

Sudamérica 2010/11



- yet another traveller's journal by
Martin Smedendahl

I've dived at the Great Barrier reef and bungied from Kawarau bridge. I've walked with the lions in Zimbabwe and slept under the stars in Navajo land. I've walked Via Dolorosa and I live in Europe, so I have been to all inhabited continents. All but one. South America, here I come!

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Part I – A journey from Gothenburg to Lima

As the hour approached and the snow and cold with it, I finally was finished packing. A final goodbye to my dear, late grandpa and a not as final goodbye to my colleagues was all that's left before take-off. Oh, and a breakfast at my local brekkie joint, Egg & Milk. And off to South America I flew.



The main characters:



Martin – aka me, myself and I. Swedish traveller in his mid-thirties. Likes beer and carries a big-ass camera.



Ross – tour leader and artist. Hails from the UK and likes Anki.



Anki – co-driver and doctor in chemical engineering. Fluent in English, Spanish, and Skånska. Likes Ross.



Clare – trainee tour leader and once an aspiring actress and/or lawyer. Grew up in Tasmania, but has a father from England, so her accent isn't all bad.



Bernard – pommie in his sixties. Prefers bitter, but can have a lager if it's on the menu.



Mel – pharmacist from Australia. Likes Ben, and can multi sport in circles around the rest of us.



Doug – aka Baby Jesus. Young pyrotechnician and -maniac from Australia, who can read faster than most people manage to think.



Ben – short-haired exercise freak with convincing scattergories strategies. Likes Mel.



Lars – hapless Swede who got robbed of his cameras and computers the very first day, but still keeps a smile on his face.



Drew – engineer from Down Under. Likes sneakers and umbrellas.



Cameron – a truck. Not a bus. A truck.

The legendary sunken city of Atlanta



So why is there a paragraph, an entire chapter even, referencing the host of the 1996 summer Olympics? Because Air France delayed their flight from Paris to Atlanta by three hours, making me miss my connection flight, that's why. And so it were that I spent Sunday exploring the home of CNN and Coca-Cola instead of brushing up on my Spanish.

But at least they upgraded me to business class, which was cool. Being pampered and treated like a king is definitely something I could get used to. Obviously they lost my luggage, so, safe to say, this trip can only get better from now on. I finally made it to Quito, settled in with my host family in Quito city centre, had a good night's sleep, and when I opened the windows I was a bit surprised to see a small ostrich farm just outside. Now, it's time for my first Spanish classes.

Excelente!

Spanish 101

Due to my unexpected overnight stay in Georgia and consequent arrival in Quito one day delayed I had to fit my planned 24 hours of Spanish lessons in three days instead of four. Muchos informaciones, indeed. Cerebral overload, one might say. But as we all know, the best way to learn anything is to cram as much of it in as short time as possible. As a result, I am now more or less fluent in Latin American Spanish. Par ejemplo:

”¡Una grande cerveza, por favor!”

”No soy el dueño de este burro, lo rente.”

”¿Donde esta el bar?”

”Estaba esperando que tú recordaras como conseguí este tatuaje.”

I can't seem to think of anything else, but then again, what other phrases could one possibly need?

Mañana, yo voy a explorar los calles y los sitios des interéses de Quito. ¡Hasta luego!



Oh, and my luggage has arrived.

Det är vattenpumpen, Gerd



'Twas a bit of a random start of my overland tour. As we met at a pre-departure meeting, it turned out that one of my co-travellers, a fellow Swede, had been robbed in broad daylight the day before. Computer, camera equipment worth about \$7000 and bits and pieces had been stolen from him at Plaza Grande, the very same square I had visited that day. And when we were supposed to set out, already an hour late due to him trying to get replacement gear (which is not easy in Ecuador), we were told the waterpump on the truck had broken down, so we got another three hours delayed.

No drama, the equator wasn't going anywhere, and neither was Otavalo, our next destination.



We didn't even make it out of Quito before the waterpump broke down again. After a while we decided to get a taxi to Mitad del Mundo, which was easier said than done. Rush hour, busy Quito and pouring rain all added up to us not getting a taxi until five-ish. But eventually we got to the equator, got the obligatory shots of straddling the yellow line and when we got back, the truck was ready to go. And who were we? Well, there's the crew: Clare from Oz, Anki from Sweden and tour leader Ross from UK. And the passengers Bernard (pom), Doug, Mel, Drew, Ben (aussies) and Lars (swede). And of course our truck, Cameron.





Old MacDonald had a farm



After a full three hours of sleep the rooster literally called. It was time to visit the animal market in Otavalo. Cows, pigs, llamas, guinea pigs, chicken and ducks were among the stalls and, more often than not, random spots. The smell, the sound and the general feel of the place was an exotic and unique experience. People seemed to heed the old advice on not buying the pig in the sack, but that was mainly a size issue; no moral quarrels arose as the market shoppers and vendors alike stuffed their still waving and breathing and protesting merchandise in nylon bags.

Otavalo is a town in the high Andes. Around 50 000 people live there, about half of them Hispanic, the other half indigenous. Their main sources of income, besides farming, is handicrafts and tourism. Saturday is a bustling market day, with everything the area has to offer when it comes to hand carved wood and stone, pan pipes, ponchos, woven cloths and so forth and so on. One

of the gullible tourists was me, who bought a Panama hat for the surmountable sum of sixteen bucks.

As the true patronizers of local workmanship we are, we took a tour to various places where the handicrafts of Ecuador are made. We got to see the processes in which wood, wool, skin and beetle blood was transformed into magnificent pieces of clothing, musical instruments and horse saddles.

Btw, there was also a waterfall.



Welcome to the jungle



After more than a week on high altitude it was about time to descend and to realize we were, in fact, in the tropics. Tena is a small town in the Ecuadorian Amazon, with the jungle lodges of Shangri-La not far outside.



As the heavy rains of the rainforest poured down upon us, we embarked on a jungle trek under the guidance of local cichuan boy Pedro, Cichua being the local people in the region. Pretty much every tree, bush and root in the forest has multiple purposes, such as for eating, medicinal, keeping the mozzies at bay and as fishing aid. And ate we did. Ants that tasted like lime, termites that did not and thick larvae went down the hatch as if eating bugs was the most natural thing in the

world.

The day after we went back to the jungle. Although the rain had stopped, we would not remain dry for long. The idea was to climb waterfalls, and that we did. Alaskan girl Bonnie joined us for the day, and since she had no dry-sack I offered to put her camera in mine. As I reached the top of the second waterfall, the buckle became undone and down went dry-sack, with two cameras and all. The scare lasted a couple of minutes; it had landed softly in the water, and had not opened. Both cameras survived the fall, and on we trekked.





