

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WHM - 1

First Days in Peru

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Hotel Turistas
 Arequipa, Peru
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

According to the geographer Preston James¹, the aridity of the Peruvian Coast is caused by the presence of the Peruvian Coastal Current, a frigid northward-moving stream fed by waters welling up from the deep layers of the Pacific. The prevailing southerly winds, crossing this stream, become progressively colder and dryer as they near the coast. Upon reaching the mountains, the air rises sluggishly until it gains sufficient altitude to pass over the western ridges. The land below, except for a few rare drops of moisture, remains bone dry.

The Peruvian Coastal Current is also responsible for one of the most appalling climactic conditions on earth - the "garúa". During the winter months (June to October) the prevailing wind is strong enough to accelerate the rising air to the point of condensation. This results in a thick, brown sea fog which smells of old cigars. The air underneath is cold and damp, but still no rain falls. For months on end, the "garúa" hangs over Lima and environs, causing no end of sniffles and general "dolor". I have been informed, however, by hardy - or patriotic "limeños", that one gets used to being embalmed in fog, and that in many ways the "garúa" is a useful thing to have around, because everyone feels so good when it goes away. Being a gringo, and a green one at that, I accepted this irrefutable logic for ten days. At the end of this period, we fled to Arequipa, the White (and sunny) City of Peru. It seems that the cold which I had contracted aboard the "Santa Isabel" - another result of the Peruvian Coastal Current - was being egged on by the "garúa" and would surely have turned into the blind staggers if given the chance.

We arrived in Callao in the early morning of August eighteenth. As we waited nervously for the Customs officials to descend like vultures upon our baggage, a Peruvian gentleman with a face like Oscar Levant's stepped up and introduced himself as our official welcoming committee from the American Embassy. His name was Victor, and I shall never be able to repay his kindnesses. It was Victor who sped us through Customs by suggesting to the officials that Peggy "might" be the Ambassador's daughter. It was Victor who guided us through the maze of "papeleo" (red tape) involved in obtaining our carnets, our tax receipts, and our police registrations. Blessed be the name of Victor.

1. See Latin America, by Preston James, Odyssey Press, New York.

Our ten days in Lima were spent as guests of Ambassador and Mrs. Harold Tittmann, two of the finest people it has ever been our pleasure to meet. Ambassador Tittmann has been in his present post for six years; during that time, according to the "limeños" with whom I have talked, he has won the hearts of the Peruvians. His latest good work was completed while we were at the Embassy Residence. President Eisenhower, in part because of the Ambassador's advice, refused to raise the import tariffs on lead and zinc, two of Peru's leading exports to the States. If tariffs had been raised, this country's standing as one of the most economically stable countries in Latin America might have been effected. When news of Ike's action became known in the diplomatic and governmental circles of Lima, toasts were drunk by all hands to "el gran embajador".

Lima gossips are always discussing some social event or other in their machine gun version of "castellano". Last week it was the arrival of "la bella estrella" Ava Gardner at the Hotel Bolivar. A fortnight ago, however, "limeños" were chuckling over the aftermath of General Noriega's attempted coup. The story goes that the good general had sunk a good part of his earnings in the Peruvian Pepsi-Cola industry. To protect these interests, he launched an all-out attack against his hottest competitor - Coca-Cola. The sale of cokes was prohibited in Army PX stores and in Lima's big "football" (pronounced "fubol", meaning soccer) stadium. Fans bought Pepsi-Cola or went without. After Noriega's hasty departure for San Francisco aboard a Peruvian destroyer, one of the business' top executives was arrested, and Pepsi sales have recently taken a turn for the worse. No one wants to associate himself with the departed revolutionary by drinking to many Pepsis at once. It would seem that "The Pause That Refreshes" has weathered the storm.

Lima is a lowslung city, constructed to withstand the "terremotos" or earthquakes that visit the coastal areas. The chief building materials are adobe blocks and bricks coated with plaster. Many of the houses in the residential sections of San Isidro and Miraflores are tinted in pastel shades of blue, green, or pink. Along the larger avenues, such as the Avenida Arequipa, irrigation ditches lead water under, or over, the sidewalks, depending on the amount of liquid the authorities see fit to turn loose on the thirsty shrubbery. Hanging from the lamp posts are ornate signs advertising such products as Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola (some signs still bear Noriega's name as distributing agent) and Inca Cola.

The cars that block the narrow streets of the downtown section are of American make, as are most of the other manufactured items. In Peru, to apply the brake is to commit the supreme act of cowardice. Judging from this fact, the taxi

drivers of Lima are the bravest men in town. Their method of crossing an intersection is to shut their eyes, lean on the horn, and pray to the saints, whose pictures are glued to the dashboard of every hack in the city. Occasionally the sounds of rending metal and shattering glass are heard above the general honking; for the most part, however, the law of averages has been suspended in the City of Kings.

