

My Trip To Peru

Oddly enough, my trip to Peru began on the morning I embarked on a two-week tour of China. The planning phase, anyway. As I waited for the taxi service to take me to the airport I received an email from GATE 1 TRAVEL with several promotional offers, including a very reasonably priced 10-day guided tour of Peru leaving from Miami (my hometown). Since Machu Picchu was one of my desired places to see in the world I booked the Peruvian tour on the spur of the moment via my computer... *just as the taxi pulled into my driveway*. Such is the allure – no, addiction – of world travel!

Over the following months my trip preparation consisted mainly of checking the itinerary and comparing it with the suggested places to visit on Frommer's website. I got inoculated against Yellow Fever and received the final series of Hepatitis A/B shots (which I began earlier in the year prior to leaving for China). I'm embarrassed to admit I did not know August was still winter in South America, and only discovered this when I went shopping at JCPenney for some 'summer' clothes to take on my trip. The cashier was Peruvian and when I mentioned I was visiting her country in less than a week she suggested I bring some warm clothing. Later, I Googled the current weather in Cusco and Puno. The temperatures plummeted into the twenties and thirties at night! I made sure to pack a jacket, and scoured my closets looking for the only sweater and sweatshirt I owned.

I also periodically checked online for news relating to Peru in the weeks prior to my trip. A new Peruvian president, former Lieutenant Colonel Ollanta Humala, had recently been sworn in. A leftist – with close ties to Hugo Chavez, the controversial leader of Venezuela – Humala was trying to reassure his nervous countrymen (and the rest of the world) that he intended to institute economic reforms similar to those in Brazil, *and not Venezuela*, hoping to improve the lives of more than 30% of the Peruvian population still mired in repressive poverty despite the country's overall economic growth the past decade. There were also some public strikes, including one by angry Peruvian tourists at Machu Picchu who were upset over the government's plan to restrict the number of daily visitors to the ancient site

in order to better preserve it. Overall, I did not read anything that caused major alarms to go off in my head.

One final note. I will sometimes use the word ‘Indian’ to describe Peruvian ethnic tribal groups. I understand that some people consider this to be politically incorrect, although in my own research the description came up quite frequently. It is not my intention to insult anyone, and I apologize in advance if I do. I use the term simply to distinguish between native ethnic Peruvians and those of mixed descent.

On the afternoon of August 19, 2011, I took a taxi to Miami International Airport and excitedly began my Peruvian adventure...

DAY ONE

My flight on TACA Airlines left on schedule at 4: 15 p.m. I had requested an emergency aisle seat for the extra legroom, but I needn’t have worried; the plane was an Airbus model and had plenty of legroom in its coach class. The flight itself took just over five hours and was very pleasant. I got to see two movies I hadn’t seen before (the exciting *Fast Five* and the amusing cartoon film, *Panda 2*). They served me an edible dinner of chicken and rice, and I even managed to get a little naptime in before we arrived in Lima at approximately 8:30 pm. There is only a one-hour time difference from EST, which I greatly appreciated; I did not suffer any jet lag on this trip. In fact, I was able to adhere to my own sleeping schedule throughout most of my visit.

At Jorge Chavez International Airport, as I was standing at the luggage carousel for what turned out to be an exceptionally long delay before I could retrieve my suitcase, I met Harry and Patty Messick, a couple from Tampa, Florida who were also in my GATE 1 tour group. The Messicks were seasoned travelers, but this was their first ‘guided’ tour. While waiting for our luggage I changed a hundred dollars into Peruvian soles (or sols) at a money exchange booth in the terminal building. It was not a good rate, just over 2.5 soles for each U.S. dollar; I would receive a much better exchange rate in both Cusco and Puno. With our luggage in tow we cleared customs and immigration and were met by a man holding a GATE 1 sign who told us

we had to wait for some tour members who were arriving on another flight. We must have been standing around for about 40 minutes before we were ushered into a shuttle van for a thirty-minute ride to our hotel, the QP.

I had not checked my GATE 1 account online prior to leaving Miami, and was unaware that there had been a change in hotels. Apparently, the Antiguas (our originally scheduled hotel) had been over-booked, and we were put up in the QP, along Jorge Chavez Avenue in the Miraflores section of Lima. It was after ten in the evening, and quite chilly, as we made our way through what looked like Lima's 'mean streets'; the squat, low-level buildings (many covered with graffiti) seemed deserted, and there was considerable trash along the curbs. I saw pockets of suspicious-looking young people hanging out on various corners, and I couldn't help but make a parallel comparison to my airport-hotel ride in Mexico City years earlier, where I got an eye-opening glimpse of the capital's down-trodden neighborhoods. Not the kind of 'first impression' most tourists wish to see. But by the time we reached the Miraflores district the street scene changed dramatically, and it was obvious this must be the more upscale area of Lima.

The QP, although larger than the Antiguas, was not a fancy hotel, but it was adequate. By the time we checked-in I was thoroughly exhausted and anxious to get some sleep. My room looked more like a small apartment, with a full kitchen area and a small living room. A curtain separated the bedroom section. It was also very cold. I could not figure out the heating system control panel situated just above the sofa. I ended up sleeping in my clothes for warmth. My right knee developed an odd pain which required two Advil's to relieve; I'm not certain if it was the cold weather or perhaps the confinement of the airplane seats that triggered the pain. To make matters worse, a car alarm kept going off throughout the night right outside my hotel window. And then my ex-wife called shortly after 1:00 am (she didn't know I was in Peru and was calling from Las Vegas where she lives to tell me something about my daughter). Because I did not have international roaming I wasn't able to receive her message or make any outside calls... so on top of the knee pain, the cold and the car alarm going off, I now had to ponder all night what sort of emergency might necessitate an early morning call from my ex. Not the best way to start my tour.

DAY TWO

The front desk never bothered to make my 7:00 am wake-up call, but luckily I had set the hotel alarm clock next to the bed (as a back-up). I took a really long hot shower and prepared two cups of coffee in the kitchen (I had brought along my own instant coffee and creamer). The previous evening Harry told me he had Googled the QP Hotel just before leaving the States and read a customer comment about how they offered a delicious chocolate pancake in their restaurant. With *that* thought in mind, I happily made my way down to the lobby at eight o'clock and, like the rest of my experience at the QP, was disappointed to discover that the 'restaurant' consisted of five tables lined up along a back wall, with a breakfast bar serving only scrambled eggs, some kind of hot dog/sausage meat and rectangular portions of cold and soggy waffles. There were some bread rolls, as well, and yogurt. I made the most of it, relishing the conversations I had with my fellow GATE 1 tour members more than the breakfast. I met Herman, a retired U.S. military man from the Philippines who was traveling with his daughter. And Tim and Jan Kinnison from Alabama. Tim was a retired air force pilot.

I usually travel by myself, but I am never alone. One of the great things about guided tours is that you meet so many like-minded world travelers, and inevitably make friends right from the git-go. During this particular trip, I became 'buddies' with Tim and Jan, Harry and Patty, and Enna, a nurse from New York City (although, I kept calling her 'Anna' during the trip....Sorry, Enna). Normally -- in my past journals -- I would list the names of *all* my fellow traveling companions, but there were just too many of them on this tour. *Sixty-four to be exact!* We were split up into two groups; ours had 33 members, the largest tour group I'd ever traveled with up until then. In fact, we were scattered throughout three different hotels in the Miraflores district as a result of the Antiguas mix-up. Our group's guide was an affable young Peruvian man named Elvis Chahuara Macoyllo, a descendent of the native Quechua Indians, who had been in the tourism business for many years and was quite knowledgeable about all the subject matter concerning our visit.

At nine o'clock, the tour members staying at the QP gathered in the lobby and we then followed Elvis through the streets of Miraflores for several blocks until we reached one of the other hotels housing more members of our group. All sixty-four GATE 1 travelers were corralled into the conference room where we met the other tour guide, Edgar Chucya Sallo, and had our first orientation meeting. I had an embarrassing moment when I opened a bottle of water I purchased earlier at my hotel -- not realizing it was carbonated -- and it exploded all over me and Hal, the older gentleman sitting to my left. The meeting was slightly delayed while they cleaned up the water...*and I apologized profusely to Hal.*

After the orientation meeting each group boarded our respective tour buses and we embarked on a sightseeing trip through Peru's capital. Lima is located on a desert coast overlooking the Pacific Ocean, in a central part of the country nestled between several valleys of the Chillón, Rimac and Lurín Rivers. It is the fifth largest city in Latin America, and definitely the largest in Peru, with an estimated 9 million inhabitants, roughly one third of the entire population. The city was founded in 1535 by Spanish Conquistador Francisco Pizarro, becoming the most important city in the Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru. Following the War of Independence in 1821, Lima was selected as the capital of the newly minted republic. The city is steeped in colonial history, and the National University of San Marcos, established in 1551, is the oldest continuously functioning university in all of the Americas.

A local guide named Jose accompanied us on our city tour. We began in the Miraflores section of the capital, one of 43 districts that make up the city, each with its own mayor (there *is* a central mayor of Lima, as well, who is suppose to oversee the various districts...but Jose said the mayors have not convened a meeting in quite a while, and apparently each district is independently managed). Miraflores is the main tourist section of Lima, and together with the adjacent San Isidro district where most of Lima's politicians and well to do live, is the safest part of the city. Since each district raises its own taxes and is independently run, they can hire an additional police force to maintain order. In the Miraflores and San Isidro districts, you can see 'district' police along with national police patrolling the streets.

We drove by nicely maintained business avenues and residential blocks, but soon entered 'less prosperous' districts, with graffiti-laced walls and

gangs of what Jose called ‘soccer hooligans’, neighborhood youth groups that form around the support of a particular soccer team. The soccer rivalries in the country are pretty intense, and whenever teams play there is always a strong police presence. The most densely populated districts of Lima are called Lima Norte and Lima Sur, and are inhabited by Andean immigrants who came to the capital in the latter half of the 20th Century either looking for better economic opportunities or fleeing the Shining Path communist rebellion that engulfed the Andean Valley during the 1980’s and 90’s. These neighborhoods are composed of middle and lower class working families.

Our first stop was in the Historic Center, which is made up of the downtown districts of Lima and Rimac, an area declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988. Here you can witness both Spanish and French colonial architecture and street designs. Spanish colonial cities were set up in a grid-like pattern with narrow streets, while French colonial influences gave rise to wide open avenues and roundabouts. Our bus dropped us off at the Plaza Mayor, the main central plaza of the historic center, where Pizarro established his capital. Surrounding the plaza are several important buildings: the government Palace, where Peru’s president lives, Lima’s Municipal Hall, the majestic Cathedral of Lima, and adjacent to it is the Archbishop’s Palace. In the center of the plaza there is a water fountain built in 1651. In addition to being the seat of the old colonial government, the Plaza Mayor was also the spot where independence was declared by Jose de San Martin – an Argentinean general who successfully led the fight against Spanish colonial rule – in 1821. The Plaza Mayor has a very colorful history, having been used as a site for public executions during its Viceroyalty period, and a rallying point for protests and marches throughout its Republican years.

We walked around the plaza, taking photographs of the colonial architecture: homes, businesses and government structures, with their intricate styles of Spanish balconies and doors. We made our way towards the back of the Government Palace, characterized by its large wrought iron fence, some of our tour members stopping to pose for photos with the palace police guards. We toured the amazing Monastery of San Francisco nearby, a massive church complex with an adjoining convent, built during the 17th century and declared a World Heritage site in 1991. The Monastery of San Francisco (St. Francis) is famous for its Spanish Baroque architecture, and has a world-renowned library and rooms with religious art and paintings by Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbaran. The best part of the visit, though,

was entering the catacombs beneath the main altar. Supposedly, there are a series of catacombs and ossuaries which connect to the Cathedral and other area churches from here. We saw piles of femur bones (which are all that remain of the tens of thousands of Catholics interned beneath the monastery over the centuries), and an ossuary well dug deeper into the ground with skulls and femur bones neatly organized to form geometric figures. *It was cramped, creepy and fascinating all at the same time!* Unfortunately, the monastic order that runs the complex does not allow photographs to be taken inside.

After our visit to the downtown colonial area, we re-boarded the bus and were dropped off at the Larcomar shopping mall for lunch. The Larcomar is a very popular shopping and entertainment center built into the side of cliffs over-looking the Pacific Ocean in the Miraflores district. There are several open-air levels with trendy bars, cafes, nightclubs, art galleries, shops, boutiques and a large selection of restaurants and fast food joints to choose from. Since I was scheduled for the afternoon excursion to the Larco Herrera Museum, I only had about an hour for lunch, and decided to eat at a Peruvian fast food place that specialized in grilled entrees. I ordered a steak, which came accompanied by rice and beans, sweet plantains and fried potatoes. I was joined by Enna and the two Iranian women from my group.

