

April 2003

Our trip to hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu was in danger when I broke my baby toe one week prior to departure, but it was doing fairly well, so we decided to give it a go. We took the red-eye to La Paz, Bolivia to acclimatize to the high altitude of the Andes. There were enough empty seats to sleep across three seats each. It was interesting to follow the cabin pressurization with my altimeter watch. At cruise, it was set to 7000 feet as you would expect for a normal flight, but then 1/2 hour before arrival, instead of repressurization, it was depressurized to the 14,000 altitude of the La Paz airport.

Our room in La Paz was decent, but noisy. The cacophony consisted of mostly horns and yelling. Traffic signals are routinely ignored, but violations are accompanied by a toot on the horn. We're not sure if this served as a warning to other motorists and pedestrians, or an act of contrition for running a red light, or both. Most of the public transportation consists of minivans with conductors hanging out the window or sliding door yelling the destination. We spent the morning of our arrival trying to adjust to the altitude while getting some sleep. Earplugs would have helped. In the afternoon we took a tour of the world's highest capital city. La Paz sits in a valley and the 2,000,000 inhabitants have absolutely filled it and are literally climbing the walls. It has classical Spanish colonial architecture with red tile roofs, grand plazas and cathedrals. Nearby is the Valle de la Luna with a landscape similar to the Badlands in South Dakota. La Paz also has the world's highest golf course. If we had more time, I would have enjoyed seeing how far I could hit a ball in the rarified atmosphere.

The next day we headed to Copacabana on Lake Titicaca. The lake is known for two things; it's the world's highest navigable lake, and the name is really fun to say. We had a spectacular view from our room. In the afternoon, we chartered a boat to take us to the Isla del Sol where we toured some ruins and natural springs. There was a small rural village where Cheryl especially enjoyed the view from the doorless, toiletless outhouse. It's great to be a man.

The next day we enjoyed a city tour before the three-hour ride back to La Paz. We climbed a nearby mountain to see a place where archaeologists theorize that the ancient Incas lined up the sunrise through certain holes onto a stone to measure the passing of the seasons, similar to England's Stonehenge. The highlight of the tour was witnessing a "Challa" outside the Cathedral of the Virgin. A "Challa" is a blessing conferred on new cars and trucks. New to the owner that is. Each of the five vehicles blessed that day was at least a decade old. They had been driven from considerable distance, freshly washed, and decorated with flower garlands. A young priest met with each new owner and his family. He said a prayer and sprinkled holy water on each, bald tires and all. The owners beamed. Photos were taken and the families followed up with spraying each vehicle from a well-shaken bottle of champagne. The looks of pride on their faces left me feeling very appreciative of the program where I receive a brand-new car every three months, if not feeling guilty.

The next day we flew from La Paz to Cusco, Peru. Cusco sits in the Andes at more than 11,000 feet. It was the capital and center of commerce of the ancient Incan empire until

the Spaniards kicked butt and relieved them of much of their gold in the 16th century. Cheryll and I had visited six years earlier. This trip was a result of her suggestion that we return to hike the Inca Trail. We paid our outfitter who arranged the four-day trek to Machu Picchu. Cusco is a beautiful city, but the people in the tourist area swarmed us like insects wherever we went selling shoeshines or gum, or trying to lead us to a tour agency or restaurant. In the evening we met with our guide, assistant guide, cook and the rest of our group of 15 hikers. 18 porters who carried all the food, tents and other equipment also accompanied us on the hike. We only carried a daypack with water, rain gear, and, of course, a camera and plenty of film.

It was a fascinating, low-maintenance group. There were three other Americans, three English, three Germans, two Irish, a Russian and a Spaniard. The group bonded very well over the next four days, and we enjoyed getting to know them. The others were all in their 20's or 30's and Cheryll and I were easily the oldest, but not slowest, of the group. Most were taking extended tours of South America lasting months while between jobs. Our eleven-day trip was by far the shortest.

