

South America 2015: Peruvian Amazon, South Peru & Bolivia: Inca Landscapes & Lake Titicaca (6 flights, 22 days)

Thursday, Jan 15, 15: After the LAN red-eye, from Los Angeles I arrived in Lima to sunny skies. After checking in at San Agustin Exclusive, in Miraflores, I walked a few blocks to a bicycle rental and negotiated a rental for the afternoon. A crummy heavy bike, with triple sprockets on the front, but mysteriously no derailer – there was a derailer on the back. Nevertheless, a beautiful ride through the city around the Larco-Pardo-beach triangle and along the beach and very nice ocean side park. Lima, legendary for continually being shrouded in haze, has shown me a rare clear blue-sky day to see the sights along the beach. Next day as our fellow travelers were arriving we walked some of the city, I am becoming familiar. Miraflores appears to be where (some of) the money is in Lima and the locals correct you if you call it Lima, saying Lima is up north. Many places have great ceviche, but rather difficult to find draught beer here, I did find Murphy's Pub on Calle Schell, and only one variety if you find any. We walked the streets around Miraflores, through Kennedy Park. The walk street south of Kennedy has a couple good restaurants, I ate with new friends from Maryland at La Paz. With this exception, Peruvian food¹ on this trip again repeats the dull standards of my 2013 visit. An unusual feature at La Paz, along with the great food, is a chain at each table that you loop through your purse or backpack and snap to the chair to thwart roaming thieves. On my 3rd morning in Lima we had accumulated the 5 travelers headed for the Amazon and we flew out to Iquitos where we immediately transferred to a small boat to travel about 35 miles down the Marañón, then Amazon Rivers to the Explorama jungle lodge <http://www.explorama.com/>. At this wet time of year the Amazon is wide, muddy, and strewn with floating logs that make night travel dangerous, and this only gets worse in the dryer season when the logs collect in the narrow river. After a couple days exploring the swamps and villages, seeing many sloths, mosquitoes and birds², we moved back up river to Explorama's slightly up scale Ceiba Tops Lodge. A highlight was piranha fishing where we caught many small ones and later had them for dinner. I was reminded of swimming in a little side stream from the Amazon in Brasil 15 years ago while natives fished for piranha a few hundred feet away. After moving to Ceiba Tops, a day trip down the Amazon and up the Napo, followed by a long trip in a winding narrow creek, in a boat longer than the width of this stream, we arrived at a remote lodge in hiking distance from a treetop walking bridge complex. The Canopy Walkway complex is high in the treetops and provides a couple hour long different perspective of the dense jungle below. On the final day we visited Neiser's Island, which seems to be kind of preserve for rescued wildlife to be reintroduced to the jungle. Here we saw more animals in an hour than otherwise all week, toucans, macaws, parrots, monkeys, coatimundi, and a 4 meter anaconda. Back in Iquitos, we wandered the water front searching for dinner and adventure as we awaited the late-night flight on LAN back to Lima. Somehow, I found myself at dinner on the water front with the same Maryland couple, stock broker and alternative therapy (shiatsu) purveyor, where we met a famous Amazon tour guide named

¹ Is this fair? Our guide is lauding Peru as a gourmet travel destination, citing *Tanta* with noted chef Gaston Acurio at the Larcomar Center. Is all the good food of Peru in Miraflores?

² We also visited the benevolent Yanamono Medical Clinic that serves the natives, established and operated by Dr. Smith from Wisconsin, <http://www.amazonmedical.org/>.

Maldonado who shared an English language newspaper account of his recent attack by a BIG anaconda (30 ft.). He also shared that the preponderance of young people in the bars along the water front are “ayahuasca tourists” very popular of late in Iquitos. After visiting jungles in Brasil, French Guinea, Bolivia, Australia and Costa Rica, still no Macaw Clay Licks or jaguars to be seen!

Thursday, Jan 22, 15: Back in Lima, we explore the Larco Museum and the French section and the San Franciscan Cathedral and city square (*all but Larco was a repeat of more extensive Lima touring in 2013*) as other travelers³ gather for our departure on the main trip to South Peru and Titicaca. Flying to Arequipa in the south of Peru we arrived early afternoon at our quaint and very adequate Monastery hotel in early afternoon in walking distance of the downtown city square. Central Arequipa has a storybook nature with all hand paved stone streets. The city square, a long block on each side, is surrounded on 3 sides by stone-arch fronted buildings that are in a completely uniform regular pattern, obviously government constructed and rented to the shop keepers, and incidentally very attractive. The 4th side is occupied by the very large catholic cathedral, all surrounding beautifully landscaped central square. The Inka Ice Maiden Museum⁴, the monastery and a couple other cathedrals make it a great place to visit for a day. Also views of the 19,100 ft. volcano, Mt. Misti, claimed source of the Amazon, were great from our hotel and surrounds – weather permitting.

Next day we are off by bus to Colca Canyon and valley along the way crossing above 16,000 ft., seeing frequent herds of vicuña, llama, and guanaco alpaca as well as Andean geese and a few flamingos! The vicuña is the source of the finest wool on earth, and a sweater can cost thousands of dollars. We spent 2 nights at Eco Lodge in the primitive village Yanque in the Colca valley. Miles of the Andean valley foothills and entrance to the canyon are sculpted into Inka terraces for primitive farming of faba beans, wheat, quinoa, barley and predominantly the 15 varieties of potatoes and corn. These terraces appear much more rough and un-manicured than those of Southeast Asia, often sloped and irregular. Things seem little advanced from Inka times 500 years past, with many buildings just piled up stones and seemingly things like a level or plumb bob non-existent as evidenced by how the doors are hung at the Eco Lodge. Farming and transportation carried out with primitive tools and the aid of a donkey or ox. Some Andeans take their basket of fruit, climb the mountain 4,000 ft with the donkey over 2 days, then ride a bus for a day, to spend a couple days selling the fruit, so nearly a week to market the fruit. We drove the bus 20 miles of unpaved road along the canyon wall to get to a location where the canyon is 4,000 ft. deep. From here we waited in the sunny morning still for the giant, 12 ft. wingspan, Andean Condor to come gliding up the thermals in search of the dead donkey that didn’t make the climb. On our visit one condor showed, and glides

