bit like jello.

Back on the bus, our tour guide points out the window. "All this land, she is covered with junk mice," she says, and we look at each other, confused. Eventually we puzzle it out and realize she's saying "young maize." For the rest of the trip, we joke about the junk mice of Peru.

Next stop is the Incan ruins of Ollantaytambo. This fortress-like structure protected the strategic entrance to the lower Urubamba Valley. The temple area is at the top of steep terracing which helped to provide excellent defenses. Stone used for these buildings was brought from a quarry high up on the opposite side of the Urubamba River—an incredible feat involving the efforts of thousands of workers. Our guide points out the grassy ramp up which the huge stones were dragged. Since the Incas never invented the wheel, they might have used logs or rounded stones as rollers. Ollantaytambo is one of the few places where the Inca were able to resist attacks from the Spanish. The Inca's forces rained down showers of arrows, spears, and rocks on the Spanish troops. We climb up the steep terraces, huffing and puffing, and can see why the Spanish had such trouble.

Our guide leads us up three-quarters of the way, then starts to descend. Maybe she's too out of breath to continue. We ask if we can continue up on our own, and she agrees but tells us to be quick about it. We and our friends race up to the top, visit the stone temples there, admire the fantastic view, snap some photos, then race back down again.

On the bus, we buy some licorice-tasting "Inca anise" from a vendor. Then we're off to our final destination, the small Andean Indian village of Chinchero, located

high up on the windswept altiplano, or “high plains,” at 12,300 feet. There are beautiful views on the way there, with the snow-capped peak of Mt. Salkantay (over 20,000 feet) dominating the western horizon. A bright rainbow seems to beckon us forward.

The village of Chinchero mainly comprises adobe houses, and locals still go about their business in traditional dress. Darkness is falling by the time we arrive. Since we’re only 13 degrees south of the equator, darkness falls quickly, and always around 6 pm. We pass through an outdoor market, climb steep stone steps, reach a grassy main plaza, and enter the quaint adobe colonial church.

After a few minutes I wander back on my own to the outdoor market. Some baby alpaca blankets with geometric designs caught my eye on the way in. I begin to bargain with the Peruvian woman selling them, and we agree on a price of \$20—if Robin agrees. I race back to the church, bring Robin back with me, and we end up buying two of the blankets for \$20 each. I suspect we could have gotten them even cheaper if we’d bargained harder, but we’re happy and so is the Peruvian woman. Out of curiosity, I check on-line when we get home and find the identical blankets selling for an amazing \$118 each.

We’re all tired as we drive the last hour home in the dark. Our gung-ho bus driver passes several slow-moving vehicles on the narrow road, flashing his lights at oncoming cars, which sometimes have to stop altogether to give the bus time to get back over to its own side. It’s better not to watch. We nap until the bus pulls up at the Plaza de Armas.

We end up treating our two new friends to a nice, long dinner at a cozy restaurant just down the street from our hotel called “Ritual.” Hot soup, unusual entrees (like my macaroni with curry), and fruit and ice cream for dessert top off a productive day of sightseeing and shopping.

We say our farewells, buy bottled water for our trek for 1 sole each, and head up to our room to finish packing. This is going along swimmingly until Robin realizes she’s missing her rain pants. She must have left them on the bus! She’s really upset for awhile—how annoying to lose your rain pants the day before a long trek along the Inca Trail—but eventually she settles down and we finish up packing.

We’re in bed by 11 pm, an hour later than planned. We have to get up at 4:45 am to start our Inca Trail adventure. I guess we’ll have to function on adrenaline.

Sep 6 (Mon) – Begin Inca Trail. We’re ready to go by 5:30 am, but our hotel pickup doesn’t occur until 6:15

am, so we have a bit of time to relax. We’re disappointed to discover that Yvette and Leon aren’t part of our Inca Trail group after all. Yvette leans out the window of her bus as it’s pulling out and tells us they’re part of a *second* Q’ente tour leaving that same day. Oh well, we still expect to see them now and again along the trail—and this turns out to be the case.

We board our bus and get our first glimpse of the fourteen companions who will accompany us along the way. All younger than us. All couples except for a single guy named Steve from Birmingham, England, and a single girl named Shaney from San Jose, California. All told, five are from England, two from Belgium, and nine from the U.S. Our main guide is named Miguel, and the assistant guide is named Luis. Both seem energetic, friendly, and competent. Miguel’s English is quite good, and Luis’s is at least comprehensible.

Our bus takes us back to Ollantaytambo, where we have 20 minutes for a quick breakfast. We sit across from Mike and Sarah, who are traveling companions from Georgia and Chicago, respectively. We discover that Sarah was born and raised in Lafayette, Colorado, just one town over from us. She and Mike even climbed Mt. Audubon this summer, getting ready for the Inca Trail, just like we did. On our way back to the bus, we buy a packet of coca leaves for 1 sole (about 30 cents), and two Snickers bars for 4 soles each. Leon and Yvette come over to say hi and give us an extra wooden walking stick they bought. I end up using it the whole way along the Inca Trail.

The final bus ride along a bumpy dirt road dead-ends at “Kilometer 82,” the traditional starting point for the four-day Inca Trail adventure. The trailhead is at 8,528 feet and situated along the Urubamba River. It’s 11 am and raining as we get off the bus. We pull on our raingear. Vendors try to sell us bottled water, hats, rain ponchos, and candy bars. There’s a long preparation period as people get their packs sorted out. Robin and I have hired the services of ½ porter each (\$35 per person) to carry our sleeping bags (rented from Peru Treks for \$8 each), sleeping mats, and extra clothing, so we only have daypacks to carry, but other people are carrying full backpacks. We made the strategic decision to go as lightly as possible so we can enjoy ourselves along the way instead of struggling along looking at our feet. Neither of us regret that decision.

