



Rediscovering the ancient  
Inca highway network on foot.

# THE GREAT INCA TRAIL

BY: NICK STANZIANO

# THE GREAT INCA TRAIL



## Expedition route Qhapaq Ñan:

- Transversal expeditions
- The Great Inca Trail expedition
- Vilcabamba expedition
- Inca administrative center
- Country boundary
- - - Departmental boundary
- Country capital
- Departmental capital
- Provincial capital
- District capital



0 100 km  
0 62 mi



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# Foreword

Spanish chronicles of the 16<sup>th</sup> century report that messages in the Inca Empire could be delivered from Quito to Cusco in a week – a distance of over 1,500 miles! To achieve this, a network of *chaskis* (messengers) running in relay must have covered more than 200 miles per day, carrying *kipus* (recording devices consisting of joined knotted cords) along good trails.

The Inca hierarchy understood that they needed a highly-developed and sophisticated infrastructure to successfully maintain and enlarge their empire. The most important part of this was a massive and complex system of interconnected trails and associated *tambos* (rest houses and supply depots) and *chaski* houses, plus administrative centers, big and small. The major roads or Qhapaq Ñan (Quechua for “royal roads”) were the skeleton of this great Andean road system.

My background in project engineering and experience traveling the world as an overland leader/driver, and tour guide over the last 40 years, combined with my participation in many archaeological research expeditions and scores of solo exploratory expeditions in the Andes, has given me a good understanding of how and why the Incas constructed this magnificent 25,000-mile-long trail network to such a high quality, in such challenging environments.

Many years ago, I met Nick Stanziano, another passionate trekker who worked in the travel industry. Over a healthy feed of Andean vegetables in a humble restaurant away from the plaza in Cusco, we talked about trekking, adventure travel and tourism. I mentioned that I had trekked over 2,000 miles of Inca trails in Peru and other countries, enjoying and appreciating their majesty, their connected archaeological sites, and the way in which they blended history, modern cultures and nature. I voiced my concern and disappointment about the continuous and widespread

destruction of Inca trails, and their surrounding environments, and the fact that travel companies were not interested in operating trips on the well-preserved and still magnificent sections of these trails.

In 2015, I received a phone call from Nick. He had been busy with managing his travel company but had also made time to develop community tourism in Choquechaca, a community above Ollantaytambo, in the Cusco region. I detected that his passion for trekking and adventure was calling – on a massive scale.

He said that he was planning a major project to trek what he called the Great Inca Trail (Qhapaq Ñan) network... And he wanted me to be a part of it! He said he would also employ some of the Quechua speaking *campesinos* (farmers) he'd gotten to know in the Choquechaca community.

Over the next 3 years, Nick's enthusiasm and commitment, including a major financial investment, mainly from himself and the company he leads, made possible the many Great Inca Trail expeditions successfully carried out between 2016 and 2018.

The logistics have been daunting and the physical and mental demands have tested the crew to their limits. But despite it all, Nick faithfully completed the expedition's daily dispatch and photos in remote areas at the end of many long and demanding days. These dispatches and photos – now compiled into this book – carefully describe, as it happened, our daily life on the trail, our experiences (good and bad), our interactions with the local communities (good and problematic), and the complex history and culture of the region. They outline what the trail network means (and meant) to the Andean world, and what opportunities it can create for the Andean communities and sustainable tourism in the future.

They also explain how we dealt with many challenging and sometimes dangerous situations, like negotiating the flooded Huancabamba River and being attacked by two different swarms of bees. Having been in countless stressful and dangerous situations in remote areas of the world over the last 30 years has taught me the hard way that it is best to just get on with the job, conserve mental energy, focus on what has to be done to solve the problem and keep moving forward.

The dispatches also detail how we enjoyed and appreciated the good times, like the spontaneous, beautiful and humbling receptions by some local communities in remote areas – Chuschi being a prime example. On our journeys, the special experiences of being immersed in spectacular and diverse scenery and nature, along with the display of generosity by so many people, inspire me and make all the tough times acceptable as a normal part of the implementation of this worthwhile project.

More than ever, Nick and I appreciate the fragile status of the Qhapaq Ñan network. It has significantly deteriorated in the 15 years since Ricardo Espinosa wrote about his numerous Inca trail expeditions in the important publication *La Gran Ruta Inca*. Nick's dispatches have helped build widespread awareness of this situation. And, in the last two years, Nick has already successfully carried out expeditions for tourists on some spectacular and well-preserved sections of the Qhapaq Ñan.

The Great Inca Trail Network and its environment – natural, cultural and political – is still evolving. Hopefully, this book and the prospect of further expeditions on other major Inca trails will assist in some way to ensure a positive and beneficial evolution for this environment that has been shaped by one of the greatest engineering feats and monuments of the pre-Industrial world.

**John Leivers**

*Explorer and Researcher of Andean  
History and Cultures*



John takes a moment to appreciate Vitcos.



The Great Inca Trail as it leaves Huánuco Pampa.



# A Perfect Storm

It had been more than a decade since I first grabbed a backpack and bought a one-way ticket to Peru.

In 2004, as an impressionable twenty-four-year-old in the midst of a perfect storm of just enough savings, wanderlust and angst, I plucked myself from the manicured, man-made world of Santa Barbara, California and landed in the indigenous highlands of the Andes to explore Inca roads. Nothing has ever been the same since.

That said, I did remove myself from the Inca world for ten years to do all the things a well-mannered kid from the northern hemisphere gets told he should do... I got married, had kids, worked a corporate job, learned to use a spreadsheet, and even mustered up a master's degree. I progressed through much of this normalcy in the context of Peru, eventually becoming a naturalized citizen of the country in 2012. Everyday life in Lima, where I eventually settled, is much like any big city in the world – minus a few Peruvian idiosyncrasies. Through it all, that nagging urge to explore ancient Inca trails in the forgotten Andean highlands never left me.

It wasn't until another perfect storm hit when I was thirty-five, that that boyhood dream boiled to the top and gripped me again. The forces of maturity, life and business all converged on one crazy idea... I decided to walk what remains of the Great Inca Trail. But I wouldn't just walk the Inca road – I would be the first to give a day-by-day account, shared in real time on social networks, of the Inca road.

This was the very beginning of a series of expeditions that in the end will last years and cover thousands of miles by foot. The journey would take us through some of the most remote stretches of the Andes mountains, tracing the footsteps of the Inca kings of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries who united an empire through this monumental transportation and communication network.

## A 25,000-mile road network

At their peak, the Incas were the largest and most advanced indigenous civilization in the Americas.

The Great Inca Trail, aka the Qhapaq Ñan, spans 25,000 miles and six countries, making it the largest UNESCO World Heritage site on the planet. Comprising two main North-South arteries, and myriad smaller roads, it was built and maintained by Inca subjects as part of the mit'a communal tax system. Encompassing sturdy stone staircases, intricate rope bridges, boulevards up to 60 feet wide, the road network was used by the *chaskis* (relay runners) who carried messages throughout the empire, by the caravans of llamas and alpacas responsible for getting goods from A to B, by Inca armies, and for religious pilgrimages. Not to mention by regular Inca subjects.

When the Spanish conquistadors first saw the Inca road in 1532, they remarked that it was as impressive as anything in Europe. Later, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt hypothesized that the Great Inca Trail was one of the largest public works of mankind. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, explorer and archeological historian, Victor H. Von Hagen made great strides in the road's awareness with his book *Highway of the Sun*. John Hyslop's foundational studies in the 1970s and 1980s led to the publication of *The Inka Road System*, the seminal archeological work on the topic.

More recently, "El Caminante", Ricardo Espinosa Reyes, brought the wonders of the Qhapaq Ñan to a wider audience with his landmark expedition and book, *La Gran Ruta Inca* – a book that was often our expedition's bible, containing the most detailed and comprehensive map of the Inca road from Cuenca to Cusco. And Felipe Varela continues to dedicate decades to exploring the road network on foot, attempting to revive its heritage from the threats of modernization.

This project sits on the shoulders of all who have gone before us – big and small; forgotten and known.

## Our chance to make a difference

At their core, our expeditions are about awareness and conservation of South America's largest and most important historical asset. Sadly, the road's destruction continues despite the efforts of UNESCO and the governments of the six Andean countries who are valiantly working to create a cohesive plan to protect it. The handful of us who have actually walked its path for thousands of miles understand that it will take far more than any one government, industry or person to protect it... What's needed is a multi-generational, global effort to reconstruct and reconceptualize what the Inca road is and can become. We hope that this travelogue and our ancillary efforts in creating tourism along the route are a positive force towards this goal.

Attempting such a feat after the idealism and impatience of youth had passed their climax meant that I could draw on reserves of patience and resources that don't come naturally to 24-year-olds. My boyhood dream had hatched alongside that of the travel company I had spent seven years building. SA Expeditions, the company I co-founded, had given me the organizational insights and resources required for such an endeavor. It also allowed me to step away for months on end and establish the administrative nucleus required for our work.

I know that the cultural patrimony of the Inca road can be instrumental in creating a new and brighter future for contemporary Andean communities. A future of dignified development and self-reliance that creates economic value through modern tourism. Me, my company, and our partners at international, regional and local levels are working to develop sustainable, community-based tourism along the Qhapaq Ñan. Our efforts come at an important crux in history; a time when multiple opposing forces are intersecting. On the one hand Inca roads are being abandoned by rural communities and bulldozed over by modern development, while on the other contemporary society is finally beginning to awaken to their inherent value.





An aerial view of the remains of an Inca causeway that still functions today.



**This project sits on the shoulders  
of all who have gone before us –  
big and small; forgotten and known.**





The Inca road as it approaches the high pass at Choquetecarpo.

## A modern expedition

The travelogue you're about to read is the culmination of our efforts to use contemporary technologies to create a daily story of a more than 500-year-old road that traverses the most remote swathes of the Andes mountains. It's as rough around the edges as it is audacious and spontaneous; we believe it's the only real-time, day-by-day account of walking the Inca road system ever to be published.

The project has required much economic and human capital to get to this point. We've had to move a team of five to ten people and an equivalent number of llamas and horses across more than 3,000 miles over 200 days, through some of the most rugged terrain on the planet.

We spent our days walking, and entire evenings packed in the cook tent, sending trip correspondence and images to a daily audience, whose engagements on social media ran into the millions. Our expedition relied on three languages, each of which was vital to

its success. We used Quechua to communicate with many of the inhabitants along the route, and every daily post was published in both Spanish – to build awareness of the road's plight across the Andes and western South America – and English, to convey our message to a global audience.

Our technology kit includes an Apple iPad to register daily stories (and our daily expenses), digital cameras to take pictures, GPS to map the route, and satellite internet to send our dispatches as we go. With chargers, batteries and other accessories, the total kit weighs just under ten pounds and is sturdy enough to keep going through the extreme weather and frequent tumbles of the trek.

Executing the project has required hundreds of thousands of dollars, not to mention man hours. The expedition is fueled by the economic engines of modern tourism in South America, where profits are recycled into the local economy to foster conservation and hopefully a more thoughtful and sustainable tourism industry of the future. It started as a boyhood dream, but it's morphed into so much more.



The Great Inca Trail follows the Taparaco River as it approaches Huanuco Pampa.

## **WHERE WE GO FROM HERE**

To date, we've spent nearly 200 days in the mountains, covering more than 3,000 miles on foot. I've written more than 60,000 words, and collectively we've taken thousands of photos – the best and most important of which you will see in this publication.

Our expeditions continue on an annual basis with our goal being to walk every last inch of primary Inca road that remains. When we're done, we will have covered more than 6,000 miles across five Andean countries: Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. The living record that you see in the following pages will eventually crisscross more than half a continent and reach all four corners of the Tawantinsuyu or Inca Empire.





**The journey begins.**

# Huánuco Pampa to Casma

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The day had come... All the planning, talking and hype about exploring the Great Inca Road had finally resulted in the day when our feet would hit the trail! It was also the day that I would start my long journey with John, a young, sixty-five-year-old Australian, who was really the first true explorer I had ever met in my life. In fact, John was the main reason we were in Huánuco Pampa in the first place. As chief consultant on navigation and someone who first opened my mind to the immensity of the Qhapaq Ñan, it was his guidance that brought us here.

It was also the day when we met Rolando the cook, the *llameros* (llama handlers) and their majestic llamas. They all came from Canrey Chica, a small Andean town in the Cordillera Blanca, and they would carry and support our expedition for the fourteen days it took the Pacific coast at Casma, approximately 300 miles away.

The expedition would be a rehearsal of sorts to prepare for longer and more challenging expeditions to come. We were beginning the arduous process of learning how to walk and live with a ragtag team of llamas and humans in the name of exploration. This was the only way we could truly know and share one of humanity's largest and greatest public works, the incredible road network that snaked across the Andes and most of western South America.

This idea of a preparatory expedition to flush out the logistical and interpersonal challenges that go with such an endeavor would serve us well. John and I worked through some important understandings, Rolando realized that he would need to walk a lot faster to keep up, and I realized that you can't treat a llama like a pack mule. And, oh yeah, I also embarked on my first serious effort to write an adventure story, while at the same time trying to take the longest walk of my life.

## It was the start of a beautiful journey!











**TOP** - The team prepares for departure.

**BOTTOM LEFT** - A statue that celebrates the tradition of llamas as pack animals in the Andes with Huaraz in the background.

**BOTTOM RIGHT** - The *Incawasi* sector of ruins at Huánuco Pampa.

## Llama drama

During its heyday, the Qhapaq Ñan spanned from southern Colombia to Northern Chile and Argentina, connecting the entire west coast of South America and covering approximately 25,000 miles.

We'll be starting our adventure in Northern Peru at one of the largest and most important Inca cities along the Qhapaq Ñan: Huánuco Pampa in the region of Ancash. At its height, Huánuco Pampa played a central role in controlling the northern reaches of the empire, although today it's been relatively forgotten besides a handful of local tourists and archeologists that specialize in the study of the Incas.

Located at 12,000 feet on a high clearing along the Andean altiplano, the citadel is at a strategic position from which our team can begin our explorations towards the Pacific Ocean, eventually ending at the modern-day town of Casma, 200 miles and 18 days later on August 24<sup>th</sup>... should everything go to plan. If you imagine Huánuco Pampa is at an important crossroads where the Qhapaq Ñan runs north to south from Quito to Cusco and then east to west from the Amazon jungle to the Pacific Ocean... We'll be taking the road west towards the coast.

We've been joined today at our camp outside the ruins by our team of five llamas: Blanquito, Maleado, Condor, Macho and Mascarone who will carry our camp for the duration, as well our *llamero* Alejandro (the llama handler). We'll introduce the rest of the team further down the trail. Tomorrow we'll be up at first sun, making our way to the community of Isko by tomorrow night, approximately 13 miles away.

## A change of plan

Today's walk brought us to our first intact section of the Inca Road, which exceeded 30 feet in width and boasted stunning Inca stone steps; the same that had so impressed the Spanish conquistadors when they first laid their eyes on them in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was one of those incredible days in the Andes where the blue skies and equatorial sun mix with the golden grasses and high peaks of the Andean Cordillera. Again, the Andes have captured my imagination and reverence as they never fail to do.

What's more, the Andes also never fails to challenge the idea of a set plan. Through a series of new information, misunderstood plans and other unexpected circumstances which are too long to explain, we've decided we will need to change our route. Essentially, we realized three things today... One, the llamas have proven to walk too slowly considering the time it takes to break down camp every morning. Two, the route that was pre-planned turns out to not be the route we need to take to Chavín de Huantar. Instead of trekking through Pomachaca we will need to shift our route by about 100 kilometers through Tamyacocha. Three of our llamas need additional support with carrying cargo, so they can walk at a speed that allows all five of us on the expedition to stay together in one group as opposed to splitting the group with llamas and *llameros* behind and explorers ahead as we did today. This causes too much confusion on camp selection, among other important details that could become an issue later in the expedition. Nonetheless, after some minor persuading of our team, we have a plan in place until the next time we need to change it.



**TOP** - Nick climbs a staircase from the Colpa Bridge crossing the Rio Vizarra, just north of Huánuco Pampa.

**BOTTOM** - Rolando and Antonio pack up the llamas for the day's walk.

Speaking of our assistants, this would be an opportune time to introduce our cook Rolando, a man we can't live without who has proven to be very good at what he does. In fact, Rolando accompanied "El Caminante" Ricardo Espinosa Reyes during his famous six-month expedition between Quito and Cusco in 2001 – the last expedition on the Qhapaq Ñan of the scale we plan to undertake when we trek 2,000 miles from Cuenca to Cusco between April and September next year. It's extremely important that the cook is as flexible as those doing the exploring, even if some convincing is necessary to get the team in the right direction.

## An ancient Inca bath

By noon we had made it to Taparaco where we had lunch and visited the nearby Inca ruins, which has a preserved Inca bath among other Inca structures. From Taparaco, we took a transversal Qhapaq Ñan that heads west to Chavín de Huántar that eventually will end at the pacific coast at Casma. This route still had remnants of The Great Inca Road, although it is tougher than the central grand Qhapaq Ñan that goes north to south along the Central Cordillera. It is the ancient route from Huánuco Pampa, one of the great Inca cities in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, to Chavín de Huántar, which was arguably the first large-scale civilization in the Andes, preceding the Incas by 2,000 years. Many indigenous population centers remained inhabited for millennia and remain connected by roads that were later integrated into the Qhapaq Ñan.

The afternoon found us summiting a path at 14,000 feet before dropping down to look for a place to set up camp, which took longer than expected. It turned out to be drier than anticipated and we eventually found a spring where we set up camp just before nightfall. By the end of the day, we had covered 20 miles and were en route to Chavín de Huántar on a lost Qhapaq Ñan, camped in a sharp canyon of Ichu grass next to a fresh spring.

We'll be up an hour before sunlight tomorrow to have breakfast, break down camp and cross another series

of 16,000-foot summits that happen to go through Antamina, which will be our first encounter with one of the many mines in the region. I'm cold and tired and just want to retire to my tent saving any thought of tomorrow for when I wake.

## A close shave at Antamina

Quite an eventful day having set out again following the lost Qhapaq Ñan towards Chavín, which leads right through the Antamina mine. The mine's property is a massive area covering hundreds of miles, meaning our only option was to continue our course if we were to prove that the Qhapaq Ñan does connect Huánuco Pampa and Chavín de Huántar.

After our experience of searching for water for most of the previous afternoon, we decided to play it conservatively and set up camp next to what was the only lake between Chavín and the spring from yesterday. It wasn't long until two security officials from Antamina mine came upon us by horseback explaining that we were on their property and had to move. The situation became precarious very quickly with the security personnel communicating on their radios about our activities to some unknown superior. If we were made to move on, we would have lost two hours of the day repacking camp and taking a chance that there would be another water source before nightfall. We quickly shifted to diplomacy and began to explain the reason for our passing, pulling out literally every card we had.

We were fortunate that our local guide Antonio happens to also be the dean of the association of guides in Huaraz, an institution that often has dealings in mining as tourism is increasingly overlapping with mining. John Leivers, the expedition's main guide, and I each presented a letter of introduction and business card, explaining our investigations along the Qhapaq Ñan which had brought us to the lake. Eventually, two more security officials arrived on horseback and we went through the routine all over again.

Finally, after an hour of wrangling, the mood turned, and they allowed us to stay for the evening. In fact, not only did they give us permission to camp, but they also stayed for a round of hot tea and discussions of the importance of Peru's pre-Columbian heritage that eventually culminated with them wanting to take pictures with the expedition team. It was an incredible shift in spirits for everyone involved. Antamina mine, and especially its security officials, get a thumbs up this time!

The day ended with our telecommunications connection being blocked within the property of the mine (hence the delay in my latest communication) and a snowstorm at our camp which sits at 15,000 feet elevation. Overall, it was a good day though.



The remains of the Inca stairway descending from Huánuco Pampa.

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having set out again  
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**We quickly shifted to diplomacy and began to explain the reason for our passing, pulling out literally every card we had.**







## Snow!

The morning began with a blanket of frozen snow over the entire camp. Icicles hung from the tips of the llamas' ears as they sat resting in the snow in the early morning hours while Rolando fired up the tea kettle. After a hot meal of pancakes and coca tea, we broke camp and descended the Qhapaq Ñan to Chavín, 15 miles and 5,000 feet down to the Challhuayaco River Valley below.

Upon arrival, our luck continued as we were allowed to set up camp within the archaeological park of Chavín de Huántar which is within the small town of Chavín and has plentiful grass for the llamas. Tomorrow we will tour this pre-Columbian complex.

Dating back 2,500 years, it was the first large-scale civilization in the Andean mountains, as populations along the fertile coast of northern Peru began a civilizational march inland to more extreme ecosystems. Understanding the Qhapaq Ñan is to understand how societies evolved and intermingled over 5,000 years through the movement of people and ideas amongst western South America.

There are very few people in the world today who have walked as many miles of these roads as John Leivers, our expedition guide. Australian by birth, John has been exploring the Qhapaq Ñan and other Andean roads continually since 1991. By his calculation he's walked and recorded about 2,000 miles of them. As testament to this, we've already observed random *campesinos*, in regions so remote they appear to not have received an outsider for a century, recognize John and comment on their surprise to see him pass through again. Therefore, to have John along for our expeditions is crucial and provides a level of expertise and intuition in the field that cannot be replaced.

**Icicles hung from the tips of the llamas' ears as they sat resting in the snow.**

When the hindsight of history takes its course, and hopefully when John takes a moment to synthesize his 25 years of explorations for others to read, the information and work that he has compiled over his lifetime about Andean roads and associated archaeological sites will be recognized as one of the great contemporary contributions to its awareness and understanding. We hope our expeditions over the next year will begin this process to share and disseminate John's knowledge of this important transportation network to the world.

## Thousands of years before the Incas

Chavín de Huántar was the first large-scale civilization in the Andes, going back more than 2,500 years. Before Cusco became the center of western South America when the Inca Empire established its capital there in the 15th century, Chavín held this title. Smaller fiefdoms from the coast to the jungle would give their allegiance to the Chavín cult and its high priests. Chavín culture would exert power over populations by their ability to construct massive stone edifices and complex systems of canals. The canals served for the control of water, but also as a tool to control their people. This was done by having visiting chiefs take a powerful mescaline substance from a cactus called Huachuma, and depriving them of light and sound until eventually they would come into contact with the cult's principal deity, Señor de Lanzón, made from carved stone and with light exacted perfectly on its face. When we experienced this today, in the underground canals thousands of years later (without the cactus unfortunately), it's no wonder how such chiefs would return home and share the message of the powerful Chavín cult to their people.

No one in the world knows more about the Chavín culture than Stanford professor John Rick. John has been leading the excavations at Chavín for the past 22 years and we were lucky enough to run into him. This meant we got to spend a morning understanding Chavín culture and learning about the exciting discoveries John and his international team are undertaking. In just one morning,



**LEFT** - John and Nick pause at a shrine (*apacheta*) marking the high pass at Cerro Castillo. | **TOP RIGHT** - Our guide Antonio walks the subterranean galleries at Chavín de Huántar. | **BOTTOM RIGHT** - A well preserved section of Inca road leaving Chavín.

we witnessed the discovery of a human skull, crawled through newly uncovered water canals five meters underground, and listened to John's comprehensive theories about how Chavín culture most likely went back a thousand years farther than previously thought.

Beyond John's archeological work at Chavín, he has been involved in Peruvian society for most of the second half of his life and has a keen interest in how tourism can help local communities and fund critical research. Specifically, we shared our belief that bringing travelers in comfort to engage with leading archeologists and explorers to places like Chavín de Huántar and the Qhapaq Ñan is a thoughtful and impactful experience for visitors and communities alike.

We leave Chavín at first light tomorrow, more enlightened about early Andean societies and more encouraged than ever about the potential for tourism along the Qhapaq Ñan with allies like John Rick.

## A new team of llamas

With the addition of a new member to the team, Ivan, a loyal assistant to help with the llamas and setting up and breaking down camp, we began the ascent from Chavín, 5,000 feet over a western summit called Cerro Castillo (Castle Mountain). After a day of light walking exploring Chavín the day before, it was a reminder of how challenging the Qhapaq Ñan is to trek when ascending such long distances at elevations that reach 16,000 feet. Still though, the one major benefit of hiking along the Inca roads at this height is that few hooved animals like horses and cows traverse them and thus the stone roads tend to be better preserved.

We ascended for six straight hours in stunning scenery that officially brought us into Huascarán National Park. Words can't describe how nature at a place like this evokes such humbleness, spirituality and exhaustion all at the same time. The Qhapaq Ñan

curved perfectly as it ascended through the valley, with retaining walls that were, in parts, 15 feet high and seemed to almost superhumanly overcome the vertical geography of the Andes.

Upon summiting, we paid tribute to the mountain deities (called *Apus* in local tongue) at an altar with a ceremony of coca leaves and *Pisco*, the Peruvian liquor made from grapes. I was happy to give thanks to anything that welcomed the end of my muscle pain and *Pisco* was a welcome swig of something besides water and tea.

Descending down the other side, we met two horsemen who were there to intercept us with fresh llamas for the next week. I think we surprised our local *llameros* (llama handlers) with the distances we can cover daily (around 20 miles). The plan from here is to change our llamas for the remaining 100 miles of our trek and increase the total number to six. While we won't miss Maleado's orneriness and Blanquito's tendency to sit down in the middle of the road, it will be a melancholic goodbye to a few majestic spirits that have been as critical as any of us during our explorations thus far.

## Old meets new

We've made it to the community of Olleros after a long march down from our camp near Cerro Castillo pass. Olleros is the home of our cook and *llameros*, which has provided a bit more certainty on the route as they enter more familiar territory. We'll be replenishing supplies for a day and a half and living the life of luxury... at least when compared to the colder accommodations we've had in tents during the past week.

In a stroke of luck, Olleros has a *tambo* which is essentially a waystation for rural Peruvian communities, where a roof, running water, kitchen and satellite internet are provided for the local community and people passing through on the Qhapaq Ñan. It's part of a government program that was created by the last Peruvian president Ollanta Humala, which plans to build nearly 500 of these *tambos* throughout the rural countryside. This idea mimics an organizational concept

of the Incas in which they would build stations with shelter and food along the Qhapaq Ñan for passing military, migrations of people, and the *chaskis*. *Chaskis* were the runners of the Inca Empire that could deliver messages and light products by traveling more than 180 miles per day. They would communicate essential information and bring important products between the coast, the Andes and the jungle. This allowed the empire to communicate efficiently and to bring things like fresh fish from the Pacific to be served to Inca nobility in Cusco, hundreds of miles away in the high Andes, in a matter of days.

While there is no *chaski* relay running across the Qhapaq Ñan today, the modern conveniences and shelter of this present-day *tambo* are a welcome respite from the extreme geography and weather of the high Andes.

## An unexpected farewell

Today we spent the whole day at the *tambo* in Olleros, having a *pachamanca* lunch (traditional Andean meal) and preparing for days ahead. From here, we begin the great descent down the Andes into the deserts of Northern Peru and eventually the Pacific Ocean. Some of the expedition team leave us in Olleros, with Rolando and I being the only two that will walk the entire route between Huánuco Pampa and Casma. Not only have we replenished fresh personnel, but we have new llamas and even a dog from Olleros named Maynus, who will serve as protection from other aggressive dogs en route.

Antonio our local guide during the first portion of the trek has left and we now have a new local guide named Leo. Also, Alejandro our *llamero* is being replaced by his son Eder who should prove a welcome addition of youth and energy to the team. The most significant change in the expedition is the departure of John Leivers. For many reasons longer than can be explained in this post, he's decided to return to Huaraz and let the expedition run without him until the coast. John has always been a strong influence in my pursuit of exploring the Qhapaq Ñan, and it's quite surreal now that I lead the expedition without his presence.



Nick sets up for work at a chilly campsite in Huascarán National Park.

The news of John's departure weighed heavy on me most of the day, despite the *pachamanca* and cold beers that the team supplied. It's one of those moments, like when I left home at 18 years old, or when I took full reigns of the operations of SA Expeditions, after the departure of my dear friend and co-founder of SA Expeditions, David. It's a moment which is part terrifying and part exhilarating, a time when one has to assume a new reality in which failure or success of the venture depends wholly on your own ability to learn and be flexible in the challenges that lie ahead.

In order to walk from Cuenca, Ecuador to Cusco, Peru, nearly 2,000 miles by foot in under five months, across the unforgiving terrain of the Andes, the team will need to cover more than 20 miles a day. A physical feat that all those participating need to be confident in their ability to take on.

**The second half of the morning and early afternoon we skipped along with the llamas and the dog Maynus on a wide and gently curving road towards Piruyoc.**



LEFT - The Inca road to Tinko. | RIGHT - The children of Tinko marvel at the llamas.

## Into the Cordillera Negra

We departed Olleros down the main, and only, road, in town to the valley floor at the Rio Negro. This road was the same Qhapaq Ñan that came from Chavín and eventually to the Pacific, which essentially makes Olleros an Inca highway town of sorts – just 500 years past its prime. From the river, we climbed 3,000 feet going through small villages where the Qhapaq Ñan disappeared into hillsides. Continuing in the direction that it should be, we finally caught sight of it on a high *pampa*, after speaking with a local who confirmed the direction of the *Camino Real* (Royal Road), which is how they would have called this part of the Qhapaq Ñan during colonial times.

The second half of the morning and early afternoon we skipped along with the llamas and the dog Maynus on a wide and gently curving road towards Piruyoc, the next goal marker for tomorrow. We have now moved out of the Cordillera Blanca across to the Cordillera Negra which is much drier, with softer more rounded hills. There is much less water though, so we've set up camp right at a bridge that has a foundation made of Inca Stones with wood and mud on top. It's a path over the only decent stream within what seems to be a five-mile radius.

The team in general was a bit slower the first half of the day, recovering from the *pachamanca* the previous day... Yet relocating the Qhapaq Ñan made us forget about all the pain. By the time Rolando's pork and fresh veggies were hot and ready to eat for a late lunch, all recollections of the exhausting, and at a few particular moments miserable climb up from the Rio Negro, had completely vanished. We contently ate our plates with traditional Huayno music coming from Ivan's battery powered radio.

## A visit to a local primary school

We began the long descent down from the path at Callan Punta above Piruyoc in the mid-morning, saying goodbye to our views of the Cordillera Blanca. As we walked down and lost sight of Huascarán, Peru's highest peak at just over 22,000 feet, we quickly got a sense of changing weather and the local culture that was very different in the higher Andes above 11,000 feet. The drop was more than 7,000 feet in elevation after a high of 14,000 feet at the pass.

Half way down, in a small village called Tinko, the Qhapaq Ñan passed right next to a primary school.



**LEFT** - The Qhapaq Ñan to Tambo. | **RIGHT** - The Qhapaq Ñan as it runs into the modern highway at its zigzag corners down towards Tinko.

The headmaster was amazed to see half a dozen loaded llamas and an odd collection of outsiders walking through. He immediately went into the only two classrooms of the school and told the kids to come outside to see for themselves.

It's important to understand that llamas in many parts of Peru are no longer used as extensively as they were in pre-Columbian times. This was the very first time the children had ever seen a llama... Or a tall *gringo* with titanium walking poles and polarized sunglasses. The headmaster explained to the children that the llama was the mule of the Incas, because in lower elevations, European descended beasts of burden are the reality. All the children wanted to do was two things: First, pet the llamas; Second, pet the *gringo* by touching my hand. It was one of those cultural experiences for everyone involved.

From Tinko we continued to drop, shifting between preserved strips of the Qhapaq Ñan that would collide with the modern highway at the end of its long, zigzag cuts through the steep Andes. The modern concrete, ready-made for things that can roll on it at 80 miles per hour from a combustible engine, seemed very futuristic, but the Qhapaq Ñan proved a far easier way down, gliding with the natural curves of the canyon.

Eventually, we made it to the community of Tambo, although this time it was just the name of the town and nothing like the *tambo* that sheltered and gave us satellite Wi-Fi in Ollereros. Tonight, we camped next to a river where the llamas had plentiful grass. Everyone washed off the day's long walk in the water and the weather is more temperate allowing for sandals past sundown. Tomorrow we will descend to Yautan, another 6,000-foot drop in elevation at the borders of the Peruvian desert, which will be our last push to the Pacific in the days following.

## Welcome back John

Our early morning hike along the river had stretches of the Qhapaq Ñan with stunning 15 feet high Inca stone retaining walls. By mid-morning, the Inca Road disappeared below the modern highway, only later appearing on the ridge above us with limited continuity. This meant we spent half a day walking on pavement, which rasps the feet of the llamas and becomes serious quickly if the pavement is very hot. For our particular venture, asphalt was not a welcome sight.







**I've never heard more roosters at sunrise than I have in Yautan. The entire pueblo was like a symphony, stirring even the dead at 5am.**



**TOP** - The Inca road from Yautan descending to Casma.

**BOTTOM LEFT** - The Inca road through the desert as it approaches the Pacific.

**BOTTOM RIGHT** - An ancient petroglyph depicting a shark.

We made quite a spectacle as we passed through each little town descending down the Andes. Locals were so surprised by our passing, they would stop everything and take photos of the llamas. Even cars on the highway stopped, braking on a dime with a passenger dashing out the door to take a selfie with the llamas... I couldn't believe it.

Through it all, we eventually made it to Yautan after a day that resembled more of a parade than an exploration. We set up camp on the town's soccer field, which will be our last night with the llamas and our trusted *llameros*, Eder, Ivan and Maynus the dog. Tomorrow they will take the trip by truck, back to the high Andes where they live outside of Olleros.

Tomorrow, Rolando and I, and John who decided he would finish the last stage after a few days of respite, will depart with only our backpacks. We will head towards Tambo Colorado along the Qhapaq Ñan to the ancient city of Sechin in the Peruvian desert, eventually finishing in Casma near the coast. It will be a final nimble push covering 20 miles, eventually sleeping in a comfortable hotel and celebrating our finish by day's end.

## Hard-earned ceviche

I've never heard more roosters at sunrise than I have in Yautan. The entire pueblo was like a symphony, stirring even the dead at 5am. This is how our day started as we said goodbye to the rest of the team and continued our descent into the Peruvian desert along the Qhapaq Ñan.

Rolando has proven to be as good a guide as he is a chef. His inquiries with some locals in the morning led us to find the Inca Road from Yautan to Tambo Colorado through a grove of starfruit and avocado trees. What was a bit disconcerting though was the constant shotgun blasts from the orchards to keep the birds away. In order

to continue the path, I reasoned to myself that if a few shotgun pellets did hit me, it wouldn't be life threatening. We made sure we just made very human noises as we walked. The sacrifice of safety was worth it though; we found three sets of petroglyphs along the route that gave us all a good dose of adrenalin from the discovery.

Eventually, the landscape became Martian looking as we arrived to Tambo Colorado where the Qhapaq Ñan opened itself up to a spectacular 75-foot-wide road heading west towards Sechín. Actually, at this junction of the Andean and the coastal roads, at least three major Qhapaq Ñan roads converged. It reminded me of one of those mega overpasses in North America like where the I-10, I-5 and Hwy 101 converge in Southern California. Sechín is essentially the end of the transversal westerly Qhapaq Ñan from Huánuco Pampa, that connects with the Qhapaq Ñan on the coast which has a North-South trajectory.

Sechín is a site around 4,000 years old, a society that developed following what is believed to be the first civilization in the Americas around 5,000 years ago at Caral, just a few hours away by vehicle. Sechín also has some fascinating rock-carved walls that have a very Chavínesque look. Chavín civilization, which is only a six-day walk east on the Qhapaq Ñan where our expedition came from, followed Sechín by a thousand years.

By this time though, I was more concerned with contemporary Peruvian society and had been dreaming about fresh ceviche for at least the last seven days since the frozen passes of the Andes. There was therefore little time to waste in dropping our gear and making our way to Tortuga Bay to gaze upon the mighty Pacific and bring this journey to a close. After 250 miles and 14 days of walking from the spine of the Andes to the coast along the grand Inca Road known as the Qhapaq Ñan, we had arrived... Ecstatic, enlightened and gorging on fresh fish.

**After 250 miles and 14 days of walking from the spine of the Andes to the coast along the grand Inca Road known as the Qhapaq Ñan, we had arrived.**





# Vilcashuamán to Paracas

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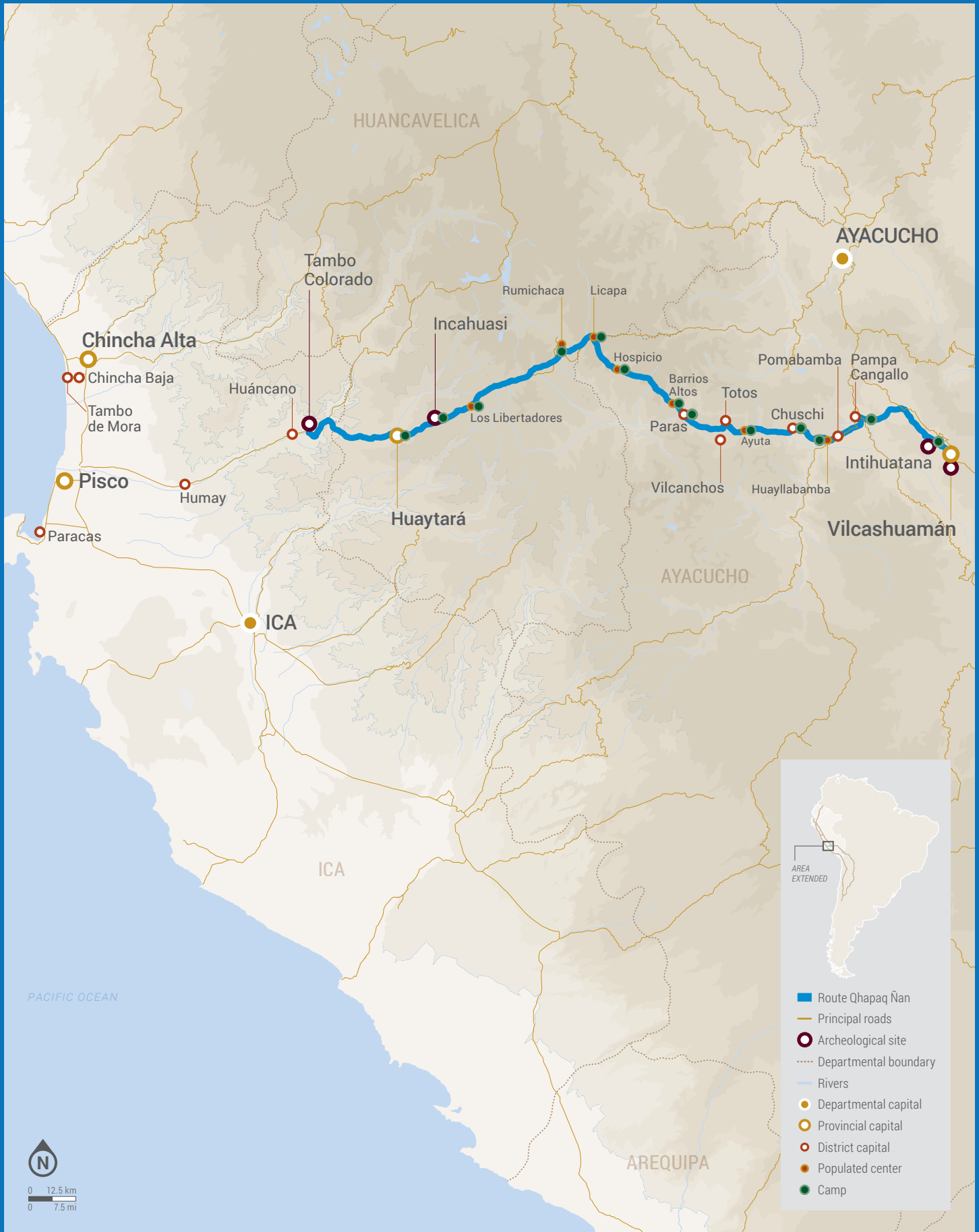
Nearly a thousand kilometers to the south of Huánuco Pampa, lies another great Inca administrative complex at Vilcashuamán, the starting point for our second expedition. John and I were joined for the first time by our team from Cusco, along with some purchased llamas from our friends back in Canrey Chica. Covering a similar distance to the first, although not quite making it to the ocean, we headed east on a transversal Inca road through some of the remotest towns we have encountered, eventually arriving to Huaytura.

Being native to the Andes, Flavio, Valentín and Nicolás (our support team from Cusco) were familiar with llamas but they had never attempted to use them as pack animals – especially not across such wide and unfamiliar territory. All of us, including the llamas, would have to become comfortable with the idea of it being okay to not fully know the way.

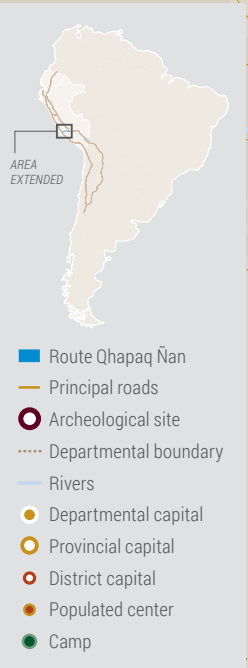
The provinces that we would walk through had been scarred by civil upheavals in the 1980s and 1990s when the leftist guerillas of Sendero Luminoso ravaged the Peruvian countryside. We would need to tread lightly, knowing that outsiders in past decades often arrived with ulterior motives and political ideologies. We were going to have to be good at explaining that we were just there to walk an old road and take some pictures along the way.

As the trip progressed we started to get the hang of things, learning to organize ourselves almost as a military unit would, with a strict schedule and daily operational goals. I even wrestled one of our llamas just to size him up, understanding that if we were to make it thousands more miles with these animals, I had to know exactly what we were dealing with. That would be the first and last fight with a llama I would ever have, realizing that force was not going to charm him into carrying our things.

**We were going to have to be good at explaining that we were just there to walk an old road and take some pictures along the way.**



PACIFIC OCEAN











**TOP** - The sunset viewed from Vilcashuaman.

**BOTTOM LEFT** - The Catholic church built on an Inca palace in the main square of Vilcashuaman.

**BOTTOM RIGHT** - A local gathers firewood near Pomacocha.

## We are no Incas

After 14 hours of traversing treacherous Andean roads, en route from Cusco towards Ayacucho, we arrived to Vilcashuamán. Vilcashuamán was a great center of the Inca Empire during the 15th century and lay at the geographic heart of the Inca world that stretched from northern Argentina to Southern Colombia along the western coast of South America. It has been said that Vilcashuamán was the retirement home for Pachacutec, the great Inca king who many also believe built Machu Picchu. Getting to Cusco from Vilcashuamán takes about four weeks by foot and llama on The Great Inca Road, the Qhapaq Ñan, which we'll be doing next year. But this visit starts us off on another expedition along the Qhapaq Ñan for a 200-mile march towards the Pacific and a desert oasis near modern-day Inca, where we will arrive by the end of October.

Being in the Andes, we will also be supported by our team of 12 llamas which arrived by truck after two days on the highway from Northern Peru. While llamas are an iconic Andean symbol, their use and familiarity has been declining since the Spanish introduced hooved animals as the principal beast of burden – even though llamas are perfectly suited for high-altitude travel. We want to rely again, as the Incas did before us, on the llama as a pack animal.

Today, though, in our efforts just to get them loaded, we were reminded that we were no Incas... The circus that ensued brought more than a 100 townsfolk and gawking tourists to watch us chase llamas around the archeological park that is the tallest *Ushnu* (raised ceremonial platform) in the whole Inca Empire. We had gangs of young children, in an amazing display of agility, skipping across the terraced Andes, pursuing llamas that were on the loose trying to escape their load.

Half the town must have been in some way part of the llamas' presence and our ragtag team of three Cusqueños and two *gringos*, as we chased them down. In the end, we found one of the llamas so ornery and with

a zeal to run, that we decided to sell it for 300 *Soles* (90 dollars) to the man who dressed as the Inca king to take pictures with the tourists. We declined his first offer, but soon found it a convenient way to find it a home that wasn't part of our expedition. In the end, we decided to camp another night and think about things and find some more clarity on how this was all going to work out.

I'll close this first post with optimism and braced for the 200 miles of adventure ahead on the great Qhapaq Ñan.

## A 550-year-old shower

Promptly at 6am this morning many of the municipality officials from the day before arrived to our camp to watch our second attempt to load the llamas. Before this though, Valentín thought it prudent to have a coca leaf ceremony (called *Haywaykuy* in Quechua), which asks the mountains for safe passing and to bless the expedition. He wrapped llama fat into three coca leaves with a purple flower and then offered it beneath the Inca stones. I'm convinced it made all the difference as we were much more successful loading the llamas before swiftly departing for Vilcashuamán on the Qhapaq Ñan towards Pomacocha. It wasn't long however until one llama, as a last act of rebellion, managed to jump the walls of the road and take off across the Andes. Our *llameros* and some town folk eventually tracked it down, after a 20-minute delay.

Arriving to Pomacocha, our inquiries locally took the team on a left turn up a steep Inca road that led to an impressive Inca complex called Intihuatana. The quality and beauty of carved stone at this Inca site are as good as anything in the empire, its capital of Cusco included. Due to its proximity to Vilcashuamán, an important home for Pachacútec, it was most likely an important temple for this powerful Inca leader giving reason to the level of its stonework.

We're camped among the site on a high terrace next to an Inca bath and sun temple. The bath is a beautifully carved fountain that serves today as a massive stone

shower. Today's experience washing in it would have been exactly as it was 550 years ago for the Incas and we were excited to have a water source with such pomp after a hot day of herding llamas and hiking.

The overall site only attracts a handful of tourists from nearby Ayacucho and Lima. Although I can't help but think that if it had half the restoration work of a site like Machu Picchu, it would attract millions of curious visitors from around the world..

## Second-class llamas and a hailstorm

Breaking down camp and loading the llamas was quicker this morning with every person and animal a bit more practiced as we left Intihuatana on a well-defined Qhapaq Ñan. The route immediately climbs 500 feet to a high *pampa*, continuing on a flat easy trail leading to Patahuasi. At the top of the climb, another llama decided that it was not going to be in the business of cargo. After only 45 minutes of walking, it sat down and decided it was not going to move. We waited, considered our options, and then finally decided to sell what was now our second llama to a passing *campesino* – leaving us with 10 llamas.

**The sight of the great roads raises everyone's spirits and reminds us why the hell we do this to ourselves.**

Of the 12 llamas that we originally brought down from Northern Peru, there are unfortunately some that do not have the specifications for carrying loads. Our old *llamero* friend you may remember from our first Qhapaq Ñan expedition from Huánuco Pampa to Casma, seemed to have sent down second-class llamas, compared to what we had used on his home turf in August. We're now in the business of selling and hopefully buying more llamas en route to improve our flock and improve our pace.

Today, after a long day of trekking, we made it to the small town of Incaraccay. The reaction of the town towards the outsiders and llamas was one of confusion and then amazement as we rested in the town square. Eventually we tracked down a local official to find a place with water and a corral for the llamas with grass to eat where we could set up camp. The vice-president of the town who also doubled as the town doctor let us camp behind the enclosed health clinic.

Timing and amenities couldn't have been better as a major thunderstorm soon hit and we were able to set up our kitchen and store our gear in the covered room behind the clinic. Pea-sized hail came down and covered the ground and the llamas in white as dinner was cooked and the next day's route discussed.

## “El Camino Herradura”

We left Incaraccay via the only street in town, which was most likely the Qhapaq Ñan, just covered up by a modern road of dirt lined by a few houses. It's like a puzzle as we walk from town to town asking just about every local for directions to the Inca Road that goes by a myriad of names depending upon the region. Some popular names are the *Camino Incaico*, *Camino Real*, *Camino Herradura* and *Camino Inka Ñan*. The last few days, *Camino Herradura* has won out as the name locals use most for the Qhapaq Ñan.



**TOP** - Nick explains the expedition to amazed locals in Incarracay.

**BOTTOM** - The repurposed Inca road near Incarracay.

**The route immediately climbs 500 feet to a high *pampa*, continuing on a flat easy trail leading to Patahuasi.**





Today especially, we've had some fun impromptu *campesino* congresses discussing directions, although we still found ourselves throughout the morning not quite sure of the exact route. The challenge comes when the Inca Road is destroyed and covered by modern roadways and agriculture. Even so, we still reached a section by lunch with walls two meters high and a stone paved trail seven meters wide. As it always does, the sight of the great roads raises everyone's spirits and reminds us why the hell we do this to ourselves.

Tonight we landed in the small village of Huayllabamba and many in the town came out to see what the commotion was in the main square when the expedition of 10 llamas and five outsiders showed up. Eventually, some opportunistic matriarchs of the town brought out their textiles – after all our requests for a place to sleep, we knew there was no way of getting out of this purchase. In contrast to much-visited destinations like Machu Picchu, Huayllabamba at best sees only a handful of outsiders in an entire year, so watching the entrepreneurial spirit of the local women was like witnessing the very earliest sprout from the seed that is tourism.

## Remembering the Shining Path

Departing Huayllabamba, we encountered a nice stretch of Qhapaq Ñan that took us all the way to Chuschi, which was only briefly interrupted by modern roads. Arriving by lunch, we decided to stay to get to know this important place. Chuschi is where Abimael Guzmán and his communist movement the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) began their reign of terror in the name of political ideology in 1980. What began here lasted nearly 15 years, took 70,000

lives, and decimated the economy, infrastructure and psyche of Peru.