³ What kind of people go to Peru on an OAT trip? We have a train driver from Texas, an MD & spouse from Seattle, a farmer couple from eastern Pennsylvania (*not the farm environ I grew up in*), the stock broker and shiatsu practioner, and a spacecraft designer, *the other engineer*, teachers, and a world vagabond.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummy_Juanita . Interesting that all the Inka ruins and artifacts were discovered by English speaking American or European scholars. It is difficult to believe that many of these, excluding the Ice Maiden that was buried, like Machu Picchu, Pusharo Pyramids and Choque Quirao <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choquequirao> , were not known all along to the local Inka and Spanish descendants, but some American came along and gave them the publicity to turn them into tourist destinations.

so close for a good photo that it seemed to expect us there. Farther down stream this canyon reaches a 10,000 ft. depth, twice that of the Grand Canyon in US. The 1st raft transit was about 1981, but commercial outfitters now regularly take groups down 100 miles of class III to V rapids.

Tuesday, off on a long bus ride across the Andean Plateau to Puno and Lake Titicaca. Again passing the 16,000 ft. plus altitude, the plane turns more to rolling farmland than the terraces of Colca Canyon. The Andean High Plateau (altiplano) is a large relatively level rolling hills area mostly in Bolivia and Peru, perhaps 75 miles wide and several hundred in north-south extent. The plateau ranges between 11 and 13 thousand feet altitude and is bordered on east and west by Andes with numerous peaks reaching 20,000 ft. The altitude makes for lots of headaches and some of our travelers were breathing the oxygen available in the hotel. Being relatively close to the equator, it does not have winter and summer, but wet and dry (reminiscent of Northern Territory in Australia), being always cold, but not extreme, with low temperature of about 20°F and 10 – 12 inches snow, while quite warm on a clear mid-day. We stop for lunch with a tribal Andean group who serve us potatoes, potatoes, and potatoes dipped in a clay condiment (*guess they need it just like the macaws*), corn, quinoa and some things we don't recognize. Andeans seem to be two major ethnicities, Aymara, north of Puno, and Quchua, south. Women, both in the countryside and cities, all proudly wear the bowler hats, and body plus adornments give a 60 inch waistline or so to their short stature – men are slim and maybe dressed like a Kansas farmer. How did these hats of English origin get so predominantly introduced in this native and Spanish culture? At Puno we visited the floating Uros reed island dwellers http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uru_people, and the Sillustani Tombs. Then moved around the lake to Copacabana, Bolivia (*they call the one on the beach at Rio Copycabana!*). High lights accessible from this little lake side village are the cathedral http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_of_Our_Lady_of_Copacabana and what many regard as the South American vacation paradise, Isla del Sol, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isla_del_Sol. On our bus trip from Copacabana to La Paz we stopped to visit and see the handiwork of a Titicaca reed boat maker⁵ reputedly employed by Thor Heyerdahl to build a boat.

Our guide in Bolivia extolled the advances of their national communication satellite – and this being my business and I having never heard of it, I thought it must be pretty simple and primitive. But after finding its name, Tupac Katari, on a museum placard at Tiwanaku and doing a bit of web research, it seems Bolivia does have a respectable modern day long life geosynchronous orbit communication satellite that few of us are aware of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%BApac_Katari_1 http://space.skyrocket.de/doc_sdat/tupak-katari-1.htm.

Last stop, La Paz is a 2,000 ft. deep and steep sided bowl approached at the upper edge at 13,000 ft. from the west over the Andean High Plateau. Every square inch of the bowl is full of construction and the population has spilled over on the Plateau to the west in a new city (28 years old) of a million called El Alto. From a distance La Paz is quite picturesque and attractive, while close-up among many attractive buildings are lots of

⁵ Everyone was thinking Kon-Tiki, but deducing that this 80 year old craftsman would have been less than 12 years old at the time of this 1947 Polynesia, we recognized that this man's contribution was to the 1970 *reed boat* expedition beginning in Morocco and ending one week short of Barbados.

trash, construction debris and graffiti. Nevertheless, seems more vibrant and appealing than Lima. Obviously subways and trains don't function too well on this terrain. A measure of public transit is provided by the brand new high capacity aerial tram system. The tram had three branches, yellow, green, and red, and provides a spectacular ride down from the Plateau and up the east side. More branches are planned. Apparently no regional source of construction lumber near by so everything built of clay masonry and from high or a distance, La Paz as well as adjacent El Alto is uniform red in color. Scattered about El Alto are a number of very unique and new 5 to 7 story ostentatiously decorated buildings⁶ that look like they belong in Palm Springs or on the Las Vegas strip. Our guide says they are typically rented for weekend long parties like weddings, etc. After three nights and some exploring around La Paz, a neat encounter in the El Alto terminal, a short flight back to Lima, a long 6 hour layover, then a nice sleep on the Dreamliner back to Los Angeles.

⁶ Six months later an interesting article appeared in **Bloomberg BusinessWeek**, October 5 – 11, 15 issue, page 66. The article titled *House Party*, has great pictures of these unique and gaudy houses that now the outside world is recognizing as Andean Architecture. According to this article, they all seem to be the creation of one Aymara architect, Freddy Mamiani. Owners typically live in the elaborate and ornately different top floor and rent the lower floors for events.