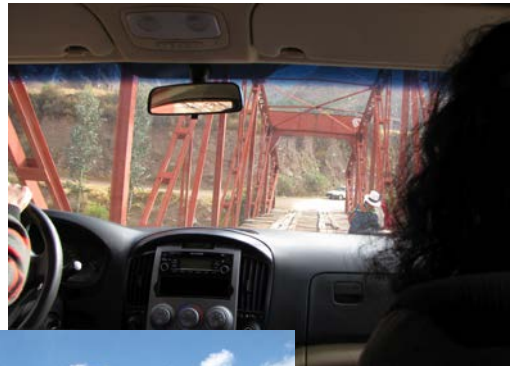


Saturday, September 14 – drive from Cusco to Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge

This is our travel day from the dry western side of the Andes to the wet eastern side. We get underway about 6 am, meeting our new travel companions, Donna and Doug Witt. They are about our age and better birders than we are, which helps us. And they are companionable people (although Doug is a talker), which is the most important thing. Now living in Walnut Creek, CA, they are both originally from Chicago, complete with Midwestern accents, so we feel right at home.

Vergillio is driving us up and up, south out of Cusco. Along the way we spot women by the roadside with large stacks of some sort of green grass or hay. Doris tells us that this is food for the guinea pigs that people raise, and we see people stop to buy some (note baby in shawl on woman's back). Should make for some nice, fat cuy for those special feasts. And now we recall that we saw some of this grass in the home we visited in Ollantaytambo several days ago, with the little cuy scampering all over the kitchen floor. It's not long before we're "out of town" and on small, sometimes paved, sometimes not, roads.



We drive through the wetlands and Wari ruins we explored several days ago. When we reach about 12,000 feet we stop to do some



birding and boy, is it cold. We are really in the land of the Andean Indians here. High, high up but continuous planting of crops and pastures; sheep, goats, cows, small ponies. It looks very poor. At one of our birding stops we acquire a young assistant.



At another stop, a sighting of a Puna Ibis (*left*) and an Andean Teal (*right*).



We drive through a few small, dusty towns along the way and are forced to make a couple of detours for road construction along the main route. The road alternates between pavement and dirt, the towns all look the same. Are we driving in circles? A nice bird sighting at one of our stops is a pair of Andean Ibis.



And there are “ruins” often along the way; some ancient, some just abandoned farms.



Another bird sighting is a pair of Andean Flickers, in one slightly “greener” spot along the road. We saw some a few days ago, but they are beautiful birds and we stop to watch for a while, and for Doug and Donna to get a good look at them.

Ed’s description of the countryside; like Switzerland with no water.



It is mountainous, but no snow, since the snow line here is about 14-15,000 feet. Everything is brown, black, and gray, with some patches of green here and there. Still, life and color want to persist here and there. And we continue our occasional bird walks off the road.



Until about noon, we continue to drive up and up through this dry, high country. Then we come to the town of Paucartambo.



We stop to walk through the town; Vergilio will meet us on the other side with the van. Paucartambo is a “larger” small town and interesting for being the gateway between the dry and wet sides of the Andes. The town is most famous for its festival of the Virgin of Carmen in July. Members of the two Indian people, Quechua and Aymara, meet in mock battle over the Virgin, who represents the idols of their former religion

and fight to take her back. It’s evidently a festival with a week of dancing, drinking and parties for all peoples of the Andes, as well as the battle. We are assured that actual fighting does take place, but without any dangerous weapons and bloodshed is rare but does happen on occasion. We come to the church and look in on the Virgin; she is decorated with lots of flowers, real and plastic. They are preparing for a wedding in the church, so we are unable to remain long. It seems that every church where we have stopped so far is about to have, is having or has just had a wedding. Could it be something in the water?





There are Incan ruins around the town, which lies along both sides of the Rio Mapacho. It was the easternmost outpost of the Spanish empire so it has a very colonial look and feel. And there are birds along the river, so as we walk across the bridge we stop and look.

After we pass Paucartambo, quick as a wink, we are through the Andean “dry side” and it is misting; clouds literally settling around us. Soon there are ferns and bromeliads everywhere and we are headed down the eastern side of the Andes, into the cloud forest, beginning our descent to 5,000 feet and Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge. Of course we stop to look for birds often, but not much by way of sightings.



