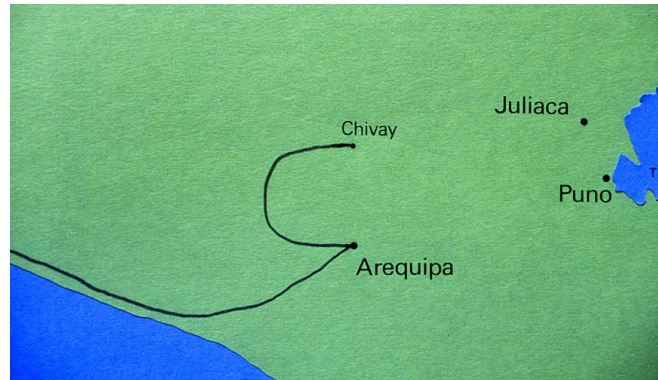


### 3 – COLCA CANYON TOUR



Tuesday, 7 May

I slept very well but woke at five o'clock thinking that I was at home. I dozed until seven, got up and had the hotel's *desayuno continental* (continental breakfast) outside in the garden. This consisted of freshly-made orange juice, bread rolls with butter and jam, a banana, and tea. When I went looking for a couple of items that I had asked to be washed (my shirt and a towel), I was told that they were not ready and so I was given a towel.

Those of us who were going on the trip to the Colca canyon then assembled and set off for a nearby travel agency, where we were given small bottles of water and a bag containing a chocolate bar, some biscuits, and a few sweets. We clambered aboard a smart Japanese minibus and our guide, a trendily-dressed young man wearing sunglasses, introduced himself: his name was Herbie. He then got us to identify ourselves. On our way out of the city we picked up an English fellow named Robert, who sat beside me. Although quiet, he was a pleasant young man.

We now left Arequipa and drove to an area named Yura. We were back in desert territory once again, except that this time we were able to see snow-capped mountains in the distance. Herbie pointed out a smoking volcano among them.



*El Misti volcano*

Slowly we were driven around to the far side of the three main volcanoes of the region: Chachani, El Misti and Pichu Pichu. The road soon disintegrated into a wide track; in some places we had to cross soft sand and so the bus could only travel very slowly. We ascended to the puna region, or Altiplano, where we saw clumps of tough *jarava ichu* (Peruvian feathergrass); Herbie told us that this was eaten by the vicuñas, alpacas and llamas. As we drove around the back of the three volcanoes through the Pampas de Cañahuas Nature Reserve, we spotted some vicuñas in the distance. We were very lucky to have spotted them, for I knew that they were very shy animals. When the bus stopped, we stepped outside and slowly made our way towards these elegant biscuit-coloured animals. Thanks to my zoom lens, I managed to take a few photos of them. When we got too close, they made strange bird-like noises and began to move away.



*Top: vicuñas in the Pampas de Cañahuas; bottom: llamas and alpacas*

Shortly afterwards we stopped to look at some llamas and alpacas. These were of various colours and sizes; the smallest animals were the alpacas. Both the llamas and alpacas were less timid than the vicuñas. Looking after them were two filthy girls dressed in local costumes. Although neither of them wanted to be photographed, I managed to snap one of them using my zoom lens. I spoke briefly to them; one was

nine and the other was sixteen. The sixteen-year-old girl looked only about eleven or twelve.



*Local girl and our tour bus, Pampas de Cañahuas*

Back in the bus again, we left the nature reserve, passed through a checkpoint and entered another region. A little later we pulled up at a low building, where there was a magnificent view of the distant mountains. Here we stretched our legs, availed of the toilets and drank cups of *maté de coca*. I sat beside an Israeli girl who was with us and was learning to be a guide; she was quite pleasant. Herbie then showed us how to prepare coca leaves for chewing. Many of us, including myself, tried a wad of leaves. This was what the local people used to combat altitude sickness, fatigue and (no doubt most importantly) hunger.

We then left this area and drove onwards towards this evening's destination: Chivay. Every so often Herbie told us about the regions that we passed through. For most of the journey, the scenery and mountains looked quite arid – it bore a striking resemblance to what I had seen in Ladakh. As I was familiar with this type of terrain and had read so much about this part of Peru, I felt relatively little sense of excitement passing through it.



