



Peru, November 2003

A Trip Review of the Amazon & Andes Odyssey by Stacey Kwiecinski

I loved Peru! This was my first trip to Latin America in November of 2003, and I wasn't sure what to expect. I joined this 10-day trip with several other travel professionals as a way to learn more about our own programs, specifically our Amazon & Andes Odyssey, which is one of our



most popular itineraries. Many people return from their trips and tell me how they wished they had more time in Cusco (or Machu Picchu or Ollantaytambo) and now I can say I completely agree. With so many cobblestone streets to roam, and all of the local musicians that seem to be playing traditional music at every turn, you can really feel immersed in the ambience and the history of the city. You don't need to look far to find vestiges of Inca walls in the foundations of buildings amidst the more recent Spanish architecture in the city.

November is supposed to be the beginning of the rainy season, but the weather was beautiful. It can be unpredictable at that time of year, but there were still lots of other tourists around. From Cusco to Machu Picchu, a pair of comfortable hiking shoes, cotton pants, a t-shirt and light weight long-sleeved shirt were perfect for most of the warm sunny days, and the cool breezes and evenings called for a light jacket to be on hand.

There were certainly areas that have become somewhat touristy in Peru, but even these places felt authentic to me. There are people selling trinkets and hot steamed corn through train windows, and souvenir stalls at the Pisac market next to local people bartering for food and livestock. Despite the imposition of modern culture, it seemed that many places had not changed much in hundreds of years.



The shopping was amazing. With so many talented local artisans, the Pisac market was a treat for casual shoppers and bargain hunters alike. I found Alpaca hats, sweaters, weavings, hand-carved stone sculptures, pottery, musical instruments, and even local musicians' cds. Of course there are also a wide variety of t-shirts! We then stopped at the Seminario Pottery studio in Ollanta, where there were some very unique and inexpensive pieces – each hand-made using traditional pottery techniques and painted with stylized traditional and modern designs.



Ollantaytambo is a charming town and a convenient base to explore the Sacred Valley. The ruins there are not as elaborate as Machu Picchu, but just as mysterious. The local people were friendly and we were even welcomed into a local home. Walking down one of the narrow streets, we were approached by a young woman who spontaneously offered to sing us a traditional song in the local language, Quechua. I noticed that not many other tourists strayed from the main square and the ruins, so our small group really felt that this was a very special encounter.

The train ride to Machu Picchu is filled with spectacular scenery of Incan terraces, fields of corn, the rushing Urubamba River and towering snowcapped mountains. In Aguas Calientes, we hopped on a bus for the short ride up the steep road with all of the other anxious travelers. Immediately our guide took us away from the crowds where we were able to explore some of the less visited, quieter areas of the huge complex. This allowed us time to look at the details as well as the larger picture. What a stunning place. One afternoon is not enough to take it all in.

A trip to the Amazon was a perfect complement to the Andean highlands. After our canoe ride down the river to the lodge we arrived in another world. Surrounded by the sounds of the rainforest, I thoroughly enjoyed a well-deserved nap in my porch hammock, gazing out at the trees and listening to the unique call of the oropendola, a south american blackbird. I'll admit, having rhinoceros beetles and tree frogs in my cabin was a little unsettling at first, but then I found myself excited to wake up and find out what had found its way into my bathroom sink and shower each morning (and the lodge staff were always happy to help people remove unwanted guests). The canoe rides and forest hikes were wonderful and educational – we saw squirrel monkeys, huge kapok trees, bright heliconia flowers, multitudes of colorful butterflies, kingfishers and even a tapir. Fishing for piranha was exciting, even though I didn't catch anything. Some of our group took a refreshing swim in one of the oxbow lakes. Our sunset canoe ride was beautiful, and spotting several caiman (a species of crocodile) on the riverbanks by flashlight was a thrill for everyone.



Like many who visit Peru, I wished I had had more time to soak it all in. I left Peru with the certainty that I would have to return. I think that's a sign of a truly amazing place.

