



## IN SEARCH OF PACHAMAMA

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LOCATION: Peru

*The frozen grass crunched beneath my feet as I moved around trying to find the best position to frame the view. The first rays of light were slowly sneaking their way over the snow-covered peaks in the distance, and the direction we were heading. Bare legs meant I didn't hang around for long, quickly snapping a few images before racing back to the van for the final part of the journey. The excitement was building as I looked at the surrounding landscape, ready to tackle the new 'must do' adventure on the already-impressive tourist list of Peru.*





THERE ARE THE obvious attractions that Peru is known for; Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley, the many Inca Ruins and Lake Titicaca further south, but we'd already locked these in for a few weeks' time. The game plan for Cusco was to spend the week relaxing and soaking up the culture, staying healthy (which also meant limiting the alcohol intake), daily yoga and morning runs exploring the streets. We wanted to be in the best shape possible before heading to the Amazon Jungle to compete in the Beyond the Ultimate Jungle Ultra.

You only had to walk the central streets of Cusco to figure out what was popular with the tourists, as business operators did their best to sell you everything from adventurous day excursions to massages at "Special price only for you pretty ladies." It didn't take us long to become curious about Rainbow Mountain though, a one-day hike from Cusco, hidden deep in the Andes Mountains. Sitting at 5,035 metres (16,520 feet) we were warned to wait at least three days once arriving in

Cusco to help with the acclimatisation. After some research online, we settled on Action Peru Treks to guide us on our mid-week mission.

After a three-course breakfast and too much coffee in our pop-up tent, we were itching to get moving and not just because the sun still hadn't reached us at the bottom of the valley. We were a group of seven for the day; Sabi our guide, Santos our 'cowboy' and his horse, Francisco and Rosario our chefs, Hilario Dias, an Inca Shaman who we would eventually leave at the top, my travel buddy Jacqs Manson and me. Finally, we were off!

With a 1,000-metre climb ahead of us, it definitely wasn't a race. We knew fitness wasn't going to be an issue but had heard stories about the effects of altitude so we just cruised along at a steady pace, taking in the beautiful surroundings and learning as much as our limited Spanish would allow.

Slowly we gained altitude, passing basic stone dwellings, which were home to the Quechua people, believed to be

direct descendants of the Incas. These people continue to live as their ancestors had centuries ago, with very few influences from the modern world. We shuddered at the thought of sleeping in these houses overnight as temperatures dropped well below freezing; one of the many times during our trip when we were thankful for living in the modern world. We were assured the introduction of Rainbow Mountain as a tourist attraction was a good thing, providing an extra source of income for the locals who until now had relied on the land as their primary source.

They farm alpacas and llamas, using every part of the animal to enable them to survive in this harsh climate. The wool is used for clothes, hides are used for sandals, the meat is eaten, and the faeces are fuel and fertiliser. We were only too happy to pay a few Peruvian Sols for their bathrooms too (even if they were long-drops) and Sabi informed us our cowboy had travelled by foot for a couple of hours that morning to join us for the day, earning extra income to support his wife and children.



About two-thirds of the way up I could feel the burn not only in my legs, but also my lungs. Sweat was appearing on my forehead as I called for a quick break to regroup and refuel. I was feeling OK, but the altitude was letting me know I was no longer at the sea-level I was used to at home. We passed other hikers and they passed us, but slowly the top came into view.

We left our cowboy and his horse on the last flat section available, and as the terrain became steeper, the landscape became more surreal. The intense colours of neon reds, electric yellows, and soft blues now surrounded us, created by the different minerals found in the soil. It was as though it shouldn't exist in reality – a world that until now I had only imagined in the pages of Dr Suess. We stood in silence soaking up the surroundings, not quite able to believe this was real life, before making the last push to the top.

The 360-degree view was well worth the effort, even if we had to wait our turn to take images without another tourist in the frame. However, the wind kept the

temperature in the low single-digits, and it wasn't long before we headed back down slightly to keep warm.

We were leaving our Shaman at the top, who was then carrying on to his village a few valleys over. Using our guide as the translator, we were told he wanted to give us a blessing to protect us on our future travels. In the Andean traditions of Peru, a Despacho is a ceremonial offering to Pachamama (Mother Earth) and the Apus (Mountain Spirits). The intention behind a Despacho Ceremony can range from something as noble as world peace to an offering of thanks for a bountiful harvest, or even something as personal as relief from joint pain.

We escaped the rest of the tourists and followed a goat track around the side, stopping behind the mountain on our left. Crouching down on the snow and using the rock as protection from the wind, we sat mesmerised watching our Shaman set about preparing this ritual. It involved gathering a selection of symbolic offerings, which included incense, maize, boiled lollies, beads

and flower petals that he'd carried up with him. Each item was placed on a large sheet of paper with great care and attention, arranged in a mandala-like shape. Prayers were blown into small bundles of coca leaves and added to the offering as well.

