

Treat Me Right

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The click of my camera shutter sounds: clunk. One more moment in time is stored on my data card. Through the zoom lens the backyard scene in the valley below is magnified and everything is visible, but when I lower the camera and look back down I can still see the figure of the lady there. I feel my skin tingle. She turns and appears to glance up, all-knowing and all-seeing, before she walks the four or five steps to the privacy of her darkened doorway. “Oh,” the sound escapes me in a breath, and I look down at the camera, which hangs like a forgotten doll in my hands. If I push the small, black button below the tiny diagram of a bin I can give the intrusion back—delete it out of existence. But like a paparazzi, I don’t do it.

Instead, I turn and let my boots carry me down the mountainside behind the others in our trekking group, my thoughts consumed. The sharp sound of my walking poles as they click against the rocks mixes with muffled noises carried upwards on the cold air. A child’s voice calls out; someone claps their hands; sheep call to one another, “Bah, Meh”. As we move downhill we pass another house. Its roof is thatched, the walls consist of mud and rocks, and the whole building is barely the size of a single room where I live. A clothes line stretches across the yard area, sagging in the centre so that the garments it holds hang only a few feet above a jumble of rocks and grass, dark coloured mud and a scattering of hens. There is no-one in the yard, but I keep walking because I don’t want to be seen looking again.

I wasn't expecting these muddled feelings when we began our trek through the Andes Mountains six days ago.

I'm feeling an odd mixture of relief and nervous excitement as I step off the mini-bus. I'm relieved because the road was the narrowest and most precarious road I have ever travelled on, and I'm nervous because I'm about to begin a nine-day trek through the Andes Mountains in Peru. The trek begins a short distance from the township of Cachora, and it will end at Aguas Calientas near Peru's most famous World Heritage archaeological site, Macchu Picchu. In the *Lonely Planet* guidebook it says that up to 2,500 people visit Macchu Picchu each day, and I guess most of them travel there on the tourist train. But not me; I am walking.

Our Peruvian guide's name is Carlos, which is the Spanish form of Charles. He stands tall, perhaps six foot, but he seems taller than he is because his voice is so commanding. "Is everybody ready to go?" he asks, and stomps his feet up and down; they are clad in sturdy walking boots that seem as though they are actually part of him. The rest of his clothing looks as if it should have been thrown out long ago. He is wearing baggy, blue shorts and a couple of layers of faded hiking tops. He belongs outdoors. Behind Carlos, the scenery is spectacular. Wispy clouds, which seem as though you could reach out and touch them, hang over a valley that plunges downward almost further than I can see. Although the day is sunny and warm, the air is cool and fresh to breathe. Brimming with anticipation, I hover around Carlos, along with five other Australians. We are ready to commence our descent into the deep and beautiful Apurímac Canyon, which carves its way through the heart of the Andes.

Our group treks downhill all afternoon, stringing out in a line along the track. Carlos is in front, and behind him are Petra and Rita, who are sisters. Next is Rose, followed by Greg (my husband) and me, and ambling along behind is Kevin. A short distance behind us all is a young Andean girl with smooth brown skin, wearing a t-shirt that says her name, Nina. She

leads a pony that is saddled in case someone becomes injured and unable to walk. The track is rocky and the gravel slippery in places, so I watch carefully where my feet tread. Every now and again I glance behind to peek at Nina. I have no idea why I am so fascinated. As I watch her, I see that her dark, blackish-brown eyes are always checking on the horse, and her hands often move to touch the coarse hair on its neck or shoulder. Every few minutes she raises her eyes to look out into the hazy valley, or back along the path behind. Carlos introduced Nina earlier, before we set off: her home village of Yanama has an altitude of 3,620 metres, her husband and father-in-law are Andean mule handlers (also part of our support staff), and she doesn't speak English. Watching her, I wonder what she sees when she looks out—a lot more than I do, that's for sure. She must know more about these mountains than can be imagined.

