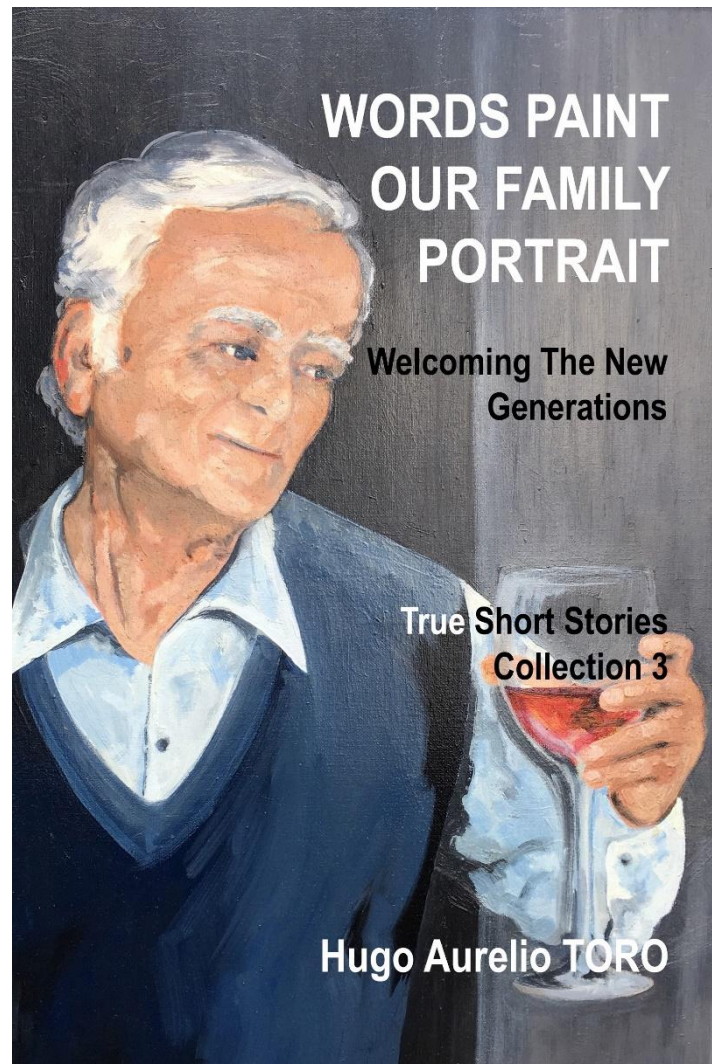


A short story from this collection.



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3.3) The Elevating Inca Trek

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



The four of us (Drina, Hugo, Elisa, and Nina) feeling triumphant - Machu Picchu 2011.

Whether it was a desire to experience unique locations, or part of our culture calling us to a place of origin, it was unclear. It happened, that on more than a few occasions, my eldest niece had discussed with me, a trip to Machu Picchu. We are not Peruvian, yet there was a pull.

The Inca civilisation fascinated us. Latin America has a terrific Indigenous culture spanning 13,000 years, followed by the Spanish conquest in the 1500s.

Drina and I are decided and started to make travel plans. Gecko Adventures offered a comprehensive four days and three-nights guided tour on the Inca trek. The tour includes a guide, a mule and four porters who move ahead of the group to set up tents and cook meals at midday and in the evenings.

Two other nieces, Nina, and Elisa, heard about our proposed trip. They wanted to join us. I felt that a group trip would be fun. We are a close family, but naturally, I worried about group safety and security. I'm a mature person and speak Spanish, so that was a good starting point.

I secretly worried about my fitness. Drina was a fitness instructor in Canberra in her mid-twenties. Nina and Elisa were active young people. I was a public servant, on the fat and lazy side. My right knee is swollen and painful from a football injury. The lunchtime public service competition was certainly fierce.

In all honesty, I feared that at fifty-one years of age, I would not complete or even survive the trip. I can make excuses and pull out, but in a moment of courage, I realised that this trip was important for us all.

