

Sunday, September 8 – Machu Picchu to Cusco by train

The shower was bad but the bed is good, and we awake well-rested. And we DO feel clean, so that ridiculous shower last night did the trick on our dust and grime. We start with a good breakfast at the hotel. They have a very nice buffet set up but there is only one other couple breakfasting with us. As we leave, we take some fruit "for the road" along. Ann's traveling with a bag of limones (similar to key limes) purchased at the central market in Urubamba that she squeezes into hot water



and drinks for her cold. It seems to be working, as she's just about cured. We pack our bags and check them at the hotel then head back to Machu Picchu for the morning. The bus ride up is as spectacular as it was yesterday, but the photo-ops are no better.



We are early this morning, but the crowd is already greater than it was yesterday afternoon. We climb the trail towards the Gate of the Sun, but then branch to the southwest and go on the Inca bridge trail. This trail is far above Machu Picchu and it is only about ½ a mile before it disappears into the jungle



It's some steep climbing at first, but soon we're "above it all"; the trail levels out and the walking is much easier.



And as soon as we are in the shade of the forest it is a very pleasant temperature, perfect for hiking. The trail just clings to the mountainside, on the left, straight UP and on the right, straight DOWN! Lots of nice quiet time, rain forest vegetation and wonderful views out over the valley far below. And in spite of the crowds at the main site, almost no one else is on this trail. A short way into the forest there is a sign in/sign



out station for the rangers to check to see that people are off the site after hours. It is a nice, easy walk, about 1½ miles each way with hardly any up-and-down except at the beginning.



The Inca bridge (there are many of these along the Inca trail network) was built on the trail to the west of Machu Picchu. It is in a spot where the trail runs along a sheer cliff face. These trails that just seem to cling to a cliff face

are almost as impressive as some of the major architecture here. The gap is bridged by large tree trunks lashed together. There is a drop of almost 2,000 feet to the base of the cliffs. The little stones jutting out from the sheer face on either side of the gap in the trail are stepping stones that could be used when the logs were withdrawn for security reasons. They are certainly too precarious to be of any use to an invading army, but a single person could use them to cross the gap easily. That would certainly be one of those “don’t look down” now moments. It’s impossible to imagine a successful attack mounted along that trail.



This hike enables us to be away from the main site to do some birding. There were a few other people on the trail, but nothing close to a crowd. We won't bore you with the birds, but we were pleased with everything we saw. Ann especially with the Andean Guan, a large bird, almost turkey size, that was hunted and eaten (and probably still is) by the natives. It's nice to see that some remain in these protected highlands.



As we return to the entrance gate to leave we see that the crowds have really arrived. Many more people than yesterday, and the trails are crowded as we get back near the main site on our return from the bridge. Something we hadn't expected but perhaps should have; many Peruvians, certainly well over ½ the crowd. And now it's even more crowded that it was this morning. On Sundays, Peruvians are granted free entry, so most of the crowd are locals and their families. Doris says Machu Picchu is indeed a very popular spot with Peruvians; it is such an important part of their history.



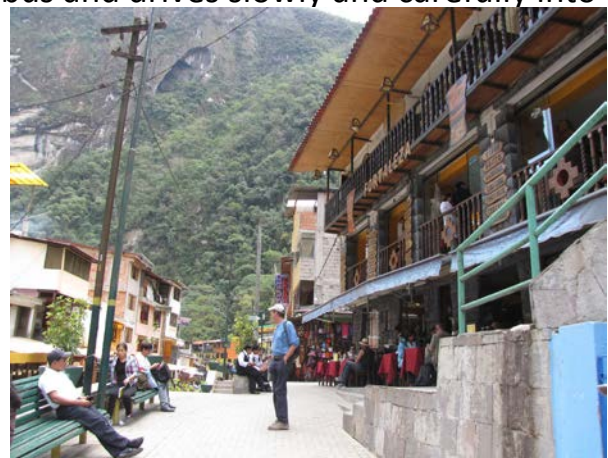
For our bus down we have a driver who apparently has always dreamed of an auto-racing career. Yes, we



are making a 180 degree plus turn here (at about 20-25 mph); yes, we're only about 20 feet from the guard-rail

here; yes, we make it fine (with some "tilt"); no, we don't go rolling down the mountainside as everyone expected; and YES, he continues to drive this way all the way down. Inexplicably, once we're on level ground again he slows the bus and drives slowly and carefully into town.

Today we take the bus all the way into Aguas Calientes, and get off at the bus station.





We walk through the quiet streets and the tiny central plaza. Of course there is a statue of Pachacuti Inca there, as there is in every Peruvian city and town, and the one church in town. Then through the side streets to Indio Feliz, the restaurant where we had dinner yesterday. It was so good we had to come back.



Ed enjoyed last night so much, he repeated with the same meal, but minus the dessert tart. Ann opted for a huge plate of veggies and fruit. She thought it would be a lighter meal, but the one plate is more than enough for any



2 people. Instead of yesterday's Pisco Sour, she orders a beer (mistaking a "grande" for extra fine; it really means extra large). It's all a bit much for a lunch, but we all manage it. Doris is a tiny person, about 5 feet tall and probably weighs 100 pounds or less, but she keeps up with both of us in the eating department. She says she's always had this appetite and feels fortunate that she has good genes and never gains weight. We suspect her VERY active life is a major contributor as well as genetics.

