

July 14, in Pisco, Peru.

First of all if there are strange letters in this email it will be because of the keyboard - not me!! Cant figure out where some keys are at all. And how to get an apostrophe totally eludes me.

Flight over was LONG and tedious. Watched movies - 2 even that I hadn't seen. Got into Santiago late because the weather hadn't been good crossing the Pacific and sat there in the terminal for 7 hours waiting for the flight to Lima. Had an instant wakeup call about being vigilant. Eva's - I met up with Eva and Malachy my friends from Australia in Auckland airport - wallet was stolen out of her bag whilst we were having coffee. We still can't work out how it was done. An airport policeman found it in the toilets - male, with the cash gone but the cards intact.

Got to Lima about 11 local time and taxied to hotel, and so to sleep - not an easy thing to do in a hotel where the floors are all tiled and so there is nothing to absorb the sound. It seemed to magnify even the tiniest of sounds.

The hotel "Los Girasoles" (which means Sunflowers) is in Miraflores which is a slightly more affluent suburb of Lima. The floors of the hotel are all tiled, so there is nothing to absorb the sound. This hotel seemed to be solely used by people on Intrepid/Gap tours which became obvious at breakfast on our first morning when the dining room was filled with people either leaving after having ended their trip, or arriving.

Day 1 we spent walking around Lima. It's very grey at this time of the year - still haven't seen the sun. There is a lot of real poverty and street vendors everywhere are waiting to pounce on "touristas" - and of course it's not obvious that we are tourists at all! We aren't wearing backpacks and carrying water bottles everywhere. We don't speak English loudly in the hope that Spanish speaking people will understand us at all! I have quickly learnt some basic Spanish, but gestures work wonders.

Lima streets are crowded and all the cars are old and battered. This is because the drivers make gaps in the traffic where none exist and just go for it. It's amazing to watch - even more so when the driver making the non-existent gap is the driver of the car you are in!

The houses are all unfinished and it wasn't until we met up with our tour guide that I found out why. Tax has to be paid on a finished house, so no one finishes them. Makes sense really.

The tour group all met up on the evening of our first day, and I think even now that we are all going to get on fine. I am by far the oldest as my Aussie friends are younger than me. We have 2 other Aussies - young guys (20s), 2 Poms, 2 Yanks and me! The guide is American - Neal and he's in his 20s as well. So I am grandma and they are all very nice to me - as of course they should be as I am a nice person.

We tried Pisco Sours immediately and I am hooked. This is a local concoction made of Pisco which seems to be a blend of a number of fortified wines mixed with lemon and egg whites. They taste great. We all then went out for dinner and getting to know each other, and then on to a bar on the beach for more drinks before going back to the hotel.

Yesterday morning we had free which was just as well. On Tuesday night at dinner, BOTH my credit cards were rejected. I could have understood one MAYBE but the second one is from a different bank. I was perplexed and concerned. Malachy immediately left in and made sure I realised that they would look after me, but that wasn't the point. I got Nick to text me the phone numbers for both banks, but didn't need to call because I was able to get money out of an ATM. I still don't know if my credit card will work to pay for something, but at least I can get cash.

The only other thing is that the South American adapter I bought has 3 prongs and Peruvian power has 2! So that buggered that idea too. At the moment I can't recharge anything so I am being cautious.

Yesterday afternoon we bussed on a local bus to Pisco. The YaYa sisterhood movie was showing - in Spanish with Spanish subtitles. Go figure that one!

In Pisco we are staying in a hotel that looks like a hacienda and is very nice except that the street party outside didn't finish till 5 this morning when the cocks started crowing. So we are all bleary-eyed.

The weather again this morning is grey. Half the group have gone out on boats to a bird sanctuary at Los Ballesteros. I declined. Even though I've paid for it, (\$10 US) as it's an extra, I decided that I feel a

little seedy to start with and getting seasick is not my idea of fun. So here I am writing this email.

