

Apu's Lasting Truth

G. James Mitchell



Discovering Machu Picchu. Photo taken by author.

A vision channeled through blind spots; a sunrise gated in megaliths; a mountain perspiring vibrant flora, with a surreal thumbprint that leaves visitors shimmering. Machu Picchu was a trip of metamorphosis and discovery.

Alex, our capable guide, was a native Quechuan with a friendly and informative demeanor. As he led our journey, he immersed us in the rich scenery of the Andes Mountains and its native culture.

Following our predetermined route, we mountain-biked a 2,000 meter descent of paved rural road, traveling through a bit of rain, waterfalls, and enchanting pinnacle views. After turning in gear, we were bussed to our afternoon outfitter in Santa Maria.

A quaint jungle lodge with a small farm served our fill of Peruvian dishes, reviving our weary limbs. While relishing our assortment of morning blessings, a charismatic river-rafting guide captured our nourished enthusiasm. He charmed us from leisure, taking us to plunge through the current of the Urubamba River, which sculpted our mountainous cradle. Our trek traced the ridges of the Urubamba. We made a welcome acquaintance with the waterway's temper. We were nine to a raft, including the guide. Everyone wore life vests, a

reminder of the danger that lay below. With a sense of preparation, we arrived at the unknown. The Urubamba exhausted our bodies, but exhilarated our souls. We retired for the day, vexed by this sacred valley.

The next morning we left modern comforts to backpack through Peruvian jungle, boasting a sense of accomplishment. We hiked over, and down, 16 kilometers across the Inca Trail. Santa Theresa greeted us with natural hot springs and private beds before we hiked an additional 11 kilometers to Aguas Calientes, using a cart and pulley to cross a 70 foot gorge, at one point. Demanding our full capacity, this experience was well worth it.

We overslept. Our Goldilocks-like beds lured us with slumber that muted our alarms. A morning knock at the door, however, brought a hasty ritual that prepared us for our ultimate destination. We'd crossed mountains, a river, a gorge, jungle overgrowth, ancient pathways, and monuments; this would be our ascent into the sacred city.

With a light pack and heavy feet, we strolled to meet friends in the mother of all lines. "What time is it?" my girlfriend groaned. I replied matter of factly, "4 am." Then it rained. Our raincoats were quickly on and zipped, but with no breath for the Nylon in 60% humidity, our sweat sealed to our skin. The line in front of us traced the muddy road for a quarter mile, unabashedly rewarding early birds with worms. No one likes worms.

Sipping coffee, we made friends with umbrellas. Eclectic tourists fed the arresting line, harboring utilities we eyed with amusement. Mystery surged from the gate as buses trickled through. This preceding caravan carried officials, guides, and servicemen fifteen minutes up a narrow switchback road, delivering passengers to the greeting center of the World Heritage site. Following them, climate controlled carriages cradled tourists in leather seats.

I cocked my neck to glimpse the entrance gate. Its simple light and tiny security kiosk satirized the citadel that greeted us. Inspecting the gateway to our transcendence, I audited all the comforts I deliberately left behind, and weighed them against my vision of the top of Machu Picchu. Reveling in a sense of invincibility, I braced for the task ahead.



The summit: viewing the last architecture of Machu Picchu's "advanced society." Photo taken by author.

Steep, overgrown jungle housed seventeen hundred wet stone stairs, linking the mountain base to the greeting center. Ascending mobs gasped arrhythmic breaths. It was every man for himself, and I was nowhere near the front.

The next hour was a little determination, a little discipline, and much disappointment. These stairs could have been traded for a \$15 bus pass and leather seat, but my metamorphosis was my prize. The self-development I experienced in this unique obstacle, shared by millennia of complexly opposite strangers, helped frame for me a truth about reality itself.

There are things beyond our awareness that operate their own agenda manipulating the contents of each domain. Quechuan people described this as the spirit of the mountains. Each mountain had a spirit, or Apu. This Apu's name was Machu Picchu, and his demands were clear from the start. Climb with consideration. Find firm footing. Look ahead. Take one step at a time, with two free hands. Be mindful of pitfalls. Watch out for people above, below, and beside, like a line of ants heaving back towards their colony. Climb.

Foggy morning twilight gradually sapped darkness along the trail. It was still too dim to lift our eyes from the endless mountain face, and we kept climbing. The first greeting platform emerged, full of chaos. Fumbling to navigate the crowd, I made it to my friends near the service stations.

In a flurry, we clamored through the final gauntlet towards the ruins of Machu Picchu. Evidence of an ancient society lifted our faces in awe. We were standing on the shoulders of giants, basking in the architecture of an advanced society, raised over 2,400 meters above sea level. Their mastery over the land lay, undeniable, in stonework that fused deadly cliff-face to a city's foundation. This pinnacle filled us with the sensation of wonder that seeped a purest curiosity. In the face of adversity, my vision had fueled me to continue climbing until I reached this pinnacle. Not only had the journey sculpted a unique prism of perspective, but the reward imprinted sure confidence that I am capable of manifesting a dream into reality.

Nominating Faculty: Professor Paula Korhonen, English 3760, Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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