



Ay caramba: The author takes a break during the long uphill slog (opposite) to the fortress of Choquequirao.

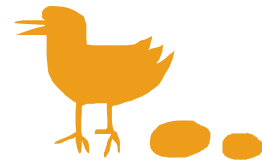
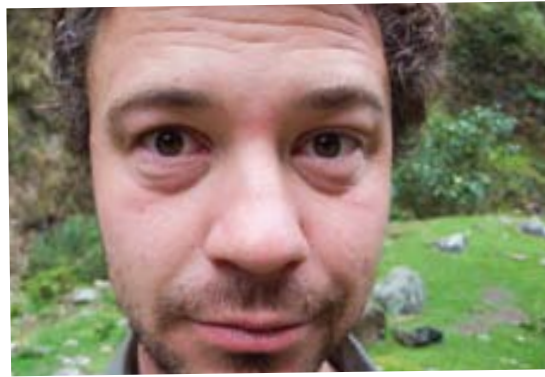


YES, THE ANDES KICKED OUR ASSES

But despite the killer switchbacks, the altitude sickness and the painful, um, *turuntus*, we still made it to Peru's most remote Incan fortress

By **Andrew Westoll**

Photography by Jason Rothe



The other Inca Trail (clockwise from above): The trailhead near Cachora; setting out with Padreyoc in the distance; Jason Rothe feeling the strain; the Capuliyoc lookout; hiking above the Apurimac River.



WAKING AT 3 A.M. to the sound of a person vomiting is disconcerting. Waking to this sound at 3 a.m. in the one-man tent you happen to be sharing with said person is even worse. But waking to this sound at 3 a.m. the night before you and said person are to embark on a gruelling trek through the Andean backcountry—a trek that will deliver you to one of Peru’s most remote Incan fortresses, a trek renowned for its near-vertical series of switchbacks, a trek that has been described as “pure suffering, plus donkeys”—is, well, a bit of an inconvenience.

Ill omens have been with us since early yesterday, when our bus broke down halfway between the busy town of Cusco and the quiet hamlet of Cachora, where the trek

to the fortress of Choquequirao begins. We spent the next three hours sweltering in the high heat of an Andean mountain ridge, waiting for a passing car to deliver our SOS to the closest settlement, and trying to avoid the nervous gaze of the half-naked man who had just sacrificed his belt to the engine block—fruitlessly, it seemed. As we waited, our guides, a young Cusco native named Juan and his brother-in-law Benji, sketched our upcoming trek against the panorama of snow-capped mountains—around that one, between those two, right over the top of that one—while we devoured a breakfast of *papas rellenas*, or boiled eggs encased in potato, purchased from a Quechuan woman who’d miraculously appeared out of nowhere armed with a wide selection of mustards. The bawls of a mule rose up

from a hacienda far below, and the female passenger next to me howled back. *Ayuda!* she screamed. Help.

Finally, an armada of taxis answered her call, but still the ill omens continued. During the long, winding descent to Cachora, Juan informed us that on his last visit to Choquequirao—Quechuan for the Cradle of Gold—he slaughtered a snake, and apparently Peruvian custom says a man should never return to the place where he and a serpent did battle. At about the time he was telling us this, a mule-driver named Berto was releasing the two mules we’d booked back into the hills. He assumed by our lateness that we had cancelled the trip.

So here we are, camped in the mule driver’s backyard, half a day behind schedule, an afternoon of hiking lost, my photog-

rapher friend Jason retching rotten eggs into the darkness, our recaptured mules huffing their annoyance a few feet away, and a flock of starved chickens pecking holes in our tent.

I fumble in the dark for the water but find the Scotch instead. The encouraging clink of the flask brings Jason bolt upright, his hand flailing toward me.

“Perhaps we’ve overestimated ourselves,” I say, handing him the booze.

“First time for everything,” he replies.