So now it’s noon. The rain has stopped and it’s misty-sunny out. We start hiking. This is the “easy” day of the hike, kind of a warmup for the days to come. We have 12 km or about 7 miles to cover. We cross the river over a pedestrian bridge, climb steeply uphill for

about five minutes, then work our way gradually uphill for about an hour as we follow along the Urubamba and then a stream called Kusichaca. We reach a point where we can look down on our first Incan ruins of the hike, a small set of stone buildings that probably served as a way station for Inca runners. The trail gets steeper. We stop for lunch around 2 pm.

All this while, porters have been running by us up the trail with huge loads on their backs. They charge ahead of us so that, by the time we arrive at our lunch spot, they already have a communal tent with folding chairs set up for dining, as well as plastic bowls filled with steaming hot water and a cake of soap and a washcloth next to each bowl. Luxury! We wash our hands and faces and enter the tent, where we are served delicious hot food, including a creamy soup that could be served in a gourmet restaurant. A hot shredded chicken dish is the entrée. We all agree this is much better than the cold salami and cheese most of us eat for lunch on the trail. There is also a cucumber and tomato salad and a variety of teas to choose from.

A short hike after lunch brings us to the extensive ruins of Llactapata, an Incan temple site. The ruins are far below us, on the far side of the river. They are impressive even from this distance. The lower terraced walls are particularly beautiful as they snake back and forth, following the contours of the river. Llactapata was primarily an agricultural station used to supply Machu Picchu with maize, the staple crop of the Incas. The settlement comprised over one hundred houses for the workers and soldiers, including five baths.

More uphill hiking brings us to a tiny village where the villagers are serving chicha, a corn-based alcohol. A red flag attached to the end of a long pole signifies this fact. Anywhere you see this red flag at the end of a pole in Peru, it means chicha is being served. In this case, a Peruvian woman sits at a rough wooden table with a big jug of homemade chicha in front of her. Two Peruvian men are also sitting at the table with big glasses in front of them. I decide to give it a try. I pay my one sole for a glass of the stuff. It tastes like weak beer. Miguel tells us that by law, chicha can only be 3% alcohol. I pass the glass around to others in the group who are interested in trying it, including Robin. I don't tell them until afterwards that, traditionally, in making chicha, women masticate a small amount of the corn with their teeth—their saliva facilitates the fermentation process. Miguel assures me this is no longer the case except in remote villages. Of course, the village we're in looks pretty remote.

Another three or four miles of fairly easy uphill hiking brings us to Wayllabamba (Quechua for "grassy

plain"), the site of our first camp. Wayllabamba is at 9,840 feet and is the last Inca community on the trail. There's an actual snack bar at Wayllabamba where you can buy Coca-cola, beer, Snickers bars, and a host of other treats. It's a strange thing to hike 7 miles into the "wilderness" and find a snack stand. But such is the Inca Trail. Because our campsite is also an active farming community, we share the grassy space with horses, cows, pigs, chickens, dogs, and roosters.

What I think is an easy first day isn't so easy for everybody. Steve from Birmingham says, with his thick accent, "It's the most difficult thing I've ever done." Of course, Steve is carrying a huge backpack on his back and is used to sea level. I'm glad he's decided to hire a porter to help him through the rest of the trip.

We have afternoon tea in the communal tent, with biscuits and popcorn. The dome tents are already set up for us, so Robin and I stow our stuff inside one of them and explore some small Incan ruins nearby. It turns misty and a bit drizzly, perfect weather for a short nap.

Around 7 pm, we have dinner in the communal tent. Already there's a sense of camaraderie in our group. Miguel refers to us as "familia," family, and it feels that way. Lots of laughter and trading of stories. Richard and Jo from England are outgoing and fun and they keep the conversation rolling. They are both geologists working in Houston for an oil company. Learning the stories of the different group members is fascinating. One couple, Chris and Lucy (also from England), are on a one-year tour around the world. They're about two months into their one-year adventure and are loving every minute of it. Hearing about their hiking adventures in the Cordillera Blanca in northern Peru makes Robin and me want to join them. Shaney, the single girl from San Jose, says she barely found the courage to come on this adventure all by herself, but is so glad she did since our group is such fun.

After dinner, we venture outside the tent and discover an incredible starscape above our heads. It's very dark out. These are southern constellations we hardly recognize, and so many stars it makes your head spin. The southern cross is hidden behind the mountains, unfortunately. Someone asks Luis about the llama constellation. First he points south, then north, then says it's hidden behind the mountains, and we're left wondering if he really knows or not.

We go to sleep in our tents, but sleep isn't exactly easy. Somewhere in the middle of the night, we hear horses whinnying to each other from one meadow to the next. Some time later, we're awakened by a very loud chomping noise just outside our tent. A horse or

cow is grazing just inches from our heads. The sound is comical. Then there's the rooster crowing at 4 am, before the sun has even begun to appear. I learn that roosters don't just crow once, but many times, all through the morning hours. It makes me wonder if rural farm life is all it's cracked up to be.

Sep 7 (Tue) – Wayllabamba to Paqaymayu. This day is considered the most physically challenging of the Inca Trail. The elevation gain is nearly 4,000 feet, from 9,840 at Wayllabamba to 13,766 at the first pass, called "Dead Woman's Pass." Even the name intimidates. Dead Woman's Pass represents the high point of the hike—nearly 14,000 feet. The distance of this day's hike is 12 km, or about 7 miles.

