

Ecuador/Peru 2013 Trip Journal

15 September, Sunday: Sharon's wakeup call came just as our alarm was going off at 04:00 AM. We had dropped our dog "Chili" off with friends the evening before. Sharon showed up at 04:45 and drove us to SEATAC. We got our boarding passes, checked our bags and waited. United-1258, a 737-900, lifted off at 08:30-right on time, bound for Houston.

IAH-Bush International is a nice airport, which was a good thing as we had a three hour layover. Our United-1035 departed 45 minutes late bound for Quito, Ecuador. It was a smaller 737-700, full, cramped and hot. A mediocre dinner was supplied as the six hour flight droned on. We arrived in Quito at 11:20 PM.

It took us about 45 minutes to get through customs, as three planes arrived at about the same time. After retrieving our bags we ran into our Monograms representative who was standing at the exit holding a placard with our name on it. We were then driven from the airport to our hotel. Midnight Quito traffic was light but it was a confusing route which ran through some rundown neighborhoods; enough to make me a feel uncomfortable. But, as we got closer to downtown, the neighborhoods improved... and then (finally) our hotel the *Grand Mercure Alameda* appeared on Amazonas avenue.

Check in was quick and our *Metropolitan Touring* guide, "Reinoso Geovanny" left us a message that our tour of *Quito* would begin Tuesday (the day after tomorrow) at 09:00. Our room (912) on the ninth floor had no sprinkler system or smoke alarm, though there were smoke alarms in the hallways. The room was small but *very clean*. I sent a quick email to Sharon, Mike and the Drakes- then crashed around 01:30 or 02:00.

16 September, Monday: Woke up about 07:30 and went downstairs for breakfast, where we found our breakfast potato balls interesting. We sat at a nice table where we could watch folks going to work. There were lots of men in suits walking quickly- must be in a business district. Retiring to our room, we relaxed.

Later that morning we walked around our neighborhood. What a busy place with folks scurrying everywhere going about their business. Quito reminded me of Costa Rica: not rich, but then not poor either and with a strong work ethic.

We stumbled across a beautiful old cathedral not far from the hotel: the *Iglesias de Santa Teresita, Robles y 9 de Octubre*. It was a real working church, so I made sure to genuflect when crossing the middle isle, and took only a few discrete photos. Still it was well worth it. Beautiful. On our way back to the hotel, Laveta bought a scarf from a street vendor, while I bought a bottle of *Old Times* Ecuador whiskey for less than 7 dollars!

17 September, Tuesday: We had breakfast in the Hotel, and then left for our Tour of Quito at 9:00. There were just eight of us, plus Reinoso Giovanni, our Metropolitan Tours guide and our minibus driver.

We drove north towards the center of the Ecuadorian capital. There we saw two churches; the first was a local church the *Inglesia de la Compania* which had the most beautiful interior that I have ever seen. The *whole* interior was covered in gold leaf! And it was full of beautiful artwork. Just extraordinary! Sadly, they treat their churches like houses of worship. No photography!

I told our guide about the great patron saint of photography who is appreciated in churches all over Europe- but to no avail.

The second church was *Inglesia de Convento de San Francisco*. Of one of the many statues inside was one of Mary holding the baby Jesus. She wore a crown and a beautiful pair of earrings! Again, very beautiful inside, but no photography.

Walking around *Independence square* with its many statues and monuments, we saw the official residence of the government, complete with formal guards. There were lots of people everywhere. It's certainly a popular spot. Finally, we drove northwards and upwards to the base of a great (100 ft. tall?) statue of the Virgin (with wings no less) crowning the hilltop. There were great views of Quito all around.

We leave tomorrow at 06:40 for the Galapagos.

18, September, Wednesday: Alarms went off at 04:30. We went down for breakfast. Returning to our rooms, we finished packing, watched CNN and relaxed a little before heading down to the lobby with our bags. Giovanni arrived shortly with our baggage tags. At 7:45 the eight of us plus Giovanni and our driver headed for the Quito airport about an hour away. Giovanni went with us into the terminal and gave us our boarding passes. After about an hour our LAN A320 arrived.