PERU IS A VERY HAPPENING PLACE these days. Woody Harrelson and Owen Wilson were recently spotted in Cusco, bathing in irrigation ditches and taunting local reporters from beneath hipster straw hats. And Cameron Diaz, Olivia Newton-

John, Princess Beatrice, Bill Gates and Ted Turner have all recently joined the more than 700,000 annual visitors to Machu Picchu, that absurdly overrun icon of South American cultural tourism, prompting the *Los Angeles Times* to declare not long ago,

HERE WE ARE, HALF A DAY BEHIND SCHEDULE, JASON RETCHING ROTTEN EGGS INTO THE DARKNESS, AND A FLOCK OF STARVED CHICKENS PECKING HOLES IN OUR TENT

“Celebrity chic has come to the Andes!” But it wasn’t celebrity worship that brought Jason and me to Cusco. Instead, it was an act of God. Last September, an enormous meteorite screamed from the heavens and slammed into the farming village of Carancas near Peru’s border with

Bolivia, sending scores of villagers to hospital with a mysterious illness that recalled Michael Crichton’s *Andromeda Strain*.

Our plan was simple. We would spend the week acclimatizing to the altitude by hiking the foothills around Cusco and

visiting Machu Picchu with all the other guidebook-following suckers. Then we would leave the tourists behind and head to remote Carancas to do a story on that puzzling meteor.

Within a day of arriving in Cusco, though, we learned of Choquequirao and



Almost there: The author crashes in camp just below the ruins; the view of the Apurimac River Canyon from Choquequirao.



immediately became smitten. Peru's newest trekking destination was rumoured to put even the most difficult Sacred Valley hike to shame; compared to the tourists who flock to Machu Picchu, only the most intrepid travellers visit her sister. True to form—that is, with little forethought or training, and employing a number of near-obsolete credit cards—Jason and I abandoned our cosmic itinerary for a much more challenging one. Sure, we were significantly out of shape. But what the hell, right?

We spent the next five days negotiating the details with Juan and the next five nights drinking ourselves into oblivion. We hiked the foothills of Cusco exactly once; we closed down a bar called Siete Angelitos three nights in a row. For one embarrassing week, we became obnoxious examples of everything worth hating about tourists. But it didn't matter—or it didn't matter as much—because soon we'd be leaving on a more noble quest. Forget Machu Picchu. We were off to storm the Cradle of Gold.

AN HOUR AFTER SUN-UP, Jason and I shoulder our backpacks and stumble after Juan to the trailhead.

"Last night," says Juan proudly, "I dreamed of three condors."

"Lucky you," says Jason.

"What do three condors mean?" I ask,

Maguay cacti, and up ahead, beyond the San Pedro de Cachora church, the snowcap of Padreyoc, the highest mountain in the area, looms over the valley like a domineering father.

The trail from Cachora to Choquequirao is 32 kilometres long and begins in a young

WE PASS THE SIX-KILOMETRE MARKER AND JASON STUMBLES. "JASON WALKS LIKE HE HAS TWO LEGS OF THE LEFT SIDE," JUAN WHISPERS

familiar with the neo-Incan connection between prophecy and the natural world.

"I don't know," says Juan. "Maybe there will be some birds?"

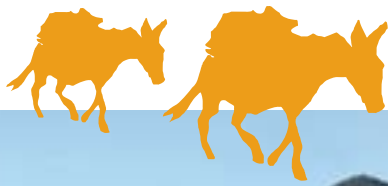
The main street of Cachora is quiet, apricot trees, tobacco plants and angel's trumpets spilling over crumbling adobe walls. A herd of vaguely Orwellian pigs has gathered around the base of an ancient street lamp to discuss, perhaps, the coming boom in local tourism. The hills above are partitioned by smooth lines of blue-green

stand of eucalyptus trees. The first section is easy, a few hours of modest uphill around the exposed belly of the nearest mountain. But Jason is not doing well. His breath comes in sudden, pained gasps. His cameras hang from his neck like two mythological tortures. His cheek is already fat with a wad of coca leaves, the Andean staple that provides an energy boost and a salve for altitude sickness—we'd been saving the coca for the much tougher climb ahead. As the late-morning sun begins its burn, we pass the six-kilometre marker and Jason stumbles. Juan leans close.

