

The Adventure of a Lifetime

by Charlotte Houchin Kresge

It was 5:00 a.m. and still dark when our bus pulled into the parking lot. The quiet chatter among the passengers broke into a buzz of excitement. We had arrived. Kilometer marker 82. The starting point for the adventure of a lifetime.



We disembarked and gathered our backpacks and hiking sticks. As I readied my gear, I gazed at my surroundings, now illuminated by the glow of a dawning day. The Andes Mountains, taller and more majestic than I had ever imagined. Much, much more.

Our guide, David (pronounced "Da-veed" in Spanish) ushered our group to the check-in station. We showed our passports and took our first steps of the journey---a twenty-six mile, four-day trek over the high Andes of Peru on the sacred Inca Trail to the Lost City of Machu Picchu.

On our first day, we hiked seven miles over open fields. The stone path, laid by Inca workmen in the 1400s, was rough and craggy and wound gradually upward toward the base of the high mountains. It was not an arduous climb, and even a senior citizen could manage it. Did I mention that I was 66 years old at the time?

As a matter of fact, I was the oldest member of our group, and my 26-year-old grandson was the youngest. David began calling me Mamasita Charlotte, and the name stuck throughout the trek. The English translation is "Dear Little Mother." At first I wasn't sure how I felt about the name, but over the next four days, I grew to love it.

Our group traveled in synchrony, stopping for an occasional rest, or to hear wonderful tales of the ancient Inca civilization, or to view amazing archaeological ruins along the trail. One such structure served as a way station, where young Inca couriers could take a brief rest while transporting messages between Cusco, the capitol city of the ancient Inca empire, and Machu Picchu, the sacred city hidden high among the clouds in the Andes.



When it was time for lunch, we were treated to delicious Andean cuisine, prepared by the cook who traveled with us. We were ravenous and devoured the feast with great gusto. Our team of porters transported everything needed for the journey--food, utensils, a table and stools, water, tents, and other necessities for life on the trail.

Most of these young men were of Quechua origin and could trace their lineage directly back to the Incas. They came from the communities high in the Andes and used their income to support their families back home. I marveled at their ability to carry huge packs on their backs while racing nimbly up the trail, their feet clad in nothing more than simple leather sandals.

After lunch, we grabbed our gear and resumed the climb. A short 30 minutes later, the porters passed us, with their large packs that included the lunch equipment that they had just dismantled. What stamina!



In the afternoon, we arrived at a check-point, where David conversed with the men in fluent Spanish. When he returned to our group, he told us that our campsite for the third night was closed by the government due to potential mudslides from the recent rainy season.

The plan now was to complete the four-day, 26-mile hike in three days! Say whaaaaat? As I contemplated the challenge, I confessed to my grandson that I did not want to be the old lady who slowed everyone down, to which he responded that he did not want to be the young man whose grandmother beat him up the mountain. I guess we all have our individual crosses to bear!

We rebounded from the shock and headed up the trail again. After hiking a few more hours, we arrived at our campsite, Wayllabamba, which means "grassy plains" in Quechua. We were astonished to see that our porters had set up the dining tent with its table and stools and that the evening meal was ready to be served. Nearby, the porters had also assembled our tents, where we would rest our weary bones for the night.

My grandson and I chose a tent, stowed our gear, and headed for the dining area. As we ate, I tried to imagine how such marvelous food could be prepared on the trail. Clearly, our cook was a genius.



During the meal, our group talked about the adventures of the day and those that we would face tomorrow when the trail would arch steeply upward through the mountains.

As the sun slid silently behind the majestic peaks, the stars appeared, and in that remote place, we saw the Milky Way stretching across the black sky as God intended it to be seen. Clear, bright, and awe-inspiring in its vast beauty. It is said that the Inca Trail was a spiritual trail where travelers communed with nature and God on their way to Machu Picchu. In that moment, I understood.