The drive here was interesting. Most of the way was through sand dunes and everywhere there were thatched houses - well that gives them more context than they deserve. They were really 5 pieces of thatch sitting leaning against each other. It doesn't rain so there is little need for a roof that doesn't leak. There are 100s of "houses" like that and the "owners" tend to be fishermen. There is no fresh water except in a big holding tank which gets filled every 2 weeks, no sewerage and no electricity - of course. It was so desolate. The bus stopped on lots of occasions, and on one, it stopped to let off a passenger in a place where there was absolutely no visible reason for him to get off there.

I am finding that I am not taking as many photos as I did when I was on my own. This will change now that I've realised that, and when I hit the send button on this email I am going for a walk to take some. All the others who didn't go on the boat are sleeping - including our leader! He's been nicknamed Lex after Lex Luther in the latest Superman movie as his head is clean shaven. He's a great guy - a history major so of course he would be. But the whole group is really nice, and interesting too. Only one girl doesn't drink - the rest are like fishes, so it's going to be great. This is only Neal's second trip so he hasn't had time to get blasé about it all. And his Spanish is good which helps too. The girl who doesn't drink - Camilla - and her surname is Rodrigues not Parker-Bowles - speaks Spanish fluently, so we are all organised.

At 10 this morning we are off to Nazca which is where all the strange markings are on the floor of the desert. I still can't really believe I am here ! It's just so different.

Pisco Sours rule though! Move over red wine!

Photo time.

It's 16 July today and we are in Arequipa.

Lots of adventures over the last couple of days too. I might have also got the hang of this keyboard. It's impossible to get to the @ sign on the numbers, but have sorted out the ASCII code for it, so that's a

start. And what's more I've found the apostrophe. Sadly old habits die hard and I find it difficult to not write proper English!

Pisco Sour is an alcoholic drink made from Pisco (which is a Peruvian wine composed of 7 different types of grapes), with lemon juice, sugar water and the white of an egg. YUMMY! Even as I write that, I am a little concerned that I would enjoy drinking something with egg whites in it (raw ones of course). One of the American girls is a Mormon and doesn't drink, and one of the Aussie guys doesn't like it, so it would be churlish to leave their drinks on the table. At every restaurant they give you one for free. So I get 3 which just about sets me on my ear! But it's very nice.

We went to a Pisco vineyard the day before yesterday (I don't have my notes with me, and we spent last night on a bus, so I am tired, as well as slightly hungover from the Pisco, and brain isn't working well, but the computer was free and so I thought I would avail myself of the opportunity).

My Spanish is coming along in leaps and bounds. I can now ask where the loo is (very important when you're drinking lots of Pisco), for fried egg for breakfast (they prefer to give you scrambled eggs which are really tough - I think they add cement), and also "how much is it" as well as all the other things like asking for water etc. I had a water filter with me which was doing a great job, but I sadly don't have it any more - I left it accidentally in the hotel last night.

The day before yesterday we went dune buggy riding at Huacachina. There are massive sand dunes there with a beautiful oasis in the middle. The ride was awesome- up and over and sideways in a buggy that didn't roll but had massive roll bars. There was sand boarding too - firstly on a small dune and then on progressively larger ones. My regret is that I didn't have a go on the small one. I am sure I could have managed it but I was too chicken. Everyone on the buggy was entertained by my screaming especially when they had boarded down the dune and the driver just took the buggy with me in it, up and over the same dune! It was as good as being on a roller coaster.

That night we stayed in Nasca, and yesterday morning, woke to a thick blanket of fog everywhere. The idea was to fly over the lines so that we could see them properly, but not in that weather. So we went to a place which makes traditional pottery first (I bought a couple of pieces which I hope will travel home all right), and then we went to

Caucachina where there is a massive cemetery which is a couple of thousand years old. The grave robbers have been through 100s or years ago or maybe even longer ago, and there are bones scattered all over about a 5 square km area. But some of the tombs have been preserved, and there are mummified remains in them all wrapped in the textiles they were buried in although all the treasure that was buried with them has gone. Their hair is intact too, and one would certainly have given Bob Marley (or Nandor) a run for his money.