The next morning, we plunge steeply downwards for an hour or so before Carlos informs us we will be climbing for the rest of the day. With an outstretched arm, he points out a barely discernible zig-zag line in the thick vegetation that covers the almost vertical mountainside in front of us. "There is the path. Nina will carry extra water on the horse, so you can refill your drink bottles. Let's go everybody," he commands. So we begin to clamber upward. Before long my thoughts become stuck on how hot I feel. The air is full of the fermented grassy smell of mule dung, which is scattered all the way along the track, mixed in with the dust and rocks. My merino t-shirt, which allegedly has sweat-wicking capabilities, becomes soaked with perspiration, and my ears are full of the sound of my breath puffing. Looking around I can see the others look hot and sweaty too, even Carlos. Later, the mule-train that is carrying our group's gear passes us; I notice that the mules' flanks, under their huge loads, are wet and dripping lines of foam. All afternoon it goes on: more steps, more corners, and more climbs. Each time I trudge around the corner at the top of a 30 or 40 metre stretch, yet another upward scramble reveals itself in front of me. But finally, the switchbacks

end, and there is an open, flat path. Phew! These mountains sure know how to belittle strangers like me.

New-found respect pours out of me the following morning, when several Quechua (native Andean) men hurry past our campsite, a few minutes apart. They belt along, sure-footed and barely puffing, more-or-less hopping from one step to the next. It hadn't occurred to me that anyone could live up here, but I suppose if you do, knowing how to get along quickly is paramount. When we move off a short time later, my mind ponders the Andean way of life until Carlos abruptly stops us. His big arms wave for us to peer over the edge of the track, down the mountainside. "See those? The people have electricity now," he declares. His thumbs hook his hands into the straps of his backpack just below his shoulders, as he leans forward to look. A shiny, solar panel, which is mounted on a two or three metre high pole, stands beside the nearest of several houses. All of the houses have identical, brand-new panels; they loom weirdly out of place beside the mud walls, and rooves constructed of old, rusted tin. "For TVs, to watch the soapies! No, no, I am not for real. The electricity is for lights, so the kids can learn to read," Carlos says. The scene makes me think of my own kids, who have a myriad of lights and screens, and oodles of books to read. Electricity will bring big changes for the kids who live up here. They'll be able to read about the outside world, as well as skip along the tracks like little, mountain-savvy goats.

Although learning about the Andean people is captivating, we are all anxious to get going because we will soon be arriving at the archaeological site of Choquequirao. The ancient city was built in the 15th century, and was once a royal estate of the Inca ruler, Topa Inca Yupanqui; its history is described in a fascinating paper titled *Choquequirao, Topa Inca's Machu Picchu*. As we make our way along the entrance path that is almost overgrown with rampant cloud-forest, our chatter dies down, and we are all quiet, bonded in anticipation. There is no-one else around, which is probably because the only way to get to Choquequirao

is on foot. Instead, all around us is the trilling of insects and birds. The ground is moist from recent rainfall. We emerge from the trail to find an array of buildings, and numerous rock terraces built one above another. No-one speaks. It's like that moment when a brilliant play or movie finishes, when no-one wants to utter the first word, because whatever you say will spoil it. On the ridge, and below on the mountainside, an assortment of ancient buildings have been recovered from the jungle, and seemingly in every direction there are terraces that extend perhaps 30 layers high. Almost all the grey-brown rocks in the terraces' walls are flat-faced, and laid carefully in a pattern. Many are only inches wide, but some are literally several feet across. Bits of tiny herbs with soft, intricate leaflets spring from gaps between the rocks. And it is everywhere around us.

Mesmerised by the grandeur of the ruins, a few of us make our way up to a roughly circular, grassed platform that is right at the end of the ridge where the ancient citadel stands. Five hundred metres below us the Rio (River) Apurímac makes its way around the spur, so that on one side we can stare up into the river valley, and on the other side we can look down to see the white water far below us disappearing in the opposite direction. It's sunny, and there is a bit of a breeze blowing across the mountain, so we spend a few minutes watching the hazy view in the distance. According to the historical description, the platform was once used for ceremonial purposes, and entry was restricted to a select few of higher Inca class. Imagine their incredible lives as rulers of an empire that extended through modern day Chile, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Their society was linked by a network of roads (Inca Trails) that Carlos said were integral to success, because the roads meant food, workers, and armies could be moved around. I can barely comprehend the complexity of building a city in this remote and inaccessible place. Inca construction even involved a system of aqueducts that channelled water around; we'd been finding these modern plumbing equivalents all through the buildings.

