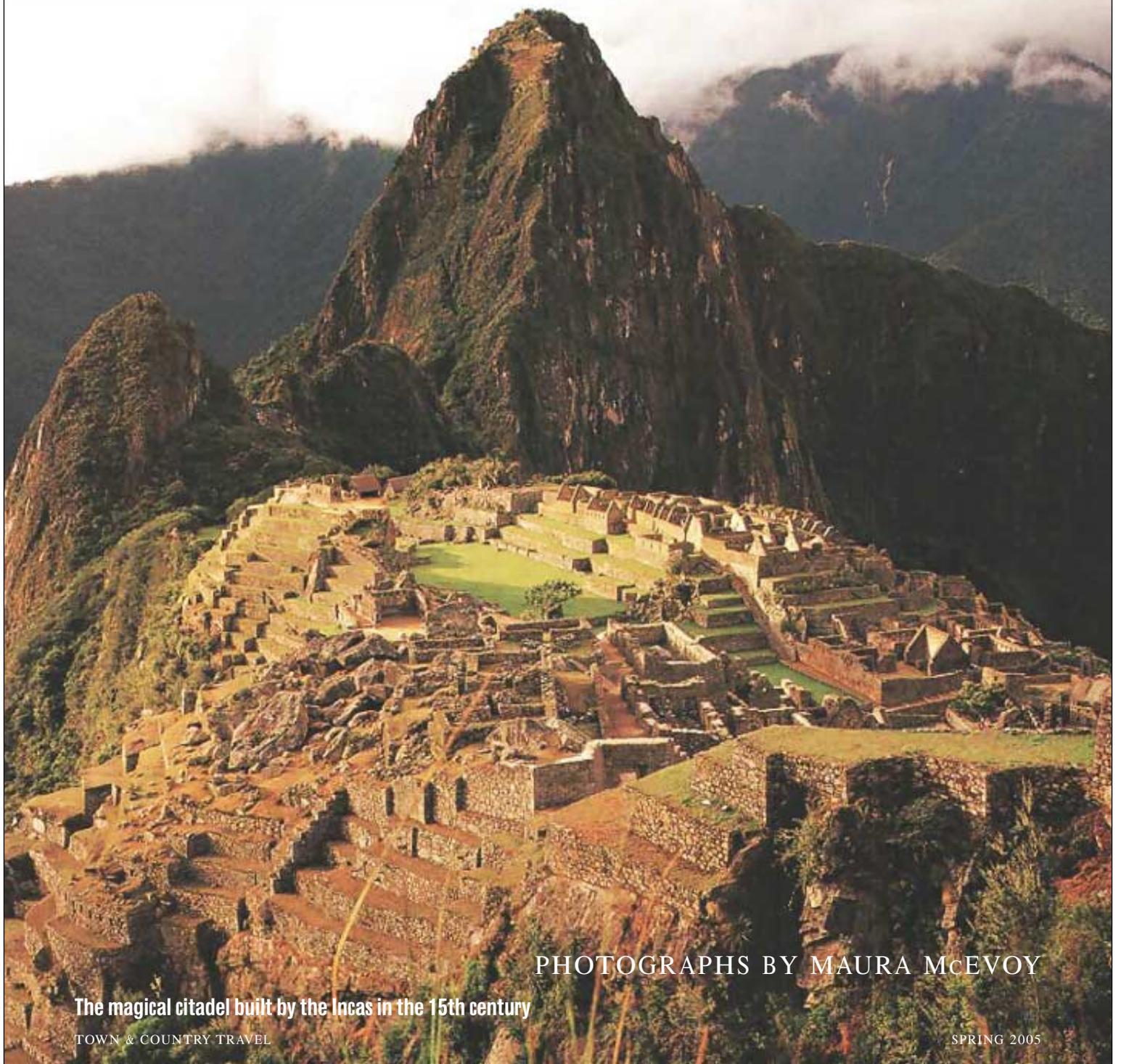


On the Trail to Machu Picchu

A high-style trek to the sacred site in Peru challenges and rewards body, mind and, above all, spirit. **BY JANET CARLSON FREED**

