

A Journey to the Navel of the Earth

a proposal for the goliard scholarship

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"Antes de la peluca y la casaca fueron los ríos,
ríos arteriales: fueron las cordilleras, en cuya
onda raída el condor o la nieve parecían
inmóviles: fue la hemedad y la espesura, el
trueno sin nombre todavía, las pampas
planetarias."—Pablo Neruda

Before the wig and the dress coat, there were
rivers, arterial rivers: there were the
mountains, in whose wave the Condor flew and the
snow seemed immobile: it was the humidity and
the thickness, the thunder still without a name,
the Planetarian Pampas.

[This was the center of the Earth]

The Background

Legend states that in the 12th century the Incan descendant Manco Capac was ordered by Inti, the Sun God, to find the navel of the Earth—a spot where he could plunge his golden rod into the ground until it disappeared totally. After searching for years, Manco finally discovered the coveted city of Cuzco, Peru. He built massive walls to protect the central streets and buried a wealth of colonial treasures in secret spots around the city. Because of Manco, Cuzco became the center of a thriving Incan empire.

Today the area seems to be ruled by a much different and perhaps more powerful entity—the international traveler. With tourist shops, hotels and restaurants on every corner, Peru's economy remains at the whim of foreign travelers eager to catch a glimpse of the remnants of Manco's once powerful kingdom. Currently, the country's mainly indigenous population is struggling to maintain its status among the influx of new tourists who seem to be taking over the area.

The Project

With the gracious support of the Goliard scholarship, I propose a return to the navel of the Earth. I wish to travel to Peru and study the impact of tourism on the Quechuan-speaking descendants of the Incas. I will begin my journey in Cuzco where I plan on interviewing hostel owners, restaurateurs, street vendors, and basically anyone willing to chat with me about the ways in which tourism has affected their lives. How has the recent influx of travelers altered indigenous culture? What would Manco Capac think about these new invaders, scampering around, flashing photos of his glorious city? These questions can only be answered by visiting with the people themselves.

After exploring Cuzco, I plan on journeying south by bus towards Lake Titicaca [a 20 hour bus ride]. I will take the road less traveled, stopping along the way at small villages, hidden restaurants and run-down hostels upon the recommendations of those I meet. All the while I hope to chat with Peruvians about their culture, the linkages to their Incan heritage, and of course, their thoughts on tourism.

Upon my arrival at Lake Titicaca, I will spend the night at the small town of Puno and plan my route to the rather isolated Floating Islands of Taquile and Amantí. The next day I will journey by reed boat to these small towns, which appear to dance upon the water, again hoping to converse with many natives along the way.

The one date fixed in my travel plans is July 25th, when the Island of Taquile celebrates El Día del San Diego. The dancing, music and festivities continue until the first days of August, when the Indians make their offering to Mother Earth. On the 25th of July, I plan on celebrating as well.

My trip will end as I travel back north to the Sacred Valley of the Incas. If money permits, I hope to visit many of the small pueblos bordering the Machu Picchu ruins. Machu Picchu is the most visited tourist destination in the entire country, and travelers have certainly affected the way of life of many people in the area. In the nearby villages, I plan on conducting interviews with local tour guides and residents.

One town in particular—Aguas Calientes—has peaked my interest. Surrounded by the remains of Manco's large stone walls and the lush Andean cloud forest, Aguas Calientes also contains secluded hot springs, the very waters where Manco and his warriors soaked after their lengthy days in battle. It is there where I will rest and revel in the beauty of what is the center of the Earth.

The Significance

Latin American literature has been one of my secret passions at Rice. Although I plan on heading to medical school next year, my academic interests have always encapsulated more than just organic chemistry reactions and pituitary gland hormones. Last year, I was introduced to the works of Pablo Neruda. In his poems, he describes the oppression of Indigenous cultures at the hands of Spanish conquistadors. His writing is emotional, sorrowful and at times, angry. Some historians draw a connection between the early conquerors and the tourists that have now pervaded most of South America. For many indigenous people, however, these travelers represent their sole source of income. The contradiction is grave, but I hope that my project will shed some light on Peruvian perceptions of foreigners and the impact which tourism has had upon their culture.

The Budget

Roundtrip flight to Cuzco: ~\$800-1500 [prices subject to change]

Lodging: ~\$5-10/day, ~\$200-400 [for 40 days, living modestly]

Meals: ~\$6/day, ~\$240 [for 40 days, eating modestly]

Excursions to Surrounding Towns: ~\$300

Finding the Earth's Navel: Priceless

Total: \$2000-2500 [depending on flight fares] *

*I understand that the Goliard may not be able to fund the full costs of my adventure, yet I would greatly appreciate any amount of support.

Other Points of Interest

As an anthropology major, I am schooled in the art of interviewing, and I pride myself in the ability to strike up random yet meaningful conversations. Given my fluency in Spanish and open personality, I feel that I will have no problem getting people to chat with me. Since interviews are a big part of my project, this point seemed important to emphasize.

And finally, the travel outline above is just a rough guide. My plan is to begin my journey in Cuzco and follow the advice of the people which I come to know during my stay. My goal is to reach Lake Titicaca and eventually end up in the Machu Picchu area; however, nothing is set in stone. With only a backpack, some money and perhaps a travel guide, like Manco, I will follow my instincts and run where the Earth takes me.

References

I have discussed the feasibility of my project with Professor Kate Jenckes of the Spanish department. She has offered to write me a recommendation, but I will merely list her as a reference source. Please feel free to contact her at kjenckes@rice.edu with any questions.

