

Last Monday morning I woke at 5am to find that my 'Inca Trots' still hadn't cleared up in time for our 4-day hike along the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. In fact, they had become drastically worse. The hostel loo now resembled something akin to a hospital operating table, so I sat there in horror, knowing that my US\$92 was non-refundable and I was really in no state to be trekking up to 4,200 metres. I was probably more ready to visit the local doctor than I was to visit the Inca Gods at Machu Picchu. I even insisted on pulling out of the trek, but my brother wouldn't have a bar of it...

At 7am our Hive assembled at the tourist office and were greeted by the usual group of locals selling postcards, grotty food, shoe-polishing services and out-of-date camera film. We boarded our minibus for the 3-hour bus trip to Urubamba where we were herded like sheep into a tourism-subsidised outdoor restaurant for breakfast. As I spent the 3-hour trip sitting as still as I possibly could, I had a small plate of boiled rice and potatoes, my safest option, as everyone around me tucked into toast & jam, bacon & eggs, etc. I was not in a very good mood...

After mutilating the restaurant's bathroom and enduring an hour's worth of a Peruvian band's out-of-tune ramblings, we travelled a further hour toward our trek's starting point, located next to the Urubamba River and crossed by a not-so-modern suspension bridge to the beginning of the trail itself. The trail has a maximum capacity of 500 trekkers and today was at full capacity due to the recent influx of tourists to Cusco for the Winter Solstice celebrations (see "The Sky Is Falling"). We all lined up at the trail's checkpoint gate like kids at Disneyland...this was going to be a feral 4-days...

The Inca Trail was used by the Incas over 500 years ago to transport messages and food to each city situated along the trail (about 40kms in length, weaving through the Andes and reaching heights of around 4,200mtrs). The Spanish never discovered the trail nor the cities along it and hence the cities are still in relatively good condition.

Ideally, our hive would have liked to enter the trail alone, carrying our own gear as per a real trek (ie. without guides and the bullshit associated with being hooked up to a tour group) but government regulations now prevent this. To that end, we had to walk with a group of 18 others plus the other 480-odd people in front and behind us. That night we slept in a tent 'city', had our meals cooked for us and our tents assembled as well. This was the closest any of us would ever get to a dreaded Contiki tour. The guides employed porters to carry everything from 20kg gas bottles to tables and chairs, food, tents and, at times, people! They even carried backpacks of people too tired (or lazy) to carry their own. Most of the porters wore thongs and worn out sandals!

The second (and most notorious) day of the Inca Trail (Inca TRIAL, as some people call it) began early at 6am for the challenging climb up through the clouds and forest to the first mountain pass at 4,200 metres. As most groups set out at roughly the same time, there was a sea of people winding up the mountain towards the top. Along the way some people were administered

oxygen, some collapsed and had to be carried by porters and others simply rested every few hundred metres to regain their breath. This was a sea of struggling humanity, all with the same goal - reaching Machu Picchu! My brother quickly earned the nickname of 'Speedy Gonzalez'...Scotty reached the peak in an incredible two hours and twenty minutes (the record is two hours). He even shocked the guides. And me? Well, given the fact that I hadn't eaten a proper meal in almost 8 days and spent the morning crouched behind a tree, reached the top in 4 hours. It was the most difficult climb I had ever made but I still managed it, complete with backpack (thanks to a pack of Choc-chip cookies, two bananas and an Orange). We spent the first night in our tents, overlooking spectacular mountain ranges below us. It rained for most of the night but had our dinner brought to our tent doors - this organised trek does have some advantages...

The third day was less of a challenge and hooked it's way down the other side of the mountain to ancient Inca cities and through spectacular rainforest. I was told that there were 400 different species of orchids alone - I counted seven. As the Inca Trail progressed, so did the cities themselves. As the Incas moved on, their cities became even more impressive. They all featured incredibly large 'bricks' carved from stones that are so huge they defy comprehension. The Incas possessed no metal carving or cutting tools!