The road gets narrower and dustier and the driving more treacherous. If you remember our description of our walk out to the Inca Bridge at Machu Picchu, that is what the road is generally like. Straight up on the left and straight down on the right, for 100's of feet, and the road never more than 1½ car widths, often barely one. Hardly enough room to even step out if we needed to. Poor Vergilio . . . but he is used to this road and is certainly a skillful and careful driver. The dust has been pouring into the van from the back for the last couple hours as we've driven along, actually billowing in clouds inside the van.

We finally stop for a picnic lunch just outside the entrance to Manu National Park where we will spend the remainder of our trip, staying at three different lodges along the way. The sun comes out briefly to shine on us as we dine. The picnic lunch is delicious and with our early start and limited breakfast (Marta had spoiled us) we are more than ready for some food.



And Vergilio discovers the source of all the dust. At one pull-out where we allowed a truck to pass we had scraped bottom and torn part of the rear bumper loose. This exposed the bottom of the van's rear door which

was not properly weather-stripped and provided an opening across the entire lower back of the van for the road dust to pour in. Nothing can be done right now, but Vergilio thinks he may be able to repair it at the Lodge.

Well, our dust problem is solved by nature as soon as we leave our picnic spot; our further descent into the cloud forest is almost immediately challenged by rain. At least it spared us for the picnic which was a wonderful respite from the drive, and sitting, sitting. First, a drizzle, then a hard rain with occasional short pauses for the next 5 hours.



We are driving at first in daylight and then finally in darkness on a one lane road where we, or the other party, has to back up to a pull-out area in order to pass. There are very small pullovers about every quarter mile, but even then it is a very tight fit. Some of the large trucks that pass us as we huddle in these turnouts come within 3-4 inches of the side mirror, and the van's right wheels are only a couple inches from "the drop"; hundreds of feet to the bottom of the mountain and the river. Virgillio is an amazing driver; calm and unflappable, even with one wheel hanging out almost over mid-air. We are NOT exaggerating any of this! Strangely, none of us is all that nervous, perhaps being re-assured by Vergilio's and Doris' confidence and comfort with the situation. But we're all glad we won't be coming back up this way.

Vergilio and Doris have made this trip many times before, and what seems so hazardous to us is simply the norm for this road. Some tourists drive this themselves in a rental car, but it's hard to imagine, even for Ed who has done some treacherous driving on horrible roads in Central America.

To add to the difficulty, they are making lots of improvements to the road as electricity is being brought to this area. We see concrete utility poles at some points along the road; wood would last just a few months in this climate, if not the rot, then the termites. No wires yet. At every switchback and at drainage points where running water crosses, there is some washing away of the road, either major or minor damage. So, they are installing large concrete culverts and where those won't work because the water cascades down onto the road, they are putting in solid concrete slabs with a shaped "spout" over the edge onto which the water will fall then pour out down the mountainside below. It's an amazing process, with huge trucks going back and forth hauling gravel and men mixing cement by hand and making the road improvements, the culverts and the "spillovers".



At one point we are delayed because the road is completely closed. None of the workmen there care to tell us anything about what is going on ahead or how long the road would be closed. Little information is shared without asking and even then it seems grudging. After over ½ hour they finally they let us through.

The rain continues as we drive, and every switchback is a challenge. Some of the trucks we pass are 6 wheelers and others are 8 wheelers, but they are big trucks even on a normal roadway and on this road they are monsters. Surprisingly to us there is little "friendliness" along the road. No one waves, no one gives the high sign that you can come ahead. There is a bit of action with headlights and horns (which everyone seems to understand), but that is it. Still no real conflicts and of course the trucks simply "take" the right-of-way. Ann begins waving and receives some smiles and waves in return. So, the idea is there, but it takes two.

For some time the rain is almost overwhelming. There is probably 20 foot visibility in front of us, and at one point we drive through a sizeable waterfall that is pounding the middle of the road. There is a tourist van ahead of us that drives through this, but they have over a dozen suitcases and duffle bags strapped to the van roof with no tarp. We're sure the luggage and everything inside is already soaked, but the waterfall is the final touch. We pity those poor folks when they stop for the night, so much water poured down on those bags they might as well have been under water.

