

Peru Story

Introduction



This year I did my third Charity Challenge Trek, with the British organisation 'Across the Divide' (ATD). Having previously done the Husky Sledding Trek, in the Norwegian Arctic, and the Desert Trek, in Namibia, this year I went to Peru, for a 6 day trek, ultimately leading up to the 'Lost City of the Incas', Machu Picchu! It was to be a mentally and physically challenging, but, at the same time, enormously satisfying and amazing trip.

Charity

This year I had chosen the charity "R.A.I.N.", a local small animal charity, close to the Veterinary Practice I work at. The main aim of R.A.I.N. is to rescue, rehabilitate and re-home animals, and to provide any help that is needed in terms of general care and veterinary treatment. For further information about R.A.I.N. please go to their website at www.rain.org.uk

Preparation

I started some months ago, getting fit enough again, by doing weekly exercise at the gym, going for the odd run or bike ride, doing agility with my dog, and keeping an eye on general fitness, nutrition and health. I also bought some further supplies of trekking gear, energy powders and bars and wet wipes and other necessary items. By the end of May I was ready, apart from a persistent cough/cold. I took it easy for a few days and went to Heathrow to meet up with my fellow trekkers. Some of these had done treks before, but most were 'trekking virgins'.

Lift off

We had a long hard day of travelling ahead of us, including flights to Madrid first, then on to Lima, the Peruvian capital on the coast at sea level. From the plane we saw the Peruvian jungle below us, including the river systems which make up the start of the mighty Amazon River. After that we flew over the Andes mountain range, very impressive! We stayed at a hotel for the night, getting our first information and briefing about the actual trek from the trek leader that night. Max Milligan, a Brit who has lived in Peru for the last 24 years, is an expert on Inca and Peruvian history and culture and has written several books on the subject. The following day we moved on to Cuzco, the Inca capital, by flying

back over the Andes, and further inland to a height of some 3300m! As soon as we came off the plane, we noticed the effects of altitude, which we had been warned about. You get a feeling of being short of breath straight away, and every day exercise becomes a strenuous affair. Also, people can suffer from various more serious side effects of living at altitude, such as headaches, dizziness, nausea and in severe cases even more serious symptoms such as pulmonary or cerebral edema! I only had the headache and after a cup of coca tea (said to reduce the effects of altitude sickness) we walked around town for a bit. We then boarded a coach for a trip higher into the mountains, where we had a spot of lunch at 3800m! I felt dizzy as I walked to the one and only loo at this point. There were three Peruvian ladies selling beautiful colourful stuff though, like woolly hats, socks and other souvenirs, as I were to find out was the usual situation, wherever I went. We followed the Urubamba river up to Ollantaytambo, the most perfectly kept proper Inca village in Peru. The small cobbled streets don't seem appropriate for big coaches to drive through, but the villagers welcome tourists. We got off the bus and walked for the first time in several days, up to our first camp site for the night, on a terraced mountain side, Cachicata, at 2800m. We were surprised to find that there were toilets, and even showers, as well as a dining room. Guess they wanted to make us feel slightly 'civilized' at this stage. Things were to change soon! By 9pm we were all in bed, in shared tents, which had been put up by the local staff.

Ruins



Early in the morning on the next day we were woken up by the local helpers with a friendly 'good morning', some hot coca tea, and a plastic bowl with 'Aqua Caliente', or hot water, to have a quick morning wash. This was to be the regular morning routine for the next week! After breakfast we walked back into Ollantaytambo, to see some more of the village and to visit the famous Inca Ruins there. Here we had a 2 hour tour of the ruins, whilst a local guide told us all about the Inca culture, history and religion. Afterwards we went into the centre of the village, where most of the streets and the houses are still exactly the way they were during the time of the Incas. We visited 2 very small houses, from a small courtyard, just off one of the many tiny, narrow streets. The people living in these houses allow ATD to bring visitors, probably for a small fee, to show their way of living and to try and sell some of the goods they produce. The houses were basically one room only, with living and sleeping quarters, as well as kitchen and other areas in various corners. The most eye-catching feature of these houses were the 30 or so Guinea Pigs

