

## Chapter 13 - Inka Trail, Machu Picchu

*“The Quechua words Machu Pichu signify Old Bird, or the sovereign guardian spirit of peace among the mankind. Starting at Pisac, where the Sacred Valley begins, this bird, in the image of a condor, takes his flight northwestward to Machu Picchu, at the end of the Sacred Valley, where the waters of the Sacred River spill away and from where the Celestial River, the Milky Way, is reborn.”*

[Cusco and the Sacred Valley of the Incas, by Fernando & Edgar Salazar, 2005, p. 144]

*To the Quechua,  
The Pachamama, the earth, is the Mother,  
The Mother that gives us food.  
From her comes water and life.  
Our past comes from the Pachamama.  
We are living our present on Pachamama  
And our future will always depend on her.  
Pachamama is used by man and by animals.  
Plants grow within her.  
If there is no Pachamama there cannot be  
A humanity nor a plant or animal kingdom.  
-- Romulo Lizarraga*

*Despite 460 years of Christian indoctrination, the Goddess Mother Earth, Pachamama, continues to be adored by all Quechua men and women. The Quechua see Pachamama outside of themselves and inside of themselves as well. They see Her everywhere, in the wind that carries the clouds, in the clouds that bring the needed rains and in the sacred rivers that flow through the land. They see Her in the faces of their children, and in the eyes of the puma, the condor, and the serpent.*  
[Journey to Machu Picchu: Spiritual Wisdom from the Andes by Carol Cumes & Romulo Lizarraga Valencia, 1995, p. 31, 34]

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### DAY ONE: Saturday (K'uychichaw, day of the Rainbow)

Early in the morning, Susie and I arrived at the appointed hour and place. The bus was waiting for us near the SAS Travel office (Calle Garcilaso) at Plaza Regocijo. The sun was just starting to rise. One by one, the rest of the group arrived, and we were ready to take off for Machu Picchu. This was the day all of us had been anxiously waiting for.

The previous evening – Friday (Ch’askachaw, day of the Stars) – we had met the guide, Hilbert Sumire, and his assistant, Danny. And we had acquainted ourselves with the other nine people in the group: Andreas and Achilles from Greece, Ann and James from England, Guy and Rose from Australia, Wim from the Netherlands, and Sandip (originally from India) and Michael (she liked to be called “Mike”) from the United States. During the course of the journey, we would get to know each other a lot better.

There was excitement in the air as the bus drove through the beautiful Sacred Valley. The thought of an adventurous four day hike on the Inka Trail to Machu Picchu thrilled our hearts and souls. There was something magical about the convergence of tourists and pilgrims at one of the new Seven Wonders of the World – Machu Picchu, discovered by Hiram Bingham in 1911 and called the “Lost City of the Incas.” All of a sudden, it was not Cusco – the ancient navel of the world – that was the center of attention. Instead, it was Machu Picchu – the crown jewel of the Andean world – that had caught everyone’s eye.

“Aren’t you glad the roads were fixed after the floods?” asked Hilbert, our guide, as the bus drove into Ollantaybambo. “The people of Peru worked really hard to reopen the World Heritage Site of Machu Picchu after the heavy rains and flooding in January.”

“Yes, I watched it on the news, and kept track of it on the internet every day,” I said. “I was worried I was going to have to postpone the trip. And then when I heard it had reopened in April, I was very happy.”

“We were happy, too,” said Hilbert. “Otherwise, our major tourist business in Peru would have suffered. And the porters and guides would have suffered, too. But, as I say, no pain no gain. I am very proud of my people for working so hard to make sure people like you can come and see what a great treasure we have in Peru.”

We were on our way to the start of the four day trek at Km 82 (51 miles from Cusco), where the road ended and the trailhead began. With all our eagerness to get started, it came as a minor setback when the single lane road produced a traffic jam. We were snarled in traffic for over half-an-hour. Somehow the trucks, cars, buses, and farm vehicles managed to figure out a way out of the gridlock. Our minibus had to travel in reverse for over a hundred meters in order to give room for some big trucks to pass by. That was our first experience in seeing how the people of Peru worked together to solve a problem.

When we finally arrived at Km 82 – over three hours after we had left Cusco – we were greeted by the camp crew and porters who were going to carry our equipment (sleeping bag, air mattress) and our belongings (clothes, supplies) during the entire trek. They needed to weigh everything to make sure the porters weren’t carrying a duffle bag

over 25 kg (about 55 lbs). That was the maximum. I was told they tried to spread the equipment amongst the porters so that the average weight would be about 20 kg (about 45 lbs). That was more like it. I understood what a 45 pounds load was, for I did a lot of backpacking in my younger years, carrying at least 40-45 pounds. Wim (from the Netherlands) and Sandip had decided to carry their own heavy backpacks. They didn't want to pay the extra cost of a personal porter. They both looked big and strong, but the heavy toll of the uphill Inka Trail would weigh on them, and they would reconsider their decision on the second day.

The official at the control point at the start of the Inka Trail at Piscacucho (2,680 m / 8,790 ft) stamped the passports. Hilbert showed my police report about the lost passport to the official at the check point. The official looked at it approvingly, then he stamped a copy of my passport. I was on my way.

A sign at the start of the trail welcomed the trekkers in four languages. The English welcome was misspelled: "Santuario Historica de Machupicchu, Camino Inka – Inka Trail, Bienvenido – Wellcome." We crossed a suspension footbridge across the Urubamba River – the same river that started out as the Vilcanota, then became the Wilcamayu between Pisac and Ollantaytambo – and followed the trail to the right as it ascended steadily up from the sacred river of the sacred valley.

The start of every great journey begins with a single step – to paraphrase a Chinese proverb – and the pilgrimage I was on to reach the Crystal City of Light began with a song in my heart and a tear in my eye. This was absolutely astounding. At Lake Titicaca, when Susie cried about the unbearable cold at the high altitude, I thought my chances of going on the Inka Trail had vanished into thin air. Then when I lost my passport, I thought for sure the Andean gods were against me. Now, I felt that I had been tried and tested, and somehow Pachamama had smiled upon me for hanging in there, for not giving up hope.

