

## TRAVELOGUE

# Northern Perú: Ocean to Mountains to Amazonian Rainforest

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Photographs by the author.

The Andes Mountains along the western edge of South America run more or less due north–south, encompassing an amazingly large chunk of the latitudinal spectrum. They straddle the equator in Ecuador, and run north toward Venezuela and south to southern Chile and Argentina.

Naturally, such a wide geographic span gives rise to a varied and fascinating array of natural and anthropological histories, from the lush cloudforests and high altitude grasslands of northern South America to the towering conifer stands of Patagonia. On the northern half of the continent, the Amazon Basin dominates the topography east of the Andes.

The northern part of Perú offers a fascinating cross-section of this extraordinary diversity. As opposed to southern Perú, which has a well-developed tourist infrastructure centered around Machu Pichu in Cuzco, the northern half of the country gets only a small number of visitors and organized bus tours are all but unknown. Nevertheless, knowledgeable local guides are readily available for most of the major sites of interest.



Tortoises (*Geochelone denticulata*) are commonly seen in Amazonian markets for use in soup.

I arrived in Perú from Ecuador, entering the country through Piura, a relatively large city near the coast with little to recommend. I continued almost immediately on to Chiclayo, another coastal city that is a major agricultural center. The city is very nice for several blocks surrounding the *plaza*, then quickly degenerates into the usual urban sprawl. However, a very large market offers for sale all varieties of produce, meat, and seafood, in addition to any other staple article of clothing, electronics, or toiletries. Other booths offer indispensable services ranging from haircuts to cobbling. Although I found the atmosphere a bit too hectic to even consider weekly shopping trips for groceries, I sure enjoyed taking a day or two strolling around the myriad stalls and gorging on cheap, fresh fruit, many varieties of which I'd never previously encountered.

From Chiclayo, I headed east into the Andes, stopping in the pleasant mountain town of Chachapoyas. Chachapoyas is the capital of the Department of Amazonas and is surrounded by many interesting archaeological sites representing several different cultures. The most prominent is the Lambayeque culture, named for the modern city in the south of Amazonas.

The bus I took from Chiclayo to Chachapoyas was old and cramped, even by Peruvian standards. I arrived at four or five o'clock in the morning and wandered with my pack to the central plaza to wait for the sun to rise. As the cloudless sky shifted



JOHN BURNS

Northern Perú is geographically diverse and is both a biological and archaeological hotspot.



A llama takes a break from grazing in the pre-Inca fortress of Kuelap.



Cryptic symbols carved into the wall of a house in Pueblo de los Muertos.

slowly from black to blue and the cocks started to raucously advertise their presence, the city slowly came to life. The plaza started to see foot traffic; elderly couples or professionals dressed for work would take several minutes to stroll around the plaza chatting amongst themselves or just taking in the town center as it slowly began to awake.

That same morning, I caught a ride from Chachapoyas down through a winding maze of river valleys surrounded by steep, daunting ridges and peaks, finally arriving at the small village of Tingo. Tingo sits next to a river in a valley flanked by steep, rugged ridges. Most travelers stay there just long enough to get a ride to or from Chachapoyas, and perhaps for a meal in one of the very basic restaurants. The main reason for coming to Tingo is the trailhead that leads up the ridge to the impressive pre-Inca site of Kuelap.

Kuelap is a heavily fortified city perched atop a ridge overlooking the Utcubamba River valley. Although the hike from Tingo is only about 9 km, you gain about 1300 m in altitude from your starting point near the river. I arrived just as darkness was falling, and pitched my tent right next to the fortified ruins, overlooking the river valley and surrounding mountains. The ruins themselves are elliptical in shape, with one long side looking down into the river valley, and the other overlooking a large stretch of relatively flat and arguably arable land that now supports a small community of subsistence farmers. It is surrounded by a massive wall of cut stone that is up to forty feet tall in some places and pierced by three highly defensible entrances.

Walking into the ruins is surreal. The massive fortifications retain soil and rainwater, producing conditions that allow large

trees, hardly ever seen on the very arid mountainsides of the area, to grown out of the ruined dwellings. Growing in large numbers on these trees are several species of orchid — and hundreds of one *Cyrtochilium* species were in full bloom during my visit. Excavations at the site are ongoing, and much of it has already been exposed. The bases and sides of the circular houses that are the trademark of this culture have been exposed, and decorative geometric stonework patterns are visible on several of them, and one has been completely restored. At one point, a small herd of llamas found their way in through one of the entrances and set about gently grazing on the low-growing vegetation. As I sat on top of an inner, secondary wall, and looked out on the llamas grazing in the ruins and the farmed land beyond, I was overwhelmed by the timelessness and tranquility of the area, the poor campesinos working to scratch a livelihood out of the rocky soil in the shadow of this monumental ruined city.

