

From Santiago de Chile

Amériques : du nord au sud

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After spending five months between 3500(11500 feet) and 4000 meters(13100 feet) of altitude we finally had to get our feet back on normal ground. So here we are in Santiago Chile at sea level loaded with red corpuscles. For the first time in our lives we can race up the hotel stairs without even being faintly out of breath! Of course we had to work hard to get such stamina. Long hikes in the mountains carrying our heavy packs, backyard soccer matches and traditional dances at 4000 meters(parties where 96 per cent strength alcohol {aguardiente} flows freely) are just a few examples of what we had to do not to be the laughing stock of the

Andean people who are not at all understanding and think nothing of altitude or appreciated the reasons for our heavy laboring.

In September we entered Peru and immediately became everyone's friend. "Amigo! Amiga! Buy my stuff! Eat in my restaurant! Pee in my restrooms! Etc." After a few days we got used to being harassed but still felt like fleeing these touristy parts for more quiet and remote locations. Of course we had to spend a few days in Cusco as this city is the jewel of Peru being the ancient capital of the Inca Empire. After the Conquistadors arrived it was partially destroyed and re-

built according to Spanish architectural styles. However it is still possible to see the imposing Inca walls dominated now by colorful colonial buildings. However the Inca's great knowledge of construction surpasses that of their invaders as these giant indigenous stones do not even move when the earthquakes tremble. On the contrary Spanish churches and houses have had to be rebuilt several times since they were first erected less than half the time of around millennia ago!

Not far from Cusco is the ever famous Machu Picchu, a beautiful Inca town perched on a very steep and

narrow mountain saddle in a cold jungle. At the time of the Empire (around 1200 A.D. to 1532 A.D. {date of the arrival of the Spaniards in Cusco}) the Incas conquered vast amounts of territory. When the Spanish discovered Peru they faced an empire as big as Europe reaching from Santiago (Chile) in the south to Popayan(Colombia) to

where. It is probable that the indigenous communities close to Machu Picchu today are populated by their descendants.

Once again we decided to see for ourselves these people, who represent today the mascots of a very touristy country (they are the official descendants of the

could experiment with the endless varieties of them. In Huilloc people have 144 kinds of potatoes used as a base for all kinds of tasty soups. But the most famous way to prepare potato here is to freeze dry them in winter. In July and August nights are very cold and the potatoes are put in an outside well filled with water to

freeze and then spread under the bright high altitude sun by day to dry. This alternating process is repeated two or three times and "the chueo" is born, a dehydrated potato that can be stored easily some years. There are no fridges here and often not even electricity! As it was time to plant potatoes we helped Crisostomo with this painstaking job as most of the fields are situated above 4000 meters (13100 feet) in altitude. This land is too steep to use a horse and plow so the men have to carry a kind of long and heavy spade that they use to dig small holes to plant the tubers.



the North. To administer their land the Incas developed a very complex paved trails network so that they could reach any place very quickly (horses did not exist in South America at that time) on foot. They could especially use these trails to exchange products between the Amazon jungle and the Andean mountains. Coca leaves were one of the most researched items used against hunger and lassitude as well as for spiritual concerns. Archaeologists think that Machu Picchu was an intermediary town situated on the way to another larger city deeper in the jungle. When the Spanish discovered it quite late in their conquests it was already abandoned and had been partly burned by its inhabitants who had fled, no one knows to

Incas) whose non indigenous majority still consider second class citizens. Less than 60 miles away from Cusco we found a very quiet traditional Quechua village called Huilloc whose inhabitants finally received us with curiosity and kindness. Although close to the Inca capital they were still not used to seeing tourists in the blood. Crisostomo and his family welcomed us in their traditional stone and straw house where we spent many wonderful moments with him and his kids, especially at supper time. It takes so long to cook on a wood fire that we had plenty of time to learn many Quechua words as the women and children hardly speak Spanish. At this altitude only potatoes grow well so we