There would be many Inka archaeological ruins along the trail. The Inka built many sites known as tambos (rest stops, inns, storehouses) at strategic places along the trail to their most sacred center – Machu Picchu. Originally, Machu Picchu was known as Picchu Huanacauri ("the mountain of origin"). According to the two main legends of Manco Capac – his emergence with his sister-wife Mama Ocllo from the waters of Lake Titicaca and his emergence with his three brothers and wives from the cave of Pacaritambo (House of Origin) – both legends end with the sign of the rainbow indicating where the sacred center (navel, qosqo) was to be established. One end of the rainbow was on the crest of the mythological hill (called Huanacauri, "rainbow") where Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo had plunged the golden staff into the ground, and the other end arched over the sacred valley and ended at the mythological navel (Qosqo). Every Inka ruin was somehow connected through 41 ceques (energy lines) emanating

from the center (Qosqo) through the 328 huacas (shrines) that united Tawantinsuyu – “the land of four regions.” The Milky Way was connected to this vast system of energy lines on the earth (as above, so below), and so was the human being. In Andean spirituality, there were four main energy centers of the body: (1) chaki, the soles of the feet; (2) qosqo, the navel; (3) sonqo, the heart; and (4) nosqo, the etheric rainbow above the forehead.

The first archaeological ruin that we encountered was Llactapata (aka Patallacta, “town on a hillside”). We saw the site from the other side of the Cusichaca River Valley. The fortress-like site of farming terraces and buildings probably was a supply center, and a control center, to the valley. It provided the perfect climate for growing maize.

“This was one of the agricultural centers that provided the maize, and other crops, for Machu Picchu,” said Hilbert, our guide. “The buildings were for the workers, and for the warriors protecting the fort and the valley. There were about 116 buildings and 5 baths that were excavated in the 1970s.”



We continued walking up the trail along the Cusichaca River, a tributary of the Urubamba River. It’s always scenic and refreshing to walk beside a river whose sound soothes the soul and whose cool wafting breeze fills the lungs. The gentle ascent allowed the hiker to walk and talk at the same time. There was no need to gasp for air or to labor with every step. After all, we were only at an altitude of 2840 m / 9,318 ft.

“Have you ever been to the Akshardam in New Delhi?” I asked Sandip as I took a slower pace for a while in order to chat with a fellow traveler.

“No, I haven’t,” said Sandip, who had been back to India several times to visit his relatives. “Unfortunately, I don’t do as much touring as I’d like since I’ve been living and working in the United States all these years. My relatives in India monopolize my time.”

“When I was in India last year, I was really impressed with the Swaminarayan Akshardham (“Eternal Abode”) that was built by tens of thousands stonemasons and artisans in five years,” I said, trying to impress him with one of the newest architectural, and cultural, wonders in India. “Someday it may rival the Taj Mahal as a wonder of the world. It epitomizes 10,000 years of India’s culture. It’s like a giant temple complex that takes you on an enlightening journey through India and all of its contributions to the world.”

“I’ll look into it when I visit India next time,” said Sandip.

“So what enticed you to do the Inka Trail?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Funny you should ask,” answered Sandip with a boyish smile. “I used to watch the cartoon series Adventures of Tintin on TV as a kid, and I was impressionable at that age. There were several episodes called the Prisoners of the Sun, which was all about the reporter Tintin’s trip to Peru. And, of course, he ends up going to the Temple of the Sun, where he’s held prisoner by an Inka ruler in an underground temple. He’s about to be sacrificed for entering the sacred Temple of the Sun at what looks like Machu Picchu, so he calls upon the sun-god to save him by hiding his face. He’s saved by a solar eclipse. The Inka ruler thinks that the sun-god obeys Tintin, so he sets him free. And to thank Tintin for bringing the sun-god back, he shows him the secret treasure room full of gold and jewels that the Spaniards didn’t find.”

“Wow, sounds like Tintin used the same solar eclipse trick that Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s court used,” I remarked.

“So now my childhood dream has been realized, and I’m on my way on the Inka Trail to see the Temple of the Sun at Machu Picchu,” concluded Sandip, the American from India.

One of the beauties of hiking on the Inka Trail was seeing all the mountains of the glorious eastern Andes. The Urubamba Cordillera (range) provided the majestic views for our pleasure the first day. Towering north above the Urubamba River, and feeding it with the snow-melt from its glaciated peaks, the Urubamba Cordillera was one of three ranges that figured large in the sacred landscape around Cusco and the Sacred Valley: Vilcanota, also called the Sacred Mountain Range because it was the place in the east where the sacred Vilcanota-Wilcamayu-Urubamba river had its source; Urubamba, north of Cusco; and Vilcabamba, northwest of Cusco.

During our journey with Hilbert, we would learn to see the snow-capped mountains as Apus, home of the ancestors and nature guardian-spirits of the Andes.

“That is Veronica on your left,” said Hilbert when we stopped to admire the view high above the Urubamba River Valley. “In our language, we call her Wakay Wilka because of the sacred tears she cries for us. Most of the mountain spirits are male. But she is a female nature spirit. Veronica’s male partner is Salkantay, the wild mountain.”

The spectacular Mt. Veronica (Wakay Wilka) stood 5750 m / 18,865 feet above sea level. I could imagine all the tears (streams) that came from that great female Apu, bringing the water of life to the plants, animals, crops, and people.



My mouth was starting to water when we arrived for lunch at a grassy glen along the Cusichaca River. A large dining tent was set up by the porters. The hard-working porters had run up the trail ahead of us to get a sumptuous lunch prepared for us when we arrived. They were like the ancient Inca chaskis (messengers) who ran on the vast network of roads and trails that connected the important places of the Inca Empire.

Susie and I had requested vegetarian meals, and we were not disappointed. We washed our hands in the bowls of warm water that were provided, and then we sat down to eat. There were so many dishes to choose from, and we passed the plates to each other when requested. There was spinach soup, fresh vegetables, yuca or manioc (like yams), and a quinoa dish.

“This is better than a first-rate restaurant,” said Wim, who relished the chicken that was served. “Compliments to the chef.”

We all agreed with Wim that the chef was the greatest. Hilbert ate with us, and it was a good time to find out about his life as a guide.

