

South America Part 1: Canyon Country of Peru

South America

Part 1 – Canyon Country – Peru

February 20, 2009

Dateline: Lima, Peru

Latitude at Lima 12.05 South, Longitude 77.02 West

Despite the gloomy economic picture on Wall Street and Main Street, we decided an investment in an international adventure was going to have just about the same return as our investment portfolio (negative that is) and we decided to go ahead with our plans for a big adventure on the South American continent. So we took off for Lima, Peru, to meet up with friends to get our adventure underway. We flew from Atlanta, via Miami, which itself can offer the opportunity to have a third world country experience without even leaving the USA. Our flights were uneventful (the very best kind) and we arrived in Lima around 10:30 p.m. We were met by a driver from our tour company and taken to our hotel in an area of Lima called Miraflores which means “look at the flowers” in Spanish, but it was way too dark for that. We did see the streets were crammed with people eating, drinking and celebrating the weekend, although it was approaching midnight. Our friends Stu and Sharon arrived at the hotel at 2:30 a.m. and reported the same activity, so we were anxious to check the apparently wonderful restaurants out, but we sincerely hope they would open before our bedtime. Two other friends, Bill and Mara, are flying overnight from Washington, DC to join us and we will meet them tomorrow.

Lima is a city of 9 million people (with apparently at least a million of them on the streets partying at any given time) in a nation of 28 million, 50% of which live on the coast. Lima is located on the Pacific Coast in a smallish valley. Most of the country's population is *mestizo* – a mix of indigenous people and Spanish. Approximately 80% of Peruvians are Catholic so there is no shortage of churches to visit here. The Andes Mountains are just beyond the clouds/smog and they, along with ocean currents determine the climate of Peru. They only have two seasons – wet and dry. We are arriving toward the end of the wet. The time zone is the same as Central Standard Time so at least we don't have to make much of an adjustment in that regard. The currency here is the sol which is worth about 31 cents.

February 21, 2009

Dateline: Arequipa, Peru

Latitude at Arequipa: 16.23 South, Longitude 71.32 West

It was very foggy as we woke up in Lima, giving us a taste of what they call the "*garua*" which is a gloomy fog that hangs over the city for most of the winter months. However it is still summer here, so I'm not sure if this was an authentic *garua* or just a preview. We all boarded a LAN flight for the city of Arequipa, in the southernmost part of Peru. It is an old colonial city at an altitude of 7,700 feet, with 3 major volcanoes looming in the distance. We checked into our



The Libertador
Hotel

hotel, the Libertador, which is a rather startling shade of pink (more Pepto Bismol than sea shell), but very luxurious nevertheless. It is sited in a park-like setting, which much to our delight, had llamas grazing on luxuriant grass outside our windows. They are tethered and quite tame and are moved from area to area, so we have dubbed them "Llama-mowers". We had the afternoon at leisure, but because it was raining, we decide to have lunch at the hotel and map out a plan. Then, of course, came the leisurely lunch with local and quite good wine. Gary and Stu ordered alpaca which tasted like beef, but with a sort of lamb-like aftertaste. We have since learned that the alpaca, like the llama, and their much smaller cousin, the vicuna are part of the camel family which does nothing to make this dish more appealing to me. After lunch we went outside to visit the resident guest tortoise, a giant Galapagos tortoise, 76 years old so we are told, assuming my Spanish was correct. We assume it was taken before Ecuador got so touchy about such things. We also were reminded that tortoises live on land whereas turtles live in the ocean so all those reptiles crawling around on land have apparently been, and continue to be mislabeled over the years.

The turtle tortoise outing gave us a chance to assess the weather (raining) so we decided, we'd better do some more planning at the hotel bar over our complimentary round of pisco sours, the native drink of at least 3 countries, and there was even a war fought over it. Well the war was a little more complicated than that, but the right to make pisco, a white grape brandy, was one of the spoils of that particular war. The combatants were Bolivia and Peru versus Chile. It was essentially over land and mineral rights, but pisco got into the mix as well. It lasted from 1879 to 1883. Chile won quite decisively and consequently looted Lima, took the disputed land and got exclusive rights to produce pisco, which stayed in effect until 2005. The pisco sours were a huge hit with us, and we had to have another round to make sure they were still good, and the bottom line is, we spent the first full

afternoon and evening of this great adventure in a bar. I can only hope we do better tomorrow or this shall be a very short, very dull travelogue indeed.

