

Incan Gold

This past May, I traveled to Cuzco, Peru with my two sons, Coley and Brent, to visit the famous Incan ruins of Machu Picchu. Never one for half measures when a more lavish option is available, I booked the trip through an outfitter called Country Walkers, whose business is what has come to be called “adventure travel.” The goal, I knew from previous excursions with the same provider, is to let professional guides take willing participants to exotic locations worldwide, but not to let them get too uncomfortable in the process. The food is generally good. The hotels are generally nice. And the guides are generally excellent.

I had wanted to see Machu Picchu for many years. Something about its look, gleaned from a succession of travel brochures – the ancient buildings, the terraced hillsides, the encircling Andean peaks – struck me as both serene and wondrous. But the Country Walkers trip was more than just a tour of the Incan monument. It was a week of hiking in the high Andes, at altitudes varying between 9,500 and 12,000 feet. To prepare for the trip, I was told, I would need to sustain my target heart rate of 135 for 30 minutes on the treadmill. I would need to drink so much water that my urine would run clear.

My history of rising to these kinds of challenges has not always been impressive. At age 13, at Camp Kooch-i-Ching, in northern Minnesota, on a ten-day canoe trip, I was asked to carry on my back the tin wannigan, a wooden chest containing all the dinnerware for 12 campers. I remember shouldering the thing, feeling its hard edges cut into my spine, then falling straight backwards, like a drunk unable to support himself. We had chosen an Indian reservation for our embarkation point, and quickly enough, all the Indians were laughing – at me. The tin wannigan was reassigned. Years later, on an adult Outward Bound course, I was so drained and disoriented after the first grueling day that only recognition of the embarrassment that would ensue should I go home early kept me in place. So this past April, I hit the treadmill. I started drinking water like my liver was aflame. And I decided to arrive in Cuzco two days early, to acclimate.

Machu Picchu was opened up to the modern world in 1911 – “discovered,” as the history books like to say – by Hiram Bingham, a swashbuckling Yale professor upon whom, many believe, the character of Indiana Jones was based. At the time, he had no concept of the importance of his find. I’ll have more to say about that later, but for now

it's enough to recognize that his bequest is, today, the largest tourist draw on the South American continent, forced to limit its visitors to 3,000 a day. While the monument's reputation was inducement enough for me, Country Walkers had more in mind. Our week in Peru was to be an exploration of Andean culture as much as a glimpse of Incan ruins. Before it was over, we would chew liberally on coca leaves, a plant with a semi-narcotic effect that has been banned in the United States since 1961, and we would drink gallons of coca tea, because, along with the energy boost that coca provides, it is said to be helpful in combating altitude sickness. We would drink countless Pisco Sours, a *de facto* national drink, sample roast guinea pig, a prized Peruvian delicacy, and in that regard, view, in the cathedral in Cuzco, one of the most famous paintings in all of Latin America, a "Last Supper" with guinea pig on the plate in front of Christ and his disciples. We would be introduced to Peruvian ceramics, weaving and music, and we would also learn from our guides that the accepted English pronunciation of Machu Picchu, which is supposed to translate to "old peak" in the local tongue of Quechua, actually translates to "big dick" – and if you want to get it correct, you should say something that sounds more like Machu Pish-u.

But all of this is prelude to my larger purpose tonight, which is to share with you the residual learning experience of this trip. That includes my instruction in the Incan culture – of which I knew nothing; my newfound understanding of the Spanish conquest, which is one of the great tragedies of history, and my discovery of how Machu Picchu itself fits into the Incan narrative – which is surprising. The person who sparked my interest in all of this was my primary Country Walker guide, Juan Carlos Yanez Choquehuanca, or J.C. for short. J.C. is a year-round guide who lives in Cuzco, but necessarily spends many weeks on the road. Of Incan descent, he has the broad, swarthy features of the locally indigenous people, a mind as sharp as the mountain summits that surround him, and energy to match their grandeur. "Lets DO it!" J.C. would exhort us as we arose from a break to tackle the next leg of any given hike, and his enthusiasm was such that no matter how sluggish we might have felt, we did it! Nearly five centuries after the Spanish conquest, J.C.'s contempt for the invaders remains visceral, even as his love for present-day Peru, and his pride in his heritage, is deeply felt.

