

— travel —

MACHU PICCHU

by sam sanders

On April 30, 2000, thirteen of us boarded a bus in Bristol, Vermont, took an overnight plane from Boston to Lima, Peru, and landed on the 1st of May in Cuzco. We were 9 women and 4 men, ranging in age from mid-20s to late 60s. There were three lesbians and two gay men. All of us were members of a meditation group that meets regularly in Bristol. We had already spent some time together preparing for this trip: making lists of clothing and gear we would need for the Inca Trail, discussing practical details, and setting intention.

During the few weeks before the trip I experienced lots of fear. My fantasy was that somewhere along the Inca Trail I was going to have to jump off the edge of a cliff. I understood that this was a metaphor for some major letting go that I would be called upon to do. It turned out that all of us were fearful, and our preparatory meetings were helpful in calming us and making us ready for what we expected to be a significant spiritual journey.

We were not disappointed. In the two weeks we were in Peru, all of us received a constant barrage of life lessons — as though all of life were being compressed into 14 days. I think that none of us had had the experience before of living so much in the moment for so long a stretch of time. Most intense were the five days on the trail — starting from a point about two hours by train from Cuzco and ending in Machu Picchu.

By the end of the 14 days, we generally felt that there would be no way we could talk about this experience except with each other. No one who hadn't been there could have any idea of what it had been like.

Well, since I have been back in Vermont I have talked about my experience in Peru with everybody I know.

The best I can do to convey an impression of what it was like for me is to quote from the journal that I kept sporadically during the trip.

May 1, 2000

It's now 9:30am, and we are flying over the Andes. The Andes are stark: unlike any mountains I've seen before: bare (or so it seems from the air), jagged, narrow valleys with a stream.

Anyhow, I can easily imagine freaking out walking on the edge of one of those canyons, or switch-backing up the face of a mountain. It is also very

exciting; and day after tomorrow we'll be walking there.

We just flew past a snow-covered peak that looks as though it should be surrounded by the word PARAMOUNT. Then a verdant plateau. Then Cuzco. It's big.

The next journal entry was in the form of a letter to my friend and ex-lover Joe, with whom I normally take vacations.

May 1, 2000

Dear Joe:

I think you'd like this place.

It's more beautiful than I was expecting. I guess mainly it's the hills surrounding the city — and maybe the clean air — and maybe the altitude (over 11,000 ft.). But I have burst into tears twice. And I have that feeling that it is too much and that I can't look at it for too long. And this is just the city of Cuzco. I can't even imagine the Inca Trail.

The hotel we are staying in — Los Marcheses — is a cross between a faded glory West Indian hotel and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The rooms are a bit run down and

are interestingly appointed (Don's room has an old four-poster bed with an elaborate canopy); there is an elegance about the place, lots of art (mainly Roman Catholic), and two courtyards with flowers. Red tiled roofs. Actually, the whole city has red tile roofs. Even very modest houses seem to have courtyards and gardens. There are two plazas within a few blocks of the hotel. The larger of them is fronted by two enormous, impressive Catholic churches.

The people are very short and very Indian-looking. Everyone is fit (i.e., poor and hard-working). They also seem very sweet. Lots of kids are selling stuff in the street — espe-

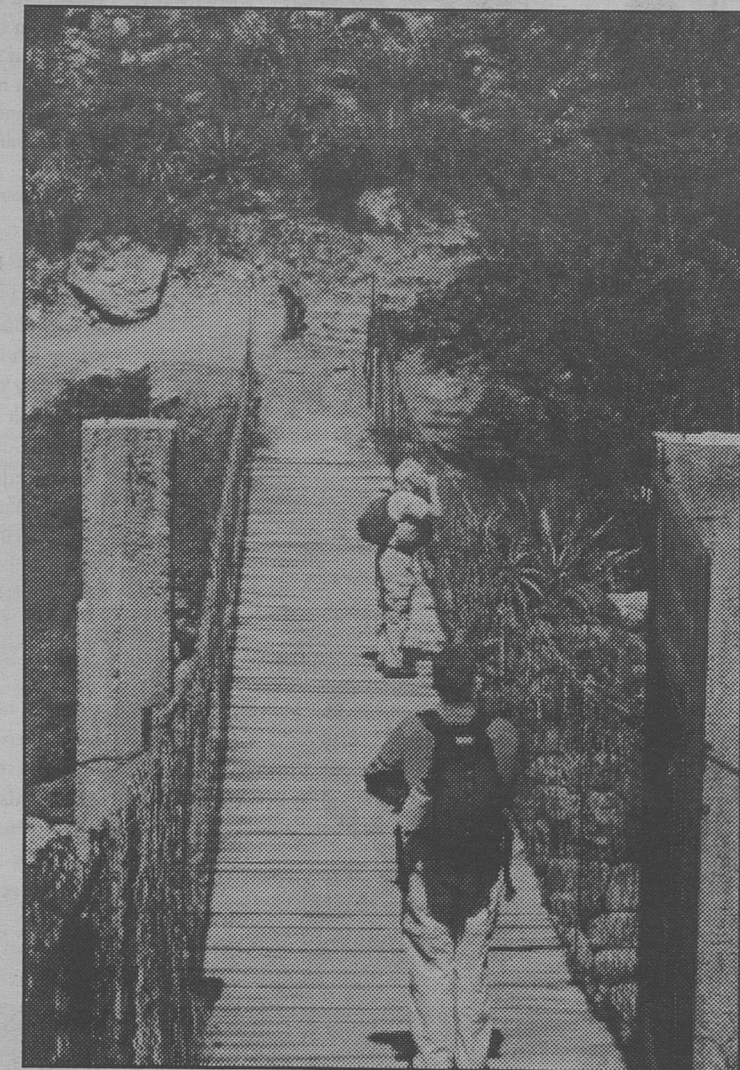
cially in the main plaza: chewing gum, post-cards. They are pretty tenacious. You want at the same time to stop them and to hug them.

I instantly missed your not being here. I kept wanting to nudge you and say, "Look at that!"

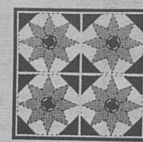
Love, Sam

May 2, 2000

The highlight was the session with Puma's grandfather, a shaman. A wonderful man who is fully himself. He greeted everybody warmly and elaborately with words we could not understand. The teachings Puma translated from Quechuan to English. I am not sure that now, 12 hours later, I



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