

The Inca Way

Enjoying time off on her gap year, Laura McKenzie signed up as part of an archaeological volunteer programme to discover the hidden treasures of Peru's Inca heritage.

The ever important first impression is decided the moment you set foot out of the confined shell of a plane. A scent and climate individual to each country eagerly rush forward to welcome you. This moment often shapes the subsequent relationship; yet this is where Peru differs so wildly from most countries. It challenges the first impression. Its diversity is so special that the initial perception of Peru upon reaching the sweltering heat and sticky humidity of the buzzing Amazon jungle can be drastically altered by the icy cold breeze enveloping the calm reefs of Lake Titicaca. Peru sits on the West coast of South America and is shaped by its rich history and hugely diverse environments. Civilization dates back to 6000BC, and the succeeding years saw the rise and fall of native Andean civilizations, the Incas and Spanish invaders. Today the peaceful independent country runs under the presidency of Alan García, and due to its vivacious history and the housing of one of the seven wonders of the Ancient World – Machu Picchu - is an increasingly popular tourist destination. It offers the adventurous miles of dense jungle with unmatched biodiversity. The energetic can set off along the Inca Trail through the Andean mountains. Whilst the relaxed can stroll through the streets of Cuzco stumbling upon backstreet stalls and undiscovered cafés; or spend lazy days on the beaches of Lima. Whatever type of traveller you are, Peru most probably offers something to suit.

As a student traveller on my gap year, I was looking for adventure. My inhibitions of travelling alone however drew me to Projects Abroad. It provided huge comfort having someone there before I left home, willing to answer my queries and smooth my worries. I was also reassured knowing I would be introduced to other travellers similar to myself on arrival. I have no doubt that knowing exactly where I would be staying for the majority of my travels, and having people to contact, also provided immense ease of mind to my parents.

Most countries to which I visit, I go with little more than postcard preconceptions, not entirely sure what to expect with barely more than a few images imprinted in my mind. I love the excitement of the unknown. Discovering a culture for myself without the influence of what it looks like through someone else's eyes; letting its history unravel before me. Peru allowed all of this and more. After landing in Cuzco from the rainforest I was welcomed by a wonderfully enthusiastic Peruvian man from Projects Abroad, and introduced to another girl I would be travelling to the Projects Abroad Inca Project base with. As we drove through the streets of Cuzco, Peru for me began to change. It was suddenly a place of beautiful snow tipped mountains surrounding deep populated valleys. It was cold; colder than I had expected. However the difference between here and the rainforest also meant altitude sickness hit with a vengeance on my first night. Acclimatisation had thankfully cured me by the next morning, for a hefty journey in a combi was awaiting me. Imagine a second hand minibus with vintage suspension and barely cushioned seats. There you have your combi. A five hour long, and bumpy but beautiful journey later, I was welcomed into the community house where I would be staying. It was here, on the edge of the small Peruvian village of Huyro, I made my home for the coming month. If as a traveller you like getting your hands dirty, and want to intimately experience a culture and really get to know a people, this little

village is perfect. Not easy to get to, I'll grant you that, but the best places never are! The following weeks were filled with variety and excitements of many descriptions. A couple of days a week, the Projects Abroad supervisor, Dan along with Peruvian archaeologist Jhon, would take us on a hike to a site half way up Cochapata Mountain. We'd set off with our rucksack of supplies, machete in hand, and after a short combi ride were set free into the mountain side wilderness. We'd clamber up the hill getting lost in the thicket and scramble our way through what was supposed to be a path, until we eventually reached a clearing. Here we would begin our work. I learnt the art of machete-ing, and my greatest feat was chopping down a tree. Albeit a small one, it proved to be a great satisfaction. All 15 of us would for hours hack away at the undergrowth and protruding branches, which sounds pointless and crazy, but by the end of the day it would be clear what we'd achieved; we'd uncovered an area of Ancient Inca ruins. Walls were visible giving a clear layout of the buildings and terracing systems, and there was a huge sense of achievement at uncovering a small piece in the puzzle of Inca history. We carried these machete skills over to other day's activities, including clearing sections of an Ancient Inca road, which we would do about once a week. There were occasions when we were made to feel like true archaeologists. We were taught how to map the ruins in the remote and ignored areas of the vast Andean mountains. We also joined a team of expert Peruvian archaeologists in the recovery of artefacts and preservation of the walls. The latter proved to be one of my favourite, and the hands on nature turned out to be a valuable experience to carry on to my Archaeology and Anthropology degree.

