

## Inka Pilgrimage: Hidden Treasures of Pachamama Chapter 2 - Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá

*Bachué is the Mother of the Muisca people.*

*It is said that once upon a time a beautiful woman with a baby came out of the sacred Lake Iguaque. She sat down on the bank of the lake and waited for her son to grow up. When he was old enough, they got married and had many children. They became the Muisca people.*

*Bachué taught them to hunt, to farm, to respect the laws, and to adore the gods. Bachué was so good and beloved by the Muisca people that they referred to her as Furachoque (Good woman in the Chibcha or Muisca language).*

*When they became old, Bachué and her Son-Husband decided to return to the depths of the lake. The Muisca people were very sad, but they were happy knowing that their Mother was very happy.*

*Other versions of the legend say that after immersing in the sacred Lake Iguaque, Bachué ascended to the sky and became Chía (the Moon), while in other versions Chia and Bachué are two different persons.*

[Wikipedia article on Muisca](#)

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The trip to Zipaquirá was skillfully arranged by Susie, whose proficiency in the Spanish language proved to be invaluable in booking bus trips and negotiating with taxi drivers. She was a natural guide and travel agent. Her infectious smile and appealing personality was riveting whenever she approached someone and asked, “Una pregunta (one question), por favor.” I was always amazed how one question would lead to a sequence of questions. The respondents didn’t seem to mind being approached or interrupted by a lovely young white lady who spoke with a songlike voice using the idiomatic expressions of a native speaker.

The 49 kilometer (30 miles) bus ride from Bogotá’s Portal del Norte station northward to Zipaquirá was through flat scenic country. The distant Andean Cordillera Oriental (Eastern range) provided part of the scenery. We would be traveling through a lot of the Andes high plateaus – Bogotá, Quito, La Paz – and we would see a wide variety of the majestic and towering mountains that were a result of plate tectonics. However, our destination – Zipa Hill – was similar to Monserrate and Guadalupe Hills

in Bogota in that it was only 2,652 meters (8,530 feet) above sea level. The towering Andes would have to wait until we arrived later in Bolivia.

We hired a taxi in the town of Zipaquira to take us the rest of the way up the hill to the “First Wonder of Colombia.” Susie wasn’t able to make the half-hour walk up the hill; she was still nursing her little toe on her right foot.

The large complex atop the Hill of the Zipa (“chief” in the native language) was called Parque de la Sal (Salt Park), a Colombian version of a theme park. Not only did it contain the world-famous underground salt cathedral, but it also had a Museum of Mining and a real mine tour, where visitors could wear hard hats and try their hand (and pick-axe) at actual mining. The theme park also had a Wall Tree, where wall-climbing enthusiasts could try their skill at ascending a 17 m (56 ft) replica of a Ceiba (Kapok) tree, the sacred tree of the Maya. A eucalyptus forest surrounded the 32 hectares (79 acres) park. A gigantic metallic statue of a miner with a pick-axe in a pile of rock salt stood in the center of the Miners Park. We were anxious to see the main attraction – the Salt Cathedral of Zipaquira – so I bought the tickets and took a picture of the large bronze map of the Salt Park at the entrance.



An English-speaking guide – I’ll call him Juan – met us at the turnstile, where we entered the mouth of a horizontal curved shaft that led to the belly of the salt mountain and its underground wonders. Juan was what young women would call a “tall, dark, and handsome” young man. On his head he wore the miner’s hard hat with a beaming light, and his body was covered with the uniform coveralls that the park guides wore. He had a Spanish accent, of course. We followed him – along with several other English-speaking tourists – through the darkness of the tunnel.

“We’re descending about 80 meters underground,” said Juan. I quickly calculated in my head (roughly 3.25 feet in a meter) that it would be 262 feet.

