

FLAG EXPEDITION REPORT

The Explorers Club Flag #75

The 2006 PAITITI EXPEDITION: Beyond the Pantiacolla Plateau and the Furthest Known Reach of the Incas

June 2006

Province of La Convención, Department (State) of Cusco,
Southeastern Peru

Gregory Deyermenjian, FN'88

158 Salem Street #1
Wakefield, MA 01880, USA

(781) 968-5174 (home); (978) 927-8827, extension 128 (office)

greg_deyermenjian@yahoo.com
paititi@alum.blsa.org

<www.paititi.com/search-for-paititi.html>

INTRODUCTION

Background

Beginning in 1984, Paulino Mamani, FI'96, and I have been finding and documenting Incan sites spread over the most remote highland and *selva alta*—high-altitude jungle—areas to the northeast and north of the Incan capital of Cusco. We have been brought ever further in this exploration by our following an unmapped Incan *camino de piedra*, a road of stone, which traverses the ridge of the Paucartambo range from southeast to northwest, and continues on, beyond, ever northward. In 1993, we carried Explorers Club Flag #61 in following the northernmost extension of this trunk road a short distance into the cloud-forests lining the hillsides above the uppermost *cabeceras*, the headwaters, of the Río Timpía. In 1999 we carried Flag #110 much farther along that same trail, past various stone retaining walls as far north as we could, until the vast distances ahead in the increasingly more difficult river valley necessitated our returning to the Andean highlands from whence we had descended.

From there, however, we headed northwest along the vast high plateau known as the *Meseta de Pantiacolla*, where branches of the trunk road led us to a large “8-shaped” lake which has come to be known as the “Lago de Ángel.” Astride the lake we found the remains of low ceremonial platforms and other indications of ancient Incan habitation, the furthest up to that point known to exist in that direction.

In 2004 we carried Flag #152 along a continuation of those Incan trails farther to the northwest, beyond the Lago de Ángel to the outer reaches of the *Meseta*, to find there, atop a peak now known as “Último Punto,” larger and more complex ceremonial platforms that would take over as the furthest documented Incan archaeological site directly to the north of Cusco.

The 2006 Expedition

The goal of The 2006 PAITITI EXPEDITION, carrying Flag #75, would be, then, to determine what lay beyond these sites, beyond the Pantiacolla Plateau. This quest—to uncover the furthest reach of the Incas into this expanse of cloud-forest and *selva alta* north of Cusco, beyond and below their Andean highlands—is what we are referring to with the term “Paititi,” which since the XVI Century has come to denote the legendary ultimate refuge of the Incas.

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The expedition was granted Authorization #06-F/F-2006-INRENA-IANP by Peru’s *Instituto Nacional de Recursos Naturales* (INRENA) in Lima, and additional approbation by Peru’s *Instituto Nacional de Cultura* (INC) in Cusco.

Members of the 2006 expedition were as follows:

- Paulino Mamani, FI’96, 43 years of age, *Capitán de la Marcha*/primary *machetero*/trailblazer/primary navigator, from Calca, PERU;
- Raul Huillca Espinosa, 32 years of age, 2nd *machetero*, from the valley of the Río Yavero, PERU;
- Saul César Huillca Mamani, 21 years of age, assistant and cook, from Calca, PERU;
- Gregory Deyermenjian, FN’88, 56 years of age, expedition organizer/leader and chronicler, from Boston, USA.

Our exploration/navigation strategy this year—based upon an idea proposed by Paulino at our meeting in Cusco soon after my arrival there—would be different than that of our previous expeditions. Rather than retracing our steps through the

highlands to follow Incan roads past our finds of previous years, and then descending endlessly through cloud-forest and narrow ravines towards the jungles below, our plan now would be to go by vehicle via newly completed rough dirt roads for trucks along the Río Yavero that would take us far to the west of, and below, what was projected as our specific exploration zone beyond Último Punto (our furthest point reached in 2004). Then we would leave our vehicle and climb into the high-altitude jungle to the north, to then head east, ascending the valley of the Río Taperachi in the direction of Último Punto and the highlands. We hoped that by taking this route, by beginning well beyond the probable outer edge of Incan habitation and then “working our way in” toward the Incan world, we would be able to “head off” the furthest Incan remains that we would come upon as soon as we reached that inevitable outer edge of Incan influence.

A secondary goal was to get as close as possible to the blank area marked “*DATOS INSUFICIENTES/INSUFFICIENT DATA*” on the 1: 100,000 satellite image/aerial photograph-generated (not field checked) topographical map titled “*CALLANGATO, PERU 2446 (25-r) J631 EDITION 1-DMA (IGN)*” produced by Peru’s *Instituto Geográfico Nacional* and the U.S.A.’s Defense Mapping Agency, an area that lay to the northwest of 2004’s Último Punto, and northeast of our projected traverse along the Río Taperachi. (We had attempted to fly over and reconnoiter this INSUFFICIENT DATA zone near the headwaters of the Taperachi and Ticumpinea Rivers by helicopter in 1999, prior to our on-foot explorations that year, but the area’s elevation, high winds, and apparently constant enveloping mist and cloud had prevented our aircraft’s advance.) Additionally, we wished, as part of our return route, to climb over the range between the Taperachi and Yavero Rivers, to allow us to investigate the Río Maputinari, which we intended to descend to the Yavero.

EXPEDITION LOG

Day 1: Saturday, the 10th of June, 2006

And so, in the early morning darkness of 5 A.M., Paulino Mamani and I loaded up and set off in a vehicle driven by Pepe Valdivia and his son Pepe Jr., following the paved road to the town of Calca in the Sacred Valley. There we picked up expedition member Saul, who is a nephew of Paulino’s, and continued on to the north and northwest, by dirt roads, further into the highlands and down through the towns of Amparaes and Quebrada in the valley of the Río Yanatile. Our vehicle soon thereafter climbed directly north via a newly bulldozed road that allowed passage over the range that separates that valley from that of the Yavero. Within sight of the Yavero below, we turned west to follow another newly made dirt road that traversed the hillsides overlooking the river, heading downstream. In the darkness of that evening, we arrived at the ramshackle subtropical frontier

settlement of Estrella, close to the river at 12°24'05" latitude south by 72°33'45" longitude west.

The plan was that here we would meet expedition member Raul, as well as our mule-driver, this evening or early the next morning. But here now in Estrella we were “greeted” instead by a drunkenly belligerent official of some sort, blowing his police whistle, trying to rouse the local populace to join in his apparent outrage, demanding documents and licenses, and acting threateningly. (I must interject here that this was most assuredly not typical behavior of the many very polite and dignified Peruvians of frontier areas with whom I have had numerous dealings over the past 25 years.) Pepe did finally hand over the vehicle’s documents, and we passed the night sleeping on the floor of a communal storage house.

Day 2: Sunday, the 11th of June, 2006

We spent the early morning hours showing our exploration documents to the now sober and much more appropriate official and the crowd that invariably gathers around such events, ending with handshakes and smiles all around, and the return of the documents for Pepe’s vehicle. Expedition member Raul, and Valerio Castro—our *arriero*, muleteer—also each arrived, independently and on foot, at the village. We loaded what we could fit onto Valerio’s two pack animals. We arranged with Pepe an approximate date and place for our meeting him and vehicle for our return in about three weeks, which we would endeavor to verify a short time before by a call to his Cusco office via the satellite phone we carried with us. And then, after bidding a very fond goodbye to Pepe and his son, and shouldering all the rest of the equipment and supplies, we set off.

