

SCALING MACHU PICCHU

Lost City of the Incas: Haunting, yet beautiful

By J. Madeleine Nash

Machu Picchu, Peru—The fear was acute, like a sudden, stabbing pain, and it took me by surprise. We had been walking among the high terraces of Machu Picchu toward the ancient drawbridge called Puente Inca. The sun, obscured by a swirling cloudbank, cast an appropriately eerie glow as we climbed through the upper cemetery and past the funerary rock, a large, flat slab where, it is said, bodies were once embalmed.

Suddenly, the terraces, which had been sloping steeply beneath us, gave way to a precipice. Far below we could hear the Urubamba River, but we could not see it through the fog-filled space at our feet. I began to step more carefully. It didn't help to realize that we were walking on nothing more than a narrow strip of rock uncertainly glued onto a 2,000-foot high cliff.

I found myself inching awkwardly along the path sideways, grabbing hold of plants for balance. Then, involuntarily dropping to a crawl, I realized I was in trouble. At that moment my husband, experiencing none of this malaise, nonchalantly disappeared around a corner. I had no choice but to continue on.

Luckily, further progress soon became impossible. Our way was blocked by a high wooden barrier, and just beyond was the Puente Inca. No ordinary drawbridge, the Puente Inca consisted of a narrow stone wall constructed on a ledge across a sheer granite rockface. The top of the wall was the footpath, and it approached from either side of the cliff. But the wall abruptly ended in the middle, leaving a terrifying gap spanned by a bridge of slippery logs.

The logs, easily pulled up to prevent entrance to the city, were a nice bit of strategic defense. But the biggest defense was the fear I had so viscerally experienced along the way. It seemed the builders of the Puente Inca had purposefully narrowed the path to strike terror into the hearts of their enemies. Some 500 years later, I posed no threat to this abandoned city, but I reacted to the Puente Inca just the way its builders may have intended.

Our morning walk to the Puente Inca was a good introduction to the psychological mindplay that is at the heart of a visit to Machu Picchu, the fabled Lost City of the Incas. A place as haunting as it is beautiful, Machu Picchu's origins remain a mystery, and mysteries inevitably stir the imagination.

We found ourselves willing to spend hours wandering through the ruins, wondering about Machu Picchu's former inhabitants. The terraces that rim the city are so steep, marching right down to the edge of cliffs, that we marveled they were built at all. How were they built? Did their constructors belay themselves with ropes while working? How many workmen were killed building the terraces and tending the gardens that filled them? Whenever it rained, which was often, we would crouch in ancient windows and doorways to pore over Hiram Bingham's account of his discovery of Machu Picchu in 1911.

"No part of the highlands of Peru is better defended by natural bulwarks," I found myself reading during a relentless downpour. "A stupendous canyon whose rock is granite, and whose precipices are frequently a thousand feet sheer, presenting difficulties which dent the most ambitious modern mountain climbers. Yet here, in a remote part of the canyon, on this narrow ridge, flanked by tremendous precipices, a highly civilized people, well organized and capable of sustained endeavor, at some time in the distant past built themselves a sanctuary for the worship of the sun."

The sun didn't appear much during our visit. On the other hand, because it was the rainy season, neither did the expected hordes of tourists. And so, over a three-day stay, we found we had Machu Picchu almost to ourselves, particularly during the early morning and late evening hours. Somehow we never tired of looking at Machu Picchu and greedily sought out new vistas. It was as if by switching perspectives we hoped to unlock the Lost City's secrets.

Theories about Machu Picchu's origins are legion. Bingham, for example, became convinced that in Machu Picchu he had discovered the ruins of Vilcabamba, the city in which Manco, the last of the Inca rulers, took refuge against the Spaniards. But now it is generally conceded that Machu Picchu ["old peak," in the Quechua language spoken by the Incas and their modern descendants] is not Vilcabamba. For one thing, its stonework is of too high a quality to have been hastily constructed by an empire on the run. Besides, the Spaniards who invaded Peru in 1532

Continued on page 11



Photos by Thomas Nash

One small step for man, one giant leap for journalism. Page 3

Is it Miami vice or Miami nice? Page 8

Resorts that cater to romance. Page 16



The stonework of Machu Picchu is a remarkable engineering feat because its builders had no steel tools.