At the bottom of the entrance shaft, Juan stopped and gave us a short introduction to what awaited us: “You are now standing inside a magic mountain of salt that was

formed about 250 million years ago. An inland sea covered this region. When the Andes were being formed by the ocean plate sliding under the South American plate, the inland sea was lifted up and it dried out. The huge deposits of salt were buried below layers of earth. They became hard as rock. That's why this mountain is a rock salt mountain."

I imagined the geological ages as far back as the Mesozoic and moving into the Tertiary period, from 250 million to just two million years ago. I visualized the continents separating from the supercontinent Pangea and moving to their present positions. I reasoned that the mountain building stages on planet earth were the result of plate tectonics, a recent geological theory explaining the movement of the various plates of the earth's crust. Scientific discoveries about the history of the earth continuously evolved, just like the continuous uplifting, faulting, and folding of rock structures to form the wonders of nature.

"The Muisca people who lived in this region of Colombia discovered the salt deposits several thousand years ago," continued Juan. "They made blocks of salt and used it as money to trade for food and basic necessities. They dug into the mountain, making lots of caves and tunnels. They also created small shrines to the Lady of the Cave (called Virgin of Guasa in their Chibcha language). They prayed to her for protection. They believed that the Sea (Mare) was the Mother from whom everything comes."

I recalled a legend I had read about the Muisca culture, where the creator goddess Bachue ("the big-breasted one") emerged from a mountain lake with her three-year-old son. It could have been an ancient inland salt lake. She was revered as the creator of humanity. Thus the high plateau north of Bogota (in the Boyaca Department) was considered to be the cradle of humanity.

"Now, after the Catholic tradition and the Muisca tradition were united – we call it syncretismo – the miners were told that the Lady of the Cave was the Virgin Mary," concluded Juan. "So now they pray to the Virgin of the Rosary of Guasa (the Cave). And the stations of the cross we will now see are in the Catholic tradition, with a blending of Muisca influence. They are the Via Dolorosa or Way of Suffering that was part of Jesus' last journey on earth."

And so the sacred pilgrimage began for the devout pilgrim, while for the ordinary tourist it was a tour of an underworld labyrinth full of geological and architectural delights.

Juan stopped at the first station of the pilgrimage known as the Way of the Cross (Via Crucis) and pointed with his light at four letters carved into the rock salt wall: INRI, signifying Iesus Nazarene Rex Iudeus (Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews).

Juan pointed out the lines representing the flagellation on the body that was condemned to death.

“Each station has a small chapel with a cross symbol representing Christ,” explained Juan. “This is the only station where the symbolic letters INRI are used instead. Also, each station has several kneeling platforms for prayer and meditation.”



We walked another 10 meters (32 feet) to the next station, which had a Roman numeral engraved at the entrance to the small chapel. Each station seemed to be equally spaced along the subterranean corridor, which stretched out into the darkness for several hundred meters.

“The second station is where Jesus has to carry his own cross,” proceeded Juan. “You can see a cross shape emerging from the rock.” The rock was transformed into a cross. I thought of the spiritual Rock, who was Christ (I Cor. 10:4).



The third, seventh, and ninth stations had to do with the three times Jesus fell under the weight of the cross he carried. The cross remained upright to signify the overcoming of adversities.



The fourth station was my favorite. It had a standard 12' x 6' cross carved out of the halite (mineral form of sodium chloride) rock. A serene blue light bathed the cross and the symbolic backdrop of the encounter with the Blessed Mother. The peaceful ethereal setting caused me to feel the reconciliation of the Son and the Mother, the masculine and feminine principles in life. The biblical injunction came to mind: “Mother, behold your Son; Son, behold your Mother.” (John 19:25-27)



Several times along the way I reached out with a wet finger to savor the salt from the rock salt wall. The initial scent of sulfur in the air was barely detected as the nasal passageway became acclimatized to it. Even the coolness of the subterranean world, which was about 14 degrees Celsius (57 degrees Fahrenheit), was rather comfortable. The eyes also adapted to the semi-darkness that we walked in, and little by little the various designs of the halite walls became noticeable. It was not just a constant gray-black wall – for it took on different shades of pink, red, white, blue, green, and yellow as colored lights illuminated sections of the small chapels and other caverns that opened up like vast interior spaces of the inner world that we were traversing.