By 2:30 pm, Enna and I made our way back to the bus in front of the mall where we met a small group of tour members and proceeded to the museum. We drove along the Pan-American Highway, which renders a scenic view of the overcast Pacific Ocean. Because of the unique geography of Peru, Lima is continuously blanketed by cloud cover during the winter months, even though it seldom rains. The summer months are very sunny, and the sunsets are spectacularly colorful -- nicknamed *cielo de brujas*, or 'sky of witches', for their intense shades of orange, pink and reds -- but the predominant onshore flow which occurs in winter casts a gray pall over the capital between May and December, which can depress even the cheeriest of Lima's residents, many of whom flock to the sunnier areas of the Andean Valleys during this time.

We arrived at the Larco Herrera Museum shortly after three o'clock. The museum is located in the Pueblo Libre district and is housed in an 18th Century vice-royal mansion built on top of a 7th Century Indian pyramid. The grounds are beautifully landscaped and maintained, and have even won awards for its gardens. Inside this privately owned museum you will find

galleries -- in chronological order -- showcasing one of the largest pre-Columbian art exhibits in the world, including Moche, Nazca, Chimu and Inca pieces that are absolutely stunning, from silver and gold ceremonial head pieces and jewelry, to ceramic and stone sculptures. There is a storage area that houses thousands of sculptures and stone tools, and a separate, eye-opening gallery of erotic pottery guaranteed to make the most liberal-minded person blush. Some of the exhibits date back thousands of years. All and all, this was truly a wonderful experience, and I whole-heartedly recommend this excursion. For those of you who wish to see the exhibits without taking a trip to Lima, you can do so; the Larco Herrera Museum is one of the first to fully catalogue its entire 45,000 artifacts online!

We returned to the QP Hotel around six, which gave me enough time to take another hot shower before dinner. At 7:15, a bunch of GATE 1 tour members from both groups were picked up by bus and taken to the Larcomar Mall again, where we had opted for a dinner and show at the *La Dama Juana* restaurant situated on the lower level of the mall. We were seated next to a dance stage and helped ourselves to a buffet of typical Peruvian fare. I had been told stateside that Peruvian food was the best in South America, but I must admit, based on this first 'authentic' meal, I was not overly impressed. The *ceviche* was pretty good, and there were various potato dishes that were interesting, including a rolled appetizer called a *causa*, but I thought the meat dishes were tough and not too flavorful. The biggest disappointment, though, came at the dessert bar. What I thought was cheesecake tasted like a thick bland gelatin. I sampled the *chicha morada*, a sweetened drink made of corn, which wasn't too bad (they also make regular *chicha*, which is a corn beer popular in the Andean Valley). I don't think most of the GATE 1 members thought highly of this meal, but the dance show was definitely worth the price of admission.

The show started at 8:30 and lasted about an hour and a half. Several groups of dancers would come out in costumed sets and do numbers representing the principal dances of the regions of Peru. My favorites were the final two dances. In the first one, the dancers would tie a cloth around their waistline, with a section hanging off their rear ends, gyrating their hips wildly while their partners tried to set the dangling cloth on fire with a lighted candle. It was quite funny to watch, and when they invited audience members to try it out, the results were downright hysterical. The last dance of the evening was called the Scissors' Dance, which resembled a free-style break dancing set performed by several young men in colorful traditional

Indian dress. They each clanged huge scissors in one hand as they performed the various acrobatic dance moves. It was fascinating to watch, and they received a nice ovation when the routine was over.

After the dance show, we piled into the bus and headed back to our respective hotels. We were leaving for Cusco the following morning and I made sure to remind the front desk about my 4:50 am wake-up call. When I entered my hotel room it felt like a meat locker. I took an Ambien and bundled up underneath a pile of extra blankets I found in the closet. Thankfully, the car with the broken car alarm had been removed. I slept like a baby.

DAY THREE

I was awake by 4:00 am and took another long hot shower to ward off the early morning cold. I packed my luggage and deposited it in the hallway for the bellboy to pick up, and then went downstairs for 'breakfast'. It was only 5:30 am but the only thing left to eat was slices of white bread, butter and jam. *I was certain Peruvian prisoners ate better than this!* By six, we boarded our bus and headed out to the airport. We already had our boarding passes so we sailed through the ticketing process. Elvis had us place GATE1 tags on our luggage so that the guides could easily retrieve them once we arrived in Cusco. Enna, Tim, Jan and I took the opportunity to eat something at the terminal's Starbuck concession before boarding. The flight to Cusco was very pleasant, lasting just over an hour. I originally had a window seat, but due to my claustrophobia I switched to an aisles seat...and regretted it once we approached Cusco; I missed the great view of the beautiful snow-capped mountains lining the Sacred Valley.

After our luggage had been retrieved at Cusco's Alejandro Velasco Astete International Airport – named after the first pilot to cross the Andes in 1925 – we had to trek across the crowded parking lot to board a much smaller tour bus. Most of us felt the affects of Cusco's climate immediately. Besides the cooler air, the high elevation (11,151 feet) made many of us feel light-headed, and Elvis handed out coca leaves for us to chew on to alleviate the high altitude symptoms. Personally, having all that mashed coca leaf

tucked between my lip and gums did not improve the situation; I had a ball of nasty foliage in my mouth with nowhere to spit it out. The *mate de coca* (coca leaf tea) that was served in all the area hotels was much better (with a little sugar). Each night I would have several cups to ease the high altitude symptoms. Most people acclimate to the higher elevation after a couple of days.

We drove through the town of Cusco, traveling on a lonely two-lane road towards a place called Urubamba, the largest town in the Sacred Valley area of the Cusco region. This valley, nestled in the southeastern Andes of Peru, was the heartland of the Inca Empire, and contains numerous significant ruins including the famous Machu Picchu. Our guide said it was called the Sacred Valley because the fertile lands near the Urubamba River produced more than one crop a year, making this one of the most important maize production areas northwards from Pisac, an important Inca village at the southern entrance of the Sacred Valley. We drove for almost an hour through stunning sceneries of flatlands surrounded in the distance by the Andean mountain wall, to a small Indian town called Chinchero -- situated at an even higher elevation than Cusco, at 12,500 feet -- where we stopped to have lunch and do some shopping.

Chinchero is located on the windswept plains of Anta, and offers a beautiful view of the Cordillera Vilcabamba and snow-capped peaks of Salkantay to the west. It is a small town of primarily adobe (mud brick) homes where the local Indian population still goes about their business in traditional dress. Its major claim to the tourism trade is the colorful Sunday market, selling all sorts of locally made art crafts and alpaca wool textiles. To the local natives, Chinchero is believed to be the mythical birthplace of the rainbow; it may also have been an important village during the reign of Inca (ruler) Tupac Yupanqui, who may have used the town as a country resort. There is a massive stone wall – the most important Inca remnant – in the main plaza that has ten trapezoidal niches.

When we arrived at Chinchero, the marketplace was already bustling, and we made our way through the crowded stall areas to a semi-enclosed picnic section in the back, taking our seats while a group of Indian women placed bowls of cooked foods in front of us. The dishes had all been prepared in an outdoor cooking shanty just meters from where we sat. There was a tasty quinoa soup to start off the meal, and the prospects of a delicious local cuisine ‘experience’ *seemed* eminent. Quinoa is a species of goosefoot, a

grain-like crop grown for its edible seeds and loaded with nutrients and proteins. Peru has over 6400 varieties of potatoes (in fact, the crop has its origins in the country). Many Peruvian dishes will contain spuds in their many different forms. We were served a potato and rice mash mixed with vegetables, fried potatoes, a long tubular-type potato, and even a sweet potato, and humongous slices of a maize variety I had never seen before. In addition, there was stuffed peppers, slices of what tasted like goat cheese, some kind of boiled greens, chopped chicken and one final dish which literally ruined the entire experience for me: *cuy*.

Cuy is the term for guinea pig, a member of the rodent family that is a meat staple of the Andean diet because of its relatively cheap accessibility; most Indian homes in this region will have numerous guinea pigs scrambling around the floor. They are gutted and skinned, then roasted like a suckling pig, or deep-fried, and usually presented at the table on a plate in its entire form. When cooked, *cuy* looks like an incredibly frightened over-sized rat. A plate of chopped *cuy* had been placed at the center of the table and I was just helping myself to a bite when one of the servers brought in a silver platter on top of which rested a freshly roasted *cuy* so we could get a better look. I took one gander at that toasted rodent and nearly upchucked the entire meal, quickly losing my appetite and sticking to the sweetened corn drink, *chicha morada*, from that point on.

After lunch we moved to an open courtyard adjacent to where we ate and watched several Indian women give us a demonstration on how alpaca wool is woven into garments. Samples of alpaca and sheep wool were passed around so we could feel the difference in texture. All of the colors used to dye the wool are derived from local plants and, in the case of the redder hues, insects. Baby alpaca wool is the softest and most desirable...*and the most expensive*. We were then given thirty minutes to shop in the nearby stalls, which sold finished alpaca garments and scarves and other Indian art souvenirs. I purchased several scarves and some leather coin pouches for family members back home. I quickly discovered that Peruvian natives are tough folks to bargain with; a year earlier I had been in Egypt, where their notorious vendors wouldn't think anything of marking up their prices several times in anticipation of some serious and spirited haggling, but the Peruvian vendors pretty much had a set price in mind, and would only budge ever so slightly.

With our Indian souvenirs in hand, we boarded our tour bus and continued our journey through the Sacred Valley. Our next stop was at the ruins of Ollantaytambo, which served as the royal estate of the great Inca emperor, Pachacuti, who conquered the region in the mid-15th century, ushering in the greatest era of the Inca Empire. Ollantaytambo is situated along the Patakancha River, close to the point where it joins the Urubamba River, and was divided into two main settlements (or sections), the primary one built on the left banks of the Patakancha, and a smaller compound known as 'Araqhama to its right. The main settlement was built along an orthogonal layout, with four longitudinal streets crossed by seven parallel streets, and had a large central plaza (up to four blocks long) which was opened in the east and surrounded by halls and other town blocks on the other sides. Both un-worked and fitted fieldstones were used to create the buildings and temple structures. 'Araqhama is a western extension of the main settlement, and features a large plaza called Manyaraki surrounded by structures made out of adobe and semi-cut stones. The buildings in this area are larger than the ones in the main settlement, and have very tall walls and over-sized doors; we saw these buildings firsthand as we entered the town, which, till this day, has been continuously occupied since Inca times.

The actual site area we explored was the Temple Hill section, a religious ceremonial center built into the Cerro Bandolista, a very steep hill bordering the western side of 'Araqhama. The part of the hill which faces the town has formidable stone terraces framed on both sides by natural rock outcrops; at the top of this hill is the ceremonial area. After a brief lecture by Elvis, most of us commenced to climbing the Temple Hill -- to get a panoramic view of the valley -- along narrow stone steps carved into the side sections of the terraces. The high altitude level of the region took its toll on us immediately. I was out of breath after only reaching the first terrace and had to wait several minutes for my pounding heart to slow down before I could continue the climb. Enna, who is a jogger, and the other more athletically-inclined members of our group (read: *younger*) made it to the top without any problems! When I finally reached the top the view was splendid. I took some wonderful photographs of the Sacred Valley. From this vantage point you could clearly make out the storehouses dotting the nearby mountains. The Incas built these storage facilities out of fieldstones, high up in the mountains, where the elevation (higher winds and lower temperatures) served to preserve the crops stored inside. Our guides told us the Indians would dry certain potato crops by stomping on them, and then warehouse them in these storehouses. The crops could last up to ten years in such

conditions, which helped get the Incas through the turbulent El Nino phase when planting was disrupted by bad weather.

From here, we drove directly to the San Agustin Hotel in the town of Urubamba. The San Agustin was originally a colonial estate, converted into a 40 room, three star hotel. The rooms were spacious enough, but very cold. At night I was afraid to turn on the portable heater, which looked like a fire trap, and slept under three blankets for warmth. My bathroom had a big pane-glass window, emanating so much cold air from outside that my morning toilet routine became an exercise in teeth-chattering frigidity. The hotel grounds were beautifully landscaped, with a wonderful view of the surrounding mountains. One of the things I found annoying in *all* of the Peruvian hotels we stayed was the lack of bottled water in our rooms. Often times we had to go out and buy it. Luckily, there was a store right across the street from the San Agustin that sold large bottles of water at a very reasonable price.

One could describe Urubamba as a sleepy little enclave, nestled in the Sacred Valley. I jokingly referred to it as a one-llama town, for there wasn't really much to see or do here. Urubamba's claim to fame, as far as I could tell, seemed to be its close proximity to the nearby Inca ruins, and the new train station that conveys tourists to Machu Picchu. Because of this, I opted to take the full day excursions to Moray and Maras the following day, instead of wandering the streets of Urubamba, like many of my fellow travelers chose to do.