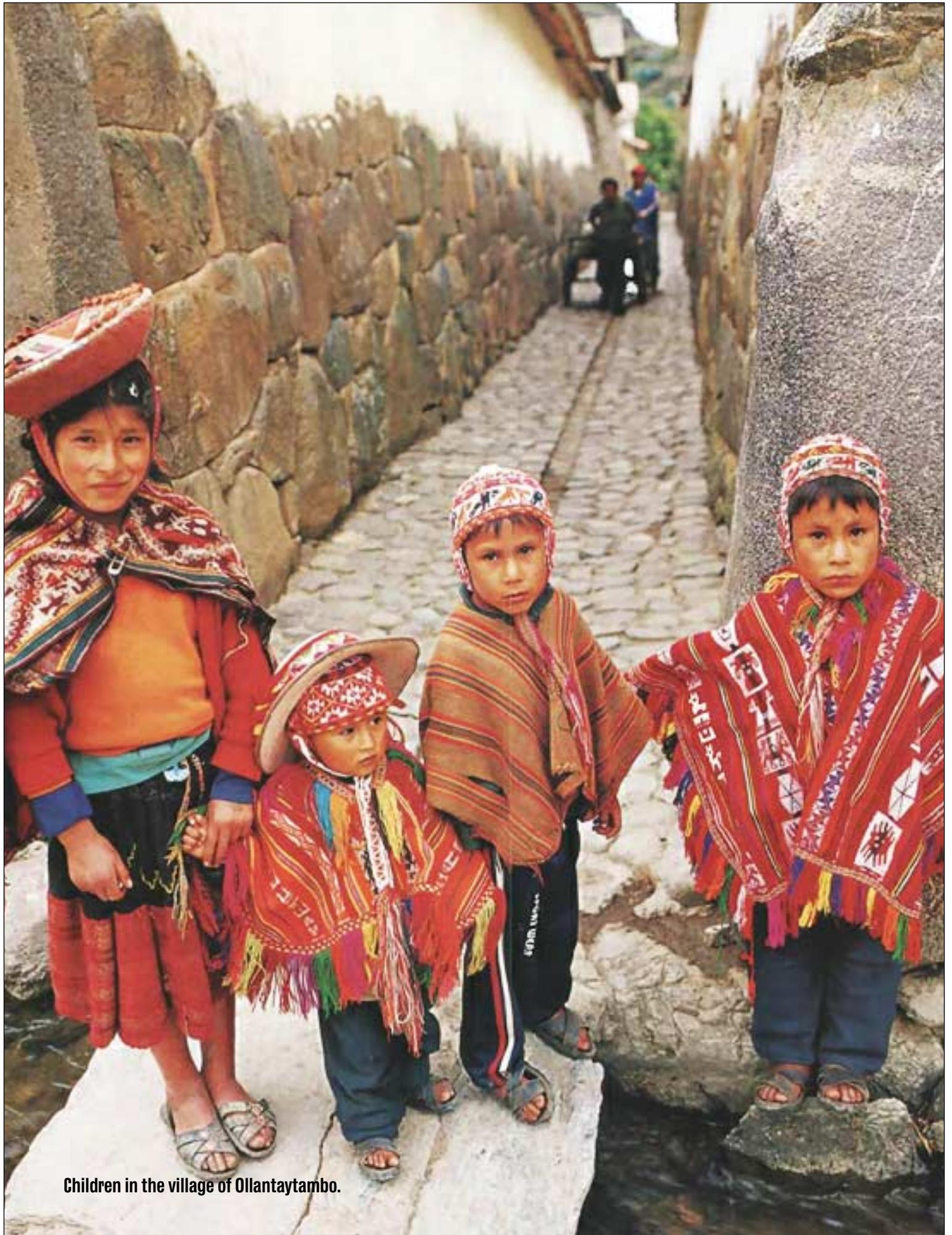


PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAURA McEVOY

The magical citadel built by the Incas in the 15th century

TOWN & COUNTRY TRAVEL

SPRING 2005



Children in the village of Ollantaytambo.

am on the Inca Trail, in the Peruvian Andes, doing a four-day trek on Machu Picchu, and after two sleepless nights in a tent, I am preparing for a third. I'm not all that concerned about hiking tomorrow in my sleep-deprived state, however. An adrenaline rush from the excitement of being here has gotten me through nicely so far. And tomorrow at sunrise, after about an hour's hike, I will see the once "lost" city of Machu Picchu for the first time in my life.>>

This archeological site is heavily touristed these days; most people don't hike to it but take the train to the town of Aguas Calientes, then the bus up the steep mountainside. But Machu Picchu is a mystery still—has been since the Spanish conquistadors stormed the area in 1533 and missed the citadel hiding at nearly 8,000 feet and surrounded by higher peaks. There is no written record of Machu Picchu (Old Mountain), built in the 1400s, because the Spanish didn't find it and because the indigenous people, the Quechua, had only oral language. Jungly growth obscured the city for centuries, until the Yale professor and explorer Hiram Bingham stumbled on it, in 1911.

Our guides say Machu Picchu was probably partly a ceremonial center for priests and priests-in-training; some have speculated that it existed purely for royal hedonistic pursuits. I love it that despite all our modern technology and smart historians, Machu Picchu's meaning eludes us; the place remains enchantingly coy. And treasured by all the world: last year the World Bank approved a \$5 million loan to Peru for Machu Picchu's preservation. The site has been on UNESCO'S World Heritage list since 1983.

I'm sharing my cozy quarters with *Town & Country Travel* photographer Maura McEvoy, and we have spent the past few days with a group of thirteen effervescent women from Atlanta whom I affectionately have come to call peach blossoms in Peru ("Y'all want some more trail mix?"). Steel magnolias is perhaps more apt. These dynamic women decided to take on Machu Picchu to, as one put it, "push the envelope, demonstrate our fitness at fifty and see a bit of the world on foot." Maura and I were invited to tag along.

Hold on, though. Do not think that the ladies from Atlanta had any intention of roughing it. This was not about baby boomers reconnecting with their backpacking youth. They organized their trip through Cox

& Kings, one of the oldest travel companies in the world, known for doing things in style. Nathaniel Waring, president of Cox & Kings in the United States, coordinated with a local outfitter, Sylvia Rico, to sign on two massage therapists and to arrange excellent meals and wines, and even portable toilets.

As for the finer points, Nathaniel, who joined our trek, told me over breakfast that he'd requested "not just jam but jam with whole fruit in it. Not powdered milk; real milk." No tin plates; chinaware. Not plastic but glassware. Juice glasses, wineglasses, Champagne flutes. We had fifty-four fleet porters to carry our astounding collection of essential and not-so-essential things, including our tents, down sleeping bags, two kitchen tents, two dining tents, two toilet tents, two massage tents, an oven (imagine!), eighteen bottles of wine, seven twenty-liter bottles of water with dispensers, and eight hundred pounds of food—including eggs, which perched atop a porter's load (and not a one was cracked unintentionally).



Dead Woman's Pass is exhausting on the second day of trekking.