“I studied English in the university,” said Hilbert when we asked how he learned to be a bilingual guide. “We had to take special courses in archaeology, history, and how to be a tour guide. My specialty was Machu Picchu and the Inka Trail because I love Peru’s sacred place, and I love to hike and keep in good physical shape. Then we

take extra courses in first aid, especially taking care of people with high altitude sickness, which we call soroche.”

It was when we would come to the hard climbs over the passes that we would learn that Hilbert was also a great motivator. His love for Peru, the people and culture of Peru, and the sacred mountains was admirable. Little by little, he would also teach us how to love Pachamama (Mother Earth).

After lunch, and after an enervating cup of Mate de Coca to get acclimatized to the upcoming higher altitude, we set out on the trail again. Onwards and upwards. We reached a bridge, crossed the Rio Cusichaca, and stopped ever so often to watch as the local villagers and their llamas passed us. They were heading for their village of Wayllabamba (“grassy plain”).

Wayllabamba (3000m / 9,840ft) was where many groups camped the first night. Our group rested at the village while we waited for everybody to gather together. Also, this was the last place along the trail where snacks and drinks were sold. That is – for the next two days. The night before ascending to Machu Picchu would be spent at Winaywayna, which looked like a mini-resort (with showers) compared to our roughing it style of camping the first three nights.

“Hilbert, I’ve got to ask you a question,” I said as I looked at the small shop that was selling snacks, drinks, and a few essential items for hikers.

“No problem,” said Hilbert. “I’ll help if I can.”

“Is it going to rain on the trail anytime during the next three days?” I asked. I had checked the weather forecast online before the trek, and the forecast showed clear and some clouds, but no rain. So I didn’t buy any rain gear.

“There is a good probability that it will rain a little when we reach Dead Woman’s Pass,” said Hilbert, who knew what to expect on the trail.

“OK, that means I will need to buy a thin raincoat from the lady at the shop,” I said. I had seen several thin blue raincoats for sale, so I bought one for Susie, and one for me. I was glad I did.

There was another 300 meters (about 1,000 feet) of uphill walking to our first camp at Ayapata. The stream along the trail was a nice distraction from the thought of always going uphill. There was a great reward waiting for us when we arrived at a campground which had a view of the distant snowy mountains in between two hills. We had a fantastic buffet dinner, with soup, spaghetti, and other delightful dishes. The

porters had already set up all the two person tents, which had a set of double air mattresses in them. Our duffle bags, with our sleeping bags and belongings, were in the tent. We were ready to crawl into the sleeping bags after dinner. We had hiked over 12 kilometers. Tomorrow, as Hilbert said it, “will be a great challenge.”



DAY TWO: Sunday (Apuchaw, day of the Apus, mountain-spirits)

The day was just dawning, and we were still sleeping, when we heard a voice outside the tent offering us a cup of hot Mate de Coca. We sat up and drank the energizing coca tea.

“Did you sleep well last night?” I asked Susie.

“It was a little cold,” said Susie, “but with the extra layers of clothing and the warm sleeping bag, I didn’t feel as cold as I did at Lake Titicaca.

“That’s good,” I said. “That means we’ll both survive the trek without freezing to death.”

We stuffed our duffle bags with our clothing and sleeping bag and prepared for the day by washing our hands and faces with soap and water from the blue plastic bowls of water that the porter had set out in front of the tent for us. We were ready for the tough day ahead of us. Today was the day we would need the help of all the mountain spirits (Apus) for our steep uphill 900 meters (almost a kilometer) ascent up to the Warmiwanusca (Dead Woman’s) Pass at 4200 m / 13,776 ft.

After the hearty breakfast of porridge and pancakes with fruit, we departed from the Ayapata camp and began to climb at a nice slow pace.

“Take it easy today,” advised Hilbert, showing us the T-shirt he was wearing with his favorite slogan. “Hold your llamas. There’s no hurry. We’ll all make it. It’s a challenge. But we’ll all make it.”



With those encouraging words from our guide and coach, we proceeded to walk with confidence along the scenic trail, stopping at times to admire a waterfall or the beauty of the cascading Llulluchayoc River of the Llullucha Valley. The Incas had a penchant for building trails according to the mathematical principle: the shortest distance (or route) between two points is a straight line. So they built trails going straight up to their destination – not the zigzag trails that we were used to, with countless switchbacks. The switchback type of trail, like the one I hiked up to Yosemite Falls, was easier on the knees. The straight up trail, with lots of stone stairs, was like climbing a straight and narrow stairway to heaven.

The porters were soon passing us by, as their fast-twitch muscles gave them a spring to their step. There was something else that helped them scamper up those steps and steep trails – coca leaves. I watched as a porter sat down on a rock beside the trail, took out his bag of coca leaves, and stuffed several leaves into the side of his mouth. It was like the Americans, especially athletes, who stuffed chewing tobacco in their mouth to keep them energized. Lucky for me, I had listened to the local people, and I bought a bag of coca leaves at a local market. They had convinced me that the unprocessed coca leaves were not a drug. The leaves were simply good medicine for altitude sickness. It was their way of coping with the thin air at the high altitude, and also a way of alleviating hunger, fatigue, headache, and pain. I put several leaves in my mouth, following the example of the porter, and soon enough I was no longer thinking of the shortness of breath or the fatigue I felt in my body. There was a quality within the coca leaves that cleared the mind of the negative reactions to the signals that the body sent the mind and replaced it with positive signals of power and strength. The power and strength of the puma.

I caught up with the youthful hikers from England, Ann and James. I was almost twice their age, but I was still in good physical condition.

“You guys are setting a good pace,” I said.

“Look at who’s talking,” said Ann in a cheerful voice. “For your age, you’re doing remarkably well.”

“It must be those years of doing yoga exercises and the deep breathing to develop lung capacity,” I said.

“That’s interesting,” said Ann. “I’m also into yoga. In fact, I’m a yoga instructor.”

“Hatha Yoga?” I asked, referring to the beginning stages of yoga.

“Yes, we do asanas and various postures,” replied Ann, “but I also work on pranayama and the flow of energy. You know, the mental aspect.”