At 7: 15 pm, we gathered in the lobby and boarded our tour bus for the short ride to the Alhambra Restaurant for an optional dinner and show. And like the Dama Juana in Lima, I was once again disappointed at the buffet selection, only this time the dessert bar was actually quite good. The 'show' consisted of what looked like a tribal family of five (including a small child) who would periodically come out and perform native Indian dances. After the initial number, the only thing I found exciting about the entire performance was the costumed clothing and masks they wore.

We got back to the San Agustin Hotel close to ten o'clock, and I tried to watch some television in my room before going to bed. There were only two English channels and neither one was a news broadcast, so I ended up watching a Spanish-translated interview of Bashar al-Assad, Syria's ruler, who was trying to explain the bloody crackdown his forces were inflicting

on his protesting countrymen. The so-called *Arab Spring* was now more than seven months old and going strong; watching this Arab dictator trying to justify his brutal actions made me feel *colder* than my actual hotel room. I popped an Ambien and drifted off to sleep...

DAY FOUR

I awoke at 6:00 am and went downstairs to the hotel restaurant and secured some hot water to make instant coffee. Our rooms were situated around an open courtyard and when I went outside the air was quite nippy. The previous day in Chinchero I had purchased some souvenir alpaca scarves and skull caps for friends and family back home, but I now found myself having to utilize one of the scarf and cap sets to keep warm; which meant that somebody was going to end up with a souvenir kitchen magnet, instead.

After a hot shower I returned to the hotel restaurant for a nice breakfast buffet. I sat with Hal, a Mormon financial advisor from Arizona, but I forget what we discussed, although I think it had something to do with U.S. politics and the sad state of our economy. At 9:00 am, a group of 22 of my fellow GATE 1 travelers gathered in the lobby for a full day of sight-seeing. There was an additional local guide named Oscar who accompanied Elvis. Oscar seldom said anything, and I think his only real role was to make sure we didn't get lost or fall off a cliff somewhere!

We drove through Urubamba, and my suspicions about the town's mediocrity became apparent; later that night, the disappointed tour members who skipped the full day excursion in order to explore Urubamba told me there was not much to see. Our first stop that day was in Moray, an unusual archeological site located on a high plateau just southwest of the village of Maras. We drove through Maras, a dusty town with a once colorful colonial history but now a seemingly isolated place, its most prominent structure is an old colonial-era church constructed of mud bricks in the main plaza. In fact, this place made Urubamba seem positively cosmopolitan. Moray, on the other hand, was definitely something special.

When we got off the bus at Moray and ventured to the actual site, our initial reaction was one of 'ooohs' and 'aaaahs'. A series of terraces, shaped in concentric circles, were constructed inside three large natural depressions high in the mountains above Urubamba. We stood at the top of the cliff, looking down into these circles of man-made terraces with awe. And we weren't the only ones. Archeologists are still debating what the purpose of this area was, beyond irrigated farming terraces; some believe that the Incas constructed Moray to serve as a greenhouse or an experimental biological station. Scientists have determined that the temperature levels between the top and bottom depressions can vary up to 5 degrees or more Celsius, and it is theorized that the Incas imported soils from throughout their Empire (Andean, jungle and semi-tropical areas) in order to experiment with crops and produce sturdy hybrids, which they distributed in the form of seeds to their villages. This was one way the Incas were able to unite large groups of Indians without continuous warfare, by offering them a better source of food.

Elvis lectured briefly about the site and then allowed us an hour to explore the terraces. There was a natural trail that took us to the edge of the first depression, and from there on out we had to climb into the terraces to reach the circular bottom. Sticking out of the terraces, at varying intervals, were stones that served as steps. I was with Enna and the two Iranian women (whose names I do not remember) and Oscar, the guide, who would help the women climb down the stone steps onto the next lower terrace. It was somewhat precarious and slow going at times but we finally reached the center of the formation. Someone had assembled a circle of small rocks in the middle of the lowest level, and from the coca leaves inside the circle it was obvious this place was considered a spiritual area, as well. Coca leaves are used in Indian religious ceremonies. I also observed some visitors praying here.

We discovered another trail that took us back to the top. From here we boarded the tour bus and headed out to the Maras salt mines. The roads in this area were not always paved, so it was pretty dusty. We were at a high elevation, and as we reached the salt mines our driver stopped so we could take photographs of the mines from above. Quite frankly, it was a tad nerve-racking being on this narrow mountain road. At times we came very close to the edge of the mountain wall and I couldn't help but think what happens to this roadway during the summer rainy season, when mudslides are commonplace.

The Maras salt mines (*las Salineras de Maras*) are actually a maze of 3,000 salt-evaporation ponds, approximately 4-5 meters in length, which dot one side of a mountain the local Indians call “Qaqawinay”. Highly salted water from an underground mountain stream flows down tiny channels and gradually fills into these man-made ponds. When the water evaporates from the sun, it slowly solidifies and leaves a layer of white (in some cases brownish or reddish) salt crystals, which the farmers then scoop up in vessels, pound until granulated and then package and sell. I was able to buy a 250-gram sample at one of the site’s many souvenir stands.

When the sun reflects off the white ponds, the color contrast against the rest of the mountain is striking. This particular salt mine has been in operation since before the Incas. All of the active ponds are individually owned by local Indian families, who can eke out a little extra income from the salt cultivation. There isn’t much money to be made from these ponds, but at least the work is not too intensive, and is basically relegated to controlling the flow of the salt water, which relies on communal cooperation. Iodine has recently been added to the salt to make it safer for human consumption.

We followed Elvis and Oscar out onto the highest elevated area of salt ponds to get a better view, cautiously making our way along narrow pathways between the small white pools. We tasted the salty stream water filtering down the natural mountain channels. Some of the more adventurous amongst us climbed further down into the salt mines. I was afraid of losing my step, though, and stayed put on the upper ledge. After about 45 minutes here, we went back to our bus, many of us stopping to buy souvenir salt packages and local fried snacks (I also bought some bananas and passion fruit). As we drove out of the salt mines, our driver pulled over on top of a mountain over-looking the valley, and Elvis and Oscar handed out box lunches. We sat on the rocky outcrops, enjoying the breeze and the mountain view, eating our lunch. It was so peaceful. And, I must confess, this meal was, thus far, the best one I had consumed since arriving in Peru. Nothing fancy, just a delicious meat-filled empanada, a slice of chocolate sponge cake, juice, two pieces of fruit, and some grainy peanut-like munching seeds, fried and salted.

We made it back to our hotel shortly after 3:00 pm. I decided to take a much-needed nap. Between the high altitude and all the climbing, I was

feeling pretty tired. Several people on our tour had experienced really bad high altitude sickness, which required a local doctor's visit to the hotel. Some kind of injection was administered that seemed to fix the problem. But there were many of us who got sick just from the change in temperature. Coughing, sneezing, fevers and sore throats plagued quite a few of us. Harry developed bronchitis, and also required medical attention, and then I think Patty, his wife, also started coming down with cold or flu-like symptoms. I developed a really bad sore throat and nasal congestion which I treated with copious amounts of really hot coca tea and Advil. Yes, my friends, a trip to Cusco in the winter time is not for the feint of heart!

At 6:00 pm, reinvigorated after a nice nap, I went downstairs to the hotel's conference room where both groups of GATE 1 tour members were assembled for an orientation on tomorrow's much awaited journey to Machu Picchu. Elvis went over the departure schedule with us. A total of 22 members, combined from the two groups (including me), had paid the extra \$72 to take the special Vistadome train to Machu Picchu. The Vistadome train was billed -- in the online travel brochure -- as a 'superior' ride, with special panoramic windows on both the side panels and along the compartment ceilings, which rendered a nicer view of the fantastic mountain scenery heading up to Aguas Caliente, the town at the foot of Machu Picchu. Elvis told us the Vistadome train left the Urubamba station at 6:30 am *sharp*, so our group had to leave the hotel no later than 5:50 am. The other travelers were allowed a few more hours of sleep, which didn't seem fair considering we were shelling out more money. I mean, why did we have to get up so early, *right*? Well, as it turned out, arriving in Machu Picchu earlier in the morning was a godsend! It was cooler (the sunshine gets pretty intense up in the mountains) and less crowded. And for those of us who really wanted to explore, we had two more hours to do so. Elvis also reminded us to have our luggage packed and down in the lobby before we left for Machu Picchu, as we would not be returning to the San Agustin Hotel but rather taking a bus back to Cusco from the train station with our luggage already stored onboard.

After our orientation meeting, 12 members of our group took a very short bus trip to a residential compound (we could easily have walked) where we were treated to a typical Peruvian meal prepared by a local family. This was an optional excursion, and it didn't surprise me that many of our traveling companions chose not to go. After the culinary let down of the two previous *optional* dinners, even *I* was a little skeptical. But this turned out to

be the first truly memorable meal I had in Peru. For some reason, Elvis could not accompany us to the residence and said he would join us later. The family did not speak English, so he asked me if I would be kind enough to serve as interpreter. Enna, who is a Salvadorian-American and also speaks fluent Spanish, helped me out whenever my 'interpretation skills' missed the mark. We were ushered into a downstairs dining hall area, and sat around a long table nicely decorated with an Quechua design table cloth. The owner of the house, Anna, and her mother, Alberta, did all of the cooking in the adjacent kitchen. Anna's beautiful eleven year old twin daughters assisted her and also sat at the table with us. Prior to the commencement of the meal, I stood at the head of the table with Anna, Alberta and the two girls and interpreted their welcoming speeches, fielding questions from our group. I made a real ass of myself when someone asked one of the twins how old she was... *and then I asked the other one the same question!* Everybody started laughing, reminding me they were *twins*. I think my face turned the color of *chicha morada*.

The meal started with a delicious vegetable potato soup. Many of us asked for seconds. This was followed by stuffed peppers, white rice, a potato stew dish, long fried potatoes, and a finger-licking portion of grilled lamb that was out of this world. When the meal was over they served us celery tea, which tasted a lot like an herbal tea. It was a very satisfying dinner. Afterwards, the two sisters took us upstairs so we could see the rest of the house (mainly the bedrooms). The typical Peruvian home in these parts has three principal rooms: the kitchen, a storage home and the bedroom(s). This particular residence probably added the large dining room once they began cooking dinners for tourists. Anna said they entertain foreigners at least three times a week, making it a tidy little business. As we were leaving, we posed for a group shot with Anna and her daughters in the courtyard, then left the compound under a dark starry sky and headed back to the San Agustin Hotel. It was just after 8:00 pm, but since I had an early morning wake-up call, I watched a little TV and then went to bed.

DAY FIVE

Not wanting to take any chances on a wake-up call mishap, I set my alarm clock for 4:00 am. I took a quick hot shower to warm myself up, dressed and repacked my luggage, placing it outside the door for the bellboy. The restaurant set up their breakfast buffet a little earlier today so we could eat before leaving for the train station. By 5:50 am, seven tour members from our group boarded a bus and we drove to a nearby hotel where we picked up 15 members from the other GATE 1 group, and then proceeded to the Urubamba train station. Our luggage was safely stored on the bus, which would be waiting for us when we returned from Machu Picchu to take us to Cusco later that evening. Our guide for the day was Edgar, who turned out to be quite the lecturer.

Since there are no bathroom facilities inside Machu Picchu (you must leave the site in order to find one), we were advised to use the toilets along the way at regular intervals. When we arrived at the Urubamba train station everybody coughed up a Peruvian sol (the cost of using the facility) and used the bathroom...whether we needed to or not! These 'pee stops' became even more important the closer we got to Machu Picchu. I went again on the train (at the half-way interval) and then again just prior to entering Machu Picchu. I felt like an eighty-year old with an enlarged prostate!

The train ride to Aguas Caliente lasted about an hour and a half, even though the distance covered was only about 27 miles. The seats were comfortable and roomy. They served a breakfast snack on board along with coffee or juice. But the real treat was the view. We were surrounded by snow-capped mountains, fog shrouded wilderness and, to our immediate left, the snaking Urubamba River. I took some wonderful photos of the scenery. We passed a suspension bridge set up over the Urubamba River which led to the beginning of the Inca Trail, the actual four-day hiking path the Incas once used to reach Machu Picchu. Today, young, sturdy adventure-seeking tourists can hire a local guide and actually trek the Inca Trail, camping out in the wilderness. When I was in Egypt last year, I traveled with a young man from New York City who had done the trail with his best friend, only to have the experience morph into a life or death ordeal: his friend's appendix burst two days into the hike, and he and several guides had to carry him back to town for emergency care before he died.

