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# Lessons through the Lens: Some Thoughts on Travel--Prompted by Photographs by Susan Wawrose

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## Chapter 5

### Lessons through the Lens:

#### *Some Thoughts on Travel--Prompted by Photographs*

By Susan Wawrose

**Abstract:** Travel photographs preserve memories and prompt recollections. They can be intensely personal, but even so themes and genres, familiar to all travelers, can be identified in any individual's collection. This photo essay relies on photographs from a faculty trip to Argentina and Peru as prompts for reflection on the nature of travel and return. It offers a photogenic perspective of the experiences in those two countries.

I took more than 1100 photographs on a recent trip to Argentina and Peru. I made the trip with six thoughtful companions—now friends--from the University of Dayton: a philosopher, a geologist, an historian, an English professor, and two faculty members from the school of education.

We called ourselves travelers, not tourists, hoped for hearty experiences, and searched for deep connections. We reflected on our experiences and discussed our observations endlessly and in great detail. It is safe to say the trip was “well-processed.” Nonetheless, as I look back now, even a short time later, I find many of my memories have already started to blur. New family, work, and other daily events have quickly rushed in to supplant the vividness of our days in South America.

The exceptions to these fogging images live in my photographs. I take pictures not just to record where I've been but to remember what I noticed. I enjoy looking at my photos almost regardless of their quality. And the quality varies greatly. For every one that might qualify as original or well-framed, there are plenty of others that have no real point of interest and should probably be

discarded. (Although I would find it hard to do so.) And there are those that, while serviceable, capture only familiar, much photographed sites, like Machu Picchu. Without any further investigation, I know these heavily-touristic places have already been professionally and more artfully photographed by others, making my versions superfluous to anyone but me.

Even so, I always prefer my own photos to even the most cleanly-produced versions of any place or event. This is not because I think they are objectively better; I can say truthfully that often they are not. But when I see one of my own photos, I am able to relive the *moment* I took it. I remember my path to the place, the people I was with and how I felt about them. I can easily conjure the emotions, sometimes the temperature and quality of the air, the light. I hear laughter, snippets of conversation, wooden wheels on cobblestones, a grazing alpaca ripping grass from the lawn. I am also transported to the moment of decision: the thought that caused me put the camera to my eye, focus, and shoot. More often than not, my thinking at that moment is simple: I am here. Now. And, in this place, this is what I, and perhaps I alone, see, hear, smell, feel.

Looking through a lens makes me see clearer. It helps me notice details and mark the objects my eyes see. It causes me to stop for the second it takes to capture a shot and note with awareness that “I see that, and I want to remember it.”



*Grazing alpaca at Machu Picchu*

Our experiences in Argentina and Peru changed each member of our group in subtle ways, as travel always does. We returned enriched by degrees. Some of my thoughts follow in this piece. It is an uneven representation of our trip, focused entirely on Peru and heavily on our trip to Machu Picchu. But these are the impressions that remain.

**Lesson One: Travelers who take the “scenic route” have exceptional adventures.**

*“On that trip it was my good fortune to be wrong; being mistaken is the essence of the traveler’s tale.”*

*-Paul Theroux  
Riding the Iron Rooster*

Here’s a euphemism for getting lost that has followed me my whole life: “taking the scenic route.”

I love the photo of the mural, below, because it was taken on a “scenic route” on our group’s first walk through central Lima in Peru. It was our first full day in the city after a bumpy arrival that left us unsure about basic things, like how to get around safely. As a group we hadn’t yet found our comfort zone with the city.

On this morning, we picked a destination, the Museo Nacional de La Cultura Peruana, and set out with guidebooks, metro cards, and each other, renewed from a night's rest, and determined to find our way.

We arrived at the glorious Plaza San Martin after an easy ride on one of the busses of the Metropolitano.



As we proceeded on foot to the museum, we consulted with security guards, police, and our guidebook map. We (and I might say I, since if there is a wrong turn, it will certainly have been me that advocated to take it) ended up not on *Jirón Nicolas de Pierola*, the broad avenue and, in retrospect, the obvious, direct route to the museum, but on *Quilca*. This narrow lane had a run-down aspect we could not quite decode. Was this area merely poor? Or, poor and...not. quite safe? The question hovered as we walked and made us wary, quiet.