GET READY, GET SET, GO

Through the open flap of my tent, I can see the clouds rolling out and the sky clearing. The high full moon is stunning. My notebook is damp and warped from the drenching rain today. Though it has been three hours since I took a blessed hot shower, my hair has not dried. But I am warm in this soggy tent, and behind it several porters are preparing to sleep through the chilly forty-degree night on the wet grass, eschewing their tent for the open sky. If it rains again, they will be soaked, and I will only be...damp. I find luxury to be a relative and very personal thing. The porters, ironically, will have a nice deep sleep (I know because I hear them snore) while I toss and turn on my Therm-a-Rest (ha!) mattress on the hard ground.

As I hang tomorrow's clothes on the tent cords, I recall that just five nights ago, I was on my way to JFK International Airport to catch an overnight flight to Lima on Chile's LAN Airlines. I'd begun to relax slightly after two months of intense planning for this trip. There was nothing more but to embrace my

From left: Still smiling after all those steps, Laura Heery; Carlos Arrarte, of Lima Tours; and Betty Jo Currie.



fear—of the unknown, of not being fit enough, of leaving home for the longest trip (eleven days) I'd taken since my two children, aged nine and twelve, were born.

When the flight landed, I met up with Maura and her assistant, John Novajosky, and we flew on to Cuzco, the center of the former Inca empire, at a staggering altitude of more than 11,000 feet in southern Peru. We stepped off the plane and I felt a blast of heat. My head and lungs promptly sent urgent messages: there's not enough air to breathe; move slow. Cox & Kings had arranged for a driver to take us a few miles north to the Urubamba (Sacred) Valley, at around nine thousand feet, where we would acclimate in the comfortable luxury of the Sol & Luna Hotel, a collection of twenty-eight bungalows on exquisitely landscaped grounds. The view all around was of high mountains, some snowcapped, and fertile green hillsides studded with Scotch broom and mountain daisy.

The next morning, we explored the environs and neighboring villages on roads winding so high, the clouds looked touchable. Then we met the group from Atlanta at Casa Hacienda Orihuela, ensconced in the nearby hills, for a late lunch. Over avocado salad and salmon trout, we talked about how each of us had gotten ready for this moment (yikes, they had been training for eight months!) and whether we were taking Diamox to prevent altitude sickness (nearly all of us were).

That night, at the Sol & Luna, after dining on seviche and curried alpaca, we assembled to meet our local guides. Williams Davalos, a Quechua-speaking native of Cuzco, in big glasses and sporting a long black ponytail, told us about each day's itinerary and advised us to drink the coca-leaf tea, which helps prevent altitude sickness and gives energy. He distributed little black and red "lucky beans" with instructions to carry these on our persons at all times. In a room that was clearly abuzz with nervous anticipation, he was calming and reassuring.

(Nevertheless, I do recommend panicking approximately two days before you leave for a trek to Machu Picchu—unless you're a very experienced hiker. There was no real danger worked into our itinerary, just hard work, but the panic serves a purpose: it spends your nerves to the point that you're willing to face the Andes, to know oxygen deprivation and light-headed disorientation. It's not that we were about to climb Everest, but still, hiking up and down mountains at nosebleed altitudes six to eight hours every day is no picnic.)



**Somewhere under a rainbow in the Andes:
The Incas' incredible stonework had endured
for centuries and survived three earthquakes.**

STARTING OUT WITH A LUCKY BEAN AND A PRAYER

At 7:30 am on Saturday morning, give or take fifteen minutes of “Where’s my mattress?” and “I’ve got an extra pole tip you can use,” we boarded the bus that would take us through the valley along a narrow road lined with eucalyptus trees and dilapidated farmhouses. We arrived at our starting point on the Inca Trail, at “kilometer 82” of the railway that runs along the Urubamba River. We followed Williams across the river on a wooden footbridge. He had us gather in a circle and hold hands, and he said a prayer—the first of many on our hike—giving thanks in advance to Mother Earth and Father Sun as we began the trail, a word he innocently but ominously pronounced, in a perfect malapropism with a heavy accent, “trial.”

His prayer seemed fitting as we took our first steps on the centuries-old trail, which today is twenty-seven miles from the Sacred Valley to Machu Picchu but which at the height of Inca civilization spanned the empire from what is now Ecuador’s northern border to present-day central Chile. I fingered the lucky bean in the secret pocket of my hiking pants and felt a twinge of excitement at the promise of a mystical journey.

We walked along the river, then ascended on a dirt path—not yet the huge paving stones for which the Inca Trail is known. We stopped often to sip water, catch our breath. Our crew scurried ahead to set up lunch and our evening camp. At midday we arrived at a high clearing, where our dining tents beckoned. After devouring cream of asparagus soup and brook-trout meunière, we hiked through the afternoon and were just under 10,000 feet when we arrived at the village of Wayllabamba and our first campsite. We were offered hot showers: giant plastic bags with hose attachments, filled with hot water and suspended above the toilet stalls in the restroom buildings.



Breakfast is served, and trekkers gobble up crêpes and cereal before hitting the trail.

