

Clockwise from top left: Quechua woman in traditional dress on the trail to Japata; Machu Picchu looking toward Huayna Picchu; dinner of roasted cuy—guinea pig domesticated by the Incas.

Andean Magic

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRICIA PEARSALL

Machu Picchu is magical, even with the crowds, but there is more to do in Peru's majestic mountain chain—namely, make the Ausangate Trek, a serious climb up and around one of South America's highest peaks, where you can see glaciers, alpaca herds and the indigenous Quechua people. By TRICIA PEARSALL

“Hear me, Ausangate,” I call out as instructed by our Indian trekking staff, who have turned into temporary shamans. I feel like Princess Leia in the “Obi-Wan” hologram from *Star Wars*. I blow across a trio of coca leaves pressed between my gloved fingers like a prized poker hand, then give humble thanks for the safe circumnavigation we’ve just completed around Ausangate, the highest mountain, most sacred deity, the Apu of the Cusco Andes in Peru.

The significance of this despacho ceremony won't sink in until I get home and finally study the pre-trip literature. Our patient and helpful Quechua-speaking camp assistants, José, Silberio and Alberto, are normally outfitted in Texas cowboy garb, but now, as we celebrate their connection to the mountain spirits, they are festooned like priests, wearing yellow wool, bolero-style jackets embroidered with white buttons, bugle beads, and turquoise and pink threads, and each is crowned with a heavily beaded,

hand-knit Andean hat. Nearing the end of our journey, my husband, Jack, and I have been physically challenged by this mountain's altitude, yet we are in total awe of its stark, arduous beauty while trying to comprehend the bond between mountain and the Inca descendants living in its shadow.

José splashes an offering of Pisco—a Peruvian brandy—in the direction of the mountain, then layers red and white carnation petals in a circle atop a hand-woven cloth, followed by our coca leaves (kintus). He raises his

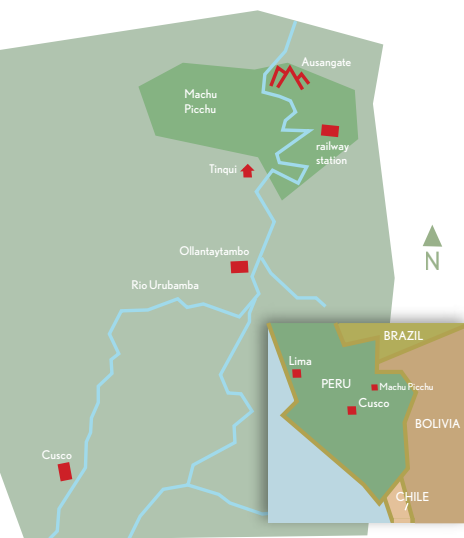
There was no applause at the top; our only reward was visual—stunning panoramic views, looking west, of the vast Vilcanota Range, its subtle earth palettes illuminated by sunbeams on mineral-dyed peaks.

voice in spiritual chatter, and then his colleagues chime in with syn-copated incantations. With each, another offering layer is added to the mound—first what looks like prayers wrapped in pink paper, then earth treasures (seeds, quinoa, potatoes, corn and nuts) followed by small plastic figures like Cracker Jack prizes, sweet candies (for healing), confetti, rice, sea shells, glitter (for gold), cotton (for the clouds that surround the mountain and bring rain), condor feathers and so on. The rite encourages healing, oneness and balance, as translated by our guide, Ricardo. José ties the mound into a bundle, soaks it with the rest of the bottle of Pisco, places it at the base of an overhanging rock and sets it afire. Sun down, they shoo us in the direction of camp, so as not to interfere with the smoke carrying the prayers to Ausangate.

When an almost-three-week window appeared on my husband's calendar, I optioned a vacation gift given a few wedding anniversaries back. I started looking for a Peru trek (for me) combined with museum and cultural exploration (for him). Thinking Inca Trail—Machu Picchu—I Web-searched local outfitters, discovering Andes Adventures under EcoAndes Travel, led by its affable president, Hugo Torres. He convinced me that the more remote Ausangate trek was preferable to the people-packed Inca Trail, plus it offered transport and tours in Cusco, down the Sacred Valley via Ollantaytambo to Machu Picchu. The price and the time were right. I booked.