There was a natural pool with a just as natural water slide not far from our lunch spot. We spent hours in the refreshing waters, jumping off cliffs and being carried by the stream. Good fun was had by all, but eventually we had to head back. It was my birthday, and totally just for that reason this was the day of the traditional Fiesta del Selba, Party of the Jungle.

Most of us dressed up in nothing but underwear and banana leaves and started drinking the local jungle spirits. As it was my birthday, not only did we get to have cake and sing "Happy Birthday" and "Ja Må Han Leva", but as the

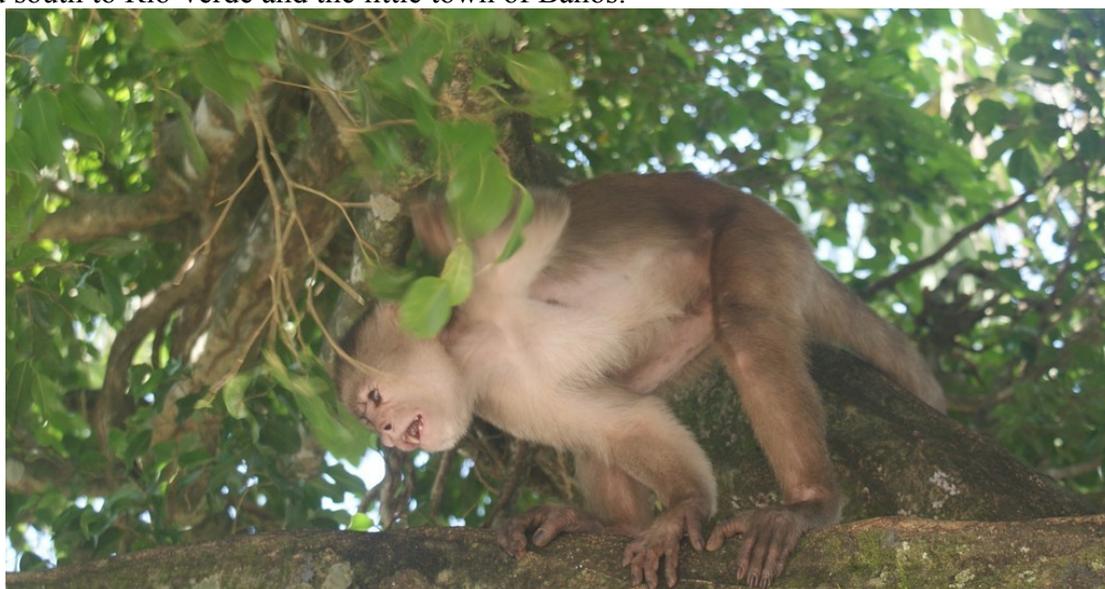
local tradition has it, I had to get whipped 36 times. Which I was.



And how we laughed.

Baño/-s

Following a quick stop in Misahualli and its extremely cheeky monkeys (they had an annoying habit of not only stealing my much needed water bottles, but also managing to unscrew them), we headed south to Rio Verde and the little town of Baños.



With two full days in Baños, the adventure capitol of Ecuador, all seemed well. Canyoning and 100 metre bridge swing was on the agenda, as well as a christmas party and several treks along the

beautiful scenery and the plentiful waterfalls.

But alas, not for me. I was sick the whole time. I did do a short trek to some waterfalls, I did enjoy a delicious turkey dinner and I did see the local volcano erupt, so it was not a total waste of time, but the 10 hour truck drive to Cuenca was a nightmare. It was a plague. It was a nightmare about a plague.



After a full night's sleep I was finally feeling a bit better, and managed to tag along to the Panama Hat factory. Yes, the Panama Hat hails from Ecuador, and Cuenca is where they make them. The reason they're commonly known as Panama hats is that all the workers when building the Panama Canal wore them, and so they got their popularity, and so Panama started to export them to the rest of the world.

A stroll around the closed city (it was boxing day) including an interesting tour at the local food market in hopeful hunt for the next few day's food followed after the hat session.

Oh, and I bought another hat.

Sun of a beach

As we descended, so did my fever. I was still not back on track, though, and so the border crossing into Perú was a bit of a struggle with my uncooperative tummy and the heat and the 11 hours of bumpy ride.