We arrived at Aguas Caliente shortly after 8:00 am, and followed Edgar through the train station and across a small bridge to a bus stop where people were lining up for the 25 minute ride up to Machu Picchu. The bus service to

the top of the mountain is run by the government, administered on a first come, first serve basis. The buses do not leave unless they are full, so at times you might have to sit for a few minutes (or half an hour) before departing. Since we had over 20 members in our group we quickly filled the coach and were on our way up what I can only describe as another harrowing mountain road; our bus driver would often bring the vehicle to the very edge of the precipice, and as I looked down into the mountain valley I became a bit nervous. The road zigzags, and in the areas around these tight corners there was little room for error. Edgar warned us if we were afraid of heights to not sit by a window.

Finally, we reached Machu Picchu, the famed Inca city on top of the mountain; a place the World Heritage Foundation recommends as one of the top 50 historical sites on the planet. And let me tell you, getting here was no easy task: a flight to Lima, another flight to Cusco, a long bus ride to Urubamba, a train to Aguas Caliente, and then a scary bus ride up to the actual site... *the whole while battling altitude sickness*. Was it worth it? You betcha!

Often referred to as the Lost City, Machu Picchu was celebrating its 100th (rediscovery) anniversary when I visited the site. On July 24, 1911, a historian lecturer from Yale University named Hiram Bingham announced that he had *discovered* a 'lost city of the Incas' high up in the mountains. He was initially looking for Vilcabamba, the last Inca refuge during the Spanish conquest, and while he *did* locate the site, he was unimpressed and moved on after hearing about a spectacular citadel in the opposite direction. Eleven year old Pablito Alvarez, a local Quechua boy, led Bingham to Machu Picchu. Some native Quechuas were living amongst the ruins, and there are several documented reports of earlier European visitors to Machu Picchu, so the notion that Bingham 'discovered' the site has many detractors. At any rate, his subsequent excavations and studies led to world-wide interest in Machu Picchu, especially when the National Geographic Society devoted an entire issue to the site in 1913. Today, Machu Picchu is a protected historical sanctuary, and listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

One of the reasons Machu Picchu is so well preserved is because of its location on a mountaintop the Quechuas call 'Old Peak' (the literal translation of *machu picchu*). The city was a military secret, and the deep precipices and steep mountains surrounding it provided excellent natural defenses. Situated above a loop of the Urubamba River – which borders the

site on three sides – it has cliffs that drop vertically almost 1,500 feet to the river below. Saddled between two mountains, Machu Picchu and Waynapicchu, it has a commanding view down two valleys and a nearly impassable mountain at its back, making it a virtually impregnable and stealthy fortress. No wonder the Spaniards never found the site. As a result, Machu Picchu was spared the sort of plundering other great Inca cities endured.

The city was built during the early 1400's, at the height of the Inca Empire, and abandoned a little over a century later as a belated result of the Spanish Conquest, which introduced smallpox into the region. Historians theorize that many of Machu Picchu's inhabitants may have died from the disease, or some other epidemic, and the site was vacated and then 'lost' over the centuries. There is also considerable debate over the actual purpose of the city. Some archeologists note that the area around Machu Picchu had been revered as a sacred place long before the Incas arrived, and that the citadel was in fact a religious site. There are temple areas where sacrifices were carried out. The mountains surrounding Machu Picchu are also purportedly to be aligned with key astronomical events important to the Incas. Other scholars think the city was the estate of the greatest Inca (king) of all, Pachacuti. Whatever its origins, the Incas built a small but extraordinary city atop a mountain, invisible from below and completely self-contained, surrounded by agricultural terraces sufficient to feed its population and watered by natural springs.

Machu Picchu is divided by a wall into two main sections: an *Agricultural area* (which is further divided into upper and lower sections of terraces), and an *Urban area* which is split into East and West sectors separated by wide plazas. The main buildings were built along a classical Inca architectural style, incorporating polished dry-stone walls of regular shape in which the stone blocks are cut to fit perfectly together without the use of mortar. The lack of mortar, and the use of trapezoidal doors and windows that tilt inward from bottom to top, and the construction of rounded corners, corners which inclined slightly into the rooms, and other such techniques helped make the buildings earthquake-proof, as they would often sway with the force of the movement and press against themselves, avoiding a total collapse. How these great structures came to be built is a matter of debate. Although the Incas knew of the wheel -- using it to make toys, for example -- they did not incorporate this concept into their engineering. Archeologists theorize that the lack of strong draft animals and the steep

incline of the terrain probably made the wheel impractical. The basic theory is that the Incas used nearby quarries and good ole fashion elbow grease to move and cut these great stone blocks into place.

When we first entered the site, many of us had our passports stamped with a Machu Picchu imprint (a cool and unique reminder of our visit). We followed Edgar through the checkpoint entrance and came upon the eastern agricultural terraces. Our first impression of the city was phenomenal, but Edgar told us not to go 'wild' with our picture-taking just yet, since we would be climbing to a better vantage point. He led us up a series of stone steps to the top of the eastern agricultural sector, where we saw even more terraced levels spanning down different portions of the mountain (there were several llamas grazing on the grass). From this point, the highest elevated spot in the actual city itself, we had a commanding view of the majesty of Machu Picchu, and were able to take those 'postcard' photos one always sees of the great citadel. Low-lying clouds blanketed the peak of nearby Waynapicchu, lending the city a surreal backdrop.

We would spend the next several hours walking the length of the city, stopping at major sites to hear Edgar's lecture. The purpose of my journal is not to give a detailed description of this magnificent city, but to generally remind me of what I did and saw on my trip to Peru, so I would advise anyone with more curiosity about the site to do further research online. We climbed down from the eastern agricultural center and passed the *Main Gate*, the actual entrance into the urban area of the city. There are about 140 structures here, from temples and sanctuaries, to plazas and residential dwellings. Throughout the city there is also a network of stone steps that were often carved out of a single block of granite, and not far from the main wall that separates the city areas are numerous water fountains.

Archeologists have divided the city into three distinct zones: the Sacred District, the Popular District (to the south), and the District of the Priests and Nobility. In the Sacred District we saw the *Intihuatana*, an astronomical observatory, with a stone sun dial used as an astronomic clock or calendar; the *Temple of the Sun*, with its semi-circular design (the only one in the entire city), and the *Room of the Three Windows*. All of these dedicated to Inti, the Sun God, the Inca's greatest deity. The Popular District contains the living quarters of the common people, with simple residential dwellings and storage buildings. The District of the Priests and Nobility consists of a series of homes overlooking a slope where the religious leaders and the royal

family members lived. We made our way to the far northern section of the city, and trekked back to the site's entrance, visiting the *Main Square*, the *Group of the Three Doorways*, the *Inca's House* and the *Temple of the Condor* (where human sacrifices are alleged to have been carried out).

By one o'clock in the afternoon, Edgar had led us around the entire city, lecturing about everything that was of importance. He told us he was heading back to Aguas Caliente for lunch, and reminded those who wanted to stay longer and further explore the site that our train back to Urubamba left at 5:30 pm sharp, and not to be late. He cautioned we should allow at least an hour for the bus ride back down the mountain. As it turned out, all of us were exhausted, and not just from trekking up and down Machu Picchu for more than three hours, but from being up so early and the long ride getting to the mountain itself. The entire group agreed to return to Aguas Caliente with Edgar. Besides, we were pretty hungry at this point!

About forty minutes later, a group consisting of Tim, Jan, and two middle-aged 'southern belles' traveling together named Carroll and June, and myself sat down inside the back of a restaurant called the Hot Springs -- with a beautiful view of the mountains and river in the background -- and had lunch. Carroll and June decided to share a large pizza, which turned out to be neither large nor all that tasty. Tim had the trout, which wasn't bad. I opted for something called the *rolled beef*, thinly cut flank steak wrapped around mushrooms and some type of jam, and served with fried potatoes and steamed veggies. It was pretty good. After lunch, we split up. I joined Tim and Jan, exploring the local market place looking for souvenirs. I found most of the items to be pretty expensive, though, remembering that Edgar told us to wait till we got to Cusco to purchase *anything*. Apparently, nothing is made in Aguas Caliente (in terms of souvenirs) -- all of the merchandise sold here has to be brought in -- which jacks up the price. We also took the opportunity to stroll around the rest of the town. Aguas Caliente is not very big, only a few city blocks, but very picturesque since it rests at the foot of Machu Picchu, surrounded by other mountains. There are numerous (and expensive) trendy restaurants, bars, hotels and shops which cater to the thriving tourism trade, and one can easily spend an afternoon browsing up and down the side streets.

At 5:00pm, we met the rest of the group in front of the Hot Springs Restaurant, our scheduled rendezvous point, and followed Edgar to the train station. Thirty minutes later we were onboard the Vistadome Train heading

back to Urubamba. Tim and I managed to sit at the very back of the train, the seats inverted so we could face the rear window, which afforded us a nice view of the natural scenery....that is, until it got dark! They served some kind of snack on the trip back, and later, they put on a mini-fashion show with several attractive train employees modeling mostly alpaca sweaters and ponchos.

When we arrived in Urubamba, an hour and a half later, it was pitch dark out and very cold, the temperature dropping into the upper twenties. We boarded our bus for what turned out to be a long -- sometimes harrowing -- ride back to Cusco, where we would be spending the next two nights. One of the bus windows did not shut properly, so it was pretty nippy inside the coach. The two lane road back to Cusco was desolate in stretches, and with the absence of any street lights, kind of eerie, as well. The bus headlights would illuminate the oncoming mountain curves and cast strange shadows in the distance. Every now and then we would come upon some kind of slow-moving vehicle (a truck or another tour bus) and our driver would maneuver to pass it in the dark, but had to be leery of any sudden oncoming traffic hidden by the mountain walls. We experienced a close call while passing another vehicle. At one point, Edgar had the driver stop the bus; it was a clear starry night and he wanted to show us the Milky Way, pointing out some Inca astrological formations. I remember looking up into the beautiful night sky, trying (in vain) to make out the llama constellation that Edgar was pointing to, trying to keep my teeth (or was it my testicles?) from chattering; it was too cold to concentrate on anything but getting back on the bus!

As we continued on to Cusco in the dead of night, the driver's dashboard began lighting up like an old-fashioned switch board, the red warning lights clearly visible in the dark. Apparently, the engine was over-heating, causing our driver to pull off the road near a secluded farm house. One of the tour members volunteered his two liter bottle of water to cool the radiator down. The driver stepped outside the bus to check the engine, and when his frame disappeared into the cold, dark night, a pack of dogs began howling furiously from somewhere nearby...possibly the farmhouse...and I could envision the poor man being ripped to shreds by the side of the road. Gratefully, he re-boarded the bus a few minutes later, having remedied the mechanical glitch and we were soon on our way again. Although, I noticed he was driving a little faster than before, possibly trying to reach the city of Cusco before the bus encountered any more problems. This made me a little apprehensive since the night driving conditions did not lend itself to

recklessness. In fact, as we approached Cusco, we witnessed what appeared to be a very bad vehicular accident off the side of the road. In these parts, it would be easy not to notice a wreck until daylight.

We made it to Cusco shortly after 9:00pm. Our luggage was already in our rooms by the time we checked in. We were staying at the San Agustin Hotel (part of a chain that also owned the hotel in Urubamba), a quaint, Spanish colonial-style lodging facility smack in the center of Cusco, just a few blocks from the main plaza. I was too exhausted to unpack, and dropped into one of three twin beds in my room and promptly fell asleep.

DAY SIX

I awoke at 5:30 am, having slept well regardless of the heavy street traffic noise right outside my hotel room window. I bribed the kitchen staff and was able to obtain a carafe of hot scalding water for my morning coffee fix. Perhaps I should have bribed the front desk, as well, since there was very little hot water in my section of the hotel and my morning shower felt like a Navy SEAL endurance test. At breakfast, I sat with Hal again (and wondered: *where the heck was his wife?*) and we had a great conversation about a historical book entitled *1491* which he recently read concerning the great Inca and Mayan civilizations that existed throughout central and south America prior to Pizarro's landing, and how they were utterly conquered by the Spaniards in such a short period of time, mostly through the spread of smallpox.

At 8:30 am, I gathered in the lobby for an optional early-morning tour of Cusco. Once again, Edgar was our guide, and we followed him through the streets of the city for several blocks until we reached the hotel housing the other GATE 1 group. Inside the conference room was an Indian shaman named Pedro squatting on the floor. We sat in a semi-circle around him while he performed a healing/blessing ritual for us. He was dressed in the traditional attire of a shaman, including a felt bowler hat and covered by a long poncho, and before him on a woven blanket was a collection of 'spiritual items' that he used to perform his ritual. Pedro is a descendent of

the original Quechua tribe that spawned the Incas, and while he is a native Indian shaman, he is also a Catholic.

