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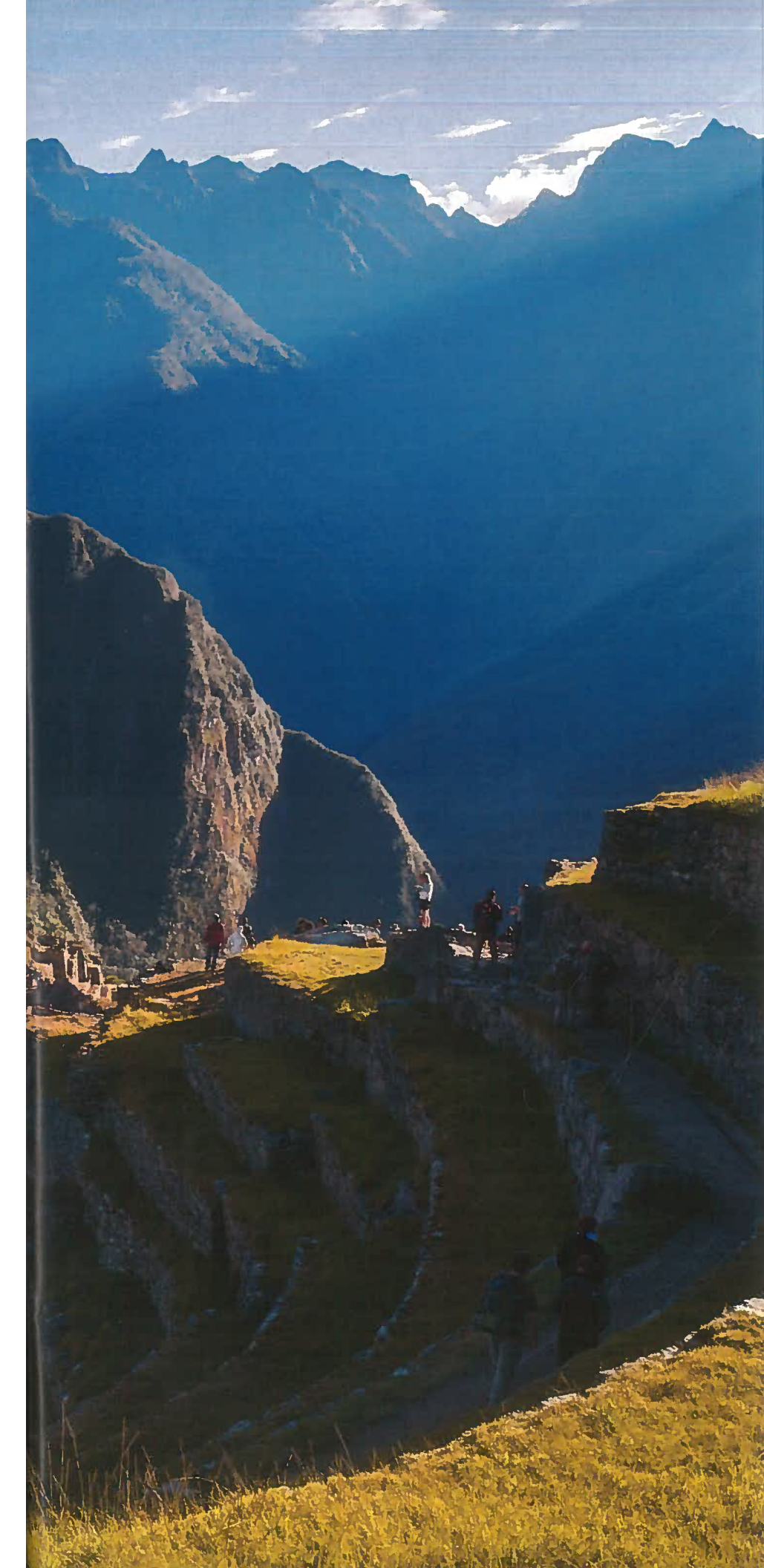
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**MACHU PICCHU,**  
the crowning glory  
of the Inca Empire, is  
seen here at dawn's  
light. Built in the 15th  
century by people  
who worshipped the  
sun, this city, high in  
the Andes, seems to  
touch the sky.