We did have one highlight – a local wedding, or at least wedding photos, right outside our bar. We thought it was the father of the bride and the bride, but no one else showed up and the bartender tipped us off that this was the bride and groom. Oops. We never did find out where the wedding guests might have been so maybe it was an elopement, perhaps a Peruvian Anna Nicole Smith and her sugar daddy. Whatever the case, the exit was done in style – they drove off in a Rolls Royce rather than joining us in the bar for pisco sours, as we were certain they would do since we were extremely witty and charming by this point. Bedtime came early – like about 8:30 p.m. and we agreed it must be the altitude that made us so sleepy.

February 22, 2009

Dateline: Arequipa, Peru

We had breakfast and met our tour guide, Arnold, and our driver, Julio, at 9:00 a.m., resolving today to pick up the pace on the travel adventure angle of the trip. The name Arequipa is *Quechuan* (a native people in this area) pronounced Ketch-you-ahn with accent on the “ketch”. One of the first myths debunked on our tour is that the indigenous people here were called Incans – this is not so. Inca was the title of the emperor. The people are Quechuan. Legend has it that the 4th Inca was asked by some of his soldiers if they could stay in this area and he replied “*ari quepay*” which means “yes, you can” and thus the name of the city evolved. Then in 1540 the Spaniards came along and “re-founded” the city, which today has 1.3 million people.



The Sleeping Lady

Our first stop is an overlook at Carmen Alto from which we can see the city, also called the *Ciudad Blanco* (White City), so named since it is built of a volcanic stone called "*sillar*" which resembles limestone. We could see the terraces on the mountainsides above the valley which date back to ancient times (like B.C. and "B. Inca"). We saw mere snippets of the three volcanoes that loom above the city since it was cloudy and we only got partial glimpses of each. There is *Chachani*, the tallest of the three at over 18,000 feet and whose name means Sleeping Lady in Quechuan, although I must confess, the way



Carmen Alto

Arnold pronounced it, I thought it was "Schlepping Lady" – maybe named for a Jewish housewife. There is also the cone shaped *Misti* which looks quite volcanic at a mere 15k feet plus, whose name means Lord. I'm not sure why the Sleeping Lady is bigger than a volcano named Lord, but maybe I misunderstood that too. The third peak, actually the smallest, has two summits and thus the name *Picchu Picchu* which, translates as "peak peak". While these peaks are quite

impressive, they are not the tallest in Peru. The highest peak is Huarascan (named for the next to the last Inca) at 22,205 feet. Arequipa, like much of Peru sits astride the *Cadena del Fuego* which means “chain of fire”, which refers to the extensive earthquake zone and active volcanoes that formed the Andean Mountain Range and create earthquakes still today. The last time there was an eruption here was when the Sleeping Lady woke up in a bad mood in the 1600’s, which seems like a lot of time to build up lava, so we are listening carefully for a Big Rumble as we marvel at the peaks in the distance. Also stretched out before us is the quite scenic Chilina Valley, bisected by the Chili river, which Arnold tells us has its “home” in the Pacific Ocean. Key industries here are wool from alpaca and sheep, along with agriculture and mining.



Church of San
Juan Bautista

From Carmen Alto we went to the Yanahuara District to the Church of San Jan Bautista built in the 16th Century. There was an interesting crucifix outside with a ladder, hammer and other tools seemingly attached to it. We asked Arnold about it, which launched a linguistic comedy of errors. He thought we were saying “letter” and he went on at length about the letters INRI which were on the crucifix, then he thought we meant later and gave us a chronology if events, and finally after much charade activity, he understood we were asking about the ladder and tools. He said it was a custom in Peru to show the implements used in the crucifixion with the cross. It is an interesting, if somewhat unconventional idea, but then

unconventional is why we're here. We also saw a lot of big wine storage jugs called *chambos* lying on their sides, now used for landscaping, but their numbers make it clear that there was plenty of "vino" in the olden days.



Cuy Ready for Market

Arequipa is one of those places that you couldn't mistake for a North American or European city. People are quite short and stocky, (most not taller than a Fifth Grader) so it makes it rather hard for us gringos to blend. There are some touches of the USA – Coke, KFC, Burger King and so forth, however a local restaurant with rotisserie chicken called Norky's really puts KFC in the shade. When you see an guinea pig (cuy) farms, an old Toyota putting down the street with a load of alfalfa on the top, a boy herding sheep on a bicycle, little shrines along the road that resemble doghouses bedecked with plastic flowers and flanked with a crescent of old tires painted yellow, women carrying babies in brightly colored woven slings on their backs, but talking on cell phones, 3 wheeled taxis that are essentially a 3 wheeled motorbike with a cab holding a family of 6, a pedal cart with a mattress strapped to it with a small waif pedaling and peering over the top, and gas stations named The Faith in Christ Service Station or the Virgin Del Carmen Gasoline and Tire Store – it becomes apparent that you and Toto are not in Kansas anymore

We had a short visit to the Plaza de Armas (the central plaza) and the Cathedral, built in 1621 and occupying the entire length of the block. We did go inside briefly to admire

the architecture and décor. It was particularly bright and cheery with melon colored walls, a marble altar, with pastels and gold leaf used extensively. Mass was in progress so we were on our best behavior.



