

The Captain's Choice of

SOUTH AMERICA

2. Cusco – Machu Picchu – The Amazon – The Galapagos – Santiago

(13 – 27 October, 2007)



Text: John Biggs © 2007

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Cusco and Machu Picchu

Cusco, once the capital of the Inca Empire, is everything we might have expected La Paz to be but wasn't. The colonial buildings going back to the Spanish occupation are wonderfully preserved, especially around the Main Square in the centre of town. The City Council decreed that nothing over four stories can be built in the city. In the streets children sell coca candy and raw coca leaves. Coca is the source of cocaine, and chewing the leaves is what kept Inca runners going and the Bolivians miners working their 18 hours a day. Coca tea is recommended as an antidote for altitude sickness. Our elderly guide Elizabeth tells us she continually keeps a wad of coca in her mouth to keep her on her toes. I bought a small bag of leaves to chew but gave up; I didn't notice any difference and Catherine didn't like the smell.



We stay in the splendid but ironically named Libertador Hotel, where in the foyer an urn of coca tea is available on tap – a very pleasant drink like green tea, but whether it helped with altitude sickness remains an open question for there was no control group, we all drank it. Also in the foyer is a colonial-era portrait of a sweet-faced, hermaphrodite angel lovingly cradling a musket in his/her arms – an apt symbol of what the Spaniards were and what they did to the Incas when they arrived in 1532. The Libertador was once a colonial palace, diagonally opposite and a few paces from the monastery of Santo Domingo.

The importance of the latter is not the monastery itself, but on what it is built upon: the Incas' Temple of the Sun. The Incas were a Quechua speaking tribe who began organising themselves around 1100, settling in Cusco and for the next four centuries gradually formed a massive civilisation. They had no tools other than stone, yet they worked their stone foundations so well, interlocking blocks of stone so perfectly, that the Spaniards couldn't demolish them: instead, they built on top of them. The Incas' stone walls incline at exactly 13° with doors and windows a trapezoidal shape, designed to catch the sun and the moon. Their philosophy was for the greatest happiness of everyone: there were no poor, although there were the very rich, the rulers who were allowed many wives and concubines. The unit was a family, and one-third of their produce was given to the government for public works and sharing. They overlaid the walls with gold (for the sun) and silver (for the moon).



Thinking of the Aztecs, the Mayans, and Mel Gibson's *Apocolypto*, I ask our Inca guide, Elizabeth, if the Incans indulged in human sacrifice. She assures me they did not: but Vida, another guide, tells me they did, occasionally, to placate the gods in times of famine: it was seen as a privilege and the victims, chosen from the best looking youths, were drugged against pain. The Incas dedicated rooms to the sun and moon but didn't worship the sun or

the moon as such, but the sun as a symbol of the giver of life, just as the Catholics would say they don't worship the Crucifix, but what it stands for.

The Catholic Spaniards however didn't see it that way. They cast the Incas as Satanists and referred to them as 'the devils'. They were thus doing God's work by stripping the gold and silver off the walls of Incan buildings and shipping it back to Spain while killing as many Incas as they conveniently could, depleting their numbers from 17 million in 1532 to 4 million that century. It is odd that the *National Geographic* (February 1938) can say that '... because of the liberal attitude of the Roman Catholic Church, of the kings of Castile, and of the best men among the conquerors, Incan culture was blended with Spanish colonial civilisation.' (p. 264). The difference is possibly because what we are told comes from the mouths of the Incas themselves, not from those of their conquerors.



Although the present day Incas call themselves Catholic, Elizabeth says that she is typical in that she also subscribes to the ancient Incan cosmology. The Cathedral dominates the splendid Main Square. You enter and gape with awe at the large nave and massive silver altar – to be told that this is only a chapel, turn right and enter the Cathedral itself. The high altar is



gold and enormous. Around the walls of the nave are more side-chapels, another pure silver, another of the Black Christ, unlike Guatemala's which was born out of political correctness and a portrait of which is in the monastery in New Norcia, but because the statue has been blackened by centuries of candles burnt by the devout. An arresting picture is of the Last Supper, the food being a favourite Peruvian dish, a guinea pig, on a large gold plate. Judas is painted in the

likeness of the Spanish conqueror Pizarro. That seems to say it all about the Incas' view of their 'liberators'.

