

A WALK IN THE
CLOUDS

A JOURNEY ALONG THE INCA TRAIL TO MACHU PICCHU

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NOT FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION

FOR JOHNNY

AND ALL MY OLD COLLEGE
FRIENDS WHO KEPT IT REAL.

CHAPTER ONE: A NEW ADVENTURE

I DON'T KNOW WHEN THE MOMENT WAS EXACTLY WHEN I REALIZED I WANTED TO SEE THE LOST CITY OF THE INCAS, MACHU PICCHU. I never really heard about it until college, or rather, if I had heard about it before then, I probably wasn't paying attention and goofing off instead. It was mentioned in an art history class once and I remember a girl in the class tell her friend saying that she really wanted

to go there. But I thought nothing of it at the time; it was just something to put in my short-term memory for an upcoming test.

In later years after graduation, the elusive “travel bug” bit me bad, and I became sickly obsessed with seeing the world. I came to realize that the world is so big, and there is so much to see. At that point, I’d already seen parts of North America, Asia, Europe, and Africa. I figured I should make a trip to South America, and suddenly the idea implanted by that girl at Rutgers resurfaced in my brain: Machu Picchu. Perhaps I did pay attention in school after all.

SO IT BEGAN IN JANUARY 2001. I was in London for the weekend to reunite with my safari-mates from a trip to the Okavango Delta in Botswana the previous October. We all met our old safari guide Harry at the “Destinations” show, this big travel convention that was in town. He was manning a booth for his company Oasis Safaris in the Africa section, trying to snatch another group like us for the upcoming season. I, on the other hand, was trying to snatch another tour company that would take me on my next adventure. I found myself lingering around the South America section quite often, specifically the area with companies that hiked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. I had read in a feature in the *New York Times* travel section about visiting Machu Picchu, and the author suggested that the only real way to appreciate it is if you go there by foot on the ancient Incan highway through the Andes, so that you actually earn the privilege to see it, and you experience the environment firsthand and not behind the glass of a tourist train.

Then I met Paul Cripps. He ran Amazonas Explorer, an adventure tour company based in Cuzco, Peru, which led willing travelers on South American adventures like rafting the source of the mighty Amazon, or the trip I actually had in mind: a five-day trek from Cuzco (South America’s hub of globetrotters) along the Inca Trail through the Peruvian Andes to the “lost” city of Machu Picchu. Paul tried to talk me into the trip, which wasn’t hard because I was already mesmerized at the prospect. Machu Picchu was slowly becoming my latest travel obsession.

And so, four months later, I was off again to explore another part of the globe, my fifth continent to conquer in my quest to conquer all seven before the age of 30 (which may not seem so difficult to a seasoned traveller who did nothing but travel, but I was doing it while still maintaining a professional 9-to-5 career with the short American corporate standard vacation time of two weeks). In great Indiana Jones fashion, I had a different set of companions than my previous adventures. This time, I was with my friend Johnny Lim, a college classmate-turned-fellow New York interactive graphic designer. Originally, I invited my friends Maurice, Terence, and Risa—Johnny had some people in mind as well—but due to different circumstances, none of them could go. It was either a lack of vacation days, a pressing deadline, a prior commitment, or some other nonsense like that. I was willing to wait for them, but the tour required two months advance notice (to apply for permits, set up reservations, etc.) and no one could commit that early. So after trying to figure out a common time for everyone to go (a difficult feat, believe me), I gave up and realized that at one point, you just have to stop waiting, suck it in, and just go. Which is what I did.

Anyway, I still had Johnny. If there was anyone of all my friends that was suited to go, it was he. In fact, by coincidence, without knowing that I had visions of Machu Picchu, he was also toying with the idea of seeing the Incan ruins. He suggested it once to a bunch of us in an e-mail, and I told him I was already thinking of that. So who better to go with?

I MET JOHNNY IN COLLEGE AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY IN NEWARK, NEW JERSEY SEVEN YEARS PRIOR. Over the course of those four years and three years after graduation, I discovered that he was a *good* guy. I italicize “good” because he wasn’t a “good guy” like your brother-in-law is or something. (“Oh Tim? You’d like him, he’s a good guy.”) He was good because he literally was, well, *good*. He hardly had a dark side, or if he did, he never showed it. As far as I knew, he was a pretty conservative, family-oriented guy. (At age 28, he was still living at home supporting his parents and putting his older brother through law school.) He didn’t frequent bars or clubs or any parties; he seemed to be perpetually

working all the time, either taking work home or doing freelance—he was married to his work. In the seven years I knew him, he never mentioned anything about a hot date he had the night before, or dating in general for that matter. He rarely drank, didn't do any drugs, didn't smoke. His only vices were *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. (He didn't have cable.) He hardly ever fucking cursed either. In a way, he was sort of a one-sided goody-goody two shoes character written for a cartoon or a cheesy sitcom. You know, the good guy.

But don't get me wrong; Johnny wasn't a total square. He still had the spirit of an adventurer in him. He was a hiker, a mountain biker, a road cyclist—we rode the entire span of Long Island once (but that's another story)—and he just started getting into mountain climbing. And in each of these “extreme” hobbies, he was a total gadget freak, the type of person that buys into a salesman's pitch of a product being scientifically proven it is better than the average one. He always had the boots with the best technological features, or the bike that weighed ounces less than the average bike, or the fleece pullover that was tested and rated to withstand a couple of degrees colder than the average Old Navy fleece. Not that there's anything wrong with that; it was just different from my approach to things, which is to get the cheapest thing out there that's good enough to get by, even if there is a little discomfort. Case in point: after much indecisiveness over whether or not he should buy hiking poles or not, Johnny eventually bought these fancy \$80 poles with aluminum tips and suspension springs in them for maximum comfort. I on the other hand, figured I'd just find a long wooden stick on the trail along the way and use that. I mean, they're just sticks. (What can I say, I'm cheap.)

Johnny's personality and my personality complemented each other perfectly, almost like two guys in a formulaic Hollywood “buddy comedy”: total opposites, but somehow really good friends. He was high-tech gadgets, shy and conservative, a novice to the whole adventure vacation thing; I was secondhand equipment, outgoing, spontaneous, curious, and with a little experience under my belt. My excitement wasn't generated so much by the hike itself, with the

braving of the elements and the camping, but rather by the exposure to a new culture, a new cuisine, a new language, and the meeting of new people. While Johnny was busy gearing up with crystal-clear plastic water bottles that don't make the water taste too plasticky, I was trying to learn Spanish. I bought the *Lonely Planet Latin American Spanish Phrasebook*, which contained such useful phrases as “*Me encantan tus pechos*” (“I really like your breasts”) and “*¿Crees en la brujería?*” (“Do you believe in witchcraft?”) I also bought Berlitz's *Rush Hour Spanish*, this audio CD learning course set to music. The songs on the CD were incredibly annoying and cheesy—woven together with this cheesy story of an American gringo guy trying to put the moves on his Peruvian gal friend—but they resonated in my head for days, and I actually ended up remembering phrases and words. I figured the lessons would come in handy whenever real life magically turned into a bad Broadway musical, and I'd have to sing to the hostess at a restaurant the chorus to “*Una Mesa Para Dos*,” (“A Table For Two”) just to be seated.

I also bought the *Lonely Planet Quechua Phrasebook*, which is the ancient language of the Incas that supposedly is still spoken by the native Andeans in the remote villages. I read that most of the porters for the tour companies are from these villages, and I figured it'd be nice to strike a conversation with them in their native tongue.

Anyway, Johnny and I did have our common interests, (otherwise, why would we be friends?) and this time the common interest was to “find” the “lost” city of Machu Picchu. The two of us were about to embark on a great adventure.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISPANIC-LOOKING GRINGO

THE ADVENTURE STARTED ON THE 26TH OF MAY, 2001 in Jersey City, New Jersey where Johnny and I both lived just four blocks away from each other, in the neighborhood just across the Hudson River from where the World Trade Center still stood proudly. I had all my things packed neatly in this travel pack I had that was actually two bags in one: the smaller compartment converted into a small daypack that zipped off the main pack. It didn't have the heavy padding or back supports like the more expensive frame packs, but at least I could pass it off as one piece of luggage if need be. Johnny brought along

an internal frame pack, complete with the back support that contorted to the shape of his back.

At that moment in Jersey City, neither of us was excited about the trip, or rather, we were excited, but it just didn't sink in that we were going anywhere remotely exotic. (This is the way I am at the beginning of all my globetrotting adventures.) For all we knew, we were just going to the airport. Our mutual friend Alan drove us there. "You guys all set?" he asked, driving his red Tercel.

"Yup," I said. Johnny nodded as well.

"Did you forget anything?"

"I hope not," Johnny said. Then we all rattled off things we might have forgotten. Film? Check. Raingear? Check. And so forth. We didn't seem to be missing anything. I figured if we forgot anything small, we could just get it there.

"So you're all ready then, huh?" Alan asked.

"Yeah, Erik's ready to have guinea pig," Johnny said. I had seen an episode of the Lonely Planet travel show on The Discovery Civilization Channel where they showed village people of the Andes eating one of the regional dishes, roasted guinea pig, which I was excited to try; it was totally different, and I was on a quest to at least try everything there. I'll eat anything new, no matter how strange, as long as it tastes good and doesn't get me sick. (I've tried mopani worms in Zimbabwe—they're quite good—and *balut*, the Filipino delicacy consisting of a duck fetus—not quite as tasty.)

Alan dropped us off at Newark International Airport and wished us luck. Johnny and I went to the first Continental Airlines desk in sight, not knowing that it was for first class only. There was no one else on line, so the Continental representative checked us in anyway. I mean, what else was there to do? He checked us in in a snap. It was a good thing too, because on the way to the gate, we saw the line we were supposed to check in at, and it was about twenty-five people long already.

We waited at the lounging area by our departure gate. Johnny had nothing to do, so I gave him the *National Geographic Traveler* I brought, while I wrote in my notepad, planting the seeds of yet another travel journal. There

was so much time to kill—almost two hours. I didn't know why people suggested arriving at the airport two hours before an international flight; you just end up sitting around bored. (This was before the national tightening of airline security though.)

After wandering the duty free shops over and over and browsing through magazines we didn't buy, we boarded the plane and waited a while to take off. I sat in the middle between Johnny at the window and Nelson, a Peruvian student studying in Montreal, at the aisle. Nelson was going home to visit his family in Lima. He was quiet and just stuck himself in his headphones, listening to AC/DC so loud that I could make it out.

At that moment, I started to get a little excited, but it still didn't really hit me yet. What was I to expect? I was going to be a foreigner in another country again. My travel books tried to scare prospective tourists with crime-ridden stories of pickpockets and strangle muggings, particularly in Lima. But I took the usual precautions: a concealable money belt, a second fake wallet (for a mugger), and signature-required traveler's checks. I didn't think it was going to be that bad. Travel books always over exaggerate stories of crime, at least from my experience.

I did have one trepidation: the language barrier. This time around, it wasn't like going to Germany and not knowing German or something. Because of my Hispanic-looking facade, people have assumed that I speak Spanish already. I figured people down there would come up to me and spew a barrage of foreign words to me and I'd look at them all clueless. I've been mistaken for everything—Peruvian, Columbian, Black, Indian, Chinese, Japanese—almost everything but a white guy. (A fellow Filipino once mistook me for a Mexican!) I'd try to get by in Peru with my limited Español, but I was already starting to feel out of place: we didn't even leave Newark yet and all the PA announcements were in Spanish first, with English as the second language.

And if being constantly mistaken for a Hispanic wasn't irksome enough, I was carded—another constant in my young adult life—when getting a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc with my meal.

OUR SEVEN-HOUR FLIGHT WENT WELL. The “chicken” meal—as opposed to the “beef” meal—was decent; like I said, I’ll eat anything as long as it tastes good and it doesn’t get me sick, including airline food. There wasn’t any menu featuring a country’s regional cuisine like I’ve been accustomed to flying coach on non-American airlines. The flight attendant went around with the drink cart for another round. She asked me something in Spanish with the word “*tomar*” (to drink) in it, so I said with mild hesitation, “*Café con leche.*”

“¿Azúcar?” she asked.

“Si.”

My Spanish was coming in fine. Granted I only said a total of four words, but hey, it was start. You just have to be surrounded by the language I guess. Who knew that that stupid annoying Spanish lesson set to music did me any good?

JOHNNY SLEPT FOR A COUPLE HOURS ON THE FLIGHT AS DID I. We watched *What Women Want*, a cute chick flick with Helen Hunt and Mel Gibson. I tried to watch *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, a golf movie with Wil Smith and Matt Damon, but it was as boring as televised golf. Instead, I started reading Kerouac’s immortal *On The Road* again to inspire my travel writing. Meanwhile, Johnny just sat in his chair—with his perfect posture—twiddling his thumbs. Literally.

Nelson was there too. He was pretty quiet, quite possibly because English was his second language and he didn’t want to practice it. Or was Canadian French his second language? Perhaps he just didn’t want to talk. Or maybe it was me. With his headphones on, I didn’t think he heard my constant farting, but perhaps he smelled something? Man, I had gas bad. Perhaps there was something to airline food after all.

When we were filling out the immigration forms an hour before descent, Nelson noticed my Hispanic last name on the form (given to my Filipino ancestors when the Spanish conquistador Magellan came and raped and pillaged our people) and finally asked, “You speak Spanish?”

“Only from the books.” I said.

“French?”

“*Un peu.*” (A little.)

He was happy to hear that and we began to have a conversation in a strange fusion of Spanish, French, and English. He told me about Lima, about where the good disco clubs were and how I shouldn't wander the streets at night because it wasn't safe. I learned he was a business administration major in Montreal that also worked part-time at a hotel. He was going to Peru for two weeks, just to visit. Nice guy that Nelson. Johnny didn't really get into the conversation that much because he was on my other side and didn't have my French or Spanish skills. Or was it my flatulence that kept him at bay?

The plane landed about 45 minutes behind schedule, but the transport company that Paul coordinated with was very efficient; an official-looking man in a suit with a walkie-talkie met us right at the baggage claim, even before customs and the exit. He had a clipboard with our names on it. Our names were there, along with “Craig Lowell,” another guy who happened to be on our flight as well. When I saw his face, I realized I had noticed him all the way back in New Jersey. But he actually came all the way from London and was on a connecting flight. He had been traveling for 24 hours straight.

We got our bags, and with our official-looking escort, we pretty much skipped customs (to my surprise) and went on out to the main hallway filled with the hordes of Peruvians, anxiously awaiting their friends and relatives. No doubt I caught some attention with my physical appearance. We made our way through the paparazzi and met up with a transport van outside in the parking lot.

We rode in the back of a comfortable mini-van through Lima by night. Outside smelled like what I remember of the urban areas of the Philippines, that ocean-side third world stench of rotten smoked shellfish or something. The neighborhood we were driving through reminded me of the Philippines as well: little shacks, two-story buildings and bodegas, all with their simple ruffled tin roofs, and lots of stray dogs and litter everywhere. There were some people out walking, but not enough to provide any safety in numbers for a Hispanic-looking gringo like me.

Craig sat facing me and Johnny. He was a tall lanky fellow with glasses, conservative British brown hair and a skinny nose. He was there as a client of Amazonas Explorer as well, flying to Cuzco in the morning with us and the others we'd meet at the hotel, but then instead of going on the trail right away, he'd be rafting for a week on the Apurimac River. He told us he worked for an insurance company in London, but absolutely hated the city life, which was probably the reason why he was out in the South American countryside for a vacation.

After about fifteen minutes through shady, dark neighborhoods, we made it to the three-star Hotel Kamana, our home for the night. It was nice, nothing fancy or anything, but clean and well lit. The hotel reception was expecting us at that late hour, so they unlocked the gate and had forms ready for us to fill at the front desk. None of us had time to exchange any sort of cash into *nueva soles* (the currency of Peru), so we couldn't tip the driver or bellhop. I hoped they didn't hold a grudge.

Near the elevator, there was a note from Paul for us (and the rest of the travelers who were already there), faxed in from Cuzco, with all the flight information. Our flight was to be the next day at 9:30 in the morning, so our wake up call would be at 6:30, followed by a complimentary breakfast. We left Craig to his room where another client was already there waiting for him.

Johnny and I arrived at our room, and it was decent. There wasn't much of a view because it was all dark outside. We plopped our bags on our beds, and only took out what we needed for the quick overnight stay. Johnny turned on the television and discovered what many others have already discovered: cable television.

"We're in a third world country, and they have more channels than I do!" he said in amazement. "Kinda makes you think what the priorities are around here."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "This isn't the 80's. Cable isn't a rich elitist thing anymore. Everybody has cable." I told him how I'd seen remote thatched-roof huts in Botswana with satellite dishes the size of the hut itself. I was pretty surprised Johnny didn't have cable yet. I mean, wake up and smell

the 21st century already. Granted I know there are people out there who don't have cable—they are usually bookworms that only watch PBS—but Johnny was a movie buff who always complained that he couldn't watch certain original sci-fi shows that were only available on cable.

Johnny clicked the clicker all night in amazement that there indeed was life past channel thirteen. However, in South America, almost every channel was “the Spanish channel.” After going through the channel cycle about ten times, we finally settled on Locomotion, South America's adult animation channel. We saw *South Park* in Spanish, followed by an R-rated Japanese animated feature. “Even if this animé was dubbed in English, I still wouldn't know what's going on,” Johnny said. (It was something about street warriors that fought with battle yo-yos.)

