

PERU 2005. I first heard about the Inca Trail about 10 years ago and said that was something I wanted to do. Finally the day came and I found myself on the plane wending my way to Sao Paulo Brazil (no direct flight to Lima from SA). Charles was to follow one week later and to meet me at Machu Picchu, where he would make the trip by train (no hiking for him!). Sao Paulo is the second largest city in the world with a population of approx 20m people and as many shops to go with it! I caught an early flight to Lima and was met there by Juan Paolo, the agent's representative,



who took me around Lima for the afternoon. It is an interesting city with some very beautiful areas and my Spanish (with huge inputs of Italian) is sufficient to scrape by!

I had done all bookings online through a company I found while checking out the options (www.andeantrails.com). I was very lucky as this company (and Tom in particular) was fabulous. They operate out of Scotland (yup a bit bizarre!) and then make all the bookings through local Peruvian agents. Andean Trails were great and tracked Charles and I all around Peru, which is advisable as things change, strikes happen etc etc and when going for the first time with limited number of days, it certainly helps.



The next day I flew to Arequipa, which is a beautiful old town surrounded by 3 active volcanoes (El Misti, Chachana and Pichu Pichu). There is an amazing Dominican



Convent - S Catelina - which was started in the 1400s and supported by wealthy Peruvian families who had daughters that either didn't want to marry or were married to the church. These girls lived in relative comfort as nunneries go (having servants, their own belongings, and a type of small apartment each). In its hey day there were about 500 people living here closed to the world. S Catelina only opened its doors to the public in the 1970s.



Wandered around the local market which was most interesting. Peruvian cuisine has a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables and the meat...well I tried to avoid that (the usual, plus guinea pig, capybara, alpaca, etc) and great fish (local dish of ceviche is divine - raw fish with garlic, lemon juice, chili, red onions and parsley). The weather was glorious the entire trip - hot during the day (between 23-28C) and cool at night (10-12C). In fact we never had rain once the entire trip, which was great. I shall not bemoan the fact that I had to lug my rain poncho around the entire time - at least I never had to actually wear it!

From Arequipa caught the flight to Juliaca, , where we were met by these wandering minstrels.



Juliaca is a brief 45km transfer away from Puno on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

Well this turned into a major trek. There was a strike on (very common in S America thus one needs to be flexible) and so we had to go in a colectiva (like our mini-van taxis) through the outback and off the beaten track. At one stage we even had to get out so that the taxi could get over the railway line as it was too low when laden! The trip took us 2h30 and was a little hair-raising to say the least. When in tourist mode I tend to go with the flow, so didn't understand why we were doing this until afterwards. Just thought wow S America is so like Africa! S Americans take their strikes v seriously with boulders strewn across the road, rocks and stones thrown at passing cars and even shooting. Not ideal, but hey we're from Africa how bad can it get☺

Lake Titicaca was good acclimatisation in preparation for the hike and at 4 000m is the world's highest navigable lake. The deep blue colour of the water and the different islands (there are some 32 in total) reminded me of Greece. We



took a day trip that went to the floating island of

Uros and then onto Taquile



Island. On both islands life hasn't changed for the last umpteen hundred years – seemed quite appealing for a day or two!

From Puno took the bus to Cusco (train cancelled due to strike) and arrived in Cusco after a full day's journey (the bus stopped on the way at different Inca ruins and our guide from the bus (we were all of 8 people!) was incredibly



interesting and informative. The Guides in Peru are extremely knowledgeable and able to express themselves very well in English, French, German and Italian. They all do a 3-4 year course at university, which includes at least one foreign language, and have to be certified in order to get a job.

The agencies in Puno reckoned that with the 4-day strike Puno alone lost about US\$500k from tourism – something they can ill afford. Strikes definitely affect everybody.

Public transport has various grades, from public masses (v cheap and not that comfortable) through tourist to luxury. The tourist and luxury transport (buses and trains) are run by private companies and are making a fortune. But they deserve to make money as they are clean, efficient and extremely well run.



Cusco (3400m) is one of the oldest cities in S America established in 1100AD by the Incas. It is characterized by incredible stonework red rooftops. It is set in the Sacred Valley and the views from high up in the bohemian quarter of San Blas, where we stayed, are amazing.

I would have loved to have stayed there longer, but was collected from my hotel at 05h30 the next morning by the Peru Trek bus (along with 11 other people from different hotels around the city and the porters, guides and cook – 30 in total) for the 3-hour ride to the start of the Trail.

I had engaged the services of half a porter (yup he had only had one leg and one arm!) and I was allowed 9kgs in a small duffel bag that was already full with my 2kg sleeping bag. Decisions, decisions as to what to take. Must say it makes me wonder why we need to so much stuff when we travel - it's amazing how little you can get by with! The group was all very sleepy and comprised English, American, Canadian, Tasmanian Oz and South African aged from 25 to 57. It was a great crowd and we all got on well and were fairly evenly matched with the walking. Some of the other groups split up with those in the lead and then the laggards hours behind, which was not great. It is amazing how different English can be and we had many laughs over what is understood by certain words....can get quite hilarious



when words mean the exact opposite in different English-speaking countries!