As happens when experiences like Choquequirao are shared, our group has grown closer, and Carlos is keen to tell us about his Peruvian home-life. “My wife is a teacher in [the regional city of] Cuzco. She teaches English. We have four kids you know,” and Carlos indicates their ages by showing us with his hands how tall they each are; some of them are adults it seems, for they are as tall as Carlos. “They all speak English. The wife, she is good,” he tells us. “She even puts my clothes in the washing machine for me, but she won’t pack my bag. No, I have to do that,” and standing squarely with hands on hips he impersonates his wife, who in an instant, has turned from “good” to tyrant. Unable to resist his amused audience, he carries on, “She has a cook you know, but I don’t let the cook do the cooking when I am there. No way. I am a better cook you see. I was a chef in a restaurant once!” He grins and sits back. He’s a funny guy, and he’s “doing okay.”

It’s important to be “doing okay” in Peru, because much of the population isn’t. Income per capita was U.S. \$6,229 in 2012, which is less than a tenth of what people earn in Australia (according to the United Nations). In the years following 1532 when the Spanish conquistadores invaded, they ruthlessly destroyed the whole Inca Empire. After demolishing the Inca temples they ransacked the Inca’s silver and gold. Millions of Inca people died. If not killed in battle, chances were they succumbed to the unrestrained spread of European bacteria and viruses. The scale of devastation is chilling; the *Lonely Planet* says ten million people were reduced to 600,000 within a century. Eduardo Galeano, who in 1973 wrote *Open Veins of Latin America*, argued that the exploitation which began with the Spanish invasion has continued ever since. He is scathing in his assessment of the region as a menial slave to developed countries that aggressively propel its mineral and agricultural resources to export markets, from which the majority of Peruvians derive little benefit. Around one in every three people in Peru lives in poverty, and in the Andes, where many of the Quechua people live,

the figures are worse: two in every three people live in poverty (according to the Peru Support Group NGO). It makes me feel hollow and subdued.

The next morning, it's as if Carlos knows my thoughts have been wandering and wants to add his perspective. "I have another story," he says. "Do you want to hear it?" The crisp air is so cold that it takes your breath away before you have breathed it, so we want to get moving. But Carlos is a one-of-a-kind Peruvian guide, so of course we want to hear. "I once had a group of 'elite' people," he begins. He waggles his hips like apparently elite people do, glancing around. It will be a good yarn. "They, the rich people, paid thousands of dollars to come up here," and he holds his hands up, rubbing his fingers together as if he were flipping hundred dollar notes out of his hands. "You should have seen it. We had a massage table, and a masseur! There were crystal glasses on the dinner table! We even had hot showers." He pauses for the enormity of *that* luxury to sink in, because we have all been showering in icy cold mountain water. "We boiled the water and pumped it by hand, like this." Carlos bends over and pumps his arms up and down on an imaginary water pump. "I was embarrassed, you know," he adds and casts his eyes downward, shaking his head. "Not for the staff, no, they were happy. We usually take maybe 12 mules on a trek for that many people, but this time we took around 30. That is a lot more money for the mule drivers. They were happy." He pauses, but I'm not sure how to react; who is he embarrassed for? Sensing the need to explain, he adds, "The other trekkers [at the campsite]. What do you think they thought?" Oh, I get it. Carlos was embarrassed to be associated with the luxury, because in this special place extravagance is disrespectful.

Another day further along the trail, and Carlos is serious, "It will be tough day today, with a lot of mud. Over the pass of San Juan it will be cold because we go up a thousand metres to 4,150 metres altitude. Wear your rain jackets." After a pause, he adds, "Don't worry though, it will be beautiful too." He strides out in front, sloshing through the mud.

“Your boots are waterproof. Just walk through it,” he says. At first, I try to tread on any protruding rock I can see to keep my boots out of the black, peaty mud, but it is pointless. The mud is sometimes just a gooey puddle, and sometimes it turns into thick slosh that goes down as far as my ankles before I can feel hard rock underneath. No-one is talking, not even Rose. We hardly even notice the crash when it first drifts out of the mist, but it gets louder and louder. Perhaps ten seconds later, it’s a roar. It sounds as if a plane is about to come crashing out of the veil of cloud hanging around us. For a moment, I think of ducking down. I can’t see more than ten metres out from the mountainside. The roar starts to turn into a crashing sound, and it goes on for perhaps a minute before quiet returns. We’ve all come to a standstill. “You know what that was Carlos?” Kevin asks. Carlos turns and looks out of the opening in his rain jacket’s hood, into the mist. He hesitates, but decides to tell us, “It’s a landslide. I think it’s over there on the other side of the valley. It’s the rocks and water you can hear.” Rather than wait for a response, he starts walking on, sloshing through the mud again. Giving voice to his nerves, Kevin says, “Well, it sounded like it was a fair size, like a lot of rock went down.” No-one answers, so Kevin speaks for us all again, “Better just get going, I suppose.” We plod on in silence; once more we have been humbled by the mountains.