Some of the crosses in the chapels were linked directly to the background wall, evoking a sense of unity with the internal spiritual reality of the sacred space. Another cross – the one at station VI – was simply carved in low relief like an imprint, symbolizing the famous cloth of Veronica (“true image”), which was identified historically with the Mandyion (portrait of Jesus’ face on a cloth). Station VIII

portrayed the meeting with the women of Jerusalem, who were symbolized by round-shaped rocks that were embraced by a white light. Station X also had a cross in low relief on the wall, portraying the stripped garments of the passion story. The cross at station XI seemed to float into the background space of a large cavern, reminding me of pictures I had seen of the crucified savior in cosmic space. Station XII showed a cross carved in relief against a wall enveloped in the darkness of the moment of death.



The climactic stations were XIII and XIV, where a visible cross was transformed into an invisible cross, signifying the passage from the material world to the spiritual world, from an outer reality to an inner reality. The cross of station XIII was carved into a meter wide wall, leaving only an empty shape of the cross, which reminded me of Jesus walking through a door. The cross and the body were dematerialized. The cross of light at station XIV was a cross of resurrection, which allowed a pilgrim (or tourist) to walk through. A truly spiritual experience of transformation!





The culminating experience at the last two stations of the Via Crucis made me recall a story I had heard of the time of the crucifixion and death of the man on the cross. The story was written in a book called the Acts of John, where the invisible Christ appears to his beloved disciple and tells him that the suffering man on the cross is not the real man, but only the ephemeral lower nature of man; and the cross of wood is only a symbol of the archetypal cross of light; and the higher nature of man . . . at that point I was interrupted (in my contemplation of the mystic cross) by the voice of Juan.

“Come, follow me,” said Juan. “I have something special to show you.”

Juan led us to a balcony (also called the choir section) where we were overwhelmed by our first sight of the cathedral’s huge central nave (“ship”). The enormous 75 meters (246 feet) long hall seemed to stretch out into infinity – towards a huge white cross at the other side of the great chamber of the miners. A green earthy color lit up the central part of the nave, revealing the height (25m / 82ft) and width (10m / 32ft) of the gigantic cave. A golden light emblazoned the high altar and its auric surroundings at the foot of the white cross.



“How much do you think that white cross weighs?” asked Juan. We looked at the enormous white cross which seemed to radiate within the full height and width of the space behind the high altar.

“What are the dimensions of the cross?” I asked.

“It is 16 meters (53 feet) high and 10 meters (32 feet) wide,” answered Juan. “Any guesses on how much it weighs? 10 tons? 100 tons?”

“I would say about 10 tons,” I said, taking a cue from Juan’s prompting. Another person said 50 tons.

“I’ll tell you the answer when we get down to the central nave and see the cross up close,” said Juan with a smile on his face. Before we turned to leave, I glanced at the statue to the left of the Archangel Gabriel blowing his trumpet, and I heard (in my head) the music of Handel’s Messiah, with the singing of the words, “The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised.”

Juan continued the tour with a descent down a flight of steps carved into the rock salt. It looked like we were descending into the maw of the underworld through the throat of death.



The final descent was like stepping into the belly of the proverbial whale, where a statue of an angel with an opened scroll read: Vos sumus sal orbis terrarum (You are the salt of the earth). This was where the participant seeking initiation into the mystery of birth, life, and death had a choice to make before making his grand entrance. Church architecture had established a long-standing tradition of three preliminary portals: the left entrance was for sinners seeking redemption, the central entrance was for regular church-goers, and the right entrance was for the redeemed. Susie and I did not subscribe



to the western theology of original sin, so we walked through the right entrance, which seemed best suited to eastern thought and its understanding of man's divine nature.

