



Huayna Picchu towering above the ruins of Machu Picchu

Learning to Trust

by Phyllis Kester

Too excited to sleep, I peeked outside one more time. My sleepy husband mumbled, “Is the sun up yet? The last time you looked, clouds billowed everywhere.”

“Mmmm, yes, I remember how the full moon glowed through them.” I felt my adrenaline surge in anticipation as I thought of the day ahead. I had been waiting—seemingly for a lifetime. We splurged and spent last night in the Machu Picchu Lodge just outside the 15th-century Inca site nearly 8,000 feet above sea level on the eastern slope of the Andes. We were about to do the one thing I wanted to do since as a child I saw a picture of the ‘lost city of the Incas’ built in a high ridge hidden by clouds where the

Peruvian Andes and the Amazon Rainforest come together with diverse plants and wild animals, many only found in this one location.

For the past week a driver and guide helped us explore many Inca ruins and villages scattered throughout Peru's Sacred Valley. The last two days were spent exploring the Machu Picchu area, but—my pulse quickened—these were merely the tantalizing appetizers because today we were finally going to hike up Huayna Picchu which is the large mountain overshadowing Machu Picchu. It is steep with almost vertical drops on all sides and is so high we'll see miles in every direction. Although it looks like a technical climb, it is just a steep hike up a trail built by the Incas. Some sections require using both hands and feet, but no technical skills or climbing tools needed. We could do this.



Huayna Picchu

Before leaving Virginia, Monty and I discussed why on earth I wanted to do this hike: not because it's one of the 7 wonders of the world but it's just one of those things that stuck in a little girl's mind and I had promised myself 'someday, I'm going to climb that!' My husband of nearly 40 years had agreed to do this hike with me after we finished off his 'bucket list' by spending several days wandering around and exploring the Amazon River basin.

I might point out, that in 2000 when we were planning this hike, neither of us realized that many years after our hike (in the world of internet and selfies) this hike would be considered one of the most dangerous in the world. Some internet writers would later nickname Huayna Picchu the Mountain of Death, and that's the mountain I'm planning to climb.

That January morning in 2001 we left the hotel with the usual morning mist still on the ground. We wore our rain jackets and standard Vibram soled hiking shoes since we knew the terrain would be rough with lots of crude rock stairs that could be slippery when wet. We allowed a whole day for the hike that should only take about half a day, plus we had food and water. We felt prepared.

My first clue that maybe I should rethink this trip appeared when we arrived at the trailhead check point. The officials looked at our gray hair and passports. Then they told us we were the oldest couple to ever attempt this hike together. They quizzed us regarding whether we were really sure about doing this. Almost indignant, I pointed out we were only in our 60's and in good physical shape. I persisted even though they took down all sorts of history and information, as well as our next of kin to notify in case we didn't return by the end of the day. This was not a very reassuring way to start my climb of a lifetime. But, nothing could dampen my excitement!

The first 20 minutes of the hike were relatively easy, so we admired the many different shrubs and trees. We spotted several orchids in our earlier hikes and hoped to spot more unusual flowers. I enjoyed the many little ferns, but I especially watched and listened



for birds since more than 420 species and varieties nest in this area probably because the steep mountains are covered with abundant vegetation, berries and flowers.

As we began our more vertical ascent, the high altitude quickly reminded us this was not a walk in the park for Huayna Picchu is about 1000 feet taller than Machu Picchu. Since we were doing this hike before social media and smart phones, we didn't have a lot of information available about this particular hike. When we met two twenty-somethings on their way back we quizzed them about the best way to get to the top. They strongly urged us to go right at the next fork in the trail so we could return back down the mountain by the steepest rock stairway trail. (Now sometimes called the Stairs of Death.) We continued up the mountain. At times we were on a narrow trail hugging the rock with a sheer drop off on the other side and no protective rail—not a place for anyone afraid of heights or having vertigo.



The occasional breeze felt good because the humidity, plus my rain jacket and pumping heart rate were definitely heating me up. We continue to climb higher into the clouds. Occasionally, it would clear and I would catch my breath as I glimpsed brief snapshots of our new world. The height was head spinning, but I kept looking upward and tried to not think about how far down one could fall. In that way the clouds were comforting friends since they hid the abyss just one wrong step away.

When we were almost to the top, the trail circled the mountain but did not go further up. The top seemed to be a massive pile of granite boulders. Monty wandered into a gap in the rocks and yelled for me to follow. He pointed to light beyond and above us, so we carefully climbed up over and through the rocks, always going toward the light. Upon reaching the small hole letting in light, we realized it was only about shoulder width. We squeezed through the hole much like tooth paste squirting out of its tube. It's rather heady to come out of the dark into the bright sunlight, seemingly at the top of the world. I gasped—partly because of the altitude, and partly from seeing the Andes mountains spread out before us for miles in every direction. We had a panoramic view of Machu Picchu mountain and the zigzag road leading up its side. The scale and ingenuity of Machu Picchu and its various structures and terraces is fully revealed from this high perch over 1000 feet above it. The size and complexity of this ancient site is humbling. My admiration soars for the Inca's ability to built so many structures and terraces in such precarious places high in these remote mountains.



