

Hiking the Inca Trail

Travelling Machu Picchu by Foot is no Easy Hike, but Each Day is an Eye-Opener

By Susan Dawson-Cook

Today, my husband Chris and I begin our five-day Inca Trail hike. At the end of our trek, we will reach the ancient Inca city of Machu Picchu, discovered in 1911 by Hiram Bingham. This will be my second passage. Ten years ago, while living in Peru, I had hiked the trail with a group of "expat" friends.

Having always loved the outdoors, I had found it awe-inspiring to see the Inca temples and cities, created in harmony with their natural surroundings. My appreciation for the snow-capped mountains, the river valleys and the stars had been heightened by my time in the Andes.

I had finished that first hike a changed person, knowing that some day I would return with a man I would call "soul mate." Today, we are here together and I am eager to walk this meditative road together.

DAY 1

A headache keeps me awake all night, so I'm exhausted when the bus rolls up to our Cuzco hotel at 5:40 a.m. The small minibus is crowded, and the windows rattle every time we hit a bump in the road.

Lost in discomfort, I speak to no one until we reach Ollantaytambo. Precipitous canyon walls surround us. The Ollantaytambo ruins, constructed centuries ago by the Incas, lie nestled in the mountains, above rows of agricultural terraces that extend upward from the outskirts of the city.

After a 45-minute van ride, we arrive at Kilometer 82. Our two guides are Fabrizio and Desnarda. Our other 10 companions are Rudi and Michael, two elderly gentlemen from Sydney; Kevin and Femi, who work for CNN in Atlanta; Louisa, a woman from Ontario, Canada; Carol and Chris, two sisters from the States; young Michael, also from Australia; and Sarah and Lee, two friends from Scotland.

As Fabrizio lays out paper bags with our snacks, we gather them and prepare to begin our hike. We carry only water and snacks; the dozen or so porters carry everything else.

It feels wonderful to be in the open air, away from the crowded narrow streets of Cuzco. We approach the checkpoint, along the Urubamba River, where an attendant verifies our passports before we cross the suspension bridge. In an attempt to preserve the trail, the Peruvian government allows only 500 people on the trail per day. We had made reservations months in advance.

The trail follows the river, and above us La Veronica mountain and its glaciers are visible. The

terrain resembles Arizona, arid and dry, with prickly pear cacti, brittle grasses, and Moya trees, which seem to be the Peruvian version of the mesquite. Their red bean pods hang from leafy fronds and torrents of Spanish moss trail from their branches. Our pace is much slower than it had been on my previous journey, but the sleepless night has left me weary and I am content with the leisurely tempo.

As we trudge on, a teenage girl wearing platform shoes overtakes us. For a moment, I feel old and out-of-shape, but my self-consciousness dissipates as I become captivated by the Andean scenery before me.

Along the Urubamba river, the water rushing over boulders provides a soothing melody. As the trail ascends we leave the river behind, and the view of La Veronica mountain becomes increasingly spectacular.

Hours later, we stop to rest in a tiny pueblo. Children with colorful clothes peer out from dark rooms with earthen floors; pigs roam, snorting and burying their noses in the mud. The cool morning air has been consumed by the midday heat, and our shirts are wet with perspiration.

My legs feel sticky beneath my pants and long johns. Fabrizio arranges for me to change behind one of the houses. Made of woven straw, the walls are far from opaque. I hear voices inside, speaking in Quechua, the local language. As I remove my pants and pull on a pair of shorts, I feel sure they are saying "Nice undies, *gringa*."

We walk for a couple more hours until we reach our lunch spot. Our porters have set up a picnic table for us



The author and her husband walking through the cloud forest on day two. Fabrizio Cornejo Yábar Photo

on a grassy plateau. Above us are towering cliffs of basalt, decorated with red bromelias.

Bathroom tents have been set up on the grass nearby. Before lunch, we are given some very important instructions: "Use the maroon toilet seat for number 1 and the white one for number 2." Rudi interrupts this explanation with an urgent question. "What if you have to do both? Is there a toilet for number 3?" he asks. Fabrizio looks confused, but everyone else erupts into laughter.

I am pleased to see that the Peruvians are trying to preserve the trail. Everything, from trash to human waste, is now carried out by the porters.