running around, loose and free, on the floor. They were eating some grass provided, but served as food themselves, at special occasions, like traditional feasts. Roast Guinea Pig, or 'cuy', is a delicacy in Peru. Another important feature, carefully positioned in small niches in the wall, is a collection of skulls of the forefathers of the people living there presently! They keep watch over the property and the people within. Kind of creepy in our minds, but totally normal for them. After our visit I bought some small souvenirs from the proprietor of the second house and went into the centre of the village for a break. I, and many others with me, bought a walking stick, as well as a poncho and a hat. These items are incredibly cheap, compared to what we are used to in the UK. We then took the coach further into the surrounding mountains, to a height of 3000m. After a picnic, we started to walk again, for only a couple of hours this afternoon. Camp was ready for us, at 3200m, near a small village, with a school and some toilets and showers. I did have a shower, even though there was only ice cold water! Still, better than nothing. After some afternoon tea and a dinner of mash and stew, we all went to bed at about 8.30pm, which was to be the norm for the next few days.

Humbling experience

The next morning we had breakfast with 'eggy bread', before we experienced something very special. The local school, visited by some 30 children or so, was right where we stayed the night. Some of the kids had to walk for 2 hours, over the mountains, on flip flops, to reach school! No school runs by mums in their 4x4s here! We had all been asked by ATD to bring some small items which might be of use to the local children. Most of us had brought some simple things, such as children toothbrushes, balloons, elastic hair bands, pencils, notebooks or small fluffy toy animals. All these items were divided into 30 small piles on a sheet laid out before the kids. There was no running, no shouting, no fighting, no jealousy, no nothing. Even I started to like kids, and that is saying something!

After some words by the local guide, one by one the kids were invited to choose a pile of items from the sheet. Again, this was a very calm affair, and you wouldn't believe the joy and happiness on these kids' faces when they collected what we would regard as something so very tiny, cheap and unimportant. Most of them got a pencil, 2 balloons, a couple of elastics and perhaps a small toy. It was a very humbling experience for us all. We also donated a football and a rugby ball to the school. Afterwards the children all sang a song or two for us. Most of us had tears in our eyes by then. It made us all realise what's important in life, and that the value of 'things' is so very relative to what kind of world we live in.

Afterwards we started our long hard walk for the day. We saw the Inca Ruins, at 3400m, where we were to have lunch, from the campsite, but it was about 4 hours walking still! These ruins have only been cleared in the last few years, with the help of ATD, after they helped discover them in the first place. There our

leader Max told us something about the history of the Incas. After lunch we went further uphill. For some this was just too much, at least at this altitude, and the packhorses we had with us for most of the trek, came in very handy, either for people to ride, or at least for our packs to be carried by, when we were totally out of breath. At 3800m we found a lone old busker, playing his zither type instrument and singing local folklore songs! We gave him some fruits and other small foodstuffs, as well as some local money. We finally reached our campsite, at Corimarca, just before dark. It was perched on a mountain side, with the most amazing views. At dinner time we saw another novelty: Max getting presented with a roast guinea pig, perfectly perched on top of some roast potatoes, by the locals, the children of whom were Max' godchildren. This was then some sort of offering to him, as a sign of respect. Some of the trekkers did not particularly like this idea, but others joined Max in tasting a little bit. I did as well, and to be honest it was a bit tough. And no, it didn't taste like chicken! After dinner it was an early night, both because it was bloody cold outside, but also because the next day we were to get up at 5am, as this was to be our hardest and longest day of the entire trek. I zipped myself in my sleeping bag, wearing thermals, a T-shirt, a woolly hat, and woolly socks!