The civilization that the Spanish encountered when they first came to South America, in 1532, was the most remarkable in the New World. It surpassed anything that the North American Indians, or the

Aztecs or the Mayans, had created. Stretching 2500 miles along the central portion of the western side of the continent, the Incans' holdings extended from present-day Columbia in the North to central Chile in the South, and from the narrow coastal plain, across the Andes, into the Amazonian jungle. With a genius for organization and building that still invites wonder, the Incans constructed roads and settlements throughout their empire. Cuzco, the largest city, was their capital. At the time of the Spanish conquest it was the largest city in the Americas.

To facilitate communication, the Incans built thousands of miles of paved roads. Because they didn't have wheels, the roads didn't have to be level, and where steep hillsides were an issue, they built stairs. On the fourth day of our trip, as we were hiking the last seven miles of the famed Inca trail toward Machu Picchu, and we were *nearly* there, the steepest stairway I've ever seen suddenly loomed out of the undergrowth. J.C. was quick to explain. "They're called the Oh-my-God stairs. I think you can see why." (I surmounted them using both hands and feet – a common solution for tired trekkers.) To handle the distances, the Incas developed a system of relay runners, or *chaskis*; they were permitted to chew coca leaves as a stimulant, when others were not. It is said that they could bring fresh fish from the coast for the emperor's dinner in Cuzco – a distance of 400 miles – with excellent results.

Presiding over all of this was *the* Inca, an emperor who ruled absolutely, who was both secular *and* divine in the eyes of his subjects, and who, in the middle of the fifteenth century, was named Pachacuti. In the central plaza of Cuzco today is a fountain of impressive sculptural forms (not unlike the Tyler-Davidson), the most imposing of which is the figure on top, with his left arm extended, his cape flowing, his gaze fixed beneath a three-point crown and his right hand grasping a carved staff of power and privilege.

"Who's that?" I asked son Brent, who had preceded me to Cuzco by several days.

"Pachacuti," I was told.

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He was the man," I was told.

At the time Pachacuti came to power, the Inca kingdom was relatively small. In short order, Pachacuti began a major restructuring, including new thoroughfares, buildings and palaces in Cuzco, military campaigns to expand the realm and new governance in the conquered

lands. “No matter what other characteristic a ruler might possess,” says Incan scholar and author Kim MacQuarrie, “the primordial one was that he be good at warfare.” Under Pachacuti’s law, local peasants populated the army and tilled the land. While they couldn’t own property, they did keep what they needed for themselves and paid the surplus as a form of tax. This was true of artisans as well as farmers, and in this way, the Incans amassed vast storehouses of commodities, both agricultural and artistic. A local Inca governor was placed in charge. Local elites could remain in place as long as they cooperated; when they did not, they were killed.

What we know of Incan civilization today comes mostly from their own oral histories, with much of that recorded by Spanish chroniclers. Lacking any written tradition, they kept records through a system of knotted chords, called quipus, made from the wool of alpacas or llamas. To report the progress of crops, or the volume of taxes, or even the advance of enemy troops, the quipus were remarkably effective. That said, what resonates for us, in 2014, are the elaborate stone constructions of walls, houses, forts and temples, and the rhythmically curving terraces of the mountainside farming that to this day still dazzle.

So revered is the stonework, that on a main thoroughfare in Cuzco, lined by ancient ashlar (or building stones) of monumental size, tourists are asked not to touch the masonry. Hiram Bingham, admiring the famed fortress, Saqsaywaman, above Cuzco, said, “The northern wall is perhaps the most extraordinary structure built by ancient man in the western hemisphere. The smaller blocks weigh 10 or 20 tons. Larger blocks are estimated to weigh 200 tons. A few of the largest weigh 300 tons! And yet they cling so closely together that it is impossible to insert the point of a knife between them.”

How did they do it? With no derricks, pulleys or wheels, and no iron or steel, they used thousands of workers and bronze crowbars of enormous strength. The combination could move even the largest stones over an inclined plane by levers. Lower tiers of walls were generally made of larger blocks, giving the construction a look, Bingham said, “of massive security.” Upper levels gradually decreased in size, “lending grace and dignity to the structure.”

