

Thursday, August 29 – flight to Juliaca and drive to Puno (Lake Titicaca)

We are picked up at 7am for our trip to airport. The plane leaves at 10:25, which is plenty of time, but we want to get something to eat at the airport since we were too early for the breakfast at Casa Inca. Like any big city, the trip took twice as long in rush hour as at 4 am two days ago. Interesting traffic “management” here, there are almost no traffic signals or stop signs, the cars just force a merge . . . and it seems to work. Horn honking is more “informational” for the other drivers than the aggressive honking you might hear in the US. Speed bumps, fierce ones, control the speed. Although we have a private pre-scheduled car and driver, there are about 500,000 taxis in Lima although no one is sure of the exact number. There is no government registration required so anyone with a car to say to themselves, “I am a taxi today”. Most of the busses are also private except a few big (“bus-sized”) ones that run on the exclusive center lanes of major expressways and main streets of major cities.



We arrive at the airport in plenty of time to have some breakfast (McDonald's, where else?) before our flight.



It's an uncomfortable flight on a small, cramped plane. Luckily it's not too long, less than an hour and a half. Then a two hour plus drive to Puno and Lake Titicaca. We are at 12,550 feet altitude when the plane lands and gain another 1,000 feet by the time we get to our hotel in Puno. It's WAY high, and we came here from Lima which is almost at sea level, an elevation change of about 2½ miles on a 1½ hour flight. Why we weren't immediately felled by altitude sickness is a near miracle . . . but we had taken Acetazolamide (trade name Diamox), the well-know altitude sickness prevention drug.



At the airport we're met by our van and driver, a very pleasant young man (whose name I'm afraid we don't remember). Since we've arranged this trip as a private tour we are often in a vehicle designed for 6-10 people, but we have it all to ourselves. It seems strange and "wasteful" somehow, but then we certainly have plenty of "stretch out and relax" space.



We drive south from the airport through the outskirts of Juliaca. It is a town of over 300,000 whose primary industry is traffic in the black markets with Bolivian and Chilean products. It's very near Lake Titicaca and the border with Bolivia is in the middle of the lake. No other real industry there and there is no other reason you would want to live there unless you somehow make money from the smuggling enterprises.

The area around the central plaza is clean and uncrowded, but soon that begins to change as we leave el centro and head for the highway.



Full of grim buildings of cement and single pane glass, most unfinished since you don't pay tax until the building is finished, though you are allowed to live in it. And most of the newer buildings that had clearly been occupied for some time were still "unfinished" with bare concrete and re-bar protruding from them. We found the same foolish law in Rhodes, Greece. It only litters the towns and countryside with hideous, half-finished buildings. Why those governments would ignore the potential huge tax revenues is a mystery.

We are in the Altiplano, the high plains amongst the Andes. Huge snow-caps cover the distant mountains surrounding us as we're driven along. Just outside Juliaca we see a crowd of people gathered in a large open area. As we come closer we see what the attraction is . . . kites! They were flying kites and there must have been 30 or 40 kites in the air along the ¼ mile stretch.



We had hoped to see some of the “Peruvian cattle” such as Llama and Alpaca along the way, but we see only the same “western” cattle you would see travelling through the American west.

It's bone shattering dry. All the way up the foothills of the mountains are built terraces to hold water during the rainy season (November through January). There are no aqueducts here as the mountains and the snow are many miles away, so they work to conserve the rainwater. But growing is good in the high altitude, cold climate foods such as potatoes, quinoa, and amaranth. All the growing patches are surrounded by high stone walls that collect heat in the sun and release it through the cold nights . . . passive solar heating as we call it. The soil is volcanic, dark and rich.



It's mostly Indians here, the Aymara people, who speak their own language as well as Spanish. The fabulous woman's costumes are everywhere evident. Derby hats (heaven only knows how they hold them on their heads), layers of gathered cotton, very full skirts and layers of sweaters. Footwear is usually a pair of loose sandals. Men wear jeans or dark pants, white shirts and often a knit Andean cap. Women carry everything in their shawl, over their backs back-pack style.