Just beyond town we all, man and beast together, crossed a swaying wooden footbridge over the Yavero, and climbed steadily northward. It was a pretty unrelenting climb, along steep mule-trails. At the high point was a pass that allowed our turning directly toward the east, to begin our movement back in the direction of the far off highlands and the Incan remains at Último Punto. At 12°20'38 latitude south by 72°34'26" longitude west we found ourselves at the uninhabited *mirador*—vantage point for exceptional views of the territory beyond—known as “Kirajateni,” which I was told means “Ultimate place reached by the priest” (a reference to the locally famous Paititi-seeker, Padre Juan Carlos Polentini, and his having reached this far on a past journey in his own decades-long quest for Paititi). From this spot we could see to our northwest the Río Yoyato, which there forms the southern border of the Kugapacori/Nanti and Nahua (largely uncontacted native tribal peoples) Reserve of Megantoni, and, directly across to our north, the exceptionally steep rise of an east-west range that blocks any access from the south to that area and beyond.

Continuing on to the east, we came, in the hazy light of dusk, finally to the *chacra*, the cultivated settlement, of our mule-driver, Valerio. It seemed ironic to me, but

not surprising, that throughout the unrelenting slog through bad light up to this point, what with the silent concentration that comes naturally at those times, there had not been any kind of slip or fall, yet at the moment we arrived within nearby sight of his *campesino* (pertaining to a “person of the countryside”) home, I stepped in a hole that nearly wrenched my leg. We spent the night sleeping on the dirt floor of his thatch roofed storage hut attached to the structure that was Valerio’s family’s kitchen area.

Day 3: Monday, the 12th of June, 2006

This day was spent at Valerio’s *chacra* arranging equipment and attaining more topographical information for the journey to come. We ate well, under the watchful eyes of gigantic cockroaches that emerged from within the plank walls of the *choza*, their *campesino* hut, to sit and watch us from above, as did Valerio’s many dogs, cats, and guinea pigs from below, silently begging some morsel. We noted that although Valerio’s hut was of typical mestizo-*campesino* settler type, the roof was thatched in a distinctly Machiguenga native style, of a particular type of palm used by those jungle inhabitants.

Day 4: Tuesday, the 13th of June, 2006

We bid goodbye to Valerio’s wife, Sinfosforosa, and headed east, toward the Río Taperachi, the uppermost headwaters of which, away to the east and southeast, approach the far-off highlands of “Último Punto.” Valerio’s mules and packhorses would not be able to navigate the trails ahead; and so, for a time, an animal-less Valerio would accompany us, carrying one of our backpacks. (It had been planned that a son of his would accompany us on the whole of our journey to come, but an injured leg prevented this.)

Within the first two hours I banged my head on a branch that hung low over the trail, and opened a large gash on the left side, a copious amount of blood flowing down to my shoulder. My companions wanted to sew the wound shut; but, luckily (as far as I was concerned at the time), we lacked a needle and thread. It would be necessary, instead, to make careful application of alcohol each morning and evening to prevent infection and infestation by the many *bichos*, flying insects that would endeavor to fly through the air holes in my hat (which I wasn’t wearing when I bashed my head) to try to get to the wound and perform their insalubrious activities within it).

This mishap reminded us that we had neglected to make any but a brief, cursory offering to *Pacha Mama*, the Andean earth mother, before setting out. We then and there tried to make amends by each imploring good wishes from that deity with the anis liquor we used to toast her, dripping a portion of each cupful onto the ground, as well as making the customary offering to the *apus*—lords and spirits of the

natural features around us—by making a *phukuy*, a ritual blowing on a *kintu* of four neatly arranged and well-shaped coca leaves, as we shook each bundle of leaves to the heavens.

Continuing to the northeast, we came to a pass covered with forest, where we ate two of the Greens+ nutrition bars slathered in the coconut oil that I had also brought from the USA, and chewed coca. (This would prove to be our typical midday meal throughout the ensuing weeks.) And we bid goodbye to Valerio, who had previously told us that he would only be going a certain distance with us, as he was too old (45 or so!) to go long distances without his mules. So that left four of us to carry what we really needed at least five men to carry. Into the afternoon we continued on in a zigzag route, going generally northeast, but oftentimes northwest and north as well.

We were still following narrow jungle trails up and down, when we came to a relatively more flat area, which we investigated especially closely because of its uncommon (for the area) nature. After a time, Paulino called my attention to a particular protuberance covered in vegetation. It was a stone retaining wall, for what must have been an *andene*, an agricultural terrace. The stones were relatively large and rough, but definitely placed there purposefully as a wall, in the *rústico* (“rustic” in the sense that the stones are unpolished and less precisely fit together) frontier Incan style. The canopy was so dense that one of my GPS’s could not get a reading; luckily I had brought the larger, heavier Brunton GPS that did attain 12°19’19” latitude south by 72°28’13” longitude west. We were south of the Río Taperachi, but still out of range of being able to see or hear it.

So, this was the first Incan remain encountered as we approached the Incan periphery from beyond, at a latitude that placed it much further to the north than the previously identified furthest Incan structures, the ceremonial platforms of the 2004 expedition found at Último Punto at the edge of the Pantiacolla Plateau far to the east-southeast.

At this present site that screamed out for accurate photographic documentation, the conditions for doing so quickly became most difficult, as it started raining. I used my small flash Olympus point-and-shoot the best I could, and filmed a bit through the rain and shadow, before we moved on. Raul, who had been much further ahead when Paulino discerned this site, had been through this area once before, and had told Paulino that there was a usually unoccupied frontier settler’s shack nearby. We decided that we would camp there, and would come back to finish photographing and documenting the site the next day.

We climbed a forested ridge and came to a small, rectangular *campesino* shack, just a temporary shelter and storehouse. It had no door, and we had to remove parts of the wall—rough hewn wooden planks attached by rope—to make an entrance. In the twilight of approaching darkness we were attacked by various *monte blancas*—gnats larger than and with a worse bite than the *pumawaqachi* that attack in larger

swarming hordes—that necessitated our setting alight clumps of straw like smudge sticks and distributing the smoke to all parts of the hut around us to try to disperse them.

However, we passed the night in relative luxury, with a roof over our heads, the packed earth dirt floor and our sleeping pads beneath us, and our stomachs full with that which always provides our only daily true sensual pleasure when on expedition, the delicious food (soups of various types, containing prodigious quantities of pasta, rice, spices, and whatever else we have thrown in) cooked up in the large *olla*, cooking pot, that is an essential part of our equipment.

Day 5: Wednesday, the 14th of June, 2006

This morning we left our equipment at the small hut, and backtracked our way to the archaeological site of the previous day. We photographed and filmed the rough retaining wall, and held The Explorers Club Flag #75 for some portraits. We searched the area hoping to find more remains of ancient habitation, but there was nothing more. It seemed as if this lone retaining wall had been the Incans' furthest probe, something that was made with the intent to add to it later, perhaps, but that was simply abandoned before it ever got beyond the one wall for one terrace. The wall was of rough piled stones, one meter high and 15 meters long. It had collapsed from natural causes (pressure of enveloping tree roots, etc.) in parts.