Ann and I continued talking about the science of yoga and its various disciplines, including Raja Yoga (royal union). Both of us were hoping to achieve the blissful state of Samadhi when we entered through the Intipunku (sun-gate) to the city of light – Machu Picchu.

After about three hours of walking on a mostly stone-paved trail through the microclimate of a cloud forest with moss hanging from the branches, we reached the tree line and the treeless grasslands (puna). We arrived at a place called Llulluchapampa, where there was a camp. It was at this point that we were able to see straight up to the highest pass on the Classic Inka Trail – Abra de Warmiwanusca (“Dead Woman’s Pass”), which was named for the legendary woman who had perished from exposure to the elements during a blinding snowstorm. She seemed to have made it to the top, for her supine body lay across the pass, and her bare breast (complete with nipple) was completely exposed. That motherly breast (of Pachamama) was the goal.

It was also at this point that the weather began to change on us. The mountains around us were creating their own climate. Clouds and mist started to rise from the mountains. It seemed as if they were breathing as we passed through them. There was a feeling that the mountains and the landscape were interacting with us as they sensed our presence. Somehow I felt that the landscape and the spirits of the mountains (Apus) had already entered my being. I was one with them. Wherever I went, they would go with me.

I put on my thin protective blue raincoat as the mist became heavier and turned into tiny drops of rain. Hilbert was right – he said it might rain at Dead Woman’s Pass. I was glad I had listened to him and bought a raincoat. I kept my eyes on the slippery stone steps as the long steep narrow trail continued to snake uphill, following the contours of the steep mountain to the left. I also kept glancing towards the top of the pass as it rose into the distant sky. The temperature started to drop, and I could feel a cold chill go through my body. My hands started to freeze.

“Slow and steady” – I kept hearing Hilbert’s words as I continued climbing towards the breast of the earth mother, which started to get larger the closer I got to the top. “No pain, no gain” – kept resounding in my mind as I pushed my body to meet the challenge of the day.

When I finally made it to the top of Warmiwanusca, I looked up at the larger-than-life mammary gland of the earth mother and let out a primordial yell, “Thank you, Pachamama!”



“If you want to thank Pachamama,” said James, who had made it to the top with Ann before I did and was resting beneath the base of the breast, “you must take a stone and place it on one of those stone piles.”

I looked to the left of the pass and saw a large flat area covered with a multitude of small apachetas (piles of stones) to honor Pachamama.

“You’re right,” I said. “I had forgotten about the stone I was supposed to bring from the bottom of the trail to place on top of the pass.”

I picked up a stone beneath the breast of Pachamama and placed it on an apacheta, and I breathed an apachekta, the customary prayer of thanks upon arrival at the top of a mountain: “Thank you, Pachamama, for carrying me up to the mountain top.”

It was at that moment that I felt the living presence of Pachamama and the Apus (mountain spirits), and tears rolled down my face in gratitude for giving me the strength to make it thus far. I also knew at that moment that Pachamama would give me the strength and energy to make it the rest of the way on the Inka Trail to Machu Picchu.

I sat down beside Ann and James, who were in a meditative state of mind, and waited for my daughter Susie to arrive at the mountain pass. I wiped the tears and the rain drops from my eyes, and I looked down at the steep trail that I had climbed. Soon Susie arrived, then Guy and Rose from Australia, and right behind them the young lady Michael (“Mike”). We didn’t see anyone else coming up the trail, so we took a commemorative picture together, and then we started our descent.



Hilbert told us beforehand to hike at our own pace and to meet at the campground down in the Pacaymayo Valley for lunch. We took our time going down the wet, slippery stone steps. Several times I felt my feet slide on the steps, but I maintained my balance and didn't fall.

We crossed a footbridge near the Pacaymayo River, and we saw a small community of various groups who were going to spend the night at the hillside camps. We were just going to have lunch, and then we would continue in the afternoon to our second pass of the day.



When we had all gathered together at our dining tent in the scenic Pacamayo River Valley, we all had stories to tell while we ate a light lunch and drank all the Mate de Coca we wanted to replenish our fluids and energy.

"I'm so glad I listened to Hilbert and bought that raincoat," I said.

"I'm happy Hilbert found me a porter at Wayllabamba to carry my heavy backpack," said Wim, the gentle giant. "It was well worth the extra money to be relieved of the heavy load."

"Me, too," chimed in Sanjay. "I don't think I would have made it to the top with 45 pounds on my back."

“I thought I was going to freeze to death at the top of Dead Woman’s Pass,” said Mike.

“I’m glad my Dad bought the coca leaves,” said Susie. “He gave me some to chew, and I instantly forgot about the cold and the headache I was starting to develop. I never thought I’d hear myself saying thanks to my Dad for giving me drugs.” That tongue-in-cheek comment brought laughter to everybody.

“I’m glad I brought my hiking sticks,” said Rose. “They sure helped me push my body up that long climb.”

“I’m so proud of all you guys,” said Hilbert, who sat at the head of the table. “You all met the challenge. No pain, no gain. You all gained a lot of experience on the Inka Trail today. The rest is easy going.”

After lunch, Hilbert had us go through a celebration ritual. We gathered together with the entire SAS Travel crew and porters, and we introduced ourselves to each other by going in a clockwise manner and shaking hands with each porter. The ritual was heart-warming, to say the least. We got to know the names of all the porters, and they got to know our names. We took a picture of the entire team – tourists, guides and porters – to commemorate the moment.



Afterwards, we proceeded with our ascent to the second pass – Runkuraqay Pass (3950 m / 12,956 ft). On the way, we stopped to look at the ruin of Runkuracay (“Pile of Ruins”), which was a basket-shaped (or egg-shaped) stone building – a circular structure with carved chambers that opened into a circular courtyard. The structure overlooked the valley below. Perfect place for a watchtower and a tambo.

Hilbert led the way to Runkuraqay Pass. This was where he kept telling us, “Hold your llamas.” He wanted to keep the group together. At the top of the pass, he stopped to give us another lesson about his favorite subject – the sacred mountains (Apus).

