



Myrna Blyth: Machu Picchu and the Journey of a Lifetime

By Myrna Blyth



Editor's Note: Myrna Blyth is the founding editor of More magazine, was the longtime editor-in-chief of Ladies' Home Journal and was senior editor for Family Circle magazine. She was also the chairman of the President's Commission on White House Fellowships. Currently she writes for The National Review Online and is the editor-in-chief of Betty Confidential.

Lots of women celebrate their fiftieth birthday by going to Machu Picchu. That's what Peggy Northrop, the former editor of *More* magazine, once told me, and now that I have been there I can understand why. Climbing up and down the many stairs and steps of the once-lost city of the Incas is, like turning 50, quite an accomplishment. Unfortunately, I didn't get there in time to celebrate that important birthday but Machu Picchu does seem to me a place to mark something special, whether it is a CT scan that shows no sign of recurrence, the end of a difficult relationship or the beginning of a new stage in one's life

On my trip to Peru, I was accompanied by two young men and two young women, none over 32, and that was a trip in itself. They were all smart, savvy travel writers. They bonded by talking about restaurants in Brooklyn, gay bars and clubs in Manhattan. They also constantly shared opinions about dozens and dozens of C-list celebrities, reality-show participants and the various remixes of the music one of the guys had on his iPod. Every once in a while I could catch a name I could relate to – Beyonce, Michael Jackson, Bruce – but not all that often. Still, they were fun to be with and we were all equally awed by the mighty Andes, the extraordinarily beautiful Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu itself.



I have wanted to make this trip since high school history class where I learned how Francisco Pizarro and a small band of conquistadores, seeking gold and glory, managed to conquer the mighty Inca empire of millions in little more than an afternoon. Our visit started in Cusco, the Spanish colonial city that was once the seat of the Inca rulers. The Spaniards forced Catholicism on the natives with the barrels of their muskets and now the city is full of churches. They used stones from the Temple of Sun, the Incas' most important religious shrine, to build one of those churches, and there is still a Dominican monastery on the site. How the natives felt about this is fairly apparent from a painting,

deep in the dark recesses of the grand Cathedral that dominates the city's square. In the seventeenth century a native artist painted his version of the Last Supper with Judas looking just like Pizarro and holding not the usual 20 pieces of silver, but a bag of gold in his hand.

In Cusco we stayed in a sixteenth-century mansion that is now a boutique hotel, the [Inkaterra La Casona](#). It is filled with beautiful Inca weavings and Spanish Colonial furniture the owners have spent years collecting. It also had the largest, deepest, most elegant bathtubs I have ever seen. The hotel's owner, Jose Koechlin, told me when I visited his home in Lima that the tubs were modeled after a nineteenth-century bathtub given to him by the president of Peru. He uses the original as the base of a glass-topped dining room table. In his home there is an even more impressive collection of Spanish colonial antiques.

Now, some hardy types reach Machu Picchu by trekking the Inca Trail for four, five or seven days of arduous hiking. Since I consider a walk in the park serious exercise, this wasn't for me. Nor was it, I am happy to say, for my young companions. We drove into the green, fertile Sacred Valley on our way to Machu Picchu, stopping to visit neat, well- preserved Inca and Colonial town. We also went to the remarkable crop terraces near a village called Moray. Many people, Shirley MacLaine among them, claim there is a special, mystical energy in the Sacred Valley. I did see a couple of groups meditating and hugging the stones at the Temple of the Sun. And the terraces, I concede, do look like the crop circles some believe UFOs have created in various places on earth.



On the terraces, the Incas planted corn, wheat and quinoa and probably coca leaves. By the way, chewing a wad of coca leaves turns out to be about as exciting as chewing Spearmint after the flavor has gone, though coca tea, medicinal Pisco Sours fortified with diomax, seems to stave off the altitude sickness that can strike in Cusco. What is unusual about the terraces is that different levels have different temperatures. Experts have found that there are at least 20 different climate categories within the terraces, making it suitable for the cultivating of almost any plant from any part of the once vast Inca empire. Now, Shirley hasn't convinced me that aliens without green cards really do drop in for regular visits to the Sacred Valley. But, hey, if they do, the

scenery sure is a lot more spectacular than Roswell, NM.

There was also time for some retail therapy in the Sacred Valley. Our group hit the stalls and loaded up on Andean music CDs, alpaca socks, sweaters and shawls, wall hangings, carvings, pottery and small paintings of the Madonna in pretty gilded frames at a sweet country market town called Pisac, which has a fiesta every Sunday. That was just before we boarded the train that took us to the town right near Machu Picchu. Besides passing awe-inspiring scenery, the train's crew entertains by putting on a fashion show of really elegant alpaca and vicuna sweaters and ponchos. No heavy trekking for us.

The night before our visit, we stayed at the Inkaterra [Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#) in elegant casitas that had fireplaces

and, best of all, cloth-covered rubber hot-water bottles to snuggle against to take the chill off the Andean night. The dining room of the hotel was filled with tourists from all over the world, all very excited and all with one purpose: to give or get advice on what was the best way to visit the site. In truth, nobody really knows much about Machu Picchu. It was abandoned before the Spaniards came. It is a large citadel with temples for astronomical observations, sanctuaries, parks, storehouses and a spacious residential area, filled with big and small houses. Most believe it was a retreat for the Inca ruler and the most important nobles and priests of his court, sort of a monumental Camp David.

I think everyone has their own experience of Machu Picchu and that is part of what makes it so special. We toughed it out by getting there before six o'clock AM to see the sun burn the mist from the snow-topped mountains that towered above us. Machu Picchu, even without trekking to get you there, is a very physical experience. For at least half a day you are climbing up and down, up and down its many daunting levels. You stop constantly to marvel and to catch your breath. I think you become so exhilarated because you are finally at the place you have wanted to see, by the wonderful views, and because you are able to cope with the challenge of Machu Picchu. Does that make it a spiritual experience as well? Maybe so.

Three of our party decided to climb the even more formidable mountain opposite Machu Picchu called Huayna Picchu. The young woman who did that claimed it was fine but one of the guys found it very tough going. The other young woman and I climbed an easier but still long, winding trail to the Gate of the Sun, which is the entrance to Machu Picchu from the Inca Trail. We kept meeting very tired groups on their way down, including one woman who told us she was considering divorcing her husband who had made her take their very arduous predawn hike. Just before the end of the trail, I suddenly stopped. I felt I did not have to go any higher. I knew I had accomplished enough. While my friend went on a very twisty, narrow road to the top, I sat by a wall that had three windows where on the summer and winter solstice the first rays of the sun appear. For half an hour, I sat in the bright sunlight and in the silence. I looked up at the Andes, down at Machu Picchu, touching the wall that had been put in place centuries before. I pulled out my BlackBerry and it was working. I emailed my husband four thousand miles away in New York this message: "I have seen what I have always wanted to see. I feel very strong – and very happy."

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