I took a quick shower and then had a well-deserved sleep. Sitting stagnant in an airplane chair was hard work! The hotel provided a familiar, almost generic experience, and it still hadn't sunk in yet that I was actually a step closer to seeing Machu Picchu.

CHAPTER THREE: TRIBES OF AMAZONAS

I WOKE UP BEFORE THE WAKEUP CALL. The five and a half hours sleep was pretty normal for me with my chaotic metro New York life at home. The sun slowly rose, illuminating the many flat rooftops that comprised Lima's skyline. The view outside our hotel window revealed a kinder, gentler Lima, but shrouded in an eerie ocean fog, with only hints of mountains in the distance.

We changed and repacked our bags before breakfast while watching The Weather Channel in Spanish. They predicted sunny skies with a high of 22° C (about 73° F) in Cuzco for the next three days.

We went down to the hotel restaurant where we met four fellow Amazonas Explorer adventurers from London: Sam, Martin, Richard, and another Richard. They, like Craig, were all going on that rafting excursion on the Apurimac first before trekking the Inca Trail. We all dined on black coffee—I forgot that simply ordering a “*café*” without saying “*con leche*” automatically meant black—toast, and scrambled eggs with ham. We continued talking about our travels—Richard Number One had also been to the Okavango Delta in Botswana where I was the previous October—and our sketchy first impressions of Lima. Craig finally came down, but sat by himself on the other side of the room. There was also a couple of cute seemingly British girls who came down. They already recognized our new companions, but we had no introduction.

We went back to the room and I brushed my teeth. While waiting, we watched the American version of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

WE BOARDED THE TRANSPORT BUS and met the other Amazonas Explorer clients that had spent the night with us behind other closed doors. Most of the people were in the same situation as the four guys we met at breakfast—rafting the first week of a two week vacation, then doing the trail the next—except for this one older solo traveler named Matt, a sort of stocky guy who looked like a younger, but still balding Richard Attenborough, complete with his *Jurassic Park* character’s walking cane (sans the mosquito in amber on the handle). He seemed nice.

We drove through Lima by day, which was a lot less sketchy than the dark shadows of night before. It was Sunday and there was hardly any traffic. I noticed a lot of signs sporting the picture of a guy that looked like Erik Estrada—you know, Ponch from the ‘70’s cop show *CHiPs*—that read “Alan Peru” on them, which I figured was an ad for a radio talk-show or something.

At the airport, we were met by a LanPeru rep who took care of us and our passports, tickets, and luggage. Everything went smoothly until Johnny got caught with his fancy techno-hiking poles that were strapped to his carry-on daypack. They wouldn't let him carry them on board because the sharp points could be used as a weapon, so he had to shove it in his big duffel bag to be banged up and mishandled by airport luggage handlers. "They're going to come back bent," Johnny said. There was a really worried look in his eye, but there was nothing he could do. Johnny really cared for his gear deeply. Once he got really mad at me because he bought this new fancy bike helmet a while back and I was testing its strength by knocking it with my fist. "What are you doing?! The styrofoam in these helmets is engineered to withstand only one major blow!" It took a little while for him to start talking to me again.

WHILE WAITING AROUND THE AIRPORT, we got to know our fellow travelers for the short time we'd be together. Richard Number One told me more about his African safari, how he rafted the Zambezi and bungie jumped off the Victoria Falls Bridge like I did. "You don't realize how high you are until you see the video afterwards," he told me. This was true.

We also got to finally meet the cute girls I noticed during breakfast. The pretty blonde one had been trekking before in Bali and in France, but she had never been rafting and was sort of nervous about it. I was hoping that by some twist of luck, she'd be switched off into my group and I could show her the ropes.

There was a vendor selling Peru's favorite soft drink, Inca Kola, the only soft drink in any country around the globe that beat out Coke or Pepsi. I was dying to try it after I heard about it in a segment on *The Today Show* when Matt Lauer was at Machu Picchu for his "Where in World is Matt Lauer?" annual special. The vendor actually accepted U.S. currency, so I bought one with my last remaining American greenback and took a sip. It tasted like cream soda and Mountain Dew and bubble gum all in one. Richard Number One—I found out later his last name was "Leech"—said it tasted pretty bad because it was

disgustingly sweet, but I liked it. (My sweet taste buds hadn't matured from that of a twelve-year-old. Neither did my personality.)

We boarded the LanPeru 737 bound for Cuzco. We left five minutes ahead of schedule and didn't even have to wait in a line of planes to take off. I had a window seat, next to Johnny and Matt, with Richard Number One across the aisle. It didn't take long before we were blessed with a metal bird's eye view of the majestic looking Andes. It was absolutely amazing. Huge brown mounds of rock reached up to the sky all the way to the edge of the world. From up there, the Andes almost looked like big piles of dirt in a construction site. "Just think, in 24 hours, we'll be on those things," I told Johnny.

After a snack and another Inca Kola, I had to piss like a race horse. I got up and went to the bathroom, did my thing, and then just hung around with the other travelers who were all up and walking around the aisle. Everyone on the plane was a tourist, gazing out any available window to take a photo. It was almost as if the Andes were international celebrities, and we were a plane full of paparazzi. (Well, the Andes *are* known around the world.) There was a clearing of seats by the emergency exit where everyone wanted to get a clear shot. I befriended an American with a distinct American Jewish accent and sense of humor. "It's just dirt! How can I build a condominium up here? It's way too rocky!" he said in a sarcastic voice. He continued by trying to convince me that the other side of the plane was more interesting. "You know, the snow peaks on the other side look a lot better!" I fell for it, and lost my spot near the good window where he and a buddy hogged up the better vantage point of ice caps and the brief glimpse of Machu Picchu. Bastard.

CUZCO IS A CITY UP IN THE MOUNTAINS, so during our short hour-long flight, our plane went up from the sea level of Lima up to the stratosphere and then down to 11,000 ft.—kind of like when you accidentally throw a ball up and it lands on a flat roof. Upon approach to Cuzco's airport, I immediately noticed how much it contrasted Lima. Cuzco was a beautiful metropolis where no building was more than three or four stories, a big overgrown mountain village. From above, the distinct red roofs of the town carpeted the valley between majestic

sloping mountains. I saw little houses perched up on the hills, like doll houses on shelves. The closer we got, the more excited I became and I was hoping it wasn't just the sudden change in altitude affecting my brain. Our plane touched down and the feeling of adventure began to sink in—at least for me. Johnny hadn't let it sink in just yet.

The arrival procedure was a snap with our newly found airport escorts. The airport was fairly small anyway. We claimed our baggage and then went outside the building where we met Paul, the tour operator I met only once before five months prior. He actually remembered my face, and I remembered his. We also met Pepe, the Peruvian native who was to be the rafting guide for those who were rafting first.

During the bus ride to the hotel, Pepe and Paul schooled us on acclimatization to the higher altitude. “As much as you wanna go out and see everything in this beautiful city, you have to rest first. Resting in the beginning will help you out later on,” Pepe said. “Also, drink lots and lots of water!”

“Yes, I can not stress enough how drinking water is very important when coming into a high altitude like this,” Paul added. I was surprised neither of them mentioned anything about chewing coca leaves, or drinking coca tea, which, according to my travel books, was the indigenous natural panacea for any altitude sickness. (Coca ultimately becomes cocaine after processing, but supposedly is non-narcotic in its plant stage.)

We rode through the city of Cuzco, which looked nothing like Lima; it was cleaner, less congested, and full of a distinct beautiful Andean motif with its Spanish influences. It was a bustling mini-metropolis bursting with colors that screamed out at you: the dark reds of the Spanish roofs of all the buildings, the lush greens of the plants and trees along the road and the mountains in the distance, the bright blues of the picture perfect sky that was surrounded us above. The streets were full of people scurrying about, many of which were either tourists or people involved in tourism. I hadn't been to Kathmandu, the hub of travelers to the Himalayas, but I read that Cuzco was very similar: the city where anyone who was anyone backpacking around South

America (or the world for that matter) would eventually run into and stay a while.

Pepe continued talking during our ride, hyping up the river trip for the rafters. After all his enthusiastic stories, Johnny and I wished we were going with them. We had only shared a bus ride and a flight, but the rafters seemed like they'd be a great group to go with. The fact that there were two cute girls in the group wasn't a bad thing either.

In no time, we arrived at Hotel Centenario, a small, but beautiful three-star, three-story hotel near the downtown area. "Wow, this is a lot better than I expected," Matt said in his British accent, "I usually stay in a real shit hole." (He had been around the world trekking in other places, so he had many places in his memory to compare it to.)

We were greeted by another Amazonas Explorer guide named Clark, who was a young North Carolinian working in Peru for the season. We all got our bags and then sat in the lounge and talked over our first taste of coca tea. "It tastes like grass," Paul said, "but it helps you acclimatize." With a spoonful of sugar, that medicine went down pretty well, and I actually quite enjoyed it. Clark shared his rafting stories as we sipped our mother-of-cocaine concoctions. He spoke with such enthusiasm and passion for rafting, that I really wished I signed up for the pre-trek rafting extension like the other guys—and those girls. "We can only hope a couple of cute Scottish girls are in our trail group," I told Johnny. (The two girls were Scottish.)

"Yeah, the blonde one looks like Buffy!" he said. Leave it to Johnny to make reference to the campy sci-fi show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in a place like that. (Granted, Sarah Michelle Gellar who played Buffy *was* pretty hot.)

Johnny and I went to our lovely room on the third floor with beautifully-colored Alpaca woolen blankets and a nice bathroom. We had a great view of the city from our front window with the Andes as a backdrop. Through the window on the other side of the room, we saw local kids playing tennis and basketball. There were roosters crowing in the near distance and great Peruvian music playing on someone's radio. It was as if I was watching a

documentary on a slice of life in Cuzco and there was a soundtrack playing during a video montage.

The place was great. I was only there a couple of hours, but I felt I could really live in Cuzco. It was so peaceful and beautiful up there high in the mountains, like being in a South American postcard. The weather was great; it was sunny but not too hot. And the altitude wasn't that bad either. I thought I would have been huffing and puffing right off the plane, but I was breathing pretty normal. However, I did feel my heart racing when I took a simple walk up the two flights of stairs to our room.

WE WENT TO OUR ONE O'CLOCK BRIEFING where we finally met the Inca Trail group. With the exception of Matt, all of them had just arrived the night before from a whole week of canoeing on the Tres Canyones section of the Rio Apurimac, a seven-hour drive away near the other major Peruvian Andean city of Arequipa. The crew consisted of people from London and the southern countryside of England. I'm so bad with names that I forgot all the names in our mass introduction. Or rather, I did remember names, but I couldn't remember which name went to which face. I remembered the names "Clair," "Sarah," and "John." I definitely remembered "Joyce" (as well as the face it corresponded with) because she was the only 69-year-old woman who was sitting in a chair with her legs up because of a minor injury on the river. She was also the mother of "Jane" who was traveling with her. "Jane," although an older woman, was the closest we got to cute Scottish girls.

Paul introduced us to a third guide: Juan, our fearless leader that would guide us along the Inca Trail. "My name is Juan," he said, emphasizing the sound you make when you want to expectorate before the "w" sound. ("Hkkkkkkk-hwan.") He stood in front of us and gave us a quick rundown of the whole itinerary, explaining each day of our four-day trek along the Inca Trail. It was great to finally hear someone hype up the Inca Trail for the rest of us; up until then it was rafting, rafting, rafting.

We had even more coca tea and then signed our lives anyway on these indemnity forms that saved Amazonas Explorer from being legally responsible

for the injuries (or death) that might occur on a trip like this. (This is pretty standard with any adventure tour company; they just want to protect their own asses.) Juan told us he'd meet up with us in the morning and went on his way to make more preparations for the trek. Then, Clark the North Carolinian led us out on the town for lunch in downtown Cuzco. We walked through the narrow streets that got busier and busier the closer and closer we got to the Plaza das Armas, the town center where the famous cathedrals were. It was beautiful, just like I'd seen in pictures: a plaza with a fountain in the center, surrounded by beautiful Spanish cathedrals brought over from Pizarro and his Spanish conquistadors. It was a lot smaller than I imagined from the pictures I'd seen in travel books. Johnny and I made like Japanese tourists and shot photos left and right.

"Did you know Cuzco is the gay capital of South America?" Clark said, referring to the big rainbow-striped flag waving proudly on a flagpole in the center of the plaza.

"Really?" I said.

"Yeah," he said with this smirk. He paused for a couple of seconds and then chuckled. "Nah, I'm just goofing." (The rainbow represented the spectrum of colors from sunlight, and served as a symbol of the proud sun-obsessed Incan heritage, still prominent in the modern culture.)

Clark took us to a pizzeria not far from the Plaza das Armas where all of us had lunch. I asked him if I could get the famed *cuy* (guinea pig) there, but he said no. He did tell me about the delicacy though. "Guinea pig is great. When you get back to Cuzco after Machu Picchu, come around here at night; they sell them skewered on a stick, and you just walk around with it, dipping it in this little cup of mayonnaise you get. It's the best." I couldn't wait. Pizza would have to do for now though.

Out of all the things to eat this far away from the New York area, Johnny and I split a Hawaiian pizza (pizza topped with ham and pineapple). Our group took up three tables and we all shared the *agua sin gas* (uncarbonated bottled water). Clark suggested getting a liter of sangria even though consuming alcohol wasn't recommended in the acclimatization process. "Yeah, I know,

I'm being a bad tour guide, but it's just so good," he said. We got not one, but two liters of sangria to toast the beginning of a new adventure. And yes, it was good. Even a dry guy like Johnny had some.

We sat and ate and talked about our lives. Clark was a really interesting guy. He was totally fluent in Spanish, well-versed in South American history, and was a sort of antithesis of me: a gringo-looking "Hispanic." He was a handsome young man in his early twenties who lived life like a nomadic hunter of adventure, traveling from river to river in North and South America, to work as a rafting guide or safety kayaker. Whenever a particular river's rafting season was over, he'd just move onto another river that was in season and start all over. He said he'd been doing this routine like his brother since the age of fourteen or something, and loved every minute of it. Who wouldn't? His lifestyle made any corporate cubicle-sitter green with envy; here was a young guy who was out there on the river everyday, and he actually made a living from it. He was happy to hear I was from New York; he'd have someone to look up if he ever got out there.

John was an older looking gentleman with white hair and a white beard, but in his heart he was about as young and as adventurous as Clark. John ran Spirit Adventures, another adventure tour group that, after he jogged my memory, had a booth right next to Paul's Amazonas Explorer booth at that travel expo I attended in London. Spirit offered treks on the Inca Trail in conjunction with Amazonas. In the past, John had sent people on the Inca Trail as one of his packages, but never did the trail himself. Thus his attendance. Peru and the Inca Trail were just another adventure for him though; he'd been in the Himalayas and other parts around the globe, trekking, horseback riding, rafting, and mountain climbing. All the stories of John and Clark made me and Johnny complain about our limited American business vacation time. There's just so much to do out there in the wide world while we're stuck in office buildings trying to make a living with only a sad American ten days vacation time.

There was a traditional Andean band playing great beats with their guitars, drum and signature bamboo flutes. The music really set the mood, like

we were in the opening scene of an adventure movie or *National Geographic* special and they were doing the native soundtrack live. They were selling CDs for thirty soles (about ten bucks), and I bought one, paying the woman in the band. We continued with our lunch, toasted our wooden cups of sangria, and ten minutes later, the woman starting fussing with me in Spanish. I figured that she was accusing me of not paying for the CD I bought and paid for. I pleaded as much I could to defend myself, but I was no use to do it in English. She kept insisting I hadn't paid, even counting her money over and over. Was it a scam? Was I going to be beat up in the alley for this? Was I going to get arrested? I just got there! Luckily, Clark stood up for me with his Spanish tongue and American charisma. He politely argued that I paid until the guitarist believed us. "A good thing about the people here is that they are honest," Clark told me. "The people here really believe in honesty and if you tell them you are truly being honest, they will believe you."

Honest my ass.

"Cover me when they jump me in an alley," I told Johnny.

AFTER LUNCH, CLARK GAVE US A WALKING TOUR of the great city of Cuzco. It was good practice for Johnny and me, walking up and down the hilly cobblestone roads. With the slightest exertion ascending a fairly mild incline, my heart raced at an alarming rate and I tired really quickly. It was a good thing I'd been training in the gym before I left for Peru. Johnny, who wasn't a big drinker and thus had a tiny tolerance for alcohol, wasn't sure if his growing headache was a result of altitude sickness or the sangria.

We all went to this T-shirt store that Clark recommended because their T-shirt designs were original and not the mass-produced ones on the average tourist shirt. Three of us got shirts, including Johnny and myself. Then we walked around the narrow streets, bustling with shops and galleries of local flavor. I stopped by one shop to buy a colorful Andean woolen knit hat for the cold nights of the trek. The woman in the store asked me how old I was in her shy I'm-not-sure-if-I'm-speaking-English-correctly voice. "*Vente-seis*," I told her in my I'm-not-sure-if-I'm-speaking-Spanish-correctly voice. She didn't believe I

was a day over nineteen. Like I said, I've been carded everywhere. "What's your secret?" she asked. I wished I had an answer other than "*Yo no sé*" ("I don't know.")

We continued to walk up hills and down hills, snapping our cameras around town while Clark gave us a history lesson along the way. I tried to be sneaky by taking snapshots of locals in their environment, without being too obvious so that they'd get pissed off and ask me for a fee. Cuzco was a beautiful city—not the cleanest however, (but not as bad as I'd seen in Manila)—and I really felt the history and the culture flowing through the people, the streets, and the buildings. Its power was slowly starting to enter my skin and into my soul as well.