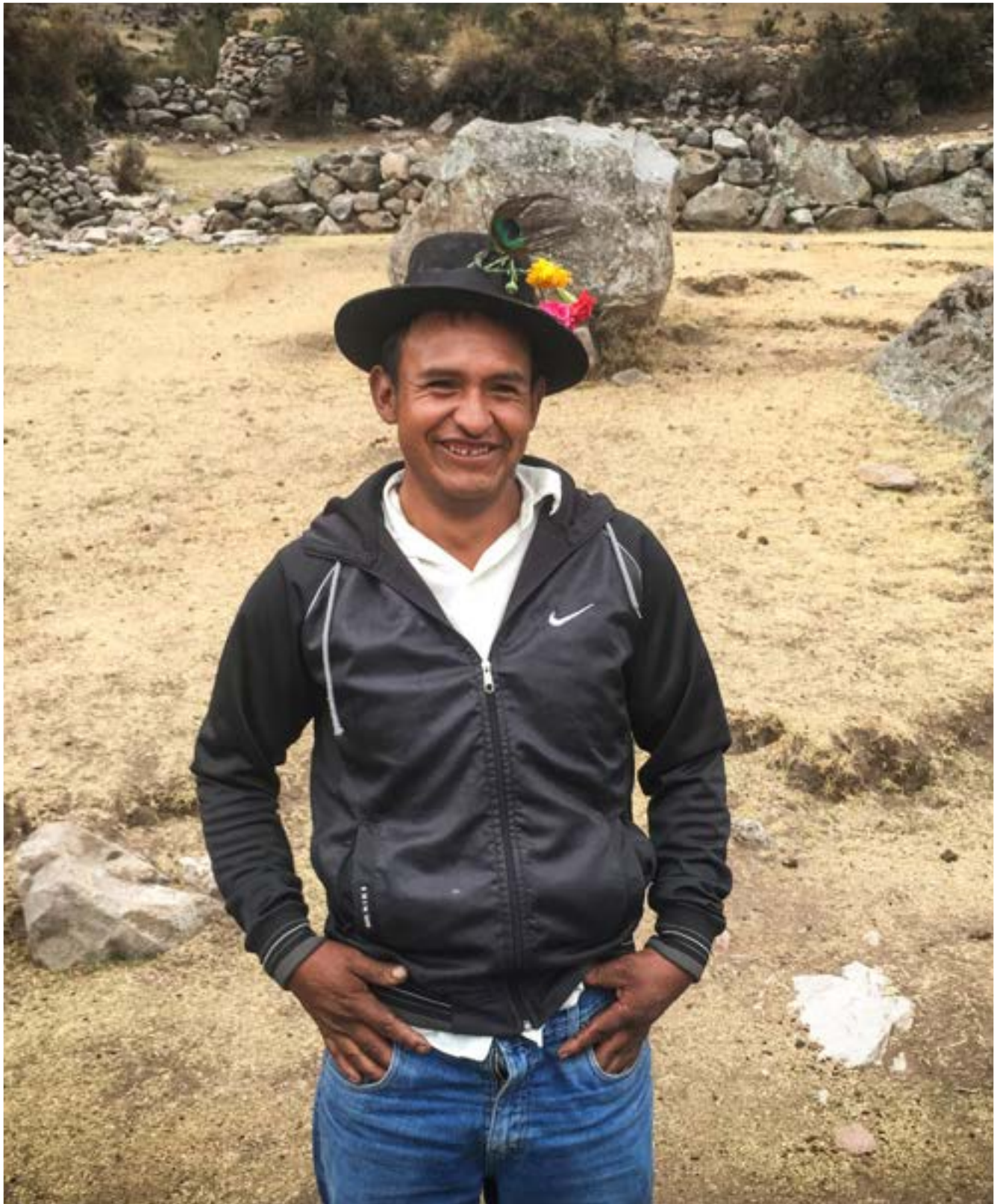
In a perfect concoction of geographic remoteness, rural poverty and a feeling then of being forgotten by the state, the Shining Path spread from Chuschi amongst the Qhapaq Ñan to other rural towns in the region of Ayacucho and neighboring Apurímac. By the early 1990s the violence and extreme ideology arrived to the capital of Lima where many feared the collapse of the government. Autocratic president Alberto Fujimori, along with his military and intelligence apparatus, was able to sort things out by capturing Abimael Guzmán and waging an internal war against anyone and anything associated with the Shining Path. Today, Fujimori finds himself in a jail cell for acts during that time that later were determined to be crimes against human rights.

The populations in Chuschi and other towns in the region of Ayacucho have only returned to their pre-1980 levels in the last decade. Many had fled to safer regions along the Peruvian coast, turning what were the small towns of Chinchá and Ica, west of Ayacucho on the Qhapaq Ñan, into bustling cities.

Today, though, Chuschi and its surroundings are an idyllic Andean paradise where men and women wear hats with flowers in them and children play in the streets at all hours. In the main square, the national police have their station doors open all the time, a state presence that conveniently allowed us to charge our telecommunication and computer equipment among the local dogs sleeping on the front steps. What our expedition sees in Chuschi is a testament to the resilience of Peruvians and a government that has made great strides in improving the well-being of the rural countryside.

**Today, though, Chuschi and its surroundings are an idyllic Andean paradise where men and women wear hats with flowers in them and children play in the streets at all hours.**





A local sporting the distinctive hat style of the region near Chuschi.



The Inca road hugs the hillside as it climbs out of Ayuta.

## School teachers for a day

The Qhapaq Ñan from Chuschi runs along the Pampas River for most of its length until Ayuta, but with only one spring suitable for the llamas and humans en route. Even more serious was crossing a narrow log and mud bridge that the llamas, after 30 minutes of deliberations, eventually decided they would cross. If they hadn't, we would have been forced to return to Chuschi for another route, taking up the rest of the day. The canyon was so steep, there was no other alternative path we could have taken.

Our camp at the town of Ayuta is among the soccer field next to the three-room school. Upon arrival, the children all ran up to see the llamas as I spoke about our expedition with their teacher, who also happened to be mayor in the past and privy to some Inca sites in the area. The children eventually turned their excitement to our maps of the Qhapaq Ñan when considering their town was where the Inca walked.

From the maps, their excitement turned to our camp equipment... The tents, therm-a-rest beds, walkie talkies, fold-up tables, etc. Before we knew it, we had 20 primary school children enthusiastically helping set up our entire camp.

After two hours of being substitute teachers for a comprehensive class on trekking the Qhapaq Ñan, the kids finally went home and we were able to relax after a long day's walk. Most notable was finally being able to touch the water of the Pampas River which had been impossible in the steep canyon below the trail. I took the opportunity to wash myself and my clothes after five days... It was satisfying beyond words and then I was promptly ready for bed at sundown.

Tomorrow will be our last day trekking around 9,000 feet in the Pampas River ecosystem, before climbing to the high Andes around 14,000 feet after Paras. We will stay high for five days before dropping down to the coast from Huaytara, eventually making it to Humay by the end of the month.



John attempts to take notes amidst a throng of Totosino school children.

## One-eyed autograph hunters

With an early morning start from Ayuta, we caught the Qhapaq Ñan climbing to the town of Totos, where we arrived by lunch to hundreds of Totosinos (people from Totos) greeting us. The teacher from Ayuta had called ahead to his friends and explained our expedition and what has now become a notorious book locally... Our Ministry of Culture guide of the Qhapaq Ñan that notes many of these towns en route. The mayor and numerous other town officials wanted us to present to the school children about the Qhapaq Ñan, as well as take copies of the pages where their town appears in this grand book they'd heard so much about. On top of this, the national police in town wanted identification and a letter that stated our purpose of being with 10 llamas...

We were in a tough position of having a long hike ahead of us to the town of Paracas, after already losing one hour chasing our llamas above the hills of Ayuta, but we had to find a way to support Totos' interest in the Qhapaq Ñan. In the end I broke off with the mayor and town officials to

copy the book and do some important diplomacy. John had an impromptu gathering with 20 or so children in the plaza explaining the Qhapaq Ñan, Flavio dealt with the National Police providing identification and letters of introduction, and Valentín and Nicolás looked after the llamas doing their share of diplomacy with everyone curious of their Cusqueño (someone from Cusco in the south of Peru) accent and look. It was also notable as the first time anyone asked me for my autograph... The town drunk, with one eye open, wanting a souvenir on the back of a piece of cardboard. It was all quite an experience.

We eventually arrived to Paracas just before sundown, where in contrast to Totos' enthusiasm, we could barely get someone to offer us a field to camp in and a pasture for the llamas. After an hour of blank stares and rambling conversations that avoided our requests, we were finally allowed to camp in the small stadium. Maybe it was because on this evening Paracas was having a big party in the town square, which when it happened, blasted loud music throughout the canyon until the early morning hours. It was a long day to be serenaded all night by local Huayno music.



**TOP** - Inca stone stairs climbing towards the high pass at Apacheta Chico.  
**BOTTOM** - The Pampas River Valley.

## Spreading the word

After sleeping through a loud and boisterous night, we left Paras ascending towards the highest point of our journey at Apacheta Chico at 15,500 feet. However, after walking 10 hours yesterday, we decided to pace ourselves, trekking only three hours to Barrios Altos about halfway up from the Pampas River Valley to the pass, which seems to be the last waystation before going up into the clouds. We are all in good spirits as the llamas are recharging with some of the best pasture yet and the team is napping and lounging around the camp which also happens to be the local school.

I know, camping at the local school seems to be a pattern... It always has water, fields for the llamas and, if needed, covering from rain and hail. Our early arrival today meant we had plenty of time to meet with the students and discuss the Qhapaq Ñan as their teacher had asked. The exchange of a campground for a class lesson is always a hell of a trade and the team and kids all have a kick. It's a pretty powerful moment when you can introduce children and early teens to this great road that traverses through their remote village.

After walking 400 miles in two expeditions on the Qhapaq Ñan, I'm now realizing the sheer numbers of schools we can engage with during the 2,300 miles we have yet to hike next year. We can introduce the Qhapaq Ñan and the possibilities of tourism to thousands of students across a significant swath of the Andes.

For those in Peru's ministry of culture, and especially the department of Qhapaq Ñan who we believe are reading this book, there is an incredible opportunity for us - with your support - to develop and distribute simple and easy-to-understand booklets about the Qhapaq Ñan to every school along the way. We believe that this will foster the next generation of Peruvians who will be responsible for preserving and utilizing this living road.

## Don't try this at home!

Today we've arrived to the town of Hospicio after the pass at Apacheta Chico, the highest point of this expedition at 16,000 feet. In the 12 years since I arrived to Peru with a backpack, having explored much of the country, I can say Hospicio is the town most disconnected from the outside world I've ever seen. Very basic Spanish is limited to a few of the town authorities and our explanation of why exactly we showed up with 10 llamas from the mountains above escapes all logic locally. We have somehow managed to convince the superstitious town that were not anything sinister like a *Pishtaco* (someone that steals human organs) or rustlers. We were therefore granted a small square of dirt to place our camp with some decent grass above for the llamas.

Getting to Hospicio took us eight hours of walking through remote Andean *puna* on a Qhapaq Ñan preserved by cold dry air and almost no people. We passed dozens of native flocks of Vicuña, a rare and prized Andean camelid, and a stunning virgin landscape of Queñua forests. I had my doubts that in 2016 such an Andean world still exists, but I am now a believer and more humbled by my complete vulnerability to the mountains and the local inhabitants of this place.

Also, an important note for anyone interested in exploring the remote sections of the Qhapaq Ñan by foot... Do not take the venture lightly. Be absolutely sure that you are with native Quechua speakers and either you or someone else on your team has deep experience in the Andes. Had our team not spent many months planning for all eventualities, our arrival to Hospicio could have been much more serious had things got lost in translation. We had maps of our route, letters of introduction, native Quechua speakers and a team with decades of experience in similar situations. This is the moment in the story when I say...Don't try this at home! Unless of course your adventurous soul is accompanied by a strong sense of preparation.



A rustic local bridge outside of Hospicio.

**In the 12 years since I arrived to Peru with a backpack, having explored much of the country, I can say Hospicio is the town most disconnected from the outside world I've ever seen.**

**I originally agreed with John on what was eventually the wrong route, but agreed with Flavio that the detour added closer to two hours to our hike.**





The llamas embark from Hospicio.

## Lost (in translation)

We left Hospicio promptly at 7am, taking the wrong direction and losing all sight of the Qhapaq Ñan. It was two passes later that we realized our error, with Flavio convinced he knew the correct route from Hospicio all along. I wouldn't be surprised as he's fast learning the rhythms of the Qhapaq Ñan, and his native Quechua and Spanish catch small nuances from locals that I can't... John on the other hand relies on the practicalities of the compass and GPS, knowing that if we're heading in the right direction, the road will appear... He's convinced the morning detour he championed was only 45 minutes extra. I originally agreed with John on what was eventually the wrong route, but agreed with Flavio that the detour added closer to two hours to our hike.

Eventually, we caught the main Qhapaq Ñan going north west towards Licapa, which lies on a modern freeway called Vía Libertadores that goes from the coast to the Andes. From this point forward the Qhapaq Ñan will head west, overlapping at times with this contemporary thoroughfare, similar to many roads Peru built in the 20th century that followed along the Qhapaq Ñan.

Licapa, being a highway town, is a complete contrast from Hospicio. We can use the word tourism with locals to explain our arrival and achieve a mutual understanding. This is in part because Licapa has SUVs blasting through it at 60 miles per hour, and many inhabitants have personal and business ties to the regional cities of Ayacucho and Ica. The windblown town at 14,000 feet is cold, friendly and desolate... We're glad to be here

**The windblown town at 14,000 feet is cold, friendly and desolate... We're glad to be here.**



## 25 miles on pavement

We began the part of the expedition that involves walking on a paved highway. An unfortunate reality of the Qhapaq Ñan as you get within a few hundred miles of the coast is that much of it is completely gone. In fact, from Licapa until our camp we walked 25 miles on pavement and only five on Inca roads. The road was nowhere to be found for the first half of the day until the town of Rumichaca where we crossed the rock bridge over the river (Rumi-Chaca means rock-bridge in Quechua) and began to climb the next pass. It was a frustrating day of questioning our map, questioning routes and questioning ourselves. Also, walking with llamas on a narrow, curvy highway with big rigs steamrolling around the corners is just not that fun.

We didn't even leave sight of the highway until our last 45 minutes before camp, which – considering how the day went – was a pretty decent way to finish. We're camped at a high lagoon with pink flamingos and no *campesinos* or towns in sight. It's absolutely frigid though being at 15,000 feet above sea level.

It's been 10 straight days now of trekking in the high altitudes of the Andes. Besides the half day from Paras to Barrios Altos, we've been walking seven to nine hours a day. We've pushed the envelope on this particular expedition to understand the limits of the llamas and humans involved. Something we will do in future expeditions is to take a zero day (no miles walked) at least every week and be more generous on half days when a place warrants extra time.

I'm cold, achy, tired and going to bed..

## Late-night llama lovin'

The morning began with Valentín, Nicolás and Flavio scouring the mountains for an hour looking for the llamas. Sometime between midnight and 4am in minus 20-degree Fahrenheit weather, they went to graze strategically a few mountains over, where local female llamas lived. In our initial encounter with the females earlier in the day, they ran down the hill at our flock and

our llamas only briefly pursued them when they ran off. I guess there was some late night, unfinished llama love high in the Andes.

When we finally herded the llamas back to our lake camp, we departed on the Qhapaq Ñan to the tiny hamlet of Chaupi arriving by mid-morning. The only four people in town were very welcoming, offering us each a cup of oatmeal with extra sugar and conversation about local archeological sites. After Chaupi, it was on and off the Qhapaq Ñan and modern highway for another 20 miles until the town of Los Libertadores where we set up camp.

We've entered the department of Huancavelica, which is distinct from the department of Ayacucho at the very least by the type of hats women wear... I think you could classify the thousands of local cultures in Peru just by doing a study of women's hats. Our handler in Los Libertadores is a local matriarch and restaurateur, wearing the local woven hat with blue ribbon. She manages to cook the food, run the adjoining store and watch her soap opera on the first TV we've seen in two weeks.

Tomorrow we begin to drop rapidly in elevation towards *Incaawasi* (house of the Inca) and nearby Huaytara... We will camp two nights at the Inca site, resting the llamas before they head to their new home in the Choquechaca Valley in Cusco by truck.

## A gorgeous Inca campsite

The Qhapaq Ñan dropping from Los Libertadores towards the provincial capital of Huaytará was some of the best we've seen in days. It took us only three hours of walking down to get to Incahuasi, an important stop on an important Inca road... We were greeted by two leery, armed vigilantes from the local community who were on watch against vicuña poachers. After getting through the formalities of identification, purpose and extended conversation, our new contacts came back with the president and community officials of Huaytará. It turns out they want to put us up in the town hotel tomorrow and give us a formal welcome, Huaytará style – parading



**TOP** - The Catholic Church built on an Inca palace in Huaytará.  
**BOTTOM LEFT** - The team makes camp near Chaupi.  
**BOTTOM RIGHT** - Beautifully cut Inca stonework at Incahuasi de Huaytara.

the llamas down main street and everything. It will be interesting to see how this all goes.

After our night in Huaytará, the llamas and Valentín will go to Cusco by truck and the other four on the team will travel by vehicle to Tambo Colorado and finish the expedition. After Huaytará, the Qhapaq Ñan disappears under the highway... designed not for llamas, but for wheels connected to a metal chassis.

For now, we're enjoying Incahuasi as one of the best camps we've had in 500 miles of Qhapaq Ñan in two expeditions. It has many similarities like that of Intihuatana on day 2 of this trip, whose quality of stonework is of the finest anywhere in the Inca Empire. It's still serving its purpose of shelter and rejuvenation for us now as it did 500 years ago for Inca travelers.

## A heroes' welcome (not)

Huaytará, being a provincial capital, is the largest settlement we've been to in 14 days of trekking on the Qhapaq Ñan. It's essentially an Inca town at its foundation, with Spanish and contemporary edifices above. There is no better example of this than the catholic church which is half Inca temple and half Spanish architecture. The quality of the stonework and the Inca terraces that still serve as property divisions here give a glimpse into the beauty and grandeur of what was an important Inca city, situated between the two major ancient administration centers of Vilcachuamán and Chíncha, which are connected by the Qhapaq Ñan.

When the Spanish conquest began in 1532, and after the capturing and killing of the Inca king Atahualpa, the conquistadors expanded along the corridors of The Great Inca roads where the most important native settlements were... It provided gold, fertile land and native labor to build prized haciendas. Huaytará was one of these places... Sacked, diminished and converted into a European worldview.

After hearing the promises of community officials who had come to our camp the day before at Incahuasi, I

admit I had brief visions of arriving to Huaytará with offerings of gold, platters of exotic food, and maybe even a royal title myself... Although like most foolish explorers chasing their imagination of a world long gone, the promises of a grand welcome did not come about. We found ourselves paying 15 dollars for a bed in one of the only hotels in town while Flavio, Nicolás and Valentín set up the camp tent in the garden with the llamas. We shared the local accommodations with a hodgepodge of out-of-town workers and a few policemen who patrol the local highway. I guess I'll have to be content with my imagination and the simple pleasures of a bed for the first time in two weeks.

## Back to the Pacific Coast

The llamas headed to their new home in the Choquechaca Valley by truck, while John, Flavio, Nicolás and I headed west towards Humay by vehicle on the Qhapaq Ñan, which was now only a paved highway. We first stopped at Tambo Colorado, a unique Inca site with significant coastal influence of adobe constructions and Inca trapezoidal design throughout. Just a few miles past Tambo Colorado, at Humay, we inquired locally to arrive at the location of a mysterious band of between five and six thousand holes in the ground which scientists believe were "were a place for Inca subjects to leave tributes for the state, in the form of beans, grains and other produce."

Flavio and Nicolás though were more excited about getting close to the ocean, which they had never seen before with their own eyes. We were so close and their interest so palpable, that we decided to head to the nearby coastal bay of Paracas to catch a glimpse and enjoy a Peruvian ceviche. Platters of fish... raw, fried, sautéed in rice with spices and peppers... The exotic flavor profiles compared to the stoic tastes of the high Andes, and seeing the wonder of Flavio and Nicolás gazing at the mighty Pacific was a satisfying way to finish this journey...





# Jauja to Pachacamac

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For the last of our preparatory expeditions that spanned over a thousand kilometers, we headed to the Inca city of Jauja. We would be embarking on one of the greatest sections of Inca road anywhere in the old Inca empire, trekking eastwards towards Pachacamac near the Pacific coast. Pachacamac was arguably the most important religious temple of southern Peru, holding sway over the region for thousands of years. The transversal Inca road that connected the Inca city at Jauja with Pachacamac was built to integrate, in a physical way, the gods of coastal Pachacamac into the belief system of the Incas, high in the Andes.

And while humans have used this route for pilgrimage for centuries, it was the llamas that transported the products; with lowlands peoples exchanging their fruits and fish for camelid fibers and tubers from the mountains. It was through this ancient system of trade called *trueque* that Antonia, that most famous of all *llameras*, came into our world. Antonia and her ancestors from the region of Tanta

have been using llamas as pack animals along this route for millennia – lucky for us, as someone actually knew the route this time around.

This would be the only and last opportunity for the llamas and *llameros* from Tanta to prepare for their journey of more than a thousand kilometers the following year, when they would be carrying and supporting our camp for the lower third of our march from Cuenca to Cusco. They would need to integrate with Flavio and Valentín too, working as a well-oiled machine through the mountains. If there were going to be any serious issues with such an arrangement, we needed to get them worked out now.

In the process, we were also going to see how moving humans from the Andes to the coast in the name of adventure tourism might be considered. Maybe human cargo could help preserve a practice that was dying because of more practical and modern ways to move potatoes?

**And while humans have used this route for pilgrimage for centuries, it was the llamas that transported the products**



- Route Qhapaq Ñan
- Principal roads
- Archeological site
- Departmental boundary
- Rivers
- Departmental capital
- Provincial capital
- District capital
- Populated center
- Camp







**Then, right when you think the scene can't get any more heavenly, Lake Mullucocha reveals itself.**

## Antonia the *llamera*

In three days' time, we'll arrive to The Great Inca Stairway in the shadows of the great *Apu* Pariacaca (mountain deity). The set of 1,800 steps will be the entry to another three days of some of the most spectacular Qhapaq Ñan anywhere on the 25,000-mile network. Ten days from now, we should arrive to our finish point at Antioquia, where the Qhapaq Ñan starts to disappear closer to the coast. The terrain for most of our trek will float between 11,000 and 16,000 feet above sea level, perfect for the llamas with plenty of Ichu grass along the way.

Our first day on the route covered 15 miles and with better behaved llamas and more efficient *llameros* (llama handlers). Our *llameros*, Flavio, Nicolás and Valentín are getting better at their craft. We also have two local *llameros*, Tito and Antonia – our first female *llamero* in 500 miles of Qhapaq Ñan adds an interesting dose of female energy into the group. Regardless, she's probably the most able *llamero* of the group and its her animals we're working with while in the region. The majority female team at SA Expeditions might find this ironic that even on the Qhapaq Ñan I find myself collaborating with strong and talented women.



Antonia and her team tending their beloved llamas.

## Valentín's sixth-sense

We've arrived to Rio Cochas after a 20-mile day, following a western path over two passes and high Andean plateau. Valentín performed an offering to the earth asking for safe passage at the first mountain pass that we reached mid-morning. The offering consists of wrapping alpaca fat into coca leaves, with flowers and various plants, placing them into a paper and putting it into the ground.

Ever since I began walking the Andes with Valentín in Choquechaca outside the Sacred Valley where we met a decade ago, he has always been consistent with his ceremony. Valentín is like the wise uncle of the group, and in fact, Flavio and Nicolás call him *tío*, meaning uncle in Spanish. Walking hundreds of miles in the remote Andes, you are always having to rely on your team and animals to stay safe and warm; which makes you quickly appreciate Valentín's presence.

He is as strong as an ox and has been at the front with me on this route, setting the pace and sniffing out the road. Hiking the Qhapaq Ñan can often be about picking up small signals every 10 to 50 feet; a line of rocks here, an impression in the ground there. You also eventually get into the minds of the Inca engineers that built it, understanding their preferences of building the road efficiently with the landscape. Valentín has a sixth sense in this regard, and I try all the while to keep up and learn the flow of the road alongside him. Really, the whole team is getting more into the Qhapaq Ñan groove with every day that we progress along its path.

## A moment to reflect

We arrived to Ninabamba after a big day, hiking along the Cocha River. Tonight's 15,000-foot camp has a heavy dusting of snow, but it hasn't dimmed our excitement of reaching the great Inca steps at Pariacaca tomorrow. This iconic section of the Qhapaq Ñan world is something I've seen in pictures for years and I can't help reflecting on what got me here.



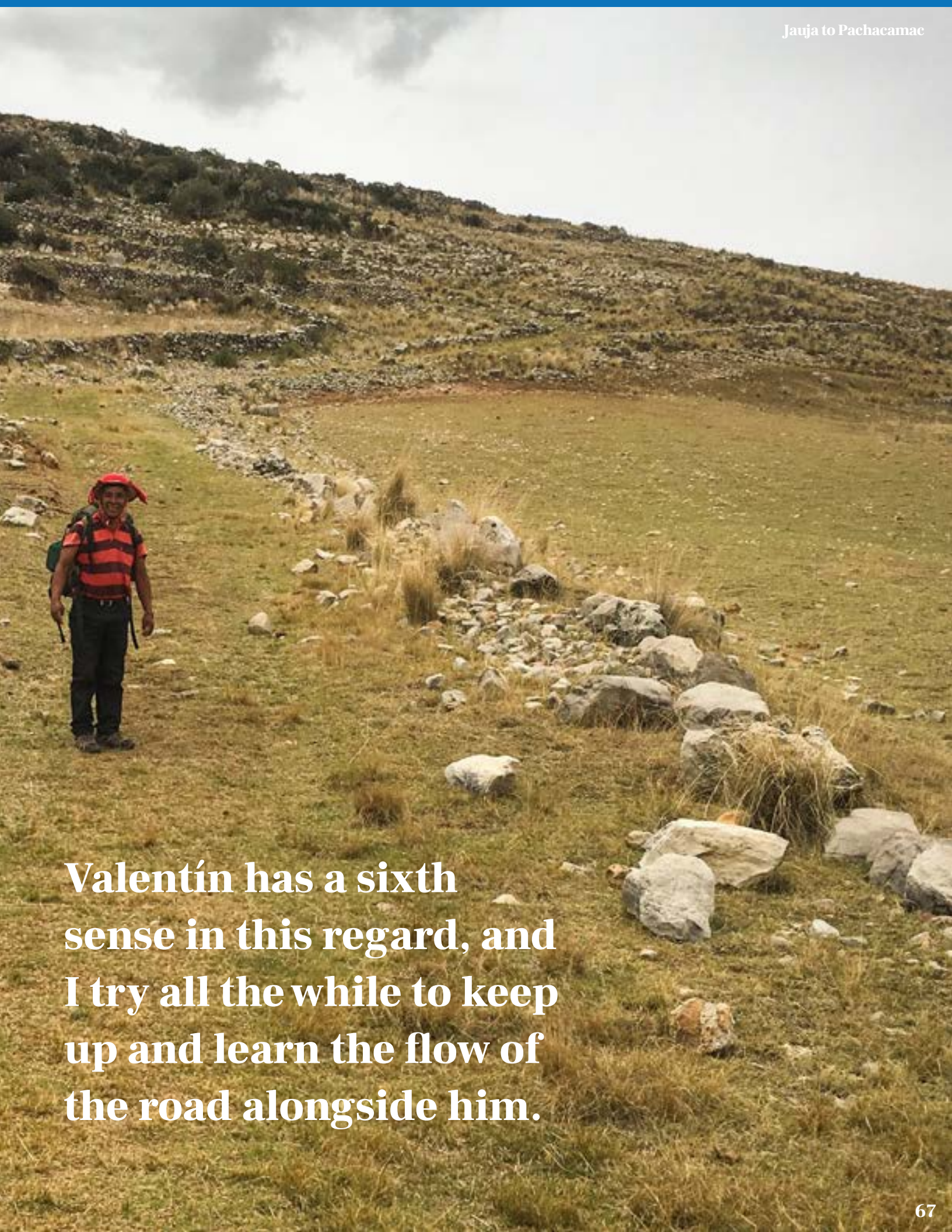
Valentín and Flavio perform a traditional ceremony of thanks for our safe passage.

My youth was filled with adventure alongside my father who was an all-in-one explorer, hobo and philosopher. We would spend weeks camping in the Sierra Nevadas in California, learning the ways of the mountains and connecting with the world – a far cry from my reality in public school learning to be a part of society. Thirteen years ago, at 23 years old, when I decided I was moving to the Andes, from a comfortable Southern California beach town, it was the images of the Andes and Inca Road that filled my mind.

Today, at 36 years old, those childhood dreams that began alongside my dad have come full bloom. The Sierra Nevadas, my education, my company, my family, my spirit, my dad, my love affair with Peru... my drive to hike 2,000 miles on the Qhapaq Ñan is an intersection of them all.

What started as a personal journey, has now become a collaboration of many people around the world – a few are walking with me, many more not – who think the task at hand goes far beyond one person. We share this great ancient road as a team, believing it's an activity that can bring forth positive action towards its conservation and the populations along its route.





**Valentín has a sixth sense in this regard, and I try all the while to keep up and learn the flow of the road alongside him.**



The breathtaking view from the staircase descending from Portachuelo Pass, below *Apu Pariacaca*.



## I'm a believer!

Today we passed one of the most beautiful and impressive stretches thus far on the Qhapaq Ñan. Departing Ninabamba, we arrived to the great Inca staircase in the shadows of *Apu Pariacaca*, which serves as a gateway to seven miles of Qhapaq Ñan that felt more like a temple than a road.

At the base of the staircase is a glacial valley with a lake and the nearby caves of Llamamachay (previously known as Cuchimachay) with drawings of llamas from the earliest of humans in the region. The road then descends on a stone path built within the grooves of the smooth glacier rock. You become surrounded by waterfalls of all sizes and then road and stream seem to be one with the tops of the paved rock just above the water line. Then, right when you think the scene can't get any more heavenly, Lake Mullucocha reveals itself with a massive waterfall coming off the glacial rock into its waters, with the Qhapaq Ñan above.

Many transversal Qhapaq Ñans catered for an aspect of pilgrimage. The road was the vein where coastal and Andean societies exchanged with one another and tributes, cleansings and ceremonies were key components of the journey. European religions demonstrated influence through conquering nature and building massive churches. But the Incas – and the Andean societies before them – built temples that leveraged nature to demonstrate their power.

After four days of pilgrimage to get here, the Incas' great collaboration with nature that we witnessed today has moved my soul and I have become a believer!

**Departing Ninabamba, we arrived to the great Inca staircase in the shadows of *Apu Pariacaca*.**



The team takes a break on the Inca stairway.

## The ties that bind

We descended from last night's camp at Tambo Real in the department of Junín and arrived on a well-defined Qhapaq Ñan to the department of Lima at the provincial capital of Huarochirí. Peru is broken up into departments, provinces and eventually districts and the national identity card of every Peruvian explicitly notes these three levels of association. I'm classified for example as (I became a nationalized citizen in 2012) – Department Lima, Province Lima, District Miraflores, whereas Flavio, Nicolás and Valentín are – Department Cusco, Province Urubamba, District Ollantaytambo. When passing through so many departments and provinces, you begin to see how these regional and local associations make a difference.

For example, our local *llameros* Tito and Antonia who are classified as – Department Lima, Province Huarochirí, District Tanta – did not have any personal connections with the communities in the department of Junín, but once we passed over to the department of Lima and

especially as we got closer to their district of Tanta, they seemed to know everybody along the route.

The district of Tanta is famous for maintaining the practice of using llamas for cargo. On our five-month, 2,000-mile north to south journey next year, from Cuenca, Ecuador to Cusco, Peru, we will need to refresh our animals at least every month and Tanta's strategic location in the southern half of our long journey makes it the ideal place to source llamas from. We plan to use llamas from Tanta for an approximately 400-mile stretch north and south of Jauja.

Due to the decline in the practice of using llamas for cargo in the Andes, our working relationships with two llama communities (Tanta in the south and Olleros in the north) to source llamas is critical. We also have a flock of llamas in the Sacred Valley that will carry our gear the beginning and the last month of the route.

We hope the injection of capital to llama communities and the revival of using llamas for long-distance expeditions in the Andes, will bolster this dying practice that goes back thousands of years.





The Inca road from Cochas to the grand staircase near Pariacaca.

## I have a dream

Today was a long day, nearly 11 hours of walking and we finally arrived to Lahuaytambo, a quaint town perched on a mountaintop, surrounded by *andenes* (terraced hillsides) and laden with canals. If Machu Picchu would have remained continually inhabited since the Inca times, passing through colonialism, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and eventually cable television and cell phone towers... I imagine it would look like Lahuaytambo.

It's unbelievable to think we're only four hours by car from the capital city of Lima with 10 million inhabitants, and yet there is almost no income from tourism here. For most *Limeños* (locals of the city Lima) with disposable income, travel to Disney World or visiting a shopping mall in Miami was a signal of status and a modern lifestyle. Traveling to the poorer countryside whether it was to see grandma or for leisure travel was not considered. Peru's rapid development of the past two decades, which has brought increased education and awareness of their own country, has opened a significant

market for airlines and tourism companies serving Peruvians. An extended weekend to Cusco is now a staple of the middle-class lifestyle along with an SUV and an apartment. The largest Peruvian hotel chain Casa Andina used to primarily serve foreign leisure travelers only a decade ago. Today, the domestic market both in leisure and business have become a significant, if not majority, part of their business.

It's this trend that I see as promising for development in places like Lahuaytambo, only an afternoon drive from the city. It's also a trend that is a counterweight against the centralism of Lima culture where one third of the country's population lives. Ever since the conquest of white Europeans who established their capital in Lima, Peru has always been challenged in establishing a single national identity that encompasses the millions of *campesinos* in the countryside, along with white European descended *Limeños*. The Qhapaq Ñan – a vein that connected cultures of all types for hundreds of years from the Incas to the colonial era – can serve as a native example of successful integration. An integration that

harnessed the productive capacity of an entire country that builds a society of equality and understanding of people with different culture and lifestyles. When this day comes, Peru will share its place alongside the great nations of the world.

And maybe one day, *Limeños* might even consider it cool to boast on social media about hiking the Qhapaq Ñan to Lahuaytambo.

## A 50 year wait

We arrived with llamas after seven days walking from the Andean highlands at Jauja to Antioquia within 50 miles of the Pacific Coast... our finish point for now on the Qhapaq Ñan. We had a host of town officials and locals greeting us in the town park with amazement to see the first llama train to arrive to town in more than 50 years. The traditional practice of exchanging goods from the Andes to the Coast, locally known as *trueque*, was prominent for millennia. Although we are not carrying llama jerky or textiles from the highlands in exchange for sweet potato and yucca from the coastal range, we are exchanging people and ideas... tourism.

Today tourism is a vehicle in which those in Antioquia have been able to connect to their past. The town's people marvel at the animals alongside modern tents and equipment, the cargo that arrived over the mountains, making for an incredible site. It's only those over 60 years old in Antioquia that remember the last time the llamas arrived.

To Antonia and Tito, our *llameros* from the highlands at Tanta, we say goodbye for now. Their sense of accomplishment – never having been this close to the coast before and preserving a practice of their ancestors who traversed this route – is palpable. It was their grandparents' generation that last came this far west with their llamas.

Antioquia will be our last lesson on the road for now. We will be sitting out the rainy season and preparing for next April 2017 when we depart on our 2,000-mile journey on the Qhapaq Ñan from Cuenca, Ecuador to Cusco, Peru. We will be joined by many friends you've met so far and will be sure to meet many new ones too.





Tito and Antonia with their gifts of coastal fruits from the townspeople of Antioquia.



25 DAYS

# Achupallas to Aypate

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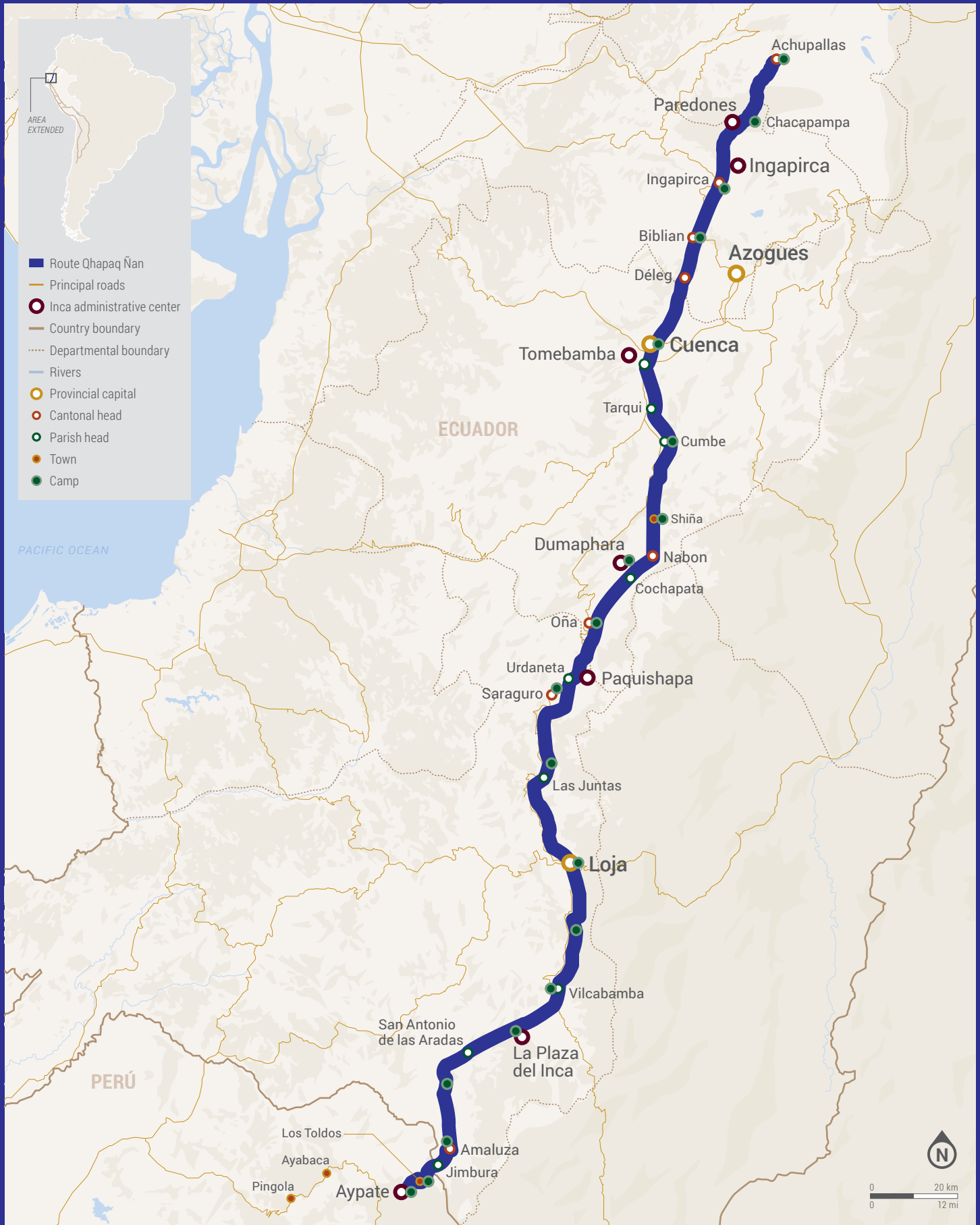
We were at the very start of a walk through the heart of the Andes that would take 130 days to complete. It was also my last day occupying a version of myself that would never live again. I would soon transform my body and stretch my mind into a new form that was both more humble and stronger.

We began in the heart of Ecuador, just north of the old Inca capital at Tomebamba. Flavio, Valentín and our new partner Alipio were leaving their native country of Peru for the first time. Together with John, and the four horses that we bought in Achupallas, we began to walk South through the center of Ecuador. Since being the northern Inca stronghold under the sway of Huayna Capac and his son Altahualpa, Ecuador has seen considerable changes.

Especially in the past 20 years, with fast economic growth covering the past with fresh layers of cement and asphalt.

This meant our team got an early lesson on how to walk freeways with horses. While the first few days provided us with some great Inca road to Ingapirca, we soon descended into the million-person city of Cuenca (during rush hour, no less) and continued southward alongside long stretches of Ecuador's most important highway, the Panamericana. In the end, we would endure a rainy 21 days in Ecuador, before crossing into Peru at the curious, rural frontier town of El Toldo. From there, we would make our way to the great Inca administration center at Aypate before continuing south through the high jungles of Northern Peru. We had become a bi-national expedition team...

**I would soon transform my body and stretch my mind into a new form that was both more humble and stronger.**







## History repeats itself

We've arrived to Cuenca, Ecuador, the staging ground where we'll prepare for our 2,000-mile expedition on The Great Inca Trail to Cusco, Peru. The team has settled into Hostal Macondo, the quaint colonial house which has become temporary headquarters for final preparations. It's been two days of meetings with local explorers, officials and last-minute equipment checks.

Flavio, the team cook and our support team of Valentín and Alipio have been scouring the local markets, stocking up on supplies to make sure we have at least a week of nutritious food for the walk ahead. They have come from the heartland of the Inca Empire in Cusco, Peru, traveling for the first time by airplane to the northern reaches of Inca domination in modern-day Ecuador. When the Inca king Huayna Qhapaq established a Northern capital in nearby Tumbamba, he brought people, architecture, religion and the Quechua language from the Incas' spiritual and military capital in Cusco. Our Cusco team brings with them a Quechua dialect rarely heard in these parts since the Incas conquered the region 500 years ago.

Flavio, Valentín and Alipio are a fine-tuned, mountain camp machine. Not only did they traverse 700 miles of Inca roads last year with John and me in preparation, but they have also been managing trekking camps on trails leading to Machu Picchu for more than a decade. They will move our animals and equipment for weeks on end, ensuring we're fed and have a dry place to work and sleep. I can't help but imagine that they might just be the first indigenous Cusqueños to walk the northern Inca trails in Ecuador for half a millennium. Only this time around, the Cusqueños

aren't coming with armies to invade, but instead with backpacks and goodwill to help reconstruct an empire by walking its ancient roads.

## Oops, wrong tent!

We departed our makeshift headquarters at Hostal Macondo, saying our goodbyes from a loaded-up van en route to the start of the trek in the village of Achupallas. For most of the morning, we wound our way through the outskirts of Cuenca until pavement turned to dirt and we eventually arrived to the tiny *campesino* village that will serve as the starting point for our march south to Cusco.

Almost like clockwork, Lucho our local handler in town, who will also walk with us for the first two days, greeted us with a big smile and quickly brought us to the village school whose flat and grassy field will serve as a perfect camp spot. In contrast to such efficiency on arrival, we soon discovered that the communal cooking and dining tent the team had brought all the way from Cusco was the wrong one... It looked similar, but what should have been a 6x12 rectangle tent, was actually a 6x6 square tent. If there was ever a rookie move in camping, it would be not testing the tent out before the trip. So, it looks like for the time being, we're squeezing six grown men into a 6x6 space to cook and have dinner. At least it will be warm.

We'd be more worried if the four cargo horses we arranged to purchase in town were not healthy and of size to handle a 120-pound load for hundreds of miles. So, when we finally got to confirm that our new animal team can in fact do the job, our self-confidence bounced right back up after the tent snafu. Now it's time to get our legs ready, have a good night's sleep and start our 2,000-mile walk on The Great Inca Trail first thing tomorrow morning.

**This time around, the Cusqueños aren't coming with armies to invade, but instead with backpacks and goodwill to help reconstruct an empire by walking its ancient roads.**





The team embarks on The Great Inca Trail for the first time.

## Our contribution to science

Our first day out the chute was wet and cold, ascending from Achupallas to the pass at Tres Cruces, before descending 90 minutes to a *pampa* (flat clearing) at Chacabamba to camp. We covered 14 miles which is unusual for the first day, as typically everyone including the animals is a little slower. Today though we didn't have much choice as Chacabamba is the first suitable place to camp after Achupallas.

The horses and *arrieros* (support team) went by the contemporary walking path that's in much better shape than the Inca Trail. The Inca Road has weathered centuries of storms, with major parts washed out. John though, followed the Inca Road and reckons he was in mud or water for 80% of the time.

John is charged with doing a complete GPS tracking survey of the entire 2,000 miles, so we can analyze and piece together the exact route taken by The Great Inca Trail. The road was like the spinal cord of an entire

Andean transportation network called the Qhapaq Ñan. The whole Qhapaq Ñan spans six Andean countries and 25,000 miles and became the largest UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014. Even with this recognition, there are still significant sections, hundreds and thousands of miles long that have not been totally mapped. We hope the critical data John is collecting (that will eventually be in the public domain) will be a step forward in its understanding.

## Brothers at arms

The rains showed some mercy today as we walked all morning on a 20-foot wide Inca Road towards the most important Inca site in Ecuador... Ingapirca. The circular temple, with high quality Inca stones sits atop the middle of a valley of green pastures as far as the eye can see. It was a nice prize after two long days of adjusting to the trek.

The Inca Túpac Yupanqui expanded into southern Ecuador, building The Great Inca Road to accommodate



The ruins of Ingapirca.

armies and populations from the south to battle with the Cañari who controlled the region, and who resided in Ingapirca before the Incas. The wars against the Cañari lasted into the reign of Huayna Capac (son of Túpac Yupanqui) in the early 1500s, before a delicate conquest was finally achieved, with the Cañari retaining many of their rights to practice their own customs and religion.

When Huayna Capac died in 1525, his two sons – Atahualpa based in Tumbamba (modern-day Cuenca) and Huáscar based in Cusco – engaged in a bloody civil war. The Cañari who allied with Huáscar, sacked Tumbamba, before Atahualpa won a few key battles and embarked on a ruthless siege against anyone and everything that threatened his control.

## Easter Sunday with a difference

Today being Easter Sunday, Valentín led us in a traditional Andean ceremony, paying tribute to the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and *Los Apus* (Mountain Deities). While camped in view of the catholic church where parishioners attended Easter mass, we proceeded with our pagan ritual (term related to the belief in animism, not the Christian definition in the worship of a devil), wrapping coca leaves in Alpaca fat and offering them to the earth. It's a very important practice for the Cusqueños that's becoming important to us all, as we reflect on the power that nature will have over us in the ensuing months, walking to Cusco.



LEFT - The Qhapaq Ñan to Tambo. | TOP RIGHT - The central fortress at Ingapirca. | BOTTOM RIGHT - The team with the Bomberos en Biblián.

From Ingapirca, where Atahualpa's northern capital at Tomebamba was located, it is two full days of trekking to get to Cuenca. Today Cuenca is a city of nearly 700,000 people, so we'll need some precise navigation to find a suitable path through. There's many a main boulevard in the small and large towns we pass through with names like Camino Del Inca (Inca Road) or Huayna Capac which are essentially The Great Inca Road – just built over with asphalt and stop lights.

The route out of Ingapirca took a straight line on older dirt roads to the exact spot on the Cañar River where the Inca, colonial and modern bridge stands. Because of the efficiency of our path and our alignment with the Inca bridge, we are confident that we were on The Great Inca Road for most of the

morning. From the river, we headed towards Charon Ventanas on the old, defunct railway line, before dropping to the town of Biblián, where we're camping at the local fire station, which provides security for the animals, and flushing toilets.

**While camped in view of the catholic church where parishioners attended Easter mass, we proceeded with our pagan ritual.**



The horses and team making our way through Cuenca.

## Overtaken by modernity

Ecuador has gone through major economic and societal shifts in the last 50 years. What was a primarily rural population dependent upon agriculture has become an economy diversified into petroleum, aquaculture and manufacturing. Its one million citizens who live abroad contribute nearly 700 million dollars in foreign remittances to an economy that has used the greenback as its principal currency since 2001. The corresponding changes in land use due to such shifts also mean significant changes in how rural communities organize and see themselves.

In contrast to Peru, many of Ecuador's rural communities are dotted with big, modern homes and SUVs. The use of more antiquated transportation and communication networks, like the Qhapaq Ñan has nearly disappeared. This makes hunting for and walking along The Great Inca Trail a bit more challenging in Ecuador, having to spend more time looking for remnants and walking more on modern roads.

Today was a day in which all these factors came into play, as we walked 27 miles over 12 hours, arriving and walking through Cuenca during our long march south towards the Peruvian border and beyond. It was a day where fences and modernity reminded us how distant contemporary society is from the Inca and colonial past. Nonetheless, tomorrow our determination to resurrect history will take us to the northern Inca capital of Tomebamba, which modern-day Cuenca now surrounds, while at the same time giving our horses and support team a much-needed rest after such a punishing day.

**It was a day where fences and modernity reminded us how distant contemporary society is from the Inca and colonial past.**



Foundations of Tomebamba with modern apartments in the background.

## Atahualpa and Huáscar, Part 2

Atahualpa was the illegitimate son of Huayna Capac, spending much of his life in the northern capital of Tomebamba. He grew up watching his father extend the empire northward from Cusco, instilling deep loyalty from the fierce armies of the north and their battle hardened general Rumiñahui. This combined with Atahualpa's fevered zeal of power and conquest was enough for Atahualpa to challenge his half-brother Huáscar for the crown.

Huáscar, the legitimate son, spent most of his life in Cusco, a part of the empire that was generally pacified by the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. While he would have been the rightful heir, controlling millions of subjects in an empire that extended from central Argentina to southern Colombia was not an easy task.

Political power laid was held by the high priests and royal *panacas* (royal kinship group), who had their own interests and rivalries. When Huayna Capac died in 1525, both brothers tested and demanded loyalty from these royal classes, setting the stage for a civil war that would see entire *panacas* exterminated and leave an empire in chaos..

## A unique cure

We left Cuenca, navigating the horses through morning traffic, going south through a valley towards Tarqui and continuing to Cumbe. This was the start of a long day on highways getting out of the city. By the time we arrived to Cumbe in mid-afternoon, it was raining hard as it has nearly every afternoon. We were on the hunt for the 'community president' to make a formal introduction, secure a good camp and maybe even get a local guide for the following day. We eventually found our man, did the necessary formalities, and were taken to a covered hut in the middle of the town's corn fields... Considering the rain, the later afternoon hour

and a limping horse, this refuge was a very welcome sight. I can still see Flavio's big smile upon setting his eyes on camp. The limping horse was happy too, he went right for the tallest grass and ate incessantly for hours. Maintaining the health of the horses is a top priority. We need them to make it at least another 250 miles to the Peruvian border, so we're extremely alert to any concerning signs. Valentín, with his mix of traditional Andean medicine and improvisation, decided that urinating on the horse's foot could help with any infection. I've seen Valentín's wisdom in using traditional medicine over the years walking the Andes with him, so I'm holding thumbs that he's right once again.



The team fights the weather on the road.

**Valentín, with his mix of traditional Andean medicine and improvisation, decided that urinating on the horse's foot could help with any infection.**



Our hosts for the night, warming at the fire on a rainy night.

## Trout for dinner

The town of Cumbe really came through as a local guide showed up promptly at 7am to show us the way to the Qhapaq Ñan. The guide also brought along two photographers to take pictures and video of this rare event for a community which is trying to use the Inca Road in the area to promote tourism.

The Great Inca Trail above Cumbe runs along the crests of the mountains, where we caught a few decent sections as we climbed into the rain and mud of the cloud forest. The Inca Road eventually meets up with the asphalt highway at the summit, where we had to walk the pavement until kilometer 49, at the turnoff to Shiña. When we arrived to the junction at 3pm, we decided to inquire about

camping in the eclectic wood cabinish buildings, that served as a roadside stop. It turned out they had a covered woodworking shop, complete with a fireplace that served as an ideal place for the tents.

The extended family that lives here is incredibly kind, helping us find pasture for the horses and offering us firewood to keep warm. They even brought us dinner: fresh artisan cheese from their cows and trout from their pond. When the fire eventually warmed up, they came and shared the evening, curious about our journey. They asked about Peru, marveled at our equipment and inquired on a few occasions if we were getting paid to do such a thing. Warming in front of a fire on a cold rainy night reminds you of the fundamentals of the human experience we all share.









**TOP LEFT** - The Inca road from Nabon to Oña.

**BOTTOM LEFT** - A close up of a destroyed section of road. You can see what was a line of Inca stones on the left barely recognizable now.

**RIGHT** - The Inca road from Nabon to Oña.



## Our most beautiful camp yet

We walked through to Nabón on our way to Oña with some good Inca trails en route. After making our way through a city and handful of modern highways, we reached what must be our most beautiful camp yet. From here we continue with a few local guides until Saraguro.