"Good morning, coca tea," the porters call softly outside our tents at 6 am, passing steaming cups of tea inside. Breakfast in the communal tent is a grand affair—huge pancakes with sugar, flatbread, cream of wheat, fruit with granola. Serious carb loading! We joke they're trying to fatten us up before the slaughter.

It's steep slogging for the next six miles. The trail consists primarily of stone steps leading upwards like an ancient StairMaster. It's funny that Peruvian people tend to be of small stature, but their ancestors built steps for giants. It takes 1½ hours to climb from our campsite to Tres Piedras, or "Three Stones," our first rest stop along the way. Here a mule lies idly in the grass before a fantastic backdrop of Andean snow-capped mountains. Not surprisingly, Peruvians mill about selling bottled water and candies. We snack on Snickers bars and other treats we've packed in with us.

Then we're off again for the next push, another steep 1½ hour climb to Llulluchapampa. I get into a great rhythm and am the first to reach the top. It's cold and windy up here and I throw on my fleece and raingear immediately to stay warm. Robin is next up, along with Mike and Sarah (formerly of Colorado)—so the Colorado contingent is holding its own. Not sure how Mike from Georgia is keeping up, but he is. It takes awhile for the rest of the group to arrive, but once they do, it's a pleasure to pop into our communal tent and sip a cup of hot tea. The wind buffets the tent on the outside, but we're toasty inside drinking tea and eating flatbread-and-cheese sandwiches and popcorn.

The final ultra-steep push is to the very top of Dead Woman's Pass. It's supposed to take another 1½ hours, but our Colorado contingent—me, Robin, and Sarah—climb up in just under an hour, passing Yvette and Leon on the way. Mike isn't too far behind. It's hard slogging, that's for sure, and we're grateful for the fourteeners we've climbed earlier in the summer. Luis, our assistant guide, comes racing past us at the

last minute to reach the top first—but hey, he's a guide and he hikes this thing weekly.

This is true Andean high country—mountainous, cold, bleak, windy. But the views in both directions are fantastic. There's a lot of celebrating up top, and a lot of relief at having made it this far. If you stand right at the top of the pass, the wind is freezing, but a short way down on the eastern slope, it's not so bad, and the sun is shining. We relax and watch the people struggling up the path like a long row of heavily burdened ants. The Englishman Richard toils up the last few steps, panting and perspiring, and cries "Bloody hell!" That about sums it up.

Robin has carried two pebbles all the way from the stream by the campsite to the top of the pass, and now, according to tradition, we place them on top of a cairn of pebbles, along with two coca leaves, making a wish for more adventures like this one.

Leon and Yvette's group want a group photo at the summit, and I become the photographer, taking pictures with twelve or thirteen different cameras. Robin is my assistant, handing me one camera after another. I'm adopted into their group as an honorary member for my services.

The tail end of our group is still struggling up to the top when we begin heading down the other side towards our campsite at Paqaymayu, about 1½ hour's journey steep downhill. The mists curl around the Andean peaks, and it all feels very mysterious and Peruvian. We speak with Chris and Lucy for awhile about their world travels, then I join Luis at the front of the line and speak with him in Spanish for an hour or so. This is great practice for me. We alternate speaking English and Spanish, since we both crave the practice. Luis is good-natured and energetic, with ambitions of being a lead guide himself soon. He is very impressed when he hears I work in aerospace. He shakes my hand and seems to be under the mistaken impression I'm an astronaut or rocket scientist of some importance. I try to disabuse him of this, but he persists in asking me my thoughts about space travel and aliens and life on earth. I wax eloquent in Spanish, relying heavily on my science fiction reading to see me through.

We also teach each other some fun phrases. He teaches me a few Quechuan words. My favorite is "Hakku!" which means "Let's go!" From then on, whenever we finish with a break and are about to start hiking again, Robin and I say "Hakku!" to each other. If you're speaking to a group of people, you say "Hakku-choo" (the spelling here is phonetic). In turn, I teach Luis the cowboy phrase "Saddle up!" and from

then on he uses it whenever we start hiking, to the amusement of the group.

The other Quechuan phrase he teaches me is (phonetically) “Im-eye-nal-ya,” which means “How are you doing?”—and the response, “A-yee-yang-mee,” “I’m doing well.” When a porter passes me, I try this out. I say “Im-eye-nal-ya,” and he looks surprised and pleased and responds shyly, “A-yee-yang-mee.”

Porters pass us so often that we get used to shouting “Porter!” up the line, so that we can all make space for them to pass. Maryann from Maryland shouts “Porter!” then races ahead herself, to our surprise.

We arrive in camp at 2:30. The tail end of the group reaches camp around 4:00. In the meantime, I decide to take a shower—a very very cold shower on a very cold day, perhaps the coldest I’ve ever had. There are actual bathroom facilities with flush toilets at this vast campsite, and there’s also a shower stall, but the water is all cold all the time. But the thought of being clean is just so enticing. I strip down, soap up, then stick my head in and out of the water. It’s way too cold to leave it under continuously. Even with the in-and-out approach, I get two severe “head cramps” similar to eating ice cream too fast. I throw my body under the chill current long enough to get the soap off, then dry off using a thin excuse of a towel. Teeth chattering, I throw myself back into my nice fleece jacket and pants just as quick as I can. Robin washes her hair but refuses the all-body wash, smart girl that she is.