We reached the highest point of our journey, at about 4,800 metres (15,000 feet) above sea level, and stopped in order to admire and photograph the view. It was quite cold here and most of us felt the effects of the altitude. Although I only experienced slight breathlessness, surly Cameron did not feel at all good, and some of the younger and fitter members of our group were complaining of the effects of high altitude.



*The approach to Chivay*

From here we dropped down and began to approach our destination: the town of Chivay. In the distance we could see the Colca Canyon. The approach to Chivay was very dramatic; a large fertile valley, surrounded by towering mountains, lay deep down beneath us. The road we were on zigzagged downwards to the town. As we descended, Herbie pointed out the bright green balls of a unique type of moss that grew in these regions.

Shortly afterwards we stopped at a checkpoint, where we all had to pay 2 s/. to enter the town, the Quechua name of which, we were told, meant 'making love'. A neighbouring town, which we had seen from above, was called Cucamaja, which meant 'virgin woman' (or, more precisely, 'closed vagina').

As we drove through the narrow streets of Chivay, we got glimpses of colourfully dressed women, whose elaborate clothes were very bright and cheerful. We finally stopped at a small and simple hotel.

Fifteen minutes later we all met at reception and were taken to a local restaurant, where we had an excellent lunch. I started with quinoa soup, served with bread, which was almost a meal in itself; this local dish was more like a very soupy type of stew. The main course was alpaca beefsteak, which was quite tasty and was served with rice, chips and a little salad. This was not the first time that we had been given rice and potato together.

After the meal we returned to our hotel, where we got ourselves ready to go to a local hot spring, and were given towels before we set off. A short drive up the valley brought us to a hot outdoor pool. Our guide showed us the source of the naturally heated water, but was cut short because of a sudden shower of rain. We ran back to

the pool, threw off our clothes, took a quick shower and joined the locals in the water. It was very pleasant and very relaxing.

Later I emerged from the water and gave myself a proper wash. When everybody was ready, we returned to the hotel, where I wrote my diary's entry for today. Philip, Bruce and Cameron, who were in the room with me, had showers and collapsed on to their beds, exhausted. No doubt they had exerted themselves too much in the hot pool at this high altitude by swimming and fooling around. Unlike them, I did not feel tired or exhausted. It occurred to me that fitness was no guarantee against the effects of high altitude.

We later went down to the restaurant in the hotel, where we had a rather indifferent meal. This evening we were serenaded by a local group playing Peruvian music in a very vigorous style. In fact, they were quite good musicians. The charango player's strumming hand moved at the speed of lightning! My meal consisted of asparagus soup followed by fresh chicken served with rice and chips. For dessert, we were given an unusual sweet dish flavoured with blackcurrants.

When we had finished eating, I followed most of the others to a bar, where a noisy disco was in full swing. The music was deafening. As my stomach was bloated after so much gassy water, I did not avail of a free drink. I sat with the Irish girls for a while, unable to make conversation because of the loud music. I finally excused myself and did a bunk. Not long after I got into bed, Cameron appeared. He was feeling unwell because of the high altitude and had realized that it would be unwise to try dancing in the disco.

