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Peruvian Highways

Hotel Ferrocarril
Cuzco, Perú
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Having just returned from an eighteen hundred mile trip by pickup truck around the perimeter of southern Perú, it is my purpose here to describe in detail the nature of highway travel in this part of the country. In the seven days we spent on the road, we encountered all of the usual dangers and difficulties - short of earthquake and flood - common to sierra and coastal travel. Despite these dangers and difficulties, however, we returned to Cuzco with the firm conviction that the Peruvian roads, chuckholed and corduroyed though they may be, are the most important arteries of transportation in the country. During the journey we saw ample signs of faulty road maintenance; but we also saw the results of the efforts of the Peruvian government to improve as well as to extend the existing road net. With capital provided by the World Bank and other foreign agencies, the Gobierno is working at commendable speed to right some of the wrongs in its highway system.

Previous driving in the sierra had given me an idea of the preparations that were needed for a long trip. Into the metal box in the back of the camioneta went the spare tire, extra shock absorbers, spark plugs, points, fan belts, tire patching kit, a fifteen gallon can of gas and a jerrycan of water, plus a complete line of tools for repairing the motor and tightening the chassis. Windshield wipers were stored in the glove compartment - leaving them in place would be an invitation to immediate theft. The pickup was examined from stem to stern, and the pressure in the tires was set to allow for the expansion of air as we climbed into the altitude. Then, assured that I was equipped to meet most of the difficulties encountered in sierra travel, I went to Limapampa, the trucking center of Cuzco, to get information about road conditions.

In a country of individuals, nothing could be more individualistic than a Peruvian truck driver's estimates of kilometraje and driving time between one town and another. I went to the plaza of Limatambo with two questions: 1) how long will it take me to drive to Abancay?; 2) what is the condition of the Abancay-Nazca road? I returned with at least two dozen answers: five hours to Abancay; eight hours; you can't get through after two o'clock in the afternoon; the Nazca road is fair, a superhighway, impassable. The answers, of course, depended on the informant's frame of mind. If he didn't especially care for gringos or had missed his noon meal, he would conjure up the grimmest figures he could imagine. If, on the other hand, he followed the ancient and honorable custom of being polite to strangers - of telling them what one thinks they would like to hear, regardless of the accuracy of the information - then the picture painted was rosy in the extreme. In the end, I found that by a simple method of

halving the figures supplied by my informants and flipping a coin, I would come up with the right answer at least half of the time.

The morning of D-Day came and went as we waited for a particularly nasty shower to end. The rainy season in the sierra is not supposed to start in earnest until December, and the thunderstorms and cloudbursts are looked upon by cuzqueños as annoyances rather than the real thing. Prodded by a group of friends who had gathered to watch the departure of the crazy gringos, we (i.e. Bob Temple, Peggy and myself) took the bull by the horns, lowered the lid of the metal box on our sodden suitcases and started off in the drizzle.

The road to Abancay heads due west out of Cuzco, crossing the length of the Pampa de Anta and dipping down into the beautiful valley of Limatambo before climbing into the angry, craggy land which is characteristic of the sierra northeast of the Cuzco basin. Cuzco-bound trucks from Abancay and Huancayo had taken advantage of the morning's rains to churn the Anta section of the road into a froth of mud and water. Despite the flatness of the land, we were forced to crawl along at 15 mph. to avoid slipping into the irrigation ditches that paralleled the road or swerving into the path of an oncoming truck. After an hour of skidding in the syrupy slop, we reached the pass west of Anta and started down the hairpin curves into the Limatambo valley.

According to Peruvian traffic regulations, horns are to be blown at all dangerous intersections and curves. In addition, a vehicle ascending a grade is to be given the right of way by all descending cars and trucks. The law looks fine on paper, but it is a bit difficult to put into practice on mountain roads. Vibrating doors and squeaking springs effectively muffle the horn blasts of an approaching truck until the vehicle is almost upon you. And most of the steep grades are broken by slight dips, so that it is impossible to decide who has the right of way without getting out and measuring the angle of the roadbed. From the top of the Limatambo grade, we could see four trucks grinding up the slope toward our vantage point. Despite every precaution (such as leaning on the horn and screaming out the windows) we managed to meet each one of them in the middle of a sharp curve. Each time, there would be the crunch of locked wheels slithering on gravel and a series of terrified bleats from the three of us. As we became accustomed to these brief encounters, however, the bleats gradually subsided to gasps and the brakes were used more sparingly.