The nights are very cold in the Andes. As we prepared to sleep, we donned long johns, sweat shirts and our chullos, Andean style hats with earflaps, made from vicuña, alpaca, or llama wool. My grandson fell

asleep immediately. Although I was exhausted, I sat in my sleeping bag, journal in hand, and recorded my reflections of our first day by the light of my miner's headlamp. When I closed my journal, I was overwhelmed with a feeling of peace, and I fell quickly and soundly to sleep.

At 5:00 a.m. the next morning, we were greeted by our chakis (porters) who offered coffee, hot chocolate or coca tea in our tents. I chose the tea. Coca is used by the natives to prevent soroche (altitude sickness). Although we had acclimated to the altitude for several days in Cusco prior to our trek, I decided to go native. When in Rome...or should I say Peru?

After breakfast, we headed back to the trail, filled with anticipation of the challenges that lay ahead. We had no way of knowing how challenging they would be. David told us that we could climb at our own pace today, as long as we joined the group at pre-determined locations for lunch and dinner.



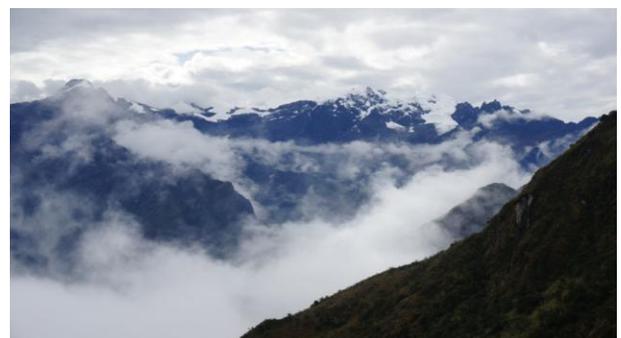
My grandson and I held the belief that the journey was as important as the destination. After all, we were re-tracing the footsteps of the ancient Inca as they made their spiritual journey to Machu Picchu. We stopped frequently to soak in the grandeur of the landscape, taking many pictures along the way.

As we moved forward, the trail became decidedly more challenging. What had been a gradual increase in elevation on the first day transformed quickly into a steep trail, composed of steps whose uneven stones challenged even the fleet of foot. Walking sticks were no longer a nicety; they were now a necessity.

The steps continued upward and upward and upward. As we rounded each turn, I hoped for even a small piece of level land to give my muscles and lungs a short respite, but the mountain said, "No!" We climbed ever upward until we reached the location of our first break. As members of our group trickled in, we talked and laughed about the enormity of our challenge.

While we rested, David informed us that our next meeting spot would be at the highest point on the trail, Dead Woman's Pass (13,800 feet above sea level). OMG! I was afraid to ask why they gave it that name, and I secretly prayed that Mamasita would not be joining her!

As we continued the climb, we saw three wild alpaca, one black and two white, grazing so closely to the trail that we could almost touch them. We witnessed pristine waterfalls tumbling hundreds of feet to the valley below, lush vegetation clinging to rock walls, and endless mountains poking their heads above the clouds. No words or pictures could ever capture their true magnificence.



The trail continued to zigzag up from the moderate temperatures of the valleys to the arid and cold temperatures of the high plains. At last, we saw Dead Woman's Pass looming above us. In the enormity of the Andes, the perception of distance becomes distorted. What looked to be a short hike took two hours to accomplish, in part because of the challenging grade of the steps and in part because of the altitude.

As we approached the summit, we had to stop every 30 seconds or so to catch our breath. Altitude is the great equalizer for young and old alike. After all group members arrived (and I must tell you that I was not the last one to do so!), we took photos of our team celebrating our accomplishment.



The air at the summit was windy and cold, so we quickly donned our jackets and hats. Our group lingered for awhile, snapping pictures and drinking in the beauty of the vast landscape that surrounded us and extended far, far below.

If this were a normal four-day trek, we would have camped just on the other side of the pass. However, this was not a normal four-day trek. Instead, we continued down the steep incline, carefully negotiating more than 900 Inca steps before the trail turned sharply upward again.

The men who built the trail allowed the natural contours of the land to guide their construction. At times the trail was wide and wound up and down the vast landscape. At other times, it morphed into a narrow ledge that hugged the rocky mountain on one side and offered a vertigo-inducing 1,000 foot drop on the other. Needless to say, I hugged the mountain too!