The secrets of Peru's past began to reveal themselves, and it proved invaluable to have knowledgeable Peruvian's working with Projects Abroad. We were given what I would call "little lessons" after dinner some evenings. A huge map was spread out on the coffee table and Jhon would point out an area to us, and then he would begin. We were told of the history of the area and taught about some of the surrounding Inca sites. It was fantastic hearing this from a local particularly one who specialized in archaeology. The best lessons however, were those when we were out and about exploring the Ancient sites for ourselves. We would visit sites along the Inca Trail in Sicre, such as Incatambo near Huyro, and given on site tutorials and guided tours through the Inca ruins.

Whilst we weren't discovering and uncovering the past, there was plenty to do within the community house, Establo. The house is almost self-sufficient meaning as volunteers, tasks such as waking up before dawn to feed the ducks and chickens, planting, harvesting and weeding, and in our case even helping to build a new out building were all included. Not to mention the washing up rota. However after a wonderful meal cooked by a local Peruvian family, this task was painless.

We also helped within the present local community. These activities vary from looking after the children, providing local schools with support and in our case painting a primary school. It is immensely rewarding to have helped the locals in a small tangible way, knowing we have given something back for their hospitality, and at the same time painting the school proved to be a hugely enjoyable activity! Although there were times when I felt like an outsider in the little village of Huyro, the moments in which I discovered local customs and the way we were welcomed into daily local life surpass most. I was quickly introduced to Gabi's shop, which provided us with all our snack supplies and doubled up as the local bar at night. Volunteers often congregated along with locals, on the benches which Gabi would place outside for us. This spot provided many nights of entertainment. One day on that very

bench, an interesting insight occurred to me. I don't speak a huge amount of Spanish, and although my ability to string an ungrammatical sentence together improved, I would go no further than to say I had a basic knowledge of the Spanish language. In a moment of conversation with Gabi's sons it dawned on me that neither of us really knew what the other was saying, however in this same moment I realised a connection can be made regardless. Through body language and noise alone we were having a conversation as real as words.

I also was lucky enough to be shown the hidden 'discothèque-come-cinema'. This bizarrely wonderful place is decorated with Juan Carlos' artwork, visible as soon as you walk through the huge garage style doors. The paintings were modern and richly intense; the subjects mostly half naked, sourcing most locals disapproval. The large open building was once the popular local club, but too large a space for such a small village. Despite being used for the occasional larger event, the locals now gather in places such as Gabi's. It now also doubles up as a cinema, where Juan shows a movie of choice on a big screen from leather sofas. The strangest cinema experience I've had, but an incredibly memorable night!

As much as there was to explore around Huyro, including tea plantations and stunning waterfalls as well as the Inca ruins, I highly recommend taking time to travel further afield. There is more than I could mention, and far more than I had time to do on offer, but Machu Picchu should be top of your list! Huyro is a perfect spring board for reaching it, and although it is still quite a journey, it's closer than coming from Cuzco. For \$30 (£7) we were driven by a local all the way across the beautifully terrifying mountain roads to Hidroeléctrica. The cliff edge roads wound round the mountains looking over the stunning stream penetrated valleys. This was an adrenaline rush in itself, for I'm sure it wasn't safe, and it certainly didn't *feel* remotely safe. We were dropped off by the railway tracks, where numbers of tourists were waiting for the train. This is an option which takes you for another \$30 to Aguas Calientes, the small town beneath Machu Picchu. However as budget travellers we chose to walk. It's not a tough walk, as it's fairly flat along the railway, however it did take a fair while longer than we expected.