Wednesday, 8 May

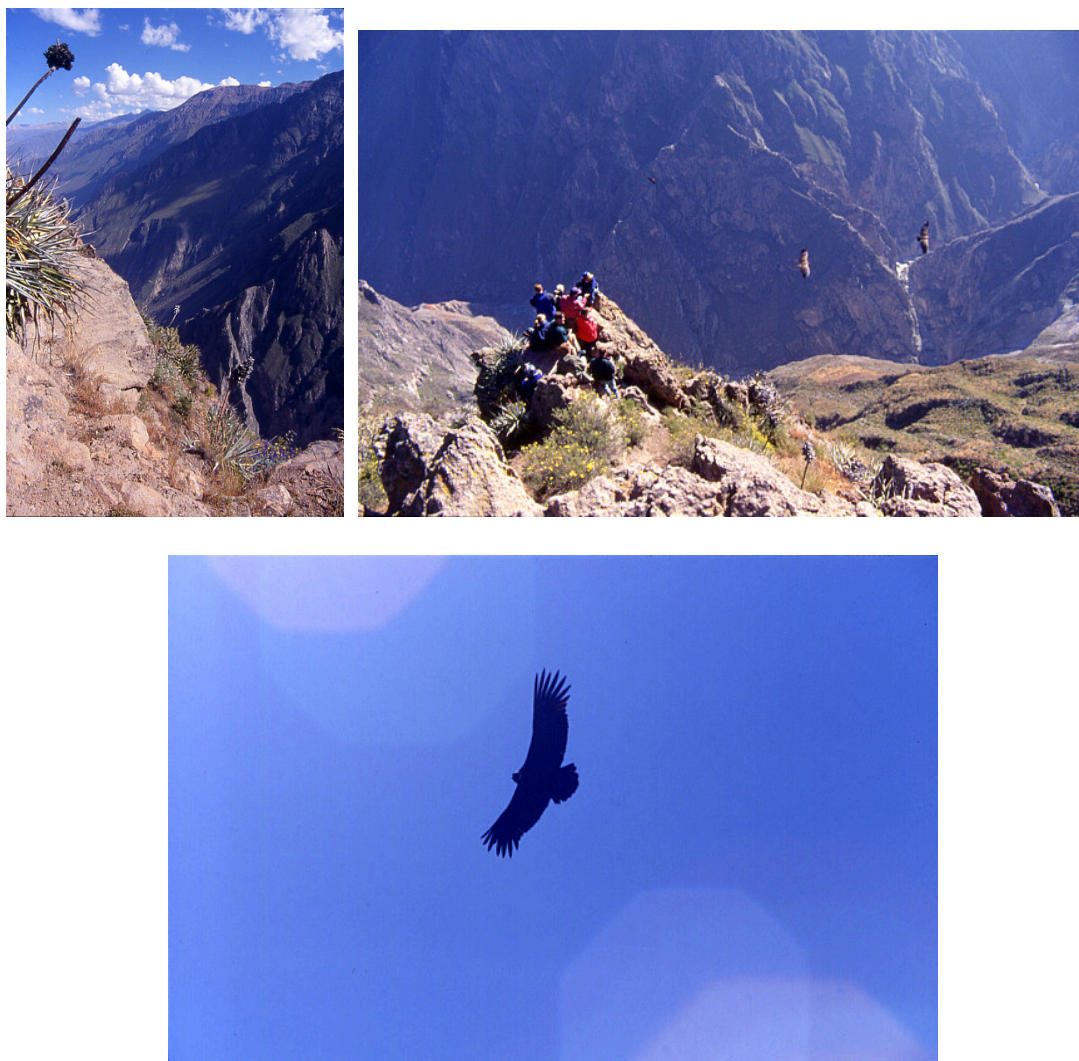
None of us had slept well, thanks to the loud disco music playing for most of the night. Herbie knocked on our door at six o'clock; Cameron was already up and taking a very cold shower. We went down to the restaurant for a simple breakfast and learned that the other members of our group had also slept badly because of the racket from the disco.

As soon as we had finished eating we boarded our minibus and set off on our tour of the Colca canyon. As we drove out of the sleepy little town, people on the bus began to come back to life on discovering that we were now travelling through some very beautiful scenery. We drove down the left side of a lush valley, through which a small river flowed. Herbie drew our attention to numerous terraced fields, most of which were pre-Inca and about 1,500 years old. Everything looked fantastic in the early morning sunlight.

While we drove along the bumpy road, Herbie told us about the canyon that we would visit, the microclimate of this region, the small villages, and the ancient traditions of the local people. There were two main ethnic groups here: the Cabana and the Collaguas people. In the past, one of these groups used to elongate the skull by applying pressure to the sides of a baby's head, whereas the other group squashed the skull so that the face and head looked wider. The two groups could now only be distinguished by the style of the women's hats. Both groups had practised strange customs, some of which were later incorporated into the Catholic faith. During the Inca period, everyone here spoke the Quechua language.

We were also told about recent volcanic activity in the region; about fifteen kilometres away was a volcano that had come to life a short time previously.

