

Semana Solo- Jason's Solo Week

I'm sitting, watching the geography, crops, and settlements change as we descend from the mountains on a 8 hr. bus ride from Huaraz to Lima, Peru. I am enjoying eating bananas again and looking forward to meeting Nancy in Lima--the huge capital city of 9 million on the central coast.

Yesterday I packed up my camp and said adios to the "quebrada", (valley or canyon) that I used as my base camp for nine days in Huascarán National Park, in the Cordillera Blanca range of the Andes mountains while I painted the alpine scenery and roamed as high as a pass at 16,500 feet. Although I rarely saw anyone in my lonely camp I was constantly among numerous grazing livestock--cows, mules, and horses. There were so many in the area that I had to watch where I stepped to avoid their dung, carefully collect my drinking water from the canyon side walls where they hadn't been wandering upstream, and barricade my tent with a makeshift fence to keep them out of my stuff when I wasn't around. (Since I can't figure out how to make an apostrophe on this different keyboard my conjunctions won't have one). Apparently, their main interest in me was a need for salt--to lick me, my things and my urine. I sensed in a few mules and cows that were persistently "nosey" that they might be somewhat intrigued with my presence for other reasons and experimented with a little inter-species communicating by singing to them, conversing, dancing and showing them drawings up close. I came to appreciate the beauty and peaceful demeanor of these animals and relaxed around them as the week went on.

Life got pretty simple up there. Nights were cold, though above freezing. The sun would drop behind the canyon ridge at just after 3, darkness coming at 6:30 and I would retire to my tent within the hour. I lived in a down jacket w/ hood that I bought here for around \$30. US and a soft, hand-knit alpaca sweater that was about \$13. US. So I got lots of sleep, had time to revisit long buried memories, and also just do nothing--reflect and meditate--ahh. Mornings generally dawned clear and I rose early. One morning I looked up and saw two condors soaring high, one, the male, with a white neck. That was a thrill for me, as they are quite rare. The Andes Condor is the largest flying bird in the world with a wingspan of over 10 feet. Early mornings I loved watching the first sun highlight the canyon walls above me, painting the scene with light and shadow. As the week progressed I started to see my overly-labored small paintings/studies loosen up and get more spontaneous and direct. It was satisfying to see this hint of fruition for my efforts, which at times felt like struggles. There were many attempts that I worried over for a couple hours only to end up "wiping", to reuse the canvas for another painting. It's never easy to concede that an attempt has failed, relax and move on with a fresh attitude. A couple sunny afternoons I achieved this by dipping in the icy stream and sun drying on a huge granite boulder.

At the head of my valley about 3-miles from camp was a serious, glaciated peak around 18,000 ft. This peak, taunted and flirted with my attempts to include it in a painting. By the time the sun would haul around to light up its dramatic features in the afternoon, the clouds would also typically be tumbling into the valley from both ends. I've never seen weather change so quickly. I ended up satisfying myself with lots of photos of the peak to paint from at home.

After a solid week of focusing on painting I took a day off to set out for the pass up one of the ridges at the head of the valley. I was psyched when I stuck my head out of the tent at dawn to see a clear sky. Shortly after I was on my way, chewing my first mouthful of coca leaves to help with anticipated symptoms of the altitude I hoped to reach. I love to roam and explore the mountains, especially above the treeline and off trail. With the oil painting gear and over a week's supply of food--mostly pasta, grains, nuts, and dried fruit, my pack was too heavy to climb steep slopes, and also I've learned that not much painting happens on a day when I move camp. So this was my big chance to explore the greater area. At the head of the valley, just before reaching the lake at the foot of the glacier, I started climbing a frosty slope, passing the last of the cows. I marvelled at the interesting and different types of alpine wildflowers than we have in the Pacific

Northwest. Nancy actually discovered a helpful, small reference book on the alpine flowers of this area written by Port Townsends Kees and Helen Kolf--who spent a few years living in Peru.

As I got higher my pace slowed to be measured and deliberate. After almost 3 hours mostly on rock slides and scree I reached the pass at 5,000m./16,500 ft. My reward was a mostly clear 360 degree view of this magnificent corner of the Cordillera Blanca range of the Andes--networks of 17-21,000 ft. frozen white peaks towering above deep glacial-carved valleys. On my way down I passed viscochas, marmot-like rodents but with long ears and bushy tails. That night, back at the tent I slept well! A couple interesting things I've learned recently are--at 12,500 ft. a lungful of air only contains half the amount of oxygen as a lungful of air at sea level. My camp was around 13,500 ft. I also am impressed by the natural disasters due to seismic activity that have occurred in this area. Several times earthquakes and resulting landslides have devastated nearby communities to these mountains. Our guidebook reports of an earthquake in 1970 that levelled the city of Huaraz, and I learned more about what actually happened. The quake shook loose massive chunks of ice from the slopes which fell into glacial fed lakes at the head of several valleys above Huaraz including the one that I camped in. These lakes overflowed, suddenly creating large rivers where quiet run-off streams had been. The resulting water and debris flooded the city, already reduced to rubble from the 8.0 quake. The same earthquake created a sequence of events that sent a huge mud slide almost 200 ft. deep that buried the neighboring town of Yungay. Over 70,000 people died in Peru as a result of the 1970 quake!

I walked out of the mountains feeling exceptionally well, and so grateful for the opportunity and my experiences over the nine-day trip!

Since that time, three days ago now, we have been on the move. From overnight in Lima we caught a flight a few hundred miles southeast to the ancient center of the Incan empire, Cusco, Peru. Now we are really starting to feel the time crunch with the end of our trip just over a month away. So we are working it, planning how to fit in a trip to Machu Picchu, and the Amazon Basin before leaving Peru.

And we are getting acquainted with Cusco and vicinity now, and still experiencing the lovely, grounding, travellers pleasure of waking up one more day in an amazing, new place, with beautiful faces and particular ways!

In Lima at the travellers hostel where we stayed there was a wall with some inspirational quotes about travelling. One was "Travelling leaves you speechless, and turns you into a storyteller."