Just before arriving back at the hut on the ridge, we caught a glimpse, down and directly to our east, of the Río Taperachi, which river is also referred to on some maps as the Kosireni or Koshireni as one gets closer to its headwaters. We packed up, closed up the wood-and-old-rope structure in which we had spent the night, and moved on, heading southeast. At one point we began investigating a rise off to our side. Climbing up, we soon came to another set of *ruinas*, archaeological ruins, at 1,280 meters altitude, that included the low stone walls of a three-sided structure, in “masma” style open on one side, open to the northeast, with its two perpendicular sides being 6 meters long, its closed, back side being 10 meters long, and what remained of each wall being 60 – 70 centimeters high. Its corners were somewhat rounded.

After photographing, holding the Flag, filming, and measuring, we returned to the trail and began to descend precipitously to the east, and just before 4 P.M. at 1,200 meters altitude we emerged from the forest at a large rocky ravine, within the middle of which a stream cascaded down toward the larger river, the Taperachi, directly to the north. Stepping as gingerly as possible we walked down the sea of rocks and boulders before us, and after losing 30 meters in altitude we reached the river itself, at 12°19'44” south latitude by 72°27'44” west longitude. We entered its waters to walk upstream, hoping that this would provide a more sure route by which to advance further toward our upstream goal. After a relatively short time, though, the river became “unwalkable,” as it narrowed and deepened and any small remnant of a stony “beach” disappeared. We climbed back into the *monte*, the

jungled hillside. Just before dark we finally came to yet another frontier settler's small square hut, also closed shut with no door. Based upon what Paulino and Raul had heard from their contacts among the *campesinos* of the nearest settled areas closer to Estrella, this would be the hut of a particular man who had two particularly strong daughters, who once a year carried sacks of coffee beans from this place all the way to Estrella, where trucks would take the sacks to far away market. We called this the *Chacra de las Mujeres Amazónicas*, the settlement of the Amazon Women, and settled in to spend the night within the relative comfort of another packed dirt floor hut with a roof over our heads. We had to apply a lot of insect repellent since we once again would not have the "solid" walls of the tent, but, rather, the "porous" walls of loose fitting and rotted away planks as the only barrier between our sleeping faces, heads and arms, and the flying insects that could enter in the night.

Day 6: Thursday, the 15th of June, 2006

By midmorning we found ourselves climbing the roughest jungle trails yet, with lots of obstructions such as fallen trees and overhanging branches. We were going east, at 1,325 meters altitude. At 1,350 meters we stopped along the trail, and Paulino, Raul, and Saul removed their very oversized backpacks, and I my much lighter pack (carrying primarily the electronic equipment such as the cameras, camcorder, GPS's, "Snake Doctor," film, etc.), in order to extract things that we would be able to leave at a spot somewhere above us, up the steep rise above this trail, to the south, where Valerio had told us he had his furthest frontier structure. We would do this in order to lighten to whatever extent possible our loads, and leave food for later, as our plan was that we would be passing back through this way on our return. So, we left our packs and the great bulk of everything there on the trail, and ascended to finally come out of the thick undergrowth at a structure composed of four posts and a flat roof. (There was no worry in leaving things unguarded, below, as months and months go by without even the most hardy frontier *colonizador*, colonizer, coming through here, and even in the one in a million chance that someone did, thievery is quite uncommon among people one might find in really remote areas.) We left some things there in plastic bags tied so as to hang from the bottom of the roof, descended to the trail, and continued on to the east.

At 1,300 meters altitude we found ourselves just above and astride the Río Taperachi/Kosireni, with a vertical cliff falling directly to the river on our left, and the banana tree plants of a semi-abandoned *chacra* on our right. Paulino made a dramatic lunge toward the *chacra*, declaring in semi-jest that "*¡Él que trabaja la tierra es dueño!*", he who works the land is owner, as he made flourishes with his machete; he instantly came running back toward us, though, pursued by *avispas*, wasps, that had consequated his levity with stings to his neck and arms. The wasps dispersed, and we spent a brief rest period engaging in one of the most addictive of activities one may succumb to in tropical areas, the obsessive cutting and whittling

and chewing and spitting out of *caña*, the sugar cane growing here at this unpopulated settlement in semi-wild profusion.

After forcing ourselves to pick up our packs and leave, we left the last vestiges of a jungle path, and began forging our own trail onward with machete, beyond any previously known point. We passed through an area where red ants suddenly dropped upon us, contorting their scarlet little torsos in such seemingly visceral rage, so madly trying to bite, that it actually appeared comical. Then our route upriver to the east-southeast brought us to a tributary of the river, and on the hillside above this stream was perched a small, relatively flat spot, covered with tall grass and other “springy” vegetation. It was from this “platform” that a campsite was cut. Little insects curled up in my earlobes were removed; I set up the tent; my companions attained firewood and water and started the most welcome ritual of any day, the cooking of supper as darkness descended. So precipitously perched above the river were we, however, that for me, the lone *gringo*, each mere descent from the campsite to the river, and ascent back to the campsite, entailed a great expenditure of concentration and effort in negotiating the slope.

Day 7: Friday, the 16th of June, 2006

The river headed more directly east from here; but we left camp as it was and climbed with minimal equipment up the hillside to our southeast, cutting with machete. A lone monkey appeared in the canopy, as we climbed on toward a *pampa*, a relatively flat area that we discerned as lying farther up the hillside. The *mono* seemed to intuit some of our thoughts—memories of what a welcome to our diet had been the monkey meat that Paulino and I had eaten with our former expedition partner Goyo Toledo and the Machiguenga of Mameria in years past—and it quickly climbed further up and out of sight. After a time, protuberances began to poke up here and there through the vegetation cover. Here, at 1,485 *metros sobre el nivel del mar*, meters above sea level, was what a *pampa* in the jungle was always hoped to contain: another archaeological site. The first protuberance we came to was that of another stone retaining wall for what must have been an agricultural terrace above it. It faced the northwest, directly downhill, toward the Taperachi (although the river remained too distant to be seen or heard). About 15 meters beyond that first retaining wall, heading slightly uphill, was a second one. And beyond that, a third, this one with a short side wall attached to its southwesternmost point, a short stone extension that faced, as well, downhill, down to the northwest. Each terrace’s retaining wall was very long, at least 20 meters, made of large, rough stones, very *rústico*, and less than a meter high. Just beyond the third wall were the low-walled remains of a stone room: four low (less than a meter) walls, with an opening that apparently had been a doorway of some sort in the wall that faced directly west. There were also two discrete rough earthen mounds at the site, oval shaped, and less than a meter high, that might have functioned as platforms of some sort. We climbed beyond to 1,640 meters, but found no more *ruinas*.

We returned to our “springy platform” campsite overlooking the stream. Soon after our arrival at camp it began to rain in torrents. A hard rain continued throughout much of the night.

