

August 28 – A tour of Lima and lunch at Chez Wong

We had a wonderful breakfast at Casa Inca. Lots of fruit, eggs, quinoa cereal, whole wheat French bread, really salty olives in brine, not oil . . . and delicious Peruvian coffee. Then we are picked up by Benjamin, our driver, and Fabiana, our guide for a whirlwind tour of Lima. Fabiana is a friend of Doris Valencia, our guide for most of our trip and really our travel agent as well, since she arranged the whole trip working with Ed.

But before we begin our day a bit of modern Lima and Peru history:

Lima's population grew from 2 million to 8.5 million shortly after 1980 when revolutions in the countryside drove the country people from their homes and into Lima. This was the time when nationalist (or terrorist, depends on your viewpoint) groups gained power. Remember Túpac Amaru (the group named for the last Sapa Inca, executed by the Spanish in 1572) and Sendero Luminoso (the group named Shining Path)? They were big news for a couple of decades. The result was years of rapid inflation and strikes that plagued Peru for years, but somehow Lima absorbed all those people. Certainly not without difficulty, but with little or no government assistance. There is no "social security" here such as unemployment insurance, Medicaid, etc. If you are out of work, you must make work for yourself or starve, so there are many, many "forced entrepreneurs" who have small businesses and work independently in various trades. During the 80's many of the wealthy Spanish families left Peru and emigrated to Spain, Argentina, etc. and the people coming into Lima were Andean, mostly Quechua (pronounced "Ketch-wah") and Aymara (pronounced "Eye-mara").

Also during this time, inflation was running at up to 2,000% at times and unemployment at 60-70%. Social unrest was rampant. One historical remnant of this is money changers on the street. With inflation so high, people would get paid and immediately change their Peruvian sols into US dollars. The government began to regulate the money changers, but did not stop them since it helped preserve some level of "peace and quiet" for people regarding their money.

Today, the best place to change your dollars into sols remains the street money changers who are regulated and wear identification vests. Exchange rates while we were there were around 2.65-2.8 sols to \$1 US.

Interesting side story of how such times often affect families and individuals. Fabiana's family, who were not religious, converted to Catholicism during this time so she could go to Catholic school. The state schools were out on strike most of the year and children were not getting an education. To convert, her parents had to be baptized, married in the Catholic church and she had to be baptized. But she got her education and remains Catholic today, as does her mother.

Our first stops of the morning are the public plazas, Plaza de Armas (or Plaza Mayor), and Plaza San Martin, where we started with a bit of Peruvian history. In 1532, the Spanish under Francisco Pizarro conquered the Incas. This brought wealth almost beyond their conception to Spain, which was desperate for it due to profligate spending by the royalty. The Inca were superior to the Spanish in many ways, but lacked guns and horses and immunity to European diseases. In jungles and low areas where they invaded the Spanish suffered from the native maladies as much as the natives suffered from theirs, but not in the high, clear climate of the Andes. And so it goes.

Here is an interesting comment on the "cultural differences" the Spanish encountered when they first came in contact with the Inca and one of the few written by an eye-witness. In Cuzco in 1589, Don Mancio Serra de Leguisamo, one of the last survivors of the original Spanish conquerors of Peru, wrote in the preamble of his will:

"We found these kingdoms in such good order, and the said Incas governed them in such wise manner that throughout them there was not a thief, nor a vicious man, nor an adulteress, nor was a bad woman admitted among them, nor were there immoral people. The men had honest and useful occupations. The lands, forests, mines, pastures, houses and all kinds of products were regulated and distributed in such sort that each one knew his property without any other person seizing it or occupying it, nor were there law suits respecting it. The motive which obliges me to make this statement is the discharge of my conscience, as I find myself guilty. For we have destroyed by our evil example, the people who had such a government as was enjoyed by these natives. They were so free from the committal of crimes or excesses, as well men as women, that the Indian who had 100,000 pesos worth of gold or silver in his house, left it open merely placing a small stick against the door, as a sign that its master was out. With that, according to their custom, no one could enter or take anything that was there. When they saw that we put locks and keys on our doors, they supposed that it was from fear of them, that they might not kill us, but not because they believed that anyone would steal the property of another. So that when they found that we had thieves among us, and men who sought to make their daughters commit sin, they despised us."

The Plazas are clean and beautiful, un-crowded streets, many interesting malls off the main streets. It's too bad we don't really have time to explore, but so be it. We still get to do some very pleasant walking around near the Plazas. This part of Lima is wonderful for walking and the day is perfect for it. Temperature in the high 60's, slightly overcast but still very nice, bright light. We're walking the rest of the morning so we won't see Benjamin and the car again until lunchtime.



