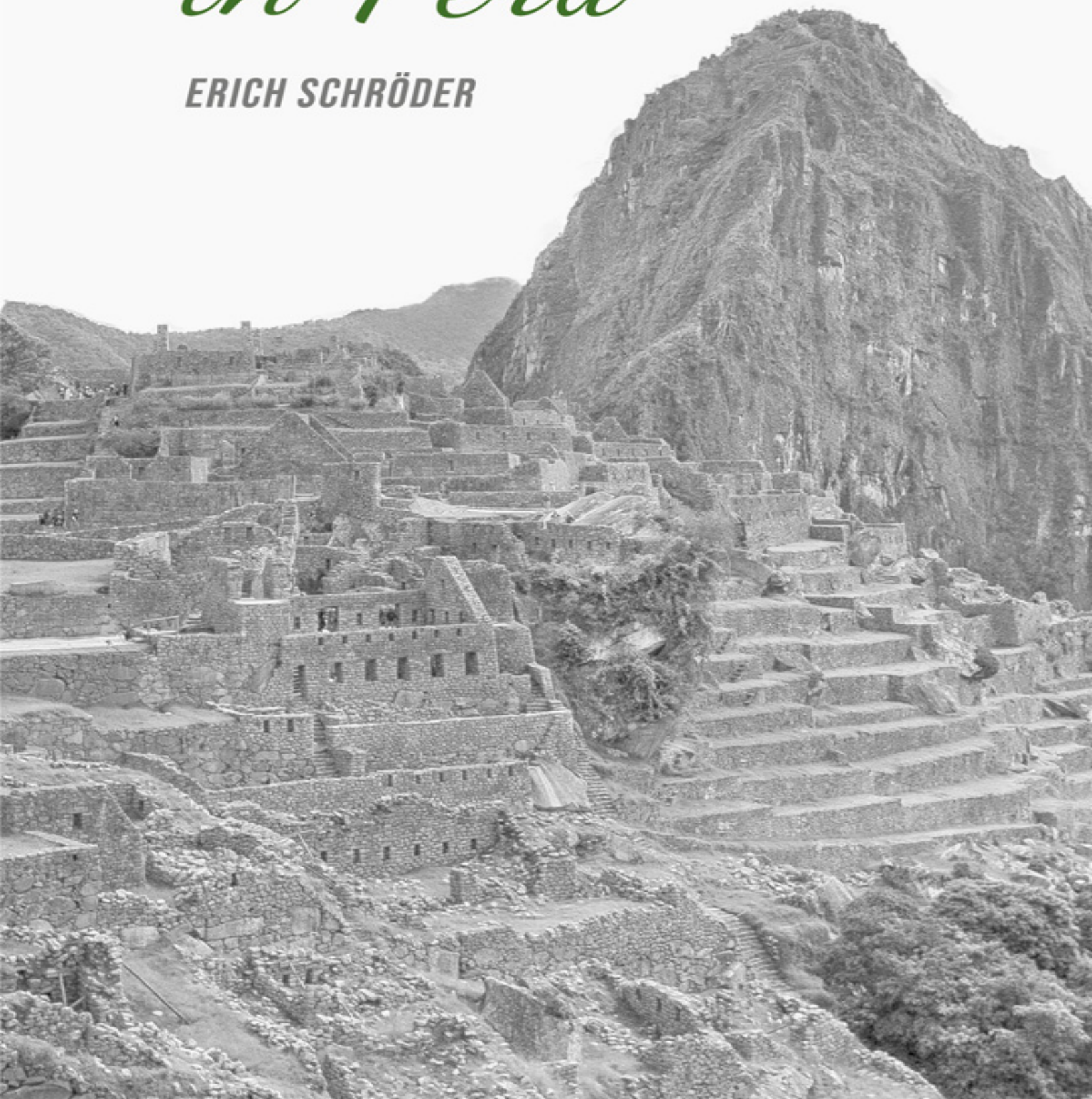


# *Encounters in Peru*

**ERICH SCHRÖDER**



Experiences of a frequent traveler  
in South America,  
told by Erich Schröder,  
dedicated with gratitude to all  
persons mentioned in this book.

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# Peru

## Meeting on Machu Picchu

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I had reached out my hand to help Teresa up to a high level and had not let go of her hand. Now we both climbed up this pyramid-shaped hill where friends, lovers and couples meet. We had to touch a small granite column together, which protrudes on an artfully hewn stone block. This stone, called "Intihuatana" in the Inca language Quechua, which means "the place where the sun is tied up", probably served as an astronomical instrument to define the seasons. One of the many myths around Machu Picchu promises eternal love or at least eternal friendship when they touch the tip together. Teresa knew this old legend; she had told me the story and now we were both curious to try it out. So, we entered the top of the pyramid and joined a group of couples around the stone block who had come here with the same intention. Then finally the time had come, the small granite column was within reach. I touched the stone with my left hand, my right let go of her hand and embraced her waist. Teresa put her right hand on the stone and ran her left hand over my back. She could not suppress a slight tremor of her hand. Would I kiss her now? Then she felt my lips on her forehead and held her breath. But it remained this light caress. I pulled her a little closer to me and then let go, only to take her hand again.