Because of this, part of the road had collapsed and had to be rebuilt. One village had been partially destroyed by a flow of lava, and some of it had sunk rapidly.



*Cruz del Cóndor, Colca canyon*

At last we reached our destination: Cruz del Cóndor, which was the deepest part of the great Colca canyon and the spot where, if lucky, we might see condors. We stopped, clambered out of the minibus, and gazed in wonder at a very dramatic view looking down into the great canyon. We were not disappointed, for within minutes a huge black condor appeared and glided past us on a warm current of air. Such warm currents only occurred at this early hour of the morning. I followed the movements of the huge, elegant bird with the zoom lens of my camera and took several shots of it, hoping that at least one would be good. Soon more of these great birds appeared: in all we must have seen about eleven of them.

While the others scrambled downwards to get a better view of the canyon, I began photographing the beautiful wild flowers that grew here and there. The beauty of some of them was quite subtle; one had to get very close to them and examine them in minute detail. Many of them were very delicate. In one spot I found some red flowers that faced downwards; when I turned them upwards and



examined them, I discovered that they were quite exquisite. In fact, they looked rather familiar, for I remembered having seen them in a book back in Ireland.



*Flowers and plants in the Colca canyon*

Afterwards, I scrambled down the edge of the canyon a little (tricky in my ordinary shoes) and watched the condors gliding past; they looked particularly impressive as they swooped past the people below me. At one stage two passed directly above me and I could hear the wind rushing past their massive wings. I also saw some other birds, including an eagle. It was a truly magnificent spot.

When we all climbed back up to the road, we found a colourfully-dressed Cabana woman with a basket of unusual fruit which she offered to us for 50 centimos (half a *sole*) each. As the fruit had thick skin, it looked safe enough to eat. I bought a red and a yellow fruit, both of which were quite tasty. The woman explained in slow Spanish that both of them were good for the stomach.



*Cabana fruit vendor*

After this, we – and the woman – scrambled aboard the bus and we drove a short distance to another viewpoint. This part of the canyon was also quite breathtaking. In between times I spoke to the woman in Spanish and asked her to tell me the names of the fruits and two types of flowers in Quechua, but unfortunately I forgot the words almost instantly; I should have written them down. One of the words, I remember, began with *sh'a...* (a glottal stop directly after the 'sh'). I bought another fruit, which grew on the top of a cactus plant, and the woman allowed me to take a photograph of her.

I then followed the others and walked to some more excellent vantage points, where we admired the surrounding mountains and views. As we stood and looked, Herbie told us more about the place. The canyon was some 100 kilometres long and, at 3,400 metres at its deepest point, was twice as deep as the Grand Canyon in the USA. Here we were able to see some more condors. Somewhat reluctantly we returned to our bus and, with the Cabana woman on board with us again, drove back towards Chivay.

On our way back we stopped to admire a fine church in a small village, then drove on to the village that had been partially destroyed by the flow of lava, Pinchello. This turned out to be where the fruit vendor lived. We were told that the name of this Cabana village meant 'small penis'. On hearing this, I began to wonder if our guide was joking and making up these translations in order to test our reactions! In this village we saw a half-ruined church and a collection of rough-looking buildings with



corrugated iron roofs (a common sight here in Peru). I got out of the bus to explore, left the dusty village and walked down the main road a little, for I just wanted to get away from the group for a few minutes and savour the tranquillity of this astonishing part of the country. The bus soon caught up with me and I clambered aboard.

Our next stop was a wonderful viewpoint that overlooked a spectacular array of ancient terraces constructed by the Collaguas people some 1,500 years ago for the cultivation of crops. It was equal to anything that I had seen in China or Indonesia. We then stopped at another viewpoint with a similar scene before us, and then at a spot where we could see *tumbas colgadas* (hanging tombs) that had been built in the cliffs. It was explained to us that the corpses had been placed in the tombs in the foetal position.

We finally returned to Chivay and the restaurant, where we ordered lunch. I started with cream of asparagus soup, and then had lamb with chips, rice, and a tiny helping of salad. The food was quite good.