The Santa
Catalina
Monastery

We then toured the fabulous Monasterio (monastery) de Santa Catalina. You wouldn't expect a monastery to be fascinating, but it was in so many ways. We got a different guide since Arnold told us they only allow female guides – I'm not sure of the rationale since there were plenty of male tourists. This was and is not your average convent. It is still in operation today with about 20 nuns. It is a cloister, i.e. the nuns have no contact with the outside world. It was established in 1580 by a rich widow who became a nun. It was open to both the poor daughters of local Indian chiefs called *curacas*, as well as girls from the wealthy



The Cloister
of Santa

Catalina

upper class (of Spanish descent) which was a noble thought, but as it turned out, some nuns were more equal than others here. The ones from wealthy families brought all sorts of creature comforts, including servants, living much the same life that they did outside the convent including having parties. In its heyday, there were 450 occupants, two thirds of which were servants or cloister employees. The fun nuns, however, had a rude awakening when Sister Josefina Cadena arrived in 1871 and put an end to not only the revelry inside the walls, but actually instituted an austerity program that one would normally associate



A Residential Street of the Santa Catalina Monastery

with cloisters. No word on the dropout rate at the nunnery, but we can only assume the sisters had to shape up or ship out after Sister Josefina appeared on the scene. She also freed the servants who were slaves and invited those interested to join the convent. Also interesting was the age at which girls were admitted – twelve years old, which seems quite a tender age to commit to such a lifelong endeavor. Today they have to be at least 20.



The Lavandaria
at Santa
Catalina

The cloister is built of sillar (white volcanic stone), but it is brightly painted on the inside with intense colors – cobalt blue, burnt sienna, and umber. It is a huge structure, intended to be a self-contained town of 100 rooms with its own street system named after cities in Spain. There are a number of kitchens attached to the “cells” of the nuns, which are more reminiscent of college dorm rooms since as many as 3 or 4 would share a room. There was also a communal laundry called the *lavandaria* built in 1770 which was quite cleverly contrived with a central conduit for water running (gravity fed) past a series of the large wine storage earthenware jars (chambos) cut in half with a drain hole cut in the bottom. To do a load of laundry, you could just hold your hand to direct the water into your “tub”, with the plug in of course, until it filled. The nuns also had their own market where they bartered goods that they made.



Cuy for Lunch

After our tour, we had lunch at the Mixto restaurant which was on a rooftop in the old part of the city. Both Bill and Gary ordered *cuy*, a Peruvian delicacy, which is actually guinea pig. It was grilled and served whole and you could even see two little buck teeth in front, forming a sort of guinea piggy grimace that looked as if his last words may have been "ouch". The guys reported their delicacy to be tasty, but not nearly filling, since the serving is one per person. Fortunately the rest of us passed on having a bite since a bite was about all there was once the bones and other inedible parts were discarded. Delicious or not, neither Bill, nor Gary every ordered *cuy* again, despite numerous opportunities.

We strolled the streets, oblivious to the fact that we were in the midst of *Carnivale* Week. We puzzled over groups of young people throwing water balloons and buckets of water at each other and spraying what looked like foam rug cleaner on each other. Then Mara and Sharon were "slimed" by a passing car with this same squirt foam , which we later learned is labeled something which roughly translates as "Cosmic Snow", and marketed, we assumed just for the



Celebrating
Carnivale

purpose of *Carnivale* fun. We all managed to get slimed in a matter of minutes, but the Cosmic Snow was harmless and did no lasting damage so it was all fun. We walked back to the hotel past a park where there was a flurry of celebratory activities, including a comedy act in progress in Spanish, of which we understood little or none. Of course when the gringos

were spotted, there were more jokes (few of which we understood, but all of which we assumed were good natured). The comedy team was also selling little packages of cookies. Gary had no small bills or coins and ended up offering 10 sol (about 3 dollars) and he received about a dozen packages which he gave away to surrounding children and a few mooching adults, so he was thrust into the role of Santa or the Easter Bunny, at least until the cookies ran out. Other areas of the celebration were kind of a fair/carnival with such attractions as scales set up to weigh you for a fee, an extremely short boat ride, all sorts of food, performers and assorted wandering people.

