

Peru, what an enchanting journey!

On May 29, twenty-six of us boarded a United flight direct to Lima. After a quick stay overnight (and I mean quick) we flew the next morning to Cuzco, the fabled capital of the Inca Empire, perched about 11,000 feet above sea level. Upon arrival, we traveled to the nearby Sacred Valley of the Incas led by our incredible tour director (Celestino) and local Peru guide (Luis). After a group picture at Lookout Taray and pictures with locals and llamas, we stopped at the private Princesita restaurant where we enjoyed a Shaman ceremony to thank Pachamama (Mother Earth) prior to lunch.



our name while thinking of people to purify and take away bad energy. We then blew three times on the leaves before adding to the offering. This ritual concluded when the Shaman set the offerings on fire to vanish.

Next, we visited Awanakancha, a weaving center that is also home to llamas and alpacas. We arrived at our hotel, Sonesta Posada, shortly thereafter – a former monastery surrounded by lush gardens in the quaint village of Yucay. A few celebrated happy hour with a first taste of Peru's



national drink, the Pisco Sour, a spirit of 38-48% (aka “pesky sour”). We also had the opportunity to spend our Sols on popular souvenirs sold by vendors right outside our hotel rooms. Later we enjoyed a welcome dinner where several had a first taste of alpaca, Peru's prized protein.

On Friday, May 31, we went to the town of Ollantaytambo to meet Rosa who showed us a house of Quechan people, demonstrating how these citizens of the Inca Empire lived. As an unplanned cultural experience, we also got to participate in a national earthquake drill where we stood in a designated safe zone or Sona Segura.



We then climbed the ruins of the Inca estate. This 15th century fortress or Temple Hill featured many terraces (taller than the average man) and MANY steps. At the top we saw a great vantage point of the Sacred Valley while attempting to catch our breath at the Temple of the Sun.

Afterwards, we had lunch at Paraqay restaurant in Urubamba and got to sample more of the local cuisine including ceviche, a national dish of Peru. Then we traveled to Pisac where we visited a local silversmith and shopped in the colorful surrounding market.

The next morning, June 1, was our BIG day as we were on the bus at 6:00am to embark on our expedition to Machu Picchu! Our fabulous bus driver, Freddie, dropped us at

the station to board the Vistadome train for a 1 ½ hour ride through the lush Urubamba Valley passing stunning scenery and hikers on the Inca Trail. We arrived at Aguas Calientes around 8:30am to visit “The Lost City of the Incas”, rediscovered in 1911. We were guided through the ruins, took an abundance of photos and learned so much about this mystical site. It was breathtaking (pun intended), everything and more than we expected.



After lunch we re-boarded the train and celebrated our incredible day on a boisterous ride with wine, cerveza, dancing with a “masked stranger” and a fashion show on our journey to



Cuzco. We arrived at our hotel, Novotel Cusco, just in time for a light dinner. At an altitude of 11,200’ above sea level, those that didn’t get relief from the cocoa tea or “magic potion” for headaches, could opt for oxygen provided by the hotel at no charge.

On Sunday, we ventured on a half-day tour to the outskirts of Cuzco. We saw Tambomachay (Temple of Water), the sentinel of Puca Pucara and the sanctuary of Qengo before climbing the amazing ruins of Sacsayhuman (sexy woman), an Inca architectural masterpiece with fabulous views of the city below.



The tour ended with a stop at an alpaca store to learn the difference between BABY alpaca

and MAYBE alpaca. We then had the afternoon free to walk the narrow streets of this old colonial town, relax in one of the many outdoor cafes, browse galleries or shop in the many stores selling local crafts.



