

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ALEJANDRO FOGEL'S

# THE INCAS ROAD

EL CAMINO DE LOS INCAS

AF-2

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## BEGINNINGS OF THE ROAD

While *The Incas Road* is a very real construction, a series of roads and trails that the Incas built between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries to consolidate their empire, for me, it is also a metaphor for a united Latin America, a continent without borders that existed before the Conquista. *My Incas Road* is a trip into the indigenous roots of South America, to show that it was and still is one nation, struggling still against its brutal *conquistadores* past while attempting to build a democratic, peaceful future.

I had the idea of exploring *The Incas Road* when I first encountered traces of the actual road system in the Andes Mountain range. I was coming from years of city life, being an artist in Buenos Aires in love with the french surrealists, isolated from nature and ignorant of my country's native roots. In school we were always taught to look to Europe. I could have told you anything you wanted about Greece or Rome but... Incas? Those primitive Indians that lived up there in Latin America? Why



ICWA FELLOW ALEJANDRO FOGEL IS AN ARTIST EXPLORING THE INCAS ROAD

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, The Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

would you care to know anything about them? Argentina is not really part of Latin America, went the implication. We are an extension of Europe, *porteños* always say. But there I was with a *baqueano*, in northwestern Argentina, drinking mate together from a gourd, watching his son tending the llamas in the fields by his home which happened to be right off a part of the old Incas road that is still in use today. And I was learning about my roots, about the people who lived in this part of the world before the Spanish invasion, about the people who live here still. It was a shock, a cultural shock that changed my life. My art took a different path, turning its back on Europe and my aspiration to be a french surrealist, to become... who knows what.

I kind of know now. I became simply an artist who stepped out the door of his studio. I wanted to do more than sit and paint. I wanted to help preserve a culture and a legacy that is vanishing out of our hands. I

wanted to educate, to excite people about their own past, to make them see the relevance of their indigenous cultures in their own lives, instead of always looking wistfully across the seas to Europe for a past, for future guidance. After all, what did we come to the New World for, if not to embrace another legacy than the one we were leaving behind? Why was this need to embrace the indigenous wisdom and culture so weak in the Argentine people? These are all things I'm determined to find out on this journey, on this metaphor of the Incas Road that has me travelling through the past and present of South America and its peoples. I am recounting the story of the Incas and their ancestors through the eyes of an artist as a kind of explorer, an explorer of roads, mountains, people, stories, needs and dreams and how they all intersect and branch off from each other, as symbolized by the Incas Road.

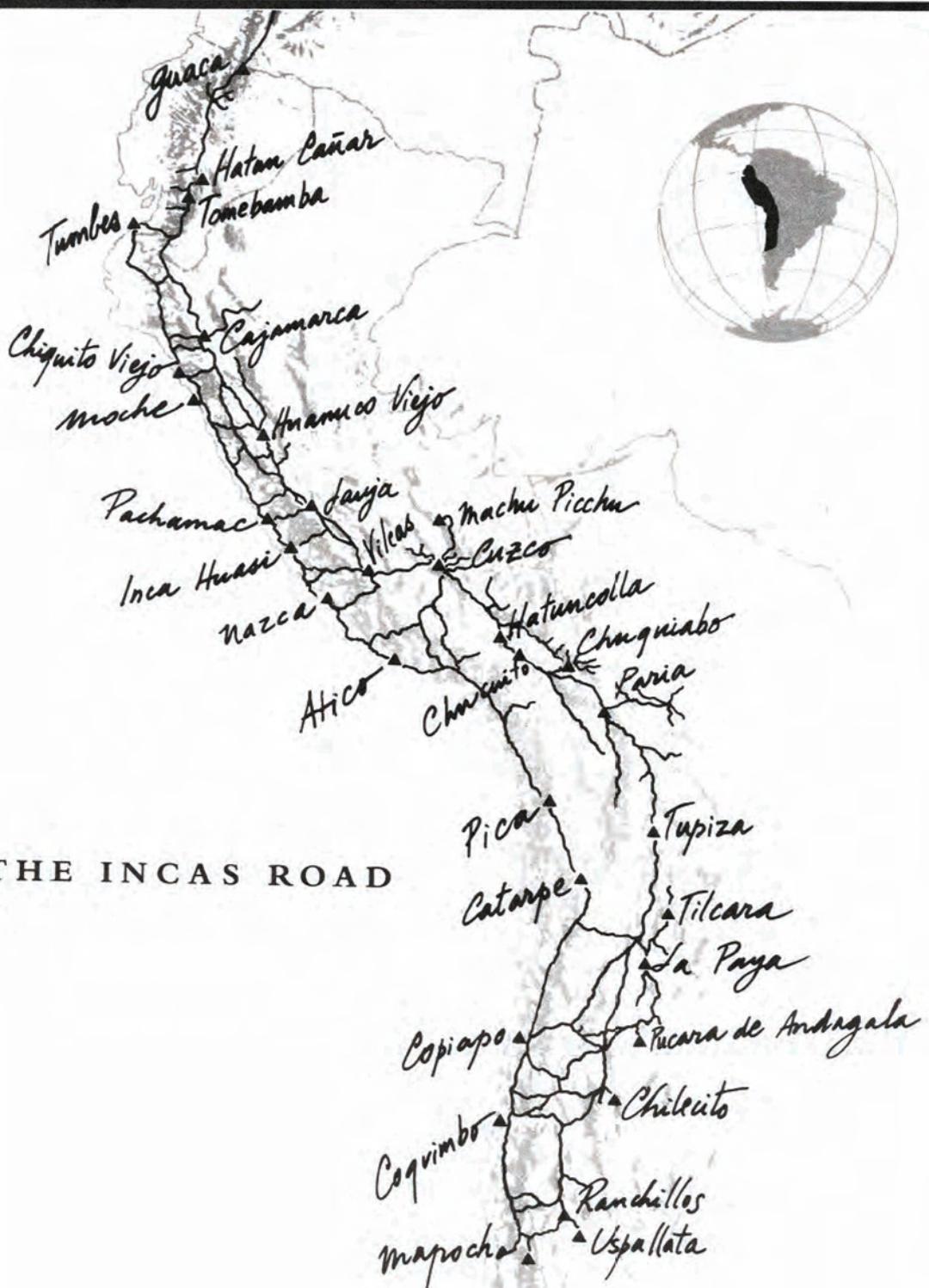
The fantastic forty thousand kilometers of roads built by the Incas, that, over five hundred