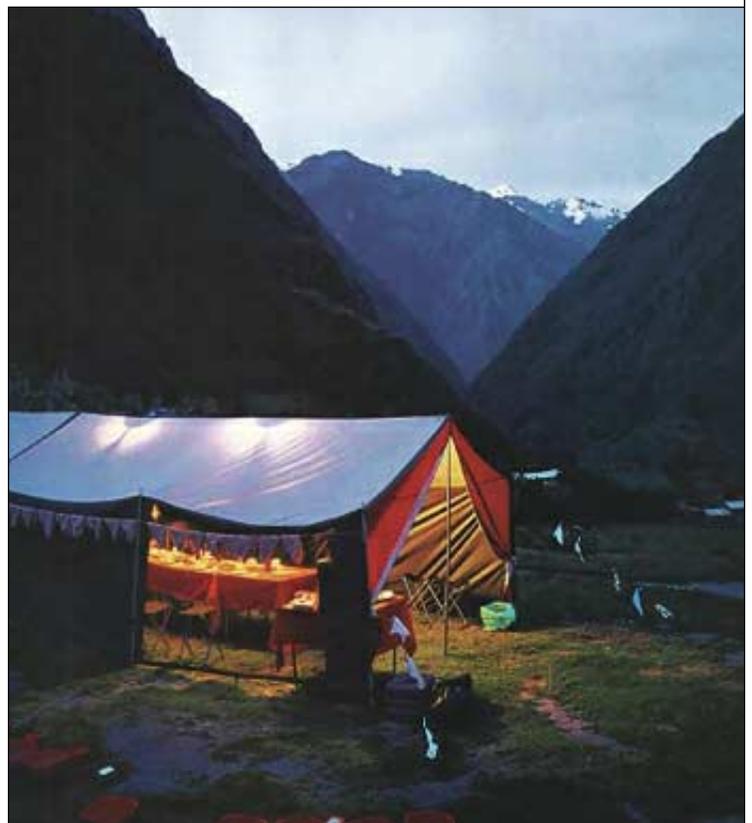
The main activity at camp was reorganizing duffels and backpacks: finding Band-Aids, earplugs, the headlamps necessary for negotiating bedtime, tomorrow's socks. Darkness fell and we assembled in a dining tent for wine (to be imbibed sparingly at high altitude) by lantern light and a briefing from Williams: "Tomorrow is Dead Woman's Pass—the highest of the three passes we'll do, nearly 14,000 feet. It's very steep climbing. It can get cold, so bring your gloves." I was relieved to learn that even though Dead Woman's Pass (Abra Warmiwañusca) is the real name, it refers to the shape of the mountain peaks flanking the pass, not the eventual state of hikers who attempt it.

During dinner, Nathaniel, who has an impressive knowledge of Inca history and the bloody Spanish conquest, told me that when Francisco Pizarro set out for Peru in 1531, he had only 180 men, and yet they slaughtered thousands of Incas. The Spanish were on horseback, with armor and swords of Toledo steel.

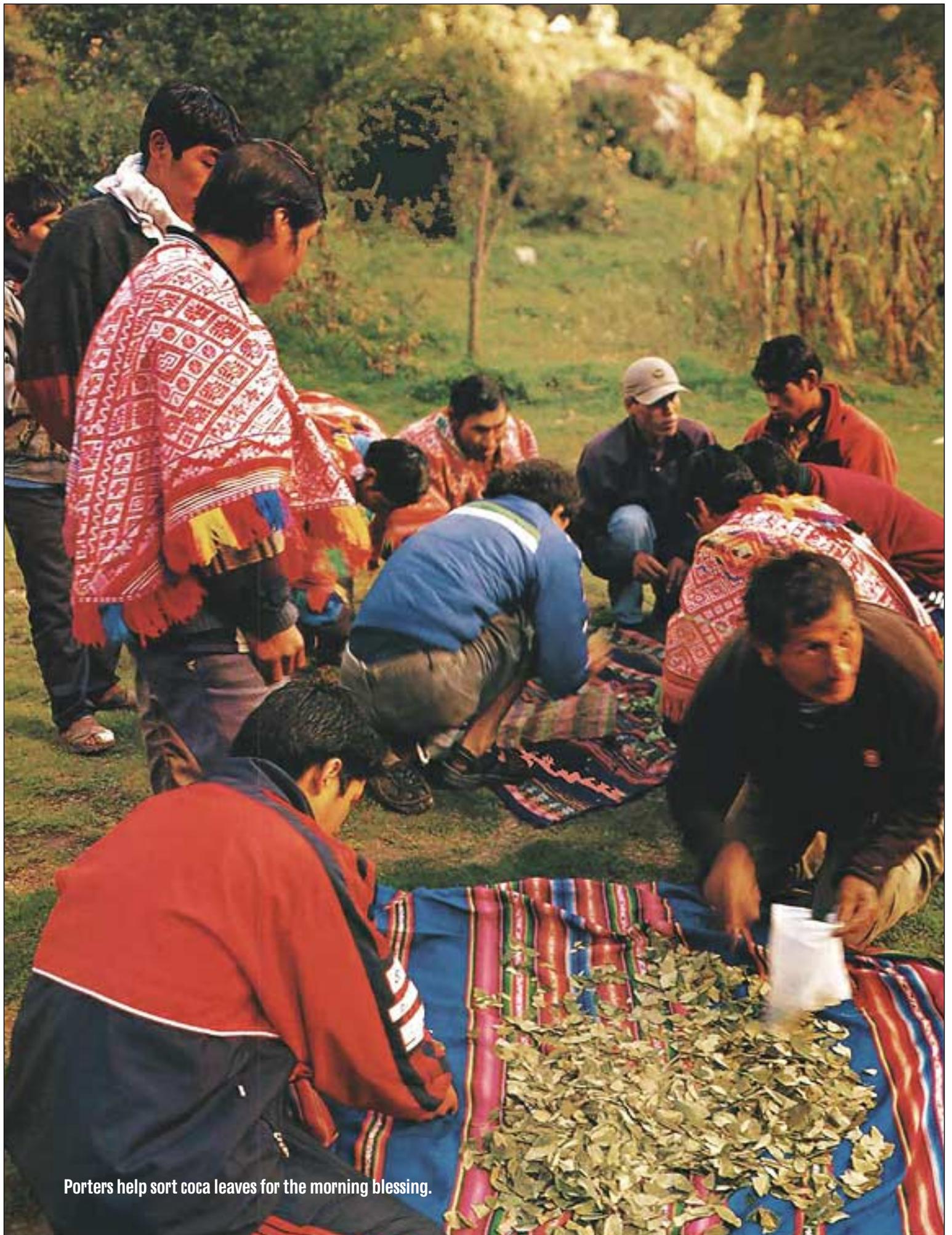
The sun-god-worshipping Incas had not a chance, on foot as they were and relying on their quilted-textile "armor" and crude wood and stone weapons. With their administrative brilliance and their engineering, architectural and agricultural expertise, the Incas had built a powerful empire, but thanks to the Spanish, it lasted less than a century.