We went into town for dinner (in a taxi to avoid further sliming) and had a fabulous meal at the ZigZag restaurant. The guys had alpaca, ostrich and beef and pronounced it delicious. And of course there were more pisco sours, good medicine for the altitude and the attitude.

February 23, 2009

Dateline: Chivay and the Colca Canyon, Peru

Latitude at Chivay 15.35 South, Longitude 71.46 West

Today our guide is Pilar and we have our same driver, Julio. We left Arequipa this morning for our drive to the Colca Canyon where we will spend the night and the day tomorrow. As we drive, the altitude more than doubles, from around 7,400 feet at Arequipa to a mountain pass of over 16,000 feet. Our destination for tonight is at just over 12,000 feet. Everyone is feeling the effects to a certain degree, but between the two remedies, Diamox, a prescription drug and coca tea, a hot tea made from the leaves of the coca plant, we manage to cope. Coca leaves are the same ingredient found in cocaine, but it has to be distilled and concentrated to a very great degree to become cocaine. The tea with a little sugar tastes a bit like Earl Grey. The locals also chew, or perhaps I should say "dip"

the coca leaves (just a pinch between cheek and gum, just like Copenhagen snuff). We found this to be almost as unsavory a practice with coca leaves as it is with tobacco products, but without the requisite spitting.



The Altiplano

Peru is a very diverse country from an ecology perspective. They have within their borders one-sixth of the world's plant life species on less than 1% of world's landmass. They have 84 (out of 114) eco-regions as defined by Holdridge Life Zones. Our journey today will take us to the *Altiplano* (high plains) which is extremely high and extremely dry. Our American "high plains" east of the Rockies are really the low plains compared to these plains which range from 12 to 16 thousand feet. The other major regions are the Coast and the Amazon Jungle.

This journey into the countryside would have been quite risky ten years ago when Peru went through a rough patch with a Maoist Organization called *Sendero Luminosa* (Shining Path) from 1980 until 2000. Their idea was to empower the poor mountain people and give them opportunities, but unfortunately they were victimizing the people they were purportedly saving – drafting young boys, raping and enslaving young girls, as well as detonating car bombs in Lima and kidnapping foreign nationals. In 1996 they took over the Japanese Embassy where a number of Peruvian dignitaries were visiting, and which had to be taken back with a commando raid. President Fujimora led a crackdown and captured the ringleaders and their organization folded. Unfortunately, Fujimora became embroiled in

corruption, apparently taking bribes in addition to taking names of Sendero Luminoso members, and he fled to his father's native Japan, from where he faxed in his resignation, but he was still extradited and tried. *Senor* (President no more) Fujimora was sent the Peruvian Big House and his "army" more or less melted into the countryside to become peasants again. Currently he is on trial for human rights violations.

Leaving Arequipa we saw a large number of shanty towns, with each shanty separated by low stone walls. Some are vacant lots also with low stone walls. Pilar tells us these are squatters who have come down from the mountains and set up housekeeping on federal land. They came to the cities looking for work, hoping to escape the Shining Path terrorists in the late 80's and few have gone back. They have little access to services and have to have water trucked in. The government is attempting to give them an opportunity to own the land (a homestead sort of deal), but there is much red tape and much illiteracy at work, and thus progress is slow. An interesting note on taxation: In Peru, as in many other Latin American countries, the people don't have to pay taxes on their homes until construction is finished. Consequently, there is rebar sticking up out of every house, indicating a second floor will be added at some point in the future. With the policy of "Never Finished, Never Taxed", why would anyone want to complete construction? It's quite bizarre, but then I guess it is not any stranger than some of our tax laws. They store their extra building materials, along with everything else from doghouses to spare tires on their roofs. Not only does it provide storage, it keeps the tin (or the tarp for the less fortunate) from blowing away.



