

**W**ALKING the Inca Trail in Peru and Bolivia is like entering a dream state. The higher you go the more the mystery and magic take over.

Arriving at the starting point of the expedition, Cusco, was like stepping into a medieval kingdom at the top of the world, literally.

Situated at an altitude of 3,400 metres and surrounded by snow-capped mountains this Indo-Hispanic city is known as the archeological capital of South America. It takes its name from the Quechua (South American Indian) language and means "navel of the world" or "place of orientation".

Early in the morning the plazas are bustling with activity before the sun has warmed the rarified air and the cobblestone streets. Women weavers sit on cornerstones using their feet as looms while babies snooze in the shawls slung across their backs. Watchful Indians huddle under their ponchos in doorways, feigning sleep but not missing anything.

Cusco's streets are steep, narrow and winding and lined with Moorish-style buildings which are decked with flower pots. There is just enough room for the passage of llama caravans carrying farm produce, weavings and pottery to the markets.

Overlooking the city is a prime example of solid stone Inca architecture. Sacsayhuaman (pronounced like "sexy woman") is a sacred construction, a series of huge multi-angled rocks forming walls, doorways and alcoves. Once a fortress and amphitheatre it is believed there are hidden passageways connecting it with the Temple of the Sun.

To the amazement of the Spanish who first arrived in 1529, the walls were entirely covered in gold and silver plate.

Inside there are temples dedicated to the moon, the stars, thunderbolts and rainbows. The flagstone floors are designed to survive the most devastating earthquakes.

In the Temple of the Moon there is a line about eight feet up from the ground. This indicates how high the Incas piled their gold in a futile attempt to buy back the freedom of their ruler, Atahualpa, from the Spanish Conquistador Pizarro.

One of the best places to see Cusco's fabulous treasures is the Archeological Museum with its fine Inca gold work, ancient Peruvian mummies and extraordinary religious artifacts, a combination of pre-historic myth and Latin Catholicism. There is also a unique collection of erotic Inca pottery.

In the Main Square, known since Spanish Vice Regal days as the Plaza de Armas, lie the remains of an Inca ceremonial platform used for offering prayers and imploring the gods for protection, particularly the Lord of the Earthquakes. This is also the



Machu Picchu . . . no one knows why the Incas built this terraced city which immediately hypnotises the visitor.

# Through the Andes in steps of the Incas

## TRAVEL

By BERWYN LEWIS

site of the Inca Palace over which the Spanish built their cathedral. The cathedral, built in 1696, is famous for its altars made of Inca silver and gold leaf and its priceless collection of gold and precious stones.

Three and a half hours and 112km by train from Cusco, by way of the world's most amazing zigzag railway, lies the ancient Inca city of Machu Picchu.

No one knows why the Incas built this terraced city which immediately hypnotises the visitor. Its intricate mazes of stairways and tunnels and mausoleums (mostly filled with the remains of women and children) provide no clues. The condors slowly circling in the sky seem to be the guardians and the wind, whispering stealthily around the stone ruins, seem to have entered a conspiracy of silence.

Cradled on the eastern slopes of the Andes at an altitude of 2,450 metres, this uninhabited city floats in the clouds.

Many of the buildings remain unfinished suggesting a sudden interruption to everyday life, another of the mysteries which are still as unsolved as the day when Hiram Bingham first stumbled upon Machu Picchu in 1911.

The first part of this trek, an 11-day walk from the village of Quillabamba, began after a tour through the Sacred Valley of the Incas and a two-day stay in the Inca village of Ollantaytambo and its one hotel. This is home to the owners, a group of English and American young couples

and their children, who share a passion for trekking and Inca ruins and culture.

The six-hour walk on Day One wound through groves of fuschia (the sacred flower of the Incas), cherry orchards and stands of pine.

Climbing higher, the villages stood out against the barren landscape. Adobe houses, gaudily painted in combinations of pink and maroon, blue and red and white and yellow, created a riot of colour against muddy streets and patches of snow.

