

YOGAChicago

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Yoga Chicago goes to Peru



In Cuzco, Peru, yogis on tour from Feathered Pipe Ranch, with Judith Lasater as guest teacher.

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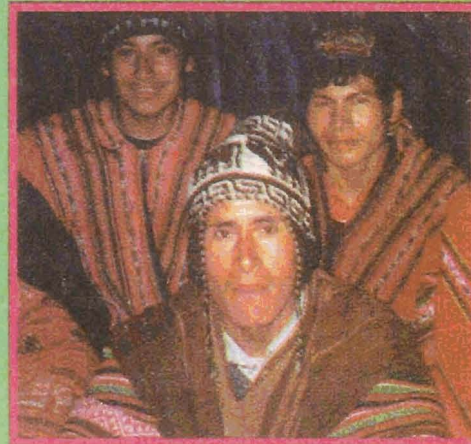
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Peru—A Spiritual Journey

By Sharon Steffensen

When I called India Supera, director of the Feathered Pipe Ranch, to ask for details on their 10-day “Yoga in Peru” trip with guest teacher Judith Lasater, she advised me to join a health club as soon as possible. My non-aerobic yoga practice and bike riding in Chicago’s low altitude would not be sufficient preparation for hiking the Inca Trail, a three-day, arduous uphill climb to 13,700 feet. For the next two months I climbed stairs in my office building—eight flights of 20 stairs each—working up to seven cycles by the time I left for Peru in early November.

The Sacred Valley

The morning after our arrival in Lima, we flew to Cuzco, which was the capital of the Inca empire five centuries ago. Cuzco sits at the base of the Sacred Valley, the area between Cuzco and Machu Picchu, along the Urubamba River, which is where we spent most of our time.

The altitude in Cuzco is 11,000 feet above sea level. To avoid altitude sickness, we left immediately for a two-hour bus ride to Willka T’ika, near the small town of Urubamba, where the altitude is only 9,000 feet. Most of us were already feeling queasy when we got there, but there was an antidote—coca tea.

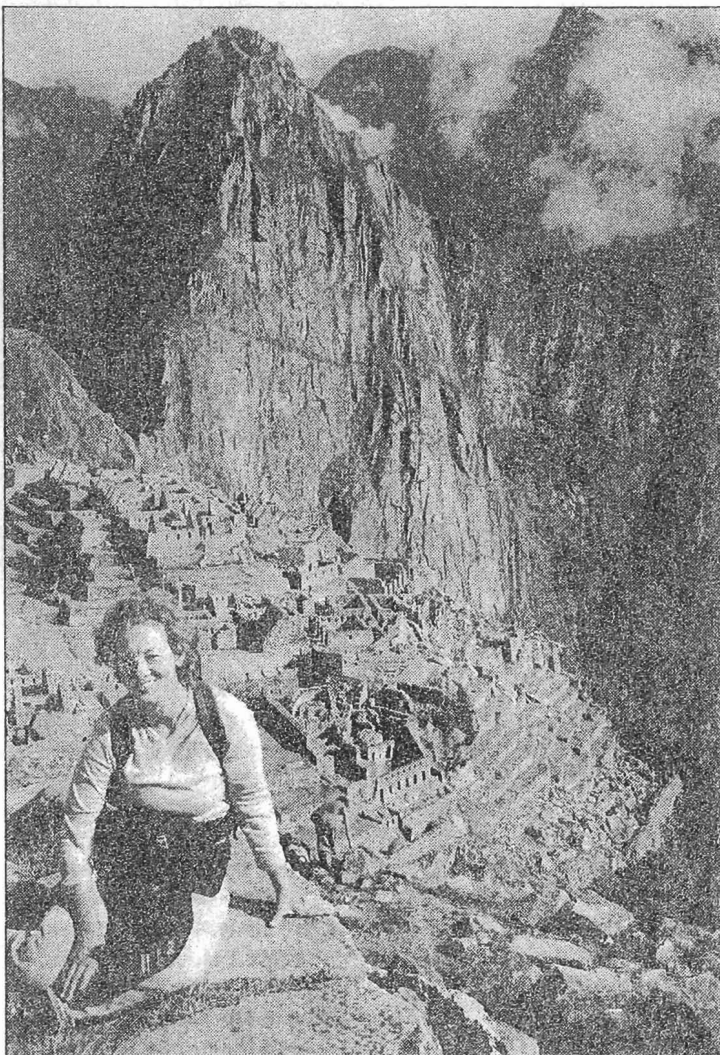
“Drink a minimum of four cups, as hot as you can stand it, with no sugar, and then go immediately to bed” were the instructions given to us by our guide Juan Carlos.