By about midday the sun had come out and the fog had burned off, and so we were able to go flying. For me, it was great to be in a Cessna again! The Nasca Lines (I cocked up the photos - put my camera on too great a zoom and so only have portions rather than whole pictures, but we've all agreed to exchange photos anyway) are around 1000- 1500 years old. Lots of theories abound about how they got there and why, but no one really knows. Go to Google and type in Nasca and have a look. They are amazing.

The town of Nasca has about 25,000 people. A couple of years ago there was a big earthquake there which wiped out half of the houses. So the government built new ones for them (which are a great improvement on the old ones of thatch) in stone and plaster. A 2 bedroomed house costs the owners \$10,000 (US) and they have 20 years to pay it off. But remember what I said in the last email about houses being incomplete? In Nasca NONE of them are complete. They all have steel sticking out the side or the top for future development.

After that, it was back on the bus and back to the hotel to get ready to depart. We left the hotel about 7.30pm, and drove into town for dinner and a wait for the bus which was an overnight one, and was due in town at 10.45, but didn't arrive till 11.30. So we did a bit of a pub crawl, which of course necessitated more Pisco. The bus was a double-decker coach, and was very comfortable, but I didn't get a lot of sleep. I don't think any one did. The driver was going so fast on the narrow roads, and passing so much traffic, that the top floor got a real sway. I did try to convince everyone this morning that that was the real reason for my slightly hungover state, but they don't believe me. I don't know why.

I do feel the need to share one thing with you about Peru that has become larger than life in our minds - well maybe it's just mine. You are not supposed to flush the toilet paper down the loo after having done your business. So we've become a little hung up on the idea of

putting the used paper in a bucket. In about 50% of the toilets however, there is no problem! One way to make sure that people don't flush the paper is simply not to give them any. So they don't.

Arequipa is the beginning of our climb to altitude. This city is Peru's second largest with 750,000. It's about 2400 metres above sea level, and it's built on the side of 3 volcanoes one of which is smoking slightly!

Tomorrow we are off to the Colca Canyon which is deeper than the Grand Canyon. We are there for a couple of nights because this is the start of our ascent to 4000m and we have to take it gradually otherwise we will all get sick!

I am off to have a shower and a snooze and then later on Malachy, Eva and I are going exploring. Taxis are really cheap - 5 soles (pronounced soless) is about \$2.50 and it will get you most places!

Puno, July 20th

For the record the reason for the length of my emails is so that I too have a record of what I have been up to so this is like my travel journal, and no one is forcing you to read it Allan!

We are now in Puno on the shores of Lake Titicaca which is located on the borders of Peru, Bolivia and Chile. We are at 3800 metres above sea level so although the days in the sun are warm, the nights are bloody cold and I've just been out and bought gloves, a hat and a jumper all made out of alpaca wool which by the way tastes remarkably like chicken - not the wool, but alpaca steaks! And NO, I did not buy a hat with ears!

The keyboard is once again a non responsive one with all sorts of punctuation bits missing so forgive the English. No brackets for starters. You know how it pains me to use incorrect English. My Spanish is of course coming along in leaps and bounds, and today I learnt how to swear also. I won't even repeat it in this generic email for fear of giving offence. Needless to say, it's something I will be able to use for the rest of my life without anyone knowing what I am saying! If curiosity is getting the better of you is to do with doing nasty things to llamas.

When we left Arequipa we went up into the Andes mountains to commence our training for the altitude. We've spent the last 3 days at 3500 metres. The only side effect I have had is breathlessness. I am ok if I take it slowly but walking up stairs is a killer. I end up feeling like I've been on a treadmill for an hour and it takes me a while to get my breath back. We have to drink or chew cocoa leaves. The tea made from them isn't bad, but the chewing is horrible. It's one of those situations I think where the cure is worse than the disease, but then again, I haven't had altitude sickness although most of the group have.

We were staying at the BEST hotel of the trip so far in Corporaque with no mobile or internet access so that's why you didn't hear from me and I suspect it will be the best of the whole trip. It was called MamaYatcchi and it was great! We went to see the condors soar at 4000 metres on the thermals above the Colca Canyon which was amazing.