The highway we are travelling through the altiplano is wonderful, a nice two lane blacktop in excellent condition. But streets in the cities are something else.. Seemingly all under some sort of strangling road repair or construction (reminds us of Tucson), narrow and crowded, but with no sign of any recently finished road work. The roads that aren't being torn up or worked on are terrible, often with stretches of dirt intermittent with pavement. And Puno is the same as Juliaca, a city with no charm or appeal. Turn signals are used only to signal that you are turning off a road, never that you are passing. Unlike Lima, horns are rarely used here. Overall, Peruvians seem to be peaceful drivers, no road rage that we could see, although some of the traffic and road conditions would have justified it.

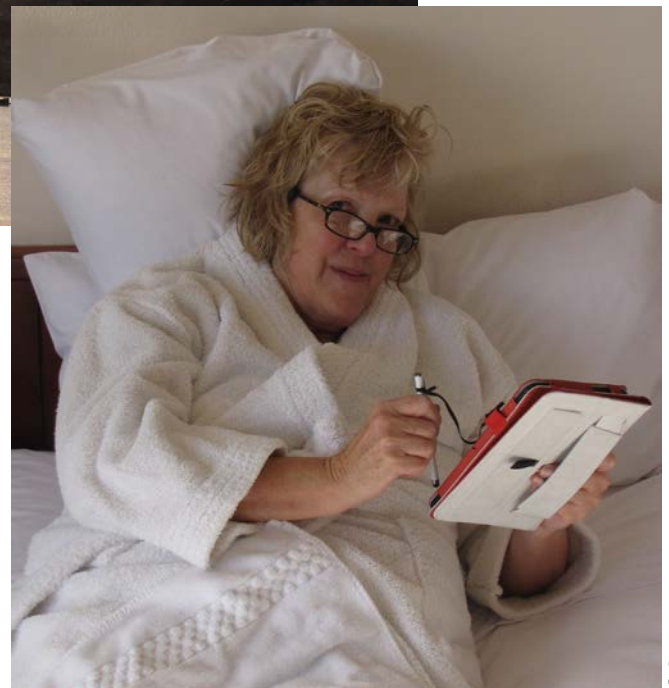
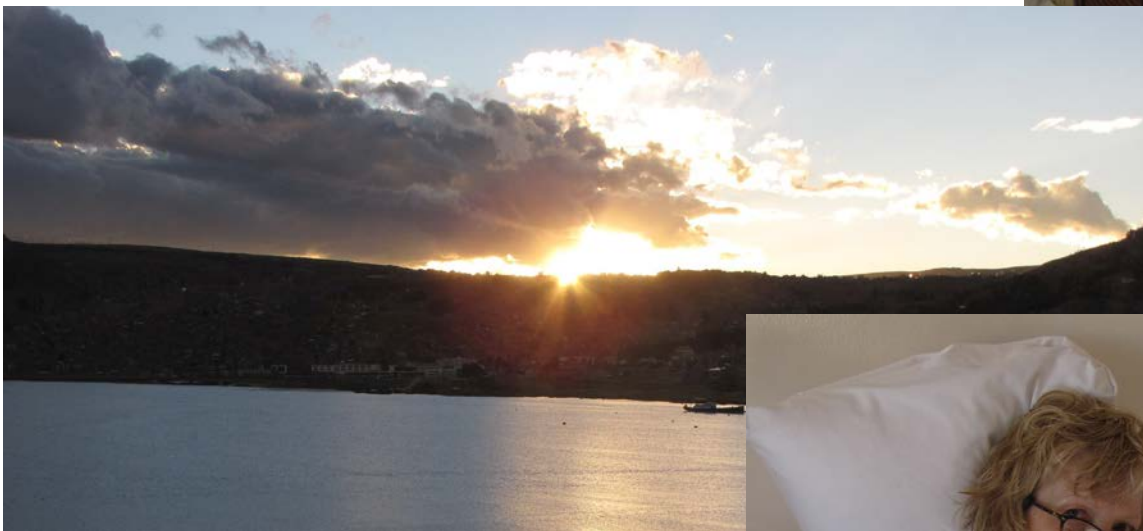
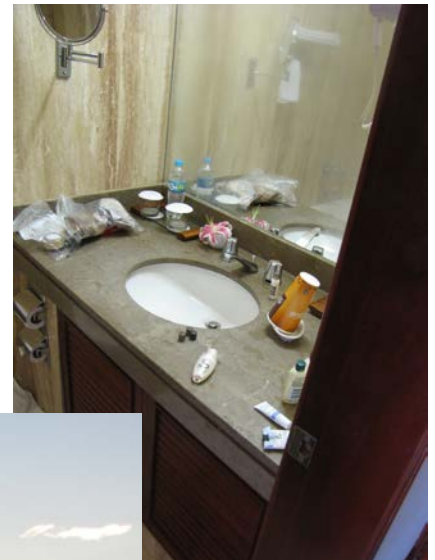
We can see the hotel long before we come near it (white building lower far left in the top picture). Finally we're delivered by our driver from Juliaca airport to Puno and our hotel, where we will spend two nights on the shores of Lake Titicaca, the highest lake in the world. We are staying at the Hotel Libertador, a very nice (perhaps 4-star?) place. It's a beautiful hotel on the inside and the modern structure is nice looking but incongruous among the other, older buildings in the area. But it appears that there is almost no one here except us



