

Pikes Peak River Runners

Mountains, Rivers and Guinea Pigs in Peru! Oct 1999



By Christina King

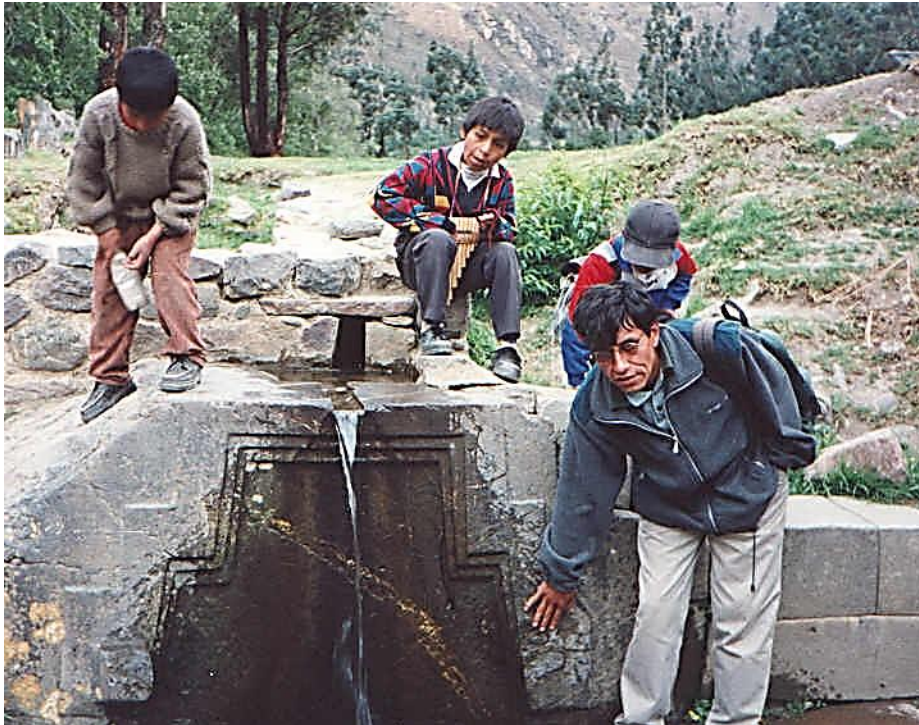
36 Hour Day

Our trip began when I got a call from my Mom in March of 1999. To celebrate her 60th birthday, she wanted to go to Peru to see Machu Picchu (Inca ruins), but my Dad had "already been there and done that" in the 1960's. Mom asked if I wanted to go and I said, "yes". We selected a company specializing in small group adventure travel called, [Overseas Adventure Travel \(OAT\)](#) and booked our trip for October 1999. OAT uses local guides, selects unique cultural activities, explores numerous Inca ruins, and features a rafting trip. I was intrigued. I scheduled Yellow Fever and Hepatitis A vaccinations before we left because those diseases are endemic to Peru.

Our 9-day Peru trip began with a series of 4 flights culminating in a 36 hour "stay awake" time with only a 1-hour time change. Sound confusing, well we were by the time we reached Yucay, Peru. Shirley, one of the other members of our 15-person traveling group was from Colorado Springs, Colorado so we carpooled to Denver together. We flew from Denver to Cuzco, Peru via Dallas, Miami, and Lima (capital of Peru). Then we got on a bus and drove 2 hours to Yucay in the middle of the Sacred Valley of Peru. What a long day!

Miami's airport had been shut down by a hurricane several days before we arrived. The flights to South America were extremely overbooked. United was offering passengers \$1000/person plus hotel and meals if 20 passengers would get off the plane. Our plane was packed. The Latino culture began with our boarding of the Miami flight to Lima. Most of the passengers appeared to be South American and were speaking Spanish. The boarding agents did not even try to call everyone by orderly seating assignments. Everyone just pushed on board. During our flight to Lima, a woman fainted and lay down on the floor for an hour while everyone just walked around her. An English-speaking doctor appeared to be asking her questions through a Spanish-speaking interpreter. By the end of the flight, some of the toilets were not operational. We did not get much sleep on the plane. Poor Shirley took a sleeping pill to get some rest, but it did not work. Several days later Shirley realized she had taken an Imodium (anti-diarrhea) pill by accident during the flight. No wonder the "sleeping pill" did not work!