Everyone was eager to get to bed early this night. We brushed our teeth by moonlight in the high grass. The group noise gradually diminished, tents were zipped one last time, dogs barked in a lullaby rhythm in the distance, and *most* of us slept.

The next day, Sunday, we were awakened at 6:00 A.M. and had breakfast: crêpes and delicious cereals and grains (amaranth, *kiwicha*, quinoa). It was cold, maybe forty degrees, and my tea went instantly tepid in its china cup. Next we took our places in a circle again for the morning's ritual: meeting the porters. Fifty-four of them, in red cloth ponchos, joined us for introductions. (Most of them spoke primarily Quechua, the official language of the Incas, but we managed to communicate with our limited Spanish.) I felt immense respect and gratitude for these men, each of whom carried fifty pounds of our gear, evidently without breaking a sweat.



The dining tent, above, is a cozy sight on a cold night.

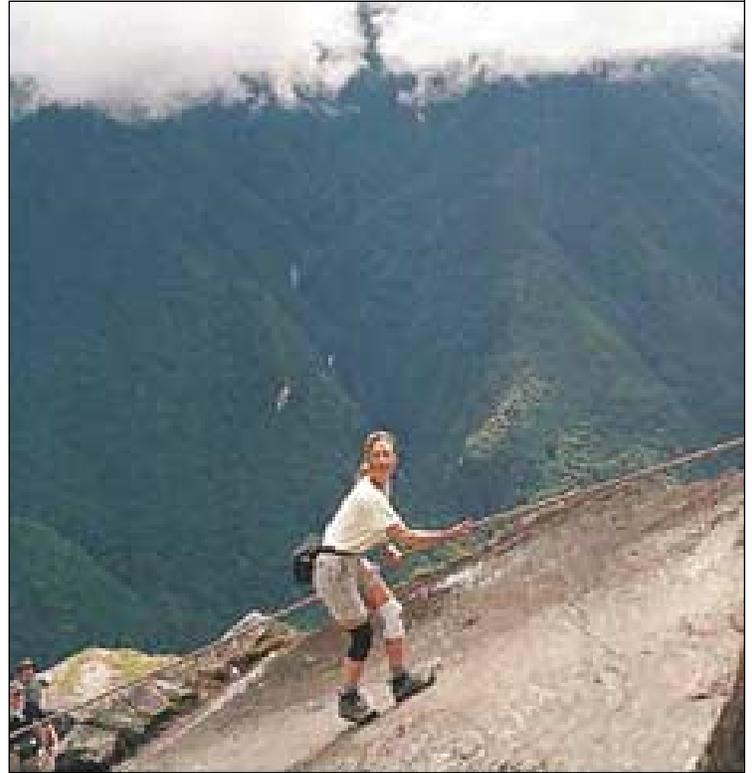


Porters help sort coca leaves for the morning blessing.

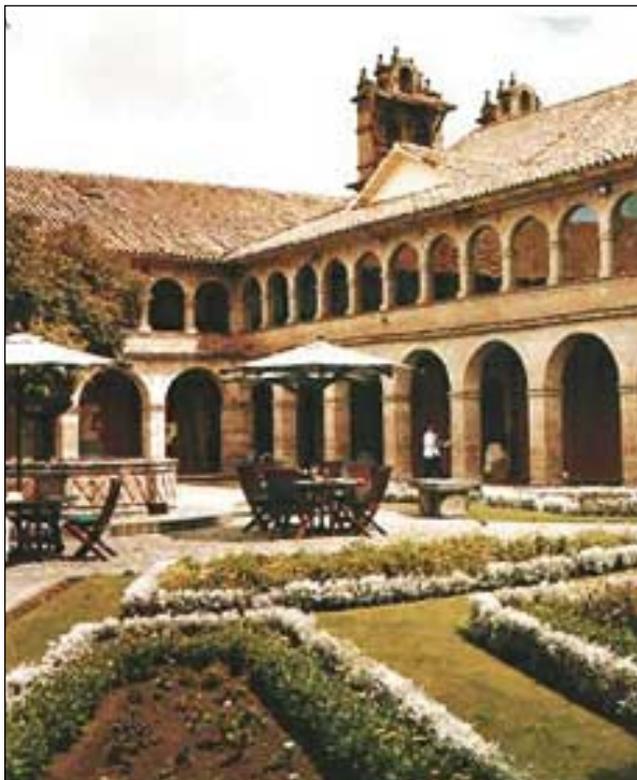
Day two of the trek was steeper, and we made frequent stops. We climbed, now on big stone steps, concentrating on breathing, which become more difficult beyond 11,000 feet. A hiker—not one of the peach blossoms—passed out briefly after bending over the stream. It was sobering; I silently gave thanks to the god of Diamox.