## No match for bulldozers

The Great Inca Trail from Nabón to Oña is one of the more preserved sections we've seen in Ecuador. We were accompanied by two local guides, Eugenio and Lauro, who helped us along from Nabón. Eugenio, who works with UNESCO on preservation and tourism development of the trail, pointed out a major section after Cochapata that was bulldozed over to make a crude vehicle road for no apparent reason. According to a horseman we passed en route, it was bulldozed just weeks before our arrival. Eugenio said it was the most preserved and beautiful section in the Nabón area.

The animals and the expedition, though, seem to be passing the first hump in getting accustomed to our new reality on the trail. Everyone including the horses was faster and less exhausted at the end of the day. Our local guides, while helpful for the first half of the day, understandably fell behind in the afternoon, not having walked for the past nine days. Nonetheless, Eugenio provided some very helpful perspective on conservation efforts within the ministries in Ecuador and UNESCO's overall activities on the Qhapaq Ñan, which has been recognized as a World Heritage Site.

We're back now to our core team, with a clear Inca Road in sight to Saraguro where we have our next day off to resupply and continue south towards Loja and the Peruvian border. Embarking on such an endeavor requires support and logistics from many people, tourism professionals and communities en route, and I'm extremely grateful for all the little and big things they all do. It gives me a clearer picture of the people and places who are key stakeholders in the conservation and tourism development of The Great Inca Trail.



The remains of an ancient wall along the road.

## Our first archeological discovery

Today we discovered our first unexpected archeological site, tucked deep within a sheer canyon along an abandoned Inca trail that descends to the San Felipe River. After wading across the river and fighting through thickets, we came upon an abandoned adobe house built on an Inca stone foundation. Next to it, shrouded in the jungle, were stone buildings, a ceremonial rock, and terraces along a waterfall. The entire site was completely hidden from the tops of the almost vertical canyon.

Before descending, the team deliberated between the safer option of staying high on the main road, or taking a chance down the steep canyon where we saw remnants of the Inca Trail. But since we couldn't see the bottom, nor see a visible road up the other side, we were risking a steep 600-foot drop with the horses, with nowhere to go but back up. In the end, Flavio won us over with his hard lobbying for dropping to the river and taking the straightest route across to Saraguro.

The Inca and Cañari cultures commonly built sites dedicated to the worship of water. There is clear evidence of Inca stonework and also evidence that it was most likely a Cañari site. I imagine the site has been formally registered by the local governments, although we see nothing of its presence on any of our maps. So, for our expedition team, the abyss of a deep canyon along a dilapidated Inca Road has brought the euphoria of discovery.

## The history lesson continues

Today we're taking a rest and stocking up on supplies so it seems a good time to continue the story of Huáscar and Atahualpa. Around 1460, the Inca Túpac Yupanqui, from Cusco, invaded and conquered the Paltas nation of southern Ecuador, with an army of



An elder of the community of Saraguro.

200,000. An alliance formed between the different tribes of Ecuador to stop the Inca advance – among them the Cañaris. The leader of this confederation was the chief of the Cara-Quitús nation, who ruled over what was known as the Kingdom of Quito.

By the early 1500s, the son and successor of Túpac Yupanqui, Huayna Capac, during a time of protracted war, decided to marry Paccha Duchicela Shyris, the Queen of the Kingdom of Quito, under the condition that their son would be named the heir to her kingdom. This peacefully incorporated northern Ecuador into the Inca

Empire and resulted in the birth of Atahualpa the future King of the Kingdom of Quito.

After the death of Huayna Capac in 1525, a peaceful cohabitation between half-brothers Atahualpa and Huáscar lasted for five years. Atahualpa ruled the northern section of the empire while Huáscar ruled the southern section and held the title of Sapa Inca, the traditional title for the sovereign emperor. The brothers' opposing zeal for power and a Cañari rebellion supported by Huáscar ended the peace and plunged the empire into civil war.

## Just another brick in the wall

We left the town of Saraguro after a day of rest and resupply, heading towards the Inca site called Ciudadela and eventually to the town of Vinoyacu to make camp. Our local guide for this section was Lauro from Saraurku Tours, who was a contact from Carlos at Apullacta Tours in Cuenca, who himself was a contact of Emma from Original Ecuador based in Quito. This is so often the nature of international tour operations, which is essentially a big chain of international, national, regional and local contacts who work together to move humans from one place to another, while ensuring entertainment and comfort along the way.

Original Ecuador is the national operator for SA Expeditions, with Carlos at Apullacta Tours being our regional contact in Cuenca and Lauro from Saraurku the local contact in Saraguro. Each one of them has put their heart and time into the vision of what this expedition is trying to achieve. Just as we're mapping the road with GPS and pictures, we are also mapping all the players in tourism along the route who can one day serve as a network of Qhapaq Ñan tour operators to establish tourism along the trail.

There are also many more people and companies who have put their time and capital to this project, who we will introduce later down the trail. Today in Ecuador, however, after 20 miles of walking and moving 400 pounds of gear on horses, Emma, Carlos and Lauro all occupy big places of gratitude in my heart, as integral parts of our team.

**Just as we're mapping the road with GPS and pictures, we are also mapping all the players in tourism along the route who can one day serve as a network of Qhapaq Ñan tour operators.**





From left to right: Fernando, John, Nick, and Lauro.



Much of camp drying out on the empty tables of the souvenir vendors.

## Cloudburst!

In two days, we walked from Vinoyacu to Loja and continued south down the Caxarumi ecological trail, which is 16 miles to Vilcabamba. The authorities in Loja (a city of 181,000 people) were kind enough to let us camp in Parque Jipiro which features a river, kiddies rides and exercise equipment. All was good, besides feeling like another park attraction with our horses and ragged team setting up next to the souvenir vendors.

The real kicker came when it decided to rain, turning the main tent where Flavio, Valentín and Alipio were sleeping into a pond. They eventually evacuated at 2.30am, using the now empty souvenir tables and tents to migrate much of the camp. The rains had begun around 10pm, which makes me wonder how long their exhaustion had allowed them to sleep before realizing their sleeping bags were full of water. Even the geese moved in at sun-up, honking and trying to take over our spot.

John and I managed to escape the worst of the deluge. When we awoke at 5.30am, it was quite a sight to see the team cooking pancakes and oatmeal with hot tea in their water sandals. We eventually packed up wet, leaving the city of Loja and descending to below 6,000 feet into the jungles of southern Ecuador.

## An unlikely tourist mecca

Shanta, our local guide was with us for a second day as we continued our jungle descent to the town of Vilcabamba at 5,000 feet. It's one of the lowest altitudes of our entire trek, and also unfortunately means that nearly all vestiges of The Great Inca Trail that passed through these parts 600 years ago have been erased by the humid climate and thick jungle.

Vilcabamba has been a mecca for international tourism and soul seekers since scientists in the 1970s began to claim that its inhabitants were some of the longest living on the planet (this theory has since been debunked). Its perfect balance of weather, culture and fame has attracted more than 1,000 foreign residents in a town of only 4,500 people. It's pretty surreal having walked through countless traditional villages (and cities), to arrive here to find international cuisine, holistic health stores and English spoken everywhere.

When the Incas conquered the region in the early 1500s, it was known as a playground for their royalty who came here to escape the harsher climates of the altiplano. Now it's a playground for nomadic souls looking for a paradise that also has sushi and Mexican restaurants on the corner. I know I'll appreciate that burrito later on.





The team looks on as our horses receive a health check.

## A clean bill of health for our horses

We should cross the Peruvian border by the middle of next week, finishing the first of five sections on our long march between the two capitals of the Inca Empire. Vilcabamba, Ecuador, where we've taken a rest and resupply day, has been the ideal spot to make final preparations for our entry into Peru. The horses got a complete physical and anti-parasite regime, securing an important health certification which we'll need at the border. The animals have also lost weight like the rest of the crew, but the doctors gave them a clean bill of health.

We've also begun to send our first batch of GPS and photographic data about the current state of The Great Inca Trail to our archeology team back in the office. Kevin Floerke who leads this team will begin to piece together what remains of the Inca Road in 2017 in southern Ecuador. The data will also build a logical and contemporary trekking route along this important Inca corridor should anyone want to follow after us.

Except for some last-minute meetings tonight with local explorers on where exactly to go next, we're restocked and ready for our last push out of the country. From the

border with Peru, we continue to walk for another four months along the spine of the Andes to the southern Inca capital at Cusco.

## A brush with trekking greatness

Our local guide, Shanta, also happens to have one of the best restaurants in Vilcabamba named after him. It was the natural place to go and meet one of the Andes' most notorious trekking teams, Robert and Daisy Kunstaeffer. Together, this husband and wife team has walked thousands of miles in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, mapping and publishing one of the most comprehensive guides to *Trekking in Ecuador*. The sequel, *Trekking in Peru* which will be released in June, should be an equal to its predecessor.

They also have a mountain of information at their home in Vilcabamba, which we were lucky enough to check out. Eventually we were sent on our way with the most detailed maps I've ever seen of Peru. The ESCALE maps, published by Peru's Ministry of Education, will be of great help and supplement the maps that Ricardo Espinosa published in *La Gran Ruta Inca*, a bible of sorts, for our expedition. Espinosa's maps focus on





the location and remnants of The Great Inca Trail from Quito, Ecuador to La Paz, Bolivia, which he walked for seven months in the early 2000s.

After all the analysis and conversation at Shanta and the Kunstaetters' home, we found ourselves reconnecting with The Great Inca Trail today after 15 miles and over 6,000 feet of ascent, over two mountains. It was a tough, steep day, with our new local guide, Tuco, who luckily has a ranch at the only suitable camp on today's walk. Tomorrow, we continue on The Great Inca Trail through a non-native, out-of-control pine forest, hopefully making it through, to the road towards Amaluza.

## A wrong turn

We've gotten lost, losing John in the process. We left the ranch with our local guide, Tuco, first thing in the morning, making it to Plaza del Inca by 11.30am. It was then that we separated with John and missed what we think is the Inca Trail to San Antonio de las Aradas. We instead descended more than 1,200 feet down a trail that disappeared at an impenetrable river at the bottom. We got within 100 feet of the river with the horses, at which time Valentín and Flavio crawled with machetes to see if there was any way to cross and get to the other side, where we needed to be. We could go no further and had to go back up the steep, barely recognizable trail. It was becoming the hottest part of the day, we were out of water, and we had four tired horses loaded with gear.

A mild sense of panic kicked in when we realized that we could no longer continue. I had remembered on the descent, a small clearing that was next to a stream cascading down to meet with the river below. We immediately walked halfway up to this point for water, resting the horses, and considering our next move. We decided to camp here and return to the top at first light. Otherwise, it would have been a long day and early evening, with no water and no clear plan.

We finally got hold of John at the end of the day catching a scant cell phone service. He made it 13 miles on the

dirt road to San Antonio de las Aradas. The same road we were on when we turned off after losing him. The descent into the canyon also allowed us to get a clearer shot of the trail that we should have taken, right as the wrong canyon was swallowing us. John's subsequent conversations with the locals in town, conveyed by phone, confirm this as well.

So here we are... Flavio, Valentín, Alipio and me, camped in what turned out to be a small, but pretty spot with a waterfall and grass for the horses. As soon as there is light, we will hike back up the canyon, everyone fresh and rested, back to where we started, to take the trail we missed. John in the meantime is with only his daypack, sleeping in a local home in the town, hoping to secure transportation back up the dirt road to meet us, when we're back at the top.

## Back on track

After getting lost yesterday, we departed at first light from our makeshift campsite in the canyon and ascended to the main road. We headed for what looked like an impenetrable pine forest (an invasive, non-native tree in this region), that in hindsight was the only feasible direction of the Inca Trail to San Antonio de las Aradas. We were determined, proceeding with machetes and horses in hand, into the thick of it.

It took us two hours to hack a 1,000-foot path, finally reaching a clear and narrow ridge, along an Inca Trail. Flavio continued to remind the group and John when we caught up with him, how he had initially lobbied for this path the day before. I agreed with him on this point, but also reminded him that he also lobbied to take the dead-end path into the canyon!

Regardless, everyone was happy to be past the most difficult 24 hours of our expedition so far. Reunited with John, we relaxed and had lunch in San Antonio de las Aradas, before continuing down the road five miles, to a small town called Centro Civico to camp. By sundown, everyone including the horses had a bath in the river and we were ready to move on to another day.




**TOP** - Our camp, minus John.

**BOTTOM** - Descending down the ridge into the clouds to San Antonio de las Aradas.



**Regardless, everyone was happy to be past the most difficult 24 hours of our expedition so far.**





**We headed for what looked like an impenetrable pine forest, that in hindsight was the only feasible direction of the Inca Trail to San Antonio de las Aradas.**

## Dreaming of Doritos

Tonight should be our last camp in Ecuador, in a place called Amaluza. If all goes as planned, tomorrow we cross into Peru at a rural border outpost near the town of Espindola. It's been 20 days and more than 300 miles on foot in Ecuador, traversing across mountains, villages and even a few cities. Peru, The Great Inca Trail and the heart of the Inca Empire known as Tawantinsuyu, are calling us.

Flavio, Alipio and Valentín are especially eager to get their Peruvian cell phones working, having not had regular communications with home for a month. Despite being matter of fact about everything, I also sense John's excitement. Peru is where his expertise in deciphering Inca Roads reaches its pinnacle, bringing with it lots of contacts along the way. For me, I just want the mud, steep canyons and chronic fences to mellow out a bit... and I want the nacho cheese Doritos which my adopted countrymen in Peru never fail to stock, no matter how big or small the place.

As far as the horses, it will be their first international escapade, assuming we do not have any issues with their documents. One of our first orders of business will be to naturalize the four of them, Supesique, Lucas, Huáscar and Atahualpa, into the Peruvian animal kingdom so they can accompany us for another month to Huamachuco. From there, we will pick up llamas who will travel the rest of the way, in the higher Peruvian altiplano, until the expedition's end in Cusco.

## Adios Ecuador (and a word of caution)

Ecuador and Peru have proceeded on two distinct paths over the last 20 years, following decades of political and financial instability in both countries that began in the 1970s. Successive governments in Ecuador have modernized the country much more effectively than Peru has managed to do. This could not have been more evident when we crossed the rural border at the Espindola River, observing the difference in roads and village infrastructure between the two sides.

However, a focus purely on modernization can erase the history of a place and limit the opportunities for tourism that are generated by valuable cultural resources. While there is no doubt Ecuador has made tremendous strides in the quality of life for its citizens, it would do well to promote a healthier balance by working to preserve its pre-European past.

Yes, these goals cost money and require competent public servants to execute; but if you look at Ecuador's recent efforts at tourism promotion (such as their costly Super Bowl commercial) while at the same time witnessing how some of Ecuador's last stretches of the Qhapaq Ñan are destroyed, (like we saw south of Nabón), you may begin to see a contradiction. I hope as Ecuador matures in its development trajectory, it will reapply the same determination it's shown for modernization, towards preserving its past.

## Pizarro's first sortie

Right around the time of the death of Inca Huayna Capac in 1525, marauding conquistadors in the Spanish colony of Panama began to hear of a gold rich kingdom called Viru (to be later called Peru). Conquistador Hernán Cortés had just conquered Mexico in 1519 for the Spanish crown, bringing wealth and power to those involved. This soon stirred a cousin of Cortés, Francisco Pizarro to pursue similar ambitions, partnering with a priest Hernando de Luque and a soldier Diego De Almagro. Under the enterprise "Empresa de Levante", they would begin a series of three expeditions to conquer the land to the south of Panama.

Pizarro would command the first expedition with 80 men and 40 horses, leaving De Almagro behind to gather men and supplies. Hernando de Luque oversaw finances and served an important role in securing permissions from the Spanish governor back in the colony of Panamá.

Due to bad weather, lack of food and skirmishes with natives, this first expedition would get no farther than Colombia. Pizarro returned to Panama in failure, but with a clear goal to try again as soon as they could muster the necessary men and supplies.



## “There lies Peru!”

In 1526, Pizarro, De Almagro and De Luque began to prepare for their second expedition to the land south of Panama, in search of wealth and power. On March 10<sup>th</sup> of that year, they set sail with two ships and 160 men reaching as far as the San Juan River in Colombia. From here the expedition split into three: De Almagro returned to Panama for reinforcements, Pizarro commanded an exploration into the interior and a commander Bartolomé Ruiz sailed the other ship south to the equator.

Ruiz’s exploration south encountered a balsa raft off the coast of Tumbes (the northernmost city in modern-day Peru), laden with ceramics, textiles, gold and silver. Some natives were taken aboard to serve as interpreters before Ruiz and his crew returned to the San Juan River to reconnect with Pizarro and eventually De Almagro, who had returned from Panama with 80 men and new supplies.

Reunited and fresh with excitement, the expedition returned south making it to Atacames, Ecuador where they found a large native population under the rule of the Inca. It was decided that Pizarro would stay on the nearby Gallo Island, while De Almagro would return to Panama for more reinforcements. When De Almagro got back, the new Panama governor Pedro de los Ríos – who was skeptical of the expedition and its expenditure of settlers and resources – rejected his request. Instead he sent two ships under the direction of Juan Tafur who was charged with bringing Pizarro and his men back to Panama.

When Tafur arrived, Pizarro refused to return, drawing a line in the sand, saying: “There lies Peru and its riches; Here, Panama and its poverty. Choose each man, what best becomes a brave Castilian. For my part, I head south”. Thirteen men stayed, traveling on a crude boat to the island of Gorgona, waiting seven months for De Almagro and De Luque to arrive with more men and provisions.



A map of the conquest of Peru.

**There lies Peru and its riches; Here, Panama and its poverty. Choose each man, what best becomes a brave Castilian. For my part, I head south.**



32 DAYS

# Aypate to Huamachuco

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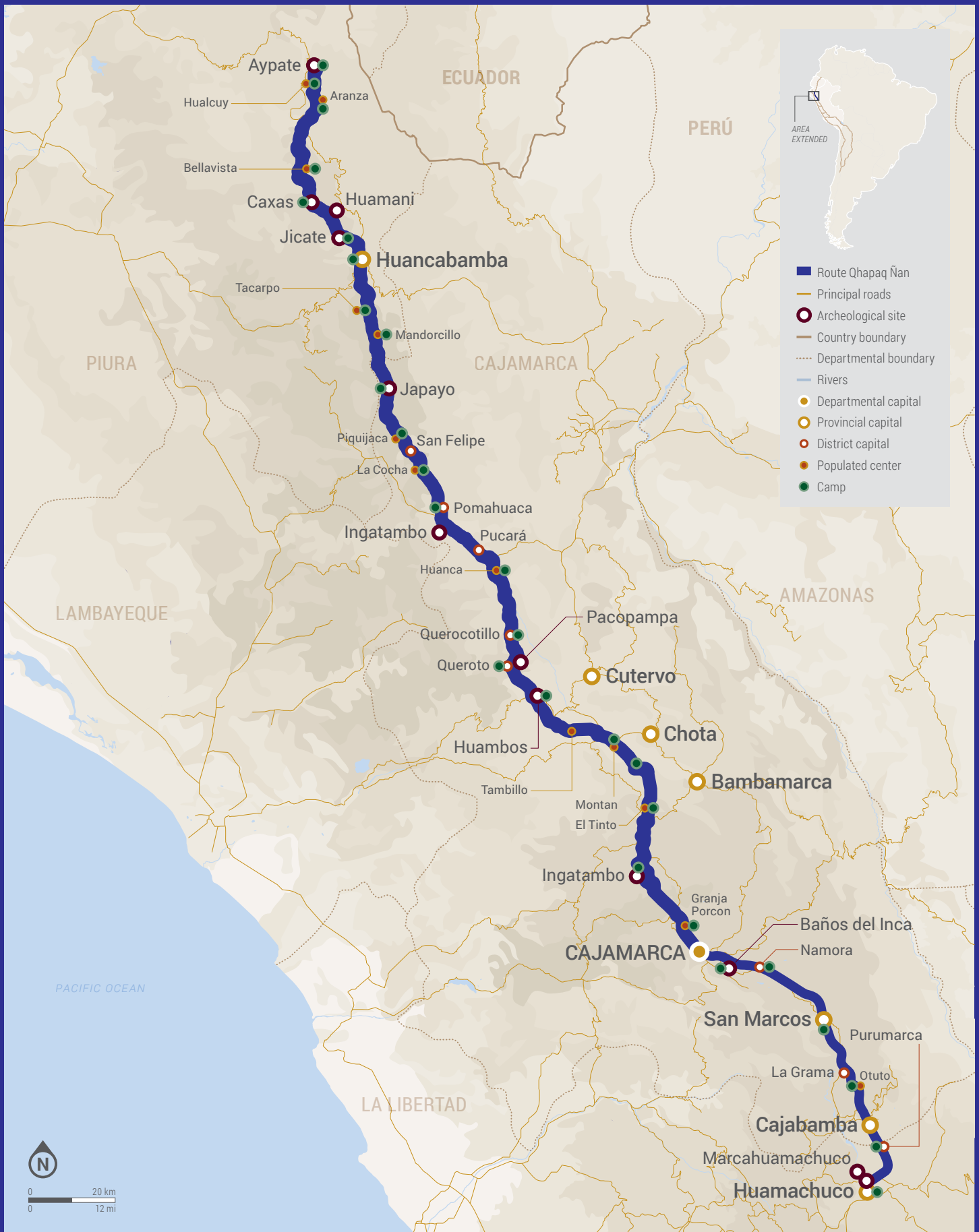
Our predictions that this would be the toughest of the five sections of our expedition from Cuenca to Cusco, proved to be correct. Twenty-six days of sloshing through the mud, getting lost daily, a bee attack, quicksand and lots of horse-dealing along the way proved to be intense. At one point we were just a notch away from total mutiny by our Cusqueño support team.


If John's experience of navigating Inca roads and wisdom in the mountains was ever in doubt, it shouldn't have been. His daily focus and stability permeated the team and calmed the rasher senses. With the Inca road dropping down to 3,500 feet at its lowest point, remnants of the grand, wide Qhapaq Ñan were few and far between.

With John's GPS in hand and thousands of pre-loaded points on the map, he guided us along a series of local footpaths and contemporary roads that followed along the Inca route. And whether it was digging out a horse as they both sank in the quicksand or being the first to brave the crossing of the Huancabamba River, he proved his grit. By the time we finally arrived at Huamachuco, we had been walking for exactly 57 days. We were buoyed by the knowledge that if we could make it this far, there was no stopping us from reaching Cusco. Even if it would take another 80 days.

Enjoy the shit show!

**And whether it was digging out a horse as they both sank in the quicksand or being the first to brave the crossing of the Huancabamba River, he proved his grit.**





**Its Inca bath,  
recently  
uncovered,  
still functions.**



## A remote Inca citadel

After two days based out of El Toldo, we headed to the Inca citadel of Aypate, with a newly purchased mule and restocked food. It was a muddy slog on a narrow trail for 12 miles, eventually getting to the archeological site. We were greeted by Lorenzo the head archeologist and Julia, an anthropologist, who are the site's caretakers from Peru's Ministry of Culture. It's definitely one of the most remote Inca citadels I've visited over the last year and 1,000 miles of Qhapaq Ñan. Because of landslides, there isn't even a car road that reaches it and we were more than 10 hours of travel time on foot and by car from the closest small city, Piura.

Nonetheless, the difficulty of getting here makes it even more satisfying to see such an impressive place. Its stonework and scale of construction represent the very best of the monumental architecture of Inca imperial style. Its *kallanka* (large guest house) is, by all accounts, the longest in the entire empire. Its Inca bath, recently uncovered, still functions. The only disappointment is that the Inca Trail immediately going to and from the site has been unattended, left to disappear into the jungle. It's unfortunately common practice, throughout Inca archeological projects in Peru, that the Inca Trail immediately entering and leaving a site is not included in the restoration work.

From here, The Great Inca Trail continues south, arriving in almost a month to Cajamarca, the next major Inca administrative center. Before that, there are numerous secondary sites on lost Inca roads that we hope to reach, should our machetes allow. For now, Aypate has been an important stop along the most important of Inca roads.



**TOP** - A local hunter with a fresh kill along the road.

**MIDDLE** - What was a residence with most impressive stonework at Aypate.

**BOTTOM** - Camilo Abad, our local guide and horseman from Jimbura.



The main gate into the Inca citadel at Aypate.



**TOP** - The horses and the team slog through thick deep mud. (NIIO)

**BOTTOM** - The team with a crew of local miners. (NIIO)

**I ran like a baby, yelling and leaving a trail of walking sticks and other belongings that flung off in the panic.**

## Attacked by bees

Today was arguably the toughest day so far on The Great Inca Trail. It started on a downhill path leaving Aypate that was really just a mud bath for two hours. The mud was up to our knees and up to the belly of the horses in parts. It was just 30 minutes after that on a dirt road that Valentín and I, ahead of the team slightly, came upon a tractor clearing the road of debris from the heavy rains the night before. We were unlucky enough to be there right at the moment the tractor hit a beehive... We were the only souls exposed to the fury of hundreds of pissed off bees who began swarming us, stinging every piece of open skin available. I ran like a baby, yelling and leaving a trail of walking sticks and other belongings that flung off in the panic.

When John, Flavio, Alipio and local guide Camilo arrived with the horses a few minutes later, they too felt the wrath of the swarm. It was either the yelling, the bees storming the horses, the tractor, or all of it combined that made the horses bolt. They turned and ran back from where we came for more than three kilometers. What was worse, one of the horses' cargo netting broke and spread gear over the entire distance of muddy road. Valentín and I, still running ahead, began to wonder where everyone was... but we weren't going to go back through the swarm to investigate. All the while the rest of the team tracked down the horses and collected the gear after more than an hour. We all finally reunited full of bee stings, with John especially getting stung all over his face and his eyes swelling.

As the saying goes, "when it rains it pours" ... and pour it did. The fourth day of relentless afternoon downpours began right after the bees. By this time, we marched forward soaking wet, feeling battle worn and looking for any suitable place to camp. The only luck of the day came when we arrived to the tiny hamlet of Hualcuay, which offered a covered roof, hot dinner and a dry place to reconvene and consider how we will continue tomorrow...





**LEFT** - John getting ready with the team to depart from Hualcuy with his eyes almost swollen shut from the storm of bees the day before.

**TOP RIGHT** - The community of San Pablo de Parcachaca in route. | **BOTTOM RIGHT** - The view dropping to the river valley of Quiroz in the morning as humidity evaporated off with the sun.

## We're not miners!

We left Hualcuy at first light to a clear sky that lasted the whole day. We had to make solid progress on distance, after a few days of delays with mud and bees. We also quickly caught up with The Great Inca Trail that had disappeared from Aypate, running parallel with the dirt road from Hualcuy. While all original Inca stones are gone at this low and humid elevation, we're confident with our maps and the geography that we're right along its route.

We're on the search for the Inca citadel at Caxas, approximately three days by foot from where we're camped tonight in the Aranza Valley. We continue to pass through very rural communities that can't seem to reconcile why our team of humans and animals is passing through by foot. While the novelty is

interesting, we do have to tread very carefully, being sure to explain our purpose to every official and main square we pass.

Our biggest challenge is convincing the communities that we are not miners. There has been a long and fraught history with mining in the region, perpetrated by tall white guys from somewhere else that I imagine looked a bit like I do. As long as we can get across the concept of tourism to key town officials, we are usually in the clear. Today though, arriving to our last town, we waited for two hours for someone in the community to help us find a camp and believe our story that we were indeed just tourists. For those who understand even the basics of colonial history in rural Peru, you can't help but understand their position, even if it requires a little more communication on our end.

## On the road to Caxas

The Great Inca Trail that runs through Aypate leads to an important (but now disappeared) Inca Citadel called Caxas, that's near an Inca bath. The walkable route (the Inca Road from Aypate has been covered over) drops 6,000 feet in elevation just south of Aypate, weaving between river valleys and cloud forest, before climbing to Caxas. Three days after leaving Aypate we go from the Aranza Valley to Bellavista, where we're provided a roof by the hospital director of the local school, whose extra storage house works as a great covered camp.

We're expecting a full day's walk to Caxas tomorrow, on what we hope will be preserved sections of the original Inca Trail. That said, the rain has been relentless for the last week, meaning we'll also have a significant amount of mud to work through as well. The constant rain definitely saps the spirits of the team, as it dampens a lot of aspects of life on the trail. Just a little sun and some nice Inca Trail though, and the team perks right back up.

## What a day... What a road!

Today was the longest continuous stretch of The Great Inca Trail we've seen to date. We were not expecting much as the maps we have, including Espinosa's, only noted a brief visible section at Caxas. Leaving from camp at Bellavista with a local informant, we immediately caught the Inca Road climbing 3,000 feet to a higher valley, where the road widened to 10 feet, and gently curved for 20 miles through the beautiful and lost countryside of Chulcanitas until the Inca baths at Caxas where we set up camp.

The area is a perfect mix of rolling hills above 10,000 feet and a local population not reached by car yet. Both variables mean that the Inca Road is still used and the

climate assists more in preservation. Five-hundred years of feet and weather essentially creates an indentation in the earth that's been manicured and maintained by the local community over generations.

The Great Inca Trail here, north of Huancabamba, is very remote and traditional. The town of Mangas along the route is one of the largest towns I've ever seen not reachable by a car road. It is right on the trail, with a few hundred people who all watched in amazement when our team passed. Just a little way further, we passed a local woman weaving by hand what was a 10-foot-long blanket in her front yard. What a day... What a road.

## Mother's Day madness

We left the Inca baths at Caxas getting lost through a pasture before a local farmer guided us back onto The Great Inca Trail towards the town of Huamani where we stopped for lunch. The afternoon walk contained bits of the original Inca Road and bits of dirt car road built over it.

Coming down from the pass after Huamani, the canyon narrows with stunning rock formations along the river. When the canyon opens up towards the town of Jicate, the large *pampa* which once had Inca ruins can be seen below at the river. We took the high road, following the Inca Trail to the town and a camp with a roof as the rain set in and night was coming.

It's fiesta time for Mother's Day weekend, with every little town we pass celebrating the holiday. Fiestas in these parts often mean extremely drunk *campesinos* outside the local watering hole and clustered around the main plaza... An unpredictable variable for our travels that we do best staying away from. So tonight in Jicate, we're peacefully camped at a farmhouse, far from the blasting Huayno music and intoxicated stares.

**Five-hundred years of feet and weather essentially creates an indentation in the earth that's been manicured and maintained by the local community over generations.**



**TOP** - A local doing traditional weaving en route. | **BOTTOM** - The Inca bath in Caxas as it appears in 2017.



**TOP** - An elder woman in Huancabamba with a traditional local hat.  
**BOTTOM** - An artist's rendition of Pizarro's ambush at Cajamarca.

## A hard-earned rest

We've done it. We've knocked out our first sizeable section of The Great Inca Trail in Peru, reaching the town of Huancabamba 130 miles after crossing the border with Ecuador. It was seven full days on foot, averaging close to 20 miles a day to get here from El Toldo. It's now time to resupply, rest the humans and animals of the team and take a shower.

From here, we're a bit more than two weeks trekking to Cajamarca, an important stop along The Great Inca Trail and also a city of almost a million people. To get there we will be dropping in elevation to almost 3,000 feet for a week before climbing into the high *puna* (altiplano) of the Andes above 12,000 feet, where will be for June and July before our last push to Cusco in August.

For now though, I'm looking for a restaurant and a cold beer... Let's see what Huancabamba is all about!

## In the footsteps of history

When Tafur arrived in Peru in 1526 with orders for Pizarro to return to Panama, Pizarro refused, drawing a line in the sand and saying: "There lies Peru and its riches; Here, Panama and its poverty. Choose each man, what best becomes a brave Castilian. For my part, I head south". Thirteen men stayed, traveling on a crude boat to the island of Gorgona, waiting seven months for Almagro and Luque to arrive with more men and provisions.

After much convincing, Panama's governor Pedro de los Ríos finally allowed De Luque and De Almagro to make the journey to Gorgona Island to fetch Pizarro. Under this guise, they took the opportunity to leave Panama and continue their explorations south with Pizarro. By April 1528, they reached Tumbes and encountered an Inca settlement with an abundance of riches in gold and silver they so long desired. They also saw their first llama, with Pizarro calling it "a little camel".

It was at Tumbes that Pizarro began to hear tales of a powerful monarch that ruled a powerful kingdom in

the Peruvian territory. With this news, and carrying samples of gold, fabric, a llama and a Tumbes native, baptized Felipillo to serve as a translator, they returned to Panama. They were now as determined as ever to return with the necessary supplies and men to finish their conquest of Peru.

Pedro de los Ríos refused to allow for a third expedition south, leaving Pizarro and his associates no other option but to lobby King Charles I of Spain directly. Pizarro crossed the Atlantic with proof in hand of the Inca Empire, making it to the Castilian court by the summer of 1528 where the King was impressed with the accounts of Peru. It would take another year of bureaucratic details, but Pizarro was granted permission on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1529, in a document called *Capitulación de Toledo*, to proceed with his conquest. It gave Pizarro the title of governor of New Castile for 200 leagues along the newly discovered coast with all the authority vested upon such a position.

The extra time in Spain gave Pizarro a chance to return to his native Trujillo to convince his brothers Hernando, Juan and Gonzalo, along with other close friends, to join him on his third expedition. Under conditions of the grant, Pizarro was to raise a sufficiently equipped force of 250 men within six months. Although after not meeting this threshold, he would have to clandestinely leave Spain, meeting up with his brothers and the remaining men on two vessels in the Canary Islands. Eventually, Pizarro left Panama for his third and final expedition to Peru on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1530 with Almagro and Luque staying behind in Panama to gather more men and join later.

## A clash of civilizations

Pizarro's intention on his third voyage to Peru was to dock at Tumbes like his previous expedition. But when he arrived towards the end of 1531, the settlement had been deserted and destroyed. This was the first evidence the Spanish would see of the ensuing civil war between Atahualpa and Huáscar and the chaotic times of the Inca Empire.



A map of Pizarro's route to Cusco.

With Tumbes no longer affording safe accommodation, Pizarro continued into the interior, establishing the first Spanish settlement in Peru at San Miguel de Piura in September 1532. After leaving 50 men behind under the command of Antonio Navarro, Pizarro continued his conquest with 200 men having soon received an envoy from the Inca himself. The Inca envoy had come from the citadel at Caxas (where we camped a couple of days ago) with presents and an invitation to meet the Inca ruler at Cajamarca.

By 1532, Atahualpa and his armies from the north continued to win a series of battles eventually pushing south to Cusco, where he took his brother Huáscar hostage, and slaughtered dozens of his brothers to prevent any challenges from the Huáscar blood line. Atahualpa had effectively won the war, receiving news in Cajamarca around the same time about the incursion of the Spanish... Which he saw as the arrival of strange bearded men on unfamiliar beasts into Inca territory. The stage was set for a clash of civilizations that would change the course of Peru and the world. The consequences of which are still playing out today and can be seen along our expedition on this most important Inca Road.



The Great Inca Trail leaving Tacarpo.

## Town or country?

We arrived to Tacarpo after a full day's walk following the general direction of the Huancabamba River. We will continue along the Huancabamba River for another four to five days from here before climbing to Huambos en route to Cajamarca. Fortunately, the team is holding up well and currently in their happy place being camped on a soccer field in the middle of the town.

Our Andean core – Flavio, Alipio and Valentín – are more comfortable staying in towns as it gives them an extra sense of security. In a big way, they're right to feel this way given the propensity of *rondas* (the community security and enforcers) to be suspicious of outsiders camping in the bush. However, the North American and Australian among us – me and John – would prefer to camp as far away from other people as possible, perched on the top of a mountain with some incredible view. This preference is certainly more akin to the Alpine style of trekking, focused on nature and an escape from urban life.

Nonetheless, in either situation, decades of combined experience tell us the critical importance of always checking in to get approval from the nearest locals. The open space of the Andes can give a false sense that it's

devoid of humans. However in reality, with thousands of years of evolving agricultural lifestyle in this region, almost every square inch of this land is already either worked on or part of the larger rural community. So today, we hang out with the Tacarpinos, and maybe tomorrow we'll be on the top of that mountain... after we talk to the locals of course.

## Stuck in the mud

Leaving Tacarpo, we climbed to Chiramoyo for most of the morning before coming down on a wide and very old walking road down to the Huancabamba River. We dropped almost 3,000 feet to the river basin, tried to cross the river unsuccessfully, lost our trail, and then hit the quicksand...

An alluvial mud drift, still wet from a landslide off the canyon, had blocked our path. We still needed to eventually cross the river but now had to get through this first. We and the horses nearly got ourselves stuck in a sinking mud that was like glue. After rolling around up to our knees to get the animals and humans back to safety, we finally found one of the very few places where the river was split in three and could cross.

John went first to see if it was actually possible and I followed with the horses. Flavio, Alipio and Valentín got down to their skimpies, held hands for support against the current, and crossed last. We had arrived to the other side tired, wet and relieved. We were ready for tea hour and so immediately set up camp on the river basin with just a few hours of sunlight left. It was time for some rest and recovery to prepare for another day on The Great Inca Trail.

## Ten times the usual rain in Peru

El Niño Costero hit Peru this year causing widespread damage on the north coast and displacing more than 150,000 people due to landslides and flash flooding. In the less populated mountains of Piura, rains have continued unusually late into mid-May and are still causing many issues.

We spent all day hiking The Great Inca Trail alongside the Huancabamba River. Rains in just the past few days have left jagged cuts in the earth leading from narrow canyons that eventually turn into muddy alluvial fans that are nearly impassable for us and our animals. Our local guide from the small community of Mandorcillo explains that they have been isolated. Nearly all the paths and roads have been affected and they are still reestablishing full connection to nearby towns.

In contrast to the large population centers on the coast, these Andean communities in the Huancabamba River Valley can sustain themselves temporarily with their own crops and animals, close-knit community spirit and clean water coming down the hills. They have withstood the wrath of nature and continued on. So far, our team has done the same.

**They have withstood the wrath of nature and continued on. So far, our team has done the same.**



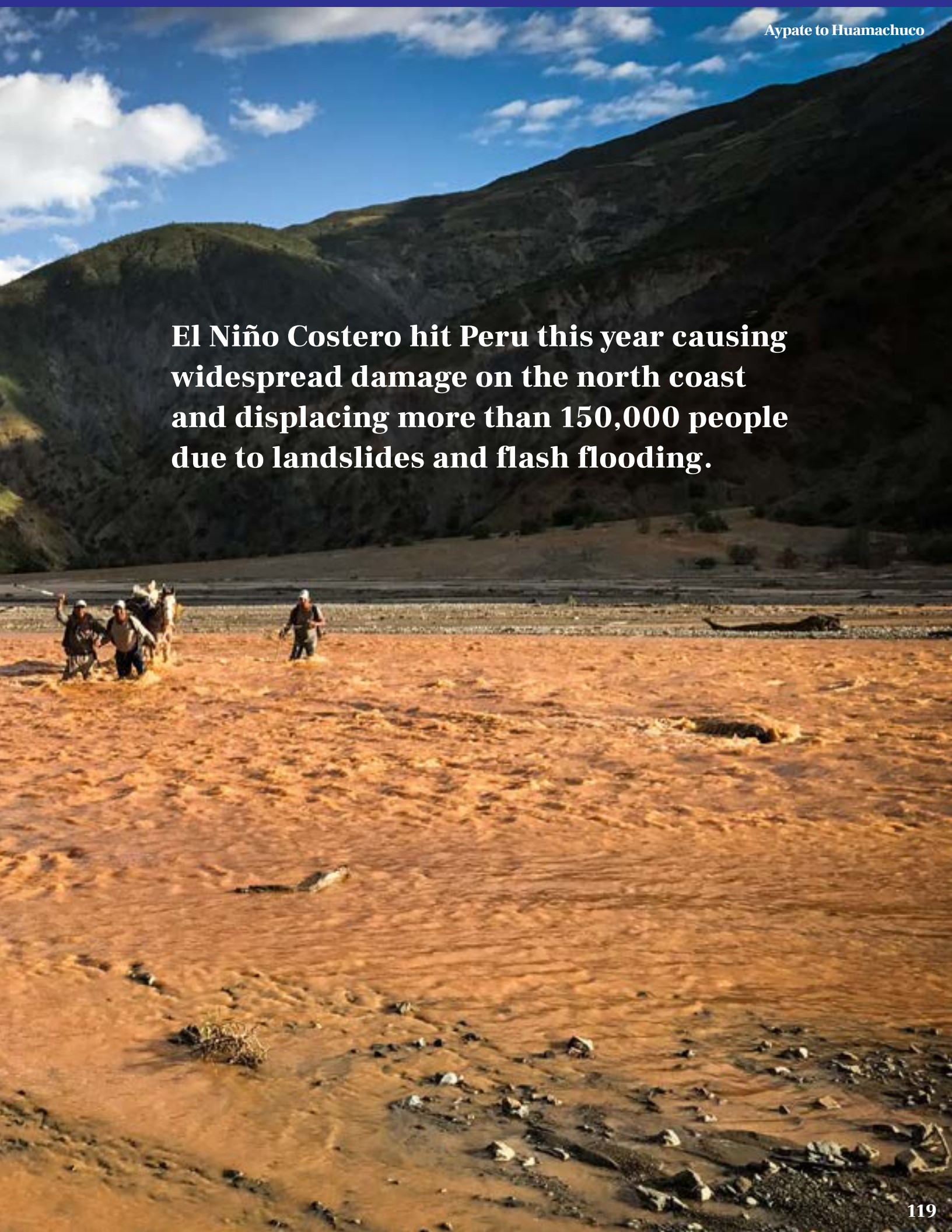
TOP - John showing off the damage.

BOTTOM - John, Valentín and Flavio attempt to extract a horse from the mud.





**El Niño Costero hit Peru this year causing widespread damage on the north coast and displacing more than 150,000 people due to landslides and flash flooding.**





**LEFT** - Coming down to Piquijaca. | **TOP RIGHT** - Camp at the church in Lacochoa. | **BOTTOM RIGHT** - A flock of sheep creates a traffic jam.

## Following the footsteps of “El Caminante”

After three days with local guides, we finally found our way out of the Huancabamba River Valley. We climbed out at Papayo, crossing the 3,000-foot pass at Buena Vista before dropping down the other side to Piquijaca. This is the exact route that Ricardo Espinosa took in 1999. His maps have been the foundation of our expedition.

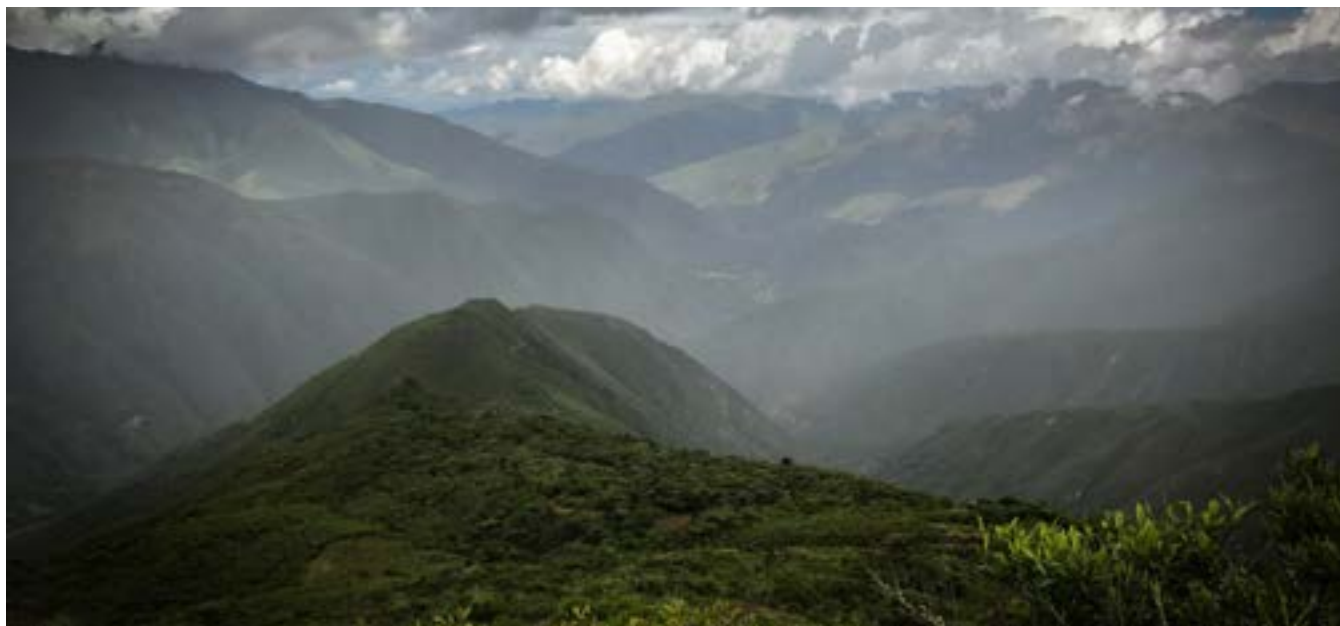
To give a sense of just how few outsiders ever come here, we met two locals who remembered Ricardo Espinosa passing through nearly 18 years ago on his seven-month trek from Quito to La Paz, and they seem to think he was the last (and only) person to walk the Inca trails in the area. Then remarkably, we ended up having dinner with the same family that Ricardo had stayed with. They fondly recalled how he had introduced himself, looking for a place to stay, explaining that he was writing a book about the Inca Road that passed through the town... Nearly 20 years later, we were in that same house with the maps from that book, now titled *La Gran Ruta Inca...* and it was all pretty surreal.

That said, a lot has changed in Piquijaca. The fears of Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path) and the violence it brought about have gone away. Most locals have cell phones now and the town is more ‘curious’ of outsiders than ‘scared’, according to our dinner hosts. We openly set up camp in the town soccer field as dozens of townspeople came to gawk and young children played amongst our tents.

## What an experience!

Walking for months on The Great Inca Trail through the center of the Peruvian Andes has hammered home how many communities – made up of anything from 10 people to 10,000 – the mountains harbor. There are literally thousands of communities scattered along the Inca Road network, each with its own unique climate, culture and – often – hats.

Experiencing the scale of it all, step by step, day after day, gives you a sense of the size and diversity of Peru. It’s hard to imagine that we will only see a small fraction of the country’s territory on our five-month walk. It would take many lifetimes to visit every little town in Peru, reminding us that our planet is far vaster than our minds can comprehend.



Traversing the ridgeline above La Cocha.

Tonight, we're camped at the small hamlet of La Cocha which has the great Inca Road running through it. We're sharing a wall with the only church in the main plaza where most of the 10 families also have their homes. The horses have excellent grass in the center, the locals are extremely friendly and we see an Inca platform high on the skyline near the pass we cross tomorrow.

Oh, what an experience!

**It would take many lifetimes to visit every little town in Peru, reminding us that our planet is far vaster than our minds can comprehend.**

## Up and down, seven days to Cajamarca City

Departing La Cocha at first light, we climbed the remnants of The Great Inca Trail all morning before dropping down on a narrow ridge all afternoon to the town of Pomahuaca. We're now at one of the lowest points of the trail, where we will be for the next three days, walking along the more developed section in Huancabamba and the more remote Chotana River. We will then start our climb to Cajamarca over seven days, going from 3,000 feet up to 14,000 before coming down into the city.

Arriving to Cajamarca will be a major accomplishment. We will have hiked 50 days through the steepest and rainiest part of The Great Inca Trail. The high Andean altiplano awaits after Cajamarca, where the road gets wider and shows off the incredible engineering prowess of the Incas.

As the saying goes... "All roads lead to Cusco." This is also seen in the road's increasing grandeur the closer we get to the ancient Inca capital.

## Desperate times in Huancas

In the vertical world of the Andes there are small towns at every conceivable elevation, from the Amazon basin to 14,000 feet. The fortunes of each village vary greatly: some so picturesque and friendly that you never want to leave; others that are stuck deep in poverty and alcoholism. The climatic events of El Niño this year have only worsened the social situation in low-lying areas such as the Huancabamba Valley and now again in the Chotana River Valley.

The 20-family town of Huancas recently lost its potable water because of flash floods and has had to make a canal to bring water in from the river. The community president, while blitzed and suspicious of our arrival at first, warmed up quickly and let us sleep in the communal house. There was also a newly-built primary school with at least 70 empty cases of one-litre beer bottles under its awning waiting to be picked up from a celebration the day before. It was one of the few dry and flat places to store the plastic cartons.

In the end, Huancas did its best to welcome us. We shared our tea and afternoon food with as many locals as we could until we ran out. We also gave a donation both to the president and another gentleman from the school who provided grass for the horses. We hope it goes back into the community, but realize it also might just go to booze. It was sad to see such hopelessness, made worse by the intensity of the climate this year. I can only hope that one day, through tourism, this monumental Inca route might be able to give communities like Huancas a bit more opportunity and pride for the future.

## Happy for high elevations!

We've been in the lowlands of the Andes for three days walking southward through Pucará at the confluence of the Huancabamba and Chotana Rivers. It will thankfully be the last time we drop below 8,000 feet (Pucará is at 3,200 feet) for the rest of The Great Inca Trail. Today after lunch in the town of Las Delicias, we climbed 4,000 feet out of the valley to the district capital of Querocotillo,

beginning our climb to Cajamarca that will take us to 15,000 feet. Querocotillo is a quaint and welcoming town of a few thousand, with locals bustling around a smart looking plaza... What a difference the elevation makes from our lowland camp last night at Huancas.

The Great Inca Trail from Las Delicias takes a straight diagonal route above the modern road that covers nearly double the distance to get to the top. While we didn't see any visible Inca stonework on the path, the size and trajectory of the route was exactly what we expected. Ascending on it for three hours in the late afternoon sun was brutal. We eventually reached Querocotillo, after walking 25 miles over 10 hours from Huancas.

So, when mayor Moses of Querocotillo promised us a camp, but then had us wait an hour while he conferred with his assistants, we got a bit frustrated. He clearly didn't understand the urgency we felt to set up our tents after such an exhausting day and get dinner started before it got dark. After a bit of insistence when the horses arrived 45 minutes later, he finally sent us with one of his helpers to the bull fighting ring at the top of town to camp. It was only three blocks from the main plaza where we had been waiting for the mayor to make a decision. Though inside I was struggling to maintain my patience, I thanked him and encouraged him to follow our journey on Facebook.

## Walking Peru's Yellow Brick Road

Trekking The Great Inca Trail can be like walking the Yellow Brick Road, except instead of looking for the Wizard of Oz, we're in search of the great cities of pre-Hispanic South America. Our Oz today was Pacopampa, a 3,000-year-old city that was hidden in the hills along our route. Pacopampa is believed to be part of the great Chavín culture that preceded the Incas by 2,000 years. They were the Incas' predecessors as the Romans were to Western civilization today. News came out just this week that a Chavín fresco was discovered on the coast a thousand miles south of Lima, giving credence that Chavín culture spread throughout much of modern-day Peru.



**TOP** - Ceremonial platform at Pacopampa. | **BOTTOM LEFT** - The first sight of stone paving approaching Pacopampa. **MIDDLE RIGHT** - The Chotana River Valley just north of Huancas. | **BOTTOM RIGHT** - A marker noting a pre-Hispanic road in the area.