Upon our arrival in Lima (4 am), an OAT representative met us and asked for some American cash, our passports, and our luggage. We did exactly what we were told not to do. We gave it all to him and away he went to the national side of the Lima airport. We got on our last flight of the long day and flew over the Andes Mountains (25,000 feet) into Cuzco. Mom, Shirley, and I were tired when we arrived at our beautiful hotel.



Upon arriving in Cuzco our guide Raul, was waiting for us. Raul arranged for us to change US dollars to Peruvian nuevo sol (soles). Raul warned us about the local problem with counterfeit soles and told us to check with him before changing money on our own. Throughout our trip every time I paid with soles, I noticed everyone checked the bills very carefully.

We also began the day with a cup of hot coca tea (made from coca leaves-yes, it is the same leaf that cocaine is derived from). Coca tea is widely used to dull hunger and combat the effects of altitude sickness. Cuzco's elevation

is 11,000 feet and has a population of 250,000. Mom, Shirley, and I were fine with the altitude but others in our group were not so lucky. Our group consisted of people from Ohio, Oregon, California, Missouri, Illinois, and Utah. The trip was billed as a moderate adventure travel trip. There are only 4 of us under the age of 60. Several women in our group appear wobbly and Val uses a cane. Our group appears to have diverse physical abilities.

Our next leg of travel in the 36-hour day involved a 2-hour scenic bus ride to the Sacred Valley and the little village of Yucay. Our hotel in Yucay is beautiful. The mountains around us are about 24,000 feet in elevation. The Urabamba river flows through the valley floor and is lined with villages and irrigated fields of corn and barley. Most homes are built with mud bricks and ceramic tile roofs. Little clay statues of oxen and crosses adorn the roofs to bring prosperity to the homeowners.

We rested at our flower filled hacienda hotel and then drove to the Inca ruins at Ollantaytambo. Inca terraces fill this valley and are especially elaborate at Ollantaytambo. Some theories speculate that Ollantaytambo was a fortress, a resting lodge, or a temple. The truth is probably a combination of the above. The water structures and waterfalls are particularly intricate. The Inca revered astrological signs and the mother earth (Pachamama). Water, sun, and earth were important in the design of Inca cities. When the Spanish arrived in Peru, they found gold treasures beyond their wildest dreams. They proceeded to kidnap the Inca King and



kept him hostage for several years. The Inca cities and palaces were plundered of their gold artifacts and the buildings destroyed. The gold was melted down and sent back to Spain. The Spanish replaced the Inca cities, palaces, and fortresses with Spanish buildings and churches using the Inca foundations. Inca structures can be seen everywhere in Peru. Agricultural terraces, irrigation canal and stone foundations are used today.

Legend of Ollantaytambo: Ollantay was an Inca general who fell in love with an Inca princess. The Inca king banished the lovers to prison for 30 years. A new Inca king rose to power and released them after 30 years and they returned to their lovely Sacred Valley (Ollantaytambo) to live happily ever after.

Young children follow us everywhere. During our tour of Ollantaytambo, young boys follow us playing a Peruvian pan flute, llama-hoof rattles, and plastic bottles full of rocks. I brought some pencils and stickers to give to children. Schooling is free in Peru, but supplies are not, so the pencils were appreciated. The children appeared baffled by the stickers and enjoyed them once I showed them what to do with them. We had a lovely dinner and went to bed early after a long day.



Rafting the Urabamba River

It is springtime in Peru and the dry season is just ending. The Urabamba River flows down the Sacred Valley and is exceptionally low now. The Sacred Valley is considered an agriculturally rich area of Peru. Crops cultivated in this valley include potatoes, corn, Andean cereal, wheat, barley, carrots, pumpkins, and squash. The Urabamba River has a different name upstream (Vilcanota river). We drive up a dirt road along the river, above the village of Pisac, to begin our river trip. The river is used for irrigation and a water source. I notice lots of trash along the riverbanks and I assume the river is polluted.

