

## The Highs and Lows of the Andes

The Andes stretch nearly the entire western coast of South America thus needs to be contended with while traveling in the region. Dealing with the mountains can be tedious or a scenic delight. The mountains are beautiful but create problems relating to transportation and health. They will take one's breath away both figuratively and literally.

The literal way in taking one's breath is through altitude sickness. Interestingly, more people die of this while in a group as opposed to individual travelers. Group participants don't want to embarrass themselves in front of the group or think that the group will bail them out if they sustain health problems. However, this is not always a possibility. There is a serious health risk related to altitude sickness, so leave the machismo at the door and limit activities for the first 24-48 hours after arrival. This allows time for the oxygen-holding red blood cells in the body to grow and thus helps get people used to the altitude.



There is medicine to combat altitude sickness, but more enjoyable is the local cure of cocoa leaves. Cocoa leaves are widely available in Peru and Bolivia. They can be bought in a small bag for twenty-five cents, which should last for a few days and should include a white or black chalky mixing agent. To use them, curl the small green leaves in half and then rip off the stems and stick a wad in your mouth. Without the mixing compound, it just tastes like sucking on grass and it doesn't help relax the body. The mixing compound looks similar to baking powder and only a small amount is needed to be placed in with the leaves. The first sensation is similar to the numb mouth feeling when going to the dentist after having a tooth pulled. Soon, the whole body will be slightly numb which is the idea. The body activity is slowed, which helps counteract the altitude. In some rural areas cocoa leaves are still used in the birthing process.

The cocoa leaves are not addictive but generally illegal outside the Andes region. This is because these leaves are one of the ingredients in cocaine. For a very short time, cocoa leaf "users" will test positive for cocaine. Carrying small bags of leaves outside the region will also get users in trouble. A further issue is carrying leaves in combination with objects used in the cocaine process, such as toilet paper and different types of lighter fluid. An example is the bus trip from La Paz to Rurrenabacque, Bolivia in which passengers will be stopped at designated checkpoints for materials. Just one roll of toilet paper wouldn't get passengers in trouble, but there are organized efforts to stop cocaine production.

In the Bolivian Andes is La Paz, the highest capital of the world and one of the poorest. Arriving by bus, visitors pass through the suburbs of the city. Unlike most cities in the US, the suburbs are poorer than the inner city. Crime, usually limited to stealing, is a problem in La Paz. One common trick is the diversion tactic, which includes spitting on the victim and as they wipe their face off the assailant goes from one of the pockets.



Moving beyond the altitude sickness and crime, there are several interesting parts of the city. There are several squares and churches than can be viewed. One of the more unusual attractions in the city is the Witch's Market. The strangest item to buy in this strange market is a llama fetus. Apparently, this is good luck. When building a new home, stick the fetus in the concrete of the floor that is being laid. This is supposed to give the new house dwellers good luck. Other, less strange, items are available at the market including clay work and household gadgets.

The most touristed city in the Andes and indeed in all of South America is Cuzco, Peru. It also has the most pickpockets but is an enjoyable city as most people there are easy to get along with. The flight in is pleasant as it is among the mountaintops before a quick descent into the city. There are quite a few people that meet tourists at the airport; many are tour operators or musical bands. There are many streets in

Cuzco that require walking up hills, which is always difficult with a backpack strapped on. Cuzco also has numerous parks and centers to visit.

The main reason people go to Cuzco is to continue on to the ruins of Machu Picchu. It's possible to take the train from Machu Picchu and back in one day, but it's a bit of quick tour. The start of the train trip also takes a while as the train must change tracks as it descends to the ruins. So, the train moves forward then back down as the train changes tracks. It's a good opportunity to see the architecture in Peru. There are many mud brick houses and bricks drying outside can be observed. Many of the roofs also have a cross on top with animals around the cross, apparently a religious reference.

The ruins are very impressive and a walk up to the neighboring hill is worthwhile. The last couple of steps of getting to the top of this hill is challenging, as it is a large rock that jets out. People with a fear of heights may have a problem. The view from here is spectacular. The actual ruins do take some time getting though and include several terraces and small buildings. Also, there is a wall that can be touched and some people apparently get a tingly sensation when touching the wall. Again, this is religious in nature.

There are a couple of options to witnessing the ruins at Machu Picchu. One way is to take the Inca Trail, which equates to a four-day walk to the ruins. The hike reservation requires 30 days lead-time, as the access to this trail is limited so as to preserve the area. It also requires good health, as the trip is physically demanding. Also, one can stop at Kilometer 108 and finish the hike from there. The last option is to take the train to the city of Aquas Caliente, and continue to the ruins by bus from there.

Aguas Caliente is a small town but an inviting, safe place to relax for a day instead of doing the hectic Cuzco-Machu Picchu day trip. Aquas is centered on the tourist industry and has many restaurants and a good market to buy goods. As the name implies, there is a hot water in the area. An outdoor hot sauna located in the mountains is a good place to relax.

Aguas is also slightly warmer as it is lower elevation than Cuzco. The temperature consistently does get below freezing in the Andes at night. For those who are used to cold

winters that may not seem cold. It is when there is no heat in the hotel room. Many hotels do not have heat and some still don't have hot water for showers or do for limited hours. The tradeoff is the beauty of the Andes. Yet another example of the positives and negatives of life in the Andes.