Even though Peru was just entering into the spring season, lavish masses of flowers already surrounded the 16th century Spanish colonial style cottage at Willka T’ika, which was more of a spiritual refuge than a lodge.

The focal point of the grounds is the 500-year-old Lucma tree which sits at the end of the

bread, potatoes and avocados.

With only two hours of sleep and altitude sickness,



The Inca Trail, a 3-day hike up to 13,700 feet altitude, ends at Machu Picchu.

property, overlooking the spiral garden which overflows with Andean medicinal herbs and flowers. In fact most of the vegetables we were served were picked fresh from the garden and combined with indigenous grains such as quinoa and amaranth, fresh cheese and

restorative yoga was the most anyone could handle that first afternoon. The next morning after breakfast, however, Judith led us in a regular yoga session. She began with a quote from Mark Twain which I paraphrase as, “I have lived through many tragedies, several of which

actually happened.” She explained how we have choices, and we can choose to be joyful all the time. Pain is inevitable but suffering is not. What we think about creates our reality. One way to be mindful of this fact is to be conscious of our speech, especially our use of the word “it” as in “It’s hot in here.” Another way to say it would be, “It’s hotter than I would like it.” Rather than “I can’t do it,” we might say, “I’m willing to try it,” etc. Judith’s advice proved useful throughout the trip as we experienced a variety of conditions.

The next few days included a rafting trip down the Urubamba River; the Incan ruins at Písac and Ollantaytambo; the 160th anniversary of Urubamba, celebrated by parades, live music, dancing and all-day partying on the main street; and the marketplace in Písac, several blocks of stalls along narrow stone streets and an open-air market where people can buy Peruvian sweaters, tapestries, jewelry, pottery, Andean musical instruments, hats, scarves, gloves, and hot breads fresh out of the oven in a large, open-air bakery.

Philosophy of the Incas

As we traveled by bus to the ruins at Písac and Ollantaytambo, Juan Carlos explained some key concepts of the Incan philosophy to us.

The *apu* were the mountains, which the Incans considered to be protectors. *Kon* means cycle of water, represented by the rivers, ocean and clouds. Both the mountains and the water are considered protectors of life.

Titi is the word for puma, the spiritual energy that we all have, the wisdom to learn to survive or live in harmony within our environment and with other human beings. The puma (along with the condor and the snake) are considered sacred animals in the Incan culture.

The word *teqsi-kaylla*, relates

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to timing, beginning and ending, recycling, the return of the seasons. Everything is eternal, says Juan Carlos. The Incas had a strong belief in reincarnation.

Wiraqocha means “the fattening of the water,” or the foam on the water, which refers to fermentation of life or brewing. All of life began in the ocean. That’s why the ocean is called *Mamaqocha*, which means beginning and protection of life. Mother Earth, called *Pachamama*, is a complement of the ocean, which means protector of life on solid ground.

Pachayachachi is the order as established in the universe. “Every element has a reason to be on this planet,” explained Carlos. “If you destroy one of the elements of the planet, you are destroying yourself because you are part of it.” To offset imbalances, offerings are made to the elements of nature.

Another concept of Incan philosophy is *ayni*, which means “today for me, tomorrow for you,” the idea being that all work is shared and that each person benefits from helping others. Rather than paying for services, the native Peruvians (the Quechua people) barter, a custom that continues to this day.

Being an archeologist as well as a Quechuan (native Peruvian), Juan Carlos shared with us the true meanings of how and why the Incans built their cities and temples the way they did. The massive stone structures which fit perfectly together without mortar were brought up ramps and easily chiseled into shape with a hematite stone, which Juan Carlos demonstrated with a small tool he pulled from his bag. Not only were the rocks shaped to fit together perfectly, the walls also slanted inward slightly to fortify the structures against

earthquakes. Within the walls can be seen certain placements of rocks that together form the shape of a puma or llama.

Key to their success was the Incas’ strong sense of community and commitment to excellence in their craft. Everything they did was an offering back to



Peruvian woman with llama and child in the town of Cuzco.

nature or to life. Because life was good to them, they likewise gave back to nature to the very best of their ability.

Even today, the Quechua greeting to one another is “*ama sua, ama llulla, ama kkella*,” which means, “Don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t be lazy.” In return, the other person answers the equivalent of “The same to you.”

