

Tuesday, September 10 – San Blas district, Plaza Mayor and Cooking Class

We begin with another delicious Marta breakfast. It's a good thing her breakfasts are so hearty, we always eat lunch late. Doris comes to meet us and we're off. First we take a taxi to the Plaza of San Blas and walk around this artsy area. There is a beautiful fountain here, and the usual native women selling craft-work.



There are still workshops here from the original Spanish times. When the Spanish wanted to decorate their churches with paintings and frescos, they imported the artists from Spain, not to do the work but to teach the Indians to do the work. Hence you have some rather interesting paintings. The Indians were not painters, they valued architecture, weaving, knitting. They had limited skills in two dimensional representation but they learned. Early attempts at full figure paintings often had foreshortened bodies, feet that didn't look like they belonged to the body, etc. Evidently there were written contracts with the Indian workshops and they were to correct the problems, but there was so much art created that much was left in situ. We plan to return here on one of our "days off" to investigate some of these workshops.

Then we walk down to the central plaza. Every city of any size in Central and South America names their main ("mayor") "Plaza de Armas", but the one here is really large. Remember this was a lake bed in the past so the center is the lowest level, and getting to the plaza from almost anywhere simply involves walking downhill until you come across it. And the San Blas district is on one of the higher hills, so it is a very up/down walk, almost
120 climbing at some spots.





Our route down to the Plaza is a very narrow street lined with shops. We see some of the old Spanish traditions in a few carved wooden balconies and many blue door and window frames. Many shops are in interior courtyards that we peek into. Sort of “mini-malls”. We don’t do any shopping today, but Ann is mentally marking interesting shops to come back to on one of our free days or afternoons.



We also pass the Palace of the Bishop of Cusco which is now a museum. It’s not part of our tour with Doris today, but we researched it on the internet and it’s a place we want to come back and explore later. The foundations and lower walls of the Palace are of an Inca building and the massive stones and fine stonework and joinery is always impressive no matter how often we see examples. Part of this wall is the famous

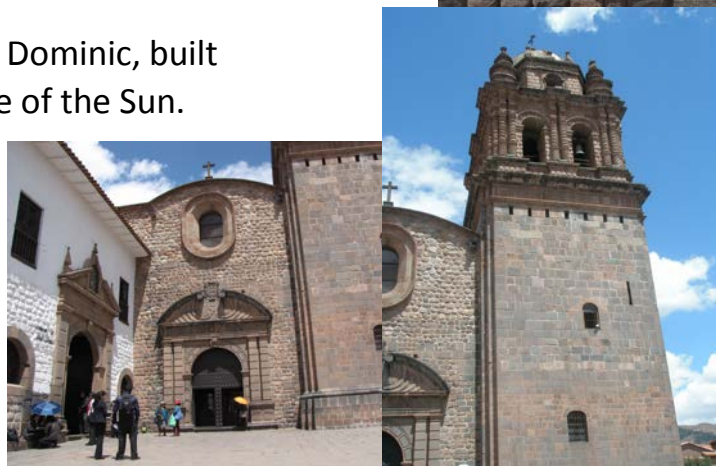
“12-cornered stone”, a tourist must-see that exemplifies the unbelievable architectural and stoneworking skills of the Inca.

We take a short walk off the square and stroll around a large grassy area with some ruins that are supposedly Pachacuti’s royal compound in Cusco. The stone work here, what little remains, is certainly of fine enough quality for royal construction. Then back to the plaza for the churches.



Our first church is that of St. Dominic, built directly over the Inca Temple of the Sun.

Interestingly, in 1950, a huge earthquake (Cusco has the big boys rather frequently) brought down most of the Dominican church and monastery that was built over the Temple.



In the rebuilding, the Peruvians insisted that the temple walls remain exposed and the monastery be rebuilt further inside of them and not on top of them. So today we can see some of the size and amazing structure of the original Inca temple.



We still marvel at this stonework, and get a very up-close look here. The temple was still under

construction at the time of the Spanish conquest; there are still some of the protrusions that were on the stones for lifting when moving them into place. After the stones were in their final position these were removed and the surface smoothed to match the surrounding stone. There is a selection of the various shapes that were used by Inca builders, all originals, not yet moved into place.