The Trail is strictly monitored and no more than 500 people can be on it at any one time. Which means that it is getting increasingly difficult to get onto the Trail and when you book you have to supply your passport details and pay. Each group is monitored and you are not allowed to change out or swap dates. If you can't make it for any reason you lose your place and nobody can be substituted. There are three checks along the route and serious repercussions for the Tour Operators that fail to comply.

The Trail was incredibly beautiful and in parts quite different from what I imagined.



People actually live on the trail and there is a fair bit of traffic to-ing and fro-ing. There is plenty of water along the way and the food is fit for kings. From a vegetarian point of view the meals could not have been more interesting or tasty. The tents were spacious and the views from the door of our tents splendid. We saw many beautiful flowers and plants along the way, as well as the Inca ruins. Day 2 we climbed 1000m over a period of



about 4 hours until we reached the top of Dead Woman's Pass at 4200m and then from there we dropped down into the valley and then up again to our campsite. It was tough but very satisfying and after a freezing cold shower (does wonders for muscles) I felt really good.

The weather was beautiful and hot during the day all the way and chilly at night, which was fine. Sleeping was not the best (but then I don't sleep that well anyway) and we were usually up by 04h30-05h00 in the morning in order to get moving.

The porters used to jog along the route carrying their 25kgs (strictly weighed before they start each day) and met us for morning tea, lunch and then afternoon tea and dinner. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served in a large tent with tables and chairs and teas were served in the open seated at tables with chairs.



We were spoilt rotten and even had cake one afternoon for tea (made with layers of crepes, cream, fruit etc). We drank lots of coca tea to assist with the altitude and guess the proof was in the drinking, as I was not affected by the altitude at all (those hours at the gym really paid off!). Mind you some of the others did suffer and took tablets to help them with the altitude. There were plenty of beautiful Inca ruins along the way with stunning views all around. It's all about location, location, location and boy did they have location!!! How they built so



high up is amazing. They had 360 views and were able to see for kilometers.

The last day we had to get up at 04h30 in order to reach the Sun Gate at Machu Picchu before sunrise. We made it and as we topped the rise there was Machu Picchu in all its glory below us. What a sight that only improved as we got



closer and the sun shone brighter. Such an incredible position surrounded by superb mountain peaks and cloud forest. We explored all over and then three of us (power to the women) went up Huayna Picchu to check out the view from a different side. It was amazing and worth the hard slog. From Machu Picchu we took the bus down to Aguas Calientes where most of the group were catching the train back to Cusco. The porters had already left, heading out from camp at 05h00 with half an hour to get down to the station (running) to catch

their train. We met up with some of them later and said our final goodbyes, exchanging emails.



I stayed on as I was meeting Charles the next day at Machu Picchu. This was a great opportunity to go back and I saw



so much more including the Temple of the Moon, which is not that frequented.

I was down there at 07h00 and the only person there – what an incredible experience as there was something about the Temple that was incredibly spiritual.

Amazingly enough Charles and I met up (I had lost my cell phone) but telepathy is still stronger than cellular or wireless! We then explored the ruins together and had a great time imagining what it must have been like in Inca times.



From there we caught the train back to Cusco and explored the city in the evening and next morning. We then caught the plane to Puerto Maldonado to start our jungle adventure in the Tambopata Reserve on the Tambopata river (a tributary of the Amazon), 6 hours by boat down river.

Well we were not disappointed and could have spent many more than the 5 days that we had allocated. It was amazing - nowhere is the symbiosis of nature more apparent than in the jungle. Walking palms that move up to 10cm in order to reach light, fire ants that live inside the Tangarana tree, the only tree where these ants are found on the inside living in



perfect harmony with the Musician Wren bird on the outside.

Our first night we were rewarded in the dining room with a close encounter with a tarantula and boy are they hairy and big! It walked on the floor as large as life and then up the spare chair near our table. Hmmmmm not sure I would have liked this in my bedroom, although they assured us they are harmless!

The birdlife was incredible and for those interested I can even send you a list of what we saw (over 60 birds in 4 days)!



We also saw capybaras (largest rodent that looks like a cross between a pygmy hippo and a guinea pig), giant otters, beautiful and colourful butterflies of all sizes (88, owl, swallow tail, glass, blue morpho, phoebes etc there are 2800 species in Peru and 1300 of these are found in the Tambopata Reserve), moths (the huge blue urania that looks like a butterfly, etc), snakes (no not anacondas!), turtles, caimans (black, white, lake and river crocs), piranhas, all types of ants (leaf cutters, fire and large black hunting soldiers), frogs, monkeys (howler, spider, capuchino), spiders (social, golden orb, tarantulas) etc. The flora was incredible and the trees so tall and



straight covered with vines and other plants growing up them. The fight is for light and nutrients (the soil is only rich for about 10cm and then it is clay). Trees sprout buttresses, palms extra roots or others have roots winding over 50 m along the ground to support them. Some trees are over 40 m high and older than 1400 years (iron wood). Interestingly enough the trees don't have rings, as there are no seasons in the jungle.

