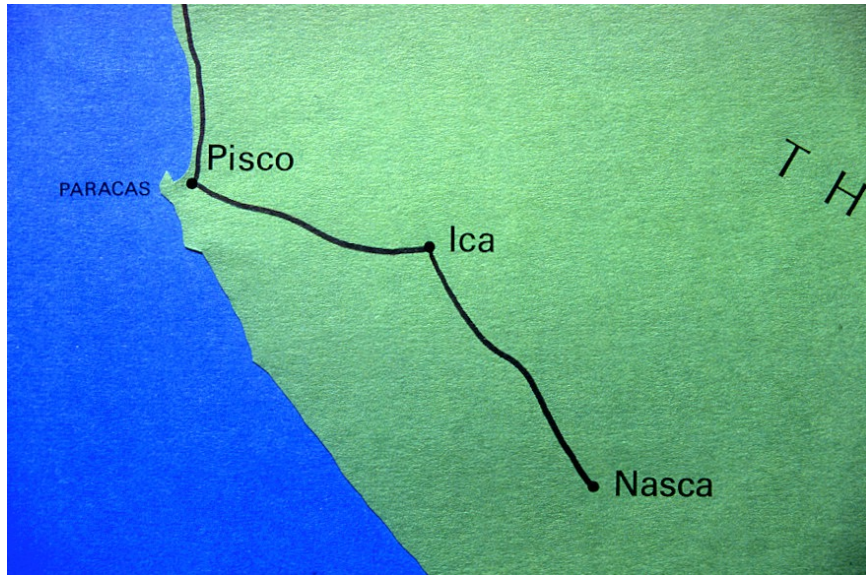


2 – NASCA AND AREQUIPA



Saturday, 4 May continued

Since their rediscovery in 1927, various people have been puzzled as to how and why lines and various types of designs, visible only from the air or from high places nearby, had been created in the desert near Nasca in southern Peru. Nobody knows the purpose of these lines; various experts have propounded theories that they could have been created for religious reasons (so that they could be seen by the gods), or to record astronomical or cosmological observations. The Swiss author Erich von Daniken believed that they were created by extra-terrestrials. Although most of the lines are long and straight, others are curved and depict various animals and plants. Nobody is absolutely sure when these lines and shapes were created, though it appears that they were made in two phases sometime between 400 BC and AD 500.

Having become interested in these mysterious lines and figures when I was in my mid teens, I was now looking forward to seeing them with my own eyes.

Our journey to Nasca brought us through more endless desert. Now and then we could see mountains and oases of differing sizes, but for most of the time we drove through vast open spaces containing nothing but sand and rocks. I dozed off for a while.

We stopped for about an hour at Ica, which turned out to be a rather scruffy town. I went for a stroll with Hugh and Philippa (a married couple) and stopped to admire two fine churches, both of which were closed. We found the rest of the group in a café. We joined them and I tasted a little of the local wine, which I found rather rough and unpleasant. Instead I opted for a bottle of 7up as it was hot and thirsty weather. Afterwards we walked back to the bus and continued our journey. It

would have been nice to see the museum here, for it contained artefacts pertaining to Ica and Paracas culture.

Once again we crossed more of the endless desert, though at one point we went through a tunnel. Shortly afterwards we turned a corner and, much to my surprise, we were greeted by the sight of a deep, green and lush valley surrounded by craggy mountains. The scene reminded me of what I had seen up in the Himalayas or in Xinjiang Province, China. We now dropped down into this valley and rose up at the other side.

On we went and finally arrived at the scruffy town of Nasca. Marianne had warned us about the hotel: it was a real dump of a place, full of rather weird young people. The first thing I did was to take a shower. This proved to be a tricky business as there was nowhere to put one's clothes. The two showers and one wash-hand basin were in the same room as the two toilets, which had no seats.

The shower over, I relaxed and wrote my diary in the dining room-cum-reception area, as it was a good deal cooler than the claustrophobic bedroom. Later I joined the group to walk to a nearby Chinese restaurant. Here we had quite a decent meal; what I appreciated most of all was the presence of vegetables. I ate well and drank some light beer that Graham kindly gave me from his big bottle. I chatted to him and to one of the Danish ladies in our group.



