



WONDERING AT THE WORLD

BY ELISABETH MARCIANO, LIBERAL STUDIES MAJOR



On March 30, 2018, my passport received its first stamp in Cusco, Peru. As I arrived at 11,152 feet elevation, the culture shock hit me. I entered a reality of reckless drivers, stray dogs and street vendors. Simultaneously, I was enthralled by the vast, green mountains that defined the landscape outside the city. I knew this would be a unique experience, but I never thought I would be breathless just walking to school or be unable to flush toilet paper!

Luckily, each of us in the Cal Poly in Peru program got paired with another Cal Poly student in a homestay family, so I had a friend who went through each challenge by my side and will stand by me long after this trip.

My academic focus was working toward my Spanish minor. The 23 students each took two informative Spanish and Latin American culture classes, but much of the learning that enriched our cultural awareness happened outside of school.

We became immersed in the lifestyle through interviewing our host parents. Discussing their thoughts about religion, diversity, gender and politics personally taught us that Latin America is more modern than many people perceive.

On my favorite weekend excursion, we traveled down the Amazon River in the pouring rain while eating fried rice out of a giant leaf. As we climbed up the rickety staircase tower above the treetops, the sun slowly fell below the horizon in a breathtaking sunset. At night, we listened to the peaceful sounds of the rainforest while falling asleep under the safety of our mosquito nets.

Machu Picchu definitely deserves its spot as a Wonder of the World, as it literally took my breath away in more ways than one. No matter how many photos we took, it was impossible to capture how stunning this landmark is in person.

One of the most rewarding parts of the experience was volunteering in a native community called Taucamarca. Our group helped hand-build more than 40 improved cookstoves in their homes and handed out shoes to the children. We were humbled by the gratitude of the people as they thanked us with the local delicacy — guinea pig. Playing soccer was another highlight, and as a future teacher, I really treasured making personal connections with the kids.

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The thrill of adventure, the beauty of nature, the diversity of culture and the gain of lasting friendships made this experience so worthwhile. Seeing the world and witnessing a completely different way of living truly changed my life, and these memories will last. Someday I hope to take what I learned in Peru and give my own students the chance to experience the world, one hands-on lesson at a time. //

Pictured: (Clockwise from top left) Machu Picchu; Elisabeth Marciano and fellow students atop Mount Machu Picchu; the Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús in the Plaza de Armas in Cusco, Peru; Elisabeth Marciano (left) and Lia Arambula with a friendly llama; salt flats in Maras, Peru; Cal Poly students at the Parque Arqueológico Tipón, a site of Incan ruins.