On the first day we were taken for a two and a half hour bus trip to the trailhead. We hiked for two hours in a spectacular valley to a spot with a view over ancient Incan ruins where our lunch was waiting for us. The cooks provided us with a hot lunch with chicken, rice, vegetables and pudding for dessert. This was the softest camping trip we've ever been on. After lunch, a gentle two-hour climb brought us to our first campsite. The tents were set up and our bags were waiting for us. The site had the nicest pit toilets we've ever seen. Some of the group members joined the guides and took on the porters in a soccer game which resulted in a 1-0 gringo loss and a sprained ankle for our Spanish companion. He toughed it out for the rest of the trip. After dinner, conversation and cards, we headed off to our tent for some well-deserved rest.

The second day started with a four and a half hour steep climb to "Dead Woman's Pass" at 14,250 feet. The insurance company will be relieved to know that Cheryll made it handily. After a Kodak moment or three we descended 2000 feet to our next campsite in a gorgeous high valley with Inca ruins above. Our site was between two streams emanating from high waterfalls. The green valley was spectacular, as the rainy season had just ended. Our raingear went unused for the duration. The temperature got down to around 40 degrees at night. The full moon made midnight "bathroom" trips much easier.

The third day was our longest with almost a ten-hour hike, but I'll try to describe the day through the eyes of the porters. We were awakened at five to be ready before the trekkers are up at six. We had slept huddled in a mass in the dining tent on top of our rain ponchos and wrapped in thin blankets which double as packs to carry our loads during the day. The cooks are already up, and we quickly eat our breakfast. At 6:00, the cooks visit each tent and prepare tea for each of the guests while still in their sleeping bags. The folding tables and stools are set up in the tent we had been sleeping in. The table is set with silverware and a tablecloth. The guests pack their bags and we take down their tents while they eat a breakfast of pancakes, oatmeal and omelets. The water bottles of the guests are filled with boiled water. They hit the trail at around 7:15. We quickly wash the

dishes, clean up and load our packs. The new regulation limits our loads to 55 pounds each. It's great, because last year we carried considerably more. We have to then run up the trail in our sandals and pass the tourists so we can be set up at the lunch site and be ready when they arrive. Hopefully they will take their time and walk at a slow pace. At the lunch site the cooks prepare four different hot dishes and a dessert on the propane stove. Two of us are carrying 40-pound propane tanks just for this. The lunch tent and table are set up. If it is windy, several of us will be assigned to hold the tent poles throughout lunch. A hole is dug for a latrine and a tarp set up as a privacy screen. Four pans of water, soap and towels are set out for hand washing. The guests eat their lunch and we get whatever is left over along with some rice or corn prepared for us. After an hour or so they head off down the trail. We pack up again and run down the trail to the evening site which is set up similarly. They have tea and popcorn at five and dinner at seven. Hopefully it won't rain and they won't stay up too late because we aren't allowed into the tent until they have all gone to sleep. This is great work that lots of my friends would love to get. With tips, I can make almost \$10 per day!

On the final day we were awakened at 4:00 AM for the two-hour hike to the Gate of the Sun. There we watched the sunrise over Machu Picchu. We toured the fascinating ruins and relaxed on a lawn under a tree in a 600-year-old town square. After a few hours we hiked down to the town and the train station. After four days, 26 miles and thousands of vertical feet on the ancient, uneven road, I slipped, fell and sprained my ankle twenty steps from the end of the trail. It's healing nicely as I write this. My broken toe on the other foot wasn't too much of a bother as my boot and three pair of socks kept it fairly immobilized. Cheryll finished tired, but uninjured.

We took a four and a half hour train ride back to Cusco, and flew home the next day. Our connections were poor and it took 33 hours from door to door. We spent eight hours in Lima which has a well-deserved reputation for petty crime. We weren't mugged, but when we were spending our last Peruvian Soles in the airport gift shop, the clerk refused one coin, declaring it counterfeit. It was worth about 30 cents. Why would anyone bother?

This was an incredible experience which won't soon be forgotten. Watching the people of Bolivia and Peru up close left us very thankful for the opportunities we have in this country. The group got along well, and we truly enjoyed their company and friendship. It seems that the most adventuresome trips are the best.

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