

Postcard from Peru

Where the past has a presence in contemporary life

BY ROSS "ROCKY" ANDERSON

Dear Friends,

Having an amazing time pursuing the Inca mystic in Peru. Certainly a trip of a lifetime. Wish you were all here (well, most of you, anyway). Lima, Cusco, Machu Picchu, the astounding Inca ruins, the rigorous Inca Trail: all are full of history (much of it tragic and poignant), culture (much of it well preserved), and inspiration (much of it from the combination of the old and the new).

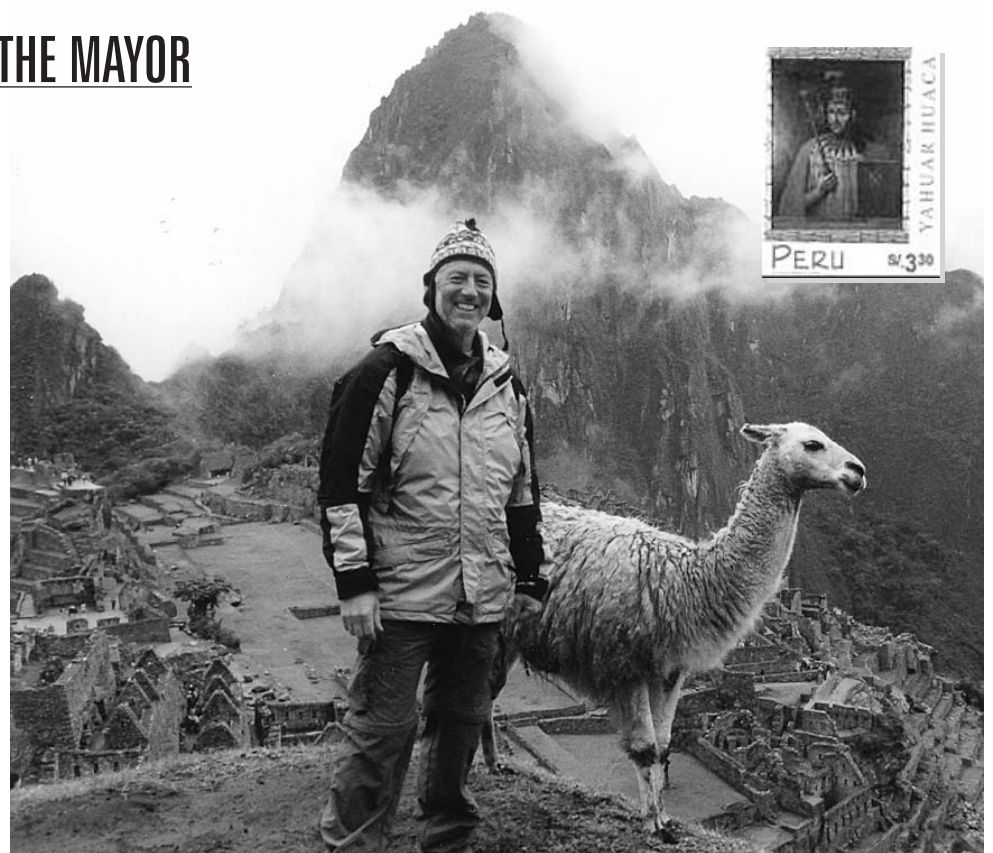
The Inca Wall Restaurant in Cusco is aptly named. Part of its front perimeter is the original Inca wall, built in the 15th or 16th century, before Francisco Pizarro led the Spanish "conquest" (some would more candidly call it the raping and pillaging) of the Inca empire. Likewise, our hotel in Cusco incorporates an original four-foot Inca wall into its façade. We sit back, drink a little pisco tea, and marvel at the huge stones, perfectly fitted together without mortar a half millennium ago into a wall that has survived two horrific earthquakes when almost every-

I see in Cusco as I saw in Oaxaca, New York City and Frieberg that the appeal of the place is, most fundamentally, its authenticity.

thing else crumbled to the ground.

No matter what the Spanish did to this region and its people, so much of the Incas — both the physical and the cultural — persevered and remains today, not only as a historical reminder of times past, but as an essential component of the contemporary life of the community.

The walls are a powerful metaphor here. Notwithstanding the brutal conquest by the Spanish conquistadors beginning in the 1530s, the Incas and their progeny have maintained much of their culture, even to the point of melding it into the traditions of the Catholic church, in which over 90% of Peruvians at least nominally claim membership. That intertwining of cultures is most poignantly portrayed in a massive Last Supper painting in the main cathedral, where a roasted guinea pig (a Peruvian



Rocky at Machu Picchu

favorite) sits in the middle of the table before Jesus and his apostles.

The oldest continuously inhabited city in the Western hemisphere, Cusco has retained its charm and identity. Nowhere do golden arches obstruct portions of the Inca wall. The new fits into the old — authentically, comfortably and with class. Not only does it seem natural, but anything else would be a disappointment to visitors who come here to experience — to sense — the history, the realness, the grit of this amazing place.

I cannot be in Cusco without thinking of my own home. I can't be in any place, it seems, without thinking of Salt Lake City. For instance, when visiting Oaxaca's town square a few years ago, I imagined a major gathering place for our city — and

that would make it appear the same as a hundred other places. No, Cusco is Cusco. It's the real thing. Just as Salt Lake City should always be the real thing, with the contemporary embracing, but never smothering, the historical.

As Cusco takes pride in its Inca walls and incorporates them into contemporary structures, so too should our city value, maintain and respect the best of our architecture — the physical and the cultural — and, in an authentic manner, incorporate it into the new. A '60s trend was to cover up beautiful old buildings with a post-modern (or was it neo-post-modern?) façade, sort of like Jackson Pollock covering the Mona Lisa. Similarly, there was an urge in those days (not completely unexperienced by yours truly) to throw out tradition wholesale in order to start anew. We're now tearing down the façades and incorporating what worked so well in earlier times with new architecture, new ideas and new demands.

The point is not that everything has to — or even should — stay the same. Rather, it's that the best of our history, our architecture and our culture does not need to be discarded, neglected or ignored to make way for contemporary life. Our lives and our communities are enriched by holding onto the enduring, the authentic and the best of what has come before, even as we move forward and experiment in ways to improve our relationships, our lives and our world. Long live the roasted guinea pig (oxymoronically speaking)! And long stand the Inca walls!

Look forward to seeing you (well, most of you) soon,

Ross "Rocky" Anderson is the Mayor of Salt Lake City and a Catalyst columnist.