One of the many American cars parked in Nasca

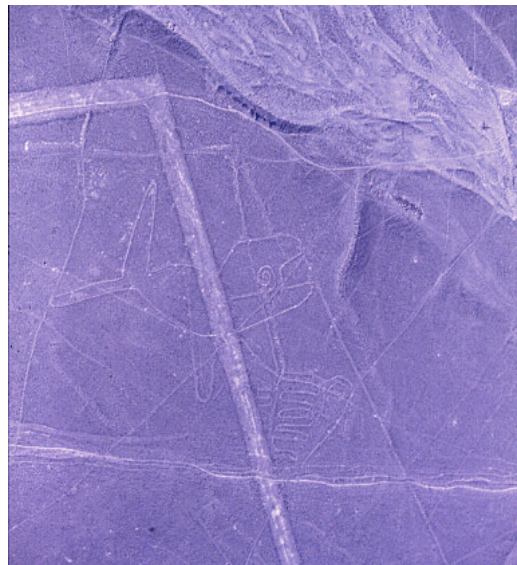
I eventually left with Chris and Graham and returned to the hotel, noticing many large (though rusty) American automobiles of a bygone era parked by the roadside. I settled down to write more of my diary and got into conversation with a local man, who complimented me on my Spanish; according to him, it was '*muy claro*' (very clear). I finally went to bed. The glass of beer obviously knocked me out, for I was hardly aware of Philip coming in later.

Sunday, 5 May

Despite my hard bed and the stuffy room, I slept well and woke early, eager to be off and to see the Nasca lines. I joined the two Irish girls for breakfast; I ate a cheese sandwich, then some bread with marmalade left over from the girls' meal. I was

ready to be taken to the local airport by 'taxi' at 7.30, but as there was only one car (a battered old Chevrolet, painted roughly with a brush in matt colour), we had to be driven there in relays. Because of this, I did not leave until after 8.30. With me came Sally, who rather naughtily had skipped the queue, and Bruce. In the car, two enormous blokes from Down Under had been squeezed into the front seat.

We drove out of the town and soon arrived at a tiny airport in the desert. After a short delay, during which I bought a tee-shirt for a friend, a tiny six-seater aeroplane appeared and we clambered inside. I sat in the back, beside Sally.



The whale and the monkey, Nasca lines

The engine roared into life and we were airborne in a jiffy, flying across the parched landscape in search of the famous lines and shapes. We soon reached the first one. The co-pilot shouted over the noise of the engine, 'If you look-a to the left-a, you'll see a whale' and the plane dipped and turned so that we could gaze down at the depiction in the sand far below us. Sally groaned as the plane wheeled about and asked me if she could lie down over my lap. I granted her permission and she gratefully lay over me, her face downwards – she had had enough!

The view from up here was quite amazing: I could see all the long, dead straight lines (some of which looked like runways), as well as the triangular shapes, the wavy lines and dunes. Although I had expected the depictions of animals to be bigger, they were certainly clear and distinctive. After the whale came the monkey, then the dog, the hummingbird, the condor, and finally the tree which, I noticed, was close to a viewing platform. I managed to photograph most of what I saw. However, with the plane constantly dipping left and right, I soon began to feel rather queasy and, like poor Sally, hoped that there were no more sights to be seen! Mercifully the plane stopped its crazy movements and we flew in a normal manner back to the airport. As soon as we landed, Sally made a bolt for a nearby loo, where she threw up. I wished that I could have done the same, for by now I felt very queasy.

We then travelled back to our hotel, where I did use the loo and discovered that I had the runs. I lay down for a while in my room and then reorganized my luggage. Afterwards I joined Hugh and Philippa in a taxi, which we shared with somebody else, and were driven to a posh hotel near the airport. This fine place, which had been a former *hacienda*, boasted a swimming pool, which proved to be a great attraction. While everyone made for the water or the sun, I sat in the shade, still feeling rather queasy, and ordered a bottle of mineral water. I was now able to bring my diary up to date. As I did so, I looked up occasionally at the people swimming in the water or sunning themselves. Most of the younger people were showing off to some degree; as usual, Sally was attracting the most attention. In my present state, I felt quite detached from everyone else. Although seeing the Nasca lines had given me a great thrill, I now felt poorly and out of sorts.

We all finally sat down to lunch at about two o'clock. Everyone tucked into what looked like an excellent meal, but I ate cautiously; I ordered cream of asparagus soup, followed by a ham sandwich. With this I drank more mineral water.



The remains of an ancient Nasca cemetery

We eventually finished our meal at about three o'clock and boarded a bus. This afternoon's trip took us back into the desert and we stopped at the remains of a Nasca cemetery. This had been ravaged by tomb robbers and now human skulls, bleached white by the sun, together with bones and pieces of clothing, lay scattered

over the sand. Hair and traces of withered skin could still be seen on some of the heads. It seemed amazing that nobody had ever bothered to conserve these ancient remains properly and they had been left out in the open to decay. The very fact that we were allowed to walk around this site was rather disconcerting. Once everyone had seen the place to their satisfaction and had taken photographs, we moved off.