When the Inca could not go around the edges of a mountain, they went through it, creating tunnels that offered a unique perspective on Inca engineering. I marveled at the feat as we passed through two of these tunnels on our way.

We continued our upward trek and suddenly saw our final challenge of the day looming before us--a second pass, Runkuracay, that was nearly as high as the first at 12,959 feet above sea level. Having recently conquered Dead Woman's Pass, I hoped that I had enough stamina left to do the same with Runkuracay. A few hours later, we reached the

summit and were rewarded with spectacular views of the mountain ranges of Vilcabamba and Pumasillo.

Thankfully, our campsite lay a short distance on the other side of Runkuracay Pass, and we rejoiced in the fact that we would soon shed our backpacks, eat dinner and retreat to our tents for a much-deserved night of sleep.

As we arrived at the camp, the warmth and light of the day had already begun to surrender to the cold and dark of the Andean night. We had survived 10 and 1/2 hours of strenuous hiking over rough terrain that included two extremely high mountain passes. Although utterly exhausted, I felt a deep sense of well-being. I had met the challenge and lived to see another day.

Early the following morning, we awoke to the friendly voices of our chakis as they offered beverages and urged us to take them outside of our tents to witness a spectacular sight. There, before us, lay a vast snow-capped mountain range standing tall as the new day dawned. When the sun's first rays touched the snow-clad giants, their alabaster peaks were transformed into a blaze of gold that rivaled anything that Midas had ever touched. A few minutes later, the crown of gold dissipated into the morning mist. What an astonishing sight!



After breakfast, we followed the trail downward for some distance, but eventually found ourselves climbing upward toward a third, and final, pass. A few minutes beyond the pass, we visited the extensive Inca ruins of Phuyupatamarca ("Town in the Clouds"), one of the most unique sites along the way.



There is an old adage that says, "What goes up must come down." This is especially true on the Inca Trail. As we navigated the final descent from the third pass, we learned that we would encounter more than 3000 Inca steps! Seriously? And what kind of person would actually count all those steps?

As the trail continued ever downward, we traveled through a cloud forest, with its hanging orchids and lush vegetation, and we felt a gradual rise in temperature. When we stopped for lunch, we chatted expectantly about our arrival at Machu Picchu. Our destination was located a mere 1 and 1/2 miles down the trail, and we were confident that this last leg of the journey would be easy. However, the Inca builders had one last surprise for us.

Just before reaching Inti Punku, the Sun Gate entrance to Machu Picchu, we were confronted with an incredibly demanding challenge--a nearly vertical 45-step ascent to the Sun Gate that was best conquered by using both hands and feet. It was aptly nicknamed the "Gringo Killer."

After successfully mounting the stairs and taking a few steps more, we arrived at the Sun Gate. And suddenly, there it was---Machu Picchu---spread out below us in resplendent glory. The Lost City of the Incas. The City of the Clouds. The ancient Citadel of Machu Picchu.

A hushed silence fell over our group as we gazed at the magnificent panorama before us. We stood in awe, reflecting on the rigors of the journey, on the spiritual connections with nature, and on the immense sense of accomplishment that could only be earned by completing the trek---but mostly, we reflected on the enduring beauty of the Lost City of Machu Picchu. We had arrived!



Epilogue

We spent our third night in a hostel in Aguas Calientes, a small town nestled at the base of Machu Picchu Mountain. The next day, we headed back to the Citadel for a guided tour with David and for personal exploration of the buildings, the temples, the royal dwelling, the Sacred Rock, and the many terraces where llamas grazed freely.



I am eternally grateful to Señor Kegerise, my 7th grade Spanish teacher, who inspired me to go on this wonderful adventure. He had visited Peru the summer before and enthralled us with fantastic tales of the Inca and their mystical city in the clouds. Gracias, Señor.

There are no words to adequately express my deep sense of awe, reverence and gratitude for being able to enjoy the experience of a lifetime. I am blessed.