This tour starts in Cusco, Peru, where we are to acclimatise. We then walk the Lares Inca Trek up to 4198 metres above sea level. Gecko rated the fitness level as 'demanding.' There was so much to consider when trekking at low oxygen altitudes. I heard that headaches can be unbearable and the exhaustion incredibly draining. People who give up must be lifted out by helicopter.

Our plan also included two weeks in Santiago Chile, visiting our family. I have relatives there. My nieces will gain from knowing where part of their heritage arises.

We purchased our plane tickets plus the national park entrance tickets to the Lares Valley and Machu Picchu heritage sites. Our sense of excitement quickens as we realised that we are going to witness this rich Inca culture in person.

Santiago Chile

In October 2011, our trip begins at the Sydney International Airport. There are seemingly endless lines of passengers checking in to leave Australia for wonderful destinations. We find our airline and take our place in the queue.

In Santiago, we stay in a comfortable hotel in a nice district by the Tobalaba metro station. In my childhood city, we visit family, and they welcome us warmly despite the years that have passed and the new faces to be introduced.

We visit tourist sites and markets rich with local goods and art. For security reasons we go everywhere together. Chile is a progressive country, yet poverty can still motivate people to be opportunistic. The mantra is to be alert, so we agree to keep our valuables close, walk with purpose and always look people in the eye.

My nieces are fondly referred to as the Spanish girls, and they turn heads. Guys stop to photograph them at the airport and in the streets. I find this disrespectful, so I confront one of the fellows in the main square who is following us. He unleashes a barrage of insults at me in Spanish, which confirmed my suspicion, on his intentions. Fortunately, my nieces do not speak Spanish, and the swear words do not register.

I'm making tourist bloopers in Santiago. I enter the country unknowingly as a Chilean citizen, not an Australian. The Chilean government has granted expatriates dual citizenship without there being an application process. Consequently, my Australian passport is ignored. The next day, I explain my situation to the Chilean consulate in person. I'm with my three Australian nieces in the office, to show that I'm in fact an Australian resident. The lady at the consulate is refreshingly accommodating and corrects my entry issue with an exit letter from her.

In Santiago, I also stuff up my departure time for Cusco. It is at 4 AM not 4 PM! We make a mad dash for the airport in the dark with barely any sleep. We can only take backpacks with us. Since the office is closed early in the morning, we left our luggage in the hotel room with a note attached, 'please store on our behalf, we will come back for our luggage.' We put our trust in the cleaners.

With the 9/11 terrorist attack fresh in our minds, I half expected our luggage to be disposed of by the bomb squad.

Cusco Peru

In Cusco, our hostel has the appearance of a dated mansion. Behind secure gates is a large three level property. Antique furniture decorates the entry and lounge area.

There is another Australian trekker staying at the hostel. Around the breakfast table, we hear stories from him about unfit fatties holding up the group. He is looking at me when he said that, so I suck my stomach in.

We walk to the artisan markets, churches, and historic sites. The mix of Indigenous and Spanish culture is evident in the architecture. Cultures are meshed in a brutal Spanish conquistador past. The building foundations are generally of Indigenous origins and the buildings sitting on top are Spanish. This stacking of cultures sits awkwardly in my thoughts, *was it an attempt by the conquerors to take a commanding position over the top of the original inhabitants?* We purchase Peruvian gifts for the family in the tightly packed market stalls. At least in the markets, native arts and crafts dominate.

With purpose, each evening we contact relatives back in Australia. We want to register our location with them at any point in time, should we run into trouble. In the back of my mind is the recent kidnapping of tourists in Peru.

A young Australian couple at the Cusco airport took what they believed was an official taxi. They encountered kidnappers seeking ransoms instead. After that kidnapping, the Peruvian airports increased security, and they only allowed registered taxis to enter the airport grounds.

Lares Village

Trek Day 1 - Daylight begins to creep over the city and we wait to be picked up in a van. The driver makes his way up a winding mountain road for about eighty kilometres. Sharp bends take us close to steep drops and the driver is not slowing down. We reach our destination, the Lares Village, in the early hours.