“From here you can see the sacred mountain called Pumasillo, which means Puma’s Claw,” said Hilbert, pointing to the massif formation which had the shape of a puma’s claw. “The puma is the totem animal of the Andean world, or the present world known as Kay Pacha. Pumasillo is part of the Vilcabamba Cordillera, and it represents the direction west. Veronica represents the east of the four cardinal directions. So you see there is a sacred geometry here. When we get to Machu Picchu, you will see that it represents north and Cusco represents south. Those four make the sacred cross of the Inka Trail. When we arrive in Machu Picchu, I will show you another very special sacred cross of the four directions.”

After Hilbert’s lesson about the Apus, we took a group picture to commemorate the joyous occasion of making it to the second pass.



We descended from the second pass, walking gradually downhill past a couple of alpine lakes, one of them a black lagoon (Yanacocha). We had one more archaeological site to see before we called it a day. Not everybody wanted to go up 98 steep stone steps to see the ruins of Sayacmarca (“Dominant or Inaccessible Town”). It was like going up the rungs of a ladder without the side rails. There was only the side wall to brace yourself against. It was not for the faint of heart, nor for those who were swayed by vertigo or dizzying heights. The complex was on top of a rocky spur, and it was protected on three sides by sheer cliffs. Another fortress, I thought. There were no agricultural terraces, just a series of rooms and squares on different levels. It was definitely a room with a view. Coming down, we measured every step carefully and held onto the wall with the right hand.

Half-an-hour later, we completed at least another 12 kilometers of hiking, and we were rewarded with another delicious dinner. The tents were already set up for us at the Chaquicocha camping facilities. The sky was clear. The sun set on the rosy-colored Pumasillo (Puma’s Claw) massif. It was going to be a good night for star-gazing.



There were about half-a-dozen of our group that assembled that night under the starry canopy to look at the brilliant display of the Milky Way across the southern hemisphere. The expert amongst us was Guy from Australia.

“Is that the Southern Cross?” I asked, pointing towards the right side (west) in the southern sky. It was a four-star design I had noticed at Lake Titicaca, but I wasn’t sure if it was really the most commonly known constellation in the southern hemisphere.

“No, that’s the false cross,” stated Guy, who was familiar with the sky that was prominent down under in Australia. “It doesn’t have the two prominent pointer stars like the Southern Cross does. In fact, there’s another cross to the left of the false cross that is known as the diamond cross. So there’s really three crosses in that section of the sky.”

“So which one is the true cross?” I asked.

“You see those two pointer stars, which are called the llama’s eyes by the Quechua people?” asked Guy, pointing to the left side (east) of the other two crosses.

“Yes, I see the llama’s eyes at the end of the dark cloud shape,” I answered. I had seen the llama dark cloud constellation on the ceiling of the Coricancha museum in Cusco.

“OK, those pointer stars are called Alpha Centauri and Beta Centauri, and they point to the top of the cross,” explained Guy. “The top star is Gamma Crucis, the bottom star is Alpha Crucis, the left star is Beta Crucis, and the right star is Delta Crucis.”

“Now I see it!” I exclaimed with excitement as I finally saw the real Southern Cross for the first time.

“Now, if you connect the two pointer stars and draw a perpendicular line from the middle of the line to the bright star way down below, and then connect the top and

bottom of the Southern Cross and extend a line towards the horizon, you will have the two lines intersect in the general region of the South Pole in the celestial sky,” demonstrated Guy.

I had a hard time picturing exactly how Guy arrived at the South Pole. It was not as easy as it was for us in the northern hemisphere, where we used the two pointers of the Big Dipper to find Polaris, our North Pole star. I was still enthralled by the sight of the Southern Cross.

“There’s a popular song I used to listen to called the Southern Cross by Crosby, Stills and Nash,” I mused.

“How does it go?” asked Susie, who had never heard of the song nor the group.

I started singing the part of the song that I loved:

“When you see the Southern Cross for the first time,  
you understand now why you came this way.  
Cause the truth you might be running from is so small.  
But it's as big as the promise, the promise of a coming day.  
So I'm sailing for tomorrow, my dreams are a dying.  
And my love is an anchor tied to you, tied with a silver chain.  
I have my ship and all her flags are a flying.  
She is all that I have left and music is her name.  
Think about how many times I have fallen.  
Spirits are using me, larger voices calling.  
What heaven brought you and me cannot be forgotten.  
I have been around the world . . . “

My voice trailed off into the night, and I stopped singing. All I could think of was – what a memorable night.

“That was beautiful,” said Ann. “What a lovely song.”

The song, and the image of the Southern Cross in my mind’s eye, lulled me to a heavenly sleep that night.

DAY THREE: Monday (Killachaw, day of Killa, the Moon)

Once again, the porters brought us Mate de Coca and water. Their hospitality was amazing. They treated us like royalty, kings and queens. The chef, of course, was the best chef in the world.



This day was an easy day, mostly downhill. The image of the Southern Cross, even though it was not visible to the physical eyes, was in the southern skies, leading the way. The llama's eyes – the pointers – indicated that the Chakana (the Andean word for the Southern Cross) was always in sight. The Chakana was the bridge that connected all three worlds of the Andean cosmos: Hanan Pacha, Kay Pacha, and Ukhu Pacha. It was the “pole star” of their interconnected life in the universe.

This day was like a walk in the park – except that on the Inka Trail it was a cloud forest. The trail was paved mostly with original Inka stones. Steps and stones – that was the hallmark of Inca engineering.

A mild ascent – and a walk through a 20 m / 65 foot Inca tunnel – led to the third pass, known as Phuyupatamarca (3750 m / 12,300 ft). The pass was named after the ruins below the pass. The ruins of Phuyupatamarca (“Town in the Clouds”) were situated at a section of the mountain that allowed the former Inca town to tower above the clouds during the latter part of the day. We walked down the intricately carved stone steps to the archaeological site and saw an impressive symmetrical arrangement of terraces that were built to follow the contour of the mountain. Six water fountains – some people called them Inca baths – seemed to be where ritual ceremonies were performed. The shamrock-looking design of one of the four groups of buildings at the site was a unique construction. Overall, the impressive temple-fortress was worth a visit, especially since it offered an expansive view (from an Inca observation platform) of nearby Mt. Salkantay and other surrounding peaks.



