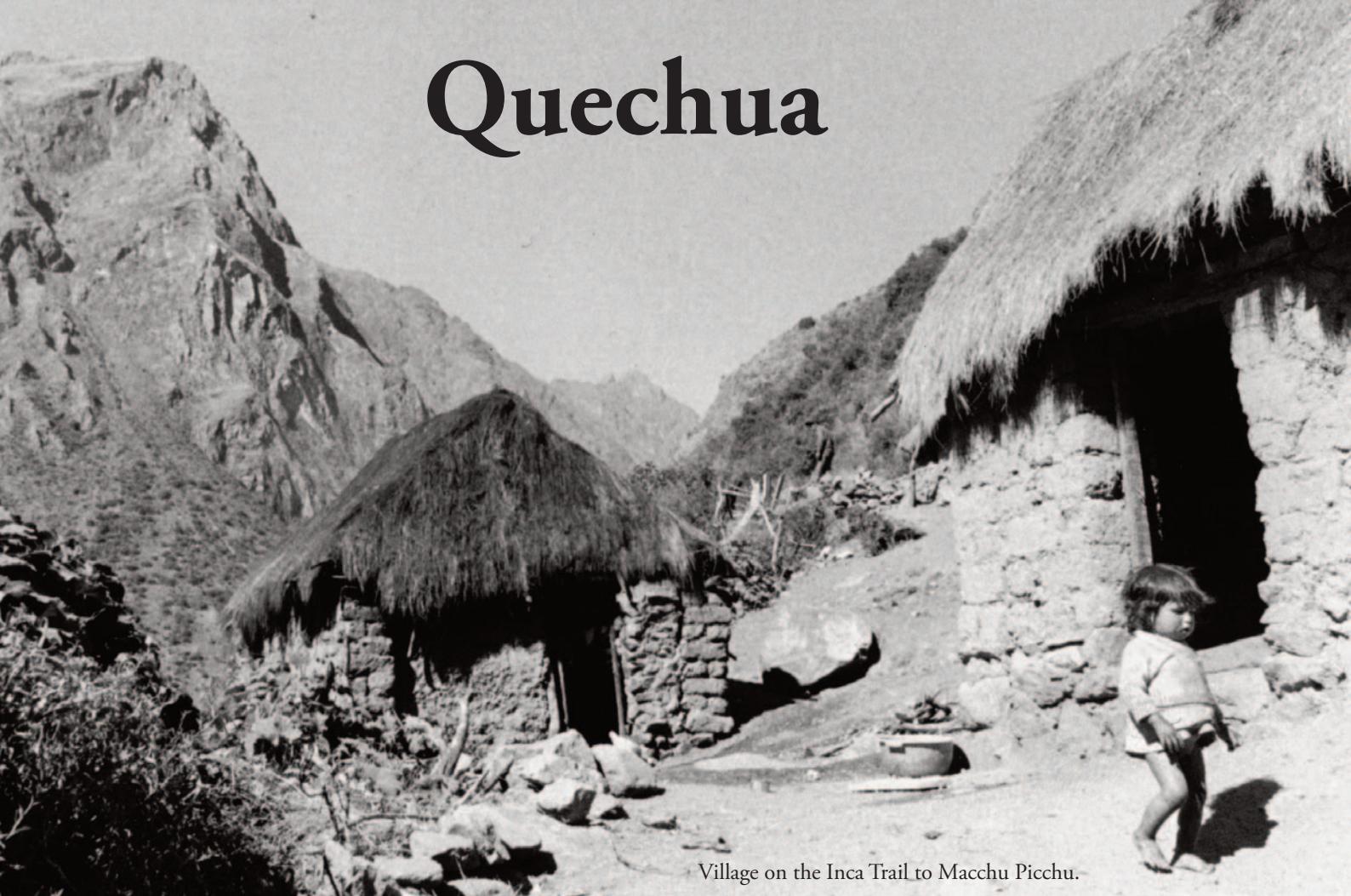


Quechua



Village on the Inca Trail to Macchu Picchu.

WE FLEW to South America in a luxurious airliner with leather seats, crossing the interminable Pacific while the cabin crew snored, sprawled out asleep on the vacant seats.

After just clipping Antarctica, our first sight of land was the ice-cream-like Tierra del Fuego, then as the sun set we continued across the flat, brown, mineralised south of Argentina which merged into the lonely pampas, with every now and then a well-ordered town blinking its lights up at us.

In Buenos Aires we watched the macho men strutting out with their glamorous consorts for a night on the town; ate beef, lamb and goat – whole carcases barbecued on six-foot vertical skewers before a bonfire by sweating, shirtless guachos; and danced the tango in the Bohemian La Boca district before re-crossing the continent to Peru.

On arrival in Lima, a brigade of well-armed police and soldiers escorted us through the spartan airport and up the dusty road to the city. Once there we had to elbow our way assertively through the hustling crowd to run our errands, then sprint back to behind the bars of our hostal to relaxation of a sort.

Everything permanent in Lima is behind bars and usually with a handful of armed guards. It's easy to see why – out on the streets are the people, 6.5 million of them, night and day buying and selling, hustling, panhandling, throwing things away and retrieving them. There are no derelicts in Lima; you can't sleep on the streets, you'd be pounded underfoot. Either no-one in Lima is a street person or everyone is.