So, we had done it. Would this short moment be enough to bring the myth of Machu Picchu to us and make the promise

come true? We only knew each other for about two hours! Teresa, a pretty 18-year-old girl, was on her first big trip with her aunt Iris. Her thick shoulder-length black hair and slim figure made her look even younger. She wore a long-sleeved white shirt, decorated with a large rose embroidery in the front, over her jeans. A light red poncho lay ready over her handbag to protect her from the cold air of the Andes.

The train from Cusco to Aguas Calientes is the only connection that brings tourists and locals from Cusco along the Rio Urobamba to the foot of the mountain of Machu Picchu. The road ends shortly after the village of Ollantaytambo, where there are also well-preserved remains of an Inca settlement. Alternatively, Machu Picchu can be reached by a three-day and quite tiring hike on the Inca Trail, which is preferred by some adventurous tourists.

In two compartments of the train sat Teresa and her aunt Iris, her father's youngest sister, and four friends of her aunt. I had been assigned a seat in the middle of this group. So next to me sat a young woman who was talking to the others in the group. Like most tourists, I looked out of the window without paying attention to the conversation in the compartment, which I did not understand too much of anyway. But my neighbor was curious, she had looked at me from time to time in a stealthy manner. I was just 30 years old at the time, wearing black jeans, a brown suede jacket and worn sports shoes and had only put a linen shopping bag in front of me. In it she spotted a camera and a book, obviously a travel guide. A tourist, she knew, a gringo as the Peruvians say, probably from the USA. Finally, she took heart and spoke to me, but I did not understand her question. So, she asked Teresa for support and translation, and Teresa sat down with us:

*"Where do you come from?"*

*"Germany. And you?"*

*"I am Peruvian."*

*I should have guessed it.*

*"What are you doing in Germany?"*

*"I am student at university, medicine."*

*"Students must be rich in Germany, traveling to South America?"*

I was not rich, had scraped together my money for the cheap flight and was now sitting on a train in the middle of South America with rather empty pockets. At that moment it seemed rather adventurous even to me. But the basis for a longer conversation for the rest of the train journey was there. The whole group asked question after question, they wanted to know everything about me, and Teresa was well occupied with the mutual translations. To the displeasure of my seat neighbor, Teresa and not her with me was now the focus of the rest of the conversation, she later complained about this to Teresa.

From the train station Aguas Calientes at the height of the Rio Urobamba, a small armada of minibuses drives the visitors over a narrow private road with numerous serpentines up to the mountain to the entrance of the Inca city Machu Picchu. Clever tourists spend the night cheaply in Aguas Calientes or expensively in an accommodation close to the entrance of Machu Picchu and get to the old Inca city before the tourist trains arrive to experience the sunrise. But this is not always successful, because the mountain is often covered by clouds. But just to experience the huge complex in its loneliness without the stream of tourists is worth every effort, even in the fog.

For Aunt Iris and her friends, it was almost like a holy duty to visit Machu Picchu once in a lifetime - but they were not particularly keen on climbing. But in Machu Picchu there are

considerable ascents and endless stairs with a total of more than 3,000 steps. So, it was easy for Teresa and me to break away from the group and explore the old city together on our own. The path led us directly to the pyramid of friendship to the Intihuatana stone, where "the sun is captured".

## **The journey to Cusco**

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At that time Teresa lived with her aunt Iris in Lima, where she attended Unifé, a university for women only, to study languages. She came from Chiclayo, where her family lived. But her mother had insisted on this university.

From Chiclayo, the largest city in the northwest of Peru, Teresa commuted by bus at the beginning of each semester to the capital Lima, a 13-hour journey on the famous Panamericana Road 800 kilometers south. The Panamericana runs from Alaska in the north of the USA to Tierra del Fuego in the south of Chile with a break between Panama and Colombia, where there is no road connection. In Peru it is the only continuous north-south connection over a length of 2,500 km. For long distances, the road runs through the desert along the Pacific coast. It touches the main Peruvian cities, which have always developed like oases where a river flows from the high mountains of the Andes into the Pacific, Piura in the north, then Chiclayo, and on the way to Lima, Trujillo and Chimbote are passed. Further south, the Panamericana passes through Arequipa and, just before the border with Chile, the small border town of Tacna. The highly frequented road is the most important connection in the country for trucks of all kinds, long-distance buses, public regional transport, and private vehicles. It is often broken, which leads to construction sites and traffic jams. Especially in times of political tension,



which is not uncommon in Peru, there are also numerous police and military controls on the route.