Our guide is to meet us at a local bar. It is empty since it is too early for clients. The pictures of half-naked ladies on the wall provides confirmation that this is an adult entertainment place by night. From the empty Guinea Pig cages in the courtyard, we deduce that a delicacy was served here last night. Our guide is a young fellow working as a tour guide while studying. He

first takes us to a fruit and vegetable market. It is suggested that we purchase a bag of Coca leaves to chew on. We are told that it is good for headaches.

The walk commences with a gentle climb on a dirt road past stone farmhouses. Small children dressed in multiple layers of mismatched clothing come out to meet us. We share our energy bars with them. We walk up the track in constant chatter. The mule and the porters make their way ahead of us to set up camp at the end of the day.

By late afternoon, we are feeling the effects of altitude and are exhausted. We reach a small village where our tents have been set up. The locals kindly let us use their communal toilet. It consists of a timber shack in an open space with a hole in the ground. Being the soft tourists that we are, makes us unimpressed with the facilities, but we appreciate the kind gesture from the locals, nonetheless.

A healthy Peruvian meal is prepared for us with a tasty mix of rice, vegetables, and meat. Thankfully, there are no little furry delicacies that night. We get to know the cook and the team. They are humble and friendly people with facial features typical of this area and reflective of their long Indigenous heritage. We then retire to our tents for a much-needed sleep. We can hear the porters talk and laugh into the night. A distant wedding is being celebrated with megaphone loudspeakers echoing pop tunes off the mountainside.

The night is cold, registering a chilly minus nine degrees. We feel the bitter temperature but are too tired to care. To make things worse, we are told not to venture out of our tents at night. The locals believe that there is a monster that will catch you and feed on your fat. I would be the yummiest one in our party.

Trek Day 2 - After a breakfast meal, we are back on the Inca trek. The gravel road narrows and gradually transforms into a winding track. There is a noticeable absence of animals like llamas, so I ask the guide about this. He tells us that beyond this point the oxygen is too thin and the animals are smart enough not to go any higher. Hmm, what does that say about us humans? We trek all morning up the winding and damp track.

Our level of fitness is showing as we spread far. Drina and the guide are a kilometre or so ahead. Elisa is hot on their heels and trekking strong. At one point she even overtakes them to lead the group. I'm falling behind with Nina, and we are feeling seriously ill. We sit on a rock for a while. Humour comes to our rescue when we discuss our exit options, including on a stretcher in an ambulance. It is dry humour, but we laughed at ourselves and gathered the strength to walk.

Indigenous adults and children, pass us at a steady pace and disappear over the next crest. Children use this track daily to go to school. Vendors loaded up with goods on their backs also pass us with speed. They set up camp up ahead to sell soft drinks and llama wool clothing.

Dead Woman's Pass Or Warmiwañusca

By lunch time, we reach our highest peak 4215 meters above sea level, called Dead Woman's Pass. My legs can no longer carry me, and I drop to the ground, lying there like a starfish on my back. The guide rushes over and instructs me to get up.

'The frozen ground is dangerous and will zap heat out of your body. You can die there, get up' he said. We must rest on our feet instead.

The view from here is mesmerising and haunting. Behind us is the steep and misty climb from the valley, beautifully framed by large mountain boulders. Ahead of us is the gentle decline past icy cold lakes. A kilometre or two over the peak, we stop for lunch in a clearing and identify Inca stone markers. These are made from volcanic rocks that are stacked up waist high with purpose. They were used for navigation and other indicators by the Incan civilization. If you look carefully at the ground, there are sharp stones. Among the rocks are carving tools and arrowheads.

Lunch is a blur, and we press on along the track. Our heads are pounding, and our kidneys and bladders are confused. Nausea is overtaking our senses. In a trance and pushing past our personal limits we reached camp at about 5 PM. We are told by our guide that we are on schedule. We are doing far better than past trekkers.

I skip our meal feeling exhausted, dizzy, and ungrateful. In my tent I fall into a deep sleep bordering on unconsciousness. Our sleep is only interrupted by the mountain air and the night wakes us with its cold touch.

Trek Day 3 - The whole of the next day we are gradually descending along a track cut into the side of the mountain. It narrows and becomes ever steeper to our right.