We walked back to the hotel and rested a bit before our dinner reservation at seven o'clock in some Andean restaurant. Clark said all the local people in Peru do everything a half an hour later than planned, so the reservation was really 7:30 in "Peruvian Time." (This is the same as "Filipino Time," which is an ongoing joke in the Filipino community. I figured the Peruvians and the Filipinos both got their tardiness habits from Spanish conquistadors.) Anyway, I rested in our room while Johnny sped through the cable TV channels like he'd never get cable again and was going to have a test on it the next morning. I sat at the desk writing a journal entry as I wondered if the Andean restaurant at dinner would finally serve the *cuy* I was waiting for. I figured they would since it was a restaurant featuring local Andean cuisine. Clark did say we could get it in Cuzco at night after the hike, so why not that first night?

Johnny and I met at seven in the lobby of the hotel as neither of us was running on Peruvian Time just yet. The rafting group was meeting there for their dinner reservation as well, and I said my hellos. It was only a few hours since we separated from them, but it was becoming clear from that point on that even though we all traveled all the way from Lima together, I was becoming part of the "us" group and they were becoming "them," like two tribes of Amazonas clients. The rest of "us" trekkers were running on Peruvian Time (they had a whole week in Peru to adjust), so Johnny and I had to wait around the office a while before the rest showed. I was telling people in our

group how cold our room had become since the sun set. They wondered why I simply didn't turn on the portable heater. "What heater?" I asked.

I went back to the room, but I found nothing. I complained at the office and Clark had my back yet again. The woman at the desk made excuses, but Clark tried to work his charm. He tried his best, but it didn't seem like the woman could magically find an open store with portable heaters at that time of night. We'd have to settle for extra blankets.

Soon all the trekkers were assembled and we were off again on foot to the Plaza das Armas. Cuzco at night reminded me of a ski resort at twilight, a big sparkly mountain with interspersed points of light blanketing the landscape like fallen stars. It was much cooler at night, so I sported my new colorful woolen hat with the embroidered llamas in it. We eventually made it to Inka Grill, a fairly fancy Andean cuisine restaurant, right in the center of town. It had great décor and great music by another supposedly honest band selling CDs from a stage on the mezzanine level. I perused the menu in search for the words "*cuy*" or "guinea pig," but no luck. However, Martin, the guy sitting to my left, showed off a video slideshow on his Sony Handicam of their canoeing adventure the week before, and the first picture was that of the roasted guinea pig he had at a restaurant in Arequipa. John, the old adventurer from Spirit Adventures who was also at the table with us, was convinced that it wasn't actually a guinea pig because it had a long tail. "Whatever it was, it tastes like chicken," Martin told me.

Martin continued his video slideshow of these amazing still shots he took. He really had an eye for composition and lighting, almost like he's done it before. (Later I learned that he used to be the videographer for a rafting company in Canada, and that he even brought his own custom-made kayak from England to South America with him, so that he could shoot better video.)

I began to learn more about the members of my new tribe. Including Johnny and myself, there were thirteen of us. About half—Martin, Jane, Margaret, Tamzin, and Joyce (who stayed back at the hotel)—were actually clients of John's Spirit Adventures, and were trekking the Inca Trail in conjunction with Amazonas Explorer. It was clear that the ice was already

broken within the Spirit people because John started teasing Tamzin. “We’re gonna have to sacrifice you to the gods to get into Machu Picchu you know.” All six of them were on a three-week “Andean Odyssey” holiday (minus Tamzin who was only doing two weeks) which included the one week of canoeing that they had already done, the week on the Inca Trail that we were about to do, and a whole week of whitewater rafting afterwards. Johnny’s and my big adventure vacation was just a mere third of theirs. Damn the Europeans and their abundant paid vacation days! I knew us Americans had two weeks and could have done at least the rafting excursion, but Johnny couldn’t afford the additional week with his project schedule at work, and I usually liked doing one week vacations anyway, so that I could use my other vacation days at some other part of the globe. Besides, when planning this vacation, I was obsessed with Machu Picchu, and nothing else. The rivers of South America would have to wait.

Johnny wasn’t as chatty as I was at the dinner table; in fact, he was totally zoned out with a headache. “I shouldn’t have had all that sangria at lunch,” he said like a zombie. “All that sangria” consisted of just two small cups, and even though he had a low tolerance for alcohol, he had the sangria four hours prior, giving him plenty of time to sober up. He was convinced it was the alcohol in his bloodstream that was affecting his head, but we all agreed that there’s no way one could still be drunk four hours later on two cups of the wine and fruit concoction. I gave him an ibuprofen tablet anyway and he drank it down with two bottles of still water. Immediately he started feeling better and realized he was just having a dehydration headache and just needed the water.

As for dinner, it started out with a cocktail on the house, a Peruvian pisco sour, a mixed drink made from the indigenous pisco grape liquor (similar to wine), lime, powdered sugar, and egg whites. It was pretty good; it reminded me of a margarita with a frothy head. Since there was no guinea pig on the menu and I still wanted to explore foods my tongue was ignorant to, I had to settle for another exotic *carne*: alpaca meat, from the alpaca (similar to the llama), the same animal whose wool provided for the new hat on my head. It

tasted like a cross between pork and lamb. Everyone else had “normal” Italian food, except for Tamzin who had aji, a popular Peruvian chicken, corn and potatoes stew dish. Together we all consumed about twenty bottles of *agua sin gas* (bottled non-carbonated water since tap is a no-no for us gringos), in preparation of the hike.

It was good to bond with our new group, but I still felt as if Johnny, Matt and I were still the “outsiders” since the rest already had a whole week to bond canoeing in frigid river waters. (The rest of them laughed when Martin’s dinnertime slide show revealed their wetsuits that were hung up overnight to dry, only to be frozen stiff like cardboard in the morning.) We all left the restaurant and walked through the plaza, taking pictures of the romantic lights of the city. I tried to get some overexposed shots to capture the lights of the cathedrals. We didn’t walk around too long because we had an early start the next day. We walked back to the hotel and settled in.

Back in our room, the cable TV was on and we watched Nicole Kidman in *To Die For* (in English with Spanish subtitles), and some more Spanish-dubbed Japanese animé cartoons on Locomotion. There was still no heat, and the shower only had really cold water or really hot water (never a warm compromise), so it was hard to wash up. We reorganized our rucksacks and our daypacks for the long-awaited hike across the Andes. In just four days, I’d get to see Machu Picchu face to face.

CHAPTER FOUR: MEET THE INCAS

A ROOSTER CROWED JUST BEFORE DAYBREAK. It was still dark, but Johnny woke up and just laid in bed to appreciate the serenity, wishing every morning he could wake to the call of the rooster instead of the cars and buses of Jersey City. I woke up too and it was great to just lie there for a while. When the rooster wasn't crowing, it was pretty silent—so silent that you

could almost hear the air colliding into the mountains.

Sunrise was soon upon us, and it was beautiful to see the rays shine down on the mountains like pillars of light forcing their way through the cracks in a cloud ceilings. We tried to take pictures to capture the mood, but none of the pictures did them any justice. You just had to be there.

We got dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. Matt was in the lounge, waiting around for company, so we joined him for the meal. Matt was a middle-aged man with hair in his beard, but hardly any on his scalp. He was a happy roly-poly man that I figured someday would make a great shopping mall Santa. He was yet another global trekker who traveled the world with his trusty wooden walking stick in search for a good trail, and he had a lot of trail wisdom gained by experience. For instance: “Whenever you’re out of breath and you don’t want to admit to your fellow trekkers that you’re just too tired, just tell them you want to stop to take a photograph.” (Not a bad idea.) Not only was Matt an avid hiker, but a rugby player as well. He also told us about the “laws” of rugby, and how he even played against American rugby teams in San Antonio and Austin. And I thought Texans just played American football.

My time invested in those Spanish phrasebooks and musical lesson CD before coming to Peru came in handy when the waitress came around to take our order. I ordered “*huevos revueltos y mate de coca.*” (Scrambled eggs and coca tea.) I also had this delicious mandarin fruit that had a green rind.

We weren’t quite sure if the meeting time was 8:00 or 8:30 or if anyone was running on Peruvian Time, so we played it safe and shot for the earliest time. We went back upstairs to our respective rooms—it was an easier task than it was the day before due to a day of acclimatization—and got ready to go.

The day before, Paul told us about a particular rule you must follow when taking a dump in Peru: don’t flush down your toilet paper after wipe your ass, put in the wastebasket. (Disgusting, I know.) Although most places in South American have indoor plumbing, many of them don’t have pipes big enough to swallow massive wads of Charmin. However, when I took a post-breakfast dump, I accidentally flushed a couple of squares down the bowl. What can I say? It’s a reflex for crying out loud. Luckily nothing happened.

SOON WE WERE ON A BUS EN ROUTE TO OLLANTAYTAMBO, our first encounter with an Incan ruin site. At the Cuzco city limits, we had to stop at a police checkpoint to confirm our bus was a tourist bus. (Usually buses are inspected for coca leaves since they aren't allowed out of the Andean sectors.) Once out into the countryside, it was beautiful! Lush farmlands of different colors appeared as if they were patchwork quilts blanketing the earth. Great big mountains stood tall in the back with white snowy hats. We drove on winding roads as I tried to do my best to take photos of Peruvian passers-by in Andean garb and their mules.

We took two stops for photo ops of the beautiful mountainous scenery. During the second stop, a group of three street vendors came rushing over to our group to sell us woolen knit goods. They were accompanied by this cute little girl dressed in Andean garb, complete with a woolen hat. Johnny took her photo and she reached out for cash. "Uh, you're supposed to pay them if you take their picture," I told him, recalling the knowledge I acquired from the two travel guides I read before coming. But Johnny left all his coins in his pack, back on the bus. I covered for him though, giving her a whole five sole piece when I took a shot with my camera.

After about three long hours on the bus, it was finally time for us to meet the Incas face-to-face so to speak. We arrived at Ollantaytambo, the first of many Incan ruins we'd see on this trip. This ancient establishment was situated on a steep hill like a huge staircase, with a temple to worship the sun at top. We went up the complex as Juan gave us a history lesson.

Ollantaytambo was constructed next to a mountain with great Incan significance. The mountain harbored many larger than life carvings sculpted right into the mountain rock, almost like Mount Rushmore but not as clearly defined. In fact, most of the faces or figures you couldn't make out unless you were there with a guide like Juan who had drawings of what it should be. They were all as vague as constellations. (Who can make out a figure in the stars without a drawing of reference?) Without the drawings, I would have never guess that one group of rock formations depicted an Incan emperor with

“Chinese eyes” (as Juan called it) wearing a crown and holding a big bag. Another rock formation was that of a face, which we learned, was carved in the exact position on the mountain where the sun appears on the exact minute of the winter solstice. “Astrology and religion were very intertwined in Inca culture,” Juan told us.

We walked all the way up the stairs of the ruins. It was hard, but I was acclimatized enough at that altitude already, so it wasn't too bad. I can't say the same for Matt because he slipped and fell on some loose rocks. He fell in top British form though. At any rate, we saw the Temple of the Sun, a circular structure with round walls, sort of like a deformed clay coffee mug you made in an elementary art class, where the Incas worshipped the sun gods. We took lots of pictures of the glorious landscape we saw from way up there.

BACK AT THE PARKING LOT OF OLLANTAYTAMBO, we were assaulted by a dozen vendors who constantly hounded us with their water bottle holders, dolls and other touristy impulse-buy goods. We managed to get away from them and back on the bus for another long and bumpy ride—so bumpy that I couldn't even take journal notes without producing incoherent chicken scratch. So I sat and watched the scenery go by. I missed a beautiful photo opportunity of a young boy in a bright blue shirt in a huge waist-high grass field. It would have been a great picture of a blue boy in a sea of green. I really loved the bright colors of the Andean fashion and how it contrasted the earthy tones of the surroundings. Alas, I missed that shot, simply because my camera wasn't out and we just sped by.

At times, the road was very narrow, allowing only one bus to pass at a time in either direction, so at one point, we had to back up quite a bit to let three buses come through. But soon, we were at our destination, Kilometer 82, where we were to begin the Inca Trail. Paul magically appeared at the parking lot with his wife and his newborn daughter, along with our team of porters. We were also introduced to Zacharius, our second trail guide who'd stay in the back of the line while Juan led up front.

I thought the entrance to the trail would have been more official-looking, with a big airport scale to weigh our bags. But the “weigh station” was just a single guy with a pocket hanging scale, like those scales you see in the produce section of the supermarket but without the metal basket. He weighed our bags and grouped them to distribute the weight evenly within the weight restrictions for how much a single porter can carry—which was probably three times heavier than any Westerner would manage to carry. A clipboard went around with a list of trekkers and we all had to fill in our occupations for some reason. I used that opportunity to learn person’s names because Johnny and I kept forgetting them, but I still forgot them after I gave the list back.

Paul told Johnny that his fancy techno-poles weren’t permitted on the trail because of the sharp tips are conducive to erosion. I saw the upset look on his face. He had already gone through so much trouble with getting the poles and getting them to the Inca Trail, only to hear Paul’s words. He dug through his bag and put these plastic caps he had on the tips. Paul said that they were fine, so Johnny’s efforts weren’t put to waste. It’s a good thing too, because I knew how much Johnny wanted to use them.

Our group ate a lunch that consisted of a piece of chicken, lots of steamed veggies, bread, and a yam. (Hardly anyone touched the yam, but I had half of mine.) We sat in the bus and ate, having lunchtime conversation. “So, out of the three of us, who’ll get sick first?” I said, referring to myself, Johnny and Matt, the three neophytes to the already acclimatized group.

“It should be you because you mentioned it,” Matt said.

The porters took our big packs and went ahead in the trail. Almost none of them used the bag shoulder straps; they stacked bags on top of bags right on top of their shoulders like iron men. Johnny questioned why they were carrying bags like that and wondered if they knew how to “use” all the ergonomic features of his bag.

We finished lunch and returned our plates to the cook with the yams still on them. Then we walked down a narrow dirt path to the entrance of the Inca Trail with mere daypacks on our backs. Right before the entrance, there was a little makeshift souvenir stand where I bought a newly debarked walking stick

for two soles (about 60 US cents), almost \$79 less than Johnny's, and without all the hassle.

And so, my left foot stepped on the dirt path, then my right foot. Then my left again, then right. And before I knew it, I was actually in the Andes, those massive mounds of rock we saw from the plane, hiking the Inca Trail en route to find the “lost” city of Machu Picchu. We began our trek by crossing the Urubamba River via a small footbridge. From there, the trail continued to hug the Urubamba, inclining slightly. Paul told us that this leg of the trail was perfect for acclimatization purposes since it eased people into the environment. And what an environment! It was one of the most beautiful lands I saw in my life. Where ever we looked, we were completely surrounded by huge regal mountains, so big that at times you couldn't even see the edge of them. There were ice caps in the distance. Fluffy clouds floated above our heads. This was the Inca Trail, and our hiking boots were actually setting foot on it—except for the 69-year-old Joyce who was wearing one sneaker and one sandal because she lost a sneaker on the canoeing trip the week previous. What a trooper she was.

There were some occasional houses on the way that apparently housed kids who'd follow us along the trail, begging for money, food...anything. We walked by cacti, pigs and cows, but the real highlight of that stretch of the trail was to see the cute little trolley come back from Machu Picchu on the railroad tracks on the other side of the river. We exchanged waves with the passengers.

It was this first leg of the hike that brought me and Johnny closer to the other people in our “tribe.” Johnny and I struck up a conversation with Martin, the young videographer who came to Peru with his own custom-made kayak all the way from London. He told us about his rafting adventures across the globe, and raved about West Virginia's rivers, (which coincidentally, was a place I went rafting two months later with my friend Risa back in the States.)

I strayed to the back of the line and had a one-on-one with our other guide Zacharius (or “Zack” as he wanted to be called). This was Zack's first season with Amazonas Explorer. He seemed like a cool guy, and Johnny took a picture of the both of us. Yes, we were already making friends.

The flat terrain led to a moderate incline and I started to get winded, but it wasn't too bad. I just had to decrease my speed and not work at it so hard. The walking stick I bought did wonders, as I could use arm strength to pull myself up rocks. "Imagine, we'll be doing a whole day of this," I said to Johnny as I began to feel the strain that the Inca Trail was imposing on my weak body.

We all took a break in a little covered area near the top of a hill. There was another group of seemingly American trekkers just across the way under another shelter. Two local kids were peddling in Spanish, but I didn't know their motive until Joyce gave them some of her chips (or "crisps" as the British say). I gave them some candy from the snack pack we got at lunch. It was the least I could do at the time I guess. Plus, they stopped hounding me after that.

Johnny sat on the bench and felt slightly ill. Juan told him that a flat Coca-Cola does wonders for ailments like the one Johnny was describing to him. Luckily, there was a local woman at the shelter with a cooler selling drinks. Johnny bought a bottle of Coke and passed it over to Juan who shook it all up like a mischievous teenager playing a prank. He carefully opening the cap, twisting it slowly to let the gas dissipate and passed it back to Johnny. "I hate it when my brother leaves the soda out and open because it gets all disgusting and flat, but hey, it actually works!" he said.

We continued on our way. Glynn and Sarah, an early thirtysomething couple from London, started lagging behind from the rest of the group, so much that they were with us straggling Americans. Glynn told us about how back at home, he designed aircraft engines, both military and commercial. He was in Peru on holiday from that job and, like everyone else, he too was surprised that we were only in Peru for a single week.