In search of Pacopampa, we left Querocotillo along its main street that turns into The Great Inca Trail over the mountain towards Querocoto. A few hours into the hike, the mud got so heavy that Flavio, Alipio, Valentín, John and the horses escaped to the car road below. Although being ahead of the group, I didn't even realize that I was alone in the hunt until I eventually got lost, stumbling around muddy paths that went in all directions. Eventually by midday, I found a trail that widened and revealed large stones at its base, a signal that I was close. That's when the whole mountain turned into a series of large terraced platforms glimpsed between clearing fog. I had found my Oz.

As I explored the sunken plazas, massive carved stones and raised platforms, I quickly saw the resemblance to Chavín de Huantar, the capital city of Chavín culture about 700 miles south on the Qhapaq Ñan that our team visited last year. The entire mountain was sculpted to demonstrate power, even showing signs of underground tunnels that served purposes of worship and control of local populations. It was another reminder of the major societies that led to the development of the Incas thousands of years later.

**That's when the whole mountain turned into a series of large terraced platforms glimpsed between clearing fog. I had found my Oz.**

## A 21<sup>st</sup>-century vision of tourism for Peru

With every step on The Great Inca Trail we get closer to Cusco, even though we still have 1,300 miles to go. It's taken 700 miles of trekking from Cuenca, Ecuador to arrive to the outskirts of Cajamarca and the high altiplano of the Peruvian Andes. Every day we wake up at first light for breakfast at 6am, getting camp loaded to start walking by 8am. It's then seven to nine hours of trekking along the most important route of the Inca Empire, which in 2017 requires a sharp eye and persistent searching for a path that flits between original Inca paving stones, car roads and even an old railway line. When we reach each day's stopping point, it's time to set up camp, prepare food and send off correspondence like this before an early turn-in to bed and repeating it all again the next day... And so has been our routine for the last 44 days in our pursuit of history and a 21<sup>st</sup>-century vision of tourism for Peru.

Today we walked from Querocoto to Huambos, an important stop to resupply and rest for 36 hours after 10 days of straight hiking through some of the most remote stretches of our expedition. Afterwards, we'll be ready for the next 100 days of The Great Inca Trail.

## Moving on up

I think we've finally escaped the rain... Today was the first time in 45 days that rain was not part of the equation. This in part has to do with the approaching dry season and because we've ascended to above 7,500 feet and are camped in the village of Montan. Tomorrow the climb continues to almost 12,000 feet where we will have arrived to the high dry *puna*, leaving the lowlands and their bugs behind.





LEFT - One of the more impressive sections of the Great Inca Trail leaving Huambos. | RIGHT - Our fantastic cooks prepare a fresh meal. (NIO)

For 20 miles of our walk today, The Great Inca Trail gently weaved along a ridge that passed tiny towns perched above colossal valleys on either side. There was no mud, no getting lost and the locals were all friendly; especially the dozen congregants of the small Adventist church that was celebrating its weekly service. They were curious about our passing and had plenty of advice on the correct direction to take.

The biggest score of the day was getting our hands on some fresh fish hawked from an old truck, its sales pitch blasting from a loud speaker, “*Pescado fresquito... fresquito, fresquito... caballita, fresquito.*” We bought seven fresh caballa fish, a welcome change from days and days of chicken and rice. We’re moving on up in more ways than one.

## Farm to fork on The Great Inca Trail

We’re finding our culinary stride, getting accustomed to working with what’s available along The Great Inca Trail... One of the great advantages of the route is all the fresh potato, corn, different types of beans, cheeses and much more, available straight from the fields along the trail. We stock up on certain dry goods in the larger towns we pass and then opportunistically buy tubers and other local delicacies depending on what we can find.

Today, camped above Yacuchinga at 12,000 feet, we’re next to a small cheese mill and a field of purple potatoes. The route continues to climb from here, getting colder as it nears the 14,000-foot pass that we will cross tomorrow.

We're just a few days out from entering Cajamarca, where we will make it to the notorious Baños del Inca.

In the meantime, we'll be enjoying the altitude and the farm food.

## Sleeping in mine country

We've arrived to mine country. Mining and the commodities they produce is one of Peru's most important exports and the north of the country is where most of it happens. Today, the trajectory of The Great Inca Trail from our camp last night at Tres Lagunas collided with a mine at El Tingo, erasing all good options to walk. We eventually had to take a road that bordered the mine to Coimolache Pass where we had no options left but to camp next to the operations.

Mining in this region was already happening during Inca times and was later expanded significantly by the Spanish throughout the Andes, to feed Europe's thirst for gold and silver. It's a contentious issue in a country where mines have done major environmental and social harm, while at the same time serving as an important revenue source to modernize the country.

From the perspective of our camp tonight, the machinery, living pods, lights and all things industrial are a surreal contrast to the quaint villages and rural lifestyle of local inhabitants. A reminder of the futuristic world beyond The Great Inca Trail.

## Cajamarca, here we come!

We said goodbye to the mine at El Tingo and walked on the paved road towards Inगतambo with no Inca paths in sight. It was a long day, sharing and navigating the road with big trucks headed for the mine. While walking on asphalt is far from ideal, the angle of the road did make an efficient southern trajectory toward Cajamarca. Our camp tonight along the road should get us to Inगतambo in the morning, making it to Granja Porcon tomorrow at the outskirts of the city.

The team is eager to get to Cajamarca, a significant milestone on our route to Cusco. Cajamarca was also an important Inca administrative center in the heart of the northern part of their empire en route to Tomebamba (near modern-day Cuenca, Ecuador) where we started almost 50 days ago.

## A model for value creation along The Great Inca Trail

For our 50<sup>th</sup> day on the trail, the team was blessed with a day of good Inca roads from Inगतambo to Granja Porcon at the outskirts of Cajamarca. It was uplifting to see how the community of Granja Porcon has highlighted its local patrimony.

Arriving to Inगतambo by mid-morning, The Great Inca Trail continued, improving in quality into a road that



Gold mine at Hualgayoc.

reaches 20 feet in width and curves smoothly around a green hillside. After a heavy and cold rain, the team reached Granja Porcon by late afternoon and was provided with a covered camp with good grass for the horses by the Cooperativa Atahualpa Jerusalem in town.

Cooperative Atahualpa Jerusalem manages forest and animal resources and creates economic activity through tourism and local culture. Beyond being extremely welcoming and helpful, they are proof of the value that local communities can extract from their cultural patrimony. They have maintained and preserved the Qhapaq Ñan through their land and built simple and effective signage for trekkers and visitors alike. It's a simple model that could be used for replication along countless communities along the Inca corridor.

## Francisco Pizarro and Atahualpa meet at Cajamarca

After the imprisonment of his brother Huáscar, Atahualpa was absolute monarch of the largest and most advanced state in the New World, while Francisco Pizarro represented the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, monarch of the most powerful state in Europe. Both had descended upon Cajamarca... Atahualpa recently victorious with his army of 80,000 battle-hardened men; Pizarro leading 160 soldiers, 50 of whom were on horseback.

There was no doubting the motivation and goals of the Spanish conquistadors. They wanted gold, power and status, raising them above the poverty of their situation. However, there has been much speculation over the centuries regarding Atahualpa's motivations in the meeting. While one must imagine his ultimate goal was to maintain his monarchy, it's likely he also had a good dose of curiosity about the bearded white men.

The Spanish arrived in Cajamarca, in view of the tens of thousands of Atahualpa's soldiers camped amongst the hills. They spent their first night in complete apprehension of what was to come, some even wetting their pants in fear. They were 1,000 miles from the nearest reinforcements in Panama, and unable to escape



**TOP** - Flavio and Valentín scanning for Inca Roads.

**MIDDLE** - Local signs pointing out the Inca road and bridge remains leading to Cocan.

**BOTTOM** - An illustration of the first meeting of Pizarro and Atahualpa by indigenous illustrator Guaman Poma de Ayala.

by road due to the inevitability of attack on the narrow mountain roads. Pizarro concealed his men around the smaller confines of the central plaza, planning a surprise attack in an attempt to cause panic and leverage the superior weapons of the Europeans.

Finally, at noon the next day, Atahualpa began his approach, with the utmost of pomp, to meet Pizarro. Two thousand Indians swept the road before him as thousands of nobles representing various clans, dressed in feathers and textiles of all colors, followed behind. Atahualpa had a crown on his head and a collar of large emeralds around his neck, sitting on a small stool in a litter lined with parrot feathers and decorated with plates of gold and silver.

When Atahualpa entered the plaza, Pizarro sent friar Vincent de Valverde to speak to the Inca monarch with a cross in one hand and a Bible in the other. He was under orders to subject the Inca monarch to the law of the Lord Jesus Christ and to the service of His Majesty, the King of Spain. Atahualpa took the Bible, viewed its paper with little astonishment, and then threw it to the ground with a frowning face...

## The conquistadors attack at the square in Cajamarca

Friar de Valverde now returned to Pizarro with a rationale for attack, even though the Spaniards' impatience and desire for loot had preceded this in their daring plan to capture Atahualpa. Pizarro immediately gave the signal to sound the trumpets as the Spanish shouted their battle cry "*Santiago*". Mounted on horseback, sounding bells and gunfire, the Spanish rushed into the plaza, throwing the Incas into panic and confusion, and began to slaughter them.

Pizarro entered the thick of the melee, sword in hand, and made straight Atahualpa's litter. As the Spanish killed those holding the litter up, others immediately replaced the fallen in an act of total devotion. Eventually seven or eight cavalry rushed upon it, heaving the litter on its side. Pizarro grabbed Atahualpa's arm, capturing him alive. Those escorting

Atahualpa and carrying his litter never abandoned him... They all died.

The Incas remaining in the square were so terrified from the firing of guns and horses – both things they had never seen before – that they knocked down a 20-foot stretch of wall to escape the Spanish. All of Atahualpa's other soldiers were a mile away on the plains above, but not one raised a weapon as they were in shock after the capture of their leader. As night fell, the Spanish reassembled at their camp, leaving up to 6,000 Inca dead and having captured the monarch of the largest and most advanced state in the New World. Not one Spanish soldier lost his life..

## A ransom is paid

Atahualpa was quickly scuttled away to an impromptu prison where he was made to understand his situation, while his army lay in shock that their divine leader had been captured. Atahualpa soon realized the conquistadors' zeal for gold and promised a ransom to secure his release. Lifting his arm high above his head, he marked a line on the wall of his 22 by 17-foot-wide prison, promising to fill the space with gold, and then two more equal parts of silver.

To collect the ransom, word was sent immediately to all corners of the empire, requesting the Inca treasure be brought to Cajamarca. Most importantly from Cusco, which held the most precious and abundant collection of gold in the New World. It would take four months for Atahualpa to satisfy his ransom, during which his wives and servants were allowed to stay with him. There was so much loot that when it finally reached the shores of Spain it caused hyperinflation in the gold price in Europe.

Pizarro and Atahualpa eventually established a close relationship as fellow military leaders, with the Spaniard even teaching the Inca emperor how to play chess. The Spanish also learned about the complex politics of the Incas, allowing them to anchor themselves as the new leaders of the Inca world, which would be swallowed by the King of Spain and the Catholic Church.



The room that Atahualpa is said to have filled with silver and gold to secure his ransom.

The ransom only temporarily satiated the Spanish, and Atahualpa soon became a liability, both as a force of rebellion and as a challenge to the conquistadors' mission. He was convicted in a kangaroo court of having his brother Huáscar killed (a crime he did commit shortly after being taken prisoner) and of planning a secret attack with his generals against his kidnappers. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1533, right after agreeing to baptism by Friar De Valverde and being given the name Juan de Atahualpa, Atahualpa was killed by garrote.

**On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1533, right after agreeing to baptism by Friar De Valverde and being given the name Juan de Atahualpa, Atahualpa was killed by garrote.**



Kevin and the Cusqueños flying the drone.

## New friends join The Great Inca Trail train

After reaching Cajamarca, the humans and animals rested for a few days at the thermal baths at Baños del Inca. Even the horses were living the life of luxury, getting new shoes and a haircut with all-they-could-eat grass. We also welcomed two new members to The Great Inca Trail crew... Kevin, our archeology ninja and avid Andean explorer from Northern California has joined us with a drone and will be assisting with our mapping of The Great Inca Trail. Rolando, from Ancash in Northern Peru has also come aboard as our next cook. Rolando and his team will be taking over when we reach Huamachuco in a few days. They will look after us for a full month until we reach Junín, when the Cusqueños will return for the final section to Cusco.

John and I have spent every day for 60 days with Flavio, Valentín and Alipio, walking 700 miles since Cuenca, Ecuador. It will be a big change to see them leave. We haven't seen the new Ancashino support team since our preparatory treks along the Qhapaq Ñan last year. They

will add an important injection of energy and will be bringing 10 llamas with them who will take us through the high Andean Altiplano.

Regardless, our Great Inca Trail train continues as we make our way from Cajamarca over some beautiful Inca roads through Namora, San Marcos and eventually Huamachuco to The Great Inca Stairway of "Escalerillas". The road is improving every day and we're looking forward to lots of new adventures with friends..

## The archeology ninja reports

Camp last night was on the highway, with trucks, tuk-tuks and motorcycles rumbling by every 30 minutes or so. It was a loud night's sleep, before awaking to find the Qhapaq Ñan cut into the hillside across the highway. The trail was only about four feet wide and went from looking like a drainage culvert to having some light stone paving. We climbed on this Camino Herradura (walking path) that crisscrosses the highway a handful of times before it became all pavement as we descended towards the river at Aguascalientes.



Dropping down towards Aguas Calientes on the The Great Inca Trail.

After crossing the river, The Great Inca Trail ascended again where we encountered a wide dirt road and faint signs of stone paving but became unsure of our route as it disappeared again. I figured this was an excellent chance to use my experience mapping roads in the Andes and decided to ask an elderly local man sitting in front of his small farmhouse if he knew anything about the route. After attempting to ask in both Spanish and rudimentary Quechua I eventually realized my words weren't quite catching on as he repeatedly smiled and called out to me... "*Soy sordo!*" (I'm deaf). So much for the brave archaeologist stepping in and helping out the team...

Luckily all doubt would soon be removed, as a wide Inca Road with stone paving and stone walls appeared and took us up towards the pass to the south. Eventually it evolved into a path that was 20 feet wide, that had been maintained and used to mark property lines by *Hacenderos* during colonial times. Whether this section was once part of the main Inca Road or not, it was a beautiful trail through the countryside all the same. We eventually reached the community of

Otuto in the mid-afternoon, where a family with some adorably curious children and a mischievous puppy allowed us to camp in their front yard which had a rustic corral and plenty of grass for our horses. Not too shabby and a heck of an upgrade from last night.

**Kevin Floerke** | Archaeology Ninja  
*Great Inca Trail team*

**We eventually reached the community of Otuto in the mid-afternoon, where a family with some adorably curious children and a mischievous puppy allowed us to camp in their front yard.**

## The Inca Roads, they go straight

The closer we get to Huamachuco, the better the Inca Road gets. Today we took a straight shot from our camp at Otuto through Cauday, Cajabamba and over the pass at Rumi to camp at Purumarca. The road from Cajabamba to the pass didn't ever change direction for three miles, going directly upward on a 10-foot wide and walled Inca trail. It was amazing!

We're within a day's walk of Huamachuco, where we will pick up the llamas and head south with Rolando and his support team of *arrieros* from Ancash who are replacing the Cusqueños. John jumped ahead a day to find a grassy staging ground for the arrival of the animals and trekkers tomorrow. Nick Dall, a journalist specializing in Latin America, will also join us for a week along one of the best sections of the route, which means we're expanding the team to eight people.

It will be a new era for The Great Inca Trail expedition...

## The splendor of Marcahuamachuco

We arrived to Huamachuco at the doorstep of The Great Inca Stairway known as the Escalera. But before we head there tomorrow, we visited the spectacular ruins of Marcahuamachuco today. The Huamachuco culture who built the site had its heyday approximately 1,000 years ago, before eventually being overrun by the Incas in the 1400s.

Marcahuamachuco sits on a high table mountain with 360 degree views in all directions. Its stone walls reach 50 feet, enclosing buildings that were used for burial ceremonies and other religious purposes that orientated the Huamachuco culture to the heavens. Despite being one of the most important archeological sites in Peru, entrance was free, and we had the vast complex entirely to ourselves.





**Despite being one of the most important archeological sites in Peru, entrance was free, and we had the vast complex entirely to ourselves.**



The massive pre-Inca settlement Marcahuamachuco overlooks the Great Inca Trail just outside of the modern city of Huamachuco.



# Huamachuco to Ondores

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We were about to begin the most impressive and monumental section of Inca road anywhere in the old Inca empire and we brought along some new friends for the ride. The Cusqueños returned home for the month to tend to their families and crops, while Rolando and the crew from Canrey Chica rejoined us on the trail with the llamas. With a refreshed support team and the promise of incredible Inca roads ahead, we also were joined by Kevin, the team's resident drone pilot and photographer. There was even a marquee showing by Nick (Nick Dall that is), who braved the five-day stretch south of Huamachuco under the trail name Trucha Luchador.

The much-hyped Inca road did not disappoint. For weeks, our expedition team followed a nearly contiguous cobblestone-like road that reached 50 feet in width. It would forever cement in my mind the importance of preserving this great work, finally imagining in more wholeness the massive scale of what the Qhapaq Ñan once was.

At the same time, the team shifted gears slightly as we started planning how we would bring trekkers along the very best five-day stretches in the future. We had to shift for the first time into analyzing how we were going to place economic value on the road through tourism. A task that required doing a rehearsal of sorts: Between Tambo de Soledad and Huarautambo, we brought on six colleagues who would mimic traveling clients.

The llamas in all their majesty also accompanied us every step of the way, reminding us that the Inca roads were just as much built for them and their cargo as they were for humans. We also realized that any adventure tourism along this stretch of road, had to be supported by llamas. Both because the gentleness of their feet help preserves the road, and also because llamas are just plain cool.

**For weeks, our expedition team followed a nearly contiguous cobblestone-like road that reached 50 feet in width.**







## Shamans, llamas and dreams of *trucha*

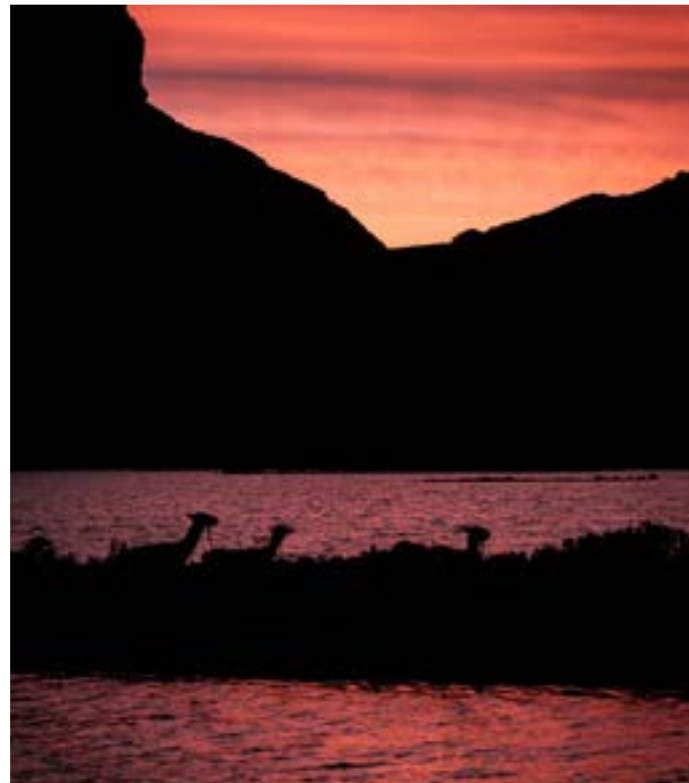
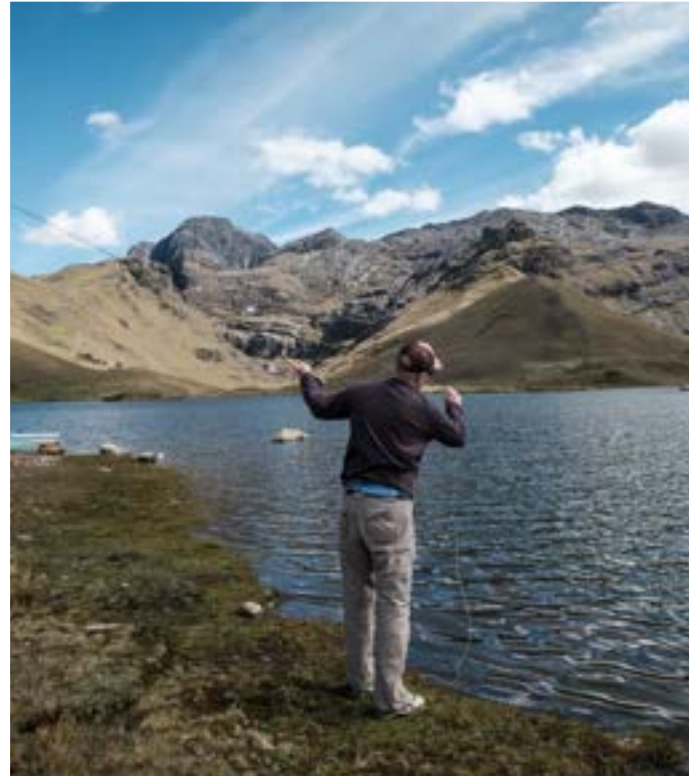
Huamachuco pulled out all the stops for us this morning. In the corner of the plaza - wedged between topiary kangaroos and a handsome 17<sup>th</sup> century Augustine bell tower - we were treated to a farewell with a difference. Representatives of three ancient cultures gave us a Shamanic blessing - coca leaves and stripes of ash on the cheeks - thanking us for our presence and wishing us well on our journey towards Cusco.

Energized, we set off towards the sacred cerros of Huaylillas, accompanied for the first time by the jingle of llama bells. The llamas added a carnival atmosphere which was only heightened by the flowers all around and the bird-like bleating of vicuñas on the horizon. But the best was yet to come.

If there's a better camp spot than the banks of Lago Cushuro, at 14,000-feet, I need to know about it. With llamas out on the peninsula and watched over by grey, glaciated cliffs, we were rowed out into the lake in a leaking blue boat to cast a fly for wily Andean *trucha* (trout). We didn't catch anything, but after a day like today I couldn't care less.

But I'll be up at sunrise giving it one last shot, of course.

**Nick Dall** | Trucha Luchador  
Great Inca Trail team



TOP - Trucha Luchador, better known as Nick Dall.

BOTTOM - The llamas silhouetted on Lake Cushuro.



The Great Inca Trail between Cajabamba and Huamachuco.









The llamas at the first pass of Las Escalarillas.

## More ups than downs on The Great Inca Stairway

Today we hiked one of the most important (and exhausting) sections of the Qhapaq Ñan – The Great Inca Stairway at Las Escalarillas. But we had to get there first. Our first climb was made easy by the gorgeous views of Lago Cushuro. But after a short detour to see some recently discovered rock art (a six-fingered hand and lots of condors), the real fun began.

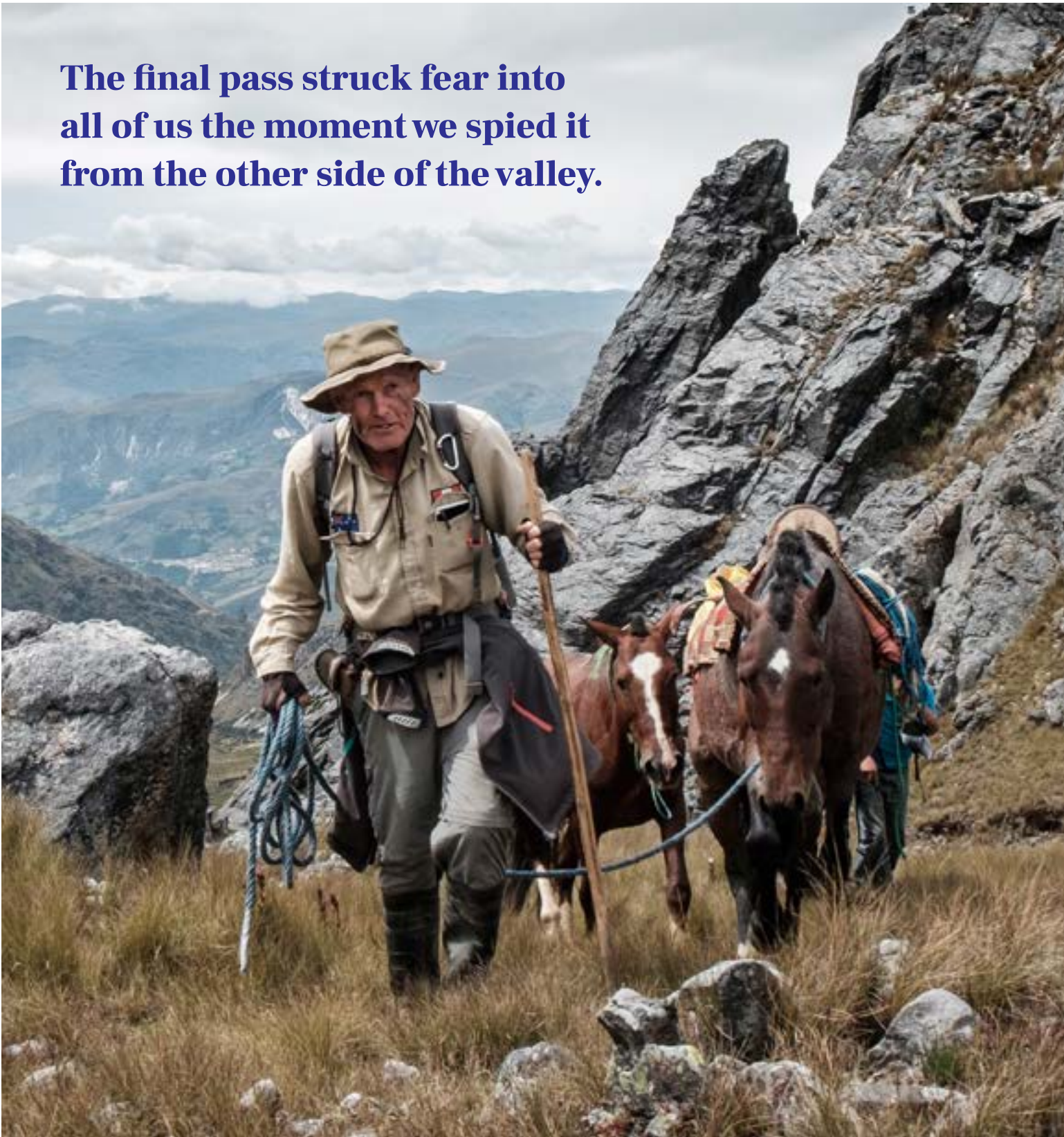
The Spanish took one look at the Escalarillas and built an alternative route which avoided the precipitous inclines of the Cerros Huaylillas. Only the Incas would think that rising to more than 14,000 feet three times in one day was a good idea. (Although in their day the steps would have been perfectly tended and coated with gypsum for increased traction.)

Arrow straight trails above crystalline lakes gave way to cruel switchbacks which took their toll on humans and animals alike. The final pass struck fear into all of us the moment we spied it from the other side of the valley. And rightly so. One of our llamas fell off the trail and rolled a way down the hill, and our token South African (that's me) pretty much passed out at the final summit.

We're all okay and all that's forgotten now. We're camped in a lovely riverside spot which has the added bonus of boasting the friendliest dog in Peru and great views of the mountains we just conquered. The feeling of accomplishment is almost as good as the cauliflower soup Rolando just made us for dinner.

**Nick Dall** | Trucha Luchador  
*Great Inca Trail team*

**The final pass struck fear into all of us the moment we spied it from the other side of the valley.**



John leading the horses to the pass at Las Escalerillas.



**The Spanish took one look at the Escalerillas and built an alternative route which avoided the precipitous inclines of the Cerros Huaylillas.**



Eder and the llamas on the Great Inca Trail.

## The Great Inca Trail team

We're two months into our 2,000-mile trek on The Great Inca Trail from Cuenca to Cusco. We've had lots of help along the way with various humans and animals who have given their all to the mission. Most critical are the *arrieros* who support the others on the team who are mapping and capturing the road in photography, video and writing. For the next month, Rolando, Eder and Robert (all from a small town called Canrey Chico, in the province of Ancash in Northern Peru) will be our *arrieros*.

They keep us fed with three meals a day, manage the 10 llamas and three horses, and set up and break

down our daily camp. Rolando, John and I trekked 250 miles from Huánuco Pampa high in the Andes to Casma on the coast last year in preparation. Rolando runs a good ship and it's good to be back with his team on the Qhapaq Ñan.

At our camp tonight en route to Tulpo, we found another nice *pampa* with good grass between two streams. Rolando made *Lomo Saltado* (sautéed beef, tomato and onion) and vegetable soup. Kevin Floerke and Nick Dall, known in this book as Archeology Ninja and Trucha Luchador, have also been a welcome addition, helping capture the Inca Road. John and I are in new company all around on our long march to Cusco...

## This idyllic place

The Great Inca Trail from Tulpo takes you gently into the Mollebamba Valley. Huáscar, who lost the civil war to his brother Atahualpa, is thought to have been killed in these parts in 1532. Whatever the real story is about Huáscar's tragic end, Mollebamba and the surrounding hillsides are one big archeological site set amongst a rural Peruvian village. The town can't have more than 400 people, but the plaza is massive – the size you would see in most major cities in the country. The layout of the valley and direction of the Inca Trail seem to suggest that the plaza in Mollebamba is a vestige of an important Inca plaza (these were usually much larger than modern-day plazas) during 15th century.

From Mollebamba, a 20-foot-wide Inca Trail takes you to a pass with a series of terraced platforms above the town of Mollapata perched on the side of the cliff below. This idyllic place is where we would end our day's walk. John happened to know the town's teacher, Ademar Polo de Castillo, from a previous visit, and he graciously welcomed us, let us camp in the school yard and showed us around the town's one room museum which houses a mummy with an erect penis.

Mollepata is a lovely village with lovely people that sustains a small church, school and community all tucked on the side of a mountain. It's taken us into a world of its own and we're so happy to be here.

## Into the Cordillera Blanca

Crossing the Tablachaca River from Mollepata has brought us into the northern reaches of the Cordillera Blanca, the highest and most visually stunning region of the Peruvian Andes. We will be traversing this range for the next month, passing by Huascarán, Peru's highest peak at 22,000 feet among many other glaciated mountains. It's yet another crossing of an important geological divide on our journey to Cusco.

The entirety of today's 17-mile trek after crossing the Tablachaca River followed along the Conchucos River Valley in the shadows of mountains and sheer cliffs.



TOP - Locals in the town of Tulpo along The Great Inca Trail.  
 BOTTOM - The Great Inca Trail from Huaygorral to Tulpo.

**Crossing the Tablachaca River from Mollepata has brought us into the northern reaches of the Cordillera Blanca, the highest and most visually stunning region of the Peruvian Andes.**

The all-day steady rise of 3,000 feet in elevation was a welcome treat to the constant ups and downs of previous days. The trajectory of the trail had all the hallmarks of the Incas, only a modern dirt road not currently in use had been built atop. It was nonetheless a spectacular walk.

From our camp at Conchucos, we will rest the animals and team for a day before continuing south to Sihuas and eventually Huari in 10 days or so.

## Value creation along long-distance hiking trails

When I first envisioned trekking 2,000 miles in the Andes along The Great Inca Trail, I had just walked a three-day section on the Pacific Crest Trail (a 2,600-mile-long trail from Mexico to Canada), arriving to a small town called Sierra City in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California.

Sierra City is a small town of a few hundred people that was once dependent on mining during the California gold rush, but now relies on an economy of tourism, a big part of which is the hundreds of trekkers passing through on the Pacific Crest Trail. If this little town could extract value from such a trail, I thought, surely the monumental size and history of The Great Inca Trail could do the same for the towns of the Andes in Peru. It was a simple idea two years ago that began this journey.

In the same way, the municipality of Huamachuco (home to both the mining industry and one of the most impressive sections of The Great Inca Trail known as “Escalerillas”) understood this potential. They were just waiting for those intrepid explorers to arrive, give them a warm welcome and create value for their community through tourism. They succeeded in this goal and we are extremely grateful and blessed to collaborate with

them on a vision of what The Great Inca Trail can become throughout the Andes.

## The stairway to heaven

This morning we left the comforts of the town of Conchucos behind. We made quite the unexpected spectacle, a ragtag group of *gringos*, *arrieros*, llamas and horses loaded with cargo traipsing through the city streets. Just outside the town we picked up a nearly perfect section of Qhapaq Ñan as it ascended over 5,500 feet to the pass at Pariachuco. As Inca roads tend to do, this one ran almost perfectly straight up the river valley, passing the charming pastoral community of Tauli before heading across the high *puna* toward the pass.

The climb was difficult, but we were more than adequately rewarded when we arrived to the Inca *tambo* below the summit. It features well preserved walls and a stone-lined laguna, and made for an excellent lunch spot. However, the true reward awaited us just above, at the high pass. As we crested the summit at 14,760 feet we were treated to our first glimpse of the snowcapped peaks of the Cordillera Blanca. We left small stones at the Inca *apacheta* and each took a moment at the ancient ceremonial platform to appreciate our arrival to what feels like the top of the world.

Afterwards we descended along a preserved 10-meter-wide Inca Trail, passing wide staircases and even more ceremonial platforms. We arrived to a serene campsite on a plain called Pallahuachanga, Quechua for “where the princess gave birth.” We can’t help but feel this is a special place, and those who came before us clearly agreed.

**Kevin Floerke** | Archaeology Ninja  
Great Inca Trail team





**TOP** - The *apacheta* at Pariachuco Pass.

**BOTTOM LEFT** - Rolando walks on a 500-year-old piece of infrastructure.

**BOTTOM RIGHT** - Inca stairs ascending to Pariachuco.







**TOP** - A Peruvian schoolgirl touches a llama for the first time.

**BOTTOM** - The remains of a remote and unstudied structure oriented toward the Cordillera Blanca, Peru's highest mountain range.

## In the shadow of the *Apus*

This morning we experienced the downside of sleeping above 13,000 feet when we awoke to a camp covered in a thick layer of ice. It took the sun to arrive for us to quickly break camp, before descending on the Qhapaq Ñan into the valley below. The walk started smoothly for a few kilometers before getting lost in a thick swamp that gave our shoes a satisfying squelch for the rest of the morning.

We eventually reached the small community of Paccha where the Inca Trail reappeared and led us into the plaza right next to the schoolyard. The joyous chaos of a hundred school children who have never before seen llamas in the flesh commenced when our motley crew arrived on the scene. The school teachers were equally thrilled, using us as an illustration of the lessons they had taught about the Inca roads and how llamas were used as pack animals by the Incas.

Passing Sihuas, tonight's campsite is in another breathtaking location, with the *Apus* of the Cordillera Blanca in clear view. The Great Inca Trail starts again tomorrow in a clear line south towards Cusco. We can't wait to see where it takes us next.

**Kevin Floerke** | Archaeology Ninja  
*Great Inca Trail team*

## The Valley of the *Ushnus*

Waking to another high frozen camp with stunning views of the Cordillera Blanca, we followed The Great Inca Trail as it wound toward the pass across the valley. We soon noticed that the top of the hills in the area had an oddly flat and rectangular shape. Investigating with zoom lenses, we discovered that almost all of them had what appeared to be ruins at their peaks. Intrigued, we climbed up the nearest one and found a collapsed temple structure made of large cut stones that faced directly toward the *Apus* (mountain peaks) of the Cordillera Blanca. Many of the stones had tumbled

inward, suggesting the roughly two-meter-tall building had at one time been significantly larger. It was an interesting diversion before continuing over the pass.

The Inca Road soon became difficult to follow, with at least one junction leading down away from where we wanted to go, and another heading high but disappearing. We decided to split up, with John taking the high route until I rejoined the main path at a nearby promontory. It was here that we discovered yet another large hilltop platform site, this time facing directly toward Huascarán, Peru's highest peak.

We suppose it's no surprise that in a region historically known for mountain worship, we would find shrines dedicated to the peaks of the Cordillera Blanca. But to wander through this remote valley by way of The Great Inca Trail, witnessing temples more than 500 years old, was a special experience.

**Kevin Floerke** | Archaeology Ninja  
Great Inca Trail team

## Crossing cultural boundaries

Today we began our descent into the Yanomayo River Valley. It's a steep drop that will take us almost two full days to complete. Along with a change of climate and vegetation, we are also witnessing a significant change in culture and customs. All along our journey we have seen traditional forms of clothing slowly shift as we've moved south, but there has been an especially abrupt change in recent days.

Women here wear colorful skirts and smaller hats marked with flowers. As our *arrieros* helpfully pointed out, multiple flowers signify a married woman, while one flower indicates that the wearer is single. We are also facing our first serious language barrier, as many of the locals of the region speak only Quechua. This is especially true of the older generation, and we have had to rely on a combination of local children (educated in schools taught in Spanish) and our *arrieros* (who speak fluent Quechua) for translation.



A local woman tends to her flock while carrying her infant child on her back.

By the time we reached the day's destination at Piscobamba, I was invited to be the guest of honor in the parade of a local saint to the plaza. It was an excellent welcome after a long day of hiking, and yet another interesting cultural experience to be had along The Great Inca Trail.

**Kevin Floerke** | Archaeology Ninja  
Great Inca Trail team



LEFT - Illa, our lead llama. | RIGHT - Our camp on a flat narrow bridge.

## Illa

Meet Illa. Illa (pronounced EEL-yah) is the lead llama for our team on The Great Inca Trail. He is also the team's most active spitter and has a real penchant for looking at me suspiciously when I photograph him. Yesterday while hiking I had the privilege of hearing the backstory of Illa's name from our *arrieros*.

Illa is a concept that means different things in different parts of the Andes. But for our *arrieros* from the small community of Canrey Chico in Ancash, an Illa is a good luck charm sent from the *Apus*, the sentient mountain spirits. An Illa typically appears to a lone traveler, particularly during the full moon. It will appear as either an apparently normal animal or sometimes as a glowing pair of eyes in the night. When you approach the Illa, it disappears leaving in its place a small stone figurine in the shape of the animal whose form it had assumed.

This stone figurine is considered to be very lucky. When used in the appropriate ceremony it causes all of its owner's animals to be especially fertile and productive, thus increasing their wealth.

Our *arrieros* named Illa in the hopes he would bring our team luck and prosperity, and in the hopes the other llamas will follow him faithfully. Just not too closely, or he might spit on them.

**Kevin Floerke** | Archaeology Ninja  
Great Inca Trail team

## Camped on a bridge

We left Piscobamba after a day's rest with the animals and team, making it to the Chuspín Bridge en route to Yauya. Today is the 12<sup>th</sup> day on the expedition for our *arrieros* and llamas from Huaraz, who are going through a bit of a rough patch, getting accustomed to life on the trail. They're at that uncomfortable stretch when the body and mind must transition to a new reality.

Today's terrain didn't make things any easier, dropping 3,000 feet to the narrow bridge which was the only place in which to camp, but with little to no grass for the animals. It was a delicate situation being the only feasible place to stop four hours behind or in front of us. Considering the geography, I was counting my blessings that we at least had a flat spot to sleep and water to drink.

So here we are camped on the bridge, preparing dinner and resting up for another steep and dry climb back up tomorrow.

## The llamas go on strike

We woke at 4am for breakfast on the Chuspín Bridge so we could climb up the mountain before the arrival of the sun. The llamas had a different plan though... They were going on strike. Being at the bottom of a river canyon with little grass for food had put them a little off kilter. Asking them to carry loads up a steep ascent took them over the limit. Halfway up, they slowed to a halt with two

of them eventually just sitting down and refusing to walk anymore... It was a showdown.

The *llameros* Eder and Robert sat for hours waiting for the llamas to move, while the rest of the team continued on. In the end, it took six hours for the llamas to reach camp only five miles from where they stopped. We have our fingers crossed that a healthy field of grass and light walking today will make them a bit more agreeable tomorrow.

For now, at least it seems that all the humans and animals are content, eating and camped at the school in Marimamanga. Tomorrow we continue to ascend for another 4,000 feet back to the llamas' happy place in the high altiplano on our way to Huari.

## The monumental Inca Road

Some roads are built for utility, others for efficiency and very few as monuments! A monumental road transcends utility and efficiency and demonstrates power and influence. A monument serves as a pilgrimage destination, but in the case of The Great Inca Trail, the monument is the journey. Also known as the Qhapaq Ñan the Inca Road was a symbol of imperial power for an Inca state that spanned the entirety of the Andes.

More than ever as our expedition progresses in northern Peru, the Inca Road has displayed its grandeur... At 14,000 feet, the cold and unforgiving landscape of the Andean *puna* has protected it from a world that no longer traverses these mountains. It stands weathered, but frozen in time since the Incas last walked its path 500 years ago.

As the Incas would have, we're camped at the *Tambo* of Maraycalla, an essential Inca refuge that provided shelter and lodging in the harsh environment. While we've arrived with modern camping equipment, our day was nonetheless completely subsumed by the world of the Incas. When traveling on it, you are engaged by the curves and vistas coming at you. Even the placement and layout of the *tambo* fits right into the flow of the road... It's a physical experience of Inca culture.



**TOP** - The llamas navigate a section of high altitude Inca road.

**MIDDLE** - A cheerful local on the trail.

**BOTTOM** - Inca Road near Maraycalla.





**Tomorrow, we will begin the long process of understanding exactly how to responsibly practice tourism along this forgotten and monumental road.**

## Save the Qhapaq Ñan!

We left camp from the surreal Inca *tambo* of Maraycalla with ice still on the ground, weaving along the spine of the Andes at 14,000 feet for the whole morning. The continuity of the road was only interrupted at points by coal mining pits large enough to fit a single human. We saw about 20 pits in total over a one-kilometer section and they all seemed to have been dug fairly recently. Hopefully the practice doesn't become more widespread, because we're on one of the very best sections of the entire Qhapaq Ñan.

It's these small and numerous destructions of The Great Inca Trail that began during the colonial era and accelerated in the past century, leaving only a small fraction of the 25,000-mile Inca road network. Preservation efforts are finally taking place, such as UNESCO giving the road network World Heritage status in 2014. But you can also target conservation on the most important sections of the road by giving real economic value to local communities. Sustainable tourism is the only way to give economic value to forgotten sections of The Great Inca Trail like we saw today, incentivizing local populations to preserve their history.

This is exactly what we intend to do. We've arrived to Huari, the provincial capital in the heart of this important section, to rest and welcome a key partner to the expedition. Lima Tours has been behind the scenes through it all with critical funding, logistical support and a shared belief in the future of the Qhapaq Ñan. We will begin the long process of understanding exactly how to responsibly practice tourism along this forgotten and monumental road.

## An exploration becomes an experience for others

Across the canyon from Huari, the expedition team is ready to depart tomorrow from Cajay, trekking south for five days to the Inca citadel at Huánuco Pampa. We've increased our animal and support teams in order to welcome a few colleagues from Lima Tours to rehearse what trekking with guests will look like in the future.

We'll be working out ideal timing between camps and miles walked per day. We'll also be beginning the process of building relationships with officials in each town and understanding what resources are available, whether it be food, shops or local families interested in supporting future expeditions. And we will be learning the cultural and archeological history of the route, so we can eventually immerse paying clients in an Andean world that few people ever experience.

The type of tourism we are working to develop does not include any ambitions to build infrastructure like a lodge or permanent camps. We are understanding how to execute small-scale, once-in-a-lifetime trekking experiences that leave no trace on the environment and spur economic activity to local communities. Sustainability in this scenario is about building healthy, predictable and fair relationships with all the stakeholders involved, including communities, local officials and providers of services.

**The type of tourism we are working to develop does not include any ambitions to build infrastructure like a lodge or permanent camps**



The Monumental Great Inca Trail ascending to Quenuajirca.



Local *campesinos* harvest their quinoa.

## Helping to conserve The Great Inca Trail

Governments are bureaucratic and inefficient, but they are necessary to achieve civic works beyond the scope of any individual or private company. Preservation and management of the Qhapaq Ñan falls under the direction of Peru's Ministry of Culture. For the past five years, they have been working within a comprehensive plan to develop and preserve the Qhapaq Ñan.

While the bureaucrats in Lima have been no help in our expedition's endeavor, the archeologists and ministry teams on the ground have been incredible. These civil servants endure low pay with no modern comforts to immerse themselves with the communities along the Inca Road. They employ local populations to help restore the archeological remnants of their ancestors, giving dignity to communities whose young people are only fleeing to the city.

Today we experienced, yet again, the commendable and dedicated work of the ministry's archeologists along The Great Inca Trail. At our camp at *Tambo* de Soledad, the lead archeologist, Ricardo, has given us context to thousands of years of societal development tied up in this great road that passes through town. He and his team have given our crew precious time

in explaining the secrets of this *tambo* and we are grateful. It will be critical that our expeditions here in the future can serve to bolster their work.

## From *tambo* to *tambo*

We have been following The Great Inca Trail continuously with almost no gaps for more than a week now, demonstrating the utility of the Inca *tambos* along the route. The Inca refuges are built a day's walk from each other, allowing travelers – either Inca or contemporary – a nightly shelter. Like clockwork, after a day's walk over the mountain from the Tambo de Soledad, we've arrived to the *tambo* at Quenuajirca for tonight's camp.

Quenuajirca is a terraced mountain plateau at 14,000 feet topped with a ceremonial platform. While the archeological ruins are quite a foreboding sight, its neighbors, the Araujo family, couldn't be more welcoming. They provided us with pasture for the animals and fresh water. The patriarch, Juan, is a master weaver, with his wooden, hand-powered loom taking up a whole room of his house. Kevin was so impressed with Juan's work, that he bought a beautiful brown poncho to keep him warm.

The Araujo family has made our already beautiful camp even more special. We exchanged contact information, said thank you with a donation of *soles*, and made our farewells... until next time.

**While the bureaucrats in Lima have been no help in our expedition's endeavor, the archeologists and ministry teams on the ground have been incredible.**

## A magical Andean world

We left Quenuajirca en route to Tambo Grande, the next Inca refuge about a day's walk away. The Great Inca Trail has been nothing less than spectacular of late, erasing all the challenges of the mud and difficulty during April and May. With the dry season in full swing and our expedition now in the Peruvian Cordillera Blanca, we are relishing the very best trekking since we began walking on April 14<sup>th</sup>.

Much of today's hike was on a 10-foot or wider Inca Road that gently curves through mountain valleys, alongside streams with idyllic pastures inhabited by locals whose culture goes back millennia. I'm surprised to see no sign of recent visitors to the scene of such monumental Inca engineering, in the same country that sees millions of tourists at the most well-known Inca site at Machu Picchu. It's like having millions visit the Eiffel Tower, but no-one travels to Burgundy to experience the wine and food, a pinnacle of French culture.

For now, our expedition skips along, immersed in a magical Andean world that we have all to ourselves.

## A moment to celebrate

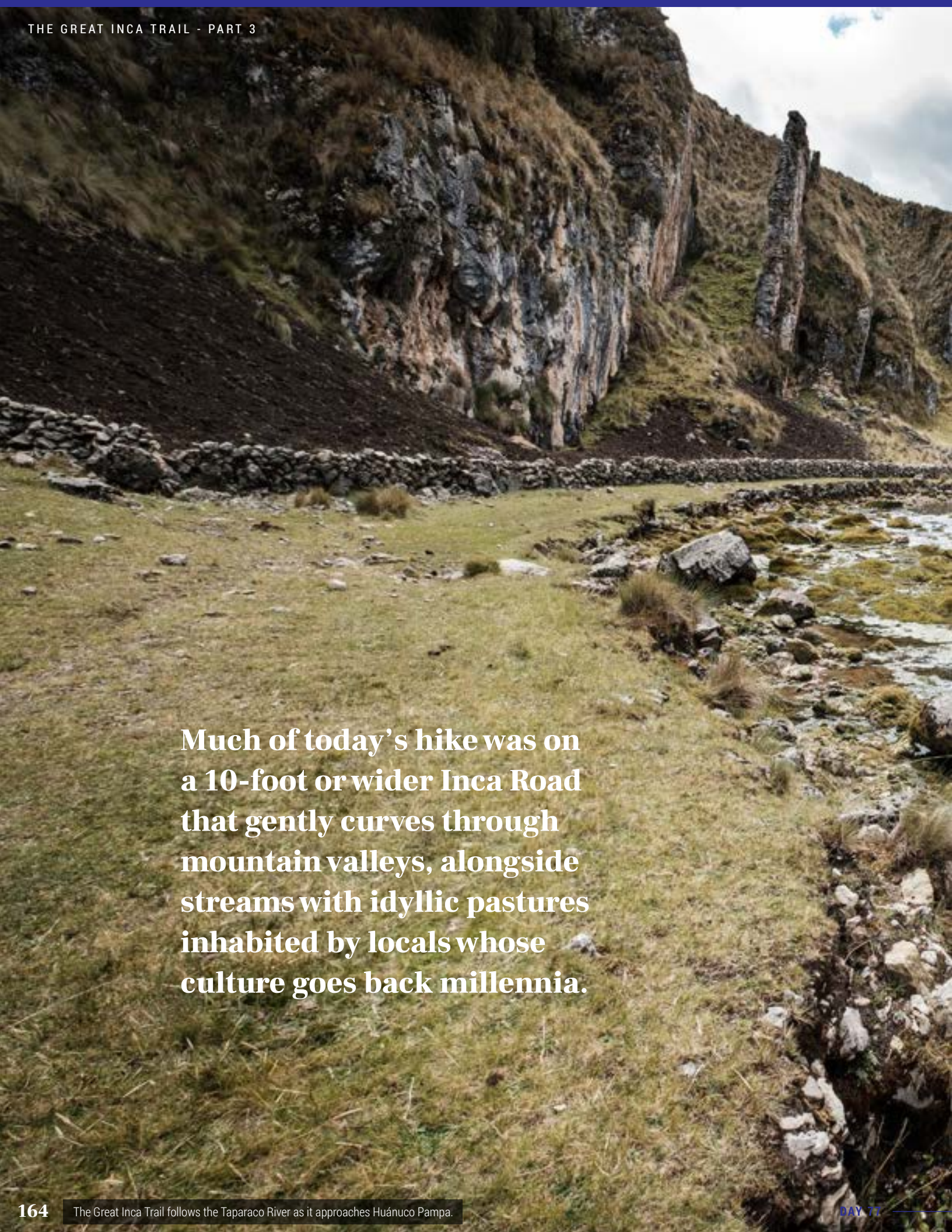
When we began practicing for this project in August 2016, we started our first pilot hike along a transversal trail of the Qhapaq Ñan, walking from the Inca citadel at Huánuco Pampa westward to the Pacific coast ending at Casma. Our very first camp on this section was in the village of Isko and today we return to the exact same camp, only this time it's as we hike south from Cuenca, Ecuador to Cusco, Peru along the longitudinal route of the Qhapaq Ñan called The Great Inca Trail.

