

Seven days of Service to Andean Incas

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I always wanted to see the Inca Ruins, and walk up the mountains of Machu Picchu. Surekha had shown interest to join our dear friends Dixits in a Masala Cruise in Alaska. While we tentatively planned for the same, I decided to trace details on Dr. David Kreir, and his organization, Volunteer-Vacations. I had received several emails from various volunteer recruiters but this one seemed more attractive to my volunteer spirit. Surekha agreed to look in to and join if OK. She does join me in most expeditions, unless she is needed elsewhere. I discussed the entire itinerary with David several times and googled for more info on all the locations and all those involved. One physician cancelled out because of potential health problem. We would be working at 15000 feet high hills and will be exposed to cold while we are there. There would some climbing, walking up the hills, hiking trails. All that excited me more, but chronic osteoarthritis in my left knee and need to use unloading brace made me conscious. All our friends including family discouraged us about High Altitude sickness and possible fatal effects on brain. But Kreir insisted, not to worry, he himself had been to these hills over 20 times. The mining company he is contracted will bear all the expenses, except domestic flights from home to Miami plus \$1200 per person. We stocked up with Diamox, Zithromycin, aspirin, Vibramycin, and other first emergency drugs. We carried heavy winter clothes, while Surekha took lots of Indian Masala, Chutneys and snacks.

There were some alterations and scheduling changes, which seemed ominous but I insisted to take chances. I am not getting any younger to keep postponing our ambitious projects. We had too many luxury cruises, attended easy tours and travels. We needed some adventures in our life, also some satisfaction of serving poor and needy.

A young Hispanic very much pregnant lady at the Delta counter at CVG airport and her cheerful smile relieved my personal anxiety. She is a Peruvian American. I felt inside that "It is going to be one wonderful trip," In spite of several hours of waiting for next connecting flights we did have a pleasant and uneventful trip to Lima, capital of Peru. At Lima we were greeted by young Peruvian associate Lidia Ruiz. There were two other volunteers from west coast on the same flight. Dr. Kreir will join us a day later. He does not need to acclimatize for high altitude.

We four volunteers spent most of night July fourth 2010. We waited for next connecting flight to Cusco till 6 am, while USA celebrated independence with cheers. Julio received us at Cusco airport. We all checked in at Hotel Royal Inka in downtown Cusco, later that evening we would be taken to a branch hotel in PISAQ which is at 1200 feet lower altitude than Cusco. That was needed for high altitude acclimatization. Region around Cusco, PISAQ, and Machu-Picchu is called Sacred Valley. Since it is surrounded by high mountains, and the valley itself is at 8000 to 11000 feet above sea level.

We forgot our exhaustion and enjoyed touring many of ruins, markets and touristy sights. Our best that day was taking leisurely stroll in the wild animal sanctuary. This non-profit organization rescues wild and rare extinct birds and animals from local poachers. Some very rare but beautiful birds were rescued from over stuffed pipe. They seem to be in great demand overseas. We took pictures with Llama, wild sheep, cattle, Andean Condors with wide spread wings. Some rare birds and animals were a treat for us. We could see a Puma from a distance. Our tour guide decided to take us Saqsaywaman and other worthy ruins while our return trip after a scheduled medical camp.

Tourist Lunches seem very popular in most expensive restaurants. It includes a drink, salad, main course, and a desert. Surekha always had difficult time selecting her Indian Veggie meal. She not only avoids all the meat, egg and fish products, also she does not like mushroom, avocado, certain cheese, and milk products. We enjoyed most all the meals in Cusco, Lima, Machu Picchu, and other towns.

After a much appreciated shower and rest for the night at this very affluent resort hotel in Pisac and a sumptuous breakfast, we got ready to catch our 40 seated Luxury Van from Cusco. There were 7-8 other volunteers to join us for this entire week. Three college students from Ariquepa Peru, Sergio, Roberto, and Mateo were best addition to our small medical staff. They were most helpful in talking to patients. Most, almost all speak a local tribal language Kechua, which is further translated in to Spanish then to English. Actually each physician and even a triage officer that is Surekha needed two persons to help get the needed info from these patients.

David said this 55 mile long trip across 4 high mountains usually takes 6 hours in a pick-up truck or a 4 wheel drive. The organizers Minera Antares, a Canadian Copper mining company, had rented a new and very comfortable 40 seated luxury bus for us. They all expected us to reach at the camping area by dinner time. 14 persons and our baggage were packed in less than a half of the bus, leaving rest of it for us to sleep and stretch.



Winding road thru' high mountains and valleys in between was narrow and rough, recently fallen debris and piles of land on the road during rock-slide every few miles made our bus to be careful but very slow. Driver would get off the bus every few miles to clear the road and also check tire pressure. Loose pebbles would somehow fit into rare two tires and took hammering to remove. The ride was extra careful and cautious. But was indeed thru' very scenic mountain range and picturesque valleys, made us stop several times to have a good look and take pictures.