"We don't have that British 20-day holiday," I told him. (I actually said the word "holiday" instead of "vacation.")

"Actually, I have 27 days," he said. (Bastard!) "I'm surprised that some Americans don't even use their ten-day vacation time to good use." I guess that's true for a lot of people I know. Travel seems to be valued more by the Europeans. Well, they have all that time on their hands.

We stopped at the highest point of the day's trek and Juan showed us Llactapata, a lesser known Incan ruin, but still a spectacular remnant from the past. He taught us the history of the Spanish invasion, about how a mere 182 Spaniards on horseback conquered a land of 34 million Incas. (Can you imagine 0.000535% of the Incan population took over because of their horses? Those must be some pretty bad ass horses!) But pretty soon there was an outbreak of syphilis amongst the conquistadors, which probably happened when the sex-crazed Spaniards began to have sex with the only thing they could get a hold of, llamas. According to Juan, this was a likely case because the Incas supposedly knew how to hide their women from the troops, leaving them no choice but bestiality to act on their sexual urges.

We rested for a while, gazing down into the valley of Llactapata. The sun was on its way downhill as we were. The too huge sky started to shrink slightly, engulfing us in a hue of pink and green. The trail led us downhill into the valley on a narrow dirt path with loose rocks. Matt slipped and fell again, the second time that day, this time scraping his arm. Joyce was still wearing one shoe and one sandal. I asked her how it was and she nonchalantly said, "It's alright, aside from the little stones that have collected."

We soon ended up at our camp in an opening camping area not far from the ruins of Llactapata, right on the bank of the river. The porters with their super powers of speed had arrived hours before, and had already set up our tents, each with a warm water wash basin to wash up. I saw two porters preparing fresh trout by the river. All the sights and sounds of flowing water made me want to pee, so I took a leak in the bushes. (There was a line for the "loo" tent already.)

The sun fell lower and lower behind the mounds of rock that surrounded us, and we just relaxed. We had accomplished a lot for the first day. One of the porters was a flute player, and he serenaded us with native tunes on his bamboo instrument. It really fit the atmosphere of being in the Peruvian wilderness, and the whole thing was magical. I felt as if I was in some fantasy land of long ago where it didn't require much to be happy.

Johnny and I were in our tent, unpacking. “C’mon Johnny, look at this place. It *had* to have sunk in now,” I told him.

“It still hasn’t hit me yet,” he said. (He was worse than me.)

WE WERE TREKKING WITH THE BRITISH and it was about that time of the day: tea time. I had some *mate de coca* while our fearless leader Juan told us how that day’s leg of the trail was for acclimatization, and how the trail in the coming days would be harder, with the trail undulating up and down for kilometers.

The conversation switched from the week’s trek ahead to the canoeing excursion of the week before, and since I had nothing to share from that experience, I just went back to my tent to write in my journal. (I hated not writing in intervals because I have to remember everything later, and so much happens in such a short time on vacations. Good thing I was taking notes.)

Johnny and Matt didn’t canoe the week before either and left the mess tent to get some good photos of the sky and the mountains, as they were both avid amateur photographers. It was then that Johnny revealed his heavy artillery: his big fancy camera, so fancy that since college, our buddies and I dubbed it “RoboCam.” (All this time, we only had time to whip out our quick point-and-shoot cameras while our SLRs were in our packs.) RoboCam was a Canon EOS Elan IIe, an SLR with all the bells and whistles—even a remote control. Attached to it was this behemoth of a 28–80mm lens with superior optics. It was loaded with professional grade film. The total mass of his pro photography equipment weighed about eight pounds alone. (Meanwhile, I just had my dad’s old hand-me-down Canon AE-1 from the 1970’s, a heavy, but sturdy and reliable camera.)

The river rambled on like those nature CDs or sound machines back in civilization that attempt to simulate the real thing but never quite come across. The flautist continued to serenade our camp, and it the magical moment continued. But I started to develop an altitude headache. I must have jinxed myself back at lunch.

It got darker and darker and soon it was time for dinner. The “cooker” (as Juan called him) made a vegetable soup that was pretty good, especially when

you added the Andean salsa that was on the table. (I was the only one brave enough to try it.) The soup was followed by a main course of trout and potatoes. I thought the trout was fresh from the river, but they were farm-raised because the river fish are too dirty because the river serves as the sewer system of the little villages. The potatoes were a staple food that came from the many farmlands of the Andes.

We were having small talk over the dinner table and suddenly there was a familiar tune in the air. The flute guy surprisingly started playing covers of classic Beatles' songs including "Imagine" and "Hey Jude." We had traveled so far only to hear tunes like that. Then he started playing "Happy Birthday." Apparently, it was Jane's birthday. I was polite enough not to ask how old she was, but I think I overheard the number "46" flying around, which surprised me because she looked very young and energetic. (She must have gotten it from her mother Joyce and her one shoe.) Jane was pretty and was the closest we had to having those two cute Scottish girls in our group, but the number "46" stuck in the front of my mind, and I felt uncomfortable being slightly infatuated with someone old enough to be my teenage mother. So that was the end of that.

As we sat at dinner, I tried to memorize names. "Steve" was a guy that had a sort of demeaning, sarcastic persona, and "Clair" was his perfect snobby match. I was offering Zack tea bags so he could have a nice hot drink, and Steve gave Zack the thermos. "Thanks," Zack said.

"No, that one's empty, we need you to get us more." I wasn't sure if he was being pompous or was just being sarcastic.

After dinner, Juan suggested that we play a card game he knew called "Muffins," so Glyn got his deck of cards out. "Three of you will be muffins," Juan explained, "and eight of you will be civilians. The muffins have to kill the civilians."

We soon realized that Juan was trying to say "mafians" (mafiosos).

We played the game and it was fun, or rather, it was something to do. Three people were "mafians" and they had to kill civilians. Everyone had to put their heads down, then the mafians put their heads up and silently picked a

victim to “kill” using eye contact and body language. Then they put their heads down, and then everyone put their heads up to hide true identities. The civilians had to vote off suspects and the mafians had to kill all the civilians. The group with the most members left wins. At one point, John accused me of being a mafian because of my crazy woolen hat, but I ended up being a dead civilian. “No one in the mob would *ever* wear a hat like this,” I told him.

Everyone left after a couple of rounds, but I stayed in the tent with Glyn and Sarah as we finished our teas. I had more coca tea because I was developing a slight headache. It really did help. Soon Johnny joined us after getting settled in our tent for a while. Glyn told us about his trek in Nepal and what to expect from a helicopter ride since he had been on one already.

We left the mess tent to turn in for the night, but before we hit our tent, we just had to admire the night sky. I mean, you absolutely can not not be inspired. It was so beautiful and clear, and you could see all the stars sparking out there in a space of nothingness. Our campsite was lit solely by the moonlight coming from the other side of the mountain, casting a big shadow on the other side of the river.

Then I saw it. I was staring up at the sky, having a peaceful moment between myself and Mother Nature, and in the corner of my eye I saw a shooting star. I don’t believe I had actually seen a shooting star until that moment. Juan noticed us outside and joined us to decipher the constellations. I told him excitedly about my shooting star, and it must happen often enough in the Andes that he really didn’t feel as excited as I was. He told me to make a wish, and I wished in my inner monologue not to get altitude sickness, especially with my head beginning to really pound.

To show off, I busted out my little *Lonely Planet Quechua Phrasebook* and Juan really got a bang out of it. Even in the ancient language of the Incas, they listed their signature funny but helpful phrases. Juan got a kick out of them, especially “*Q’echa onqoywan kashani*” which translates to “I have the shits.”

We all went back to our tents to rest up for the next day. It wasn’t as cold as I thought it would be, but then again we weren’t at our highest elevation of the trek yet. It was great sleeping out there near the river; no nature CD’s or

electronic peaceful sound generators needed. The Urubamba roared through the night, as dreams of seeing Machu Picchu roared through our heads.

CHAPTER FIVE: A NATURAL HIGH

I HAD A DREAM THAT NIGHT THAT DINOSAURS WERE RUNNING AMUCK BACK HOME IN LIBERTY STATE PARK WHERE I USUALLY RIDE MY BIKE. How dinosaurs entered my subconscious on a trip like this was a mystery to me, but perhaps it was because the whole environment looked like the beautiful landscapes in the original *Jurassic Park*. Weird.

The sun slowly woke up and poked its cheery face from behind an Ande. The ambient morning glow surrounded us and we had no choice but to open our eyes and wake up. The first thing I did was take a piss, just like I would at home. Perhaps I was already adjusting to my regular routine out there. The others slowly started to wake up as the flute player played some wake-up music like a morning clock radio. There was no snooze button, so people just started getting out of their tents to start a new day. The Rio Urubamba was still roaring on, but the roaring in my head was gone and I realized that when you wish upon a star, your dreams really do come true.

We all met in the mess tent and had a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast. Juan joined us shortly wearing a T-shirt with the logo of Cusquena on it, which was the native beer of Peru. He explained to us how everyone in Peru hates that beer because they shot a TV commercial at Machu Picchu once, and a camera accidentally fell and actually chipped off the tip of the ancient sundial. The Cusquena company paid millions of soles in apology for the incident, but no money could repair the real damage. At any rate, it made for good breakfast conversation.

We packed our bags and had our water bottles filled by a porter who was hand-filtering river water with one of those purification pumps. Some other porters packed our big rucksacks and distributed the total weight amongst themselves like the day before. The rest of the porters took down the tents. We weren't exactly "roughing it" out there in the wilderness; we had a staff of about twenty.

Soon, we were on our way on the second day of trekking on our Incan adventure. The goal of that day was to continually go uphill, all the way up above the tree line before setting up camp. We hiked into the wilderness up the dirt path, leaving Llactapata behind in search for another greater Incan ruin. The scenery around us was beautiful and it took my breath away—both figuratively and literally.

Our group naturally became two smaller groups: those trekking far ahead and the stragglers. I was one of those stragglers. In fact, at times I was *the* straggler, all the way in the back of the line. I guess I was out of shape or the

altitude effects were really kicking my ass. The more we ascended, the more oxygen we needed, but the thinner the oxygen got. It was a Catch-22.

We hiked the trail up the Cusichaca valley, which led us through the small hamlet of Huallabamba, the last inhabited place on our route. We walked near houses and soda stands, mules and horses. About an hour into the day's trek, we stopped at a covered resting area where I put on more sunscreen and converted my zip away pants into shorts. We continued uphill for about forty minutes until we made another stop near a house. It was at this house that we met a parrot named Pancho, who climbed up my walking stick and then over to Glyn's hand. It was bizarre to see a parrot walking around the yard because I've only seen them domesticated in cages.

We continued our uphill trek. The group of stragglers consisted of myself, Johnny, Joyce, Jane, Glyn, Sarah, and John, who didn't have to be a straggler with all this mountaineering experience but just looked after us. We were all amazed at the porters constantly zipping passed by with heavy loads on their backs. Whenever a porter was speeding up from behind us, we'd yell out "PORTER!" (or rather "PORTAH!" with the English accent) and step aside to let him and his load pass. Soon we were going downhill to our lunch camp where the forerunners were there already, politely waiting for us to eat.

We dined with coca teas and a lunch of tuna, potatoes and some sort of a macaroni casserole. For dessert, Martin introduced me to the passion fruit, a fruit you'd normally hear about in American juice drinks but never really see in its pure form. That's no surprise because I discovered the fruit looks like something out of the movie *Aliens*, this weird looking pod thing full of this gooey ooze and slimy seeds. John referred to them as "frog sperm," as they did resemble tadpole-shaped specimens. I dared to eat it anyway, and it was pretty good, sweet but very sloppy.

We rested a while at our lunch camp. John told us a joke. "Wanna see my impression of an elephant?" And he pulled out the insides of his pants pockets and let them flap on his sides while leaning his pelvis out to bring attention to his genital region. "Look, these are its ears." I chuckled and smiled as I would

with any corny joke, but Juan didn't get it. "Were gonna have to teach you English humor," John said.

We continued to sit around leisurely to rest up for the rest of the day's trek. We were making good time and had time to spare. Juan said we were a fast group because we were arriving at checkpoints way ahead of the average tour group, even with us stragglers. With our abundance of time, I used the port-a-potty for the first time on this trip. I couldn't figure out how to flush it and as Johnny went to use it after me, I had to yell out to him to flush it for me. (It was just Number One only anyway.)

It started to drizzle a little bit, but we marched on. Suddenly the environment changed from mountain rocks and shrubs to a jungle-like area with so much vegetation and woody vines, it inspired Martin to climb up a tree and posed as a monkey for us. The incline was very taxing on me, even with my stick. I had to stop every two minutes or so to catch my breath—uh, I mean to take a photo. I was really behind, and I began to think that maybe Johnny had a good idea to invest in those techno-poles. I started to think that maybe I wasn't cut out for a trip like this, but John looked after me, the good guy that he was. Sarah, Glyn, Joyce, Jane, and Johnny were all at a fairly slow pace anyway, always just 25 feet ahead. I eventually caught up with them when they stopped to observe a big worm in the middle of the path. John picked it up and pretended to eat it and Jane made a face.

Together, we took our time and eventually made it beyond the tree line to Llulluchupampa, a big open grassy field. It was a lot colder without the trees to filter down the force of the gales coming in. I finally made it to camp—I was the last one—and took a well-deserved piss behind a bush. It was only a little after two in the afternoon—an arrival time still far earlier than the average group according to Juan—and I was already finally at my home for the night.

I started to develop a slight headache with the high altitude—we were at the highest campground of the entire trip, at about 11,500 ft.—but rather than take some ibuprofen and a nap, Juan suggested that I just stay up and walk about because sleeping would only make it worse. So us guys played this game that Juan introduced where you have to insert a tent pin into the ground as far

as you can from a designated starting line and push yourself back up without falling over (which is the hard part). The farthest pin wins. I was in the lead until someone taller than me could just reach over with the extra length of his body and arm, so I started a new strategy where I'd run towards the line, crouch down real fast to insert the pin and push myself up in one quick motion before gravity really started to kick in. It was great fun, but I think it required too much oxygen that I couldn't afford because my headache got far worse. The more and more we exerted ourselves, the more and more my head throbbed with pain

Clouds came through our campsite and it sporadically drizzled. Above our heads, there were two falcons flying around the valley. There were also some horses and mules near the only other camp nearby, inhabited by the Americans who had been trailing us an hour behind the whole time. The whole thing was just awe-inspiring. "Okay, *now* it's sunk in," Johnny told me.

We had tea time in the mess tent while munching on popcorn that our "cooker" made for us. Juan, as always, struck up another tea time dialogue with another one of his anecdotes. He told us about a client he guided a while back who was bustling with so much energy to the point of annoyance—especially in the early mornings. He'd get up earlier than anyone else in camp around 5 a.m. and exclaim out in a way that was almost singing, "Good mooorning to yooooou!!!"

"He was American, wasn't he?" I asked. (Only an American could be so annoying at that time of day.) I was right.

The sun began to set behind the mountain peaks while a pain began to set in my head. I had a massive migraine. I felt cold and nauseous and felt like puking. I was shivering from cold but my body temperature was rising higher like I had a fever. I hoped for another shooting star to appear that night so I could wish it all away, but it was cloudy.

Johnny was having a bad case of altitude sickness as well, so bad that Johnny was actually cursing at himself. "FUCK! FUCK!" he yelled to himself. "Be sure to write that in your journal." (Here it is, Johnny.)

Johnny couldn't take it any longer and just wanted it to end, so he turned in early. I gave him an ibuprofen pill and left him in our tent, and went to dinner with the rest who were already acclimatized to this altitude from the week before and not suffering at all. Matt had trekked the Himalayas before and adjusted ten times better than me or Johnny in our short acclimatization period. He was doing well until he fell down with his chair like a tree falling after a lumberjack yells "Timber!" We were beginning to discover that falling was a regular thing for him.

We ate over a dimly light table. Johnny should have gone to dinner with me because as soon as the tomato soup hit my lips, my headache weakened. The more and more I ate soup, the more and more the pain went away. After two bowls I was a new man again! (Later I learned that Zack sneaked him out some soup at our tent.) The main course was salisbury steak sans gravy (or as Juan simply called it, "burger") with instant whipped potatoes. I could only eat half of it because I was still feeling a little queasy in the stomach. Dessert came around and it was chocolate pudding, and I couldn't pass that up. I finished the meal off with another coca tea. "You'll get an addiction to that," Steve said.

"I already have one I think," I joked.

We sat around the table a while longer. The Brits were still hungry and asked Juan for some "biscuits." Juan didn't know what they were talking about. Soon he realized that "biscuits" were "cookies" or as I call them, "crackers." You learn something new everyday I guess.

It was getting stuffy and I needed to get some fresh air, so I excused myself and Matt jumped at the opportunity to leave with someone. As soon as we got out of the mess tent, Matt said, "There's a reason why I needed to get out of there." And he laid a terrific fart. Perhaps his stomach was unsettled at this altitude after all?

The clouds in the sky cleared away and revealed the immense star field. Our camp was above the tree line and there was nothing to obstruct our view of the heavens. It was a pageantry of lights dancing in a sea of blackness. It seemed as if each point of light had its own personality and was screaming out to be noticed. I just had to take a photo to capture the moment. Taking

advantage of the moonlight and starlight, Matt and I tried to get some overexposed shots of the sky. (Later I was disappointed to discover that none of them came out.)