# THE JOYS OF (NOT) GOING IT ALONE

A MOTHER OF TWO PRIDED HERSELF ON NAVIGATING THE WORLD SOLO—ON HER OWN TERMS. SO WHEN SHE SET OFF FOR PERU WITH HER DAUGHTER AND A BEVY OF FRIENDS, SHE EXPECTED THE WORST. WHAT SHE GOT INSTEAD WAS A WARM SURPRISE  
BY MARCIA DESANCTIS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
DIANE COOK & LEN JENSHEL



**WHEN I** travel I like to do it my way, and my way is alone. There is a moment after takeoff when I suddenly feel I need no one and am, in turn, completely unneeded. For me, that means no *voyages en famille*. I prefer time off with the kids, who are 15 and 18, to consist of *Law & Order* marathons in our PJs. I've tried to impart the concept of self-sufficiency—pack your own bags, keep track of your own passports—but still I become their personal logistics assistant, shuffling behind them and my husband as I wave documents and itineraries.

I like to wander invisibly through new terrain and have grown reliant on the knowledge and confidence provided by these solitary stretches of anonymity. There seems little point to travel if you're in familiar company.

And then I got sick in Cuzco.

**FOR EIGHT** years, I had indulged my daughter's chatter about traveling to Peru for a classmate's *quinceañera*, the 15th-birthday rite of passage in Latin

American culture. We always knew the party would take place in her family's home country, but I'd felt equally certain our participation would never come to pass. OK, *hoped* it would never come to pass, because this voyage also involved several other classmates and their parents—in short, a platoon of pilgrims advancing to a party in South America. So I was stunned to find myself one August afternoon at Sbarro in the churning bowels of Newark airport, hauling a trayful of calzones, awaiting the overnight flight to Lima.

"Mom, do you think I remembered to bring my red sunglasses?" my daughter, Ava, ventured. If she'd forgotten them, they were the only object in her room besides her bed that wasn't coming to Peru with us.

"Don't worry, someone will have an extra pair," I said. I wedged myself into a seat at the table with Ava, her friend Phoebe and Phoebe's mother, Ann, with whom I am close. We were about to embark on the journey we had been inching toward for years. Five 15-year-

old girls, five mothers, one husband and 11 different rolling duffel bags stuffed with 11 different fantasies.

Our itinerary—an arduous crisscrossing of Peru's waterways, highways and airspace with the appropriate boats, hired vans and planes—had been cobbled together via several hundred million e-mails. As friends, we were mindful of one another's requests and idiosyncrasies, financial and otherwise. Some of us, for example, would forgo the death march up the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu and would instead take a day trip by train from the city of Cuzco, once the capital of the Inca Empire, where we would be staying. On this point, my daughter and I were in complete agreement, since I had raised her with the good sense to opt, wherever possible, for flush toilets rather than soiled ditches. In a few days we would all meet up at 8,000 feet in Machu Picchu, and the real touring would begin, culminating a few days later in the western town of Ica, where the birthday celebration was



**A LONE LLAMA**, one of the agile denizens of the Andes, wanders the main square of Machu Picchu (above left). The Temple of the Condor (above) is part man-made, part natural rock formation, all majestic. The author (right) and her daughter, Ava, closer than ever.

being held. Even as I dreaded the prospect of wall-to-wall togetherness for a week, I dreamed of Paracas, a beach town where I had planned one night's solitary escape at a swanky resort. I would go when my friends were still in Ica dune boarding over the sands, an endeavor that struck me as nothing short of suicidal.

**ANN AND** Phoebe were, to my relief, the easiest of travel companions, and my daughter was so pleasant and undemanding, I had to wonder whose child she was. Ann has a relaxed style of mothering quite unlike my own, and I've learned a lot from her over the years. When, for example, Phoebe said she was hungry at 5 PM, Ann suggested we stop for dinner. My tendency is to quote from the rule book—"Dinner is in two hours"—and ask the hotel to recommend the best Quechua pumpkin stew in town. Instead,

we ducked into the nearest pizza joint, and the kids were fed and content.

By the time we reached Machu Picchu the next morning, my head was floating somewhere above the rest of me. I sensed that it was neither the elevation nor the gallons of coca tea I had drunk to ward off its effects that caused the crescendo of pain in my head, throat and lungs. We hiked the granite steps along the terraces and through the ruins and clouds. We took in the staggering vistas across the Urubamba Valley and Huayna Picchu, the anchor peak of the Lost City of Machu Picchu. As I climbed the cliffs, my stride morphed into a stagger. I knew that Alejandro, our guide, was discoursing on Inca priests and the conquistadores, but his words failed to penetrate my brain. I



had dreamed my whole life of coming to Machu Picchu, and I was so dizzy, I wasn't quite certain I was even there.