Tomorrow we are going on the lake and tomorrow night we home stay in an island on the lake which should be interesting.

More on toilets. Today I had my first ever experience of a non toilet. It was a hole in the ground. I know you are all going to think I am fixated with toilets, but when you have to drink water like it's going out of fashion (dehydration at this altitude is a big no no), you have to pee. And when the only option is a hole in the ground. . . . well all I can say is the guys have it made. I bought antiseptic wipes today. Seemed to be my only option.

All the other nights of this trip so far I have had a room to myself, but tonight there are THREE of us in a room the size of my bathroom so it will be interesting! I warned them I snore, which thrilled the girls no end. I don't actually know if I do! But it was worth telling them to see their faces.

The roads are something else. We've been on so many dirt or stone roads bumping around all over the place. But the sealed roads aren't much better. Some potholes are so deep that a bus could be lost in them and that's on toll roads.

Still I am in one piece and having a great time. The group is the best. I am just so lucky to be with this group of people.

We have a team meeting to plan tomorrow in a minute and I need to find some loo paper.

Puno, July 22nd

Well here I am back in Puno. The activities of the last couple of days have been "interesting" to say the least.

On the drive from Colca to Puno the toilet saga took on a whole new meaning. We stopped at a service station to get gas and we decided to take advantage of "los banos". We should have known it would be an interesting experience when the attendant saw where we were heading and rushed there with a bucket of water to sluice them down. The toilet (and I use the word loosely), was a hole in the ground, no paper of course, and a bucket to flush it with. Sorry about the fixation with the loo, but its a very important part of our lives that we take for granted. Well I certainly did.

Yesterday morning early we were taken by bicycle with two seats in the front to the port where we boarded a motor boat for a cruise on Lake Titicaca. We drove for about 3 hours before stopping at the island of Taquile where we were to climb to the square at the top. The climb was a kilometer and was almost vertical. It would be tough for me at sea level, but at 3800 metres it was damned nigh impossible. I did finally make it and was rewarded with stunning views, but I don't think I took any photos as I was too stuffed. But little did I know the best was yet to come!

We had lunch there which consisted of quinoa soup, followed by kingfish with fried potatoes and rice of course. There are about 3000 people living on the island in a commune of sorts where they all share the work and the income.

After lunch, we climbed further up before descending 500 steps vertically down. The steps consisted of broken bits of stone and rock, and somewhere in the descent I wrenched my knee which has been giving me a few problems since.

Once on the boat we made our way to the island of Amantani where we stayed for the night. This village has about 2000 people in it and is perched clinging to the side of the hill. We were staying in the homes of the locals, and some seem to have had better experiences than others. I opted to stay with Malachy and Eva rather than on my own and we climbed a massive hill in order to get to it. It took me a while.

The house was two storeyed and made of dirt bricks with electric light in the rooms but very low wattage, and a loo well away from the house with a bucket for cleaning up afterwards.

We were supposed to meet straight away at the soccer field, so we set off. I am sorry to say that after the earlier events of the day, I wasn't on my best behaviour.

At the .75 km mark, I sat down and refused to go any further. The sad thing was that we were to ascend to this field, then descend to our homes for dinner, then ascend again for a party and a dance. Once I could have managed although in the dark that is debatable too. The batteries on my headlamp were dead as it must have got turned on by accident, and I didn't realise till we were there.

So my house mother rescued me and took me back to her house: Eva and Malachy arrived later, and we jointly decided not to go dancing. There were no paths and the thought of bumping around in the dark and breaking my leg was enough for me.

For dinner we have quinoa soup. Quinoa is a local grain that is like barley a little and they put veges with it to make a tasty soup. Then we were given rice and curried veg. The Amantani aren't vegetarians but only have meat for a festival. By this time it was about 7.30pm so we went to bed.