I went back to the tent where Johnny was out cold like a bear in hibernation. I took an ibuprofen pill and put on my thermal underpants and my fleece. I snuggled myself into my sleeping bag with five layers of clothes on. I was still felt a bit feverish, but at least my headache was gone. That was some magical tomato soup! Soon everyone turned in for the night, but I still heard voices outside: voices of porters. At times they'd laugh; they were probably laughing at how weak us tourists were. I laid in sleeping bag shivering, feeling sick, wondering if the sight of Machu Picchu at the end would make it all worth while.

CHAPTER SIX: LOST IN A CLOUD

I HAD ANOTHER STRANGE DREAM THAT NIGHT THAT MY PARENTS CONVERTED THE FROZEN FOOD SECTION OF A SUPERMARKET INTO AN AFTER HOURS NIGHTCLUB. Disco ball, DJ, dance floor, the whole nine—right next to the big freezer bins of frozen peas and fish sticks. Weird.

I woke up at around five o'clock when I started hearing voices outside. When I went out for my daily morning urination session, no one was up and about yet; they were just talking in their tents. My headache was gone. Johnny's was too. We eventually got out of our sleeping bags, packed our bags and sorted out our film for our longest day of the trek.

It was a peaceful morning. Soon we were greeted by Zack and some porters for our morning coca tea tent service. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, definitely. That soup last night did me good," I responded. "Me too," Johnny said. "The pain is gone." And we sipped on our coca teas and continued to pack. Soon, everyone was up and about and we walked about camp with them. "How are you doing?" Margaret asked me.

"Great," I told her. "I never get this much sleep at home." (I usually have so many things going on that at times sleep just gets in the way. It's no wonder I was having dreams every night out there. At home, I don't get enough REMs for dreams to kick in.)

"You look like a new man," Martin said. "Your body must have made a bunch of brand new red blood cells."

We had a breakfast of apple oatmeal with raisins. Steve joked that it was just last night's mashed potatoes, just with apples and sugar in it. Sure did look like it, but I'm sure it wasn't. Right?

We got ready to go back on the trail. Margaret, seeing that I had lots of film (twenty rolls at the beginning as I never want to be caught without a roll of film), wanted to buy some from me. (She only had four.) I graciously gave her a roll. "How much do I owe you?" she asked.

"Just buy me a drink back in Cuzco," I told her. I figured I'd need a drink to wash down my long-awaited guinea pig dinner back in town.

We went up this steep, narrow trail that lead back to the main Inca Trail. It was all uphill, so us stragglers climbed at a really slow pace. Sarah, Glyn, Johnny, Joyce, Jane, and myself ascended with John who helped us along the way as always. It was about eight o'clock in the morning when the sun was high enough to rise from behind an Ande, and it started to get really sunny, so we stopped to put on suntan lotion. John just put some on his nose, leaving

the white cream just sit there like a face mask. “Is that some sort of tribal thing?” I asked him.

“Yes, it’s an Incan thing.” With all his help, perhaps he truly was a noble Incan warrior reincarnated in the body of an Englishman.

We continued to walk up to our first of three passes (peaks) on the trek, all three of which were to be reached in that single day. The first, Warmiwañusca, was nicknamed “Dead Woman’s Pass” for it supposedly resembled the shape of a dead woman lying on her back. It was the highest point of our trek. (I read that there are peaks higher than Warmiwañusca on the Inca Trail, but they don’t lead to Machu Picchu.)

Zack came from behind and I took his picture for kicks. “I’d like to see that picture some day,” he told me.

“Sure,” I said.

“How will I see it then?”

“When I come back.” Perhaps one day I’d return to the beauty of the Andes. It was apparent to me that the everything about the Peruvian highland wilderness would seduce me for more later in life—the lush foliage, the transcendent mountain range, the wonderfully friendly people—everything but the nausea of altitude sickness.

We continued to trek under the morning sun which was blinding at times without trees for cover. Without those trees, it also meant that there was no place to have a “private moment” (as the ladies called it.) Luckily I found a small bush where I had to crouch to do my business, but it was no secret to everyone as to what I was doing back there.

We ascended some more. Dead Woman’s Pass was getting closer and closer, and even with the tough incline, the mere sight of the peak made me burst in a rush of adrenaline. The natural high didn’t last very long though, because I almost felt like passing out and had to slow down and pace myself.

By nine o’clock that morning, only about an hour since we left camp, we reached the top of our world, Dead Woman’s Pass at over 13,700 ft. above sea level. The front runners Matt, Martin, Steve, Clair, and Juan were already there waiting. We took a moment to catch our breaths, as the scenery took it away

from us. There were other trekkers there as well, awe-inspired along with us. It was impossible not to be.

WE TOOK LOTS OF PICTURES OF THE VIEWS, and then Zack took all our cameras to take group shots of us for everyone. He'd cue us with these loud crazy Quechua and Spanish phrases that we didn't understand but just made us laugh nonetheless. I had to pee again, and people outnumbered private spaces about twenty to one. I found a boulder nearby, not realizing that these two Americans (from Utah I later found out) were just above, watching me flow liquid like a Roman statue. Oh well. I gave them a freeshow of nothing they probably haven't seen before.

Soon we were on our way again. The rest of the group went ahead as Johnny and I were wrapping up with some last minute photos—him with RoboCam, me with my hand-me-down. You should have seen how wide the porters' eyes would light up whenever Johnny pulled out his camera. It was like nothing they've ever seen before, like Johnny was Moses and RoboCam was one of the original tablets of the Ten Commandments or something.

It was just downhill from there, down an incline similar to the one that took an eternity to ascend. The more and more I went down, the more and more oxygen I got, and with that in mind, I shot down like a rocket. It was like I suddenly had super powers like the Flash. Unlike my ascension, I scrambled down the trail, using gravity to work with me instead of fighting against it. My footsteps sounded downward like a typewriter going eighty words-per-minute. "I thought you were a porter," Sarah said when she heard my footsteps speeding from behind her.

"Oh my, look what the altitude has done to him," Jane said as I zipped passed her. I was high on fresh oxygen and I was a rocket. I passed Clair (who had to slow down because of her bad knees), Steve, Margaret, and Tamzin, then Juan, then Martin, and quickly made it up to Matt who was in the pole position. My knees weren't that shocked as Clair's were, probably because of my years of snowboarding and my magic walking stick that kept my balance.

Soon Martin caught up with us and the two of us had a conversation at a leisurely walking pace. Martin told me he was an engineer in the UK for some American pharmaceutical company I'd never heard of. That was just his day job though; his dream was just to be a whitewater videographer. He used to do daily rafting videos for a rafting tour company in Ottawa, Canada, and this was his first video for Amazonas, his first overland tour video as well. He was slowly making provisions at home to quit his job and start a rafting company in Costa Rica with his whitewater friends.

We rapped a bit about the Internet and the American economy, and soon we made it to the bottom for a break with Matt and Juan. We were the first four of the group to make the descent from 13,700 back down to 11,500 ft.

Eventually, everyone joined up with us and we rested even more with them. (It was good to be a front runner for a change.) From that vantage point, Juan tried to show us the image of the dead woman in the pass and I think I saw it. I mean, I wasn't stoned or anything. It was as vague as the figures at Ollantaytambo. The Incas must have smoked a lot of coca leaves to conjure up those things.

The next leg of the trail was to be "undulating" as Juan put it. We'd be in an area with lots of mosquitoes, so we put on bug spray on all our exposed skin. John helped Jane and Joyce out with their blisters as well. I had to urinate yet again and there again was nowhere to hide, so I just went to an empty stretch of the trail and went. I think an elderly couple approaching saw the whole thing.

Juan's definition of "undulating" translated to long gradual inclines interspersed with short teasing downhill. It was uphill from our pitstop, and I became the straggler again. We ascended at a slow pace, huffing and puffing the whole way. We eventually made it to Runturacay, an old Incan watchtower base with a spectacular view of the Pacasmayo valley we had just trekked through. The Incas could have clearly seen anyone coming from that vantage point. Juan played tour guide and gave us another history lesson while we played tourists and snapped photos. Then we bundled up for the windy leg ahead.

It was all uphill again, which up until that point wasn't too bad, but this time it was all up these steep steps—a part of the original Incan highway. Imagine being on a Stairmaster at the highest difficulty level for two hours straight. That excruciating. Eventually everyone left me and Johnny in the dust—even John and usual stragglers abandoned us—and we were way behind. We struggled, and it was really tough for us, even with our walking sticks. “I thought Juan said it was going to be ‘undulating!’” Johnny said with a shortness of breath.

We finally made it up to the second pass where Zack was waiting for us, casually sitting and reading his fauna and flora book, studying to be an official guide recognized by the government. “Finally you made it,” he said. The others were way ahead.

I was starving and just wanted to have lunch. Fortunately, it was all downhill from there to the lunch camp. The downhill gave me my superhuman speed again and soon I saw a dining tent in sight in the near distance. I ran down and realized it wasn't our tent, but the Americans' tent, who were trailing behind us. So I continued scrambling down like a porter, down, down, and down. I was high on molecules of O₂ again. The terrain was somewhat treacherous and my shoes were starting to fall apart at the seams near the soles. The real dining camp suddenly appeared from behind a curve. (I recognized our black loo tent.) I made it to camp in a rush, just as Matt, Glyn, and Sarah got there at their leisurely pace. According to Juan, we were still fifteen minutes ahead of schedule, even with my tardiness. Soon, Johnny—whom I couldn't help but leave behind because of my downhill super speed—arrived five minutes later.

I was starving and thus had three servings of the cooker's onion noodle soup, not knowing that sandwiches were still to be served. We ate while talking about the condiments on the table. It was pretty bizarre that our mayonnaise came in this plastic toothpaste tube. I hoped never to mistake it for my Colgate.

We sat around and talked about New York in the 21st century and its differences since the 1980's. (Matt didn't believe me that Times Square was all

cleaned up by Disney.) John continued his ongoing jokes of sacrificing Tamzin at Machu Picchu. (She was only slightly amused.)

We filled up our water bottles and headed just ten minutes down the trail to Sayacmarca, another Incan ruin that probably served as another watchtower overlooking the Vilcabamba range. Juan gave us a tour around the complex and we got some really good photos of the ruins and the valley as the clouds started to come in.

We continued the trek through the cloud forest. At that altitude, the clouds started coming in real fast and soon we were actually inside them. We were walking in the clouds and I was marveled at the fact that I was actually in something I always saw above me, floating carelessly through the sky. I was suddenly answering a childhood curiosity of what it would be like to actually *be* inside a cloud.

The moisture of the cloud forest provided for lots of vegetation, plenty of lush colorful flowers and woody vines. Johnny thanked the plants for the extra oxygen. We were stragglers despite the extra air, along with Joyce, Jane, Margaret, and John, but we all eventually caught up with Matt, Glyn, and Sarah. Soon, the clouds got very thick and it began to hail. The hail turned into a heavy rain, but luckily we found cover in a rock-formed tunnel and put on rain gear. The precipitation got heavier and heavier, so I stopped again to put on my rain pants. (I accidentally put them on backwards and they kept on slipping down.) I struggled with my pants so long that I was totally left behind in the mist. Only Zack was somewhere behind me, but I could never see him with all the curves on the narrow path. It was pretty treacherous; on one side there'd be the mountain, and merely four feet across from the path, they're be a sharp drop with no railings or anything. And it was slippery when wet too!

I walked on for about fifteen minutes when I realized I was all alone, lost in a cloud, somewhere between heaven and earth. It was a spiritual experience, like I was in some sort of melancholy dreamscape. The trail curved so many times and the fog was so thick and I could never see people ahead or behind me. Everything around me became a mysterious entity. There were no sounds

but the sounds of my footsteps and the sounds of hail hitting the nylon of my jacket. It was my moment of peace with Mother Nature.

I trekked on though, all the way up towards the third pass, near the ruins of Phuyupatamarca. It wasn't as steep as the other inclines of the day, so it wasn't that bad. Near the peak, I came to a fork in the road, which was very mysterious because it had been one clearly defined path since we began. Was I in a dream? Was I transported in a fantasy world where I had to choose the right path and follow my destiny? I had no idea where to go and there was still no one ahead or behind me but the clouds. "HELLOOOOOOO?!?!?" I yelled. No response. Where was I? Did I exist? Was I truly in a limbo between heaven and earth? "HELLO?! ANYBODY THERE?!" Nothing. They couldn't have just disappeared, or could they?

Soon, I heard some faint voices down the path to my right. Was it my companions? There were mysterious footsteps coming from behind me, and I felt like I had to choose a path soon or perish. Fortunately, it was Zack. He probably didn't have a wild imagination and was still down to earth and just nonchalantly told me to go on the path to the right. The American camp was there near our camp, just above the third pass. But at our camp, no one was around, which was odd because I was so behind. Then I realized that they all probably went to a secret place that Pepe discovered. He told Juan to show it to us, as it is unknown to tourists and not even on the maps. When the group finally came back, Johnny told me it was right out of the opening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with the elaborate ancient stonework.

Soon everyone was back in camp. It was still pouring rain, but there was nothing we could do about that. I actually appreciated it; it was yet another situation to experience in a place like that. I value any experience, good or bad, as long as there's a good story to tell afterwards.

We sorted out our bags and had our daily English tea time in the mess tent as the rain pitter-pattered on the roof. We were all sloppy wet and disgusting but were feeling good. John said we needed to appease the rain gods anyway. He looked to Tamzin with a shifty eye. "Um, you can't burn her in the rain," Clair said, picking up on his teasing joke.

“Well, we’ll just light her up in here and then throw her outside,” he said with a chuckle. Tamzin didn’t seem amused.

We had tea and Nestlé Milo over “biscuits” with butter and strawberry jam. Martin the engineer he was argued with Matt over the viscosity and density of butter.

I sat in my tent after tea time to write. The rain stopped and soon it was time for a dinner of soup, followed by spaghetti with a mystery meat sauce. I didn’t care of course; it was food and I deserved lots of it after a day like that. “Who wants to guess what type of meat this is?” Steve said.

“Llama,” Johnny joked. “When we get to Machu Picchu, they’ll only be two left.” (The guidebooks said that since llamas aren’t indigenous specifically to Machu Picchu, they keep three imported ones on the agricultural terraces.)

For dessert we had flan (which Steve jokingly questioned if it was flammable.) Juan sat down and discussed our plans for the next day, how we’d hike to the Sun Gate and see Machu Picchu for the first time. That night was our last night camping and we’d have a ceremony the next morning where we’d tip the porters.

Sarah was feeling ill in her stomach (possibly because she digested a coca leaf), so I gave her one of my pills of generic Pepto Bismol. Before we turned in, Johnny and I set up our cameras and tried to get some overexposed photos of the nighttime clouds. “Can you believe we’re actually camping *above* clouds?” Johnny said. Yeah, it was pretty amazing.

The rain came back, and we went to sleep underneath the pitter-patter. Machu Picchu was only a day away.

CHAPTER SEVEN: GIFT OF THE GODS

THE NEXT MORNING THE RAIN WAS GONE. There was still a morning mist that surrounded us but it gradually burned away by the sun. We all awoke and packed our bags for the last day of the trek. We'd finally get to see Machu Picchu's face that day, our lofty goal for the past four days.

I had my trusty Lonely Planet Quecha Phrasebook, and I thought it'd be appropriate if we could say "thank you" or "goodbye" in the ancient Incan language since supposedly all the porters still spoke it. I asked Juan if my pronunciation was okay, and he said that Quecha is probably too ancient a language, so we should probably just say "gracias." So we did.

We all wandered around the area. The morning was breathtaking with the clouds still underneath us, and we were shooting photos left and right. We had a quick breakfast of pancakes and got ourselves in order. Meanwhile, the porters were at their base tent, looking eager for the tipping ceremony to come.

"I HAVEN'T SHAVED IN FOUR DAYS!" Johnny started complaining as we were lingering around. I didn't know what the big deal was; he only had a slight stubble, and only on the tip of his chin and his moustache region.

"Johnny, that's nothing!" I told him, but he just had to be clean shaven. "Just let it grow man, it'll look cool."

"Yeah, look at me!" Matt said, showing off his full beard. And Johnny put off a shave.

Eventually we had the thank you ceremony. We each put money in a pot so Martin could distribute it evenly to the team of porters, with a little more going to the "cooker." We all gathered around the top of the third pass that morning, us tourist on one side and the porters on the other. This was probably a weekly ritual for them, but it was entirely brand new to us. Juan stood in the middle and started a dialogue. He thanked the porters for helping the gringos out. We said our big "gracias." Juan opened the floor up for questions before the actual tipping, and a porter asked a question (which Juan translated): "Where are those two from?" (He was referring to me and Johnny.)

"Nueva York," I told him. He was probably confused, how a very Peruvian-looking guy like me was on the gringo side of the hill.

Anyway, the porters came up in groups of three, and Martin dispensed with our nueva soles evenly. I took pictures of the whole thing, and it was like being a college newspaper photographer again, covering a news event. The

porters were happy to receive the money, and we were happy to give it to them. I mean, they were superhuman enough to carry all our things, up and down the mountains, ten times faster than any of us.

Soon, all the money was given away, and it was time for goodbyes. We shook the hands of our helpers for the week. We thanked Tito the flautist for his daily tunes. Then we all gathered around for a couple of shots of our big family—at least for that week. Zack took the shots, cueing us again with crazy Spanish phrases that just made us laugh.

We parted our ways, and we even tipped the porters a little more by giving them the candy we received in our snack packs. Martin even gave up his flashlight to one of them.