As soon as the last hikers arrive in camp, lunch is served. Lunch at 4:00 pm! But oh, is it good. Delicious hot soup (this chef really knows his soups), yucca, fried rice, and tea. Followed by a nap and then dinner at 8:00 pm. None of us is that hungry, but of course we eat anyway. It’s very cold outside, so the hot food does us good. It’s the coldest night of the trek, since the campsite is at an elevation of 11,480 feet. I have every piece of clothing on that I’ve brought, including my newly purchased alpaca sweater, so I’m warmer than most. Our guides serve us two steaming pitchers of hot wine, and this is the hit of the evening. We merrily get tipsy trying to keep up with Steve from Birmingham. Never challenge an Englishman to a drinking duel.

We have a jolly time that evening, with much laughter and high spirits all around. Everyone is happy to have completed the hardest day. During the course of conversation, Robin mentions I’ve submitted a crossword puzzle to the New York Times. There are several crossword puzzle enthusiasts in the group, and they pepper me with questions. I agree to send them my puzzle once I get back home.

We hit the sack. Thankfully there are no barnyard animals at this elevation, so we all get a decent night’s sleep—though our sleeping bags are just barely warm enough to ward off the chill.

Sep 8 (Wed) – Paqaymayu to Winay Wayna. This turns out to be the longest day of the trek. We start at sunrise and don’t arrive in camp until sunset. For me, it’s also the hardest day because I’m not as mentally prepared as I was the day before. There are some unforgettable Incan ruins along the way, though, which makes the effort worthwhile. Within the first hour, we see the small circular ruins of Runkurakay (12,464 ft.), which occupy a commanding position overlooking the Pacaymayu valley below.

We have two passes to climb today, the first one steep and short, the second more gradual. It takes less than an hour to reach the top of the first pass, “Abra de Runkurakay,” at 12,792 feet. Our guide Miguel informs us that, up until this point, much of the trail has been refurbished, but now the paving is almost all original. You feel like you’re really walking along the trail of the Incas. I’m the first to arrive at the top of this pass, and I join Leon and Yvette who are drinking tea with their group at an outdoor table. They are all bundled up, and it’s no wonder, because it’s freezing up here. I throw on my fleece and am glad when the rest of the group arrives so we can have tea inside our tent.

The descent down the steps from the pass is steep. Robin and I hang back and talk with Richard and Jo from England, who both have Ph.D.s in geology and are able to tell us all about the granite, quartz, serpentine (greenish in color), and other rocks we’re seeing. They explain how the granite starts out as molten, solidifies as it is pushed towards the surface, then fractures—then how the liquid quartz pushes into the fractures. So *that’s* how those lines of quartz get into the granite.

The section of trail up to the second pass is particularly beautiful. It crosses high stone embankments and skirts deep precipices. After about an hour, we arrive at Sayacmarca by way of a ladderlike, superbly designed stone staircase. The name Sayacmarca means “Inaccessible Town” and describes the position of the ruins perfectly, protected on three sides by sheer cliffs. Miguel turns the floor over to Luis. This is his first chance to give a talk of this kind. His English is a bit tortured, but we all help him out and give him our encouragement. I suspect the tour takes twice as long as it would otherwise because he has to struggle so much, but that’s okay. He runs up a set of “flying steps,” freestanding stones that jut out of the wall like stairs, to demonstrate how the Incas used them to climb from one terrace to another.

We have to backtrack a little to rejoin the trail as it passes Conchamarca, a small Inca dwelling situated in the shadows of Sayacmarca, which was probably a tambo for weary travelers on their way to Machu Picchu. From then on the path descends into magnificent cloudforest full of orchids, hanging mosses, tree ferns, and flowers, passing through an impressive Inca tunnel, carved into the rock, on the way.

Miguel wants us to arrive at the top of the second pass before having lunch, since this represents the last uphill climb of the trek. So up we go, climbing until we get to the top at 11,972 feet. And just like that, we're done with all the uphill climbing on the trek. It's all downhill from here to Machu Picchu at 7,872 feet. We have a late lunch at 2:30 in the tent while it thunders ominously outside. We're way above treeline, so the porters scurry around covering the packs and equipment with tarps to keep them dry.

We have a leisurely lunch before continuing on. A few minutes after the pass is Phuyupatamarca, the most impressive Inca ruin so far. The name means "Town in the Clouds." Access to the ruins is down a steep flight of stairs passing six Inca baths. An impressive Inca staircase continues down from the west side of the ruins. We descend a thousand or so steps. Big steps. Ouch. This is the part of the hike we're the least prepared for. We have more than 4,000 feet of elevation to lose on our way to Machu Picchu, and most of it is steep downhill. It takes a toll on the knees. My trusty walking stick helps a bit, but it's still tiring.

The terrain turns more jungle-like and humid the lower we descend. We start to see many small orchids growing trailside. Miguel tells us 500 different types of orchids have been identified along the Inca Trail. We keep count as he points them out, telling him, "Only 495 to go."

We're weary by the time we reach camp. It's after 5:30 and already getting dark. But we're not done yet. The most impressive ruins of the day are still ahead—that is, if we can get there before full darkness falls. The tail end of our group is still descending those giant's steps, so unfortunately they miss the ruins, but the rest of our group pushes on, amidst much groaning, with Luis in front. It takes about ten minutes to reach Winay Wayna ("Forever Young" in Quechua). Once we get our first view, we're all glad we made the effort to come, because they are magnificent. A whole Inca stone city with row upon row of steep agricultural terraces descending the hillside. Dusk is falling, so the ruins look mysterious and other-worldly. They are empty of tourists at this hour.