This was an exercise in itself. I had purposefully not been drinking anything as I didn't want to traipse to the loo in the pitch dark in the middle of the night about 200 metres away from the house through a paddock inhabited by a large number of livestock and their associated droppings. So it was into bed absolutely freezing cold. The bed did have sheets, but they had been used. I took off my shoes and got into bed. That was it. There were about 10 blankets on the bed each weighing a ton. So I couldn't have moved even if I wanted to. The stars were amazing as the sky was so clear. I woke a zillion times during the night, and had to force myself NOT to look at my watch to see what the time was.

At about 6 I couldn't wait any longer, so got out of bed stiff and sore. The ground was white from the frost. For breakfast we had a pancake. And then it was back to the port and onto the boat for today's excursions.

Today we visited the Uros - the floating islands. These islands are made of reeds to which new reeds have to be added every couple of weeks. They were very spongy to walk on. We looked in the houses all of which had solar panels and televisions. The Uros people showed us the products they make and how they barter to get what they need. Once again of course there was the insistent 'amica' friend or 'senora', as they tried to get me to buy their products.

From the first island we were transported to the second island by a boat made of reeds. It only lasts the tourist season, and they have to build new ones for following year. From the second island, it was back on the boat and back to Puno where it is bitterly cold even though there is a cloudless sky out there.

Tomorrow early, we leave for Cusco where we will be for 5 days - well those of us not doing the various treks will be. It will be nice to stay put for a couple of days.

My hands are now so cold my fingers are barely functioning so I will finish this tome and go get warm.

Cusco, July 24th

It's been about 24 hours now since we arrived in Cusco, and for the first time since arriving in Peru, I can actually say what a beautiful place this is. It's got a grandness and a feel about it that none of the other towns or cities in Peru that we've visited has. The buildings are beautiful and of course the weather is better. That's not to say that the weather has been bad. It hasn't. We've had blue skies and no cloud all the time since we left Lima which was grey, but everywhere else it's been cold, and here in Cusco, it's about 20c during the day, although the nights are really cold.

We arrived here by bus about 2 yesterday afternoon, had a walk around and a briefing about what to see, and then met up to go to dinner. I've talked previously about the food, but this time I am going to talk more about the restaurant than the food. It was called the Fallen Angel and the tables consisted of glass covered bath tubs with gold fish in them. Some of the seating consisted of brass beds with cushions on them and the wall decorations were in the same vein. It was wonderful - and so was the food!

Steak to die for - the first we've had since arriving in Peru (well steak that was beef as opposed to steak that came from a llama or an alpaca). I have still to eat guinea pig which is a national dish and it's quite possible that I will avoid that.

After dinner, we went to Paddy Flaherty's which says it's the highest Irish pub in the world. We had popped in there for a beer in the afternoon when we arrived, and so some of us went back for their happy hour from 10.30 to 11.00. Now get a load of this: there's Madeleine, sitting in an Irish pub in Cusco Peru, with an American, a Pom and an Australian, drinking beer and watching the All Blacks beat the South Africans at rugby. How strange is that?

The guys I was with are neat guys, and the drinks kept on flowing, so we went to another bar which was more like a dance club called Uptown, where of course we had to have more drinks. The fact that a tout at the door got us to go in with the offer of our first drink for free had nothing to do with it of course. We were drinking Cuba Libres which slid down really well! Maybe too well.

We were out on a desk looking at the Plaza de Armas (which is the centre of Cusco) and all the lights, as well as the churches when I happened to mention that the bells in the bell towers looked lonely and begging to be rung. The Pom and the Australian decided that it was a good idea too! They scaled fences, security gates and got in, scaled the wall of one of the churches, but got beaten back - literally almost - by a monk who threw a stone at them. And of course it was ALL MY FAULT!

Needless to say, it's been the topic of conversation today.

Today 2 plus the guide (the naughty boys from the excursion last night) went white water rafting and the rest of us have been checking out the Inca ruins around Cusco.

Well theres a queue for this computer so I will go! I am as you can read having a ball!

Cusco again July 29th

Back in Cusco after a couple of days doing what I came here to do.

On Tuesday we left Cusco on a bus to travel to Ollytamtambo which is in the Secret Valley. I finally confess to being totally ignorant of the Inca ruins I would be able to see other than Machu Pichu. I guess I had not really stopped to think about it. What makes Machu Pichu unique is the fact that the Spaniards did not find it, whereas all the other Inca towns were discovered and destroyed by the Spaniards.