From Huilloc we hiked to more remote Quechua villages whose peoples still wear traditional clothes. Each place has its styles and particularities in their way of dressing and the colours are different (in Huilloc red is the main colour for example) even to hat and skirt designs where the fabric is sometimes bought but more often woven. Peruvian and Bolivian women are probably the best weavers in Americas. After this immersion in the Quechua/Inca world we left Cusco for Lake Titicaca(the highest navigable lake in the world) where we spent some days on the three main islands off the Peruvian coast. Firstly we visited the Uro culture on one of the numerous islands of

the Uros archipelago. The Uros are the descendants of the people who always rejected Inca domination over the Lake Titicaca region so they had fled their territory long before the Spanish arrived and started to build small family floating islands with a kind of reed "totora" growing abundantly there. Upon the soft and fragile lands they also erected new style totora houses and even used it to go from one island to another using elaborately woven totora rafts! Today these islands have many visitors and the Uros have for the most part voluntarily lost their culture and dedicate themselves to the tourism industry. However some of them still try to survive exchanging fish against potatoes and maize during the weekly markets. We then sailed to Taquile and Amantani islands whose people are Quechua descendants of the Incas, before reaching Bolivia.

Once in Bolivia we became everybody's brothers! People were calling "Hermano, hermana" but unlike Peru no one tried to sell us anything. Bolivia is a much less touristy than its neighbor so we enjoyed a relatively quiet stay in this country. We discovered very sweet and even curious locals who helped us a lot. We stayed a few more days around Lake Titicaca on the coast of the Bolivian side participating in the spiritual life of the amautas, the traditional Aymara priests. Taking no chances, we decided to pay with a special ceremony to Mother Earth (Pachamama) and especially the land of Bolivia, asking them to take care of us for the rest of our trip. Tunupa, a very respected amauta, took us to one of the sacred hills on Copacabana today dominated by the cross

bearing Catholic missions there to force the indigenous people to forget their ancestral beliefs. As for each ceremony Tunupa repeated the advice of the coca leaves which spoke to him, guided him to the place to make the ceremony and told

Their blue, red, green, yellow and pink skirts, called pollera, give them a very broad silhouette as they wear these upon layers of petticoat. This dress style is inherited from the 18th century Spanish bourgeoisie. Today it is these Indian



how to ask the Achila and Apu (the spirits of the mountains) to protect us.

We then could travel "safely" on Bolivian soil! We soon reached La Paz the country's capital. This city is one of the craziest cities we have ever visited, situated on an ancient lake bed at high altitude. It has grown without control since the 1980s after the fall of the tin price on the global market and the arrival in town of the then newly unemployed mining population. Houses have been built on each spare plot of the ground over a distance of 6 miles by some 3000 feet in breadth. A poor city in a poor country but La Paz is well alive. In a place where survival is the priority, there is always life. The streets are full of merchants trying to make just enough money to eat and feed their children. In the wide open markets, the cholitas (Indian women living in town) give a colourful touch to the grayness of the concrete and tarmac.

women's pride to wear the pollera along with a nice and clean bowler hat.

From La Paz we went to a region called Yungas north of the capital. This land is situated between the plateau of the Altiplano and the Amazon River basin and is perfect for cultivating coca leaves as well as citrus fruits and coffee beans. As we really wanted to understand Bolivian coca culture we decided to learn how to harvest this "sacred leaf". To reach the town of Caranavi one has to descend from La Paz at 3600 meters (11800 feet) to 600 meters (2000 feet) in altitude by one of the most dangerous roads in the world. On average 26 vehicles fall in this scary ravine each year. Hence some travellers prefer sleep the whole trip but miss the beautiful landscapes of the mountains and luxuriant jungle. After the seven hour trip one finally arrives covered in dust and sweat. Once in Caranavi we met Javier, an Aymara from the