At one point, the path has been washed away by rain. We stop to size up the danger. The rocky path is barely a foot wide with a cascading drop to the right. We can see treetops below. There is no handrail or barrier between us and a vertiginous deadly drop.

The Ruins Of Phuyupatamarca

Houses appear on the hillside, and the guide points out a village known as ‘the town above the clouds’ in the far distance. This is our destination for the day. In our state it seems to take forever, but we eventually reach camp. We are set up on a level and grassed football pitch. The toilet facilities on the grounds look more current with real toilets. What a treat.

We have a laugh with the porters and take photos. I suggest for the photos that we replace the ‘say cheese’ with something more Latin like ‘say pichi.’ Despite the exhaustion, there is still time for a dad joke, and I get a laugh from the porters. We give them the remaining Coca leaves in our bags since we have not overindulged. They show appreciation because the leaves are of high value to them.

The Town Of Aguas Caliente

Trek Day 4 – The walk commences with a comfortable downhill walk that follows the river’s edge. The morning goes quickly, and at midday we arrive at a town named Aguas Caliente. Known for its hot water springs, it is located at the gateway to Machu Picchu.

Our hotel rooms are small but comfortable with proper beds and an ensuite bathroom. This is a real luxury after three nights spent in tents. The town looks modern and is buzzing with tourists. Drina and I head for the hot water springs and sit around, soaking up the warmth. It is a relief to let our muscles relax. Nina and Elisa rest at the hotel instead and go on to explore the town centre.

The guide asks us for one hundred US dollars for the hire of the sleeping bags. I’m doubtful but go along with the request. It is a tip for the young man who looked after us well. He follows me to the teller machine on the main street, keen to end the tour.

Machu Picchu

The next day, fully rested, we board a bus to the historic Machu Picchu site and spend the day exploring the ruins. We walk around fascinated by the remains of the dry-stone buildings, sacrificial altars, water canals and cropping terraces. With my untrained eye, I see that generations of Indigenous people were at work on the stone structures, each applying their own stone cutting craft differently.

A real sense of tranquillity and connection with the past, comes over us at this historic site. We sit on a high vantage point to take it all in. The mountain ridge across from us is dotted with ancient buildings. Beyond them and all around us are steep and forested mountain ranges. For a city that was inhabited around the year 1450, it still has a strong presence amongst its impressive mountainous surroundings.

That late afternoon, we board the train back to Cusco. This is a relaxing train ride through the mountains following the river downstream as it widens and cascades. There are humble farms and stunning mountain views unfolding with every turn.

Back In Santiago, Chile

Upon returning to our hotel in Santiago, we reclaim our luggage and stay two extra days. We are totally surprised at the honesty of the cleaning staff. They have stored our luggage safely based on a simple handwritten note from us. Chilean hospitality gets a gold star.

We visit all our relatives one more time and say our goodbyes. Quite possibly, and because it is an unavoidable fact, we may not meet again. The elders are aging, and this party of travellers is from the other side of the world.

Our adventure does not quite end in Santiago. The icing on the cake is our last stop.

Auckland, New Zealand

On our return trip to Australia, we stay in Auckland for a further three days. Drina continues to Australia with family commitments.

The remaining party of three are feeling fit and healthy in Auckland. We have shed unwanted weight on this adventure and are strong. During the day we walk everywhere exploring the quirky shops and restaurants. A day is spent immersing ourselves in the wonderful Auckland Museum. It is rich in history with its Mauri and Pacific collections.

By night, we are so energised that we even set out on evening jogs in the city. We could never imagine having the fitness to do that, yet here we are, ten kilos lighter and jogging in the city.

To explore further out of town, we book a mini tour bus. A chauffeur driven visit to the wine district hits the spot. The day becomes giggly with wine tasting followed by a pleasant lunch at a well-known vineyard. Feeling tipsy and elated from, the adventure, family reunions, and stunning locations, we find that this is the perfect way to end a holiday adventure.

The trip taught us an important lesson, and that is that sometimes you have to say ‘YES’ to challenges and adventures in life. Seeing something unique and spectacular from a past world is enriching. With the completion of the Inca trek and the physical challenges that went with it, we all feel an elevated sense of personal achievement and pride.