And even with the Church walls re-built inside the old temple walls, thus much smaller than it originally was, the central courtyard is huge. Again the amazing stonework on all of the old Inca walls that we see.

In recent years roofs were constructed over the old walls, to help shelter them from the weather.



There are also other interesting exhibits, one of them being an Inca astronomical chart. They were great astronomers and they identified constellations, but they saw shapes and objects familiar to their world and not ours.

And of course the night sky and the constellations viewed in the southern hemisphere are all different from what we see in the northern hemisphere.



The Inca temple was not hurt by the frequent earthquakes because the Inca would place spheres and cylinders of hematite under the huge foundation stones, so the structures they built would “roll” with an earthquake but not fall. This worked just like giant ball bearings and roller bearings; but made of hard stone instead of steel. “Today’s technology” applied in different ways by Peruvian cultures for over two millennia then lost. Those “earthquake proof” construction methods are more sophisticated and more effective than anything built since then, including today’s methods.

Not a crack anywhere through centuries of earthquakes. This is a huge installation, similar to the Franciscan monastery in Lima, with a cathedral and the adjoining two story monastery. The Dominican nuns still run a girls’ school here. Since the church was pretty much leveled in the 1950’s, it now looks like what it is . . . rebuilt. They did rebuild it stone for stone, using mostly the original material.



Then off to the Cathedral of Cusco, immense and loaded with remarkable paintings, carvings, gilt. It is still a working parish and the seat of the archbishop. In fact in the sacristy there are life size paintings of all the bishops back to the first one. The Cathedral of Cusco is reputed to be the largest in Central or South America. The Cathedral itself is huge and has two large Chapels adjoining it. The front is impressive but the doors are closed so we enter through one of the Chapels, which of itself is huge. The parapet of the Chapel is decorated ornately with shrines; a preview of the lavish interior.

One of the most impressive aspects of this cathedral is the carved choir stalls with the male saints in full body on the backs of the first level and the female saints' half body on the arm rests. The carving on each stall is different from the others, all representing different Saints.



But on the arm-rest supports of each and every stall is a carving of a female figure with generous "lady parts" and what looks to be

a pregnant belly about knee level. If you were the Indian carver, you were carving into each choir stall arm rest a replica of Pacha Mama (Mother Earth) sitting on a potato. This was more representative of Inca beliefs. It was a real "gotcha" on the Spanish by those sneaky Indian artists.



But our favorite is the painting of the last supper with Christ and the disciples eating guinea pig and potatoes. After all, it's a feast for an important person who is being honored, so that's what Jesus would be eating if he were in Peru.

Doris' attitude on these "Christian" tourist attractions is interesting. She is Quechua, and she always refers to any ancient cultures as "our people". When she talks about "the Spanish", she almost spits the words. The Dominican church and monastery had a lot of old Inca things to see and talk about, since these were all uncovered in its 1950's re-construction. But in the Cathedral of Cusco, it is another matter altogether. Since we have a couple of days here to ourselves we don't press her for information but agree we'll come back later on our own. In spite of her bias she really does know the history and doesn't hesitate to share. But she clearly enjoys her "show and tell" much more at the pre-Columbian sites we visit.

There is apparently a motor rally that will end at the plaza later this afternoon, and they're all set up for the big finish, with the Cathedral in the background.



Possibly the best stop of the day is a little lady who sits opposite the Cathedral under a small portico with tamales for sale. Just the woman sitting on a stool

with 2 huge sacks of tamales brought from home. Started by this woman's grandmother in 1940; worked by her daughter (this current woman's mother) and now finally the granddaughter. They have been selling them here in this exact location since 1940. Doris treats us all to a tamal twice today; savory ones made with the finest masa, the lightest and most delicate tamales we've ever eaten. Ann usually steers clear of them because they are often heavy and oily, but not these.



