

# The Incas:

## a journey through history and spirituality

The Incas of Peru are undoubtedly one of the most admired of ancient civilisations. An amalgamation of tribes, it has been difficult to date their start, for they left no written records, although it is thought that they became a force by the 13th century.<sup>1</sup> However, it was during the 15th century that they undertook one of the most rapid cultural and territorial expansions ever seen.<sup>1</sup> Less than two centuries later, however, their culture was extinct, victims of arguably the cruellest episode of Spanish colonial history. Under Francisco Pizarro's leadership, the conquistadors arrived in

1532. They captured the Inca leader Atahualpa, and executed him a year later. After fighting a number of battles bravely but in vain (including the one in which Pizarro was killed in 1541), their last leader Tupac Amaru was executed in 1572, and the civilisation effectively decimated.

We had, for several years, a real desire to visit Peru, not least because the Inca culture held a remarkable fascination for both of us. Often, however, a traveller's fate is disappointment when reality does not match expectation; fortunately, however, Peru left a different, and very positive impression.

The capital Lima was our first stop. Although its city centre was possessed of several fine colonial buildings and churches, it palpably suffered some of the clichéd problems of so many large cities, particularly capitals — overcrowding, the uneasy mix of extremes of wealth and poverty, and an excess of the ostentatious, yet ultimately soulless brand symbols of global capitalism.

Cuzco, the ancient capital of the Inca empire, made a welcome change. At 3330 metres above sea level, it certainly tested our cardiovascular fitness. Despite welcoming hundreds of tourists each day, the pleasant city centre retains a remarkable tranquility. At Cuzco, we had the good fortune to come across one of the finest tour guides in the business, a sprightly septuagenarian of Quechua Indian stock called Juan Cornejo. An archaeologist by training, a world authority on Inca culture and brilliant polymath, Juan, who speaks eight languages, still lectures at the local university and continues to write about a topic on which he has published several hundred papers. A deeply spiritual man, he left us with memorable sentiments such as 'We are poor in dollars but rich in soul'. Although there remains the problem of uneven wealth distribution, several sectors of the country, such as the tourism and silver mining industries, are doing well and with a hard-working population, Peru's future is probably more propitious than he suggested.

Wherever we went, the spirit of the Incas seemed to be there, and on no other trip did buildings viewed in the present seem to so vividly harbour ghosts of the past. Beginning at a tour around the city of Cusco, we asked Juan about the Incas and speculated on how and for which rituals they used certain buildings. He remained silent, though nodding nonchalantly, albeit in a knowing way.

We decided to take the short Inca trail, a compromise allowing us to see the highlights without excessive wear on the joints. After an early start, a bus and train



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journey, we arrived at KM104, the starting point of the short Inca trail. This took the form of a steep and winding walkway around the mountain; indeed, a seemingly endless, body-shattering climb ensued. Following lunch and still more climbing, the rather barren scenery began to give way to the romanticism of the lush green valleys seen before only in the guide books. Eventually at Intipunku (the Sun Gate) came the highlight of the tour — the first glimpse of the lost city of Machu Picchu. At this point rest was decidedly welcome, hence the bus ride to a nearby hotel.

Given its popularity as a tourist destination and, as of 2007 a Wonder of the World, it seems surreal that Machu Picchu was hidden from the modern world until relatively recently. Its 'discovery' by Hiram Bingham in 1911 is itself a remarkable story. Bingham came from a family of impeccable public service traditions — his father and grandfather were missionaries, and he would later become Governor of Connecticut. A Yale graduate and history lecturer at the university, he travelled to Peru in 1909 with the aim of studying Simon de Bolivar's independence struggle. Becoming fascinated by Inca architecture, he returned with the Yale Peruvian expedition 2 years later, taking the narrow mule trail down the Urubamba gorge. A friendship with a local farmer led him to the jungle-covered ruins, whose exact purpose remains uncertain, indeed, part of its mystique. The consensus of current opinion is that it was constructed around 1450, at the height of the Inca empire.<sup>2</sup> Its purpose is less certain: the ideas most commonly espoused are that it formed a political headquarters, a settlement for Incan aristocracy, or even the private estate of the emperor Pachacuti. What is certain is that it was not inhabited for much more than a century before the empire fell.

The next morning we arrived at the summit of the city with the mountain and much of Machu Picchu covered in a hazy spiralling mist, ensuring an unforgettable, eerily familiar sight. Our guide, impressed by our enthusiasm, kindly escorted us around separately to feel the different areas of the lost city.

Then it all started to come together for the first author: the five main areas of the city each related to one of the seven chakras.

The Sacristy is the throat chakra of the city, with the North Stone being a compass, this area was used to communicate with the people, rather like a modern day speaker's corner.

The Temple of the Three Windows, linking to the solar plexus chakra, was used for energy and healing. The stones in the area were placed so people could sit on them, and like a clock at each hour, certain energies would help each person. There would be different priests to cover the different days, bringing various healings to the area. This was the city's gut.

The Puma being the base of the city and relating in energies to the base chakra, was the city's spiritual heart. Fires were burnt and vine leaves left giving heat to the energies of this chakra.

The Palace of the Princesses supplied strong energy to protect the city — like a fighter; this was the city's sacral chakra.

The Intihuatana (sun-tier) from where the priests and wise men used to address the people in the square below; this linked to the crown chakra. The large stone was placed there to connect to mother earth, and placed strategically to focus the energies of the earth onto the stone. The rock face had deep caverns of crystals that enhanced the energy, and when the priests touched the stone and stood on it they would spread their hands out to enrich the soil, mother earth and the people.

Where did the author's understanding come from? Probably the sixth sense, a valuable tool we should enjoy rather than feel uneasy about simply because it is not an exact science. Our own world of health care is, after all, not exactly an exact science either. What is certain is that we will treasure not only the memories of Machu Picchu but the Puma and snake Juan presented on our last day — a 15th century treasure he felt was meant for us. It is kept in a very safe place.

**Sonia Grover and Edin Lakasing**

#### REFERENCES

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## New Year's Day

The cacophony of fireworks resounds outside. This time last year, as if by magic, my Mother awoke from a 2 hour slumber and we all drank champagne around her hydraulic bed. She smiled and laughed like a playful child, never complaining and almost forgetful of her debilitating, terminal illness. In 39 days she would die. She must have known, as we all did, that this would be her last New Year. She must have known that she would not be calling me this year as I revise for impending exams. She must have known that in 8 days she would leave her home, forever, and live her last few days in the hospice. But she never surrendered any sign of such thoughts. She didn't even look concerned! She simply smiled and was happy. I appreciate the neurological changes that occur with such illness, and perhaps the diffuse metastatic tumours had infiltrated her limbic lobe, altering her ability for conscious emotion. Or perhaps she was simply a happy, loving person, who was always aware of her guiding compass, and could not resist being drawn towards her magnetic North of love and happiness and laughter.

So what of the resulting void? Irrespective of the loss and pain, out of such love can only spring positivity. No bitterness or anger or jealousy polluted her earth. While my Father suffers, he rises to the challenges before him with inspiring emotional industry, becoming an unexpected light in the darkness. And us siblings care more and give more, to each other, and others, just as she would have hoped for. A beautiful blossom where you once stood: the ultimate legacy and tribute to any human being.

Let the New Year's resolutions this year, and every year, simply be to listen to your inner compass, and follow it, true. Such endeavours will nourish the soil of your soul with the fresh compost of happiness; perpetuating positive life in exchange for our physical self. And when our day comes, let us smile, as she did.

**Robert Scully**

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