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On the Ancient Trail in the Mystic Land of the Incas

SUZIE HAHN, a first generation young Asian-American woman from US was studying for a semester in a university in Lima, Peru. While taking a course on the history of the Inca civilization, she learned that the civilization flourished not only in advanced agricultural, architectural and astronomical fields, but also in painting, pottery and sculpting. The country's most notable Inca ruins reside in Machu Picchu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that could be accessed from Lima going through Cusco, the ancient capital of the Incas. Serious hikers prefer to hike 24 miles on the original Inca Trail, traversing ancient mountains, over a four-day period to get to the site. Due to her time-constraint for taking various courses, Suzie was fortunate enough to find out that there was an alternate shorter one-day / six-mile hiking trail that meets the longer trail closer to the ruins. However, she also learned that the Govt. of Peru issues only 500 hiking permits per day that get distributed very quickly. Luckily, one of the travel agents in Cusco was able to procure a permit for her as well as arrange for a hiking guide (a must due to the official regulation) who was supposed to meet her at the trailhead.

Thus after flying to Cusco to retrieve her hiking permit from the travel agent along with some logistical directives, Suzie headed, on road, towards the historic town of Ollantaytambo, nestled in the so-called El Valley Sagrado (Sacred Valley). Ollantaytambo itself is a continuously living Inca village, adorned with its own historic remnants. After exploring the town over next two days, one early morning, she caught a train from the town's railway station. The journey, on a single track railway system, was through the mountains and alongside the fast flowing picturesque Urubamba River. After about an hour, the train slowed down, stopped for a few moments to drop Suzie along with a few other fellow hikers at an open space that did not appear to be a regular station. An official board at the place announced the marker KM 104 as well as the trailhead for shorter one-day trail. Here Suzie met with her guide Naomi, a young college-educated Peruvian lady who gave her some valuable instructions about hiking in the mountains.

As two began their journey from the trailhead, the morning fog that shrouded the distant mountains slowly started to melt from the soft light of the morning sun. Soon, they passed by a few scattered remnants of stone-built huts, supposed to be used by the Inca travelers as a resting area. As they were making their progress upwards through lush greenery, various mountain orchids in unique shapes and colors came to their view. Their presence indicated to Suzie that the rain-forest nature of the still unpolluted environment of the surrounding mountains. After covering the first mountain for next couple of miles, the duo needed to hike downwards to access the trail spanning the next mountain. Suddenly, a waterfall, like nature's bridal veil, appeared between the ridges of these neighboring two mountains. At the bottom, water was filling up a natural pool and then overflowing to another downward journey. By this time, a friendship grew between Suzie and Naomi, nearly same-aged, but two strangers with different ethnic make-ups from two different worlds. Thus, they could not escape discussing the recent eventful US Presidential elec-

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tion as well as sociopolitical realities of the still impoverished South American women.

After crossing the wooden bridge over the body of the water, they came to a bend on the trail from where a massive staircase agricultural farming system of the past Inca society appeared in front. It turned out that the next phase of the journey was to climb those steps to reach to the top, known as the Wiñaywayna Point where this trail met the longer trail from the four-day hike. Though the climb was strenuous, it also gave Suzie an opportunity to traverse the remnants of an ancient highly-evolved agricultural system. This kind of farming technique was utilized to grow different kinds of corns and vegetables at different levels, taking advantage of the influence of the climate-difference at different altitudes on growing patterns of the produces. In addition, on this gorgeous sunny day, the view of the surrounding nature from the Wiñaywayna Point appeared heavenly to Suzie. She even noticed several snow-capped higher mountains at the far distance, even being so close to the equator. Next, they had to pass through an official check-point to show their hiking permits. Here she came close to some wandering gentle alpacas and llamas. Then, after some additional hiking, they arrived at the ruins of Inti Punku (the Sun Gate of the Incas). From here, the first stunning glimpse of the ruins at Machu Picchu with the iconic sacred Huayna Picchu Mountain in the background appeared before Suzie. She soaked into this magnificent scenery in the glow of the setting sun. Slowly, a rolling evening fog started to shroud the distant mountains creating a mystic atmosphere all around.

However, they needed another half an hour to climb down on the remaining part of the trail to reach the valley floor. Once there, Suzie rode in a local bus to arrive at the nearby town of Aguas Calientes to spend the night to start the exploration of the historic ruins from early next morning. However, the journey itself on the mystic Inca Trail, a remnant of a past human civilization, was a magical as well as a meditative one for Suzie. In addition, this new friendship with Naomi also brought to her a feeling of interconnectedness with the member of a remote humanity. She also came to realize how her parents, being the first generation South-East Asian immigrants in US while trying to establish themselves, never had an opportunity to experience what she just experienced. And then came her final epiphany *“Why am I so fortunate to be living on this wonderful planet when one-percent of population amounting to seventy million currently living in tents as refugees due to poverty, war and displacement?”*