There is a wonderful book (and we really mean wonderful) called 1493, about all the enormous changes wrought in the world after Columbus discovered the New World. One of the largest was the introduction of all sorts of domesticated potatoes and corn from Peru and Mexico throughout the new world, Europe and all parts of Asia. In fact, many civilizations would have died out except for being saved by the sweet potato, especially in China. One of the things we never realized was the tremendous trade Spain did with China from the ports of Peru and Panama, via the Philippines. Read the book, you won't be sorry. And there is a book by the same author, Charles Mann, titled 1491; which gives a lot of pre-Columbian history of Central, South and North America. They are a great read as a pair; the "before" and "after" story of the Americas

This afternoon, we are attending a cooking class here in Cusco, so that provides our lunch today. It is such a unique and enjoyable experience that we have separate pages following "today's pages" to describe it all.

And there is certainly no need for dinner tonight; we were eating and drinking all afternoon and are stuffed. We have a little time to relax and read "by the fire", our trusty (we hope) gas heater. But we've indulged so much we're falling asleep as we sit there, so it's off to bed early. Ann, unused to so much rich food and alcohol, does not sleep well. Wonder why? Ed of course sleeps like a log.

Eric Paz Cooking Class

The cooking school we arranged to attend here is conducted by Erick Paz, a well known local chef, and Doris's friend. Peru is now one of the leading "high cuisine" countries in the world and prominent chefs from all over the world come here to explore and study the "food scene". As we mentioned, we "discovered" the fabulous (not an exaggeration) Chez Wong in Lima through an Anthony Bourdain show on TV.



And Eric has also been on Peru national TV as well as

international including Europe and the US. He has built a small addition onto his restaurant Uchu, where he

holds his classes. His teaching kitchen is brand new and fully equipped with only the best available equipment and supplies.

Peru has literally thousands of indigenous species of vegetables, fruit and grain. Since 90% are organically grown, using relatively low-production methods for large markets such as the USA or Europe, they cannot easily be exported in any quantity. The Peruvian government is also very protective of Peruvian varieties and doesn't want them "pirated" (yes, it IS possible to do genetic piracy, ask the Chinese), so they severely limit any exports of basic produce. So we learn something about them, but we'll not be able to find them at home, either in Tucson or in Chicago, except Quinoa and Chia seeds which are easy to obtain in the US.

We are at the cooking class for six and a half hours! We show up at around 1:00 assuming that this would last two hours or less, as most of these classes do in other countries where we've taken them. But not this one; it's a cooking and drinking party rather than simply a "class". This may be partly because Erick has just begun hosting cooking classes in addition to his restaurant business. He is not a "teacher" per se, but is a personable, outgoing guy and a good communicator. His genuine enthusiasm provides a better learning experience for us than most instructors could. He is a sort of like "Iron Chef" with a great sense of humor and fun. His little school strikes us a labor of love. And I think our "class" ran so long because he just has so much to share and can't stop himself. Well, that's all to our benefit.



We have four “classmates” (*left to right*), a Chinese/American mother (Julie) and her daughter (Casey) from Sacramento, a young British couple (Rebecca and Stewart) and then Ann and Ed. We all get along tremendously and they are great classmates and a lot of fun, especially in the “drinking part” of the afternoon.



First we learn about Peruvian fruits and taste some of them. Then we go into Erick’s in-house “market” where he has hundreds of representative foods from Peru. We learn about hot and mild chilies, beans, oils, coffee . . . on and on. And there is a huge variety of spices, infused oils, etc. etc. So much in such a tiny space, but there is more variety here than you would find in many of the

large “gourmet” supermarkets in the US. And, as mentioned before, very little available outside of Peru because they can’t easily convert the way they farm in small patches to industrialized farming to produce quantities big enough for export, and there are many government restrictions to prevent this.

To start the actual cooking, we make causas (although they are not actually “cooked”). Originally called “por la causa” (“for the cause” in Spanish) because it was food for the armies. Now just referred to as causa and on many restaurant menus as an appetizer. But in the typical home here, it is often made as a main course.

It consists of layers of mashed potatoes, mixed with Aji Amarillo (a spicy yellow pepper sauce) and lime, avocado, chicken, diced hard cooked egg, sauce made with mayo and hot red pepper sauce, etc.



We stack ours in little terrines, which makes pretty servings, with various sauces on the side. Yum . . . then we pause to eat them. Immediate gratification! Here is the step-by-step for making them, ending with "before" the finished product (this one is Ann's) and "after" plates.



