

Many, many thanks for organising such an enjoyable trip. One of the best holidays we have ever had. Paul and Jayne Wignall - 2015

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Classic Peru

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Paul & Jayne Wignall write about their recent self drive adventure in Peru



Driving through Peru, heading south down the Pan American Highway, we were on our second trip with Steve McCullagh from Classic Car Journeys. The other participants were a like minded, humorous bunch, many of whom had been on one of Steve's trips before. They ranged from a chicken farmer, to three, yes three anaesthetists. Our chosen vehicle

was a very respectable Toyota Rav4 although most of the group were in Hi Lux pickups. Those who had elected to travel four up were in spacious Toyota Land Cruisers. Despite all the vehicles setting off from Lima, more or less together, we were soon driving along on our own. Navigation was ludicrously simple, as to get to most destinations in Peru, there is only one choice of road! Driving standards were unexpectedly good with many of the truck drivers showing considerable skill and courtesy to us mere motorists.

In 2001 Jayne and I did a competitive drive through South America covering 25,000 kms in eight weeks. As a result we saw little of the country and were now really looking forward to the opportunity to take it all in at a more leisurely pace.

Steve's trips allow you to see parts of the country typical tourists don't see and this trip was to be no exception, although the agenda did include the well known tourist spots of the Nasca Lines, Machu Picchu, Colca Canyon, Lake Titicaca and much more. When we hit the outskirts of Lima we realized the city sits in the middle of a desert. As we drove south hugging the coast, to our left, all we could see for miles and miles were towering sand dunes. With nearly one third of the population living in the capital city it's not surprising that once you drive out of Lima there is hardly anyone about.

It is always fascinating driving through countries like Peru. Europe tends to be 'very well organized and established' whilst in South America the countries are still finding their way and developing, so what is considered the 'norm' in Peru may be far removed from what is considered the 'norm' in Europe. To give you an example, we drove through one small town where cats are eaten as a local delicacy!

Overnighting at Nasca, famous for the ancient lines drawn in the desert sand, the next day saw us heading up the Andes. Steve's morning briefing before we left the hotel told us all we needed to know about what lay ahead. Our coffee stop was at 8000 ft and then we continued climbing to nearly 15,000 ft, before descending to our hotel at a more acceptable 7,000 ft. Setting off along an incredible road we wound ever upwards in a series of tight bends. Eventually reaching a high plateau where the road was strewn with pot-holes. A fantastic day's drive although we only had one turn to make, so it was an easy day on the navigation front. Not many people live in this region and those that do, live in extremely primitive conditions, existing on managing sheep, llamas and alpacas. We were glad of our picnic as there were no facilities to 'wine & dine' in this remote region.



The following day we travelled further inland and soon reached the first of our stops, an interesting ancient Inca village. The surrounding area boasts over 400 such sites and visiting them all would take months. Instead our route took us to the more well known and the grandest. As we were now at 12,000 ft we had to walk extremely slowly up the narrow cobbled alleyways which were lined with local women selling their wonderful colourful woven fabrics. The lady sellers possessed good marketing skills – well they persuaded me to part with money. However they were never pushy. On the contrary they were polite and gentle. After several historical site visits, including the astounding salt flats where the locals have been harvesting salt for hundreds of years we arrived at a lovely hotel where we based ourselves for the next two nights to allow us time the following day to visit one of the highlights of the trip, Machu Picchu, known as the Lost City of the Incas.

Machu Picchu was indeed a highlight and in typical 'Classic Car Journeys' fashion, we didn't follow the standard tourist trail, or timings, meaning by the time we walked around in the afternoon, most of the 4000 daily visitors had left. Despite all the images you see of Machu Picchu it is still a privilege to visit. It's quite incredible to think it was unknown to the outside world until the American Henry Bingham was led there by a local Peruvian in 1911. The Peruvian Government, who now manages and conserves Machu Picchu, does a marvellous job which includes everything from the actual site, to the transportation on trains and buses. It is all very well organized and spotlessly clean. Although it was a long day, we returned to the hotel completely exhausted, but totally elated.

Fortunately, the next day was easy and our route to Cusco, included the fabulous Pisac Market – a must see. Cusco is one of the highest cities in the world, the former capital of the Incas and South America's oldest continuously inhabited city. Having a full day off from driving gave everyone the opportunity to tour the city and many to try the local delicacy of guinea pig in a local restaurant. Opinions varied but there was definitely not a unanimous thumbs up!