One city that escaped the Spaniards because it was way up in the mountains was Machu Picchu. It was not discovered by westerners until 1911. Today Machu Picchu is reached by a train, following the Urubamba River as it winds between the massive snow-capped Andean peaks we can see through the Vistadome roof. This section is reminiscent of travelling up the Three Gorges in China. We also pass through fertile valleys, cropping beans and potatoes and 200 different kinds of maize

Machu Picchu is so well known and so stupendous, the guidebooks say that the well-known pictures will not prepare you for just how overwhelming it is. I therefore expected much more

than I would otherwise have expected so, when I actually saw it, it matched the expectations I had had in the first place. Our attractive Inca guide, Vida, sets off the scene nicely. Vida explains that Machu Picchu was dedicated to worship or ritual, not for residence. It is placed centrally in the region, the mountains around pointing to the Southern Cross, a carved rock a scaled down version of the mountains' profile. The ruins are still in excellent order, apart from the sacred sun dial which was recently damaged by a Mexican film crew.

Machu Picchu is the anticipated peak of the trip for all of us, which turns out to be a pity. We are asked: 'There's an easy, short route round the ruins, or a harder and more



interesting route: you choose.' All choose the more interesting route, including the infirm and those still suffering from altitude sickness. As a result, we are slowed down and our group doesn't complete the tour. A tricky problem for our manager, Gordon. Is he supposed to rule on who is fit enough to proceed and who is not? Two rabbit look-alikes, chinchillas, scornfully watch us from a stone shelf as we make the easy way back.



The ruins are a fifteen minute bus ride down a dramatically zigzag road to the railway station. As we approach the first corner, a boy with a brilliant headband and short red tunic leaps out at the bus and shouts something savage-sounding. At the next corner he reappears – he's dashed through the bush to meet us again, and again, and again, until we reach the bottom. The driver stops the bus and lets him on board. Smelling like a horse, the boy lets rip a Quechua war cry – and passes round his beaded purse. And on the return train journey, the crew of our compartment entertain us with a fashion parade and a traditional ghost dance: this time the sting is to buy llama wool clothing, locally woven.

The Sacred Valley of the Incas is a fertile valley along the Urubamba, to the southwest of Machu Picchu. We are heading towards the market town of Pisac. On the way we stop at a llama farm and learn the difference between alpacas (smaller, more docile), llamas (bigger



and will spit if they are loaded with a single gram over 20 kg: airports should use them) and vicunas (wild and may kick). We watch the locals dye the wool in brilliant colours obtained from herbs and minerals and then spin into garments. Pisac market is full of quite lovely silver-mounted jewellery and brilliantly worked throwovers depicting llamas, condors and the odd stylised Incan chief. Just the thing for the worn out throwovers on our lounge suite back in Hobart.

Vida makes a phone call to the local school and yes, the principal would welcome a visit from the Australians – and the donation to the school that goes with it. We enter the school grounds and everything stops. Kids pour from classrooms and like wheeling pigeons settle around us, clamouring 'Photo!', 'Photo!' Sweating, shouting teachers bring them to order, we get our photos, and a large Year 8 girl gives us a welcome speech in Quechua. Translated, we learn from her: 'We children value education so much we walk two hours each way to get to school, some from the Inca ruins high up the mountains overlooking the town.' The principal takes us to a classroom while a lesson is in progress. Gordon hands out a few pens to each of us. We solemnly hand them out to the children who look at our nametags and copy our names in block capitals onto their notebooks.



Vida takes us then to another Inca ruin just outside Cusco: Sacsayhuaman (pron. 'sexy woman') where we see again just how carefully and meticulously shaped Incan stonework is, a stone altar the centre of their rituals. But in keeping with their dual theology, a short distance away on the hill, a minor version of Christ the Redeemer, arms outstretched, keeps a watchful eye over the citizens of Cusco. The statue can be seen from the Main Square (p. 11).