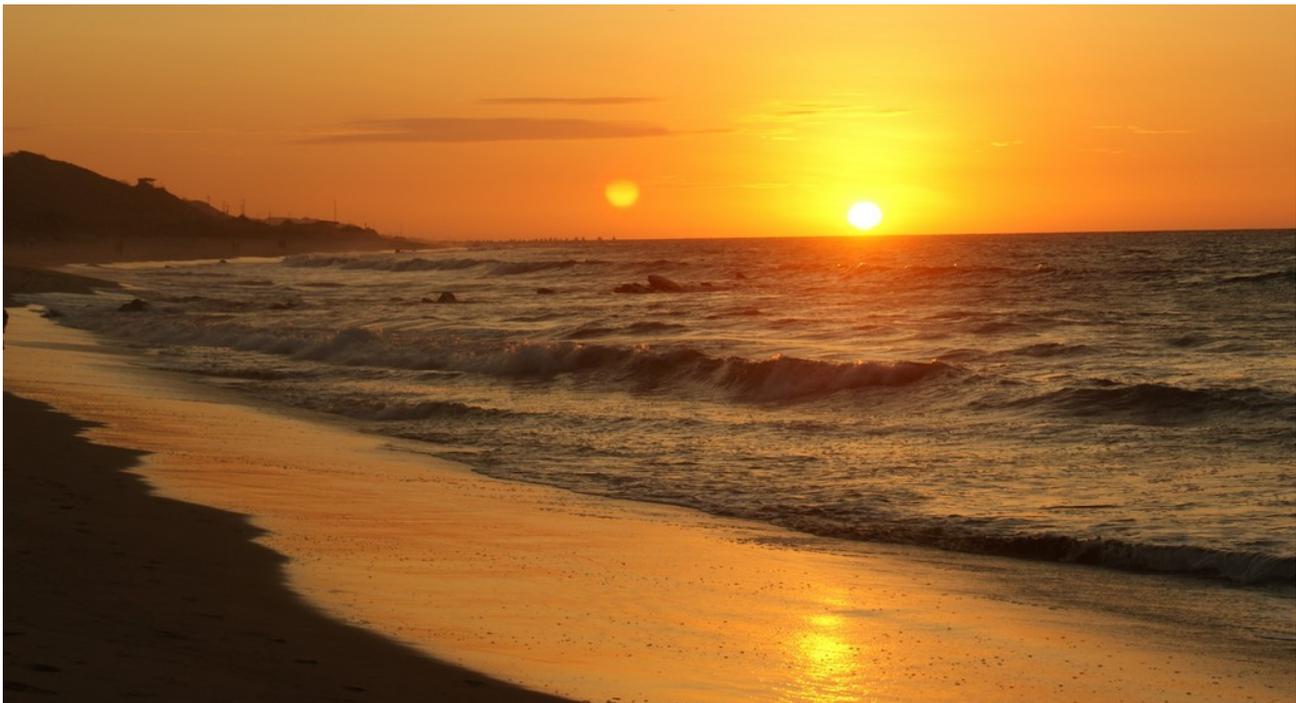


At length we could at last feast our eyes on the majestic Southern Pacific; we were in Punta Sal on the Peruvian west coast, with sandy beaches as far as the eye could see and roaring waves as far as the ear could hear.

It was also Anki's birthday, and we set off fireworks and a huge bonfire, all while wearing festive hats.

The next day was a relaxing one; swimming, playing beach volley, reading in the hammock and visiting the nearby surfer town of Mancora for some money business, juice bar hopping and general strolling around. They do know how to make their fruit juices in South America. Also, Cuba Libres.





Muchos Moches

Before the Inca, there were the Moches. A proud civilization of fishermen, brick makers, farmers and potters inhabited the northern parts of pacific coast Perú.



They were excellent craftsmen, making intricate masks and ornaments of gold, silver and copper. They perfected the irrigation systems. They were proud warriors and magnificent mariners. They were also barbaric and performed human sacrifices to their pantheon, most notably their creator god, Ai-Aepec. They built huge temples, using slave labour, that served as palaces for the high priests and the kings. And when the king died, his up to 44 wives were generously given a choice: Drink the deadly poison of the local cactus, or get

their heads cut off. Clearly they needed to get buried with the late king, along with his servants, guards and llamas.



All of this was displayed at Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipan and in the still being excavated Huaca de la Luna (Temple of the Moon). Amazing exhibition, amazing ruins. These guys were as advanced as ever the



Mayans and the Incas, but had drawn the short straw in the lottery of life, and faded into historical obscurity.



In Huanchaco, the event of the year took place. It's Big, it's Meaty, it's Bally. It's the first ever annual MEATBALLOFF.

Three Swedes, yours truly being one of them, with a bowl of mincemeat and various condiments showed off their cooking skills. The balls were judged on taste, texture and form, and in the end there could be only one winner. And that was, of course, so not me. But I claimed the bronze!



Incidentally, my belly and I were once again the bestest of friends.

¿Wanna get high?

A climb to end all climbs. We started at sea level, then drove up the Andes to a high point of 4100 metres, followed by a slight descend to 3100. We entered the town of Huaraz at 18:00, after twelve hours of driving. As this was New Year's Eve we gathered in the common room, eskie at the ready. The Aussies had already had theirs some ten hours earlier, but us swedes rang in the new year at seven and the poms an hour later. However, the real celebration takes place locally, and off we trotted to our booked restaurant.



As the bell tolled twelve, we watched as our resident junior pyrotechnician set off the fireworks, all while wearing our silly yellow party glasses.

After midnight Huaraz city centre looked like a benevolent war zone; fireworks that had been dropped on the streets were neatly gathered together in burning bonfires, the street vendors were desperately trying to push their leftover party utensils (including, but not limited to, the yellow underwear Peruvians wear on new years night for good luck. It's a tradition, or an old charter, or something) and people were generally in a state of blissful disarray.





In Huaraz area the Andes dominate the scenery, and it was about time to explore them first-hand. A full day trek to the glacier lake Laguna 69 in the stunning Cordillera Blanca (White Mountain range), which includes Huascarán, the tallest mountain in Perú and the second tallest in South America with its 6500 m peak. Starting the trek at some 3900 metres was hard enough, seeing that we were at sea level just two days earlier, but the real challenge were yet to come. Hiking constantly uphill is tiresome enough at low altitudes, but the 700 metre ascent by foot took its toll. I might have been as tired as I've ever been, but when I finally reached the peak it was so worth the effort: The turquoise waters of Laguna 69, framed by the barren landscape and backdropped by snow covered mountain tops were a sight for your gods and my camera.

The trek back was literally a walk in the park compared to the trek up. Not only was it downhill, but every step was one step closer to an altitude where oxygen was no longer something that happens to other people. With shaky legs and a full day's worth of exercise we took to what in Perú counts as roads, but to us (and especially us road designers and urban planners) were more like potholes interspersed with random chunks of asphalt. Three hours of avoiding the deepest voids later, and we were back at our hotel for a well deserved tomato soup dinner.



BTW, Happy New Year!

But where's Adriana?

The first leg of the trip was coming to an end. A short, ten-hour drive from high Huaraz to low Lima was followed by a final feast with the original passengers. Argentinian meat and ditto wine was on the menu, and after dinner our waiter guided us through the back streets of the Peruvian capital to the poshest hotel bar imaginable, which held opened just for us. After tasting the local spirits pisco, which is made from grape peels, Ross, Anks, Lars and I felt like going even more local and found a Limanese dive. The beers were plentiful and songs were sung.

The morning after could have been the start of a day of shopping. I was hoping to replace my lens, since the autofocus had for reasons unknown given up. I was unable to find one, but Lars was more successful and managed to get hold of both a video camera and a DSLR.



Part II – A journey from Lima to Gothenburg

By the time we got back from our differently successful camera shopping, Drew had left for new adventures and was replaced by the new members of the passenger list: A Dutch couple, a Canadian ditto and an Irish one, along with two Danish friends, two pommies and a Korean girl. Clare took over as tour leader and we all went out for our first group meal. But Ross stayed in bed all day.



The new characters:



Lea – Danish florist with high confidence and the coolest (figuratively) tights ever.



Doug – Farmer from the western part of Canada with a dog that gets kicked around. Married to Pat.



Maja – Accident prone Dane with floral profession.



Gill – Pommie motivational coach who holds the key.



Tim – Dutch musician who can play the drums, percussion and mobile phone. Likes Renate.



Pat– Canadian farmer's wife with artistic inclinations. Married to Doug (the elder).



