

Tour of Peru

Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce

Fall, 2016

Organized by Continental Travel Group

A recent tour of Peru, sponsored by the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, was developed and provided by the Continental Travel Group. The 31 Canadian travellers included persons of various ages, many of whom had travelled together on Chamber trips previously, as well as some joining the group for the first time.

After flying from Winnipeg through Toronto to Lima, we arrived after midnight and were taken directly to our hotel in the Miraflores area of Lima. After a good night's sleep, and an extensive buffet breakfast, we had the morning to explore on our own. Several of us spent the time in a large folk craft market, marvelling at the variety of woven products, silver, jewellery, carvings, nick-knacks, and unusual items; a great place for an instant exposure to many crafts we would experience throughout the trip.

After a quick lunch in a restaurant, sampling a variety of Peruvian dishes, we were on our way to the Larco museum, with a guide teaching us about the thousands of years of history, based upon the artifacts. In the evening it was time to explore the high-end shopping centre overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and once again enjoy a relaxing meal, continuing to try new dishes, and watching the sun set over the water.

Up early the next day, we were off to the Hacienda Los Ficus, where we learned about the Peruvian Paso horse, with a natural smooth and different gait from other horses. Our local guide of the Hacienda, Alejandra, taught us a bit of the history of the horses, guided us through the paddocks where we could get "up close and personal" with the horses, and then served as emcee of a horse show, first with a young horse, then an older one, then a dance performance of a rider on horseback and a senorita dancing on the ground, and finishing with a display of horsemanship by a half-dozen riders in unison. We even had the chance for a brief ride, led by a handler. Throughout the show we were provided with pisco sours and appetizers under a tent, followed by a huge buffet luncheon. Then off we went to the old central part of Lima, with large plazas surrounded by gorgeous immense buildings of Spanish architecture, and a tour of an old convent.

After a good night's sleep and breakfast, we went to the airport and in a flight lasting a bit over an hour we flew from Lima, at sea level, to Cusco, at about 12,000 feet altitude. Upon landing I immediately felt the effects of lower oxygen levels at this altitude, and my feet felt like lead; every step was slow and measured. Fortunately, we got onto a bus, and headed to lower levels in the Sacred Valley, driving through the mountains, past farms and rivers, stopping along the way to learn about llamas and alpacas, and other domesticated animals. The terraced hillsides climbed hundreds of feet toward the sky, reminiscent of the ancient Inca times and the history of the Andean people.

During our stay in the Sacred Valley, we stopped at an unusual area of open-aired salt mining, with salt water flowing from within the mountain into terraced shallow pits, where the evaporating water left the salt of many colours and grades behind. Venturing on, we saw massive terraces, of concentric circles believed to be an ancient crop testing field station; each elevation of the terrace had different humidity and temperatures, allowing a determination of which crops should be grown and which altitudes—an impressive display of science applied to agriculture.

Also in the Sacred Valley, we had the chance to tour of an Inca fortress and an “operating” town still structured as developed by the Incas. I was amazed at the architectural knowledge to build the town, marvelling that the Incas had learned that, if doorways were not square but trapezoidal, they could withstand earthquakes. For me, one of the highlights was visiting the ceramic studio of Pablo Seminario, where, after a film and presentation by Sr. Seminario, we could see all stages of his craft, as artisans diligently attended to their tasks. I was impressed by a vase that he and his wife had made, which I had shipped home, as my primary souvenir of the trip.

The next day it was off to Machu Picchu by train through a narrow valley, along a river, into the town of Aguas Calientes. Off the train and quickly onto a bus, we were transported to the base of Machu Picchu. And then, after being checked through the entrance (no more than 2000 people could enter on a day) it was time to climb—stairs, terraces, walkways, past stone buildings with precisely cut and fit immense stones, others more rustic, places of worship and defense, seeming to climb from within the mountains towards the sky, surrounded by mountains and jungle. It is impossible to describe with words, and even pictures cannot capture the grandeur. Some say this is the most significant site to visit in South America—as this was my first time to the continent, I can’t make comparisons; if someone can suggest an alternative, I would love to experience it.

Then back to Cusco, by a 3 hour train ride with an on-board fashion show. The oxygen was no better, but I managed over the next couple of days. The market in Cusco was a cacophony of sounds, a mixture of smells and colours, full of people doing their daily shopping, as well as other tourists. Anything could be had here, and much was totally unfamiliar to me. In downtown Cusco we had the chance to visit the cathedral with overwhelming works of art, as well as time to explore the plaza on our own. Outside Cusco we saw more Inca ruins, had a picnic (not a box lunch but a multiple course barbecue!) at a lake in the mountains, saw weaving and dyeing demonstrations (again with the opportunity to shop).

The flights home were uneventful (other than me not having taken my boarding pass in Lima for the Toronto-Winnipeg flight), but I must have been tired, as I slept most of the time on both flights.

In closing, while I had anticipated that Machu Picchu would be the solitary highlight of the trip, it is now one of many memories of various adventures and experiences, sights and sounds, foods and drink, crafts, music (the pan flutes and El Condor Pasa still ring in my ears) history and modernism, wealth and poverty, and pleasant, friendly people everywhere. – John Bond Jr.