Cars don't have windscreen wipers – they all get ripped off. When it rains, hawkers jump out at traffic lights and sell them back to you. That's fine, everything it seems

is for sale; everywhere is a market. At midnight in a restaurant, a panhandler came up to our table and tried to sell a three-foot spanner – "Oh sure, mate. It's just what I always wanted!"

In the centre of the city is the presidential palace, a whole block surrounded by a sizeable portion of the army, including tanks and canon. Beside it runs the river which is also the garbage dump. The President can stand at his palace window and watch pigs, dogs and children fight for scraps to eat.

From Lima's grey, misty, sulphurous cacophony of defective rust-bucket Brazilian VW taxis we caught a bi-weekly 727 flight up into the Andes to Cuzco – once capital of the Inca empire, now a thriving tourist centre and still spiritual and economic centre for the Quechua indigenes of the central highlands. The landing and take-off at Cuzco airport, surrounded by glacier-clad



Across the Cuzco Plateau to the Cordillera Blanco.

Andean peaks, is breathtaking and by itself worth the trip.

The ruling Quechua family 500 years ago were the famous Incas (like, say, the Murdochs). There were several million Quechuas re-arranging rocks in the Andes of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia when Pizarro and 200 armoured Spaniards in 1523 eclipsed them with the greatest act of treachery in political history. Capturing the head Inca, Atahualpa – an easy job with swords, muskets and horses – Pizarro was offered a ransom of two rooms full of silver and one of gold for his release.

The Inca's brother and all his subjects laboured for two years to fulfil this demand. When the rooms were finally filled, Pizarro strangled the Inca anyway, razed as many of the religious monuments as possible and installed Atahualpa's brother as puppet king and Catholicism as the new religion.

Four hundred and seventy years later I was awakened early in my bone-freezing Cuzco hotel by what sounded like a revolution but what turned out to be fireworks for "Father's Day". No-one turned up for work anywhere so, myself a father, I took the day off as well to soak up the sun in the main plaza and to recover from the debilitating altitude sickness which makes your heart race and every uphill step a marathon. There I bought a button off a school-girl collecting alms in a small tin – local Red Cross or something, I thought. I later found out the button said "I love the Pope" (he was the father).

The central highlands of Peru are very scenic, very fertile and the communities appear prosperous. Infrastructure is poor but there is a hydro-electric scheme on the Urubamba River, so most of the locals were watching the World Cup on TV in their mud brick houses. At

night the moon-lit barren altiplano landscape was dotted with little brown boxes from the glassless windows of which emanated an eerie blue glow, and when Peru kicked a goal, a giant muffled roar echoed off the 18,000-foot mountains as an entire nation came close to ecstasy.

Cuzco is full of young travellers, burned-out hippies and tourism entrepreneurs. There are many restaurants, bars and nightclubs specialising in local cuisine and music. It's worthwhile trying guinea pig, or "cuy", raised as a special dish for ceremonial occasions.

Surrounding Cuzco are the Inca ruins, with Macchu Pichu the tourist mecca. There is better spirit in the lesser-known places such as Aguas Calientes with its hot springs and "Gringo Bill's" hotel. Sacsayhuaman was and still is the main Quechua temple. Overlooking Cuzco and built from house-sized stones with



Machaguenga village on the Manu.

the unique Inca masonry, it's easy to see why.

But the jungle is still the real frontier, and in the north it's where the cocaine traffic and guerilla activity make travel dangerous. Population density is much less and the land less suitable for agriculture. Nevertheless there is considerable pressure from campesinos, migrating Quechua and expanding local indigenous tribes to practice a modest slash-and-burn to cultivate manioc, bananas, avocados – and coca.

Everywhere you go you are offered coca in little plastic bags, and coca tea is freely available anywhere you eat. It's refreshing, numbs the mouth and offers relief from altitude sickness.

From Cuzco a 14-hour bus trip along a precipitous one-way dirt road brought us to the one-horse town of Shintuya. Travel on the few roads in Peru is extremely dangerous. Vehicles may travel east to west three days a week, west to east on alternate days and both ways on Sundays. It's wise to keep off the roads on Sunday evenings as whole villages of locals, drunk on chicha (corn chewed by old ladies, spat into a gourd and fermented) rollick home 30-up on their one brightly-painted truck.

Shintuya is famed for its hand-crafted longboats, built from cedar cut in the jungle and floated down the Rio Manu. Travel in the jungle is by boat and our destination was the Manu National Park, three days

down the Rio Madre de Dios and up the Rio Manu.

From our base camp on the Manu we met the jeans and sneaker-clad Machiguenga indigines (never, ever call a native Peruvian an "Indian" - he'll cut your throat), sighted a jaguar and cub, saw many types of monkey and some giant otters and got eaten alive by a type of sandfly.

Though moderately uncomfortable from the insects, heat and humidity, there was no diarrhoea or malaria. The food everywhere was wholesome, fresh and hearty, but we took the advice and drank none of the fresh water, necessitating a constant intake of strong black coffee, coca tea, Inca Cola, cervesa (weak beer) or pisco, the aptly-named local rot-gut.