2 views of the Plaza de Armas (Plaza Mayor)

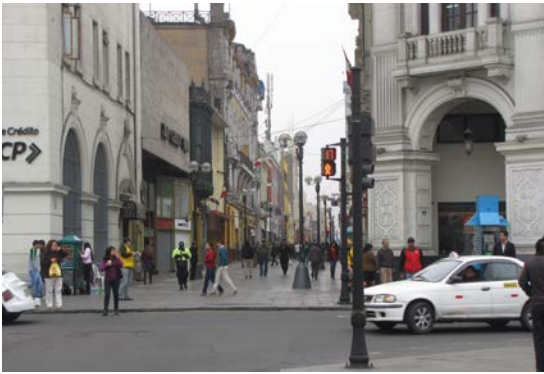
Pizarro lived in Lima on the Plaza de Armas and his house only burned down in the last 100 years. The influence of the conquering Spanish is seen in the wooden balconies that front many of the old buildings. They are in excellent condition because they are made of cedar brought from Nicaragua and Panama in addition to a benevolent climate with very little rainfall or moisture. Lots of earthquakes in Lima, so much has been destroyed and rebuilt several times.



Ann and Fabiana



Some of the old, original Spanish balconies.



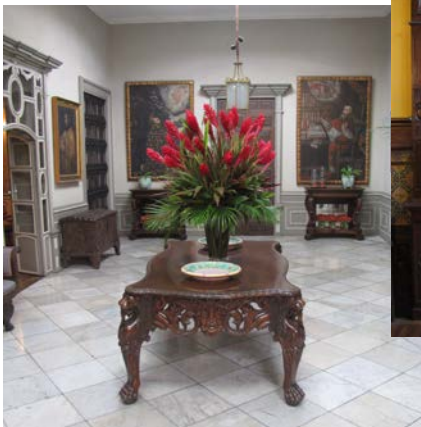
We walk the streets near the Plaza. Lots of Guardia and soldiers, all different uniforms. Most of the groups of Guardia and soldiers had dogs with them, many of the dogs in “uniform” also. There was a “baby” tank outside the presidential building, so the security there is very visible.



Most stunning was the house of the Aliaga Family. Built directly across from what was Pizarro's house and is now the Presidential building. Here you can really see how dry the climate is because when you enter the front door, the house is open to the sky with magnificent, un-weathered woodwork all around. It just does not rain in Lima. It mists a bit but that's it. There are often no windows, just shutters. But it is not "destructively" dry as it is in Arizona dry seasons. Proximity to the ocean makes it nicely humid and cool all year round.



Amazing furnishings and artwork, a lovely open courtyard, and the family chapel complete the picture of colonial opulence. You could really sense the wealth and power of this ancient Spanish/Peruvian family in the house.



The Aliaga family still lives in their house today, two generations in apartments that face each other across the large entry hall. Their money today comes from real estate throughout Lima and from entry fees to see the house, renting it for weddings, etc.





above: Aliaga family Chapel

Then to the church and monastery of San Francisco (Saint Francis), still run by the Franciscans. At the height of their power in the 17th century, there were 300 monks. Now there are only 15 or so, but what a magnificent place. The artwork, the tiles, the carvings, the gold work are almost beyond belief. The Clergy felt the need to impress a native population who had been wealthier than the Spanish, so they developed a “Peruvian Baroque” style which took European Baroque way over the top with gold and elaborate decoration. Under the church are catacombs where at least 25,000 are buried, but mostly just piled femurs and skulls now. These catacombs and the deep round ossuaries helped keep this church from being brought down by the frequent earthquakes. It is the original building.

Though we really didn't have time to examine them (and all the artwork could use a good cleaning) the most valuable paintings are by the school of Francisco de Zurbarán, a 17th century Spanish painter who we both love. One, of Jacob and his 12 sons, is particularly stunning. Throw in a room full of Rubens and drop dead wonderful carvings in the monks' stalls and we are overwhelmed. We could easily have spent a day just at this monastery. No photography is allowed here and somehow Ed managed to behave, so there are no pictures for us to put in this book. It will all have to live on in our memory (and on the internet, if anyone cares to look it up).



Now, time for some lunch at the famous Chez Wong. We found this so delightful we have separate pages following “today's pages”, just for our Chez Wong adventure.

After lunch we go to Museo Larco, the original house of the Larco family, built atop an ancient Indian pyramid, because these were everywhere in Lima and provided choice foundations for buildings. The house and the grounds are beautifully maintained and a pleasure in themselves. All along one wall is a bed of beautiful orange Epidendrum orchids.



It is home of 45,000 objects all from native Peruvian peoples, but primarily those in the north, primarily the Moche and Chimu cultures, and dating from 1200 BCE to 1532 CE. These pieces, primarily pottery, were amazing. The very least of the pieces of pottery is a treasure. All of it found in tombs and most left behind by grave robbers who had already taken the gold and silver but had no interest in pottery.

We went through room after room lined to the ceilings with shelves of pottery. Human heads, “stories”, animals, religious figures, even sexual themes. Definitely something for everyone. There were other things as well, fabrics, ancient dolls/toys, gold ornaments. It is often said that the Inca had no awareness of the wheel. But they did know of the wheel, it’s just that they never put it to the obvious (to us) uses for transportation, engineering, etc. They only used the wheel for TOYS!



