



International Escape

Peru, South America



Riding The Jungle Inca Trail

Machu Picchu Bound

BY LARRY SIMPSON

Peru proved to be huge in all respects: a nation of color and grandeur. The geography includes such contrasts as mountains, coasts, deserts, and rain forests. The history and culture includes the Incas, Machu Picchu, and Nasca lines, all coming together in one nation with a population close to Canada's and bordering on just about half the countries in South America. I visited for a week on my South America tour from Nova Scotia, Canada. As I rode south into Peru from Ecuador, I was surprised to find coastal terrain with beaches transitioning inland to featureless desert, with cacti and mirages no less. Gas stations were few and far between, and a couple times, I was running on fumes before happening upon a roadside entrepreneur who would sell me 5 liters out of a can at twice the going rate.

I spent a few nights in the capital, Lima, checking out city life and the beaches that flank the city. I decided to head out of the city, toward Nasca, to view the whale and hummingbird formations carved in the ground. They're best viewed from on high. (I had a look from the ground observation tower first and then opted to share a small plane with four German tourists.) It was sort of a "the truth is out there" kind of outing, with many grand theories as to the origins of the lines and designs. My arrival in Nasca was highlighted by fires burning on the road into town, and punctuated by piles of rocks, all being actively replenished by motivated citizens casting dirty looks at yours truly weaving a zig-zag pattern around the obstacles. Turned out some of the locals and police were at odds over a new law concerning taxes on art and mining income. On day two in Nasca, I wanted to head on to Cusco, the jumping off point for Machu Picchu. I ended up delaying an extra day when both citizens and police assured me it might be dangerous to jump or skirt the roadblocks out of town.

When I finally got the nod to depart, the ride to Cusco was that much sweeter. Climbing out of Nasca, I felt drawn toward a huge blue sky over a repetitive series of switchbacks. It was something of a rush, with the other side of the coin being that it was scary in places, with plummeting drop-offs and blind turns. One saving grace is that generally the speeds were not high; in fact, my Beamer was rarely out of second and third gear. The terrain did level out later on, however, and I saw sparse populations of locals living in rock houses, tending to sheep and llamas on a barren, windswept land similar to my old tundra digs in Nunavut. The stark beauty of it was breathtaking. I noticed ideal camping spots with little bundles of firewood for sustaining campfires in remote places. I kept on with my plan of making it from Nasca to Cusco in one day, but this notion went by the wayside when I encountered road construction. As the sun dipped behind high peaks, I was happy to find a little village centered by a restaurant with a few rooms for rent upstairs for just \$3 in local currency. The owners even let me drive my bike through the doorway and park in the restaurant after the last customers had finished their dinner.

The next day finds me reconnoitering Cusco from the higher-ground entry route into the city. American motorcycle traveler Steve Randall spied me on my loaded Beamer circling the Plaza de Armas city center for a landing spot and caught up with me just as I was kicking out my sidestand. A keen, young KLR jockey from Colorado, Steve was full of friendly advice on better-value accommodation options away from the center. He suggested Estrellita Hostel on Tulumayo Street. It proved to be an excellent choice, even if one has to negotiate a 12" board over



the stairs that descend 6' from the gate to the courtyard. I figured what's a measly 6' when you're 3,500' above sea level? Estrellita, unfortunately, does not have WiFi for my toled netbook, but does have a very cozy communal kitchen complete with friendly guests from France, China, Germany, and the US. Steve also dropped some veiled hints about hidden paths to Machu Picchu that stouthearted riders with suitable mounts might be able to navigate.

After giving my bike a good wash in the courtyard, I set off on foot to have a look at Cusco. It is an amazing place actually and appropriately the official jumping off place for Machu Picchu (meaning Old Mountain), one of the top destinations in South America. Thousands of tourists come here each year, and there was a surge of

them because Machu Picchu was closed just prior to my visit due to damage from heavy rains. The trains were running once again, the main means for these folks, jet-setters or backpackers, to get to Machu Picchu. In fact, this trip is heralded as one of the top train rides in the world, given the majesty of the route and the spectacular vistas. But Steve and I opted to ride the jungle Inca trail on two wheels, over back roads in a terrible state of disrepair that could ideally get us within walking distance of the old Inca citadel. For Steve and me, taking this journey by bike, and not by train, was a challenge and an opportunity.

We set out early in the morning and gassed up just out of town. We knew it would be challenging to cover the 250km-plus route in one day. The riding was uplifting, and we were soon in high mountains with low population density. As we climbed higher, our engines complained a bit and delivered less power, but soldiered on nonetheless. We rode up and around on countless switchbacks, and ascended into fog (or cloud?) banks and hanging rain for a good hour. Eventually, our bikes were pointed downhill again and our wet duds dried. The first town we came to was Urubamba, where we hung a left and head on to Ollantaytambo. Much of the route lies in a green river valley with mountains on each side. A dozen times, we rode through a foot or more of water crossing the road and soon this became old hat. The road was narrow and winding, and the pavement not generous. Gravel surface asserted itself sporadically as we progressed to Alphamayo, and soon the pavement gave up the ghost entirely for the final 75km through Santa Maria to Santa Theresa. This riding environment is what our bikes are built for. The dusty runs were punctuated by occasional large craters of water and mud.