After lunch, I hang back with Desnarda, our assistant guide. Soft-spoken and shy, she struggles with English, so I switch to Spanish. A pretty girl, she is short, with wavy hair and a round face. When something pleases her, she erupts into a broad Andean smile. The slogan on her T-shirt boasts "Fabulous cleavage under kit" and even though her breasts are rather large, I'm shocked. The shirt doesn't match her personality. Either she has a wild side or she bought the shirt without understanding its meaning.

At 4:30, we arrive at our campsite to find a neat little row of tents. Two bathroom tents and a dining tent have also been laid out on the grassy terraces. The porters bring basins of warm water.

I lean outside to dip my hands into the basin and am startled to see the tall and lean Rudi standing outside in gray bikini underwear. Embarrassed, I look away. He doesn't seem embarrassed in the least. He acts more like he is in his twenties than his sixties. He and his friend Michael are the oldest in the group, yet they are among the fittest. Earlier that afternoon, Rudi told me all

about Sydney – the great hiking, the beaches and how he and Michael had often hiked and traveled together.

Before supper, Chris and I relax in the tent for awhile, chatting about the day's events. Nestled in a little V-shaped valley between the mountains, our camp is protected from the wind and enveloped in beauty. Hundreds of feet below, the rushing Lulluchayoc stream provides background music.

Carol asks Fabrizio about the names of the Incan gods. She seems to be on a spiritual voyage. Her life as a single mother has probably been difficult and I would warrant that her faith and resilience have enabled her to prevail. Over the next few days, she will demonstrate the latter with flying colors.

We dine inside the immense tent, which protects us from the icy winds. As we sip cups of hot chocolate or coca tea, Fabrizio asks us to introduce ourselves. Chris and I are in an interesting bunch. Rudi's unusual sense of humor provides constant amusement. Kevin rather intrigues me, with all of his gizmos – he has this iPod-like thing that he uses to take video and watch pre-recorded TV programs. Twenty-something Mick, the youngest group member, listens to music as he hikes, as I often do. He will travel to California next week, staying on Hollywood Boulevard, "where all the action is."

Sarah sometimes gets on my nerves. Her little barbs during meals, spoken in sweet sardonic Scottish, make us out to be a bunch of greedy pigs. Round and plump, she is the only one that never requests a second helping.

Perhaps I am overly sensitive to her comments, since I became ill last week



A mother and baby llama at Machu Picchu. Susan Dawson-Cook Photo

while we were in Colca Canyon. Having lost several pounds, I am forcing myself to eat to regain my strength, which I will need tomorrow when we ascend to over 13,000 feet.

As the porters clear our dishes, Chris rests his chin on his arm, his eyelids beginning to flutter. We excuse ourselves from the table and head outside into the night.

On our way back to the tent, I am distracted by the view of the V-shaped valley that extends thousands of feet upward toward Dead Woman's Pass. The upper part of the valley is illuminated by the rising moon, while the lower section lies in shadow. Between the mountains, the midnight blue sky is speckled with stars. As the moon continues to rise, the silvery light trickles down the sides of the valleys, illuminating each jagged section. Feeling an icy breeze, I dive inside the tent and into my sleeping bag. Exhausted, I am instantly asleep.

DAY 2

I rub the sleep from my eyes as Fabrizzio brings cups to our tent door. Chris and I have an hour to wash and pack all our belongings before breakfast. I am so busy packing that I don't realize how cold it is until the tips of my fingers begin to go numb. I dig my gloves out of my backpack and pull them over my hands.

After we finish nourishing bowls of hot porridge, we begin the day's hike, climbing a series of stone steps through a dense cloud forest. There are hundreds of polilepis trees, with thick twisted trunks of red and white, and dark green foliage. The contorted trunks and branches are draped in Spanish moss, bromelia and Tarzan-style vines.

Carol explains to us that the bromeliads are air plants — they grow not in soil, but instead attached to branches and rocks. Their roots serve only to give the plants a firm anchor to whatever they are growing on, and they absorb all of their moisture and nutrition through specialized leaves. This explains how they

Michael – Rudi had told us yesterday about the handy washing kits he and his friend had brought along. I narrow the suspects down to two, when Fabrizzio comments on the aroma of stinky plants. The bitter odor singing the lining of my nose is not emanating from anyone's armpits, but rather is coming from a particularly pungent variety of bromelia!