Machu Picchu

After a few days at Willka T’ika, we took an early morning bus to Ollantaytambo to catch a 7:30 train to Machu Picchu, several thousand feet lower in altitude than Urubamba. Everyone felt exceptionally well there.

Machu Picchu is exactly like it looks in photographs, only it is about ten times bigger. The city was built in 100 years from the mid-1400s until the mid-1500s.

Is is estimated that 1,000 people lived there in 200 rooms. Terraces were built for farming, an extensive water system was established, and homes, palaces, temples, storage houses, and mausoleums were built.

One of the highlights of Machu Picchu is the temple of

the sun, where on June 21 the sun comes in through the middle window, and on December 21 through the north window. Outside the temple a diamond-shaped stone carving of the southern cross points due north. On June 21, when the sun shines on this stone, this sculpture makes the shadow of a puma. In fact, all of Machu Picchu is in the shape of a puma, evident when viewed from a certain point. In the mausoleum section, standing guard are two giant rocks in the shape of the wings of a condor, the sacred bird who carries the dead to the higher world.

Cuzco

After a day at Machu Picchu, we spent the night in a hotel in Aguas Calientes and rode the train to Cuzco the next day. The next morning we woke to

roosters crowing and dogs barking, and we did yoga outside on the bright sunny terrace overlooking the city.

Judith began with a short discourse on mindstuff, or *chitta*, as explained in the *Yoga Sutras*. The mind is continually in a state of flux: one minute we are happy; the next second we are agitated. Yoga, however, is a state in which all our agitations are resolved. The key to that state, explained Judith, is disidentification. We are not trying to change, suppress or control our thoughts—the mind has its own agenda—we simply choose not to react to the fluctuations of the mind. For example, if you say, “I am angry,” you have identified “I” with “anger.” When we do this, we are not free. If, however, you say, “I am having an angry thought,” you are stepping back from that thought. You create some space from the emotion. The next step is to say, “Anger is arising,” which has about the same emotional intensity as “Clouds are passing.”

Judith explained that when we identify with our thoughts, we have a tendency to obsess about them, and they affect the way we are able to enjoy an experience. “Thoughts are not reality,” said Judith. “Yoga is about getting rid of the veils that cloud our experience of what is happening at this moment.”

Judith told us to think of the emotions that had surfaced within us during the past 24 hours. “They dominate our experience of those moments. Are you experiencing reality as it is, or are you experiencing your thoughts about it? Acknowledge your thoughts, then choose another path. That’s the spiritual quest.”

During the next few days, Juan Carlos took us to ruins and temples in and around Cuzco. The weather was perfect: warm days and cool nights. On the day we went to the ruins, a Quechua

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flautist who had played for us one evening at Willka T'ika accompanied us and played near the rocks and in a cave.

On our last night in Cuzco, we ate dinner at a restaurant in the square with Peruvian traditional singing and dancing. This was the last night for some tour members; some would continue on to a two-day jungle tour and four of us would leave for the Inca Trail.

The Inca Trail

At 5:30 A.M. a van came for us. (Everything happened so early in Peru!) On our way to the Inca Trail, we stopped in Ollantaytambo, where our guide Adriel had arranged for us to visit Rumisoncco, a shaman who would give us a blessing for the trip.

The four of us sat around a small table on a large llama rug that covered the dirt floor. First Rumisoncco gave each of us a small stone Andean cross to wear around our neck during the trip, and then performed a reading with coca leaves, which foretold good weather except at the end of the trail. Next he spread out a piece of wrapping paper (with a computer keyboard motif!) and offered a prayer for the offering he was about to assemble from a package of herbs, seeds, candies, confetti, incense, flower petals, and other ingredients Adriel had brought from Cuzco. We all assisted in sprinkling these items onto the paper, and Rumisoncco wrapped up the offering and gave it to Adriel for the trip. Later that night we would build a bonfire and offer it to Pachamama, Mother Earth.

By late morning we arrived at the start of

the Inca Trail, at a point called km 88, which we had seen from the train coming from Machu Picchu. We started hiking while the porters (seven including the cook) assembled the packs, which included food, cooking equipment, sleeping tents, dining tent, cooking tent, bathroom tent, a folding dining table, small folding chairs, and a large metal box that held breakables such as eggs and crackers—all this in addition to our own frame backpacks holding our clothing and sleeping bags. Shortly after we started walking, they ran past us, carrying three backpacks apiece; and when we arrived at the first stop, they had lunch ready.