Some examples of the amazing collection at the Larco Museum.



Most of the Peruvian pre-Columbian civilizations are identified by their pottery, textiles and jewelry.

All of them so convinced in life after death that they loaded the tombs with wealth and “provisions” for their next life, like the Egyptians.

This is a ruler’s head-dress, necklace, ear-rings and breastplate, and you can see the fine, quality workmanship. Most of this sort of thing has long since been melted down into ingots for transport to the King in Spain. What a shame!



And galloping around the grounds we see a Peruvian Hairless dog (an AKC recognized breed). They are strong, broad-chested dogs that look somewhat like a cross between a Pit Bull and a Greyhound, and are more the size and build of the former. They have NO hair except for a mohawk-like crest down the center of the head. The dog at the Museum was running around so much we couldn't get a good picture, so here is one from the internet.



Home about six pm, it's almost dark. We say good-bye to Fabiana and Benjamin and thank them both . . . we loved every minute of the day. We stop at the fruit vendor near Casa Inca for bananas and oranges that make our supper. We are still so stuffed from our Chez Wong lunch that's all we can manage to eat tonight.

Ann washed a few clothes the morning after our arrival and they are still moist. There is no heating in the rooms to dry them. You just dress for the 55 - 65 degree weather inside and outside all the time now. Temperatures here in Lima are between 55- 75 degrees all year round. Lima is almost on the equator so this seems odd, but the cold Antarctic Humboldt current has a huge cooling effect on the air as well as the sea. And eight months of the year the sun rarely shines. We are here during winter, ergo, little real sunshine, no more than an hour or two in mid-afternoon, but the days are pleasant. Daylight begins at 5:45 and the sun sets and darkness immediately sets in at 6:15 pm.

Chez Wong

We learned of Chez Wong from our friends Sandra Burke and Don Sitarz who referred us to a TV show with Anthony Bourdian, the well-known chef, who was touring Peru in that particular episode, and this restaurant was featured. There were only 8 tables when the TV show was taped, lunch only by reservation well in advance. He's gone big-time now with 10 tables. We made our reservation a month in advance and it's a good thing as every table was filled by the time we left



From the street you would never know there was a restaurant there at all. Just a house in a residential area, but there were a couple of “greeters” at the front gate who let us in. His restaurant is simply a good-sized room in his home which he had fitted out with a modest commercial kitchen.

We had the most famous ceviché in Peru, and a chance to watch one of the most famous Peruvian chefs, Javier Wong. What a grand meal. And what a great show. We wished Sandra and Don could have been with us, after all we “found” the place because of Sandra's tip on the Bourdain TV show. The large fresh fish that he used was Lenguado (a flatfish in the Sole family that resembles a Halibut). He filets and cuts the fish right at the head of the restaurant next to the kitchen, chops special Peruvian red onion (mild unlike our bitter US ones), chops the fish, adds Pulpo (Octopus) and other sea delights, then the marinade. He simply stirs the ingredients in the marinade for perhaps a minute, not letting them “soak” at all, and immediately serves it family style to the tables.





And in the small space with open kitchen the preparation was a great pre-meal show. One man even went up and watched him “up close and personal”.

An interesting note was the sanitation of his preparation. He had an assistant standing by with a stack of fresh cutting boards, and every time he

completed any action with the fish the board was changed. Fish gutted, fresh board; fish filleted and deboned , fresh board; fish skinned, fresh board; and so on through rough cutting and final cutting. The fish that finally went onto our plates had last touched a new, perfectly clean cutting board.



He also offered a chance to get individual pictures with him and we were such “tourists” that we couldn’t resist. Here is Ann with Javier and “Hilary” as he called this particular Lengüado, and Ed with Javier and “Obama”. Javier is apparently not concerned with political correctness.





And here is the finished product. The very best ceviché we've ever tasted! And this is an individual serving, not the plate for the entire table. We were well fed!

Then he made a ceviché tiradito, in which the fish is sliced sashimi style, with a thicker marinade (we have no idea what is in it, we were busy eating and didn't watch him make it) poured over it and topped with chopped pecans. So delicious, so rich!



Then we had a fish stir fry (another Lenguado fish) with the most wonderful fresh mushrooms. Here are the ingredients we could identify:



chunks of fish, wood-ear mushrooms, trumpet mushrooms, button mushrooms, bits of celery, baby bok choy, sweet red pepper, tiny bits of chopped ginger, orange rind, sauce made of a bit of oil, soy, oyster sauce. But most unusual were tiny pieces of sweet melon similar to canteloupe. All heated up in a super hot, hot wok for only about a minute. It was all just incredible, and he came around to each table and served everyone himself . . . the portions were HUGE.



We could not eat another thing though he offered still another course and some diners (who hadn't over-indulged, as we did) enjoyed that fourth course too.



But finally . . . farewell Chez Wong!