We left the archaeological site, from the west side of the ruin, by way of a long white granite Inca stairway. It was here that I slowed up and joined Andreas, whose traveling companion Achilles from Greece had raced ahead down the steps.

“My knees and hip are not what they used to be,” said the middle-aged Andreas.

“Me, too,” I said. “I used to run short races and several marathons, but then I found out it was bad for my knees, so I quit.”

“I injured my hip years ago, and I thought it wouldn’t give me any trouble,” said Andreas, “but all of a sudden it acted up yesterday and now I have to slow down.”

“I had knee surgery on my left knee to repair some torn cartilage, and the doctor advised me not to run anymore,” I said. “So now I just walk a lot.”

“I’m so envious of you, that you get to travel with your daughter,” said Andreas, changing the subject. “I have a three-year-old daughter at home, and I hope one day to follow your example and travel with my daughter to distant places.”

“Susie is a fantastic traveling companion,” I said. “And a great guide, especially since she knows Spanish.”

“By the way, I see that you still wear eyeglasses,” said Andreas. “I’m an ophthalmologist who does laser surgery, and I think you would benefit from modern science. I had laser surgery done on my eyes, and now I see perfectly without glasses.”

“I’ve thought about it,” I said, “but I’m still concerned about the risks involved.”

We talked some more about the eyes, and then we talked about Greece, past and present. I told Andreas that Greece was on my list of places to visit during my retirement years. After all, the civilization of Greece was – in western eyes – the greatest in the world.

The Inca stone steps went on and on and on. Somebody must have counted all of them when they stated that there were 3,000 steps going down to Winay Wayna (“Forever Young”). Another source said there were about 2,000 steps. A generalized way of talking about the numerous steps was just to say, “a thousand or so steps.”

Later on, when I saw the middle-aged Achilles from Greece resting on the side of the trail, I decided to join him in a friendly competitive race down a hundred or so steps. I used to love letting the force of gravity take me down a hill, and I concentrated on using short strides as I ran down the steps almost side by side with Achilles, whose name reminded me of the great hero of the Odyssey and the Iliad – two of the greatest literary works of western civilization.

Soon we arrived at Winay Wayna, our last campsite. The short spurt of youthful vigor and energy subsided, and I sat down to rest my weary knees. Achilles and I congratulated each other on the successful completion of the “thousand or so steps.”

We waited for the rest of the group to arrive. When the assistant Danny arrived with the last person, we celebrated by giving each other the victorious “high fives” – the modern equivalent of a laurel crown for winning a race. We were all winners.

“No pain, no gain,” said Hilbert, who congratulated each one of us. “You met the challenge again. I knew you all could do it.”

After lunch, we visited the nearby Winay Wayna ruins, and the adjacent site of Intipata (“Place of the Sun”) with its dramatic terraces.

“The Inca people always took advantage of the topography,” said Hilbert as we looked down at the terraced mountainside and buildings from a view point. “The Inca complex was named Winay Wayna by a Peruvian archaeologist named Paul Fejos. He named it after the beautiful orchid that grows here perennially. I will show it to you on our way down to the site. The orchid’s name Winay Wayna means forever young. That is what we all want to be – forever young.”

Hilbert led us down the trail to the site, pointing out the beautiful red-pink orchid along the way.

“From here you have a closer view of the town that the Inca people built,” said Hilbert. “There are four parts that I will point out to you. The main part, of course, are the agricultural terraces that follow the contours of the mountainside. The living area, or urban section, has single and double-story buildings with the Inca style trapezoid windows and doors. The tower area is the fortress part. The ritual area, which includes ten baths, was important as a cleansing or purification area for pilgrims going to Machu Picchu. For you, as tourists, there will be a place to take a shower at the hostel next to our campsite.”



After a walk through the ruins that looked like a city on the side of a hill, we walked to the adjacent Intipata (“Place of the Sun”).

“Intipata is called the place of the sun because it faces east,” said Hilbert, “and it catches the first rays of the sun in the morning. There are 48 agricultural terraces here, and only a few buildings at the bottom. From here, you can see the sacred Urubamba River down below. And you get your first view of Machu Picchu Mountain.”



There appeared to be a rainbow flag flying above the Machu Picchu Mountain. I thought of the rainbow flags that I had seen at the plaza in Cusco. The rainbow flag – red, orange, yellow, green, sky blue, blue, and violet – was the official flag of Cusco. Some sources claimed that it was also the flag of the Inca Empire, Tawantinsuyu. In Bolivia I had seen the Aymara rainbow flag with 49 squares of rainbow colors. When I saw the rainbow flag on top of Machu Picchu Mountain, I thought of the legend of Manco Capac and the rainbow that appeared when he plunged the golden staff into the ground. Someone must have set the rainbow flag on top of Machu Picchu Mountain to indicate that this was indeed the mythological hill called Huanacauri (rainbow) – “the mountain of origin.”

At that moment a condor appeared high in the sky over Machu Picchu Mountain. Or so I thought. I had wanted to see the sacred bird ever since I had found out it was the Andean totem animal of the spirit world.

“Is that a condor?” I asked.

“Maybe condor,” answered Hilbert. It was hard to tell unless the condor was closer, or if you had high-powered binoculars to see it better.

“If you want to see condors up close,” said Wim, “you should go to Colca Canyon. That’s where I saw the world’s largest flying bird. It has a wingspan of three meters. I saw quite a few of them.”

That evening, I went to the hostel at Winay Wayna to take a shower – or as Hilbert called it – a purification ritual for pilgrims going to Machu Picchu. The chef prepared the last supper, with chicken, a beet and carrot salad, another special protein dish of quinoa for Susie and me, potatoes, rice, and – to top it all off – a special cake with the words, “Welcome to Machupicchu” from SAS on it. Then we took a final picture with the porters to commemorate the journey that we had taken together on the Inka Trail.



#### DAY FOUR: Tuesday (Atichaw, day of Ati, lightning energy)

The porters woke us up at four in the morning. They needed to get to the train station at a specific time, so we hurried with the packing of our duffle bags so they could take down the tents. By the time we went to the dining tent for a light breakfast, most of the porters were already hurrying down the trail with our bags and supplies to the train station in Aguas Calientes.