"Jason walks like he has two legs of the left side," he whispers, repurposing the local joke about a model from Lima who hosts a variety show on late-night television and is rumoured to be the worst dancer in Peru. Juan bursts into hysterical laughter. Jason nearly collapses. I offer to carry his pack.

Immediately, I regret the gesture. I am a writer, you see. I carry pens, a notebook or two, some clothing, perhaps a sip of water. I fancy myself a lithe and nimble fly-on-the-wall. Though not particularly lithe or nimble, I pride myself on being able to appear and disappear at a moment's notice, like a foreign correspondent, or a delinquent





The Cradle of Gold (clockwise from left): Looking down on the main plaza, with the house of the king above; the sweeping line of an Incan wall; the author, Jason and guide Juan enjoying the sunset on the ceremonial lawn.

father, and pack my bags accordingly.

Jason, on the other hand, carries the full inventory of a broadly tasked surveillance team everywhere he goes. Two SLR camera bodies, with batteries. Two fixed-length lenses, with hoods. One zoom lens. Two portable hard-drives. One pocket camera, plus charger. A vast regiment of rechargeable batteries. A pair of AA chargers. One digital audio recorder. One high-end interview microphone. A ball-head tripod. A

will be descending 5,000 feet to the Apurimac River, which cuts a muted line along the canyon floor. That will be the lowest point of our trek, itself about 5,000 feet above sea level.

Juan drops his pack and points to a far-off mountain ridge awash with sun.

“Choquequirao!” he yells.

I squint into the distance, follow Juan’s finger through the air. Across the river, high on the third ridge over, I can just make out

our increasingly evident stupidity, I drag myself up a steep hillock onto a precarious peninsula of windswept rock that hangs out over the valley.

Here I spy a young man perched on the cliff-edge. Padreyoc towers above him, and he’s surrounded by hundreds of cairns of stone. As I approach, bent and breathless, the man smiles and waves me over. His name is Orestes, from Cusco, and he has just completed a pilgrimage.

“I first came to Choquequirao four years ago, the summer before I began university,” he tells me. “It impacted me very much.” He raises his eyebrows, asking if I understand. “Last month,” he continues, “I finish studies. So I come back.”

“Like a circle,” I gasp.

“Yes,” says Orestes, smiling. “You know about this?”

“Know about what?”

“The Incan Circle of Life?”

“Sure...”

Orestes leaps to his feet. “You must build for Padreyoc,” he says, pointing to the field of rock cairns. “You are still on your journey.”

He helps me search for stones. Pickings are slim and we only find three of suitable size. I sculpt them into a sad little bungalow and Orestes takes my picture.

“Don’t forget to make a wish!”

I close my eyes.

Continued on page 76

JASON MAKES A SIMILAR MOAN, BUT IN HIS CASE, THE TRANSLATION MIGHT BE: “HOLY SHIT, WE’RE GOING TO DIE ON THIS MOUNTAIN!”

spirit level. A set of macro extension tubes. A flash. A slew of memory cards. A lens-cleaning kit. All within a heavy-duty waterproof bag. Five minutes with all this slung over my shoulder and I gain a new appreciation for my trusty photographer—and the two bulletproof polyethylene bottles filled with blended Scotch buried in the bottom of his cache.

AN HOUR LATER, the trail skirts west along the northern edge of the mountain and delivers us to the Capuliyoc lookout. To our right, Padreyoc rises up, its glacier rooftop too high to glimpse. The Andes climb sharply here, to a height of more than 19,000 feet. From the lookout, we

the miniature shapes of buildings shimmering in the sun. And far below these, a strange smudge of grey: the telltale symbol of Incan civilization, a series of terraced gardens miraculously carved into the mountainside.

My first reaction, if I can call it that, is a sort of breathless moan, which might be loosely translated as “No!” Jason makes a similar moan, but in his case, the translation might be: “Holy shit, we’re going to die on this mountain!”