WE TREKKED ALL THE WAY DOWN from our third pass base camp. It was all downhill that morning, and I was able to jet down like a porter again. My thighs were really burning though. “You may be as fast as a porter,” Matt said, “but now try it with all our packs!” Yeah, right.

We trekked down at our normal pace, complete with our occasional pause to let a group of porters go by. “PORTER!” we’d yell to signal the others ahead to stop. We trekked all the way down the mound until we caught a glimpse of a town in the valley. We continued down and down and then took a short break. John put on some more suntan lotion in the fashion of a tribal mask again. We eventually came across a resting house that was being built. With its structure built out of sticks, it reminded me of the “stickman” figures from *The Blair Witch Project*. Then we continued down and down some more where we ran into a small waterfall and took some pictures. In the distance we could see the train come in en route to Machu Picchu. We ran into some Americans from West Palm Beach, Florida on the trail who were taking a break. Soon, we were caught up with the leaders of the group, Steve, Clair, Margaret, Joyce, Juan, and Jane. We stopped at a fork in the trail near a power tower—a sign that we were soon coming back into the modern world. We sat around for a long break. Some people were coming from behind, and I joked, “The

Americans are coming! We have to leave now!” as if we were in a great race against nations.

“But you’re American,” Sarah said.

“Today, we’re honorary Brits,” I said. So we high-tailed it out of there, and in no time we arrived at Inti Pata, an ancient agricultural terrace that was being restored to its former glory. The Sacred Valley lied beneath us and we took some pictures. There were workers all around the terraces, moving mud, making bricks, etc. One worker I guess assumed I spoke Spanish and asked me “¿*Que hora es?*” Rather than tell him I didn’t speak the language, I did my best to answer him in his native tongue.

“Mediodia y media,” I skeptically tried to tell him it was 12:30. He looked at me with a confused face as if he was thinking “How can this guy not know Spanish?” Luckily Zack was nearby to coach me.

Zack took pictures of me with Johnny and Glyn, and then we all went down this narrow winding path down, down the mountain. Johnny’s knees were getting all dodgy. It wasn’t long until we passed by a small vendor house where Margaret, Joyce, and John were grabbing a drink. I was looking around to see if they had guinea pig, but all I saw roaming around the kitchen were cats. “Cats probably taste like chicken too,” John told me.

We continued down the long and winding road and in ten minutes, we were down at a restaurant where we’d have lunch. The place looked like a ski lodge. It was pretty surreal being back in a building after camping in tents for three nights straight. It was great to finally drink a cold water instead of the piss warm stuff we’d been drinking for days.

Water wasn’t good enough, so I bought myself an ice cold Coke which was so refreshing that it felt like I was in a TV commercial. We sat around a bunch of tables, and our “cooker” made us his final meal, a casserole of rice, peas, carrots, Spanish onions, egg, and tuna fish. It was pretty decent and I even had seconds.

Lunch came to an end, and with our bodies recharged, Matt asked how much farther we’d have to go. “It’s only about forty minutes undulating,” Juan said using his favorite word “undulating,” “then thirty minutes uphill.”

“Undulating?!” Matt complained. “Every time you say undulating, it’s really a lot of uphill!” He wasn’t alone on that opinion.

We sat in the restaurant for a short bit to rest. Martin laid out on a cushioned bench, with his Roots hat over his eyes and took a quick nap. Soon, we all left the lodge for a quick bit to check out the Willawayña ruins, just five minutes behind the building. Juan gave us a tour and history lesson as always. He told us about the theory that the structure that looks like it would be a sun gate could not have been one because it was in the wrong place if you look at a compass. (It was probably just a watch tower.)

We walked through the ruins, and in the back, there was a small fountain of flowing water. It was a sacred Incan fountain that was used to cleanse oneself before entering the sacred temple of Machu Picchu. So we each took turns placing our heads underneath the flowing water, except for Steve and Clair who were their cynical non-believing selves. Zack washed his whole face. “Do you feel cleansed?” Juan asked us.

“I feel a lot cooler,” John said. Hearing that, Clair went under to “cleanse” herself cool.

We walked back to the lodge. I walked back with Zack and we talked about our fondness for soccer—his much more than mine. When we got back to the lodge, it was packed with other trekkers, stopped off for a cool one before heading off to the Inti Puncu, the Sun Gate. There was no more room for us, and that’s just what we did: head to the Sun Gate.

Our group naturally split up in groups again. This time, it was me with Johnny, Tamzin, and Margaret. The ladies set a good steady pace through the jungle path. Margaret told me a little about herself. She was a librarian in a small town near London. She was interested in Peru because her aunt lived there and she wanted to know what it was like.

We got closer and closer to Inti Puncu. We saw a dam and power lines. We heard the train of lazy tourists go by. Soon, we took a short break while waiting up for the rest. Then it was the last leg. And it was all up hill. And not just up any hill, but up these really steep stairs, a sort of stone ladder up to the next level. At first sight I said, “Oh man. Go back everybody. Just go back.”

We struggled up the stone ladder—it probably wasn't that bad, but we were tired from walking for days already—and at the top, we were fully rewarded. The sun gods blessed us with a perfect rainbow, stretching from one edge of one's peripheral vision to the other. It was so beautiful. With a gift from the heavens upon us, we knew we were on the right track and had to continue without turning back.

The rainbow was glorious, but it didn't prepare us for what we saw next, just a ten-minute walk from there: Inti Puncu, the Gateway of the Sun, and our first glimpse of our pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, Machu Picchu. What a sight to see! We were actually seeing the sights we'd only seen in postcards and travel book pictures.

We spent a good half hour or so at the Sun Gate, awe-inspired by the grandeur of it all. Hardly anyone spoke a word for a good while, and we just sat there and observed, reflecting. I'm sure this journey had been a spiritual one for some. Juan said that the view of Machu Picchu from the Sun Gate has brought many a tourist to tears of joy. I think I saw Jane shed a couple. As for me, I laughed at the spectacle, overjoyed that we were actually in sight of my obsession for over a year. I had "found" the "lost" city.

Soon, we gradually broke silence and had a bunch of group photos. Johnny got many good pictures with RoboCam. I got a picture of the shuttle bus going up the funny zig-zag road that goes from the town at the base, up the mountain to Machu Picchu. Soon it was time for the final leg, the leg to Machu Picchu itself. It was all downhill, and as we descended, we saw the Lost City get closer and closer, grander and grander. There was a rumble of thunder in the distance and John said it was the gods calling out "TAAAAMMMMZIIINN..." for their human sacrifice.

Johnny and I couldn't stop taking pictures the whole way down, so we were straggling behind. We didn't know when to stop, it was just so great. We made it down to the agricultural terrace that gives the ultimate postcard view of the city, where we had to be wary of llama shit. The three imported llamas were there on the terrace, grazing on the grass, just as the tourbooks said they would be.

We paused for a while again, in awe of the sight. We took some classic pictures of the city—and of the llamas. There was another lone trekker there as well, and we had him take our big group photo.

After a while, we made our way down into the city. It was nearing sunset, and the city would be closed soon, but we'd have the next day to explore. Johnny and I were shutterbugging left and right, and we ran into two young Japanese girls, one of which knew Cantonese, (which Johnny knew). They struck up a small talk conversation for a bit, and the girl took our picture, and we took theirs.

Machu Picchu was somewhat of a maze, especially when we had been accustomed to following a single path for four days. It didn't help either that we were straggling way far behind taking pictures. We managed to find our way out by following the other exiting tourists. On the way, I got a close-up picture of a llama, and fortunately, it did not spit all over my lens as people were predicting.

At the exit, we found the others, sitting in a surreal environment—a café table covered by an umbrella—sipping on ice cold soft drinks. We joined them with some ice cold Inka Colas. It was absolutely refreshing and well-deserved.

The café was near the regular tourist entrance and exit, so we soon saw the shuttle bus that was to take us down to Aguas Calientes, the nearby town at the base of Machu Picchu. It was a nice bus, nothing shabby or anything, and it took us down the thirteen hairpin turns of the narrow zig-zag dirt road we saw from above at the Sun Gate. Juan told us before of the chasqui, or “messenger,” that would race the bus down the mountain. And as we went back and forth on the zig-zag road, there he was, a young Andean boy perhaps only ten years old, wearing a traditional Incan toga thing and sandals, racing the bus to the base of the mountain via a linear staircase that went straight down instead of back and forth a big zig and zag. After every one of the thirteen hairpin turns, he'd reappear to greet us from the side of the road:

“GOOOOOODBYYYYYEEEE!!!!” or “AAAADIIOOOOSSSS!!!!” or “PAQARINKAMAAAA!!!” (“goodbye” in Quecha). It took us a while to figure out that the first phrase was actually English because he'd stretch it out so

long and we'd just zoom by without hearing all the syllables. The whole thing was actually pretty funny to me, and I couldn't stop smiling. At the bottom of the mountain, the road went straight towards a bridge that crossed a river. By the time we started approaching that bridge, the chasqui was already moving his little legs with all his might to beat the bus over it. After beating us, he stopped at the other side of the river and got on board to salute us.

“GOOOOOODBYYYYYYYYYEEEEEE!!!!” he yelled with his young lungs, this time inside the bus for us to clearly hear. Then he went down the aisle to collect tips. Juan took his picture up close for me as well.

Soon we were in the town of Aguas Calientes, the major tourist hub for visitors of Machu Picchu. In fact, I think it was solely built for that reason—that and the hot springs it harbors (thus its name). It was pretty surreal being there; it was an exotic third world village with commercial tourism sprouting up left and right. I was in awe of the whole vibe, people from around the world mixing in with locals, and thought it was a great town. It was busy, but not busy like a city. It still had a hometown feel to it, with kids playing ball in the main plaza, and people walking around. The town wasn't really much of a town in a sense though. There were no cars or roads really, just one main promenade that stretched from the train station and bus station to the other side of town where the hot springs were located. It was this promenade that lead us tired travellers to the Hostal La Cabaña, about three quarters of the way. Our legs and thighs burned the whole way up the minor steps.

We marched in like tired soldiers and plopped our asses on the seats and couches in the lobby. Juan went to the front desk to get our rooms, and Zack was there to say goodbye. He was going to leave us and go start setting up the next trek already. We each said our individual goodbyes, and I was the only one (at that point) who gave him a tip as well. That was the last we ever saw of him until we got our pictures developed.

We got our keys and went up to our rooms. The hotel was a great place, with a rustic yet modern feel to it. Our room was small but decent, even though there were no hooks anywhere to hang anything. More importantly, there was

a shower. My first order of business after all those days of trekking was to wash my ass thoroughly.

Johnny took a shower first, so I spent the time exploring the hotel. It was small—our group took up most of the total rooms. The hotel was set up like a mini village, with two buildings connected via an outdoor hallway with a view of the Aguas Calientes' flat skyline. At night, it was beautiful to see the darkness of the valley illuminated by the sparkles of the town's lights. I went to check out Martin and John's room. It was pretty much the same as ours, except, their room was decorated with Incan toy instruments. No fair!

Soon, it was my turn to take a shower, and what a feeling that was! Four days in the Andes, trekking without really washing up can get pretty nasty. I washed off the layers of grime, sweat, bug spray, and suntan lotion. Then I was ready for a night on the town with my trekking companions. I locked up my pack to the bed with this chain I brought for an additional sense of security, although there was already great sense of safety and security in the town, even in the streets.

We all met downstairs in the lobby. Lou Bega's "Mambo No. 5" was playing in the distance out of all things. Then we all walked down the promenade to a restaurant where we had a dinner reservation. I was all ready for my first taste of guinea pig.

But they didn't have guinea pig. I even had Juan ask the waiter if they had it special or anything. Nothing. So I just ordered from the prix fixe menu selection. Most of the people in our group ordered pizza, which I immediately thought was odd because why would you order pizza when you came all this way? (You can get pizza at home!) Perhaps it's a British thing. Anyway, I tried to order as many indigenous foods and drinks as I could get. I started off with the traditional pisco sour, and went onto an Inka Cola. There was a band there playing "Guantanamera" among other songs. The grill was in the center of the restaurant so everyone could see the chef prepare meat on a glorious open flame.

Johnny and I sat with Glyn and Sarah, and we learned that Sarah worked in electronics. To Johnny's and my surprise, we learned that they were just

friends and weren't even a couple, married or unmarried. (In fact, there were no married couples on the trip at all.) Juan sat with us too, and we were telling him how great a guide he was. He was telling us a little bit more about himself, how he rarely drinks, and how he lives with his parents back in Cuzco (although he's never home because he's always tour guiding.)

I dined on a soup appetizer, and then I had grilled lamb, followed by chocolate cake. It was great to finally be served food in civilization again.

There was an internet café across the street, tempting me to send out an e-mail or two, or log onto Instant Messenger to see who was on, but lucky for me, it was closed by the time we left the restaurant. I had gotten that far, why succumb back to the digital age now? Most of the other shops were closed too, so there was nothing to do but go back to the hotel. We all opted for an early rise anyway, so we could get some more quiet time at Machu Picchu before the first train of tourists invaded. So Johnny and I went back to the room. We read tour books until we passed out. What a day it had been.

CHAPTER EIGHT: BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

WE WERE AWOKEN BY THE CONSTANT CROW OF A ROOSTER AROUND 5 A.M., EVEN BEFORE WE SAW ANY TRACE OF DAYLIGHT. It went on and on and there was no snooze button. So I just sat there in the dark and admired the serenity, still half-asleep. In the distance, I heard the faint sound of a freight train.

The first tourist train would come in at 10 a.m. so we had before then to have Machu Picchu all to ourselves before the flash flood of people.

Johnny woke up before our 5:30 wake up door knock as well and enjoyed the tranquility with me. “I’m gonna go back to New York and start waking up this early,” he said.

After a quick breakfast, we were all ready to go, waiting in the hotel lobby. We trekked down Aguas Calientes’ main strip again, to the bus loading area, near the street market. Soon we were on a bus bound for Machu Picchu, via the long winding zig zag road.

At about seven in the morning, we, along with the other small groups of tourists that stayed overnight in Aguas Calientes, had a good two hours before the train from Cuzco brought over the first batch of lazy, non-hiking tourists who ruin the grandeur and mystery of the Lost City. At the entrance gate, there was a sign prohibiting the use of walking sticks. Of course, I had mine, as did Matt. (Johnny left his techno-poles back at the hotel.) Matt just told them that he had a bad knee and that he needed it. I was with him and we both got our sticks in. Touché.

It was truly an experience being at Machu Picchu that morning, despite Juan having told us that “viewing the beautiful sunrise at Machu Picchu” is a misleading attraction because the sun always rises *behind* a mountain. Plus it’s always way too cloudy in the morning.

But you didn’t really need to see the actual sun rise, because when it’s there, it’s there in all its splendor. We all split up to roam the city on our own, and for me it was truly an unforgettable experience to be there in the virtual silence, wandering around alone in the one place I’d obsessed about for months. The grandeur was definitely still there despite the commercialism of it all. Tiny humans were engulfed in a big ancient universe full of years of history. I’m not quite sure how to describe how it felt—I felt like crying and laughing at the same time. One of those mixed emotional times I guess. Whatever feeling it was, it was at its superlative. I climbed the stairs up to the highest level of the city, and with the clouds below, it was like I was in a city in

the clouds, a heaven on earth if you will. I felt as if I could jump off into the nothingness of space through the clouds, like the girl at the end of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. (My apologies to those who haven't seen it yet.) The sight of the panorama was so beautiful, there was nothing to say to myself except three monosyllabic words: "Oh my God."

There were three llamas grazing in one of the plots, and I stopped to take a photo of them. Then came one of the most magical moments of the entire trip: one of them stopped pulling grass with his teeth, stood up, looked at me, and smiled. Click!

I soon left for fear of one spitting or urinating on me, and all in good time because it was time to regroup with the rest. I was late because I could not take pictures. Soon we were all reunited after our hour alone with Machu Picchu, and Juan started our historical tour.

Juan lectured us of the different theories of Machu Picchu, how it was most likely a city for the nobles of Incan society. He taught us about how Hiram Bingham "discovered" it in 1911 and how Bingham himself didn't believe he was the first Westerner to discover it because he found two names engraved in a stone which was dated 1901. Juan led us to the different religious sites of the city, from the royal tomb, to the house of the sun priest, to the house of the Inca (ruler) himself. The house of the Inca was fairly advanced in technology; there was a bathroom and an outdoor plumbing system of water shafts. We continued onto the Temple of the Sun and then the quarry where most of the stones were carved from (with other stones). We climbed up near the sundial where there was a miniature version of Machu Picchu and its surrounding mountains, comprised of smoothed out stones the size of fists. And we saw for ourselves, the chipped corner of the sacred sundial, where the camera for that Cusqueña beer TV spot fell.

The rest of the morning was up to us after that: trek up the perilous trail up Huayna Picchu, the tall mountain behind the city in all the classic Machu Picchu photos, or trek to the not-so-perilous Inca bridge and take it easy. Joyce, Jane, Clair and Steve chose the latter, while the rest of us braved the steep climb. It was pretty treacherous because with all the mist around, there were a

lot of wet slippery areas. I had to hold on to the steel cable ropes, and I had to catch my breath all the time. Four Americans with no backpacks zipped passed us. “We’ve had four days practice,” they said to apologize for their speed. Gee, we had four days practice too. Show offs.