Vestiges of Incan agriculture, signaled by rows of long, narrow terraces dropping precipitously down the sides of high mountains, or rimming depressions in the occasional plain, are much in evidence

today. Each fresh example – and I saw several – was a prominent feature of the landscape, not unlike Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty on the shore of the Great Salt Lake. Each forms a distinct pattern, and is a vivid reminder of the importance placed on agriculture. Incan husbandry combined expertise in the cultivation and conservation of soil as well as in irrigation and drainage. Fertilizer was greatly valued. Guano produced on the bird-islands off the coast of Peru was a primary source, and although thousands of birds populated them, the Incas punished by death anyone killing even one. Corn, potatoes and today’s trendy quinoa were some of the crops most commonly grown. Today, J.C. assured us, Peru produces thousands of varieties of potato. They supplement the meals served in Cuzco the way bread is offered here – you almost can’t get dinner without them.

On our trip, the guides saw to it that we visited multiple Incan sites of both architectural and agricultural significance. Two of the most famous, Pisac and Ollantaytambo – ancient way stations on the road to Machu Picchu – proved to be not only aesthetically compelling, but altitudinally challenging. The former featured dizzying paths down exactly the kind of mountainside that had made my wife stay at home; the latter claims a 240-riser climb that J.C., mercifully, broke with two rest stops. While the view from the summit, about 280 degrees, is stunning, the Incan stone formations framing it may be even more remarkable. “The only place the builders could have gotten those stones was in that valley,” J.C. said, gesturing to a point so far away and so far down that moving the stones such a distance was virtually unthinkable.

“Awesome,” said Coley, and for once, it seemed the only word appropriate.

J.C. then launched into one of his frequent observations about the depredations of the Spanish. They had destroyed the culture that made such craftsmanship possible, and they did it in the most savage ways imaginable. He said, “You have only to look today at the nations that were ruled by the British, and compare them to the nations that were colonized by the Spanish, and you can see for yourself how they’ve fared.”

Spanish conquistadors first set foot in Peru in the spring of 1532. Under the command of Francisco Pizarro, they carried with them the authority of his royal license, signed by the king and queen of Spain,

granting him the exclusive right to conquer this unexplored land. In effect, it was a license to form a company – drawn up as a contract and duly notarized – to implement, at the employees' own expense, an economic plan premised upon murder, plunder and torture.

Contrary to the romanticized images you may recall from history books, conquistadors were not professional soldiers financed by and sent out by the Spanish monarchy to extend the empire. They included cobblers, tailors, carpenters, blacksmiths – in short, a representative sampling of all the lower classes of early 16th century Spain. At the time, the country was transitioning from feudalism to capitalism. If someone from a low station could somehow acquire wealth, he could reasonably aspire to an estate of his own, manor status and a life of luxury. On an expedition such as Pizarro proposed, participants were entitled to a percentage of the plunder exactly proportionate to the investment in the enterprise that they were willing to make. In other words, it was a great way to strike it rich.

Pizarro himself, now 54 years old, had already spent 30 years in the New World on various expeditions, always moving himself up within the ranks of the company he served. When Vasco Nunez Balboa “discovered” the Pacific, Pizarro was with him. Illegitimate at birth, and illiterate all his life, he was, nonetheless, according to MacQuarrie, “tall, sinewy, athletic, quiet, taciturn, brave, firm, ambitious, cunning, efficient, diplomatic and – like most conquistadors – as brutal as the situation required.” On this voyage down the Peruvian coast, he was also intent on making his fortune.

Arriving in Northern Peru with just 167 colleagues, he was entering an empire of some ten million natives, ruled by an elite of perhaps 100,000, all of them beholden to *the* Inca, a man about 30 years old named Atahualpa – who was Pachicuti's great-grandson. Atahualpa had come to power in a great civil war that ended just as the Spaniards landed. Still reeling from the devastation, the Incans had not even had time for Atahualpa's official coronation. To accomplish that, he was preparing to travel 600 miles to the South, to Cuzco, when he learned that there were, on his turf, some funny-looking foreigners – men with hair on their faces, steel plates across their chests and sitting astride four-legged beasts that no Incan had ever seen. They needed to be dealt with.