On the way to Ollytantambo, we stopped at a woman's collective where we watched them weaving, dyeing and creating textiles. It was interesting. There were no men in this village at all because they were the porters for people walking the Inca Trail. 2 of our group did this trail, and 3 did an alternative trail called the Lares Trail which is slightly shorter. The Inca Trail bookings have to be made almost a year in advance. I was not at all sorry that I wasn't able to walk it. My knee recovered quickly from the wrenching I had given it - aided of course by drugs, but I've done enough climbing in the last couple of weeks to last me for a long time.

After the weaving, we went to a llama farm where we saw all the 4 varieties of cameloids that exist in Peru. I confess that I hadn't realised that the llama is a member of the camel family! There are 4 varieties. The llama, the guanaco, the alpaca and the vicuna. The Guanaco and the Vicuna are rare and protected.

We drove to the top of ruins situated high above the town of Pisac, and wandered around, amazed yet again by the skills of the Incas, and their ability to build amazing structures well above the valley floors. The ruins here, held granaries which were almost inaccessible but stunning nevertheless. After this, we went to the market-place in Pisac which happens every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. We had a lovely wander around, but didn't see anything we hadn't already seen before 100 times. There is a great deal of repetition in the hawkers and stalls which are found everywhere and of course all the products have been hand made 'by me, Madam - you buy lady!'

Then it was on to Ollytantambo and the Temple of the Sun God - high on a hill in Pisac which of course required a lot more steps and climbing. We had a Peruvian guide for this trip who spoke excellent English and was very easy on the eye! I have been teased a lot because this lovely man not only encouraged me to climb the 500 steps to the top of the temple ruins, but held my hand all the way down to assist my descent! His assistance was invaluable! But the ribbing continues!

The accommodation in this town was basic, with no heating in the rooms. The days have been reasonably warm, but the nights are cold. So we went in search of a bar with a fire, found one, and played cards for a while.

On Wednesday afternoon, we boarded a train to take us the final 1.5 hour trip to Aguas Caliente (hot water literally - there is a hot spring there) but the town prefers to be called Machu Pichu Pueblo. When we arrived, Neal, our venerable guide confessed to me that the accommodation we were supposed to have in this town had fallen through and he didn't have a clue where we were going to stay. Along with the help of a local, however, he managed to sort it out so that we were staying in a much better place than had been intended. This town is built on the side of a very steep hill which necessitated lots more climbing up and down.

Then yesterday morning, it was the highlight of the trip - the reason most of us had made the trip in the first place. We were on the first bus to ascend the mountains - at 5.30 - and so arrived at Machu Pichu just as the sky was starting to lighten.

Words can't describe the feelings that overwhelmed me when I caught my first glimpse of this famous mythical and mystical place. It purely took my breath away. It was fabulous. I climbed higher for a better view as the sky got lighter, but at the same time, the mist (or cloud) surrounded the view rolling across the site and then vanishing for a short time. I didn't climb to the Sun Gate which was very high up on the hill. But I sat in awe and watched and photographed. I made sure that at least some of the photos I've taken are detailed enough so that if I need to I can get them printed off for framing!

Machu Pichu was awesome. I didn't need or want a guide to tell me about it. It was enough for me to just be there, to achieve another dream!

Yesterday afternoon, we got the train back to Ollytantambo and then a bus to Cusco where we are today and tonight. Last night, we went out for dinner, and I discovered a new drink that I hadn't tried before. This is called a Mojito - rum, mint, lime and lemon juice! YUM. But once again 5 of those was enough to make me very happy!

Today is a quiet day. I have been reading in the sun, and taking things easy.

Tomorrow we fly to Puerto Maldonado in the Amazon basin for a couple of nights. There is no electricity there at all, so the next time you hear from me will be when I am back in Lima, before leaving Peru.