During the next three days, we were greeted at dawn with a cup of tea and a dishpan of warm water outside our tents. After breakfast, we'd hike, stopping for lunch and a nap, and hike again until late afternoon. We'd arrive at the campsite exhausted, but our tents would be set up with our packs inside, warm water set out for washing, and tea, hot chocolate, popcorn and crackers and jelly would be ready for us in the dining tent. A half hour later a tasty dinner was served by candlelight—usually soup, rice and vegetables, stew, and pudding for desert. Immediately after dinner, we collapsed in our tents.

We didn't have to do anything but eat, sleep and hike. Hikers like us are called "pampered tourists." A few other groups were on the trail at the same time, some carrying their own packs with porters carrying the food and preparing it, and others roughing it on their own.

On the trail Adriel taught us about Andean history, geography, customs, philosophy, plants, birds, butterflies, animals. He showed us an agave cactus and how, when you peel off the top layer of one of its long leaves, it reveals long, sturdy strands of plant material with the consistency and the

strength of fishing line. The tip of the leaf is attached to it and is used as a needle.

We stopped to visit a family in their traditional home. The mother was stirring cheecha, a homemade corn brew popular among the Quechua people, and pouring it into containers. Two small, shy children clung to her skirts. Guinea pigs (a delicacy) and chickens scratched on the dirt floor.

Adriel explained to us that many tourists think the Andean people are poor, but they are not poor. They grow their own food, raise some livestock and are self-sufficient. They barter with their neighbors. Everyone helps everyone else. Also, they live surrounded by great beauty, and their lives are stress free. The Quechua people live in harmony with nature, and nature takes care of them.

The Inca Trail is made of rough stone, most often in uneven stairs several feet wide. The second day was spent literally traversing stone steps all day at a high altitude. That morning Adriel pointed out a destination for the day: a mountain pass far off in the distance, 13,700 feet up called Dead Woman's Pass. My stomach was already feeling queasy, but I started up the path, one step at a time. After an hour or so we came into the cloud forest where trees, lush ferns, thick moss, and tropical looking plants grew along the trail. We could have been in Hawaii.

As we ascended upward, we came out of the cloud forest into the dwarf region where small trees and low bushes grew. Wildflowers sprouted along the path and they encouraged me. As I stopped to catch my breath (sometimes every five steps!), I looked out at the incredible views of Mt. S Francisco, Mt. Veronica, and the sacred Mt Salkkantay. Even though my heart was pounding continuously and my insides were

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churning inside out, I felt tremendous gratitude to be there. My primary thought was, "I'm on the Inca Trail!"

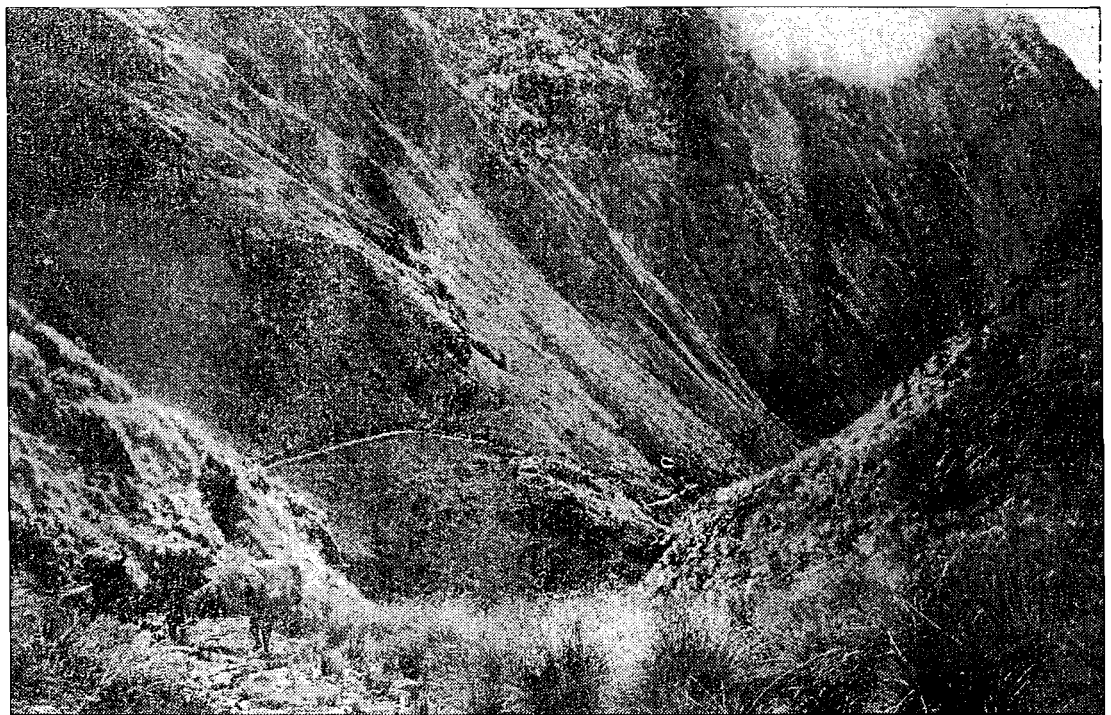
Toward the top we came into the highlands where only tough grasses grow. The air became much colder and windier, the higher we went. For this day we had brought our heavier clothing, including hats and gloves.