First task on the agenda when we arrived in Aguas Calientes was to find a room for the night. Thinking we had been relatively organised, we headed in search of our chosen hostel. This proved to be an endless search as it didn't seem to exist, or rather if it did it was so well hidden I'm surprised they got any customers! So we hunted for the cheapest accommodation we could find. There is a lot to choose from in around Machu Picchu, from the most luxurious orient express accommodation adjacent to the Inca ruins, which could cost you up to £800 for a king sized room, a balcony with views to the surrounding mountains and forests, and of course western luxuries like a mini bar and satellite TV. However in Aguas Calientes accommodation ranged from very good, to basic. We managed to bargain down the price of the latter, in what seemed to be somebody's house with rooms going spare. However it turned out to be a good find as it was clean, cool and quiet with hot water from relatively powerful showers; just what we needed for a good night's sleep to prepare us for our adventure the next morning. There is an almighty hill to reach Machu Picchu, and only two ways up; by foot, or by taking a half hour bus ride. We chose to walk, and having been told of the limit of 400 people a day up to Wayna Picchu, we were keen to get there early. We set off at 3.30am, torches and rucksacks in tow, blissfully oblivious to the challenge ahead. It's a definite test to your fitness hiking up the steps first to Machu Picchu and then onto Wayna Picchu, and the latter is not for those afraid of heights. The steep, slippery and open steps, with no more than a steel cable to grip onto caused my heart

to flutter in-between each pound, leaving me more energised than I've ever felt before. Having such high expectations, I was sceptical to how impressed I would be; however on reaching the summit at 2,720m not long after sunrise, I caught my breath and looked out into the vast mountains and gazed down to Machu Picchu. Noise suddenly shied away and my mind filled with pure beauty. My eyes glazed over with held back tears. Nothing can prepare you for the striking beauty of this far out Inca settlement, set in some of the world's most stunning scenery. With the full moon still proudly on display despite the sun's dominance in the crystal blue sky, it seemed the perfect time of day to reach the vantage point. I now understood how worthy it was of its notorious "world wonder" status.

Peru's offerings however do not end here, with many smaller Inca settlements to visit, the beautiful Lake Titicaca to sail across, and vibrant cities to marvel at, not to mention the dynamic rainforest far below the Andean cloud forest. The volunteers often visited Urubamba and Cuzco at the weekends. Even travelling this relatively small distance from Huary, the warmer cloud forest turns to a cold freshness mirroring the changing ambience. In Cuzco we satisfied our Western desires with a good old "English breakfast" and a cup of tea at The Real McCoy, as well as tasting some of the more adventurous Peruvian dishes. Cuzco's streets are teeming with good value little restaurants, and I recommend trying the popular "coy" meaning Guinea Pig. I tried it on a couple of occasions, the first time I was presented with a whole cooked guinea pig which although was a brilliant experience I'm not so sure I would order again! The second was a meatier and tastier option in which the coy was cooked in a traditional Peruvian manner. Namely "Pachamanca", the method involved cooking the coy along with several different meats and potatoes in a hole in the ground. The meat is wrapped in leaves and placed among heated stones and then left to cook for a few hours. The result is a delicious aromatic dish, which I highly recommend! Cuzco is bustling both by day and throughout the night with markets and street sellers on every corner, and rushing volatile rivers close by, providing an adrenalized experience white water rafting. The bars and clubs range in price, but "happy hour" can lend you some good deals. The Peruvians show their hard party nature when the sun sets, and their local drinks such as Pisco sour are defiantly not for the faint hearted. The festivities don't die down until the sun comes up again.

Although I could have easily spent months more discovering the untold wonders and little fascinations of Peru given half an opportunity, my solitary month on the Inca Project with projects Abroad left memories I hope to never lose. I learnt more than I could have wished for in so many aspects. I learnt about myself and of Peru; its archaeology and its people, their customs and way of life. In an instant I would do it over again, and doubtless find a completely different Peru...