After about an hour of ascending, we eventually made it to the peak. There was a narrow tunnel that we had to climb through, and Matt happily struggled through it. Near the very top, there was a side path that Juan knew about, that lead to “the most beautiful orchid” called *wakanki*, which translates to “you will cry” (because it’s so beautiful). The orchid however, was on the other side of a small chasm with a deep drop that would probably lead you down the entire side of the mountain to your doom. I jumped it anyway for the sake of photography like a *National Geographic* wannabe, but it was worth it. I didn’t cry or anything, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

The trek up to the very top of the Huayna Picchu was so worth it. We all sat around the highest point of the peak and took some group photos. From up there, the city of Machu Picchu looked smaller and yet still grand. And the surrounding Andes from that vantage point was definitely a sight to see.

What goes up, must come down, and so we did. It was still treacherous with all the slippery spots, but at least it was all downhill. “I’m gonna have to come back here as a handrail salesman,” John joked.

Near the base of the mountain, I noticed a guy with a “Jersey City, New Jersey” T-shirt on. I called him on it. “Hey, you’re from Jersey City?”

“Marin Boulevard, right behind City Hall.”

“Holy shit, I’m from First Street,” (which was only four short blocks away from my apartment.) His name was Pete, and he also did the four-day trek to Machu Picchu. He told us he was also going to be on the same Sunday flight as us from Lima to Newark. What a truly small world we live in.

Soon we were back in the city of Machu Picchu where it wasn’t the tranquil, majestic lost city of the Incas that it was earlier that morning. It wasn’t exactly “lost” anymore, but “found” by hundreds and hundreds of tourists roaming around the grounds. So we left.

We waited for the bus at the tables by the entrance where we ended our hike the day before with Cokes and Inka Colas. Matt was good enough to buy me a replacement roll of film at the souvenir stand for one that I gave him before. Nearby, there was a young shoe shine boy wearing a Today Show hat. I figured he must have got it the month before when Matt Lauer was there for *The Today Show* in his “Where in the World is Matt Lauer?” week-long travel series.

We raced the chasqui down the mountain of Machu Picchu again (he won again), and from the bus stop, we walked through the street market to the train tracks down the block. The train’s schedule was predictable and didn’t come too often, so the tracks were actually lined with shops and restaurants as if it were any main street in a busy town. We followed the train tracks down a bit, hugging the river to our right, until we came to Hanaqracha, a nice sit-in restaurant over looking the river. The side of the restaurant that faced the river was all glass and it revealed a perfect view of the whitewater rapids without getting anyone wet.

We ordered from another prix fixe menu, which did not have guinea pig to my dismay, so I had the trout with a pint of Cusqueña *cerveza*. I ate with Steve who was his pompous British self, bragging to me about how he was pretty well-off, and how he owned a company which built ice rinks, and that he had no immediate plans after Peru because he could just fly off anywhere he pleased. He didn’t know where to go next before going back home. Damn the British and their long holidays.

We had mazamorra morada for dessert, which was a sort of watered-down Peruvian grape Jello. And lots of *agua sin gas*.

After lunch, we had time to kill before our helicopter transport. Johnny and a few others just hung out at the restaurant (we pretty much had it all to ourselves), taking pictures of the river, while I ventured out into the streets like a Lonely Planeteeer. I had to buy some souvenir gifts for people back home anyway. I ended up getting T-shirts for my parents, and finally one of those bamboo pan flutes that all the Andean music bands have. I haggled a bit, but not too much because I really wasn’t in the mood and time was of the essence.

We all regrouped back at the restaurant after half an hour and then trekked down the train tracks out of town like in *Stand By Me*. On the way, we were hounded by vendors walking around with dozens of necklaces on their arms, trying to make a sale.

I never rode in a helicopter before, and suddenly I was at the heliport at the edge of town, near the river. HeliCusco was the commercial helicopter service that we were to take back to Cuzco. The loitering track vendors eventually caught up with us, and we had to fend them off while waiting to board. We eventually got on board, leaving the overpriced necklaces at the gate, and put on our ear protectors. Then, the motors started spinning loudly, and before we knew it, we were lifted up into the air. It felt like a loud elevator.

The view of the Andes was spectacular at that altitude. It took us four days to get to Machu Picchu on foot, and it would only take 25 minutes to get back to Cuzco. We finally got to see the Andes from above. I reckoned this was the way the sun gods of the Incas saw the landscape, with the beautiful Andean mountains and their white snowy hats reaching up to the heavens, fluffy cottony clouds floating around as if each one represented someone's lofty dreams, agricultural fields of different colors that resembled a patchwork quilt. I couldn't imagine it looked much different from the Incans' times, except for maybe the addition of the chopper I was riding in, and without the hundreds of Spanish conquistadors running amuck.

The helicopter ride was, surprising, just like an airplane ride. There was a flight attendant who even went around with snacks for us. I noticed Johnny checking her out. Perhaps the journey *did* transform him. (Well she *was* a pretty cute looking latina.) Anyway, I took some great photos, framing the landscape with the portholes of the helicopter. We were free to roam the cabin to get different shots. I think Martin and some "yank" from America had a small scuffle over the best vantage point for their video cameras. We even got to get a view from the cockpit.

Twenty-five minutes later, our Incan journey ended at the place where it began: Cuzco airport. To Johnny's and my dismay, the chopper didn't land straight down like we'd seen in so many Hollywood movies. It landed like an

airplane, coming in forward and fast until the landing gear touched the runway. Oh well. It was a pretty great experience anyway. Johnny wanted to stage a photo of us coming out of the helicopter waving, so he gave Matt his camera. But perhaps it was too staged because it looked really cheesy.

A familiar face appeared in the near distance: Paul Cripps, the great Amazonas Explorer director. He greeted us with two vans and drove us over to the makeshift baggage claim area where we got our packs. Then, just like Day One, we drove through town to the hotel, only this time it was different. We were transformed by the power of the Andes. We were one with this land. The places that whizzed by were familiar now. We had been exposed to the people, the culture, the food—except for guinea pig of course. We weren't strangers anymore. We told Paul all about our great adventure, even though it was probably all stuff he's heard before, just from a different set of people. John said Tamzin was lucky that she survived without being sacrificed.

We were assigned different rooms back at Hotel Centenario. Johnny and I had a first floor room on the other side of the building, which wasn't that far anyway. We took it easy in the room for a bit, relaxing in the lap of civilization (and cable television) again. Johnny, mesmerized by cable yet again was flipping around and eventually landed on *Highlander*. Then he shaved off his stubble. He was the same old self again. I unpacked my bag and reorganized my belongings. I found a banana all rotten and squished in the bottom compartment. I knew I didn't eat it the first day of the trek! I wondered back then what I did with it.

After failing at trying to get rid of the disgusting smell of rotten banana and spilled bug spray, I just let my bag air out, and decided to get some air myself. Johnny couldn't part with this rare encounter with cable TV (in Peru of all places), and so I went solo to explore the great city of Cuzco.

I wasn't solo for long because I ran into Jackie, the cute Scottish blonde from the other group from earlier in the week. God, it felt like months since I saw her last. Anyway, their trip ended the day before, and she had all day to wander around aimlessly. Soon, we were joined by Craig, the one who came to

Lima from Newark with us, and Richard Number One. They all said that their rafting experience was excellent.

The three members of the other tribe went on their way, and so I was solo again to explore Cuzco for one last day. What a great city. Unlike the first day I got there, I didn't feel like an outsider anymore. I felt one with the people, or at least like someone who's been there a while. I sort of knew my way around and I knew enough Spanish to get by. (Well, at least knew how to ask "How much?") I figured I blended in better than any touristy white guy anyway. I walked back to the Plaza das Armas and watched the sun set over the cathedrals. Then I pretty much wandered aimlessly in search of souvenirs to bring home for the folks. I went from store to store, farther and farther away from the tourism of the city center, looking for chotskies for my little cousins back home—I got them these Peruvian whistles. Pretty soon, I was in a regular Cuzco neighborhood where not a word of English was spoken, and suddenly I felt like an outsider again. What a difference a couple of blocks makes. At any rate, I was still Peruvian-looking and blended in. Unless of course, they were all snickering behind my back.

My cover was blown pretty fast because soon I became the lost American, wandering around some strange neighborhood like a lost puppy, wondering which way was north or south, trying to retrace my steps without any luck because all the roads aren't in a grid like in New York City. (I can't get around anywhere without the grids, not even in America.) However, like New York, there were cabs everywhere, and so I hailed one. But unlike New York, I could get to any point in town for the equivalent of about fifty American cents. (That would *never* happen in New York.) I sat in the front with the cabbie, and tried to chat with him in his native Spanish. He, of course assumed I already spoke Spanish.

"*Hablo un poco Espanol,*" I told him in a way that pretty much let him know I wasn't Peruvian or Latino at all. He didn't mind as long as I was paying him. I tried to strike up a conversation with him, using only the vocabulary I got from language books at that *Rush Hour Spanish* music CD. (I didn't serenade him though.)

“Cusco es bonito,” I told him.

“Si,” he said.

“Soy de Nueva York.”

“Si.”

That was about the extent of it because I couldn't remember any more at the time of my phrase book. The driver was more interested in finding where exactly “Hostal Centenario” was, because apparently “Centenario” was the name of an entire neighborhood that harbored many hotels. We drove down some familiar road, and I had to stop him abruptly when I recognized it. “*La,*” I told him. I paid him the equivalent of seventy-five American cents instead of the usual fifty, figuring a 50% tip was damn good.

Martin went around the rooms to give everyone an order form for a copy of the video he'd make from the trip, including the week of canoeing before our week on the Inca Trail, and the week after, rafting. I ordered one. Back at the room, Johnny was laying in bed like a couch potato, channel surfing with more than his usual seven broadcast stations. Cable TV to a non-cablelite (who likes entertainment) is like water to a guy wandering the desert. Once you get it, you can't get enough. In fact, it surprised me that he'd gotten all this way in life without cable. Alas, his anal-retentive issue with cable installation was that hole they'd have to drill in your house.

After a shower, we were all out with Paul and Juan in the lobby waiting around for others for our last supper together. Email lists were being passed around, and I finally figured out how to spell “Tamzin.” Then we caught three cabs over to this Andean restaurant near Plaza das Armas with a Tibetan motif and an eclectic music selection ranging from Cuban mambo to drum and bass. Jane was looking all over for her mother Joyce, and didn't realize she was in the first cab way ahead of her. She hesitantly went to the restaurant after looking around too long. “Don't ever do that again!” Jane scolded her mother for running off without telling her. It was apparent who was the parent and who was the child in this pair.

It was our last supper in the Andes, and one question still remained: “Do you serve *cuy*?” They looked at me funny as if I was kidding. I wasn't. Paul even

asked if they had anything special in the back. Nothing. “I wanted just two things out of this trip, to see Machu Picchu...and to have guinea pig!” I whined to everyone. I had to settle for alpaca...again. The gastronomically unadventurous rest got pizza.

We sat around and ate our last meal in Peru together, well, at least for me and Johnny. We reminisced about the trek, retelling the tale to Paul even though he had probably heard all of the same, forty times a year. Sub-conversations included subjects as travel and politics.

A toast was in order. We all toasted Juan and gave him thanks and pats on the back, as well as our communal cash tip). “Do you have any suggestions for me?” Juan asked. “Is there something I should do different next time?”

“Um, don’t play that tent pole game at high altitudes,” I told him. And everybody chuckled like a family at the end of an old cheesy sitcom or cartoon.

For dessert, I had what the menu called a “mango thingy” which was made with Baileys Irish Cream and some sort of mango purée, which was different but very good. Martin couldn’t get enough of his and literally licked his plate. Soon Juan had to bid us farewell; he had to get ready and wake up early and do it all over again with a new set of people. A weird feeling overcasted the table. For the first time, our relationship with Juan was sort of cheapened as we realized we weren’t life-long buddies with him, but merely that week’s clients. Oh well. He’s a good guy nonetheless. Nature of the business that’s all.

Anyway, Martin, I learned, wasn’t born in England, but in Zimbabwe of all places, and his eyes lit up when I mentioned the whole turmoil with President Magabe that I heard so much about when I was there in Zimbabwe just seven months before. And he ranted and ranted about Zimbabwean politics, as if it was something he had strong opinions on all his life. (Well, he *was* Zimbabwean-English.)

“Where are you off to next?” John and Martin asked me when I told them about my love of globetrotting.

“Actually, I’m really looking into Antarctica,” I told them.

“You should definitely go,” Martin said, without hesitation. (Usually I get, “What?! Antarctica?!”) Ah, the English and their love (and vacation days) for

travel. John was urging us to come out to the countryside of England to go rock climbing, and Johnny's eyes for climbing opportunities lit up. "I think I may take you up on that." Jane and Martin said we should meet up for a reunion in the UK sometime and watch Martin's video. Perhaps the British Empire would have me again that year. (I went to London earlier that January.)

PAUL KNEW A BAR ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PLAZA, so we were to meet up there. Since it was our last night in Cuzco, Johnny and I wanted to get some last minute souvenir shopping done before the shops closed. Glyn and Sarah as well. After about half an hour, most of the shops closed and we went looking for the "Norton's Rets" or "Norton Rests" or some bar with "Norton" in it that Paul told us to meet at. But we got lost. We couldn't find it at all. We searched all the bars in the general vicinity of where Paul's finger pointed, but no avail. We walked way off track to an empty block where we found no bars at all. It was getting grim, and Glyn and Sarah decided to give up and get a cab for the hotel. But I was determined to have one last drink with my trekking pals. Johnny was caught between a rock and two Brits. We were standing on some empty corner near a dark street a little bit off the town center, and a cab pulled up. Glyn and Sarah hopped inside, asking Johnny if he wanted to go. He stood there in mid-thought, debating with himself. Finally he caved. "I'm just gonna go back to the hotel." And he hopped in and they drove off.

So I was solo again. My last night in the great city of Cuzco. The air was a bit chilly but not cold. In fact, it really was a beautiful night, a perfect night for a walk. But I was on mission to find the bar. One host at a restaurant that was closing up shop finally directed me to a bar the four of us avoided before in a long, dark and scary alleyway behind the shady double doors of a shady-looking building. I opened the door, and inside it wasn't that sketchy at all, and I wished we just tried this door in the first place. Inside, there was staircase that went up to the bar which was located on the second floor, but my companions were already on their way down. I thought they would have been drinking the night away, but they explained to me that they discovered that there's some Peruvian law that limits the sale of alcohol forty-eight hours

before a presidential election. “They should do that in all countries,” Matt said. “Especially in *your* country,” he said to me, joking about the five-week post-Election Day ordeal of 2000 between Gore and Bush. (He may have a good point there.) So with all the bars closed, we all walked back to the hotel, speaking our English tongues down the Peruvian streets. It my last trek with a group of companions I’ve grown to like over the past week.

The hotel lobby was empty except for us, and I said my final goodbyes to Matt, Johnny, Tamzin, Jane, and Martin. We were wondering where Clair and Steve ran off to; they must have taken a cab or something and got there early. I could have cared less, because they were always in their own little pompous world away from the rest of the group the whole week, and from what I gathered, the week before too. At any rate, we talked a while in the lobby and they told us to come out to England to check out the countryside. We kissed and shook our goodbyes, and then that was it. Goodbye.

Johnny was still awake in the room, and he missed the whole goodbye all together. It didn’t occur to me that I should have tried to get him when I said my goodbyes. Oh well. Johnny was fixated on cable TV anyway, waiting around for MTV to replay the new U2 video, flipping up the numbers like a madman with ADD. We eventually settled on another Spanish-dubbed episode of *South Park* for a while, and then called it a night. I had a dream that night that I was walking through the dark streets of Lima with Martin and John and we were harassed by a bunch of punks. I hoped it wasn’t a vision of the future or anything.

WE WOKE UP AT FIVE IN THE MORNING with my alarm. It was still dark outside, and I assumed the roosters were still asleep. I was very much awake—especially my bowels because something the night before gave me the runs. I rushed to the bathroom.

We packed our bags and checked out. It was dark and chilly outside, but it was refreshing to breathe in the cool Andean mountain air one last time. The desk clerk just told us to wait around, and soon we were picked up by Zarela, a nice lady from Amazonas that we never met before that was to escort us to the

airport with a van. We rode through the dark streets as the sun began to peer its face over the jagged horizon. Zarela helped us check in at the LanPeru desk and escorted us to the gates. She was a nice woman despite the fact that she was probably all groggy from having to get up so damn early for two Americans. But she liked her job; she told us she was going to be a nurse until she met Paul, joined the adventure travel business and hadn't looked back since. Not a bad idea. Anyway, there was no use for her to wait around a whole hour with us outside the gates, so she left us after wishing us a good flight.

There were many familiar faces in the waiting area by the gates. I saw the Americans we saw at the top of Huayna Picchu, plus the girl from Utah who saw me piss off of Dead Woman's Pass. Johnny and I found a bench to camp out for an hour, near a guy and two girls. I couldn't help but overhear one of the girls talk about getting her camera fixed "back in Jersey" or hearing the name "Rutgers" come up. (It's the state university of New Jersey where Johnny and I went.) We got to talking to them, and the girl was in fact from New Jersey, but with her friends from Miami. (It's a small world after all again.) The three of them hiked the Inca Trail too, but only for a day and a night, from the 104 km. starting point. They were going to be stuck in Lima as well, but were fortunate enough to leave at night.

The flight back to Lima seemed a lot quicker; it felt as if we started to descend as soon as we hit our highest altitude. I guess all journeys seem shorter going back the way you came because it's all familiar. Looking out the window, we saw our last glimpse of the Andes, those magnificent mountains that we were now very familiar with.

