

"Riding in Peru"

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Every Peruvian dreams that one day he will make the journey to Machu Picchu - a spiritual place that grips you the moment your eyes take it in. It is the only Inca city that wasn't destroyed by the Spanish conquerors in their quest for gold. In fact, the Spanish never found it. At 8,200 feet above sea level, Machu Picchu was mysteriously deserted in 1536. In less than nine years, the fast-growing Amazon jungle had swallowed everything up. It was rediscovered Hiram Bingham, a professor at Yale University, in 1911 and has been a magnet for travelers ever since. Machu Picchu can be reached via a three-hour train ride from Cusco or a four day hike on narrow mountain trails. The mountains are

so steep that a train cannot switchback its way up and down, but instead traverses by backing into Ys of track before moving forward again.

For me, a native Californian who has lived in New York City for a dozen years, the lure of South America was irresistible after being locked in the concrete jungle of Wall Street for so long. Peru, in particular, is appealing because it is a long way from Chile or Argentina, both of which still remind you that the United States is close at hand. An adventure vacation was just the ticket to shake me loose and get my juices flowing again. Having taken up motorcycle riding two years ago at age 45, a dualsport trip to Peru seemed a magical combination. My theory proved true: It was the most fascinating, educational and physically enjoyable vacation of my life.

Our two-week tour combined visits to Machu Picchu and all the major attractions of Peru with unforgettable dualsport riding along the coast, in the desert, the Amazon Jungle, the Andes mountains, and the Colca Canyon (which is twice as deep as the Grand Canyon.) The coastal riding was captivating, as it offered exciting dualsport riding right on the beach. The sand had a brittle crust, so as long as you stayed on the throttle, you sailed along effortlessly, enjoying the views and warm breezes of the Pacific Ocean. In contrast, the adjacent desert offered limitless sand dunes, roads or no roads, your choice! The sand dunes were enormous, with elevation changing as much as 3000 feet. It hasn't rained there in more than 20 years, and the lack of vegetation and rocks gave it an eerie, otherworldly

atmosphere. For boundless two-wheeled freedom, the coastal desert offered the best riding of the trip.

In addition to the diverse landscape, we also saw some incredibly varied wildlife. Peru is one of the most biologically rich countries in the world, home to some of the most diverse species of birds, mammals and plants found anywhere. On the Paracas Peninsula, we visited sea lion colonies that live on the Ballestas Islands and also saw penguins, to my surprise. A variety of sea birds were present, including some that resembled the puffins you might find in Alaska. On the coastal desert, lone condors with over ten-foot wing spans would soar overhead, riding the thermals looking for their next meal of dead seal. In the Amazon, small monkeys were everywhere. We also passed a noisy flock of bright green parrots making a deafening noise.

The tour operator, Flavio Salvetti, has a rare combination of historical, cultural and motorcycle knowledge that is key to an informative and seamless trip. Flavio shares his native perspective of Peru with the pride and understanding that only someone who has grown up loving this country could provide. Educated at American-run schools in Lima, Flavio writes and speaks fluent English. He has been riding the back country of Peru for over 20 years and knows it well - as a casual bike enthusiast and as a participant in races including the first Inca's Rally. He selected roads and trails that ensured that we experienced the diversity of Peru and challenged our riding skills without getting us in over our heads. As a guide, he is very perceptive in assessing the abilities of the riders. Before we left, we tested our bikes with Flavio, as rider safety is a priority. Everyone was issued a new Honda XR600R, though due to my short height, Flavio had arranged a Yamaha XT 350 for me. All the bikes were in top condition. Dualsport bikes would prove to be the best way to tour the country.

For gear, off-road equipment is best, but on our tour half of the people wore rain-proof jackets, street helmets and jeans with shin and knee guards on the outside. Most people who take this tour are street riders with little or no off-road experience, ranging in age from 20 to 70 years old. The majority of riders fall into the 40-to-60 age group.

The riding terrain on the tour consisted of about 30% sand, 20% pavement and 50% dirt roads. The pavement sections were on the Pan American Highway, where you often ride for 40 minutes or more without seeing any other sign of life or moving vehicles, only to be surprised around the next corner by four or five workers in safety vests sweeping sand off a section of the highway. On the dirt roads, road grading and reconstruction workers often appeared unexpectedly. This can be scary, as this section of road has been watered down to a virtual mudhole. For a beginner like me, the sweep rider becomes a most important component of the trip. A good one will make the difference in enjoying the experience or perhaps just surviving. The sweep vehicle - a Nissan truck that carries spare parts, gas, luggage, and lunch - was driven by Oscar Palacios. When I fell, Oscar was out of the truck and helping with the bike before my vision cleared. Here in the U.S., he

would excel at calf roping in rodeos! Of course, he must have been riding on my fender to get to me so fast, so if he missed the brake by half a second, I might have become Oscar's road kill. This thought was added incentive to stay upright - as if one needed added incentive. He drove like a pro with Led Zeppelin at full volume in the cassette player. He is also one of the top bike mechanics in Peru. Not a bad set of talents when you are hundreds of miles from the nearest repair shop.