Eventually, we leave the wet mud to climb over the pass, and on the way down I stop to take *the* intrusive photo. You would think, with me being reminded every day since we began our trek of the need to show some respect around here, that I would have known better.

Until recently there were no roads leading into the high mountain village of Yanama, but now there is a road that goes over the 4,660 metre high pass of Mariano Llamuja. It connects Yanama with the populated Santa Teresa River valley. After six days of negotiating narrow mountain trails, the four metre wide gravel strip, with its smooth pebbles beneath my feet, feels like a six lane highway. I can lift my eyes without stumbling, and we can walk

side-by-side, in pairs, for the first time since we began. Remnant notes of the traditional pipe music that the Quechua people play circle around inside my head, drawing me closer to the delightful scene ahead. A stream of white water dances, and churns its way along the valley. Fences made of loosely stacked, dark rocks climb up the slopes, away from the line of water. In the fields between, a couple of herdsman jog along behind small groups of sheep or cattle, their shouts mingling with the animals' noises. As well, every so often dark green rows of *papas* (potatoes) lie askew on the slope, like patches on a blanket. There's a sense of things being alright here, in this community.

Only, it's easy to see that already the road is changing things. There are small concrete buildings beside each of the mud-brick houses. The buildings are all exactly the same: they cover only a few square metres, are painted grey, brick red and cream, and each has a door on one side and an opening which must be a window on the other side. Intrigued, I ask Carlos, "What are those little buildings?"

He answers me straight away, "They are bathrooms you know. The government has paid many Soles [Peruvian Nuevo soles] for new toilets everywhere. They are all built according to engineering standards." He shoots a quick look at me, "But, you know, the government is well, you know. It wouldn't cost all those Soles to build the toilets. Where do you think the rest of the money goes?" He pauses, then feigns to pat the hip pocket of his hiking pants. I nod. The entrenched political corruption is described in the *Lonely Planet* guide book: Ex-President Fujimori is serving time in prison for embezzlement of government funds during the 1990s, and in 2008 President Garcia's entire cabinet was forced to resign under allegations of corruption.

As well as the identical toilets, about half the houses have shiny-new tin rooves. "Did the government pay for those as well?" I ask Carlos.

“No, No. The people here are enterprising,” and as he speaks his arm swings up and around. “See? The road is here now, so they can bring a truck with tin into the village, and the people buy it for their rooves. They are a community you know, everyone here knows each other, and they work together.” His words remind me of something I read only a day or two ago in *The Incas*: for communities that follow a traditional way of life the legacy of the Incas continues to influence their cultural philosophy—life is still defined by kinship and mutual support. However, my thoughts are interrupted by a vroom-vroom sound. A motorbike, which is so lovingly shined that the weak sunshine still manages to cause a glint on its metallic fuel tank, drifts up and stops beside Nina. Her smile tells me that he is a friend, or perhaps a cousin. He reaches to cut the engine off, and Nina steps up closer to touch the bike, gently with her fingers in the same way that she touches her horse. The road brings new opportunities.

Another two days of walking and my feelings begin to settle. I know that if I were a Peruvian in the Andes, I would want the material things that can improve my lifestyle. I would want electricity and lights, tin for the rooves in my community, and for someone I know to own a flash, new motorbike. I would want a better education for my kids, and a chance for them to learn the English language, so doors of opportunity open for them as they have done for Carlos’s family in Cuzco. I would want to be respected for my affinity with the mountains that has taken generations to acquire. But the people here are ill-equipped to challenge the corruption or evade those who carelessly exploit them. These thoughts brood, causing a dull ache in my head, as I drag my tired legs the last few kilometres to the end of my journey. I’m supposed to feel exhilarated as we walk into Aguas Calientas with the white water of the Rio Urubamba crashing spectacularly downhill beside us, but my feet feel like heavy rocks. I can’t ignore my nagging conscience; if I were the lady in my photo I would want to be treated with dignity and respect.

In the end I do it quite quickly; a small “beep” emits from the innards of my camera, and my intrusion is *deleted*. Over nine eventful days, I’ve learnt how easy, yet how wrong, it is to take even a moment of privacy, from others who are less privileged. I was born in Australia, I speak English, and I am literate. How fortunate I am, yet how humble I must also be.

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