Along the way I met so many different people from all over the globe. The excitement was building now, as we were just a day away from Machu Picchu. Whilst the trek had become a little easier, we were still climbing steep mountains and walking down them as well (tougher than it may sound). Along the way, groups stopped and assembled for group photos, leaving unfortunate bystanders to take photos with upto 20 different cameras (I was unluckily spotted on two occasions to do exactly that). Because I was one of very few Australians (I met just one other during the entire trek), I was easily remembered by people I met along the way from each group, so was usually asked to take group photos. They seemed to enjoy my Crocodile Hunter impersonations, well, it made them laugh anyway. Lots of smiling people in those photos! They must think all Aussies talk like the Crocodile Hunter...

The final night before the decent to Machu Picchu was spent camping on a mountain at the foot of mind-blowing Inca ruins. As it was our last night, we shared a few beers, sang terrible songs and played charades (aaagghhh!) with a stick. The hapless stick took on the form of a pool cue, dynamite, Star Wars light sabre (complete with Jaycar blue keyring torch shon along it - my idea), vibrator, rectal probe (not my idea), Elvis' microphone, Sony Playstation (huh!) and various other ridiculous charade-objects. That's right, folks, no TV up here in the Andes. At 9.10pm, an American in his fifties came out and complained that we were making too much noise and asked if we were going to 'play' much longer. The poor prick received abuse in three different languages and was shot in the head with our imaginary charade stick. Half an hour later we climbed into our tents, yelling out smart-arse comments to the 'Seppo' and, well, behaving like children. Elvis, Star Wars and Star Trek impersonations echoed through the night till the wee-hours (how many Elvis, Yoda and Captain Kirk voices can one campsite

bear?). I suppose you had to be there...

We rose at 4am the next morning still yelling out in the darkness from tent-to-tent ("Is your rod on-line yet, Captain?"..."Is the Force still lying on top of you, Luke?") - you get the idea. A German man walked over to us in the dark and in his thick accent, thanked us for 'destroying his night'. From that point on we named ourselves the Night Destroyers. Some people have no sense of humour...

The one-and-a-half-hour walk to Machu Picchu was more like a race. With the aid of torch-light (and blue 'Jaylight'), we made our way down through the forest and headed towards Machu Picchu. People ran past one another, all trying to reach Machu Picchu before sunrise in order to capture that 'million dollar photograph'. We were refused to pass some selfish (and slow) people, and at times the whole affair got a little out of hand. A group of ageing New Zealanders took exception to us trying to walk past them (although the previous three days weren't a problem...I think some people now regarded our destination as a prized race) and quite literally tried to shove one of our group over the edge! We eventually got past but not after some heavy handed shoving and bargaining. And to think, all they had to do was stand to the left just as they had for the previous three days...

Reaching the peak before Machu Picchu was a sight I'll never forget. Below us at about 2,350 metres was the ancient 'city' of the Incas - shrouded in a fine mist and yet to be lit by the morning sun - WE MADE IT! Most people stopped there on the peak in stunned silence to take photos so we seized the opportunity and pressed on downward, leaving hundreds behind us. We arrived at Machu Picchu about half an hour before the sun broke the mountains. I walked off alone to find my personal piece of 'sanctuary' and eventually settled against one of the ancient terraced-walls overlooking the complex of Machu Picchu. To sit there in front of this massive ancient city was awe-inspiring...people were mostly silent and condors flew above looking for their first morning's feed.

For the photo-savvy, I used colour 800 ISO film with a polarising filter, 105mm Minolta lens and 1/8 exposures; my brother clicked away in 400 ISO black and white with a 70mm lens 1/60. Fog slowly drifted over the city; the sky became more blue and the sun eventually pierced the distant mountains, illuminating Machu Picchu in a crisp orange light. This was heavy-shit, and I'm confident that the 28-total pics we took over one hour, capturing the evolving light, mist and colours, at least one will be worth hanging up!