The long and winding road

After a very early morning call, we had breakfast of hot porridge. Most of us were still wearing our thermals! At 6am we started our day's walk, which sometimes takes 8 hours, sometimes 12 hours, depending on the general fitness of the group. We passed mountain streams with lots of icicles on the grass around it, and did a 4 hours steady steep climb, most of us with pounding headaches, to try and reach the highest point of the entire trek, at 4445m. Here we saw the most stunning views I have ever seen, showing snow capped mountains in all directions around us. Most of us were quite emotional at this stage, as it was the culmination of climbing for so many hours. All of us took photos, shook hands and hugged each other. I was quite proud of myself to have made it up the mountain, without having to resort to using the horses at all. After a picnic lunch at a river we followed our day's walk, slightly less strenuously, and mostly downhill, to our next campsite, at the highest level of the week, at 3960m. We passed a very small farmhouse, where one of the richest people in the area lives, by choice, with nothing more than some livestock, her little house and the mountains around her. Amazing! We had made it to camp in just over 8 hours and were rewarded with tea and popcorn at arrival. Again, after dinner it was an early night, as most of us were quite simply exhausted.

Down, down, down

The next morning I woke up cold, stiff and with a pounding headache. It was 0°C inside the tent, and even the woolly socks etc hadn't managed to keep me nice and warm. We had a later start today and had breakfast outside in the early morning sun, with pancakes. Life doesn't get much better than that really. Today was to be a relatively easy walk, along a mountain stream, downhill all the way, through the Elfin Forest, towards the Sacred Valley. All the time we had a magnificent view of the Sacred Mountain, Mount Veronica, in the distance, which kept us going. The walk through the forest was more hot and humid than anything we had encountered before, but when we came to our lunch spot we forgot all of this. We had lunch at a river, near a waterfall, sitting on a rock, enjoying these incredible views. Later that afternoon we visited the farm Max bought a few years ago, which still needs a lot of work. Time for a group photo on a big rock, and onwards to the next camp site, at 2981m. The camp was just near a stream of ice cold glacier water, perfect for a dip! Some of us braved the water for a quick dip, some of us chose to have a proper, but cold, shower. I did both. We had some free time this afternoon to relax, sunbathe, catch up on writing diaries, or just have a chat with our newfound friends. I bought a proper Peruvian woolly hat, featuring llamas of course, from one of the local traders at the campsite. Dinner was a bit special as well today: potatoes and lamb were prepared in a sort of 'ground oven' (a bit like the 'Hangi' ovens in New Zealand), made by collapsing hot rocks from above a campfire into a big pile, on which layers of food were heaped, and then covered with cardboard and plastic and earth. An hour later or so, dinner was ready! Not bad at all in fact. After dinner we all sat around a big campfire to drink some beers or a glass of wine (for the first time this week, as alcohol and altitude don't really go together very well). As usual, there were some people telling jokes and the 'party' went on for ages.

Hot stuff

The next day we had a late start, not in the least because of the party the night before, and we all had breakfast outside again, this time eggs and sausages. We then set off for a short walk through the Sacred Valley and through a cactus wood. Here we found cacti of some 15ft high! At about lunchtime we reached our final campsite for the week, and it was a treat. There were proper toilets, hot showers and even a sauna! Also, some of the tents were put up underneath a small thatched roof, so they stayed cool. Unfortunately I was in the second group this day (the whole group of trekkers was divided in two smaller groups for walking on each day, called the 'Condors' and the 'Pumas'), so that they were all taken. Still, we had lunch, and then had some time to relax and sunbathe again, before some friends and I enjoyed a very hot and aromatic sauna, before having a shower. We bought some further souvenirs from the local people and had dinner and coffee. We were all thinking of the very big day tomorrow, as this was to be the culmination of the whole week's trek, when we would reach Machu Picchu (MP). It was to be the second hardest and longest day trekking, but worth it!

Lost City found!