years ago nearly united the western part of South America into a prosperous nation, became a symbol for me, and the beginning of my dream: to walk those roads and register what I see, what I feel. But not only about the Incas. I want to find out about their ancestors, about the other peoples that became absorbed into the melting pot of the Incas' Empire. I want to know about their descendants, the survivors of the Spanish holocaust that kill 80 million people or about 90 percent of the population at that time. I want to know about their art, their crafts, their daily life, their sufferings and happy moments in an effort to save a present and a past of Latin America that, as a non-European culture, has been practically erased and historically diminished in its importance as a highly advanced, multi-ethnic, peace oriented civilization.

The ruins of the Incan Empire and their fate of neglect are a reflection of what is going on at archaeological sites all over the world which threaten humanity



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with the literal erasure of its past, without which there can be no promising future. In the words of Hiram Bingham, the American scholar and explorer who discovered Macchu Picchu : Few are the ones

that are fully aware of what is owed to the Incas. Their civilization, which took thousands of years to develop, was characterized by the inventive genius, the artistic skill, and a knowledge of agriculture that has

not been surpassed even up to the present. With regards to the elaboration of beautiful ceramic objects and to the knitting of their delicate fabrics, they equate the best products Egypt and Greece could offer. Although the Incas

*rulled millions...and allowed no one to suffer either from hunger or cold, they did not have a written language or even hieroglyphics. Due to this fact, our knowledge depends on what we were left...*

In my own way I am a road builder, as I visually reconstruct the ancient stones and monuments of the Incan culture, to help preserve what has been left to us. I am carrying out this exploration collecting oral histories and folk songs, videotapes and photographs of the monuments, petroglyphs, cities, and people along the Incas Road. I am also working on a series of paintings and drawings inspired by this journey, as well a series of articles.

The Incas Road exploration is a testament to the tremendous Andean landscape and culture that is swiftly being destroyed by human progress; to keep its heritage alive for future generations and make them aware of the archaeological sites that exist in the world and attest to human histories that go neglected or suffer deliberate destruction due to greed, ignorance, poverty, pollution.

### **Back in Buenos Aires**

After years of living in the Midwest of the United States with my American wife Shelley Berc, I came back to fulfill my dream: to walk the Incas Road starting from Mendoza, the southernmost part of the Road and working my way up. But the day I arrived in Buenos Aires ready to start my journey, a cholera outbreak hit the province of Salta in northern

Argentina affecting primarily the aboriginal population. The epidemic started in Peru a year ago and rapidly spread through South America. The outbreak of cholera somewhat changed my planned route. Instead of starting my exploration in the province of Mendoza and officially beginning my trip to the north, I decided to go immediately to the cholera area, right on the border with Bolivia, and symbolically start from there. I felt that nothing could so eloquently show the state of misery in which the aboriginal peoples of South America live today: in extreme poverty, their rivers polluted, their environment destroyed, and they, themselves, forgotten and oppressed by a dominant culture that denies their origins and rights and makes ready to celebrate Columbus's quintennecennial, the anniversary of the beginning of a physical and cultural massacre that has not ended yet.

### **A bit of history and geography**

The Incan Empire, which flourished between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries AD, absorbed many groups of people without war or bloodshed. It united large portions of South America (much of Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru) through a governing system that promoted peace, economic stability, and progress. The fantastic road system which spans forty thousand kilometers and covers an area of over 2 million square kilometers was built in a two hundred year period. It went

from Cuzco (see map) the capital of the empire, to Colombia in the north and reached into the central parts of Chile and Argentina in the south.

Many segments of the Incas Road can still be traced and are in use. They go from beautifully paved sections nearly 16 yards wide to just a tiny line of stones vanishing into the horizon to rugged overland trails between small towns. I particularly admired the straightness of some of the roads, the tendency of their engineers to avoid major curves when the terrain allowed it, like the still existent 70 km of straight road in the Uspallata Valley of Mendoza, Argentina. The diverse range of materials used to build these roads, as well as their size and location, was closely related to each region's weather conditions, natural resources, quantity and quality of trade, religious purposes, and military concerns. But whatever variations, the roads were all designed to connect the peoples of the empire with some degree of ease and efficiency. Many of today's streets and avenues in Argentina, Chile and Peru were built on existing Incas Roads. The Incas, themselves, used their ancestors' knowledge and established their roads on pre-existent paths. The development and prosperity of the Incan civilization could only have been achieved through their remarkable network of roads that may still lead us in and through the indigenous roots of Latin America.

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Cover: Guaman Poma de Ayala(1545?-1620?) "Governor of the Royal Roads", drawing.

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