Time to take on Dead Woman's Pass. Soon we were above the tree line, and the landscape was rockier, drier, brown, bare. We were silent. There was only the sound of hiking boots striking the ground in lock-step. I concentrated on sucking air; it cleared my head of thoughts, troubles, nagging voices. I expended vast amounts of precious energy just in lifting a hiking-boot-clad foot up to the next Inca-laid stone step.

A steady rhythm developed among us; place your pole, inhale, step, exhale, place the other pole, inhale, step, exhale. Over and over again. Time stopped. The sun beat down on visored heads, stealing resolve. Yet we persisted, upward, in slow motion. When we arrived at the summit, most of us had just enough energy left to marvel at the view, 360 degrees of...well, now I knew the true meaning of "breathtaking."



The author braves the backside of Wayna Picchu.



The rewards after the trek, back in Cuzco: The Hotel Monasterio.

Tackling the 2,000-foot, knee-jarring descent was hardly a reward, but I enjoyed crossing an area of cloud forest where hummingbirds and Andean bear dwell. We arrived at the Pacaymayo campsite near dark, nodding to other clusters of campers setting up their sites. The massage therapists (super hikers who never stopped for lunch) worked hard that evening in their candlelit tent. At dinner we gobbled up lasagna (from the oven) and learned we'd do 9.94 miles the next day—up to Abra Runkurakay, then down the other side.

Monday began clear but turned rainy. We donned waterproof pants and jackets and hiked on, pausing to inspect incredibly tiny orchids glistening with raindrops. During nine hours of trekking, we inspected archeological sites—forts, granaries and temples—that distinguish the Inca Trail from all other trails. We saw a site also called Runkurakay and then Sayacmarca, the latter a stunning semicircular complex of ruins. We passed through the Inca rock tunnel to arrive at the third pass, Abra Phuyupatamarca (Town Above the Clouds), and hiked down to our final campsite, at Wiñaywayna (Forever Young), where I had the aforementioned shower, a real one.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE DAMP TENT

Maura and I are now trading stories and giggling excessively (we attribute this girlish behavior to the lethal combination of fatigue and oxygen deprivation). Machu Picchu is just over the next peak, and that may partly account for our giddiness. I am dead tired. My legs ache. All is well.

And then comes the 4:00 A.M. wake-up call. We eat a quick breakfast, say too-hasty farewell to our porters and use headlamps to negotiate the stone steps, slippery with dew, in the darkness, with some moonlight helping to show the way. During the hour-and-a-half hike, day dawns and it's suddenly rush hour on the Inca Trail: several groups of young hikers pass us. I see other hikers ahead. We climb the "oh, my God" stairs, scarily steep, and plod on. Then in a rather unceremonious, indeed quite ordinary moment, there is no farther to go. We are at Intipunku, the Gate of the Sun, at 6:45 A.M.

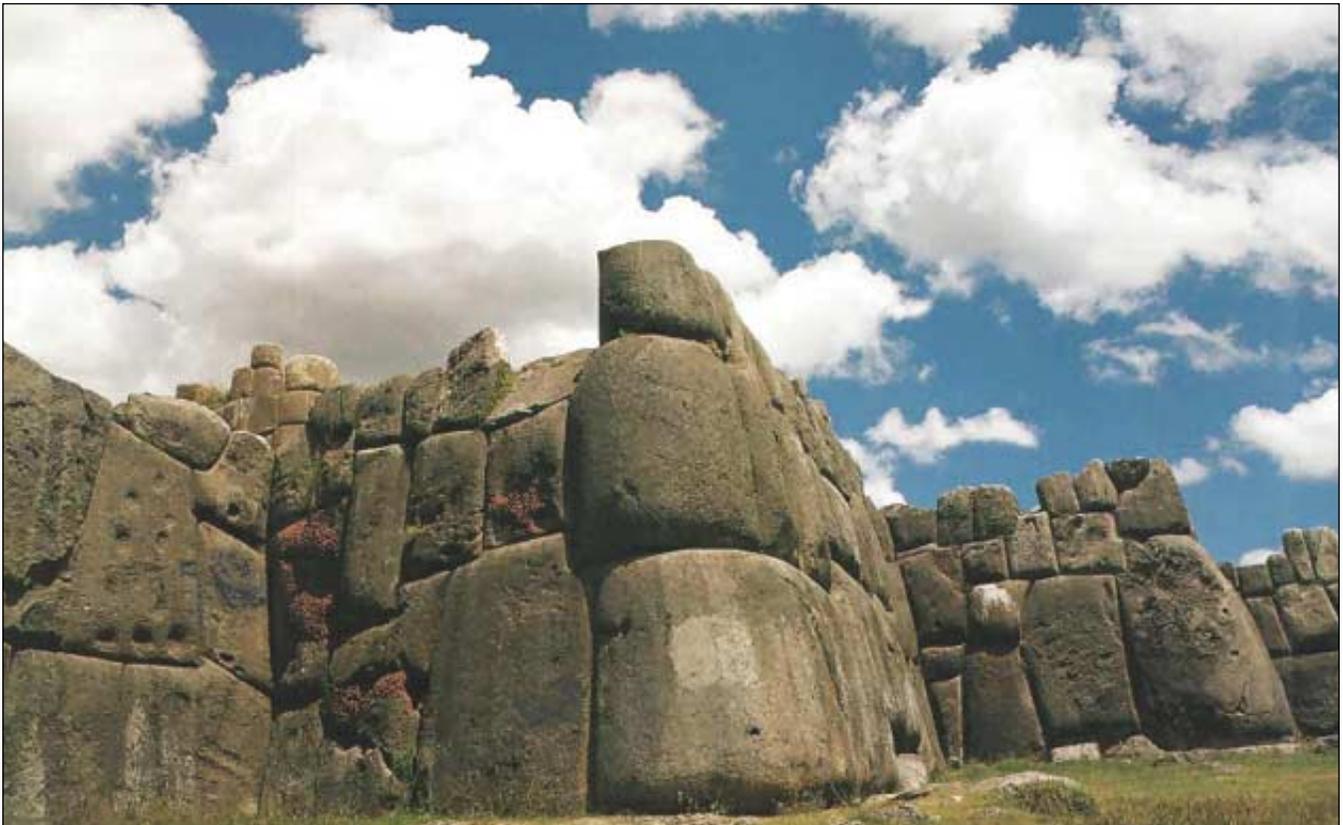
I take the last few steps to the stone archway, then look into the distance, and my eyes land on the magical reward. The ruins, far below, are just emerging from the shadow into the golden morning light. The stone amphitheater of the Gate of the Sun is crowded with hikers. They are mostly silent, careful not to obscure anyone else's view of the event: the rising sun