Hours later, we emerge from the cloud forest into a broad valley, carved out by ancient glaciers, where llamas roam and trees are absent. The valley and surrounding mountains are covered with icchu grass. Behind me, I can see the icy peaks of Huayanay mountain. The llamas put on quite a show for us; fighting, running in circles, barking and nipping at each other's heels.

After lunch and a *siesta*, it is hard to get moving again, but once I get my rhythm, I feel strong and confident. Louisa is having the hardest time; she is lagging far behind, and we have lost sight of her and Disnarda. My husband is also struggling. He doesn't hike often and I am worried this trip is too rigorous for him. "If you can just make it to the top of this pass, it will be a piece of cake after that," I say. He nods, trudging onward.

From the top of the pass the 360-degree view is incredible. The last time I had been up here, the pass had been enveloped in clouds. In the cloudless afternoon sky, the sea of jagged blue-green mountains seems to extend forever.

We hike steeply downward, towards the valley thousands of feet below. Our destination camp lies out of sight, shadowed by the mountains. Despite my mental and physical exhaustion, I try to focus so I don't inadvertently misplace a foot or turn an ankle.

We reach our camp at Pacamayo, which, unfortunately, resembles a crowded KOA. There are four other groups nearby and the terraces where our tents lie are so narrow it is easy to

to relax before dinner. Our dinner conversation begins with cartoons, progresses to soap operas and, at the lowest point, derails to farts. Now that we are getting to know each other, anything goes.



A view of Huayna Picchu mountain and the many buildings and terraces of the Inca city of Machu Picchu.
Susan Dawson-Cook Photo

Femi is sharing her tent with co-worker friend, Kevin. She says his morning fart inside the tent had been so awful, she could taste it. Fortunately, by now, my silverware is neatly crossed on top of my empty plate.

It is almost too much, but everyone except Kevin is falling off their seat, laughing. Kevin looks like he is pondering murder. The affects of the altitude are making us a bit batty, turning us into a bunch of unruly teenagers.

DAY 3

I sleep soundly until the porters next door begin yelling orders as they break down their camp. They are slated for the early departure time and even though we get to "sleep in," we can't with all this ruckus.

At breakfast, the dark circles beneath their eyes make Carol and Rudi appear years older. The journey is taking its toll on them, but neither will complain or lag behind in the days ahead.

During the day, we repeatedly stop to allow porters to pass. They whiz by in sneakers, boots or sandals, clad in anything from potato sack pants to nylon soccer shorts. Fabrizzio warns us to stick close to the mountain side as they pass, since they occasionally knock people over precipices.

We ascend a second pass, Runcu Raccay, stopping to visit some ruins along the way. Five styles of Inca building have been documented; Imperial Inca, Pirka, cellular, enchased, and Cyclopean. The half circular Runcu Raccay ruins we visit in the morning exhibit the Pirka, or rustic, style of construction. Farming terraces, storehouses and homes for the common people had often been constructed in this form, using rough stones, fit together with mud mortar.

The most awe-inspiring style of Inca

construction is the Cyclopean. We had seen such structures at the Saqsaywaman fortress near Cuzco, the former Inca capital. Immense andesite boulders, as large as 28 feet high, had been carved so precisely that they fit together perfectly without mortar.

In the early afternoon we detour from the trail to climb the narrow stone staircase to the Sayac Marca ruins, nestled on a grassy mountain slope, rich with multi-colored wildflowers. Miles away, I see a valley filled with dense overgrowth, above which lies a grassy plateau and our picnic table.

After lunch, the pace slackens. Chris and I ask Fabrizzio if we can walk ahead to camp and he agrees. We reach Phuyupatamarca pass and are washed and reading our books by the time the rest of the group arrives.

Later, the two of us walk to the summit to watch the sunset. Camp Phuyupatamarca or "place above the clouds," is beautiful, but crowded. We pass several camp sites before we reach the top, at 11,975 feet, where orange hues of the setting sun illuminate the snowy slopes of Salcantay mountain.

To the west, we can see Machu Picchu mountain. I feel a pang of regret

that we won't trek into the city. It had been incredible to see the sacred city far below, magnifying as we had approached. An avalanche in March had washed out the trail, so groups must detour into the Urubamba river, eventually reaching Machu Picchu by bus.