In the valley of Limatambo, we met two more hazards of the course: noisy water and vegetation. The Limatambo River drowned out the sound of oncoming vehicles, and the solid walls of sweet smelling _retama_ (Scotch Bloom) and flaring red _pisonay_ trees blocked my vision. Deprived of the use of eyes and ears, I crept around the valley curves at the speed of a sleepy sloth.

At the Limatambo control station, the Guardia Civil on duty told us to beware of _derrumbes_ (landslides) in the Quebrada Honda, the deep gorge that lay ahead of us. Then he unfastened the chain which was stretched across the road and let us through. The policeman turned out to be a most observant man, for no sooner had we entered the gorge than we had to skirt a small rock slide covering half the road. A Bureau of Highways crew was already at work clearing the slide, somewhat hampered by the fact that the battery of their dump truck was dead and the vehicle had to be pushed by hand. Once past the slide, we were

in the deepest part of the Quebrada Honda, riding along the bank of the Apurimac River. The stream banked against the cliffs in its whitewater drive to the jungle, big-muscled now from the showers back in the hills. Last winter's floodwaters had cut chunks out of the road, forcing us to drive close to the jutting overhang of the cliff. Thinking of the rockslide we had just passed, I refrained from using the horn as much as possible. Vibrations in a gorge this narrow just might do the trick and send a few tons of rock tumbling about our ears.

We crossed the Apurimac on the Puente Cunyac, a narrow steel suspension bridge, and began the steep ascent on the other side - one of the most dangerous grades we encountered in the whole trip. There was barely enough road to accomodate a heavy cargo truck, and points where two vehicles could safely pass were hundreds of meters apart. But the boulders were the greatest danger beyond the Puente Cunyac. Some had fallen from the cliff above, but the majority had been hauled onto the road by truckers, used as makeshift wheel chocks, and left behind when the trucks moved on. The rocks were big enough to tear open an oil sump or flip a car over the edge of the cliff. One would think that any man in his right senses would remove his boulder chocks before moving on. But then one would be forgetting about that part of the national temperament which shrugs its shoulders at death and injury suffered by others and which regards unavoidable highway hazards as tests of personal courage and unavoidable ones as obstacles in a steeplechase of _machismo_ (maleness).

Luckily enough, we met only two trucks on the narrow stretch of road. By this time, I had learned the trick of pulling to the inside of the road away from the lip of the canyon when I heard a big vehicle coming. I would wedge the _camioneta_ into the rock wall, thus giving the truck more room in which to pass and, at the same time, forcing him to take the more dangerous of the two routes while doing so. Although this sounds like a dirty trick, it is a necessary one on the sierra roads. Trucks on a grade rarely stop unless they are forced to do so. Rather than taking the risk of trying to slip past a moving _camión_ by edging along the lip of the road, it's a good idea to leave that unpleasant task to the more _macho_ truck driver.

For an hour or so we followed a wide valley, swinging in and out of tributary canyons each one of which took us several kilometers back into the hills. Then, late in the afternoon, we entered a series of hairpin curves which took us up into the puna. The engine whined as it lost power in the altitude, and most of the ascent was made in first or second gear. The mists closed in around us as we came out on the high plateau. Around us were the stretches of yellow _ichu_ grass, the jutting blackness of rock and the heavy soil, in places ploughed in the characteristic square furrows of a _moraya_ potato patch. Later the fog boiled away, and we were riding almost level with the black-jawed peaks and the hanging tongues of the glaciers. The air at 14,000 feet was thin and very cold. In the bowl of the western horizon lay Abancay, thousands of feet below us and over thirty road-kilometers away. For an hour we dropped down the side of the bowl, swinging through curve after curve with the horn going in the dusk. Abancay lay in sight throughout most of the descent, a small cluster of adobe houses at the bottom of a giant depression lidded over now with the flat rays of the evening sun. The frustration of seeing our destination and yet not being able to reach it for an eternity of curves and dips was repeated over and over again as we travelled through the sierra.