Pizarro, recalling how Cortez had exploited native divisions in Mexico to his own great advantage, now wondered if he couldn't do the

same in Peru. By allying with either the winner or the loser of the civil war, mightn't he be able to achieve his own ambitions more easily? Through interrogations of captured natives, many of whom were tortured and/or killed to get the information sought, he learned of Atahualpa's whereabouts, in a city named Cajamarca, some distance into the Andes. Without hesitation, he moved his recruits into the mountains, continuing to play nasty and rough with the locals as he advanced.

Atahualpa was encamped on the plains outside Cajamarca in tents erected by his army. Estimated to contain between 40,000 and 80,000 troops, Incans outnumbered the Spaniards between 200 and 400 to one. Under the circumstances, Pizarro decided to remain flexible. On the chance that some accommodation with the emperor might be reached, he would be open to negotiation. But should it not, he would be ready to fight. Accordingly, he arranged his cohorts inside four buildings surrounding Cajamarca's central square . . . most with their horses and their crude guns in three of them, forming a U around the square, and leaving a few, with their total of four small cannons, in the fourth. Terrified – there are reports of the men urinating on themselves out of fear – the Spanish waited.

On the afternoon of November 16, 1532, after moving several thousand of his troops to within striking distance of Cajamarca's central plaza, Atahualpa entered the square, born aloft in the elegantly constructed litter that was traditional transportation for the Incan elite. His plan: to see for himself these strangers – these arrogant, irritating strangers – and then to punish them for the havoc they had wrought in the short time they had been in his land. He planned to kill them all. Soon, he was in the middle of the plaza, surrounded by five to six thousand of his men. No Spaniard was visible.

Out came a priest, and an interpreter, to address them. His assignment was to read the *requerimiento*, or "Requirement" that the Spanish king demanded be read to all potential subjects before a conquest was undertaken. In the face of reports of Spanish brutality in the New World, the king and queen had decided that an ultimatum/justification for their proxies' actions be proclaimed to all newly discovered people. In brief, it said that in creating the world, God had granted the divine right to rule it to his emissary on earth, the pope. And since the pope, in 1493, had granted to the Spanish crown jurisdiction over all lands west of the 46th meridian, it was the duty of all

people in these regions to submit to their rightful rulers, the Spanish monarchs. If, upon receiving this information, the natives refused to obey, then all necessary violence could and would be used against them to either force submission or destroy them altogether. That the Requirement was frequently read in Spanish to people who didn't speak the language was beside the point. They had heard their rights, and thus any violence that ensued would be justified. God himself had legally sanctioned it.

What happened next is only partially clear. The priest held up his prayer book. Atahualpa asked to see it. The priest handed it to him and tried to show him how to open it. Atahualpa struck him on the arm, opened the book himself, threw it to the ground with great scorn, and upbraided the priest for the Spaniards' unseemly treatment of his people. According to some accounts, he then stood up on his litter and called to his troops to prepare for battle. The priest, in fast retreat, exhorted Pizarro to take them on, and Pizarro – never a hostage to indecision – signaled to the cannons to fire. Immediately, chaos broke out; butchery of barbaric proportions followed. The Spaniards, in padded armor and on horseback, poured out of hiding, guns blazing and steel slashing. Their razor-sharp swords, knives and lances, wielded from horseback, were more than a match for the clubs, lances and spiked maces of the natives. Panicking, the latter pushed for the gates of the square, trampling one another in the process, only to find that the Spanish were hell-bent on chasing them onto the open plain and slaughtering them there. Within a relatively few hours, six or seven thousand Incans had been cut down, and Atahualpa had been captured. Not a single Spaniard lost his life.

In the immediate aftermath, Pizarro treated his new guest to dinner, clean clothes and sleeping arrangements in his own room. The next day, he dispatched 30 of his men, under command of Hernando de Soto (later to “discover” Florida), to make a sweep of the outlying Incan encampment. Unchallenged by the soldiers, who were under orders from Atahualpa to desist, the Spaniards ransacked the tents, and then the trail of artifacts, including some jewelry, which the emperor's attendants had left behind as they fled. Among the spoils were 80,000 gold pesos, seven thousand silver marks and 14 emeralds. The gold and silver were largely in the form of pitchers, dishes and drinking vessels, all of which Atahualpa said came from his table service. Should the

Spaniards be interested, he said, there was a lot more where that came from.