Once in Santa Maria, we were happy to spot a gas station. We also inventoried a number of small hostels and restaurants in case we needed to stop on our way back. Smaller buses still plied the



road this far, and some of the passengers were backpackers trying to take an alternate route to Machu Picchu like us. At the gas station, the attendant wanted to buy us a beer to celebrate his birthday, but we bought him one instead. Steve practiced his pretty impressive Spanish with the man, impressive in that he knew zero *español* when he started his journey from Colorado.

As we continued, we encountered a couple trucks and smaller buses, somehow making their way over this road, which anywhere else would be a dirt bike and four-by-four path. The drop-offs were highly unnerving, and helmets off to the formidable stomachs of drivers that snake their way along this trail. We got friendly waves from these intrepid souls as we hugged the inside, thinking small is beautiful. Thanks be, it was not raining as we made our way over this last challenging section, and we derived some satisfaction from blue sky and more so from a rainbow off to our left. We passed some backpackers on the road, walking from Santa Maria and tenting on the way. For them, this section is a two-day journey with stops for swimming, enjoying the scenery, and chatting up the few scattered settlers along the way.

There were many water crossings, but then we came to the mother of them all. There was a 40' expanse of aqua about 2-1/2'-deep gushing across the road from the base of a waterfall which at other times would have tickled our fancy. Steve, on the

nimbler, more dirt-ready, KLR went across first in low gear with lots of throttle, particularly at the deepest point where the current throws its own twist. My turn! Steve hovered at water's edge, ready to get wet should I hit some underwater rock and topple with my heavier bike. No problem! The weight, height, and the 1000cc mill of my BMW GS walked me, legs spread-eagle, right through that mess at a good steady clip. Steve gave me a high five on safe ground. The sun was low in the sky, and we are thankful to be through this part in daylight. The road ahead was more of the same as the light faded, but we were charged with confidence and freshly honed skills. We descend into the village of Santa Theresa only 20 minutes after the veil of total moonless night has fallen.

We learned definitely that the bridge was out over the river on the trail from Santa Theresa to the hydroelectric station, which in turn is connected by rail to Aguas Calientes, the service community down slope from Machu Picchu. Unfortunately, I had to hole up for a day, suffering a delayed reaction from a pulled muscle when I picked up my loaded bike from a low-speed fall on loose gravel the day before. The next day I was still hurting, but I decided I was just too close to Machu Picchu to lie around licking my wounds. After storing my bike, I took the 8km hike to the hydroelectric, which got me to the rails just before the morning train. I was told it's just open to the locals but pled a



case for my injured back (my walking stick helped), and they let me on. Once at Aguas Calientes, I hopped a bus up the hill. Machu Picchu is actually lower in elevation than Cusco, but it feels higher. The complex, set against a panorama of green mountains spiked up from the Urubamba and tributaries below, is partly shrouded in clouds and that just adds to its splendor. I'm not generally one for archaeological attractions, but Machu Picchu is really something. A couple of hours was enough for me, and then it was time to head back down and catch the later train (open to tourists) back to the hydroelectric. On my way to the cablecar, my gait was slow and halting, but the enchanting valley hike was therapeutic.

The next morning, I was mostly recovered, so I started making preparations to head back. Our bikes had been stored in a small shed and mine wouldn't start. I figure it had a lot to do with that drenching we got on the way over. My battery was down and my charger was not working either, but just then, Steve showed up, anxious to get going, too. A push-start fired up the bike. The ride back to Santa Maria is mostly downhill, but my electrics were wet, and gremlins were raging in my tired, 17-year-old bike. We got through that mother of all puddles again, but it had been down some from what it was three days before.

The ride back to Cusco was backtracking, which I am not entirely fond of, but in this case, the spell binding scenery and

challenging roads make the return trip no less pleasurable. I smiled all the way back. Even my bike was humming contentedly, the electrics had dried out, and things functioned as they should. Events of the past week play back in the riders' minds, and there was a lot of satisfaction in what we had achieved. We were not able to ride right into Machu Picchu, but we did the next best thing, getting as close as Santa Theresa at a time when the roads were just creeping back from wash-out. The cable car crossing and the hike up the valley to the rail line were splendid add-ons to a great bike trip. Mission definitely accomplished!

I recall young Steve asking old Larry over a beer what advice I could offer him, drawing from my fairly long span of lessons in life, particularly of the riding kind. In spite of having just come down off the Ancient Mountain, I hesitated, knowing age and experience do not always make someone wiser. Finally, I offered that old guys should not ride old bikes on hijinks, such as the backroads to Machu Picchu, let alone on serious overland journeys from Nova Scotia to South America. My bike, indeed, got me home again after continuing on through Bolivia and Argentina and then looping up the east side of the continent (albeit not entirely trouble and stress free), but it is time to put the old Beamer out to pasture before contemplating future journeys. Old guys/young bikes. That's my new mantra. Not quite as midlife crisis as old guys/young women, but it will do. **RB**

