



**UCD School of Chemical & Bioprocess Engineering**

*Carthy Travel Award Report 2022*

*Recipient: Cathal Nulty*

## **I. Introduction**

I have delayed beginning this report for some time after returning from my journey to Peru. The idea of reporting out on such a personal experience has been daunting to say the least. To make things more difficult, I am still questioning where I can even make sense of it myself.

The easiest place to begin this report is by looking back at my motivations in applying for this award. In my proposal I spoke about wanting to escape the bubble that had started to become increasingly overbearing during the years of pandemic we have just experienced. I am sure many people can relate to the feeling of being ‘stuck’ during that time. To expand on my own ‘stuck-ness’ – I study Engineering at one of Ireland’s top universities, with a campus located in an affluent Dublin suburb. Prior to this, I attended an all-boys private catholic school. The uncomfortable truth is that every detail of my academic and social history is associated with exclusivity of some kind or another, whether it be based on gender, religion, or income level. In such a familiar place as home it is difficult to remove oneself from the influence of this exclusivity. So what is the solution? On reflection I realised that part of what I was (maybe naively) seeking from this trip was to remove myself from anything familiar and experience a place completely free from these barriers I have mentioned. What actually happened on my travels was more complicated. I may have left my bubble, but I carried with me much of the privileges I had at home. Being able to travel at all is another privilege.

## II. My Plan

Pretty much my entire 14-day trip was planned around a 4-day trek which would (/was supposed to) take me from Cachora through Choquequirao to Villa Carmen from where I would take a bus to Machu Picchu. The original plan was to take an 8-day trek from Cachora all the way to Machu Picchu, but this was not possible due to the unavailability of guides.



I would fly into Lima from Amsterdam and spend two days there before catching a non-stop 24-hour bus from Lima to Cusco. This was a strange decision on my part and a very inefficient way to travel. A flight takes only 1.5 hours. My reasons for choosing this option were a) that I wanted to at least see (from a bus window) some of what was in between these two cities and b) that I wanted to test the limits of what I could endure, both physically and mentally. I gave myself 3 days to acclimatize to the altitude in Cusco before embarking on my trek. From a planning point of view, the trek was the easy part because I knew I was in the good hands of the local guides and wouldn't have to worry about much more than putting one foot in front of the other. After this, I would spend another day in Cusco before getting a flight back to Lima. I would then spend a day and a half in Lima before my flight home.

## III. My Journey

At 4am on Tuesday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August I set out to Dublin airport for a flight to Amsterdam, where I would make a connecting flight to Lima. I ended up being about 5 hours early for my flight. During those 5 hours, a lot went through my head. I began to question what I was really doing. This was the first time I would ever be travelling solo, and I was taking a transatlantic flight to South America. This was completely uncharted territory for me, and I was starting to wonder if I had taken on more than I was capable of. Something which didn't even occur to me then, but which became quite significant was that I didn't have a word of Spanish to my name. Somewhat facetiously, this was the second time I had waited to board a flight Terminal 1, Gate 207. The first time had been about 9 months earlier. I was alone then too and unknowingly about to experience a very significant personal loss. All this considered, emotions were running high.

About 21 hours after leaving home, I was dropped off at 8pm local outside my hostel in Lima. I was slightly disappointed to find it so dark so early and missed the long summer evenings back in Dublin. I would later find out that I was located in a less desirable part of the city (my own fault for lack of research) and found myself slightly on edge as I got out of my taxi from the airport. In Lima it rains less than once a year on average. Due to lack of rain, everything is covered in a layer of dust. In

poorer areas (one of which I was staying in), nothing is irrigated, and as such there are no green areas. During May to November, a persistent sea fog descends over the city, and it is rare to catch a glimpse of blue sky. I found the climate jarring. Sure, in Dublin we are used to grey skies but for everything to be so dry was unusual. A few weeks before this I had heard an American colleague new to Ireland make a remark on how green the place was. I had previously thought this was a cliché to boost tourism, but I was starting to wonder if I had been taking our green spaces for granted all along. A few paragraphs into this section I have probably talked more about Ireland than Peru. I have mentioned our long summer evenings and abundance of green spaces. These are the types of thoughts I was having through my entire journey. Travel involves getting impressions of unfamiliar places, but I found that these impressions acted to change my perception of what is familiar.