Well . . . I don't have to tell you. The Spanish could hardly contain their excitement. Even this much booty would put all of them well on the way to Easy Street for life. To Atahualpa, the captured goods were handsome, but no more; the Incans had no concept of money. Seeing only the sacrifice of what, for him and his people, were utilitarian objects, Atahualpa immediately struck what he thought was a deal: Walking into a room in the Temple of the Sun, he drew a white chalk line well above his head on all four walls. In return for his life, he said, he would guarantee the Spanish enough gold and silver to fill that room; they had only to be sufficiently patient to let it arrive from all corners of the empire. It would take about a year. Pizarro was flabbergasted. In all his experiences in the New World, he had never heard anything like this, but then, at this moment, Pizarro had no real grasp of the dimensions of the empire he had breached.

Never mind. In short order, he had a notary draw up the basic points of Atahualpa's offer, and in return, he promised he would allow his prisoner to return to Quito, where he could rule his own kingdom in the North. But this was a lie. He had no intention of ever allowing the emperor to go free. If, once he fulfilled his pledge to secure the gold, Atahualpa could be useful, Pizarro would allow him to live. If not, he would die. Following the agreement, word went out across the kingdom to bring gold and silver to Cajamarca, and as a corollary, to let Pizarro's men pass unimpeded. Because Atahualpa remained in their eyes their ultimate ruler, the order was obeyed. But we can imagine the anger and resentment when – in one particularly unsavory incident – three unruly Spaniards entered Cuzco, brushed past the priests, charged into the Qoricancha, the holiest temple of the empire, and began stripping away with crowbars the banded sheets of gold that ornamented the interior. The sacrilege was characteristic of everything the intruders did. When the room in Cajamarca was filled, Pizarro ordered the precious metals to be melted into ingots. And so, during a four-month period, from March to July 1533, more than 40,000 pounds of sacred Incan gold and silver – statues, jewelry, plates, vessels, ornaments and other works of art – were lost. Today, Incan objects made from these materials are an extreme rarity.

As all this was going on, Pizarro received some long-awaited reinforcements from Spain, about 153 more men and 50 more horses.

The impact on Atahualpa was crushing. For five months, he had hoped that once his captors got their gold, they would leave. Now, seeing their increased numbers, and their excitement over their plunder, he knew instinctively that he had been duped. Shrewdly, he asked Pizarro how the peasants of Peru would be divided among the Spaniards, and without thinking, Pizarro revealed a very precise plan. Atahualpa is said to have uttered simply, "Then I shall die."

And that, in fact, is what happened. Less than a year after the Incan emperor had been captured, and led to believe that he would eventually be set free, he was garroted in the public square on trumped-up charges of fomenting rebellion among his troops. Pizarro and his men set off on the 600-mile march south, to Cuzco, confident that once they controlled the capital, they would be positioned to control the empire. Along the way, they installed a puppet king, Manco Inca, who was 17 years old and a younger brother to Atahualpa. Through him, the Spaniards expected they could again steer the natives, and again they were right – at least for a time.

I will not take you through the agonizing unraveling of the Incas. Suffice to say that the tactics employed in the capture and betrayal of Atahualpa provided the script for all that was to come. Although Manco Inca served Pizarro's purposes for a time, he eventually recognized the Spaniards' true intentions, triggered a formidable, but ultimately unsuccessful, rebellion, and ten years after he was put in place, was murdered by his former sponsors. The two sons that succeeded him, first Titu Cusi and then Tupac Amaru, withdrew to the remote Andean city of Vilcabamba, one hundred miles of nearly impassable mountain terrain from Cuzco. It was there, following almost 40 years of guerilla warfare, that the Spanish ultimately stamped them out. Their victory occurred just 39 years after Francisco Pizarro had landed in Peru.

On the fourth day of our trip, we were scheduled to arise at 4:30 a.m. to catch the train from Ollantaytambo. The train was to drop us off at a trail marker in the woods, and from there we would hike some seven miles, up into the mountains, along the famed Inca Trail, to the Sun Gate of Machu Picchu. It is a glorious way to come upon the ruins. You see them from above, ringed by mountains, architecturally precise echoes of an ancient civilization in a vast panorama of wilderness. But to earn this, I first had to navigate those seven vertiginous miles.