Every night so far in the Andes we have been entertained by bands like Arauco Libre, which plays every Saturday at Salamanca Market, Hobart. Tonight is to be the same, in a top Cusco restaurant. Quite a few stay behind at our hotel, anticipation of more of the same. What a mistake! The top billing is the band Arco Iris; the moment they start playing, the sun, the moon and the Black Christ turn to listen with us. My throat seizes up as drum, guitars and wheezing panpipes launch into 'Jesu Joy of Man's desiring': J. S. Bach himself! Not the reverently turgid pace we often hear, but a joyous one-in-a-bar, springing along like an enraptured chinchilla. Next, Beethoven's Ode to Joy, the final movement of his Ninth, compressed to an entrancing four and a half minutes. Thankfully, their CD rightly entitled 'Joy' is on sale.



The Amazon (16 – 18 October)

Our two nights beside the Amazon had better be worth the required elaborate medical precautions against yellow fever, hepatitises A and B, typhoid and malaria. We strike another problem at the accident-prone Lima airport: LAN cancels our flight and reschedules us, entailing a 6 hour wait. During our flight to Iquitos we are entertained – every flight so far – with interminable ‘Just for Laughs’ repeats, an appallingly crass series of candid camera type setups while we leave LAN’s staple inflight meal of cheese sticks and cupcakes untouched.



Dripping insect repellent, we arrive in Iquitos in a humid dusk. We board a hard bench school bus and driven through acres of dimly lit huts which comprise the struggling city of Iquitos to the aging *Amazon Queen*, which plods for over two hours to Explorama’s Ceiba Tops Luxury Lodge while we eat sandwiches for dinner. The Luxury Lodge is set up flights of wooden steps from the river and reminds me of sixties motels but at least we have private facilities and airconditioning. Ceiba Tops is named after the ceiba tree, a tall handsome tree with coarse-grained wood used

exclusively for plywood and is one Explorama’s chain of eco-resorts ranging from this luxury to very basic in the heart of the jungle.



Next morning we discover the breakfast room has been over-run by loud and enormous Americans – a situation Gordon rectified for later meals by arranging for a ‘Captain’s Choice’ labels on our tables, an act of territoriality that enrages one voluble enormous American. Fortunately we keep to ourselves for the morning walk through the jungle surrounding the resort: some interesting birds, insects, the buffo frog and the tiny orange frog used by the natives for poison tips on their darts and a tarantula hole but unfortunately poking in it didn’t encourage the giant spider to come out. The jungle is not as dense as I expected, and very reminiscent of Australian tropical rainforest.



A boat takes us further up the Amazon, always muddy, to a native village, Yungua, to see a tribal dance and the use of blowguns. Someone asks about piranhas; we are told they live only in the 'black water' of the streams running into the Amazon, which is 'brown water', and anyway they are harmless unless you are bleeding and there happens to be lots of them around at the time. We land, carefully nevertheless, and walk along a jungle trail. We meet a little boy and his mother – prearranged I'm sure – and see that the boy is carrying a baby sloth, a monkey-like snub faced animal with long arms and legs. The boy's mother said it would remain a pet. We walk through one of the Explorama eco-lodges. They also run Ceiba where we stay, but these are for the really adventurous, having no electricity. At the village, the dance is slow, the villagers old and lethargic. Most of the young folk are in school or work in Iquitos, leaving a few children and the old folk to maintain the tribal arts of dancing, hunting with blowguns and entertaining tourists. There are several pet macaws sitting decoratively around to add to the effect

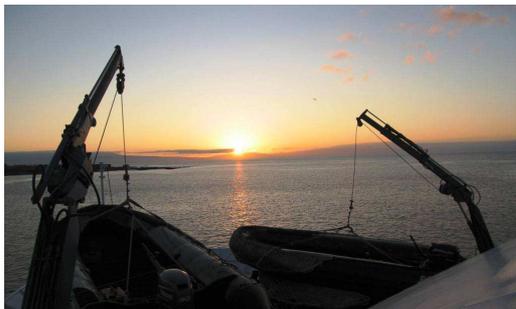


In the morning we drop in unexpectedly to a primary school in the village of Iquique: the guide says he will not warn them as the children would then learn to play up to the tourists. There are 52 children there, only six of whom will make it to secondary school in Iquitos because they simply can't afford to go. The children are thrilled and sing to us – and ask us to sing back. We oblige with a diffidently rendered *Waltzing Matilda*. We take lots of photos and show them to the children. Catherine suggests we get them printed and ask the guide to take them back to give to the children.