Day 8: Saturday, the 17th of June, 2006

What with the natural clutter that comes from staying any time beyond one night at any particular campsite, combined with the torrential rains that had thoroughly wet and disorganized everything, it took us until 10:30 A.M. to finally have things somewhat dried out, arranged, and packed up. Adding greatly to the chaotic feel was the fact that the morning sun had brought not only a humid and uncomfortable heat, but swarms of bees that formed a constant buzzing irritant to our every move. These were aggressive little things, trying constantly to climb into one’s shirt, up one’s pant leg, up one’s neck, and stinging with or without provocation: to allow one of the bees to do as he wished, to enter one’s shirt, would mean that eventually that bee would sting one’s torso; and to prevent its entry with one’s hand—no matter how gently and non-aggressively attempted—would result in one’s hand being stung. Necks, it seemed, were a prime target for stings, especially when other areas were made unavailable.

We walked for a time along and through the waters of the river, but before long the smooth rock walls of the canyon on either side dropped directly to the water, forming the river into a *pongo*, an impossibly narrow and deep torrent, that necessitated our climbing up into the *monte*. This we repeated numerous times. The initial part of each of these climbs up from the river onto the hillside was the most worrisome, as it would inevitable entail “acrobatic” moves in negotiating large slippery boulders, radical inclines, narrow ledges over steep cliffs, and large slimy fallen logs and suspended tree trunks.

The way became increasingly more difficult. Paulino and Raul climbed without packs high above Saul and me, seeking a route through what had become nearly impassable hillside overlooking a definitely impassable river. They returned, and we all trudged up and onward, again. Before afternoon’s end we reached a relatively airy, cooler spot along a branch of the river, at 1,785 meters, where we made camp.

Day 9: Sunday, the 18th of June, 2006

I awakened to find my face swollen and misshapen, my right eye narrowed to a slit and almost clamped shut with sticky seepage of some sort, likely from the effects of so many bee stings and the bites of so many *mosquitos* over the previous two days. (The word *mosquito*, along with that of *bichos*, in local idiom refers to various generic biting gnats and flying insects, while *sancudo* is used for what English-speakers call “mosquito.”) I mentally tortured myself for a time with worries of

Chagas Disease, which is transmitted by a particular insect, the “kissing bug,” that drops down from thatch roofs to bite the face of people sleeping on the floor below, and one symptom of which is a strangely misshapen eye. But I finally took some comfort in remembering that, although we had slept under the thatch roofed hut of Valerio for two nights, Chagas was typically found only hundreds of miles away into Bolivia and Brazil.

Again we didn’t get to leave camp until 10:30, what with trying to get the tent and sheets of plastic and various articles of clothing dry in the morning sun, both for the sake of future comfort and to lighten the loads, before moving on. The next hours were filled with a constant dropping down to the river, then climbing up and along narrow ledges overlooking the even more difficult spots below, then, once past, descending again. I tried wrapping my head in a bandana and my neck in a neckerchief, each soaked in repellent, in an attempt to foil harassment by the bugs. At some of the spots up along the hillside, we would have been unable to negotiate some particularly steep stretches were it not for the rope that we used to methodically haul the equipment and ourselves up, and safely over and around the obstacle. The going was extremely slow, with sometimes an hour being necessary to negotiate what would have been, as the crow flies, a distance of a couple hundred feet. We were weaving our way slowly upstream. Our efforts were rewarded, though, by finally reaching a fine site upon which to set up camp, at 1,435 meters, a little flat area at a crook along a ridge above and between two bends in the river.

Day 10: Monday, the 19th of June, 2006

With morning, the rays of the sun were most welcomed, as there was a surfeit of equipment still needing to be dried out; but these same rays finally reaching us from over the hillsides to the east were also dreaded as the signal for all manner of flying insect—most unpleasantly, the bees—to come out and descend upon what would otherwise be a not unpleasant campsite. Immediately upon setting off, we were once again negotiating narrow ledges made up of dirt, loose rock, and protruding tree roots, high above the river. Frequent stops were necessary, whenever we’d descend to the river, for Paulino and Raul to use the water and rocks to sharpen the machetes that each carried. Many spots within this canyon we were gradually ascending were so boxed in that it was difficult or at times impossible to get a GPS reading. I waited awhile to finally see appear 12°19’12” south latitude by 72°21’56” west longitude. We were at 1,460 meters altitude, very close to the river.

By evening we had camped at a site that was literally hacked out of the soil and vegetation a few meters above the Taperachi, under a canopy of relatively large trees. After we had set up the tent we noticed, in the canopy above, a tree branch that hovered a little too directly over the tent, and that had become separated from the trees, connected as it was only by a dense and enveloping labyrinth of vegetative debris and vines. The ever-dynamic Paulino endeavored to pull it down by jumping at and grabbing and yanking at the mass, but it just wouldn’t budge. We had to

decide to just let it go, as it did seem stable and secure enough; and, besides, the tent had been placed where it was because no other spot nearby was as sufficiently flat or as relatively free of sharp boulder points or thick tree roots sticking up.

We were at a longitude of 72°21'43", that had us almost exactly to the south of what our satellite-generated topographical map showed as a high point upon the unknown range between the rivers Taperachi and Ticumpinea. We would make this camp our furthest point east, having already determined what of the Inca was to be found nearer to the Incan world's periphery to the west; and from here we would begin our ascent of that range just across the river, to see what of the Incas might be there within a portion of the Megantoni Reserve, as well as to get close to the *DATOS INSUFICIENTES* zone beyond. Our altitude here, at what would be our furthest point upriver along the Taperachi, was 1,465 meters.

As we were seated by the fire eating our evening meal, there was a loud thud in the darkness nearby. We shined our flashlights in its direction, and saw that the mass of vegetation and woody debris attached to the disembodied tree limb had fallen to the ground...and by luck had just missed our tent.

Day 11: Tuesday, the 20th of June, 2006

Early this morning the sound of a loud chopping of wood was added to the constant roar of the waters of the Taperachi. Saul had gone down to the river, and was hacking away with machete at a large tree. It finally fell partway across the river. This would form our partially submerged "bridge," allowing us at least an easier time of it across the deepest parts, which seemed to be found nearer to our southern side. Various other poles and sticks were added to the felled tree to provide a bit more of a secure footing. After finishing our two usual large breakfasts (one "salty" meal of a soup with pasta, and a second "sweet" meal of oatmeal with *azucar rubia*, brown sugar), we got ready to take advantage of our engineering handiwork. We packed only our most essential items, such as camera and film equipment, some food, coca leaves and *llipta* (the alkalizing agent to be added to the leaves); and we zipped shut the tent and covered the bulk of our supplies and equipment with sheets of plastic. This would be the base camp to which we would return later in the day, after our ascent.

We all went down to our makeshift bridge, threw some more branches on for good measure, and proceeded slowly and carefully and respectfully across. Once on the other side we needed some time to shake off the debilitating effects of the frigid water and the intense worried concentration that crossing such a river entails. And then we began climbing up the jungled hillside. The vegetation quickly became one of cloud-forest: extremely precipitous slope, everything wet, broad trees and above-ground roots blocking the way and necessitating much cutting away at the thick woody vegetation to clear a rough path, as well as regularly required drops to the

ground to crawl on all fours through narrow spaces within hollowed out trees and under lateral tree roots and overhanging moss-covered branches.