Before leaving the area, I visited another, less well-known archaeological site called ‘Pueblo de Los Muertos’ or City of The Dead. This is a row of about six houses that were built on a narrow rock outcrop about halfway up a vertical cliff face. Only one route allows access, and the space between the houses and the cliff edge was sometimes less than two feet. The surrounding cliff faces are dotted with the mud sarcophagi with stylized human faces that are typical of the area. The area is dotted with piles of ancient human bones, and symbols beyond my ken were engraved in the sides of some of the houses and painted in red pigments on the sides of the cliff. This site was not impressive in a monumental way, as was Kuelap, but it was powerful on a more esoteric and very human level.



A nocturnal Boat-billed Heron (*Cochlearius cochlearius*) in Picaya-Samiria National Park.



Waters were just beginning to recede from seasonally inundated forests.

The bus ride from Chachapoyas down the eastern flank of the Andes and into the Amazon basin offers amazing scenery, with a wide variety of vegetation and habitat types, from rugged, arid mountains to lush exuberant cloud forest. While crossing the last foothills of the Andes, you can see the wide Amazonian plain stretching out endlessly to the horizon. No real forest is left in the area; most has been converted to pasture. Much of some secondary growth is in the process of being cut and burned a second time.

The road runs due east into the Amazon, finally ending in Yurimaguas, a bustling river town on the banks of the Río Marañón. This city is an important port for riverboats taking cargo and passengers downriver to the large jungle city of Iquitos and to various smaller settlements in between. These boats pass by several small settlements on the outskirts of Picaya-Samiria National Park, the largest protected area in Perú. Because it is well off of the southern tourist circuit, it gets only a small fraction of the tourists of the Manu Reserve in the south. Nonetheless, some of the larger towns are used to seeing the occasional tourist, although one shouldn't expect luxury or an English-speaking guide. This area, however, is probably the best place to arrange a tour into the rainforest — if you cannot pay the often outrageous prices charged by tour operators in the south of Perú.

I disembarked at Lagunas, a town of about 5000 residents that is the most popular place to arrange a jungle tour into Picaya-Samiria National Park. Even before we got off the boat, several folks were visibly anxious to arrange a tour for us. We spoke with both of them, asked many questions, and ultimately went with a well-established tour operator who seemed fairly professional.



A large nocturnal treefrog (*Osteocephalus taurinus*) in Picaya-Samiria National Park.



Our guides with the evening catch; the catfish sustained our entire group for days.

After registering with the local police and the park rangers, we loaded our large dugout canoe with our gear and set out downriver. Most of our equipment was fairly traditional; our canoe was made from a single piece of wood in the same way they have been made for centuries, our guides used heavy, spade-shaped paddles made from a very dense wood, and our fishing equipment included a net and a three-pronged spear for fishing shallow water.

Picaya-Samiria contains a lot of seasonally flooded forest and, at the time, the rivers were still receding. For the first couple days of paddling, we saw almost no dry land. Our camping sites were no more than small islands in what was otherwise an endless expanse of flooded plain. The vegetation shifted notably as we passed downstream into the uninnundated forest. The



The Black Caiman (*Melanosuchus niger*) that we encountered were small; larger animals have been hunted extensively and are rarely seen.

flooded parts of the forest were dominated by several species of palm. The tufts of fronds perched atop the 30+ meter trunks gave the forest a sort of Dr. Seussian feel, and gregarious groups of brilliantly-colored Blue and Yellow Macaws (*Ara ararauna*) called raucously as they foraged in the trees or flew over the forest. During our first night, we camped on a small patch of dry land, with only mosquito nets between us and the moonlit jungle. Surrounded by the surreal sounds of the night, I listened to the haunting melodies of Howler Monkeys (*Alouatta* sp.) and a chorus of frogs and insects until they eventually lulled me to sleep.

I awoke the next morning to see our guides paddling back to camp. They had pulled in the fishing net that they left out during the night, and had met with some success. They had managed to catch a meter-long catfish of a type that usually swims too low for the nets to snag. The meat was a darker red



Monkeys, such as this Spix's Night Monkey (*Aotus vociferans*) are sometimes kept as pets in the Amazonian lowlands.

even than tuna, and that fish kept me, two other tourists, and our two guides satiated for several days.

