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What I Did On My Summer Holidays: Remembering my 2015 trip to Peru

By Elisabeth Flett

It's the heat that I remember the most.

It was a blazing, unrepentant constant in this land of unrepentant constants; unrepentant rock, unrepentant tree branches, unrepentant dust, unrepentant altitude.

I was nineteen. I was in Peru on a trip I'd expected to be the trip of a lifetime, and which was turning out to be very possibly the trip of my lifetime in a way rather different to how I'd intended. It was week three of my time in the country, so very distant from my home in London, and I'd already nearly died being thrown off a horse onto rocky terrain - not to mention all the times I'd *prayed* for death from flu, altitude sickness and food poisoning and, cough, "alcohol poisoning". (No-one had warned me about the effects I might experience after drinking tequila at several thousand feet...!) I was a member of a student-led drama group, touring around the country performing our - quite frankly, pretty bad - short devised theatre show to unsuspecting, puzzled children in schools and orphanages all over Peru. None of us were over the age of 24; several of us, including me,

couldn't speak Spanish. We got into the cars of strange men, hoping that they were indeed going where they promised to take us. We got stuck at the side of a dirt track waiting for a tuk-tuk to take us back to the city and then discovered, in the scorching midday sun, that we had run out of water. Someone ate hand-skinned rabbit, roasted on a stick outside our accommodation, and was horribly ill in the communal bathroom.

Someone managed to get dangerously lost on a hike up a mountain and wandered round the forest for hours with only coca leaves to eat, ending up trying to follow a small stream with the hope of finding her way out again (she did, looking decidedly worse for wear!)

We somehow managed to get stuck with someone's ex-boyfriend who stayed with us for a week and insisted on doing cocaine (the most mortifying moment of his stay with us was when he asked the headmaster of a community music school at which we were performing if he could sell him coke.) Three of the troupe went out nightclubbing in Lima and did the show the next morning a horrible shade of grey, taking it in turns to run to the toilet during the group chorus songs. We went on a 2-day tourist trip on a bus full of excited Germans and it poured with rain the whole time - I'm talking trying to dry sopping wet, freezing underwear under an icy cold hand dryer in a bleak roadside toilet level of rain - so all we saw was a castle that was purely hypothetical under all that mist and some sort of coin factory.

Our bus nearly reversed off a cliff. (No, it turns out it's not actually fun to role-play the end of the Italian Job.) We went to a salt mine - without doubt the most dangerous tourist attraction I've ever visited - and I nearly fell in. We cooed over a cage of adorable guinea pigs then screamed when we realised that their fate was to be impaled on a skewer,

roasted and offered to us as street snack. We sprinted for rickety local planes, bargained with bad-tempered taxi drivers, feared for death as we screamed through Lima on a tuk-tuk that seemed horrifyingly ill-equipped to deal with the sheer mayhem, then decided that wasn't so bad after all when our next ride was in a car where the windscreen was half-shattered and I had to hold the door closed as we drove. Sometimes we ate well; sometimes we literally only ate rice, Inka Cola and the Peruvian equivalent of digestive biscuits. We performed our cheery little show in orphanages so bleak we sat in saddened silence for the entire journey back to our accommodation, in a tiny little tin hut that proclaimed itself a library despite being in a dusty car parking lot - so dusty, in fact, that after trying to lead a movement game outside for five minutes I had to find a concrete step on which to sit as I frantically tried to wheeze air back into my lungs, my body covered both inside and out in the bright orange dirt found everywhere in these poorer urban areas. We performed in hospitals so rural that the women still wore traditional hats and skirts, in a decidedly unfriendly posh school for the children of American diplomats, on a football field in the dark, in an Evangelical Christian institution where they admirably tried to convert us to Jesus Christ despite the language barrier...

Yes, it's safe to say that my life had flashed before my eyes several times before this moment, in the blazing heat. But despite all the struggles and difficulties listed above I had made it to week three, just about intact, and I had made it to the prize at the end of our trip here in Peru: the chance to visit Machu Picchu. And here, on the last leg on this

journey, on what was meant to be the relaxing activity to celebrate a successful theatre tour, was when my body finally gave up.

Not wishing to seem like the weakling of the group - as you may have already guessed I had a bit of a reputation for being eternally ill by this point- I agreed to climb up a mountain path to see the sights of such a famous place. The first half hour was unpleasant but possible; sweat stickily trickled down my neck and soaked my thin grey tank top as I climbed up the steep grey stone steps cut by masochists several centuries earlier. There's a photo taken at about the one-hour mark. I look like someone who's beginning to realise that this hasn't been a fantastic call of judgement but is going to keep going because going back isn't actually that much of an option either, thank you, look that steep descent there, so let's just keep going shall we and not think too much about how much trouble we're probably in- ...I am smiling, but my eyes scream THIS IS NOT MY NATURAL HABITAT.