We stopped at 2,035 meters altitude to eat some *mote*, boiled corn kernels that we had prepared the night before. Then for a time Paulino had Raul take over as first cutter; but, after a slow 45 minutes it became too apparent that only Paulino in the lead could make for the necessary speed in our getting where we had to go on time, and so Paulino reassumed the lead. (Later I realized that a part of Saul's hesitancy in being in the lead came from his having been bitten by a poisonous snake—the same kind that inhabited these parts—a year ago, from which he almost didn't recover.)

But the topography, that I thought couldn't get any more accidentado—broken, slippery, and ripe for accident—did. The moss that covered everything obscured holes in the mat of vegetation beneath our feet, and quite a few times one or the other of us would plunge through, to the level of one's elbows, to then have to expend even more energy in pulling one's self back up. As the afternoon progressed, and the scope of the challenge before us loomed larger, we adapted our plan such that come four o'clock we would start the descent, regardless of where we were on the massif, and try to complete the ascent the following day. Being the one most concerned about the possibility of getting caught up there by darkness, I started regular announcements of the time. A bit after four we did start down, but the descent was even more fraught with falls and near falls than had been the ascent. And it was getting more and more hazy and dark as the afternoon approached sunset and we got progressively lower on the mountainside, further from the sun and light above. At camp later that night, in spite of absolutely intense fatigue, I slept fitfully in the tent that seemed a bit overcrowded with the four of us.

Day 12: Wednesday, the 21st of June, 2006

It began as a cloudy, overcast day, and soon turned to rain. My companions seemed fine, but I felt as if the small store of energy within me that had not been previously devoured by our west-to-east ascent of the valley of the Taperachi had certainly been finally and fully depleted by yesterday's climb to the north and descent back to the south; and so, I inwardly welcomed the rain, as providing a perfectly legitimate possible excuse to postpone our second attempt on the peak. But, competing with this feeling was the knowledge that I was the one with a time crunch, as I had flights to catch and other accoutrements of *gringo* life in the city to which to attend. Time was of the essence, and every day counted in our race to complete all we needed to do before beginning an equally arduous return journey through equally unknown territory, with who-knew-what unforeseen circumstances awaiting us along the trails waiting to be cut. However, when we began to talk of our plan for the day, there was no doubt in my mind, as I readily gave agreement to the proposal that we wait out the rain, and aim to make the great ascent the following day.

And so this would be a day of rest. Of course, to spend an inordinate amount of time hanging around camp can feel extremely enervating, especially when the bees and *bichos*—whose numbers would dissipate for a time only when the volume of rain would pick up--would drive one into the tent, to there drift in and out of brief daytime naps. I was pleased to notice that the swelling in my face had gone down considerably. That evening we had what was the most enjoyable of the many delicious meals we had eaten up to that point, a stew composed of the few fish that the ever resourceful Paulino had been able to catch in the otherwise niggardly Taperachi, long noodles, and a fine and flavorful broth, all piping hot.

Day 13: Thursday, the 22nd of June, 2006

The morning of the 13th we awoke to rain falling even harder and more steadily than it had been the previous day. But our course was clear: to avoid yesterday having been a wasted day, we had to now follow up with the ascent, one way or the other, rain or no rain. We would trust in the distinct possibility that the weather would clear by the time we reached the top, thus affording us the view of the *DATOS INSUFICIENTES* area we needed to attain. I could feel that the cumulative effect of yesterday's naps, and the daylong lack of physical challenge for ankles and knees that had previously been pushed to the limit, had had good effect, and there was a distinct renewed physical vigor. In the pouring rain the river crossing was more fraught with potential accident than usual, but we all made it across without untoward incident. Raul even had to cross it twice, having been sent back to the campsite to retrieve the *antiférricos*, the vials of snakebite serum as well as the pre-serum anti-shock vials and the hypodermic needles for its delivery, that we had forgotten to bring across with us.

We began the ascent of the massif that begins precipitously right there, a meter or so from rivers edge. We followed the trail that had been cut two days before. But this time, not far from the river as the crow flies but definitely high above it, Paulino noticed something that had eluded us our previous passing through here: another retaining wall of rough but purposefully placed large stones, which must have been constructed at this spot to shore up a terrace above it. And this wall was additionally significant in that it lay to the north of the Taperachi. Anxious to move on in the uncomfortably pouring rain, and ever mindful of the vast distances ahead of and above us, I forgot to get an altitude reading or to try to use the GPS. By 11 A.M. we had reached the furthest point attained on Tuesday, at 2,110 meters. It stopped raining, but everything was still dripping wet, and the sky overcast. After a particularly enjoyable coca break, with the second of the very few great pleasures available to us in these settings, that of relaxed conversation, we continued on, more slowly now as we were again cutting through virgin territory.

We ascended through a seemingly endless cloud-forest zone before finally emerging upon a rolling plain very similar to the *páramos*, the nearly treeless, open, wet and windy highlands of tall grasses and other exotic vegetation of Colombia and

Ecuador. Its surface was thick with plants like the *achúpaya*, a primary food of the spectacled bear, with broad pockets of other *maleza*, undergrowth and thicket. This new zone, while initially quite welcome after the dark, dank, and claustrophobic cloud-forest, came to offer an endurance test of its own, as we pushed and pushed our way through its unending expanse. We would repeatedly reach the end of the plain, to then climb a rise before us that we believed would finally provide the summit, only to find ourselves upon yet another false peak, requiring more traverses of high swampy flatland.

In concentrated silence we pressed on, oblivious to any need but that of finally reaching the peak and putting an end to this frustration. And at 2 P.M. we climbed through the tall grass of one more rise, and were presented with a view that sloped down and away from us to the north: we had reached the actual peak. We were at 2,340 meters above sea level, the GPS having no trouble, with the open sky above, attaining a reading of 12°18'21" south latitude by 72°21'41" west longitude. We took advantage of our position to make some calls with our satellite phone, as well.

Far away, but immediately beneath us to the northeast, was the valley of the Río Ticumpinea; the river was down there, and we could hear its faint roar, but it was so deep within what must have been its very steep closest valley walls that we could not actually see its waters. Beyond that valley, up to the northeast, was the area we had been desirous of seeing since we first became aware of its existence when we encountered the challenge of its cloud covered heights by helicopter in 1999, the blank on the map marked "INSUFFICIENT DATA." Even as we stood gazing at it, it changed from cloud covered to semi-clear to cloud covered and back again. Its mountains and hills appeared almost pyramidal in form, prohibitively precipitous and at least as *accidentado* as the territory we had traversed along our current and most grueling route. Very far off to our east was the high territory where must have been our Último Punto of 2004, with the Lago de Ángel beyond and to the southeast of that. But, interestingly, between where we stood and the approaches to Último Punto we saw a *garganta*, a spit of relatively flat land, like a level peninsula within a sea of peaks and ravines, that appeared to provide what could well have been a natural passageway between the higher reaches of both the Taperachi and the Ticumpinea, leading toward that intriguing zone of "DATOS INSUFICIENTES." It provided thoughts for possible future explorations...

After more observations, resting, coca leaves, filming and photographing, it was time for the long return. Knowing that we had attained the top this time made for needed psychical and physical energy for the descent. As we approached the Río Taperachi we stopped again at the *muro de contención*, the rough Incan retaining wall that we had noticed on our way up. This time I remembered to get an altitude, which was some 1,605 meters. The vegetation was so dense, and the valley so enclosed, that my GPS could attain no further latitude-longitude reading. Any doubts that we may have had as to whether this line of stones so roughly piled one upon the other might have been of natural origin were dispelled when we uncovered from the moss an extension, straight and long, attached to the main portion of the

wall. And then, not far below, the machetes wielded by my partners liberated yet a second such wall, also facing directly south, downhill, toward the Taperachi.