An aqueduct near Nasca

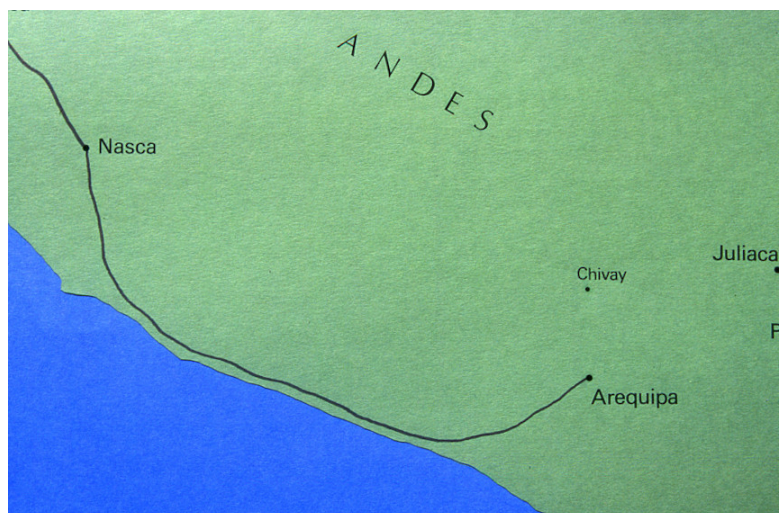
We now drove past the airport, through the town and out at the other side, stopping in an oasis where there was an ancient aqueduct constructed by the Nasca people, along with several *venturas* – vertical circular openings in the ground with walls of stones to enable people to gather water and service the aqueduct. It was explained to us that the water had been channelled down from the nearby mountains in a manner similar to what I had seen in Xinjiang Province, China.

After we had examined this at our leisure, we drove back to Nasca and visited a workshop where we were shown how reproductions of the Nasca pottery were made. After the demonstration, which was quite interesting, we looked at the articles for sale, but nobody bought anything. The difficulty posed for all of us was carrying this delicate pottery in a rucksack without breaking it.

On our way back to our hotel, Marianne got the driver to stop at the nearby telephone exchange centre, where I managed to telephone home. From here I walked the short distance to the hotel, where I wrote more of my diary until Marianne met us at seven o'clock to outline what would happen over the next few days. A small group of us then walked to a nearby restaurant, where we had an excellent meal. We started with a complimentary glass of pisco sour and finished with sweets. I ate a simple dish of chicken and rice, which was very tasty.

We then returned to the hotel where I washed my teeth, reorganized my bags, changed into some warmer clothes for tonight's journey, and wrote some more of my diary until it was time for us to leave. At 10.30 we drove off in a small coach to

the makeshift bus station. Amazingly, our bus to Arequipa arrived on time, at 11 o'clock. We joined a crowd of local people, clambered aboard and set off into the night. I wondered if I would be able to sleep on the bus but, as I was quite tired, I had no problem, though I woke at regular intervals.



Monday, 6 May

At about 5 a.m. I was aware that the bus was turning north-eastwards, which meant that we were leaving the desert and climbing up into the mighty Andes – at last! I continued to sleep on and off, and finally woke as dawn broke. The scenery in this region became more varied; higher mountains appeared and we skirted dramatic valleys. Despite this, the dreary colour of the desert continued. Soon we were able to see a huge snow-capped volcano named Chachani and then the conical shape of its more famous companion, El Misti.

We arrived in the scruffy outskirts of Arequipa at about 8 a.m. and stopped in the large bus terminus. Five taxis then transported us the short distance to our hotel: the oddly-named *La Casa de mi Abuelo* (My Grandfather's House). This turned out to be a delightful place. We relaxed in a wonderful garden until rooms were allocated to us. Although the heat was intense in the sun, it was pleasantly cool here in the shade. The first people to receive keys from Marianne were Philip, Bruce, Cameron and myself. We were conducted to a small 'chalet' at the back of the hotel and brought up to a little suite of two bedrooms (each containing two single beds), a sitting room, a small kitchen, and a bathroom containing a shower. All this was positively luxurious!

When we had got ourselves organized, we went back to the garden and ordered breakfast, which we ate in the shade. Because of the delicate state of my stomach at the moment, I played safe and ordered a ham and cheese sandwich with tea and a bottle of mineral water. The breakfasts that the others were tucking into looked very appetizing.

This done, a group of us walked down the street (named Jerusalén) to a bank and changed some money on Marianne's advice. The service was extremely slow.