Jason snaps a few photos, collapses beneath a tin-roofed shelter and quickly passes out. Juan and I scour the thin air for condors and devour packages of chocolate cookies. Then, to take my mind off

YES, THE ANDES KICKED OUR ASSES

Continued from page 62

“Buena,” says Orestes. “Now I go home.”

Back at the lookout, Jason is gone. Juan sits alone on a flat slab of stone, arranging individual coca leaves into a miniature fan. When he’s finished, he places a small stone on top to keep them in place.

“This is *kintu*,” says Juan. “I give to *Pachamama*, Mother Earth, so she will give strength to Jason.”

I tell Juan about the wish I’d just made—for Jason to feel better, for something inside him to shift and release a torrent of newfound energy.

“Where is he, anyway?”

A groan rises up from the bushes right behind us.

BERTO AND BENJI arrive with the mules just as we’re leaving Capuliyoc. Each animal carries at least 200 pounds of gear on its back, an incredible feat considering the heat, the altitude and the dainty width of their ankles. The men push the animals ahead—*Mulas! Mulas!*—as the trail begins its long descent to the river.

Our legs sink gratefully into the downhill slope. I hear Jason mutter a shaken word of thanks. But now, across the canyon, an ominous zigzag pattern appears on the opposite mountainside. It stretches all the way from the river up to an invisible point far above, somewhere near the ruins. It is a daunting sight and suddenly makes me feel I may not be up to the task. These are the despised switchbacks that have kept Choquequirao, for now at least, relatively free of mainstream tourists.

In the late sixteenth century, as the Spanish conquest of Peru neared completion, Choquequirao was the administrative and religious capital of the dying Incan Empire. Manco Inca and his people had taken refuge there after being driven first from the city of Cusco and then from their mountain strongholds in Ollantaytambo, Machu Picchu and Vilcabamba. Their pursuers never found the city due to its remote locale and impossible approach. The first Westerner to enter Choquequirao was a Spanish explorer, Juan Arias Diaz, who came more than a century later, when the fortress was deserted.

For the next two hours, we follow a monotonous, bone-jarring route into the valley. The slope is bare but for a carpet of

sun-burnt grasses, and as we drop lower, the peaks above us shutter the sky. It is a smooth, steep and featureless section of the trail, a place shaded from both the sun and the raw, eruptive forces that gave rise to the Andean range. It is only when we stop to rest our weary knees that we are able to appreciate the incredible backdrop, the soaring walls of deep blue-green, the staggering ridge-lines that ripple the skin of these mountains like muscles beneath a fine coat of fur.

In half an hour, we are stumbling down a hillside speckled with red and white orchids, and Juan is asking us where we’re from.

“Toronto,” I say.

“*Turuntu?*” asks Juan with a laugh.

“No. Toronto. Toh-ron-toh.”

“Benji!” hollers Juan. “They come from *turuntu!*”

Raucous laughter rises up from somewhere far below. Juan explains. Apparently, *turuntu* is the Quechuan word for “testicle.”

“You come from *turuntu!*” Juan says happily.

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, we stagger into Chuquisca, a modest tourist camp of bamboo huts sitting on a floor of sand. Finally, time to rest. The mules browse contentedly in the shade while Berto and Benji chop vegetables and giggle together around the camp stove. Jason and I stretch out on ragged benches. We don’t speak as we peel off our boots and breathlessly chug water.

I spend the next half-hour watching my thigh muscles quiver like wild animals. My head pounds and my shoulders burn. I can’t imagine how terribly Jason must be feeling. We are almost unconscious when Berto appears with two bowls of hot powdered *sopa*.

“Thanks for dinner,” mumbles Jason.

“Dinner?” says Juan. “You mean lunch.”

Chuquisca is where hikers usually spend their first night. But due to our late start, Juan has decided we must press on down to the river and then halfway up the opposite mountainside by nightfall, to a place called Santa Rosa.

“What about Jason?” I ask.

“We are not dancing ladies,” says Juan.

