

Trekking in Peru – The Land of the Incas and Machu Pichu

After my husband Robin died of a brain tumour last year I realised that one of my principal aims in life had to be to raise money for research into this devastating disease and that I would have to do something fairly dramatic in order to raise an amount sufficient to make a difference. Samantha Dickson Brain Tumour Trust, supported us through Robin's illness and is the largest funder of laboratory based brain tumour research in the UK was advertising treks in various parts of the world on its website so I decided to go to Peru at the end of April.

Peru appealed partly because I anticipated that the scenery would be beautiful – which it was – but I had not really reckoned with the problem of high altitude which makes everything much harder and can cause altitude sickness. Perhaps it is better sometimes that we don't know in advance exactly what we are letting ourselves in for; otherwise we might never go outside our front doors! I was very fortunate, however, in being able to train by walking up and down Box Hill and Mickleham Downs, so by the time I left my general level of fitness was pretty good.

Another problem which few of us had really grasped, is that Peru is very long way away! After a two hour flight to Madrid and a further eleven hour flight to Lima, we were exhausted before we started. We tasted the delights of a last night in a hotel before our one hour flight to Cuzco the following morning in order to disappear into the wilderness for six nights camping in fairly primitive conditions, without proper washing or toilet facilities. For some of us I think this was what made the exercise the most challenging!

By chance this year all of my companions were female – and of a certain age. We were raising money for a variety of different charities from motor neurone disease to liver cancer, bone marrow cancer, breast cancer etc. Apparently groups raising money for firemen etc tend to be mostly male, other groups tend to be roughly half and half but for some reason trekkers raising money for cancer charities tend to be predominantly female.

Cuzco is a most charming town with the feel of a ski resort about it and we started by visiting a bar owned by a friend of our British tour guide in order to sample our first (of many) cups of the indispensable coca tea! The locals attribute not only their resistance to altitude sickness but also their longevity to this brew, which is not unpleasant if you like herbal teas in the first place. By the end of the week I don't think any of us felt like challenging customs by bringing any coca tea home though. By the way apparently you would need a pile of coca leaves the size of two men to produce a few tiny grams of cocaine, so customs officers really don't need to get so excited by tourists who try to bring a few leaves home!

Next stop a small town called Ollantaytambo which is supposed to be the 'most Inca town of all'. Having observed the annual weaving festival which just happened to be taking place, we set off for a fairly short walk to our first night's campsite. All this was in order to acclimatise us fairly gently to the altitude which was by now sufficient to affect us. It was remarkable how when we came down to Ollantaytambo again 6 days later we felt as if we were coming almost down to sea level but it is in fact at about 3,000 metres. Apparently each night you spend at altitude enables the body to

produce more red blood cells, which protect you from altitude sickness so by then we were pretty well acclimatised.

The following morning we returned to Ollantaytambo to tour some Inca ruins and to learn a certain amount about the Inca civilisation and their prowess as civil engineers. We were shown the way in which they smoothed the sides of huge boulders so that they could be placed on top of each other without the need for mortar to fill the cracks. Indeed it would be impossible to insert even a razor blade between two stones! They also diverted the mountain streams and built narrow canals to carry the water across the hill sides. Apparently 4 times more of the land was irrigated in Inca times than nowadays. They used this fertile and well irrigated land to grow crops, including their staple diet of potatoes; there are over 3,000 varieties of potato in Peru. All these food supplies were stored in huge store houses, some of which can still be seen on the hillsides. The Incan civilisation lasted from the 1300s to 1532 when they were conquered by the Spaniards.

It was at this point that altitude sickness kicked in for me. The non-life threatening form consists of an unpleasant headache and a feeling of sickness so the only remedy is to keep taking paracetamol and ibuprofen alternately and if necessary some anti-sickness pills supplied by the doctor. We also visited a typical house occupied by local people, complete with guinea pigs running around the floor waiting to be somebody's supper! This is a local delicacy and the inhabitants seemed to have realised that it is something of a talking point for tourists. Indeed one of our party had stated that she was vegetarian simply in order to avoid the possibility of being obliged to eat guinea pig! In the event we were not offered it; I think the tour leader realised that we had enough to contend with without that.

After lunch which consisted of a very tasty dish made from some type of bean related to lupins, we set off on our first serious climb. The views were quite beautiful, the sun was shining, my headache had vanished and we were encouraged to go quite slowly so the experience was definitely enjoyable. Our second night's campsite was the field in front of a village school and was also surrounded by beautiful views. The way in which all the equipment was carried from camp to camp was most impressive. Tents etc were carried on horseback but all the cooking equipment, including gas stoves and all ingredients were carried by the cooks themselves. Fortunately there are now regulations protecting porters from being asked to carry loads of over 20 kilos.

The following morning we continued our ascent, climbing a zig-zag route in the sunshine. After lunch at a ruined Inca village, which had been partially restored by a team from Across the Divide, the organisation which runs the treks, we continued our climb past a dramatic waterfall. It was at this point that altitude sickness really kicked in for me and the rest of the climb was something of a blur. I continued to take the tablets but my head was pounding by the time we reached the campsite and I just crawled into my tent and fell sleep. A couple of hours later I woke up feeling considerably better and managed a small amount of supper (4 others missed supper altogether!) but I quickly returned to my tent to spend the night wearing two fleeces and a woolly hat! Apparently it is quite common for as many as half the group to be ill by the end of that particular day.