Our flight was routed thru *Guayaquil*, Ecuador's largest city to drop off and pick up passengers. It was about a 35 minute flight to Guayaquil, then 40 minutes on the ground (we stayed aboard).

The flight to the airport on Baltra island took about an hour and a half, followed by 40 minutes in line for national park entry (kind of like customs).

Finally about 30 of us boarded a very dirty bus that took us to a small walk-on ferry to Santa Cruse Island where 10 of us boarded another bus. Mario our guide for this trip took us into a large lava cave then into an area with (very) large land tortoises. They were indeed fine and large and roamed the fields freely.

The bus then took us for lunch at a strange two sided restaurant/trinket-store/bar. Then back aboard the bus for a 40 minute ride to *Puerto Ayora*, the main town on the island where we boarded a zodiac for our trip to the Finch Bay ECO hotel.

The hotel is really neat with spread out cottage like rooms, complete with WI-FI and air conditioners but no TV. The hotel restaurant is rather elegant and is open on one side to Finch Bay.

This day has been a whorl of activity, birds are chirping and we're tired. Dinner begins at 19:00 and our day tomorrow at 07:40.

19, September, Thursday: Another busy day! We had a great buffet this morning- with lots of finches to keep us company. One side of the restaurant is open to finch bay views and Finches like to eat breakfast too. An employee is devoted to fending them off of our tables with a towel but it's a losing battle. The finches are cute... and we don't mind them.

Walking down to our pier, we boarded our launch to the "Sea Lion" a 74 foot diesel yacht with three levels, one for crew, one for passengers, and a third roofed but open deck. There were 12 of us plus 5 crewmembers and our naturalist guide.

Our hotel is on *Santa Cruz* Island and we voyaged to the island of *Santa Fe* which took us about one hour and forty-five minutes. The island was over the horizon when we started. The weather began overcast in the mid 6'0s and fin-

ished sunny low to mid 70's with a light breeze. Just about perfect.

Disembarking into our large dingy (a zodiac big enough for all of us), we removed our shoes and stepped out onto a beautiful sandy beach crowded with Sea Lions and lots Sea Lion poop. Except for the large males (which we were warned to give a wide berth) the sea lions don't seem to mind us at all- even the nursing mothers.

A Galapagos hawk was perched on a bush near the beach, waiting for a meal of sea lion afterbirth. A few small sharks could be seen swimming parallel to the shore. Since the sea lions fish 5 to 10 miles out to sea they seem to be lazy on the beach but really they're just tired out. Even so there's a lot going on and they're loud- especially the males.

Walking up a very rocky trail for 30-40 minutes, we saw strange tall cactuses. They have hair rather than thorns since there's no predator that can climb and eat the pads. Weird. Land Iguana's do eat the ripened fruits that drop off and we did see lots of *Land Iguanas*, who watched us closely but didn't seem to mind us, so long as we stood 2-3 feet away.

We walked back to the beach and onto our zodiac for a ride back to our yacht where most of the party went snorkeling for about an hour, though the water was reportedly cold. The Humboldt Current is what keeps these islands so temperate and the surrounding water cool, even though they're on the Equator. It was also neat to look up at noon to see the Sun directly overhead. We then ate lunch aboard on cloth covered tables. We returned to Finch Bay about four o'clock.

20, September, Friday: Leaving the hotel at 07:45, we motored east and then north around Santa Cruz to nearby South Plaza Island, a rather small rocky island, low on one side with

cliffs in the other. There were numerous Sea Lions, as well as land, sea and Hybrid Iguanas. Some of Sea Iguanas match the rocks so closely it's easy to step on them accidentally. The landscape here is other worldly- like nothing I've ever seen. Rocks are black where the tides and waves can reach them, above that almost white from Sea Lion poop, finally grey rocks. Patchy groundcover is red interspersed with strange looking 10-15 foot tall cactuses.

