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My Three Weeks in Peru

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During August, I spent three weeks in Peru enrolled in an ethnography field school offered by the **Center for Social Wellbeing and Patricia Hammer**. We focused on Action Research, an idea that insists on the researchers' participation in the community in which they are learning about. My lessons began when I flew into Lima, a busy city by the bay. When I arrived, I found two of my fellow anthro classmates from Fresno State, Garin and Katie, waiting at the hostel with nine students from other universities from around the US. We were all in a foreign land and we really had no idea what we were going to be doing.

When we explored the city of Lima, constant horn honking echoed off the buildings and men hung out the taxi bus windows yelling at us when they drove by. At first, I wished they would stop "checking us out" but then I learned they were just communicating with us. For example, the honk may mean, "Watch out I am driving by you." Or "Get out of the way!" Or "hey, you need a ride?" Once I got passed my misinterpretations, I realized all of the people I met on my adventure were friendly and helpful. They may have tried to get an extra *sole* from the gringa, but in general they all treated me well.

For the majority of the three weeks I spent my time in the Andean Highlands of Carhuaz, a community where traditional ideas meet contemporary times. The women, for the most part, wore Spanish style full skirts and blouses of bright colors, thick-legwarmer like pants, boots, and cowboy like hats with a flower if they were single. They carried everything on their backs in a brilliantly colored cloth tied across their shoulders while the men and boys wore contemporary clothing and never carried anything on their backs!

The rocky streets are outlined with shallow canals rushing with glacial water from the high mountains. The Glaciers in the highlands are the reservoirs that provide water during the dry season. However, due to global warming for the past 20 years, they have noticed the glaciers receding on the mountains and they fear what will happen in the future.

Their crops are mainly corn, wheat, and potatoes. Potatoes are a very important staple food for these Andean people. I was told that there are over 2,000 varieties and I believe that of the 21 days I was in Peru, I was able to try 21 varieties. Yes, I feel as though I had potatoes everyday, blue ones, pink ones, yellow ones, you name it, I had it. I like potatoes but papas fritas, or French fries, still remain my favorite. Cuy, or Guinea pig, is also a large part of their diet. I was able to try some. It tasted very mild and I, a vegetarian, would even say it was good. Chi Cha, or corn beer, is a must try and part of the cultural experience. A drunken man walking around with a one gallon white bucket filled with yellow, yes the color of urine, fluid offered me some. How could I resist? Handing me a Dixie cup that nearly everyone else had already drank out of, I sampled the sweet drink. Let me reiterate the word "sweet". I'd even say too sweet for me. That brings me to Inca Cola, another yellow drink this time sold in a glass soda bottle that tasted like bubble gum, too sweet for me.

In the program I learned some Quechua, the language that existed in the area before the Spanish influence. I naively thought that this language was limited to a certain community because I had never really heard of it before. Later I learned I was wrong. The spread of this language is huge, crossing country boundaries. In Peru I drank, I ate, I sang, I learned, I got sick. Animals were everywhere. Feces and burning trash coupled with the smell of eucalyptus filled my nasal passages. Houses were arranged in compounds, made of adobe and brick, covered with a white finish and decorated with political graffiti. Speakers came and shared their knowledge and experiences with us, while the geese cackled in the back ground.

I recommend this program to all anthropology students interesting in challenging their limits. We visited archeological sites, went on hikes and spoke with the people of the town.

This was a humbling experience for me. I realized we know what we know. I wanted to learn from them what they knew and in that they were the experts and I was the student. They were happy to share with me as long as I shared with them what came from it. And so I will.