By night, Abancay isn't much of a town. Mostly adobe walls barely discernible in the feeble glow of what pass for street lamps. It does boast a Government-built tourist hotel, though - part of a recently completed string of hostels built in the more important cities in the country. Hotel Abancay looked quite handsome to us after five and one-half hours of bouncing and leaning. Our first impressions were somewhat tempered by the fact that there was no running water of any description in the building. We contented ourselves with throwing pails of icy water over the accumulated grime and letting it go at that.

Because of the high altitudes in which we had been travelling, gas consumption had been very high during the day. The camioneta had been getting barely twelve miles to the gallon. After a bit of searching along the narrow streets, we found Abancay's gas pump. While the tank was being filled (at sixteen U.S. cents per gallon) a trucker carrying a new spring shackle ambled over and asked if we could take him out to his rig which was stalled near Chalhuanca. The man had started out on the twenty-two hour truck haul to Nazca and had broken one of his front springs in a chuckhole. Another truck had picked him up and brought him back to Abancay to buy replacements. His assistant and a passenger had remained with the truck; they would be very glad to see him, he said, for they hadn't eaten much during the last day, and he was bringing them some bread and meat.

As we talked, more and more cargo trucks pulled up in a line behind the gas pump. The truckers' assistants rode on the tailgate to make sure that none of their Indian passengers jumped ship without paying. The trucks were Fords or Chevrolets, the two most popular makes of cars and camiones in Perú. The standard cabs had been removed and extra-wide wooden cabs installed to facilitate the seating of the wealthier passengers. Usual seating capacity was five, one passenger sitting on the driver's left. Occasionally a rear seat or wooden bench was nailed to the wall of the cab to boost the "first class" seating capacity to ten or twelve. Very few of the cabs were equipped with rear view mirrors.

I asked a group of truckers about the Nazca road and received the same bedlam of differing answers as before. The air was full of "malo", "regular" and "bueno". There was nothing to do but to return to my old coin-flipping method. We went back to the hotel and figured out the day's speed average. One hundred and twenty-five miles, five and one-half hours - an average of twenty-two miles per hour, a fair speed on the Cuzco-Abancay road.

By four o'clock the next morning we were on the road again. It was lucky for us that we picked up the trucker who had begged a ride the previous night; before we had gone three kilometers, the road split into a mystifying jumble of trails leading in every direction. There was not a sign to be seen. However, with the shouted directions of the trucker to guide us, we eventually emerged on a dirt road which followed the Pachachaca River up into the high country. At dawn we picked up the chauffeur of an overloaded camioneta which had just broken its rear axle. The chauffeur spotted an Abancay-bound pickup and, in the camaraderie of the road, whistled us both to a stop and changed vehicles. A mile further on, we dropped the trucker by his assistant and passenger, both looking very hungry. The constant pounding of the rough roads had knocked some of the air out of my tires, so I stopped at Chalhuanca to refill them. A dozen men came up and asked for rides to Nazca or Puquio.

They seemed confused and hurt when I pointed out that the pickup's roof and fenders were not strong enough to bear their weight.

Beyond Chalhuanca the road climbed a steep cuesta and flattened out on a vast stretch of puna varying from 13,000 to 15,000 feet in altitude. For tens of square kilometers on either side of us, there was nothing but gently curving bowls of dun earth, the blank sky, and great herds of alpaca. Along the razor edge of the horizon the hail storms drifted, the jet black clouds dragging banners of hail. All afternoon the granizadas crisscrossed each other, and the hail stones pinged off the roof of the cab. In places the hail covered the road with a slippery carpet of ice pellets.