Renate – Potter from Holland with smooth moves and a liking for Tim.



Cillian – Irish mathematician and jackass. Likes Catherine.



Catherine – Lovely lassie from the Emerald Isle. Likes Cillian.



Cholong – Always happy South Korean who tends to stand way too close to the edges of sheer cliff drops.



Kate – Mancurian PE teacher and awesome choreographer.



Cameron – Still a truck. Still not a bus.

Now, this is podracing!



The new batch got to know our truck Cameron as we left Lima and headed south. First stop of the day was a little coastal town outside Paracas. The idea was to go by boat to Ballestas Islands, but unfortunately the sea was too rough. Instead we got in a minibus and drove into Paracas National Park. Flamingoes, pelicans, vultures and sea lions were on the menu on this park where the desert meets the ocean. Tim sank knee deep in the mud by the shoreline and dropped his



cap in the process. It was later retrieved though, through the aid of a plank and a well-balanced Ben.

After a very tasty sea bass lunch we headed off to the main event. In Ica there's a big and beautiful oasis in the sand dunes, and from there operates Desert Adventures.

We got into a dune buggy and it set off into the desert in ludicrous speed. It felt like I was on Tatooine, and I was half-expecting to see Tusken raiders ride their banthas in single file a distance off. The ride was like a roller-coaster and it was impossible not to laugh throughout. It was recommendable, though, as the air was almost as full of sand as the desert was.



Part II – A journey from Lima to Gothenburg

Suddenly we came to a grinding halt at the edge of a steep slope and braced ourselves for the thrill of a lifetime. Surely the buggy couldn't go down a slope that steep? Well, that was irrelevant, for here came the sand boards! With no prior experience we threw ourselves head-first down the dunes. And how we laughed.

The entire afternoon was spent alternating between thrilling dune bugging and equally thrilling sand boarding, and soon we stopped to enjoy the amazing sunset over the desert.



As night fell, we dug in to an amazingly tasty barbecue and plenty of piscocolas. The group sat around the fire, got to know each other a little better and entertained each other through traditional music from Ireland, Sweden, Korea and Canada. As the metaphorical sandman entered, we simply lay our sleeping bags down and slept in the dunes. I still have sand in my... everywhere, but what do I care? This was all in all a bloody brilliant day.



And I thought Tatoonine had two suns?

Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-Nazca



Long before the Inca, there was the Nazca. Long before geohydrology and hydraulics there were the Nazca underground aqueducts. And long before GPS and theodolites there were the Nazca lines.

Now, the cheapest way of catching a glimpse of the impressive line art is to stop in the middle of the desert, pay the two soles they charge you and climb up the viewing platform. The second cheapest would probably be to get a helicopter licence, buy or rent a decent mini chopper and fly the 500 sqrkm yourself. The most expensive way would be

to take a plane flight from Nazca airport, and that's what I did. 120 US\$ was what they wanted, and even though it might not have been worth such a humongous sum, I would have regretted it had I not done it. The flight offered amazing views of the Whale, the Astronaut, the Colibri and the Monkey, among others, and the pilot tilted the plane generously from both sides, so that everyone in the 12-seated Cessna could get a clear view through the windows.





After the linespotting there was high time for skullspotting. Valle las Trancas in Chauchilla is an old Nazca burial ground. They were highly skilled conservators, and some of the mummies are very well preserved, including skin, mouth and hair. Children were mummified too, sometimes after decapitation. The bodies were placed in foetal position (to represent the circle of life, birth and death and rebirth and that sort of thing) along with their belongings, usually some kind of finely painted pottery and placed in a tomb, with its roof merely a metre below ground level.

Decapitation was also a major point on the Nazca agenda. As their enemies were slain, their heads were chopped off, their brains removed and their eyes and mouth were sewn shut with cactus thorns.

As lunchtime approached, we left the macabre moors and headed for the coast, reaching Puerto Inca in good time for swimming in the lethal waves, playing beach volley and taking a short walk to the nearby Inca ruins in the amazing rock formations.

Yet another night under the stars, and why was there a Batman logo among the Nazca lines?



Ice ice Lady

The second most important city in Perú (after Lima), and likewise the second biggest tourist town (after Cusco) is Arequipa, aka La Ciudad Blanca, so named due to many of its buildings having been built of sillar, a local white volcanic rock. It's located between three volcanoes and is completely Spanish and mestizo in origin. No Inca ruins as far as the eye can see.

As is a must-do, I tried two of the traditional Peruvian dishes here: Alpaca, which was amongst the most tender meat I've ever had the pleasure to taste, and cuy, which might've tasted slightly like chicken, but that's hard to tell, seeing as there's not much meat on it.



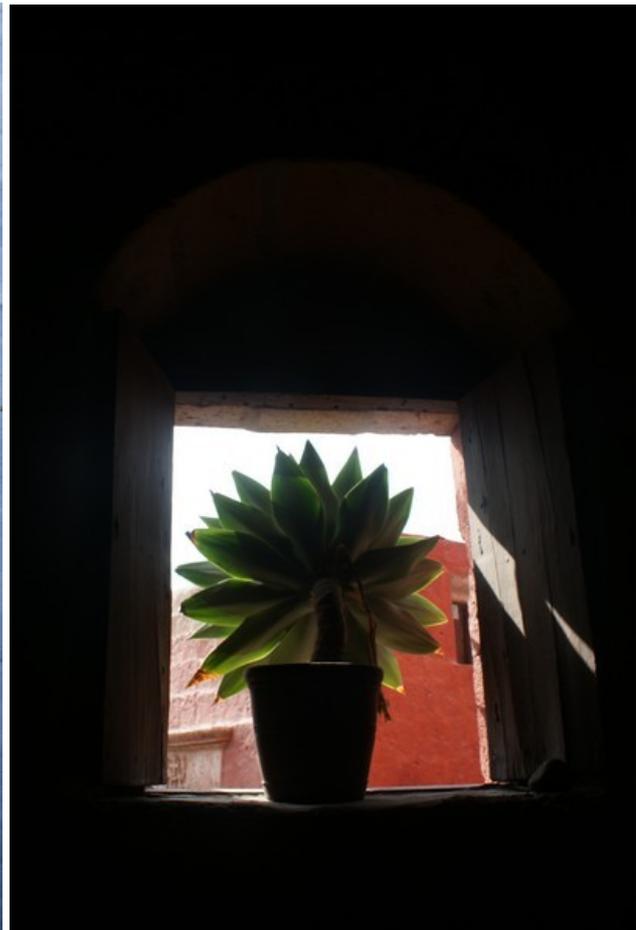
One of the highlights in Arequipa is the Museo Santuarios Andinos, which normally hosts the frozen Inca mummy girl Juanita. However, she was on a world tour, but instead we got to see the equally frozen Inca mummy girl Sarina. Most of the artefacts found high up the mountain of Ampata were on display. The 14 year old girl was sacrificed to the gods after a strenuous trek up the mountain, where she was kept frozen in almost perfect condition (except for her face, which unfortunately had been exposed to the sun) for over 500 years until she was discovered in 1995.