We get permission to make a quick tour. Luis takes us to a sequence of ten baths and tells us ritual cleansing probably took place here for pilgrims on the final leg of the trail to Machu Picchu. We do our own ritual cleansing. Luis goes first, bathing his face in water. Then each of us takes a turn. It feels spiritual and right. We descend a set of very steep steps to see more of the ruins. By the time we come back up again (which, by the way, is laughably painful after the long day of hiking we've had), it's full dark and we have to turn our headlamps on to be able to see.

We hike back through the jungle in darkness to our campsite. The porters have left our individual equipment in large blue rice sacks, so we have to segregate it in the dark using our headlamps. We're camped on terraces. The tents are lined up one right against the other with only the narrowest of paths in front of them, with a dropoff to the next terrace (and the next set of tents) below. It's a bit awkward maneuvering around without falling off.

Dinner is at 8:30 pm. The cook pulls out all the stops. We have spaghetti with meat sauce (oohs and aahs at this announcement), mashed potatoes, french fries, rice, a tasty steak dish with gravy, and more. There's way more food than we can eat, but we give it a valiant try. I actually get to enjoy a Coca-Cola with dinner. There's a restaurant at the Winay Wayna campsite where you can purchase Cokes and beers and even get a hot shower. Robin and I skip the showers since it's so late by the time we get into camp (and we know we'll be getting showers tomorrow), but we do stop in the restaurant for some Cokes, and again after dinner with members of our group for a celebratory beer. We ask Miguel and Luis to join us and buy them each several beers.

The big topic of conversation during dinner is the tips we need to leave tonight for the porters and guides. In the end, we agree to give all the porters and guides the same amount, then add to the guides' amount individually as we see fit. This means the porters make out quite well—about 45 soles each. After dinner, the porters crowd into the tent, standing behind our chairs. One member of our group, Chris, stands up and gives a great speech in Spanish to the porters telling them how much we appreciated their hard work. They applaud and so do we, and one porter sings a song for us, with the other porters singing and clapping along.

Later on, two porters stand quietly outside our tent. They say nothing at all, that's how shy they are, but we gradually realize they must be our personal porters and are awaiting their tips. We give them \$5 each and they seem pleased. Robin and I also give individual tips of 20 soles each to Miguel and Luis. We want to

make sure they're well taken care of because they've done such a great job.

We go to bed around 11 pm, much too late since Miguel tells us we have to get up at 4:00 am to beat the rush to Machu Picchu. I have trouble getting to sleep and manage only about 3 hours before our big day.

Sep 9 (Thu) – Winay Wayna to Machu Picchu. Up at 4:00 am. Tired and groggy. The coca tea in the tent helps a bit. We pack quickly, eat breakfast quickly, meet in the restaurant and begin hiking. Luis is up front, leading us at a fast clip. It's dark enough for the first ten minutes that we use headlamps, then dawn arrives. The mountains are shrouded in mist, picture-perfect, but we are hiking so fast it's difficult to slow down enough to take a photo. I manage one shot. There is literally a cavalcade of hikers moving towards the same destination, and no one wants to lose their place. Luis is keeping such a fast pace that we pass several other groups. The trail contours a mountain-side and drops into cloudforest. There are some really big orchids here, but we zip right past them, intent on reaching Intipunku, "the Sun Gate," before the first rays of the sun reach Machu Picchu around 7 am. After 1½ hours of hiking, we come to an almost vertical flight of fifty steps leading up to the final pass at Intipunku. We climb it breathlessly. Another fifteen minutes bring us to a sharp turn, and around that turn is the Sun Gate and our first fantastic view down onto Machu Picchu.

Wow. There it is—a magnificent city of stone situated on a high saddle among towering mountains. Ancient, mysterious, ethereal in the mist. Also a bit forbidding. Row upon row of steep terraces descend in green steps from the city. There's no sun for us at the Sun Gate, but there *is* a break in the swirling clouds that allows us to see Machu Picchu spread out before us in all its glory.

Five minutes after we arrive, the mist becomes so dense that Machu Picchu completely vanishes. The groups that congregated at this overlook point now begin to descend. We hike down the trail to a sacred burial site and get another quick peek of the city before the mists envelop it again.

Eventually we reach the Guardhouse, at the topmost corner of the city, and can see Machu Picchu through the swirling mists. We do a group photo here, then head down to use the facilities before meeting up again at the green umbrellas of a food stand.

Miguel leads us on a three-hour tour of the site. I won't go into details here, because Robin and I do an even more thorough tour on our own the next day. Suffice it to say that the city is just as magnificent in its

details as it is at a distance. The only downer is that the day turns cold and rainy. By the last hour, we all have our raingear on and are listening to Miguel's talk in a constant drizzle. After seeing all of the key sites, most of us agree it's time to catch the bus to Aguas Calientes. We head down on a zigzagging road at 1 pm and reach the tiny town about twenty minutes later.

Robin and I are the only ones staying an extra day at Machu Picchu (for which we are very grateful). The rest have to catch a train back to Cuzco that leaves at 4 pm. Until then, we hang out at a pizzeria with most of our tour group and celebrate our memorable trip together with hot wine and pizza. Robin and I sit across from Chris and Lucy and talk world travel. The whole group trades e-mail addresses. After two hours or so, Robin and I collect our bags, say farewell, and head off in search of our hotel. It's hard leaving—we've grown attached to these folks—but we know they're heading off to the train station in the next half hour or so, and for us, it's on to Gringo Bill's and some much-needed hot showers.

Gringo Bill's is a small hotel located at the corner of the main plaza in Aguas Calientes. We check in, shower, and nap despite the light construction work being done behind the hotel. Around 5 pm the hammering ends and things fall quiet.