Machu Picchu: Mysterious, haunting Lost City of the Incas

Continued from page 1

appear to have had no inkling that Machu Picchu even existed.

Was Machu Picchu destroyed long before the conquest by plague, perhaps, or by fierce warriors from the jungle? Or was it, as Washington University archaeologist David Browman has suggested, simply one of a series of vacation villas established by Inca royalty in the Sacred Valley of the Urubamba River?

Whoever built Machu Picchu, and for whatever purpose, chose a site of incomparable beauty. A walled city of granite blocks, it sits on the shoulder of the Andes atop a sloping saddle of emerald green. Before it stands an assemblage of awesome monoliths, as grand as those of Yosemite. The central monolith is shaped like a blunted arrow that has been shot through the Earth by some giant bow. Around it the river, white with rapids, bends in an embrace.

Nearby is an even taller, steeper monolith called Huayna Picchu ["young peak."] Incredibly, there are orchids growing on its face and terraces clinging to its peak. We tried to imagine these same terraces as hanging gardens, filled with the bright red begonias and fiery gladiolas that today grow wild throughout Machu Picchu. Wherever we walked in the ruins, we could always look back and see Huayna Picchu which, we soon decided, must be the guardian spirit of Machu Picchu.

In the company of a couple of Chilean honeymooners, we braved a climb to the top of Huayna Picchu. A steep and rocky trail led up the most approachable side of the mountain, ending in a vertical stone staircase. To reach the staircase, it was necessary to climb a short stretch of rock where a crevice was our only foothold. On top of Huayna Picchu we found a jumble of giant boulders abuzz with insects and a magnificent, if dizzying, view of the ruins of Machu Picchu below. Once, when the clouds parted, we caught a glimpse of distant, snow-capped peaks towering above us.

Up close we studied the stonework of Machu Picchu, an engineering feat in any age. That the work was done by people who had no steel tools, no wheeled carts, no beasts of burden beyond the weak-backed llama makes it even more amazing. The major

structures are particularly finely crafted, made of large stone blocks that, on close inspection, turn out not to be squares or rectangles but polygons. Examining one such stone, we counted 32 perfectly chiseled angles.

To our eyes, no building was finer than the Temple of the Sun, a curved tower shaped like a broken snail shell. We found ourselves visiting it again and again. Our favorite approach was by way of the staircase that leads through Machu Picchu's cascading Liturgi-

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cal Fountains. At the Sun Temple, staircase and fountains split in two, a bit of symbolic architecture whose meaning has been lost.

The Intihuatana, or Hitching Post of the Sun, is another monument to the Inca Sun God. Like the Sun Temple, this beautifully proportioned column is thought to have had astronomical significance, enabling Inca priests to predict such important events as the winter solstice. It is the only Intihuatana in all Peru whose top was not smashed by the Spaniards.

Most visitors arrive in Machu Picchu by train from Cuzco, bustling modern city and ancient Inca capital. The journey is nothing short of spectacular. The train travels right through the heart of the Sacred Valley, with its broad pastures and rocky gorges filled with yellow broom flowers.

The initial ascent from Cuzco is so steep it has to be negotiated through a series of switchbacks, along which the train uncertainly sways, moving first forward, then backward. Later in the journey enterprising Indian saleswomen known as *comerciantes* can be counted on to climb aboard. Among their wares: bananas, pastries and roasted ears of large-kernelled Cuzco corn. Along the way, one passes a series of Inca

ruins, in themselves well worth a visit.