Back across the river and at camp, our fourth and final evening at that same spot was further enlivened by a delicious soup of noodles and canned tuna fish.

Day 14: Friday, the 23rd of June, 2006

Our early morning efforts to get everything ready and pack up to be able to break camp and begin our return journey were made truly miserable by the unbeatably diabolical combination of the bees and their stings and threats-to-sting on the one hand, and the asphyxiating (for us) smoke that we coaxed from the campfire in an attempt to disperse them. But finally we were ready to make our escape, and our return began, following for the most part the same trail we had cut on the *ida*, the trip in.

But the trek back downriver, and the frequent climbs into the *monte* and down again, encountering the same difficult spots as on the coming, seemed now even worse. When we finally stopped for a break at riverside, the bees were the most insistent and enveloping yet, and I noticed how much more they preferred to land on me than on my companions; in trying to figure out why, it struck me that I had washed my extremely filthy and smelly shirt that morning, and all along we had seen that these creatures go crazy for soap, even in a concentration that has been greatly diluted. So omnipresent were they in hovering and landing all around me, and so fearful of getting stung yet again (especially on my neck) had I become, that I had a moment almost identical to that which I had in 2000 on the banks of the Río Choritiari, an affluent of the Nistrón in the lower jungles of Manu much further east, when I had finally “snapped” and found myself running toward the river and then immersing myself in its waters in a hasty attempt to escape my tiny tormentors (and those swarming *bichos* had been primarily only the non-biting, but maddeningly invasive, “sweat bees”). But this, now, was the treacherous Taperachi we were astride: there’d be no attaining refuge within its deep frigid waters, constantly in rapids that flowed over ever-slippery rocks below. I caught myself just before starting to move, and stayed put. The moment of almost unbearable discomfort passed.

We continued on. It was slow and laborious and difficult going, ever westward. We cut a new trail into and through the *monte* to avoid some of the river route. We had planned on attaining the structure where we had left supplies, at the furthest rough *chacra* of Valerio; but by late afternoon as nightfall approached we had only reached the *chacra* where we had stopped briefly for Paulino to be stung by wasps, and for us all to chew sugar cane, eight days previously. The decision was made to spend the night here. Bumps and abrasions covered much of my legs because of the cumulative effects of so many unavoidable falls and bangs. The *choza* here was in particularly bad shape, and was home to the largest cockroach that I—or even my

companions—had ever seen. We prepared and ate supper seated within the structure, but slept in the tent set up beside it.

Day 15: Saturday, the 24th of June, 2006

We began the day by noting that this, the 24th, was the day celebrated in Cusco as the festival of Inti Raymi, as well as the day, in 1572, when the redoubt of the rebel Inca Túpac Amaru in the tropical forests of Vilcabamba—a site that I had visited in 1981—had been, lamentably, finally reached and overrun by the Spaniards.

We continued our trudge to the west. By noon the Taperachi could not be seen or heard, as we rested within a small and pleasant valley, beside a shallow stream fed by a nearby waterfall, where we had stopped for lunch nine days before. From here our route would veer more to the southwest, farther and farther from the Taperachi, as we would begin moving ever deeper into the ranges toward the Yavero. Raul was the first to hoist his oversized backpack and walk up from the stream to the trail just above. Not five seconds past before we heard the thwack-thwack of his machete, and he came down to us with a dead snake draped across it. It was a small but deadly *vibora*, a poisonous snake known locally as a *marionito*, of the kind that had almost done him in with a bite a year ago.

After much laborious trudging along we came to the spot along the trail from which we, as we had done on the trek in, climbed directly and steeply up to the south, to finally attain the wildly overgrown furthest point ever reached by Valerio, where was his four-posts-and-a-roof structure at which we had left supplies. We were at 12°19'58" south latitude by 72°26'12" west longitude. There were semi-sweet oranges in abundance, which we used primarily to slake our thirst. The bees seemed to spontaneously generate from the ground, as was their wont, and did what they could to diminish the pleasure we might have otherwise had in simply sitting and eating. Paulino and Raul went looking for water; they returned after a long absence, since the spring they had found provided such a paltry flow that it had taken forever to partly fill our plastic water carriers. We set the tent up underneath the roof of the structure.

Day 16: Sunday, the 25th of June, 2006

The day began in an abject manner as we awakened before 6 A.M. to the sound of mass buzzing just outside the tent, compounding the difficulty of getting up to put on wet, cold, smelly clothing with that of dealing with the insects' harassing activities first thing in the morning. Around breakfast we discussed our immediate strategy, and debated the merits of going up above, without equipment, to cut as far and as fast as possible, to return to this camp by evening and then carry all the equipment up on the actual bust-out tomorrow; or, to simply break camp this morning, shoulder our packs and all our equipment, and set off for good. The latter

won out, in no small part because of the realization that any snake bite or other emergency would best be dealt with by a united group, with all our various skills and devices and snakebite cures present. And so we all set off together, Paulino with machete well in the lead, with Raul doing what he could to add to the trail some paces behind. It rained on and off.

It was a constant push upwards, and a dense thicket greatly slowed our already sluggish rate of advance at 2,060 meters altitude, where we stopped at 1:45 to eat a meal of rice that we had cooked up in coconut oil earlier that morning. It was good while it lasted, but the heaviness of it in my stomach after we started climbing again reminded me of the wisdom of the midday meal strategy we had up to that point been following: a light, quick, but sustaining lunch of one Greens+ energy bar and one protein bar, slathered with coconut oil, some coca leaf chewing as “dessert,” and off.

We continued on, climbing through the steep incline of increasingly thick, moss-covered cloud-forest. The area we were traversing was one of vegetative layer upon vegetative layer, with laterally extending above-ground tree roots providing the foundation keeping the whole quivering mass together. I was worried about where in this miasma we would possibly be able to pitch the tent, as darkness would soon—as it does every night at 6:04 sharp—be falling. At 5 o’clock we lay down our packs, and, as Paulino continued on above to cut trail for another half hour, Saul and Raul pulled and pushed and hacked away at the vegetation and the rocks and the ground below, to actually construct what had previously seemed to me to be an impossibility: a small rectangular *pampita*, a little flat area which just barely fit the tent that I was then able to set up within it. Saul also climbed into the hollow beneath a tree adjacent to our campsite, where he found a large and natural subterranean cavern, and into which he placed some of the equipment.

It was with some difficulty that a fire was started, so wet was all the *leña*, firewood, to be found hereabouts. And, after Paulino returned, a tree not too far along the trail beneath us was cut down by machetes, so that its insides could provide us with dryer wood for the fire later that night and the next morning. We called this spot, at 12°21’10” by 72°26’15”, *Ukuku*, “Bear” in the Quechua tongue, since we entertained ourselves before the campfire with tales of that animal that figures prominently in Andean myth as a manlike creature that kidnaps fair damsels. Before entering the tent for the evening at 8 P.M., that wood that my companions had hacked out of the inside of the tree was stacked around the smoldering remains of the fire to help further dry it out, and, as always, sheets of plastic were thrown over the heaps of equipment in case of rain during the night.