Part II – A journey from Lima to Gothenburg

Close to the beautiful Plaza des Armas (which held a little dance festival in honour of the augmentation of the new mayor) lies Convento de Santa Catalina.



A convent consisting of several buildings of different sizes, narrow streets, flowers and trees and old time kitchens. Every area of the convent is specially colour-coded, and the beauty and timelessness of it all made for many a snapped photo.



The second night ended up being a real party night, as we visited a local nightclub, invented new ways of toasting, improvised the "I'm so Sticky Blues" and came up with new dance moves, including, but not limited to "The Viking".

In case you were wondering, cuy is Spanish for guinea pig.

The bird is the word

Cameron set forth with more than half of its passengers showing strong signs of the night before. Some of them, it turned out, had also become the victims of a tummy-bug. Nevertheless, our guiding star determinately ascended, past 4800 and down into Colca valley, where Chivay, the main village of the region, and likewise our destination awaited.



Next on the agenda was to swim in the nearby hot springs and do some zip-lining from mountain to mountain. But alas, the zip-lining was closed, but there was plenty of hot-springing. That didn't cure all hangovers, though, but the pizza in the evening helped. Four nights with poor sleep had taken its toll, and with the early rising the next morning it was off to bed early as.



The most typical of Andean birds, and definitely the heaviest airborne one, is the condor. In Colca Canyon the majestic vulture nests, and it rises with the up-winds early in the morning. With front row seats by the edge of the canyon and a big tele lens on, the avian artistry caused the camera to go warm. On the way back we stopped at a small village where I happily posed with a llama by my side and an Andean eagle on my shoulder. And woolly hats were purchased.



Home sweet home, part 1



A long drive's day set us from Chivay, through high peaks at 5000 meters, where an impromptu snowball fight took place, and down again to the modest elevation of slightly below 3000, and the hospitable little village of Raqchi. There we were welcomed by a bunch of old ladies in traditional clothing. They were our hosts for the day and night, and off we trotted to different little houses in the little village. Bernard, Renate, Tim and I were invited to the home of Dolores and her husband Raúl. While she was happily cooking



dinner, Raúl took us to the outskirts of the village, where he proudly showed us his patch of corn, potato and quinoa. Using poor Spanish, body language and funny noises, we learnt a bit about their customs and traditions.

After the little guided tour around Raqchi, we were served a delicious dinner of soup, rice and chicken, cooked on a wood-burnt stove. The after dinner entertainment rained out, though, so the dancing, singing and wearing of traditional clothing had to wait a while.

A long nice sleep in their rustic guest room (with stamped clay floor) was followed by a steady home-cooked brekkie, after which we were introduced to the secret art of pottery. Dolores showed the group how it was done, after which Catherine, Kate and yours truly showed the group how it wasn't.



Raqchi was, a long time ago, home to the central reserve of the Incas. A crossroads in the infrastructure and located at an altitude where it was neither too hot, nor too cold, Raqchi made the perfect spot to build storage rooms for food for travellers and tribes in need.

As is convenient, they also provided ancient bathrooms, whose water had a source no one knew. The Incas kept it a secret to avoid their enemies

poisoning the source. Challenge accepted, thought Cholong, Cillian, Catherine, Kate and I and climbed the nearby mountain in search for the elusive source, or, failing that, a good view and some photo ops. As far as everyone else knows, we did not find the water source.

After a delicious home-cooked meal, we dressed up in traditional clothing and danced our goodbyes to the hospitable home owners and set sail for Cusco.



The only way is up

Cusco, an old town with many Inca structures still functioning as foundations for the newer, hispanic-influenced buildings, was the port to the trek that was going to take us through the Sacred Valley, with its main complex, Machu Picchu, as the ultimate destination.

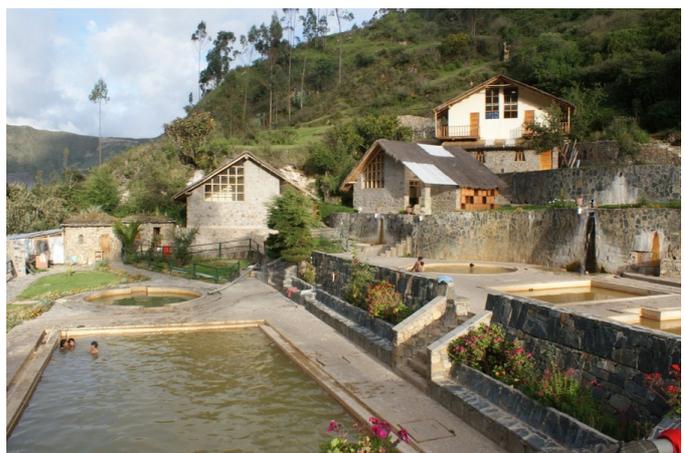


A bit of last minute shopping for hiking gear and a relaxed day exploring town was followed by us setting off by bus early in the morning. First stop was Pisac, the condor shaped sacred city, after which we said adiós to Doug and Pat and Bernie, who figured their 60+ age might be of hindrance on the upcoming four day trek at high altitude. Cholong, Mel&Ben had already set off on a different trek, and so the rest of us set off, walking sticks in hand, with our local guides Rolfie and Fernando leading the way. Way behind us tagged the porters and the mules, who were carrying all our equipment, and even further back a bunch of llamas who were training to become beasts of burden. They were soon to overtake us slowpoking sealevellers, though.

We started at 3800 and trekked up to 4600, and the lack of oxygen and the constant uphill climbing took its toll, but as soon as we reached the peak and a bit downhill I immediately caught my breath, and more or less skipped-to-my-lou to camp a bit down in the valley. The weather changed throughout the day, so the zip-offs, the many layers of clothing and the three soles rain poncho, which happened to cover both the daypack and the camera bag, came in more than handy. When evening fell and we had coca tea after dinner, whilst playing the addictive dice game ambioso, the mercury sank close to zero, and I was extremely glad that I had heeded the tips from cousin Sara and colleague Lina about bringing longjohns.



