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Day of The Llamas

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On the trail.*Photo: Lance Richardson*

By building lodges and putting its beasts of burden back to work, a village is back from the brink, writes Lance Richardson.

At its height, the Inca Empire covered more than 2 million square kilometres, from modern-day Colombia down into Chile. This staggering dominion was due to one unusual advantage: a single soldier, equipped with a dozen llamas, could walk until he died from old age. Llamas provide everything from fleece for warmth to dried skin for sandals. Indeed, the Inca Empire died in 1533, but its mountain descendants, the Quechua people, dusted themselves off, loaded the llamas, and kept on walking right into the 20th century.

Then the Peru government built a highway through the Andes. Smallpox from Europe failed to finish these people, but asphalt is a different sort of disease. For hundreds of years Quechua in the highlands collected corn and fava beans in Pitumarca, or coca leaves and sugar in the Amazon, transporting everything across the mountains. "The reason we're poor now is because our llamas lost their jobs," one local told me recently, lamenting the arrival of trucks and shipping companies.

Staff in the Andean Lodges kitchen.

Rather than give up and move to the metropolis, though, some locals have pushed back with a new strategy. There is a small community called Chillca near the mountain of Ausangate; the main town looks like a handful of gems rolled to the bottom of a glacial moraine. The residents - about 160 in all - noticed a steady flow of visitors to the city of Cusco, a short drive away. They decided to entice visitors to Chillca, putting their llamas back to work. And to make it happen, they called Roger Valencia.

Valencia is an internationally renowned tourism consultant, expert climber, and fierce advocate for all things indigenous. He works with world leaders and the head curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He once saved a Peruvian town by having it host an ultramarathon from the mountains to the jungle. He is, by all accounts, a fearless entrepreneur, and to save Chillca he proposed a plan so ambitious I would scoff if he hadn't shown me the end result first-hand. For nearly a week he guides me through remote ravines and scree fields beneath the summit of Ausangate.

The Inca saw the mountain's "apu", or spirit, as a giver of life, part of the sacred river cycle flowing through Willcamayu, the Milky Way. Valencia saw the mountain as a giver of life, too - and an opportunity.

Entrance to an Andean lodge.

He began by working with local people to plot a route so high in the Andes that some outsiders said it couldn't be done. He designed a series of lodges called tambos (four in all) that visitors would hike between over the course of five days. Then he raised more than $1 million.

The community would fund one lodge, giving them a financial stake in the project. And community members would staff nearly every available role, from tambo guardians to itinerant cooks, following visitors with a llama weighed down by clanging pans. Valencia set up a training program at up-market Cusco hotels, ensuring women were included on the class roll. Everybody was paid from the first day. This wasn't a Band-Aid solution, so much as a seismic shift for the Quechua people of Chillca.

"If we get 1000 people on this trek each year, nearly all of the llamas will be back to work," Valencia says confidently. But the project almost collapsed before it really began, because even though locals were receptive to the plan, weather meant they could only build for a few months each year. By the third exhausting season of stop-start construction, disillusionment set in. "When will the visitors come?" they asked.

Lodge Anantapata Tambo.

Valencia told them a story.

Every February, the Inca used to celebrate the land's fertility with a big carnival. But the river god would get so drunk he'd begin to dance, drowning everything in his path. Eventually the Inca emperor took offerings of coca leaves and seashells to Ausangate, begging the mountain spirit for help. The apu was silent. Disillusioned, the emperor began to give up.

But when he turned back he saw his people assembled in the shape of a giant: where they cooked they looked like a stomach; where they harvested they looked like arms.

“We are the giant," the emperor yelled to the Inca. "But the giant has no head!" So he pulled the elders together, forming a head capable of designing a canal. "If our ancestors can order a river to march straight, how can we not build a few tiny lodges?" Valencia asked the people of Chillca.

When he tells me this we're sitting in the first tambo surrounded by candles. All of the lodges are finished now. All of the locals are trained, or in training. His story leaves me momentarily speechless, and into the vacuum silence slides the musical strains of an Andean harp. Nelly, the housekeeper, begins to sing huayno, a thin reedy style popular in the mountains. Then she walks over and holds out her hand. When Nelly first started working here she could barely look a stranger in the face. Now our dance is called "Love is like a plant".

Every step you take: llamas at work.

There are many such encounters on the "Camino del Apu Ausangate". The community may have set out to put their llamas back to work, but what they've created is something far more remarkable. I learn the story of these people, their customs and rituals; and I learn about the power of the mountains in a landscape so stark and unsettling, I quickly comprehend what Valencia means when he says, "Sometimes, carrying logs up the valley, I would wonder if I was in a dream."

Between the first and second tambos we meet Santos, heading to the "chaco" - a gathering where community members corral wild vicunas and shear their valuable fur for market sale (the animals are then released). Santos loiters on the path until I take his photo with Hatun Jampa, a mountain he refers to as "grandfather". After this impromptu photo shoot, with Santos posing like the Lone Ranger, Valencia points out Hatun Jampa's three peaks and reveals Santos has two wives. "He had no choice," Valencia says with a sly smile. "The mountain dictated his destiny."