I look at Jason, whose eyebrows are raised mid-sip. I take this as a promising sign—an expression of emotion, the equivalent of a

hearty gut laugh. I ignore the *sopa* dribbling down his chin.

An hour later, my legs feel like wooden stilts as we stand on the bridge at Playa Rosalinas, the waters of the Apurimac—“The Strong One”—raging beneath us. The sun is almost gone. We are at the bottom of the canyon. Choquequirao, bless her, is at the top.

RUMOUR HAS IT the Peruvian government plans to build a funicular railway up this slope. Others say a gondola is planned from the nearby district of Hunipaca. No matter the method, tourism officials agree that something must be done about this infernal climb for Choquequirao to become more popular with tourists.

The next five hours pass like an hallucination. We trudge up the mountainside, following the steep switchbacks like obedient animals. We go our own speeds, slipping ahead then slipping behind, passing each other without a word. We stop at the corners, heaving, shaking, oblivious to everything but our pained next steps. In a burst of energy I catch up to the mules; then I bonk and the mules overtake me.

Our feet become leaden, our legs tree-trunks, our lungs burnt and sore. We fill our cheeks with coca. We all begin to slow. Dusk ends almost as soon as it began, and Juan curses his homeland as a cold wind picks up. I have a standoff with a shadowy tarantula. Or at least, it seems like a standoff to me. The spider sits stubbornly in the middle of the trail, its front legs probing, its body bristling with portentous hair.

As the hours go by, I feel an ominous chafing between my legs, the scourge of every male trekker. I raise the issue with Juan.

“*Turuntu!*” he yells, impressively bringing the joke full-circle. “Tomorrow we will flour our balls!”

At nine p.m., we stop somewhere—Santa Rosa, I presume—and collapse beneath a bamboo shelter. A lone man lives here. During the high season, he says, only 20 people pass through each day. We raise our tents among a cabal of black cats. An ancient press for making *chicha*, or corn flour beer, sits nearby in the darkness. We’ve walked 25 kilometres, most of them straight up and down.

Juan snores. Muscles cramp. Dreams exhaust. The sun comes up. Juan and Benji sprinkle corn flour into their underwear. I experiment and discover a remarkable

Continued on page 78

YES, THE ANDES KICKED OUR ASSES

Continued from page 76

new use for medicinal lip balm.

The trek continues. Back and forth, up and up, water breaks, Scotch breaks, coca breaks, the mountain reluctantly giving way, yesterday's route carved into the slopes below our only compensation. We reach Marampata, where we buy year-old Gatorade at a tiny shack. We reach Sunchupata and nap beneath its shelter, the ancient city so close now, just another ridge over.

One more push, one more hour, and we arrive at a government campsite perched on an exposed cleft of grass. It's four p.m. The ruins loom above us, just a short walk away. We struggle to raise the cook tent in the vicious wind. I am struck by a wave of nausea and retch a few times into the grass. This might be altitude sickness—we are above 10,000 feet now—but it might also be sheer exhaustion. Jason passes the Scotch.

We spend the night in the shuddering cook-tent, toasting our arrival with copious shots of sugar-cane rum and listening to the howling wind. Berto, a man who obviously enjoys his drink, teaches us how to give thanks. Holding the shot glass in his left hand, he dips in his finger and flicks liquor in all directions while intoning the names of Peru's most sacred *apus*, or mountain gods.

"Ausangate. Vilcabamba. Salcantay. Machu Picchu. Padreyoc."

Then he smiles, points to a spot above our tent and downs the shot.

IN 2006, only about 7,000 people made the trek to Choquequirao—less than one per cent of the number that passed through the turnstiles at Machu Picchu. While the village of Cachora still retains much of its Andean charm, the town of Aguas Calientes, the nearest settlement to Machu, has devolved into a soulless tourist trap of high-end hotels, Italian restaurants and cheap souvenir stores. Every nook, cranny and stone at Machu Picchu has been studied, lectured upon and written about, while 70 per cent of Choquequirao has yet to be cleared of the thick cloud forest that has swallowed it in the three centuries since it was abandoned.