Tomorrow we will arrive back to Huánuco Pampa too, approximately the halfway point of our 2,000-mile journey that began on April 14<sup>th</sup> this year. Our colleagues and friends from SA Expeditions, Lima Tours, Peru's Ministry of Culture and others will join us to celebrate a pilgrimage that's been the result of two years of preparation and countless hours of effort from collaborators throughout the world. The scale, communication and research of this expedition would have never been possible without every one of them.

Tomorrow we celebrate our achievements as a team, and then... Back to work as we continue our journey to Cusco.



Our camp at Tambo de Soledad.

A wide, grassy valley with a stone wall and a stream. The valley is filled with green grass and scattered rocks. A low stone wall runs across the middle ground. To the right, a stream flows through the valley. In the background, a steep, rocky mountain rises, with a prominent, jagged rock formation. The sky is overcast.

**Much of today's hike was on a 10-foot or wider Inca Road that gently curves through mountain valleys, alongside streams with idyllic pastures inhabited by locals whose culture goes back millennia.**





Dancers in traditional dress perform to celebrate the team's arrival.

## The team celebrates

Our arrival in Huánuco Pampa was marked by a celebration involving many good friends and colleagues from Lima, officials with the ministry and the local community of Shique. Children from the school prepared a traditional dance, accompanied by a *pachamanca* lunch and donation of dozens of jackets by *höség*.

The undertaking of this expedition is the result of the dedicated efforts by tourism professionals from Lima Tours, kmCERO and SA Expeditions. All three companies have put forth capital, expertise and coordination in a shared belief that tourism development along the Qhapaq Ñan can incentivize preservation of the Inca Road. All three companies are working in tandem to not just walk the road, but record and share it with the world.

After walking for 78 days, reconvening and celebrating with the larger team from Lima was a great moment. Huánuco Pampa itself was a critical administration center and almost the halfway point between Tomebamba (modern-day Cuenca) and Cusco. It's an Inca site that deserves its own story tomorrow..

## The expedition changes form again

We continued south from Huánuco Pampa with a change of team members. Kevin, Ximena and Dafney took their planned departure from the expedition and we welcomed Diego, Christian, Rodrigo and Jenny. All four are critical members of our endeavor to develop tourism along The Great Inca Trail. They will be with us for only five days capturing footage of the trek (in the case of Rodrigo and Christian) as well as learning how to develop client experiences (in the case of Diego and Jenny).

With the six llamas, five donkeys and two horses, we left Huánuco Pampa through the main road of the Inca city that includes a massive *Ushnu* (high platform) and 500 *colcas* (food storage buildings) among hundreds of other Inca constructions. Huánuco Pampa was one of the largest and most important administration centers between the two Inca capitals of Tomebamba and Cusco. Today it also happens to be strategically located in the middle of a 10-day section of the most preserved and impressive Qhapaq Ñan in existence.





The Inca road cuts across the landscape.

**For tourism to work its magic on disappearing stretches of the Inca Road will require our work today – and our persistence for many years to come.**

Huánuco Pampa will serve as a point of arrival and/or departure for five to 10-day treks supported by llamas, guides and assistants. These treks will give intrepid tourists a chance to experience one of the most remote and preserved ancient roads of mankind. For tourism to work its magic on disappearing stretches of the Inca Road will require our work today – and our persistence for many years to come.

## The whole is greater than the sum of its parts

Departing from camp at the Inca baths, we crossed the river by way of hand-powered cable car, while Eder and Rolando walked across with the animals. We quickly found ourselves on a stretch of Inca Road as spectacular as any we've seen so far. A 50-foot-wide, stone paved road cut through the high Andean *puna* at 14,000 feet, part of it almost completely preserved.

Trekking alongside Diego made the day especially surreal. It was the realization of a conversation we'd had over dinner on the Hiram Bingham train in Cusco.

That was in September 2015, and we'd just finished five days hiking the Salkantay Trail to Machu Picchu. The idea of this expedition had been nagging me for months and Diego was the man to help me achieve it. He had spent more than a decade working in the rural Andes helping to develop tourism along Inca trails and was one of the few people in the world who could understand the scope of my idea... While also being in a position to help make it happen.

By the time dessert arrived, Diego had digested the totality of what such an expedition could achieve and he's been at the center of the partnership between Lima Tours and SA Expeditions ever since. He now oversees the project's logistics as part of the significant human and financial capital Lima Tours has provided towards the project goals.

## The Grand Tour of the Andes

Just like the Grand Tour of Europe in the 17th and 18th century, traveling on the Qhapaq Ñan in the 21st century is a Grand Tour of the Andes. Life along The Great Inca Trail immerses you in an exotic world for thousands of miles over many months. It's an experience where new



The Great Inca Trail between Andahuaylla and Huarautambo.



The team crossing a preserved Inca bridge near Huarautambo.

**For the first time in over 2,000 explored miles of Inca Trail, I saw an original stone Inca bridge. And not just one, but two in the same day.**

people are constantly coming into view, either for a brief moment in passing or over several days in camp.

This week, we've been joined by our colleagues Rodrigo and Christian, who have come along to tell the story of the Qhapaq Ñan through film. They do so under the banner of kmCERO, a tourism consulting firm with significant strengths in audio-visual production. Between the two of them, they have told the story of Peru like no one else does today. The country's best hotels, chefs and destinations have called upon them to capture the unique essence of Peruvian culture.

Their involvement started one late April afternoon in Lima as Rodrigo, Christian and I chatted over a beer in Barranco, with the expedition a year away from departure. I explained the journey I was about to take and that I needed a team to help me communicate the story of this great road. Whether it was due to the importance of the endeavor, or the cold beverage with ocean views, they joined The Great Inca Trail team from that moment. Dreams have now become reality and I'm grateful for their efforts and partnership in telling a story of the Andes.

## Brrrrr... Freezing rain!

The freezing rain has decided to descend upon the expedition now for two days, making the Inca Road between Tambococha and Andahuaylla a difficult section for our four new arrivals. It's hard enough trying to cover 15 miles a day above 12,000 feet without the weather punishing you while you do it.

We're in good company though as everyone who's joined us has experience of the harsh and unpredictable weather of the Andes. Especially Jenny, who is a SA Expeditions Destination Expert by day, and a rock climber and explorer the rest of the time. She has come

aboard to intimately understand what trekking on the Qhapaq Ñan is all about. She will be at the frontline of planning and preparing for our travelers of the future.

Jenny will be the one reconfirming dates, sending packing lists and handling the myriad other details required to get someone from across the world to have a transformative trekking experience trekking The Great Inca Trail. Her attachment to the Andes on a personal and professional scale is far too strong for a little freezing rain to get in the way.

## The Grand Inca Highway

We awoke to clear skies at Andahuaylla, ready to take on the last seven miles to Huarautambo. Since leaving Huánuco Pampa, today will complete one of the best five-day sections on the Qhapaq Ñan to date. Having sunshine for the first time in days also made it productive for filming along some of the most monumental sections of Inca roads anywhere in the Empire. For the first time in over 2,000 explored miles of Inca Trail, I saw an original stone Inca bridge. And not just one, but two in the same day...

For an Inca Road geek like me, it's one of those moments that you dream of for years. The Incas also constructed hanging bridges out of braided Ichu grass, but they used stone bridges for flatter and shorter distances. It was an awesome finale for Jenny, Rodrigo, Christian and Diego who will be leaving us tomorrow.

From here, John and I will continue south to Junín where we will meet back up in a few days with Flavio, Valentín and Alipio from Choquechaca and a new team of llamas from Tanta. The expedition will shrink back down to its core as we pass through Huancayo, Ayacucho and Vilcashuamán during the month of July. By August, the expedition will make its final three-week push to Cusco.



**TOP** - The Inca road cuts across the landscape near Andahuaylla.  
**BOTTOM** - Jenny Byrne, a Destination Expert with SA Expeditions, joins the team to learn about the trail.

**For the first time in over 2,000 explored miles of Inca Trail, I saw an original stone Inca bridge.**



The rebuilt Inca causeway at Huarautambo.

## The Inca Road as a form of conquest

Huarautambo was an important Inca city. Even today the archeological ruin occupies the back of the commemorative one Sol Peruvian coin. Before the Incas arrived, the site was occupied by the Yarush people, whose temples are just across the river from the Inca ruins. It appears that after the Incas conquered the Yarush and built their road through their territory, both cultures lived side by side.

The Incas had federalist tendencies and incorporated many of the cultures they absorbed in a sort of multicultural society... As long as the conquered recognized the sun as their principal deity, and the Inca as their sovereign leader. We saw similar evidence of this in Tambo de Soledad, where the Pinkush lived, and at Huaritambo, where the Huari (not to be confused with the Wari from the Ayacucho region) culture existed. This is similar to what you see in multicultural cities today, with people worshipping at different temples and living in their own cultural subset of society.

Building the Inca Road was a form of conquest through these smaller city states and connected them into a larger network of production and society as part of the

Inca Empire. Today our expedition preferred the Yarush side of the river, giving the conquered minority of Inca society their fair due.

## Don't lose the donkeys

Descending from Huarautambo, we followed The Great Inca Trail to a hanging bridge which the llamas crossed, but the donkeys would not. Antonio, the man in charge of the donkeys, took the hooved animals up an alternative route and didn't reconnect with the larger team until lunch. Considering we dropped 1,200 feet before climbing another 3,000 just after the bridge, all the while entertaining the idea of losing half the gear with Antonio, the morning was a bit challenging.

By the afternoon, we reached the high Andean altiplano, skipping along on an Inca Road that was interrupted at times by the modern highway. Eventually we made it to Tambopampa, a windswept village at 14,000 feet, with hospitable locals who came to our camp with a hot beverage and fresh bread.

Tomorrow we will continue south on The Great Inca Trail to the fringes of Lake Chinchaysuyo along a flat, albeit high trajectory. Antonio and the mules shouldn't have any problems staying with the team tomorrow.

## The Qhapaq Ñan in Cerro de Pasco is threatened

After more than 1,200 miles walking south on The Great Inca Trail from Cuenca, Ecuador, we've witnessed the largest and most significant stretch of the Qhapaq Ñan in danger of disappearing. Heading south from Huarautambo, we've left the Daniel Carrión Province and entered Cerro de Pasco.

An hour south by foot from camp at Tambopampa, the 20-foot-wide Inca Road at Tambillo Chico becomes completely fenced off for grazing and personal use. There was barbed wire in all directions, despite the clear outline of The Great Inca Trail running south on the flat, Andean landscape at 14,000 feet. We had no choice but to stay on course, downing and raising dozens of fences so our animals could pass. In all, we downed and put back 30 fences over a 15-mile stretch.

We had a handful of angry locals come out too, demanding answers as to why we were in their fields. We calmly showed them our letter explaining our work, the maps, and the undeniable fact that they had illegally fenced off Peru's national patrimony for their personal use. After understanding our purpose, nearly everyone was friendly and helpful, often deflecting the blame onto their neighbors for fencing the road. We were also very careful to leave the rustic barbed wire fence as we found it, to not ruffle any more feathers.

The trick is finding a way to balance the livelihoods of local communities with the laws of cultural preservation. In Tambillo Chica, rudimentary gates which can be opened and closed where the Inca Road passes would be a good place to start.



TOP - The Inca road leaving Huarautambo.

BOTTOM - The Inca road goes right into a barbed wire fence.

**The trick is finding a way to balance the livelihoods of local communities with the laws of cultural preservation.**



# Ondores to Vilcashuamán

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After a month away, the Cusqueños arrived back to the frigid plains around lake Junin, bringing with them ten of our old llama friends from Tanta and their handler Tito. Rolando's crew from Canrey Chica returned home after an action-packed month featuring lots of visitors to the expedition and mile upon mile of beautiful road. In some ways I was glad that the Cusqueños got time off to reconnect with home. But in others, I wished we could have experienced those monumental stretches of Inca road together, as a team.

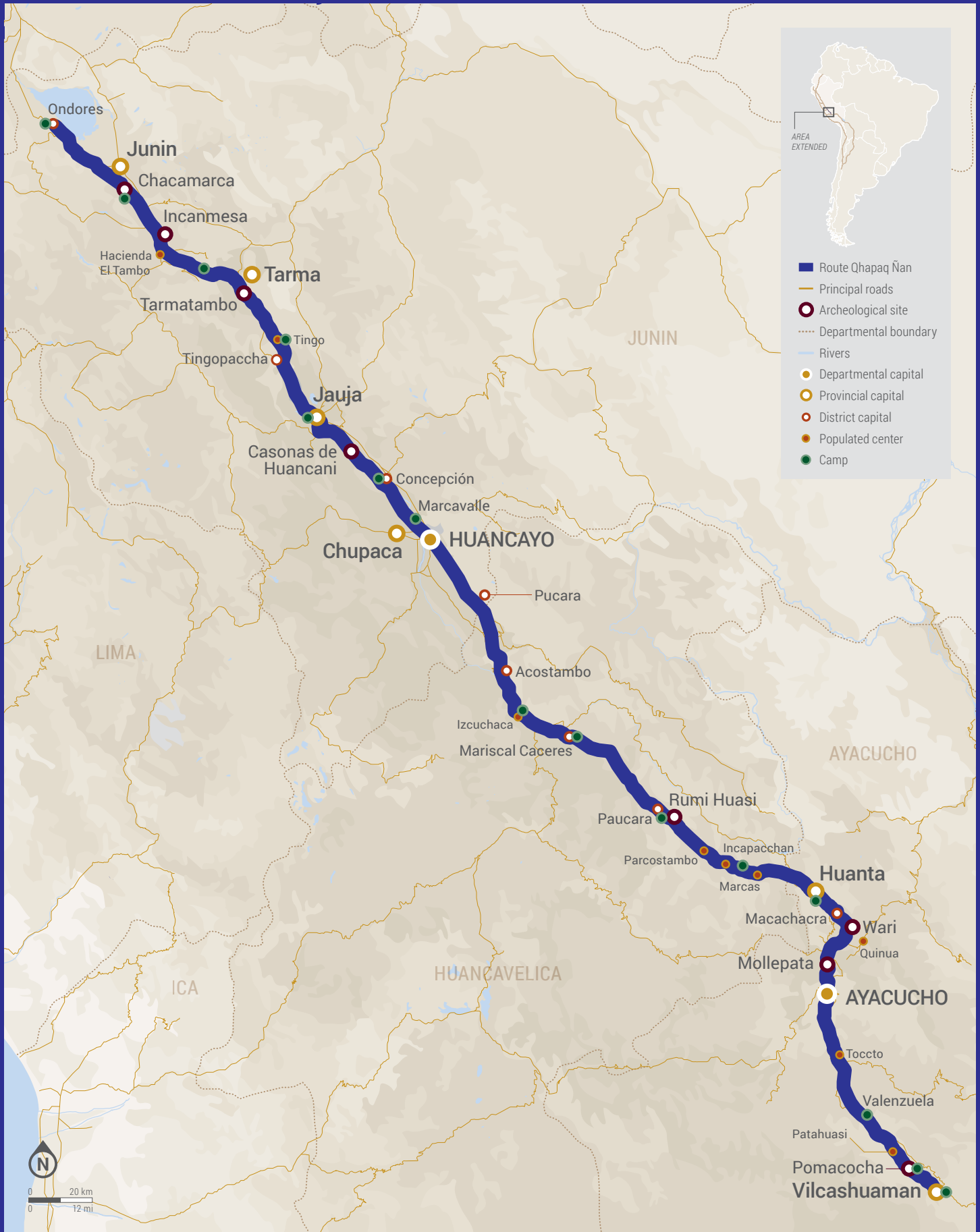
By now, the cold, dry Andean winter had really set in. Trekking on a section of Inca road that would consistently stay between altitudes of 12,000 and 15,000

feet, our nights were equivalent to sleeping in a walk-in freezer.

We also had to pass through the major Andean cities of Huancayo and Ayacucho – each containing almost a million people in their metropolitan surroundings. Much of the modern central Peruvian highway tracks the Inca road – allowing one to understand how contemporary Peruvian society has been shaped along the same transport and communication lines that defined the Incas. That said, we knew better than to bring our llamas into cities where taxis fight buses for rule of the road: in both Huancayo and Ayacucho we loaded up the team to cross from one side of the city to the other.

**Everywhere else in between was  
a world forgotten by modernity  
along a royal road to Oz.**









## The Cusqueños are back

Today was a changing of the guard for the expedition. Our support crew from Canrey Chico in Huaraz went home after a dedicated month on the trail, and Flavio, Valentín and Alipio are back after spending a month at home in the Sacred Valley in Cusco. But not before we walked 20 miles from last night's camp at Quiulacocha to the Inca ruins at Pumpu.

The llamas and donkeys that have been with us are also going home. Now, our *llamero* friend Tito (from last year) with his 10 llamas will take us from here to Jauja and onward. The team as it now stands, with the addition of John, is the same as when we trekked from Jauja to Antioquia last December, passing the great Inca steps of Pariacaca.

Today we've arrived to the shores of the massive Lake Chinchaycocha in Junín. We are in a different world now with pink flamingos feeding amongst thousands of other birds on the Andean lake. We will continue southward along its shore from Ondores, before arriving to Tarmatambo and Jauja over the next week.

## When the team doesn't walk

Inevitably there are days when we don't do much walking at all, and instead rest our bodies, catch up with life... And, if it's a big enough town, enjoy a cold beer (or five).

On days when we're not walking, John stays busy tracking down municipal authorities, town elders or anyone else with useful information on local Inca roads. I'm always amazed by the people and information he digs up. He's possessed with the history of the Qhapaq Ñan and the related archeological sites. Flavio and Alipio, on the other hand, hit the market early for food supplies while Valentín tends to the animals and their associated gear. I stay busy balancing the accounts, coordinating logistics with our team in Lima and sending off content like this story.

In the end, it's not much of a day off after all, but a necessity to avoid going too fast and losing an expedition wheel in the process – whether it be a llama or a human team member. And so is our purpose today, as we rest in Ondores overlooking Lake Chinchaycocha, camped in a local bullfighting ring, getting ready to hit the road again.



The tough and talented support team from Canrey Chico who has been with us for a month. From left to right Antonio, Eder, Rolando, Robert, Juan and Percy.



The team stands atop the steps of the *Ushnu* at Pumpu.



The monument at Chacamarca that commemorates the battle of Junín.

**But instead of 8,000 troops, we arrived with 10 llamas, two horses and seven tired hikers looking for a good place to camp.**

## Chacamarca and the battle of Junín

It took nearly 300 years from when Francisco Pizarro and his marauding conquistadors landed in Tumbes for Peru to gain its independence from its European overlords. And even then, Peru's independence from Spain was more an act of taxation and control by the white Peruvian aristocracy, than it was a return to Inca times and increased rights for indigenous populations.

Peru's war of independence in the early 19th century often happened along the great Inca roads. It was still the principal transportation infrastructure at the time, and therefore the preferred route of both the Spanish and Peruvian armies. One pivotal battle – the first Peruvian victory and a turning point for anti-Spanish sentiment – took place at the *pampa* of Junín in Chacamarca.

In August 1824, Simón Bolívar, the George Washington of South America's wars of independence, was traveling south on The Great Inca Trail with 8,000 soldiers to cut the retreat of the royalists (those fighting on the side of Spain) towards Cusco. In the ensuing battle, the royalists fled, dropping their weapons and suffering a defeat they would never recover from.

Today we arrived to Chacamarca on the same road as Bolívar. But instead of 8,000 troops, we arrived with 10 llamas, two horses and seven tired hikers looking for a good place to camp. It was a day in which we were reminded that The Great Inca Road was pivotal not just in Inca times but also during the colonial period.

## Our very own “llama train”

After more than three months and 1,500 miles walking south on The Great Inca Trail from Cuenca to Cusco, we've encountered quite the variation of paths. Today, though, was the first time that we actually travelled on train tracks with the llamas... Our very own llama train.

From the *pampa* at Junín, The Great Inca Road disappears under a modern highway and railway line



LEFT - Our llama train. | TOP RIGHT - Our frozen camp upon waking up. | BOTTOM RIGHT - Finally getting off the train tracks, we caught the Great Inca Trail towards Cochabamba.

that run parallel to one another. We walked the entire first half of the day with our llamas on the tracks. Only by mid-afternoon – after 13 miles on the tracks – did we finally get a glimpse of the Qhapaq Ñan veering off from the tracks and disappearing into the high *puna* towards the town of Cocha.

By the time we got to a suitable camp with water and grass for the animals, it was getting dark and really cold. At 14,000 feet, the temperature dropped below 15 degrees Fahrenheit, freezing everything: the tents, the water and nearly the team. After shivering my way through last night, I've realized that we will need some more blankets to get us through the cold dry winter of the high Andes as we make our way to Cusco.

## The Tarmeños of Tarmatambo

We woke up to what was essentially a walk-in freezer at 14,000 feet – only with pretty mountains all around

us. Thankfully the bright hot sun began to penetrate the camp at 7am, thawing life out. After weeks of being immersed in nature's choreography, you understand why the Incas worshipped the sun above all other deities. I almost got on the ground with my coca leaves and started chanting myself, so relieved was I at the sun's arrival.

From camp at Tierra Blanca, The Great Inca Trail continues towards Cochabamba before dropping to the Tarma River. It's then a climb around a big mountain to the hillside Inca citadel of Tarmatambo. The main plaza of the Incas is now the town's soccer stadium, with terraces rising from three directions.

We tracked down the mayor, Valerio Felix, who was a welcoming Tarmeño, receiving us with his Qhapaq Ñan hat and giving us permission to camp on the field. He proudly boasted of the importance of Tarmatambo in the Inca Empire as he showed us the town's *Inkawasi* (Inca house), wonderfully preserved with some of its original plaster over the stones.

## Just another day on The Great Inca Trail

If there was ever a routine day on The Great Inca Trail, today might have been it. For half the day, we had a beautiful 20-foot-wide trail, mixed in with a few kilometers of pavement. A llama went swimming in a head deep pool of water, complete with a tent and first aid kit on its back. The weather was good, the animals were fast.

John separated from the team in the morning and sleuthed around Huaricolca to visit the small museum there and find local archeology. As he often does, he quickly befriended the local expert and ended up eating potatoes and seeing a purported 10,000-year-old cave painting. The *arrieros* and I were making miles, getting to camp at El Tingo while the sun was still up. John's always the team's reminder to slow down and explore the surroundings, and he only reappeared at dinner.

Those of us who got to camp earlier, dried out the tents, had tea, ate popcorn, talked with the neighbors and sunbathed before the freeze... Just another routine day on The Great Inca Trail.

## Jauja and Xauxa

From El Tingo, The Great Inca Trail continues above the modern highway until Acolta, where it disappears under the fields and houses of the growing town. From there we walked on a mostly dirt path that travelled parallel to the highway until arriving at Jauja, a major waypoint in our journey.

Modern Jauja – spelled Xauxa when referring to the Inca city and administration center that preceded it – is a small but bustling city in the Peruvian Andes. Jauja also marks the beginning of one of the most important transversal Qhapaq Ñans that passes the great Inca steps of Pariacaca en route to the coast at Pachacamac. It was this westerly route from Xauxa that played a big role in Inca Pachacutec conquering the cultures on the Peruvian coast near modern-day Lima.

Going back 2,000 miles in this book you will find our team's exploration of this transversal Inca Road, where we finished in Antioquia with Tito and his llamas from Tanta. This year in Jauja though, it's all about the longitudinal Inca Road from the northern Inca capital at Tomebamba and its southerly march down the center of the Andes to Cusco.



John hikes the Great Inca Trail as it overlooks the modern highway.



## Peru's first capital

Hatun Xauxa, as Jauja is known in Quechua, was a critical administration center of the Inca Empire. When the Spanish sealed the conquest of Peru by taking Cusco in 1533, Francisco Pizarro, named Santa Fe de Hatun Xauxa (Jauja) Peru's first capital. Only in 1535 did Peru's capital move to Lima whose proximity to the port of Callao facilitated easier exportation of Inca gold to Spain.

Today, Jauja has a population of approximately 20,000 people. It's a welcoming place, an hour from the much larger city of Huancayo which is home to nearly a million people. While Huancayo overshadows Jauja in size and economy, the municipality of Jauja works hard to promote and uphold its cultural heritage through tourism. In fact, officials from Jauja and the neighboring district of Sausa have teamed up with the Ministry of Culture to hold a ceremony to launch a new archeological project on the Qhapaq Ñan that will coincide with our departure tomorrow.

As usual, John sleuthed around city hall, meeting local officials and letting them know about our expeditions. Tomorrow we'll be bringing the llamas and team to the ceremony, serving as an example that there really are

people from faraway places who can see value in The Great Inca Trail beyond its use as a good place to plant crops, or a convenient supply of flat stones to build a house.

## Long-distance trekking in Peru

The community of people who engage in long-distance trekking on the Qhapaq Ñan is really tiny. Today in Jauja at the ministry event in Sausa, I met Felipe 'Chaski' Varela, one of a handful of people who have immersed themselves in the world of the Qhapaq Ñan for more than 15 years. We've heard Felipe's name in many villages along the route, being one of the few people that have passed before us.

The others include Megan Son, who in 2006 walked the Inca Road with Laurent Granier from Ecuador to Chile over two years - nearly twice the distance our expedition will trek in 2017. Sebastian Jallade and Simon Dubois who independently walked thousands of miles of Inca Road, and El Caminante, Ricardo Espinosa, whose map we are following. This group, as well as John Leivers, my walking partner for 95 days now, is possibly the sum total of everyone who has continuously walked thousands



Officials from Jauja and Sausa hold a ceremony to kick off a new project along the Qhapaq Ñan, and to coincide with our visit.



**TOP** - Nick's birthday party on the trail.

**BOTTOM** - A beautiful stretch of Inca road dropping into Ñahuimpuquio.

of miles of the Andean road network in contemporary times. Maybe there are others, but two years of preparation and more than 2,000 miles of walking on the Inca Road, show no evidence of anyone else.

When compared to the Pacific Crest Trail that goes 2,600 miles from Mexico to Canada and is completed by more than 700 people every year, The Great Inca Trail is virtually unknown as a long-distance trekking route. I'm convinced the future will bring others who will come to explore the road over months and years. And in doing so, increase its use as a pedestrian and animal byway and promote its preservation... When a road is not used, it disappears...

## Trucking on through Huancayo

From our camp at Concepción next to the railway tracks, the city of Huancayo begins to absorb the small towns into its sprawl. To avoid bringing our llamas and horses into the dangerous melee of traffic and urban life, we put them all on the back of big truck with the gear and drove them across town. We landed on the other side in Pucará, where we ascended the Inca Trail to Marcavalle in the afternoon.

We camped on the *pampa* in front of city hall, that was also the main avenue of the small town. Half its residents must have come by to stare at the llamas and watch us set up camp. One woman brought a big bag of local potatoes and young children ran amongst the tents.

From Marcavalle, you could see Huancayo's sprawl covering the vast Mantaro Valley below. We were glad to be along the Inca Trail outside of the hustle and bustle of the city. And since it was my birthday, we decided that we were going to drink a bottle of *Pisco* to celebrate. It was a joyous night in Marcavalle.



A beautiful stretch of Inca road dropping into Nihuiquipico.

## The Great Inca Trail has reappeared

We woke up to a freeze and a bit of a headache after the cheap *Pisco* from the night before. John who was the only one who'd abstained and gone to bed early was chirpy as ever, synchronizing his compass as the sunrise crested over the mountains. Regardless, we stayed on schedule, finishing breakfast by 7am and walking by 8am.

We weren't expecting much regarding the quality of preserved Inca Road, but we were completely blown away by a truly monumental section. Within a few hours of leaving Marcavalle, after ascending from Pazos, we encountered a 20-foot-wide road that drops 400 feet in a series of well-preserved Inca steps. It then shoots across the large *pampa*, just west of Ñahuimpuquio to Acostambo.

At Acostambo, the Inca Road begins its descent to Izcuchaca at the Mantaro River, which is where we've set up camp for the night. First thing in the morning we will descend into the canyon so we can climb out back to higher elevations by the afternoon. We will continue the climb for a few more days, reaching one of the highest points yet on our 2,000-mile expedition on The Great Inca Trail.

## Old roads under new

The Great Inca Trail from Acostambo to Mariscal Cáceres starts as a wide grassy road leaving town on what was clearly the main thoroughfare until the modern highway was built above. I couldn't help but remember a recent trip down Route 66, which has been superseded by the building of Interstate 40 in the southwest United States. Instead of abandoned gas stations and roadside attractions, the Inca Road leaving Acostambo was lined



Looking down at Mariscal Cáceres after climbing the first 1,500 feet. We climbed another 4,000 the rest of the day.

with older, abandoned homes and used only locally by pedestrians and animals. The new car highway is now where the commercial and human activity clusters.

For our expedition, it was smooth walking for most of the morning until Casma, where the Inca Trail disappeared under the pavement in a narrow canyon with only space for one road. So, we walked the rest of the day to Mariscal Cáceres on the highway, imagining the Inca stones below us.

The route passes through Izcuchaca, a quaint town with the best preserved colonial bridge we've seen. Besides the pavement and dodging big trucks with the llamas, it was a nice place. Upon arrival, the mayor let us camp on the town's athletic fields and the grass was decent for the animals.

## Up, up up... into the high Andes

From Mariscal Cáceres, The Great Inca Trail goes straight up... All day long. From the Mantaro River, we climbed 5,500 feet over 15 miles to the pass at 15,000 feet where we set up camp. I feel like I did back in April when I was just acclimatizing to the trek and we were slogging through steep valleys in Ecuador. Today was eight hours of intense hiking.

The llamas are happy with their Ichu grass and cold weather. Aypate and Charon Ventanas, our two horses, are calm and docile as always, nipping at the roots of the shrubby grasses. Flavio is busy in the cook tent with Alipio, chopping away at vegetables. Tito and his son Cero are pasturing the llamas. Valentín climbed across the *puna* to go talk with a local *campesino*, making sure we've checked in with the neighbors. John did his daily freshening up and is now reviewing the maps and metrics on the Inca Road forward... And I'm tired, writing this summary for the day.


We're in the middle of nowhere, with temperatures dropping to freezing soon. But we have Huayno music, good food and a warm place to sleep along The Great Inca Trail. Life can't be that bad...



John in all his splendor.

**From Mariscal Cáceres,  
The Great Inca Trail goes  
straight up... All day long.**





**Aypate the horse was as important as every human on the expedition and walked 100 days from Ecuador to Cusco, Peru.**



The Great Inca Trail near Paucara.





Valentín leading the team in a *despacho* (payment to the earth ceremony) at the start of the day.

## A great day for a feast

Why humans celebrate multiples of 10, I can't say. For our team though, 100 days and more than 1,500 miles trekking since we started this expedition in Tomebamba, Ecuador is more than enough reason to have a feast. And conveniently for us a *campesino* was butchering a fresh alpaca right along the road. We purchased an entire rear loin, along with fresh alpaca liver, heart and kidneys that will all go into a big alpaca soup. And because we had an excuse, we bought a bottle of rum to go with it all.

In contrast to the hellish ascent yesterday, the Inca Road today was a gentle downhill that bisected the paved road to Acobamba for much of the day. We passed Paucar in the early afternoon, arriving to another tiny community 20 miles southeast of our camp at the pass last night.

So, here's to 100! To 100 days retracing the Qhapaq Ñan, one of the most important and beautiful roads of pre-industrial man... And to fresh alpaca soup!

**100 DAYS**

## Becoming part of the parade in Choclococha

Leaving our camp near Paucar in the adobe ruins of an old home, we ascended to Tori Rumi. Here we missed a critical fork to the east that takes The Great Inca Trail through Rumi Wasi and Parcostambo, and instead met back up with the main Inca Road at Incapacchan. We had dropped to Acobamba and reached Incapacchan through Choclococha.

When we arrived to Choclococha, the entire town and surrounding schools were having a marching band parade with hundreds of children, locals and officials. The llamas' arrival created quite a stir with the kids, who rushed over to see an animal they rarely, if ever, have seen in real life. Once they'd done marveling at the llamas, the crowd directed their amazement at the ragtag band of humans from different parts of Peru and the world.

Valentn spoke Quechua with a crowd of old ladies who descended upon him, curious of his traditional hat from Cusco. At 6'4", I was nearly twice the size of almost everyone, and found myself surrounded by dozens of school children curiously studying me, rushing to take pictures of me with their phones. It was all quite a spectacle for everyone involved.



The marching band at Choclococha.

## Into the lower altitudes

From camp above Incapachan, the llamas decided to take a midnight stroll, disappearing into the dark. It took Tito and Valentín an hour of crossing mountains at 5am the next morning to find them. Whatever happened on their escapade, they pranced back into camp looking content. We still managed to pack camp and load the gear for a 7am departure.

The Great Inca Trail then climbed for two hours to a high pass above the village of Marcas, before descending to the Huarpi River en route to Huanta. The descent that reached as low as 7,000 feet was long and hot, with the vegetation going from the grassy Andean *puna*, to a prickly desert of cactus and shrubs. It didn't help that the road was destroyed, causing our team to rather take the longer and curvier route down the paved highway to reach the river.

And so it goes for The Great Inca Trail when we're not amongst the safety of the remote and high Andean *puna*... The Inca Road is frequently destroyed and ceases to exist. The Incas always preferred higher altitudes for their road, where the climate was cold and dry... We do as well.

## Looking back

It's been nine days since we left the *pampa* at Jauja, arriving to Huanta at the doorstep of Ayacucho for a rest and resupply day. Ayacucho is yet another major milestone on our march south to Cusco and an important city in the story of Peru.

Ayacucho, a city that sprouted after the Spanish conquest, is the capital of a region that was home to the great Chanka culture who fought and eventually lost to the Incas in an area neighboring Cusco in 1438. It was a major turning point for the imperial ambitions of the Incas and the historical debut of Pachacutec, the valiant Inca prince who fended off 40,000 Chanka soldiers invading Cusco. Following the wars with the Chanka the Incas would continue their expansion, consolidating their power along the entirety of the Andes for the next century until the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in 1531.

Even today, in contemporary Peru, old rivalries between the Chanka and Inca people come to the fore in the debate between archeologists from Ayacucho and those from Cusco. The great clash of Andean civilizations in the 15th century is still working itself out, only now it's in how the history is recorded.

## Revolution and terror

As the expedition team takes a rest and resupply day in Huanta near Ayacucho, we have time to reflect on another important story in this part of the Qhapaq Ñan... It's a story of political ideology, revolution and terrorism along The Great Inca Road. The Shining Path, a Maoist communist movement founded by former philosophy professor Abimael Guzmán, first took hold at the San Cristóbal de Huamanga University in Ayacucho in the early 1970s.

This contemporary struggle, the latest in a series of political and social insurgencies that sought to redress the significant inequalities that 300 years of colonialism and modern economic structures had nurtured. What started as a political movement turned into a decade of murder and conflict on both sides of the political spectrum. When Abimael Guzmán was captured by the government of Alberto Fujimori in 1992, 70,000 Peruvians had died at the hands of the Shining Path and responses by right-wing militias and the military.

At the height of the conflict, terror and violence gripped Ayacucho and its surrounding regions; searing a scar in Peruvian society and politics from which the nation is still recovering.

**Even today, in contemporary Peru, old rivalries between the Chanka and Inca people come to the fore in the debate between archeologists from Ayacucho and those from Cusco.**





## Remembering a beautiful stretch of Inca Road

As in Huancayo, the idea of bringing the animals into the melee of traffic and city life at Ayacucho was a dangerous prospect. Instead, we loaded all the animals, humans and gear into a truck and covered the 25 miles or so of modern life in Ayacucho by vehicle, landing in Toccto on the other side.

The Great Inca Trail at this juncture follows the modern central mountain highway through Peru very closely. This means that we have to tolerate more pavement and more population centers... If there is any consolation, it does mean there's more cold beer en route...

## Pomacocha and Dutch kids

Waking up at camp to another beautiful clear and crisp Andean sunrise at Valenzuela near Manallasacc, the neighbors greeted us with a tub full of thick vegetable soup and a big bowl of boiled potatoes, eggs and local cheese. It was a welcome change to the standard oatmeal and bread breakfast we have on most days. After an

extended goodbye with our new friends, we departed for the religious and ceremonial center at Pomacocha.

For the first half of the day, The Great Inca Trail ran below the modern highway before crossing the Vischongo River just after lunch. From here we climbed to Patahuasi, catching the transversal Inca Road that comes from the coast... It was the same trail we had taken last year from Vilcashuamán to Huaytara, just heading in the other direction. We arrived to Pomacocha from above, so enjoyed incredible views of this important Inca site which sits next to a blue lake and is bordered by an Inca wall that spans nearly 1,000 feet.

We set up camp next to the lake, alongside 40 Dutch high school students of all things! They were on a school trip working with street kids in nearby Ayacucho and had come to Pomacocha as a side trip to learn about the culture and history of the region. It made for a bit more noise than we've been used to recently, but was a worthy reason to share such a beautiful place.

**John Leivers** | Andean Explorer  
*Great Inca Trail team*

**We arrived to Pomacocha from above, so enjoyed incredible views of this important Inca site which sits next to a blue lake and is bordered by an Inca wall that spans nearly 1,000 feet.**



Pomacocha's fine Inca stonework in ruins.



**LEFT** - The Inca leaders during the ceremony in ruins. | **TOP RIGHT** - The temple at Vilcashuaman.  
**BOTTOM RIGHT** - The changeover of relay runners during the *chaski* race at Vilcas Raymi.

## Vilcashuaman bound!

After the Inca Pachacutec conquered the Chanka, he established Vilcashuamán as a major administrative center in the heart of his enemies' territory. Pomacocha complemented Vilcashuamán in the same way that the many religious temples do around Cusco. Pomacocha also serves as a gateway to Vilcashuamán along the transversal Inca Road that connects to the coast from Huaytara to Chíncha, an important route of pilgrimage and conquest.

The Inca stonework and architecture at Pomacocha are some of the very best, with many similarities to Machu Picchu. It's said that Pachacutec was responsible for the building of both during the second part of the 15th century. Pomacocha was one of the most important temples, and Vilcashuamán one of the most important Inca cities. The fact that our expedition passed through Pomacocha on its way to Vilcashuamán would have pleased the Incas.

Our arrival to Vilcashuamán also marks Peruvian Independence Day tomorrow and a weekend of festivities known as Vilcas Raymi – a smaller version of the Inti Raymi festival at Cusco. We're looking forward to two days of music, *chaski* races and celebrations of Inca and Peruvian culture.

## Running like *chaskis* on Peru's Independence Day

Today is the 196th anniversary of Peru's independence from Spain. A day when Peruvians of all colors, both rural and urban (and even a few adopted Peruvians like me) celebrate Peru! And what better way to celebrate than to have a *chaski* race across the Andes on an original Inca Road...

Every year, during the Vilcas Raymi festival at Vilcashuamán, the municipality sponsors a *chaski* race. The *chaskis* were the relay runners who sprinted across

an empire connected by more than 25,000 miles of road. The *chaskis* were so efficient that they could deliver live shellfish wrapped in seaweed all the way to Cusco, 500 miles from the coast. The *chaskis* were part of the Inca Road infrastructure, and the ones who knew it best.

So, after a night of festive libations, Flavio, Alipio, Tito, Cero and I gathered the required team of five, under the banner “*Chaskis of Huilloq*”, and entered the race. There were 18 teams, mostly made up of local kids in their early 20s who looked like marathon runners. Flavio and Alipio, having raced on the Inca Trail in Cusco before, were our only veterans. We were all nursing hangovers, but we had a reputation to uphold as our team was the only one that showed up to the party after walking 1,500 miles on the Inca Road. These kids looked fast though, and the eight-mile course that started at 12,000 feet and crossed several mountains was a daunting prospect.

Alipio started out on the first stage, taking the lead for most of it before vomiting from exertion. Tito, a slightly overweight *llamero* in his forties took stage two, before having cramps and walking his mileage, losing any lead gained by Alipio. Cero took stage three, arriving in last place to stage four where I took over. I had a good 500 meters of sprinting before I just about passed out and started walking, accepting our position of being last to avoid a heart attack. I passed the stick to Flavio, who ran the final two-mile stage. Meanwhile a following ambulance picked me up and we tailed Flavio until the plaza at Vilcashuamán.



**When the action started, the high Inca priest took one llama to the ground to sacrifice. He then took a golden knife and began the sacrifice with a real llama heart on hand for effect. Our llama was a bit confused by his acting role, but he was eventually untied and reunited with his pack that had been watching this spectacle with Valentín.**

We finished in last place, upheld our manhood (kind of) and were reminded to never again race a 20-year-old local marathon runner across the Andes... Viva Peru!

## The llamas and Valentín get their first acting role

Vilcas Raymi is an annual three-day festival that centers around an Inca reenactment at the Inca sun temple in the main plaza that is now topped with a Catholic church. The terraces and stonework on the lower half are stunning, bearing many similarities to the Koricancha, the most important of all sun temples in Cusco. The day is a significant production, with hundreds of locals dressed as Incas, drums, fires and a battle scene. The main plaza fills with a thousand spectators, mostly local tourists from nearby Ayacucho.

As we had 12 llamas grazing at the *Ushnu* nearby, the municipality decided to commandeer them for the show. Valentín put on his Sunday best and brought the llamas through the Inca warriors and onto the stage as a plaza full of people looked on. Valentín fitted right in with the show, with his hand-woven poncho and traditional hat, proudly gazing into the horizon.

When the action started, the high Inca priest took one llama to the ground to sacrifice. He then took a golden knife and began the sacrifice with a real llama heart on hand for effect. Our llama was a bit confused by his acting role, but he was eventually untied and reunited with his pack that had been watching this spectacle with Valentín.





The Inca priest lifting a real heart with our llama acting as the sacrificial llama.



# Vilcashuamán to Cusco

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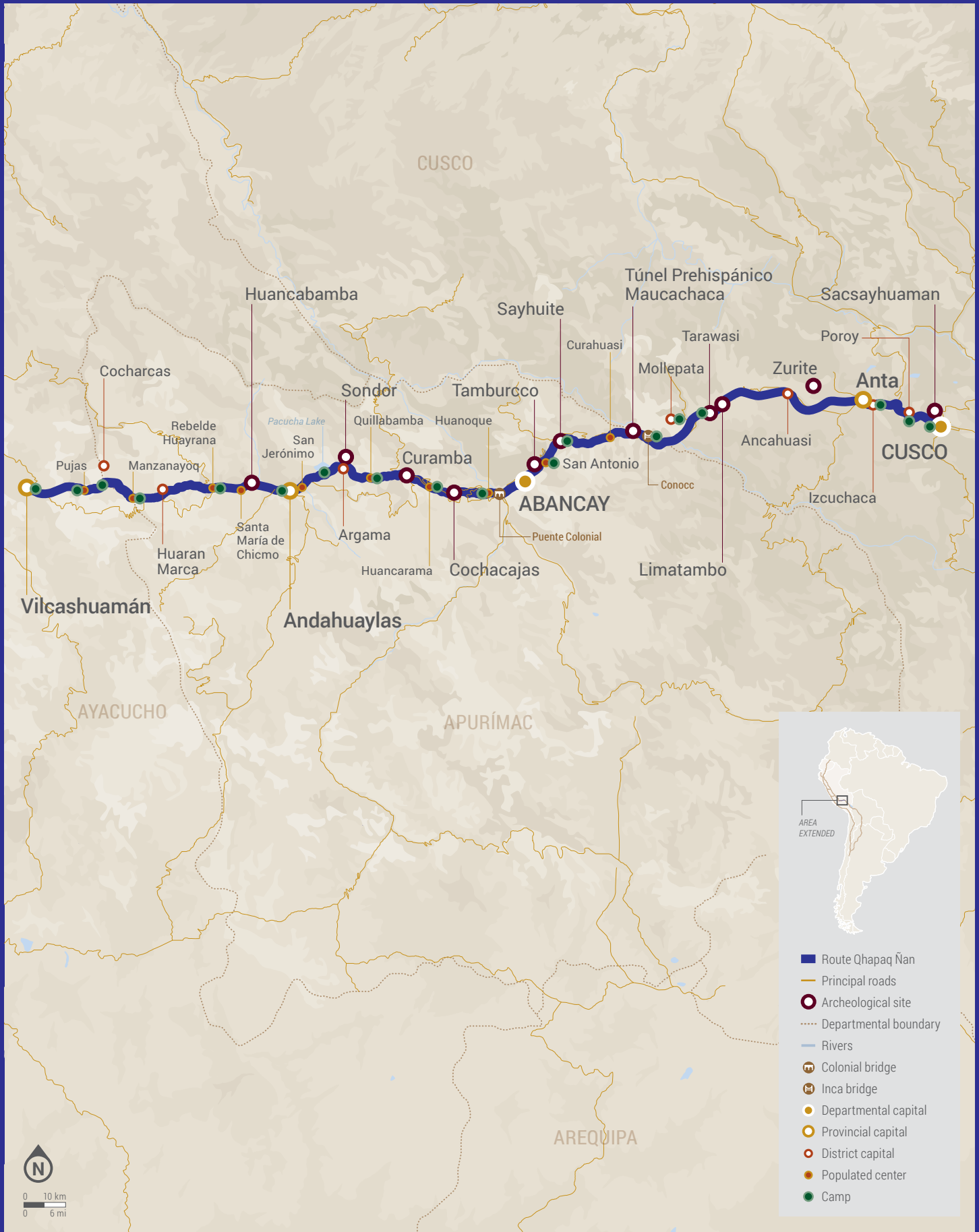
After more than 100 days walking, we were only three weeks away from our destination! We began to think more concretely about what it would be like to arrive in Cusco as a team – ragged, but in top spirits. Antonia the *llamera* from Tanta would be accompanying us as well, replacing her cousin Tito and bringing a fresh team of llamas.

While many of us had celebrations on our minds, John continually reminded us not to underestimate the massive canyons, raging rivers and teeming cities between us and Cusco. It was advice well heeded... We nearly lost Flavio to the Pampas River, we got lost in the Apurimac Canyon, and we lost our horse Charon Ventanas off a hundred-foot cliff, loaded with gear.

At the end, though, it was indeed a celebration. First as a team during the final days, and then with the wider community. Our expedition culminated when we passed through the arch of Tika Tika – the ancient gateway to the Inca road – and into the main plaza, accompanied by the llamas and throngs of friends, strangers and city officials.

It was Antonia's (and the llamas') first visit to Cusco. But, in truth, it was new ground for all of us. We had brought a llama train from the distant reaches of the Inca Empire for the first time in hundreds of years. We had proved that it's still possible to walk between the two capitals of the Inca empire, from Cuenca to Cusco, with the animals and descendants of the Inca people.

**Our team was filled with  
gratitude and relieved to have  
a little break from walking!**









The Inca road leaving Vilcashuaman.

## Time to get back to work

After two days of *chaski* races, reenactments, concerts and even dancing to big brass bands in the plaza, it was time to get back to work and commence our last three-week push to Cusco on The Great Inca Trail. The Inca Road from Vilcashuamán goes east to Cusco, after following a mostly southern trajectory for the last 1,500 miles.

Our journey from here heads towards the Pampas River where we will pass into the Apurímac region which neighbors Cusco. Today we walked the same Inca Road that we traversed two days ago in the *chaski* race, making it to Pujas at the start of the descent to the *pampas*. From here we drop 3,000 feet tomorrow morning before crossing the river with the llamas and no bridge.

Let's hope the water is not too high...

## Crossing the Pampas River

We've had weeks of discussion about crossing the Pampas River. It's the biggest crossing without a bridge on our four-month expedition. No bridge means the humans, animals and all our cargo need to cross on foot, without being swept downstream. If we weren't

able to cross, it would mean a four-day detour... We had to find a way.

We fought spines and cactus the entire way down the canyon from camp at Pujas, until eventually reaching the banks of the river where we lunched and considered our next steps. John and I tested a few hundred meters of accessible river looking for the best place to cross, getting a full picture of what we were up against. The water level was high, rising all the way to my chest... And I'm almost a foot taller than most of the rest of the team! Antonia and Fidel, our newest *llameros* from Tanta can't swim and the 12 llamas are not very taken by water. Along with our camp, tents, and sleeping bags, we also have computers and telecommunications equipment that can't be lost.

I took the tallest horse Sharon Ventanas across first with the most important cargo, arriving after a short swim through the deepest middle section. Going back, we put Antonia, our *llamera* who can't swim on our riding horse Aypate, before doing the same with Fidel, while John walked across with Flavio and Alipio. Now only the llamas, Flavio and most of our cargo remained on the other side. John, Flavio and I began to herd the llamas across from where they huddled in the rapids. John was



Chest deep in the Pampas River.

pushing the bundles on their backs through chest deep water as I reached for the bells tied to the leader and began to pull from the other end. Right when we started to make progress, one llama jetted back to where we'd come from with Flavio chasing him down the playa.

Eventually we got 11 llamas across, soaking all the cargo in the process, and Flavio managed to catch and bring the escapee back to the shore. I had to put his cargo on my back as he was no longer going to carry, and we eventually herded him across after a brief swim. This left only Flavio - one of the shortest in the group - on the other side. I waited at the deep section 15 feet below him in case the rapids took him down... which is exactly what they did. He lost his footing and went under, flailing his arms and gasping for air in a panic. After a gulp or two of water, he arrived downstream to where I was, allowing me to grab him and walk to the other side. He was shaken, but okay and we had all crossed the Pampas River.

## Manzanayocc's first *gringo*

During Inca times, a hanging bridge made of braided Ichu grass spanned the Pampas River at a place called Incachaca, a few miles downstream from our water crossing. The bridge covered a distance of almost 200 feet, making it one of the longest spans of any Inca hanging bridge. Today, we find only scant foundations of a stone colonial bridge that was built over the site sometime later.

From Incachaca, we climbed from the depths of the Pampas River, 3,000 feet up to the town of Manzanayocc. It was spiny, hot and straight up with a team of llamas and *llameros* who were struggling most of the way. At Manzanayocc, we were greeted by a small town of a hundred or so people who were amazed at the sight of our arrival.

By their accounts, I was the first *gringo* to have ever passed through the village. They were nonetheless very friendly, bringing gifts of potatoes and fava beans and spending the sunset hours sharing stories and visiting our team in the rustic main plaza.

## Robert and Daisy join us for the day

Manzanayocc turned out to be an excellent place to camp with friendly locals and plentiful grass. In the morning, we were also joined by our friends Robert and Daisy, who we met earlier on The Great Inca Trail, back in Vilcabamba almost three months ago.

They are the trekking legends who have hiked thousands of miles in the Andes over many years. They are also the authors of *Trekking in Ecuador*, *Trekking in Peru* and the Footprint guidebook *Cusco and the Inca Heartland*. Their arrival was a wonderful surprise, and it was great to share a day of camaraderie with others who have experienced thousands of miles of hiking trails in the Andes.

Departing from Manzanayocc, we weaved up and down for most of the day, walking perpendicularly through a series of narrow valleys, arriving to the town of Rebelde Huayrana for camp. It was another eventful day of friendly locals and lots of local delicacies given as gifts en route.

