

• Seven

7/9/85 The road to Ocongate climbs long switch-backs steeped in dust before topping out on the windswept altiplano. Far across the Sacred Valley of Cuzco, El Salcantay floats like a mirage on the powdery blue sky. The road meanders among desiccated, shallow vales and crests until the immense block of the Cordillera Vilcanota swims into view to the southwest; then it drops into a eucalyptus-shaded valley and follows a rocky streamcourse into Ocongate, where devils whip across the square and kittens play on the dirt floor of the inn where we take tea in enameled cups. In this square agents of the old, baronial Hacienda Lauramarca used to sell ice cream made from ice cut out of the glaciers of Ausangate.

At the gas station our driver Roberto helps fill our VW van, hoisting a five-gallon can onto his shoulder while the attendant sucks on a plastic hose to urge the petrol into the tank. Our guide Peter Getzels arranges for horses to pack in our gear, and, in an odd coincidence, discovers that his colleague, the archaeologist Johan Reinhard, is in the vicinity to search for high mountain ruins and will join us soon.

From Ocongate it is less than an hour to the village of Tinquí, where, after meeting Reinhard and his local assistant Cayetano Quispín, we toss the duffelsacks into the dust and pitch camp in the local schoolyard. The village is small, though one of the biggest on the long, empty road to Puerto Maldonado; it consists essentially of two short rows of one- and two-story houses, one

Llama grazing near unnamed glacier on Ausangate

paralleling and the other perpendicular to the dirt thoroughfare, separated from the river by stiles of heaped stones and bounded at the lower end by the bright blue schoolhouse.

At dusk, llamas and alpacas stand silhouetted atop a low ridge, black against the bright clouds now clustering atop Ausangate. Out in the schoolyard the village children play an unruly game of soccer; behind them a woman drives home her cows, which move like shadows in the thickening darkness around the tents. Over the whole scene, standing away and above, are the whitewashed buildings of the old hacienda, atop the bluff which commands the Paucartambo River.

After years of conducting archaeological research in some of the world's highest mountain ranges, Johan Reinhard walks up and down the Andes as if they were his back stairs. A lover of science as well as moun-



tainering, he never saw any reason to divorce the two, though he now claims he is not truly happy with an ascent unless it produces hard data. In addition to receiving his Ph.D from the University of Vienna, he has climbed in the Hindu Kush and in Nepal; in 1976 he was a member of the American Bicentennial Mount Everest Expedition, and climbed as high as 24,000 feet on that mountain. In Ecuador he climbed with the famous cragsmen Joe Brown and Hamish MacInnes, and it was on this South American trip that he first heard of ruins, predating Pizarro and the Spanish conquest, on some of the highest Andean summits. The ruins reportedly included solidly-built stone shelters on mountaintops as high as 22,000 feet. He found such rumors fascinating, not only as an anthropologist but also as a mountaineer, for, as he put it, "such heights were not even *reached* again until nearly 400 years later." When his climbing partners went home Reinhard stayed on to investigate the known ruins and search for others; what had begun as a summer's vacation would eventually consume three years and thousands of dollars of his personal savings.

He began his field research with a 1980 ascent of the 19,421-foot volcano Licancabur in northern Chile, on which he found some modest structures and in whose summit crater he noticed a small, frozen lake. The lake in particular fascinated him; he had heard that many Andean peoples believed high mountains formed a sort of *axis mundi*, a religiously significant link between the three realms of Ocean, Earth, and Sky, and he felt the presence of a body of water at such a height might have reinforced such a notion and struck the local people as having particular significance. The following January, then, when he hoped the short Andean summer might have thawed the lake, he returned with diving gear to search the lakebed for

evidence of religious offerings. Once back on the summit he "proceeded to make a very cold dive [which] at 19,200 feet . . . surpassed by c. 4000 feet the highest known dive." The lake proved to be about 15 feet deep, and inside Reinhard writes that he found, not a link through the earth to the ocean, but a previously unknown, otherworldly ecosystem,

a dark layer, roughly four feet thick, covering the center-bottom and consisting of millions of crustacean larvae — something hardly to be expected at this altitude. Diving into this dark swarm under such unusual circumstances proved to be an unforgettable experience. Like others at altitude, I too have occasionally had the sensation of someone accompanying me who didn't exist. Never before, however, did I have visions of this being a giant squid! I also saw underwater mole-like tunnels through the sand made by something I wasn't able to identify. Although a few pieces of wood were found at about 12 feet, these were apparently thrown in without any purpose in mind and no offerings of any type were seen.