But the days of Choquequirao's obscurity are coming to a close. Tourism doubled here between 2003 and 2006. The number of hostels in Cachora is growing, and the town recently opened its first Internet café,

on the ground floor of a lovely old Quechuan woman's home. The world's leading expert on Incan history recently warned that Choquequirao could suffer irreparable harm from a rapid increase in tourism, as the Peruvian government seeks a "pressure valve" for the overwhelming popularity of Machu Picchu.

We enter the ancient city by the light of dawn. A cold mist billows down from the ridge-top above, concealing the upper plaza and sending white phantoms through the abandoned doorways of Manco Inca's last home. This surreal city was built just beneath the summit of a mountain, and anyone who visits it is intimately aware of the struggle involved in merely reaching the place, let alone building a home here.

Juan takes us through the houses of the main plaza, 400-year-old homes that would be habitable today with the simple addition of a thatched roof. The renowned Incan attention to detail is apparent everywhere—in the fine lines of the windows, in the soft curve of the terraces, in the surprising nooks built right into the walls. The city's layout is aligned to the movement of the sun and the stars. The main temple is small and cozy with room for perhaps 20 people. Stone hooks protrude from the walls where the priest may have hung his robes.

We follow a steep staircase straight up into the mist. To our left, a stone aqueduct travels the length of the ridge. When Choquequirao was first discovered, says Juan, this channel was lined with gold. This is where the city got its name, Cradle of Gold. Legend has it the water here ran thick with the precious metal.

Now we reach the house of the king, the upper plaza where Incan royalty lived like gods among the clouds. Apparently, the leaders would rarely venture down to the city. They would send emissaries, or simply bellow their demands into the roiling mist.

We spend the next few hours wandering freely among the ruins, climbing the walls and hopping through windows. We hike down to see one of the best-kept secrets of Peruvian tourism, a half-excavated series of terraces with cartoons of adult llamas and their young playfully embedded in the masonry with chalk-white stones. From afar, the animals appear to be climbing the imposing slope. As Juan says, when tourism really gets going here, a visit to the llamas

Continued on page 81

YES, THE ANDES KICKED OUR ASSES

Continued from page 78

will cost “crazy extra price.”

As the sun begins its descent behind a neighbouring peak, Juan leads us to the shaman’s house, a short hike down the ridge-line. Here the buildings are in mid-restoration, wooden poles buttressing the crumbling walls, each stone labelled with a catalogue number in white ink. I feel as if I’ve wandered into an archaeological field station during a smoke-break. As I walk through the same rooms where an Incan medicine man prepared his libations and rehearsed his prayers 450 years ago, shards of crimson pottery shatter beneath my feet.

Part of me thinks we shouldn’t be here. I see flashes of the future, hordes of marauding tourists, exorbitant gondola rides, the rich and famous treating these ancient ruins as a playground. I think of an incident at Machu Picchu not long ago when a crane collapsed, permanently damaging the site’s most sacred shrine. What was the crane doing there in the first place? A beer company was shooting a commercial.

WE HIKE TO THE TOP of the ridge to watch the sunset on the ceremonial lawn, where the shaman used to prostrate himself before the sun, the stars, the mountains and the moon. The space is perfectly circular, like a massive helicopter landing pad.

“In Cachora, I dreamed I would see three condors,” says Juan. “Now I will look for them.”

As we scour the sky for birds, we hear voices from the opposite side of the lawn. Another tour group appears, two women and two men.

“There’s one!” yells Juan, pointing up into the canyon.

We chat with the other tourists. They’re as amazed as we are by the emptiness of this place.

“There’s two!” yells Juan, pointing behind us into the sun.

One of the new arrivals tells us where he’s from. Jason laughs, and I roll my eyes.

“Here condor, condor, condor,” calls Juan. “Here, condor number three.”

The man lives five minutes from me in *Turuntu*. It turns out we’re both regulars at the same damn coffee shop. **e**

Andrew Westoll’s first book, The Riverbones, is being published in November. He wrote about Suriname’s jungles in our June 2007 issue.