We dipped down into the town of Puquio and then climbed back to the plateau. The more dangerous curves in the ascent and descent were marked with groups of crosses indicating the spot where a car or truck had gone over the edge. On the puna beyond Puquio, the crosses were replaced with the skulls and bones of the victims themselves lying in open stone graves. It was not a pleasant sight to see a row of human thigh bones protruding from the gray earth by the roadside.

In the late afternoon we left the puna behind and started the long drop along the western face of the coastal hills to Nazca. As we descended the Cuesta del Borracho (Drunkard's Cliff),the crosses became more numerous. We were approaching civilization. Dusk came quickly from the sea, and I received my first taste of night driving in Perú. The law specifies that approaching vehicles must take turns flipping their lights on and off so as not to blind each other. There is no dimming of lights in this country. Instead, you drive in total darkness for a few seconds at a time, fervently hoping that the approaching vehicle will follow the established on-off sequence and turn on his blankety-blank headlights before you fall off the cliff. This method of night driving becomes even more fascinating when two cars meet in the middle of a sharp curve.

A few miles out of Nazca we turned onto a paved road and revelled in the bumpless ride to the tourist hotel. Even though I had driven for thirteen and one-half hours over very bad roads, the heavy, oxygenated air of the coast revived me immediately. The camioneta lept ahead like a Porsche sports car with slight pressure on the accelerator. After three months spent at 11,000 feet, where automobile engines are robbed of 25% of their power, both driver and pickup felt the effects of sea-level air.

The next morning we drove over the paved Pan-American Highway to Lima and, a week later, returned via the same road to Arequipa. After travelling those five hundred and sixty smooth miles, I can safely say that I prefer the sierra roads. On the Pan-American, cars and trucks move at speeds of well over sixty miles per hour, a fact attested to by the long line of crosses, bones and tombs along the road. Blowouts are frequent in the scorching heat of the coastal deserts, and mirages play hob with drivers' vision. Speeds on the sierra roads are held down by topography and road conditions to a comparatively safe twenty or twenty-five miles per hour. In addition, I prefer the sierra hail storms and rains to the sand storms of the Pan-American Highway which come driving across the desert road propelled by winds of gale force. Severe sand storms have been known to strip a car of its paint in short order.

The one we went through south of Ica on the return leg of our journey was an average one. Flying sand cut vision to less than one hundred feet. We shut the windows for a few seconds but were forced to open them when the temperature inside the cab reached that of a blast furnace. Dust filled our lungs and settled in miniature dunes on the dashboard.

But even the sand storms are preferable to the fog we encountered on the way from Nazca to Arequipa. September is the season of fogs on the southern coast, and this one had been leaking water all over the landscape for four days. All very fine for the parched desert soil, but terrible for this correspondent. Whenever we got below the mists, we found ourselves wallowing in foot-high sand that had drifted from the beaches onto the road. As darkness fell, vision was cut to the front bumper. Bob Temple kindly volunteered to dismount and guide me through the dank drizzle but changed his mind when he thought of the amount of moisture floating around outside.

Deserts are not used to moisture, and this desert was no exception. The next morning's run along the sea was a succession of brake-slamming stops to avoid crashing into boulders that had inched their way down the greasy slopes to the road. Occasionally we would run over the flattened corpse of a sea bird that had lost its way in the soup and cracked into the radiator of a truck groping along the highway.

We left the fog behind us only after a hard pull up the coastal cliffs to the Pampas de Majes. There, a beautiful blacktop highway was waiting to take us into Arequipa. Our joy at being back in sunlight again was short lived, however. There was a hard tug on the wheel, a smell of burning rubber, and two area generalists were kneeling on the sizzling asphalt absently pulling at their lower lips and regarding the steaming mass of what was once a U.S. Royal tire. Six thousand kilometers of Peruvian roads had beaten it to pieces. I had joined the ranks of Peruvian motorists who shell out over $10,000,000 a year for new tires and vehicles to replace those which have been hopelessly beaten up by travel over the country's roads.