I hastened back to the train station on a quest for tea to soothe my aching throat, then plunked down on an outdoor bench and fell into an unforced interlude of REM sleep. I woke to the voice of a woman leaning into me.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Why do you . . .?" Then I noticed she held my backpack, which contained



**IN THE SACRED VALLEY**, salt pans line the hillsides (above) of Maras, about 25 miles from Cuzco. The pan technique dates back to the Incas, who left salt water to evaporate in the sun so the salt could be harvested. Wheat fields (above right) flourish in the valley's lowlands.

my wallet, our passports, money, tickets, cameras, Ava's copy of *West with the Night*, my \$32 sunscreen. I had left it in the station café without a backward look.

On the train back to Cuzco, I told no one how I felt, but Ann, one of those friends who intuit what you need, knew that something was amiss. I resisted her inquiries; being of Yankee stock, I would scarcely admit to impending doom even if perched on a platform with a noose draped around my neck. Plus, I'm the big traveler, right? Forever traipsing off by myself to Haiti or Rwanda, undaunted by hardship anywhere on earth, I had a reputation to maintain.

**THE NEXT** morning our group boarded a plane in Cuzco for Puerto Maldonado, located on the Tambopata river in the part of the Amazon jungle that hugs Peru's border with Bolivia. An airport

check-in en masse was more than I could bear, although I could disguise my distress from all but one person.

"Try to hang in there. OK, Mom?" said Ava, who fixed me with an almost maternal look of reproach. "You don't look so hot."

"I agree," said Liz, another mother. She's an unflappable sort, one of my go-to gurus for wisdom and reason. "I'll get your suitcase, honey," she told me, then placed her palm on my cheek and grimaced. "No fever yet. Don't worry about anything. We'll carry you if we have to."

In Puerto Maldonado we were greeted by 100 degrees of tropical humidity. After a glass of passion fruit juice and some salty plantain chips, we embarked in an open boat through the troubled brown waters of the Madre de Dios river, the epicenter of the illegal mining operations that are one of

Peru's most explosive political issues. I didn't know whether illness or weather was inducing my sense of dislocation, but somehow I half expected to sail past a raft bearing the royal court of Spain. In an hour, we arrived at the magnificent Hacienda Concepción, an eco-resort in the belly of the jungle. I climbed out and asked our guide to steady me on the nearly vertical climb to the hotel grounds. The canopy of green and the hum of insects added to my fevered dismay. Without a word, Ann checked me in first and led me to my room. "Let me know if you want anything," she said.

"Just this bed," I said, and drifted off under the ceiling fan. Sweat soaked through my brand-new moisture-wicking outfit and onto the lovely Peruvian cotton sheets. I slept through dinner and pisco sours and card games by lantern light. I slept through the girls' ordering of multiple grenadine lemonades. I slept through what I finally recognized as the point and reward of the trip: time with Ann and



Liz, and also with Val and Natalie, all of whom were, like me, raising children in rural New England. Time with our daughters. After all these years of talk, we had actually made it to Peru with our band of teenagers, who had been together since kindergarten.

**MY FRIENDS** urged me to stay behind and rest the next day. Ava offered to keep me company. But something—maybe the howler monkeys that roared like lions—got me out of bed, into a steaming shower, into my jungle gear and then to a rattan chair in the lobby, clutching a mug of coffee. Peer pressure, I suppose. I didn't want to let my daughter down. I wanted to be game, up for anything, committed to my companions, all the things I never had to be and never was when I traveled alone.

It was a two-mile trek through the rain forest, and my hazy vision seemed to freeze the capuchin monkeys as they leaped across branches. We spied macaws and kingfishers wedged among the foliage. Soon we boarded

an open boat and sailed dreamily onto Lake Sandoval, where river otters paddled in the blistering sun and caimans, camouflaged by tree roots, sunned themselves. The scene was imbued with the mystery and exoticism that I continually jump on planes to search for. At the time, though, it barely registered. My delirium was interrupted only by short bouts of paranoia. The waterways hung thick with vines from which I was sure dangled whole colonies of fer-de-lance.

"We've got to get you back," said Ann.

"I'm starting to think we should get you to Lima and a doctor," said Natalie.