At the top we took photos and performed a small ceremony. We had each selected a small stone to carry with us to the top. We laid our stones on the ground, opened a beer, offered it to the four directions, poured some of it onto Mother Earth, thanking her for our successful climb, and each took a sip. Starting down the other side of the mountain, we spotted the dining tent far below where the porters were preparing, as it turned out, a very late lunch.

We were fortunate to have such favorable weather. At other times, hikers have walked through three days of dense fog. Spring was approaching, and in the cloud forests Adriel pointed out exotic flowers and wild orchids blooming.

Wake-up call the last morning is at 4:15 so that hikers can get to Machu Picchu at sunrise to see the sun coming over the mountain and shining on the Incan city. It had rained our last night (as the shaman had predicted), but the morning was clear.

The Gate of the Sun, large stone pillars which open out onto a terrace overlooking Machu Picchu far below, was filled with people from the trail and others who had hiked up from the hotel down below at the main entrance. For most of the hikers, this was their first view of the spectacular golden city gleaming in the sun. We were pilgrims at the end of the



Porters on the Inca Trail toward Machu Picchu, Peru.

journey. It was a joyous event.

Eventually everyone climbed down another hour or so to the Sacred City. Friendly llamas met us on the way. Although we had toured Machu Picchu the week before, this time we visited some different sections and were interested in Adriel's interpretations of the legends.

That afternoon we rode the train back to Cuzco where we took showers, repacked our luggage, and fell into bed. Early the next morning we caught a plane back to Lima and met up with the rest of the group, who had gone on the jungle trail. Over breakfast, we exchanged stories and made plans for the rest of the day. (Evidently the plane to the jungle ran into horrific weather where even the flight attendants were screaming, and the pilot later announced that the Virgin Mary had landed the plane.) After breakfast some went shopping at the Indian market, others went to restaurants or coffee shops to relax. I found a lovely park with gardens, fountains, children playing in the playground, couples strolling, whole families squeezing onto benches, vendors selling balloons and popcorn, people eating ice cream cones. It was

Sunday. I decided to sit on a bench and do nothing.

Later that afternoon we toured Lima and the Museo de Oro (Gold Museum). We ate dinner in the hotel, and the next morning we got a wake-up call at 4:45 for our ride back to the airport to catch our flight back to Houston.

With some vacations—you get back into your routines, and after a day or two you feel like you hadn't even gone anywhere. Although I am back into my routines, I definitely have gone somewhere.

This trip had been referred to as an adventure trip; however, it was much more than an adventure. Neither was it a yoga vacation, although we did as much yoga as we could, despite the last-minute changes in train schedules and other unforeseen circumstances. (In Peru we learned to be flexible in many ways other than through yoga.) Nor was it a relaxing trip.

Two weeks in Peru is transforming, perhaps similar to what some people feel when they travel to India. The same exact experiences could not be duplicated anywhere else. On the trail I experienced that everything had a purpose, from the protection of the *apu*, to the wildflowers

that smiled at me. I sensed a kinship with the ancient spiritual energies of the Andes, and all of us felt a bond with our guides and with one another. We learned with and from each other. Most valuable were things we learned about the Andean people. Their respect for the earth, their attitudes toward one another, and their simple lifestyle are what the world needs to heal itself.

In looking at my photos, I see myself sitting on a ledge overlooking Machu Picchu. Why didn't I at least sit in the lotus position or do a tree pose? Originally I planned to take photos of people doing yoga in that spiritual site. Then I realized it might have been inappropriate, bordering on ostentatious. Machu Picchu stands alone. I'm in the photo only for perspective. Besides, when you're at a place like Machu Picchu, you're so overcome with a feeling of awe, you're not thinking about anything but where you are.

For the whole story (well, almost the whole story), see our website at www.yogachicago.com.