Arriving in Cusco (10,860 feet), South America's oldest continuously inhabited city, we boarded a tour bus for the Sacred Valley. Gateway to Machu Picchu, Cusco is Inca central. A mid-16th-century cathedral, constructed atop the Inca palace, anchors its main square. Laden with Spanish embellishment, the sanctuary is worth touring for its repository of colonial art, especially the mid-18th-century painting by indigenous artist Marcos Zapata of the *Last Supper*—in which the “last supper” includes local cuisine such as roasted cuy (guinea pig). Cusco's Inca Museum is the finest primer anywhere tracing Peruvian history from pre-Inca culture through the Conquest (c. 1532) and its impact on native cultures, and the ruins in town are spectacular, particularly the Temple of the Sun (Qorikancha), which forms the foundation of the church, the convent of Santo Domingo and the fortress of Sacsayhuaman.

Our three-day Cusco-Sacred Valley immersion into Inca civilization



was not only requisite on-site cultural scholarship; it was also a necessity for altitude acclimatization. We got an A-minus in Inca Civ and a D in acclimatization. Our bus wound down alongside the Urubamba River, dropping us in Ollantaytambo, northwest of Cusco. The present-day village encompasses its original Inca town sandwiched between the massive Inca fortress complex, comprising deep pyramidal terraces, the ceremonial center and temples on top, and Pincuylluna—the mountain to the east, with three enormous face profiles carved into its stone flanks, plus several large Inca colcas, or stone warehouses. Inca construction is *big*. One is chillingly dwarfed when walking the narrow cobblestone alleys between towering, interlocking stone walls.

This being our first Inca ruin encounter outside a museum, I raced to the top of the terraces, determined to see it all before a dark cloud dumped cold rain. We were astounded by the precise masonry of the monolithic stones on top, particularly considering the quarry was some three-and-a-half miles down, on the other side of the river. An hour later, slammed by an altitude-induced pile-driver headache, I regretted my bravado. I survived thanks to many aspirins and cups of coca tea, later, at the Ollantaytambo Lodge.

From Ollantaytambo, Jack and I boarded the backpacker train with all the other geezers and gap-year kids headed to Aguas Calientes, staging site for Machu Picchu. As we chugged past the bridge at stop KM 82, a creeping, single-file column of daypack-toting trekkers crossed the river, plodding up and over the hill on the Inca Trail. As the river wound down through the Urubamba gorge, its banks grew steeper and greener. Conical mountains, teeming with orchids, rose high into the clouds;

primary-colored birds perched in gnarled tree limbs—here was the edge of the dense jungle that forms the Amazon basin.

Leaving the train in Aguas Calientes, we searched the hordes before finally finding our guide, who led us to a bus that hauled us 2,000 feet up, via snaky switchbacks, to the Machu Picchu entrance. My pompous cynicism be damned: This magical site was worth the entire trip to Peru.

We clambered another 100 feet to gain the full cinematic spectacle of terraces and ruins sprawled across the mountain saddle. With our guide, we then trekked down to explore the temples of the Sun, Three Windows and Condor, as well as the famous Intihuatana, like a sundial and used for predicting the solstice. It is the symbol of Inca sun power, and one of a few examples the Spanish didn't obliterate. The stonemasonry is unbelievable, each multi-ton block precisely fitted without mortar regardless of dimension, withstanding centuries of earthquake and erosion. Inside the “Royal Tomb,” a mosaic of carved stones resembled a curvy woman's cinched waist. Leaving our guide, we hiked a mile to the Inca drawbridge, a long wooden plank connecting carved stone ledges perilously sliced out of a sheer rock face. It is a precipice—an easy way for the Incas to keep intruders away.

In a 1913 *New York Times* piece, Hiram Bingham, the real Indiana Jones, reflects with understatement upon the enormity of his rediscovery (the locals knew all along, and an earlier explorer had mapped the site): “Machu Picchu might prove to be the largest and most important ruin discovered in South America since the

days of the Spanish conquest.”