We set off early in the morning for a short walk to the train station of the 'Camino Inka', or 'Inka Trail', at Piscacucho, at km 82. After some obligatory photographs under the sign we boarded the train, to get us to km 104, where we were to get off and do the rest on foot. When we got off, we entered the 'Machu Picchu National Park', entrance to which is limited to 500 people per day only, to preserve the state of the paths and staircases used. We were on a tight time schedule, as the last admission to MP was at 4.30pm. The walk over the ancient Inka Trail paths was a very arduous one and we must have done thousands of big steep Inka stone steps, in fact so many I never want to see a stone step ever again! Lunch today was at a beautiful waterfall once again. A bit later we reached the famous Inka ruins of Wayna wanya, with fantastic views of the surrounding mountains and clouds. We were the only people there and each and every one of us got given some time to sit down and think about our personal reasons behind our trek, the charity we had raised money for, the people we loved or anything personal really. This was to be quite a satisfying and emotional time for most of us. After this we only had the rest of the afternoon to reach MP and just then it started to rain. After all, we were in a 'cloud forest', and it wasn't green for no reason! Out came the ponchos and rainproofs. After many more stone steps, we finally reached the 'Sun Gate', through which we were to see the full extent of MP for the first time. Just before we got to the summit, all the staff lined up to congratulate us on achieving our goal. Finally walking through the 'gate' was, again, an emotional moment for most of us, and we all spent some time taking it all in. After that, there was a 45 minute walk down to MP. Unfortunately, MP was still looking very grey in the afternoon rain and mist. When we got to MP itself, it was still raining and we took some photos, hoping that, in the morning when we were to return, things would be better for a group photo or two. All of us were tired, sweaty and wet and we couldn't get to the hotel in Aguas Calientes (Hot Springs) soon enough, for our promised hot shower. When we got to the hotel, there was a further surprise waiting for us: within no time at all the lights went out due to a total powercut! And I mean all the lights, in the whole of the town! More importantly, the showers weren't working anymore either! By torch light and candlelight most of us managed to just freshen up a little, before we were to go out in town for a celebratory 'gala-dinner'. Amazingly enough, the restaurant was still able to provide us with a decent meal for over 30 people, cooked on gas stoves, at candlelight! I suppose they must have done this before. After a nice meal and

some speeches we went back to the hotel, still bathed in candlelight. Surely it was going to be OK in the morning?

Try again!

The next morning we got up at 5am, had an early breakfast (yes, in the dark still!) and got the bus up to MP once again, for an early visit, to try and see the first light onto MP this time. After a good example of how not to run the administrative office of the greatest tourist attraction in the whole of South America, we finally made it to the entrance to MP, only to see it raining again. We were promised a 2 hour tour of the city by our local guides, but this was cut short slightly due to the weather. MP itself is an amazing place, put on this particular mountain top for very good reasons, to do with Inka religion and culture in mind. The various temples, houses and terraces are all in a very good state of repair and the explanation of the guides made everything more interesting yet. After a coffee it was time for the arranged group photo at the ideal photo spot, overlooking the entire complex. We all got together, with our cameras in hand, not expecting many nice shots, when suddenly.....the sun came out! In no time at all MP was bathed in beautiful sunlight, with a backdrop of glorious mountains, still draped in fluffy clouds, perfect for our photos! We all took the necessary shots, people alone, couples, small groups, the entire group etc. Some of the trekkers wore the T-shirts of the charity they had done the trek for, to show them back home they made it to the top. After the photo shoot, there was an opportunity for some of the group to do a further 2 hour climb up Machu Picchu mountain, behind us, for some more impressive views of the MP city. I chose to go into town for some more coffee and some cheap shopping at the local market. I bought way too many souvenirs, but at those prices, who can blame me? After some relaxing in a bar overlooking the main square it was time for lunch in a restaurant before the trip back to Cuzco, by train and coach. Late in the evening we arrived in Cuzco at a nice hotel, where there was actually power! We went out in small groups for a late evening dinner around the main square. Some friends and I found the well known 'Inka Grill' and enjoyed a nice meal with some bubbly!

The long, long way home

The next day there was just the small matter of getting back to the UK. This involved 3 more flights, some free time in Lima and a lot of time sitting in airports. Finally, on Friday the 13th, we all arrived back in the UK in one piece. After some heart wrenching goodbyes we all went our way to our homes, to tell our loved ones what we had achieved and experienced. We were all tired, jet lagged and quite emotional after such an amazing trek, but richer for it. We brought home souvenirs, photos, walking sticks and much more, but, more importantly, had one of the most fantastic experiences of our lives and started some beautiful friendships. Would I do it again? You bet! These challenge treks are a bit addictive, you know. I've now done three, all amazing, all interesting in

their own right, all very different though, and I can't wait to do another, hopefully with some of my newfound friends. Next stop: The Great Wall of China probably. Watch this space.

Pete van Dongen