Stupidly, I kept climbing. Climbing, climbing, climbing.

It turned out that the view from the top may have been fabulous but the way up was really quite monotonously similar. Yes, the forest surrounding us was beautiful but, I thought rather sourly, it had also been beautiful further down. The view of the buildings of Machu Picchu were now in fact nearly entirely covered by trees and as we kept climbing the trees continued to get thicker. Brightly coloured butterflies started to land on me as I pushed through greenery, lightly flickering against my boots and trousers

before flying off again, mocking me in their ease to get higher up this infernal mountain. Finally, so frustratingly close to the summit that I could see it but literally unable to take another step, I gave up, lay down and proclaimed that I had stopped. As people stepped over me with pitying glances I squinted up into the sun and decided that I didn't like Peru very much. At that point a member of the team, another teenager who was pale and not very athletic, panted up next to me and helped roll me over so I was at least able to admire the view we'd half-killed ourselves for. It was stunning, the green luscious forest melding into formidable mountain peaks and, as always, that bright, bright blue sky.

"ESSA!" A hand dragged me back - In my exhaustion I'd wriggled to try and find a more comfortable position on which to sit in amongst all the rocks and grass and had nearly slid off the mountain. It says something to my sheer exhaustion that I just laughed.

"Quicker way back down," I'm pretty sure I joked as I ate my 235th packet of Peruvian digestives. The midday sun began to beat down relentlessly as I reapplied Factor 50 with the rising suspicion that it wasn't doing very much. My companion suggested that it was time to head back down, I reluctantly agreed and then tried to stand up.

This was when it all went horribly wrong.

My legs wouldn't work. They had turned to pure jelly, and as I stood there leaning against a tree, black spots circling my vision, everything shaking, squinting through the sweat sliding into my eyes, I knew I was in genuine trouble. "I can't move," I croaked to my friend with the sort of calm alarm that only comes with a genuine problem. "Just go slowly, you'll be fine!" he suggested with the helpfulness of an eighteen-year-old boy.

“No, I mean I CAN’T MOVE.”

He doubled back to where I was stuck, his panic rising with my resignation.

Things are pretty blurry from here on out, probably from a mix of sheer exhaustion and heat, but here’s some of the things I remember seriously suggesting:

- Ask the staff to fly out a helicopter to where I was stranded (never mind it was a narrow stone path halfway up a mountain, I clearly hadn’t thought that far ahead)
- Just leave me here, I’m sure I’ll think of something
- CARRY ME
- Abandon me here to die, I’ve had a good life (I do remember half-seriously saying that one multiple times)

This team member, despite also being a teenager, despite also being exhausted and dripping with sweat, did none of those things. Instead, step by step, inch by agonising inch, ignoring my cursing and pleading and insisting that I couldn’t go any further, he literally talked - and occasionally dragged - me down a mountain. By the time we’d arrived at the bottom the only thing that he could do with me was prop me up against a shaded wall - incidentally, a wall that proved to be the congregating place for the llamas to come and relieve themselves, which was a very alarming blurry image to look up and see coming towards you when you’re out of it with heatstroke, let me tell you - and leave me to muse on how I was never going to go up another hill ever again. When I tried to thank him later, he waved it off. I’d shared my water with him and hadn’t teased him for missing breakfast tea; he’d looked out for me in return.

This rather improbably and ridiculous story, I believe, is a perfect example of humans being humans. Whenever human endurance is mentioned, it is often in the guise of phenomenal trips to the Arctic or the Amazon; few documentaries are dedicated to the sheer miracle of the everyday ability of everyday humans such as myself to simply pick ourselves up and... Just. Keep. Going. Whenever human fellowship is mentioned, it is often in the guise of unbelievable acts of heroics, of self-sacrifice, of incredible feats that are deserving of medals and knighthoods; few books are dedicated to the simple choice to help a struggling friend, be that up an arid Peruvian mountain or in the office as they try to help get the printer to work before a big meeting.

It probably doesn't mean much to that person now, so many years on, that they didn't leave me stranded beside that tree. But it meant the world to me then, and I often still think on it now. None of us have to show our fellowship to each other in gigantic, monumental ways. All we have to do, to be good humans, is to look out for those crumpled on all sorts of different kinds of stone steps, both physical and metaphorical, and offer them a helping hand. I can say with absolute confidence that it will always be appreciated.