*Local people, Chivay*

After our meal we wandered down to the main square, where we took one or two photos of the local people (with their permission and a little tip), then returned to the bus for the journey back to Arequipa. As Herbie had moved to the back of the bus with the Israeli girl, the front two seats were now free. I sat on one of them and was able to enjoy the journey to the full as I could see all the scenery very clearly. I was now able to appreciate fully the skill of the driver, a small dark-skinned man with spectacles, who had to drive over very difficult terrain, negotiate sharp turns and avoid potholes.

It took some time for us to climb out of the valley in low gear. It had by now clouded over in this region, but once we reached the Altiplano, the clouds disappeared and the sky was blue. Although I dozed off once or twice for a few minutes, I stayed awake for most of the journey. We stopped briefly at the café in Sumbay for refreshment, to use the loos, and to stretch our legs. Soon afterwards we left this Pata Wasi ('High Home') region at the checkpoint, and once again we entered the nature reserve of Pampa de Cañahuas, where we saw more llamas and sheep, but no vicuñas this time.



*The road back to Arequipa*

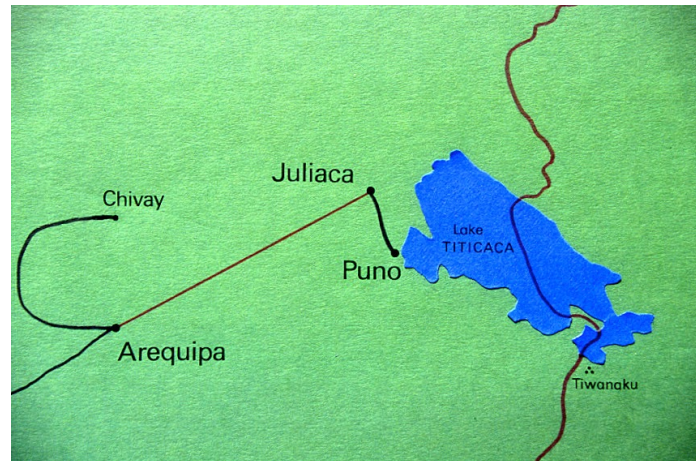
As we left this area and reached the Pampa de Arrieros, the sun began to set. Straight ahead was a fine view of El Misti, clear in the evening light. The police stopped us at one point and the driver had to pay them 5 s/. for some unknown reason. Later we stopped to photograph a nearby smoking volcano; it looked quite dramatic with the sun setting behind it.



*Smoke from a volcano near Arequipa*

At last we reached the properly surfaced road and so the rest of the journey went quickly. It was dark when we finally reached Arequipa.

Back in the hotel we retrieved our luggage, spruced ourselves up and paid the bill. Afterwards, a small group of us met in a pizzeria down the road. Marianne joined us later. I made short work of a Hawaiian-style pizza. As we would have an early start on the following morning for our trip to Lake Titicaca, we returned to the hotel and went to bed at an early hour.



Thursday, 9 May

I slept reasonably well during the night, but was woken up by a barking dog. Shortly afterwards, when I was about to fall asleep again, my alarm clock went off at 5.30. I rose, washed, shaved and, as I packed, ate a bread roll that I had bought the previous evening. I ate another one while waiting downstairs, then helped myself to a glass of water from a dispenser.

Our luggage was loaded on top of two minibuses and, at about 6.30, we left for the nearby airport. Arequipa looked quite pretty in the bright early morning sunshine. We drove off in the direction that we had taken two days previously and soon arrived at the smart little airport, which was not far away from El Misti. As we had to wait for a while, I killed time by drinking a cup of tea and bringing my diary up to date.

Our Air Peru flight took off at about eight o'clock; we rose up into the clear blue sky, circling El Misti, and were rewarded with a superb view of the Andes far below us. The mountains, like the surrounding terrain, were brown and bare. At one point we could see the salt left from a dried-up lake. I spent most of the half-hour journey writing my diary.

Soon we began descending to Juliaca airport: another smart building similar to the one in Arequipa. When we had collected our luggage and walked outside to a waiting bus, we were set upon by local women wearing bowler hats, who tried to sell us all manner of things, including local knitwear. Sally succumbed to one of them and bought quite a pretty sleeveless jumper with a repeated design of llamas.