Ollantaytambo, the fortified outpost where Manco Inca drove off Hernando Pizarro in a fierce battle, is clearly visible from the train as is Sacsayhuaman [pronounced sexy woman], whose fall to the Spaniards in 1563 marked the end of the Inca empire. Just outside Cuzco, Sacsayhuaman is remarkable for ramparts that zigzag like lightning bolts. The outer walls are composed of massive stones, the largest of which is said to weigh 361 tons.

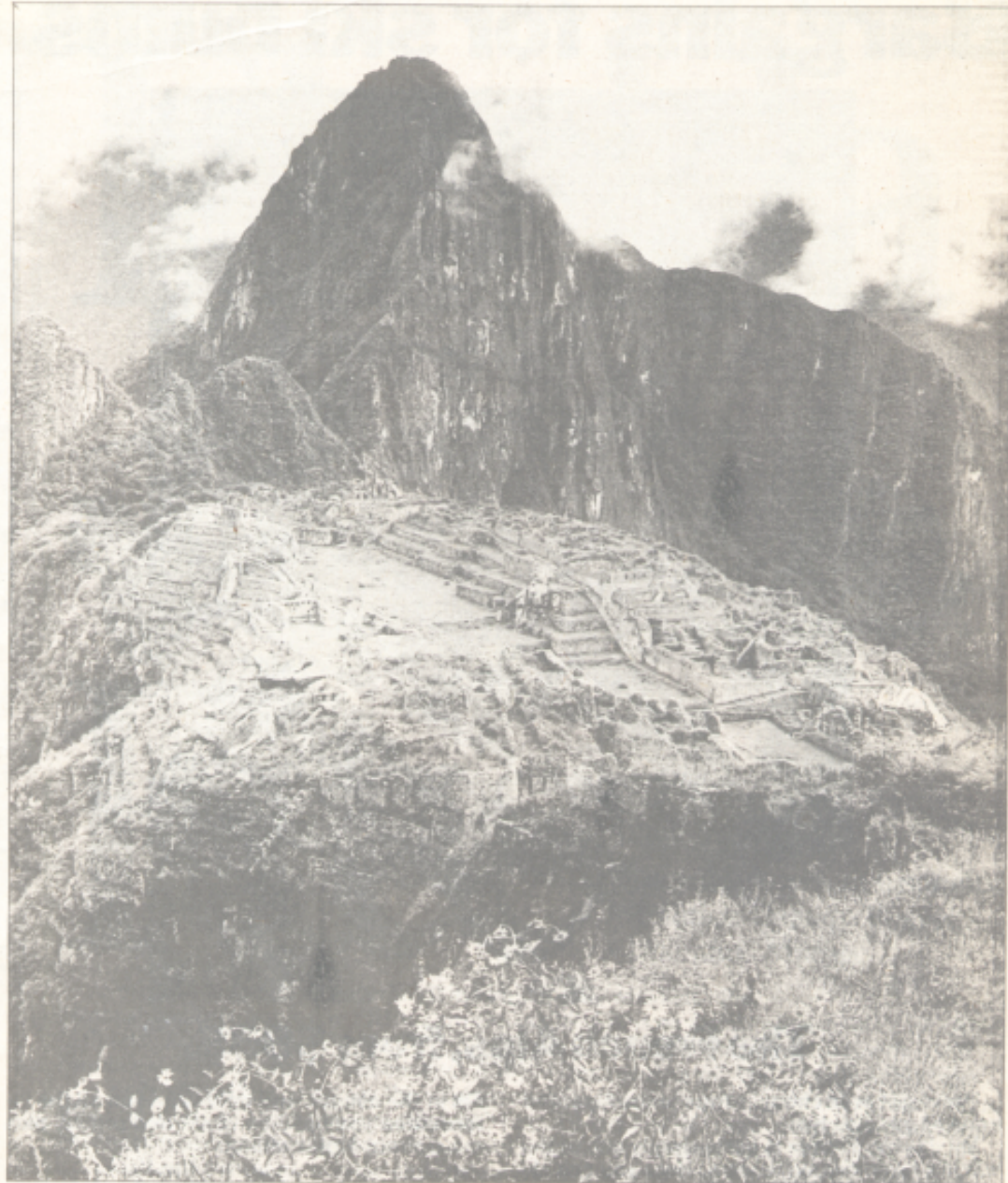
From Cuzco, we walked to Sacsayhuaman, and on the way back made the mistake of stopping in a local restaurant and ordering *cuy*, or guinea pig. *Cuy* is a local delicacy, and it was served to us fried, with paws and teeth. The meat was gray; the fat deep yellow.

