

Peru Part I: Snakes!

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Having had some dealings with snakes a little out of the usual, as I reported in the 1999 *Cairngorm Club Journal*, I thought I could perhaps add a postscript.

A friend was arranging a touring holiday in Peru for five of us, and was speaking to the travel company on the phone to tie up some of the final details. I asked if I could have a word with him. I told him that I was one of the very few people in Scotland who had spent some time in Accident and Emergency, having been bitten by an adder. I then told him that I had seen on a TV programme the previous evening, an event recorded on the very same part of the Amazon on which we would be sailing a fortnight later. There was a giant anaconda slowly swallowing an alligator whole. There was a short silence, then "Oh! You'll be all right there. Anacondas aren't poisonous." You don't get advice like that on the high street every day.

For those who have not yet been to Peru, I can only say that it was really amazing. Everything we saw and did was new. We were well warned that this was not a holiday but an adventure. It was. After arrival in Lima, it involved twenty-three separate trips. Six were by air, seven by boat – on the sea, Lake Titicaca and the Amazon – and the rest by bus and train.

At the Ceiba Tops Jungle Lodge, our guide apologised for the Amazon being only three kilometres wide at that point, 2,400 miles from the sea. As some recompense for this shortcoming we did see some of both species of fresh-water dolphins, white and pink, and many kinds of birds. We were warned not to trail our fingers in the water over the side of our shallow open boat, as the piranha might spoil our piano-playing skills. On a jungle walk we came upon a vulture eating a dead ant-eater. It took off and we found that the ant-eater had been ripening for some time. The most dangerous thing we saw in the jungle, according to our guide, was a colony of ants known as bullet ants. He said that they are so named because a bite felt like being hit by a bullet. I took his word for it.

Down river thirty miles or so, we visited a Yagua Indian settlement of about twenty palm-leaf thatched huts scattered through the trees, with little in the way of walls. The men demonstrated their skill with blowpipes and darts, hitting a four-inch post nearly every time at thirty paces. Walking through the muddy-floored jungle on our way back to our open boat we passed a small native girl of about six years of age wearing only an old faded pink shift. A lady in our party paused, leaned towards her

and said very slowly and clearly "Adios." The small girl looked up at her and said equally carefully "Goodbye." One up to the Yaguas, I think.

On another day we were on a bus trip on the high plains at about 10,000ft when, passing a rough-looking farm steading, I saw a small crowd grouped round a llama or similar animal, which was lying on its side. The poor thing was possibly ill, I thought. In the next couple of miles I saw at least two more such scenes. The penny dropped. The following day was to be a religious feast day and they were preparing ingredients for the barbecues.

Our food in our various hotels was excellent and a very wide choice was provided. There was one item that none of us fancied – a roast about the size of a partridge but with four small legs in the air. Guinea pig! I don't eat pets.

The remains of the Inca civilisation were very impressive. The colossal 40- to 100-ton rocks were shaped to fit together exactly without the benefit of iron or steel tools or mortar of any kind! I checked the accuracy with a postcard. You could not push it into the join. Try Sacsayhuaman and Ollantaytambo as well as the top attraction of Machu Pichu. And hurry if you do want to stroll over the terraces of Machu Pichu to examine the buildings closely. They say that visitors will eventually only see the place from a helicopter.

I only saw one snake in Peru. It was about five feet in length and I could examine it quite closely as it was wrapped round my neck at the time. No, it did not drop out of a tree, but was placed there by a teenage girl during the hotel's evening song and dance show. I wasn't bothered as I could see that it wasn't an adder or a giant anaconda.

Back in our own Scottish hills, I note that the snakes that once were so common across the road from Muir Cottage have disappeared. The sunny spots they favoured are now largely shaded by the ever-expanding trees. I saw one on the road about 100 yards towards the Linn but it was very flat and motionless. In September, I sprayed myself lavishly with insect repellent and searched the area closely, and saw none. I spent that evening extracting more than a dozen ticks from various areas of my anatomy. No one else got any. Why me?

A WARNING! There was a programme on TV recently, showing the removal of a colony of adders from an expanding motorway in England. I heard someone say that the death rate from adder bites in the UK was about one every decade, and then they went on to say that there had not been a death for twenty years. Step carefully!