

Peru trip report – November 2013

This is a report of our trip to Peru in November 2013. The group was small, consisting of just the two of us, together with friends Liz Scott and Duncan Rankin. We originally met both Liz and Duncan on holidays in the past with Naturetrek, and have travelled with them several times before. Once again our tour guide friend from Belgium, Gerald Broddelez, put together the trip for us and travelled with us.

We can thoroughly recommend Peru as a holiday destination. We found the Peruvians very friendly and helpful, and the meals (including the alpaca) were tasty, although often served tepid, on cold plates! (None of us felt like eating the local speciality, guinea pig (*cuy*), which appeared to be mostly bones, although that was not the reason we did not eat it.) We needed to take a full wardrobe with us, as we experienced temperatures as high as 40°C in the Amazon Basin and as low as 5°C in the Andes. And wellington boots, to tramp through the mud in the jungly areas. And apart from a headache or two, we had no difficulties with the altitude.

Part 1: Condors (or not)

We visited four separate parts of Peru. After flying to Lima (via Paris), we continued by plane immediately to Peru's second city, Arequipa at 2,350m (7,780 feet). We stayed there for two nights to acclimatise to the altitude (for comparison, Ben Nevis is 1,344m (4,400 feet)). Arequipa has a fine cathedral made of the local volcanic sillar stone. Then we travelled over the Altiplano (high plains) by minibus to the town of Cabanaconde, which was less than 100 miles but took virtually all day as the road was poor and we stopped from time to time. The highest point reached was some 4,600m (15,000 feet). The scenery was stunning and we were lucky enough to have excellent views of wild vicuña, which is a particularly endangered species of camelid (in other words, a smaller and more delicate version of a llama).

The purpose of the trip to Cabanaconde was to visit a viewpoint at the edge of the nearby Colca Canyon, in which condors roost overnight and rise on the thermals in the mornings. Apparently they often drift over the watching crowds – but not on this occasion. We saw only one condor, flying along the base of the canyon hundreds of feet below. It was a bit disappointing given how far we had driven to see the spectacle, but sightings of wild animals can never be guaranteed. Liz had visited the spot on a previous trip to Peru and had been more successful on that occasion, so we had been told how good it could be. The scenery on the drive was spectacular and there were several interesting birds, including Puna Teal which have bright blue beaks.

Part 2: Down into the Amazon Basin

The second part of the trip began the following day. From Arequipa we caught an early flight to Cusco, the old Inca capital city. It is said to be the oldest continually occupied town in the world. Cusco lies at 3,326m (10,900 feet), which is high enough to cause breathlessness if you walk up stairs (or mountains) too quickly, and even altitude sickness. We did not explore Cusco at that time, but instead set off immediately in a minibus for the Amazon basin, travelling down what is called the Manu Road, famous in birdwatching circles. This road leads from Cusco down to the Manu National Park and the Madre de Dios River, which is one of the many rivers that join up to form the Amazon. From Cusco to the end of the road at Atalaya is about 125 miles. This does not sound much, but for nearly all the distance the road is single-track and unpaved. It is being widened (to about one-and-a-half track) which means it is closed in parts for several hours morning and afternoon. There is no alternative route, so journeys have to be arranged in advance to avoid times when the road will be closed.

The reason for travelling down the Manu Road was to stay at various birdwatching lodges, at different altitudes. Peru has almost 1,900 different bird species, most of which were new to Penny and Duncan, and different birds live at different altitudes. So (birdwise, at least), it is important to stay at as many different places as possible. We stayed at four different places for a total of seven nights – Wayqecha Research Station (at 3,700m (12,100 feet), in the cloud forest), Cock of the Rock Lodge (1,500m (4,900 feet), in the rain forest) and then two lodges at much lower elevations on the river, Amazonia Lodge (160m (500 feet)) and Pantiacolla Lodge (135m (450 feet)). It is necessary to travel by boat to these last two lodges along the Madre de Dios river. From one of the lodges, we were fortunate enough to visit a Cock of the Rock lek where we saw five birds displaying.

The four places where we stayed were all impressive in their own ways, particularly Cock of the Rock Lodge, where the accommodation is in individual chalets, with hot showers, and Amazonia Lodge, which is a former plantation, also with hot showers, and even permanent electricity (from a generator). The other lodges provided electricity in the main building for three hours a night – so while we ate dinner we were able to charge our electrical equipment and cameras. There were plenty of birds to see in and around all of the locations, particularly hummingbirds (a favourite of Duncan's). There were also some mammals including various monkeys, one family of which spent a long time trying to steal food from the dining area at Cock of the Rock Lodge. In these lodges, everything has to be brought in and taken out by boat, which is an impressive operation.