The cities of the Peruvian coast are located by necessity near the mouths of the rivers that flow out of the high Sierras. Lima is no exception. The city exists because the Rimac River exists. The very name of the capital is derived from that of the boulder-strewn stream that snakes out of the bare hills into the sea.

My first close look at desert and river came as a result of Ambassador Tittmann's invitation to drive up to Chosica, the resort town where rich "limeños" go to escape the "garúa". Behind the town, the road looped past several small hills crowded with the hovels of the Indians who have come down from the hills in recent years to look for work as "cargadores" or household servants. Buzzards wheeled over the filth-clogged streets. Water carriers dressed in rags, wearing sandals made out of discarded automobile tires, filled their cans at an open sewer. Death and misery are first cousins of these people. Many of them are dying on their feet. Tuberculosis, dysentery, and enteritis carry off unbelievable numbers each year. Despite the threat of disease, the population of the slums grows with each passing month. Although the city health authorities require that tuberculosis certificates be carried by all household servants, it is easy to acquire a forged document, and the T.B. incidence rate continues to be unbelievably high (Callao is said to have the highest T.B. incidence rate in the world)

The Chosica road runs between high flanking ridges of dun-colored earth. The hills in the distance look like crumpled linen flung against the sky. Twenty minutes from the city, one passes under the sharply defined edge of the "garúa". Beyond, the sun glints on the rocky bed of the Rimac. The road drops into the valley bottom, and the land turns from dun to green. Truck gardens, strips of alfalfa, and fields of long-staple Peruvian cotton are crowded along the banks. Grass grows like a monk's tonsure along the irrigation ditches that circle the lower shoulders of the hills. Above the ditches, the dirt slopes rise bare to the sky.

The miracle of irrigation is a little easier to understand when one realizes that what appears to be barren sand is, in reality, dried topsoil. Although it sounds like

a dehydrated soup advertisement, one simply adds water and serves. As there are no rains, there is no leaching, and the soil is rich in vital minerals. The obvious problem, however, is that of bringing the water to the land. In some cases, tunnels have been dug through the mountains to tap the water sources further inland. I have been told that Peruvian engineers are tunnel-happy. Whether they construct a highway, a railroad line, or an irrigation system, the blank face of the mountain wall presents just two alternatives - up or through. As water has a hard time flowing uphill, the tunnel is often the only solution.

I asked a member of the C6ndores Club - an elite country club located in a fold of the hills high above the Rimac - how his colleagues found enough water to produce the lawns and gardens around the clubhouse and still had enough left over to fill the ornate swimming pool. He pointed to a small water tower and said, "It is not enough; we are going to get some more by tunnelling through that hill." "That hill" was an imposing ridge rising a hundred feet above the club. To reach the water on the other side will require about five hundred yards worth of tunnel. I plan to return to the C6ndores in a few years to see what happens when some tough-minded, tunnel-happy Peruvians get mad at a mountain.

The Chosica trip gave me a quick and very incomplete idea of some of Peru's big problems. The geographical makeup of the country, for instance, is a major headache. There is the coastal desert in which no permanent human habitation can be too far from those rivers powerful enough to push their way to the sea. Although the map shows over fifty rivers cutting through the desert tableland, only a few have a sufficient volume of water to remain wet all year round. East of the desert, the mountains rise in sawtoothed chains. In the intermont basins, such as the area around Cuzco, live a large percentage of Peru's peoples. Contact between these basins and the coast is hampered by the mountain ridges. East of the mountains, the highly-dissected, heavily wooded hills of the "monta6a" region slope down to the "selva" - the jungle. The easternmost portion of Peru, that area around the headwaters of the Amazon, is by its very nature the most inaccessible of all. The problem of creating a political whole out of a geographical confusion must keep the government biting its fingernails.

In the poverty of the slums back of Lima, one can see and smell a different kind of problem, that of the Indian who leaves his "tierra" - his home, his land, his people - and who drifts down to the cities. What will happen to these people is anybody's guess. Perhaps city life will have an enlightening effect upon the Indian. Perhaps he will demand his share in the affairs of the country. This is a

possibility which terrifies the members of the economically powerful landowner class, whose very existence depends on the preservation of the essentially feudal status quo. I have been told that the Peruvian hacienda is built on the premise of the continuing presence of cheap labor. If the laborers start demanding higher wages, things are apt to become very difficult for the landowners. However, Peruvians with whom I have talked do not believe that such a demand will occur in the near future. The Indian quality of inertness makes any form of enlightenment a very lengthy process.

Sincerely,

William H. MacLeish
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