We then drove through the rather scruffy town of Juliaca, which was full of dark-skinned locals, and headed off across the flat Altiplano to Puno. The landscape was fertile; we passed cultivated fields and farmhouses, and saw animals such as cows, llamas and sheep. After a while we climbed up some low mountains. Then, turning round a bend, we got our first breathtaking view of Lake Titicaca, one of South America's largest lakes and the world's highest navigable body of water. It looked magnificent: a vast expanse of deep blue, though the water appeared to be green near the shore. In a bay nestled the untidy town of Puno. I was both excited and impressed by this first view of this famous lake, which straddles the border between Peru and Bolivia.

Puno, when we reached it, turned out to be a more prosperous-looking town than Juliaca. We bumped our way through some narrow streets and stopped at our hotel:



the Imperial Hostal. This suitably imposing name had been bestowed on a rather basic, but not unpleasant, hotel. The room that I shared with Philip was on the second floor; because of the high altitude we felt a little out of breath when we reached it. We tidied ourselves and walked down the road to a market, where we bought pens, pencils and fruit to give to children whom we would meet when we visited the lake's floating Uros islands. I bought some coloured pencils, apples, oranges, and three bananas (one of which I ate). I also bought a string for my sunglasses and a bottle of mineral water.

We then returned to the hotel, boarded our bus and drove to the shore of Lake Titicaca, where once again we were approached by women selling knitwear. After a short delay, we boarded a large motor boat and set off across the water. Following Sally's example, a few of us clambered up to the roof, from where we had an excellent view of our surroundings.

After a short while we approached a dense patch of totora reeds, a subspecies of the giant bulrush sedge, found in South America and (interestingly) Easter Island. Looking at these, and also at a man in a small boat made of balsa wood, brought back memories of Thor Heyerdahl, his Ra reed boats, and his Kon Tiki balsa-wood raft. It was thrilling to be actually sailing on this great lake after so many years of reading and hearing about it.



*Lake Titicaca and one of the Uros islands*



*One of the Uros islands, Lake Titicaca*

We emerged from the reeds, sailed through a clearing and crossed over to one of the famous floating islands made of totora reeds. We stepped off the boat onto a surface that resembled turf. It was hard to believe that what we were walking on was man-made. We walked a short distance to a small square that was covered with loose stalks of totora; here we looked at the few simple buildings (including a tiny church) and some colourful souvenirs that were for sale. Our guide gave us a short talk about the islands and the people living on them. Their original language was no longer spoken and now they spoke Aymara. When he had finished speaking, we returned to the souvenirs. After much hesitation I bought a simple wall hanging for just 5 s/. and then a more elaborate and fairly tasteful sample of embroidery for 35 s/. Immediately after I had bought the latter, I wondered why I had done so!

We then returned to our boat. Just as I boarded it, I discovered that some of the others had accepted a lift in a balsa-wood boat nearby. I quickly ran back and joined them. We had a most delightful journey to the second island in this ancient mode of transport; it was a wonderful experience to actually be in one of these traditional boats. I leaned over and let my hand trail in the cool, deep blue Titicaca water.

As we approached our destination, our boatman stopped and cut a few stalks of totora. He peeled back some of the outer layer from the base and offered it to us to taste. It was a little like celery as regards texture, though it did not have a strong taste.

As soon as we disembarked, we were hounded by a group of rather dirty-looking mothers and tiny children demanding something from us, and so my fruit disappeared in a flash. There were quite a number of stalls here offering colourful souvenirs. The begging did not bother me too much, for I was prepared for it, though some of my companions did not take too kindly to it.

We eventually arrived at a small school and found a number of children gathered outside it, singing songs for us quite tunelessly. Included were two different versions of *Frère Jacques*: one in French, the other in Italian. The students, who looked rather bored and were all neatly dressed in uniforms, stood out in stark contrast to the poorly-dressed mothers and small children nearby. I wondered how often they had to perform in front of tourists like us.



