

## **Special Report on Peru**

*Dr Deborah Mills MBBS*

I travelled to Peru for two weeks in August 2000 with my mum.

We flew from the US to Lima. We had to rescue our luggage in Lima. Going from place to place is called 'travelling' and yet more than half the time seems to be spent 'waiting' our duty as tourists was not to wait for several hours in the arrivals hall. It was simply not permitted to check in more than 2 hours before the flight. We sat down on the hard plastic chairs and tried to be good little tourists. The sight of our suitcases staying where they were, and the melodious roar of Spanish television kept us entertained for several hours.

When we finally made it through the barricades to the closely guarded 'advanced' waiting area, the fun began again. The environment still suffered from a disturbing lack of coffee.

Boarding the plane in Cusco, I tried to ignore the holes in the carpet next to our seat, and the somewhat worn out appearance of the cabin. I tried hard to convince myself external appearances do not matter, and push images of exploding concords out of my mind.

Every now and again on the one hour flight a string of Spanish would come from the PA system – the tone of voice of the speaker seemed calm so I chose to believe she wasn't instructing us to prepare for an emergency landing.

After touch down, we waited for our luggage to appear. Given the recent disappearance of my 31 kg suitcase on a one hour flight, I could not help but feel my palms get sweaty. Appear it did, along with the inevitable tip-seeking porter.

Jessica – one of the 400,000 inhabitants of Cusco, greeted us at the airport. Our smiling guide had a great command of English and briefed on the altitude and the need to drink coca tea.

On arrival in Cusco we both felt fine. The occasional desire to take a very deep breath was really the only indication of altitude. On arrival at our hotel, we were offered our first taste of the famous coca tea. The sight was reminiscent of grass clippings steeped in boiling water. The taste of the foul smelling green liquid did not do much for me. I resolved to get altitude sickness in the line of duty so I could describe it to my travellers.

I found out later that one needs 4 cups of the 'real' thing per day to have a dint on one's altitude tolerance.

Owing to our hotel being at the wrong end of town, we had a 25minute walk to the main square. This fitted nicely with my plan to develop altitude sickness. I believe I could have done the walk at sea level by myself in about 10 minutes.

After carefully choosing the restaurant, we sat down at a clean table near the window. The nibbles that magically appeared while we waited for our meal looked like unpopped popcorn with salt. Figuring that no bacteria could live in such a salty environment I threw caution to the winds and dug in. I also know I had a dental kit handy if I broke my tooth on the rock hard corn.

The main meal arrived - recently well cooked. We ate with a clear conscience. The Peruvians like their food very salty – this also increases the likelihood of tourists developing altitude sickness. Diamox ( Lederle brand ) cost \$27 from the local pharmacy

We undertook the usual tourist wander – looking at the souvenirs, buying bottled water etc.

That night I awoke with my wish for altitude sickness. The experts told me that symptoms of altitude take 8-48 hours to develop – mine took 18 hours. Nice to know I was in the normal range. The symptoms closely resembled a migraine – pounding headache, nausea, insomnia, and shivering. Shivering is a feature that I have not seen described in text books but the local medical experts confirm it as a common feature they see.

All the 3-5 star hotels in Cusco have oxygen available. Our hotel did not qualify on either score.

During my stay I lined up a visit with a Dr Manrique - he looks after sick tourists at some of the hotels and in his day job he works at 500 bed 'Social Security' hospital. I visited him at his hospital. The Social Security hospital is a government hospital for those persons who work – some sort of tax is taken out of wages to pay for the hospital. It is a large and very busy hospital with clean corridors, wards, and consulting rooms. In fact I spotted 5 cleaners as I took our brief tour. On the same tour we potted about 15 security guards! The doctors all wore white coats, and the patients lay in their beds as they do in hospitals - one was working on a computers, talking on his mobile phones. The hospital facilities were good but the machines were a little old.