The next day consisted of, according to calculations, an 8-9 hour trek up to 5000 metres and a bit down. We were woken up with a knock on the tent (?) and served a nice cup of coca tea, before we packed, had brekkie and set out. However, the weather was optimal for trekking; overcast but no rain, and neither too warm, nor too cold. And so, our pace was quicker than expected, and we reached camp just in time for lunch after a mere 6 hour walk through stunning and, in many ways, breathtaking landscape.





The following day was like the first, with rain and sun all mixed together, and we camped right by the natural hot springs, in which we of course soaked our tired bodies. The 1,1 litre beer bottles



were consumed and we thanked and tipped our cooks, porters and mule drivers and got ready for a nice, 4 hour night's sleep. A bus picked us up way before sunrise, but the trekking was in no way over. The, you guessed it, Inca ruins of Ollataytambo were up next. A small, touristy town, with narrow streets and rustique buildings. We were welcomed at one of the homes, where guinea pigs roamed free and they kept the skulls of their grandparents on the wall, along with, for any which reason, a miniature crate of beer and a small dalahäst.

After that we visited the actual ruins, which in this case were in the shape of a giant llama, if you squinted just right. Lars, Kate and I ventured up the Path of Certain Doom, which probably weren't a proper path at all. Man-eating cacti and loose rocks were among the perils, in addition to the sheer steepness of the mountain. But we came back in one, or rather three, pieces, ready for the night's dinner out.

And so, trekking for four days in the footsteps of the Incas, through their sacred valleys, was over and out.

Machu Picchu – Gesundheit

The last day of trekking in the sacred valley of the Incas was of course a visit to one of the contemporary seven wonders of the world: Machu Picchu. The holiest of Inca sacred sites, this was where the pilgrims finished their purifying journey after having been slightly damp in Pisac, cleansed in Ollataytambo and utterly scrubbed (spiritually speaking, of course) in Machu Picchu. The holy site was abandoned when the Incas heard rumours of Pizarro and his band approaching, and the Spaniards never found it. Eventually it was rediscovered in 1911, by that time a barely visible stone collection, overgrown with vegetation and near impossible to spot with the naked eye. Happily chanting 'Machu, Machu Picchu' to the tune of 2 Unlimited's classic eurotechno hit of the early '90's, we got a guided two-hour tour of the royal area, the astronomy section and the religious bits, before feasting on our packed lunch of tuna and rum.



Some of us set sail for Sungate, Bloody Sungate in the pouring rain, but soon enough there was high time to head to the little town of Aguas Calientes, from where our train would leave. Cold and damp we found a little restaurant that served us hot chocolate and rum and we came up with drinking names for the entire group. After a few revisions the complete list looked as down further.

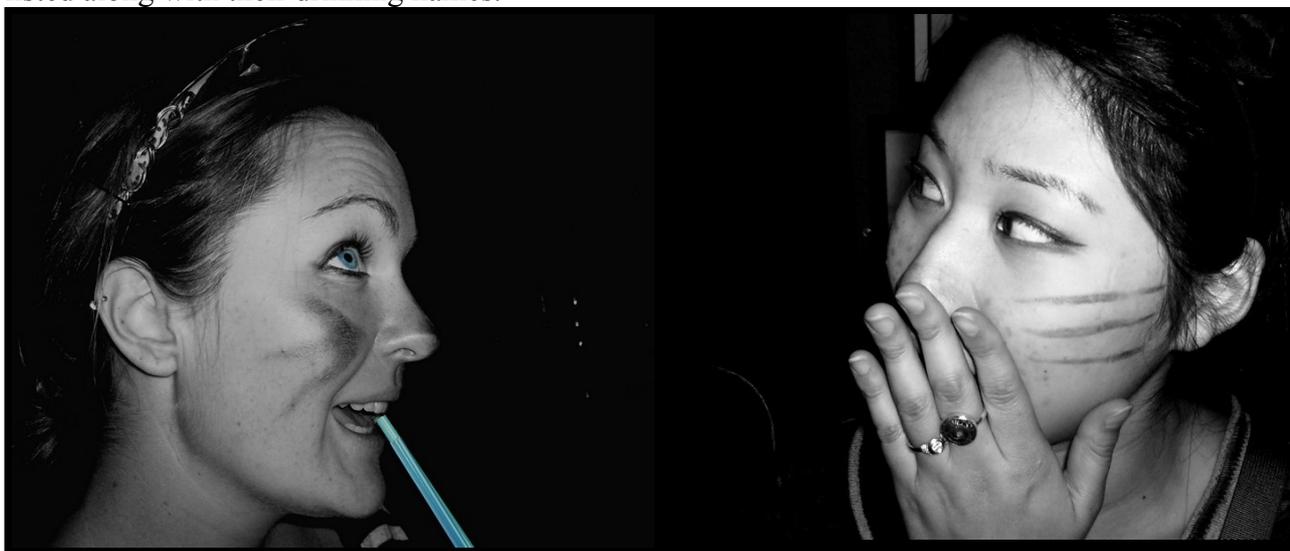


We arrived back in Cusco close to midnight, and everyone buggered off to bed, to be rested for next night's big dress-up party, to which we were supposed to come dressed as anything beginning with the same letter as their first name. A big brekkie was consumed, after which we set out to the dodgy 'burbs, where some of

us played football against the locals. I tended the hooligan section along with Catherine and the Danes, and soon it was high time to get masquerade supplies. As the Irish and I also were in charge for next day's eatery, some grocery shopping needed to be done.

I bought a black shirt, used its collar support as a priest's collar, fashioned a Holey Babble from a pocket book, some red paper and a gold pen, and headed for the party as Martin the Minister (or possibly missionary). People had put mind and effort into their costumes, and best was probably Ben, dressed up as baños (Spanish for bathroom), complete with floating pieces of faeces made from painted insulation. Pat the Painter and Doug the Doctor were in character all night, and played

their roles brilliantly. My babble quotes were a constant source of amusement (or possibly annoyance) and fun was had by all, especially Kate. The characters of those who went partying are listed along with their drinking names.



Guinness at Paddy's, me trying to sell my crappy compact camera for booze, dancing at the bar desk, all the hallmarks of a good party, and not a single thought on the ten hour truck ride, debarking time 6 o'clock the next day. Just as it's supposed to be.