We started our final walk in the dark. Flashlights were lit all along the trail. The various groups were lining up for the final ascent to Intipunku (“the Sun Gate”). The kilometer long single-file procession of tourists / pilgrims slowly slithered like a snake through the forest of trees to the final destination. The six kilometers (3.7 miles) from Winay Wayna to Machu Picchu seemed like the final leg of a marathon journey. The anticipation of what I would see, how I would feel, and all the emotions of having waited so long for this moment to arrive came rushing through my mind and body like a bolt of lightning. It was like a personal Pachacuti – an inner world transformation. The sky was starting to brighten up, signaling that the dawning of a new day was coming. We didn’t need flashlights anymore.

Our group congregated at the final checkpoint, and then we walked together through the final stretch of cloud forest and up the final flight of 50 steps leading to the final pass at Intipunku (“Sun Gate”). We passed through the stone gate, which reminded me of the Sun Gate at Tiwanaku with the image of Viracocha the Staff-god, and we stood facing a cloud covered scene before us with a barely perceptible peak of Wayna Picchu Mountain above the clouds in the background.

Suddenly, the first rays of the sun beamed down on the ridge area where we expected to see Machu Picchu. And like a theatrical presentation about to begin, the beam of light signaled the start of the performance, and the clouds slowly rolled away like a curtain, revealing the Crystal City of Light.



It was about 7 AM when the first rays of the sun reached Machu Picchu. Hilbert led us down to the end of the trail at a series of terraces, where we had a classic view of the entire city of Machu Picchu (“the Old Mountain”). It seemed to belong to an ancient age and time when the seekers of wisdom and light made their pilgrimage to this sacred mountain. Just like the pilgrims who came to the Temple of the Sun at the Island of the Sun in Lake Titicaca.

It took a while for the realization to sink in that we had finally arrived at the place we had dreamt of for such a long time. And then, like a bulb of light going off in the mind, the epiphany arrived and revealed the Crystal City of Light in all of its brilliant glory: “the Old Peak” (Machu Picchu) and “the Young Peak” (Wayna Picchu) were the polar opposites, the duality within which all opposites (masculine and feminine, left and right, up and down) existed in a complementary (symmetrical) way; the sacred Urubamba River encircled the sacred peaks like the cosmic serpent encircling the cosmic egg; embedded in the natural formation of the young peak was a gigantic puma, and spreading its wings across the ridges of both peaks was the celestial condor; and at the center of the saddle between the two peaks was the “Old Bird” (Machu Picchu’s ancient sacred name). This was the sacred place that emerged from the womb of Pachamama at the dawn of space/time; this was the sacred place where the three worlds of the snake, the puma, and the condor coexisted. This was the sacred place of Chakana: Ukhu Pacha (the under world, where the water of the river, the ancestral spirits, and the serpentine energy moved); Kay Pacha (the present world, where the strength and power of the puma moved in Nature and in all of its living creatures); and Hanan Pacha (the upper world, where the flight of the soul upon the wings of the condor went between heaven and earth). All this was Pachamama.



And we were part of the whole scene that day. I felt a heightened sense of awareness as we assembled as a group to take a picture of us and the classic view of the city of Machu Picchu. The sun was shining bright on our faces, and the clouds had almost all dispersed. We had helped each other make it to the end of the Inka Trail. We were a team of eleven hikers who had gathered together from different parts of the world to undertake a special journey – for me, a pilgrimage – on the marvelous trail that led over mountain passes, around terraces and ruins, through tunnels, and finally to the grand mountain and city of Machu Picchu.

“I want to congratulate each and every one of you for making it to Machu Picchu,” said Hilbert after he had taken our group picture with Machu Picchu. “Slowly, but surely. No guts, no glory. You have all worked together, and you should all congratulate each other for the great work that you have done.”

We gave each other the customary “high fives,” and then we gathered around Hilbert in a semi-circle as he gave us a short lesson on the history of Machu Picchu and some of the highlights we would see when we went down to the city.

“Before I tell you about the special sacred cross that’s here, I want to tell you a little bit of history,” said Hilbert, as we looked at him and at Machu Picchu in the background. “The great Inka Pachacuti built this sacred city for himself as a palace and retreat, and also he built it for the Inca people as a religious center where they could come to learn about the Inca religion, about the three worlds, the Apus (mountain spirits), Pachamama (mother earth), and the Milky Way (Mayu) in the sky. It was like a royal city and a university. Pachacuti wanted to bring the Golden Age to the Inca civilization, to enlighten the people. So all the symbols of the religion were built here: the Temple of the Sun, the Temple of the Condor, the Temple of Pachamama, the Temple of the Three Windows, the Intihautana, and other sacred places.

“When the Spaniards came, the Inca ruler and priests did not want the Spaniards to know of this sacred place, so they left it and let the forest and trees cover it. When Hiram Bingham came here in 1911, he was looking for the lost city of the Incas, and some local people told him about Machu Picchu, the old mountain. So he came here and discovered the city and proclaimed his discovery to the whole world. Even though it was not the lost city of Vilcabamba – the last refuge of the Inca ruler – he was looking for, his discovery made him famous.

“So what you see now is the work of archaeologists and local workers who spent many years clearing the site of the shrubs and the trees that covered the city. This is the original site that the Spaniards never found; otherwise it would have been destroyed like the Qoricancha in Cusco.

“If you look to the left, you can see the western or upper sector of the city. It included the Temple of the Sun, the Intihuatana, the royal residence, and the sacred plaza in the center. To the right you can see the eastern or lower sector of the city, which included the Temple of the Condor and the Sacred Rock.



“The Temple of the Sun was the most important for the Inca, who worshipped Inti, the sun-god. It’s the circular building that looks like a tower in the upper section. It has two tower windows that line up with where the sun rises on the June and December solstices.

“The Temple of the Condor in the lower sector is the most interesting place because it has two carved rocks that look like the outspread wings of a condor, and a carved rock on the ground that looks like the head of a condor. That’s also the place where you’ll see the three-stepped chakana that symbolizes the three worlds.