Our baggage, the food and tents were stowed across the backs of llamas and mules. Each day the muleskinner team set out ahead to set up camp and prepare afternoon tea, cocktails of *pisco sours* and evening meals.

Camping beside fast-flowing streams with stunning views of the Cordillera Vilcabamba range was like watching a different movie each night. The late afternoon sun, reflecting on the snowy peaks, cast shades of pink, orange and mauve on the snow.

Each day the slopes grew steeper but the rewards were spectacular views, wave after wave of white spires, some lost in the clouds, some streaked with silvery glaciers, some spuming feathery plumes of snow teased up by the wind.

Supplies of chocolate, spare sets of socks and down jackets took on a real significance, so did the coca leaves which are freely available in village market places.

Chewing coca leaves made crossing the higher passes easier. The highest in Peru was Yabana at an altitude of 4,575 metres. Later in Bolivia we made record time, and gained the pass of Condoriri at an altitude of 4,877 metres.

The highlight of the trek in

Peru, was Paccha, "Place of Waterfalls" where we could take long overdue baths in glacier-fed streams and wash clothing.

One afternoon we arrived just as a mist unravelled through the campsite, creating a ghostly atmosphere and obliterating the mountain peaks. As sky and earth dissolved into an eerie fog the Inca gods, demons and mythical creatures seemed very close.

Having crossed the 4,400 metre pass of Salcantaycasa we dropped down to the "Place Of The Grass", Marcahualle. The thought of leaving the high mountains, those silent observers of our puny attempts to scale their slopes, and returning to tame and grassy lowlands, produced a pang of sadness.

On the descent we passed llamas, donkey teams and traders bent under loads as big as themselves, the men in wide pants and waistcoats, the women in layers of bright petticoats under full skirts.

With our sun-creamed noses, assortment of wierd sunglasses and backpacks it was a case of mutual fascination.

The second part of the trek began at the 8,300 sq km Lake Titicaca, Bolivia. We rested in the Hotel Prefectural in the town of Copacabana where every year one of Bolivia's most bizarre ceremonies takes place at the Festival of Santiago. Brightly painted trucks, festooned with flowers, draped in streamers and hung with pompoms and crucifixes, assemble in the square.

Roosters, donkeys, tuba players, percussion and brass bands compete with the droll beat of Bolivian music piped through loud speakers. The crowds perform a stately

dance in traditional costumes of sequins, pearls and thick embroidery.

Priests are summoned to bless the cars and trucks with bottles of liquor which are smashed over the bonnets; at the same time incantations are

offered to deities of the roads. With the dizzying drops, steep bends and potholed surfaces it's obvious why drivers need all the help they can get on Bolivian roads.

The Bolivian government consists of 72 parties and in the 150 years since its independence from Spain it has enjoyed no less than 200 different presidents.

The streets of its capital, La Paz, are crowded with BMWs and beggars.

Towards the end of the trek we made an unscheduled walk across a glacier. This was the highpoint for me. Walking across its sparkling lunar landscape of frost and ice was a carefully considered exercise in economy of movement. Frail icy sculptures glinted in the intense sunlight. The dark blue and green abysses gleamed and hinted at infinite depths. The strange stillness and purity of everything at this altitude of the Cordillera Blanca inspired awe.

It was a moment familiar to all trekkers, a sense of communion and contact with far greater forces as you stand at the top of the world. Suddenly all the hard slog, the sweat and steep climbs are worth it.

★ ★ ★

### Travel details

Treks in Peru and Bolivia:  
 ● Adventure World (02) 27 2159.  
 ● Australian Himalayan Expeditions (02) 357 3555.  
 ● Peregrine Expeditions (03) 60 1121 (Peru only).  
 To go independently:  
 Write Tambo Treks Ollantaytambo, Cusco, Peru.

**QUOTE:** *One afternoon we arrived just as a mist unravelled through the campsite, creating a ghostly atmosphere and obliterating the mountain peaks. As sky and earth dissolved into an eerie fog the Inca gods, demons and mythical creatures seemed very close.*