We dine at Indio Feliz, probably the best restaurant in Aguas Calientes, known for its "French-Indian" cuisine. There's a fireplace and cozy seating. I have the trout "macho" (meaning "spicy") and Robin has a memorably delicious quiche lorraine with sliced tomatoes and mild mustard sauce on the side. Red wine for her, Coke for me, and flan for dessert. Afterwards, stuffed, we amble up an inclined, brick-lined street with surprisingly upscale shops and restaurants. The lighting is soft, the ambience pleasant. Clearly, Aguas Calientes is turning itself into a tourist haven in its own right.

I stay up for awhile reading a self-tour book on Machu Picchu. Then we go to sleep, in actual beds, which is a real treat.

Sep 10 (Fri) – Day at Machu Picchu. We wake up early and catch the 6:45 am bus to Machu Picchu. The sun is already up by the time we arrive—but hey, at least there *is* a sun! It's a beautiful day. Mist swirls up from the Urubamba River early on, but it enhances rather than detracts from the beauty of the site, and slowly evaporates as the day progresses.

We start by hiking up to the Guardhouse to get a fantastic overview. I can't stop taking pictures, it's so photogenic in the morning sunshine. After half an hour, we head down and begin to follow our guide-

book step by step through the complex of Machu Picchu. We begin at the Main Gate, where the Inca of old would have entered with great pomp and ceremony. Robin picks out “her home” near the entrance gate. We continue to the Temple of the Sun, the only rounded building in the complex—and the centerpiece of Machu Picchu, where some of the best stonework can be seen. We purify ourselves at the first of twelve interconnected fountains, bathing our faces in water.

Next comes the Royal Residence and the site of “the most beautiful wall in America,” as Hiram Bingham, the discoverer of Machu Picchu, put it. This is a wall of perfectly fitted, coursed granite (“coursed” meaning shaped into regular rectangles instead of “polygonal” or randomly shaped). Ironically, most modern visitors (including myself) prefer the polygonal walls because they are so unusual looking and irregular and yet fit so perfectly, but the Incas saved coursed stonework for their most sacred temples and residences.

By now it's quite hot. We're grateful to be wearing shorts, except that Robin's getting bitten on the legs by tiny midges that are almost invisible. We take a break in the shade at what's called the Artisan's Wall, a really beautiful stretch of polygonal, pink-hued masonry. Then we visit the Intihuatana, traditionally considered a sun dial, though our guide book disagrees, suggesting instead that it's an artistic representation of the mountain Huayna Picchu. In any case, it's an unusual piece of stonework that must have been sacred to the Incas, because it's located atop their highest temple. Nearby are two “image rocks” carved to exactly mirror the mountains behind them. Cool! There's also a Temple of the Three Windows which boasts three symmetrically carved windows that offer lovely framed views. We briefly tour the conveniently located stone quarry where the Incas mined their granite.

That completes our visit of the Western Sector, where most of the temples and royal residences are located. We take a break for lunch under the green umbrellas, paying exorbitant fees by Peruvian standards for a cheeseburger, fries, and Coke. After a brief nap in the sun, we continue to the Eastern Sector, which contains a few fancy residences for favored subjects and many more basic rooms for normal folk. The main attraction on this side is the Temple of the Condor, which contains a rock sculpture in the shape of—you guessed it—a condor. We also tour the Incomplete Temple, one of the few unworked areas in the complex.

One of the things we really admire about the Incas is how they work enormous *in situ* stones into their walls and buildings—that is, they don't move them but rather build *around* them, incorporating them into their

designs. They were clearly fantastic engineers. They say that 60% of the work at Machu Picchu took place underground, preparing the terraces and building sites to avoid flooding and make their buildings earthquake-resistant.

We wander through the maze of “conjuntos” (groups of buildings) in the Eastern Sector and are a little less thorough in following our guidebook by this point. For one thing, it's darned confusing over on this side, so instead of proceeding step by step, we amble about looking for interesting sights, then find the appropriate page in our guidebook. After an hour of this, I'm about worn out, but Robin's still going strong, so I relax and let her do some exploring on her own. Every once in awhile she calls me over excitedly to share something new. By 2 pm we've seen just about everything there is to see. We sit in the shade of a restored thatched house, admiring the view one last time, then make our way to the bus and back down to Aguas Calientes.

An afternoon thunderstorm causes us to pop into Indio Feliz for a cup of hot cocoa and some flan. Then we pick up our bags from the hotel and make our way to the train station. The train departs at 4:20 pm. We chat with a young couple seated across from us who tell us of a great beach in northern Peru, called Mancora Beach, where you can rent huts for \$12 a day. Sounds nice. After about three hours, the train stops in a town called Poroy and nearly everyone gets off. We follow their lead and take a connecting bus back to Cuzco for 5 soles. This saves an hour compared to staying on the train.

We're back at the Plaza de Armas by 8 pm. We have dinner at a nice restaurant called A Mi Manera, on our favorite street with the stone wall, Hatunrumyoc. We sit upstairs, by a window, looking out at a small square with a fountain. The free appetizer is *conchita con queso*, or toasted corn bits with cheese, which is addictive once you get started. The “chicken aji” entrée is quite good. The waiter finishes off the meal by giving us each a free shot of Peruvian tequila, which we can tell you has quite a kick.

It's a relief to get back to the Rumi Punku, our home away from home. We are just plain exhausted. We go to bed early and sleep in late.