A vast circular dome – brightened with a celestial blue light – seemed to open up the heavenly sphere as the pilgrim finally arrived at the cosmic center.

“This is where man meets God,” announced Juan as we lifted our eyes into the blue sky of the dome and contemplated our place in the vast universe. A sensation of a limitless expanse flooded my consciousness.



We entered the nave of life in the new cathedral and saw the creation of man, a circular sculpture in marble based on the masterpiece of Michelangelo's iconic representation of the Almighty stretching his hand to touch the hand of emergent man. The vision of the great white cross loomed at the far end of the nave of life.



“This is the new cathedral that was constructed 200 feet under the old cathedral,” said Juan. “It is a compound of three naves or chambers. You are standing in the nave of life, the central one. Everything you see on this level was opened up in 1995 after the stations of the cross and the many additions to the underground marvel were

finished. Most of the additions were simply made to caves and underground passageways from previous mining operations.”

Juan did not take us directly to the front to see the great white cross up close. Instead, he led us to the nave of birth, where a nativity scene welcomed us to a world of biblical proportions, with sculptures representing the story of the birth of a savior in a cave-like manger. A winged-angel hovered over the earthly diorama of humans and animals celebrating the Christmas story, where the Good News of “Peace on Earth, Good Will to All” was proclaimed to all humanity.



A four-cornered baptismal font in front of a pink-colored halite wall was part of the chamber of birth. “The water in the baptismal font is salt water,” explained Juan. “Fresh water would dissolve the rock salt, so we have to use salt water. The story of Christianity takes place near the salty Dead Sea – which gets its water from the Jordan River – so we like to think it’s good water for christening babies since it’s all the same water.”



In a small chapel nearby was a shrine with a statue dedicated to the Virgin Mary holding the Divine Child in her right arm. She was standing on the water surface (Mare)

on the globe of the earth. This was the patron saint that the miners honored as the Virgin of Guasa (the cave). I thought of the legend of the Muisca goddess Bachue rising out of the water with a child in her arms. I also thought of Pachamama, the Earth Mother.



Another statue caught my attention – a statue of an indigenous rendering of La Pieta (“Pity,” a sorrowful mother cradling her dead son). The sandstone sculpture of a body taken down from the cross was a perfect symbol for the nave of death. The figure of the dead savior surrounded by an indigenous female figure to the left and a masculine beloved disciple to the right represented the polarities of human existence. Even though the three figures of the single sculpture seemed to be separate, they also appeared to flow into a unified wholeness, like the two complementary principles (or forces) of the female Yin and the male Yang interacting within a circle, a human being, a crucifix with horizontal (female) and vertical (male) arms, and so forth. The union of opposites is realized in the symbol of the cross (Christ). What seems to be death becomes an anticipation of life.



“Now we will solve the mystery of the great white cross, and how much it weighs,” said Juan as he led us to the front of the central nave. We walked past four enormous cylindrical columns of rock salt that supported the cathedral’s roof. They connected the upper world (of the ceiling) and the lower world (of the floor), but they were in essence part of the same mountain. The church considered the four columns to be the four pillars (evangelists) of the church: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I knew

them as the composite signs (emblems) of the Fixed Cross in the heavens: Aquarius (Matthew, winged man), Leo (Mark, lion), Taurus (Luke, ox), Scorpio (John, eagle). These were also the four quarters of space, the four cardinal directions, etc.



“Now take a good look at the white cross that you saw from the balcony,” said Juan as we stood in front of the rectangular-shaped 18-ton block of rock salt that served as the high altar, representing the place of sacrifice. This was the sacred place where an individual transient selfhood (ego) was sacrificed for a greater vision of an eternal transcendent reality – from the material to the spiritual, from the corruptible to the incorruptible.

