

December, 2016

Dear Friends and Family,

I finally made it to Peru. It was my bridge from the west coast of the U.S. to the east coast at approximately the midpoint of a ten week, eleven state trip to visit friends and family this fall. More about that trip another time. Instead of visiting a friend who lives in Texas she joined me in Peru.

Lima was the hub from which we did two forays – one very quick visit to Machu Picchu, and another, slightly longer trip to the Amazon.

In Lima we stayed in a boutique hotel in the San Isidro neighborhood which was very peaceful and housed many Embassies. Taxis were inexpensive and plentiful and I was happy to have followed the advice of a Peruvian traveler I met on a walking tour in Berlin last spring to not stay in the old city, which was where I had initially booked. Having said that, an afternoon bus tour was fascinating and especially interesting that many of the historic buildings (palaces, court houses, parliament, “white house”) were designed by Italian and Polish architects in the



19th and 20th C. There are also many balconies dating from Spanish colonial times.

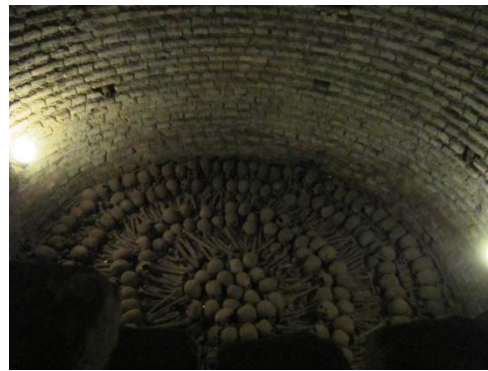
It was a Sunday so there was traditional dancing on the main square, Plaza de Armas, which apparently occurs from a different region of the country each week.



There was lots of purple bunting on display as it was the eve of one of the most important processions during the festival of the Lord of Miracles, a uniquely Lima/Peruvian celebration.



We toured the San Francisco Monastery (still active with a handful of monks) and its catacombs. Although photography was not allowed I did sneak a photo of one of the deep cisterns where the lime-preserved skeletons were eventually rearranged. Apparently each church in colonial times had a catacomb as well as tunnels connecting it to the closest nearby



churches.

Street markets were active on Sunday with many side streets closed to traffic other than pedestrians which became very full when the day's football (soccer) match terminated as the



stadium is in the heart of the old city. There are many lovely parks, both grand and modest in



the residential neighborhoods.

We met up with friends for lunch in the fashionable Miraflores neighborhood at the Larcomar shopping center which is very deceiving. At street level there is a large plaza and no evidence that descending the hillside below you to ocean level is a multistory modern shopping center! We returned again for dinner and admired the nighttime view of the lights along the sweep of the ocean.



Having only two days total in Lima we opted to visit the MALI which was an excellent choice. The building (Exhibition Palace) was built in 1871 for the first public Expo of Peruvian Arts, Science and Industry to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Independence of Peru. The building represents the eclectic architecture that characterizes the city of Lima and was designed by Italian architect Antonio Leonardi and Gustave Eiffel with its iron columns still supporting the structure. The collection of pre-Colombian art was especially outstanding and informative as to the significant differences in materials, styles and symbolisms among the different regions of Peru. The religiously-oriented art of the colonial period had its own

local flavor and most especially the Cusco (gateway to Machu Picchu) school with its gold wash overlaying the painting.



The other main Lima activity was an evening of traditional dance performances and dinner buffet at Donas Juanas. Again the music and dancing styles and costumes were highly varied according to the region. I think my favorite was what was called coastal/African (the ones in the orange outfits). The buffet was actually of better quality than one expects at such an



establishment. We also had the delight of dining at Astrid y Gaston, one of Lima's gourmet restaurants, at its new location in San Isidro where I had my first taste of cuy (guinea pig) as an appetizer on blue corn tortillas. Peruvian Chinese food known as Chifa is very popular fast food but we didn't get to try it.