As we proceeded down *Quilca*, my confidence that we were in no real danger slowly grew. I noticed that those around us were carrying shopping bags and appeared to be running errands. I relaxed completely as I noticed an increasing number of bookshops and finally a courtyard filled with several vendor's kiosks of books and journals. What a wonderful detour this was: We were on the booksellers' street! With this realization, it made sense that the street was a little frayed around the edges.

And, then we saw the mural that brought us to a halt. Because of some earlier experiences with street art, we were primed to stop for graffiti at this point in the trip. But, a longer look at this piece and a quick translation offered us confirmation that we had taken the right road after all. The artwork spoke to us, both as Readers and Travelers: "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page."

We laughed aloud and declared this as our motto. Our spirits were lifted. Ready for another day of adventure.



*“El mundo es un libro y los que no viajan leen solo una pagina.”*

*(“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.”)*

As a postscript: We returned to the Plaza San Martin by the main avenue, *Nicolas de Pierola*. It was broad, sunlit, and hot. It was busy, commercial, and safe. Nothing unexpected happened.



*The Italians*

**Lesson Two: You aren't special just because you go somewhere.**

Lots and lots of people travel as tourists. The numbers of tourists roaming the globe each year is staggering. So, visiting a tourist destination, even an offbeat one, is a common experience.

Even a relatively remote destination like Machu Picchu, Peru, which strictly limits the numbers of visitors allowed, sees 2500 people cross the ticket booth threshold every *day*.

And yet, travelers who go to faraway places feel special when they return. Often this is merely because they have been away. Most travelers, if we are honest, collect place names like trophies, happy to recite the list and always considering how to enhance it.

This photograph of what I believe is an Italian tour group posing at Machu Picchu. It is a classic portrait of a happy group experiencing the exhilaration of bonding in a foreign place. I think in this moment they felt special, happy, and different. And yet, dozens, if not hundreds, of similar photos were taken that day, including by us. These photos shout: “WE are HERE! Remember it!” The moment is documented, but the thrill will surely pass.

Watching the exuberance of The Italians pose for this photo gave me a little shock. It reminded me to do more than rest on the mere fact of having arrived at this ancient Incan city. To do more than just float through the site. To look with care. To attend to small details. To note or photograph the thoughts and elements came across my awareness. To stand away from the crowd. I am still grateful to this group of strangers that they prompted these thoughts in me on that day.



My best advice to any traveler: Wake up! Lose the crowd. Create your own damn experience!  
That is the one you will remember.

**Lesson Three: Other travelers can help you find your bearings when you feel lost or uncertain.**



*Sunrise photographer at Machu Picchu.*

I like this photograph because it reminds me of how clumsy and stupid I sometimes feel when I travel, and how much it helps me to rely on others.

We all want to be “perfect” travelers, not ordinary tourists. We want to breeze into new places and have transcendent moments. We want to feel experienced and knowing in places and situations where we have never been before and may never return to again. No one wants to be the rookie, lost and unsure where to begin or what to look for.

Ironically (or, is it obviously?) I have found that once I lose my fear of being a rookie tourist, I can relax a little more into the experience of being new. I do this by relying on other travelers and by being unafraid to ask, observe, and listen.

I took this picture while waiting for the sunrise at Machu Picchu. It was an odd thing to wait for the sunrise there because, as the photo shows, clearly it is daylight although the sun has not yet risen over the peaks that surround the site. Indeed, when our group arrived in this early gray light and experienced some doubt: Were we too late for the magical moment? There was added pressure. We had only one morning in our itinerary to see the sunrise. We knew we had to “get it right.” We did not want our story to be that we had traveled over 3500 miles only to have *missed* the sunrise at Machu Picchu.

Walking about, I only needed to spot this well-equipped, quite serious, and prepared photographer waiting patiently behind his camera to rest assured that despite the amount of light in the sky the grand spectacle was still due to occur. His demeanor and the sure the aim of his eye were convincing. Without a doubt, this man would not have flubbed the timing. And, indeed, he had not.





*Julius and Ernesto on the way to the Sun Gate at Machu Picchu.*

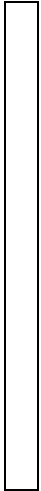
**Lesson Four: The bonds of a shared travel experience are deep and lasting.**

When I look at this picture I remember two things. I remember the sound of our group's historian. Julius, the historian (on the left), his voice and his laughter were deep, loud, and mirthful as we loped along a portion of the Inca Trail from the main village of Machu Picchu to the Sun Gate and back. As we approached the Sun Gate after a long, steady uphill hike in the bright sun, Julius was nearly giddy at a silly joke I made. Other than that I cannot remember a specific thing we talked about.

