

Peru Part II: The Inca Trail

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MACHU PICHU! Forty years ago a friend's account convinced me that I'd have to get there one day. And now it's the world's number one tourist target! With my love of hill-walking, it was natural that an approach via the Inca Trail should appeal, so this became a number one post-retirement objective.

In the old Andean Kingdom, extending far beyond modern Peru, which was ruled by the Inca (or King) from the 'Navel of the Universe', Cuzco, there were thousands of kilometres of paved trails extending through the Andes, and many remain. The best known nowadays is the 43km section which was built for noblemen to cross the hills in the Urubamba to reach the Inca's new mountain-top citadel of Machu Pichu. Many now aspire to travel this trail, which includes three high passes, the highest being Dead Woman's Pass at 4,215m.

The tourist pressure on the Trail is now so intense that there is a limit of 500 daily starts (tourists, porters, cooks and guides all count). The route is closed during February for repairs and maintenance, and this period may be extended in future. This now means that a permit has to be applied for well in advance, and porters and campsites need to be booked as well. Our group of four, organised by Journey Latin America, was scheduled to leave Km 82 on the Urubamba, with a guide, cook and eight porters, on Saturday, March 11th, 2006, and to reach Machu Pichu on March 14th to tour the site.

Our guide, Augusto, came with us from Cuzco, and we met up with cook and porters at the checkpoint, where identification was checked and the porters' loads were weighed to ensure that no burden was over 25kg. Then we were allowed through, across the Urubamba and onto the trail. The first day is defined as 'easy', and so it proved, a steady but gentle ascent from 2,600m, past cultivated fields and archaeological sites to a rest camp at 2,950m, where an excellent lunch awaited thanks to our cook and porters. After lunch the trail continued upward as a well-made path to the last village on the route, and beyond it to a campsite on an old cultivation terrace with good views across the valley. Afternoon tea and another good meal led to a comfortable night's sleep, before the warm water for washing arrived at 4.30 a.m. on Day 2, rated 'challenging'!

The 'challenge' was the combination of increasing altitude with some steep, high steps on the path, and was too much for a group of Americans, who had found Day 1 more than enough. However, the trail wound upwards through delightful cloud-forest, full of bromeliads, orchids and hummingbirds. I followed Augusto's advice to enjoy it all, and reached



Approaching Dead Woman's Pass at 4,000m

the rest-stop at 3,850m to find the 'young tigers' had just left to get over the highest pass and down for lunch! Augusto then explained that he'd never taken anyone QUITE so old across before; but he seemed satisfied with progress, and in the event we reached the top of Dead Woman's Pass in 5.5 hours (the average is 5.0) in good condition, despite the 'thou shalt not pass' attitude of a large bull llama 50m below the pass! 'Slow and steady' seemed to work, as I did not seem to be suffering from the altitude. Perhaps time on the Altiplano of Bolivia and at Lake Titicaca served well as an acclimatisation!

Photos taken, we started bouncing steeply downwards towards lunch, and I was easily leading the young Irish and Dutch groups with whom I'd shared the ascent to the top. Then – disaster! Augusto stopped once we had reached easier ground to speak with a friend, while I continued on and met one of the Rangers – they are vigilant for infringements of the Trail Rules – and stopped to chat. As I prepared to continue down I spotted an unfamiliar flower and turned to investigate it – on a small loose stone! Result? One dislocated right ankle, with badly torn ligaments, plus severe pain and faintness. Solution? To arrange myself tastefully on the path to avoid falling over the cliff, and take a rest! Fortunately, camp was in sight and I had a stick, so I was in time for the end of lunch and could soak the sore bit in a cool stream, before trying to sleep.

Day 3, rated 'unforgettable', lived up to the claim, for the sheer beauty of the cloud forest and the scenery, as well as for the problems with

walking! Uphill was OK, the Inca rest-house and the second high pass were reached fairly well on schedule; but then came the nightmare of descending steep, rather uneven steps, with a sharp drop on my bad side, and a bright purple foot twice its normal size squeezed into a boot! What should have taken thirty minutes took three hours, so Augusto found a porter. I was concerned that I exceeded the 25kg maximum, but the porter assured me "I can carry 90kg!" However, pride didn't allow help, so we omitted one major archaeological visit and arrived for a late lunch. The young ones had gone on, expecting me to reach the night's camp at midnight, but a large dose of Ibuprofen got me through the glories of the cloud forest to the final high pass, and then down, down and down to reach the campsite in time for afternoon tea.

Day 4, 'arrival', meant up at 4.30 a.m., to be ready for the final 5.30 a.m. checkpoint and the trail up to the Sun Gate with its view down to Machu Pichu. There was swirling mist, which cleared as we passed through more archaeological sites on the 300m descent to the main gate and the non-trekkers in the group. The site WAS magnificent, but the many steep steps were stressful, and the peak of Waynu Pichu was out of the question – and not just for me, as a landslide had closed the path two days before our arrival.

However, having been the oldest this year on the Trail, I'm determined to go back again, so that I can properly enjoy the magnificence of the mountains, AND Machu Pichu!

Finally, I couldn't have completed the Inca Trail without the kindness of our porters, not to mention the patient encouragement of guide Augusto – it was almost overwhelming, and terribly hard to thank them adequately!