We have to drive through small waterfalls cascading down onto the road a few other times, but this particular one is a biggie. It really wants to wash us over the edge. Those poor people with their bags on the roof of their van during the storm.

We want to get some pictures of the deluge and the “on-the-road” waterfalls, but there is no real opportunity. Too rainy, impossible to shoot photos through the car windows. We can barely see through them. No place to stop. Then finally, too dark. But it will all remain in our memories!

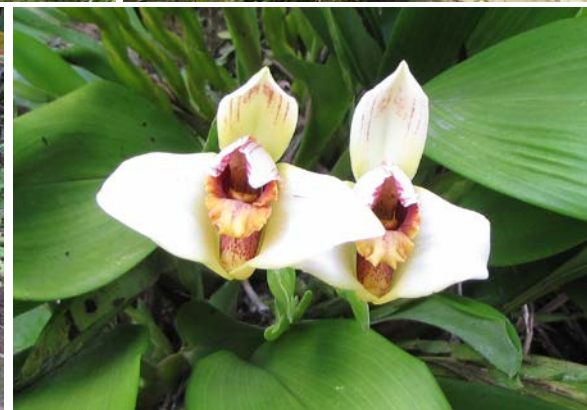
We arrive at the Cock of the Rock lodge about 7:30 pm. According to the map, our trip was 40 miles as the crow flies; but it takes us over 13 hours to make it. We guess our actual driven mileage is about 200-250 miles. Yes, we did stop for some birding, and a walk through the town of Paucartambo, then our picnic lunch near the entrance to the Manu National Park where we will be for the rest of our trip. But the major factor is that during the afternoon we seldom were ever able to drive faster than 5-15 mph. With the road quality, the rain and the many, many short “traffic” stops added to our low overall speed it was SLOW going. Doris feels that we “made good time”! We wonder what NOT making good time would have been like.

We are at 5,000 feet elevation, but we spent part of the day in the hot sun birding. And there is no air conditioning in the van, just open windows. Even when we finally closed them, there was lots and lots of dust until we got into the rain. In fact our suitcases are full of dust, around the zippers as well. But at least they didn’t get soaked like that other group we saw in the rain. But we are hot, sweaty and so very dusty. At least the rain has stopped, it is perhaps a 150 yard walk from the road back to our cabin. If it were still raining we would be soaked to the skin, to say nothing of our very dusty, but dry, luggage. Then we discover that there is no hot water at the Lodge right now. Tomorrow, they tell us; a problem with the heaters. We’ll just have to make do with a cold-water clean-up. Uncomfortable, but we manage and it feels great to be at least clean. We hope the hot water difficulties will have been remedied by tomorrow night. We are so spoiled!

We have a nice dinner. The lodge is very accommodating of Ann’s vegetarian needs; no vegan, but by now she doesn’t care all that much. And with dinner Ann has a delicious Pisco Sour made with passion fruit. And then to bed! Even though we have been riding in a vehicle the entire day we are exhausted.

## Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge

The lodge is situated at the temperate elevation of 5,200 ft in the mosquito-free Kosñipata Valley. There are plenty of other insects though, and we assume that when we get down to lower elevations and into the rain forest we will find the mosquitoes. There are a dozen cabins here and a communal dining room. The grounds are “groomed” and park-like with both hummingbird and other feeders around. We see birds all over the grounds of course. There are bromeliads and orchids growing on the railings along the path down from the road to the cabins and dining room. Quite a beautiful place.



We have a small cabin with twin beds, a bath and a small balcony out the back. But because of problems with the generator and water heater caused by the rain, there is no hot water in the cabins, so only cold showers or no showers. The night we arrived we were assured it would be fixed by the next day, but no, no fix. At least the water is not “cold” cold, more like cool, certainly bearable for a shower.





The only electricity here normally is in the dining room. That will be typical the rest of our stay in the cloud and rain forest. We'll be getting used to candlelight in our cabins. But the meals we have in the dining room are fabulous.

Our cabin is spotlessly clean, but you can't keep the bugs out. Our windows have no screens and there are too many gaps in the ceiling and walls anyway, so we sleep with bug nets. That too will continue through the rest of the trip, along with the candles. And we do "la cucaracha" around the large and small roaches on the floor, not the kind that come from garbage; but nice, clean "wild" roaches. But still cockroaches . . . and some of them are BIG ones.