There are several companies in Peru that operate long-distance buses. Each company has its own stops and bus stations. In contrast to the often old and rickety local buses, the long-distance buses are usually in quite good condition and sufficiently comfortable. Some companies also offer first class with reclining seats and meals. On long stages without a stop, there are occasional breaks at rest stops that have contracts with the bus company. Peruvians love window seats in the bus, but not to look out. They close the curtains, put a jacket against the window and your head on it and fall asleep immediately, at the latest when the bus starts rolling.

There is also a bus service from Lima to Cusco, which is operated by several companies. It is 1.100km long and takes about 22 hours. Aunt Iris and her friends probably did not want to do this to themselves and instead allowed the small travel group to take the one-hour flight. Most flights from Lima to Cusco leave early in the morning. The few flights that leave in the afternoon are often unpunctual or cancelled. This is due to the special location of the city of Cusco, in the middle of the Andes mountains at about 3,400 m altitude between snow-covered peaks. During the day it can get quite warm in the valley basin, occasionally up to 30 degrees, but at night it is always very cold, often frosty. In the morning, the sky over Cusco is usually clear, and over the day clouds often gather, into which the peaks of the surrounding mountains plunge. In addition, the approach to Cusco leads through a long and curved valley between the mountain peaks from where the runway is reached in a narrow left turn. This approach is not easy even with good visibility, in clouds almost impossible, as even the usual radar approach aids cannot be used on this complicated

flight path. The approach to Cusco is a challenge for every pilot.

I had also come to Cusco by plane and had already had an awfully long journey behind me. This trip was supposed to bring me some distraction after a divorce proceeding that had just been completed and to open up new perspectives. The flight with the then low-cost airline SATA, which I had found after some searching, was almost cancelled for me because the ordered ticket (at that time still a paper ticket) did not arrive despite several reminders. It finally arrived by express courier/night delivery the evening before my planned departure. The flight started in Zurich and had stops in the Caribbean and in Bogota, the capital of Colombia, on the way to Lima. So, I was on the road for about 16 hours from Zurich and reached Lima around 02:00 a.m. There were considerable queues in front of the entry counters, but the formalities themselves were uncomplicated. The official even spoke English, which, as I was to learn shortly afterwards, was by no means to be expected in Lima. When I happily found my black shoulder bag on the luggage belt, it was already 03:00 o'clock. So, I entered the airport hall, practically without speaking or understanding a word of Spanish, and was immediately surrounded by a horde of probably illegal taxi drivers who tried to grab my shoulder bag to catch me for their taxi. I was able to ward this off successfully and observed that they did not lead other passengers to the taxis that were waiting in a row but somewhere on the parking place behind it. After they could not land at my place and the situation had calmed down a bit, my search for an official taxi was successful and I got a ride to Plaza San Martin in the old center of Lima. In my travel guide I had read that there are many and partly cheap hotels and hostels in the surroundings of this place. There I found a simple hotel and also managed to make clear to the receptionist that I

needed a room and a beer, with which I immediately learned my first Spanish phrases from him. I stayed in Lima for two more days and continued learning how to get a meal in a restaurant. But then I wanted to go on to Cusco.

The flight from Lima to Cusco is not only a challenge for the pilot but also for the passengers. Lima is located by the sea, i.e. at sea level, and a good hour later, at an altitude of 3,300 meters, the passenger receives his suitcases. This is not for everyone, and at the latest when you have carried your luggage a little bit or when the path is rising, most arriving passengers run out of air at first. If the complaints persist one speaks of the altitude sickness, the Peruvians call it "Soroche". The usual therapy there is coca leaves, which are mostly offered as tea infusion. The positive effect is not long in coming. I allowed myself a few days of acclimatization to explore the beautiful city of Cusco in peace. Then I booked the train to Machu Picchu.

## **Cusco - the Inca capital**

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*"Well, did he kiss you,"* Aunt Iris asked curiously.

*"No,"* Teresa replied and immediately noticed that she blushed a little. Aunt Iris had not missed this either, but she did not go into it any further. She had made herself comfortable on the bed of her shared hotel room in the center of Cusco to put her feet up a bit after the exhausting hike through Machu Picchu. Teresa was sitting at the small table of the room. For the evening I had made an appointment to visit a *Pena* in the city and drink *Vino Caliente* (hot red wine) against the cold of the night and eat some *tapas*. *Penas* are mostly small but overcrowded pubs offering live music of Peruvian folklore as well as drinks and *tapas*.