Except for a few sand dunes that had taken up residence in the roadway, it was smooth sailing to Arequipa. Near the pass in the foothills were the familiar crosses - over twenty of them - staked out in the sand to mark the location of a bus accident. The driver, following the custom of putting the transmission in neutral and shutting off the motor, had lost his brakes on the steep grade. The authorities estimated that the bus was travelling at a speed of over ninety miles per hour when it went off the road. Everyone aboard was killed.

While buying a new tire at Arequipa's Chevrolet garage, I complained to the mechanic about a wierd flapping noise that had developed in the rear of the pickup. After a few minutes work he had located the trouble: the truck bed was secured to the frame by one screw; the rest were scattered along the road from Cuzco to Nazca. A few more kilometers and I would have been the driver of a strange looking conveyance - four wheels and a cab. Still, this incident is a good illustration of the pounding to which trucks and cars are submitted when they travel over sierra roads.

The remainder of the journey (Arequipa-Puno-Cuzco) was familiar to me, and the only difficulties encountered were mud puddles, Indians

and inquisitive policemen. The mud puddles effectively concealed the holes in the road, and there were times when the camioneta was rocking like a boat in the mire. The policemen were on the lookout for vehicles carrying contraband from Puno (where it had been smuggled in from Bolivia) to Cuzco or the coast. They eyed the pickup's large metal box with suspicion, but let us proceed after a few minutes' questioning. The Indians posed the greatest problem. It is practically a habit of these solitary wanderers to wait until a car is almost upon them, then skip nimbly to the other side of the road. Only sometimes the skip is not so nimble. According to the law, a downed pedestrian may not be moved until the authorities have arrived on the scene of the accident. In the sierra, this may take a day or two. However, any kind hearted motorist who totes his victim to the nearest doctor may find himself behind bars for violating the law of the land. The law does not apply to cows or llamas, but as highway hazards they are the worst of the lot. Many are the accidents caused by beasts of the field on the mountain roads.

Despite the increasing number of vehicles travelling Peruvian highways, the peruanos themselves are not mechanically minded. The truckers are the mechanics of the road, the masters of improvization, but they leave much to be desired in the way of repairing a truck. In the garages, there is usually one maestro, the only man who is remotely acquainted with the science of automotives. His flunkies merely grease, wash and tighten bolts. The country's pedestrians regard the car as something foreign to their lives and, therefore, something to be forgotten about as quickly as possible. Perhaps this fact accounts for the extraordinarily high death toll. Jaywalking, a manifestation of the populace's disdain for all things automotive, has become a national pastime, and it is no wonder that the number of flattened pedestrians reaches a staggering figure at the end of each year.

There is such a thing as highway courtesy in Perú. Truck drivers will help you to pass them on narrow roads (after a few moments of horn blasting) or give you a ride to the nearest town if you have a breakdown. In general, the truckers are good drivers; were it not for the great delight they take in playing the game of machismo, they would also be careful drivers. Carelessness, however, is a foregone conclusion on the nation's roads. In combination with hairpin curves and muddy or sandy surfaces, it accounts for a large portion of the weekly toll of accidents which are written up in such lurid detail by the newspapers: SIX DEAD IN ABANCAY AS TRUCK FALLS INTO CANYON or DRIVERS HORRIBLY MANGLED IN COLLISION NEAR NAZCA. It is a rare day when you cannot find at least one such headline in the local daily.

Although he is speaking of city driving, William Lytle Schurz in effect sums up the whole philosophy of machismo on the highways in his book This New World (Dutton, New York, 1954). "The colonial cities required one extra-large thoroughfare where the members of the local aristocracy could exhibit themselves and their finery and equipages to the best advantage. Avenues and boulevards did not become a pressing matter until the automobile dropped the miracle of multiple horsepower into the eager hands of Latin Americans and thereby created a major traffic problem. The problem was further complicated by the survival of a network of narrow streets and alleyways that had perfectly well served the needs of oxcarts and horse-drawn carriages and mule trains, and it was aggravated by the resistance of an individualistic people to any controls over their right to run down or to be run down."

