

GLOBETROTTER

An enchanting, exhausting trek to the Incas' lost city



Delaware native Claire Bushey is traveling around the world on her own.

Nine days ago I finished hiking the 27-mile Inca Trail in the Peruvian Andes. I no longer stink, thanks to the hot shower at my hostel, a luxury unavailable on the trail.

I decided to hike the *Camino del Inca* long before I realized what was involved. (This is how I start most of my projects.)

The trail winds through mountains and cloud forest, sometimes following the original stone road built by the Incas, the indigenous people who ruled an empire stretching from Colombia to Chile before losing it to the Spanish conquistadors 500 years ago.

It ends at Machu Picchu, the "Lost City of the Incas" discovered in 1911 by American explorer Hiram Bingham. The site, abandoned by the Incas for unknown reasons, contains temples and a sundial, causing experts to speculate it functioned pri-

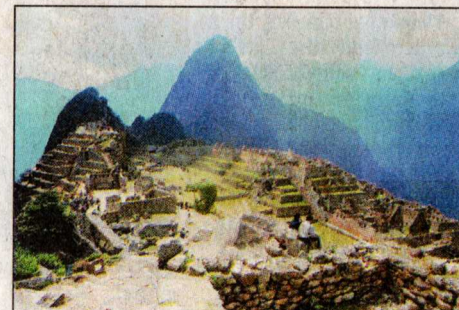
marily as a religious center.

The trail's highest point, "Dead Woman's Pass" in English, reaches 13,000 feet. That's almost half the height of Mount Everest. But I figured plenty of fat and sweaty tourists hike the trail each year, so I could too, right?

Actually, no. The five other hikers in my tour group were decidedly fitter than I; there was even a personal trainer from New Zealand who carried his backpack all four days.

I, being an idiot, also carried my pack for the majority of the trip because I was too cheap to hire a porter. Tour companies hire these men to carry camping equipment, a service also available to the feeble ... for a price.

The mountains we walked on the first day were green with eucalyptus trees and the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus.



AP file

The ruins of Machu Picchu in the Peruvian Andes.

Snowy peaks framed the horizon beyond the Río Urubamba. I was enchanted.

On day two I was concerned less with scenery and more with breathing. The path

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led straight up through thinning air. I sweated through my shirt – the only one I had with me – but at every break the chill reminded me of the altitude. Meanwhile the porters zoomed by with their impossible loads, backs bent like beasts of burden.

My tour company billed day three as “unforgettable.” I’ll say.

That day I discovered coca leaves. You stuff a wad in your cheek like chewing tobacco and suddenly you have hours of energy. During the conquest, the Spanish gave it to Indians slaving in the silver mines so they could work longer without food or rest. Sometimes they dropped dead of exhaustion.

I just kept walking.

“I feel so good right now,” I yelled at one pass. “God, I love coca!”

“And that right there is why it’s illegal” in other countries, replied a fellow hiker.

Our group raced the sunrise to Machu Picchu on the final day. We ran up steps so steep I used my hands to climb. Through the Sun Gate, the ruined city appeared below, floating amidst the mountains like a pearl in the jagged smile of a monster.

I tried to imagine what Bingham must have felt almost a century earlier when confronted by the same view. Perhaps he felt a greater sense of wonder and reward.

Perhaps.

Claire Bushey is a freelance journalist who worked for The News Journal before leaving for her grand trek. To contact Bushey, go to www.clairebushey.com.