In the Andean regions, the indigenous populations adopted their version of Catholicism, often mixing it with their own religious beliefs, a practice the Church accepted in order to win over the hearts and minds of the Indian masses. In addition to the worship of Jesus, the local population often incorporates aspects of the Andean Trilogy into its customs. Inca religious deities occupy three realms: *Hanan Pacha*, the celestial realm of the sky (of which Inti, the Sun God, and Mama Quilla, the Moon Goddess, are the important deities), *Uku Pacha*, the inner earth realm – also symbolic of the underworld, or death -- which is ruled by Pachamama, the Earth Mother. And finally, *Cay Pacha*, the outer earth realm where humans live. This trilogy of realms is represented in Indian art as the condor (representing the sky), the puma (representing the earth) and the snake (representing the underworld). It's interesting to note that the contrasting symbolism between Christianity and Inca religious mythology appear to coexist peacefully in Andean Catholicism; for example, the Indian view of the snake does not have the same negative connotation as it does in the rest of the Christian world.

Pedro performed a thirty minute ritual for us while Edgar translated what he was doing at every step. Many of the items laid out on his blanket were symbolic of the Andean spiritual elements. There were cookies shaped in the form of a cross, various animals, and of a woman (representing the Earth Mother *and* the Catholic Church), there were shells from the Pacific coast symbolic of water, there were fake precious stones (representing the riches of the earth), peanuts (as a harvest symbol), blessed wine, a llama fetus, and other spiritual items. Pedro chewed on coca leaves (which are a big part of all Andean religious rituals), chanted the names of a sacred mountain, blowing air over some coca leaves which he placed in the center of the pile on his blanket. We formed a circle, and he gave us three coca leaves apiece which we could blow on ourselves, asking for a specific blessing in return, and then placed them on the pile. Afterwards, Pedro blessed each one of us in the center of the circle. When he was done, he wrapped up all the items in a tight bundle, saying some sort of prayer or chant, and Edgar told us he would now take that bundle up to a sacred area in the mountains to finish the healing/blessing ritual (I'm not sure if he would burn or bury the items). It was a very nice way to start our morning tour. Many of us then tipped Pedro and thanked him before we left the hotel.

Before I continue with my morning tour of Cusco, I think it would be appropriate to give a brief history of the Incas:

Cusco sits at an elevation of just over 11,500 feet above sea level, near the Urubamba Valley of the Andes mountain chain. The original inhabitants of the region were the Killke Indians, who lived in the valley between 200 and 1100 AD; the Incas arrived in the 13th Century, eventually conquering the entire region, establishing their empire's capital in Cusco. From the air, the city is said to be shaped like a puma, the Inca representation of the Earth. By the time Columbus 'discovered' the New World, the greatest empire on the planet was that of the Inca. Called *Tawantinsuyu*, or the 'Land of the Four Quarters', it spanned more than 4300 miles along the mountains and coastal deserts of central South America. The Inca Empire stretched from central Chile to the Ecuador-Colombia border and included most of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, northern Chile and northwestern Argentina. This length exceeded any medieval or contemporary European nation and equaled the longitudinal expanse of the Roman Empire. But for all its greatness, *Tawantinsuyu* only lasted for a hundred years, coming to a violent end upon the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors.

Inca mythology claims that the first Inca, or ruler, Manco Capac, and his sister, Mama Occlo, rose out of Lake Titicaca, having been created by the Sun and Moon as divine founders of a chosen people. Manco Capac and his sister, as the myth goes, went off with a golden rod in search of a suitable place to establish a great city. This would later become Cusco. The actual reality of how the Incas came to be is a lot less dramatic. First, the word *Inca* originally referred only to the ruler of the tribe, of which there were only a little over a dozen of them throughout their brief history. Historians later used the term 'the Incas' to also describe the Indians of this empire. The first pre-imperial Incas were simply one of a number of petty tribes in the south central region of Peru. Between 1200 AD and the early 1400's, the Inca engaged in numerous battles with rival tribes, but were not able to establish a supremacy over any of them. This all changed around 1438, when Inca Viracocha and his son, Pachacuti, defeated the powerful Chankas, creating the beginning of an empire. Inca Pachacuti (considered the greatest of the Incas) and Topa Inca would continue to conquer and expand the empire, from southern Colombia to central Chile.

Before the Incas were overthrown by the Spaniards in 1532, they developed one of the most sophisticated empires in the pre-industrial world, drawing from numerous pan-Andean tribal institutions. They accomplished this phenomenal growth through a mixture of diplomacy and warfare, and a highly effective socio-political management system based on a reliable taxation process (which included labor as a form of payment) and the dependable distribution of goods and services to the people of their realm. The Incas normally tried to win over border tribes with gifts, and marrying into their leaders' families. If this diplomacy failed, the threat of a superior Inca military invasion usually did the trick. Eventually, these newly incorporated tribes were organized into larger administrative units and political provinces. *Tawatinsuyu* (the Inca Empire) had over 80 provinces, each with its own ethnic and linguistic characteristics, which prompted the Incas to establish Quechua as the official language of the realm and the medium for government communication. The Incas also moved whole communities within their empire, allowing for the spread of specialized labor. Their efficient system of taxation and government management allowed them to build wonderful cities, monuments, and an amazing network of roadways connecting the entire empire, enabling the relatively quick transportation of food (and other goods and services) throughout the provinces, keeping everyone more or less happy.

Why did such a great empire collapse so swiftly? A combination of things conspired to do the Incas in. When the Spanish Conquistador Pizarro first arrived in the area, the Incas had never seen white men on horses before (carrying such strange weapons), and thought they were gods. By the time the Europeans' evil intentions were known, it was too late. Smallpox spread by the Europeans, either knowingly or unknowingly, began to decimate the Indian populations. Also, an Inca imperial succession squabble left the empire at odds with itself, something the Spaniards took full advantage of. The last real Inca, Atahualpa -- who became emperor by defeating his older half-brother in a civil war following the death of their father -- was taken captive by Pizarro, who used the prisoner king to control his empire before eventually killing him, ending the *Tawatinsuyu*.

When Pizarro arrived in Cusco on March 23, 1534, he wasted little time converting the city into one of the greatest Spanish colonial centers in South America; farming, cattle-raising, gold and silver mining, and trade with Spain made Cusco a very wealthy city. The subsequent church constructions became the spearhead for the spread of Christianity throughout the Andean

world. Today, Cusco is more of a quaint large town, with a population numbering around 800,000. I would say that the main economic enterprise is tourism, since the region contains perhaps the largest collection of archeological sites in South America.

We took a bus to the local food market, which took up an entire city block, and also served as a popular eatery for the town's residents; counters were set up in different sections where you could buy an odd assortment of meals for breakfast and lunch. Some of the dishes were not for the squeamish: roasted guinea pig and fish heads. Edgar -- trying to show off (*or gross us out*) -- swallowed some fish head (with eyeballs) that he purchased from a vendor. It was thoroughly disgusting. The locals love it, though; a bustling colorful mix of people lined the counters, including Indian women wearing plaster hats.

The Cusco market place was divided into sections like produce, meats and bread. The potato stalls in the produce section were extensive, with numerous varieties of spuds ranging from very large to pebble-sized. Edgar (and his assistant guide, Oscar) purchased two loaves of bread shaped like bicycle wheels from a bread vendor and split it up between us; it was crusty on the outside and tasted slightly sweet on the inside. The market opens really early in the morning, when it is still cold outside. This allows the meat vendors to display their products without the use of refrigeration (which is non-existent in the market place). We saw a small Indian vendor carrying a fully grown pig carcass (that probably weighed more than he did!) hoisted over his shoulders. There were many dogs roaming freely in the market, probably trying to score a free meal... *and nobody seemed to mind*. In fact, everywhere we went in Peru we saw packs of stray dogs. The market also had clothes and textile sections, a flower section and even an area to buy spiritual items for shaman rituals (with llama fetuses creepily suspended from hooks).

From the market place we drove to the Almudena cemetery in the Santiago district of Cusco. It would seem like an odd choice to visit, but this historic burial ground (established in 1850) was quite interesting. Beautifully painted murals depicting Peruvian burial customs adorn the walls just outside the cemetery entrance. When you walk through the gates there is a *black list* of city residents who have died and whose families have failed to pay the 'death taxes' to keep them buried in the cemetery. *I could you not*. The city leases the gravesites and collects yearly taxes on them. If a family

becomes too delinquent in paying the tax, then the body is removed from the cemetery, which is considered a big shame in these parts. Edgar told us the maintenance and cost of keeping a loved one buried here has prompted more families to choose cremation.

What makes the cemetery interesting are the burial sites, which are actually crypts. Walls and walls of neatly lined crypts. Coffins are slid into the wall and then a glass-enclosed cover is put in place, usually adorned with pictures of the deceased, flowers, and in some cases worldly items which represent what the person did or enjoyed in life; for example, a deceased cop had a police figurine and a bottle of booze placed in his crypt display. The maintenance of the crypts is very important for family pride, according to Edgar, whose own father is interned here, and locals will often hire street kids to clean the glass and metal crypt covers. While we were there, Edgar hired a local boy and girl to clean two of the crypts to show us how they do it; basically, rags, water and a lot of elbow grease is used to polish the metal and keep the glass spotless. There were other areas of the cemetery which had tombs and mausoleums, and these belonged to the well-to-do of Cusco. Some of them had elaborate statues and stonework.

From the cemetery we drove to the Plaza de Armas, the main square, to a restaurant called El Meson de Don Tomas for lunch. But before we sat down to eat, the restaurant's head chef gave us a cooking demonstration in which some of us were called to help prepare the dish. My brief contribution was to dice some cooked chicken breast. What the chef made was a Peruvian appetizer called *causa*. The name literally means 'cause' in Spanish, and was traditionally served to celebrate an event. There are different types of *causa*, but they are prepared in a similar way. Basically, mashed boiled potatoes are pressed into a flat shape, then a mix of (in this case) diced chicken, avocado, mayo, mustard, salt, olive oil (to prevent sticking) is placed on top, and then the mashed potato is rolled over this mixture to create a log shape, which is then garnished with scallions and black olives. It is sliced into sections and served cold. Very tasty.

After the food demonstration we sat down at a long table to have lunch. I ordered the alpaca, which other tour members touted as having a beef-like flavor. It came grilled, with fries and steamed veggies, and *did* taste a lot like beef, although a bit tougher. I enjoyed it very much. Prior to the meal, they served everyone a Pisco Sour, an alcoholic drink made from a type of strong colorless grape brandy mixed with lime juice, sugar, egg whites and

aromatic bitters. I quit drinking alcohol years ago, so I did not imbibe, but the others described it as a kind of whiskey sour. In just about every restaurant we visited, a complimentary glass of Pisco Sour was served prior to the meal.

From the Don Tomas Restaurant the group split up. I walked the three city blocks back to the San Agustin Hotel to meet up with another group of GATE 1 members who were embarking on a 1:30pm tour of the city, headed by Elvis. We began the tour by walking two blocks over cobblestone streets originally built by the Incas, until we reached the Convento de Santo Domingo del Cusco. Surprisingly, this beautiful religious structure serves as a glaring example of how terribly the Inca and European worlds collided. The Catholic convent was literally built on top of Qorikancha, the grandest temple in the Inca Empire. In fact, the stones from the temple were used in the construction of the church grounds. How ironic that the temple of one culture sits atop and encloses the other, like a symbolic reminder of the complete subjugation of the indigenous people by the Europeans.

We were not permitted to take photos inside the convent except in the courtyard. As we walked down the corridors we came upon exposed parts of the old Inca temple within the convent, and the architectural contrast was startling. The Baroque-style church of Santo Domingo pales in comparison to the classical Inca construction of the site (which is the main attraction). The fine stone masonry of the Incas was evident everywhere: mortar-less stone walls, earthquake-proof trapezoidal doorways, curved retaining walls and artistic carvings. For centuries, much of the original Inca structure was hidden, but in 1953, following a massive earthquake in the region, parts of the church building collapsed revealing four original chambers of the Inca temple. In an ingenious restoration move, a large section of the cloister was removed in order to preserve *both* buildings (the church and temple). In one temple chamber there is a display of Inca stones that show the fascinating concept of male and female blocks, and how they fit together perfectly.

More than 4,000 priests once lived in Qorikancha. It was the main astronomical observatory in the Inca Empire. The extraordinary *Temple of the Sun* at Qorikancha must have been a sight to behold. Dedicated to the sun god Inti, the greatest deity in the Inca religion, there were hundreds of gold panels lining its walls, with life-size gold figures, solid gold alters and even a huge golden sun disc, which reflected the sun and bathed the temple in light. The word 'qorikancha' is the Quechua term for 'courtyard of gold'.

Much of this gold was used to pay the Spanish ransom demanded by Pizarro for the return of the captured Inca ruler, Atahualpa. A ransom paid in vain since the king was murdered anyway, the rest of the site looted and torn down to build the Dominican Convent of Santo Domingo. Yes, I'm ashamed to admit it, but my Spanish fore bears were real bastards.