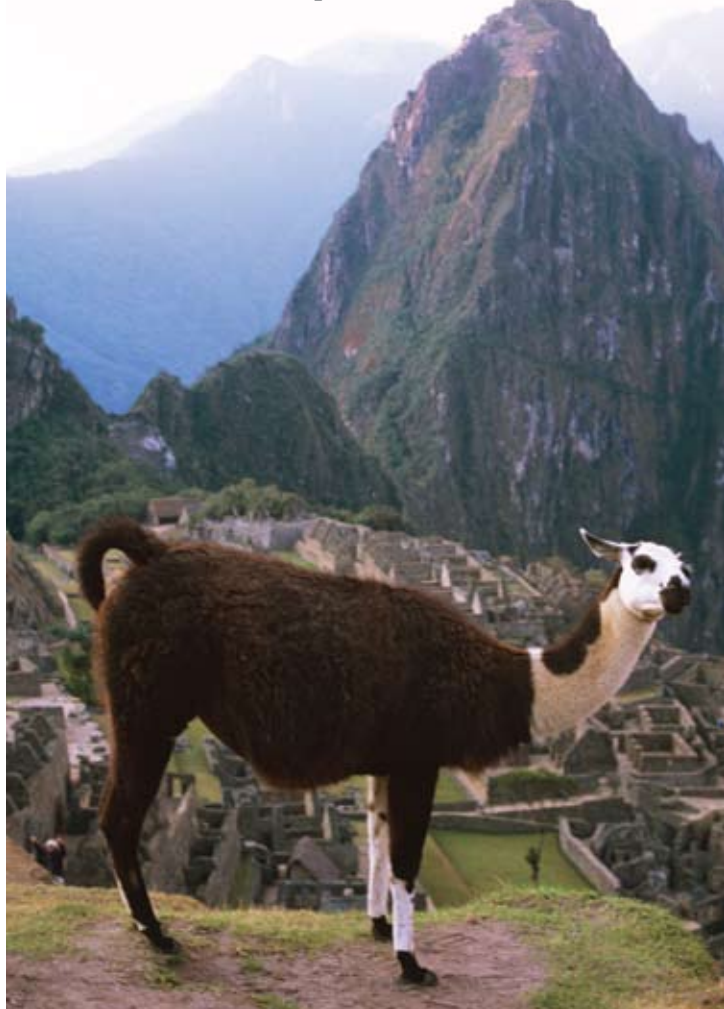
Though more immaculate, the site today looks just like his 1911-1912 photographs. Scholars and archaeologists have no definitive interpretation for Machu Picchu's function but speculate that it must have been a ceremonial site. As the sun set, Jack and I along with a few students had the entire place to ourselves, for the tourist groups had cleared out by mid-afternoon. We sprawled along the upper terraces, eyes glued to the ruins below as the light slowly turned them gold. I kept thinking, “location, location, location.” Gazing far out across the Urubamba River, with the sun casting a shadow of this iconic site on mountains to the east, I got an unaccustomed spiritual tickle. The guards then shuffled us onto the last bus down to Aguas Calientes, where we took in the hot springs and a roasted cuy dinner before returning to Cusco for our Ausangate Circuit Trek.

Piling into a van for the six-hour drive to Tinquí, we joined our guide, Ricardo, and trekking mates, New Zealanders Margaret and Donald, this their fourth Peruvian adventure. We took one look at their muscled legs and rust-colored faces and hoped they would be kind to a couple of AARPs. Avoiding construction on the new Trans-South American Highway, we climbed off the paved road to above 14,000 feet, crossing a barren plateau, scattering llamas. We stopped to watch some potato planters. Just as we'd seen in a Lima museum drawing by a 16th-century priest, a man shoved down on a foot plow, making a hole amid the soccer ball-sized clumps of earth. A lady followed him, dropping a seed potato into the hole, then a second woman threw in a handful of llama dung. Both women were dressed in short dancing-style skirts trimmed in pink and yellow, striped shawls



Fitted stone walls at the mammoth site of Sacsayhuaman, an Inca fortress outside Cusco.

Clockwise: llama, Machu Picchu; south face of Ausangate at Ausangate base camp; three tiered lakes after Campo Pass, seen from Lake Comerocha Camp.



and big embroidered and sequined hats, their bold colors a strong contrast to the earth tones all around.

I'd heard that community elders consult the mountain, Ausangate, to determine the proper direction for potato planting each year—cross-slope to collect water for a drought year, down-slope for runoff if a rainy year is foretold. The Inca ethos was clearly the cultural foundation for these indigenous Andeans. The combination of geographic isolation and deep-seated ancestral traditions has insulated them from European influences.