## Arriving to Andahuaylas

We've completed our first five-day stretch from Vilcashuamán, reaching the provincial capital of Andahuaylas. Vilcashuamán marked the beginning of the last three-week section of our four-month journey along The Great Inca Trail. From here we resupply and continue east to Abancay and eventually Cusco.

The trail from Rebelde Huayrana was hard to find in the morning with car roads and modern life mostly erasing it. By the afternoon, we finally found a decent trail that showed many signs of the Qhapaq Ñan. That lasted until we reached Talavera, where urban life and the sprawl of Andahuaylas began. Bring on a hot shower!



Robert regales the local children.





The team eating *mashua* (a Andean tuber) gifted by a local in Rebelde Huayrana.

**Their arrival was a wonderful surprise, and it was great to share a day of camaraderie with others who have experienced thousands of miles of hiking trails in the Andes.**



**TOP** - The sign marking Sondor.

**MIDDLE** - Antonia, our *llamera* from Tanta in the middle of her llamas at Andahuaylas.

**BOTTOM** - The full-time expedition team. From top left Nick, Valentín, John, Flavio and Alipio below in the middle.

## Turning our sights towards Cusco

A sense of finality has begun to seep into the expedition that has occupied every thought for the last four months. From today at Andahuaylas, where we are taking a rest and resupply day, we're exactly two weeks' hike away from the Plaza de Armas in Cusco – the very center of the entire Inca world.

John, Flavio, Alipio, Valentín and I are each – in our own way – beginning a transition back to a life that does not consist of walking all day, and nearly every day across the Andes on The Great Inca Trail from Cuenca to Cusco. When we get there, we will be left with a few more bits of wisdom and a deeper appreciation of the complexity and massiveness of the Andes and its people.

In this spirit, I leave a parting video of our crossing at the Pampas River a few days back that was captured on John's GoPro.

## The shores of Lake Pacucha

We left Andahuaylas, a bustling town on the verge of a small city, in a direct line through the center of town. Townspeople of all types came as the strange sight of llamas weaved through moto taxis and traffic. After our morning of urban trekking, we caught the Inca Road at San Jerónimo to the pass towards Lake Pacucha.

After stopping for fried pork and corn beer mid-morning, we dropped to the lake and a grassy shore which is also a perfect camp. The grass was so soft and the scene so relaxing that almost everyone napped before we started to pitch the tents.

Lake Pacucha is an important body of the water in the middle of Chanka country, the culture that was conquered by the Incas in 1438. Therefore, surrounding this sacred lake are archeological remains of both cultures. The Inca citadel at Sónдор overlooking the lake is the most impressive of all and we can't wait to explore it tomorrow.



The Chanka and Inca site at Sónдор in Andahuaylas.

## The blending of the Chanka and the Inca

We awoke to the light crashing of waves on the shore of Lake Pacucha, as Flavio prepared eggs and fried plantains for breakfast. It was a peaceful start to a day where John and I departed early for the ruins at Sónдор, while the rest of the team packed up and met up with us again mid-morning.

The ruins at Sónдор are one of the best examples of Chanka infrastructure being adopted and integrated into the Inca world after the former's conquest. In fact,

you get a sense from the locals maintaining the site, and the phrase “Nación Chanka” that is inscribed across the mountain, that locals view it as more of a Chanka site than an Inca one.

Regardless of whether your loyalties are with the Chanka or Inca, it's an impressive site with circular terraces and a grand staircase through the center. Its views towards the Amazon on one end and Lake Pacucha on the other, accentuate the architecture as if it was all one canvas. It's a spectacular ancient citadel and another example of the multiculturalism practiced by the Inca, incorporating the vanquished into their empire.



**Its views towards the Amazon on one end and Lake Pacucha on the other, accentuate the architecture as if it was all one canvas.**

## We want to keep the Qhapaq Ñan alive

The Great Inca Trail is a living road. It's a testament to the strength and durability of a civilization that began to form 5,000 years ago in Peru. It's a road that traverses one of the highest and most unforgiving mountain ranges on the planet.

On the 118th day of our expedition, a day when we climbed from the depths of the Pincos River, 3,000 feet straight up to the town of Huancarama, we sign off exhausted but exhilarated.

*¡Vivan los Andes y viva El Qhapaq Ñan!*

## More ups and downs

From Huancarama we lost the Inca Road for most of the morning before cresting the pass at Sotapa and taking in the sprawling views of the city of Abancay below. The geography has intensified significantly of late, meaning we've had to ascend big mountains and descend river valleys on each day's walk for almost a week. Today followed this trend with a steep drop towards the Pachachaca River during the afternoon.

Abancay, the capital of the Apurímac region, while sometimes overshadowed by its regional neighbor, Cusco, is an important city of the Peruvian Andes. And it's a big and bustling enough city that we will need to load the llamas into a truck to avoid ensnaring the animals in dangerous traffic.

Before we do that, though, we've camped in Huanoque above the colonial bridge across the Pachachaca, which lies at the same spot as its Inca predecessor. We've rented the front yard of a house with sufficient grass and fresh water in preparations for tomorrow.



The Inca *Ushnu* at Curamba above the town of Huancarama.



The lights of Abancay at night.

## Our last city crossing

Promptly at 9am, we loaded the llamas and our horse, Aypate, into a truck for the 10-mile pavement crossing of the city of Abancay, landing in the suburb of San Antonio on the other side where the Inca Trail begins its climb over the next pass. We'll be using the school's grass field here as a temporary headquarters to rest and resupply for our last nine-day stretch to Cusco.

John and I also visited the municipality of Tamburco, a district whose roots go back to the Inca *tambo* there, which is now enveloped by Abancay. We were looking for any information on local archeology and the Inca Road we could muster, and found ourselves in a small third floor office, staffed by three helpful civil servants who took us to the local Inca *Ushnu* at a site called Moqo Moqo.

They had recently restored the site for tourism in the past month and were just as excited as we were about the visit. Theirs was a small but important act towards the conservation of the Inca corridor and we were glad to serve as proof that people will come from afar to experience it.

## Conservation of the Qhapaq Ñan

On a day of rest and resupply in Abancay, with only a few days left of this journal, I'd like to take a moment to reflect on how conservation and understanding of the Qhapaq Ñan can play a pivotal role in contemporary society in Peru and beyond.

For example, the thousands of potato varieties that are still grown along the route constitute a genetic treasure trove that can help the world adapt to climate change and increased populations by the development of more efficient strains of tubers. Governments realize this and are working to capture Andean ecosystems by establishing potato banks in order to save and store this genetic material.

Peru's ecosystems can also give pride to a new generation of Peruvians to whom traditional lifestyles are a distant memory. The Peruvian chef Virgilio Martínez Véliz combs Peru with a team of researchers and displays the country's incredible diversity in a series of dishes that represent the different elevations of Peru. His 17-course menu has placed him, his restaurant Central, and Peru at the very top of the world's food scene. One of the pillars of his work is his attempt to restore traditional methods and ecosystems through taste and experience.

The Qhapaq Ñan was built to aggregate different cultures and practices in a vertical world into one system of production. It's a skeletal system that lets us look back at humanity for 5,000 years in western South America.

**The Qhapaq Ñan was built to aggregate different cultures and practices in a vertical world into one system of production.**



The carved stone at Sayhuite.





The team looking out towards the region of Cusco across the Apurímac.

## Views of Cusco

From San Antonio the Inca Trail ascends 4,000 feet to the pass at Soclaccasa. By lunchtime, we were at the top and taking in our first views of the Cusco region, the Apurímac Canyon and a handful of important *Apus* (mountain deities) along the Sacsarayoc range. It was a moment that signaled the beginning of the end, 122 days after we started.

The moment we cross the Apurímac River the day after tomorrow, we will officially be in Cusco. It will then be seven days until August 19<sup>th</sup>, after passing the plains of Anta and entering the city of the same name, through the Tica Archway, down Calle Saphi and to our finish point in the Plaza de Armas.

But before we do all that, we still have some stunning Inca sights and road ahead. We reached camp today after dropping from the pass to Sayhuite, the home of an enigmatic Inca stone monolith. Many experts believe the Sayhuite monolith is a representation of the entire Inca Empire known as Tawantinsuyu, with animal figurines representing the different regions from the coast, Andes and jungle. There has never been anything else like it found anywhere in the Inca world.

## Into the depths of the Apurímac Canyon

It wasn't long after we started the day's walk that a local drunk in Sayhuite commandeered our expedition, claiming he was going to be our guide to Curahuasi. I was a little wary at first, but he proved himself sharp as a tack when it came to finding the Inca Road.

We descended to Curahuasi by lunch, filling our bellies before continuing down to the river in search of the Inca tunnels and the old Inca bridge site at Maucachaca. The descent was steep and difficult for the llamas, and we only reached the river as the sun was going down. Nevertheless, we were determined to push on through to the hot springs at Conoc, an hour down river.

When we arrived, we found ourselves in the middle of the Saturday rush with hundreds of local people cramming into the hot baths and tents everywhere. We were a little unprepared for the crowds, and thankfully found a beach with grass for the animals on the outskirts of the premises. And since it was a Saturday night and we were feeling good after 20 miles of walking, we quickly joined the party too.





## Hot, buggy and lots of pavement

Having to cross the Apurímac with 12 llamas and Aypate, the horse, left us with no other choice but to endure an entire morning of paved highway to cross on the only bridge at Puente Cunyac, in the process officially entering the region of Cusco. It was a momentous transition that we celebrated with papaya, generously given to us by the fruit vendors we had passed.

In the afternoon, we left the highway on a dubious dirt road that supposedly climbed to Mollepata, which would allow us to reconnect with the Inca Road that we had abandoned to reach the Conyac bridge. We had to climb 3,000 feet in the afternoon sun with thick bugs attacking any open skin and a road that wound around the mountain like a slinky.

In the end, we never did make it to Mollepata, finishing another 20-mile day with the sun going down and us still a few hours away from our goal. Tomorrow we continue with a full day's climb, setting our sights on Limatambo, where things will eventually flatten out until Cusco.



Eating papaya before crossing the Cunyac Bridge over the Apurímac.

## Into familiar territory

Nearly every full-time member of the expedition team has a long history in Cusco. Flavio, Valentín and Alipio are from the Sacred Valley, having spent their entire lives in the region around Huilloc. John has spent 25 years exploring and studying Peru with Cusco as his base. When I arrived to Peru 12 years ago, Cusco was my landing place, where I spent many formative moments learning about the Andes, dedicating myself to the history and culture of the Andean world. If there is any common bond geographically between the five of us who have walked The Great Inca Trail since we left Ecuador on April 14<sup>th</sup>.. Cusco is it.

As such, with our team arriving to Limatambo today in the region of Cusco, we were all met with familiar places and geography that we've experienced on many occasions before. After 125 days in remote and unfamiliar lands far from what we know, there is a certain relief that comes with being here.

Nonetheless, it was another tough day walking here from Mollepata... Fighting our second pissed off beehive since Cuenca, Ecuador and braving lots of spines, pavement, and steep drops. It's all been worth it, though. We get to camp at Tarawasi, the Inca site above Limatambo and home to one of the most beautiful Inca walls anywhere in the empire. We're all counting the days – five to be exact – until we arrive to the Plaza de Armas in Cusco!

## Our last rest stop

In four more days, we arrive to Cusco. Today we're taking our last rest and resupply day, going through routines that we have been religiously following for months for the last time. One which I won't miss is the actual accounting of the expedition... Every purchase, from a roll of cheese to propane gas, must be accounted for with an accompanying receipt. There are literally hundreds of them that must be meticulously



LEFT - John looking at the map with a local near Mollepata. | TOP RIGHT - Mollepata and its burgeoning tourism routes.  
 BOTTOM RIGHT - The high status Inca platform at Tarawasi.

entered into a spreadsheet and shared on the digital cloud. It's a long way away from a bag of gold chips and a handwritten expense log that an expedition would have used in the 18th century.

Our tents and equipment, after four months along The Great Inca Trail, are pretty worn. John has gone through two sets of tent poles, in the last week alone. The expedition is battered, but in good spirits and excited about our arrival to Cusco. Not to mention the fact that we won't have to walk anymore...

We'll be arriving to the center of the Inca world, at a finish point that is also the pinnacle of its society. It's like having walked for 1,500 miles from Constantinople through the Byzantine Empire, to arrive in Rome and behold its massive monuments to western civilization.

**If there is any common bond geographically between the five of us who have walked The Great Inca Trail since we left Ecuador on April 14<sup>th</sup>... Cusco is it.**



LEFT - The Great Inca Trail between Tarawasi and Killarumiyoc. | RIGHT - Political banner in Ancahuasi.

## How we share the Qhapaq Ñan with the world

From Tarawasi at Limatambo, we went straight up for 5,000 feet, finally leaving any sign of the Apurímac Canyon after spending five days dropping into it and climbing out again. Today was our last major ascent after four months of ups and downs on The Great Inca Trail. Tonight, we're camped at Killarumiyoc in Ancahuasi and will be arriving to the plains of Anta tomorrow before reaching Poroy and Cusco the days after.

With only three days left on our expedition, I thought it would be fun to share some behind the scenes logistics as an example of how technology has facilitated sharing and capturing daily life on The Great Inca Trail for the last 127 days.

Besides some guest appearances with more professional photographers in the north, most of this journal's photography was done on an iPhone 7. This links up easily to the iPad (in a wireless keyboard case) on which I write my daily stories. We've got a BGAN 510 wireless satellite modem for when we're totally off the grid, and a few cell phones to capture local data carriers which serve as wireless modems at a fraction of the cost of the

satellite. Add in a few good battery chargers and we can share some of the most remote and rugged parts of the planet in real-time, daily with you.

## On the doorstep of the Inca capital

From last night's camp at the interpretation center at Killarumiyoc in Ancahuasi, we departed on the Inca Trail toward Izcuchaca, which surprisingly had signage of the Inca Road en route to Zurite. It's been one of a handful of short sections over 1,500 miles on The Great Inca Trail in which an effort has been made to help trekkers follow the trail... A surprise for sure, and a signal of an increased focus on tourism in the Cusco region.

Killarumiyoc and Zurite, the two Inca sites which the signed trail connect, are impressive in their own right. Killarumiyoc has a large carving of a half-moon shape in a massive rock, alongside a temple dedicated to water. Zurite, just five miles down the trail, boasts a massive set of Inca terraces that occupy most of a mountainside. We can feel we're getting closer to the Inca capital city of Cusco from the level and quality of Inca architecture since we crossed the Apurímac.



LEFT - The intricately carved stone at Killarumiyoc. | RIGHT - Government signs marking the ruins at Zurite.

Tourism is massive in and around the city of Cusco and Machu Picchu – which brings with it some downsides. But there is no doubt that the improvement in social indicators and infrastructure overall in the region is being driven by economic activity from outside visitors. Maybe one day The Great Inca Trail will help distribute the intensity and economic benefits of tourism to other parts of the Andes beyond Cusco and a larger swath of Peruvians?

## Our last camp

Tomorrow is the day we complete our 130-day journey on The Great Inca Trail. We will walk from the municipal stadium at Poroy up to the Tica Tica Arch, entering Cusco and making our way down to the Plaza de Armas. We will make the final walk with dozens, if not hundreds of others who will join us on our public walk to promote the conservation of the Qhapaq Ñan.

Since our departure from Cuenca, Ecuador on April 14th, our experience on The Great Inca Trail has changed all of us in some way. It's been the adventure of a lifetime, walking the spine of the Andes along one of the greatest ancient roads of mankind.

I hope that this humble journal, that was only able to scratch the surface of our daily adventures and the complex archeology and routes of the Inca, has inspired a new generation of explorers and protectors of this great road. Because as mankind it's imperative that we don't forget or lose the physical remnants of our past that will guide us into the future.

**It's been the  
adventure of a  
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the greatest ancient  
roads of mankind.**









The delegation from Huilloc in full regalia for our arrival to Cusco.

## Our arrival to Cusco

From our camp at the stadium in Poroy, the expedition departed for its final time en route to the Plaza de Armas in Cusco... And to celebrate our journey's completion, we were joined by more than a hundred friends, family and local officials.

It was a grand sight to behold as we climbed up The Great Inca Trail that ascends to the Tica Tica Arch. The arch signals the official entrance into Cusco and is a sacred place where tributes and ceremonies were made for pilgrims entering the capital during Inca times. It is said that as late as the 1960s, people would bow and take off their hats when entering Cusco through the arch.

For the expedition, it was a profound moment, despite the news cameras scurrying about, as Valentín prepared and offered a payment of alpaca fat wrapped in coca

leaves to the *Pachamama*. We had been humbled by the power and massiveness of Mother Nature, and it was time to pay our respects.

From the arch, we dropped into Cusco, reaching Calle Saphi where we walked our last 1,000 feet along a street lined with people holding Peruvian flags and blowing conch shells. When we entered the main plaza and the very center of the Inca world, the crowd swelled with curious onlookers taking pictures of us as we hugged all those important to this grand adventure.

We had realized a dream of walking The Great Inca Trail across the Andes for 130 days... An adventure that has forever changed us, and we hope, the future trajectory of one of the most important roads of pre-industrial man... the Qhapaq Ñan!



Nick, Valentín, and John stand below the arch that forms the entrance to Cusco.







John takes in a long drink of *chicha* to celebrate the team's arrival.

**We had been humbled by the power and massiveness of Mother Nature, and it was time to pay our respects.**



**TOP RIGHT** - Nick is interviewed by local news in Cusco. | **BOTTOM RIGHT** - José Pedraza of Lima Tours greets the team in the central plaza of Cusco.







# Choquequirao to Espíritu Pampa

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It had been almost exactly one year since our expedition team was last on the Inca road together. Until this point every thought had been consumed by the preparation and execution of our 130-day expedition on the Great Inca Trail.

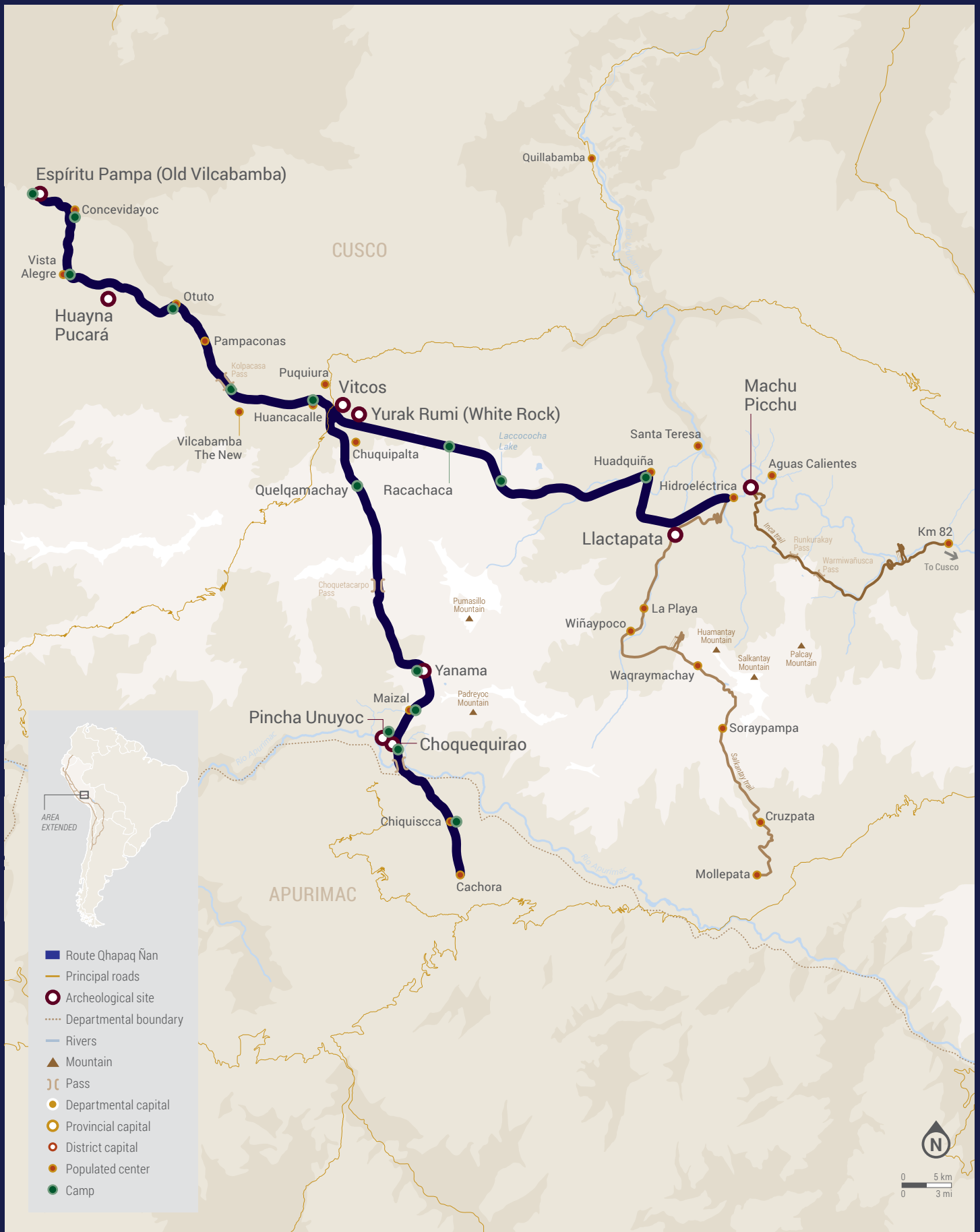
We now had to pause to ask ourselves several questions. Should we keep walking? Where should we go next? How many Inca trails are really left? And what defines an Inca Trail versus a smaller Andean walking path that may or may not have been built by the Incas?

The first place we would attempt to answer these questions was in the Vilcabamba, the last refuge of a neo-Inca empire that held out in the jungles north of Cusco for thirty-six years while the Spanish ruled in Cusco. The Inca roads in Vilcabamba are some of the most impressive on the continent, but development and

disuse are threatening their existence. Yet, as will be shown, there are dedicated efforts by the government, archeologists and communities to prevent more dire outcomes. The Inca roads in Vilcabamba also hold incredible tourism potential, being within a day's drive of Cusco, the gateway to Machu Picchu.

Flavio, Valentín, John, Kevin and our new *arrieros* Henner and Artemio were excited about our latest venture. We would spend nearly a month, tracking and sharing the rich and important history and patrimony of the region. And because we were covering less ground and were better versed in the logistics of getting daily stories out, you might notice that our dispatches were more focused than before. We had evolved from a team focused on the singular goal of getting to Cusco, to one that was dedicated to exploring – and sharing – all the Inca roads that emanate from Cusco.

**The *Apus* were calling, and we were far from done with our journey!**







## Vilcabamba... The last refuge of the Incas

When the Spanish conquistadors walked into the defeated Inca capital of Cusco in 1533, they quickly installed a new indigenous leader, Manco Inca, to rule on their behalf. The Spanish campaign down The Great Inca Road from Cajamarca in the months prior had seen the previous Inca king Atahualpa executed, and his rival brother Huáscar, the other potential Inca heir, dead in the ensuing chaos. Manco's crowning, however absurd it may seem today, gave the Spanish a sense of legitimacy in their actions. Yet Manco's fury and shrewdness would interrupt their convenient plans.

Manco, the grandson of the great Inca leader Huayna Capac, quickly learned that he was a puppet in the grander scheme of the Hispanisation of South America. He found himself at the cruel and fickle whims of the marauding Spanish, with the last straw being the theft of his favorite wife Cura Ocllo by Gonzalo Pizarro, the younger brother of Francisco Pizarro. By 1536, Manco would gather a rebel army of 200,000 soldiers and lay siege to his own capital of Cusco, which the Spanish now occupied.

While he held the high ground for six months, attacking the city from above at the fortress of Sacsayhuamán, he eventually came to realize that his rebellion would need to establish a new capital, that was protected from the Spanish invasion by glacial mountains and the high

Amazonian jungles. With the remaining treasures of the Inca Empire in tow, he would lead a band of hundreds of thousands of his followers into the Vilcabamba, establishing capitals at Vitcos and later at Espiritu Pampa, the final refuge of his conquered people.

Manco, and later his three sons, would rule a neo-Inca state in the high jungles of southwestern Peru for 36 years until eventually in 1572 the youngest and last of the brothers, Túpac Amaru, was captured and taken back to Cusco to be executed.

This is the tale that we will unravel for the next 25 days as our team of modern explorers retraces the steps of the final Incas of Vilcabamba. It's a new chapter in a story that has brought some of the most fantastic discoveries of lost cities... From the Yale historian Hiram Bingham who rediscovered Machu Picchu to explorer Vincent Lee, who in the 1990s finally put to rest without a doubt the location of Espiritu Pampa.

Is there more to the story? What else might still be waiting to be discovered in the Incas' final refuge?

## Choquequirao in the distance

Choquequirao sits in a mountain cradle overlooking the mighty Apurímac River. It's this same river canyon that we found ourselves descending to our first camp at Chiquisca. Tomorrow we will cross the Apurímac River and then do a grueling five-hour climb up to the Inca citadel.

**Is there more to the story? What else might still be waiting to be discovered in the Incas' final refuge?**

Today was also the first day in nearly a year that our Great Inca Trail team is back together on the road as a unit and it feels good. John's happy to be in familiar territory, having explored the Vilcabamba religiously for the last 17 years. In contrast, to our 130-day expedition last year where almost every day contained an unknown stretch of Inca Road, our route over the next few weeks will be one that John knows better than almost anyone in the world.

Kevin the drone pilot, archeologist and photographer who joined us for 30 days on The Great Inca Road is back too. He's been exploring and guiding trips on the stretch from Choquequirao to Machu Picchu for six years and is as excited as the rest of us to have some sense of what to expect in terrain. Kevin's pictures will accompany much of my words over the weeks ahead – a great assist for me and good news for you too.

Flavio our cook and Valentín our team's Quechua uncle are back too, managing camp logistics. We walked 100 days together last year on the Inca Road and are by now like a well-oiled machine. Hener and Artemio, our two *arrieros*, are new additions to the team. They came recommended by Kevin, who works with them on the Choquequirao to Machu Picchu route.

Your author, having spent much of the last year not in the mountains, is ecstatic to be back... Especially because we're en route to Espíritu Pampa, a place I've been dreaming about since I first arrived to Peru in 2005 as a 24-year-old backpacker... It only took 14 years to finally make it happen.

And so, we are off on an adventure into the deepest parts of the Vilcabamba, to the last refuge of Manco Inca's jungle empire. As Rudyard Kipling urged Hiram Bingham in 1909, there was "Something hidden. Go find it. Go and look beyond the Ranges – Something lost behind the Ranges. Lost and waiting for you. Go!"



**TOP** - Hener Huaranca leads the horses onto the trail at Capuliyoc.

**MIDDLE** - John points out the trail from Chiquisca.

**BOTTOM** - The bridge over the Apurímac.

**“Something hidden. Go find it. Go and look  
beyond the Ranges – Something lost behind  
the Ranges. Lost and waiting for you. Go!”**

RUDYARD KIPLING







The team's camp at Choquequirao.

## Ascending to an Inca citadel in the clouds

Choquequirao has gained in popularity in recent years because it's seen as the sister city to Machu Picchu... albeit without the crowds of its sibling. This new-found popularity has meant 50 people per day embark on the relentless and unforgiving 5,000-foot climb from the Apurímac River to camp next to the ruins.

Like Machu Picchu, there is no evidence that the Spanish ever visited Choquequirao during their initial conquest of Peru. As John Hemming explains in his book *The Conquest of the Incas*, the first mention of the site came in 1768 when Cosme Bueno mentioned "a new attraction in Vilcabamba".

For much of the 19th century, Choquequirao was thought to be the last refuge of the Incas due to the important 17th century Spanish chronicle of Antonio de la Calancha who wrote that the last refuge was "Two long days march from Puquiura and this distance would include Choquequirao". It wasn't until 1909

(coincidentally the year Bingham arrived to the site) that Peruvian historian Carlos Romero, who had recently studied the newly discovered chronicle by Titu Cusi (Manco Inca's son), argued that Vitcos was the last refuge of the Incas with Choquequirao being merely an outpost in the Vilcabamba state.

As can be seen, understanding Choquequirao's role in Inca history can be tricky. What's important is to realize that Choquequirao was the focal point of centuries of explorations in the fabled search for the last refuge of the Incas. For our team in 2018, we therefore are merely visiting Choquequirao on the way to the real last refuge of the Incas deeper in the Vilcabamba.

But for now, we're enjoying a world-class view peering into the abyss of the Apurímac Canyon accompanied by Flavio's world-class Andean gastronomy. For many years there has been a distinction between explorers and Martini explorers and I've started to accept that at times our team falls into the Martini category... with Pilsen beer instead of Martini. In fact, I think now is just the time to earn that title and bring today's correspondence to a close.

## The Inca Ruins at Choquequirao

Choquequirao is a magical place that elicits from deep within a sense of wonderment that borders the supernatural. Even 500 years after the Incas built it in order to facilitate religion, trade and satisfy their cosmivision, it still astonishes its visitors. Like all classic Inca architecture, it's built with and is part of the natural landscape. For the Incas, the landscape was meant to accentuate their stone buildings, terraces and plazas... It was an integral part of their grand design.

The Yale historian Hiram Bingham first captured a glimpse of the Vilcabamba region while visiting Choquequirao in 1909. On the same visit he learned, from Carlos Romero in Lima, that the last refuge of the Inca lay deeper in the jungle at a place called Vitcos. When he returned to the United States, he was inspired to raise funds and launch the Yale Peruvian expedition of 1911 in which he later re-discovered Machu Picchu.

Choquequirao lies at one edge of the Vilcabamba overlooking the Apurímac River, much like Machu Picchu which overlooks the Urubamba from the opposite edge. Both citadels, along with Espiritu Pampa, emanate from the central point of Vitcos like spokes on a bicycle. Together they consisted of a network of Inca centers in which a neo-Inca state could exist in relative security, hidden by roaring rivers, steep ravines, glaciated mountains and dense cloud forest.

Vincent Lee, one of the most prolific explorers of the Vilcabamba, posed the possibility that the network of roads that emanate from Vitcos mimic that of Cusco – only on a smaller scale in their new jungle capital. This theory has been shared by John, ever since he made his first explorations to Vitcos and Espiritu Pampa along the Inca roads in 1994.

Our visit today to Choquequirao began with cloudy mists that crept up a sector of terraces that is one of the most unique and impressive in the entire known Inca Empire, The Llama Sector. The terraces depict 25 llamas and

their *llamero* formed from white stones against the most impossible slope. This served as an ornate entry point for an Inca Trail that curved around the mountain from Pincha Unuyoc, our camp tomorrow night.

After visiting the llama terraces, we proceeded to the ceremonial platform with a panoramic view of the entire Apurímac Canyon. It was our turn to pay respect to Mother Earth and the mountain deities (*Pachamama* and *Apu* in local speak), led of course by Valentín, the one most connected with the traditional ways of the Andes. Valentín wrapped vicuña fat into coca leaves with other offerings and interred it into the ground. We have a long hike ahead of us and we hope that the mountain deities are satisfied with our offering and will grant us safe passage on our journey.

We might be needing their protection sooner rather than later, considering Kevin's daredevil plan to walk out to the end of a nearly 360-degree perch beyond the *Peligro Farallón* (Danger Cliff) sign. I got vertigo just watching him, but the pics should be worth it...



John points out the unique zigzag design in the terraces at Choquequirao.



The llama terraces at Choquequirao. Once one of the main entrances to the site, they were lost under vegetation until 2004.



The Inca royal palace at Choquequirao.



The team attempts to scramble up a steep hillside near Pincha Unuyoc.

## Pincha Unuyoc - The suburbs of Choquequirao

Going straight up from the main plaza of Choquequirao following the Inca canal takes you to a high trail that goes back down the other side of the mountain during the course of a half-day walk to Pincha Unuyoc, a satellite sector of Choquequirao. In fact, the entire backside of Choquequirao is one massive hillside of 500-year-old Inca and pre-Inca terraces covered by thick growth.

Pincha Unuyoc, translated by Valentín from Quechua, means “The place with a little bit of water”... Which makes sense, as the Inca spring here at the fantastical set of Inca terraces is the only water source on the entire mountainside. The view from our camp of this Inca bath is dominated by the imposing jagged green slopes of Wiracochan mountain. It’s a place that envelopes you in a remote Andean world.

En route to Pincha Unuyoc, John inspired everyone (besides Hener and Artemio who continued on with the mules) to go off trail and search for the old Inca Road. A far-off Inca construction that could be seen on a razor thin saddle in the distance was a logical marker of where the road probably passed. So, with Flavio and Valentín leading the way, we went off into the bush.

The thing with searching for evidence of ancient humans in Peru is that it this evidence is everywhere! Large-scale civilizations in Peru began at the same time as those in Mesopotamia and the Nile Delta, about 5,000 years ago: the human footprint throughout the country is dense and goes back thousands of years. Almost anywhere you look that has not been bulldozed over by modernity, you will find roads, buildings and platforms of ancient man.

As expected, the team quickly encountered Inca terraces hidden under the jungle and even what Valentín described as a *T’oko*, a small stone enclosure that served as a shrine of sorts. Our destination was the temple looking structure that we saw from the trail, which we eventually got to after literally rolling and holding onto



The team takes in the view from way above the ruins of Pincha Unuyoc.

the mountain to get there. And when we did, it was well worth it... Seeing one of those Inca-inspired panoramas in which their architecture is only complete with the surrounding nature.

At the end of the day, we felt that we had earned Flavio's dinner of *Lomo Saltado* (Classic Peruvian beef and potato dish), by exerting ourselves beyond the normal walking path in search of a Vilcabamba still hidden in the jungle. After all, John had spotted the Inca trail clinging to the cliff, we did all reach the temple, and no one got seriously hurt. It was a good day.

## The search for the last refuge of the Incas... Vilcabamba

Hiram Bingham's expedition in 1911 was guided by the then recently re-discovered 17th century Spanish chronicle of Antonio de la Calancha. De la Calancha described in specific detail the locations of the principal

Inca citadels in the Vilcabamba... Citadels that were the core of the breakaway rebel Inca state during the Spanish conquest, and a place that withered into history following 1572 when the Spanish captured the last Inca, Túpac Amaru.

With this knowledge and new roads to transport rubber from the jungles, Bingham managed to re-discover Vitcos, Espiritu Pampa and Machu Picchu within a month between mid-July and mid-August 1911. Due to the circumstances, coupled with his drive to find the fabled last refuge of the Incas, he managed to do what no explorer for the previous 300 years had achieved. The question now... Was Vitcos, Espiritu Pampa or Machu Picchu the final capital of Manco Inca?

Due to Machu Picchu's stunning visual impact, coupled with some erroneous archeological work at the time and some mis-reading of De la Calancha's chronicle, Bingham determined that Machu Picchu was the location of the final refuge. He was wrong, and it was another







nearly 50 years before another American explorer by the name of Gene Savoy decided he knew what no one else in the world did at the time... Espiritu Pampa, deep in the jungle visited by Bingham for only two days in 1911, was the true final refuge of the Incas of Vilcabamba.

We'll get back to Gene Savoy later in our expedition, as we hike deeper towards Espiritu Pampa. Tomorrow we cross the 13,500-foot San Juan Pass, leaving the Apurímac and passing into the Yanama Valley. Our *arrieros* Hener and Artemio are from Yanama, which will also conveniently be our next resupply stop.

For now, our team is camped in the small two-house village of Maizal, on the side of the mountain that looks back at Pincha Unuyoc. We spent the entire morning descending to the Rio Blanco 2,000 feet down and back up 4,000 feet on steep and relentless switchbacks. Maizal is part of a dispersed and largely covered ruin complex known as Coriwayrachina. The site was first excavated by National Geographic Explorer Peter Frost in 2001, who also led later expeditions across the river in which our photographer/archeologist Kevin and our *arriero* Artemio both participated.

So, with the afternoon off, Kevin and Hener took John and me up to see a few complexes that didn't require a repeat of going off the trail like yesterday's adventure. We reached a set of terraces and stone constructions that Kevin says likely goes back 800 years, prior to the Incas' arrival in the valley. It was a reminder that the mysteries of the Vilcabamba are still being uncovered and seemingly will be for a long time more.

## Arrival to Yanama

Last year when our team trekked the Inca Road from Tomebamba (modern-day Cuenca) to Cusco over 130 days, I never got sick once. Now only seven days into this year's exploration, a painful fever and weakness has taken over me. When all I wanted to do was settle into a comfortable bed with lemon and honey tea, while watching re-runs of Anthony Bourdain, I had to climb a nearly 14,000-foot pass. So immediately upon arriving to our destination of Yanama, I stripped down to my skivvies and passed out in my tent for much of the afternoon. Tomorrow we have to climb another steep canyon, Qelqamachay, so I'm on mountain bed rest and forced to pass on the first cold beer in five days... What luck.



The ruins of Coralpata.



**LEFT** - Nick and John take in the view from the San Juan Pass. | **RIGHT** - The team's camp in Yanama.

Yanama is a small town of about 60 families, where we've set up camp at the home of our *arriero* Hener. The resupply vehicle from Santa Teresa has not arrived (no surprise there) and we're crossing our fingers that it gets here for our morning departure. In the meantime, Hener's wife Maribel is cooking us *cuy* (guinea pig) roasted on a stick with some local potatoes and Flavio is using up the last of our food supplies. We even have some basic electricity in town, which means Kevin and I can charge all the batteries for our modern gadgets and this story can go on.

In two days, we reach the next big pass at Choquetecarpo, rising 15,000 feet and crossing the glaciated divide from the Apurímac watershed to the Urubamba. For those that have been reading these reports since we began, you might remember that the Vilcabamba region is surrounded by these two great rivers with mountains reaching 20,000 feet in the middle. It was precisely the inaccessibility of the region, which led Manco Inca after his rebellion against the Spanish conquest, to take refuge here and create a neo-Inca state that lasted 36 years.

The topography was also the reason that it took almost 50 years after Hiram Bingham's visit in 1911 for

Gene Savoy to revisit Espiritu Pampa and consider its importance. Gene Savoy was a controversial character, accused of being a looter and shunned by the archeological community in Peru. He even went on and formed his own religion based out of Reno, Nevada for the last 20 years of his life.

Regardless, his astute reading of 16th century Spanish texts and his observations in Espiritu Pampa of curved roofing tiles that imitated Spanish architecture, among other clues, were enough to cause academics and explorers the world over to turn their focus away from Bingham's Machu Picchu as the final refuge of the Inca... And instead to seek out a lost and covered Inca city in the low jungles. Savoy's work and thesis on Espiritu Pampa was captured in his defining book *Antisuyo: The Search for the Lost Cities of the Amazon* published in 1970.

When he explained the thrill of hacking the jungle away from Inca building after Inca building in Espiritu Pampa, he wrote, "*An excitement has taken over, an excitement that only discovery produces, an intoxicating feeling!*"

Let's just hope my feelings go from fever to intoxication when we arrive in Espiritu Pampa.



Nick descends an Inca stairway with the high pass of Choquetecarpo in the distance.



Valentín walks on a raised section of Inca road in the Choquetecarpo Valley.

## Into the valley of the Incas at Choquetecarpo

The trail from the Yanama River ascends 3,000 feet up the Choquetecarpo Valley, turning into an Andean wonderland. Above 11,000 feet, the Inca Road becomes visible as it typically does in the higher elevations with Inca *tambos* and water temples along its path. No matter how many times you do it, hiking into a place like this always feels like the first time.

After walking for most of the day, we arrived to camp at Qelqamachay just below where the Inca Trail begins to traverse the last ascent under the snow to the 15,000-foot Choquetecarpo Pass. The native Queñual forest that lines the edges of the valley, creeps up into the seams of the rock cliffs, giving texture to a scene that takes you back 500 years.

Unusaminchana, the name given to the Inca water temple on route, is translated by Valentín as, *Unu*, meaning water and *saminchana* meaning to adore or worship. By the looks of the canals and two-sided Inca bath below a large spring, Valentín's translation seemed right on point. Valentín explains further that it was a place to give offerings designed to coax a plentiful season of water for agriculture. In fact, Valentín performs similar ceremonies at a shrine where he lives above the Sacred Valley near Cusco. While the Inca Empire is gone, many of its traditional practices live on in its Andean descendants.


The Inca Road was spectacular in a few sections, reminding us of the importance of the route between Choquequirao and Vitcos as key Inca citadels in the Vilcabamba. The size and construction of Inca roads always matched the importance and scale of the Inca centers they connected. Vitcos was the heart of Inca Vilcabamba prior to the Spanish conquest.

In fact, Manco Inca's initial plan after the siege of Cusco and his retreat from Ollantaytambo in 1536 was to set his capital at Vitcos. But the Spanish sent 300 cavalry and foot soldiers to pursue Manco and his army, crossing the Urubamba River and marching up the Vilcabamba Valley, invading Vitcos and sacking the rebel capital. With Manco on the run, they took with them a bounty that included gold, women, herds of alpaca and llama and Manco's own son Titu Cusi. The Spanish believed that they had quashed Manco's rebellion for good.

However, Manco was resilient, and began a plan to muster an army once more, traveling north on the great road towards Chachapoyas, where some chiefs had offered him exile at what was most likely the stone fortress of Kuélap. In the end, he decided to stay closer to Cusco and build his new capital four days' march from Vitcos, deeper into the jungle at Espiritu Pampa with friendly tribes as allies.

Our expedition will arrive in Vitcos in two days, following Manco's exodus to Espiritu Pampa after that.





**No matter how many times you do it, hiking into a place like this always feels like the first time.**

## Her name is Choquetecarpo

Mountains are like lovers: each one engages your senses in a way that can never be repeated with any other. After 3,000 miles of walking Inca roads in the last three years, I've been seduced again by yet another glaciated peak and the otherworldly Inca Road that penetrates through its heart.

Her name is Choquetecarpo, and it is one of the most beautiful stretches of Inca Road anywhere in the Inca Empire. From camp at first light right below the snowy 15,000-foot pass, we departed on a trail of Inca stones, supported by retaining walls up to 10-feet high. The curves of the Inca Road softened the intensity of the ascent and the surrounding geography. The Inca engineers of 500 years ago, were bestowing their brilliance upon our team of ragtag explorers who were in awe all morning.

Our photographer and drone pilot Kevin couldn't stop clicking away at every turn that unveiled another angle, another view that couldn't be missed. Flavio and Valentín, who at times are not as excited as the *gringo* Inca Road geeks they accompany, burst out with chants... "Qhapaq Ñan jefe!" ("Qhapaq Ñan" means Inca Trail in Quechua and *jefe* means boss).

Our *arrieros* Hener and Artemio picked up the back, donning their sunglasses for the reflective snowy

stretch just before the pass. John, the only team member besides Hener and Artemio to have walked this stretch before, was the proud mentor, enjoying the sight of his pupils capturing the moment.

After walking up and down from the Choquetecarpo pass on thousands of Inca steps that covered more than 2,000 feet of elevation on each side, we made our way to the town of Huancacalle right below the Inca citadel of Vitcos. Our hostel for the next few nights is called Sixpac Manco, the most famous base camp in the annals of Vilcabamba exploration. The name is derived from Vincent Lee's expeditions in the 1980s which finally solved the riddle of the Inca's last refuge.

We'll get back to Vincent Lee later as we will be walking in his shadow as we make our way to Espiritu Pampa. For now, we're relishing the fact that we can stage the next section of our expedition under the care of the Cobos family who own Sixpac Manco. The extended Cobos family were the principal *arrieros*, *macheteros* (machete trail cutters) and guides for both Gene Savoy's expeditions in the 1960s and Vincent Lee's expeditions that started in 1982 and continued for three decades.

For the next few days, we'll be in the relatively urban world of Huancacalle's 500 inhabitants, amongst the gardens and beds of the Sixpac Manco hostel.



LEFT - The team descends the Inca stairway from Choquetecarpo. | RIGHT - John walks along a beautifully reconstructed section of Inca road.





The White Rock of Vitcos.



## Vitcos and the White Rock

Manco Inca managed to re-establish Vitcos after the Spanish sacking of 1537, while at the same time building Espiritu Pampa as a new Inca capital protected deeper into the jungle. It was in 1544, in Vitcos that Manco Inca (while playing a game of horseshoe quoits with seven Spanish soldiers who had taken refuge with the Incas as protection against a rival band of conquistadors in a Spanish civil war) was stabbed in the back – both literally and figuratively – by the Spanish refugees who were hoping to earn kudos and return to life in Cusco. After Manco Inca's death, the throne of the rebel Inca state in Vilcabamba was passed to Sayri Túpac his son.

The Inca citadel at Vitcos encompasses an important religious temple called Yuraq Rumi (White Rock in English), which is a massive carved rock from which a spring emanates. The shrine was most likely dedicated to fertility and it has been said that it housed the “virgin women of the sun”, to serve the Inca state. It's all part of a complex that occupies a mountain that overlooks two adjoining river valleys. Just below the White Rock in a series of Inca terraces is a mausoleum that is rumored to have housed Manco Inca's mummy before it was moved to Espiritu Pampa during the exodus into the jungle sometime after 1544. This mausoleum looks conspicuously similar to the mausoleum at Machu Picchu.

The main plaza and center of Vitcos looks down upon the Vilcabamba River and valley as both a military and religious center. Massive polished stones

adorn the most important entryways to the citadel's many temples. Kevin's photography attached to this correspondence speaks far more than any brief explanation of the site.

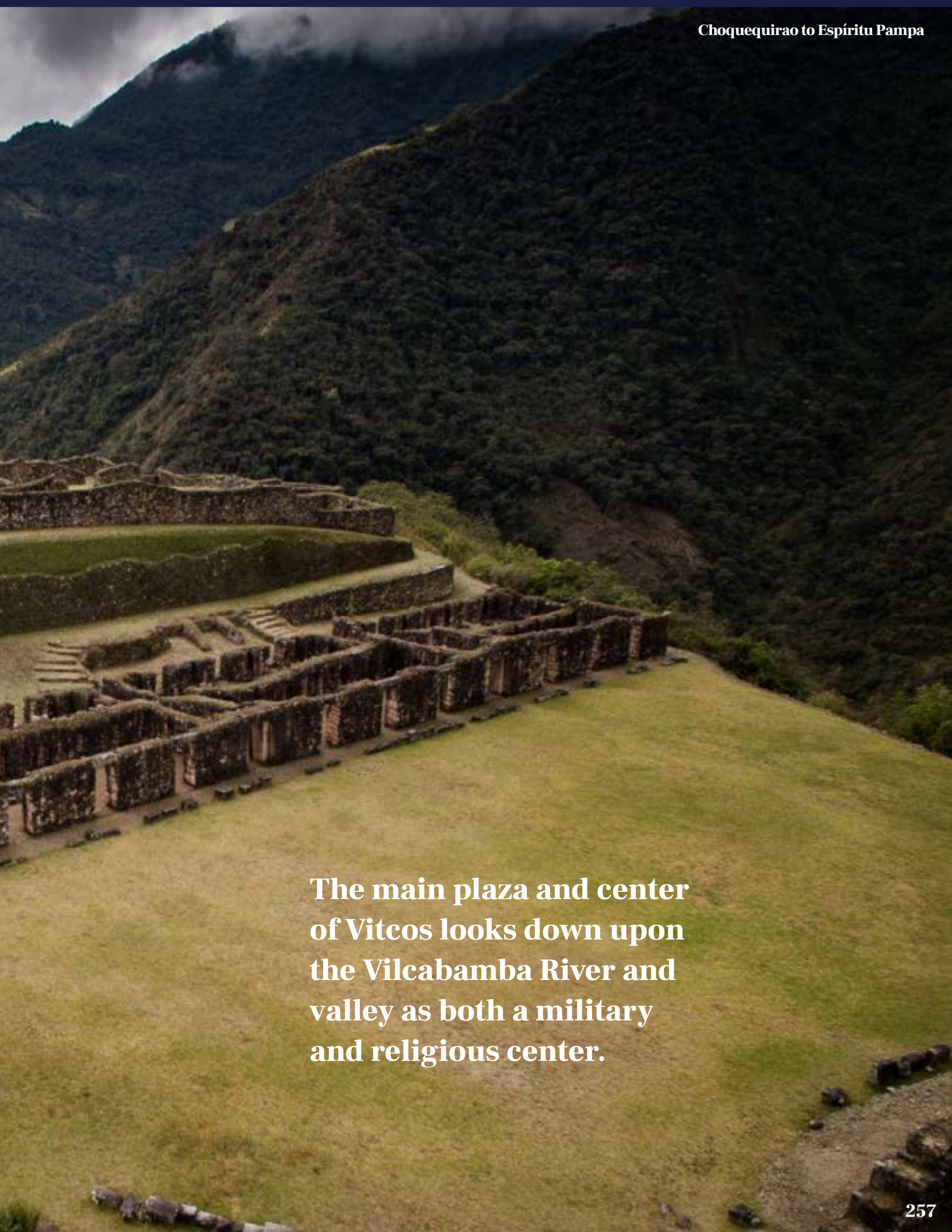
Our expedition team, hunkered down at the Sixpac Manco hostel after a big day crossing the Choquetecarpo pass yesterday, dedicated our morning to exploring Vitcos and the surrounding mountain. In the afternoon, we sacrificed a lamb for a *pachamanca* (traditional Andean meal cooked in the ground) tomorrow which will be a celebration of our journey and the legacy of the Cobos family who are the guests of honor.

Valentín, like a master butcher, took apart the sacrificial lamb and processed every part of the animal. While our team will take two days' worth of meat on the road with us, most of the animal went into a big tub of marinade that Flavio concocted. We even saved the wool hide for additional padding on our riding horse's saddle.

Our preparations at Sixpac Manco for the final approach to Espiritu Pampa, the last capital of the Incas, are nearly complete. We just have the party left to do.

**Valentín, like a master butcher, took apart the sacrificial lamb and processed every part of the animal.**





**The main plaza and center of Vitcos looks down upon the Vilcabamba River and valley as both a military and religious center.**



**TOP** - The team prepares a *pachamanca* feast at Sixpac Manco.  
**MIDDLE** - Juvenal Cobos sharing stories of more than 50 years of exploration in the Vilcabamba region.  
**BOTTOM** - Nick shares a *pachamanca* feast with members of the legendary Cobos family.

## A day at Sixpac Manco

Upon the death of Manco Inca in 1544 at Vitcos, his five-year-old son Sayri Túpac ascended to the throne of the rebel Inca Empire in Vilcabamba under the care of older administrators. Sayri Túpac didn't have the same resolve as his father, though, and was lured out of the jungle by the promise of large estates and riches in the Yucay Valley near Cusco in 1557. The Spanish had hoped that this agreement would quash the Inca rebellion in Vilcabamba for good. Instead, Sayri Túpac's suspicious death in Yucay a few years later in 1561 allowed his more capable older brother Titu Cusi, still held up in Vilcabambato, become the new leader and revive Inca nationalism from his base in Espíritu Pampa.