We ran across a sea lion mother who had just given birth that morning. The rocks near her were still blood stained, (some blood not yet dried). Two Frigate birds were fighting over the afterbirth. But mother and baby seemed to be doing fine.

We walked around the island for an hour and a half or so then boarded the dingy, transferred to our mother ship and continued around Santa Cruz Island until we reached the northern pass between Santa Cruz and Baltra Island. There we transferred to a bus and crossed the length of Santa Cruz back to where we started our trip. Our boat remained anchored on the North side of Santa Cruz where we will board it tomorrow for our journey to *Bartolome Island*.

21, September, Saturday

Had a great breakfast at our hotel with the usual finches, who seem to be evolving smarts. The little buggers are now uncovering the bread baskets to steal bread and they eat the toast that pops up from the toaster! Had four of them mob my plate when I left for a moment to get a refill on my coffee.

Leaving the hotel, we took water taxi to town, hopped on the bus and drove 45 minutes to the north side of the island where we had left the "Sea Lion" the day before. We then motored north for two hours to Bartolome Island, anchoring next to the Island's high point which rises about 300 feet or so from the water's edge.

We took our dingy to the trail's beginning. The trail is all wooden planked with handrails! It must run about a quarter to 1/3 mile. There are many steps. There were a few stops for views, where Mario, our Naturalist for the day, expounded on the volcanic geology, flora and fauna, all of which was strange. The views from the summit are exceptional in all directions, from lava fields, to cinder cones- and of the little bay in which we were anchored.

We then descended, boarded our dingy and went looking for Boobies and Penguins. We found both. Galapagos Penguins are the smallest penguin and live the farthest north of any penguin. Penguins on the Equator- strange indeed!

I took photos of both. We returned to the boat, and then most folks went to the beach or went scrubbing. An hour later we had a great lunch aboard and started for home, arriving around 18:00. This was the best day of the trip so far.

22, September, Sunday: Breakfast was at 06:00, bags out at 6:45. At 7:30 we said good-bye to the Finch Bay Hotel, grabbed a water taxi to our waiting bus then drove about 10 minutes to the Darwin Research Center, where we saw tortoises from babies to yearlings to teenagers to old timers. We also saw the famous and prolific "*Deigo*" from the San Diego Zoo who was responsible for more than a thousand offspring here in the Galapagos

And these tortoises live a long time! Our Naturalist said that a baby tortoise from the Galapagos, personally given in 1835, by *Charles Darwin* to some royalty personage in Australia, died as recently in 2006. By then the giant tortoise, known as *Harriet*, was at the Queensland-based Australia Zoo owned by "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin and his wife Terri. *Harriet* lived to be 176 years old.

We then visited some really large sink-holes, maybe 300 meters across and 150 deep- then continued to the ferry and then to the airport. Our flight again stopped at *Guayaquil* to drop off and pick up passengers. Then it was on to Quito (again): immigration, ticketing and bag checks.

Our LAN-2581 flight to Lima lifted off just after 20:00. It lasted about 2 hours, 10 minutes. By the time we went through customs and got our bags it was 23:15. We were met by Debora (our Monogram representative) and driven by her to the *Alpha Hotel* in Miraflores, Lima Peru- which took nearly an hour on nearly empty streets. The hotel was ok but certainly not the wonderful "Finch Bay Hotel" that we had left on the Galapagos. We were in our room at 00:30. I found a Jonnie Walker scotch in the room cooler and poured it. What a long day!

23, September, Monday: Easy day. We relaxed until 14:00, and then boarded our sight-seeing bus for a tour of Lima. Of course we couldn't see it all. Lima has a population of over ten million! It was a strange mix of old and new, young and old, poor and rich. There are no subways, or light rail, or freeways, which leaves busses- lots of them. Buses with standing room only, busses packed to the gills and mobs of pedestrians at rush hour. The city has lots of areas poverty but some very nice upscale districts.