*A children's school on one of the Uros islands, Lake Titicaca*

At the end of the singing, we offloaded our pens, pencils and notebooks into a large plastic bag. I wondered if any of these gifts would make their way back to the mainland to be sold again! Some of the stalls here sold fruit similar to what we had brought. I noticed that when one of the mothers took a piece of fruit from a member of her group, she quickly hid it under an item of clothing.

We wandered around a little, noting the relative squalor in which these dark-skinned people lived, then made our way back to the big boat. We then set off on our return journey to Puno, making our way through the clumps of totora reeds. Once again, I sat up on the roof.

Back at the harbour, our bus collected us and drove us to the hotel. However, we were brought into the hotel next door, where we had lunch. The service was incredibly slow. While Cameron and Sally complained about their dry cheese sandwiches, one of the Danish couples raved about their trout, which indeed looked delicious. I chose the *pollo al chino* (Chinese-style chicken) which, although it bore absolutely no resemblance to any Chinese dish, was very good.

At about three o'clock we set off again in the same bus, with the same guide, for Sullustani, where we would see some unusual funeral towers, known as *chulpas*, and some fine scenery. We drove out of Puno with an excellent view of Lake Titicaca to our right; our guide stopped the bus and we tumbled out to take some photos.



*Sullustani*



We now drove across the Altiplano and turned off the main road for some low mountains. We soon arrived at Sullustani, where we were approached by bowler-hatted women offering necklaces for sale – some of them were quite pretty. On a hill before us were the strange ruined funeral towers that I had read about in Patrick Leigh Fermor's amusing book. Passing by a peaceful lagoon on my right, I followed my companions up the hill along a path. I caught up with Sally who, like me, was a little short of breath. At the top, I scrambled up a ruined structure and looked out over the lagoon, the funeral towers, some stone walls that reminded me of rural Ireland, and a couple of local people with llamas. One rarely saw men in the fields here – just women. The countryside was now bathed in late afternoon sunshine.



*A chulpa (funeral tower) and a view of Lake Urumaya, Sullustani*

Our guide now gathered us around him and he told us about these unusual *chulpas*. In fact, the term *chulpa* only applied to one type of tower, for there were various different types here, either circular or square, but most of them were pre-Inca. We then wandered around, looking at the various towers. Afterwards we went uphill a little more and looked down at the unusual Lake Urumayu. It had a large island in the centre, on which we could see vicuñas. Our guide told us about various legends surrounding this almost hidden lake and showed us a small quarry where the locals had got the stone to make the funeral towers. It was all quite interesting. The stonework used on the more sophisticated circular towers was quite amazing to behold as the individual stones were so accurately cut and fitted together. The Incas had managed to produce blocks with curved surfaces. Our attention was drawn to a depiction of a lizard carved on one of the blocks of the biggest tower.

At the bottom of the hill, the local women approached us again and I bought two blue and white ceramic necklaces at 5 s/. apiece. Later I discovered that Mary had bought three for 10 s/.!

We now drove back to Puno in the fading light. When we had left Sullustani, the sun had been setting and it had begun to turn cool. As we approached Puno, lights twinkled below us and the place actually looked pretty.

Back in the hotel I took a shower and wrote some of my diary, which had got a day behind. Later we met Marianne downstairs, who told us of our plans for the next

few days, when we would be travelling to the capital of Bolivia, La Paz. She then described the Inca Trail, which would involve a few days of trekking in Peru. When I discovered that it would give us no time to see around Cusco, I decided not to do it. Although our guided tours were very interesting, I was anxious to be on my own for a few days and to see things at my own speed.

Later I went on my own to the restaurant next door to try the trout that the Danes had raved about at lunchtime. While waiting for the food to arrive, I continued writing my diary. As I was now on my own, the service was much quicker. I started with cream of mushroom soup, which had obviously come from a tin or a packet, then had the *trucha à la italiana*, which I discovered was not the dish that my Danish companions had ordered. However, it was not too bad. While I ate, a boy played a charango very loudly; fortunately he left after a short time.

Back in my room I continued writing my diary until Philip returned, early. I put the diary away and went to bed as I was tired by now. A very interesting and fulfilling day. Tomorrow morning we would be driving to Bolivia.