Luckily we packed enough water and snacks, Surekha had variety of Indian snacks too. Small villages and houses of farmers were seen in the hills which were very primitive and lacked many amenities. There were no places to eat on this road. As it got dark and sun had set beyond the mountains, travel became too tiring and all the fun and charm of the ride got sickening. 6 hour ride took over 12 hours, the mining company got worried and sent a lead vehicle to guide the bus still the ride was not any faster. Our 6 hour trip started at noon, finally we reached past midnight. Cafeteria was kept open for us with warm dinner.

Mining camp was stationed in the very remote hills at a height of 15000 feet above sea level. And it was cold, since it's a winter time in the south of equator.

Housing was arranged separate as men and women. Surekha and Barbara, a certified nurse shared a small room, pharmacist Deb with Lidia, there were some other nurse and a dentist in other rooms. It was equipped with a common bathroom in the same building.

All 8 men were housed in a double Decker 24 cot Army type thick double layered tent. Toilet and baths were built in a smaller congested tent nearby. These were dirty wet and cold, they were used by other employees including kitchen staff. I was not able to shower and shave regularly.

Good thing we had taken daily dose of Diamox ever since we landed in Cusco. We had enough warm clothing. We all dressed in layers, to keep ourselves warm. I got short of breath even with a small walk from toilet to my tent. Going uphill even 10-15 steps would leave me breathless. I had to do several minutes of deep breathing exercises, Pranayam to be able to function. I did not want to resign to lower levels, and stop from I came here for. Later I found everyone was having similar symptoms. I had to wear an unloading brace for my arthritic left knee under my pants that made walking further slow.



We got ready to visit a nearby village early am after a sumptuous breakfast. The bus was loaded with pharmacy trays, dental drill and a generator. Distance was hardly 6 or 8 miles but being very slow and cautious the bus took over an hour. Mine authorities decided that the bus keep idly parked from next day. But the driver was kind enough to be interpreter, since he does talk Kechuan and Spanish languages. He was a great help to us. Since most tribal Incas in the hills do not even speak Spanish.

But food supplied by Minera Antares during our 7 days medical camp in the hills was not very palatable and a too large amount to make us feel guilty to throw. Language barrier made it impossible to get proper meal, Surekha tried unsuccessfully to invade the kitchen one time. She had to put up with what she could surf thru her bowl. Fortunately she had brought enough pickles and chutney.

First clinic our team held was in a tribal village called Pararani. It is a small town in the hills (pop 200) within the district of Chaulhuahuacho. While teachers at the village school, local volunteers and few young interpreters cleared a classroom and set up seven plus distinct tables for a pharmacy, registration, triage person to take vital signs, etc. a dentist and psychiatrist and

three physicians. Teachers and social workers must have done a good public relation job. All patients came in soon after our arrival from nearby villages, small huts and lined up for exams and treatment.

Minera Antares is a multinational copper mining company. Many copper and other mineral mining is done by Chinese companies. This company had several Argentinean Geologists. Company seemed careful to establish good public relation among the poor tribal Incas living in these remote primitive villages. In their provisional exploration good amount of copper deposits were found within a 500 feet deep. Second stage exploration is being done at bigger scale. They will be doing deep mining rather surface mining.

Public sympathy and good relations are essential for success of any good company. At one of Rotary International meeting Dr. Kreir was approached by mining company asking for medical help. Our team was invited to help in that cause. They want to be good to us providing all the amenities possible in the situation. Geographically it's a very beautiful and pleasant, clean, pollution free location, but it is in the cold mountain top at high altitude.



In the morning session I examined over 25 patients, while Dr Krier and NP Barbara only 10 each. Poor Surekha had to take vital signs for all who registered. Small healthy looking kids were given supply of vitamin, worm medicine and Vaseline. Afternoon session was much better organized, people showed up after Lunch. Our lunch boxes were delivered from the mine, while villagers cooked their meal consisted of roots, rice and potato soups. I took long stroll and sat on a rock admiring the god's creation. It was very clear day with a view for miles beyond mountain range with a calm clear blue sky above. I thanked Mother Nature for it.

First day was over and with great satisfaction to all. We returned to the camp site long before darkness fell in the hills. Some of ran for surfing on internet. Some showered and shaved. I took a nap.

At each clinic Lidia entertained children with soap bubbles, while Barbara with help of two interpreters demonstrated right ways to lift, walk, squat, bend down and other small things to avoid injuries. She had a very funny and jovial way to explain this. Some must have lost in interpretations, but villagers, men and women enjoyed a little demo. Mateo and Rosita were very good in showing these postures and demonstrate to the villagers. Demand for pain medicines was remained high in spite of these sessions.