At Tinquí, we met our three “wranglers” (trekking staff) and headed out across the altiplano—miles of grass and bogs—toward dark skies under the hulking, glaciated mass of Ausangate, at 20,945 feet the tallest peak in the region. We soon found ourselves doing a *do-si-do* through a herd of pink llamas, kids corralling sheep, child-toting women spinning alpaca yarn from drop spindles, herders selling alpaca hides, and ruggedly handsome guys galloping around on cordovan-colored horses—a convergence of the Ausangate populace, headed for Sunday market in Tinquí.

Summitting a low pass (15,600 feet), I heard Jack stumbling behind me. We were traversing a narrow ledge, so I gave him one, then two sticks. When we stopped for a

break, he wobbled in circles until he plopped like a rag doll onto the ground. Ricardo told him it was altitude sickness and put him on a horse. Protesting, Jack trotted off. We joined him on the far shore of Puchacocha, one of several sparkling turquoise lakes under Ausangate's hanging west glacier, full of fish that fed us royally.

Jack and I took it slowly on our highest pass day, his balance returning with help from Diamox. Atop a barren plateau near the lower Apacheta Pass (16,005 feet), a woman sat, backstrap weaving, child and dog beside her, all minding their alpaca herds. Some nights, a solitary woman would come into camp and sit quietly by our tent, selling her handwoven capes, mats and shawls, each with images similar to those on ancient Inca weavings. These were the only people we encountered on the “back” side of Ausangate.

Continuing our ascent to Palomani Pass (17,200 feet), highest of the trip, we trudged like turtles alongside finned and rutted glaciers that looked like ice highways. We walked on rock, then on barren, hard, desert-like sand. There was no applause at the top; our only reward was visual—stunning panoramic views, looking west, of the vast Vilcanota Range, its subtle earth palettes illuminated by sunbeams on mineral-dyed peaks. Beyond the pass, to the east, we were

met by thunder, lightning and wind-driven-corn snow, all the way down to our camp at the climber's refuge beside the rumbling south glacier.

The mountain's fickle wintry ferocity returned the next day. High winds and snow made forward motion a challenge, but the scenic feast—packs of alpacas loping over hills, a valley of lakes and bogs made ethereal by white-out conditions—trumped any cold or misery. Inside a glorious snow-bowl wedged between craggy spires, we were welcomed to camp by an Andean snow lady. She'd been built by our crew, complete with gathered skirt and large hat.

The next morning, we went up and over Campo Pass, the second-highest and last of our seven-day

adventure. It was filled with pure Apu-inspired magic. As we climbed, a rainbow appeared over the adjacent Tres Pico, growing into a complete circle around the sun. It's called a *parhelion*, or *sundog*, and is formed by the sun's rays bending through ice crystals rising from the snow, suspended in the atmosphere. Another 15 minutes later, there appeared not one, but two brilliant solar rainbow halos. It was like being under a surreal Peter Max big top. I'd seen one before but never two and took it as some recognition of passage, a seal between Ausangate, *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and us. Looking back across the Campo Pass, I saw the outer rings of the sundogs dipping like a pair of double Dutch jump ropes between the snowy spikes, framing and backlighting swarms of stacked cairns. These were not path-marking cairns, but holy stacks placed by pilgrims in tribute to Ausangate, the Apu. This was a sacred site.

Down from the pass, our crew set up camp on the shore of the lowest of a three-tiered nest of cyan-colored lakes. It was the chosen place for our *pachamanca*, or ceremonial “last supper,” and *despacho* ceremony. Wrangler Silberio fitted a dome oven of rocks over a quick fire of grasses, adding alpaca and cow dung, then sealing the dome and allowing it to smolder. An hour or so later, he and Alberto knocked a hole in the oven roof, rocks now glowing, and filled the bottom with small potatoes. Ricardo called them *rifu*, one of over a thousand varieties of potatoes in this region—then lowered a cloth-wrapped lamb's leg into the coals. Silberio raced to the lake, grabbed fistfuls of wet grasses, layered them on top, covered it all with freshly turned dirt, then gave a proud thumb's-up sign—men and their barbecues!

Following the *despacho* ritual, we dug the lamb and roasted potatoes from the earth, brushed them off and chowed down, fingers pulling succulent strips off the bone. We raised our plastic cups in toast—*salud* to Ausangate!—then chased our feast with a well-earned glass of local red wine. ●

Ausangate, in the background, from a trail crossing the altiplano south of Tinquí.

