Buenos Tardes. I'm Lyn Jarvis, Contributing Editor for Across the Fence and today our show comes to you from South America and the amazing country of Peru. Before we begin our adventure, I want to tell you about the local drink down here. It's called Inca Cola and it can be purchased just about anywhere… and no it doesn't taste a bit like the cola at home. As you can see, it's yellow, it's very sweet, but it does have a lot of caffeine and I'm going to need a lot of that for this journey.

The gateway to Machu Picchu is Cusco, the historic capital of the Inca empire, now a UN World Heritage Site and one of the most important tourist destinations in Peru. Dominating the "Square of the Warrior" is this statue of Emperor Pachacuti, (Pah-ch-koo-tee) creator of the Inca empire. He chose Cusco as his Imperial city and designed it to reflect the strength and beauty of his Inca heritage. Everywhere there is evidence of its rich and complex history, representing the contrast of their culture and Spanish colonial.

Lyn Jarvis: A wake up call at 4 a.m., a bus ride at 5 and at 6 a.m. a train ride, and then another bus ride that wound its way up a narrow dirt road, we have finally arrived at Machu Picchu at 8 a.m. Standing here looking out over Machu Picchu is, definitely, one of the highlights of my travel adventures. Built by the Inca's in the 15 hundreds, at an altitude of almost 8,000 feet, it's hard to capture in pictures, but I'll do my best to show you its history and grandeur as we look around. And what could be better than being greeted by llamas, sure footed and agile, they have been used as pack animals since pre-Hispanic times and can carry up to 80 pounds. It was animals like these that helped Hiram Bingham, an assistant professor at Yale University, to bring Machu Picchu to the attention of the world with his discovery on July 24th, 1911.

Rising out of a thick tangle of undergrowth with a maze of terraces and walls, it's the Inca's most splendid accomplishment that had been hidden from the outside world for nearly 400 years. "It fairly took my breath away," he later wrote, and this icon of the Inca world now beckons some 2,000 visitors a day. Hidden high in the Peruvian Andes, it was the royal retreat for Emperor Pachacutxi, that testifies to the Inca's masterful building skills with its precision cut stones and perfectly placed terraces and religious sites. To create such a masterpiece took time and many strong men. By using a shrewd mix of diplomacy, intermarriage, and military coercion... no one dared to attack them.
When there was hint of insurgency, the able bodied men were brought to places like Machu Picchu to work the quarries and move stones to build their architectural treasures. When the Spanish arrived in Peru, the last inhabitants of Machu Picchu drifted away and with its remote location, the invaders never found the sacred site. I asked our guide Teddy Mendoza why the Incas left.

Teddy Mendoza / Tour Guide: Different points of view. Absolutely. The first one and I consider this one very traditional is because the Spaniards. They were moving and expanding trying to capture the king and the other on is the civil war between two brothers fighting for the kingdom. The last one which is even more important for me is diseases. Because they weren't good sailors and they get into Panama in the 1520 approximately. During the excavations or research at Inca sights our archeologists found shells not from this part of South America. Even feathers that we don't have here. We have some pieces but not like those ones. In that process of years by years entered diseased to this part of South America. Obviously they didn't know. This idea of degasses came with this expedition. We don’t have as much info as I told but George Eaton one the Archeologists He says that they abandoned this place because disease.

Because of steep paths and hundreds of stairs allowing movement from one level to another, and especially the thin air, one has to be very careful when exploring here. We don't have time to look at all the structures, but here are some that I found most interesting. In the sacred district is the Intihuatana stone pointing directly at the sun during the winter solstice. Literally meaning "the hitching post," for the Inca's are said to have tied the sun to the post to keep it in place along its daily path through the sky. Many consider the Sun Temple the most impressive building here. Built in a semi-circle it is 35 feet in diameter. When the sun of the winter solstice enters through the central window, it falls directly on a ceremonial stone, out of respect for Inti, the Inca sun god.

The Incas perfected hillside farming and grew bountiful food supplies and thousands of their terraces continue to be used for local food production. Their storage and distribution of water is another engineering marvel. By gravity, it flows through a series of channels and works as well today as it did hundreds of years ago. And just maybe I discovered something that will give archeologists something to ponder. To me, this looks like the head of a rabbit set carefully in stone. Our guide said he had never noticed it before.

Back in the small town at the base of Machu Picchu we had a late lunch while listening to some talented musicians and I was happy that all had gone so well. (music)

To get to Lake Titicaca we traveled through remote and baron countryside and along the way we were fortunate to meet many of the local children. Our first stop was Raqchi, about 70 miles from Cusco, a remote mountain town, where the villagers had their beautiful crafts on display in the small plaza. They have no electricity or electronic devices and take great pride in the crafts and clothing that they design and create.