Our river guide, Juan, is from Cuzco. Juan has been guiding for 15 years and has run the Bio-Bio and Apurimac rivers in South America. Sacred Valley Adventures equipment is modern and includes NRS rafts, America's cup lifejackets, helmets, and Carlisle paddles. Juan tells us that these sections of the Urabamba's rapids are Class III and they increase to Class IV/V when the wet season arrives, and the river rises. My guess is the river is running about 4000 cfs. I can see the high-water line 10 to 12 feet above us. The rapids are fun (pool and drop style).



The waves get us wet, but we make sure to keep our mouths closed. We do not want to swallow any river water by mistake. We float along the river and Juan points out the sites during the slow stretches. Inca terraces, Inca bridge foundations, mud brick making projects, villages, oxen and sheep, and school children are some of the many sights we see. During one narrow section of river, Juan guides our boat around a huge mid-river boulder through a tight squeeze. I cannot help wondering why he is going this way (but I did not say anything). As we pass the boulder, Juan tells us to look up at the foundation marks on the top of the boulder. He explains that these structures are the remains of an Inca bridge across the river and points out the foundations on each side of the river. The rapids are technical (rocky) because the water is so low. I can see how much more difficult the river must be when the flow increases. Some school children are just getting out of school and they yell, "Hola" to us from the shore. I am sure the Peruvian campesinos think tourists are crazy for floating down the river.

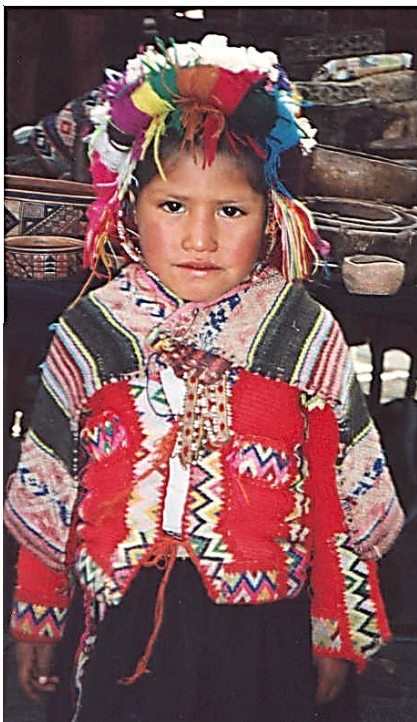


The inhabitants of most of the rural villages are comprised of Quechan Indians or mestizos (Quecha and Spanish background). The rural campesinos (farmers) live off the land and use communal work practices. I notice that some of the fields we pass have a dozen campesinos working in them. Their tools are very primitive, wooden plows and shovels. Our raft trip concludes with a picnic lunch along the river where we enjoy traditional Peruvian food. Vegetables, corn, potatoes, fresh bread, and hot coca tea. Peru has more than 150 different varieties of potatoes and corn. Every day we buy enough bottled water to drink for the day. Bottled water is provided at all our meals. Peruvians either buy bottled water to drink or boil it. The water is not safe to drink. I appreciate the convenience and safety of our safe drinking water at the tap in Colorado after

this trip.

The weather this morning has been cool and cloudy. We wore our rain gear and fleece, but it did not rain on us. The river water is very cold, not too surprising because the river's headwaters are in the Andes Mountains.

After lunch we visit more Inca ruins above the small town of Pisac. I never expected Peru to have this many ruins. The Pisac ruins include mummy tombs (which were pillaged by the Spanish). Children are everywhere. Children are walking



home from school (5 miles or more one way), selling trinkets, posing for pictures (and tips). I am astounded by their independence. As we drive on the roads (50 mph), young children walk along the road unattended. Some children appear as young as 3-4 years old.



Women and children are friendly, and we communicate in Spanish. All the children we met on the trip appear healthy. One group of children I visited with showed me their schoolbooks and explained that they were studying spelling in school today. They were 7-12 years old. The 7-year-old thought she was 3 years old. Oops, I guess she might have to work on her math. Most children look several years younger than they really are. Peruvians are generally small. I have hardly seen any old people. A few older women at the markets but that is all.