"Just take it slow," said Val.

"Oh, Mom," said Ava, "it's awful you're sick."

By the time I limped the same two miles back for lunch, I had spiked a fever of more than 103. After tucking me back into my simple, perfect bed, my friends delivered tea, water, Theraflu and updates. We debated whether I should start the Z-pack or the Cipro I'd packed for emergencies (I'm a

## PERU ESSENTIALS

**MACHU PICCHU** There are 17 (80-minute) flights from Lima to Cuzco daily. From Cuzco, take the train through the Sacred Valley to Aguas Calientes, which is four hours and connects with a short bus ride to Machu Picchu. I booked this through Enigma Travel Collection ([enigmatravelcollection.com](http://enigmatravelcollection.com)), and the fee—\$348 for adults, \$311 for teenagers—included transportation to and from the train station, an English-speaking guide, the bus and entrance to Machu Picchu. *Pack:* Hiking shoes and sunscreen, and if you think you might be susceptible to altitude sickness, ask your doctor to prescribe Diamox. From June to September, the nights are dry but chilly, so bring some layers.

**TAMBOPATA NATIONAL RESERVE** After you arrive in Puerto Maldonado, a boat »



will ferry you an hour along the river to the Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción ([inkaterra.com](http://inkaterra.com)). Rates are about \$360 for three days and two nights and include round-trip transportation, all guides, tours and meals but, sadly, just one pisco sour. *Pack:* Long hiking pants, high socks, a lightweight, crushable hat and some energy bars to sustain you on the lengthy (and very hot) walk to Lake Sandoval. Long sleeves are best for the jungle.

**PARACAS** Until construction is completed on the international airport in nearby Pisco, the best way to cover the 180 miles from Lima to Paracas is by bus (about three and a half hours) or rental car or, if you splurge, charter plane. Hotel Paracas can arrange tours to the Ballestas Islands and the National Reserve. Hotel rooms during peak season are \$170 to \$690 a night ([starwoodhotels.com](http://starwoodhotels.com)). *Pack:* Waterproof jacket and layers. —M.D.S.

doctor's daughter, used to diagnosing and treating myself in the wild). The other mothers slipped in and out, sat cross-legged on my bed and recounted every detail of the quinoa, avocado and mango salad and spicy chicken stew with yucca and chilled papaya that I was missing. My daughter breezed in occasionally, taking a break from girlfriend time in the hammocks that were draped throughout the hotel.

"This is what it's going to be like when I'm in the rest home," I said. Ava kissed my head, exactly as I had kissed hers 10,000 times: She groomed my hair, tucked it behind my ears and smoothed out the pillow underneath.

**IF I HAD** been alone, I would have stayed at the hotel to recover. But early the next day my friends packed for me and propped me up, and we all departed Tambopata. Ava snapped pictures of our boat's propeller, stuck in a fisherman's net in the muddy depths of the Madre de Dios, and the out-of-nowhere men with machetes to slice us

free. I recall my state of utter dependency as someone offered me ice cubes and poor Ava lugged my computer bag to the plane to Lima and then on a six-hour bus ride down the coast to Ica. I wanted to be surrounded by strangers, not so I could disappear into the landscape, as I usually do on trips, but so I could stop pretending I was OK while nonetheless being a total, burdensome drag. I wanted to get Ava into better hands than mine were at present, skip the planned sightseeing the next day and head straight to the resort in Paracas to steam away whatever infection had me in its grip. At midnight we pulled up to the tidy Villa Jasmin hotel in Ica, and early in the morning, even I emerged for breakfast.

Piedad, the mother of our daughters' friend Stephanie, whose *quinceañera* we had traveled so far to celebrate, sat at one of the breakfast tables. None of us could seem to believe we were actually here in her hometown, and I felt terrible that I had neither the will nor the strength to explore with them that day.





**DONKEYS** help farmers (above left) harvest lima beans, which are native to Peru. The market at Pisac (above) is full of textiles, produce and the necessities of life; it draws travelers as well as locals, some of whom arrive on foot along steep Andean footpaths.

"I can't go," I announced. The plan called for us to board the bus again for the sights: a boat trip, some marine wildlife, a fishing village.

"It's supposed to be spectacular," Val said. "You've come this far."