Building up the Despacho took some time, and we watched patiently as he continued his ritual and prayers before we were invited, one at a time, to do the same. The leaves were handed to us after they had been blessed, then it was our turn. It's an opportunity to focus on areas of your life where you feel you need support or you can simply just ask for a blessing. I do not consider myself a spiritual person by any means, but the experience was incredibly powerful and the enormity of the moment was not lost on me. After handing the coca leaves back, the mandala was complete, and the bundle folded, closed and tied up. Finally, it was then ceremoniously burned while we turned our backs to the fire to allow the spirits to 'eat' the offering in peace. The incense took the prayers up to the Mountain Spirits,





leaving any heavy energy behind as ash for Pachamama to consume and compost, transforming into fertile ground for new endeavours.

It was now time to leave our Shaman and begin the journey back down the valley towards the van, retracing our steps and collecting our cowboy on the way. It was a relief to be heading back as I was starting to feel a bit average, with a dull ache making itself known in the back of my head. I told myself I just needed to lose some altitude and I'd come right. I'd been above 5,000 metres before and been fine, plus I was so fit and healthy, right? Surely altitude sickness wouldn't affect me. Wrong. So very wrong.

Boom! By the time I was two-thirds of the way down, the dull ache had turned into a serious headache, even with the help of some Agua Florida (flower water), a liquid herbal medicine that our guide had poured into his hands, then made me inhale deep breaths of through my nostrils. I wasn't sure if it

was the headache or the intense scent of the cloves in the medicine that was making my eyes water, but I did know I wasn't in a good place.

And it only got worse. I finally arrived at the tent where we had had breakfast and sat down to another three-course meal, this time, late lunch. I managed to force down some vegetable soup, but that was the best I could do, opting to head outside and curl up in the foetal position in the sun. Another round of Agua Florida was on the menu instead, offering only a small moment of reprieve. All I wanted was to go home but our tour included lunch, which along with breakfast were the only jobs for our chefs for the entire day. Luckily Jacqs stepped up and forced down as much as she could to be polite, while I lay motionless on the grass outside.

After what seemed like an eternity I heard our guide suggest it was time to get on the road. Finally, just get me out of here. If this is what a migraine is like, I honestly don't know how

people make it through. I shuffled my way to the van and lay face down like a starfish while everyone else packed the equipment away around me. While in these situations I always think the worst, but our guide didn't seem fazed at all, obviously having seen it many times before. I wasn't too sure if that was comforting or not.

Slowly the wheels beneath me started to turn, and we were on our way back to Cusco. My eyes were closed, and I couldn't even reply to Jacqs when she tried talking to me. What a shit travel buddy I was. But she did rub my temples, and I did my best to inform her that what she was doing was heaven.

All too quickly we stopped, having been on the move for a maximum of five minutes. There was a lot of Spanish being spoken, of which I understood zero. After a period with still no movement, I forced one eye open to see a group of Peruvians in the middle of the road. What the heck? I turned to Jacqs, who looked at me





with a sheepish smile, “We just have to wait here for a bit while they pour the concrete for the road.” Yes, for real. They were making the road right in front of us.

Because Rainbow Mountain was a brand new tourist attraction, with tours only really starting within the last few months, the infrastructure wasn’t quite ready for the number of vehicles now heading up the road. I could only laugh. Because the only other option was to cry, and that was no use to anyone. Peru at its best.

With a convoy of vehicles now behind us, we started to move and carry on our way, but again it wasn’t long until we came across another group of road workers, this time placing a culvert across a ditch. At this stage, I didn’t know if I was Arthur or Martha, but I did recognise that taste in my mouth just before I spew. I jumped out the door, not caring in the slightest as I

felt many eyes burning into my back as each vehicle behind us slowly made its way past.

After some big deep breaths I slowly got back in the vehicle and thankfully there were no more stops. My eyes were firmly closed, but I heard every gasp and swearword that escaped Jacqs’ mouth as we went far too close to the cliff edge, or were overtaken by vehicles on a road clearly not made for passing. I’d been previously warned about these roads; maybe it was a good thing I couldn’t open my eyes!

I had my Suunto watch on, which informed me we were at 4,353 metres when I’d dragged myself into the van. Fixated on the numbers, I watched them slowly decrease as we made our way down the valley floor, dropping more than 1,000 metres over the following hour. The intense piercing in my skull was slowly subsiding. Maybe I was going to survive after all.

The next thing I knew I awoke to darkness and city lights, a solid hour-and-a-half sleep later and we’d arrived at the outskirts of Cusco. The headache had downgraded back to a dull thud, and I could finally join in on the conversation that Jacqs was having with the rest of the crew.

What a day, for the best and worst reasons. But don’t let my sickness put you off, if you find yourselves in Cusco looking for an adventure, then make sure Rainbow Mountain is on your list.

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Hollie Woodhouse is based in Christchurch, New Zealand, but is always day-dreaming about her next adventure. She is the queen at justifying reasons to travel to new places, so she can create more content for this magazine!

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