We then met Marianne back in the garden of the hotel and walked a short distance to Arequipa's most famous attraction, the Santa Catalina Convent. I had

read about this in Patrick Leigh Fermor's book, *Three Letters from the Andes* (1991). From his book I had formed a vague picture of Arequipa in my mind's eye; what I now saw frankly did not live up to my expectations, for I had imagined it to be somewhat more elegant and less noisy.



The convent of Santa Catalina, Arequipa

However, the convent turned out to be quite interesting. A local girl, who spoke English well, though with a heavy accent, brought us around the huge complex and showed us the pretty little squares, the narrow 'streets' (which all had names of places in Spain), the cells where the nuns had lived in rough simplicity, the workrooms, chapels, the religious artefacts, and works of art. The nuns, who had entered as young girls and had been sent here by their parents (who believed that they could buy a place in Heaven for them by doing so), had lived very harsh lives

here. However, many of them – especially those from wealthy families – had the services of native girls, who were in fact slaves. The nuns had lived in damp conditions, had drunk infected water, and had further inflicted themselves with wounds and infections caused by self-flagellation. I cringed when I heard this. Because of the heat and high altitude, most of us were feeling exhausted by the end of the tour. We met Marianne outside, who informed Sally that her luggage had been found; Sally was delighted to hear this.



The convent of Santa Catalina, Arequipa



Musicians at a restaurant in Arequipa

We now hopped into taxis and were driven to an exclusive restaurant in the suburbs. We asked for tables to be arranged in the shade in the garden, then got down to the serious business of eating. Some of my companions ordered guinea pig, which did not look at all appetizing and tasted rather nasty. I enjoyed an excellent dish of succulent pork with potatoes, salad and bread. We all received a complimentary glass of home-made *chicha* (not very nice) and I asked for a bottle of Sprite. After our meal we ordered cups of *maté de coca*, a very mild infusion of coca

leaves, said to be an excellent cure for altitude sickness and other ailments. While we ate, a small group of colourfully-dressed musicians played for us very well and, predictably, included *El Condor Pasa* in their performance. When they had finished playing, I bought a CD of their music for \$15.



A view from the main square, Arequipa, and the La Recoleta monastery

After the meal we all went our separate ways. Chris, Graham, Bruce and I walked up the road, following Marianne's directions, and arrived at a handsome square that contained a church with an elaborate façade and overlooked a panoramic view of the city with El Misti and Chachani in the background. Chris chatted with some of the locals, who roared with laughter at his attempts to speak Spanish. By now the air was becoming a little cooler.

We then walked to an intersection and took the main road that led back to the city centre. Bruce left us at this point; Chris and I walked on, then turned off for the La Recoleta monastery or, as Chris had called it, the 'Rigoletto'. We paid to go in and were greeted by a young lady who could only tell us about the place in Spanish. Fortunately we were able to understand what she said, which was mainly about the route that we should follow. Having collected a few more visitors, she brought us all up to the library, which she unlocked. Here we were able to see some fine old books and manuscripts. I translated, as best as I could, the descriptions in Spanish for my two companions.

Once we had seen the library, we were free to wander around. In many ways, this fine monastery was more elegant than the convent that we had visited this morning. It had beautiful cloisters and there were plenty of fine things to see: ancient artefacts of Nasca and neighbouring cultures, objects taken from the jungle, and examples of religious art. We spent quite some time visiting the various rooms.

By the time we emerged, it had become cooler and so we walked quickly towards the main square. En route we stopped to take a look in the elegant San Agustin church, where a Mass was in progress. The Plaza de Armas (the main square) contained magnificent colonnades and a very large cathedral, which we entered. The interior was painted a dazzling white, and the décor was tasteful. A few worshippers were sitting in the pews, and a Mass seemed to be in progress in one of the side chapels.

Afterwards we walked back to our hotel, passing the fine Gibbs-Richetts house and the church of San Francisco. Back in the hotel I retrieved my money belt, paid for the following day's tour of the Colca Canyon (\$26) and went up to my room, where I found a rather lifeless Philip on his bed. Bruce was up, reading, and Cameron appeared, looking half asleep. We looked like an absolutely cheerless bunch of lads!

My three companions went out to join Sally and Henrietta, and after a while I went down to the reception area and ordered a meal. Whilst waiting, I wrote some of my diary. The food soon arrived: a bowl of soup with bread, then a hamburger served with chips and rice, and finally tea. I wrote more of my diary afterwards and later was joined by Chris, Graham, Hugh and Philippa.

Not so long afterwards I adjourned to my room, where I sorted out luggage for tomorrow's two-day trip up the mountains to Chivay. I was soon joined by the other lads and we went to bed early.