Part 3: Cusco and Machu Picchu

After seven nights in the Manu Road lodges, we drove back up to Cusco (3,326m or 10,900 feet, remember) and spent a day there acclimatising again. Penny and Duncan went birdwatching with our guide Alex, and Peter and Liz were taken on a guided tour of nearby Inca sites at Pisac and Ollantaytambo, which are remarkably well preserved, and also to a demonstration weaving centre at Chinchero, complete with demonstration alpacas. On the following day, greatly excited, we took the train to Aguas Calientes, the town that lies below Machu Picchu. This is a distance of less than 100 miles but it takes over three hours as the route is so winding and (for a train) steeply downwards. The second half of the trip is entirely within the gorge of the Urubamba river, which is the river that virtually encircles the mountain on which Machu Picchu sits. At one point the train even reverses over a zig-zag section of line, to lose height in the space available within the gorge.

Aguas Calientes is an untidy town developed solely to serve tourists who are visiting Machu Picchu. It comprises mainly hotels and restaurants, most of the latter each having a waiter outside trying to entice passers-by inside. This happens even when you have eaten dinner and are walking back to your hotel. You could eat several dinners in an evening quite easily on that basis. The town covers the floor of the gorge and climbs up one side, so there is a lot of uphill walking, especially if (like us) your hotel is some way up from the centre. There are no cars, and with one exception there are no roads. The only way into the town is by train, which (for visitors) is extremely expensive. Train tickets for foreigners are priced in dollars and are some twenty times the cost of tickets for Peruvian nationals.

Machu Picchu is as spectacular as we had expected. Built in the fifteenth century as some kind of Inca citadel, it was abandoned after the Spanish invaded South America. The remaining Incas fled further into the jungle, destroying the access trails to it, and the Spanish never found it. Its rediscovery is attributed to an American archaeologist, Hiram Bingham, in 1911, although it seems that others had found it a few years earlier. The native people, of course, had known of its existence all along and indeed some families were living there in 1911 and were farming the terraces as the Incas had done five

centuries earlier. Now it has been much tidied up and restored, but the restoration does not detract from the spectacular setting or the intricate stonework. The Incas are renowned for constructing walls without mortar using huge stones in such a way that it is not possible to put a piece of paper into the join. In fact, this technique tended to be used only for the very important buildings (palaces and temples). For most buildings, and for the iconic terraces, simpler and less sophisticated techniques were used, either with mortar, or without mortar but with less carefully-shaped stones. Whichever technique is used, it makes for an unforgettable visit.

The citadel itself is on a man-made plateau some 130m (400 feet) above the town of Aguas Calientes, and it is reached by small buses that snake their way up the mountain on the town's only road (even the buses, like everything else in the town, must have been brought in on the railway). The buses have to negotiate 20 or so hairpin bends and the journey takes about 25 minutes. There seem to be enough buses for one to run every couple of minutes, and they start running at 5.20 am (shortly after dawn). We caught one at about 5.45 am.

Our first act on arriving at Machu Picchu was to scale the mountain at the back of the site, which is called Wayna Picchu ("Young Peak", as opposed to Machu Picchu, "Old Peak"). It is 130m (400 feet) higher than the site of Machu Picchu, although you have to climb much more than this because the track starts at the elevation of Machu Picchu and descends before it starts upwards. You have to buy a separate ticket for this climb (only 400 people are permitted on the mountain daily), and provide your personal details as you start the climb, so you can be accounted for on your return. The Incas built a temple (to the moon) at the top of the mountain, and the whole of the track up the mountainside is actually a rough staircase, extremely steep in places, and in a couple of places diving into tunnels. Fortunately it was a sunny day. We got a bit hot during the climb, but at least the path was not slippery. We completed the whole walk in just over two hours. There is a spectacular view of Machu Picchu and the surrounding mountains from the top, but also from many points on the path (we spent a lot of time on the upward climb looking at the views!).

After the climb, we spent a couple of hours walking around the site of Machu Picchu itself. There are plenty of photos on the website. We stayed in Aguas Calientes for a further day, and then caught the train back to Cusco. On this occasion we were on the slightly smarter train, which boasted bigger windows and a glass roof. On the way, we were treated to demonstrations of how to make the local cocktail "pisco sour", folk dancing (in which passengers were selected to join) and a fashion show created to enable the train staff to flog us alpaca knitwear (in which passengers were also selected to join). The weather was virtually clear on the way back to Cusco and we had splendid views of the surrounding mountains. A "quiet carriage" (no mobile phones, folk dancing or fashion shows) might have been preferable however.

Part 4: The coast and home

On our final morning we flew from Cusco to Lima, which took about an hour in the air. As our flight back to Paris was not until the evening, we were taken to a small fishing village on the coast about 40 miles away, and given a tour of the local cliffs from the water. We saw a range of interesting birds, including boobies (the Southern hemisphere version of our gannets), pelicans and – most important of all for me – the Last Penguin. Penny had already seen all the penguin species in the world but I had not seen the Humboldt Penguin, which lives on the coast of Peru and Chile. We saw several of them from our boat, so now I too have seen all the penguin species in the world. A fitting way to finish a wonderful holiday, which also fulfilled our long-held ambition of visiting Machu Picchu.