As we passed downstream, the palms were replaced gradually by the towering hardwoods that come to mind when we think of the Amazonian rainforest. Monkeys were abundant and easily approached with our noiseless, motorless canoe. By night, we would scan the waters for caiman. Most of those we saw were quite small, as all of the larger individuals had been hunted for their meat. We also spotted some incredible tree frogs I was unable to identify and got quite close to a nocturnal Boat-billed Heron (*Cochlearius cochlearius*).

About midway through the third day, our guide pulled the boat onto a river bank still flooded under several feet of water and pointed to a large brown lump about 4 m up the trunk. It looked



The expression of an irritated Three-toed Sloth (*Bradypus variegatus*) bears a striking resemblance to every other expression of which the sloth is capable.

not unlike many of the other large, brownish lumps protruding from the tree and the various vines choking the trunk, but he told us it was a sloth. He hopped out of the boat and into the knee-deep water and started to clamber his way up the trunk of the tree. He proceeded to poke and prod the sloth until it worked its way far enough down the tree for an excellent photo opportunity. He also gave an interesting lecture on the behavioral psychology of the Three-toed Sloth (*Bradypus variegatus*): “If you tap it on the head,” our guide Raul said, “it will go down.”

I was excited when we finally reached an area of permanently dry forest. This is where you find the towering, 50-m hardwoods and, of course, all of the interesting land animals that you are likely not to see in a visit to the Amazonian rainforest. We hiked for several hours. Having size-15 feet, I was equipped with the largest rubber galoshes the guides had, but still three sizes too small. I consequently made obscenely flatulent noises with each step, sockless and awkward in my rubber galoshes.

The walk was interesting from a herpetological perspective as we encountered myriad frogs and toads. Many small, brown frogs were elegantly camouflaged to look like dead leaves, and only appeared as they hopped out of the way. We found a medium-sized toad with two crests protruding from behind its eyes. I spotted several brilliantly-colored teiid lizards (*Kentropyx* sp.) basking and foraging in the small patches of sun that occasionally reach the forest floor. We came across several snakes,

including a black colubrid with yellow mottling that, according to our guide, produces a mild venom. We originally saw it on the ground, but it quickly shot about 3 m up into a tangle of vines when we approached too closely.

Botanically, the walk was very interesting as well. Raul showed us plants with traditional culinary and medicinal uses, including a small palm nut with a pill-shaped hollow containing a white coconut-like flesh. After these nuts fall to the ground, a large grub develops inside the nut, eating away the white flesh. It tastes pretty good — as long as you get to it before the grub does.

At one point, we came across a massive leafcutter-ant mound. This mound was about 2.5 m in diameter, over a meter tall, and the center of converging trails composed of thousands of ants scrambling to get leaf sections or carrying huge chunks of leaf back to the nest. Also clearly visible were large warrior ants with extremely big heads and powerful jaws, and even the tiny ‘rider’ ants that hitch a ride on sections of leaf and are carried back to the mound. The function of this odd caste of rider ants is unknown.

During our paddle back upstream toward Lagunas and relative civilization, our guides pulled the boat to the side of the river and urged us to be quiet. We first saw a flash of pink and then a large splash, then, after a wait, another. We were lucky enough to be seeing Botos (Pink Amazon River Dolphins, *Inia geoffrensis*) splashing and playing in the river. Due to the murk-



According to our guides, this colubrid snake (*Chironius fuscus*) has only a mild venom.



Stylized mud-brick reliefs in the Tschudi Complex at Chan Chan.



Mud-brick reliefs of birds in the Tschudi Complex at Chan Chan.

iness of the water, you only learn of a dolphin's presence as it jumps playfully out of the water. After watching for a while, we realized that not only were we seeing Pink River Dolphins, but also at least one member of the other Amazonian freshwater dolphin species, the Gray River Dolphin (*Sotalia fluviatilis*). We sat and watched in rapt amazement until ten minutes went by with no dolphin surfacing, at which point we shook ourselves out of our daze and continued paddling upstream.

Paddling back to the village was like slowly coming out of a daydream. The vegetation gradually shifted back to its disturbed state surrounding the village. The massive hardwoods became shorter and shorter, and the choking vines began to be replaced by the Seussian palms. With the palms came the groups of screeching macaws that flew by to bid us farewell. As we slowly shifted from one set of surreal surroundings to another, I had already begun to think back on all that I had seen and to plot my eventual return to this humbling forest. Before I knew it, we had traded the dugout for our own two legs, and were walking past burning fields of dry ferns and grasses, with most of the trees relegated almost to the horizon.