After checking our backpacks into the tourism office, we walked into the city itself...a collection of impressive stone buildings that were once used for religious, cultural, astrological and agricultural purposes. The place even features an extensive underground irrigation system! Many ruins I visited in Egypt back in 1987 barely compared to what surrounded us yesterday morning. We sat in the sun, high up in the city, removed our shoes and just sat there taking this amazing place in. A guide and his group walked into the building we were in and surrounded an Inca 'sundial' (although it was not an actual sundial - it was used to tell the seasons and

monitor the stars). The hippy-looking guide casually walked over to the stone structure, leaned on a stone wall and, instead of launching into a tirade of guide-information, quietly announced, "Now, close your eyes and imagine what you will of what went on here...". That was it. That was his explanation of one of the most fascinating structures at Machu Picchu. At that point, a member of his group walked over to him, lit a joint, then offered the joint to the guide (to the horror of the conservative group of old Americans he was leading). That guide gave the most, "Wow, just look at these incredible stones..." and, "Let's just sit over here, close our eyes and imagine who lived in this building..." - laid back, stoned tour of Machu Picchu...

After keeping Kodak in business, we walked to the US\$240/night hotel and checked out the US\$20 all-you-can-eat buffet lunch. Dressed in a pair of grotty shorts and a 4-day old filthy white t-shirt, I walked into the 5-star (and only) hotel to suss out the buffet food on offer. I reported back to the guys who, at US\$20, thought I was mad (we're talking about 5 days worth of backpacker meals here at US\$20!) - after seeing the awesome food on offer and the buffet sign (which, in our heads, really read: come on, fella's, it's all YOU can eat!) then, to the horror of the staff, we waltzed in and sat ourselves down at a window table overlooking the valley below. One by one, we all went to the hotel's bathroom to 'bath' in the hand basin and freshen up for the upcoming onslaught. We were filthy after 4-days of trekking and the looks we got from the rich Japanese and German diners was priceless - especially after we walked out of the bathroom with wet hair and broad smiles. We sat down at 11.45am and left at 2.45. Between 'The Hive', we ate 3/4 of a roast pig, a massive cheese platter, a whole platter of smoked salmon, all the pasta & ham salad, tuna salad, potatoe salad, emptied out the special Machu Picchu sauce container, an entire bowl of chocolate mouse, a bowl of fruit (most of which was slipped under the table and into our shoulder bag) plus enough fizzy drinks and coffee to satisfy the entire hotel. After we had eaten deserts, we kept going back for more pig (now the second pig) then back to desert again (as you do). I was waiting for God to strike us all down in utter disgust. The staff were getting so shitty with us that they closed the buffet half an hour early. Towards the end of our 'buffet lunch' it became so ridiculous that each time we went up to ask the carver for more pig, we'd break out into uncontrollable laughter...even we could see the pathetic side to it. At one stage during our lunch, Neils, a human food compactor, dissapeared for 20-minutes...it was like losing a child...we thought we'd find him asleep in the chocolate mouse bowl. He was in the bathroom making room for more...

After about 3pm we crawled out of the hotel ("hey, do you guys still feel like more pig?") and walked back to Machu Picchu where one of the boys gave us a personal guided tour using his 'Machu Picchu guide book'.

"And here, hundreds of years ago, Lamas waited nervously to be sacrificed as they waived a hoof to loved ones". Yep, a quality tour of Machu Picchu.

And so it ended. As the sun set over Machu Picchu (and my brother took a dump behind an Inca wall), we set off for the final one-hour walk down the

mountain, through the forest in darkness and to the town below, Agua Calientes. We settled into our quality A\$7 Peruvian hotel and slept until 5am...then took the train back along the river and back to the beginning of the trek where busses and taxis awaited for our ride into Cusco, our 'base'.

We scored a flat tyre in our taxi in the middle of nowhere on the way back - with no spare tyre - but that's another story for another day...