At dinner, Fabrizzio announces that our porters will leave us at daybreak. They have prepared a song for us and he wants us to do the same for them. Everyone has a different song in mind. The only song everyone knows is the "Hokey Pokey," but each country has a slightly different version. The Scots call it the Hokey Cokey rather than the Hokey Pokey, and they also have this part where we hold hands, run up to the middle and yell "Hoo-key Cokey." The Aussies do different hand motions as they turn themselves around. Our plan is to meld our versions together.

DAY 4

When the time comes for us to perform for the porters, everyone forgets the original plan. Each nationality does something different as we do "right hand," "left foot," "butt" and "whole self." The porters, standing in rows wearing their brightly colored, traditional clothing, look more mystified than impressed, as we allow the inner children escape.

Several of us present the porters and cooks with our collective tips. When I present the Assistant Cook with his tip, I make a short speech thanking him and the others. The men appear baffled that a woman is acting as spokesperson. In my enthusiasm, I sometimes forget cultural differences.

We hike to Wiñay Wayna, finding the main building overrun with visitors. We lunch inside the crowded building instead of in the open air. The visitor



On day two, the group makes it to the top of Dead Woman's Pass, 13,779 feet above sea level. In the front row, from left to right, Chris Ferko (author's husband), Kevin Corriveau, Lee Curtis, Louisa Mak. In the second row, from left, are the author, Carol Opeka, Chris Lutterbie, Femi Oke, Michael Le-Vesconte, Michael Clancy, Rudi Freyberg and Sarah Parker. *Fabrizzio Cornejo Yábar Photo*

stumble over the edge when exiting. The camp layout is grim, but the natural

manage to survive on the faces of cliffs and along tree branches. We are surrounded by tumbling water and where there is sunlight, wildflowers poke out their heads in yellows, purples and iridescent blue.

As we walk upward, I try to determine who stinks. It can't be Rudi or

surroundings are spectacular. The valley is rich with pampa, a bright green grass with purple and golden tips. Tropical trees with yellow flowers teem with colorful birds, and crystal waters tumble from rocky cliffs, merging into nearby streams.

It is almost dark, so we have little time



Trekkers hike through Aguas Calientes on day four in search of hot springs and hot showers.
Susan Dawson-Cook photo

center is nothing like the tranquil place I remember, where I had awoken before dawn to see the peaks of Machu Picchu mountain, dark gray against a purple-pink sky.

After lunch, we stroll into the amphitheater-shaped city of Wiñay Wayna, embedded in a lush jungle. Trickling fountains line the walls of the agricultural section and abundant trees and a light breeze provide reprieve from the afternoon sun. I stroll with Chris through the corridors, some of which are completely overgrown. Purple and pink orchids appear brilliant against the thick green grasses and elephant ear plants, which have leaves more than two feet long. Alone at last, we embrace and share a kiss, enjoying the tranquility of the moment.

Before we cross the river, Fabrizio warns us we will follow the railroad tracks to Aguas Calientes. Trains will be coming from both directions so we should be careful, he says. They didn't share this little morsel with us in the travel brochures.

The rest of the group is taking this well, but I am nervous. I walk especially briskly along stretches where rocky cliffs on the right and sheer drop-offs to the left allow no room to vacate. Trains come and go and we scramble to move out of their path. Fortunately, they pass very slowly.

The one-hour walk takes more than two hours. Desnarda leaves us at a train station along the way and we each give her a final hug before her tiny frame disappears onto the train. It is dark by the time we reach Aguas Calientes.

We walk up a highly inclined street toward the Pueblo Viejo restaurant to pre-order our dinner before we go to the hot springs. The little town is transformed. The assemblage of dilapidated buildings had been converted into a quaint European town, with narrow cobblestone streets and neat rows of well-lit restaurants and shops.

We continue upward toward the hot springs. Gone are the two greenish pools and the ramshackle wooden locker rooms, where I had once enjoyed a quiet afternoon with my mother and children. *Voila* – now we have the Aguas Caliente resort!

We follow the cobblestone trail, lined with rails of bamboo, past a bar where reggae music emanates. Hundreds of feet below, are rows of square pools. The pools, overflowing with bodies, appear black in the night.