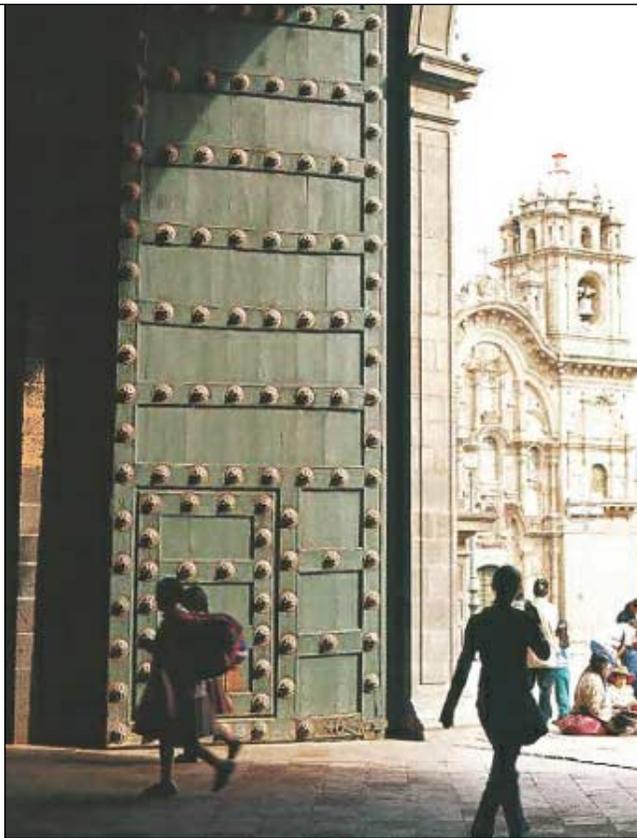
illuminating the citadel, showing us at last a gem of green and gray nestled in the majestic, protective Andes, secret keepers still, standing tall under a clear blue sky.

Cameras click like cicadas for a while. After a time, we hike down to the city and follow a path to our hotel, the Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge, the only accommodation right at the ruins. After an early lunch, we tour the site. The Incas' stonework is as astounding as I'd heard. (Using hematite tools, they cut huge stones down to size so that they fit together without mortar, so tight you cannot put a razor blade between them.) The stone walls, canals, altars, rooms and cubbies for mummies—all have lasted centuries, through three major earthquakes and the Spanish invasion.

Because we're staying at the Sanctuary Lodge, we have the privilege of seeing the city before the crowds arrive by train and bus at 7:30 A.M. and after they leave at 5:30 P.M. This evening, after dinner, six or eight of us walk back into the ruins to assemble for a blessing with a shaman. High, billowy clouds swirl above as the shaman places the coca leaves, incense and candles just so and begins the ritual, circulating among us, ringing a mellow gong and saying a prayer. We focus on his incantations. I notice that one Atlantan is crying. It has been a long journey. I understand her tears. The blessing ends with the shaman

How *did* the Incas lift those massive stones?





The cathedral in Cuzco's main square and the Hiram Bingham, which you take to get there (below).

pointing to the mountain peaks where gods dwell. We can almost see the summits through the clouds. The instant he utters his last words, unbelievably, the clouds pick up speed and swirl away. We are speechless. The sky has cleared as if in collaboration so we could finish well, with a flourish.

It occurs to me the next day that despite all our intense preparations (which I now see as efforts to control the journey), I have been most delighted and moved by the moments over which we have had *no* control and which have unfolded in quiet, stunning perfection. It started with the full moon lighting our way and ended with it shining over our spiritual gathering. The weather at this time of year, the end of the rainy season, is usually iffy. We have had bright sun every day but one. Because the rains have just ended, the landscape is bright green ("It'll be brown in a month," says our Cuzco guide). We'd been warned that the first glimpse of Machu Picchu is often disappointingly obscured by heavy fog and clouds. Not so for us. Absolutely nothing has gone wrong, and we gradually recognize our good fortune.



A TRAINING REGIMEN

During our four-day trek, we made the 18,000 strides uphill and 18,000 strides down, give or take a few stumbles. How to train for the challenge? I consulted June Lay, a health and fitness expert in New York, slightly more than two months before my departure date, which left me enough time to do some training, but not quite enough to significantly "build blood." That means increasing your total number of red blood cells, thereby maximizing the availability of oxygen to your body.

"Eat lean meat," June told me immediately. "At least six ounces a day. And take B complex even if you're already taking a multivitamin."