We thought fish would feature big on the jungle menus, but that was not to be. In the jungle they pan for gold and use mercury for the extraction. So fish are a no-no. They are now starting fish farms to breed for consumption. Seems crazy!

From our Lodge at the Tambopata Research Center we took a short boat trip before sunrise to the world's largest macaw clay lick. The macaws, parrots and parakeets come there at sunrise in order to eat the clay which contains kaolin



(necessary for their digestive systems).

Up at 04h00, seated in front of the clay lick by 06h00 and by 08h00 all the excitement is over, more than 1000 birds have landed on the clay lick (a vertical clay



wall in the middle of the jungle on the shore of the river) and left again. The noise is tremendous and the build up to them landing involves a ritual dance, overflights and lots of noise. The air and surrounding trees are filled with parrots, macaws and parakeets flashing their beautiful colours in the rising sunlight.

The first day they were about to land when a falcon appeared in the area and next thing they were off. The following morning we returned again (yup another 04h00 rise) and this time they landed. It really is quite spectacular and all the different birds just so beautiful. After seeing them in the wild I certainly don't want to see them in captivity – unfortunately a very large black market exists and so many of these exquisite creatures die in transit.



We hiked in the jungle observing all the different flora and fauna, dripping perspiration with temperatures of 28C and 100% humidity. Cold showers were the order of the day and we tramped through the forest in gum boots, as it was incredibly wet underfoot, and long pants and shirts, as the mosquitoes were everywhere. Something really so different and exciting.

From the jungle we headed to the desert – Ica – to fly over the Nazca lines, which are these enormous geometric patterns in the sand.. We went in a small 4-seater plane flying 300 feet above the ground. The lines can only be viewed from the air and there are many different theories as to how they got there, including aliens. Interestingly enough the desert at Ica is a huge agricultural area, using Israeli drip irrigation methods to water the crops. The irrigated fields stretch for kilometers and are surrounded by dry, barren desertland. The desert experiences no rainfall or wind at all hence the survival of these amazing geometric patterns.

Our final stop before heading back to Lima was a place called Paracas, south of Lima on the coast, where one takes a boat trip out to the Ballestos Islands, rich in sea life (cormorants, terns, turkey vultures, gulls, sea lions, dolphins



penguins, etc). Ballestos means arches and the rock formations are quite beautiful. This area is rich in guano which in years gone by brought in huge revenue for the country. They still harvest the guano every 5-10 years but the volumes are not as great as before. It would appear that El Niño has destroyed a large proportion of the cormorant population, which even now looks like a large black patch on the side of the one island.

We took the bus to Lima and arrived in time to go shopping in the evening at the market. Shops, restaurants and markets stay open late, which is great and walking about on the streets in Miraflores where we stayed was fine. We felt quite safe and most at home. There are so many things that are very similar, even the same as SA.



The supermarkets were fascinating; we recognized many of the brands and products, yet there was a far greater selection than in SA.

We flew back to SA via Sao Paolo where we had half a day to wander around. Andrew had asked us to see whether we could find him a birenbau (Brazilian ethnic instrument used in capoeira). Well we walked downtown Sao Paolo experiencing the amazing shops and selection of goods, but not finding what we were looking for. Eventually someone understood what we wanted (Brazilians do not have a great command of the English language) and sent us down to the industrial warehouse area to an ethnic Brazilian music shop that has 'soirees' on a Saturday morning for all these aging hippies with receding hairlines and ponytails who gave singing, instrumental and poetry recitals for those sitting around. We had such fun in this shop and ended up with our birenbau, shaker (caxixi) and calabash. Everything was beautifully wrapped in bubble wrap and we walked out feeling like one of those tourists in SA that walk around with giraffes in bubblewrap. The hassles we had getting it through security at the airport; in the end an SAA representative had to come and take it personally from us promising that we would see it unbroken on the other side. And we did! What we do for our children ☺. For those who are not in the know, a birenbau is a wooden pole usually about 1,5 m long bent by a single metal string with a gourd resonator tied around both pole and string near one end. The bow is held in the left hand and the string is stuck with a small stick in the other hand. The stick hand also holds a small rattle (caxixi) made of woven grass or vine. Between thumb and index finger of the bow hand, the player holds a coin or stone, which is used to stop the string, thus producing two main tones (stopped and unstopped). The sound of the birenbau is often compared to the moans of slaves longing for their African homeland. Not the sort of thing that fits into your hand luggage!



S America is a fascinating continent and we have only scratched at the surface. We definitely need to return to explore the rest. There is so much natural beauty and the people are fabulous.