I awoke at 5.15 the following morning feeling a great deal better and took a precautionary dose of paracetamol followed by regular doses throughout the rest of the day in order to stave off the possibility of a recurrence – fortunately it worked. At 6.30am we set off on what was to be our longest day, walking for 10 hours. We were told to climb very slowly as we were by now at extremely high altitude. The technique was to put one foot forward then breathe, the other foot forward then breathe etc. By late morning we reached our highest point at 4,445 metres with amazing views. Our stop for photos was brief as the human body finds it seriously difficult to remain at over 4,000 metres for any length of time, so we then descended to a mere 3,900 metres for lunch. On that occasion we were warned not to fall asleep as this would increase the risk of cerebral oedema, the dangerous type of altitude sickness which would necessitate us being airlifted from the mountain without delay! In the afternoon we continued our descent, which felt much easier, although we were warned to use our poles in order to prevent too many sore knees. After another short ascent we reached our campsite for that night, at 3,958 metres the highest one of all. In the grounds of an abandoned school and set in a bowl, surrounded by high peaks, it was spectacularly beautiful and we were all beginning to feel much brighter and more cheerful so, despite the extreme cold, supper was a fairly jolly affair.

The following morning dawned bright and clear and once the sun had reached our tents we were able to have breakfast ‘al fresco’. Amazingly the cooks managed to produce pancakes and maple syrup so far from civilisation. The morning which followed was a delight for wild flower enthusiasts such as myself, as we walked down through a forest with wild orchids, bromeliads, wild lupins and plants which looked to me like wild rudbeckia and spiraea. After another delicious lunch by a mountain stream, we continued down the valley towards our next campsite, where we encountered the joy of our first hot showers for 6 days. For dinner that evening we were treated to a ‘Pacha manca’ (Pacha = earth, manca = pot). The meat and potatoes are cooked in a hole in the ground on hot stones and covered with cardboard, grass, a tarpaulin and finally the earth which has been dug out of the hole. It was truly delicious, some of the tenderest lamb any of us had ever tasted. Another sign that life was improving was that we were allowed our first glass of wine since arriving in Peru – to celebrate, I think, the fact that it was unlikely now that any of us were going to die on the trip!

After the best night’s sleep for a week (altitude does affect your ability to sleep and also induces very strange dreams) I awoke to lovely sunshine and beautiful views. The morning’s walk was an easy one on the flat through the cacti and aloe vera of the arid montane forest. In the afternoon we began our re-entry into civilisation by revisiting the charming town of Ollantaytambo in search of some presents for the family, a decent cup of cappuccino and even an internet café in order to check how many more people had sponsored us during our absence.

After one more night’s camping we awoke to face the final challenge, that of reaching Machu Picchu itself. For the rest of the week we had been lucky enough to walk on minor Inca trails and dog-legs of the Inca trail rather than on the main Inca trail which is now heavily populated with locals selling Coca Cola and campsites with facilities which one would prefer not to think about. On this final day, however, we had no option but to follow the main trail which was very stony underfoot but with stunningly beautiful views. After 6 hours we reached the Sun Gate above the citadel

of Machu Pichu and saw the classic view of the ruins, surrounded by breathtaking mountains. Machu Pichu is the most visited site in South America yet still receives a tiny fraction of the numbers registered at other World Heritage sites around the globe. The number of visitors is strictly regulated but its inaccessibility also helps to keep the trampling hordes at bay. This incidentally accounts for the fact that it was not destroyed by the Spaniards along with all the other Inca temples. It had been abandoned 30 years before the conquest and was so overgrown that they did not find it and it lay undisturbed until discovered by the American Hiram Bingham in 1911. As yet further evidence of the Inca's extraordinary skill at civil engineering, Machu Pichu is built on a flat area between mountains so that it is directly in line between two mountains over one of which the sun rises on the Winter Solstice and the other on the Summer Solstice. The windows of the Sun Temple in the citadel itself are positioned so that the rays of the sun are in perfect alignment on each of these two days.

Our last evening was spent in a hotel in the small and unlovely town of Aguas Calientes in the valley below Machu Pichu. I quote from a book written by our expedition leader 'The original hot baths were wiped out by a mountain spirit offended by the sheer ghastliness of it all.' Officially we had a gala dinner that night but in reality most of us were tucked up in our beds (real beds for once) soon after 9.00pm. this was just as well as we were called the following morning at 5.30 so that we could catch the sunrise over the Sun Gate at Machu Pichu at 7.00. As it turned out the whole area was shrouded in mist so we could have stayed in bed but we were treated to a very interesting tour by our charming local guide, Claudia. We visited the Temple of the Sun, the Temple of Mother Earth, the Temple of the Condor, the Hitching Post of the Sun (a sort of huge sun dial) and the House of the Inca (there was in fact only one Inca at a time as this was the name of the ruler).

The following 48 hours seemed to be spent returning to the UK (although the 6 hour time difference meant that we lost 6 of those hours somewhere over the Atlantic). By this time we were all feeling very pleased with ourselves with wonderful memories of beautiful scenery and delighted that our bodies had responded to the challenge. There wasn't a single member of the group however who felt that she would be prepared to live under canvas in those conditions in the future!

At the time of writing I have not yet collected in all my sponsorship money but I have raised around £5.000 which has made it all worthwhile and I am very grateful to the many local residents who so kindly made donations.

Angela Parfitt