We stopped at the Pisac market and bought some trinkets. Mom bought a Peruvian hat for Dad and we bought a pan flute for James, my nephew. I also

bought another flute and necklace for some friends at home. David and Lois buy everything in sight. I wonder if they will have room in their suitcases to take it all home. Lois loves to shop. The inhabitants of small villages such as Pisac consist mainly of Quecha Indians. Many Quecha women wear native dress that includes, skirts, sandals, hats, and brightly colored sweaters. They use



blankets to carry children or market goods on their backs so they can keep their hands free for work such as spinning alpaca or llama (yama) wool.

As we walked through the town of Pisac, I noticed sticks with a red plastic or cloth on the end jutting out of doorways. Raul explained that this signaled that chicha (local beer made of maize) was available for sale. Raul warned us not to try the chicha because it was not prepared under sanitary conditions. I am glad I did not try it because I felt carsick on the way home and got sick later in the evening.

Our guide Raul has a lot of patience with our group. Herding 15 people anywhere is a chore. Our group asks the same questions repeatedly and gets off track easily. Raul comes from a family of 8 (3 brothers and 4 sisters). Leo, our assistant guide, comes from a family of 7 children so I guess they have a lot of experience. Raul studied for 5 years at the University of Cuzco to be a guide. He has never traveled to the United States but wants to visit soon. Raul's family is typical of Peru. Most families live off the land and/or tourist industry. Tourism is the biggest moneymaking industry in Peru. Parents leave the land to their children and most women marry. Children contribute to their family's prosperity. Children work from a young age to help the family. Spanish-introduced oxen, horses, and donkeys have replaced the Peruvian llama and alpacas as beasts of burden. Llamas and alpacas are



still used for fur, meat, and tourism but they can only carry 30-40 lbs.

Chinchero, the Weaving Village

Today we travel to a weaving village called Chinchero. A local women's weaving group treats us to a weaving demonstration. We visit more Inca ruins in Chinchero and view the lofty 24,000 feet peaks from the hilltops. Snow never falls below the 16,000 feet snowline but it does get cold at night. The fields we pass today are non-irrigated and grow barley on a rotational basis. Poor Frances and Lisa have felt ill from the altitude since the beginning of our trip. They still feel sick today.

Flora, a local Chinchero woman, explains the weaving process in detail. Blankets take up to 2 months to complete and the young children begin spinning wool at the age of three. I purchased a black and red blanket (manco) that typical Peruvian women wear, to carry children on their backs. It has the typical Chinchero "S" and "eye" design woven in the blanket. Every village has a unique design that they incorporate into their weavings. Flora invites us to her home for a typical Peruvian meal.

We have soup, corn, potatoes, Lima beans, sheep cheese, toasted wheat, and GUINEA PIG (cuy)! Guinea pig is the local



delicacy. We eat it roasted. Some say that it is prepared this way so people cannot be fooled and think it is cooked cat. Interesting thought. Guinea pig has dark meat with a duck flavor but without the oily taste. I tried it but did not like it.



We checked out the kitchen afterwards and saw the guinea pigs running around on the floor eating alfalfa hay. We really get a feeling for rural Peruvian village life today.