I also remember Ernesto inching along the stone pavers of the narrow trail, gently and steadily responding to Julius' sustained banter. Ernesto moved forward carefully, hunched slightly forward and hugging the wall that rose straight up on one side of the trail and leaning as far as possible away from the steep drop on the other.

Although the details of our conversation fail me, what remains is the impression of the moment. Three new friends, colleagues, walking, connecting, happy and relaxed, on a beautiful day in a spectacular place. I have traveled alone, and that is its own experience. Here, my recollection comes with an overlay of camaraderie that provides the color to the experience.

**Lesson Five: You'll lose something when fear is your companion.**



*I wish I had taken the photo that belongs here*

Sometimes the best photos are the ones we do not have a chance to take. The picture I wish I had here is from [name of school/facility], an after-school facility in [name of neighborhood], a neighborhood so rough we were advised not to bring cameras or other technology with us. It was a sensible warning, no doubt. I wish I had ignored it.

The setting is a small gray room. About ten children, 8-10 years old, sit around a square table. They are serious, diligently sewing with needle and thread. An older woman sits with them, quietly watching, guiding them and softly answering their questions.

We arrived in a group and the children remained focused on their task. As we mix gingerly with them, I kneel down to talk to one of the girls. I start in Spanish. This catches her attention. Then

I ask her tentatively, “Hablas tu ingles?” [need to correct Spanish grammar] Her face falls and she looks down at her lap as she shakes her head firmly, “No.”

“Una palabra?” I press.

A pause. A gulp. Courageous, she looks deep into my eyes, inhales, and with her exhalation bursts forth: “Good. After. Noon!”

I smile and extend my hand. “Good afternoon!” I respond.

My new friend grins as broadly as she possibly can. I imagine she has just discovered something sublimely empowering: This English; it *works!*

Even now, in my mind’s eye, I can see her radiating the joy of connection and accomplishment. It is that picture I wish I could include here.

### **Lesson Six: Even the “lightest” travelers leave more than footprints.**

I was so thrilled to be walking a narrow street in Cuzco, Peru and suddenly come across large groups of uniformed school children, finally released, chattering, laughing, unfolding into their street side demeanor after their school day. Our arrival in Cuzco, the high-altitude gateway to

Machu Picchu, had been a brisk touristic sweep. We were met at the airport, escorted quickly to a van that took us directly to a heavily guided tour of the Inca ruins of Qorikancha and the Convent of Santa Domingo.

Now we were momentarily free to stroll down a bumpy street somewhat more leisurely and to pretend we were on our own. Even though we were just outside the tourist site, passed the vendors, and headed only to our van, the immersion into the city was invigorating.

“Real people!” I thought, as the throng of students filled the space between the Incan walls.





But, his pair of photographs pains me to look at. What you see is the instant of recognition that a camera has surfaced, that an intruder has arrived. In the first photograph, the schoolgirl is happy and anonymous. In the second, she appears almost to have been struck as she realizes that she is the subject of my photograph.

Travelers are affected by the places they visit, but they also leave an impression and change those places and the people who live in them.

**Lesson Seven: Leaving and returning home are important parts of every trip.**



And, finally, there are the people I left at home, the ones that have to listen to me. Every traveler becomes a storyteller, and storytellers need listeners. Most of the people who remain at home when you travel have no real interest in your tales of far away. They will listen politely for a while before finding a way to change the subject to their life experiences or more common ground. Your own people, if they have not come with you, are required to pay attention: to your daily reports, your post-trip debriefing, and most importantly to the vignettes that emerge weeks and even months after the trip. In this way your experiences become rooted in the broader fabric of the collective that surrounds you daily when you return. Your narratives become part of their narrative and your experience lives outside of your own consciousness. Your stories are honed in the telling, making them marginally more real and certainly more concrete. They become the tales you all tell.



A final thought on the role that home plays. For the homesick or merely weary traveler, the news from home can be warm and welcome, grounding. It can also be banal, even deflating. *The cat got out. The bathroom sink is clogged. Dad is annoying.* Although sometimes my first reaction to such news is, “Why are you telling me these things when I have so many very interesting things to share?” But, the truth is, after days on the road, I sometimes grow a little numb, feel aimless, or simply tired of preparing for the newness of the next day. Hearing about life back home invigorates me. It reminds me to wake up to the journey, the luxury of freedom from daily concerns, and the limited space and time for exploring a place that I may never return to again.