Our tour rested from riding for two days while we adjusted to the change in altitude, providing us an opportunity to play tourist around Cusco, the oldest continuously inhabited city in North and South America. With its blending of ancient and modern peoples, Cusco is the hub of South American travel, much as Katmandu in Nepal serves as the hub for Central Asian trekking. Like the Himalayas, the Peruvian Andes contain some of the highest mountain peaks in the world, 19 of which top 20,000 feet.

Cusco is also considered a Mecca for the Inca people. For tourists, it is the most beautiful and interesting city in Peru, with its Inca and Spanish stonework. Our hotel was only a few blocks from the street that the Spanish rode down when they conquered the Incas in the 16th century, with our motorcycles stored not 100 yards away.

We spent two days touring Cusco and Machu Picchu, reaching 13,000 feet before heading for the Amazon Jungle. From that altitude, we descended to 3,000 feet in less than 100 miles. As we rode through the high country, I had to remember to keep an eye on the switchbacks while we worked our way through local farms and past herds of sheep, alpaca and llamas. The shepherds were dressed in their traditional colorful clothing. The women wear full skirts and married women wear the Derby hat introduced by the Europeans centuries ago. The road took us through the middle of villages, keeping us on the watch for loose chickens, cattle and pigs in the road. Flavio warned me that pigs make you fall down. I have news for him: A chicken would make me fall down, too.

The people in the villages were very friendly and curious. At one stop, the local police gave each of us an orange to enjoy for lunch. Villagers routinely waved and encouraged us to ride faster! This amazes me, as we were stirring up a lot of dust, plus the loose livestock were at risk.

Whenever we stopped for gas, groups of men and children would gather to see us and get a closer look at the motorcycles. Not speaking Spanish, I had to rely on the others on the tour to explain where we came from and what we were doing. The men had many questions while the children were quite shy. The guide books say that of 8 million inhabitants in Lima, 6 million are under or unemployed. The lack of affluence is evident, yet the people of cities and in rural areas are very happy. The impoverished do not seem as desperate as we see here in the United States. After a day of riding out of the mountains and into the jungle, we reached Quillabamba, the gateway to the Amazon. Our rooms at the Hotel Don Carlos

opened onto a magnificent courtyard, with flowering plants, orchids and tropical trees. We ate dinner at a rural restaurant on the bank of the Urubamba River. The restaurant owner also served as taxi driver from the hotel in his pickup truck. One of the guys observed that the pickup ride alone was worth \$400 at Disneyland for thrills and chills through the jungle. The restaurant residents included several pet monkeys and a small fluorescent green parrot with blue on its wings. Dinner was served on picnic tables with great canopies made from nearby palms. The foods of Peru are as diverse as the countryside. The local specialty is cuy (guinea pig), which I tried it at Flavio's recommendation. It is very good and it does NOT taste like chicken! For lunch on the trail, we enjoyed avocados that were the size of cantaloupe and ripened to perfection, canned tuna, fresh baked bread, Inca Cola, and lowland bananas. The bananas have a slightly pink or orange tint and a hint of sweet potato in texture and flavor compared to a regular banana. Delicious. The fruits and vegetables tasted as if they had all been picked the same morning - and they probably had.

Our last day of riding, from Quillabamba to Cusco, was breathtakingly highlighted by the waterfalls along the mountainside. Savoring our last day, we took almost 12 hours to cover the 192 miles back to Cusco. Along the way, we stopped at a hidden waterfall. It was too inviting to resist stripping down to T-shirt & bicycle shorts and jumping into the stepped pools that cascaded 200 feet down the granite rocks. Everyone regretted the trip coming to an end.

Our group of eight riders included a schoolteacher from Germany, a couple from San Francisco and a Mexican couple and their son from Cabo San Lucas. Peter is the president of the enduro club in Berlin. He takes a motorcycle vacation every year and has been to Africa, all over Europe and the U.S. While he was probably the most skilled rider in the group, I noticed he was one of the last riders to finish on the last day - enjoying every minute. The people from San Francisco and Cabo were friends. The guys had ridden together on street and dirt for over 20 years. Their wives rode behind them, two-up. To them, this was the ideal adventure vacation and the best way to see Peru. Ed from Cabo San Lucas told me a secret: If you want your kids to continue to vacation with you when they are in their 20s, the key is to find way-cool vacations that they don't want to miss! I hope these friendships last a lifetime - as will my memories of Peru.