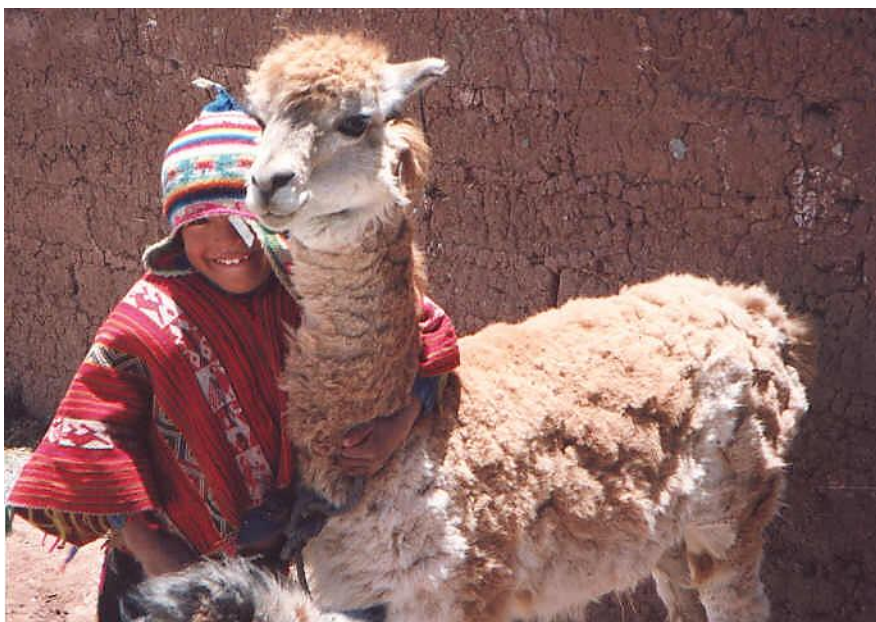
We drove back to Cuzco and stopped at the Inca ruins called Coricancha (Sun Temple). We wandered through the ruins that included temples to the sun, moon, stars, and rainbows. The stones are fitted perfectly together without any mortar. The Spaniards built over most of the ruins, but small intact areas remain. That night we explored some cathedrals and the Plaza de Armas in Cuzco. We ate dinner at the central Plaza de Armas. What a delightful day despite the guinea pig feast!

Sexy Woman!!

I knew that would catch your attention. Today we visited the Inca ruins above Cuzco called, Sacsayhuaman (pronounced...sexy woman). The puma head shaped fortress or temple is incredible considering that only 20% of the ruin remains intact. We wander the site at our leisure, and I take a picture of a grazing llama. We visit another Inca ruin called the "Labyrinth" because of the tunnels and trails carved inside a natural rock formation. A sacrificial altar is hidden inside the ruin. Llamas, alpacas, guinea pigs, and humans were sacrificed during the Inca reign.

Our next event is a Curandero ceremony. Pedro, a Quecha Indian shaman, performs this ceremony using offerings and chants. We each offer coca leaves, llama fat, llama fetus, incense, wine, and candy. Pachamama (mother earth) loves these things (...her liquor and sweets). The shaman chants and pats each of us with the special offering pouch and then drops our offerings into the fire. Raul tells each of us to wish for something special.





We stopped at a small store to look at sweaters made of alpaca and llama fur. (Peruvian trivia: Baby alpaca refers to the soft fur located under their bellies, not the fur of baby alpacas). The store must have had 500 different sweaters. I visited with a little boy posing with alpacas and llamas outside of the store. The little boy was missing an eye but looked well cared for and his mother was weaving next to him.

Alpacas are supposed to be smaller than llamas, but I still cannot tell them apart. The coloring on each of the animals is varied so that is not an indicator. While

we were waiting for everyone to find the "perfect" sweater our shaman read coca leaves for Raul. Raul would ask questions and the shaman would shake the leaves and drop them on the table. How the coca leaves landed predicted the answers to Raul's questions. The shaman said that Raul would have two women in his life, and one would be bad for him. I think Raul was taking the future predictions half-seriously. The coca leaf reading was comparable to the psychic readings that are advertised in the US. Raul said that at least once a year a shaman performs a blessing ceremony at his family home. Ninety percent of Peru is Catholic, but they blend Inca idol worshipping and mysticism into their everyday life.

Lunch was at a Peruvian restaurant with wonderful musicians playing pan flutes (all sizes), drums, guitars, and more. The Coricancha ruins that we visited yesterday are across from our hotel, so I take the opportunity to sit outside and sketch the ruins. Shoeshine boys gathered around me and visited while I drew. I know they giggled politely at my drawing ability, but they asked many good questions. We talked for quite a while. They asked me if I would sell my drawing and why I did not just take a picture instead. I told them that I had pictures but wanted to take this drawing home also. I then replied that I deserved a sol for providing them entertainment. They had a good laugh over that comment. I gave them pencils and had them sign my drawing. We walked through a local market in the late afternoon and saw many types of



potatoes, coca leaves in big trash bags, varieties of beans, cheeses, and meat hanging everywhere without any refrigeration. You could even buy a cow mouth, which included both nostrils!

