

Peruvian Textiles – a match for Machu Picchu?

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As I stood and looked down on the awesome sight of Machu Picchu shrouded in cloud forest at the end of a three-week tour of Peru, many would assume that this was the crowning highlight of the tour, but they would be wrong! Wonderful as it is, Machu Picchu is matched in its brilliance by the textile heritage of this country that stretches back to 2500 BC, when the use of fibres in garments has first been detected by archaeologists.

Over the three weeks of the trip our experiences ranged from museums in Lima, with their amazing artefacts, to hand woven textiles crafted by master tapestry weavers of Taller Laura. We visited an alpaca farm and mill. We had textile workshops with Quechuan teachers and saw the work of the *Centre for Traditional Textiles* in Cusco, which encourages villagers in reviving their ancient weaving skills.

There were twenty-three of us in the group from eight countries, ranging in age from 24 to over 70, united by a love of fibre and textile crafts. Weaver and designer Sasha McInnes, who planned the stimulating itinerary, lived in Peru until she was 29 and has a deep love of the country, its people and its textiles. Her contacts meant we met and were taught by some of the leading craftspeople of the country – a real privilege in both teaching and personal terms. These workshops really made the difference between what could have been an interesting travel tour of Peru and a major creative experience. We not only learned craft techniques but also acquired a greater cultural understanding of Peru and its people. The workshops were a high point of the trip. There were three sessions spread through the three weeks, lasting two or three days each. The choice included tapestry weaving, Peruvian knitting, braiding, hand and machine embroidery and gourd engraving.

In each group we were taught by indigenous people who often had no English and sometimes no Spanish either. We did wonder how we would cope with this, but need not have worried. Our teachers were delightful people for whom nothing was too much trouble. Some like Rufina Huayro came from their remote local villages in many parts of Peru to

teach us and their skills were ones that had been passed down the generations. Others, such as Maximo Laura are internationally known. He leads Taller Laura whose dramatic interpretations of nature and folklore lead to stunning wall hangings. It was remarkable how effective demonstration is in learning new techniques – words are mostly irrelevant. Learning to knit with your thumbs, using five short needles made from bicycle spokes hooked at one end, is an experience I would not have missed. The skills shown in the products brought along by our teachers were fantastic.

The main fibre used in knitting and weaving is alpaca, although there is wool available, but its quality is much inferior. We were able to see alpaca and vicuna grazing on the mountains outside Arequipa. These camelids live on the high Andean plateaux at altitudes around 13,000 feet, where the temperatures can drop to -13C. Alpacas have a wide range of natural colours from white through to brown and black and their very fine fibre spins up into a soft, glossy yarn. We were lucky to see vicuna, as very few are left, protected in a reserve in the Andes near the spectacular Colca canyon. They have a camel coloured fleece, which is immensely expensive. In Arequipa we visited a large alpaca mill where we saw the raw fleece processed into dyed cones of yarn and a small company, which produces beautiful, hand woven shawls, made from baby alpaca by local weavers in the mountains. The shopping opportunities were irresistible and we were glad we had brought extra bags, which were bulging on our return, with excess baggage costs being taken as a sign of success by our friends. As we travelled around the country from Arequipa, centre of the alpaca industry, to the remote Colca canyon and on to Cusco, the Inca stronghold, there were many locals selling produce at the roadside. Some was obviously mass-produced for the tourist, but in many villages you could see local people making it.

Local manufacture was very obvious in the villages around Cusco where the work of the Centre for Traditional Textiles and Nilda Callanuapa has been pivotal. Nilda is from Chinchero and she, with other local people, understood that local



Knitted socks in colourful designs

weaving skills were vital for their village and the others around it, if the villagers were to be persuaded to stay and not migrate to life in the slums in Lima. Each village has different traditional patterns used in their backstrap weaving, but they needed to be encouraged to use natural dyes and to go for a quality product. The Centre for Traditional Textiles in Cusco is a showcase where these textiles can be purchased with their particular village provenance. Local weavers also come to the centre to work, so that their techniques can be seen. By charging a realistic price for this craft work the income enables the village to become self-sustaining. The centre also houses a small museum highlighting the local crafts. Nilda ran the backstrap weaving workshop we took in Cusco.

The use of natural dyes is increasing in modern Peruvian weaving and seeing the range of colours they can produce had the dyers in the group, including my daughter Katie, very excited. Cochineal is used extensively as the beetles live in the prickly pear cactus which is very common, and many indigenous plants are used to give a wide palette of colour for alpaca fibre used in weaving and knitting. Spinning locally is still done on the puchka or drop spindle, but with a different technique to ours and, in the villages, local women can still be seen





Left: *Dyed fibres*
Below far left: *Weaver*
Below centre: *Village*
Knitted and woven items in the market



going about their business in local costume, spinning as they walk along.

For anyone interested in textiles a trip to Peru is an amazing treat. There is something fascinating at every turn. Although Lima is not the most beautiful city, its museums such as the Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Arqueologia e Historia and the Museo Amano house wonderful examples of ancient textiles. In Arequipa alpaca reigns supreme and Cusco is the capital of the Incan culture with all the wonderful local weaving. So when you reach Machu Picchu at the end of it all, it is not surprising that it becomes only a part of the breathtaking experience that is Peru.

Frankie Owens travelled with Puchka Peru fair-trade textile/ folk art/ market tours.



Above and detail below: Finger braiding in process
Photos courtesy of the author