We made the briefest possible visit to Machu Picchu and were very lucky with the weather, there having been showers in the morning before we arrived and thunderstorms just after we

departed! I had wanted to avoid spending time in Cusco at 11,000' elevation. However, the trains down to MP (~8000' el) departed early in the morning before any flights arrive from Lima. At the moment the trains don't leave from Cusco station but from Poroy, 18 km on the other side of a mountain from Cusco. Due to a delayed flight from Lima (because of bad weather in Cusco) we didn't arrive in Cusco with the planned afternoon to explore the lovely old town and saw only the main square (also Plaza de Armas) when dining the following evening after



returning from MP.

Our itinerary was the expedition train with domed observation cars descending at 7 am arriving MP (or Agua Caliente as the town is actually called) at 11am. Then we caught the bus which runs continuously up the half hour drive to the entry point to MP. The changes in landscape on the train ride were impressive, from farmland to snow-capped peaks (snowing as we passed by) with a rushing river accompanying us. As we went through towns the train was blowing its horn at the crossing streets causing everyone to be covering their ears! It was spring time so the fields were newly planted and there were baby lambs, piglets, calves, etc.



I saw the type of eucalyptus we used to sell in the flower shop, which I have never seen growing before! Plus bright colors from the bromeliads living (parasites) on the trees, and many areas of rock slides. We saw a new road under construction which might in the future make the descent

by car safer than it is currently reported to be. En route on the train we passed large groups of hikers setting out from Olyantampo for the Inca trail and the Austrian couple who were our seat mates on the train were planning to spend three weeks based in MP.



From the bus there were some good views of MP and the dawning amazement of the steepness of the terrain on which the city was sited! Once there we were a bit worried that we wouldn't find a route to a viewing point that we could actually negotiate with our various infirmities, but fortunately with the cane and helpful visitors we negotiated stairs and found a viewpoint. That was all that we were hoping to do – no hiking, no tour guide. The overall impression between the art at MALI and Machu Picchu of a taste of what the Inca civilization accomplished in a mere century of its ascendancy is overwhelming!



And of course the view to where we didn't go!

Based on shortness of breath and a slight headache when in Cusco I now know that destinations higher than 11,000' elevation are not on my bucket list (not that they were!). I was fine at MP.

After a cancelled flight but eventual return to Lima the next day we turned right around the following morning to fly to Iquitos, gateway to the Amazon. In fact, Iquitos is only accessible by water or air and for most of the flight from Lima there was nothing below us but jungle and winding waterways. By the way, we were totally pleased with Peruvian Airlines' service. They

were very customer oriented and communicated well regarding what was happening with delays, etc.

Iquitos is a bustling city of ½ million people (fifth largest in Peru) with a unique personality. Transport is by motorcycle rickshaws called motokars which are ubiquitous and cheap. The main square is dominated by a large multi-storied blue hotel that has been abandoned for decades! But a very interesting building on the same square, the Iron House, was purchased at the 1889 Paris International Exposition and after disassembling for shipping required hundreds of men to carry the heavy iron pieces through the jungle. The building is square and although originally a residence, it quite resembles many of the traditional covered markets in France.



The rubber 'barons' invested in handsome residences which used tile as decoration (a la Portugal), some of which still survive from the late 19th C. The rubber boom was relatively short lived, however. The Amazon bistro, owned by a Belgian, gave us a real at home feeling with European food and good beer and wine.

There is a long corniche with views over the river, floating village/market, sculptures and former rubber baron houses. Of course what is cultivated now will be under water in another





month! The Belen market is well known and another claim to fame is that Werner Herzog's 1982 film Fitzcarraldo was largely filmed in Iquitos.

Iquitos is actually on the Itaya river whose water is almost black and as you reach the junction with the Amazon the water color change to a milky white is dramatic. A coast guard post as we left Iquitos was registering everyone's destination on the Amazon. A significant part of Iquitos is on floating structures and as we were there at the lowest water level time of year (the rains were expected to start less than a month later) the climb down somewhat makeshift stairs to get to our boat to the lodge was a challenge.