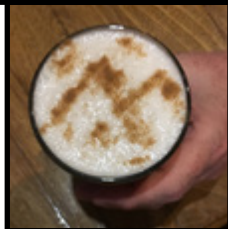
The next morning, June 3, we took a guided walking tour. We went in the Convent of Saint Dominic of Cusco and saw Qorikancha, the navel of the Inca universe. At the Plaza de Armas, the center of the Inca Empire, we encountered a

children's parade with music and colorful outfits, an early celebration of the 6/21 Winter Solstice – Inty Raymi (Sun Festival). June 21st is the shortest daylight of the year and their ancestors held this festival to ask the sun to come back. In Cuzco, they celebrate all month (including fireworks early in the morning). After a tour of the impressive 16th century cathedral built on the ruins of the Inca Palace, we had the afternoon to explore at our own pace, including the large mercado for more shopping and bargaining!

That evening, Celestino arranged a group dinner so we could sample more local cuisine. Deva was a small family restaurant run by an Argentinean and his Peruvian wife. In addition to our buffet, we got to sample guinea pig, a local delicacy usually served at special occasions, and Chicha de Jora (corn beer). Our waiter also gave a presentation on the hundreds of varieties of corn and potatoes in Peru.



On Tuesday, we boarded the bus for our journey to Puno. Another unplanned cultural experience: our departure was delayed for an hour to ensure we arrived after roads were cleared into Puno – demonstrators had been blocking roads with rocks and glass to protest mining that had been polluting the rivers of the high plateau.



During our drive along the rugged snow-capped Andes, we stopped at Oropesa where we sampled a popular local bread (Pan Chuta) fresh out of the oven, visited a 17th century church in the charming village Andawaylillas, shopped at the market square in Raqchi, took a group photo at La Ralla at 4335 meters or 14,244.5 feet and passed quaint local villages and herds of llama and alpaca. We also stopped in Puca Pucara for Café Caca (google it) that was highlighted in the movie “Bucket List”. Early in the evening we arrived at the Hotel Libertador overlooking the majestic Lake Titicaca.



On June 5 our local guide, Charo, led us on an unforgettable boat journey to explore Lake Titicaca, South America's largest and highest navigable lake situated between Peru and Bolivia. First, we visited the floating islands of the Uros Indians that still practice the old traditions of fishing, trapping birds and living on the lake plants. The tortora reeds, which grow abundantly, are used for their boats, houses and to build the very islands on which they live. As we disembarked, we were greeted by five local families – “Kamisaraki” (Hello, how are you); we answered “Hualiki” (I am good, thank you). Their colorful outfits were not costumes, but everyday clothing. Their warm welcome included interesting stories about their culture/daily life and an opportunity to purchase handmade crafts.



Next, we took a short cruise on a charming reed boat before heading to Taquile Island where the indigenous inhabitants



are dedicated to agriculture and crafting of high-quality textiles. They shared their customs, traditions and unique attire before we enjoyed a lunch of fresh trout (caught just three hours earlier).

On Thursday, we left for the Juliaca airport an hour early to avoid any road blockages due to continuing protests (whew!).

Upon landing in Lima, we stopped for lunch at Café

Restaurant Larco, a former late 18th century ranch house near the museum and surrounded by flowering gardens. We then toured the San Francisco Church and catacombs and saw the Plaza de Armas and the Government Palace. Later, we drove to the fashionable districts of San Isidro and Miraflores where we celebrated our incredible journey with a farewell dinner.

We departed Lima on an overnight flight, arriving 6 ½ hours later in Houston at 7:00am Friday Morning, June 7.

A true bucket list adventure with 26 savvy travelers truly blessed by Pachamama: Diane and David Stotz, Lara Sterzing, Nancy Richard, Jo Ann Zemlicka,



George and Darlene Hirasaki, Jim Hassing, Vivian Wang, Pat Musemeche, Sam and Sandra Cornelius, Beverly and Charlie Roberts, Patricia Salinas, Michele Reynolds, Craig Campbell, Terry Gray, Robert Reidenbach, Kim Hlavinka, Megan Melius, Gloria Lopez, David Walter, Roger Holzman and Joan Waddill.