On the subject of altitude, Dr Manrique recommends that tourists take 125 mg Diamox ( half a 250 mg tablet ) twice a day starting 48 hours prior to ascent and a further 250mg on arrival if still feel bad

On arrival he recommends that visitors rest for 24 hours, consume minimal food, alcohol and caffeine. He cautions care with the salty Peruvian food.

He confirms that many tourists feel fine on arrival and don't rest. They get sick that first night.

Exploring Cusco by Peter Frost is a useful guidebook to the area which we bought for about \$15 in a bookshop off the main square. It contained lots of information about the ruins, useful maps etc. the chap who wrote it has lived in Cusco for years and knows the real story behind many of the ruins. There are many interesting places to see on tours and many, many examples of fine Inca masonry. I must say I reached my Inca masonry event horizon on the trip.

On the shopping side there were lots of great souvenirs - if one is of a mind to stock up.

I bought, tablecloths, jumpers, bags, silver jewellery, T-shirts, little carvings of wood and stone, pots, and a tic-tac-toe sets for the kids. The Pisac markets in the Sacred Valley were popular and well deservedly so – good range of things and cheaper than Cusco. The locals have an affinity with fireworks even in the day and our shopping was interspersed with BANGS from fireworks.

I always wondered how people got those great pictures of locals in costume – the locals dress up and sit around or wander around looking for likely tourists to take their photo. They expect about 50c for a photo – if there is a group, they seem to expect 50c each. You don't seem to have to pay for the Llamas.

Wearing leather shoes is a real pain as there are dozens of local shoe shines wanting to clean your shoes – I had sneakers on and no-one bothered me but my mum had leather shoes and was always getting asked.

Bottled water was readily available for about 3-5 Solas per litre ( Aus\$1.50-3.00). A grocery shop was to be found on the main square of Cusco with limited supplies for emergency nibbling. Slide film was hard to find, but regular film readily available. Take a phone card. It is easy to buy a local phone card but the instructions are given on the phone in Spanish and unintelligible to my Australian language centre.

Machu Pichu was worth the whole trip.

I have seen many videos and photos of the spot and wondered if it would really live up to all its notoriety. I remember seeing the Mona Lisa painting in Paris and feeling quite disappointed at the real thing. Machu Pichu had a presence. It was hard work getting there – even though we got the train and did not trek. Some tourists get a train at 6am. On our tour, we got a wake up call at 3am, got a bus before 4am. That bus kept stopping to pick up tourists at different hotels. Eventually we got off that bus and boarded another. We eventually made it to the train – boarding further along the journey than some have done. The 'free' food on the train was rather dubious – croissants with butter ham and cheese on them and creamy cakes. I would suggest it's a good idea to stock up with food the day before a trip to Machu Pichu. There was no opportunity for any safe food until 1pm.

Our tour included a magnificent smorgasboard lunch at the Machu Pichu Ruinas hotel up at the ruins – We chose the cooked food – many other tourists ate the salads etc. The salads were very beautifully displayed. We stayed one night at that hotel – many tourists stay at Agus Calliente village down the mountain – but have to drive up on buses in the morning and back down to the hotel at night. Due to where we were staying, we were able to be out on the ruins at about 7am – in time to see the ant trails of trekkers reaching the ruins. By 9am the place was amok with tourists everywhere,

My mum suffers with Sleep Apnoea. Prior to our departure she bought a new CPAP machine. She did not want to be fiddling with voltages 110/240 or altitude settings.

She was very happy with the performance of the machine on our trip and I liked it because it was significantly lighter than her existing machine. ( I carried it a bit as we did not trust it to go in the hold of the plane. )

SULLIVAN RESMED CPAP S6. She got it from Air Liquide Healthcare Pty Ltd 25 Montpelier Rd, Bowen Hills Phone 61 7 3252 8039 Cost \$1495

#### Altitude

Cusco	3349 m
Machu pichu	2800 m
Sacred Valley	2500 m