Titu Cusi's efforts to describe Inca life in the Vilcabamba in his chronicles, *Relation of Titu Cusi*, helped Vincent Lee figure out the puzzle of the lost Inca capital 450 years later in the 1980s and 1990s. Vincent's disciplined research of Vilcabamba history and the support of the Cobos family as *macheteros* and *arrieros* are what fueled his famous Sixpac Manco Expeditions. Approximately 20 years after Vincent Lee's expeditions, our expedition still uses his book *Forgotten Vilcabamba: Final stronghold of the Incas* as our bible on the navigation of the Inca Trail to Espíritu Pampa.

Many of the generation of the Cobos family who supported the Sixpac Manco Expeditions are today nearing their 90s. They are understandably no longer in the business of explorations to Espíritu Pampa, but they were generous enough to sit down and speak about the rich Inca history in the region and their experiences guiding every important exploration in Vilcabamba for more than 50 years.

Hener, Artemio, Flavio and Valentín, our expedition's support team of *arrieros* and *macheteros*, spent much of the morning preparing the *pachamanca* by heating rocks in a fire. They then put the fresh slabs of lamb with native tubers and bananas amongst the searing rocks, before covering it all with grass and finally dirt. After about one hour in the ground, everything was ready to gorge on.



LEFT - Reconstructed Inca road cuts through pastures below the Collpaccassa Pass. | RIGHT - Valentín performs a ceremony of thanks using a locally grown pineapple.

And then the Cobos family and our expedition team feasted the afternoon away as we talked about the past, the quality of the Inca roads in the days ahead and what else might lay hidden in the jungles of Vilcabamba... And so with that, we were ready to resume our adventure to the last capital of the Inca at Espiritu Pampa.

## Titu Cusi takes the reigns in Inca Vilcabamba

Titu Cusi was a consummate diplomat during his 10 years leading the rebel Inca state of Vilcabamba between 1561 and 1571. While he was never lured out to the comforts of life in Cusco like his brother Sayri Túpac, he did manage to give the Spanish enough optimism that their predicament with the rebels could be resolved peacefully. As part of this diplomacy Titu Cusi even invited two Catholic priests to establish missions at Pucyura (near modern-day Huancacalle) and Guarancalla (now buried in the forest). Neither priest was ever allowed to enter into Espiritu Pampa to witness the most important shrines and religious customs of the Inca. This was an example that Titu Cusi was, for a time, able to balance the needs of his people with the ever-growing Spanish influence throughout Peru.

After an extended two-day rest at Sixpac Manco in Huancacalle, visiting Vitcos and White Rock, we continued on the Inca Road towards the Collpaccassa Pass. Up the valley only a few kilometers, we reached

Vilcabamba the New, a Spanish settlement established after the final sacking and destruction of Espiritu Pampa in 1572. As Vincent Lee explains in his book, *Forgotten Vilcabamba: Final stronghold of the Incas*, “The Spaniards soon abandoned the ruins of Vilcabamba to the jungle, where they lay forgotten and undisturbed for the next three centuries. The site disappeared, literally, beneath a dense, green blanket of vegetation. Having established their own provincial capital in the highlands, at Vilcabamba the New, they came to call the old Inca city Vilcabamba the Old (Espiritu Pampa), but no one ever went there except nomadic, forest tribesman in search of game. In time, lost Vilcabamba vanished from the map and, like Atlantis, Camelot and El Dorado, continued to live only in legend.”

A few kilometers beyond Vilcabamba the New, we reached the 13,000-foot Collpaccassa Pass, with an Inca plaza and platforms at its summit. It will be our last pass before Espiritu Pampa, where the Inca Trail begins its descent into the humidity of the high jungle.

At the Inca platform, Valentín put a tropical touch to his offering for the *Pachamama* and *Apus*, reverently stuffing coca leaves with vicuña fat into a pineapple. It was his way of asking for safe passage in the lower and warmer ecosystem up ahead. I had seen Valentín use countless types of herbs, plants, fruits and beverages in the more than a hundred passes we’d crossed together in the last decade... But I had never seen him use a pineapple before.



Nick explores the remains of the *ushnu* platform at Pampaconas.

## Pampaconas and a special anniversary

Our expedition team began its descent from below Collpaccassa Pass en route to Pampaconas, a small but important town that was once an Inca settlement with an *Ushnu* that is bigger than almost any other to survive from the Inca Empire. It measures 200x150 feet in area with walls reaching 10 feet high. In fact, Inca Pachacutec (Manco Inca's great-grandfather and the first Inca to take his empire beyond the Cusco Valley) first set his court at Pampaconas during his initial conquest and integration of the lands and people of Vilcabamba around the 1440s.

The Inca Empire only lasted about 100 years. Many of the tribes conquered in the early 1500s, and at a distance farther from Cusco than Vilcabamba, sided with the Spanish in their conquest of the Inca. This had to do with the fact that their defeat at the hands of the Incas was still fresh. Also, this fact could have played into Manco's decision to establish a rebel empire in Vilcabamba, as the tribes here were more integrated and friendlier than most. The large *Ushnu* and continual Inca architecture in the Pampaconas River Valley suggests a strong and continuous Inca presence too.

We will stay along the Inca Trail that follows the Pampaconas River Valley until we reach Espiritu Pampa. The road itself has been maintained and continually

re-constructed for centuries by the communities along its path. Since Vincent Lee's expeditions in the 1980s and 1990s, and a massive landslide around 2004, the communities have reconstructed many of the stone paved paths that you see in Kevin's pictures. John seems to think that the trails to Espiritu Pampa so far are in the best shape he's seen them in the last 25 years. The main exception is the new car road from Huancacalle to Pampaconas that has destroyed long sections of Inca trails higher up in the valley.

And with that we celebrate... Not just because we've actually seen some improvement in Inca Trail infrastructure, but also because today marks an important one-year anniversary. It was exactly one year ago that our team, after marching 130 days on The Great Inca Trail from the northern Inca capital of Tomebamba, finished their trek at the center of the Inca world in Cusco. It was on this date that we reached Cusco's Plaza de Armas with our team of llamas ready to have a party.

So, in the spirit of rationalizing another fiesta – and of course to celebrate such a serious endeavor – Hener bought whatever alcohol he could find in Pampaconas for us to toast with. So, from the northern capital of Tomebamba, to the spiritual capital of Cusco, and now to the Incas' final capital of Vilcabamba... We reflect on thousands of miles of grand adventures along The Great Inca Road.

## Hacking our way to Huayna Pucará

In 1571, after 10 years of ruling the rebel Inca state in Vilcabamba, Titu Cusi died of unknown causes. His younger half-brother, Túpac Amaru, ascended the throne and was thrust into a role he was unprepared for. The Spanish governor Francisco Toledo was determined to settle the “Inca problem” in Vilcabamba and was making his final efforts at diplomacy with Titu Cusi when the Inca died. Right around this time, a Spanish emissary to the Inca was killed (probably to delay word of Titu Cusi’s death), with one escapee sending word back to the Spanish in Cusco. This was the final straw for Toledo...

A Spanish army of 250 horsemen and cavalry, followed by 2,000 native allies, departed Cusco on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1572 and marched to the Vilcabamba. Within weeks they arrived to Vitcos, which the Incas had fled, leaving the royal flocks of llama and fields ready to be harvested. Resupplied with Inca booty, the Spanish proceeded to cross the Collpaccassa Pass and march on the Inca Trail towards Espiritu Pampa.

The Incas, now led by Túpac Amaru, established a plan to ambush the invading army at a fort called Huayna Pucará located on a high ridge. The plan was to rain boulders down the steep mountain – something that would surely have created chaos, if not forced a Spanish retreat. Instead, in an act of treason, an Inca captain told the Spanish of the plan, who then hauled their cannons to the hill that overlooked the fort and launched an attack of their own. This forced the Incas to abandon both the fort and their last line of defense before Espiritu Pampa.

Our expedition’s goal today was to reach Huayna Pucará, hacking our way from the Inca Trail below to the Inca towers on the high ridge above. John having been to the site before, and with our handy-dandy copy of Vincent Lee’s *Forgotten Vilcabamba: Final stronghold of the Incas*, we had all the information we needed. As a plus, the Huaman family who have farmed next to the ruins for three generations, was home and willing to assist

in the ascent too. The mountain was steep, hot and covered in dense forest. We took a sharp left, straight up the mountain on a small path through Rudy Huaman’s vertical corn fields. The trail then evaporated into the bush as we reached the high ridge, and we were forced to cut our way through with Rudy and Valentín at the front. After about 90 minutes, we reached the bases of the first towers and their platform.

Vincent Lee, who rediscovered the site in 1982, mentions in his book that he saw many boulders still lined up for Spanish targets. John says he saw them in 1994 too. Despite our best efforts at finding them, there was no sign of the boulders that Vincent and John had both witnessed in earlier years. We eventually made our way back down the other side, pushing ourselves through the thicket and using a machete when that wasn’t possible.

By mid-afternoon, we had reached our camp at Vista Alegre along the Pampaconas River. It was a good but hard day.



The team’s camp along the Pampaconas River.

## Welcome to the jungle

The Inca Trail from Vista Alegre to Consevidayoc is not easy. Landslided hills mix with torrential streams that quickly turn into rivers. At sections, Inca paving stones can be seen amongst deep mud, against a backdrop of elephant ferns, moss and bromeliads. It's been raining now on and off for nearly three days and everything is soaked. Our shoes, our tents and our clothes are all wet. Even our sleeping bags can't avoid the moisture. The jungle is a tough world that is constantly penetrating your core, making sure you're never comfortable. We eventually did make it to our camp at Consevidayoc, soaked and tired, both humans and mules.

After routing the Incas at Huayna Pucará in 1572, the Spanish preparing to enter the hidden Inca capital at Espíritu Pampa spent the night here in Consevidayoc, where they found stocks of maize and tropical foods. They had been marching from Cusco for weeks and were hungry and short on provisions. These supplies were just what they needed to take the last free Inca city and finally solve the "Inca Problem" in the Vilcabamba.

Consevidayoc today is a small rural community that is the last stop for travelers en route to Espíritu Pampa on the Inca Trail from Vitcos. The local school, situated on a large terraced *pampa*, has been the only suitable camp on our entire walk since Vista Alegre this morning. Since the fall of the Inca in 1572, Consevidayoc has retreated into the shadows, tucked in the jungle, with no phone service, and its first car road arriving only last year. The worry is that modernity and asphalt will quickly cover the Inca Trail both in disuse and development.

Upon setting up our camp at the local school, we had some urgent business to take care of: confirming our transportation in a few days' time. So, as we always do when there is no phone service for miles, we broke out the satellite connection that allows us to send you all stories, but also to make some important phone calls. The director of the school was amazed by the apparatus, seeing a phone call being made from the school for the first time. He and his assistants couldn't resist the

temptation of modernity and they insisted that we let them call their husbands, girlfriends and anyone else who they knew would pick up the other line. So there we were, serving as the first public phone booth in Consevidayoc... Sometimes in the exploration of the past, you realize you're also influencing the future.

Tomorrow, with our soaking clothes and boots, we will hike into Espíritu Pampa and see the last capital of the Incas for ourselves.

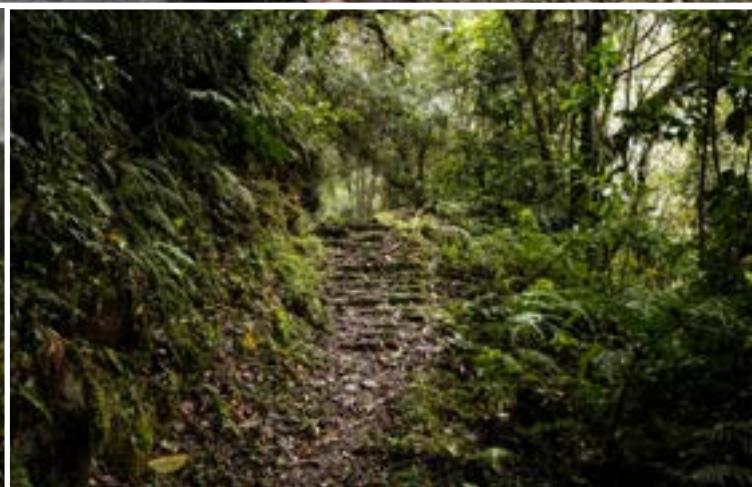
## The Spanish invade Espíritu Pampa

At 10am on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1572 after marching from Consevidayoc, 250 Spanish soldiers and their native allies, walked into the main plaza of Espíritu Pampa and planted the Spanish flag. In a last-ditch effort to deprive the Spanish the means to occupy Espíritu Pampa and force their return to Cusco, Túpac Amaru, his generals and the entire Inca royalty of Vilcabamba had burned the city to the ground and fled into the jungle the day before.

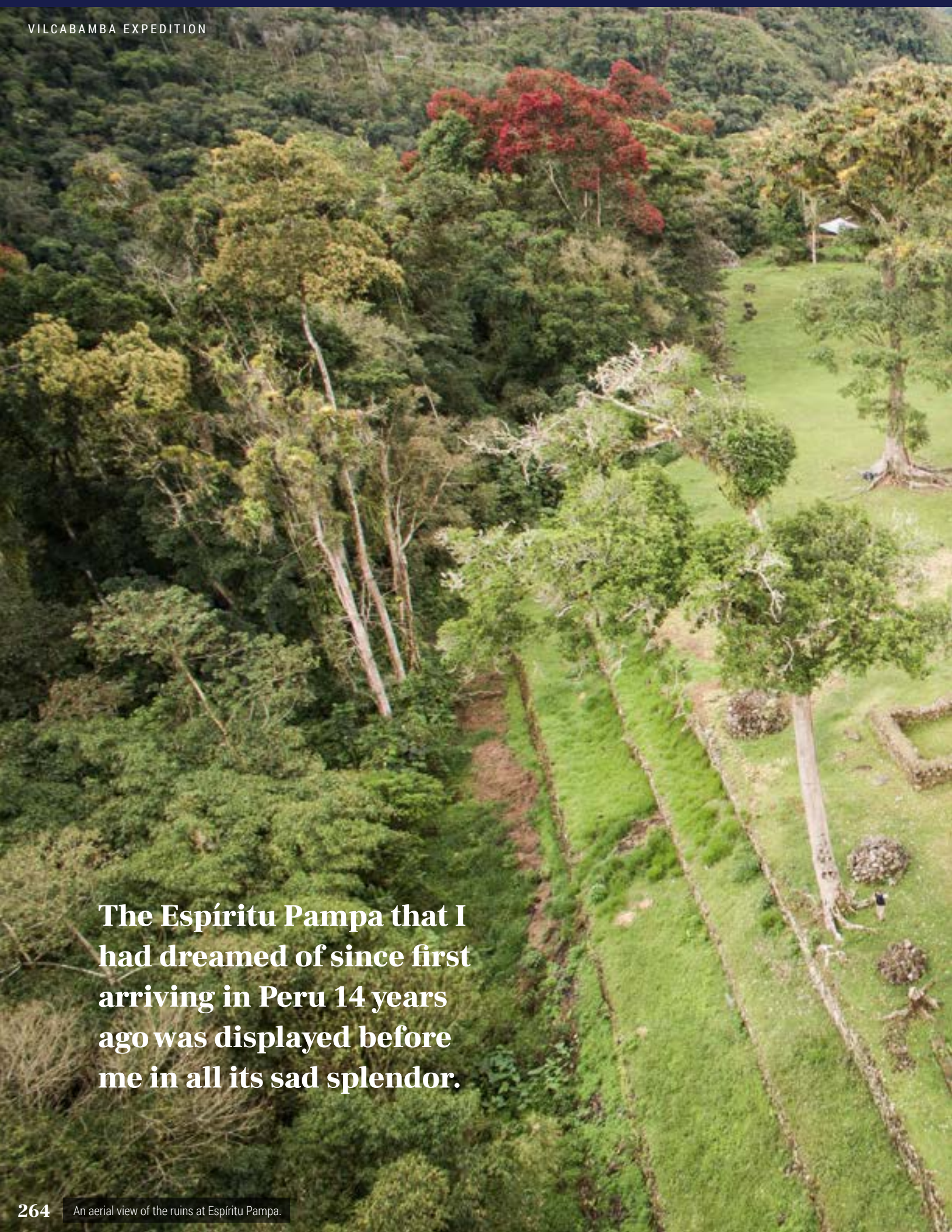
Immediately the Spanish sent parties into the jungle using the information from the local tribes who lived amongst the Inca and who began to emerge from the forest. The daring and ambitious Spanish soldier Garcia de Loyola, together with 40 handpicked comrades, volunteered to follow Túpac Amaru and his entourage deeper into the jungle. For hundreds of miles and over several weeks Garcia de Loyola relentlessly pursued Túpac Amaru's movements with the aid of the jungle communities who he manipulated through a combination of false promises and threats.

Eventually, those in Garcia de Loyola's contingent spotted a fire burning in the distance. When they reached the source of the smoke, they found Túpac Amaru huddled with his pregnant wife who was too scared to travel farther down river by canoe. The Inca surrendered to the Spanish who set up camp that night on heavy guard, before returning to Espíritu Pampa. It would be the last dying breath of the largest civilization in pre-Columbia America.





**TOP** - Kevin attempts to stay dry crossing a locally constructed "bridge." | **BOTTOM LEFT** - The Pampaonas River viewed from above.  
**BOTTOM RIGHT** - Remnants of Inca stairs in the jungle outside of Concevidayoc.



**The Espiritu Pampa that I had dreamed of since first arriving in Peru 14 years ago was displayed before me in all its sad splendor.**





The jungle is slowly taking back the Inca ruins at Espiritu Pampa.

As our expedition entered Espiritu Pampa today at 10am after a brief morning hike from Consevidayoc, this epic drama was ever-present in our minds. Both the dilapidated ruins of this great Inca city and its grand history were being devoured by the jungle right before our eyes. And while the one dedicated groundskeeper-slash-security-guard was diligent and affable in his job, there was far too much forest to compete with.

Our team combed the principal sectors of the site, following Vincent Lee's maps for an idea of what it looked like during Inca times. We searched and found the infamous Spanish-inspired tiles that the Inca used for the roofs of their most important buildings in the city. These were the same tiles that Gene Savoy claimed were proof that Espiritu Pampa - not Machu Picchu - was the last capital of the Incas. His argument was that the Inca at their last capital had adopted Spanish building techniques, something found nowhere else in the empire.

We marveled at the fine ashlar stones that made up the palaces and likely homes of Titu Cusi and his successor and younger brother Túpac Amaru. The plaster that once covered the walls and was painted in Inca style was still visible in parts. The Espiritu Pampa that I had dreamed of since first arriving in Peru 14 years ago was displayed before me in all its sad splendor.

## The Incas of Vilcabamba are marched back to Cusco

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1572, approximately three months after capturing Túpac Amaru and the leading Incas of Vilcabamba, the Spanish arrived back to Cusco with their captives chained together. They had also brought with them the mummified bodies of Manco Inca and Titu Cusi. These were burned so they could no longer be idolized. Francisco Toledo, the Spanish Viceroy was personally on hand to oversee the European celebrations and the perfunctory trial of the prisoners.

The first order of business was to convert Túpac Amaru to Christianity, a task taken up by leading Spanish ecclesiastics, some of whom had traveled from afar. Túpac Amaru took to this indoctrination quickly, learning all that was necessary to be baptized in three days and being given the Christian name Pedro. Túpac Amaru's eagerness to acquire Christianity was most likely due to a feeling that the Spanish religion had proven superior to the Incas in battle and/or that it could prevent the most severe of punishments going forward.

This mattered very little though, as Viceroy Toledo was relentless in his belief that Túpac Amaru must die, thus scouring Peru of any vestige of the Inca. After a

short sham trial, Túpac Amaru was sentenced to death by beheading. The Inca was led through Cusco with his hands tied and rope around his neck to a scaffold that had been erected in the main plaza. Thousands of natives filled the streets, overflowing onto balconies and atop walls, wailing with cries of sympathy that their last native lord was to be killed.

Once on the scaffold, Túpac Amaru raised his right hand to silence the crowd and gave his last words. In summary, as explained by John Hemming in his book *The Conquest of the Incas*, Túpac Amaru said: “Be it known to you that I am a Christian, they have baptized me and I wish to die under the law of God. And I have to die. All that I and my ancestors the Incas have told you up to now – that you should worship the sun Punchao and the huacas, idols, stones, rivers, mountains and vilcas – is completely false. When we told you that we were entering in to speak to the sun, that it advised you to do what we told you, and that it spoke, this was false. It did not speak, we alone did: for it is an object of gold and cannot speak. My brother Titu Cusi told me that whenever I wished to tell the Indians to do something, I should enter alone to the idol Punchao;... afterwards I should come out and tell the Indians that it had spoken to me, and that it said whatever I wished to tell them.”

After that, with his eyes bound, Túpac Amaru placed himself at the block, where his head was severed in one blow with a cutlass as the bells of the cathedral began to toll.

Our team left Espiritu Pampa on this day 450 years later, but without the chains or the tragic ending of the Inca. Instead, we were relegated to fitting six of us and all our gear into a truck for the long haul out of the jungle. Our search for the last refuge of the Inca was over.

## Trekking through the back door to Machu Picchu

Having now trekked for 17 days starting in Choquequirao, then to Vitcos and Espiritu Pampa, it's high time that we reached the last major Inca citadel

in the Vilcabamba – Machu Picchu. We'll be taking the Inca Trail that is one of the spokes leading from Vitcos. Vitcos was the center of the exiled neo-Inca state in Vilcabamba, with four Inca roads emanating outwards, just like the four main Ñans (Inca roads) that leave Cusco.

This upcoming Inca Trail is rarely traversed by outsiders, taking us on a three-day, 40-mile march past the Racachaca River and over the 15,000-foot Mojon Pass. We will then descend, eventually arriving to the old Huadquiña *hacienda* and on to Llactapata and eventually Machu Picchu.

For the moment though, our team is taking a day to resupply and dry out at Sixpac Manco in Huancacalle. Everything was wet, from the tents down to our boots, after days of walking through the jungle to Espiritu Pampa. We'll even get to take a shower after more than a week, and if I can manage, shave my beard that is getting a bit out of control.

We also had to say farewell to Kevin who had to get back to Cusco. This unfortunately means you'll have to tolerate my iPhone pictures from here on out. Artemio, after walking back to Huancacalle with the mules alone from Espiritu Pampa, is heading back to Yanama. From here, John, Flavio, Valentín, Hener and I will make the final push to Machu Picchu and thus complete our exploration of the Incas' final refuge of Vilcabamba.

## The frozen rains of Racachaca

Right when we started to get comfortable, after a sunny few days at Sixpac Manco and only four more days on the trail, we're reminded again of the unforgiving nature of the Andes. The moment we reached the 14,000-foot pass above Huancacalle en route to Racachaca, the rains began. But these weren't the tropical rains of the high jungle in Espiritu Pampa... This was sleet, hail and windchill all mixed into one, the kind of thing that sends you right into survival mode.

Descending from the pass to the Racachaca River, the weather continued its fury all afternoon. I had no choice

but to get into my sleeping bag to stop my descent into a deep chill. John, having arrived to camp an hour after the rest of the team, seemed only interested in where lunch was at this late hour. Valentín and the rest of the support team didn't seem to be as bothered with the cold, having spent their entire lives in these mountains. They carried on with business as usual.

The Inca Trail that ascends from Huancacalle to the pass above Racachaca shares many of the same characteristics of the other principal Inca roads that emanate from Vitcos. Its width is approximately 10 feet, with sturdy retaining walls and water channels every hundred meters for drainage. It was an important Inca road in its time for sure.

Like the Inca Trail that connects Vitcos with Choquequirao and Vitcos with Espíritu Pampa, this Inca Trail connected Vitcos with Machu Picchu, the other key center in Inca Vilcabamba. Like Machu Picchu, little is known about the sites along this road or exactly what their purpose was. It's been used by locals over the centuries, with little to no interest from the outside world besides a handful of intrepid explorers.

Tomorrow we climb again out of the Racachaca Valley and over the 15,000-foot Mojon Pass to a lonely *tambo* called Laccococha. For the time being, there'll be no tough mountain man play from me... I'm cold, wrapped in my poncho next to Flavio's stove where all sorts of delicious, and warm concoctions are stirring... Dreaming of mummifying myself in my sleeping bag.



A stone house along the trail from Vitcos to Machu Picchu.

## An Inca Trail into the snow... Again

With the rain having finally stopped, and a trout frying on the stove for morning breakfast, things were looking up. Our local guide and *arriero* Moises who joined us for this last stretch was successful in catching 15, albeit small, trout from the stream that ran through camp. One of the unique cultural adoptions of the high Andes from North America was the rainbow trout. Nearly every village above 10,000 feet, either has a small artisanal trout farm or catches them directly from the river. In an Andean world where the main proteins were traditionally alpaca and guinea pig, fresh rainbow trout has been an important nutritional introduction.

The Inca Trail that ascends from Racachaca follows the trout stream to the 15,000-foot-Mojon Pass that's still covered in a dusting of snow by the precipitation that hounded us yesterday. It was also the last pass of many on our three-week journey... Time to pay our respects to the *Pachamama* and the *Apus* for giving us safe passage.

From the pass, the Inca Trail winds along the top of the mountain in the shadow of the Sacsarayoc glacier, before turning down into the Urubamba watershed and away from the Vilcabamba. Laccococha, our camp for the night, is really just a flat clearing, next to a lake and below the harsh weather of higher elevations. It also has the telltale signs of an old Inca *tambo* with stone buildings next to a stream and protection from the wind. It has probably been occupied – either seasonally or as a homestead – for a few thousand years, due to its strategic location.

The thing about walking along the Inca Trail in rural parts of Peru not bulldozed by modernity is that the infrastructure of Inca stones, buildings and paths is still in use. It's like walking through an Inca archeological site where the ruins are still being lived in by contemporary people.

For those willing to get off the beaten path and tread lightly as a guest in someone else's world, the Andes can serve as a time machine into the past.



**TOP** - An Inca *tambo* between Racachaca and Mojon Pass.

**MIDDLE** - Flavio and Valentín prepare a *despacho* in view of the *Apus*.

**BOTTOM** - The Inca Trail as it climbs toward Mojon Pass.









Huadquiña in the town of Santa Teresa.

## Lost mules, late drivers and abandoned *haciendas*

As happens from time to time, the mules decided to go on a midnight exploration over the neighboring peaks and valleys. By the time we discovered them missing at first light, it took hours for our local *arriero* to track down only four of them. And because we supposedly had a vehicle waiting 3,000 feet below at the roadhead, we had to depart without the animals to not miss our transportation to Huadquiña.

After descending in a rush and arriving just in time, we were greeted by a rural dirt track with no cars in sight. The roadhead was hours from any civilization and our satellite phone calls to the driver went unanswered. We therefore resigned ourselves to walking, all the while cursing the flakey *chofer* who'd left us stranded.

The Inca Trail disappears under thick forest at this point. But if the forest were cleared, the trail would take you all the way to Llastapata and eventually Machu Picchu. Instead, we had hiked an hour on the modern road in the same direction when we finally heard a car

tumbling down the dirt road. The driver arrived an hour late, acting as if nothing was wrong. Flavio made his peace by insisting on a discounted fare. I figured it best that we saved that conversation for when we actually arrived to our destination, avoiding being left again on the side of the road.

We did eventually make it to Huadquiña, which is next door to Santa Teresa, a small town that serves as a way stop for tourists en route to Machu Picchu and beyond. The entire region was once a fiefdom of the Huadquiña *hacienda*, whose bell tower and adobe walls still protrude from the low lying, tin roof shacks that occupy the valley now.

In 1962, 5,000 *campesinos* who had suffered the harsh treatment of the *haciendas* for more than a century, overtook its walls in an act of rebellion. This was the first stirring of a revolution that eventually overtook the entire country of Peru. It culminated seven years later in 1969 with the leftist president Juan Velasco, who instituted sweeping land reform that touched nearly every citizen of the country. The hacienda system that began with the Spanish conquest of Inca palaces and land in 1532, had lasted more than 400 years...

The reform stripped the land holdings of the European-descended *Hacendados* for redistribution to communities that were governed by the *campesinos*. This clash of a colonial world still reverberates through Peru today. Peruvians with indigenous lifestyles are still working to integrate into a global modern economy, while also holding on to their traditional practices.

## All good things must come to an end

After a night of team celebration, John and I reconnected with the Inca Trail this morning, where we would ascend 3,000 feet to the Inca complex of Llactapata. Hiram Bingham first re-discovered Llactapata on a brief visit in 1911, after which they would again be lost in the jungle for another 70 years. In 1982, the explorer Hugh Thompson and archeologist David Drew, re-found the ruins in what could be considered a case of youthful idealism and good detective work, as described in Hugh's book *The White Rock: An Exploration of the Inca Heartland*.

In 2002, Hugh Thompson went back to the site with John Leivers and another explorer Gary Ziegler to begin to clear and understand the ruins. Today, after almost two decades of work that began with that team, and later continued by the ministry of culture, Llactapata is now on the main tourist circuit along the Salkantay Trail to Machu Picchu. This is a great example of how the work of exploration can put economic value on Peru's cultural patrimony, and thus promote its conservation.

Llactapata, as John explains, is an observatory of sorts that connects with Machu Picchu through the Inca's grand cosmovision. From Llactapata's main plaza, Machu Picchu comes into view across the Aobamba River Valley, cradled proudly between the peaks of Huayna Picchu and Machu Picchu mountain. It's a unique perspective on the Inca citadel... Especially after an expedition like ours through the Vilcabamba, that allows you to place the site within a larger Inca world that strategically built its cities in relation to the alignment of the sun, mountains and natural world.

This view of Machu Picchu in the distance from Llactapata will be our expedition's end. The native habitat of The Great Inca Trail team is one of forgotten trails, that lead through unforgiving mountains, to Inca cities that exist only in the consciousness of the few intrepid explorers that dare to leave the beaten path. Machu Picchu has millions of Instagrammers, countless coffee table books and an army of visitors who discuss its mysteries in banal interactions the world over. Machu Picchu does not need the efforts of our team to spread its awareness.

We hope that visions of the Vilcabamba - from the final refuge of the Inca at Espiritu Pampa to the Inca Trail over the Choquetecarpo Pass to name a just a few - might inspire others to visit and preserve the history of this lost world...

Our journey has just begun, and we will be back to continue to explore lost worlds along The Great Inca Trail another day. See you next time!



LEFT - John above the torreón at the Intiwatana complex above the Hidroeléctrica train station.



RIGHT - Nick and John chilling out at Llactapata at the end of our 21-day expedition across the Vilcabamba.

# Cusco to San Pedro de Atacama

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It had been nearly two years since we arrived in Cusco after walking 130 days down the spine of the Andes from Cuenca, Ecuador – nearly the entire length of Chinchaysuyu, the northern quadrant of the Inca empire. Now it was time to cross into the southern quadrant, known as Qollasuyu. From the navel of the Andean world at Cusco, we would travel south to Lake Titicaca, before crossing the Bolivian *altiplano* and venturing into the Atacama Desert of Northern Chile. In all we would cover over 1,000 miles, hunting Inca trails across three countries.

This expedition was unique in that we replaced llamas and horses with pack animals of a different kind: 4x4 vehicles. Due to the large swaths of geography, the lack of a continuous Inca road to hike, and the difficulty of leading llamas across hundreds of miles of desert and pavement, vehicles were clearly the practical choice. On this expedition, we leapfrogged our way across the *altiplano*, hopping between remaining sections of Inca road and walking for hundreds of miles at a minimum altitude of 12,000 feet.

The journey would bring along many new friends to join John, Flavio, Valentín, Kevin and me as we headed across the high, desolate and frozen *altiplano*. Our

attempts at summiting two volcanoes at 17,000 and 19,000 feet, were bitterly cold and brought us to the highest Inca *Tambo* that we believe exists anywhere. These *Apus*, as the locals call these mountain gods, are but two of the hundreds of mountain deities in a volcanic range like nothing we've seen before.

Our time in the deserts of the Chilean *altiplano* reminded us once again that the Inca road is more or less forgotten in the minds of many local populations along its paths. Or, worse still, destroyed for much of its trajectory, as we saw through Bolivia. But there were oases of hope: the Inca road at Raqchi and its path bordering Lake Titicaca in Peru still cling on to their monumental past and are even being preserved for use in tourism.

**In the course of a month  
we gained an entirely  
new perspective on this  
great road!**





**We passed through a monumental Inca gate with two pathways, bordered by a facade of finely polished Inca stones.**





A view of a bridge builder at Q'eswachaca.

## Dusting off the cobwebs

And so, we departed on this crisp morning at 7am from Cusco's main plaza, picking up where we left off on the Royal Inca Road headed from North to South. With John ahead by a few days, Flavio, Valentín, Kevin, Rick (more about him later) and I ceremoniously walked south, past the Koricancha – the most sacred temple in the Inca world and now part of a bustling urban scene locked in morning traffic. Eventually giving in to the forces of modernity, we boarded our vehicle for the brief drive to Rumicolca, gateway to Qollasuyu.

There, we passed through a monumental Inca gate with two pathways, bordered by a facade of finely polished Inca stones. We loosened our legs on a wide Inca trail that had seen far better days, before continuing south to the Apurímac River, where bridge-building descendants of the Inca were hard at work in a unique ceremony that happens only once a year.

John greeted us upon our arrival in Q'eswachaca, where we have set up our first camp and are getting back into the swing of things. As with all Day Ones on the Great Inca Trail, we are a little rusty and it'll be a few days till we've dusted off all the cobwebs. But at the same time we are excited to have the team back together exploring the Inca Road!

## An Inca grass bridge across a canyon: Q'eswachaca

There have been few moments in exploring this planet that have raised my adrenaline to the point of being out of breath. In 15 years in the Andes, I've experienced hundreds of variations on indigenous practice in Peru. But I have never seen a hanging bridge made of grass – let alone walked across one as part of an Inca trail. Watching the bridge being built was one thing, but walking across it literally took my breath away. Reminding me once again why I decide to embark on such adventures.

As Kevin explained in his pre-expedition blog, “the royal Inca road departs Cusco's central plaza and, after passing the monumental gateway of Rumicolca south of the city, the road winds toward a series of plunging river canyons. Undaunted, Inca engineers devised an ingenious strategy to span these cavernous divides using only locally sourced grasses and the collective manpower of nearby communities. This tradition of collaborative engineering has been relegated to memory in every corner of the empire except for one: the town of Q'eswachaca.

Here, community members gather once a year to renew ancient bonds of kinship and to rebuild the last





Women pounding the grasses with rocks before braiding them into ever larger braids.

remaining Inca suspension bridge. A festival every June brings together members of four communities from either side of the canyon to harvest and weave tufts of coarse q'oya grass into thick sturdy ropes that act as cables to support the bridge. Cooperating across the canyon, they raise the cables and weave together a new bridge, renewing their bonds to each other and to their shared Inca heritage.

There were said to be more than 100 such bridges during the height of the Inca empire. As John explains, the grass ropes supporting the largest bridges were the thickness of a human torso, able to handle hundreds of tons of weight. The bridge at Q'eswachaca, while smaller than the monumental bridges of the Inca past, is still an incredible sight to behold. In an era of hydraulic, electric and nuclear power, it is a reminder that sheer manpower can do some pretty cool things too.

At some moments the festival is a chaotic mix of men playing tug-o'-war across a canyon while getting totally

plastered, but it all comes together in the end. The women of the community are tasked with collecting and braiding the grasses, and smashing the raw material to make it more pliable. In a single week the groundcover of the surrounding mountains is literally woven into a walking path through the sky - using only the power of human hands.

The Q'eswachaca bridge has been designated as Cultural Patrimony of Mankind. It is registered with UNESCO and attracts people from all over the world. As I stepped across it for the first time, I was inundated with the scent of its freshly cut raw materials, as the bridge lightly swayed from side to side. It was a moment of complete intimacy with nature and history, being suspended in air by nothing but woven grass... A rush of ecstasy in the sheer living of it all.

**Qollasuyu is a place of wonder!**

**It was a moment of complete intimacy with nature and history, being suspended in air by nothing but woven grass.**



The shamans overseeing the bridge building work.



Bridge building at Q'eswachaca.







The Great Inca Trail as it reaches Raqchi with the temple of Wiracocha in the background.

## The Inca Road to Raqchi

About 100 miles south of Cusco, The Great Inca Trail reaches the archeological complex of Raqchi. The entire site is surrounded by an eight-foot-high Inca stone wall made from volcanic pumice, a unique material that is used in all the constructions at Raqchi. The Royal Inca highway cuts a swath through the middle of Raqchi, like a train track through an industrial yard.

Raqchi represents all the promise and all the challenges of developing tourism on the Inca Road. In modern-day Raqchi, the villagers are motivated to promote tourism through the utilization of cultural patrimony to strengthen the local economy. They've had support from government and local NGOs, and even Condor Travel, Peru's largest tour operator, has promoted tourism at the site. They have many advantages, but they are still working to get visitors to stay longer than the 30 minutes it takes to check out the ruins.

The fact of the matter is that not all tourism is created equal – and there is seldom a clear definition of what is the ideal tourism for a particular destination. Dolores, our delightful local host during our stay in Raqchi put it this way. “Raqchi has lots of people visit every day, but they don't stay and they don't spend any money.” Raqchi is often just a stopping point for tourists on a set itinerary. Of all the visitors that come to Raqchi, almost none witness what is one of the widest and most monumental stretches of Inca highway in all of Qollasuyu – even though it leads directly in and out of the site. Raqchi is an important part of the larger story of Andean history, and it warrants more attention.

So, on our visit we would like to show Raqchi in a deeper way. A way that explains Raqchi's rich history and its contemporary population who keep the traditions of the past alive. We want you to see how Dolores makes ceramics using techniques passed down from her Inca ancestors. We want you to experience how a whole community comes together to perform a traditional ceremony of thanks, followed by a raucous celebration of local music and dance around a fire. Add to this the walls of the temple of Wiracocha, (which, at more than

60 feet, are arguably the highest adobe walls in the Inca empire) and the Inca road that cuts through it all, and it is clear that Raqchi is far more than a stopover.

Upon our arrival, we walked that Inca Road into Raqchi for a chunk of the afternoon with an entourage of locals accompanying us. After only three miles we reached the main plaza with its quaint artisanal shops selling everything from jewelry to local textiles. If even a small percentage of tourists to the region understood that they could walk the monumental Inca road without needing to sleep in a tent or even contemplate a blister – and even wash it all down with a gourmet meal in Cusco – it could transform Dolores and her family’s future.

The challenge is getting the people of Raqchi to understand the trend towards unique and authentic tourist experiences while at the same time educating the tourism industry about how Raqchi is so much more than just an archeological stopover en route to more crowded destinations in Cusco and Lake Titicaca.

While our day-long visit is short, we hope this chronicle and the accompanying pictures will help to demonstrate the beauty and importance of yet another place along the Great Inca Trail.

**The Royal Inca highway cuts a swath through the middle of Raqchi, like a train track through an industrial yard.**



TOP - The team prepares a *pachamanca* feast at Sixpac Manco.  
 BOTTOM - Dolores our host demonstrating their local ceramics.

## The Great Inca road appears again

At 7am, we departed Raqchi with a send-off from Dolores and our new friends from the community. We were headed to Inca Uyu to find the Inca road that Ricardo Espinosa shows clearly on the maps in his landmark book *La Gran Ruta Inca* that we've been following since the very beginning of our project. As is normally the case when following Ricardo's cartography, the road appears right where it should. In this case, a 20-foot-wide boulevard that cuts right along the edge of Lake Titicaca to Platería.

But before we did that, we had to see the fertility temple of Inca Uyu, where around thirty carved male phalluses are housed in an Inca temple that features some of the finest Cusco imperial stone blocks anywhere. If you're anything like us you're probably wondering 'Why all the penises?' And with good reason. John has read a report that the sculptures were placed there in the last 50 years and are by no means original. So, as far as we can tell, the community decided they needed something to attract visitors, and an Inca fertility temple with carved penises was what made sense to them. These days, some Peruvian women and New Age tourists "sit atop" the sculptures to increase their chances of becoming pregnant. All of this obscures the earlier history of the site, which has to do with the favor paid by both Pachacutec and Topa Inca to the people of Chucuito for their loyalty to the empire. Regardless, it was an exciting start to some exciting Inca road.

Until today, we really hadn't walked much at all and I was starting to feel that my waistline was growing after the fiesta at Q'eswachaca. The moment we hit the ground walking, our minds quickly returned to the trail. It had been almost a year since the team had done any serious hiking together, but we jumped right back into our roles. After spending months together in the Andes, there's a familiarity between us that cuts across our varied cultures, languages, and personalities.

The Qhapaq Ñan we witnessed today was stunning. In parts the road was flanked by 10-foot-high sidewalls facing the water line. They looked as if they served as a barrier of some sort, and an old man who spoke to us as we passed him in the fields confirmed that the lake water used to come right up to the Inca trail when he was a child. As always when walking across the Andes, the journey is enlightened by those along our path.

Tomorrow we continue south into Qollasuyu, on what our research says should be more monumental Inca road alongside an equally massive body of water – Lake Titicaca. Before long, we will reach the border of Peru, passing into Bolivia where the Great Inca Trail cuts across the *altiplano* and onwards into the deserts of Chile.

For the time being, we are camped in the quaint village of Luquina on the shores of the lake. While we will sleep in our tents, we have a bathroom, showers and an electrified dining area. Life on the Great Inca Trail has gotten a lot more comfortable since the early days lost in the jungles of Northern Peru!

**After spending months together in the Andes, there's a familiarity between us that cuts across our varied cultures, languages, and personalities.**





**TOP** - The Great Inca Trail between Inca Uyu and Plateria. | **BOTTOM LEFT** - Valentín socializing with the locals along the Inca road. | **MIDDLE RIGHT** - Camp at Luquina, where our host is peeling *chuno*, freeze dried potatoes in the background. | **BOTTOM RIGHT** - Fine imperial Cusco style masonry at Inca Uyu.



The Cordillera Real in Bolivia as seen from the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca.



From left: Nick, John and Valentín walking around Lake Titicaca to Juli.

## Around the lake we go

Lake Titicaca is an inland sea measuring approximately 3,000 square miles at an elevation of 12,500 feet. It's the 18th largest lake in the world, straddling the border of Peru and Bolivia, and has been home to numerous cultures dating back thousands of years. The early settlers of this region domesticated the potato and the llama about 7,000 years ago, starting an important part of the process of civilization in South America.

Today contemporary cultures around Lake Titicaca still practice many traditional lifeways – only now they have electricity, transport and communication. Most of the population today still occupy their time with animal husbandry and agriculture, growing tubers and cereals. It's *chuño* season right now: a peculiar variety of freeze-dried potato. After leaving the potatoes to freeze overnight, the moisture is squeezed out by stomping them with bare feet in the frosty grass. This process continues for three days, after which the skins are removed and the potatoes are left to dry for a week. In this arid, cold, high altitude environment, *chuño* can last for more than a year. It can then be rehydrated and consumed in soup or made into a flour and baked into a bread called *pan de papa* (potato bread).

After a day of tracking the Inca road along the lakeshore and, at times, through fields, we set up camp tonight

above Juli, next to the Qhapaq Ñan. We are once again surrounded by locals peeling and stomping their *chuño*. This scene plays out amongst their pigs grunting, their donkeys braying, their dogs barking, their sheep bleating, and their cows mooing. It's an Andean version of Old MacDonald's Farm playing out around us all day and night. Most importantly though, we have flat and grassy *pampa* to pitch our tents on, safe and secure in the backyard of a friendly local family who was happy to rent it to us for the night.

The size of our team has been expanded a bit in Peru, partly because Alicia Moreno – the Spanish voice of the Great Inca Trail blog – has joined us for a week. While Alicia's day job is helping administer SA Expeditions from her base in Lima, she has become a very adept translator. Especially considering how it all began. In 2016, entirely out of the blue, I told her that I was going to walk the Qhapaq Ñan and asked if she could translate "some" stories I wanted to write. She had never done any formal translation before and has since translated more than 60,000 words into beautiful Peruvian Spanish. Eventually it will be her words that will grace the Spanish version of all our chronicles that can already be seen in our [English e-book here](#).

So we dedicate today to Alicia. To her competence and dedication to telling over 200 days of this ongoing story in Spanish. We would have never reached the audiences we have reached without her.





## It's time to reconsider tourism for the 21st century

Today marks the last stretch of unvisited Royal Inca road within Peruvian territory for our team. From the border of Ecuador at the great Inca citadel of Aypate, we've crossed the spine of the Andes to the Bolivian border at Lake Titicaca – almost 2,000 miles by foot. It's a curious thing to know the geography of a foreign land better than you know your own home. For me, Peru is a laboratory of human civilization whose intense geography has preserved its cultures over centuries and even millennia, allowing the student of history to consider the past by simply walking through it.

And on our final day in Peru, we were treated to an Inca road as beautiful as any we have seen. The causeway at Challapampa is a bridge across a lake, leading to a 15-foot-wide Inca road that crosses a low pass before dropping into the small town of Pomata. And like has happened so many times before, I find myself asking why no local travel companies are bringing clients along this walk? As an industry, we stuff thousands of tourists a day onto boats visiting various sites and communities around nearby Lake Titicaca – despite the fact that none of these sites has UNESCO World Heritage status. The “Inca Trail” brand – leveraged by the tourism industry to send millions of travelers a year to walk a 20-mile stretch of road to Machu Picchu – does not extend beyond Cusco. But it should.

The two miles of monumental Inca trail leading into Pomata only takes a few hours to walk. Yet tourists zoom by in vehicles en route to tourism centers in Cusco, Peru in one direction, and Copacabana, Bolivia in the other. The challenge is that traditional tourism models economies of scale, shuffling visitors from highlight to highlight, along with the rest of the herd. It's cheaper and easier for travel companies to piggyback on decades of glossy brochures than it is to create some new ones.

Travel – which comprises a whopping 15% of the global economy – extracts culture in the same way that an oil company extracts crude oil from the ground. And

just as oil companies are starting to realize that their sustainability requires investments in alternative energy, travel companies need to recognize that we must invest in alternative destinations for our sustainability. Developing new destinations requires long-term efforts in marketing, capacity building for local populations, infrastructure development, and involvement from the private and public sector. Reinventing travel will require plenty of time, capital and focus – and the same is true of the other industries that drive our global economy.

So as our team departs after thousands of miles walking on Inca roads across Peru, we plead with those in our industry who can affect over-tourism the most to consider increased investment and creativity in exploration. The regurgitation of glossy marketing brochures from the last century is not doing travelers, nor the long-term profitability of our industry, any favors. It's time we understood that travel should be about real experiences – not a concocted reality in the search for short-term profits.

## Developing new destinations is not simple. But does anything meaningful and long-lasting come easy?

### Into Bolivia and to the Island of the Sun

We departed our camp at Pomata, after a visit from the president of the community who had heard about a curious band of travelers coming to walk the Inca road. He was an affable man, taking pictures of our tents and interested to talk about how to use the Inca road to create tourism for his community. It's these

small but important conversations across hundreds of communities along the Great Inca Trail that build awareness within local populations about what visitors consider when traveling. Even something as small as clear signage of the one-mile Inca road that leads into their town square would be a simple and important step in getting folks to stop for a closer look.

Much as it was nice to chat, we eventually had to continue south for our planned crossing into Bolivia, and onwards to Sun Island. After some wrangling with Bolivian immigration – mostly to do with Rick getting hassled about his visa – we arrived to the port city of Copacabana. The closest Bolivia has to a beach town, Copacabana is the jumping off point for Sun Island, where one of the creation myths of the Inca civilization plays out. The simplest version of the legend says that the first Inca, Manco Capac, and his wife Mama Ocllo emerged from the lake to lead an empire.

Today Sun Island is like the most picturesque Greek island you can imagine – only at 12,000 feet above sea level. The Inca sailed across Lake Titicaca with totora reed rafts, establishing temples and complexes throughout its islands. Lake Titicaca displays a distinct version of Inca history and reminds us that their empire extended over water as well as land. Being an island within the inland sea of Lake Titicaca has helped Sun Island preserve its culture over the centuries, meaning that it now serves as a lens into the past.

And sometimes it takes someone to take a picture through an actual lens to gain a unique perspective of a particular place. Christian Declercq and his firm [Km Cero – Turismo](#), have been crucial partners in the Great Inca Trail project since the very beginning. They've captured some of the most incredible photography of our adventures and told a story that words never could. Especially when you consider that in order to capture such moments, Christian has to trek at high elevations over dozens of miles, processing his photography on the trail.

We dedicate today to Christian, and not just because it's his birthday! ¡Feliz cumpleaños Christian! We look forward to many more explorations to come.



**TOP** - The view of Pomata from the Inca road that leads into it.

**MIDDLE** - Copacabana Bolivia, the jumping off point to Sun Island.

**BOTTOM** - The Great Inca Trail team crossing the Bolivian border with our gear in carts.









The team pitches in to try to keep the boat from drifting into the Lake Titicaca storms.

## A stranded boat and a machine gun

The day started out in the lap of eco-lodge luxury on Sun Island at La Estancia, the best hotel on the Island. Everyone on the team indulged in beds, private bathrooms and warm hospitality from Gabriela, the manager. Even Flavio and Valentín took the day off from cooking, as everyone enjoyed a fresh three-course dinner made on site. After a lazy morning, we walked along the spine of the Island to the Inca sun temple before meeting our boat to Escoma, across the lake. As it turned out, the voyage from Sun Island to Escoma was more of an exploration and the first such navigation for everyone involved, including the boat captain. We were heading across the lake in search of lost Inca roads en route to Santiago de Okola.

What started out fine enough as we pattered across the lake in a humble motorboat eventually turned into an adventure no one was expecting. After a few hours of navigation and within 150 feet of the shore, the driver took us onto a sandbar – apparently knowing he was just about to run out of gas. This maneuver served as an anchor of sorts, keeping our small boat from drifting out back into an inland sea with a cold night and harsh winds approaching.

After everyone pitched in trying to figure out a solution, it became clear that someone had to wade ashore in frigid waters, taking the empty gas tank with them. The driver, taking responsibility for the situation, dived in wearing only his skivvies. He fought his way through the thickets of totora reeds toward a small outcropping of houses on the Bolivian *altiplano*. All the while, I was trying to work out how to stay warm sleeping on this boat. But in a heroic move by the driver, he miraculously showed up thirty minutes later in a rowboat, with a full tank of gas! He was quickly rebuilding his reputation as he climbed aboard, shivering. Eventually we made it to a makeshift jetty as night descended, everyone relieved to be on dry land at last.

We quickly packed the two 4x4s that had been waiting for us on shore and headed to our camp. But there was more excitement to come. The Bolivian military must have been watching our admittedly rather suspicious antics, because before long, one of our cars was stopped by a roadblock comprising a single white station wagon. Immediately, three military police in full fatigues and carrying a loaded machine gun ran towards our car. As one officer went to our driver Tomas, the other circled around the passenger side with his gun aimed right into the car.



The walk to Santiago de Okola from Carabuco.

Tomas, our driver and partner in Bolivia, explained to the officer what was obvious at this stage – that we were just a bunch of tourists happy to be on dry land. The gun was lowered, and we continued on our way.

Curious to see what tomorrow brings!