Alpaca on the
Altiplano

It is the rainy season now and the hillsides are lush and green until we get above 10,000 feet and the landscape changes to largely rock, volcanic ash and scrub brush. About the time we get to 13,000 feet, we are either in the clouds or above the clouds continuously. It is very foggy and rainy with occasional sun, so we have the opportunity to spot the wild vicunas, the smallest of the camelids, here and there. There 4 branches of the camel family in these parts and they are, in the order of their size: guanacos, Llamas, alpacas, and vicunas. Only the llamas and alpacas are domesticated. The guanaco are very few in number and live way up in the highlands and are rarely seen. The llamas come in a range of colors – white to dark brown, and are next in size. They are used for pack animals and their



A Young (very
young)
Shepherd on
the Altiplano

wool is used for rugs and blankets. The alpacas come next and they provide meat and their wool is used to make clothing.

Their colors are white or cream. Baby alpaca is the best quality and comes from the first or second shearing of the animal. The most highly prized wool is that of the vicuna which can only be trapped one day a year, sheared and released, by members of a government sponsored association. Their colors are either fawn or cinnamon. Llamas have pointy noses, pointy ears and longish necks and their tail goes up.

Alpaca are smaller, with shorter ears, shorter faces and much softer wool with tails that go down. Vicuna are so teensy, there's no mistaking them for the other two. Their predators are the puma and the fox, but of course the fox has to go for the newborns or the disabled in order to have vicuna for lunch. They have herds of around 15 females to one male and new babies only stay in the herd until they are around 8 months old. The females have it easy, in that they are always welcome in another male's herd, but the males have to duke it out with other males once they reach 2 years old, for the right to mate. It's hard to imagine two Bambi's going at it, but that's the way it works here in the *Altiplano*.



A Stone Shelter on the Altiplano

On the domestic side, llamas and alpacas can interbreed, but their offspring are sterile and often have serious birth defects, so they are separated by herdsman (or in this country more often herdchildren) during mating season so as to avoid any unintended consequences. Dogs are used occasionally to herd the flocks, but since they require a steady diet of meat, they add significant expense that the families can ill afford.

Also on the wildlife front we saw a vizcacha which is a type of chinchilla that looks very much like a rabbit, especially with the ears, but they aren't normally made into clothing, since, we assume, trapping enough of them to make a coat would be very hard to do. We also saw a very incongruous sight at this altitude – pink flamingoes feeding at a soda lake where the same type of algae that gives them their distinctive color at sea level grows. They apparently don't mind the cold and get plenty of nutrients to keep them “in the pink” so to speak.

We learned this and much more from Pilar, who is quite knowledgeable, and we found her manner of speaking to be very charming. She speaks excellent English, but some of her expressions require a little thought, such as when she told us about “shaving” the sheep and the alpaca (I had a mental image of a farmer approaching an alpaca with a Gillette razor, a handful of shaving cream and a hot towel).



A roadside
Apachuta
(Stone Cairn)(

On our route we saw many rocks piled in cairns (called *apachutas*), originally done by locals as part of their religious beliefs and since taken up by tourists, ourselves included. The original idea was to place something symbolic (e.g. coca leaves under the rock pile) for good luck – sort of like the penny in the wishing well.

The road was getting increasingly rough and potholed and just

as we traversed the pass, it began to hail. We have concluded that this trip is not for the faint of heart or weak of bladder. We were surrounded by volcanoes of the Chila Range, many active, but none currently erupting or steaming, and all of which are over 16,000 feet. The vegetation was sparse, but there are meadows dotted with blue-purple lupine and yellow daisies. We only glimpsed at the mountain



Above Chivay

peaks through the clouds and intermittent fog and rain. The town of Chivay was visible far below us in a valley at 11,000 feet and we made our descent to have lunch. Chivay is a small village of around 14,000 people who live largely in adobe houses. There is a town square and a lively market that sees few tourists and thus is quite authentic. We purchased ponchos for \$12, which proved to be a great investment given the increasingly soggy weather, at a market stall that also offered donkey shoes, shovels and alpaca hats. These people appear to be right out of the pages of *National Geographic*, but by and large are not wearing costumes – these are the clothes they have in their closets (if they had closets that is).



Photo Op at the Chivay Market

We did find a few folks in traditional dress with cute children and fluffy white baby alpacas (obviously a tourist set up) that allowed us to take their picture for a sol or two. There is a very high adorability factor at work here. The surrounding valley is too high and cold to grow many crops, but they specialize in cold weather crops such as corn and potatoes. Unlike the mountains above, the valley looked positively Ireland-like with every imaginable hue of green, blocked off in squares and rectangles terraced into the hillsides.