Lima is the largest city I have ever been in. I spent my first day in the city with an American traveller, Oscar, I met in my hostel. He had been travelling through Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia for 2 months and was spending his last few days in Lima. He shared some practical tips on how to navigate South American cities and showed me around the main tourist areas in Lima. That evening, I tripped and fell in front of a speeding car.



A Bus

The next morning, Oscar left early to catch a flight back to Michigan and I was on my own again with a 24-hour bus to catch. With all the advice I had received I decided to challenge myself to use public transport to get to the bus terminal, which was about a 40-minute walk away. I was to get on the 237 outside my hostel which would take me directly to Terminal Plaza Norte. The 237 ended up being a converted van with no doors. I decided to get on against my better judgement, paid the 25c fare, rode till the final stop and was no closer to Terminal Plaza Norte than I had been at my hostel. So, I decided to get a taxi (which costed the equivalent of €2), and I was on my way.

I cannot describe what it is like to take a 24-hour bus. There is nothing in my life which I could possibly compare to that experience. I have never in my life spent so much time alone with my thoughts while at the same time being completely cut off from everyone I know. I remember at the time feeling as if it were therapeutic, but I can't say with certainty that it was because it has been so long, and I no longer have access to that headspace. In any case, the bus took me south down the arid west coast of Peru before starting to head east at nightfall. The next morning, I woke up at an altitude of 2,400m with a view of the sun rising on the Peruvian Andes.



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A Mountain View

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When I arrived in Cusco, I felt I could relax. I wouldn't have to worry about transport again until my flight back to Lima which was 10 days away. The city is also much smaller which meant I could walk almost anywhere I wanted to go. It was around this time that I started to feel like I was actually on holiday. During my three days pre-trek, I did normal holiday things which included a few guided tours outside the city to see some ancient Inca sites. The festival of San Cristóbal happened to be underway so there was a nice level of excitement around the city. In addition, a re-enactment of the Situa, a health and ritual purification festival, was staged in the grounds of Qorickancha one of my nights there. I also got the chance to attend a local professional football match which I was invited to by the family of one of my tour guides.



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Festivities of San Cristóbal

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Architecture of Saqsaywaman (~two thirds destroyed by the Spanish)



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View of Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús from San Blas

The day finally came to start out to the head of the Choquequirao trail. I was slightly apprehensive about the people who would be accompanying me on the trek. Before leaving Ireland, I had asked about how big the group would be. There would only be 5 of us and all the others would be women over twice my age. Not exactly what I was expecting when I booked the trek. Little did I know that this was actually a massive opportunity for me to connect with this group of people in a way that I would never otherwise get the chance to in my day-to-day life. Going back to my motivations for going to Peru, this is exactly what I wanted to get out of the trip. The trek itself was stunningly beautiful. The second day from Santa Rosa Baja, through Marampata, to the ruins of Choquequirao and back to Marampata was by far the most challenging. The food was unfortunately not substantial in terms of portion size but was also making me sick. I was truly running on fumes that second day, and no exaggeration, fell fast asleep on reaching Choquequirao and as the guide was explaining the significance of the site.



View from the Campsite at Marampata 2,850 m.a.s.l.

After the trek had ended and we had seen Machu Picchu, I spent a day in Cusco with some people I had met there previously. Although I still had a long journey home, I felt like I had accomplished what I had come to do. The last few days of the trip went smoothly. I flew back to Lima and spent a day in the nicer area of Barranco. On my last night I went out to see some live music (fusion of Flamenco and Peruvian traditional music) where I met some wonderful people. It was the perfect end to my time in Peru.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

It is very difficult to put into words how much this trip affected me on a personal level, especially since writing this report is the first time I have reflected on the trip as a whole. While it was not always easy (and I would have been disappointed if it was), this was an overwhelmingly positive experience, and I am grateful to Mark Carthy and the School of Chemical and Bioprocess Engineering for making this possible for me.



The Gang

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