We stroll back to the hotel and encounter yet another parade, but with different Saqras leading it. Yesterday the parade was in the evening, today it's at mid-day. Do they have
104 two parades every day?





It's unclear what the parade is honoring, but everyone seems to be enjoying it; there are even men lighting firecrackers along the tracks. We pick up our bags, then off to the station to await a 3:30 departure.



We pass the shop where Ed bought his T-shirts this morning and there is a "guard cat" in front watching the passersby. We've seen many dogs here, but this is only the second (and last as it turns out) cat we see in Peru.



We're held up momentarily by an incoming train, but it's only a 10-minute walk to the station and we have plenty of time.



The station is crowded, and even the outdoor seating areas are full; there are few seats left. We have about an hour to wait; Ed walks around outside for a last look at the



Urubamba Valley. A different train leaves shortly, so there are seats available now. Ann does her needlework and Doris checks her phone and reads a Natural History book as we wait. But this time the train is right on time (well, close at least).

We are headed for Cusco, a 3½ hour trip. The same scenery we saw yesterday morning, but in reverse. Still beautiful and we both stare out the window. Doris has seen it countless times before so she reads her book and talks with a Brazilian tourist across the aisle to practice her Portuguese as Ed and Ann look out the windows.



We start in the rain forest at Aguas Calientes in a narrow canyon then gradually up through increasingly drier biomes with the canyon walls retreating as it widens, past Ollantaytambo where we departed for Machu Picchu yesterday and on to Cusco where the climate is dry



indeed. We see more Torrent Ducks as we go along the riverside and more of those wonderful rugged mountain. After we pass Ollantaytambo and approach Cusco the canyon narrows and deepens again, even deeper than before. But by this time it has begun to get dark and it is increasingly harder to see those wonderful mountains.

Yesterday when we went to Machu Picchu over ¼ of the seats were empty but today the

train is crowded, every seat filled. Train fare includes a nice food service and evidently unlimited alcohol (judging from a group of American and Australian tourists a few seats in front of us), but Ann's still full from that lunch-time beer so no booze for her. And Ed and Doris aren't drinkers so we have to pass on the free open bar. That's all right, the Americans and Australians seated up ahead of us drank our share and more. But we are all hungry again and eager for some food.



Once it's dark outside PeruRail entertains us with a dance of the Saqra (they seem to be everywhere around Aguas Calientes) up and down the aisle, and he/she(?) is very funny, "engaging" the passengers. We successfully lay low (DON'T make eye contact, DON'T take photos) and avoid becoming part of the entertainment.

Then a fashion show of Peruvian woolens, beautiful alpaca and vicuña woolens, scarves, coats, sweaters, slacks, wraps, etc., etc. Every type of garment you could imagine for both men and women. All modeled by the PeruRail staff and accompanied by fashion show "runway" music as they parade up and down the aisle. Beautiful, tempting things, but more costly than cashmere, and we don't need to buy, buy, buy. The lowest priced item they show is a beautiful shawl for \$700 and it's up, WAY up, from there for the other things. At this point in our lives, we are trying to get rid of "things", and don't want to accumulate more.

It's dark by the time we arrive in Cusco. We meet Vergilio again at the bus station without difficulty and we're on the way to our apartment here in Cusco. The station is on the outer edge of the city so we have a long, slow, traffic-filled drive through neighborhoods that remind us of Juliaca, a real s**t-hole. But the neighborhood slowly improves as we near the center of the city. It's nice and clean and looks civilized as we approach the main square and head down Avenida del Sol. Vergilio stops at Gato's, a small grocery just off the square and we pick up some snacks and drinks. This turns out to be a regular stop for us while we're in Cusco, and it's a good place for "small shopping". And not long after this stop we arrive at our apartment.



Fortunately for our budget, any wool, alpaca and vicuña included, makes Ann itch, so our \$\$\$ are safe for the time being.



It's almost 9:00 by the time we get our bags into the apartment. It is a nice, modern place with more than enough room. We're tired, it's been a long day, but we need to unpack and get the apartment organized. Ann has some computer work that's been delayed for days now (at last . . . a "real" wi-fi connection . . . hooray!), and Ed downloads the day's photos from his camera into our computer every day. It's cold here, perhaps colder inside than out since the buildings are all made of concrete. We briefly huddle around the propane heater in the living/dining room of the apartment which is meant to heat the entire apartment, but really heats only about a 6-8 foot radius around the heater. At least there are lots of blankets and comforters available. We're told that only the homes of the wealthy here have any sort of central heat. The average Peruvian just bundles up and deals with it, and the heaters are only brought in for the tourists.

It is almost 11:00 pm by the time we get to bed. The heater has done some warming of the place but not very much. Blankets and comforters or not, we think we will do some powerful cuddling tonight, as you are not supposed to sleep with the heater on (the CO might kill you . . . bad for the tourist industry).