Time to leave by slow boat to Iquitos. On the way down we pass men fishing in long log canoes, houseboats, literally a house on a flat boat, and clusters of villages. Nearer Iquitos we see numbers of sawmills with huge piles of sawdust and scrap, shipping yards and industrial junk: a very depressing sight. We dock and a bus takes us to a decent hotel for dinner, then to the airport, Lima-bound.

Ecuador, Galapagos Islands (19 – 24 October)



The usual stuff-up at Lima Airport: no group check-in, which means they weigh bags individually. We are carrying a whole 4 kilos in excess so more long queues to pay the \$20. Our boarding passes are inspected five times by different officials, the official at the gate tells us if we enter we can't leave to go to the toilet ... all very curious. South Americans face-to-face are

generally quietly spoken and very polite, yet put them in a uniform and they are officious and arbitrary.

Ecuador grows and exports the most beautiful roses in the world, grows most of the world's raw cacao beans, especially for high quality chocolate. Another surprise: although Quito is on the Equator, when we arrived it was raining and the temperate 11°. We felt we could have been in a Hobart winter, but then Hobart isn't nearly 3,000 m. up and Quito is, making it definitely the second highest capital city in the world. A minor cock-up: the local guide ordered a bus that could barely seat all of us, let alone our luggage. It ended up piled high in the bus with three of our number pushing against it to prevent it falling on passengers. We were all dog-tired but the guide, a voluble woman, insisted 'I want to show you my beautiful city!' But we wanted dinner and bed – but agreed to get up half an hour early so she could show us her beautiful city. And just as well, because it really is, especially the old Spanish colonial quarter dating from 1532, with its thirty churches, each built to outdo its predecessor in grandeur. But we could do no more than drive slowly past, as we had a plane to catch.



Another major Ecuadorean industry is tourism, based on the Galapagos Islands. The number of visitors is capped at 120,000 a year, soon to be halved. Each visitor is charged \$100, which is paid directly into maintaining Galapagos infrastructure. Every effort is made to avoid a human 'footprint', to keep the environmental balance at whatever cost. Any damage done by a human is to be undone; any damage from natural causes is left alone. Animals are not to be touched, if a sea-lion pup is patted it's mother will smell human contact and not feed it, and the pup will die; I was lectured just for inadvertently stepping on a trailing vine. The islands were created by geologically recent volcanic activity, the oldest 2 million years old, the youngest one million. The complex pattern of warm and cold ocean currents and the isolation from the Mainland has meant that unique ecosystems have developed – as Darwin discovered in six weeks' stay, later coming up with the theory of natural selection.



There are many different flower varieties but are only white and yellow in colour. The only means of pollination is a night moth that could see only white and yellow, so red and blue flowers simply didn't get pollinated. The cormorant has tiny wings and is flightless – but it is an excellent swimmer, which is what the conditions required, so large winged cormorants that didn't swim well couldn't compete. But the 13 different species of finch were evidently what clinched it for Darwin in only six weeks in the Galapagos: originally one species, conditions on

different islands led to quite different characteristics evolving, differently sized bills, different colouring and size, ostensibly quite different species but all evolved in a comparatively short time from one common ancestor.

We cruise the islands in the *Galapagos Explorer*, a luxury ship that is full to capacity every day of the year. It too is eco-friendly: nothing is dumped in the sea, it distils its own water supply. We are divided into groups of sixteen or so and are dubbed 'Albatrosses', 'Boobies', 'Dolphins', 'Seagulls' and taken by zodiac to the islands, where local guides walk us to selected sites to see millions of



bright red Sally Lightfoot crabs, black marine iguanas leering evilly as they huddle together for warmth in their hundreds, isolated and smaller orange-yellow land iguanas, friendly sea-lions, turtles ... The birds are 'tame'. North Seymour Island is a nesting place for blue footed boobies and frigate birds, the male of which puffs out a brilliant red sack in their throats to attract females. A baby booby almost brushed against our legs while frantically thrusting its beak into the mother's mouth to extract more fish. I was looking forward to the snorkelling but the 14° Humbolt current from the South Pole is currently winning against the warmer currents, cold even for Tasmanian beaches, and I chicken out. Others go and gleefully tell of friendly encounters in the chilly waters before thawing out under a hot shower. Here we are on the Equator – we cross it four times in our cruising – and most days call for a jumper at some stage. It is warm when the sun is out, but Tasmanian-like again, that is only half the daylight hours.