**THIS IS** what I dreaded. Responsibility. Structure. Obligation. My scenario was to hire a car for the one-hour ride to the Hotel Paracas and then wallow in the high thread count. I would return the following afternoon while my friends courted their demise on dune boards. Then we would get dolled up for the party. I wasn't going on any boat, and no one would pressure me into dune boarding, not the next day, not ever.

"The point is, we're here," said Liz.

"When are you ever gonna be back?" added Natalie.

"Please come with us," said Ava.

My group-travel nightmare had come to pass. I boarded the bus but feigned sleep and sulked all the way to the coast. When we arrived at the

bay of Paracas, however, the smell of salt and baking bread and a great canvas of turquoise waves jolted me upright. The wind seeped through six layers of clothing as we sailed toward the Ballestas Islands, ripe with guano and covered with birds and sea lions. The coast was an undulating strip of dunes that ended at the ocean's edge. My hands were stiff from the cold when we returned to the port village of El Chaco. Vendors hoisted trays of sliced chocolate cake and hot empanadas through the crowd, and I scraped coins from my bag to sample one of each. Our driver, Rolando, ferried us to the National Reserve, a sweeping stretch of desert flats bordering the sea. The sand was once the ocean floor, so it was a grainy mixture of salt and shells, marked with fossils and the memory of waves where one day the water ebbed and never returned.

Ava and I supported each other like drunks leaving a bar as we made our way against the wind toward the point where the desert met the Pacific. We wondered at the rich blues and lemon yellows for as long as we could remain wordless—maybe two minutes.

"Can you imagine that such a place exists?" I said.

"Aren't you glad you came?" she asked.

"Honey, you have no idea," I said. "Are you OK with my spending the night away tonight?"

She shot me a look I've seen before that said something like *Get real, Mom*.

**AT LUNCH** in the tiny cove of Lagunillas, the girls sipped glasses of deep-red *chicha morada*, a sweet, nonalcoholic drink made from purple corn. I watched as my daughter, her friends and my friends were served plates of ceviche and **CONTINUED ON PAGE 159**

grilled fish. Our restaurant was sheltered, but there was no door, and beyond our covered terrace, pelicans squawked and the wind whirred. The faces around the table were pink and healthy, and everyone's hair was a nest of tangles. Rolando motioned to me and said something to the waiter, who returned with a small measure of gold liquid.

"This will be good for you," he said, holding out a tumbler.

I downed the pisco, neat, and for the first time in days, my throat scalded in relief rather than agony. After lunch, I strolled with Liz around the cove toward the van.

"You know, you have pneumonia," she said, trusting her mom-based diagnostic instincts.

"I'm pretty sure," I said.

"You're smart to go off alone and spoil yourself tonight," she said.

The problem was, I no longer wanted to be alone. What I wished for instead was that time would stop. I wanted our girls to remain 15, for us never to be old and stricken with illness and grief. I wanted the wind from this ancient coast to preserve the afternoon and emboss a memory of Ava's perfect innocence into my brain. I wanted to overcome whatever convinces me, against all proof, that I have all the answers and that I know what is best for myself. I wondered what else I had missed in my countless solo journeys, with no one urging me beyond my own wishes. That morning my companions did what friends are supposed to do: They saved me from myself. Not all voyages have to be a total surrender to the unknown. Togetherness might be as good a reason as any to take to the road.

"You know, I'm not going dune boarding tomorrow," I said.

"You are too," said Liz. "Do you know why?"

"I will be scared out of my mind," I said.

"Me too," she said.

"I don't think I will be able to stay awake for the party tomorrow night," I said. This was South America: The

festivities would begin at 11.

"Yes, you will," she said, and we kept walking into the wind. "Doesn't it all go so fast, Marcia?"

"I guess it does," I said. The others were scattered around us. Ava and her friends laughed, bending to collect shells; Ann and Phoebe were off to the side, deep in conversation.

"It stinks you got sick," Liz said. "But it's funny. We all love to have someone to take care of."

I dabbed the raw skin under my nose with a wet tissue. The 11 of us converged toward the bus that sat waiting.

"Hey, Liz," I whispered. "How would you like a fancy hotel and a really hot shower tonight?" She turned toward me and raised an eyebrow at the invitation. "I'm too . . ." I said, shrugging, "sick to be alone."

"Will we get back in time to dune board?" she asked.

I nodded, then said, "I could really use the company." \*

In 2012, MARCIA DeSANCTIS received three Lowell Thomas Awards, including the silver award for Travel Journalist of the Year. She is writing a memoir about travel and marriage.

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