We raised our eyes toward the white light of the cross and beheld a stupendous vision of a fantastic illusion – there was no cross. There was only emptiness in the shape of a four-armed cross. The grand illusion was created by carving out the rock salt to form the crucifix shape; then the space – where the rock salt had been carved out – was illuminated with an artificial white light.

“The white cross does not weigh anything!” I remarked. Juan smiled knowingly.

The white light was the cross. It was a light that shone in the darkness of space (in the underground cathedral). It was the light of the (inner) world.

My mind reeled from the shock of the illusion. At the same time, it was spinning through a vortex of an esoteric contemplation of the grand mystery of the cross as portrayed in the Acts of John:



Later on in our pilgrimage, another manifestation of the cross – and its use in the Andean world – would become familiar to us. That three-stepped symmetrical cross would be known as the Chakana, and it would symbolize the three worlds of the Andean cosmos: the upper world (celestial), the middle world (human), and the lower world (underworld).

But for now, Juan led us to another attraction in this wonderland. He led us past a three-dimensional display of a group of the Muisca people, whose mining skills created the first wonders of this salt mountain. It was a Muisca confederation (of local tribes) that ruled in the eastern part of present-day Colombia and brought the benefits of their small civilization to the highlands of the Eastern range of the Andes. It was their stories of the creator goddess Bachue and Bochica, the messenger of the creator, that were spread through the oral tradition. It was their belief that the Muisca people descended from Bachue, the mother of humanity, and that Bachue periodically returns from the underworld to once again guide humanity. It was the fortunate pilgrim who felt her presence in the solidified form of this ancient inland sea and spread the word of the underground salt cathedral to honor her, the Virgin of Guasa (the cave).



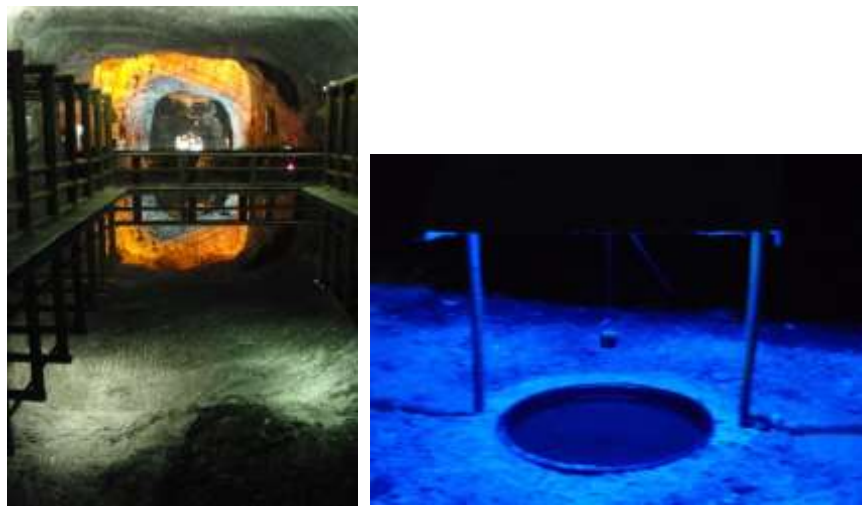
“How deep do you think this pool is?” asked Juan when we arrived at a rectangular-shaped pool that reflected the ceiling of the cave.

“It looks pretty deep,” responded Susie. The rest of us were scratching our heads, trying to figure out the depth of the cavernous pool.

“It’s only ankle deep,” stated Juan. “It appears to be very deep, but that is only an optical illusion produced by the thin layer of salt water.”

Once again, appearances contradicted reality. What appeared to be real to the perceiving senses – the eyes and the mental faculties – was only a mirage. Nevertheless, it was beautiful to see and reflect on the apparent concept of the lower world (of water) reflecting the upper world (of the cave’s ceiling).

One last item was pointed out by Juan before he finished the tour. It was the small wishing well that was located near the mirror pool. We made our wish without throwing a coin into the well, and then we followed Juan to the gift shop area.



