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**Peruvian Exploration**

By Richard Corzo

Five of us guys (Chris, David S., John, Bruce, and myself) from points across the East and West Coasts signed up with Hermes Tours (<http://www.hermestours.com>) for 8 days in Peru. Our friendly Hermes guide was David Harrison. For everyone this was our first trip to Peru and we didn't know fully what to expect, but we were excited to begin the adventure.

We started and ended the tour in Lima, the capital and largest city, on the Pacific coast.

Despite being relatively close to the equator, the temperatures were very comfortable. Once you're in the highlands expect cool nights. May is a good time to travel in Peru, because it's after the December-to-April rainy season and before the more crowded summer (their winter) period.

The food throughout the trip was a real treat, starting with an al fresco lunch at a cafe on our first full day. At different times a couple of us tried the delicious ceviche, a couple of brave souls tried cuy, the Peruvian term for guinea pig, and some of us had alpaca. Potatoes, vegetables, and fish were abundant and fresh, and there was always dessert, chocolate being Chris's favorite, but also some featuring local fruits such as lucuma and sauco berries.

OK, we also did some sightseeing. From Lima we flew to Cusco, a city in the highlands at about 11,000 feet, and made our way by bus through the Sacred Valley. We stopped at an outdoor market at Pisac and visited the Inca fortress at Ollantaytambo. The next day we took a train to Aguas Calientes, the Spanish word for hot springs. It's a town in the mountains with no room for cars, but just a short bus ride up to Machu Picchu. David H. and I tried out the hot springs, while others took an orchid tour and got massages at the hotel. At the hot springs we encountered a very international crowd, including a couple of Australian lads and a stunning French guy.

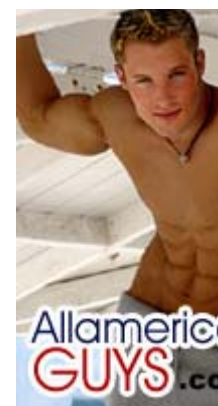
Some people brought Diamox to adjust to the altitude, which tends to make you pee a lot. Others including myself stuck to drinking coca tea, which is also supposed to help. But in truth we didn't have much trouble adjusting, although David S. reported headaches in Cusco. Later we theorized that the combination of high altitude and some light air pollution was the cause, as he had no trouble when we traveled to an even higher altitude.

The highlight of any trip to Peru is Machu Picchu, an Inca settlement which was high and remote enough that it was unknown and untouched by the conquering Spaniards.

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The site was rediscovered a hundred years ago by Yale professor Hiram Bingham. If you'd like a more rigorous experience you can sign up for a 4-day guided trek along the Inca trail all the way to Machu Picchu, instead of the bus/train/bus route we took. The stone work was very impressive, with the close tolerance between the stones and the way they put them together to withstand the pressures of an earthquake. The views in this area are breathtaking. The second day we hiked a trail to an Inca bridge built across a stone gap, which had a couple of planks that could be removed to prevent access by enemies.

We next returned to the city of Cusco, visited museums, shopped, and had dinner at a gay restaurant called Fallen Angel. Our table was a glass-covered tub with goldfish swimming in it! On our next free day, inspired by a postcard Chris bought earlier, we decided to take a tour of some Inca agricultural terraces at Moray, and then visit some open-air salt mines near Maras.

I would highly recommend Peru as a destination, and if you have more time there is much more to explore than we did. I was struck by the variety of vegetation I saw in the mountains compared to the American West. The country and the food are beautiful, and we were very pleased with our Hermes Tours experience.

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