The Chivay
Market

We had a buffet lunch at the Qhapaq Nan (pronounced cha-peck-non) which means town restaurant. They served a lot of local dishes (no guinea pig that we were aware of) including good soups and fresh vegetable dishes. They also have dish called "tuna", but it is the fruit of the prickly pear cactus, versus a fish. A surprisingly good dessert was a type of corn pudding made with purple corn. It looked sort of like Jello that hadn't quite jelled yet, but tasted like a rich berry and cinnamon jelly, but not overly sweet. They also had little free-form donuts served with local honey which were very tasty. Peruvians seem to have a fondness for uncooked things –

ceviche and carapaccio are very big here, and are quite tasty, if somewhat risky from a digestive perspective for tourists, which of course, we had to learn the hard way.



A Local Chivay
Girl

After lunch we headed to the Colca Canyon under low heavy clouds, and our driver, Julio, put on a CD with some Andean music featuring the pan flute (called the zampona) made from reeds with two rows of graduated length, bound with leather thong-like strips. Other local instruments are the Andean version of the harp, mandolin and ocarina which yield haunting, and sometimes melancholy music, but very fitting to the scenery. There is also an instrument called the “donkey jaw”, but I have to say, I’m not clear on how any tuneful music is rendered from that. Our drive took us parallel to the Colca River, which starts high on the western slopes of the Andes and empties into the Pacific. The river and the canyon are named for the many cool dry caves on the sheer rock walls above us that the ancient Quechuans used to both bury their dead and store grain – hopefully not in the same caves.

We traveled through Yanque town with a drive-by of the Church of the Immaculate Conception which has a façade covered with saints. We encountered very rough roads and the occasional “cow jam” or “llama jam” where herds blocked the road and we had the occasional rock slide to avoid. And speaking of avoiding, we were urged to avoid llama spit at all costs. Apparently llamas do not just spit what they have in their mouths and throats. They do this projectile spitting of

stomach contents as well. We subsequently gave llamas a wide berth. People here are also very attuned to cuteness as a way to make a buck. At every stop we saw cute kids are dressed up in native costumes with cute baby animals who collected a couple of sols from the thoroughly enchanted tourists. The road got rougher by the mile. We did see a road grader, but it was on a truck going to where we assume was a worse stretch of road, but we were having trouble getting our heads around that one unless it involved a rock slide or washed out bridge.



Terrace
Farming above
the Colca
River

We saw the Colca Lodge long before we arrived at it. It is situated on the Colca River and is reached by a muddy winding road, amid incredibly green fields and steep sided canyon walls. The Colca Canyon is said to be the deepest in the world, as measured from canyon bottom to the top of the surrounding peaks, which is over 11,000 feet (twice as deep as the Grand Canyon). To convey an idea of how high the mountains are, we were at the bottom of the canyon at the Colca Canyon Lodge and were still at an altitude of over 10,000 feet above sea level. It does not have the same dramatic effect (i.e. not so much vertigo)



Hot Springs on the Colca River

as the Grand Canyon since there you are looking down at the bottom from flat plains, but is quite magnificent nevertheless.

The motto of the Colca Lodge is that it is a place privileged by nature. It is indeed in a privileged spot, both rustic and luxurious at the same time. The setting is very rural – sheep trotting up the road, donkeys carrying loads of crops, people working the field (non-mechanized), thatch-roofed adobe and stone houses. There are many activities the lodge sponsors, but we decided to head for the natural hot springs. There were 4 enclosed springs



Wine and Hot Springs at the Colca Canyon Lodge

(one too hot to handle at 80 degrees Centigrade), but the other three were delightful after our road ordeal, especially

since there was a bartender who served us wine as we soaked alongside the roaring river. Needless to say, it was another short evening, as bed time came early.

February 24, 2009

Dateline: Puno, Peru

Latitude at Puno, 15.49 South, Longitude 69.59 West



Condor Country

Today we regretfully left the Colca Canyon Lodge to head for La Cruz del Condor (the Cross of the Condor) and then on to Puno, on the shores of Lake Titicaca. La Cruz del Condor is located on the canyon's highest point and there is a cross there and a lookout from which to watch the condors soaring over the steep canyon walls on thermals sweeping through the canyons. However, there wasn't much soaring going on since it was cold and foggy with no thermal action and the condors, who can weigh as much as 27 pounds and stand up to 4 feet high, would have to do a lot of wing flapping in order to put in an appearance. So



Fog Keeping the Condors in their Nests

on cold days, we were told, they stay in the nest. They are not really predators, but are vultures and eat only carrion, so as they soar around (when they soar around), they are actually just looking for some other animal's leftovers or unfortunate demise. We waited several minutes but the fog became so dense we couldn't even see the canyon walls, much less a nest, so the condor mission was a bust. We went to lower elevations with weather slightly better, but still the condors were a "no show".