When we arrive we are given a small cup of coca tea and it was insistently “suggested” that we drink it. It was actually tasty, but the main effect of the tea was to immediately make us feel tired, almost exhausted. As soon as we finish checking in we stagger upstairs and into bed around 2:00 pm for about 3 hours of sleep. Our tiredness must be altitude-induced, since the trip from Lima wasn't that long or arduous. But we DID go from sea level to over 12.000 feet in less than 2 hours. This is a luxury hotel and we snuggle under heavy down comforters and enjoy the forced air heating (there was only a barely functional portable electric heater at Casa Inca in Lima). It is only the middle of the afternoon and baby it's COLD outside. But we brought good cold-weather clothing, jackets, sweaters, “waffle-shirts” for under our regular shirts, so we'll be fine when we go out tomorrow.

Then a light dinner (well semi-light for Ed) in the hotel dining room. It was barely occupied and we saw only a few people in the dining room at breakfast and dinner the following day. Yellow potato soup and then corn fritters stuffed with lamb and mushrooms for Ed. Quinoa soup and quinoa Tabouleh for Ann. At first she was afraid to eat the Tabouleh since there were fresh tomatoes in it. We had heard so many dire “don’t EVER eat the fresh fruit or vegetables” warnings that she was jumpy about eating it, no matter how hungry she was. Fortunately Doris, our tour agent, called just to see “how things were going”, just as Ann was deciding to unhappily forgo the meal. Doris told Ann (perhaps even a bit testily) that “eat the food! . . . we don’t want our tourists getting sick, so any hotel or decent restaurant washes everything in purified water”. So Ann got her hunger satisfied and there were no unfortunate after-effects. As it turned out we never had any problems throughout the trip, even with food that we later bought from the markets In Urubamba and Cusco.

Then back to a “clean-up” and a nice hot shower and the fleecy clouds we see through our window, our nice bed and our down comforters. We take a look out our window at the sunset, and then pull out our Kindles. We need to be up tomorrow at 5 am for our day on Lake Titicaca, so it’s just a bit of reading and then to sleep. Still tired, we both fall asleep instantly.



Hotel Libertador

Libertador is a beautiful 4-star hotel right on the shore of Lake Titicaca. While it is a great place, and turns out to have a good shower and comfortable beds (the benchmarks for thumbs up or thumbs down) the exterior is painted bright white. Even from a good distance away it sticks out like a sore thumb as you approach it but perhaps that's intended.



Our stay was very comfortable and the dining room had a wonderful breakfast (included) and served delicious dinner meals. But the place was almost empty. We never saw other guests “around” the hotel, and only one or two other couples at breakfast or dinner.