Santa Cruz is the main island and carries most of the population of 30,000, and all of the giant tortoises, which are the main reason for our visit. There are extraordinary changes in the landscape as we ascend into the highlands. The land is barren at sea-level, apart from stumpy bushes, cactus and prickly pear, then higher up it changes into gnome-country, ever-larger trees mystified with fungus and epiphytes. At the plateau it then turns into lush farmland, bananas, pineapples, various fruit-trees and large boulders that turn out to be giant tortoises.



Billy walks us around several tortoises explaining that they evolved exclusively



on Galapagos from marine turtles and took to the land where their flippers became marginally usable legs. The original population is estimated to be 60,000, there are now 25,000, which makes them an endangered species. Sailors, particularly whalers, used to keep turtles in the ships' holds as a source of fresh meat, as tortoises and turtles could survive without food for up to a year. But now, Billy says, on Galapagos there is no such thing as fear as generations of birds and animals haven't learned to be afraid of humans now that we do not interfere with

them. I notice that when walking around a tortoise it pulls its head in and makes a hissing noise. A fear reaction, surely? No, Billy says, that is their way of emptying their lungs.

Tortoises eat grass and fruit, are loners, live for well over 100 years, and do not seem to serve any useful function for any plant or animal except tourists. I say to Billy that I'm puzzled: anywhere in the world, living organisms fit into an eco-system and especially on Galapagos, where the animals are symbiotic. Iguanas eat sea-lion placenta for protein and their shit for good bacteria, birds clean the dead skin from iguanas ... and so it goes for every animal we've seen so far, except tortoises which appear to be a one-off. Billy is nodding impatiently until this point: So what, I ask, is the function tortoises serve in the eco-system? He can't think of any.

We visit a lava tunnel on the way down. A million years ago, the lava flow from volcanos solidified on the top, but it was so hot it kept flowing out to the sea underneath, leaving an apparently well-engineered forty mile long tunnel with glassy smooth walls. While waiting for our zodiac to take us back to the ship, we have to stand because the seats are occupied.



I have to say the Galapagos are interesting more than beautiful. The Islands themselves are fairly bare but seeing what Darwin saw makes for a deeper understanding of his theory of natural selection.

Santiago and Home (24 – 27 October)

After overnighing in the airport hotel in Lima, the 25th October, my birthday, looked fairly hellish: up at 4 a.m., departing Santiago for home at 23.45 p.m. with a city tour in between. With a three hour flight and a two hour time change, it's lunchtime when we arrive. We are taken to a huge indoor market, where long tabled restaurants fit in between all sorts of stalls and bands of musicians and singers stroll between tables.



Gordon knew it was my birthday and paid a band to happy-birthday-dear-John me and then insist that I stand up and sing La Bamba with them, which after a couple of pisco sours and red wine I brought myself to do. Gordon then explained to everyone that I was 62 after I had already told him I was 73, and why hadn't Catherine a wedding ring? Cheeky. The last has been repaired but I can't do anything about the former.

As we boarded the last internal flight from Lima, Gordon was arrested at the boarding gate by airport police and taken to an underground room where he was faced with two slavering German shepherds and three cops built like wrestlers. He was then searched and shouted at to produce the drugs or whatever criminal activity he'd been up to when flashing that bulging wallet around for the past few days – Lima airport had been our hub. With minutes to spare he managed to persuade them that he was a tour manager and please could he catch his flight and take his charges home? I've never been so scared, he told us later.

Review

Captain's Choice is on the expensive side, but the price covers everything, which makes CC better value in the end. Although we were told at first that drinks were extra, Gordon supplied wine with most lunches and all dinners.

Excellent as the trip was, there were some executive decisions that might have been improved. There were 22 different flights in all – too many, especially in the iffy conditions of LAN. It would have been preferable to visit fewer places and staying longer in each, but working out which to drop would be difficult. CC have since solved that problem by chartering their own plane. Anyway, we already have booked our next Captain's Choice tour: Eastern Europe by train (see my website).