Sep 11 (Sat) – Cuzco City Tour. Our first relatively quiet day of the trip. We sleep in, then share a delicious lunch at A Mi Manera, including *lomo saltado*, the most popular beef dish in Peru. It's a funky and surprisingly tasty dish that includes beef in a garlic gravy sauce with french fries mixed right in, along with onions, tomatoes, and bell pepper. We also enjoy the most popular Peruvian soup, *Sopa a la Criolla* (Creole Soup), which contains beef, noodles,

milk, and vegetables. Two lovely glasses of red Peruvian wine complete the meal.

During our lunch, we talk at length with our friendly Peruvian waiter, Danny, mostly in Spanish. He teaches us slang Peruvian. “Mi embrita” is “my girl.” He says people will get a laugh if I call Robin “mi embrita” because foreigners don’t use this word. It’s not in any dictionary, that’s for sure, though Danny assures me it’s “clean.” I try it out later on our taxi driver as we’re driving to the airport the next day and Danny is right—the guy turns around, flashes me a big grin, and starts joking about my bringing a different embrita back with me next time I come to Peru. No, I assure him, it will be the same embrita next time, too. Robin asks Danny a good slang word she can use to describe me. He says “Mi flaco,” which literally means “my thin” but somehow translates as “my guy.” “Una chela” is “a beer.” “Nobody says ‘una cervesa’ in Peru,” Danny assures us—nobody halfway cool, anyway. “Que lomo!” is “How sexy!” I get a kick out of this one since “lomo” literally means the prime loin of beef—as in the lomo saltado we’re eating. Another useful expression, Danny tells us (young college student that he is), is “Estoy misio,” which means “I’m out of money.” This could be true of us in the very near future.

At 1:30 we embark on our final tour, the Cuzco City Tour. We luck out and get a very good guide who speaks perfect English and has a dry sense of humor to boot. He’s a diminutive older man who dresses impeccably in a suit and carries an umbrella, which he raises up into the air when he wants our group to be able to find him. He takes us to three key sights. Two are directly on the Plaza de Armas.

The first is Korikancha, the “Temple of the Sun.” On the outside it’s your average Dominican church—but hidden inside its walls is a superbly crafted Incan temple. The Dominican friars of the 17th century built right onto the walls of the Sun Temple. Since then, much of the cloister has been gutted to reveal four of the original chambers of the temple. The finest Inca stonework in existence today is the curved wall beneath the west end of the church. In Inca times, the walls of the Korikancha were lined with 700 solid-gold sheets! There were life-size gold and silver replicas of corn, golden llamas, figurines, and jars. All that remains today is the stonework—the conquistadors took the rest. Unfortunately all the exquisite treasures ended up being melted down.

Next stop is the Cathedral, which dominates the northeast side of the Plaza de Armas and sits squarely on the foundations of an Incan palace. It is a typical baroque cathedral, almost obscenely full of ornate gold and silver altars, relics, and madonnas.

There are only two things I genuinely like in the cathedral. The first is a painting, done by a Peruvian artist, of the Last Supper showing Christ and the Apostles about to dine on guinea pig, washed down with a glass of chicha! The second is a figure called “the Black Christ” (not because it was painted black, but because the materials used to make it were oily, which over the centuries became dark due to candle smoke). But what I love about it is that the Peruvians parade this, their most cherished icon, through the streets on the occasion of big soccer matches, substituting Christ’s usual gold-embroidered loincloth with one emblazoned with the colors of their beloved “Cienciano” soccer team.

Sacsayhuaman (“sexy woman,” as every tour guide likes to joke) is the most important stop on the tour, our guide informs us. He says that while Machu Picchu is magical, Sacsayhuaman is a miracle, because no one can exactly explain how the Incas managed to construct it. The blocks of stone are massive—the largest is 28 feet tall and weighs 140 metric tons, far more massive than anything used at Machu Picchu. The stones fit so perfectly that no blade of grass or steel can slide between them. There is no mortar. They often join in complex and irregular surfaces that would appear to be a nightmare for the stonemason. With only natural fiber ropes, stone hammers, and bronze chisels, it must have been an enormous task. How did the Incas suspend such massive rocks? How did they get them to fit so perfectly? After all, they were too big to move in and out of place to “tailor” their fit. And there are tiny irregular corners that should have broken off when the stones were fitted into place, and yet they are perfectly intact. These are all mysteries.

There is no adornment or inscription on the walls—as at Machu Picchu, the stones are allowed to speak for themselves. They need no embellishment. We feel quite small standing below the main ramparts, which consist of three massive zigzagging walls designed to make any attacker expose his flanks. But this is much more than a fortress—it’s a work of art.

Our guide justifiably spends minimal time at the other stops—Q’enko, Puca Pucara, and Tambomachay—which pale by comparison to Sacsayhuaman.

We have soup for dinner that evening at a restaurant named Pukara—rustic potato and noodle soup and another bowl of sopa a la criolla. I sip an Inka Cola, Peru’s national soft drink, which is yellow in color and echoes the flavor of cream soda and bubble gum. Robin goes for the hot wine, which she’s developed a taste for ever since those cold nights on the Inca Trail.

Late that Saturday evening, we decide to go out and do a little partying Peruvian-style. We head to the Plaza de Armas and visit Mama Afrika's, one of the best hangouts/dance clubs in Cuzco (according to our hip waiter, Danny). We each order a drink called the "Machu Picchu," which has three tiers of color you're supposed to sip through, one after the other. Boy, that third tier is pure alcohol! Later on we turn in coupons we received outside the club for a free rum and coke. All this alcohol loosens us up enough to get us off our cushy chairs and onto the dance floor. It's midnight by now, and the club is hopping. The music, which started out as salsa, has segwayed into hip-hop and even a "Grease" remix. We feel a bit too old for this young crowd, but that doesn't stop us from joining in the festivities and having a blast. Like it says in one of the guidebooks, this place is "totalmente kickass!"