There's also lots of police and other security folks and lots of barbed, and electrified wire and video cameras protecting homes and places of work. A thought passed through my mind that America of the future might look like this- if the rich keep getting richer and the poor getting poorer. In any case the city was clean; no trash lying around. I didn't see a single empty plastic water bottle or fast food wrapper the littering

public spaces anywhere on this trip, which was remarkable as US based fast food is everywhere. We then went to Peru's great square where the president works and the Catholic cardinal resides and the mayor of Lima has his offices. Beautiful buildings!

We then went to the San Francisco Museum which was a marvel. This is great artwork that is sadly deteriorating. The whole building should be environmentally conditioned but they don't have that kind of money.

Laveta and I ended our day by walking from our Hotel to a restaurant called "Haiti" for a dinner of roast beef fettuccini. Great meal with great ambiance!

We flew to Cusco the next morning.

24, September, Tuesday: Our landing at Cusco (elevation over 11000 feet) was fast but smooth. The strange thing was when we landed; the plane, which was pressurized for flight at the standard 8000 feet, had to be de-pressurized to the airport environment! Just the opposite of any other landing I've ever made. I felt a little light headed getting off the plane and everyone seemed out of breath going to baggage claim. After baggage claim we were met by a Monograms representative and taken downtown to the *Sonesta Hotel*.

From 13:20 to 18:20 we were given a tour of Cusco. In the *Plazza de Armas* we went inside the cathedral which was filled with beautiful artwork- just outstanding! No photos were allowed.

We then toured the *Santa Domingo Monastery* which was previously the *Koricancha Temple*, one of the most important Inca temples devoted to the worship of the Sun. The monks had destroyed most of the temple- as they did with all the symbols of indigenous, pagan worship (or places of worship) they came across. But enough was left for us to appreciate the wonderful stonework- the world's best.

We then drove outside the city to see the ruins of *Sacsayhuman* (pronounced like sexy woman). The stonework is fantastic and the stones are very large indeed. From the top of the hill you can look down on the city of Cusco surrounded by mountains. We then went to see the Amphitheatre of *Keno* and farther on to the *Red Fortress of Puca* (elevation 12000 ft.) By the time we got to bed it was after 22:00!

25, September, Wednesday: Before we preceded to the next leg our journey, we needed to place our bags in the storage room of the *Sonesta* hotel in Cusco. But before we did that, we had to take with us- things we would need for the next 2 nights-3 days, because we'll be taking the narrow gage railway to Machu Picchu. The train allows us only 11 pounds each. Taking things like underwear, a coat, poncho, walking sticks, one umbrella toothbrush, pills, cellphone charger, notebook computer and the camera, I came in at 14 pounds, Laveta about 7. We heard that the railroad does not weigh luggage- but since we'd have to carry all of this stuff to the ruins on our backs for 5 hours- 14 pounds is heavy enough.

Leaving the hotel at 8:20, we stopped at *Awanakancha*, a neat place where we were shown Alpaca's, Lama's, and Vicuna's and others. We also had a chance to feed them. There were also natives giving examples of weaving techniques. Of course there was also the obligatory store for shopping (we didn't buy anything) but the visit was interesting.

We had lunch (don't remember where) then continued to the town of *Pisac* where we were "treated" to another market. The town was neat but I'm getting tired of markets. Our bus headed down the sacred valley following the Urubamba river as it flows northward over granite tocks.

The river continues flowing down into the jungle, merges with other tributaries- finally forming the mighty the Amazon... meandering its way to the Atlantic ocean over 2000 miles to the east.

Finally at the end of the Sacred Valley, above the town of *Ollantaytambo*, are some wonderful Inca constructions. To get to them is a meandering route of about 260 irregular steps made of odd size stones. There are no guard-rails anywhere and the irregular surfaces- especially going down are more than tricky. It's a good place to break your neck. I decided to do it, though Laveta passed- as did several others. It was crowded and till we reached some shade- very hot. Even so it was worth it. Took lots of photo's. Afterwards, we were then bussed 20 minutes to our hotel, the *Casa Andina Private Collections Sacred Valley*.