We returned to our same restaurant in Chivay, the Qhapaq Nan, for a quick lunch before heading south to Puno. It was a jolting ride, but a beautiful one, with people tending their fields, some by hand, some with donkeys, with no John Deeres in sight. There are still ancient stone walls that were meant to keep the grazing animals out of the fields and gardens. The rock walls are often topped with cacti to discourage those of the human persuasion from raiding as well. Everywhere we looked we saw fields like bright green patchwork quilts on the terraces. We also saw waterfalls and babbling brooks by the dozens. The elevation was still quite high so we continued to take our altitude medicine, prescription or coca leaves or coca tea – to each his



Sheep Herders
Near Colco

own. There are many flocks, often a mix of sheep, donkeys, llamas – The herders are mostly on foot and again dressed in what you would swear is a costume, but these are their real working clothes. The women carry brightly colored bags in which to tote things (big loads) and wraps to tote babies on backs. The most interesting shepherd was a kid on a bicycle with a bent rim on a potholed road trying to round up his sheep. The average age of shepherds is less than 10 years old and many are barefooted, but they seem blissfully oblivious to the fact.

There are some interesting herding techniques here, bicycles notwithstanding. For the cows, they leave a length of rope around the horns of the “alpha cow” – sort of like a dangling leash, and when they make him or her “heel”, the other cows follow along. For the llamas, there were little strings of yarn attached to their ears. It is used instead of a brand – sort of like suitcases on the carousel at baggage claim, so they can find their llamas or alpacas among the herd.



The Church at
Maca

They use donkeys extensively – supposedly they are better workers than horses, they eat a lot less, are not so high strung, and require a lot less maintenance. There are literally hundreds of great photo ops with every mile. We stopped briefly in the town of Maca where we heard a voice in Spanish blaring from the town hall and were told this is how the local people get their news, since many do not read or have a radio or television. It's mostly local and lasts only minutes -blessedly few minutes, since it is audible across the whole town. There was a man at the town square that had a huge eagle he had caught and tamed and



The Eagle Has Landed

which for a sol or two he would allow you to pose with it for a photo op. For the second “op”, he would remove his hat and place it on the head of the volunteer tourist and the bird would climb on said tourist’s head. Only later did we wonder what exactly what creatures from the insect world might be living in the hat. The local church was destroyed in an earthquake and was just restored by the Spanish government in 2007 in a country-wide effort to preserve colonial era buildings. The Spanish seem to have more fond memories of Spanish Colonialism than the locals do and thus keep the pesos for restoration flowing.

We also saw evidence of a *Carnivale* tradition from the prior day in the form of a small fallen tree. Trees are at a premium here so the local people bring one in just for this festival. They put up the tree, called a *yunza*, and decorate it with

little gifts of clothing and food. They then cut the tree down in a ceremony called the *cortemonte* which literally translates as “cut the mountain”, but for whatever reason, in this case it means “cut the tree”. Couples dance around the tree taking turns whacking at it with a machete. When it finally falls everyone rushes for the goodies – sort of piñata style, and also the couple who took the last whack have to provide the tree and host the event the following year. They also do the water squirting as they do in Arequipa, but it has little bearing on Easter other than timing.



Puno, Peru

Puno, our destination, is considered “party city” in these parts, but not in the familiar sense of the word. Here they have folkloric festivals where fraternity-style partying breaks out – sort of like Carnival in Arequipa, but more frequent and more bizarre. The City was founded in 1688 by a Spanish Viceroy who named it San Carlos de Puno, but the saint part was apparently later dropped. But back to the festivals – there is the *Waca Waca*, in which celebrants parody Spanish bullfights, with the men wearing head pieces resembling bulls in a parade through the town. There is the *Diablada*, which symbolizes the triumph of good over evil, in which a person in a giant devil costume is pursued through the streets by people dressed up as angels, skeletons and other assorted characters. There is the *Llamerada*, a dance from the Ayamara, another indigenous people of Peru, in which dancers dressed in fancy ponchos and odd masks pay tribute to the llama by imitating the walk of the llama, again through the streets of the town. Also from the Ayamara is the Love Dance where young girls flip

their petticoated skirts at young swains who stamp their feet in a dance called Zapateo (after *zapatras*, the Spanish word for shoes) and whistle while circling around them as they parade through the streets of the town. And on a more traditional religious note, there is the Festival of the Virgin of the Candles (a.k.a. *Mamita Candelaria* or Little Mama with the Candles) which is more of a pilgrimage of their patron saint through the streets. Unfortunately, we missed all festivals and had to drink pisco sours all by ourselves with no one parading in the streets – at least when I went to bed.