We stumble out of the club at 1 am and make our way home, laughing and happy. We have so little money left that pickpockets aren't much of a concern. Anyway, what I mostly have in my pockets at this point is candy. Robin thought it might be nice to bring candy from the U.S. for the kids, so she lugged a huge three-pound bag of assorted sweets all the way down to Peru. I hand out the first installment tonight when I see a group of five kids playing on the Plaza. I place a pile of candy surreptitiously on a concrete wall near where they're playing and sneak away. One kid immediately whoops for joy and pounces on the whole pile. The other kids throng around us. In a classic case of bad planning, I've given all the candy away and have no more to give. They hang onto us for several blocks. The whole time I'm telling them, "No tengo mas!" ("I don't have any more!"), but what I don't realize is that Robin, meanwhile, is handing out dollar bills as if they're candy! No wonder they're following us so aggressively.

Our tag-alongs consist of three girls who can't be more than seven or eight, and a small boy no older than five. The boy is literally clinging to Robin's coat. When I try to disconnect him he says "Fug you!", close to tears, and reconnects himself. Once I realize Robin is handing out money, I can understand his frustration. I shrug and give up a handful of Peruvian coins to the kids, but keep one "5 soles" coin in my hand. Somehow one of the young girls knows it's there and whispers in awe, "5 soles!" This is strangely heart-breaking, since 5 soles is about \$1.50 to us. I give her the coin. We make sure the young boy gets one of the dollar bills, too. Now we literally are out of money. Our little entourage finally disengages and melts away. Whew.

Sep 12 (Sun) – Cuzco to Denver. Even this day has its share of adventure. After a very necessary stop at

an ATM on Avenida del Sol, we go on a massive last-minute shopping spree, having decided that Peruvian blankets will make for fine Christmas gifts. The store we'd scoped out the night before turns out to be closed on Sunday, so we hunt around for awhile before finding a shopkeeper on a side street who has the type of "Alpaca Superfino" blankets in the pattern we want. But she only has two in stock and we want seven total. The shopkeeper tells us "Come back twenty minutes." She literally runs up the street to get more. We don't know what her source is, but twenty minutes later she has all the blankets we need. We negotiate and pay her \$19 per blanket. She is very happy and tells us this is her first sale of the whole week. We're glad to have found such a nice woman to buy from. We take the blankets back to our hotel and somehow find a way to pack them into our luggage.

I have nearly three pounds of candy bulging in my coat pockets and knapsack. We're determined to get rid of it before leaving Peru today. Our first thought is the Plaza de Armas, but there's a parade going on, with young children marching in goose-step formation, and with actual rifle-fire salutes from the soldiers. There are no street urchins anywhere to be seen; the local police have cleared them out, apparently, for this Sunday gathering. We wander along our favorite street, Hatunrumyoc, and pause at a small courtyard with a fountain. There are several kids here, including two cute little girls dressed up in full traditional costume holding lambs in their arms. We plop down on the curb. When one of the kids tries to sell us something, I say no but offer her a few pieces of candy. The next thing we know, there are seven or eight kids crowding around us looking for handouts. We're only too happy to oblige—and this time we have plenty for all. We fill their tiny hands to overflowing with sweets. They keep coming back for more, giggling with disbelief at their good luck. "For mi hermana" ("For my sister"), one of them says. Another one points to her lamb and says, "More for him, please." I keep handing candy out until there is no more. I show them my empty pockets and empty knapsack and they run off to enjoy their unexpected bounty.

We have a farewell chorizo pizza for lunch then pick up our bags and head to the airport. The fifteen-minute taxi ride costs us all of 5 soles.

Normally I would skip over all the boring flight details, but in this case, it's not so boring. We check in. Everything's fine for awhile, then we learn that the entire Cuzco airport is closed because of fog. If the fog doesn't lift by 4:30, that's it—the airport is closed for the rest of the day. The 4:30 deadline comes and the dreaded announcement is made. The airport is

officially closed. There's a mass exodus to the front of the airport to try to rebook for tomorrow's flights. Robin and I stand rooted in disbelief. It just doesn't seem that foggy out. It just doesn't seem right! We reluctantly call our hotel and ask if they can hold a room for us, and are just beginning to contemplate the nightmare of missing our international flight when gate attendants come rushing back into the terminal area. An airplane is taxiing towards the gate! It's *our* airplane. And since we didn't rush off, we're right near the front of the line. Hallelujah. The only sad thing is there are empty seats on the plane when it departs. We wonder how many people never heard the revised announcement.

We watch a cute show during the flight to Lima called "Just for Laughs," kind of like our "Candid Camera." Then comes the long, seven-hour wait in the Lima

airport until our Delta flight back to Atlanta at 12:10 am. We're down to just 7 soles. We put a lot of effort into deciding what we're going to have for dinner for 7 soles when most items cost 12 or more. We can get one egg for 3 soles. Is it worth it? There's one sandwich for 7 soles, but Robin hates that kind of sandwich. We end up splitting a bag of Lays potato chips and a Coca-cola, and that's our sad excuse for dinner.

Fortunately, we both manage to sleep during the long flight home, and we're served a warm breakfast around 6 am. It's after 1:30 pm by the time we finally reach our front door. There's Chaucer, very excited to see us. He's awake, even if we're not. But even though we're drained from our travels, we have no regrets. This has been a fantastic trip. On our list of "must-do" travel, we finally get to put a big checkmark next to Machu Picchu.