Can you imagine our typical Safeway sign "Buy one nostril, get the next one free"?! The Andean black sandals we saw most Indians wearing were on sale. Shirley bought a bag full of coca leaves and plans to chew them at some point in our trip. Raul tells her to make sure to get rid of them before returning to the US. They are considered contraband in the US. Before dinner we visited the San Blas Artisan Square and looked at wonderful Peruvian art (paintings, jewelry, weavings, carvings, and ceramics...). We had dinner in a nice restaurant for \$8. Everything is a good bargain. Lois is still shopping hard. Several others in our group are not far behind.

The vendor women and children all call me, "Madame" and entice me to buy things by saying, "por su nina.... *buy this necklace for your little girl*". Very few Peruvian Indians know English. Most speak Spanish and we get by speaking in Spanish. It appears unbelievable to them that I am married and do not have children.

The Lost City



[Machu Picchu is called the lost city](#) because it is one of the few Inca sites that the Spanish did not find and destroy. We take an early (6 am) 3.5-hour train ride to get to the village at the base of the ruins. We descend the Sacred Valley along the Urubamba River gorge.

Machu Picchu is 6000 feet in elevation. They call this area the "Eyebrow of the Jungle". The jungle vegetation is everywhere, and the climate is hot, sticky and buggy. The train ride along the Urubamba River gorge is unbelievable.

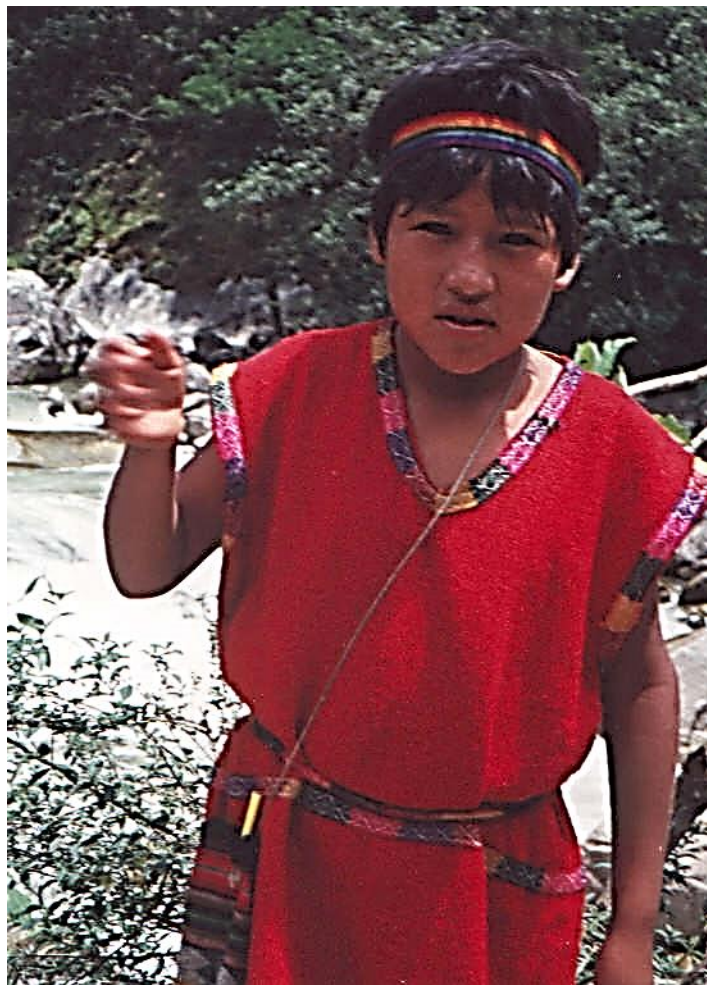


The river appears to be un-runnable whitewater. The white froth continues for miles. Huge holes, boulders, and waves run continuously along most of the gorge. I assume that when the rainy season arrives, the whitewater torrent will look even more spectacular. When we arrive at Agua Calientes, the small village at the base of Machu Picchu, I ask a local woman if she has ever seen any boats

on the river. "No" she replied and looked at me like I was crazy. Shirley tried the coca leaves and says they taste bad and stunk up her suitcase.

