

THE PERUVIAN DIARY OF A SCOTTISH LADY BY MOIRA FURMAGE.

It is late afternoon. The sun is warm. And I am planting potatoes in Peru. Beside me, two oxen till the land with a wooden plough. I feel a million miles from home.

The journey had started in Cusco at 11,000ft. After 15 hours of flying, we'd made our way by bus to our first campsite at Parpiso. En route, we visited Moray, and Inca experimental farm, where they'd transformed a natural depression into circular terraces of differing sizes and aspects to create micro climates and study the effects of altitude on different plants. Then it was on to view the saltpans at Maras, before finally making camp at 5pm.

I'd already completed the first part of my challenge, of course, by raising £2,500 for Cancer Research UK. Now began the second and third parts – coping with the physical demands of walking up to 10 hours a day at high altitude and living with people I'd only just met.

Our typical day starts at 05:30, when we crawl from our warm sleeping bags into the chill of the morning. Our porters bring mugs of steaming hot Coca tea and we savour it as we contemplate the tasks ahead: get dressed, pack our main rucksacks, pack our day-sacks, fill our water bottles – and only then breakfast on fruit, bread, 'red' jam (of indeterminate origin!) eggs and pancakes. A veritable feast. There's also some finely ground cereal on the table which, we are told, has a high energy content and is used by US astronauts. We heap the 'NASA magic Mix' onto our fruit.

A slow climb along the side of the mountain rewards us with lovely views of the valley below. But some of the group have already fallen victim to Acute Mountain Sickness. AMS affects most people to some extent over 7,500 ft, regardless of how fit they may be. As less oxygen reaches the brain and the muscles, the lungs and heart have to work harder. First symptoms are headache and nausea – and if they persist the only cure is to descend. You ignore the warning signs at your peril – AMS can be fatal.

Our second campsite is at Chillipawa (12,400 ft) just past the little village school. All Peruvians are mad about football and even the smallest villages have a field set aside as a football pitch. This is the only piece of flat land and we are greatly honoured to be allowed to erect our tents there. The children don't seem to mind, though – they haven't seen any 'gringos' for almost a year and we're even more entertaining than a football match!

We have a briefing about the next day's climb, followed by dinner of hot soup, chicken and potatoes and a fruity jelly pudding derived from purple maize. It's dark by 6 o'clock and we're in bed by 8:30 – to keep warm and save our torch batteries.

The next day turns out to be gruelling. We're up at 05:30 and ready to leave by 08:00. The horses set out laden with our camping equipment and large rucksacks. We toil

up the steep slope at a snailpace. One step and breathe – one step and breathe. We stop frequently to sip our water and gasp for air. Some who feel unwell mount one of the spare horses brought along for just such an eventuality, or have their day sacks carried. We reach the top of the pass at 1:30pm.

At just over 15,000ft Chuya Qaza is cold.

Our descent is steep and tricky, and it's 2:45 before we reach our lunch stop by the river. I have a pounding headache and pass on lunch.

We walk by the river towards our next campsite but, as the rainy season has lasted longer this year, the rivers are still swollen, making crossing difficult. We climb again, looking for a bridge. The bridge we find is new – made of branches, twigs, clods of earth and grass – and one by one we cross the ice grey river, feeling the 'earth' give beneath our feet. It is nearly dark and we arrive at Angascocha (13,000ft) by torchlight. Only half of us make it to dinner.

The scenery has changed dramatically. We are now walking through jungle, along narrow, precipitous paths leading down into Silke valley. We see bromeliads and many orchids, and are lucky to find a flowering Huakanki orchid (Masdevallia Veitchiana for the botanists among you.)

We're hot when we arrive at Kamicancha (9,900ft) where we find an island of tents surrounded by ploughed fields. The aforementioned oxen are ploughing and the Campesinos – the local people – are planting potatoes. Would we like to help? So, in the late afternoon sun, I and a few colleagues are planting potatoes in Peru. We get into the swing of it and plant many furrows. In fact, we're too quick for the oxen, but the chill evening wind comes to their rescue and we have to stop. After expressions of grateful thanks and much shaking of hands, we try to clean ourselves in 2" of tepid water in a plastic bowl.

Next morning, I unzip the tent to find the ground frosty. The view of MT. Veronica is stunning – a word I'm told I've used a lot in these past few days! We leave Kamicancha praying that our potatoes will grow.

We descend into the sacred valley. Again the flora changes: huge cacti, some over 15ft high, and a eucalyptus grove where we shelter from the hot sun to have our lunch.

Earlier this morning we were invited into a local house. We sat down with guinea pigs running round our feet while the wife poured a large glass of Chicha for us to taste. Chicha is a maize beer that dates back to the time of the Incas. You can identify the houses that sell it by the red flags or bin bags the fly on sticks. It looks a bit like milky cider, but tastes quite good – with no after effects!

Our next camp is at Piscaycucho, where the great attraction is two showers! We find some chairs and form an orderly British queue, clutching our barely used toiletries

and waiting our turn. Cleansed, we dine on fresh fish from the nearby River Urubamba.

We are now at Km 82 on the trail and have to board a train for the short journey to reach Km 104.

Once over the river at Km104, the path heads upward through pleasant woods and across streams. The river is far below as we start to climb the Inca steps(they turned a 1,500ft hillside into a staircase!) We reach the waterfall at Huinay Huayna . In Quecha, Huinay Huayna means 'forever young' – so named after a pink orchid that grows there. We continue on to some ruins, a truly impressive site, where the Incas have terraced the side of a mountain – each terrace over 6ft high. The view of the surrounding mountains is awesome and we sit alone, quietly, to think of our reasons for raising the money and doing the trek.

It has taken us 7 hours to reach this spot, but it's not until nearly 3 hours later that we reach our goal. Intipunku – the Gate of the Sun.

As we pass through the stone arch we hug and congratulate each other. Below us is Machu Picchu.

The following day we explore the site. Too soon our 24-hour pass to Machu Picchu has expired and it's time to leave. We pile into the little train for the zig- zag ride back to Cusco. Five days to walk up – and five hours to get down.

The hotel manager meets us with a welcome drink – the local Pisco Sour. Distilled from grapes and mixed with lemon juice, sugar and egg white, it tastes like nectar!