February 25, 2009

Dateline Puno, Peru

Today we explored Lake Titicaca (a name which has long titillated adolescents), at an elevation of 12,500 feet, covering 3,210 square miles. It is most famous for its floating islands occupied by indigenous people of Ayamaran descent, since pre-Incan times. It was considered a Sacred Lake since it was believed the first leader (First Inca) emerged from the lake as opposed to being born the usual way. It is over 1,000 feet deep in places, waist deep in others, with vast stretches of reed filled wetlands. Reeds here are called *tortura* and have a multitude of uses.



A Reed Boat on
Lake Titicaca

We went with our guide Freddy and our boat driver, Javier, in the early morning to the Uros Islands, which are approximately 40 tiny floating islands made from the reeds. Our boat is an

interesting vessel with a Toyota engine, steering wheel and captain's seat. The rest of us sat on non-Toyota benches. We disembarked on one of the islands, slightly larger than our dock on Lake Lanier, where we learned about how the islands are made and why. The why was to escape from enemies who apparently were not aquatically inclined. The people here have a fascinating way of life with reed boats, reed houses, and reed



An Ayamara
Girl Greets us
on Her Island
Home

islands. To make a new island, they cut peat-like chunks of soil where reeds are growing. This soil actually will float (sort of like Styrofoam and about the same size as dock foam). They then drive in stakes in each chunk and lash them together. Then they layer reeds on top of that to the desired thickness. From a stability perspective it is pretty mushy walking, but it is manageable in sensible shoes (no stilettos allowed). New reeds are laid weekly since those on the bottom rot out. They told us that an island will last about 20 years. Then everyone will move to a newly built one. Gary won a prize for guessing depth of water below islands – which was 45 feet. We learned that 28 people in 7 families live on this island. Other islands have other families, but with only 40 islands, everyone is related to everyone else and there are intermarriage issues to cope with. In an interesting mix of

the old and the new, the 7 families use a communal kitchen (stone based ovens – open flame) and solar panels to power their TV's in their reed houses (no flat screens yet). They have small gardens on raised platforms for fresh produce and they trade produce for meat, TV's and so forth.



Blending with
the Locals

We all had the opportunity to dress up in native costumes except for Gary, for whom they had nothing to fit, and in fact they didn't even try. We had a lot of yuks with the costuming event. As charming as they were, we gave our costumes back to our hosts and took a ride in a reed boat ride. Three of the children rode with us (high adorability factor) and sang for us in Quechuan such favorites as "Frere Jacques" and "Red River Valley" (this last one was a hoot and half).



A Short Ride
in a Reed Boat
with Local
Children in
Tow

From Uros, we went to Tequile Island, which unlike Uros is solid land, or perhaps solid rock mountain is more apt. It is very Greece -like, with walled paths and stone arches and steep, steep inclines. Tequile it seems is also celebrating *Carnivale* (it was actually Ash Wednesday, but just because Lent has started, doesn't mean the party is over in these parts). We had a lengthy hike – 545 steps to the village at the top of the mountain. The local women, about four feet tall and carrying over 100 pounds on their backs, made everyone look bad, as they carried suitcases and cargo up the steps and lapped us more than once en route. When we finally collapsed in a heap at the top, we had a delicious trout (*trucha*



Celebrating on
Tequile Island
– Lake
Titicaca

in Spanish) lunch. Gary did such a good job of cleaning the meat off the bones, he was awarded 2 more. While we were having lunch, a huge party broke out with people in costume coming from all over the island for a dance competition (folkloric rather than Dancing with the Stars type competition). Costumes were very brightly colored and very elaborate, again, right out of the pages of National Geographic. The women have pompoms they twirl (much smaller than cheerleader size.) and there is a lot of stamping and drum beating.



Leaving Tequile Island

We left the island by a different set of steps (they tell us there are about 700) with no two steps the same height. The sun came out, the day cleared, and we could see mountains of Bolivia in the distance on a lovely ride back to Puno. We were accompanied into port by a Peruvian Coast Guard vessel which was originally built in 1878. Since the lake has no access to the ocean (totally landlocked) the vessel was brought overland in pieces by truck and donkey. As old as it was, it easily outdistanced our Toyota-boat and got to home port long before we did. Tomorrow we head to Inca Country.