Once my eyes adjusted to the bright light, I realized all the boulders were uneven. That meant I must balance at strange angles if I want to stand up or walk around on the top. I'm not usually afraid of heights, but somehow I suddenly want to keep a lot of physical contact with the rocks under me so I crawl or scoot around on my butt. Standing up didn't seem desirable when looking down from this dizzying height. Somehow my sense of distance seems warped.

We noticed a trail below us with a small Inca ruin. Perhaps someone stayed there if stationed on top of this mountain as a lookout for Machu Picchu. Crops must have grown in the terraced areas below and beside the small hut. But, how will we get down to that trail? It appears to start at the base of the pile of boulders we're sitting on. Monty spied a large smooth rock about 20 feet long that reached from the trail below up to us. It looked nearly vertical to me, but he pointed to it and said, "That's our way down."

"Not me," I thought—but my only other alternative would be trying to go back down through the hole we had just climbed out. That would be like trying to put toothpaste back into the tube. No way that would work for me.

Monty moved onto the large, flat, weathered rock and began locating places for his fingers and shoes to rest against as he inched his way, foot first, down the rock. I held my breath and prayed. What if he slipped? If the narrow trail at the bottom of the rock didn't stop him, then it meant a sheer drop over the edge. Several long minutes later he stood on the trail at the bottom of the rock. He shouted and motioned with his hand for me to follow him since I saw how he did it.

I snapped, "You've got to be kidding! I wasn't the parent that did rock climbing with the boys and this doesn't look like a good place for my first try."

No amount of persuasion moved me. My heart pounded. Fear glued me to the rock underneath me. Monty began to climb back up the 'seemingly vertical rock,' examining every inch of it as he came back. He was familiarizing himself with that big boulder for the plan he already had. Once almost at the top, he told me to roll over on my stomach so I could hug the rock. He would stay with me and show me where to put each hand and foot. He would guide me as we worked our way down together. I still didn't

move a muscle as my eyes searched his face; my mind screamed at the insanity of this situation. I would fall off this mountain and take him with me over into the nothingness. This was the man who had loved and protected me for nearly 40 years. How could he ask me to do this? He was faithful and trustworthy in everything he had done during the time I knew him. He usually followed behind me when we were climbing up something to let me choose a path I could manage. But, he would go in front of me when we were descending, so he would break my fall if I slipped. But this? I agonized. We could both slip off this mountain! Trust is hard. Do I really trust him with my life?

With heart racing, I took a deep breath, swallowed hard and rolled to my stomach like he directed. I even put my sweaty hands and feet in the places he pointed out. As I stretched my arms and legs to reach the weathered niches in the large boulder, I could feel its warmth. Monty stretched his arms to spread eagle across my body and we slowly began to inch down the rock almost as one unit—he just one hand hold ahead of me—keeping me between him and the rock. I found it comforting to feel his muscular body pressing me close to the warm rock. I think I was concentrating so hard on doing everything he said that I forgot to breath. When we reached the bottom and my feet were safe on the trail, I began gasping for breath and needed to sit down before my wobbly knees gave way. I sat on the ground looking up where we had been and realized now (from this safe perspective) the rock didn't look so scary. It wasn't even vertical, as I originally thought. I felt humiliated, but he only said, "I knew you could do it."

As I sat safe and secure on the ground, my racing heart began to settle. My breathing slowed to normal and I began filling with admiration and appreciation for my dependable, self-controlled mate. Then the edges of my consciousness began playing with a parallel pattern and I realized, Monty was not the first man to prove so trustworthy, nor was he the first to stretch out his arms to provide for my needs. I whispered a grateful prayer. "Thank you, Jesus, for also providing me a husband to illustrate your love."

View of Machu Picchu terraced gardens and ruins from Huayna Picchu





UPDATE NOTE: When we did this hike in January 2001, we saw less than two dozen people scattered out over the whole hike. Now, because of “selfies” on the mountain, the popularity has caused access is become more restricted for both Machu Picchu and Huayna Picchu. In 2023 they are restricting access to Huayna Picchu to only 200 people a day grouped into four time slots with 50 people in each one. You have to plan many months in advance to buy entrance tickets because now they sell out months early. I’m thankful we did it in 2001 when we didn’t have a lot of people present to break the wonderful leisure tranquility that accompanied the awe of such a hike.