

## **It's the Journey: The Lares Trek to Machu Picchu**

*August 17, 2009*

Our four-day trek to Machu Picchu started from Lares, a small Andean pueblo at 11,000 feet (after a wonderful dip in the nearby hot springs). The mountains along the way weren't particularly beautiful: most were a golden brown, and even the Andean farms added little color to the landscape. Houses were put together with gray sun-dried brick, seemingly a mix of clay and dried grass, with mud "stuckoed" onto the outside, while herds of llamas and sheep and the occasional horse munched the yellow-green vegetation on the surrounding hills. Surprisingly, politics has made its way up into these isolated mountains, as political slogans & symbols and the names of politicians were painted across many of the houses. In the far distance, constantly overshadowing our trail, were black mountains topped with precarious stretches of snow.

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Even after two days of altitude acclimation in Cusco I was panting halfway up the first short incline. I had my fair share of cocoa tea, but the leaves did nothing for me--not even an energy boost. And because we kept climbing, full acclimation was close to impossible: by the end of the first day we had hiked to 12,500 feet; by the following afternoon we were almost at 15,000. Despite that, you'll be proud to know that I represented Americans well, as I was almost always in the front of the pack and never had to take a break. I'm lucky that before this trip I was biking 12-18 miles a day, and while altitude sickness can hit anyone, I feel that much of it is just being able to control one's breathing. Kudos to Malini as well, since she had never gone hiking before, much less camping, yet she held her own on the trail.

The main reason we chose the Lares trek was that it went through a number of villages, and was much much less crowded/touristy than the Inca Trail. In short, we were better able to see real Andean life than on the other main routes: farmers with brightly colored ponchos walking their llama herds from one end of the valley to the other, thin sandals over dirt-caked feet, lower legs left uncovered even with the cold, cheeks burned permanently red and black from the extremities. We walked through Sunday markets full of handmade goods (and many imported imposters) while dodging chickens and pigs and countless stray dogs. Unfortunately, even though it's a road less traveled, the kids know an opportunity when they see one, and the second we were spotted a line of children would come out of nowhere to "greet" us, some even running half a kilometer uphill just to ask us, "¿Tienes dulce?" (Do you have candy?). We fed them bread instead (since they'd just litter candy trash), even though it felt a bit condescending and dehumanizing--and I'm not even sure why.

Malini and I were accompanied by a fun, well-rounded group: Audrey, a teacher and experienced traveler from Montreal; Mathieu and Nele, a couple from Belgium; and Carlos, a systems engineer from Spain whose generosity when it came to giving out food has made him, I'm sure, the most popular person in the Andes, if not in Peru. Our guide was Walter, who was a good guy but not a particularly good guide. Our horseman, who accompanied our seven so-called horses (I'm still convinced they were "mulos"), was a quiet, hard-working, Peruvian John Wayne, colorful cowboy hat and all, skin taut and tan, small wrinkles etched under vibrant eyes. I didn't exchange more than a few words with him, but I would have loved to have heard his story.

Aside from the physical challenge of the trail itself, the camping was quite tough. The nights on our trek were frigid: our first night hit freezing, and our second at 14,000 feet was probably around 22 degrees (ice had already formed on our tent by 8 o'clock). A layering of two thermals, three pairs of socks, and two sweaters allowed my body to survive the elements, although even that didn't stop me from staying awake, wiggling my toes until the feeling came back, just to ensure they'd still be there in the morning. I joked on the first night that we should just kidnap a sheep or llama for warmth, but within twenty-four hours I think all of us were seriously entertaining the idea.

In addition to the cold, cleanliness became an afterthought. After hiking for days on dusty paths without showering, healthy tan rings formed around my ankles, wiping my nose turned the tissue brown, and belly button lint formed like no other. Luckily we didn't have access to mirrors either, so I couldn't tell how filthy I was. Aside from the communal hole-in-the-ground, which I refused to use on principle (the principle of smell), I enjoyed the rustic living: we went to bed with nothing but the sound of the river and the occasional sleet storm in our ears, the foreign stars of a foreign sky providing our only light. On our second night the Milky Way was especially clear, stretching from one mountain ridge to the other, fading behind a distant cloud formation and its subtle strokes of lightning.

At the end of the third day (which sadly saw the altitude get the best of Nele's stomach), we finally caught a bus and a train to Aguas Calientes, which had the most absurd density of tourists I've seen since the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. If Ellis Island had had a few restaurants, hotels, and a market, it would have resembled this place. I must say, however, the town will always hold a special place in my heart as home to the warm shower that washed off the three days of Andean dirt from my artificially tan body.

### **Machu Picchu**

The clouds around Machu Picchu rise and fall almost like gel inside a lava lamp, tangling and untangling themselves along the way, their tails scraping against the mountainous ruins. Lush jungles climb vertically up the surrounding mountains, and the valleys below hold--depending on the view--either rivers or expanding infrastructure. The old Inca town was never discovered by the Spanish conquistadors, partially because most of its 1,200 inhabitants (primarily women, apparently) had already died of smallpox.

I didn't have much time to think about this, though, as I was racing to the other side of the complex to get in line for a chance to be one of the 400 people allowed each day to climb Wayna Picchu, a mountain adjoining Machu Picchu but 1,200 feet higher. Even though we had gotten to the bus station at 4:45 to catch the first 5:30 bus up to the ruins, about 125 people were already in front of us, not even counting the people who decided to hike up to the entrance in the dark. Sprinting through Machu Picchu probably wasn't the best way to get acquainted with it, but I hadn't wanted something so badly in a long while. In the end, we got the tickets because our guide knew one of the workers, but even he seemed nervous in the meantime, since he had promised us that if we got to the bus station by 5:15 we would be fine.

After meandering around a bit, Malini, Carlos and I hiked up the innumerable steps to the top of Wayna Picchu, (just as the rain stopped and the sun started beating down); seeing that we were six thousand feet lower than where we had been the day before, I found it relatively easy to hop two steps at a time (passing by a girl who was crying from the vertigo). Malini clearly wasn't as happy for me, as she called me "evil" for saying "You're almost there!" one too many times (when she complained that they needed to widen the ancient stone steps, I suggested she take it up with the Inca Empire). Once we got to the top, though, we all admitted it was worth the climb, and joined the many others at the top to lounge and admire the view.

I must confess that I enjoyed Angkor Wat in Cambodia and even Stonehenge more--partially 'cause they were less crowded and less reconstructed; but the fact that the Incas chose to build a small city, replete with temples and an observatory, on a steep mountain 8,000 feet above sea level, is still quite amazing. I'm not spiritual or religious, but I still always find myself in awe of the human spirit. I often fret over the horrors that humans inflict on nature and on each other, but seeing places like this reminds me of the power of the human spirit and the human mind, of the human ability to solve any problem that comes our way. I have faith in people.

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As is often the case, my favorite part of this journey was just the mundane conversations we had along the trail and around the dinner "table." How often in life do you get the chance to have a dinner conversation in three different languages, or to discuss the implications of Franco & the Spanish Civil War and then talk about French cinema a few minutes later? How often can you make people from five different countries laugh? It's trips like this that make me feel so inordinately lucky. I doubt I deserve it, but I do appreciate it.