

SECRET CITADEL OF THE LAST INCA

Text and Photographs by Ricardo Carrasco Stuparich ©

Lured by history and myth, this author trekked through dense Peruvian jungle to a remote stronghold once occupied by Manco Inca

Cuzco creates an immediate impression; the cradle of the Inca empire, where every street, every corner, every house bears witness to what was once the great city founded by Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, children of the sun god. Their father had sent them to save mankind when he saw men living like animals, without law or order. The city and its environs bear the stamp of inspired Inca master builders, yet, despite this concentration of imperial magnificence, one can still discover lost citadel and marvelous treasures far from the well-traveled routes.

I am sitting in a restaurant in front of the Plaza de Armas in Cuzco, where hordes of tourists, who have come to visit the fortress of Machu Picchu and the sacred valley, stroll by. Sipping my bitter coffee, I browse through the yellowing pages of a book about the great revolt and the siege of Cuzco by Manco Inca, the brave young prince who was the son of Mama Runtu and Huayna Capac, twelfth monarch in the royal line that began with the founding of that great empire. The young Inca is famed for his skill and cunning in manipulating for his skill and cunning in manipulating the Spaniards and for his hard-fought battle against them. Riding at the head of hundreds of thousands of warriors, he launched the great rebellion of 1536 by laying siege to Cuzco, an unprecedented and glorious moment of resistance against the Spanish invaders.

At that time, arrows, clubs, and lances were the weapons used by Inca warriors. Amid the bonfires surrounding the city, these weapons, lit by burning tinder, rained down on the unfortunate conquistadors led by Francisco Pizarro. Gradually, over the course of months of fighting, a lack of food and the arrival of new Spanish soldiers began to weaken the Inca army, which was finally defeated at the fortress of Sacsahuamán and forced to flee, taking refuge in the cordillera of the Upper Urubamba.

Manco Inca and his men plunged into the deepest, most uncharted jungle of Perú, far from the Spanish blockade, where he established a centre of resistance known in Quechua as Vilcabamba, or sacred pampa. From that remote region he resolved to attack the Spanish positions in Cuzco. Yet, within a decade, he would be assassinated by seven Spanish fugitives to whom he himself had given refuge.

Hidden in the jungle fastness, the stronghold occupied by the last of the royal Incas, the remote and mysterious Espiritu Pampa, still survives. Reputed to contain over four hundred structures, most of which are buried, the fortress of Espiritu Pampa is, according to some anthropologists, greater than Machu Picchu itself. All of this excites me, and the hours pass swiftly as the city lights up and is transformed into a jewel, its many carefully preserved churches illuminated and dazzling as diamonds of light.

A few days later, my companions – a Peruvian anthropologist and a Zen master – and I are ready to depart on an expedition to the fortress of the last “Inca of Vilcabamba”. Three days of traveling will take us through the mountains to the lowlands and then into the deep jungle of the Upper Urubamba, a major tributary of the Amazon river.

Our route ranges from the scenic to the hair-raising: First, we must cross the gorge of the Verónica, a sacred mountain, or *apu*, nearly nineteen thousand feet high on the eastern slope of Machu Picchu. Our little microbus literally penetrates the clouds, and I feel

as if in a dream, with the abyss disappearing in the mist beyond each curve. Slowly we descend, reaching the city of Quillabamba after a six-hour journey. This is an important coffee, cacao, and lumber center in the Department of Cuzco, where tropical fruits such as papayas, fragrant bananas, and custard apples restore our spirits.

We continue on the next day in another vehicle to the town of Kiteni, which, like many jungle towns, has only one main street and many improvised stalls selling fruit and chicken soup. We walk among the steaming, smoking stalls to the Kiteni Hotel at the end of the street, where we will spend the night.

Darkness falls as I sit on a small chair in my room, sensing the proximity of the jungle. I count more than fifty spiders trapping insects in the screenless window frames. This forest owes its abundance to the fact that the deep Urubamba and Apurimac River valleys separate the Vilcabamba mountain range from the rest of the Andean cordilleras, thereby isolating countless species of animals and plants. Scientists call this “the island effect”, which means that geographically marginalized populations are able to produce new species of plants and animals.