“This is where our tour concludes,” said Juan after giving the ladies at the shop a kiss of greeting on their cheeks. “You can look at the emeralds these beautiful ladies are selling. Or you can go across to the auditorium to watch a fifteen minute video of the salt cathedral.”

I thanked Juan for the excellent tour and for teaching me how to take good pictures with my digital camera by using the right settings for the underground scenes. Susie and I took a look at the beautiful emeralds that were mined in Colombia, but we didn’t buy any. Then we headed for the auditorium to watch the short film entitled, “Guasa, treasure of a people.” The 3-D film featured a robot called Nacho, who bounced around from geological age to age in order to demonstrate how salt developed in the area. It was a cartoon-like entertaining, and educational, film that even adults could enjoy.

Afterwards, we ascended a flight of steps back to the long corridor of the stations of the cross that led to the exit. As I passed the stations of the cross a second time, I realized that I had traveled this path before. I had written about my understanding of



this universal path that humanity traveled on. It was about the path of the disciple (initiate) who followed the path that the Essene Teacher of Righteousness (based on the Dead Sea Scrolls) epitomized in his path. It was the path of “the old rugged cross” that I had sung about as an adolescent growing up in a Christian church, a path whose end result was to exchange the cross “someday for a crown.”

This is what I wrote:

“Each step that the initiate/disciple took along the way that the Essene Master traveled was like a grand procession of the Ancient Mysteries. The initiate/disciple realized that everything in the life of the Master was done in a mystery that only the participant in the mysteries could comprehend. Each step was a stage of the path that the soul of Everyman (everyone) had to travel on in order to accomplish the grand design of the cosmos.

From the first step on the path when the initiate/disciple sensed the need for self-knowledge, to the second step when he took up his own cross of the burdens of physical existence, he realized that there was a long road ahead that required self-discipline, dedication, and perseverance. He saw himself fall many times as he struggled with his physical, emotional, and mental natures. He began to understand that life was an ocean of suffering that needed to be crossed on the ship of soul-awareness. He became aware of the Divine Mother, the compassionate principle of nature, who commiserated with the suffering pilgrim and offered encouragement each step of the way. She brought help to the aspiring initiate in the form of fellow travelers who would help the pilgrim carry his personal burden and perform acts of kindness and love. The initiate/disciple became cognizant of masculine and feminine forces, the sons and daughters of man, cooperating with the soul’s quest for wholeness and union with the divine. When he finally arrived at the place of the great renunciation, he knew that he would need to divest himself of the three garments of the physical, emotional, and lower mental bodies in order to be clothed in the royal spiritual body. The initiate/disciple saw himself make the final decision to crucify the horizontal feminine nature and the vertical masculine nature on the cross of finite matter in exchange for infinite repose in the deathless androgynous body. As soon as he felt himself liberated from the body, the cross of material awareness, the initiate/disciple knew that death had been overcome. In one climactic final act, he saw his physical body placed in the tomb of matter, where the physical elements were dissolved, and the spirit rose in the deathless body.

The fourteen-step drama of the Way of Sorrow culminated in the Way of Attainment. The Son of Man (the physical self) had become the Son of God (the spiritual Self).” [God in Three Persons: A Spiritual Odyssey, p. 357-358]

We exited the cave of the Salt Cathedral and walked to the entrance of the Salt Park. We passed the plaque that declared this place to be “Primera Maravilla de Colombia” (First Wonder of Colombia). We agreed! It was also, as was written

everywhere, a “jewel of modern architecture.” To me, it was a hidden treasure of Pachamama, which has been brought out into the light of day.



We looked down through the trees at the scenic view of the town of Zipaquirá. A taxi took us back to the bus station. The last image embedded in my mind was of the magic mountain of salt – Zipa Hill – in the distance as the bus took us back to Bogotá.