We chose Muyunas Lodge, 140 kms up river (3 hours by speed boat) which is locally owned and largely staffed from the adjacent village. En route our drivers (we were three boats) stopped at a floating café for a quick lunch break and we got to see a local ferry also stop for food.



At the lodge after climbing up two flights of stairs from current water level we were on elevated walkways and cabins that made it clear how different the experience would be for a visit during high water season. By the way, the good news was that there is no malaria in this area and we really weren't aware of bugs. Our cabin was completely screened so we didn't need to sleep under nets. It was heavenly to wake up each morning to the varied animal sounds.



The food at our lodge was excellent and largely grown or caught locally. The Amazon visit experience is organized similar to an African safari. Breakfast was at 6 am and we were out on the water exploring flora and fauna (smaller, quieter boats) until late morning. We returned to the lodge for lunch and a siesta then the afternoon again on the water or on forest trails. After dinner there was an evening water excursion to see nocturnal critters, especially to find caiman. Of course no participation is mandatory and all is included in the package price. We spent three days and two nights but some people stayed five or more days and went further afield and did more activities such as fishing for piranhas and eating them - delicious - according to the fisherman. We are off grid although solar panels generate enough to power some LED lighting and a shared plug for charging cameras.



We saw two types of monkeys and countless types of birds – Peru alone has 1800 species, more than North America and Europe combined, 168 of which can be seen in the

vicinity of our lodge. My favorite were the russet colored hawk with a head like an owl, the water birds with delicate yellow wing tips (a type of Jacamar) that walked on the vegetation choking our tributary river (the YanaYacu meaning black river in local Quecha language) and the



fluffy babies of the large horned screamer. Of course elegant white and grey herons were always around as well as cormorants. There were always three cormorants perched on a snag just upstream from our lodge and I kept wondering if it was always the same three!



First time views for me were the three toed sloth, from which we derive the word slothful, or is it vice versa? It sleeps 20 hours a day, chews food for the rest and has the slowest digestive system of any mammal so it needs to descend its tree to defecate only once every one or two weeks.



We are on the edge of the Pacaya Samiria National Park and Reserve. Here is our neighboring village Caserio de San Juan de Yana Yacu and some of our neighbors.





Among the system of tributary rivers there are also some large lakes, one of which is known as *currentes* (i.e. electricity) because it is full of electric eels.



We also saw the mud holes of catfish all along the embankments and fenced areas where villagers contain the catfish once they are caught. In one area there was such a density of catfish it looked as if we could easily scoop up a



meal's worth from our boat.

Keeping in mind that the vast majority of travel is by boat, there were all manner of craft to be seen.



The Amazon at this location is very wide and realizing how much wider it would be after the rains was hard to imagine except you could see the mud lines about 20' up on the trees on shore. For example the banks were all currently under cultivation with corn, rice, beans and other vegetables, plus tapioca (cassava/manioc) and banana trees grew above the normal high



water mark. A large island in the river is known as Buenos Aires. The very center has a town where students from the region go to high school and board there. In the rainy season the rest

of the island disappears under water. Currently crops are being harvested prior to the beginning of the rains.

It was near Buenos Aires's shore that we found the pink dolphins. These are a river dolphin, they don't leap about, just surface slightly periodically to breathe through their blow hole. Their shape is somewhat bulky (to me almost like a manatee) and they eat all types of fish including crustaceans and small turtles. I've included a stock photo so you can see what the animal actually looks like.



To accomplish all we did in 9 nights meant we were up at 5 am virtually every morning! This was a wonderful first taste of Peru and I know there are many low elevation destinations that are highly varied for future visits. And we never did get to see a Llama!

I think this ranks as the most significant travel contrast ever as I departed by speedboat from the Amazon jungle lodge to Iquitos in the morning, flew to Lima and immediately flew overnight to New York City!