After the dive on Licancabur, Reinhard visited Argentina's Mount Aconcagua, which at 22,834 feet is the highest point on the continent. He'd heard of the bones of a guanaco — a camelid related to the llama and sometimes used as a sacrificial offering — being found near the summit, and thought ruins might be found nearby. Unfortunately, however, a storm hit shortly after he reached the summit, and he was forced off the mountain before finding any ruins.

While in Argentina he and his companion — the South American archaeologist Antonio Beorchia — also climbed 19,057-foot Cerro Azufre and 20,106-foot

Quechar. Storms struck again during both the summit days on Quehar, "leaving four feet of snow," as Reinhard wrote later, with all the modesty of the true explorer,

and making work difficult . . . There was little visible beneath the snow, and we could only dig down to the layer of ice in which Antonio had seen the frozen body of an Inca child years before. Treasure hunters had been there before us, however, and, using dynamite, had blasted the 'mummy.' We picked pieces of cranium and an ear out of a wall that showed it originally had been perfectly preserved . . . the treasure hunters destroyed something more valuable than anything they could have hoped to find.

The blasted child had presumably been a human sacrifice, much like the body which had been found in 1954 on the summit of Cerro El Plomo and which is still being held in cold storage at the *Museo Nacional de Historia Natural* in Santiago. In the extremely cold, dry air of the high Chilean Andes this body had remained remarkably well preserved; it has been examined not only by anthropologists and archaeologists, but also by physicians, who have tried to resuscitate some of the parasites which once, nearly 500 years ago, plagued the living child.

7/10/85 *Walking uphill toward the Arapa pass we stop at Cayetano's house, where Peter spent several months doing research and where we are fed boiled potatoes and ribs of lamb ribbed with cumin and garlic. Leaving the house with pockets as well as bellies full to bursting (to leave behind anything that was offered would be impolite, we are told), we totter up*

*the trail to Cayetano's father's house, and are promptly invited inside for another feast, and once again we pack it away as graciously as we can.*

*Inside the smoky confines of the small sod house, isolated shafts of sunlight stab through the thatch of the roof, sharply illuminating the smoke of a dung-fed fire in the dark interior. Scrap-fattened guinea pigs sprint from corner to corner across the floor; the dogs wait obediently outside. Cayetano tells us of a local grazing-rights dispute which culminated tragically with the poisoning of several of his dogs — no small thing, since good dogs are crucial to any herding people.*

*A short distance up-valley, where we camp, a soggy green meadow holds the meltwater of a big glacier on Ausangate. The mountain itself is hidden in gray cloud behind a dark jumble of moraine boulders. The smattering of snow which fell here last night still lingers this afternoon in the shadows, and in the cold air the nearby hot springs of Upis betray themselves with a thick banner of steam. We soak in the bubbling, sulphur-tainted water as the last minutes of sunlight throw a yellow sheen across the sloping grasslands of this high altiplano valley.*

Reinhard had heard and read elsewhere of human sacrifices having taken place in recent times — two in 1942 and 1945, where children were sacrificed to alleviate a drought, and one in 1958 on a peak near Lake Titicaca — and it occurred to him that many facets of the highland religion might, despite an official veneer of Catholicism, have existed in an unbroken tradition reaching back to pre-Columbian times. Both his reading and his own questioning of local people indicated that, in fact, the quasi-Catholic local worship was merely a facade behind which they continued to wor-

ship the mountain gods, or *apus*, just as they did 500 years ago. In at least one case the people claimed that, while human sacrifices might not be common, the practice

was their normal custom . . . People in Moya maintain that even today human sacrifices are made to mountain gods, especially during major public works, such as tunnel and road construction, which disturb them. They fear that if there are no sacrifices, the mountain will cause mortal accidents among the workers . . . The way in which the sacrifice is conducted closely parallels Inca sacrifices for which there is more evidence . . . It seems, therefore, a reasonable hypothesis that at least some human sacrifices were made on mountain summits to the mountain gods.

Even in Inca times, these mountain gods were venerated, and were often the most powerful deities operating at the local level. (Ausangate was perhaps the most powerful *apu* in the Cuzco region; the most prominent mountain deity in the Callejon de Huaylas was Mataraju, the pre-Inca name for Huascarán.) These *apus* reside also in mountain lakes and sometimes in irrigation canals as well; they were — and still are — perceived to operate within a strict hierarchy, with their status fixed roughly by their altitude. Today, in a sort of unintentional parody, that hierarchical structure is often patterned after the bureaucracy of Peru's national and local governments, so that, for example, the three primary *apus* venerated in the Pampas River area are correlated with the important cities of Ayacucho, Ica and Lima. According to the anthropologist Billie Jean Isbell, some *indigenes* describe these gods as "tall, white bearded males who dress elaborately in Western dress,"

and claim in addition that "their palaces, located inside the mountains and lakes, are sumptuously furnished in gold and silver." Regular ritual offerings are still made to these gods for a variety of reasons, most of them related to the rather reasonable belief that the *apus* control the local weather. They are thought to control rain — which is crucial to the success or failure of dry-season plantings — and also hail, which can destroy crops. Lightning, too, which strikes down its share of *puna* residents, is an *apu* function. The mountain gods also control the fertility of animals and, to an extent, people as well — in fact, it is thought that in some cases thunder alone can make women pregnant.