We left the convent and walked back to the Plaza de Armas and toured the incredibly opulent Cathedral of Cusco. Again, we were not permitted to take photographs inside the church, but this Baroque-style building, constructed between 1550 and 1650, contained an enormous amount of wealth; we saw gold leaf everywhere, and a massive alter made of solid silver, and one of the five chapels flanking the nave contained a large solid-gold crucifix. There are amazing paintings and Italian marble crafted in Europe – painstakingly transported to Cusco – used to line the hall-like sacristy. Elvis, a Quechua, was not shy about exposing the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in Peru. The Church charges a high admission fee to enter the cathedral, and at times the local people have to plead with the officials to allow them inside to *pray* (without paying the fee). Yet the Church, according to Elvis, does not provide a single social service in Cusco; there are no soup kitchens, no Catholic schools, no charity hospitals. In fact, I saw homeless people sleeping outside the church grounds in the frigid night air. Under these circumstances, I am surprised the Andean people continue to embrace Catholicism as they do.

The Cathedral was built over the former palace of the Inca (ruler) Wirachocha, using stones looted from the hillside Saqsayhuaman fortress where a major battle against the Incas was waged. The Cathedral of Cusco is considered one of the most splendid Spanish colonial churches in the Americas. The thing I found very intriguing about the cathedral was the use of non-Christian imagery. One of the great paintings (of the Last Supper) by Marcos Zapata that hangs within the church's high walls depicts a main feast of guinea pig, and there are more Andean images inherent in other paintings, including an image of a crucified Jesus who appears to be chewing on coca leaves while Inca images of the Sun and Moon are by his side. On the enormous front doors of the Cathedral there are Puma figures, an Inca symbol.

As we exited the Cathedral, a woman vendor approached me, trying to sell what looked like a large postcard of Cusco. I shook my head politely and told her I was not interested. But the woman insisted I look at the postcard.

She was persistent, and to humor her I glanced down...and noticed that in the center of the card was *my* picture. It was taken on the day we arrived in Cusco, as we left the airport terminal. The picture was cleverly glued to an over-sized postcard depicting various sites in the Sacred Valley. And, I must admit, it was not a bad picture of me. Amused, I handed the woman the ten soles she wanted for it, and then asked her if she had pictures of other group members. Apparently, they had photographed all of us (unbeknownst) as we left the airport. I saw the one of Enna and excitedly pointed it out to her. But Enna seemed embarrassed and told the woman vendor she wasn't interested. When the bus pulled away, the woman vendor was left by the curb shouting after us, still trying to sell her photos. Later, when we left the Saqsayhuaman site, the same woman vendor was in the parking lot. She had followed our bus there, still trying to sell our group the photo-postcards. I couldn't resist, so I snuck off the bus and purchased Enna's photo, and discreetly placed it next to her seat on the bus. She laughed when she saw it, so I think she got a real kick out of it.

From the Cathedral we boarded a bus and drove to the Inca ruins of Saqsayhuaman, a walled complex on the northern outskirts of Cusco. Located on a steep hill that overlooks the city, it has a commanding view of the Sacred Valley to the southeast. Pottery found at the site indicates that a tribal people known as the *Killke culture* were already living on this hill top for at least a thousand years before the Incas arrived. Because of its elevation and immense terraced walls the site has been referred to as a fortress, but most archeologists believe Saqsayhuaman may have been a temple, its huge plaza -- capable of holding thousands of people -- would have been ideal for such ceremonial activities. There are accounts that a Sun Temple existed here, and some of the larger structures could have been used in religious rituals.

In 1536, Manco Inca Yupanqui (a former puppet ruler set up by the Spaniards) laid siege to Cusco from this area; in a futile attempt to dislodge the cruel Europeans, giving the site its military status as a fortress. The word 'saqsayhuaman' means *satisfied hawk*. According to our guide Elvis, thousands of Indians died here during the siege battle and the area got its name from the full-bellied hawks who feasted on the dead. I'm not sure if this is true or not, but the hawk, a bird of prey common to the Andean region, is the symbolic protector of the first Inca, Manco Capac.

The most impressive structures at Saqsayhuaman are the three massive terrace walls in front of the plaza. Made from boulders weighing anywhere between 20 and 125 tons *each*, the walls are polished and cut to fit perfectly together, measuring up to 400 meters in length and six meters tall. How they built these perfectly aligned walls is still a matter of furious debate. The basic architectural theory is that the boulders were pre-cut at the quarry and then lowered in to place on top of one another to create this exact fit. A system of ramps and logs were used to move the large stones. On the other side of the debate, UFO theorists think the Incas had a little extraterrestrial help. Either way, the terraces dwarf anything of human size and are incredible to look at.

We boarded the bus and drove through a wooded section of the Valley to a cave that purportedly contained the stone altar where the great Inca Pachacuti's body was prepared for mummification following his death. We were able to view the altar, but I'm not sure if his actual body was interned here, as well, and I have not been able to find anything online pertaining to this. In the woods heading here, someone had hung two dolls (one male, one female) from a tree limb, and when we asked Elvis what this eerie image meant, he laughed and said it was a cultural superstition (more of a joke) concerning god parents, and their need to be 'good' to their god children...*or else!*

From here we drove to see the big Jesus statue overlooking the cliffs facing Cusco. I noticed that many Peruvian towns and cities had similar statues, which are illuminated at night and can be seen from miles away. This one looked to be over twenty feet tall with out-stretched arms. After a brief photo op we proceeded to the Alpaca Wool and Textile Shop, and received a demonstration on the various grades and qualities of alpaca wool and garments. We were given time to browse and shop. I found the alpaca clothing to be very expensive, and wondered if these were the real prices Peruvians paid for such garments. I decided not to buy anything. Our last stop was at a silver jewelry shop which made all its own jewelry. Once again, a store employee gave us a tour of the shop, lecturing and showing us (at the silversmith workshop) how silver is turned into jewelry. Peruvian silver is usually .95 pure. I learned that Peru and Mexico are the largest producers of silver in the world. Later, we were given time to 'oh and ah' in the jewelry shop. I purchased a couple of pendants for gifts. I'm not sure if I got a really good price, though. I remembered my trip to Mexico two years earlier, where I purchased several silver items in the town of Merida,

thinking I had made out like a Mexican bandit. Here, I felt more like a conquered Inca.

We made it back to our hotel and at 6:30 pm had a brief meeting concerning our trip to Puno the following day. After the meeting, I joined Enna, Tim, Jan, Harry and Patty for dinner at this restaurant called the Inka House across the street from our hotel. They had a 'tourist menu' which offered a relatively inexpensive selection of three-course meals. I ordered an interesting chicken and green rice dish (made with celery). When dinner was over, I took a brief stroll through the streets of Cusco with Enna, Tim and Jan, but it was a chilly night, and we decided to head back to the hotel. I watched a Peruvian national news show before going to bed, and was surprised to discover that a small earthquake had rocked the Urubamba Valley. And while no one in our tour group experienced any tremors, this gave me one more thing to worry about on my trip...

DAY SEVEN

I was awake by 4:30am. Thirty minutes later I went to the kitchen and once again 'bribed' the (grateful) staff to give me a carafe of hot water for my morning coffee. I took another lukewarm shower, dressed, repacked and put my luggage in the hallway by 6:15am. Breakfast was a rushed affair. By 7:00am we had checked out of the San Agustin Hotel and boarded two smaller buses which transported us to a wider street nearby where a bigger tour bus awaited us. Many of the streets in Cusco are narrow (due to the Spanish colonial design) and cannot accommodate large vehicles. Once on board the bigger, more comfortable bus, we began our ten hour 'odyssey' to Puno.

The distance from Cusco to Puno is approximately 380 kilometers (or 235 miles) and accessible via a main two-lane highway. Along the way we made several stops and witnessed some terrific mountain scenery. In one town, we stopped at a bakery and the guides bought us some more of that wheel-sized crusty bread. We drove through another town which smelled oddly of bacon, and discovered it was famous for producing *chicharron*, or pork cracklings.

Our first tourist stop was in a town called Andahuaylillas, about 45 kilometers into our road trip. A small colonial village with a beautiful main plaza surrounded by structures from the early 19th century, and containing one of the most remarkable churches we saw while in Peru. The Church of San Pedro Apostol of Andahuaylillas has been nick-named the ‘Cusquenian Sistine Chapel’; it sits on the southwest section of the main plaza, and was built following the parochial temples of the Andean South, constructed on a platform and consisting of an extended nave, a baptistery, vestry, and a bell tower. The church has wide walls made of adobe on top of stone foundations with many pieces of Inca manufacture, and a rounded wooden roof structure. It has a large atrium cobbled with stone in front of the temple. A wide staircase leads from the street to the entrance made of stones from both Inca and colonial times. The Renaissance façade of the temple contains an open chapel with Doric columns and has painted scenes of the martyrdom of San Pedro (St. Peter) on the left wall, and one of San Pablo (St. Paul) on the other.

Inside the church, atop the extended nave, the entire arched ceiling is decorated with simple rhombuses of blue, red and yellow, filled in with ornamentation of vegetation and with simulated gilded molding, which is rare in the churches of this region. But the most important elements of this temple are the extensive murals which cover almost the entire nave’s interior, featuring artwork from Cusco’s greatest painters, and the reason it is known as the Cusquenian or Andean Sistine Chapel. Photography is not permitted inside the church, so I purchased an official pamphlet to remind myself of its splendor. To find such a remarkable temple in such a small out-of-the-way town speaks volumes about the Catholic Church’s efforts to spread the ‘grandeur’ of the Christian faith. I cannot imagine how the indigenous Indians would not have been impressed, *or enthralled*, by the temples of these Europeans. I am not a religious person, but even I was totally blown away by the beauty of this relatively small church.

We were given some time to shop amongst the street vendors lining one side of the plaza across from the church, and I was able to pick up some more souvenirs at a really good price. Afterwards, we boarded the bus again and continued on to another, even smaller town called Ttio, where a different type of ‘beauty’ awaited us.

GATE 1 tours in Peru have adopted a program that I first experienced in China, earlier in the year. Tour companies, probably due to increased competition, have been incorporating 'cultural highlights' into their itineraries to give their travelers a different, more personal glimpse into the local societies. Our stop in Ttio was such an excursion. We visited the I.E. Virgin de Fatima elementary school. Consisting of three main one-level buildings set around a schoolyard, with the surrounding mountains as a backdrop, the I.E. Virgin de Fatima educates approximately 80 to 100 local students in grades 1 through 6. Some of the students, who hail from very poor Indian families, have to walk two hours (each way) to reach the school. They were dressed in uniforms and wore floppy sun hats with the school's insignia embroidered on the front. Like small children everywhere, they were simply adorable, and seemed happy to see us. The tour members broke up into smaller groups and we were escorted into individual classrooms where we met the students and their teachers. I think the classroom we visited was the fourth grade. The teacher's name was Jacinto, and in Spanish he welcomed us to his school and fielded some questions before individual students stood up to either sing or recite poetry for us. The classroom was not large, with about 15 or so simple wooden desks facing a black chalk board. Along the walls were maps and other elementary school posters. The students took turn asking us questions, and then we posed for photographs with them.

The entire student body assembled in the school yard, in front of a basketball hoop, where the principal said some words, welcoming us to his school, and then we officially handed over a pile of soccer/volley balls, school and building supplies that our guides purchased in Cusco with money the group donated. Some members had brought additional donations from the States. Enna, for example, gave Jacinto a really nice back pack filled with school supplies. It was a very beautiful and touching moment for many of us. The students, lined up by grades, sang a song for us, and we sang something to them, although I cannot remember what song we selected (a nursery rhyme, I think), and I recall a little music and dancing before we finally said our 'goodbyes' and boarded the bus again.

About 125 kilometers into our trip we stopped to tour the fascinating Inca ruins at Raqchi. Archeologists believe the Raqchi site was once used as a storage center for foodstuff, clothing, and even arms. A series of *qolqas*, circular storehouses made of stone with thatched roofs, probably

warehoused supplies that were administered by the Inca military or utilized in times of natural calamities. Situated near the Urubamba River, the entire complex was walled, and contains a massive temple built in honor of the great Inca god, Wiraqocha, the creator of the universe. It is theorized the Temple of Wiraqocha was erected to ask for the god's intercession in keeping the nearby Kinsachata Volcano in check, a ploy that only worked some of the time. Prior to the Spaniard's destruction of the temple, the structure's roof, which stood at just over 300 feet, made it the tallest single building in the Incan Empire. Today, the main center column – constructed of adobe with a stone foundation – still exists, flanked by the ruins of eleven support columns on each side. We spent an hour here, walking the perimeter of the temple, and exploring the Inca bath house and the remains of a residential area known as the *apostas*, which contained barracks for soldiers, workshops and possibly the homes of the nobility or priests. Through the center of the Raqchi site was a 6 meter wide section of the Inca Trail known as the “Qhapaq Nan”, part of the extensive Inca road system that connected the empire from one end to the other.