Unfortunately, I had had no sleep. A short-lived cold, in combination with the altitude and the knowledge that any rest would be brief at best, conspired to keep me awake until, about 3 a.m., I gave up and turned to a Jack Reacher thriller. By the time we hit the trail, around 7:30 a.m., I was not surprised to see the others in our party bound ahead. Coley, Brent and one of the guides were with them, while I – shades of Kooch-i-Ching and Outward Bound – brought up the rear. J.C. stayed back with me. Although the Country Walkers itinerary characterizes the climb as moderate to challenging, I would drop the “moderate” in a heartbeat and tell you that it was one hell of a slog.

By the time I actually saw Machu Picchu, I was as relieved as I was enchanted. Both of which sensations, I think, differed markedly from those experienced by Hiram Bingham when he happened upon the same ruins more than one hundred years ago. Understanding why is an intriguing part of the Machu Picchu story.

The son of a shabby-genteel, missionary family, Bingham grew up in Hawaii, where his devout and rigid parents forbid him even to dance. Restless from an early age, he withdrew \$250 from his college savings when he was just 12 and booked passage on a steamship to the states, with plans to go on to England and Africa. Even then, he wanted to explore, and only a delay in the ship’s departure foiled the scheme. Later, following schooling at Andover and Yale, he decided to teach, and quickly developed an interest in South America. Tall, handsome and charismatic, he married a Tiffany heiress when he was 25, and she allowed her fortune to help expedite his soon-to-be serial trips south. In 1908, as a Yale lecturer in South American history, Bingham accepted an appointment as representative to a Pan-American Scientific Congress in Santiago, Chile.

On that trip, he made his first foray into Peru, and to Cuzco. There, amid the streets of the old city and the stones of Saqsaywaman, he fell under the spell of the Incas. He learned of their glory, and then their humiliation, resulting in a forced retreat to a new capital in the mountains of southeastern Peru. But where was this capital? If no one knew, could not *he* be the explorer to find it?

Bingham, who was nothing if not ambitious and energetic, began planning another trip almost immediately. A focus would be the unexplored heartland of the Incas. By this time, he was seeing himself as the explorer he had always wanted to be, and from here on, he would

list his profession in *Who's Who in America* as “explorer.” Even in his later years, when he had left academia for politics, the title stuck. The rakish photos of him that have come down to us, in safari jackets and smart neckwear, tend to reinforce that vanity; it is easy to see where the Indiana Jones reference blossomed. He was also an unapologetic control freak, as evidenced by this entry in his *Official Circular of the Second Yale Peruvian Expedition*: “Every one should see to it that his bowels have moved at least once a day. If the day has passed without a movement, one Compound /cathartic Pill should be taken the next morning a half hour or more before breakfast.”

On the morning of July 24, 1911, Hiram Bingham found himself climbing up the steep slope of a cloud forest on the eastern flank of the Andes. Rumors of ruins drove him, but it was raining, and two others in his party had not wanted to make the push. Only the bribe of a shiny silver dollar had persuaded his guide, Melchor Arteaga, to join him; Peruvian sergeant Carrasco, who had been assigned by local authorities for safety, was also on the climb. Shortly after noon – about two hours from the time they had set out – they reached a long, wide ridge top, where a magnificent 360-degree view of the mountains and jungle opened up. Two Peruvian peasants materialized, offering water and refreshments. Each belonged to one of three families who lived on the ridge, finding its abundant sun, fertile soil, spring-fed water and remote location most agreeable living conditions. In conversation, the lanky New Englander learned that the ruins were “a little further along.” In his own words, “I was not unduly excited, nor in a great hurry to move.” At best, he thought, he might see something similar to the minor ruins already spotted in earlier stages of the expedition. Finally, he stood up. A small boy appeared, and the two peasants instructed him to take their visitor forward. Arteaga, meanwhile, opted to remain behind, noshing with the peasants.

And then: “Hardly had we left the hut and rounded the promontory than we were confronted with an unexpected sight, a great flight of beautifully constructed stone-faced terraces, perhaps a hundred of them, each hundreds of feet long and 10 feet high. They had recently been rescued from the jungle by the Indians.” Still, he was not overly exercised. Similar installations at Pisac and Ollantaytambo had taken the edge off what he was seeing now. Until . . . “Suddenly, I found myself confronted with the walls of ruined houses built of the finest quality of Inca stone work. It was hard to see them for they were partly covered

with trees and moss, the growth of centuries, but in the dense shadow, hiding in bamboo thickets and tangled vines, appeared here and there walls of white granite ashlar carefully cut and exquisitely fitted together.”

