

A South American Voyage

By ROGER LEVESQUE

In the true tradition of youth many of us will feel yearnings for travel, we will try and experience new worlds and cultures even if it is just for a short time. This week's feature deals with a travel experience unlike your average European vacation, a cultural route that carried this traveller to the vast and majestic continent of South America. It is my hope that this recounting of events will atune more people to the beauty and accessibility of a South American vacation.

The first time this traveller went to South America was in a controlled group atmosphere. Canada World Youth is a cultural exchange programme for young Canadians aged 17-21, the trip is entirely paid for by the Canadian government and is aimed at cultural interaction. Although my experience was limited to one country (Bolivia) the experience was invaluable. In this type of environment the traveller gets to interact with natives in their communities; learn their customs, language and culture, all the while getting better acquainted and more understanding of this foreign environment. This experience for me was valuable but at the same time limiting in its scope (i.e. one country). After returning to Canada I pledged to once again travel to South America, this time on my own and not in a controlled atmosphere.

I returned to South America one year later, this time with a friend in the hopes of seeing more of the continent. In our travels we visited Costa

Rica, Honduras, Panama, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and the Carribean Islands all within 15 months. It is important to note that I had a knowledge of Spanish (which is important) but my partner had none. Within six months he was able to communicate in Spanish. A command of the language is necessary to a truly fulfilling experience and some advance study is advised. I think we were very lucky in our travels since we saw both extremes of social class in South America, we stayed with some very poor families and some very rich, learning the structure of South American society, a society much different than our own.

As a reference guide we used a travel book entitled: "The Road To South America," which can be found at any bookstore. It helped us out a lot at first, because we were not well acquainted with South America but as we moved on we used it less and less. The book offers, lodging, food prices, which cities and historical sites to see, climate, methods of travel, diseases to be found, etc. It is strongly recommended to gain a foot-hold in your travels.

As one begins to travel in South America you become more comfortable with the environment. Along the "Gringo" trail as it is called, you continually meet other foreigners whom you can share the experience with, this can also aid in broadening the cultural experience.

Once we got started I found the most effective method of travel to be by transport truck (this may not appeal to everyone). This is because these trucks travel to remote areas to pick up fruit and

vegetables, then return to the cities and markets. You can virtually travel for nothing if you help load and unload the produce. It can be a dirty travel but also fulfilling to see areas off the "Gringo" trail. If this does not appeal to you the trains offer a great cultural experience, especially if you travel with the natives and not "American" class, you may share the coach with chickens, goats and pigs, but you will also meet native folk. Immediately one begins to see that South Americans have a different concept of time than do North Americans, if you set a meeting at 10 and arrive at 12 you are right on time!

The highest train in the world goes from Trujillo to Huancacho, Peru, crossing a high point in the Andes to the coast. Most people when taking this train, bring along

with them, as I did, a bag of coco leaves which reduces altitude sickness. Without these leaves the discomfort would be substantial.

There are two extremes in South America. One could find lodging in a major city, eat 3 meals daily, and visit all the cultural and historical sites for \$12 American per day (1981) but a true cultural experience is awaiting beyond the city limits, one that should not be missed. I will not say that nobody in South America will try and harm you, generally most people you meet (and if they realize you are Canadian) will do most anything to ensure that your stay in their city, or village is pleasant and eventful. Everywhere we went we had people put us up, feed us; show us around, just for the simple fact that they enjoyed the contact as much as we



The ruins of Machu-pichu, one of the most awesome attractions in South America at 6,000 feet in the high Andes.

did. Pride and nationalism are seen everywhere, South Americans with all the political strife are some of the most patriotic people you will meet.

While I was in LaPa, Bolivia, I had the chance to witness first-hand a political Coup. A curfew was set at 11:00 and anyone caught on the streets would be dealt with by the authorities, although we were safe in our Hotel Room, we did witness atrocious acts of violence. Most people found in the streets were rounded up and brought to a local stadium where they were forced to play soccer all night long (under surveillance on crushed rock with no footwear. As I noted, however, these acts of violence can be avoided if you obey the laws and curfews. Most natives in Bolivia that I spoke to apologized to me for the

condition their country was in. Because of the pride and patriotism they held they didn't want "Gringos" to think their pride and such was in vain. Like anywhere in the world each country has its problems to varyig degrees. Very few of us Canadians know just how good we have it here until we witness other less fortunate state oppression. The "coup" was quite scary for a person who is used to political stability like myself.

Of all the historical sites that we visited Machu Pichu was definately the most exhilarating. The legend goes that when Pizzaro (the Spaniard) was conquering South America his biggest rivals were the Incas. When the leader of the Incas saw they were losing the battle he had all his wives, about 15000 of them between 12-25 sent to this recently built

city in the Andes; at about 6000 feet in altitude. Castrated guards were sent with them to carry and feed these survivors. This city later became known as the "Lost city of the Incas" because it was not found until 1911. This city, at one time, had running water, irrigation and medical practice far advanced for such an ancient civilization.

The city is found not far from Cuzco, Peru. To arrive their today, one must take a train directly to it or hike the Inca trail which takes about five days, over three mountain peaks. I took the trail and must say it is one of the most spell-bounding experiences around. All along the trail (which once was a beautifully engineered cobblestone road.) can be found ruins from these ancient Incas.

The city itself is absolutely spectacular (witness photo spread above). On the fifth day, you must walk down over a peak into the ancient city. As the morning clouds disappear you can begin to see the ruins below, the grounds are inhabited by herds of Llama's and Ec Paca's and the Sacrafice Tower can be seen in the distance. This ancient city is a lost reminder of a once great civilization and is nothing short of breath-taking.

For those that do enjoy higher comforts we were lucky enough to run into an American millionaire in Ecuador who needed a crew to help him sail back to Miami. He hired us for \$50.00 a week, bought our food and taught us how to sail. We ventured from Guayaquill, Ecuador on the Pacific Ocean through the Panama Canal into ports in Columbia, Costa Rica

and some Carribean Islands, on to Miami in comfort. It was kind of a nice way to finish a year's back-packing.

As I stated earlier a traveller in South America need never be alone. Most travellers follow a route called the "Gringo" trail. The reason why it is so well travelled is because on this course most foreigners will see many of the great attractions of the continent. It starts in Mexico, moves through Central America and goes right to the tip of Argentina. If one travels this route there will be very few problems. The people are used to seeing Gringo's and other travellers are always on the path. For myself it is most interesting to leave the beaten path and venture into more primitive areas for a truly rich cultural experience. For example we travelled along a few small rivers heading into the mighty Amazon. This was quite interesting because the people are different from the Alti-Plano, who are the mountain dwellers. These people are far removed from the political happenings in the cities, they live a slow paced, easy existence, practising subsistence living, isolated but content.

As a final aside I strongly encourage those with the desire to "see" the world to travel to South America, it may not be as comfortable as a European vacation but the experience is as fulfilling as one can find in our world. If one is willing to travel with a back-pack and endure a little discomfort this world offers the best education to be found, one that cannot be price-tagged but will remain with you forever.