After shopping we made our way along 500 year old walls to the archeological site. More than 150,000 people a year, come to see the Temple of Wiracocha, another important Inca construction. Its 328 feet long made from mud bricks built on a volcanic stone foundation and thought to be the largest single roof structure in the Inca Empire. And then we heard children, a small group at first, who were quite shy and probably wished I wasn't taking their picture. But then, down an ancient stone path came dozens of them and being with their teachers, they felt
secure and were happy and spontaneous. Since our travel group wore nametags, many of them were intrigued by my short 3 letter name, pronounced "Leen" in Spanish and they whispered it as they passed by. Such happy children with so little...it speaks volumes, doesn't it?

My most cherished memory of Peru happened at this elementary school not far from Lake Titicaca. I don't often mention tour groups that I travel with, but today, I am making an exception. The children, dressed in hats and uniforms provided by Gate 1... were there to greet us. The company had suggested that we help by bringing school supplies such as paper and pencils. This is Richard who was selected to represent the school because he is a nice guy, gets excellent grades, and is a good dancer.

Our Gate 1 guide Washington, gives some background:

After a heartfelt thanks from the principal, we distributed our school supplies. I chose the 2nd grade. Their teacher noticed I was a little emotional as I handed the notebooks and pens to her and she replied "What is a moment of happiness for you is a lifetime of happiness for these boys and girls."

Adios, mi amigos. With the help of Gate 1 and tourists from around the world, you will get a good education and with hard work and dedication, your dreams can come true.

Lyn Jarvis: This is Lake Titicaca, on the border of Peru and Bolivia, high in the Andes, at 12,500 feet above sea level and believe me, you don't dash around here because the air is very thin...but we are going to meet one of the amazing civilizations that I have ever heard about.

In the afternoon sun it was very impressive with Bolivia there in the distance. Lake Titicaca is the highest navigable lake in the world and the largest in South America. Recent discoveries indicate that massive Titicaca has been inhabited for thousands of years and is now home to the Quechua and Aymara Indians, both here long before the Incas.

To them, the lake is sacred with powerful spirits deep within. For it was here that Viracochua, the creator deity lighted a dark world by having the sun, moon, and stars rise from the lake to occupy their places in the sky.

And from nearby came Mallku Kapak and Mama Ocllo, the first man and woman, their Adam and Eve, who were commanded to go out and populate the world...familiar stories aren't they? Some 100,000 people live in Puno crowded into less than 2 miles of flatland between the shores of Lake Titicaca and the mountains. By walking slowly, it's an interesting place to explore on foot. This is Lima Street, just for pedestrians, that's full of interesting shops and restaurants. Puno is considered the "Folkloric Capital of Peru" because of its artistic wealth and cultural expression, particularly in dance, and we sat on the steps of their cathedral to watch a splendid example of this... and we'll see that later.

Remember that I mentioned that we would be visiting an amazing group of people? To get there we went down to Puno Harbor that's full of boats to bring people to the Floating Islands of Uros. With the help of our guide Washington, we found our boat and climbed aboard. It was a spectacular morning, and at this altitude, the air was dry and clear. As unbelievable as it sounds, the Uros Indians live on floating islands that are made from totora reeds that grow in abundance along the shore.
The original idea was defense so the islands could be moved if a threat arose and it wasn't until some 35 years ago that they first came to the attention of the modern world. Several hundred pre-Incan people still live on the 40 some islands and only boat to Puno for business transactions, shopping, and school. Only a few islands, however, are set up to receive tourists while the vast majority of Uros people live in continued isolation and peace, far away from the rest of the world.

The family on the island we visited was anxious for our arrival and they were most hospitable. Since it was a school day, only the adults were there to greet us. Walking on the island made from reeds was like being on a giant sponge and at any minute you could fall through a crack, never to be seen again. I peeked into their small kitchen and there on the table, the dishes from breakfast sat waiting to be washed. I'm sure they'll get to it as soon as we leave. And this is the bedroom…I wondered if they sleep in shifts as it is so small, they must have superior dispositions to all get along in such close quarters.

We were greeted by the president of the Island who told us that there were 14 extended family members living here and he went on to explain how the islands are constructed. When dried, the root of the tortora reed floats like a cork and that is what keeps the islands afloat. The roots are bound together in large blocks like this… that are attached to 10 logs that are towed in from the mainland… which creates a floating foundation that will last for up to 30 years. To keep the islands from drifting to Bolivia on a windy day, 7 anchors are used that are at a depth of 350 feet.

What a fascinating and remote part of the world and I'm pleased that you could explore along with me. Now back to the mainland to enjoy some of that music and dance that I mentioned earlier. We were lucky to be in Puno for a competition sponsored by the Instituto Tecnico Superior del Altiplano along the street in front of Cathedral. The event started at 4 p.m. and lasted until well after dark. It was a big party and a good time for all. I particularly enjoyed seeing the children dressed in their Sunday best, and those beautiful braids. Now let's sit back and enjoy the performances by these young dancers and musicians.

(Music)

Some amazing things here in Peru, aren't there? I have to give the ancient people who lived here a lot of credit for what they accomplished and to those who preserved it for us to enjoy centuries later. I hope you have enjoyed these highlights of Peru. I'm Lyn Jarvis for Across the Fence, here in Puno, and it has been my pleasure to be your guide to some of the historic treasures in Peru, South America.

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