“Now, if you want to climb Wayna Picchu to the top, it’s very steep, and there’s a narrow trail with cliffs on each side. You’ll have to get in line to get permission to climb it.

“After we finish with a short tour of the city, you’ll be free to explore the city on your own, or climb Wayna Picchu. Or if you’re tired, you can catch a bus to Aguas Calientes and go to the hot springs for a relaxing soak in the mineral waters. Either way,



whatever you choose, we will gather together for a buffet lunch at Los Viajeros hostel in Aguas Calientes, where you'll pick up your bags and belongings. And then catch the train back to Cusco.



“And now, I will show you the special sacred cross of Machu Picchu. Remember, I showed you the other cross of the Sacred Mountains and the four directions. I will draw it for you on the ground. Here is Veronica in the east, Pumasillo in the west, Machu Picchu Mountain in the north, and Cusco in the south. Now watch closely as I draw this special sacred cross of Machu Picchu. Here is Veronica in the east and Pumasillo in the west, but now we have Wayna Picchu Mountain, the young mountain, in the north, and here we have Machu Picchu Mountain, the old mountain, in the south. And right at the sacred center you have Machu Picchu city. We are standing right at the sacred center.

“And that, my friends, is the end of my lesson. Now we will go down to the city, and I will show you a few special places, and then you'll be on your own to explore.”

Before we went down to the city, I asked Hilbert if I could take a commemorative picture with him. Since my camera had been stolen at Puno, I had to rely on friends for pictures. This time I asked Ann if she would be so kind as to take a picture of me and Susie, and of us with Hilbert. Ann was very accommodating. She sent me the pictures later by email. Andreas and Sandip were also kind enough to send me pictures to use with my story.



Ann took several classic pictures of Susie and me with Machu Picchu in the background. She had an eye for the mystical aspects of the sacred place. Combined with her photographic skills and the wide-angle lens on her camera, the pictures turned out professional.



As I look back and reflect on the pictures of Susie and me at Machu Picchu, I notice one special picture in which we were standing on a granite platform. The local shamans called Machu Picchu, “the Crystal City.” They knew that the granite blocks contained a high concentration of resonating quartz crystal. This quality allowed them to connect with what to them was the Enqa (aka “Inka,” the creative energy of the universe, the puma energy). The Enqa-Inka resonated within the shaman as a “kingdom of heaven on earth,” allowing him to connect with the living energies of Pachacamac (Father Sky) and Pachamama (Mother Earth) – and with the Andean worlds of Hanan Pacha (condor), Kay Pacha (puma), and Ukhu Pacha (serpent). In India, the yogi achieved the state of Samadhi (enlightenment) when he connected to the consciousness and creative energies of the universe. In Peru, the shaman achieved the Inka kingdom of enlightenment (i.e. became the “Inka”) at the City of Light, the mythological (mystical) mountain of origin. Susie and I were standing on the granite platform of that City of Light – Machu Picchu.



The rest of the day at Machu Picchu was spent walking through the various sectors and temples that Hilbert had pointed out to us from the upper section of the agricultural terraces. I felt like a kid at a large playground, or a child at a city festival, as we walked from place to place. Everything was new and exciting.

I followed Hilbert through the city of Machu Picchu as a student would follow a teacher. I wanted to learn everything I could about the city that exemplified the culmination of Inka knowledge and wisdom. The Temple of Three Windows taught me how important the solstices were to the agricultural community and the understanding of the solar year, from the shortest day in June to the longest day in December (in the southern hemisphere). Climbing up several steps to the Intihuatana Pyramid, which was carved from a peak, provided the astronomical observatory to follow the movements of the sun, the planets, and the stars; and the Intihuatana rock (“hitching-post of the sun”) taught me the moment in the year when the gnomon (pillar) did not cast a shadow. The Sacred Rock showed me the importance of landscape models for teaching geography, such as where the Pumasillo (Puma’s claw) was in the west. The shape of the Condor Temple taught me that the sacred bird of the Andean world was inscribed in all the sacred landscape of the Sacred Valley, from Pisac, where it started its flight, to Machu Picchu, the end of the Sacred Valley. The semicircular Temple of the Sun, and the three-step Chakana below it, taught me that the Andean three worlds (Hanan Pacha, Kay Pacha, and Ukhu Pacha) were interconnected with the solar deity Inti.

When Hilbert gave us the remaining time to explore on our own, that’s when the student became the shaman. It is when the student takes concrete knowledge and raises it to the abstract level that he enters the domain of the shaman. I entered a mythic time-space where everything is possible, and the essential nature becomes known. As I walked the sacred circuit of the city in a contemplative state of mind, I noticed that the Temple of the Three Windows opened up the awareness of man’s essential nature of body, soul, and spirit. As the light entered the window and filled the room with light, I was reminded of the axiom: “If your (third) Eye is single, your whole body will be full of light.” When I placed my contemplative mind on the Intihuatana’s “hitching-post,” the third eye opened up and the flight of the soul at the Condor’s Temple was achieved. It was then that the three-step Chakana allowed the initiate to project his consciousness – like a shaman – through all three worlds and enter the Temple of the Sun, the City of Light.

Susie was ready to go to Aguas Calientes. She was tired of walking. Anyway, she promised to buy a crystal for a friend of ours, Cathy, who wanted a crystal from Machu Picchu. As we turned to leave the sacred city, I saw Mike roaming around.

“Are you staying here, or are you going to take the bus down to Aguas Calientes?” I asked her.

“I’m going down, but I’m coming back tomorrow morning,” she said.

“You’re staying overnight down below?” I asked.

“Yes, I wanted an extra day for myself so I could do some serious meditating here,” she said.

“That is a smart move,” I said. “I wish I had scheduled my time to include an extra day here for meditation. As it stands, we fly out of Cusco tomorrow for Lima.”

We took the bus down the switchback road, called the Hiram Bingham Highway, to Aguas Calientes. We ate lunch at Hostel Viajeros, we shopped at the local market, and we spent some time soaking our weary bodies in the mineral waters at the hot springs pools.

Before we left for the train, Hilbert gave us our certificates, congratulating us for surviving “Dead Woman’s Pass” and successfully completing the 49 Km, 4 day Inka Trail to Machu Picchu in one piece.