While this was going, Sergio showed some interest in Eastern Indian, Hindu and Buddhist culture to Surekha. She pointed his attention towards me. I am as always more than happy to explain what I understood from my spiritual reading of Bhagwat-Gita and other books. I told him real inner meaning of very first word, Om, Nirgun Niraakar Creator Brahma. Sergio knew Gayatri-Mantra. He asked for its meaning. I explained the details of the spirit, his creation, of the universes beyond our universe and planets. Hindus believe in this Creator beyond all the millions of universe. He is responsible for creating all this, including a theory of rebirths and death such as big-bang and black holes. We consider all living beings on all these planets are related. He asked me about Vedic philosophy of Hinduism and present day traditions of rituals and blind faiths. He seemed satisfied with my response.

At 7 pm we all ate in the kitchen same, large bowl of soup, large plate of rice, meat and beans, potato and bread. Local Labor staff seemed to enjoy these meals, while we all shared chutneys, and pickles Surekha had brought. Nights were most peaceful and pretty but cold. We could see the bright stars within Constellations in the south Hemisphere, none of us could identify or name any. The Milky Way was widest and brightest among all I had seen in years of nights in various open skies of numerous tribal locations.

Next day clinic was at Lahuani, even much smaller town with very small school. Principal was still asleep when we arrived. This time we were in a four wheel drive, while supplies were in a pickup truck. That saved us much travel time and agony. Nature looked wonderful, with clear, blue and open sky at this village. It's a photographer's paradise.

Surekha spent every leisure moment taking pictures of clean, clear, cloudless, skies, vast treeless mountains covered with dry tundra grass, beautifully dressed women and children. Most women carry their infant on their back in a well-protected wrap. All men and women tightly wrap

their mid back with a heavy thick belt, to prevent any backaches. They do not use, can't afford to have any eye and skin protection from bright and strong sunlight. Most have solar dermatitis.

Next three days were similarly spent in different villages. Our young, pretty and petite Peruvian Dentist seemed very popular. She managed a large numbers of open mouth illnesses. She extracted more teeth and drained more tooth abscesses as our days progressed. Our next visits were to village of Choccoyo, Huanacopampa, Cchuanhuiri, and last was at Record all in the same district.

Record is most pretty among all the villages we went. It is situated on a small river bank. I felt a desire to white water rafting at that wild, turbulent river, It must been very cold. Actually past two days the temp went down below freezing and our camp site became unbearable to me without central heat. And hot showers.

At Record clinic was held at a health center, as we performed our service, some officials distributed 100 sols to each individual, all women with children were given baby food, milk and vitamin. Each family was given sac of rice potatoes. This was done in a very organized fashion.

At the end of our 5 days and six clinics we had seen over 687 patients, vaccinated hundreds with Hep-B, and drawn blood for RPR, HIV from all the potential employees at the mine, given vitamin, worm medicines to all kids and women. Everyone seemed happy and thankful. Minera Antares official were very satisfied and requested us to return again and again to help their public relation efforts.

On 14th July 2010 we loaded our things and remaining supplies and headed for Cusco, a Sacred Valley. We hoped our travel time will be about 6 hours as predicted. But I am sorry, we all are very sorry to experience the trouble we encountered for our return trip. During the freezing nights and days at the camp site, our Luxury big Bus was sitting idle. Thermostat for the radiator got frosted and would not get defrosted in spite of all the efforts. Our driver Julio did not know how to fix and claimed not having proper tools to fix it. He insisted on driving up the mountain tops and down the valleys across four mountain ranges to Cusco, only 55 miles far. Every few hundred feet of uphill drive would make the engine hot, needed half an hour to cool.

Julio, the driver, would not take any suggestions from our American Dr. Krier. All he needed to do disconnect the thermostat. While riding slowly up these mountains there were no towns equipped with any mechanical help, there were no cell phone connections to get any sort of satisfactory help. Our three young Peruvian volunteers walked across mountains to seek help but with no good. Driver was afraid of losing his payments and nervous. He insisted of driving us all the way to Cusco, instead of asking for a replacement vehicle. He did reach us to our destination Hotel Royal Inka at Cusco way past midnight, 18 hour later.

Next part of vacation voyages was very pleasant and most memorable. Touring sacred valley and Peru Rail ride to Machu Picchu was very comfortable and scenic. Machu Picchu is really very scenic, memorable, historic site, built by Incas 600 ago, prior to Spanish invasion. Although, the day we toured the ruins, was cloudy and foggy. It had rained all night. It was still very pretty site. Sun was not harmful, weather was cool and calm. Mountain range looked more pretty and scenic because of lingering rising clouds over the mountain top. Lower ruins of Inca temples and Palaces seemed more picturesque. The day was a feast for photographer Surekha.

All worked out exactly as planned and there were no mishaps. But we all were happy to serve poor tribal Andean Incas in the hills 15000 feet above sea level. Would I come back? Yes, I certainly will but better prepared for cold and high altitude. I must thank organizers; Minera Antares LLC, VacationVoyages.com and Rotary International for giving the lead and my sweet wife Surekha for letting me do what I like the most. That is helping the needy.