With so much control over crops and animals, the mountain gods clearly hold the power to make or break a farming and herding people; thus in many places regular offerings are still made to the *apus*, generally during February and August, when, again according to Isbell, "the Earth Mother is open and receptive . . . [when] the earth opens and the gods are hungry." But this auspicious time also has its dangers, for then the *apus* "can also eat the hearts of men who dare to walk alone in the mountains at these times . . . The rocks talk . . . the *ichu* [grass] converts itself into rope, the trees move, and the ravines call out." The guidebook author George Bradt mentions a case in the Cordillera Vilcanota in which the *indigenes* refused to help an ailing climber, in spite of being offered what for them was an astronomical amount of money, because of their belief that the *apus* "will claim a certain number of lives each year, so they might as well be gringos not Indians." Those who actually make the offerings may be relatively unskilled diviners or genuine shamans, who, according to Reinhard, "become possessed by the mountain gods and through whom they speak" — shamans who "are also reputed to be able to change into

animals and send their souls to the mountains while in a trance." Many believe as well that the souls of the dead reside within the mountains; Reinhard relates the belief current in some parts of southern Peru that "Saint Peter is waiting with the key to open the door, not of the gates of Heaven, but of the spirit world within the mountain Coropuna"; still others believe that the souls of those who have committed particularly heinous sins go to Ausangate.

*7/10/85 The morning is icy and perfectly clear. We strike camp in the shadow of the great mountain, whose heavily crevassed northwest facade beetles 6,000 feet overhead. The frost shines everywhere when the sun finally appears, sparkling on the close-cropped grass and the crunchy ball bearings of alpaca dung. In the new light a pair of Andean geese climb with steady wingbeats up the valley, their black-and-white plumage brilliant against a shadowed ridge of Ausangate.*



*Mother and child near Upiis*

Having established, at least to his own satisfaction, that the mountaintop structures had been built to make offerings to the mountain gods, Reinhard went on to show they had in all likelihood been constructed by the Incas. Since virtually all the ruins are found in areas the Incas controlled for less than 60 years before the coming of Pizarro, the Incas must have made, in a very short period of time, a remarkable advance in mountaineering:

There is no doubt that the Incas were regularly undertaking ascents up to 22,000 feet which most of us even today find challenging . . . Imagine these ascents . . . being made in the 1400s! Overcoming the psychological barrier . . . was itself a considerable accomplishment. One need only recall the superstitions prevalent at the time of the early climbs in the Alps to have some idea of what the Incas were up against . . . I'm not aware of anywhere else on earth that structures were actually built at such heights in ancient times.

In addition to overcoming the psychological obstacles presented by the mountains, of course, these early climbers also had to solve the logistical and routing problems inherent in high-altitude climbing. Reinhard noted corrals near the bases of several peaks, indicating that llamas were probably used to transport supplies to a sort of "base camp"; he also found small shelters spaced like intermediate camps at intervals on the mountain. None of the peaks ascended require any technical climbing, but their easiest routes are not always obvious, and the Incas' routefinding, he discovered, "invariably showed mountaineering savvy." The structures themselves are generally modest, but because of their high altitude and remote locations the work

required to build them was in some cases enormous. On one 20,739-foot summit walls had been constructed on a slope to hold in stones and gravel to form a level platform; Reinhard observed that the structure could only have been built with rock brought up from 300 feet below, and estimated that the job required 4,000 carries — all at elevations above 20,000 feet.

7/11/85 *In the rolling defiles surrounding the Arapa Pass the pathway thins and grows indistinct. Little vegetation leavens the parched landscape; here and there, tiny pink and blue flowers poke a quarter inch above the sun- and wind-hardened soil, and tough sprigs of brown grass tremble in the lee of rocks no bigger than my fist. Otherwise, except for the cold wind and the backdrop of glaciers, we could be in Death Valley, or on the moon.*

*At the pass itself, piles of stones mark the offerings made by travelers over the millennia to the local apus — Ausangate and Arapa. Johan and I each add a stray stone to one of the existing cairns, but Cayetano leaves nothing; when questioned about it later, he says merely that he “forgot.”*