I am a light sleeper, which has its benefits. At 9 o’clock I heard some strange crackling and hissing noises. I sat up and saw a strange light dancing upon the wall of the tent. Then it hit me. “¡Algo está quemando!”-- something is burning--I spoke out loud. Paulino jumped up, hurriedly unzipped the tent, screamed for some flashlights so that he could see what needed to be done in the blur and haze of flame

and smoke outside, and began tearing away at the sheets of plastic that covered our equipment and that had begun to burn. I gathered as many flashlights as I quickly could, threw one to Paulino, and he continued beating the fires out with his hands and whatever else he could grab onto. I rushed to put my boots on, then did what I could to help stomp out some pockets of flame here and there. Saul emerged from his deep sleep and joined us. When we were able to assess the situation we realized that what must have happened was that the wood stacked around the dying campfire must have caught fire, and, somehow the flame had spread to the sheets of plastic in our cramped little campsite area. Luckily, although the one pair of pants belonging to Raul was destroyed, and various other items—including part of one of the backpacks, the laces to boots, and the end of a cord leading to the tent--were damaged, the fire had been halted just before the whole collection, including the tent, would have caught. Paulino's hands, especially his right, which would be needed more than ever over the next couple days to wield the primary machete in cutting our way out of here, suffered some burns from melted plastic. This didn't prevent him from laughing heartily at the absurdity of it all. I lamented that I had neglected to bring from home the burn gel that had been a part of our expedition first aid kit for so many years, but Paulino thought it no big deal, and requested that I quit worrying.

We had been very lucky, as our having become so used to camping year after year in places that are always wet, as well as having spent so much time at *chacras* of the forest-dwelling Machiguenga Indians, who always keep a fire burning—or at least, smouldering--throughout the night, had inured us to the danger of letting a campfire just naturally drift into embers at its own pace after bedtime. We resolved to change our ways. Interestingly, whereas I, the most civilized among us, usually slept so lightly and fitfully that I was likely to be the one to notice something like this during the night, Raul, the most countrified among us, was such an untroubled and sound sleeper that he did not awaken at all during the entire near catastrophic event.

Day 17: Monday, the 26th of June, 2006

We told Raul about why he no longer owned a pair of pants. I gave him a pair of mine that had been retrieved from the supplies we had left below at the structure of Valerio's. And we noted the irony of how it was the wood that had been so laboriously extracted from the felled tree that had, in the end, provided us with nothing but a near disaster for all the effort expended.

By just after 10 A.M. we were again in the middle of ascending the cloud-forested mountainside, at 2,400 meters, with Paulino and Raul stopping to sharpen machetes. Soon thereafter Paulino climbed a tree to see what topographical intelligence he could gather for our navigational aid, and declared that to our west was a *pampa*, the most desired of topographic types of landscape, a flat area. If we had begun our climb toward the south not from that structure of Valerio's, he said, but from some

point further to the west, further upriver, we would have been in better position, regarding that *pampa*, than we now found ourselves. But for now all we could do was continue to try to push our way up and out of this “closed” cloud forest.

We had been traveling for awhile without any water, as a good quantity of water is too heavy to add to all our other burdens, and streams are virtually non-existent in the cloud-forest. And so it was seen as a double blessing when we finally emerged from the *bosque de nubes* onto a more open, flatter, high grassland, full of various stunted plants and bushes: for here, at 2,520 meters, we found a plethora of *wacontoy*, botanical cousins of the distinctive *achúpaya*, and inside each *wacontoy* was a prodigious quantity of relatively clear and clean fresh water. We pulled up each plant, tipped it toward a pocket we had made in one of the black plastic garbage bags that Saul had been using to cover his backpack, and out it flowed. Then we placed each plant back in the ground (as these plants can regenerate easily, I was told), and transferred the water to our invaluable foldable plastic water carriers.

Moving on along this high windswept ridge, I then stopped to film. Soon thereafter, following the trail made by those in front of me, I arrived at a part of the highest peak just after Saul had, and just as he was sticking his hand out to guide himself in sitting against a grassy tussock astride us. His hand shot back and he recoiled with what appeared to be a combination disgust and shock. ¡*Vibora!* he hissed, and Raul’s machete shot out in three quick slashes, and then I saw draped across it a dead snake, three feet long, that was an exact larger version of the *marionito* encountered two days before. The serpent was camouflaged to look like the grass and vegetation against which it had sat. Although we were all in need of a rest, no one wanted to stick around that specific spot, and so we moved to a higher part of the broad peak, which at 2,600 meters altitude and at 12°21’32” south latitude by 72°26’14” west longitude was the highest point around. We indulged in the luxury of drinking some of the water from the *wacontoy*. Strangely enough, although we hadn’t had but a few drops to drink for awhile, I did not feel inordinately thirsty, and so it was possible for me to confine myself to a very small amount, wanting to “test” the water’s effect on me first.

At the peak we used the satellite phone to call Pepe in Cusco, and verified our tentative plan that he and vehicle meet us at Túpac Amaru, another frontier settlement along the Río Yavero, a ways to the east of Estrella from whence we had begun our trek. We asked that he be there at 8 A.M. on the 28th. Then we made what observations we could of the territory before us, so as to better plan our route down. But the bright sunlight upon us began to alternate with a *neblina*, a dense mist, until finally the *neblina* won out, and most of our view of our immediate future was obscured. All indicators were, however, that by going steadily southwest we would be following the most direct route toward the Maputinari, and so we shouldered our packs, and began our descent.

After a time, we had passed through the high scrub vegetation area beneath us, and found ourselves once again enmeshed within a world that I, for one, had already had just about enough of: that of the dark, moss-draped confines of the cloud-forest, negotiating on hands and knees one tunnel after another beneath the roots of broad trees. Again, I found myself pleading silently for no privilege more than that of simply being able to walk like a human being, on two legs. This side of the range was even wetter than the other, and we crossed a few muddy inclines that had been swept by landslide sometime in the not too distant past. The route of our descent became the steepest yet. I began to worry again about where we would possibly be able to make camp. We were within what appeared to be a ravine so precipitous and damp that the area of our “*Ukuku*” campsite on the other side the previous night seemed, by comparison—and in spite of our near disaster there—level, desiccated, and inviting.

At 5:15 P.M. our packs were thrown off and my companions wordlessly began felling thin trees and stripping them of branches. As I filmed, they laid the poles side by side, in the middle of the trail that Paulino had been cutting, and created a platform with just about enough room for me to set up the tent upon it, with only a few inches of the rear door end of the tent hanging a bit over it. There was not enough level ground beneath the platform for our sleeping quarters to be level, and so, to prevent our rolling onto each other during the night, we arranged our sleeping bags such that our heads would be at one wall, on the uphill side, and our feet against the other wall, on the downhill side of the tent (as opposed to our usual manner of having heads at the front door end, and feet at the back door, for easy exit as needed). There was no room at this campsite for a fire, and we had no water and little food to cook anyway, and so we all ate inside, feasting upon the contents of cans of tuna in oil, followed by dessert of powdered *kiwicha* (an Andean grain), dry. The tuna tasted exquisitely satisfying. During the night, the unique sleeping arrangement which had me positioned broadside right beside the rear door, with a breeze sweeping up and in from the west, meant that I enjoyed a relatively more comfortable night at a comfortable temperature, rather than the usual condition of it eventually getting too hot within (or under) a sleeping bag (and too cold without one).