For a while there, and I guess you would have read it in my emails, I wondered if I had made a mistake in coming to a third world country from the comfort of my home and all I've known before. But this experience has been amazing and invaluable. Not only does it give me a better appreciation of what I have and what is so easy to take for granted, but it also made me realise, that I should step out of my comfort zone again - soon! This has been a mind-blowing experience for one who has only ever traveled in 'western' countries and now all I can say is 'bring it on'!

Lima August 1, 2006

Arrived back in Lima last night and so the trip is over. One of the amazing things about being out of contact for so long is that I have - had - no idea of what was happening in the rest of the world, but the hotel here in Lima has a tv in the room and I was able to see CNN last night and hear about what's going on in the Middle East and also Cuba!

Back to my world!

At the moment we are all sitting in an internet place - most of us are doing emails, but Paul is taking all the photos off all our cameras and putting them together so that we will all have a DVD each of the photos from all the cameras. The one thing we realised early on was that this was something we had to do. We were all taking photos of each other on the various activities and so this is the only way to ensure that we all have everything.

The last time I wrote was after Machu Pichu. That was the highlight (along with the dune buggy ride), but I did think that the jungle trip would be pretty cool too. However, it wasn't to be.

The experience as a whole was interesting, but it was COLD! When we arrived off the plane in Puerto Maldonado on a tributary of the Amazon, it was very hot and humid. We were transported from the

airport to the river by a bus on the most rickety road in Peru. At the river, we got onto a motorboat built to transport gringos up or down the river, and set forth.

In the distance, we could see that the sky was REALLY black, and then the lightning and thunder started and it rained. It wasn't as heavy as I would have expected, but it certainly rained - the first time we have had rain in Peru. This didn't stop the guide from looking out for things for us to see. She kept on pointing to 2 birds flying together in the sky. These black dots were Macaw parrots, and that was the closest we got to them.

The Lodge we stayed out was about 2 hours' ride up the river and was primitive even by the standards of the places we had already been to - with the exception of the stay on the island of Amantani. We each had a bungalow with a thatched roof, running water (which was an unexpected bonus), but no hot water or electricity. We had been warned about mosquitoes of course and there were nets over the beds, but having been told by the guide who escorted us for our stay in the jungle that there was a cold front coming in from the Antarctic, we were warned. I of course knew better and decided that her idea of cold wouldn't be mine. I was wrong. Her idea of freezing (her description) was my idea of cold. The advantage of course was that there were no mosquitoes. The disadvantage was that there were no animals, spiders, butterflies or birds to be seen anywhere. We saw some caymans (members of the croc family) and capybaras (members of the hippo family). The food was excellent. The cold shower was - cold! I wouldn't have minded if I had been doing something to deserve the cold shower, but it simply took my breath away.

The next day we went by boat to an oxbow lake in order to see giant otters, piranhas and other fauna. We saw lots of flora - trees and interesting things, but little fauna at all. We were split into two groups and the other group had a guide who made a tarantula come out of its hole. That evening, we went for a walk in the dark, and the guide tried once more to get a tarantula out of its hole, but basically it told us to get lost. It was too damned cold for it - the most I saw was a furry leg! (So I bought a t-shirt with one on instead.)

Yesterday, we left the jungle in the cold again, still, and traveled back to the port, onto the plane and back eventually to Lima. Last night we all went out for dinner to a Mexican restaurant which was great. We had a lovely evening, and Camilla, one of the American girls on the

trip, took a video of each of us saying something about the experience. Without fail, everyone said how much we had enjoyed the company. It was the wedding anniversary (2nd) of the British couple, and our tour guide, Neal, had organised a cake for them. It was a great way to finish off the tour.

One of the Aussie guys left at 9 this morning. He is working in London so he's on his way via Bogota, and Paris. And so over the next day we will all vanish. We've exchanged email addresses and so I am sure some of us will stay in touch. The British couple will be in New Zealand in September and are coming to stay with me. So Christchurch people will get to meet them.

I leave tomorrow morning at 1.45 to fly to Santiago getting there about 6am, and then at 5pm I fly to Easter Island.

It's hard to realise that three weeks vanished just like that, but it did, and it was an awesome experience.