

A Peruvian Alpaca Journey

In 2001 while backpacking around South America I had the luck to be invited along on an alpaca buying tour in the Peruvian Altiplano. Back in New Zealand my parents had been farming alpacas for a few years and I had recently decided to invest. We had just purchased some coloured suri stock imported from Australia.

The buying tour in Peru was mainly made up of New Zealanders with a few Aussies and English thrown in. They were there to choose and purchase stock for a shipment to be made around the world via Holland, Australia and finally ending up in New Zealand. Before I had left New Zealand I was told that if I was in the area to come along for the ride.

This was too good an opportunity for me to miss. I made sure that my travel plans fitted in with the tour. I had started off in Ecuador and so after a many hours of flying and sitting in airports and negotiating to get on the flight I arrived in Juliaca.

Juliaca is in the Puno region near Lake Titicaca. Most people would never go to Juliaca preferring the more civilised Puno - a good move. Juliaca has one "good" hotel, The Hotel Touristica, and at US\$50 per night it was out of my backpacking budget. However the official alpaca buyers were all staying there so I did get to spend some time in relative luxury. Although it does seem that even US\$50 doesn't buy you a hot shower.

The next we boarded the bus for a 10 hour trip down a bumpy track known in Peru as a road, to Macusani and Accoyo home of Don Julio Barreda. Most people would think we were idiots traveling for 10 hours on a rattly old bus to spend a couple of hours looking at some alpacas, spend a night in a "hotel" (loosest possible use of the word) with no hot water, then drive 10 hour back on the same bus. But in the world of alpaca breeding there is none that is more respected than Don Julio Barreda and the Accoyo name. The opportunity to visit him and view some of the finest in his herd was too good to miss.

Accoyo is perched on the edge of the Andes, just before the mountains plummet into the tropical Amazon basin. Although here tropics seemed much further away as at around 5,000 meters altitude the air was thin and cold. Our journey had seen the pastures that feed horses and llama descend behind us leaving only the herds of alpacas. Most of the alpacas in Peru are farmed by the Quechua and Aymara Indians. These are mainly of poorer genetic stock as little has been done to improve them. The life of the high country Indians is not easy, conditions are harsh and poverty is widespread. To them the alpaca is everything, income, food, clothing.

Barreda has spent most of his life working toward improving the quality of the alpaca genetic base. And today his stamp on the alpaca gene pool in New Zealand, Australia and the United States is easily recognisable in the large, densely fleeced alpacas that command a premium price on the market. Visiting Accoyo and seeing the reality of the legend was the chance of a life time.

The next day we visited the Rural Alianza Macusani Hacienda. The scene reminded me of the New Zealand high country, barren hills with snowy peaks as a backdrop. But the climate was a strong reminder of the harsh realities of life on the Altiplano. One day in New Zealand I hope to see as I did at Alianza the huge herds of quality alpacas. A herd that was only black alpacas, one of white, and one of fawn.

Once back in the relative luxury of Juliaca I said goodbye to the alpaca buyer and headed back onto the tourist trail to Cuzco and Inca trail. Traveling in rural Peru may not be easy or convenient but the view into lives of the people of the Altiplano and the ancestral home of my alpacas back at home was something I'll never forget.