At four in the morning we clamber into a truck going to Chuanquiri, the last town before beginning our hike to Espíritu Pampa. It is full of Machiguengas, natives of the Urubamba, and we are obliged to find seats for ourselves on a wooden plank, since it is clear that we are not welcome there. Speaking in Machi, they stare at us as if they would like to throw us off. The anthropologist among us, who speaks several Peruvian languages and dialects, breaks the tension by telling them that we are going to Espíritu Pampa, whereupon they all begin to laugh, while some who appeared to be sleeping, smile, giving us to understand that we will never get there.

The truck stops suddenly, and, looking out over the canvas roof to find out what has happened, I see a river in front of us. My first thought is that we won't be able to go any farther, but I am wrong. The driver turns off the engine and waits a couple of hours for the water level to recede. We listen to the rattling of small stones borne along by the current. It's hard to believe, but the Machiguengas attribute the mishap to my presence (if anything goes wrong, as an outsider, I could be in trouble). Fortunately, after weaving around some large rocks in the stream, the truck manages to cross, and we are again on our way to the settlement of Chuanquiri.

Soaked from head to foot, I am holding tight to the roof of the truck as the sun comes out and illuminates one of the most beautiful and precipitous landscape I have ever seen. Escarpments disappear into the depths of the planet in an impenetrable tangle of humid, steamy blue jungle. At the bottom of an abyss, a river churning up a lather of mud creates terrifying rapids that roar through the canyons. For one moment, I feel as though I am at the end of the world or perhaps at the beginning. The truck is speeding along a narrow, eroded track that threatens to vanish at every curve.

Finally we reach Chuanquiri, where our refreshments include enormous papayas. “Now the adventure really begins”, my anthropologist companion announces. He had been there thirty years earlier.

The settlement of Chuanquiri seems to have sprung up around an improvised soccer field; on one side there is a small school. I try to take some photographs of children, but they run away into the jungle, and I realize that I should have been more tactful with the inhabitants of such a remote place.

We begin our trek with a guide who has brought a pair of mules for the trip. We hike along the Koshireni River, which winds into the mountainous jungle. We come across rivers of giant ants carrying leaves in their jaws and enormous butterflies of rare shapes in brilliant orange, green, black, blue, and red. Flocks of yellow-rumped caciques, famous for their hanging nests that the local people use as bags, accompany us throughout the day. We also see the Andean cock-of-the-rock, a bird similar to the toucan.

After a six-hour walk, making a half-dozen crossings of the Koshireni, the turbulent Concebidayoc, and other streams, climbing and trying to protect ourselves from the incessant attack of gnats and mosquitoes, we decide to spend the night in the hut of some settlers. Their diet consists of guinea pig with cassava or *uncuchas*, a starchy jungle potato that is a good accompaniment to meat. They fish for the local *surcador*, bass, common dolphinfish, and the gigantic *mamury* by tying baby chicks to their lines. They also plant and harvest coffee, which they sell in Chuanquiri for about twenty-eight dollars per hundred pounds.

The next day we take up the trail again, with the assurance of some Machiguengas that it is only a few hours to Espíritu Pampa. But for them time exists in another dimension, and we need to trek through the jungle for several more days, sleeping wherever the night finds us. We often come upon improvised stone and red-earth graves, for in the steaming jungle there is neither the time nor the taste for ostentatious tombs. Local people quickly solve the problem of those who leave this world by burying them beside the path.

At this point, inexplicably, our guide decides to return with his mules to Chuanquiri, and we watch him disappear into the trees. We continue in the company of some young Machiguengas, who offer to carry part of our gear, which is growing ever heavier in the intense tropical heat, for a short way.

As we climb the muddy slopes we see such orchids as the common *michi michi*, the exotic *wakanki*, and the no less spectacular *zapatitos*.

Among the foliage of a lost path we find, to our great surprise, a splendid Inca bath, the first clear sign that our effort is being rewarded. We have reached the fortress of Espíritu Pampa. The bath, consisting of a main pool and three water spouts down which a thin stream still runs, was the place where visitors were obliged to wash themselves before entering the sacred citadel. Tired but content, we walk a little farfortunately, some Machiguengas had cleared with machetes a few days earlier to drive away predators. Seven kinds of venomous snakes are native to this area, among them the feared fer-de-lance.

Gradually, there emerge before our eyes houses and more terraces, as if a veil had been lifted. Though most of the buildings had been destroyed by roots or smothered by moss, some, against all odds, preserve their lintels -fine details of a skilled master sculptor-intact above the entranceways; and on the ground, undisturbed pieces of broken jars are scattered among leaves.

After this discovery, we sit in silence in the presence of such buildings lost in time, as if the jungle had swallowed our tongues.

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