Mountains motivate most elements of life in the Andes. "The Inca in the 16th century were a culture unusually obsessed with the beauty of mountains," Hugh Thomson writes in The White Rock. Little has changed over time, and the obsession turns out to be contagious. The second lodge, Machuracay Tambo, is tucked beneath Ausangate's southern ridge. By the time we arrive I can think about nothing but mountains and vertiginous drops.

Partly this is due to a growing sense of illness. Machuracay Tambo is 4800 metres above sea level, making it the highest fixed accommodation in the world. Valencia is leading us over stones fringed with ichu grass, chattering about condors and Andean cats, while my mind is stretching out like mozzarella cheese. Though the walk is structured with a policy of "walk high, sleep low", altitude sickness in an unpredictable foe. In worst-case scenarios "people start walking like they're on a boat" Valencia says, describing cerebral edema.
Nothing that extreme is going to happen here, but I pass a strange day suspended between migraine and delirium. To help me relax, Valencia takes me fishing and tells another story.

"I used to spend months hiking here," he says. "Once I spent 45 days in a row. After seven peaks my pants were walking on their own; I hadn't washed them all that time. I'd buy a sheep, slaughter the sheep, eat the sheep.

"Then I'd dry the sheep's skin and use it for tent cushioning. The tents were very comfortable, as you can imagine."

So are the lodges. Each one features a shared living space filled with candelabras, and wide double-pane windows open over vistas like the snowy mountain face of Mariposa. Every night, a hot water bottle appears in my bed. Meals are ample and delicious, designed by a nutritionist to satisfy without being heavy (in oxygen-thin altitude the first bodily function to be sacrificed is digestion). There's quinoa soup and rainbow trout, Spanish omelets and yellow potato causa. I could stay forever, I think, were it not for the trek unspooling like a cliffhanger serial, each break in the narrative capped with the promise of something new just over the top of the next mountain pass.

The third day brings Paloma Chajoc, "the pass with the doves", a point so high it feels like going any higher - to Ausangate's summit, for example (6384 metres) - would mean

leaving the atmosphere entirely. It is bitterly cold. The pass is polished bald and streaked with unearthly magenta, cyan and metallic grey. My head pounds in the unrelenting sun as I struggle to take it all in: the jagged peaks like battleships, the shale coloured like a paint box left open in the rain.

And then, starting down a 70-degree slope, I catch sight of our retinue coming over a neighbouring crest. There is Nelly, "the mountain goat" as Valencia calls her, clutching a transistor radio decorated with butterfly stickers. There is Nico the cook, "a tiny bottle holding a tremendous spirit". There are our hardy llamas, trotting with luggage strapped to their flanks. It is astonishing how deftly this team navigates terrain, barely registering inclines while I struggle to walk across a flat field without losing my breath on the wind.

After stumbling down a terraced valley cross-hatched with water lines, we come across a fragrant pool filled with bacterial blooms. I poke it with a stick, unable to help myself, while Valencia pauses to take in the scene. He has one more story to tell.

The Apu Viracocha, embodied in the mighty Ausangate, pitied the Quechua people, struggling in the highlands with just their llama. So the mountain spirit ordered alpacas to come into the Andes, saying, "You will be part of the human family, treated with respect, and in return you will become the joy and the wealth of my children who live in the high puna". The alpacas sprang out of natural water fountains, filling the fields with vast flocks such as the ones we see today.

"There will be life in the Andes until there are no alpacas and llamas," Valencia says, gesturing down the road to the next tambo and our proud little party. "The day the animals are gone, the people will also disappear."

Lance Richardson travelled courtesy of PromPeru, LAN Airlines and Andean Lodges.

FAST FACTS

Getting there LAN Airlines has a fare to Cuzco for about $1890 low-season return including tax. Fly to Santiago (16hr including transit time in Auckland), then to Lima (3hr 45min) and to Cuzco (1hr 20min). Melbourne passengers pay about $100 more and fly Qantas to Auckland to connect; see lan.com.

Trekking there Andean Lodges offers the Camino del Apu Ausangate as a full five-day hike for $US1045 ($1000) a person, or as a shorter, three-day version for $US810 a person, visiting two of the tambos. Prices include transport, food, accommodation and guides. Phone +51 84 224 613, see andeanlodges.com. Andean Lodges also offers acclimatisation programs that focus on Cusco and Machu Picchu before dovetailing with the Ausangate trek. Price is $US2000 a person. Also incorporating extra days for acclimatisation, the hike can be booked in Australia through World Expeditions. Its nine-day package, called the Ausangate Eco Lodge Trek, includes transport to and from Cusco and costs $2390 a person. Phone 1300 720 000, see worldexpeditions.com.au.