Sincerely
William H. MacLeish
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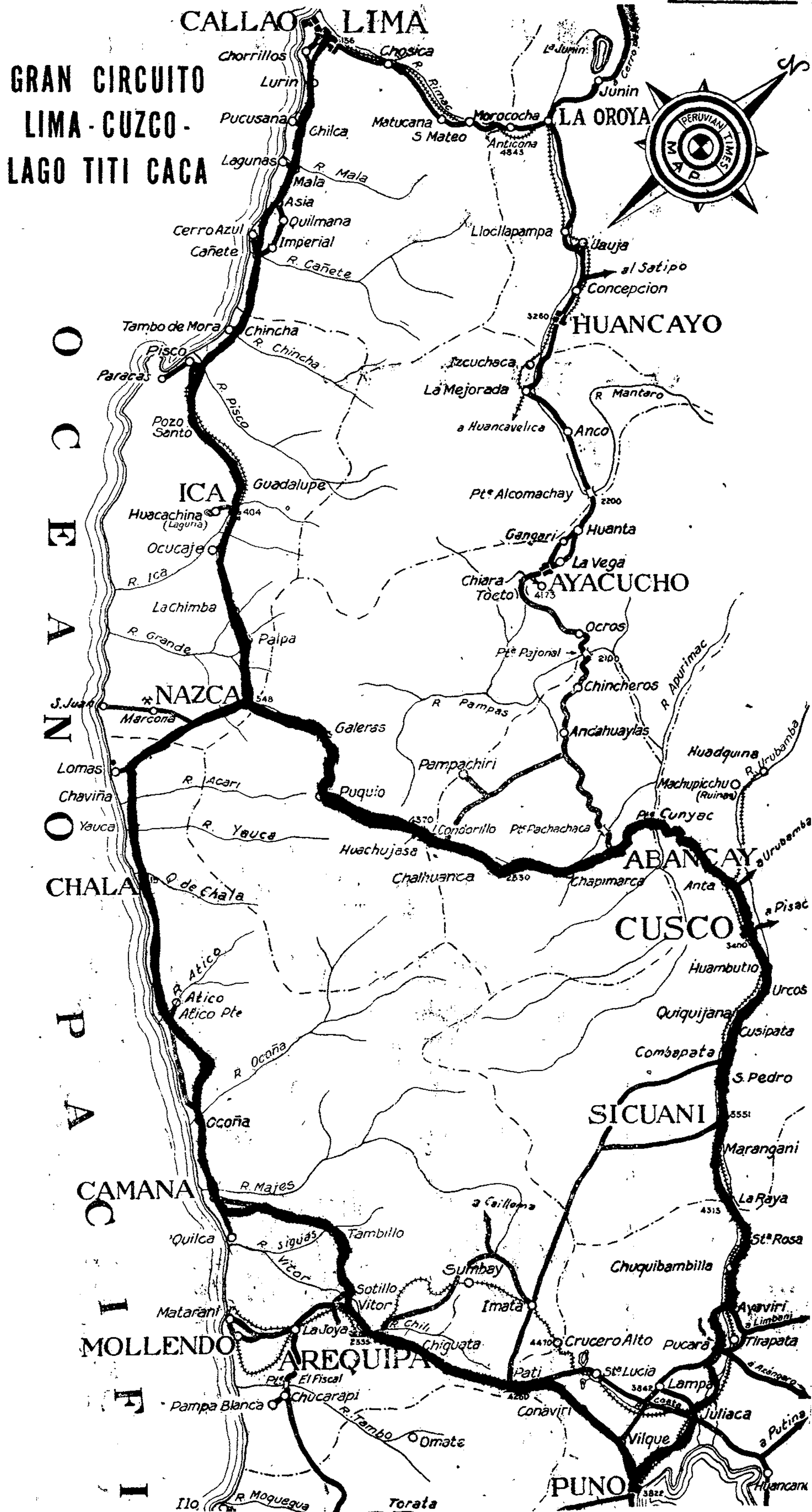
Map of trip taken from July 22, 1955 edition of the Peruvian Times.



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