Altiplano who moved there some 20 years ago to make a better life for himself. At that time Bolivia exported exotic fruits such as citrus, bananas, mangos and coffee beans. A lot of Indigenous people from the high lands, who had a serious land shortage because of the big property owner's greed, decided to migrate to the low lands. They created their families here and never considered going back to their native villages as life is still easier in Yungas. The climate is hot and steamy and fruits and vegetables grow well without chemical/fertilizer use. Since Evo Morales won the December 2005 election, as the first indigenous president in the history of South America, each family can now grow a small plot of coca for its own use or for sale. Coca leaves are not considered a drug here. "And they are not one!" Cocaine comes from chemical concentration of the active ingredient of coca leaves but the whole plant in itself is an incredible source of vitamins and minerals. Andean people have been

using it for thousands of years for nutrition and medicine. A high dose can be a good anesthetic where as in small doses it relieves hunger and fatigue. Fortunately we arrived at a "right time" to harvest coca leaves, a plant which grows so fast that it can be picked four times a year. This job is not easy as one has to pick the leaves one by one. After two days working under the fierce sun I managed to pick a little over 4 pounds of leaves. Once dried it is ready for consumption. Mine dehydrated to less than 2 pounds yielding around 3 dollars in returns!

Back in La Paz we faced the crowded city streets busily preparing for Christmas. As everywhere in the Christian world people were running from one open market to another to find the latest model doll or cell phone. Our experience of Christmas Eve was not a happy event as we were witness to whole groups of poor families, homeless kids and old people begging us to give them a few cents "for Christmas". In our own street, were queuing doz-

ens of these life rejects, young shoeshine boys, poor Indian children and drug addicts waiting to receive their Christmas supper doled out by a charity organization.

We left this incredible but terribly cruel city a few days after Christmas and spent New Year's Eve in a quiet Quechua village close to Tarabuco in the south west of the country. We then continued to Potosi another poor city, which paradoxically fed Europe with silver for centuries. In Potosi we were close to the Uyuni salt desert but instead of following the road to Uyuni we took rather an off the beaten track route needing another week to reach our goal but it was all worthwhile. Following the northern dirt road we first stopped in a small Aymara quinoa producing community. Quinoa is a native Andean nutritive cereal which is grown organically on the dry sand of the salt lake's desert shore. Bolivian quinoa is the best in the world and is exported as far as

Europe and United States but through fair trade practices this time. It was not the season to harvest quinoa unfortunately but another event was about to occur. A big party to thank Pachamama or Mother Earth was to start the day we arrived. So the villagers invited us to participate. It was an honor for us so we accepted without realizing that the party would last for days non stop! We finally stayed one night and one day but it was enough to knock us out as we started drinking the 96 per cent spirits and did not stop till we left. Chewing coca leaves allowed us to stay awake the whole night so we could share this very special moment with the local people. At the same time we were exchanging our little bags of coca (chuspa) and preparing the offerings we would burn the following day at one of the village's sacred

places. At 7 AM we left the communal room where we had spent the night to hike to the waca (sacred place) mountain situated at 4500 meters of altitude (14700 feet). It was not easy with that amount of alcohol in our blood as it is high and our legs were soon heavy. But we made it fortunately and could witness a lama sacrifice, executed with a small kitchen knife sharpened on a stone. The animal's blood was spread out on the sandy ground demanding Pachamama be lenient and bountiful with the next quinoa harvest. As cowardly gringos and being exhausted we could not stay longer and needed to escape to other horizons.

We waited 24 hours for the public bus which brought us to Lica at the far end of Uyuni salt

desert and then we commenced to cross it after waiting a few more hours in the cold night of the Altiplano. We stopped in the middle of this desert on Incahuasi Island, an oasis of land with thousand year old cactuses lost in its white immensity. We were even lucky enough to spend a night there as it is usually forbidden. It seemed finally we deserved to enjoy a quiet sunset followed by a beautiful sunrise over this endless salt plain. We will always savour this moment voluntarily lost between earth and sky with stark beauty all around us!

To all our English speaking, Peruvian, Bolivian and French friends,
thank you, youspagara, gracias et merci !

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