Grey puma

By the shore of the world's highest navigable lake lies Punos. In the lake itself floats several reed islands, and we went to the island known as Khana Uru on that last full day in Perú. After being told how the Aymara people of the lake made their floating islands, Kate, Cholong, Katherine and I were welcomed into the house, or rather reed hut of Norma and her husband. A trip by a Ra-styled reed boat was improved, or slightly disturbed, by a young boy screaming songs in different languages at the top of his lungs.



After buying some tacky souvenirs we headed back to the shore, and whereas most of the overlanders took a bus back to the hotel, Lars, Kate, Cholong and I decided to take a tour in one of the pedal boats. Choosing the dragon-shaped one over the swans, Donald Ducks, Godzillas and pelicans, we pedalled our crazyboat across the still waters, before having a delicious trout lunch. We got some tricycle taxis to take us back to our home and set out to go to a totally different country: Bolivia. The border crossing went without any glitches for most of us, but the guard thought Cholong was from North Korea, and insisted on her going to the embassy in wherever to get a visa. Anks came to the rescue and explained to the border police that South Korea is indeed not the same country as North Ditto.

We arrived at another lakeside town, this one called Copacabana, rather late in the evening and headed for Fatima's for dinner. Afterwards Ross, Lars, Cillian and I went for one beer at Nemo's. Well, one beer is impossible to have, so before you knew it was 4:30 and an Argentinian guy suggested a game of poker along with the barkeep, Tom the Pom. 6:15 was the time we went back, and the boat to Isla del Sol embarked at 8:30.



Of course, we couldn't go straight home. The giant anchor sculpture by the lakeside was way too climbable to ignore, and thus the night ended with a photosession of 'The Wankers on the Anchors'. Not with my camera, though.

The rain was pouring down, and the inside of the boat was jam packed, so we had to sit on the sunroof. Nevertheless, after two hours of cold and rain we arrived at the island on which, according to legend, the sun and the moon were born. A brisk hike to some Indian ruins was followed by a series of magic rituals, in which my co-travellers placed stones in what our local guide insisted was the mouth of a cliff shaped exactly like a cat and bathed their faces in holy water.

After the religious nonsense we set out on a 1,5-2 hour trek, that turned out to be closer to three hours. The peaks just kept coming, and as Clare insisted that that particular peak was the last one and it was downhill from then on, she promised me a hot chocolate with whisky upon return to town if there were any more peaks to climb. There were.



Eventually we came back, had the best and biggest pizza in Bolivia, I claimed my hot chocolate with whisky, which Clare happily provided, and took an early night, eager to get ready for the next day's drive to La Paz, my last driving day of the trip.

The lake's name is Titicaca, and it means grey puma in Aymara.

The peace

The highest capitol city in the world is La Paz, at roughly 3600 metres. As my final destination drew ever closer, I started writing the night's speech, but alternated with a few games of Shithead. After six weeks on the road, most of us had at some point suffered the fate of being the shithead. Some had even been jackass candidates (shithead twice in a row), but up until that point no one had been a complete jackass (shithead three times in a row). As the heads-up began between Lars and the jackass candidate Cillian, the suspense was extreme. When Lars finally played his last card and Cillian was made jackass, the cheering knew no limits. And just then we drove into La Paz.



That first night in the Bolivian capitol was also the last of the Lima-La Paz leg, so we all gathered at the penthouse diner. As this was also the end of Clare's test drive as a tour leader, and as she had two university diplomas (acting and law) but never been to a graduation, Doug & Pat had come up with the idea of making a faux graduation ceremony for our cheerful cicerone.



Anks was the Dean of Dragoman, Doug was the Chancellor of the High Incas, Bernie was the Buddy of Excellence, Lars was the MC and I was the representative from the Swedish Nobel Institute, as well as the night's guest speaker. Pat had made a mortarboard for Clare to put on, and ceremonial scarves were worn. Doug the younger had made a diploma, and Clare was presented with that, flowers and a speech by yours truly. A glee-style dance number, choreographed by Kate, completed the ceremony and never have we seen Clare happier. Another crazy night followed, as we hooked up my Spotify-equipped laptop to the sound system, let everyone add whichever music they pleased, and danced the night away.



And Catherine started to burn Lars' hat, but was stopped just in time.

A quiet day followed. Tim, Renate & I decided to go shopping for some small but thoughtful gifts to accompany the tips we intended to give our fine crew, along with Ben & Mel. Cuba Libres in PET-bottles and with hot babes on the label seemed suitable, as well as coca tea, Sublimes, and of course the tips, all of which were presented in an in no way gift-wrapped cardboard box.



A city tour on a bloody tourist bus gave the gist of La Paz, and it's nearby Vale de Luna was an interesting site. A visit to Avenue Mariscal Santa Cruz/16 de Julio (La Paz's main avenue) and some flag shopping at the witch's market completed the Lapaceñan experience.

I went mountainbiking down the world's most dangerous road...

...and all I got was, in addition to a not in the least lousy t-shirt, a full day of adrenaline-inducing activities, good fun, and all possible weather conditions bar sandstorms.

A bunch of us decided to tackle what is commonly known as the most dangerous road in the world outside of La Paz, so named because of its frequent fatal accidents, its width of roughly 4,5-6 metres, its utter lack of railings, its ill-maintained dirt surface (at places undermined by the erosion of waterfalls), its solid rock walls on one side and mostly its sheer, 300-600 metre drop on the other. Lars, Kate, Cholong, Ross, Catherine&Cillian and I were the ones willing to risk life and limb on the Andean infrastructural botch job.



We started by taking the bus up to some 4600 metres, and put on as much clothes as possible while still operating a bike. In the gently falling snow we plummeted the steep, still asphalt-covered and wide roads, at 60-80 kph, overtaking bi and lorries in the process. As we descended, the snow stopped and was replaced by a thick fog, which later turned to rain. My at first freezing feet were warmed up, as my Converse, when sufficiently soaked, served as some kind of wetsuit. The rain stopped as we started our 8 km climbing section. Biking uphill at 3300 metres elevation is not as walk-in-the-park as you might think.

After the climb, the tarmac took one route, and us the other. The steep, narrow dirt roads had begun, and the lack of fences and the non-lack of random rocks added to the fear factor.



Downwards we swooshed, with certain doom on one side, certain banging into solid rock on one and a certain risk of being ridiculed by the others if going to chickeny. The altitude shrank, the vegetation increased, the temperature rose and the waterfalls grew ever more frequent. Eventually we were riding in nothing but t-shirt, shorts and the mandatory vests and helmets and found ourselves in an animal sanctuary in the jungle. A jungle which we zip-lined across. Superman style.