At approximately the 178 kilometer mark, we reached La Raya, the demarcation line separating the regions of Cusco and Puno and stopped for a photo op of the snow-capped mountains that are the origins of the Urubamba River (also known in this area as the Vilcanota River). The tributary flows north-northwest for about 724 kilometers before joining the lower Apurimac River to form the Ucayali River, the main headwater of the Amazon River. Basically, La Raya is a desolate outpost, with a sign designating the Cusco-Puno border, and a group of local Indians who've set up a small roadside market to sell souvenirs and alpaca garments to the tourists who undoubtedly stop to photograph the beautiful mountain scenery. Back on the bus, Elvis and Oscar handed out boxed lunches to everyone. We would spend the next couple of hours just driving along the highway heading towards Puno, passing one small town after another (Santa Rosa, Chuquibambilla, Ayaviri, Tirapata, Laro, Nicasio, and Calapuja), taking in the desert-mountain landscape, witnessing the single and two-storey mud brick homes and farm houses dotting the roadway, watch the locals farming in the fields with water buffaloes or herding their flocks of sheep, llamas or alpacas. After a while, many of us began to dose off.

Around 4:00 in the afternoon, we reached Juliaca, the Puno region's largest city, with a population of several hundred thousand. Approximately 12,500 feet above sea level, Juliaca is located in the Collao Plateau

northwest of Lake Titicaca. It is the biggest trade center in the province, and has its own airport. But driving through the city, we got a completely different perspective about the place from Elvis. Resembling more of a frontier boomtown, many side streets were still not paved, and much of the buildings were still under construction. Elvis did not have many nice things to say about Juliaca, either. Much of its trade, according to him, was black market contraband brought in from Bolivia. Counterfeiting was a main business here, and Peruvians are leery of anything purchased or made in Juliaca. In fact, several years ago, fake coin money produced in Juliaca was so prevalent throughout the country the government had to mint a new currency.

Apparently, the residents of Juliaca are also averse to paying taxes, and come up with any number of schemes to avoid the tax collector. One of the reasons most of the homes and businesses in the city are still under construction is because the government cannot make a property tax assessment until construction is completed, which prompts new ‘extensions’ and unfinished work. Rebar can be seen sticking out of every home and establishment. Elvis told us that if a vehicle is stolen in Peru, it will make its way to the countless chop-shop garages here, where they are re-constructed and re-sold as different vehicles. Driving through the city we saw numerous tour buses, for example, that seemed to be undergoing major facelifts... *and all of this done in the open*, as police corruption in the city is rampant. There are whole street markets where the vendors sell nothing but counterfeit products, from designer clothing to watches, all under the watchful eye of the local police.

The main transportation consists of ‘trikes’, or motorcycles fitted with passenger carriages, which are not regulated and (in some cases) can be dangerous to ride. But there isn’t a politician in Juliaca who would dare try and rein in this business. The workers’ unions here are very powerful, and when they go on strike they not only close the entire city down, they also block the major highway, cutting off commerce and the tourism business from Cusco to Puno. The city has a very gritty, turn-of-the-previous-century aura about it, reminiscent of the factory/tenement areas spawned at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Even the locals themselves seemed to embody a hard-scrapple and gritty persona.

By 5:00pm we finally arrived in Puno, on the shores of Lake Titicaca. Both GATE 1 tour buses arrived at the same time; because we were all using

the Hotel Royal Inn, mass confusion erupted as the over-whelmed staff tried to cope with checking in 64 tourists simultaneously. Ayacucho Street, where the hotel is located, was too narrow to accommodate the size of our bus, and we had to park in front of the Cathedral a block away while our luggage was piled on the sidewalk waiting for the bellboys. What a curious sight this must have been to the locals! By the time I got my hotel room key I was anxious to get up to my room on the fourth floor and decided not to wait for the solitary (and incredibly slow) elevator, taking the stairs, instead. Puno sits at an elevation of almost 12,500 feet above sea level, and when I reached the fourth floor I thought I was going to require CPR; I was gasping for air like a fish out of water. Later, I needed to take two Advils – swallowing them down with some coca tea the hotel provided in the lobby – to stop the perpetual pounding in my head.

The hotel room was nice, with an enormous king-size bed, but when I went to close the curtains I found myself staring across an alley into an open window with another man staring back at me. I'm not sure if all this coca tea was making me a little paranoid, but I kept the curtains closed the entire time I was in Puno. The bathroom contained a curtain less window just above the shower area (which made no sense at all to me) and I was certain the people in the adjacent taller building were posting YouTube videos of my naked body on the Internet...*or, um, maybe that was just the coca tea again.*

At 6:00pm, I met Enna, Tim, Jan, Harry and Patty in the lobby. We went to eat at a nearby restaurant called La Portales, selecting three-course meals from a tourist menu priced at only 15 soles, or approximately \$5-6. I ordered the alpaca steak again. On my recommendation, Tim did the same, but the alpaca was cooked with an unusual mint-like sauce that gave it a funny flavor. Tim was not too impressed. To start off our meal, everyone ordered the chicken soup, which was delicious. Poor Harry, wracked with a bad case of bronchitis, he kept coughing throughout the meal. I prayed the chicken soup would help stave off whatever germs I was taking in. I did somehow manage to get through the trip without developing a major cold (probably due to my extensive vitamin and mineral supplementation), but I did suffer from night-time nasal congestion which oddly cleared up by morning.

After dinner, I joined Enna, Tim and Jan for a stroll down Puno's famous Lima Street, a pedestrian walkway lined with shops, money-changers and restaurants. We browsed the stores, and Enna and Jan purchased some alpaca-wool items. I was able to purchase a souvenir shot glass for a co-

worker back home who collects them. It was a beautiful chilly night, the sky was clear, and we continued down Lima Street until it was almost closing time (10:00 for most businesses). Back at the hotel, I tried to watch an episode of *CSI: New York* dubbed in Spanish, but found it annoying and went to bed.

DAY EIGHT

I was awake by 5:00am. I trekked downstairs to the restaurant and tipped one of the waiters setting up the breakfast buffet into giving me a carafe of hot water so I could make coffee in my room. I took an exceptionally long hot shower hoping the steam would fog up the bathroom window, offering me a little privacy while I shaved. The breakfast buffet was delicious. I sat with Enna and an older married couple who were in the other GATE 1 group. The man was named Bill, but I do not recall his wife's name. We had a great conversation about American politics. Bill and his wife were from Texas, and surprisingly (to me, anyway) life-long democrats. In this time of political and economic upheaval and uncertainty in the world, it was comforting to meet other socially progressive-minded individuals.

By 8:15 am our entire group gathered in the lobby and we embarked on a fascinating tour of the Floating Islands of Lake Titicaca. Our local guide was a woman named Charo who turned out to be one of the best tour guides I have ever had the pleasure of listening to; she reminded me of the enthusiastic history professors I had back at Rutgers University. We drove down to the pier and boarded a shuttle boat which ferried us to the Uros Islands.

Puno is situated between the shores of Lake Titicaca and the mountains surrounding the city. With less than 2 miles of flat lands between the lake and the foothills, the city has continued to expand upward into the hillsides. There are many very steep streets in the upper areas of Puno. The city has a population of several hundred thousand, and serves as the first major hub in the constant migration of poorer Andean peoples who move on to other, larger Peruvian cities in hopes of a better life. The region of Puno is famous

for its agriculture and livestock (particularly llamas and alpaca) which graze on the immense plateaus and plains just beyond the city limits. Because of its altitude, the temperatures here can be quite extreme, dropping below zero at night during the height of winter, while sun rays can be very strong during the day. Many of the locals I observed in this region had both wind and sun-burned faces.

The city was established in 1668 by the Spaniards, and has its share of colonial structures and design, including several colonial-era churches. Puno is also known as the ‘folkloric capital’ of Peru due to the amount of artistic and cultural expressions found here, particularly dance. But to me, the most interesting cultural aspect of Puno was to be found on Lake Titicaca. At 12,500 feet, Lake Titicaca is the highest commercially navigable lake in the world, situated on the border between Peru and Bolivia. By sheer volume of water, it is also the largest lake in South America. Puno’s access to Lake Titicaca is surrounded by a series of over forty ‘floating islands’ which are inhabited by a group of Indians called the Uros. And our visit to these amazing people was one of the highlights of my trip to Peru.

The Uros are a pre-Inca people who originally settled on the lake for defensive purposes, moving further into the lake whenever another tribe threatened them. They traded with the Aymara tribe on the mainland, and as they intermarried with them, the Uros abandoned their language for that of the Aymara. Today, many of the people who call themselves Uros are actually a mix of the two tribes. During the time of the Incan Empire, the Uros were conquered and made to pay taxes and provide slave labor.

What is amazing about the Uros is how they live. Using totora reeds (a subspecies of the giant bulrush sedge) which grow in the lake, the Uros build man-made islands. From the incredibly dense roots of these plants, the Uros make solid blocks of floating layers called *khili*, which they then tie together to form the foundation of their islands. The islands themselves have to be anchored by ropes attached to sticks that are driven into the bottom of the lake. More totora reeds are continuously piled on top of the foundation to form a walking ‘ground’. Water is constantly rotting these reeds away so every three months a new layer has to be added (more so during the rainy season). The islands last about thirty years, and must be constructed anew. Small huts, which also incorporate totora reeds, are then built on the surface of these islands and serve as the living quarters. The huts rot quickly and need to be rebuilt yearly.

The islands vary in size, and can include anywhere from two to three families or as many as ten. They elect amongst themselves a leader (the island we visited had a 'president') and a governing council. Their diet consists of fish caught in the lake (ipsi, carichi and catfish...plus trout and kingfish which have been introduced into the lake over the last seventy years). The fish is usually smoked. The Uros also hunt birds such as seagulls, ducks and flamingos. And they eat the totora reeds, as well. The white bottom part of the reed provides iodine. Totora reeds are also used in much the same way coca leaves are used by the Andean people, as a medicinal substance which can be made into tea or used topically to alleviate pain; in the summer months, the reeds can provide cooling relief from the hot weather when split open and pressed to the forehead.

Traditionally, the Uros bartered for the goods they needed to survive on the mainland, but over the years they have come to rely on tourism as a means to make money. They now make crafts and tapestries which they sell to the tourists. This is both a blessing and a curse for the Uros way of life. Each footstep taken on the islands sinks the ground 2-4 inches depending on the density of the reeds underfoot. To maintain the island ground requires constant reed layering, a lot of hard work, but with more and more tourists visiting the islands yearly, and all the additional walking *that* entails, the Uros find their lifestyle being challenged by the extra maintenance of the islands and their need to cater to the outsiders. Another problem facing them is a dwindling population. Currently, there are about 2,300 Uros living on Lake Titicaca, but as their children go to school on the mainland -- being exposed to modern living -- many choose not to continue the Uros way of life once they grow up. It is conceivable that in a few decades the Uros will cease to exist as island-dwellers, and their culture will come to pass. So I was very grateful for my chance to visit with them.

Our shuttle boat took us slowly out into the lake. We passed a government office and health center erected on a man-made island. We also saw several Uros in small motorized crafts going about their business. The island we visited contained seven huts and consisted of several families headed by two older brothers (one the leader of the island) and their wives, their grown daughters and son-in-laws, plus the children. Near where our shuttle boat docked, there was a lookout post shaped like a giant fish. In times past, the lookout post was always manned to keep an eye on any potential threats.

We were warmly greeted by the Uros on this island. After taking a brief look around we arranged ourselves in a semi-circle, sitting atop logs made of dried totora reeds, and watched Charo and two of the male Uros demonstrate how they make the islands out of reeds. It was both interesting and funny, as the Uros have a great sense of humor, using humorous scale models to describe their lives to us. At one point, they passed out fresh totora reeds so we could taste them. It was like eating a blander kind of celery. When the lecture was over, we split up into small groups and visited the actual living huts of these people. The quarters were very cramped, and most of us had to bend over in order to fit inside. I sat on a bed, which appeared to be some kind of weaved platform covered with layers of alpaca blankets. During the rainy season the Uros place plastic coverings over the thatched roofs to keep the water out. After visiting the huts we were 'encouraged' by the individual families to purchase some crafts or tapestries they had set up outside in a sort of makeshift mini-market. Normally, I do not go overboard with my souvenir shopping, but seeing how these people live, how warmly they treated us, and the skill they put into their crafts and artwork, I couldn't help myself and purchased several items, including a pillowcase, tapestry and a beautifully hand-crafted replica of an Uros fishing boat made out of totora reeds.