## Santiago de Okola

Waking up on firm ground on the shore of Lake Titicaca, we began our walk down the northeast side of the lake from the town of Carabuco, a small village that was once an Inca *Tambo* (waystation). Above the town is a small peak which features the fourteen stations of the cross. These are represented by a trail of actual wooden crosses up the mountain slope. The carved stairway to the impressive viewpoint at the summit was, no doubt, a temple in pre-Columbian times as well.

From here, we walked along the lakeshore to the town of Santiago de Okola, which sits beneath another mountain – this time in the shape of a sleeping dragon. The 12-mile trek took us through fields, old roads that had telltale characteristics of Inca engineering, and eventually along the shoreline into town, where a feast awaited us.

The beauty of Bolivia and its Aymara culture was on full display today in Santiago de Okola. The town’s tourism association has, for more than a decade, been building capacities to welcome guests from all over the world with the help of a local tour operator, Sendas Altas. Sendas Altas has helped them make iterative improvements on everything from family homestays, to fresh meals directly from their fields, and walking circuits that allow visitors to take in the history and culture of the region.

Tourism is about partnerships, which in this case starts with the community collaborating with a thoughtful local operator who then partners with tour companies from abroad like SA Expeditions to help market the experience. With lots of trust and capacity building along this value chain, everyone can benefit economically and, as happened today, enjoy a big feast. A meal that John enjoyed so much that he stuffed extra goodies into his jacket (as he often does when greeted by a table full of Andean staples).

Our meal was accompanied with gratitude from all involved – especially from Don Vicente, an elder of the group who bonded immediately with Valentín, who has been working to improve community tourism in his village of Choquechaca in Peru. Watching these two

elders from different corners of the Andes discover they had so much in common was a sight to see. A poignant reminder that the indigenous, pre-Columbian bonds along this great Inca route transcend modern-day nation states.

The afternoon was finished off with live music of flutes and drums, and flower petals showered on our heads. Rick, the only member of the team who doesn't speak Spanish, didn't need to: the *señoras* from town pulled him up with the rest of us to swing and dance as Kevin snapped his camera, capturing the moment.

We were all having a hell of a time along the Great Inca Trail!

## Sleeping Dragons and Sweeping Vistas

Today the team awoke to cloudy skies after being lulled to sleep by the sound of pounding rain and rolling thunder. It seems we are in the midst of a *friaje*, a series of unseasonable Andean rainstorms caused by rising moisture from the Amazon basin.

The cloud cover made for the perfect weather for climbing Santiago de Okola's primary tourist attraction, el Dragón Dormido. Named for its resemblance to a dragon who has curled up for a nap, the Sleeping Dragon is a dramatic rock formation that juts from the lakeshore to an elevation of 13,400 feet. It also figures in local legend as the mythical residence of the god Tunupa, who lived here until he was banished to die on the mountain bearing his name above the Salar de Uyuni. Since we are planning to climb his final resting place in just under a week, we thought it would be fitting to ascend to his one-time home as a warmup. The climb was tough but rewarded us with some stunning panoramic views of Lake Titicaca, as well as a look back at our path over the last several days.

After descending the Dragon and saying our goodbyes to our gracious hosts in Okola, we hiked out of town, following the Inca Road as it ascends to the nearby pass at Sisasani, which was once an Inca *tambo*. In sections it was clear this road was once wide, well paved, and

beautiful. Unfortunately, disuse and development have taken their toll on the royal road, as many sections have been washed out by runoff issuing from culverts built under the modern highway, forming deep gullies that have gutted the widest and most evident sections of the road. While it would be a significant amount of work to rebuild the Inca road from Sisasani to Okola, one can only imagine the value a restored Inca trail would provide the community in its efforts to bolster tourism.

Arriving in Sisasani we climbed to yet another viewpoint with sweeping vistas of Lake Titicaca, the snowcapped peaks of the Cordillera Real, and the road that lay both behind us and ahead. Having explored the Inca road on both the southern and northern shores of Lake Titicaca, the expedition will now jump to the south, taking our vehicles to the important pre-Inca centers of Chiripa and Tiwanaku before heading across the *altiplano* into relatively unknown territory. Sitting atop the Sleeping Dragon and the Mirador of Sisasani provided the perfect opportunities to appreciate the natural splendor of the Titicaca region, and made for a fitting end to our time in the area.

**Kevin Floerke** | Head of Explorations  
SA Expeditions

## Empires of the Andes

The Incas, who built the monumental road that we've been tracking for 200 days (and counting), were an empire for only 100 years. The Inca empire was the culmination of 5,000 years of civilizational development that began on the coast of Peru at Caral. Although, of course, none of this would have been possible if bands of hunters and gatherers hadn't migrated from Siberia over a land bridge after the last Ice age.

About 1,500 years ago, an empire known as Tiwanaku emerged from the Bolivian *altiplano*, serving as a mother culture to all who followed – especially the Inca. It's no coincidence that the spiritual and political capital of the Tiwanaku is along the Great Inca Road just south of Lake Titicaca. Tiwanaku's stonework is still the finest in the

Andes and it certainly influenced the Inca, themselves master stone carvers. Many archeologists believe the people who would become the Inca probably fled Tiwanaku around 1100 AD due to a drought, establishing their capital at Cusco.

This morning, we left our camp at Chiripa, the site of a proto-Tiwanaku culture, looking for an old road that connected the two sites. A local *campesino* pointed us to a path that climbed gradually toward the ridge before reaching a large pre-Columbian platform at its highest point. The vistas from here showed expansive views of the lake to one side, Tiwanaku on the other, and the 20,000+ foot peaks of the Cordillera Real in the background. Once you know where the ancient settlements were, you can start to connect them with old roads.

Before long we arrived to Tiwanaku, where we set up camp behind the Taypi Uta restaurant near the gates of the archeological park. We visited Puma Punku, the entry point into Tiwanaku, and all the principal sectors and pyramids of the complex. We witnessed monumental stonework, where geometric carvings adorned slabs of stone weighing over 100 tons. At first you wonder how they were so precise in their carvings with only bronze tools. Then you wonder how they moved such large stones in the first place.

To put this into perspective, consider that the Tiwanaku site was built over different epochs, for a total of 700 years. Considering how much the American empire has progressed over the last 150 years, imagine how much a culture could refine their engineering, art, and spirituality over a timeframe five times that figure. There remains much about the Tiwanaku culture that we do not yet understand.

Whatever the case, today's journey through the past filled in a few more pieces of the great story of humanity. It was also done over a walk and followed by a late afternoon teatime of popcorn, beer, *tequeños* and other goodies. Not to mention the stimulating conversation about [Butch Cassidy and Che Guevara](#) interwoven with the writing of this story.

Next up for the day... Flavio's hot dinner and early bed.



**TOP** - John is happy to be back on the trail climbing el Dragon Dormido (The Sleeping Dragon).

**MIDDLE** - Rick climbs into Tunupa's cave on the back of the Sleeping Dragon.

**BOTTOM** - The Ponce monolith at Tiwanaku.



**TOP** - Part of the team eating a second breakfast of street food at Jesus de Machaca.  
**MIDDLE** - Our caravan stops at Caquiaviri, an old Inca *tambo* and contemporary village along our route.  
**BOTTOM** - The Bolivian army caravanning on the Inca road along with our team.

## The Inca Road from Jesús de Machaca

The Inca road from Cusco that heads south into Bolivia splits into two arms. One heading south-east towards Tupiza before crossing into Argentina and eventually arriving to Mendoza. The other arm takes a more direct southerly route through Jesús de Machaca and eventually towards the Salar de Uyuni, and into Chile. Our 2019 Great Inca Trail expedition will take the second option, saving the easterly route through Argentina for next year.

So today from Tiwanaku, we took the short drive to Jesús de Machaca, once a well-known Inca *Tambo* and now a contemporary village, where the Inca road connects to Caquiaviri and other *tambo*-towns beyond. The road, like the towns, displays few remnants of its Inca past – except when looking at the route in its entirety in obscure publications and Google Earth satellite views. This Inca road has long-since succumbed to vehicle traffic in a region hungry for basic infrastructure and transportation, a reminder that conservation of the past needs to be balanced with the basic needs of contemporary people.

After stopping in the main Plaza at Machaca to have a look around and indulge in some local street food, we began to walk south with cars passing us every ten minutes or so. Any modern traveler along the Qhapaq Ñan needs to understand that the Inca road is as much a transport artery as it is a contiguous trail. And while there are monumental stretches of Inca road to be found throughout Qollasuyu, it's mostly a game of finding an old *tambo* and following the old road for a few miles out of town until you find the next one. It's a bit like a treasure hunt that requires you to connect the dots instead of finding the "X" that marks the spot. As for today, the lines connecting the dots could be traversed by vehicle, so we decided that six miles of walking would suffice, jumping in our 4x4s and zipping across the *altiplano* like Chaskis (Inca relay runners) on wheels.

Overlanding across a harsh landscape with little to no services for hundreds of miles requires preparation. Tomas, our driver and local fixer with [Sendas Altas – Operadores en Turismo](#), made sure he brought along his mechanic Gabriel as our second driver – a fantastic idea that gave us peace of mind. With extra tanks of gas and our team’s food and camping equipment on the roofs, we confidently barreled through small rivers and rocky roads, enjoying a new mode of transportation while exploring the Qhapaq Ñan. I have to admit; I did not miss our fussy team of llamas spitting at each other and ignoring all human commands.

We were zipping ahead in order to attend the Solstice Festival at Inkawasi Island, 300 miles south on the Salar de Uyuni. Here on the morning of the 21st of June, we will witness the first crest of the sun which signals the beginning of the Andean New Year. Being so close and given our fascination with all things Inca, it’s a festival we simply cannot afford to miss. So much so that we’ve decided to detour from the Inca road to Bolivia’s main highway, on which we will continue our southbound mission tomorrow.

## An intermission at the halfway point

On all Great Inca Trail expeditions there is a need to take a day to re-supply and prepare for the road ahead. Oruro, the last stop with a decent market before the barren southern expanses of Bolivia fit the bill perfectly. Like many cities in Bolivia, Oruro sprung up during colonial times on the back of mining. And while Oruro’s mineral reserves have long since been exhausted, the city is still heavily shaped by its mining heritage.

Flavio and Valentín hit the local market to stock up on food supplies with Kevin and me in tow. Kevin was there to see what kind of life he could capture with the camera and I wanted to make sure we didn’t forget about the nuts and dried fruit. Flavio always gets a little worried when he has to walk into a new market and quickly learn the layout of stalls filled with vegetables, meats and dry goods,

Just imagine the challenge of showing up to a local bazaar, in a new country (Flavio and Valentín are from Cusco), having to buy a week’s worth of food, which must then be packed so it will keep for a full week. Not to mention that fact that he will have to eventually cook it all with Valentín in a tent – which, in the case of breakfast, takes place in sub-zero temperatures. There are no better and more adaptable trail cooks in the world than those from Cusco, Peru.

John, however, feels at home anywhere in the Andes and he helpfully reminded us that the Inca citadel at Paria was not far from Oruro. In typical John style, he’d walked into Paria – a now-barren outpost on the Bolivian *altiplano* – last year and befriended Carola Condarco and his family who busy themselves with local archeology and exploring Bolivian Inca roads. As if this wasn’t enough, they also had a nice *finca* where we could make camp for the night. John has a network of hundreds (if not thousands) of friends across the Andes – contacts who have graciously helped us along our journey for thousands of miles.

Paria lies along the path of easterly Inca road through Bolivia that heads towards Tupiza and into Argentina. We have taken a detour from the westerly Inca route to here, due to the convenience of re-supplying at Oruro. Nonetheless, Paria was a major Inca center in Qollasuyu, probably the most important Inca city along the Bolivian Qhapaq Ñan, as described in the Spanish chronicles of the 16th century. Now there is almost nothing left of its infrastructure, besides a few stone bases of what used to be *colcas* or Inca storage buildings. It truly is a lost world erased by time.

On this day, Paria is getting a little bit of attention from our ragtag team of contemporary adventurers as we make our way through the old Inca empire. Tomorrow we’ll be gone, leaving these plains to the winds of the past and its modern inhabitants, the Condarco family of the Cotochulpa Finca.







**Tomorrow we'll be gone, leaving these plains to the winds of the past and its modern inhabitants, the Condarco family.**



The team "coming in hot" to Salar de Uyuni.

## “Comin in hot” to Salar de Uyuni

Rick, the new member of our team, reminded me something very important as we descended into the Salar de Uyuni: That if we’re going to arrive somewhere, we better do it “hot”. In North American speak, “coming in hot” means that we are coming with everything we got... With *chutzpah!* With balls to the wall!

We are sure going to need it, because over the next week we are going to summit at least two volcanoes over 17,000 feet. In between, we are going to walk across the Salar de Uyuni, the largest salt flat in the world. It will be a journey of two days and over 50 miles, immersed in nothing but white. Rick was right when he said we must “come in hot”... Anything less and we aren’t going to make it.

Since 2016 we’ve dedicated this page to exploring the Great Inca Trail. Inca roads were my first love in exploration, and I’ve now journeyed over 3,000 miles on the Qhapaq Ñan. We’ve had social media engagement running into the millions, reaching the screens of people across the planet and introducing many to the wonders of the Inca Road. We’ve taken llamas, horses, mules and ourselves through jungles, over peaks and across deserts. The experience has transformed us all, but it’s now time to look forward.

Soon we will move on to other projects, leaving the Inca Road to academia, whose deliberate way of deciphering the past will continue to work itself out over the next

centuries. We will continue to publish our findings and story of the Qhapaq Ñan [as we’ve done here](#) but we will also begin to explore other parts of our planet. And who is to say that we will stop within our atmosphere? The private space industry is among the most dynamic and well-funded industries today, and it is only a matter of time before we see mainstream space tourism. This is an area of great interest to our team of explorers, and we plan to be here, there and everywhere in between, bringing you to new parts of our universe.

These first years of exploration for SA Expeditions have been about exploring close to our nest in Lima, Peru, where our organization was born in 2010. It’s now time to move beyond that and contemplate what else in the universe begs exploring. We need to consider how we can take the know-how we’ve gained crossing the Andes and apply it to exploration elsewhere, places that need to be shared with humanity.

But before we approach those lofty summits, we face the looming mountain in front of us. We are going to share the Salar de Uyuni with anyone who’s looking. If anywhere on Earth feels like another planet, Uyuni might just be it. But don’t take our word for it, follow along and see what otherworldly places humanity still has to explore. This story is for the curious – those who want to know about their world and maybe understand how we fit into it all.

Welcome to a journey that is beginning to move beyond the Inca road... To natural and cultural patrimony beyond the confines of the Central Andes.



LEFT - Bolivian *Amautas* throw sacrificial wine into the air to welcome the rising solstice sun. | RIGHT - The solstice dawn breaks over the salt flats.

## Happy New Years from the Andes

On the 21st of June every year the Andean world celebrates the New Year. In contrast to a New Year in New York, where the big apple drops as everyone counts down from 10, the Andean New Year is marked by the rising of the sun as it first crests the horizon. This morning's celebration on Inkawasi Island, in the middle of the Uyuni Salt Flats, started in frigid darkness as we dragged ourselves from our tents to drive across the salt to witness the event – along with many other tourists and even officials from the capital of La Paz.

As day dawned, the *Amautas* (wise elders) prepared a large fire topped with llama fetuses, coca leaves and other goodies. With the fire lit, they offered libations to the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) by tossing wine and liquor into the flames, chanting, singing and dancing to the rising sun as onlookers took pictures. It was a cold morning, which made the *Amautas*' fire as useful for warmth as it was for ceremonial purposes. As the sun rose at 11,000 feet on a salt flat in the Bolivian *altiplano*, everyone started to wish each other *Enhora Buena*, a local way of saying “Happy New Year”.

There was even a temporary stage and a Bolivian rock band who stopped their set when the *Amautas* began their ceremony and picked up again after. By 8am, pickup trucks had pulled up to the scene, hawking beverages and food, which even included Coronas. The Vice Minister of Bolivian tourism, Marcelo Arze, was on

hand to welcome the New Year. Arze has been intimately involved in developing the Qhapaq Ñan for tourism in Bolivia and across South America and he graciously welcomed our team, giving us all new hats and books to thank us for our work in promoting the Inca Road.

Inkawasi is the center of the tour circuit for day trippers to the Salar and a logical place for Bolivia to display its Andean culture to visitors around the world. Attracting tourism to a particular country happens within the context of competition with other countries in the region. Bolivia – a country of immense natural and cultural heritage – needs to compete with other neighboring countries like Chile and Peru which receive many more visitors despite boasting similar tourism resources.

Hydrocarbons have always been a major export for Bolivia, reaching nearly two billion dollars annually (much more when prices were better). If Bolivia could attract five million annual visitors (as Peru does), its tourism exports could match that of hydrocarbons. Bolivia's neighbors, mentioned above, have both established tourism exports that compete with extractive industries in terms of economic value.

On this New Year's morning, our team was taking things a bit less seriously though, having some breakfast beer and listening to the band before returning to camp for a big breakfast, a nap, and an afternoon hike up the mountain to get our legs loose to summit the 17,000-foot Tunupa Volcano tomorrow.







A view of the team's ascent of Tunupa Volcano.

## To the top of Tunupa Volcano

Tunupa Volcano looms large over the western side of the Salar de Uyuni at 17,000 feet. The various minerals, baked by extreme heat, give off a layered rainbow effect on the exact ridge we eventually walked up. Jirira, our base camp for three nights, is just around the shore of the Salar from Coqueza, the typical jumping off point for those wanting to hike to the volcano's summit. Our plan was to walk up from Coqueza and descend the other side of the volcano before returning to Jirira.

It was about time the team started to do some serious trekking after enough days in trucks. We had to get our mindset right for the week ahead. Tomorrow the plan is to cross half of the Salar by foot, making camp at Isla Pescado approximately 20 miles away, and then crossing a similar distance the following day. Only a few days after that, we'll attempt to summit Licancabur Volcano – 19,000-foot behemoth. Needless to say, it was time we started to get moving.

We started the walk up to Tunupa strong, taking only a few hours to reach the spot where things began to get steep at about the 15,000 foot mark. As is typical with our team's various opinions on paths, we split up. Valentín and I took the rainbow-colored knife edge, that quickly found me on all fours climbing up the volcano with a mild level of fear. John, Kevin and Rick took a more indirect route which, as John put it, covered more

distance but reduced the angle of the ascent by about ten percent.

No matter how you slice it, it took everything we had to get to the top. Eventually we made it to a small landing where we could all congregate, take pictures, eat lunch and send the drone up. The massive Salar de Uyuni expanded in all directions before us, making even this seemingly gigantic volcano a humble point in the landscape. We were on the top of the world, our blood rushing, a little cold and amazed at what lay in front of us.

The euphoria would only last about forty-five minutes and was sandwiched between a painful ascent and an exhausting descent to the town of Jirira. From the top, we could clearly see the direction to Jirira but couldn't be sure that the valleys in between were as harmless as they seemed from our vantage point in the sky. Getting there would require us to walk into the millions-of-years-old crater and down a river valley emanating from it.

Then came the ridges. By the late afternoon, after a full day of hiking, we had to climb a series of small ascents which plunged a dagger into the heart of all our energy. What we could have done in ten minutes at the start of the day was now causing seemingly unbearable discomfort as our muscles limped along. Eventually, we reached Tomas by radio for our rendezvous with the car above Jirira. Everyone was tired, but we had made it and we felt good for it.



**TOP** - Ascending to Tunupa Volcano. | **BOTTOM LEFT** - An *apacheta* at top of Tunupa Volcano, where previous climbers have added their rock.  
**BOTTOM RIGHT** - Valentín carrying the drone on his back heading to Tunupa Volcano.

**No matter how you slice it, it took everything we had to get to the top.**



**TOP** - The Salar de Uyuni at sunset, with Tunupa Volcano in the background.  
**BOTTOM** - Rick, John and Nick walking across the Salar de Uyuni.

## Across the Salar de Uyuni

At 7,500 square miles, the Salar de Uyuni is the largest salt flat in the world: reason enough to walk across it. From Tahua, below the Tunupa Volcano, Kevin, John and Rick took off walking on the flat, bright white Salar. I walked for a good hour in the morning before joining Tomas in the support vehicle and playing photographer for the walk. Being an observer to the adventure going down was a nice change of pace. Those trekking across the salt were covering 3.7 miles an hour during the morning with fresh legs and cold air. As they moved across the Salar, Tunupa got smaller and Isla Pescado, our private island destination, got bigger.

As John explains the day from his perspective: “The afternoon was a real slog. It’s a bit like walking across a big white board with no sounds and no life. The only things that do change are the shapes of the Islands on the horizon. The salt and ice blend in a unique kind of permafrost, hexagonal tile patters that mimic the monumental stonework in Cusco. Which made me wonder if the Inca were inspired by natural patterns here in Uyuni?”

Rick, who plowed alongside John all day, put it this way: “OMG what an incredible 36 hours. To go from the highest spot I have ever climbed (16,780 feet) to walking across a sea of white that reminds me of the blizzard of 78 in Boston. Today as we trudged 20 miles across a huge flat, white puzzle, to an island that never seemed to get any closer, there was plenty of time to reflect on how lucky I am. And to be thankful that the soundtrack to *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* was on my iPod.”

Kevin, in the meantime, set a velocity that put him beyond sight of the other two by midday. He seemed the most determined to walk the whole length over these two days, giving these reflections: “There is no way to get



to know an environment as intimately as when you walk across it. For hours, you notice these small changes, the shape of patterns in the salt, the distortions of the mirages on the horizon, the crunching of the crystals under your feet. It was a privilege to get to know such a unique environment.”

Beyond playing photographer, I helped prepare camp and play welcoming committee when they eventually arrived to the finish point at Isla Pescado. For now, we’re camped at an odd beachhead on a deserted island amongst a sea of salt.

## Worth your salt

Leaving from our camp at Isla Pescado, the team walked south for another day across the salt flats, reaching land about 20 miles later. Kevin was the only member of the team who walked the complete length of the salt flats, more than 37 miles over two days. John and Rick lasted most of it, getting into the support vehicle for the second half of today. I showed up to walk about an hour to make sure I at least got a taste of what it was like. Kevin, who had set a goal to walk across the entire Salar, achieved what he set out to do. It’s a big achievement, especially after summiting the 17,000-foot Tunupa Volcano with us the day before.

The Great Inca Trail expeditions have always been about crossing natural and cultural corridors to raise awareness of our planet. As we enter this new phase of exploration beyond the confines of the Inca world, it remains at its core an experience in awareness. Awareness of the beauty and fragility of our planet, and to consider ways in which future visitors can help protect our shared patrimony as earthlings. There is no doubt that the Salar de Uyuni belongs alongside Earth’s great creations, and we as humans need to do what we can to share and protect it.

However, the idealism of such ideas can only be considered if you can stay warm in this damn place! We woke to a 7am breakfast in conditions pushing -10 degrees Celsius. Our toes, fingers, ears, and even our souls were frozen. There is no room for miscalculations in this environment – get it wrong and you could easily die. Sure, Uyuni has its tourists class hotels, its private guided tours, its hordes of Instagrammers roaming across the landscape. But our expedition, as Tomas says, “is about living like Spartans,” surviving in tents, immersed in the elements and carrying on as a team of Boy Scouts 30 years too old.

Although sometimes, I must admit, we indulge in what luxury is possible in the barren and cold Andean *altiplano*. Like tonight, in a town of only 15 full-time families, when a small hotel made of salt appeared we jumped at it. Not only does it have a hot shower and full-size beds, but it also has beer! With cold beer and a power socket for our speaker, we enjoyed a frigid and well-earned happy hour.

Life can be enlightening, consequential and banal all at the same time.

# Our toes, fingers, ears, and even our souls were frozen.

**It's a bit like walking  
across a big white board  
with no sounds and no life.**



## Lagoons, Deserts and Freezing Cold

After four days kicking around an inland sea of salt at the Salar de Uyuni, it's time to move on, continuing south along the Great Inca Trail across southern Bolivia and eventually into northern Chile.

Departing from our salt hotel at Aguaquiza, we began the overland trip through the barren and spectacular scenery of southern Bolivia. The dusty, bumpy and meandering road passes through various windswept hamlets that make you feel like you're in an old western movie and Clint Eastwood is going to walk around the corner. As we moved south, first came Puerto Chuvica, then Julaca, San Agustín, Sora Canyon, Villa Alota and finally our planned camp at Valle de Rocas.

When we arrived to Valle de Rocas, halfway along the route to Laguna Colorada, wind speeds were pushing 40 miles an hour, and the temperature was close to zero degrees Celsius - before you'd even factored in the midday windchill. For a moment we considered setting our camp amongst the sandstone rocks for shelter, but it soon became apparent that things were going to get a lot colder and we knew we would freeze in our tents.

After exploring around the area of Valle de Rocas for a refuge of any sort, we decided to continue for another three hours to Laguna Colorada where we could find



One of the many volcanoes en route between Aguaquiza and Laguna Colorado.

shelter in the national park. With the winds continuing and temperatures dropping well below zero degrees Celsius, we rallied across the high-altitude desert (14,000 to 16,000 feet), making our own path across the sandy landscape. Soon a gathering storm darkened the horizon, adding an element of urgency to our journey to shelter. Given the weather and our remote location, we were one flat tire away from being in a real pickle. The heater was also out in Tomas's vehicle, with us all bundled up and extra eager to arrive someplace warmer.

Between it all, we passed by stunning lagoons of whites and blues, a result of borax concentrations, salt, ice and water. In every direction, dormant volcanos dotted the skyline as our vehicles navigated between them, making our way south. Eventually, as night approached, we glimpsed the largest lagoon of them all: Laguna Colorada spans 43 square miles and boasts an eerie pinkish red hue.

Just as we hoped, a small refuge with a few rooms, a kitchen and a fireplace appeared. Our change of schedule meant that we hadn't had a chance to stop and make lunch so, after getting warm, the next order of business was food. Flavio and Valentín boiled a pot of potatoes and eggs, accompanied with cheese and hot beverages. We then had squash soup and pork chops with lentils and rice. Warm and with full bellies we watched the snow fall outside our windows, thanking our lucky stars we weren't camped on a windswept plain. What a difference a few hours can make.

## Geysers, Hot Springs, and High Desert Passes

We awoke to flurries of dry snow blowing across the landscape as the sun rose over a frigid Laguna Colorada. Ice rimmed the shoreline as we walked, sheltering ourselves from a bitter cold wind. Flamingos took flight over herds of indifferent llamas grazing on tender grasses among the hills surrounding our *refugio*. The blazing reds of the *laguna* were on full display, making a striking contrast with the whites of both the snow-dusted

hillside and the borax islands below. We almost could have been dreaming but for the biting cold penetrating all our layers of protection.

We left this scene and its friendly wildlife behind, heading onward to the small community of Polques and its hot springs. We figured this was a good opportunity to both rest our weary bodies after three intense days on the Salar and to acclimatize in preparation for our ascent to 19,400 feet. After driving over a series of snowy passes above 16,000 feet, we arrived to yet another dreamlike scene as the Geysers Sol de Mañana emerged from a frozen alpine landscape.

Here relentless blasts of hot steam stream into the sky, and pools of sulfur bubble with geothermal heat. After driving in a car with no heater in temperatures below zero degrees, it was surreal to suddenly be faced with the very real danger of being severely burned. But such is life in the otherworld that is southern Bolivia, a place of extreme contrasts and fantastical sights. We took them all in as we made our way south to a *refugio* on the shore of another frozen lagoon. This time, however, our frozen lagoon comes complete with an outdoor hot spring with a view to the snowy peaks beyond.

So here we found ourselves today, above 14,000 feet and looking out at a snow-covered landscape in our bathing suits. Our aching muscles got a reprieve and our cardiovascular systems got a chance to adjust to yet another high camp. Tomorrow we will arrive to our base camp at Licancabur and ready ourselves for yet another serious challenge. The Inca climbed this mountain to revere it and they even built a *tambo* at its base. We will follow in their stead, letting the ancients guide the footsteps of modern explorers.

**Kevin Floerke** | Head of Explorations  
SA Expeditions

## Flamingos took flight over herds of indifferent llamas grazing on tender grasses



**TOP** - One of the friendly llamas at Laguna Colorada.

**MIDDLE** - The expedition team in the hot springs at Polques lagoon. From left: Flavio, Rick, Kevin, Nick and John.

**BOTTOM** - John and Rick immersed in steam at the Sol de Mañana Geysers.



The 19,300 foot Licancabur Volcano that borders Bolivia and Chile.

## Staging our summit of Licancabur Volcano

Waking up on our third day in the cold and barren Eduardo Alvaro Reserve in Southern Bolivia, we headed to base camp at the foot of the nearly 20,000-foot Licancabur Volcano. We will spend another night camped out in a small *refugio*, departing tomorrow morning for the all-day climb and hopefully the summit of Licancabur.

But before that, we did a preliminary climb to the neighboring Juriquez Volcano to continue our acclimatization and preparation process. It only took us the afternoon but was still a challenge with a steep angle of ascent and loose volcanic sand leading up to the summit at 15,500 feet. It was a good reminder of the challenges that await tomorrow and a test of our gear.

On Juriquez winds howled, and wind-chill temperatures were well below zero degrees Celsius. Every inch of

our skin was covered from head to toe, except for a few patches exposed at the cheeks and nose. It's wintertime in this part of the Southern Hemisphere, which means it's the dry season but also the coldest and windiest. A bit different than what I'm used to in California, where the winter months bring both chill and precipitation.

Licancabur Volcano sits right on the border of Chile, and we are camped next to Bolivian *aduana* (customs) officials. The border crossing here is as remote as they come but it still sees many vehicles and travelers going to and from the Salar de Uyuni and San Pedro de Atacama. The only ones who stop and stay for the night, however, are those looking to hit to the top of Licancabur.

We're all hoping that the weather doesn't get any more extreme, preventing our summit tomorrow. We're loading up on carbs, getting our minds in the right place and getting an early night sleep. We'll hopefully have views from the top of this world for you tomorrow.



**TOP LEFT** - Ceremonial platform at Pacopampa. | **BOTTOM LEFT** - The sun rising as we climbed Licancabur.  
**RIGHT** - The frozen lake at the bottom of the Licancabur crater.

## To the Top of Licancabur

After tracking over 3,000 miles of Inca road across the Andes, today we witnessed the highest evidence of Inca civilization that our Great Inca Trail project has ever come across. Licancabur Volcano, on the border of Bolivia and Chile, features the remains of an Inca *tambo* at its base and ceremonial buildings in its crater at 19,300 feet. In order to experience it, we would first have to climb to the top. The hike begins at what is, to the best of our knowledge, the highest Inca *tambo* in the empire at 15,300 feet. From this base camp, the Incas had efficient access to an important *Apu* (mountain deity), where they could perform religious ceremonies and pay tribute to their gods.

We were just hoping we could make it to the top without frostbite, hypothermia or acute mountain sickness (AMS). We started trekking at 6:30am, with temperatures around minus 10 degrees Celsius and winds touching 40 mph, making our water freeze in our backpacks. Layered

to the max, we began a slog up the sandy face of the volcano.

The intensity of the altitude, cold, wind, and slope were all-consuming, making you wonder how the Inca ever established themselves here. At regular intervals during the ascent we saw crosses where previous hikers had lost their lives, usually due to slipping on ice or loose rock. The final few hundred feet to the summit, I found myself semi-delirious, numb at the extremities and scrambling up a rocky ascent. I reached the top first in a little under five hours, with the rest of the team about 45 minutes behind. At the summit, the crater lake proved to be a solid block of ice. The peak was a freezer with sheer winds that shut down my iPhone seconds after taking a quick selfie. Neither humans nor technology are welcome here for long.

While I would have liked to have waited for the rest of the team to arrive and take a group shot, I was sure that hypothermia would kick in, so I immediately started back down. The rest of the team had a similarly hard







time, with Kevin getting frostbite on his fingers down to the second knuckle, and both John and Rick struggling with numb fingers and toes. Getting back down in half the time that it took me to get up, I reached our vehicle and huddled up in the warmth, waiting for the rest of the team to arrive over the ensuing hours. When we finally were all back in one place, we rejoiced in the achievement over beers and *singani* (Bolivian firewater) back at base camp.

In 1981, the renowned high-altitude archeologist Johan Reinhard summited Licancabur and did what was at that time the highest altitude scuba dive ever (in the summertime when the lake was liquid), looking for Inca remains. Reinhard later went on to summit dozens of other high volcanic peaks in Qollasuyu, including the nearby Llullaillaco Volcano, where he discovered one of the best-preserved Inca mummies ever found. The Inca would sacrifice pubescent children at the top of 20,000-foot peaks as an offering to the gods, giving humanity a frozen time capsule through which we can try to make sense of the pre-Columbian world. Considering how hard just getting to the summit of Licancabur was, Reinhard's achievements seem even more incredible.

## Into the desert plateau of Atacama

The team awoke today slightly sore from yesterday's high mountain ascent but ready to drop down to lower altitudes and warmer temperatures. After packing up our Bolivian 4x4 vehicles for the last time, we headed to the isolated immigration outpost that marks the border with Chile. We were also surprised to learn that we owed a 15 boliviano "exit fee." Having traveled to and from Bolivia many times without encountering this fee, we found this to be slightly suspicious and asked what exactly it was for, and if they could give a receipt for our payment. When we were denied both an explanation and proof of payment John lost his temper and accused the border guards of padding their beer fund. The "officials" simply shrugged and replied that payment was obligatory. At the

end of the day it's only two dollars – and if we had to man that cold border post we'd also want something to warm us up at night. We hope those beers are tasty.

After crossing the border into Chile things changed rapidly. We saw our first paved road in nearly a week, and while Chilean immigration and customs officials are incredibly thorough, we found them to be both courteous and fair. Our vehicle and baggage were quite a sight in this quiet border outpost, and everyone came out to see our piles of camp equipment and hear just exactly what we were doing dragging so much gear through the desert.

After clearing the inspection, we were finally free to descend out of the high volcanic rim of southern Bolivia and make the 7,000-foot drop into the Atacama Desert. We attempted to track any evidence of the Inca Road as it crossed over from the *tambo* in the saddle of Licancabur, but erosion has left little of the once wide and visible road. We finally picked up the trail as it crossed the modern highway at the Tropic of Capricorn. We hiked it back north as it made a dead straight beeline for the *tambo* at Licancabur, leaving a lasting imprint on the desert sand even 500 years after its construction.

Chile marks the fourth country the Great Inca Trail project has traversed, joining Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The Inca Road network is a piece of shared patrimony among Andean countries that harks back to a time before the nation states of modern South America. It is a common history that, if nurtured and shared with future generations, can be a pillar of political and economic collaboration between Andean nations.

Tomorrow we will continue on the Chilean Inca trail, but before that we head to San Pedro de Atacama to enjoy the fruits of civilization for the first time since leaving Cuzco twenty-three days ago. As if escaping the freezing temperatures of the *altiplano* weren't enough, we were also treated to cell service, hot showers and even a laundromat. With the team feeling and smelling better than we have in weeks, we are ready to face our last day of trekking on the Inca Road tomorrow as we prepare to close out the Qollasuyu chapter of our adventure.



**TOP** - Flavio and Valentín wait outside Bolivia immigrations at the border of Hito Cajon with Chile. | **BOTTOM LEFT** - The Inca road at the Tropic of Capricorn in the Atacama desert in Chile. | **BOTTOM RIGHT** - The Inca road is the Atacama desert of Chile as it winds down from Lincancabur volcano and southern Bolivia.

## The Great Inca Trail of Chile

The Inca empire of the 15th and 16th centuries expanded its control and influence from the capital at Cusco as far south as modern-day Santiago, Chile – a distance of approximately 2,000 miles. They did this by building one of humanity’s greatest pre-industrial road systems, which can still be seen and walked just an hour outside of the tourism mecca of San Pedro de Atacama.

Amongst the throngs of curbside travel agencies in the oasis town of San Pedro, hordes of travelers buy trips to the local geysers, to so-called Moon Valley, and other classic desert destinations. Yet, sadly, no company or adventure lodge that we know of offers a hike on the Inca road. Only an hour away from San Pedro, our team departed the large Inca *tambo* at Peine on foot, walking for hours along a 10-foot-wide Inca road with 20,000-foot volcanoes on one side and the Atacama salt flats on the other. Besides a few publications by specialists on the subject, general awareness of this stretch of Inca road is almost non-existent.

Today that lack of awareness meant that we had the Inca Trail all to ourselves. Going south from San Pedro, the Inca road that emanates from Licancabur Volcano runs along the foothills. Every 15 miles or so where water comes off the mountains in shallow canyons, we would encounter the remains of Inca *tambos*, which are now the small villages of Camar, Toconao, Peine and Tilomonte. And while the last five centuries of erosion

and development have taken their toll, erasing large swaths of the Inca road in the region, we have again been reminded of the power and ingenuity of the Incas.

Twenty-four days after departing from the Inca capital at Cusco, we have tracked this old road over three countries on a grand adventure, through an otherworldly natural and cultural corridor. Like all our Great Inca Trail expeditions, we hope that our real-time dispatches from the road help in some way to raise awareness of this important cultural heritage. And we won’t stop here: SA Expeditions will leverage its economic engine to put value on the Inca road through tourism, thus incentivizing the road’s preservation.

As can be seen on the SA Expeditions web page, explorers can now trek along the Inca Road’s most monumental and vulnerable stretches. In addition, media outlets from the *BBC*, *Guardian*, *Lonely Planet* and others have assisted in broadcasting our project and the beauty of the Great Inca Trail. SA Expeditions will also continue to align our company’s supply chain with local providers who attempt to practice a kind of tourism that goes beyond profits and increased visitor count. Outfitters that practice tourism that is both creative and empathetic to the challenges of Andean communities.

Because in the end, it is these communities who allow our passage and assist our intrepid team as we explore the Great Inca Trail.

# Thanks for following along.



**TOP** - The Qollasuyu trekking team from left to right: Valentín, Rick, Flavio, Nick, Kevin, John. | **BOTTOM** - John, Valentín and Flavio walking on the Inca road with the Atacama salt flats in the background.

**The Inca Road network is shared patrimony that harks back to a time before the nation states of modern South America.**





# Appreciation

The Great Inca Trail project was established in early 2016 with a simple goal in mind... To build awareness of the Inca road system and promote its conservation through tourism. In the 24 months since we began to walk the Great Inca Trail, we've trekked along its path for nearly 225 days, sharing every one of them real-time to a growing audience around the world.

Following our expeditions, our team of local partners, marketers and operational professionals develop travel experiences that fast forward the visitor into the Inca world and specifically aim to place economic value on its cultural patrimony. Having now experienced first-hand more Inca roads than a handful of people alive today (my colleague John far more than me), we can say that destruction of the Inca road is persistent. Local mayors bulldozing the trail to show their constituents' progress; simple farmers using stones to build animal corrals; and local populations shifting to motor vehicles as their main form of transport.

It would be belittling to assume that those in the Andes live in a static world. Modernization happens the globe over - often for the betterment of humans' health and happiness. But we can modernize and preserve our history at the same time if we are incentivized to do so. I believe the economic returns of tourism can provide the impetus to preserve the Inca road.

The treks described in this book would not have been possible without the help of many people and companies. The expeditions themselves are just one piece of a much larger story and a project in which a few

key companies have banded together to promote the conservation of the Qhapaq Ñan. The expedition was completely funded by the private sector, with no formal involvement from the governments of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, or Chile.

First and foremost, a big thank you to Lima Tours. Its team of dedicated professionals funded many of the expeditions and provided the logistical backbone within Peru where a majority of our explorations took place. Its directors, José Octavio Pedraza and François Morin, put their trust and support behind the project from the very early stages. Miluska Galdo and Diego Gordillo gave their hearts in all aspects during the early phase of the project. Paloma Prevost was key in the execution of daily logistics with considerable support from Gabriela Montero and Karhen Flores.

Km Cero has been fundamental in the storytelling of this journey and a relentless supporter of not only this project, but many others that aim to make the tourism industry more ethical and sustainable. Special thanks go to Rodrigo Cabrera and Christian Declercq for helping me tell the story through video and pictures from afar. Geraldine Longoria painstakingly managed and updated the wonderful maps published along the way.

And our partners in Ecuador - Emma Morgan with Original Ecuador in Quito and Carlos Ventimilla with Expediciones Apullacta in Cuenca - graciously dedicated their time to make sure our team of Peruvians had the support we needed from our neighbors to the north. Lauro Guayllas with Saraurku Turismo in





Saraguro, was especially critical in the south of Ecuador, guiding us and even putting shoes on the horses.

Tour Operator Cordillera Blanca and its owner Nelson Mejia Romero gave their time and operational expertise for our entire walk through the Cordillera Blanca during month three. Not to mention the hard-working team of arrieros from Canrey Chico in Ancash, Rolando, Eder, Robert, Juan and Percy.

In Qollasuyu, Pepe Lopez and his team at Apumayo Expeditions graciously outfitted our expedition with the serious equipment needed to traverse harsh landscapes for more than 1,000 miles. They also provided the logistical expertise needed to establish tourism on the Great Inca Trail in rural Peru in collaboration with SA Expeditions.

Our partners Sendas Altas provided key financial support and logistics across Bolivia. Stephen Taranto and Tomas Sivila wholeheartedly gave their company's commitment to the project – just one more example of their efforts to develop thoughtful tourism in Bolivia. Their colleague Lucia Berrios worked diligently behind the scenes, making sure all the small details were taken care of.

In Chile, Southbound Expeditions made sure we had everything we needed to walk across the deserts of Atacama and provided helpful financial support. While

the Inca road is very much off the tourist radar in Chile, its manager Eduardo Doerr empathetically listened to our group of Inca trail geeks about the importance of the road. We hope this exploration will inspire them to place economic value through tourism on the Inca road in the future.

Throughout Qollasuyu we were also joined by Rick Greene, who – after a high-flying career in technology – has now committed himself to living life to the fullest. His financial support was critical in the execution of that expedition and his positive spirit helped keep the mood in the right direction.

SA Expeditions, who brought the dream of this expedition to the table, is blessed to have a director like Riva Bacquet, who has brilliantly managed our company in my absence, and made sure nothing fell through the cracks. Ali Moreno, who for 225 days translated my stories from English to Spanish and gave her heart and soul to telling the story of The Great Inca Trail. Carrie Shapiro, dedicatedly managed our social media reach, targeting audiences in the digital realm that were critical to building awareness of the Inca road.... And the team of SA Expeditions destination experts... Staci Steele, Jean O'Halloran, Jenny Byrne, Sara Hensel, Kim Leary, Alexa Bermudez, Corey Cruzado Jay, Arina Mueller, Abby Usher, Amanda Kuajara, Julia Steck, Tom Carroll, and Shaina

Molano. You should be proud of your daily efforts which are critical in creating the capital that funds SA Expeditions' conservation activities on the Qhapaq Ñan.

And to all those who supported us not under the banner of any company flag. Camilo Abad, who came looking for us on his mule in the remote area near Aypate, walking with us for a week through what was probably the hardest and muddiest section of the expedition. Shanta in Vilcabamba, with his selfless support in southern Ecuador and his tasty culebra cane liquor. And in Bolivia, Gabriel Quispe and Paulino Flores, took us across the deserts in two 4x4 vehicles that deserve as much recognition as the drivers themselves.

One of the pillars of our expedition was resuscitating the use of llamas on an Inca road that was designed for them 600 years ago. Tito, Antonio, Cero and Fidel, all from the region of Tanta, Peru, bestowed their cultural heritage of using llamas to carry loads, a practice that has declined and almost disappeared since the Spanish Conquest and the introduction of hooved animals.

And to Ricardo Espinosa Reyes, whose landmark expedition in 1999 from Quito, Ecuador to La Paz, Bolivia first brought the Inca road beyond small academic circles and into the wider world. His publishing of *La Gran Ruta Inca* and the accompanying maps were our expedition's bible. Ricardo's vision of the Great Inca Road down the spine of the Andes is still realizing itself today.

The daily histories of the Vilcabamba expedition relied heavily on John Hemming's *The Conquest of the Incas*, Vincent Lee's *Forgotten Vilcabamba: Final Stronghold of the Incas*, John Hyslop's *The Qhapaq Ñan* and Hugh Thompson's *The White Rock An Exploration of the Inca Heartland*. These key books amongst many other smaller publications orientated me on the history and archeology of exploration in Peru.

I would also like to thank some of our most active fans on social media, whose comments encouraged us along the way. The expedition's routine of walking all day, sending correspondence and attending to personal care made it nearly impossible to interact with your comments. Thank you to... Ted Dziadkiewicz, Larissa Cha Zeg, Mapi Bud, Jimmy Abel Calle Gallo, Victoria Donovan-Cloud, Mike Allen, Diego Arellano, Croz Crosbie, Hernan Valdizan Carrasco, Doug Foley II, Philo Tree, Vicky E. Hinostroza, Amoroso Machupicchu, Julia Molina, Janet Welch, Sonia Ortiz, Miguel Landa, José Perez, Paul Chacon Saloma, Jherson Nampa Romero, Harry Tyler, Ray Armijo, and Manuel Quispe Cahuana.

And of course, the core walking team itself... Valentín Laucata Sinchi our elder Quechua ambassador, whose knowledge of the Andes we could have not done without. Flavio Usca Paucar, who made sure we were fed every day. And Alipio Flores Quispe who selflessly gave his muscle and heart to the daily work of the team. Kevin Floerke walked with us for a month in the Cordillera Blanca and also joined us in the Vilcabamba and Qollasuyu, capturing many of the most incredible pictures and videos of the trek. As our new head of exploration, Kevin will help me take the project into the future from a management perspective. John Leivers' expeditionary philosophy and technical understanding of the physiological and mental challenges of such an undertaking has been critical. Not to mention his first-hand knowledge of thousands of miles of Qhapaq Ñan and his studies of the Inca for over 25 years. These five and I have shared an experience and camaraderie over many days that words cannot express, and I am grateful for that.

And lastly, I would like to dedicate this journal to my late father Robert Stanziano... My partner in countless adventures across the Sierra Nevada mountains of California and the one who instilled in me an importance of the past. Without his dedication and love, I would have never arrived to the Andes with a backpack 14 years ago to find my own frontier.



- ▼ **LEFT** - Rodrigo Cabrera, photographer with kmCERO.
- ▼ **MIDDLE** - Cristian Declerq, photographer with kmCERO.
- ▼ **RIGHT** - Diego Gordillo, operations support with Lima Tours.



Many of the larger Great Inca Trail support team gather to celebrate at Huanuco Pampa. ▶



▼ Kevin Floerke, photographer and Inca road expert.



- ▼ The tough and talented support team from Canrey Chico. From left to right Antonio, Eder, Rolando, Robert, Juan and Percy.



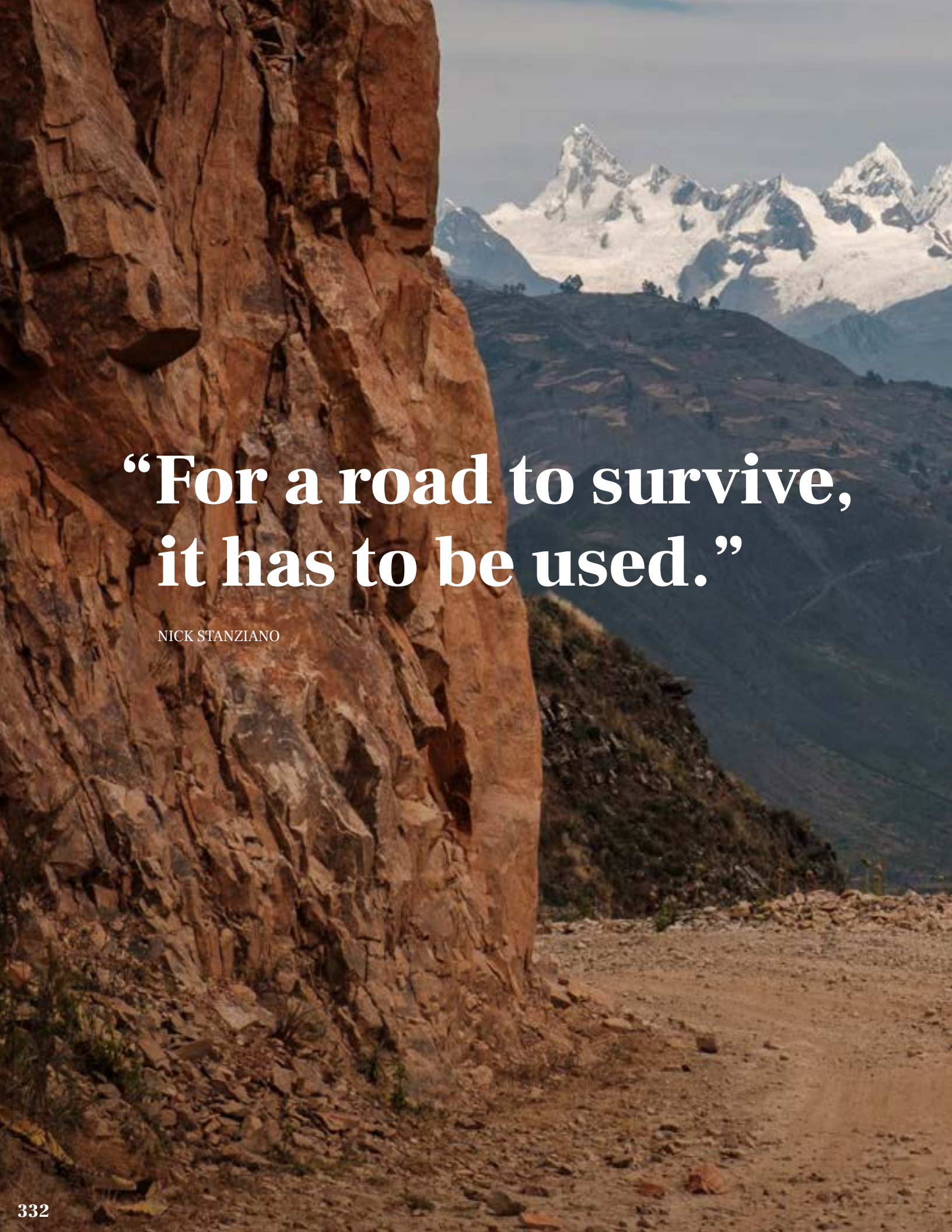
- ▲ The core Great Inca Trail team: Nick Stanziano, Valentín Sinchi, John Leivers, Flavio Usca Pauccar, and Alipio Flores Quispe.

- ◀ Tito and Antonia, *llameros* from Tanta.

- ▼ John Leivers, the team's Chief Navigator.



◀ Hener Huaranca and Artemio Fernandez Huaman, our support team for the Vilcabamba expedition.



**“For a road to survive,  
it has to be used.”**

NICK STANZIANO





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Nick co-founded SA Expeditions and currently serves as its Chief Explorer. Nick is a dreamer and a thinker; someone who will always wonder at what lies beyond. Originally from California and resident in Peru for a decade, he straddles two worlds. He has a BA in Global Studies from the University of California and a trans-global MBA from St. Mary's College of California. Nick believes wholeheartedly that tourism has the potential to bring dignified income to the forgotten peoples of South America and the world.