Back in Lagunas, my plan had been to catch one of the daily cargo boats heading down the river toward Iquitos. Once we got



Piles of human bones, Pueblo de los Muertos.



This young Matamata (*Chelus fimbriatus*) shows the elaborate head camouflage typical of its species. Adults with carapace lengths to 40 cm have been found.

back, however, we quickly learned that this was no longer an option. Just a day or two before, the Peruvian government had started allowing rice imports from southeast Asia, which sent the cost of rice plummeting from about \$300 per 1000 kg of rice to about \$120. This prompted all the rice farmers nationwide to strike, setting up roadblocks on all the major roads and essentially bringing all ground transport to a halt. No transport meant no cargo and no cargo meant no boats heading downriver. I eventually ended up catching a boat back to Yurimaguas, and waited there for almost two weeks until I could start retracing my steps over the Andes. The road down from the mountains and into Yurimaguas was the last to open and, by the time I actually started making my way back, several roadblocks remained, forcing me to walk across and switch vehicles countless times.

With the little time I had left before my return to the United States, I decided to explore some additional archaeological sites. My first stop south of Chiclayo was Trujillo, another large city very near the coast. A few sites around Trujillo are of interest, including the massive mud-brick city of Chan-Chan. Chan-Chan was built by the Chimu culture from around



Ai Apaec, god of the Moche, also known as “The Decapitator,” Huaca de la Luna.

850–1470 AD. One large complex, the Tschudi Complex, has been excavated and studied, but many more temples and other large complexes await systematic examination. The excavated parts of the site include a number of beautiful mud-brick reliefs centering on several motifs that included fishing nets, fish, birds, stylized figures, and basic geometric shapes such as circles and squares. A small on-site museum was accompanied by several overpriced gift shops.

Chan-Chan makes an interesting comparison with a nearby site that was built by the Moche (ca. 100–800 AD), the culture that immediately preceded the Chimú. The site is called Huacas de la Luna y del Sol, and its main features are two pyramids at opposite ends of the site. Excavations at the smaller pyramid, Huaca de la Luna, are uncovering many magnificent polychrome reliefs. The pyramid was actually a series of stepped structures superimposed upon one another, and it seems to have had regular resurfacing with the addition of another level every hundred years or so. Each time another addition to the pyramid was made, the underlying reliefs and painted patterns were sealed in a layer of mud-brick and mortar, which effectively preserved them.

The Moche were a coastal people living in a harsh, semi-arid region where life was centered around rivers and streams, and irrigation was almost essential for the growing of crops. Their religion centered on mountain worship and the god Ai Apaec, which translates to “The Decapitator.” Huaca de la Luna is situated at the foot of a solitary peak in what is otherwise a very flat, dry region. Remains of several dozen human sacrifices have been uncovered, and some evidence suggests that some victims may have been tortured prior to being killed. In many of the reliefs and murals, the Ai Apaec, who assumes various forms such as felines and spiders, is depicted holding a severed human head.

Several of the murals are still being renovated and are not yet open to the public. However, you can view them from a distance.

My last archaeological stop was in the small coastal city of Casma. Just outside of town is a fascinating and ancient archaeological site called Séchin. The site consists mainly of a single temple, which is fairly small in comparison to the other sites I visited. What sets this site apart is its age — it is about 3600 years old, outdating the Moche civilization by some 1700 years. The outer wall of the temple is covered with stylized and often gruesome reliefs. These consist mainly of warriors and decapitated heads, although various dismembered body parts and organs also are obvious. Compared to some of the other ruins in Perú, the site may seem plain, but the very age of the temple renders it impressive. Despite some discouragement and derisive reviews from the locals, I was enthralled with the reliefs and some of the relics in the small, on-site museum.

The northern section of Perú certainly has a lot to offer to the intrepid traveler with a keen interest in nature or archeology or both. The lack of tourists offers a more authentic glimpse of the challenges most Peruvians face and of the daily rhythms of Peruvian life. Smiles from the locals seem more genuine, restaurants and markets have more character, and a wide range of natural and cultural wonders await those curious and eager enough to seek them out.



Depiction of a warrior on the outer wall of the temple at Séchin; note the severed heads decorating the warrior's outfit.