Before leaving the island, the Uros tribal leader thanked us for our visit and for purchasing their crafts (Charo did the interpreting). They sang some native songs for us, as well, a kind of 'thank you' send-off, and then we boarded a double-decked, tricked-out Uros vessel (made of wood, reeds and plastic bottles stuffed into the side panels to keep the thing afloat) while two of the sturdier male Uros rowed us to another island where our shuttle boat was waiting to take us back to shore. I am not one for prolonged sentimentality, but I can truly state that I will never forget this brief cultural experience.

When we got back to the hotel, I put away my Uros souvenirs and had lunch in a small café across from the Plaza de Armas (the main plaza). I was actually looking for Enna and some of the others, and ended up in this place by mistake. I ordered a ham and cheese sandwich and a cup of their special coffee, which came highly touted. Tunki coffee is a Peruvian blend grown in the Amazon region that has won awards for 'best-tasting coffee in the world'. I'm not sure if it was the *best* coffee I ever tasted, but it was a great cup of Joe.

At 1:45 pm a group of us took an optional excursion to the Sillustani Tombs on the Altiplano (high plains) just outside of Puno. Charo was our guide. We drove along the main highway, passing adobe brick farmhouses and the equally hardened Colla Indians toiling their fields, until we reached the Sillustani Tombs, a pre-Incan burial ground situated on top of a peninsula overlooking the stunningly beautiful Lake Umayo. After pulling into the large parking area we had to walk up a long paved pathway to the actual entrance of the site, and then make our way slowly up a rocky dirt trail to the top of the hill where the tombs were located.

The Sillustani tombs are above-ground, tower-like cylindrical structures called *chullpas* that were originally built by the ancestors of the Colla Indians (an Aymara-speaking tribe). Primarily, they housed the remains of complete families, but were probably limited to the nobility. Many of these round structures were not fully completed, or were damaged by grave robbers looking for treasure who often dynamited the walls to gain access into the burial chambers. They stood as tall as 12 meters high, and some of the burial mounds found near here are believed to be thousands of years old. The Colla were conquered by the Incas during the 1400's, and some of the tombs also display Incan architecture. There is an unusual mixing of both styles, though. The Colla built their *chullpas* using even rectangular edges, while the Inca used stones of varying shapes. Throughout the Andean plains there are sites with *chullpas*, but the ones at Sillustani are the best preserved. We also saw storehouses and smaller tombs made of piled stones, and an altar believed to have been used to sacrifice young girls. The view of Lake Umayo (with the Umayo Island in its middle) from the top of the burial hill was absolutely breath-taking; I took some wonderful photographs from here. We then climbed back down the hill along a different, even rockier (and more precarious) section of the site.

We drove back to the hotel, stopping to take pictures of some of the adobe homes and farmhouses along the way, at times having to wait for a flock of llamas or sheep to cross the road. Shortly after 5:30 pm, Enna and I went to have dinner at a local restaurant situated along Lima Street, where I ordered my last alpaca meal. Afterwards, we went shopping for some additional souvenirs (Enna remembered an uncle she'd forgotten to buy something for) and then we headed back to the Royal Inn Hotel. It was cold and I was tired, and I gratefully crawled into the king-sized bed, beneath three blankets, and dozed off.

DAY NINE

Perhaps because I went to bed so early the night before, I woke up several times during the night, and by 5:00 am was unable to go back to sleep. I went down to the lobby and was able to get some hot water for my morning coffee, and then I spent the next couple of hours writing in my journal notebook, taking a shower and repacking my suitcase (and watching some local news program on TV). My luggage was exceptionally lighter now because I kept discarding my underwear, socks and T-shirts as the trip progressed, a little trick I learned from a fellow traveler on my China tour. Leery of going over the baggage weight limit (and getting reamed by the airlines), I had packed some of my rattiest undergarments and would discard them daily. Yes, I left a trail of Fruit-of-the-Looms all over Peru, but by the time I boarded the plane back to Lima, my luggage was still under the 50 pound limit, even with all the souvenir trinkets, scarves and books crammed inside!

At breakfast, I sat with Hal and Bill and once again re-hashed the horrible state of the U.S. economy, and what we thought needed to be done to ease us out of the recession. I think we must have 'solved' our national problems at least five times during these morning bull sessions! By 8:00 am, we were on our way to the airport in Juliaca for our return flight to Lima. Although our flight did not leave until almost noon, we needed to get to the Manco Capac Airport really early since this was a very small facility -- with only one bank of check-in counters for all its flights -- and we had to wait on a long slow-moving line to get our boarding passes. Packed inside what appeared to be the only airport gate, a group of Peruvian musicians entertained us while we waited to board our plane. By 11:15am, we walked across the tarmac and got on the plane for our 1:25 minute flight to Lima.

When we descended into Peru's capital, the air pressure in my ear became very painful, and I was partially deaf for about an hour after getting off the plane. We were met by a GATE 1 tour bus which whisked us through Lima, back to the Miraflores district, to the Hotel Antiguas on Grau Avenue. This was the same hotel that had been over-booked when we first arrived in

Peru; as a way of apology, the manager gave each room a complimentary bottle of wine, which I then *re-gifted* to Elvis. The Hotel Antiguas is a very quaint, turn-of-the-century colonial mansion converted into a hotel, but had the look and feel of a traditional bed and breakfast inn. My room was decorated with simple, colonial wooden furniture and offered a magnificent view of the beautiful courtyard.

Upon arriving at the Hotel Antiguas, news of Hurricane Irene (off the northeastern coast of the United States) was all over the CNN news broadcast, and it was announced that both JFK and La Guardia airports in New York City had been closed down as they braced for the incoming storm. Many of our tour members had flown in from New York City and were now in panic mode wondering how they were going to get back home the following day. Over the course of the next 24 hours, GATE 1 had to make re-scheduling contingencies to fly everyone out. For those affected, it was not a fun way to spend your last night in Lima.

I decided to skip the final dinner excursion, which included a meal at one of Lima's premier restaurants and a night time light show at a central park nearby. The travel website I used back home referred to the light show as a touristy gimmick, and so the idea of paying \$80 for a dinner seemed very expensive to me. I opted, instead, to meet Harry and Patty at 3:00 pm, and we set out to explore Miraflores and make our own dinner arrangements. I also said my goodbyes to Enna, Tim and Jan. They had booked the optional air plane jaunt over the Nazca Lines for the previous day, and had to take a seven hour bus ride to the area. We had previously exchanged emails, and everyone promised to write.

Prior to leaving the hotel on our walking tour, I asked one of the guides to suggest a restaurant in the area. He marked a few down on my Lima street map. Harry suggested we visit an archeological park called Huaca Pucllana, which was about a twenty minute walk from the hotel. The three of us made our way north along Grau Avenue, crossing the busy Jose Prado Street, passing some very nice residential neighborhoods. At Huaca Pucllana we had to pay an entrance fee of 10 soles, which included an English-speaking guide to take us through the site. While we were waiting for the guide, we checked out the park's museum, and I was able to find out a little more about the place:

Huaca Pucllana was a temple complex built by an earlier civilization that lived in the Lima coastal region between 200 AD and 900 AD. Other remains have been uncovered here belonging to the Wari Culture, as well, a Middle Horizon (600 to 1000 AD) civilization that flourished in the south-central Andes and coastal areas of modern-day Peru. The main structure is a pyramid made of adobe bricks, built on seven staggered platforms and surrounded by a large plaza. A wall separates the complex into two sections; one used for religious offerings, the other had an administrative function. From what I could understand from the inscriptions in the museum (everything was in Spanish), the pyramid was erected by the clergymen who ran the society to show their complete religious power or control over the water sources of the region (both ocean and rivers). There were drawings and carvings of sharks, and deep pits have been unearthed used for offerings of marine life. One of the tombs discovered intact, known as the 'Lord of the Unkus', contained the shrouded remains of three adults, two wearing death masks, and those of a sacrificed child.

What is amazing about this site is that it sits smack in the middle of Lima's nicest district. All around the wrought iron fence perimeter are quiet residential streets and upscale business areas. Prior to being discovered, Huaca Pucllana was a privately owned hill lot. In fact, excavation is still going on; this complex might even be bigger than what has been unearthed thus far. We had to wait almost thirty minutes for our guide, a young woman who looked more like a college student. Her English was so-so, and I found myself asking her questions about the site in Spanish. We started our tour walking around the plaza area, and made our way up and around the pyramid until we reached a section that included live animals (llamas, alpaca, and guinea pigs), a botanical garden and even diorama statues of the original Indian inhabitants performing rituals. Adjacent to this section of the site, ironically enough, was the restaurant where our fellow tour members would be eating dinner later. We stopped by to check out the menu.

After Huaca Pucllana, the three of us continued on our walking tour of Miraflores, orientating ourselves with my city map. It was Saturday night and the streets were bustling with locals out for a good time. We trekked down Independencia Avenue and then turned west on Jose Pardo Street, a major business thoroughfare, and decided to stop at a restaurant called Norky's for dinner. Harry said a Peruvian friend of his recommended the place for ribs and chicken. After days of eating alpaca, I was up for some barbecue. And the place did not disappoint, either. We sat on the second

level, over-looking the busy street below, and had some delicious chicken and rib barbecue with French fries and veggies. I must say, it was the most satisfying meal I had while in Peru!

It was already night time when we left Norky's. We decided to search out the famous market area near Larco Avenue before it closed. Walking east along Jose Pardo we came upon Ovalo de Miraflores (a major circle intersection) and continued until we reached the public markets a couple of blocks away. The first one we entered was already closing down, with most of the stalls' metal doors drawn shut. But the place was still hopping because a very festive public dance was in progress at the back of the market area. A live band was playing and the locals were in the middle of the square, dancing away. We crossed the street and entered the Indian arts and craft marketplace which was still open, browsing the maze of shops and stalls, admiring the artworks, garments and jewelry on display. I purchased my final souvenirs here.

We got back to the Hotel Antiguas shortly after 9:00pm, exhausted but satisfied we had made the most of our last night in Lima. I said my goodbyes to Harry and Patty, and retired to my room. Before going to bed I repacked my luggage one final time and laid out the clothes I would be wearing for my flight home.

DAY TEN

My final entry will be a short one. The last day of a tour is basically nothing more than the trip home. I was awake by 5:00 am, showered and dressed quickly, then watched the CNN broadcast about Hurricane Irene, which was making landfall in the northeastern part of the U.S. Although there was a lot of flooding associated with the storm, it didn't cause the kind of damage initially expected. When I was checking out of the hotel, a staff member told me everyone flying to New York City had managed to find connecting flights out of Lima.

A couple in their sixties – whose names I do not recall – were flying back to Miami with me. They had taken a different GATE 1 tour, starting in the Amazon jungle of Ecuador and then traveling for several days in Peru before heading back to Michigan (via Miami). Our airport transfer service picked us up at 7:15am, accompanied by another GATE 1 guide who dropped us off right at the check-in counter. This is why I *love* guided tours, I feel like a well-cared for child! As it turned out, the other couple and I ended up in the very last row of the plane, on opposite ends of the aisle, with no other passengers sitting with us, so we were able to really stretch out. The man showed me some really interesting videos on his camcorder from the Amazon jungle, including a very funny clip of a small barracuda jumping out of the Amazon River unexpectedly and clonking his wife on the forehead during a riverboat trip (she was a tad startled, but otherwise all right). During the flight I managed to take a nap; the five-hour trip went by quickly. I breezed through Customs in Miami International Airport and was home in less than fifteen minutes after leaving the terminal building (I live in a neighborhood adjacent to the airport). As much as I love to travel, nothing beats coming home! I immediately unpacked my dirty laundry and separated my souvenirs and downloaded my photographs into my computer. Much of the rest of the night was spent calling family and friends, letting them know I was back.

Days later, when I returned to work, a co-worker asked me if I would ever return to Peru, having told him about the high altitude, the cold weather and my experience with the food. And, yes, I would go back in a heart beat. I learned more in ten days – in terms of the history of that region – than I had learned in any of my last three international outings. I would love to see the Nazca Lines (and regretted not taking the optional excursion). I would also love to spend more time visiting the ruins in the Sacred Valley, including Machu Picchu again. I wouldn't mind another boat trip on Lake Titicaca to revisit the Uros. I think it would also be fascinating to travel to the Amazon region of Peru. Whether I ever make it back or not doesn't worry me, though. I have enough wonderful memories to last me a life time. To Enna, Tim, Jan, Harry, Patty, and all the rest of that large group, thank you for your companionship. To Elvis, Edgar, Charo and the rest of the guides, thank you for your expertise and concern for our comfort. Until next time...

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to Peru occurred on August 19 – August 28, 2011)