We sampled these at several restaurants during our stay and they all have a slightly different version of causa as a point of pride. One of the best was made with smoked trout. This is a dish we promise ourselves to try to re-create at home. Although we won't be able to duplicate some of the ingredients exactly, we're sure we can find some sort of yellow pepper sauce (or even red pepper if need be) and hope that Yukon Gold will be a reasonable substitute for the Peruvian potatoes we used here.



Erick keeps us stuffed with "amuse bouche" (appetizers) from his two restaurants

throughout the afternoon. We must have had 8-10 different ones. First was ceviché with local fresh water kingfish. Then bruchetta with huacatay, a mint-like herb used in lots of Peruvian cooking. Then fried wonton skins stuffed with goodies, served with a small side of tomato ice cream, amazingly good.

Then, smoked rosettes of cuy. So we were able to try cuy, without buying a whole one at a restaurant.



Being smoked, it tastes a little like smoked turkey dark meat. After that we are so busy cooking and drinking we lose track of the various small bites that keep coming our way.



Then we retire to the bar, where we have another “class”, this time on Pisco, the distilled grape brandy that is made in Peru. We’re not really much wiser now that we know the difference between aromatics and non-aromatic, except that it all tastes like a light brandy with alcohol content between 44 - 48 % (90+ proof, wow). The non-aromatics are a bit like Italian Grappa, lots of heat and power. The closest taste equivalent might be Mezcal, kind of an earthy flavor. Ann and most of our fellow students learn to make a mean Pisco Sour,

but Ed does a Pisco Mojito. This “genuine” Pisco sour is not so sweet as usually served in bars and restaurants in the US; they often add powdered sugar to a Pisco “sour” (yuk). And then we make another round with Erick’s infused Piscos, Ann’s is dried plums, Ed uses pepper-infused. Now we are talking a great drink! Here are the drink recipes . . . enjoy:

Pisco Sour

- 3 Parts – Pisco
- 1 Part – Fresh Lime Juice *
- 1 Part – Simple Syrup
- 1 Egg White
- 1 Drop of Angostura Bitters

(the drop of bitters is for garnish only, do not stir it into the drink or it will affect the taste).

In a shaker with 5 large ice cubes (not crushed ice), combine liquids adding egg whites last. Shake vigorously for 10-15 seconds. Strain into six ounce rocks glass (be careful not allow any ice to pour into the cocktail. Ice is the enemy of a great Pisco Sour. it will melt and dilute the cocktail. Garnish with one drop



Pisco Mojito

- 2 Parts – Pisco
- 6-8 Fresh Mint Leaves
- 1 Part – Simple Syrup
- 1 Part – Fresh Lime Juice *
- 3 Parts – Soda Water



* The Lime juice should be Key Lime or Mexican Limones.

In a shaker, muddle mint leaves with simple syrup and lime juice. Add the Pisco and ice cubes, and shake briefly – just enough to combine ingredients. Add soda water and stir lightly. Pour entire contents into a tall Collins glass and garnish with a sprig of mint, and be sure none of the ice “escapes” into the drink as you pour.

Suitably fortified, we go back to the kitchen to cook the main meal, using hot woks no less. Finally actual “cooking”! We make an alpaca stir fry that is delicious. Erick raises his own alpaca and the quality shows. His restaurants are all about grilled meats; “man food”. The stir fry contains red onion, red bell pepper, yellow pepper, garlic, ginger, cilantro, green onion (green ends only) oil, red wine vinegar and soy. All cooked sequentially and quickly. Oh, and Pisco of course (very flambé). We plate it with delicious French fries and rice, a beautiful presentation as well as incredibly tasty. Then we all retire to the restaurant and have our “home-cooked” meal and visit with our fellow students.



First smile from Erick all day! I believe he's just happy we didn't burn down his new student kitchen.



OOOOPAH!

No, wait, that's not right is it?



As you can imagine, we barely roll ourselves out the door, into a taxi and home. Eric's bartender called one for us and it cost 6 soles (about \$2.00 US). It would have been a \$15.00 ride in Chicago. By the time we get back to the apartment it's past 8:00, and fun though the afternoon was, we're beat.