CHAPTER NINE: WANDERING LIMA

AN OCEAN MIST SURROUNDED LIMA'S AIRPORT AS WE TOUCHED DOWN. It looked like it was going to drizzle or something. When we were out on the runway, it smelled like an old fish market. Ah yes, the scent of Lima. We were back.

I was less anxious this time about finding our way around. I had faith in Paul's snappy escorts. And lo and behold, as soon as we walked in the airport, we were greeted by an AQP agent who was there to meet us and help us get on our way to our hotel transport. I tried to dazzle him with my Spanish—I had him for a record time

of 30 seconds—until he said something to me and I was like “Uh, *no entiendo?*”

The agent switched to English and led us to our transport. The driver didn’t exactly know what hotel he was going to, but luckily Johnny recognized it. It looked a lot friendlier in the daytime. We checked in—they were expecting us—and got our room. In no time, the TV was on, and Johnny’s relationship with cable was on its way back on track—except this time they only had nineteen channels instead of the fifty or so we had in Cuzco. Nineteen was still better than the seven with his rabbit ears antenna at home, and he was addicted yet again, clicking the remote like a baby with a new Fisher Price toy.

Paul recommended we see the National Gold Museum, and my guidebook intrigued me with the nearby city of Miraflores, so we decided to get a cab and see both. We asked the desk clerk about how to get a cab, and he pulled out a phone number from a book stashed in the back as if it were his secret stash of hitmen or something. He called up a guy he knew and after about fifteen minutes, a car drove up near to the hotel door, with one half up on the sidewalk. I was wondering if hiring this guy was such a good idea.

We hopped in the car anyway, only to find out the guy knew not a word of English, not even a few key words or anything, so it was up to me and my hours of listening to that *Rush Hour Spanish* CD. First I tried to negotiate a fixed price for the ride.

“*¿Cuántos pour El Museo del Oro?*” I asked in broken Spanish. He responded not with a number but with a barrage of Spanish that entered my ears as gibberish. Like a fool, I pretended to understand and continued.

“*¿Y pour Miraflores?*” Again, gibberish in my ears.

“*¿Y pour El Museo y Miraflores?*” More gibberish. He was trying to say something about time and traffic or something. He wouldn’t give a straight number.

“*¿Cent soles?*” I asked. He sort of smiled in approval and we were on our way. I hoped I wasn’t gonna get ripped off. I figured one hundred soles was about

thirty bucks or so, for the whole day. That was better than a one-way ride to the airport in New York City I figured.

The museum was far, far away, all the way on the other side of town. Our driver aggressively zipped in and out of cars all the way through busy and congested streets, most of them plastered with those banners and posters with the words “Alan Peru” on them that I noticed the week before. I learned that they were part of a big presidential ad campaign for the election to come the next day.

Johnny seemed a bit nervous about the driving, but I figured that was just the way it was around there. The trip was long, and it was awkward to just sit there in silence, so the cabbie went for small talk. It was sort of confusing, but with his body language and my puddle full of vocabulary, I actually understood him. I tried to answer back as best I could. He ranted about museums, soccer—there was a big Peru vs. Ecuador game that afternoon—and the upcoming election. (He believed neither of the presidential candidates were any good.) Most of the time, he’d say something, and I’d just nod. “*Si. Si.*” For all I knew, he could have been asking me to lick his dogs’ balls, and I just accepted.

The National Gold Museum wasn’t like a museum in New York, where everything is confined in a single building. It was more like a small college campus, with an entrance gate that led you into a small plaza lined with little boutiques and some sculptures, leading you down a sidewalk towards the main building. The driver dropped us off at the gate and I figured out that he was going to be there when we got back. I wasn’t sure if he was going to pick us up in two hours or at two o’clock. (It was about eleven in the morning.)

Backpacks and cameras weren’t allowed in the complex, so we had to check them in at this shady looking security office with seemingly shady security officers. I had a combination lock on my bag, so I could easily lock it up before giving them my valuables. Johnny had no sort of security device and was really nervous about parting with his precious and pricey RoboCam. But he had no choice. The shady man took his bag, not knowing that only a thin layer of nylon was between him and about \$1600 worth of photographic equipment.

Peru's National Gold Museum was an extensive collection of many things, most not made out of gold. It hosted huge rooms showcasing weapons from different countries from around the globe, all from various time periods. Samurai swords from feudal Japan. World War II German lugers. Stuff like that, all encased behind glass in a sort of cramped haphazard way, like they had so many pieces and not enough room to fit it all. Plus there was no apparent concern for what the moisture and humidity was doing to everything. Johnny could care less, though. All he could think about was the entrance gate guard raping his precious RoboCam. Actually, he was more concerned about the rolls of film he shot which were priceless. But you should have seen how restless he was. He was a nervous wreck.

We went around the other exhibitions of the museum. It wasn't crowded at all. I think it was mainly tourists stuck in Lima for the day like we were. We even ran into the three Americans we met at the Cuzco airport that morning. We saw more weapons, a big room full of damp and dusty textiles, and finally, *gold* artifacts from the Incan Empire. Most of the rooms were dimly lit and smelled of an old musty basement, but at least it was something to do for the day. My favorite part was this showcase of ancient Inca figures enacting pretty much every position in the Kama Sutra. There were literally hundreds of little statues the size of paperweights doing it doggy-style, 69-style, and *ménage a trois* to mention a few. These must have been excavated from an ancient pornography store I guess. Johnny still could care less; RoboCam and his bag of photographic memories was out of his reach. He was out of control.

After browsing the boutiques and buying nothing but some postcards of the pornographic figures so people would believe me, we got our bags and met the driver outside. He was already there waiting. Perhaps he did say "two hours," not "two o'clock." He didn't seem to mind. Soon we were on our way to Miraflores, and Johnny checked his bag. Everything was accounted for and he could finally breathe again and unclench his ass.

My Lonely Planet guidebook suggested that the must-have food in coastal Peru is ceviche, a sort of South American sushi dish made of slices of raw fish "cooked" in the acidity of lime juice and spices. Paul told us seafood in general

was excellent in Miraflores, so I asked our driver if he could suggest any places. He wasn't quite sure where to bring us though, so we had to stop and ask passers-by for suggestions.

Miraflores may have been just a couple miles south of central Lima, but what a difference a couple of miles made. Suddenly we were in this beautiful beach community, reminiscent of Miami's South Beach or L.A.'s Venice Beach. It was an overcast day, but it was still exhilarating being near the Pacific, with its waves racing to the coast just below the higher land we were traveling on. The ocean was such a concept after being surrounded by mountains for a week. Our driver zoomed through the streets like a madman, even accidentally going the wrong way on a major one-way road for a couple of seconds. "My life raced before my eyes," Johnny said. But we survived.

Punta Sal's *cebicheria* and seafood restaurant was located across the street from an open field near a cliff that overlooked the beach, where a bunch of boys were diligently playing the country's favorite sport, soccer. Despite Punta Sal's cartoony mascot that would usually bring to mind a fast food restaurant—it was a cross between Charlie Tuna and Mr. Peanut, a fish with a top hat and cane—it was quite a fancy seaside establishment. We dined on Inka Colas and big piles of citrusy fish. It was very good and I seconded Lonely Planet's suggestion. For dessert, we had *panqueque*, or "pancakes."

After lunch we took pictures across the street at the cliffside park overlooking the ocean. I asked our driver to join us, and he was a good sport. (I guess he figured we'd paid him well.) I found out his name was Isaac (with the "I" pronounced "ee.") Johnny got a picture of the two of us, and you could clearly see how Peruvian I looked with him (minus the Yankee hat)—he could have been a distance uncle or something.

In the distance, there were big statues in a nearby park, and so we walked in their direction. Isaac went to get the car to meet us there. The statues turned out to be part of Parque del Amor, the Park of Love. The big statue in the middle was that of a man and a woman engaged in a horizontal embrace—rather racy for a public statue. The Parque del Amor looked familiar to me. It was reminiscent of Gaudi's Parc Güell in Barcelona (where I was just

one year before), with its distinct mosaic benches and walls. We walked around for a bit. It was a definite makeout place because that's what couples were doing. I mean, it *was* the Park of Love after all. Johnny and I were dateless, and Isaac was double-parked or something, so we hightailed it out of there. Soon, we were back at the hotel, where we paid Isaac the one hundred soles. He had no complaints.

HOTEL KAMANA WASN'T FAR FROM LIMA'S PLAZA DAS ARMAS, so I decided to talk a walk. Johnny's stomach wasn't feeling too hot, so he stayed in yet again to explore and experience another world: cable television.

I wasn't too nervous about walking down the streets. It was day time, and I figured that perhaps all the stories from Paul and the guidebooks were just over exaggerations, just like they always are every time I go away. Besides, I wasn't an easily targeted touristy white guy.

The main plaza was only four or so blocks away. It was nice to be there with all the people—international tourists, Peruvian tourists, and street performers. There was even a man on stilts passing out flyers. There was a big fountain the middle of the plaza, which was backdropped by Lima's old cathedral. You could clearly see the mark of the Spanish on this part of town. In fact, across the street from one of the corners of the plaza was a statue of Pizarro, the Spanish conquistador that conquered Peru. Why the Peruvians still had a statue of the man that killed of the indigenous people I'll never know. Then again, the United States is full of those same kinds of statues and I hardly think twice about it. I walked around and tried to take some interesting photos.

One end of the plaza fed out to the Jiron de la Union, this long walking promenade full of shops and restaurants, sort of like a shopping mall without a roof. The promenade was bustling with people like it was the weekend before Christmas already. I walked through the chaos, and I felt something. There was an energy I felt around me, like an electricity in the air, and I don't mean electric electricity. Soon I realized most people were rushing to a television, to watch the big soccer game of Peru vs. Ecuador, and clearly the national spirit

was everywhere. When the game started, people's lives shut down. It didn't matter what else was going on in the world; Peru was playing soccer. In every restaurant, bar, boutique, or tiny souvenir stand, heads were all focused on a television to watch and cheer on. I was so excited to be part of it all, as the pride of the nation infested me as well. I had no one to share it with, so I rushed back to the hotel to get Johnny. The hotel manager and all of the staff were fixated on the television in the hotel restaurant.

"ARE YOU WATCHING THIS?" I said back in the room.

"What?" Johnny said, lying in bed, flipping through cable.

"The big soccer game. Peru vs. Ecuador. Everybody out there is watching it. Everyone on the street is watching it, even the tiny dive shops. It's like that scene in *Armageddon*," I told him. (I was referring to the scene when the president of the United States makes a speech about the meteor headed for Earth and everyone in every country is watching him on TV.) Then I noticed the sound of the toilet tank filling.

Johnny went to the bathroom and started jiggling the handle. Apparently, he took a dump while I was gone, and I guess without thinking twice, accidentally flushed toilet paper down the bowl, the big no-no in South America. The clumps of paper and his shit just wouldn't completely flush, and so Johnny was pushing down the handle away like a senior citizen at a slot machine in Atlantic City.

"You put toilet paper in, didn't you?" I said.

"I thought we could do it here, just not in Cuzco," he said.

"Paul said it was a *South American* rule," I told him. I don't think either of us did a Number Two our first night in Lima, so we never had to think of it. Johnny continued flushing until everything finally went down the hole.

"So you wanna grab a drink and watch the game?" I asked him.

"Really? I didn't know you liked soccer," he said.

"Yeah, I love soccer. And I've always wanted to be in a country where soccer is really big, and watch them go crazy in the streets. You can just feel the

energy out there in the streets. Let's go find a bar or something and watch. It's not so bad out there," I told him. He started to put on his shoes.

"You're not gonna take me to a dive bar are you?"

"Nah, we'll find a good place, it's on everywhere."

WE WONDERED DOWN THE STREET in the direction away from the Plaza das Armas, just to see if there was any place closer. Just one block away, we were on a main thoroughfare which we turned onto and eventually made it back to Jiron de la Union by accident. The soccer game was at halftime, so people were temporarily going on with their lives. Temporarily. Johnny and I walked around the promenade and checked out the shops. We didn't buy anything though. There was a church nearby that we checked out. It was Sunday so mass was in session, and it was interesting to see the usual Catholic routine go on in a different language. We walked all the way up to Plaza das Armas and took some more photos.

The game started up again, and we eventually wound up in some restaurant with a mezzanine level that hosted the game with a modest-sized TV mounted in a high corner. Ecuador was up by one and the crowd was restless. We got a table with a fair view, and ordered a couple of Inka Colas. The room was dimly lit, and they couldn't serve huge amounts of beer with the election coming up, but the place was still alive with all the energy as people were cheering on their fellow countrymen. Whenever Peru would go for a goal and miss, we'd all exclaim in unison, "Awwww..." You could even hear it from outside. There are just some things that are universal, where ever you go.

The second half was coming to a close and Ecuador was up by two now. The easily discouraged gave up hope and left the restaurant, giving us a better view. We stayed until the end, cheering our host country, hoping for that magical corner kick. But in the end, Peru lost, and everyone got on with their lives. So did we.

We had accomplished a lot for a day "stuck in Lima." In fact, I was pleasantly surprised with the city because so many people gave me warnings that it was this ultra-crime ridden metropolis where trouble hunts you down.

So I decided to share my good experience with the rest of the trekking crew who would most likely be “stuck in Lima” the following day. I wrote them a note and posted it on the bulletin board near the elevator:

AMAZONAS EXPLORER

June 3, 2001

To: Matt, Glyn, Sarah, Tamzin

(and whoever else is “stuck”

in Lima for a day)

Hope your flight from Cuzco went well. Lima isn't as bad as you may have thought...at least not in the daytime. Grab a taxi and check out Parque Del Amor in Miraflores. It's near the ocean so you can see the waves “undulating.” Also, try the cebiche at Punta Sal's (near the park.) The Plaza das Armas isn't bad either. (You can walk there.)

Keep in touch,

Erik and Johnny

Nighttime set over Lima, and it seemingly became scary again, at least for us vulnerable tourists. We turned in fairly early anyway because we had to wake up for our early flight the next morning. We just sat in the room, and I flipped around the tube with Johnny who was an old pro now. To our surprise, we picked up WABC, the local New York affiliate of the ABC network, and we watched our own New Jersey Devils play for the Stanley Cup. We were slowly being acclimatized back to the homeland, sort of like the way we had to acclimatize to the altitude coming into this trip.

WE WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING AT 4:55. Our bags were pretty much packed up from the night before, so it was an easy checkout. Outside, a lone van was waiting for us on the dark and abandoned street. We rode to the airport. It was a peaceful time of day for this bustling city, quiet and traffic-free. It was Lima's quiet goodbye to us.

The airport livened things up as we were suddenly thrown back into the madness that only an airport could deliver. We lined up at the Continental Airlines line, along with fellow Americans who were also smart enough to get there fairly early before departure. Suddenly, a familiar voice. "ERIK! Erik from First Street!" It was Pete From Marin Boulevard, the one I met at Huayna Picchu. He was on his way somewhere. We checked in our bags—I made sure to secure my walking stick to my pack—and then went over to pay our \$25 departure tax. We had time to kill so we browsed through the airport stores. Then we parked at a café, where we had a light breakfast and watched the news on TV. It was election day after all, and field reporters were all over the country doing spot interviews, from the peasant villages of the Amazon basin where it didn't seem like a change in the presidency would mean anything, to the seaside city of Miraflores and the great city of Cuzco where we just came from.

After breakfast, we waited around the waiting area by the gate with the rest of the people. I acclimatized more into the American scene with more Kerouac. Then Pete From Marin Boulevard showed up again, this time with his traveling companion Adrian who was a photographer. This was probably the only flight for the day to the New York area, so we were bound to run into each other again. We got a group photo of the Jersey City Boys. Pete gave me his card, and I said I'd contact him back in Jersey. "See you at the Hard Grove," he

said. (He was referring to the Cuban diner in Jersey City that everyone in the neighborhood knew about.)

On the runway, we taxied a while, and I read my book, *On The Road*. Johnny had nothing to read except for the airport magazines. Johnny had a gift and addiction for finding useless technical information, and found the page about the different airplanes in Continental's fleet. "Did you know that this plane has 200 more horsepower than this one?" as he pointed out two planes on a page.

"Uh, really?" I said to entertain him, and continued on with my book. Things were returning back to normal.

The flight back was relaxing. We flew north, back to the hustle and bustle that only America could provide. We were bringing precious cargo this time, but not in the tangible form (unless you count the eighteen rolls of film we shot combined.) We were bringing back memories, memories to last us a lifetime, memories of Brits, altitude sickness, and llamas. Oh, and Machu Picchu and that funny little chasqui boy too. What an adventure it was.

There were two movies on the flight back, *Miss Congeniality* (which I watched) and *Thirteen Days* (which I opted to read instead). Soon, we were back at Newark International. Johnny's brother Tony picked us up, and soon we were home.

MARTIN EVENTUALLY SENT US HIS VIDEO, and it was beautifully and amazingly shot. (We even got to see the canoeing and rafting portions of their three-week trip.)

I selected a bunch of photos from our massive collection, and posted them on the web to share with the others. No body responded (except for Martin in our email back and forths over the video). I even sent the link to Pete From Marin Boulevard, but he never wrote back.

For weeks, I tried to track down roasted guinea pig at the Peruvian eateries in the New York area since I missed out all those times in Peru. But no such luck. I'd have to wait until the next time I'd go back to South America.

Months later, Johnny finally got cable television, and he hasn't looked back since.