After the day off we were keen to set off again, this time travelling across the Altiplano to Puno on the shores of Lake Titicaca, not only South America's largest lake, but the highest navigable lake in the world, covering over 3,000 square miles. The drive was spectacular, akin in parts to Scotland, only steeper and greener. Among other things we came across, a chap hand making roof tiles and working at an incredible rate which was a sight to behold. Each day he started at 3.00 am and finished at midday because the sun was too hot to work the clay in the afternoon. On piece work, he and his wife were literally running to get as many made as possible. We picnicked at 14,000ft and it was a delight to reach the shores of Titicaca just as the sun was setting. The next day was spent on the lake which included an amusing time with the friendly and hospitable Uros people who live on floating islands made of hollow reeds.

Leaving Titicaca, we headed south on a road no tourist bus would ever travel on. Bumpy at first we soon reached decent tarmac with stunning scenery, in parts similar to the Lake District only much more impressive. We couldn't believe how long some of the straights were, measuring one section absolutely arrow straight for 11 kms. The scenery changed throughout the day. As we climbed to the highest point on our tour at 15,957 ft (Everest Base Camp is only 2,000 feet higher) pampas grass gave way to an arid landscape and then, in the distance, dramatic snow capped mountains. At the top we were able to take

photos of three volcanoes.

The highlight the next day was a visit to the Colca Canyon hoping to view condors rising on the early morning thermals. After a 40km drive, much of which was on gravel, we arrived, along with several tourist buses, at the viewing point at 8 am. The condors did not disappoint. It was an amazing spectacle, having the largest flying birds in the world swooping so closely over our heads. Leaving the condors behind we soon arrived in Arequipa, Peru's second largest city, in time to spend the afternoon exploring its impressive colonial centre and pleased to be at a much more comfortable 7500ft.



Leaving Arequipa, we wound our way down hill and by mid morning we were back on the coast heading north to complete our circuit. We were now back in desert country and again on the Pan American Highway where the traffic was light and we were able to make good progress.

With few suitable refreshment stops, Steve did well to locate a restaurant in Puerto Inca, an old Inca port on the beach at the end of a dirt road away from the traffic. Two of our vehicles suffered punctures here but they were only equipped with run-flat spares. Steve gave up his 4x4 vehicle to the two crews whilst he and his son drove the two run-flat equipped vehicles on to Nasca. Can you imagine driving 200km/124 miles on dead straight roads at no more than 50mph? Repairs were made in Nasca. On our way back it was our turn to be stopped by the police (to inspect our documents, not to be caught for speeding). An afternoon arrival at the hotel enabled some crews to have a relaxing swim in the pool before making their own dinner arrangements.

In the morning some of the participants opted for a flight over the Nasca lines in a light aircraft. As the pilots have a reputation for throwing the planes about we declined, however, everyone made it safely back to ground and all who went thought it was an amazing flight. The Highway then carved its way through some lumpy rock formations,

then some smoother ones where sand rather than snow had accumulated in the crevices. At other times the road ahead was dead straight for eight or nine miles, slicing through sandy desert with tiny enclosures surrounding straw huts no bigger than a garden shed where people were living. As we approached inhabited areas, police were more in evidence, although we weren't stopped.

We arrived at Huacachina, an oasis with a lake surrounded by a beach, and our excitement for the day was to be a ride in a dune buggy. These buggies were V8 powered and held up to ten people. The drivers were experts at racing across the desert. This was a real white knuckle ride, especially when they charged up a steep dune and executed a U turn to the right at the top and then went full pelt back down the dune and up another one! Included in the ride were a couple of opportunities to sledge down the dunes on snow boards. Great stuff!

Now we only had a short run back to Lima with one more overnight on the way at a fantastic hotel, which in our opinion was the best of the trip. With a huge pool which could be accessed direct from the rooms and with the beach in front, it was an idyllic setting. We were sorry to leave it the next day for the drive to Lima. Arriving in Lima mid afternoon we reluctantly returned our vehicles, leaving us with a couple of hours to relax before our farewell dinner.

.....and so ended our Peruvian adventure. Once again Steve McCullagh and his team had excelled themselves, having constructed an interesting, varied and unforgettable trip. Our travelling companions were delightful. We had many laughs, great dinners and a thoroughly enjoyable time. Can't wait for the next one.!

Paul and Jayne Wignall

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