Our hotel is beautiful hidden among orchids and ferns. We rest, then board a bus to ride up to the ruins. Machu Picchu looks different than I imagined. The ruins are well defined and perched on a steep mountain. The vegetation is very green, and I can see the 25,000-foot snow-covered mountains in the distance.

Raul explains theories of the individual temples; Condor, Hitching Post of the Sun, Pachamama, Watchman's Hut, Funerary Stone, Moats, Cascade of Fountains and Tomb/House of the Princess. To explain each of the ruin sites would generate another story so I will not explain the theories but suffice it to say the ruins were mystical. The only way to reach Machu Picchu is to walk, ride the train or fly by helicopter. Two good references to take to Peru are "The Inca Trail: Cuzco and Machu Picchu" by Richard Danbury and "Peru: The Rough Guide" by Dilwyn Jenkins.



Young boys wearing Inca dress have a tradition of racing the bus down to the bottom of the valley. They use an ancient Inca trail and beat our bus down every time. The trail crosses the road at several points and the boy's yell Inca chants to catch our attention. Of course, this is not just recreation for the runners. The runner's board the bus at the bottom and ask for tips. At dusk, we return to the hotel and have a relaxing evening dinner. The next morning, we rise early to return to Machu Picchu. Very few tourists spend the night and so we have the ruins almost all to ourselves. Some of us decide to hike, others wander alone. I chose to hike some, then sit quietly and draw different scenes of the ruins. Several llamas graze on the ruin terraces and the ruins make a picturesque backdrop. The "no-see-ums" are extremely aggressive, so I am diligent about using bug spray. There is one hotel right next to the ruins, but it does not look nice and entrance to the ruins is closed at 5 PM. It is difficult to capture Machu Picchu on film because of the steepness and inaccessibility of the

site.

On the train ride back to Cuzco we had a strange German group sitting in our area. I had the window open slightly for fresh air so I would not get carsick. The Germans made a big fuss about the window being opened so I closed it all but 1-inch. They were still fussy, but I just said no "I don't want to close it all the way because I felt carsick". They said, "so what". I even offered the person behind me my fleece if they were cold, but they

refused. The rest of us were in shirtsleeves. The Germans boo-ed when we got off the train. Odd group. We had dinner at a nice restaurant complete with live Peruvian musicians and dancing.

Gold, Gold, and more Gold

This morning we flew back to Lima. Lima is a large city of 8 million people. Rich and extremely poor neighborhoods are scattered throughout the overcast (foggy) city. We visited a beautiful park overlooking the Pacific Ocean. We stop at a church filled with Spanish treasures and catacombs filled with human bones. What a contrast. Peru has a democratic government, so we stop by the presidential palace while walking around a beautiful plaza. Peruvians have an interesting way to increase voter turnout. Peruvians must pay a fine if they do not vote. Since most of the citizens cannot afford to pay the fine, they vote. I do not know how democratic that strategy is, but it might be a good idea for us to try just once to increase our voter turnout in the US.

The [Gold Museum](#) is unbelievable. Never in my life have I seen so much gold. Mujica Gallo was a private collector of military and gold Inca artifacts. This man never sold anything. Do you want to see 5 Inca mummies, 200 gold nose rings, 300 face masks, 1000 pieces of jewelry, 1200 idols, carvings.....? You get my point; the list goes on. No picture taking is allowed in this private collector's museum. So, I guess you must go to Peru and see it for yourself. You must see it, to believe it anyway. We celebrate our last night in Peru by eating dinner at La Rosa Nautica, a beautiful pier restaurant overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Despite our varied group, I enjoyed our trip. It seems hard to believe how much we have experienced and seen.

We get up at 3 a.m. to begin our journey home. The Peruvian airport security measures are very tight. They check our baggage, passports, and tickets at numerous checkpoints. When we arrive in Miami, Shirley is stopped by customs and they check her suitcase. Shirley says it was random, but we tease her about those odorous coca leaves. We arrive home and are in bed by 2 am. I went to work the next morning in a daze.

Peru is a beautiful country and the culture fascinating. The Inca ruins are just a tip of the iceberg. Peru offers much to interested travelers.