As for exercise, June said, "Prepare by mimicking what you'll be doing in Peru. Climbing stairs is great if you can't climb some mountains. You need to work up to thirty flights three times a week at regular but not-too-speedy pace and gradually add weights, preferably in a pack on your back. Remember to land on your heels, not the toes, and to use your butt muscles to pull your weight up to each next step. This minimizes back and hip strain." I broke in my new hiking boots in my office building, doing twenty flights at first and, ultimately forty.

Speaking of footwear: your most important gear for this trip will be your boots. Invest time in the purchase (I decided on light-weight Garmont hiking boots) and you'll be a happy trekker. You must break in your boots well before you leave; if the first pair doesn't feel just right after a few sessions, buy a different pair. Also essential: light- and medium-weight socks, plenty of them, plus liners. June Lay: 212-224-0221; junefit.com ~J.C.F.

And then comes another sign of our incredible luck. We leave Machu Picchu by bus; the steep, winding road, with hair-pin turns, leads down to the station, where we board the luxurious Hiram Bingham train for the four-hour ride (cum glamorous dinner) to Cuzco. A couple of days later, we hear that a horrific mud slide below Machu Picchu has swept six villagers to their deaths in the river, damaged buildings, covered the train tracks and closed access to and from the site for days. We were safely and obliviously in Cuzco by the time this happened, seeing cathedrals, shopping, sipping tea at the divine Hotel Monasterio. Nathaniel hears the news on CNN when we get to Lima; the newscaster said, "The only way in or out was by treacherous footpath." Meaning the Inca Trail! Our Inca Trail. Treacherous? No. But I am relieved to only imagine what it would have been like to undertake the trek in reverse.

HOMeward BOUND

I have wondered, since returning to my life in New York, Why did I press myself to scale the mountain? Why not take the train to Machu Picchu, as most do? When we arrived at the ruins, I felt no sense of accomplishment. I waited for it to come. Look what I just did, I told myself. I felt only relief. Back home I confessed this unadventurous, unbrave thing to my husband. He simply said “Men do it for the T-shirt.” I reflected for a long time on this wise comment and finally decided that I am not goal fixated. Instead I enjoy the process. Life *is* the trail—or is it the trial?

The Peru experience percolated in me for a few weeks, and then came a startling revelation: I felt blessed. Blessed to have been capable enough, to be finished, to have had such an impossibly excellent trip, to have made good friends far away and now to be in my kitchen, peeling carrots with my daughters. Knowing that I am blessed: there is no sweeter accomplishment.

THE BASICS

GETTING THERE

Cox & Kings arranges customized trips for individuals, families and small groups. I joined a ten-day trip organized for a group of friends. The cost was \$5,000 a person, not including airfare. Cox & Kings' Inca Trail program, which is four days and three nights of camping, with arrangements similar to ours, costs \$3,484 a person based on a couple traveling together; the price decreases with each additional person who joins the tour. Typically your Peru trip would also include visits to Lima, the Sacred Valley and, following your trek, the Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge and the Hotel Monasterio, in Cuzco. *For more information and suggested itineraries, visit coxandkingsusa.com, call 800-999-1758, or contact Dianna Upton, director for Latin America, at 813-258-3852 or dupton@coxandkingsusa.com.*

COX & KINGS SPECIAL TOUCHES

The company arranges “signature events,” such as lunch with the Lambbarri-Orihuela family, owners of the Casa Hacienda Orihuela, in the Sacred Valley; a private visit to the home of Enrico Poli, and amazing collector of pre-Columbian and colonial art, in Lima; and lunch in Lima at Casa Aliaga, one of the oldest continuously inhabited houses in the Western hemisphere. It was built in 1535 by Pizarro's treasurer, with whose descendants you'll dine.

WHEN TO GO

April through September, after the rainy season. Remember that our spring and summer are Peru's fall and winter. August nights can be quite cold. The Andes are known for variable weather patterns. Lima is always mild and dry.

ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS

Your passport, which must be valid for six months from the date of your arrival. No visa required.

YOUR BEST SHOTS

Doctors advise being vaccinated against hepatitis A, tetanus and typhoid before you leave for Peru.

WHERE YOU'LL STAY

In the Sacred Valley, at the Sol & Luna Hotel (011-51-84-20-16200, charming and well-appointed circular rooms in round bungalows. At the ruins, the Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge (011-51-84-21-1039 or contact Orient-Express at 800-237-1236; orient-express.com). In Cuzco, the gorgeous Hotel Monasterio (011-51-84-24-1777), also an Orient-Express property, originally a monastery built in 1595. The Monasterio offers oxygen enrichment, so if you are in a deluxe room or suite and have a headache, the O₂ will be pumped into your room as you sleep (\$25 nightly). In Lima, the Miraflores Park Hotel (011-51-1-610-4000; its renovation should be complete by March 2005), another Orient-Express lodging, just a lucky bean's throw from the beach. You'll read about pickpockets in Lima, but no worries here.

WHAT TO BUY

Woven backpacks and inexpensive jewelry in the markets in Aguas Calientes (before boarding the train) and in Cuzco's main square. Fine alpaca and vicuña sweaters, ponchos and hats at Alpaca III and in the better shops in Cuzco and Lima. For fine jewelry and accessories, go to Ilaria (308 Dos de Mayo, San Isidro, Lima; 011-51-1-421-1574).

WHAT TO PACK

Walking poles; Patagonia rain gear (including pants); hiking boots, well broken in; headlamp; flip-flops (for camp and shower); clothes made of material that wicks and dries fast (cotton retains moisture); Ziploc and trash bags (for keeping your clothes dry in your backpack); and Purell disinfectant or wipes. Ask your doctor about Cipro (a prescription antibiotic for treating traveler's diarrhea, among other things) and Diamox.

~J.C.F.