About the time we arrived at our hotel we heard that there was a national rail strike in Peru; this was just the day before we were scheduled to take the train to Machu Picchu. Our travel representative in Cusco called a few hours later to say it was a one day strike and that arrangements were being made to change our tickets to Friday. It will still cost us one day, of our original two days in Machu Picchu and it would make that day long indeed but we would still go there.

26, September, Thursday: At 14:00 we were relocated about 20 minutes south to a town Called *Yucay* and a hotel called *Sonesta Posadas del Inca*. Our last hotel was good, but I like this one even more.

27, September, Friday: Nine of us boarded our Mercedes Minibus from the Hotel. After driving for about twenty minutes or so and past the small town of *Urubamba*- we found all traffic stopped at the entrance of the next town. This

was the town where burning tires and boulders had blocked the highway as part of the national strike the day before. The road was narrow and there was no way around the traffic jam. Nor could we tell how long the stoppage would last but we needed to get to the train station in 15 minutes. Our driver suggested that we get out and walk a few blocks north into the town proper and hail some taxis. Thinking this was our last chance we walked. After we had walked about 150 meters we saw traffic starting to move again! Unbeknownst to us, the police had ordered the driver to move his truck that was blocking the road. Looking back, we saw our minibus turning around to go back the way we came!!! But in his rear view mirror our driver saw traffic moving again, reversed course and picked us up and we continued our way to the train station. We barely made it- coming within only a few minutes of being abandoned just outside the town!

We boarded our rail car which was surprisingly nice and roomy with leather seats. It was also much smoother than riding our bus and far less dangerous than the traffic on valley roads. We headed north following the *Urubamba River*. The river, tumbling ever downward, skirts the feet of Machu Picchu, joins other rivers and finally merges into the Amazon and finally... the Atlantic Ocean. The farther we journey onward, the greener the foliage and trees became- until we suddenly notice air plants perched on branches and hanging mosses. We had come upon the cloud Forest of the Urubamba river valley. After an hour and a half we arrived at the last station and the small town at the end of the line.

Checking our pack-packs for safekeeping at the park entrance, we boarded park busses for the final leg to the ruins. The dirt road (if you could call it that) switchbacks relentlessly upwards for about 30 minutes. Here at the end of

the line we had our tickets (and optionally our passports) stamped. From now on we walked, and in the beginning that's mostly upwards on broken ground and badly set stones.

Finally, we rounded a corner and there it was-Machu Picchu, just like on the cover of National Geographic. The ruins appeared like jewels in an emerald setting of mountains. The weather was about perfect, just a few clouds to increase the feeling of space and depth. We Climbed up and down and up and down to see various altars, storerooms, houses and places of worship. We saw how terraces supported stonework constructions (many of which exhibit stellar alignments). We also climbed down to see the large and green Plaza Principal (main square) then set out for the busses, the train to *Ollantaytambo* station and then another bus ride to Cusco and our hotel, where we returned about 20:00.

Machu Piccu is a masterpiece by any standard. Set high on the spur of a mountain, kept company by majestic surrounding peaks, its feet bathed in the Urubamba River far below; it has kept watch on the coming and goings of peoples for hundreds of years. For much of that time it

was forgotten. Well, the sun god can be happy now for the people have returned (in droves). We returned by bus to Cusco and arrive around 20:00, repacked our bags, showered and slept.

28, September, Saturday: We flew from Cusco to Lima. The landing was so smooth that I didn't know we were down until I heard the thrust reversers! We met our local representative and were we are taken to the *Casa Andina Private Collection Hotel* in the *Miraflores* district of Lima. It's a four star hotel with great rooms. We had dinner a couple of blocks away-then crashed.

29 September, Sunday: Normal check-out is 10:00 but we elected to pay 100 dollars for an 18:00 checkout (will be picked up and taken to the airport at 20:00 for our flight to Houston which leaves at 23:50 (midnight).

The flight home from Lima-Houston-Seattle was long uneventful.

Chuck Williamson / November 2013