As he continued to thrash through the undergrowth, more fragmented buildings caught his eye: first, what appeared to have been a royal mausoleum, next a temple, one closely resembling the famed Temple of the Sun in Cuzco, and then a wall, “made of very carefully matched ashlar of pure white granite . . . clearly it was the work of a master artist.” “Dimly,” he wrote in *Lost City of the Incas*, “I began to realize that this wall and its adjoining semicircular temple were as fine as the finest stonework in the world.”

Even so, he remained there fewer than five hours that day. He made some sketches, and took some photographs, including Carrasco and the boy for scale, and then moved on. Harry Foote, one of his Yale companions who had remained behind collecting butterflies, wrote in his diary of that day’s activities, “No special things to note.” In hindsight, given the worldwide fame that Machu Picchu has achieved, it seems almost unimaginable that it could have been tossed off so lightly. But as the old disclaimer goes: Maybe you had to be there.

Here’s why: Bingham and his co-horts were in search of the fabled “lost cities of the Incas,” Vitcos and Vilcabamba, the two wilderness capitals to which Manco Inca and his sons had retreated when the Spanish forced them out of Cuzco. Contemporary Spanish chronicles provided descriptions of both locations, including relative distances from other places and certain landmarks to look out for. Yet no educated observer had seen them for at least three centuries. When the unexpected ruins at Machu Picchu failed to match what Bingham thought he should be finding, he moved on. And sure enough, within a few days, he did locate them, first Vitcos, and then Vilcabamba. The combination secured this first of his three major Peruvian expeditions as one of the most significant in archeological history. Years later, when Bingham became a U.S. senator from Connecticut, he was still most celebrated as the discoverer of Machu Picchu. It was his calling card for life.

But history is full of ironies, and in Hiram Bingham’s Peruvian expedition of 1911 lie three. First, and least, no one today is all that interested in Vitcos. It has become a footnote in the saga of the Incas. Second, although Vilcabamba really was their last capital, and thus

retains considerable historical importance, Bingham didn't recognize it as such. The ruins were not that impressive. The overgrowth was so thick that he couldn't know their full extent. Certain things about them – some questionable roofing tiles, the location's distance from other landmarks – left him unconvinced.

The third irony grows out of the second. As Machu Picchu's fame expanded, and more and more people – scholars, art historians, archeologists, tourists – extolled it, Bingham felt increasingly pressured to explain it. Why was it built? What was its meaning? Certain that Vilcabamba was not the Incans' last (and lost) capital, he began to find reasons that Machu Picchu was. Not only that, he developed arguments that it was the cradle of their civilization as well. In 1948, at age 73, he published *Lost City of the Incas*, filling it with revisionist history of his discovery, and propounding – on the "flimsiest of evidence" as one scholar says – his inflated propositions as to its meaning.

They didn't stick. Fifty-three years after Bingham, another American explorer, Gene Savoy, traveled to the same remote Peruvian environs, again in search of Vilcabamba. From everything he had read, he was dead certain that it, and not Machu Picchu, was the true missing piece of the "lost city" puzzle. When he found on site a much larger set of ruins that Bingham had overlooked, and as he found reasonable answers to questions that had baffled Bingham, he was able to confirm his thesis.

So what was Machu Picchu, anyway? As difficult as it may be to swallow, the best thinking today is that it was a retreat, a place to which the Incan elite might repair for recreational, or spiritual, or even, in 21st century terms, therapeutic purposes. An early Camp David, one writer hypothesizes.

The question I ask, however, is: Does it really matter? Isn't the important thing that they built it and left it, and that it remains today for all who come upon it a source of inspiration and beauty that has few rivals? As Fred Chapman, one of Hiram Bingham's beloved colleagues, said: "In the sublimity of its surroundings, the marvel of its site, the character and the mystery of its construction, the Western Hemisphere holds nothing comparable."

Although I would like to think I could find better words to describe the Incan wonder, I know when I've met my match. So I'll leave you with that!