We don't care to sample *cuy* again. But we would like to return to Machu Picchu, this time not by train but by foot along the old Inca Trail. We got a taste of what this four-day trip would be like by hiking from Machu Picchu to the nearby ruin of Huinay Huayna. Setting out early in the morning from Machu Picchu's Tourist Hotel, we climbed to La Cumbre, the pass, and walked through an ancient guard gate into another world.

Soon we were plunging down a steep trail through bamboo thickets; the air was warm and steamy with moisture. This area of low Andean rain forest, we later learned, is referred to by locals as the "eyebrow of the jungle." It is the reason there is so much fog in Machu Picchu. It was not only wet on our jungle path, but dark and dense with ferns. We encountered brilliant butterflies, so large they could be hummingbirds. Yellow below, iridescent blue above, they soared to the very top of the jungle canopy.

Passing by a cave, we startled a horde of brown moths with vivid spots on their wings. They seemed as numerous as autumn leaves blown by the wind. Just in front of us, a fat black millipede was in the complicated process of advancing to some unknown destination. Its myriad feet were bright orange, and it worked them with the coordinated skill of 1,000 oarsmen.

At first we stepped gingerly and



For hundreds of years Machu Picchu lay hidden from the world, defended by natural bulwarks.



Traversing a narrow cliffside with nothing but air for 2,000 feet below the swirling cloudbank.

avoided grabbing branches, fearful they might suddenly materialize into poisonous snakes. But as our path along the cliff's edge grew slick with mud and even narrower, we would have been grateful for any handhold. In two places, we managed to find a good Inca stone road, wide and flat, left over from the elaborate footpath network that linked an Empire. Mostly, though, we slithered over mud and logs. The logs were particularly unnerving; they were there to cover holes in the path.

Reaching Huinay Huayna, we briefly explored the overgrown ruins and enjoyed a picnic with a spectacular view of a waterfall that gushed from the mountains behind us. The clouds briefly parted to afford us a view of snow-

capped Mt. Veronica in the distance. Then, amid a steady downpour, we began the long trudge back to Machu Picchu.

It was nearly dusk when we reached the top of the pass and saw the whole of Machu Picchu spread out before us. It seemed to us the most beautiful place we had ever seen, and so Inca travelers long ago must have found it.

We were tired but couldn't resist wandering through Machu Picchu one last time. Standing in a trapezoidal doorway [the Incas never developed the arch], we watched a dirty white llama forage for his supper. His name, we learned later, was Panchito, and he smelled strongly of wet wool. I gingerly reached my fingers beneath his matted outer

coat and was surprised that his inner coat was soft, dry and warm.

Probably Panchito had fleas. But that didn't bother us. Somehow he seemed to belong there. Probably there were herds of flea-bitten, mud-caked llamas in Machu Picchu when it was a thriving city. Probably when Machu Picchu was a thriving city it was dirty and smelly like Panchito, as well as incredibly noisy.

These thoughts occurred to us as we walked back to our rooms at the Tourist Hotel. Suddenly we were conscious of the silence. The busy stone masons of Machu Picchu had long since stopped their ringing, and a heavy evening mist hung over the city like a shroud.

Photo by Thomas Nash