The bus ride back up was even scarier; the bus was at places just slightly narrower than the road, the sheer 600 metre drop was more poignant than when cycling down. And the information our bike guide had withheld earlier he now relayed: That on just how many cyclist had died on the road since it opened for gravity assisted mountain biking in early 2000. The whole day was bloody awesome, and a perfect end to the trip. As my former co-travellers boarded Cameron at ridiculous o'clock next morning, I was there to say farewell. Hugs and kisses. I went back to bed after which I set sail for Sweden.



As the plural of cactus is cacti, and the plural of platypus is platypi, so must the plural of bus be bi.

Home sweet home, part 2

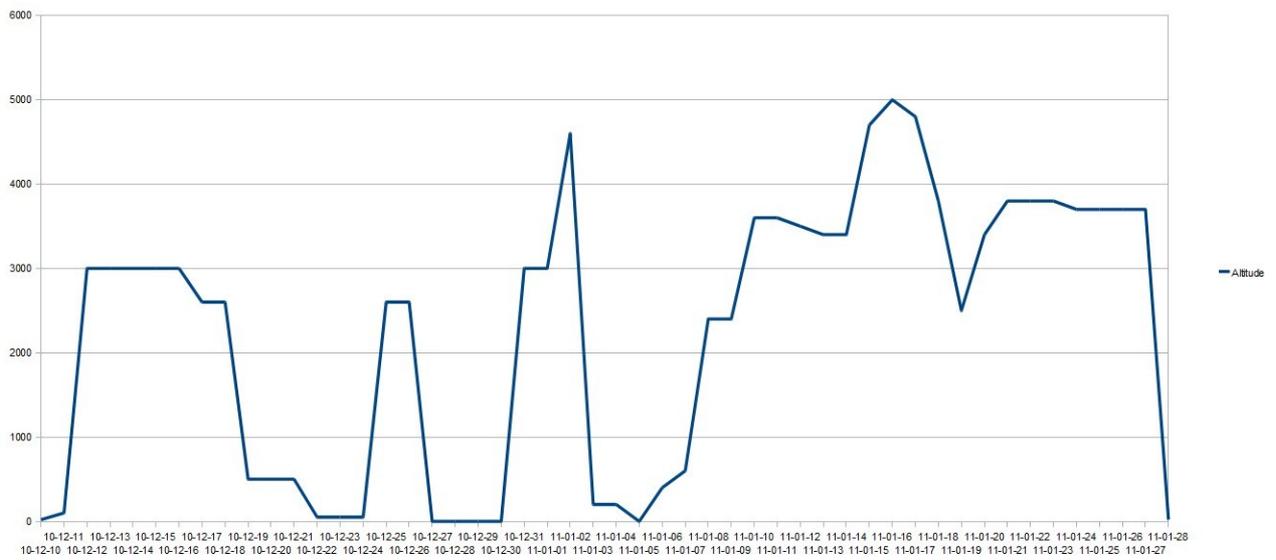


Ticket problems, some bloody box under the seat in front of me, an impromptu visit to Amsterdam, a lack of working wifi and no mobile were some of the keywords that could describe the journey home. Better then to focus on the frequently used phrases during the awesome Dragoman experience:

- Buddies!?
- Bloody Swedes...
- ¿Baños?
- Can someone please point at the shithead?
- Is there alpaca on the menu?
- Ross has been in bed all day.
- Let's go for just one beer.
- Jugo de piña, por favor.
- Are we there yet?
- Mh-mh-mmmmh!
- Gonads!
- What altitude are we at?*
- Cockney Whore!
- Santas on the attic, owls in the swamp, no cow on the ice etc...
- Don't go so close to edge, Cholong!
- Can someone please point at the jackass?
- Peel.
- We're at 3700 metres. That's roughly 8400 smurfs.
- ¡Rapido!
- Drive drive drive the truck.../Smoke smoke smoke your fag.../Variations thereof
- Inca, inca ruins... (to the tune of No limits)
- Pisco, pisco sour... (to the tune of No limits)
- Machu, Machu Picchu... (to the tune of No limits)
- Hands on the table!
- Is a tomato a fruit or a vegetable...
- Visa pattarna så får du popcorn!
- Sungate bloody sungate
- There is no spoon.

*)That can be answered by using the not at all geeky profile sheet enclosed belowish.

Part II – A journey from Lima to Gothenburg



Thanks all of you who contributed to making my stay in South America the best trip I've had the last year. Definitely top 30!

Part III – The Backpacks

To summarize, I have a tradition of handing out awards in different categories. The Backpack recipients of 2010/2011 are:

Backpack	For...	...and the backpack goes to...	Other nominees:
The Cotton backpack	....best accomodation	The Peruvian desert	Homestay in Raqchi
The Plush backpack	....best transport	Cameron	The bike down the world's most dangerous road
The Glass backpack	....best hang	The local dive in Lima	The nightclub in Arequipa
The Rubber backpack	....best adventure experience	Gravity assisted mountain biking down the world's most dangerous road	Dune buggying and sandboarding
The Brick backpack	....best city	Cusco	Arequipa
The Granite backpack	....best landscape	The Andes	The Jungle
The Terry backpack	....best swim	The natural pool and waterslide in the jungle	Hot springs at the end of the Community Trek
The Fur backpack	....best nature experience	The Jungle	Condor spotting
The Khaki backpack	....best guide	Anks, Ross and Clare	Pedro
The Silver backpack	....best eating	Baby Alpaca	The Meatballoff
The Malt backpack	....best drink	The first beer after my cipro cure	Hot chocolate with whisky
The Gunpowder backpack	....best fireworks	Those provided by our resident pyrotechnician, Baby Jesus	
The Celluloid backpack	....best photo	Dead dude in Valle las Trancas	Snow covered mountains, blue sky and a llama skull in the foreground
The Jade backpack	....best cultural experience	Homestay in Raqchi	Eating bugs in the jungle
The Nylon backpack	....best backpack	My day pack	
The Velour backpack	....softest experience	Punta Sal	
The Calico backpack	....best surprise	Clare's graduation party	
The Magma backpack	....hottest chick	I'd hate to single anyone out, but... Clare	Everyone else
The Vinyl backpack	....song of the tour	Sungate, Bloody Sungate	No limit (with various different lyrics)
And last, but not least....			
The Gold backpack	...best experience in total	All the wonderful people	The Community trek



Hasta luego!