When we reach the front desk, a heavyset woman lifts our dusty backpacks from the counter, places them in a locker and hands us our keys. We walk toward the locker rooms, change our clothes and head outside.

We descend another set of stairs to the showers and pools. There is a wait for the hot showers, but people disperse quickly when we arrive. The hot water envelopes my neck and shoulders, making me feel rejuvenated and refreshed.

At dinner, Femi, Louisa and Carol sit nearby. Femi tells Louisa she is amazed that she was able to complete the hike

without training and Louisa laughs proudly. I'm not sure her lack of conditioning is an accomplishment, but I detect subtle sarcasm in Femi's compliment.

Chris feasts on trout and I enjoy a bowl of spinach soup and a pizza. Cuzceña dancers and singers perform for us. Women in yellow dresses and men in white, wearing red caps and capes, turn the night into a swirl of colorful activity.

Soon, Fabrizio determines we should depart for the camp site. We leave the narrow, well-lit streets, descending onto the dirt road that leads to Machu Picchu. In the night, we walk for 25 minutes through the jungle, listening to an orchestra of insect sounds. Above us, brilliant stars are visible until they disappear behind the towering cliffs of granite that meet the sky.

As we approach the camp, I see an illuminated A-frame building, which casts a narrow beam of light on our row of tents, laid out on a plain of grass alongside the river. Chris and I stumble around looking for our tent, finally finding the familiar 31.

DAY 5

On our last breakfast together as a group, we feast on immense pancakes doused in syrup and then pack up our belongings for the final time.

The bus arrives, taking us up the dozens of switchbacks to the top of the mountain. We reach Machu Picchu at about 8:30 a.m., and Fabrizio leads us inside the site and on an uphill hike for 15 or 20 minutes. We stop high up on a set of circular terraces, where we have a lovely view of the ruins and a soft agricultural terrace to sit on.

Fabrizio tells us the Dalai Lama had recently visited Machu Picchu. He also points out the spot where the landslide had wiped out the trail below Intipunku. I got a closer look, using Carol's binoculars. Repairing the trail will be difficult. The green mountain is a wall of dirt hundreds of feet above and below the trail.

The Incas had reigned throughout much of Peru until the 1500s, when Spanish conquistadors arrived. The Spanish killed many of the Inca Royals and destroyed many of their temples and cities, but the religious center of Machu Picchu somehow escaped this destruction.

No one knows the fate of Machu Picchu's residents or why the city had been built in such an inaccessible location. The city remains shrouded in mystery, although it is clear that the natural world had always reigned in the Inca empire. The key to understanding lies

in the surrounding mountains, rivers and constellations, considered deities by the Incas.

We walk up the stone steps to the ritual site of Intihuatana, which exemplifies Inca astronomical knowledge. Later, we enter the Temple of the Three Windows, where each trapezoidal window provides million-dollar views of the nearby mountains. When we approach the massive mountain-shaped Sacred Stone, which reportedly has supernatural powers, I run my hands across its rough surfaces, whispering a silent prayer. Carol and Chris also take a moment to connect with this spectacular mountain of granite.

At the end of our visit, Chris and I sit on a grassy terrace and take a final look at the incredible sanctuary. I want to take a mental photograph so that when we leave, an image of Machu Picchu will remain. As we prepare to depart, Chris says "the next time we hike the trail, we'll have to wear those shirts with SPF protection." He loves this place nearly as much as I do, which makes our exit easier. There will be a next time.

We lunch in Aguas Calientes before boarding the train. As our train passes hikers making the same miserable trackside journey we had made the previous day, we are greeted with views of naked backsides.

Chris and I will stay in Ollantaytambo, an hour's train ride away. Everyone else will make the four hour trip to Cuzco. The train stops and we say a quick goodbye to our Inca trail family before we step off of the train. I will miss these travelers who shared our journey for the past five days.

I take one last look at Mick's green t-shirt and his youthful smile before the train pulls away from the station. Chris and I walk hand in hand toward the Pakaritampu hotel. A hot shower and a warm bed will be waiting for us. *WJ*

Touring Peru 411

These highly recommended companies provide Inca Trail hikes and also arrange travel and tours throughout Peru and other South American countries.

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