Day 18: Tuesday, the 27th of June, 2006

At 6:12 A.M. we were all four once again sitting up in the tent, eating a breakfast of Greens+ bars with a spreading of coconut oil. After emerging from our cozy quarters, at 2,240 meters altitude, we saw clearly that we were within a funnel-like ravine, a bowl, a *barranco*, while over across to our west we could see a *moro*, a peninsula of high land that juts into the valley and jungles below, and offers a relatively moderate incline for a more reasonable and safer descent. The sun was shining on the *moro*, but where we were the surrounding hillsides obscured the sunlight, and maintained the wet, muddy, and early-morning-chill of our setting. Paulino lamented the fact that we should have traversed the ridge above us further

to the west before beginning our descent to the southwest, but that the enveloping mist had kept the full awareness of this from him at the time. The incline of the hillside down which we had come was much too steep and muddy, and the ridge much too far away, for us to consider—without perhaps, losing an entire day or more in doing it—backtracking and correcting our navigational error by starting anew at the top. Instead, we would continue to descend from where we were, trusting in Paulino’s instincts that had never yet led us into something we couldn’t get out of, and hope for the best.

We pushed and slid and lowered ourselves down the trail being blazed by Paulino. We came to the beginnings of the Río Maputinari, rivulets of water emerging from the mountainside at 2,135 meters. We quenched a bit of our thirst. It only took about a minute of following the stream itself downward before fully realizing that its plunge would get more and more steep, with probable waterfalls of unknown size below, and with the constant threat of slipping and falling on the slimy wet boulders in its path, and against the rock walls that were lining much of its path. And so, as inviting as was the idea of taking a “quick” way down, as possibly afforded by the stream that would soon become a river, we instead climbed up to our immediate west, to reenter the vegetation and thicket of the hillside.

Now our goal was to keep going laterally along the side of the mountain, trying to reach the far edge of the bowl we were in, to escape its grasp and attain a more gradual slope downward. We inched our way along, Paulino leading and cutting and pushing away mats of vegetation and tree limbs every step of the way. We crossed a number of *quebradas*, discrete gullies within the bowl, that again looked quite tempting as a quick route down, but that were sure to sooner or later end in a cliff that we might not be aware of until too closely upon it. Thus it was that I was smacked with the full awareness of how much safer it was to descend a route that one had already climbed up, no matter how challenging its topography, than one in which what lay below, on the lower slopes, was unknown.

The *moro* that we hoped to reach and descend appeared to perpetually be receding from us, no matter how much distance we covered at the cost of much sweat, cuts and bruises, and depleted energy. Even Paulino, my partner on a dozen previous expeditions, who, in addition to his unparalleled skill in any expedition setting or situation, had never before exhibited anything but joviality and equanimity no matter what the problem that faced us, began to groan at the extreme exertion that was overtaxing his otherwise prodigious reserves of strength, endurance, and judgment. Moving ever sideways to the west, whenever we came to an area where it appeared that the bowl might be leveling out onto the less precipitous incline, we’d inevitably find the way before us blocked by sheer cliffs or the remains of a landslide, and have to climb yet again up and over that spot to renew our crablike crawl westward. Many of these spots required us to remove our backpacks and pass them over to Paulino on the other side of yet another geographical obstruction, then help him lift and haul each other up and over. The “worrier” side of me filled me with fantasies of us being imprisoned here forever; I kept those thoughts to

myself, as always, and did that which was the only thing *to do*, trudging onward, hoping...

As late afternoon shadows portended getting caught where we were, Paulino must have felt the definite need for one last shot of energy, at any cost. We hadn't drunk anything, amidst all that sweating, since we had been at the mountainside springs whence began the source of the Maputinari, and so Paulino told Raul to throw him his water bottle. It was empty. So Paulino simply urinated into it, raised it to us in the fashion of a toast, bidding us *¡Salud, Señores!* and glugged it down. Then he turned, and with a last desperate reserve of *ánimo*—soul, spirit, fortitude, will, frenetic vigor—cut furiously through the vines and limbs and woody growth of what turned out to be the last reaches of the declivitous *barranco*. With the more moderate ground of the *moro* finally and unequivocally beneath our feet, Paulino handed his machete to his nephew, Saul, and collapsed onto a mat of vegetation. He lay there, eyes closed, and waved me off as I approached. Raul, then Saul, and then I slid down the muddy 45+ degree incline of the *moro*, on and on, being overtaken when halfway down by a newly invigorated Paulino. Awhile later, we reached the valley floor.

Here we were surrounded by the deafening omnipresent roar of the Río Maputinari. We walked and stumbled in approaching darkness, wading across various rivulets and channels of the river in a hazily shimmering twilight, hoping to come to some chakra, either *campesino* or native. But none appeared, although there looked to be at least a few cultivated areas without visible houses of any kind on the hillsides overlooking the river far above to our left. Darkness finally did fall all around us, as we stumbled along a broad stony floodplain by flashlight, before stopping there to make camp. My companions bathed in the Maputinari's fast flowing waters by flashlight, but I was too utterly exhausted and without sufficient *resistencia*, endurance or will, to deal with the vicissitudes of such a nighttime act: the shock of the cold water; the sharp and slippery rocks beneath bare feet; the balancing of self in the water so as to not fall, fighting against the current; the holding onto and keeping track of flashlight and eyeglasses, so as not to drop them into the water or otherwise lose them in the darkness; the sand and grit that adheres to one's body as soon as one emerges from the water... And so I applied all my efforts instead to merely setting up the tent, with Saul's welcomed help, and preparing equipment for the night. We cooked and ate a meal, now being blessed with plentiful water, and slept more or less soundly, finally within the valley of the Maputinari.

Day 19: Wednesday, the 28th of June, 2006

We broke camp early, since we did not wait around to prepare any breakfast. We found ourselves walking downstream along the type of worn jungle trails that indicate cultivated settlements nearby. We passed through one, a *campesino* settler type, but its only inhabitants appeared to be ducks and a frantically barking dog. There was a maze of paths leading in all different directions, and just as we were

puzzling over which to follow, the *campesino* who must have been the *dueño*, the owner of the settlement we had just passed through, came running, likely wanting to see what was causing his dog so much consternation. For us, here was the first other human being we had seen since leaving Valerio two weeks before, but the man gave us a quick indication as to which trail we should take downstream, and hurried away without another word. After a time we came to an inhabited *chacra*. Paulino asked the *campesina Señora* of the house if she, or the members of the household, could prepare breakfast for us. We had to wait a full hour for them to collect and prepare *uncucha*, a delicious type of thin potato that grows well in tropical areas, as well as hot sugared milk. During this time I tried to get another message to Pepe with the vehicle, via satellite phone, that we'd be arriving late at our designated meeting place, a message that his wife in the office in Cusco said that she would get to him. Then, just before leaving we settled up with our hosts: they didn't want any money, but asked instead for a *regalito*, a little gift of some of our batteries, plastic bowls, and coffee cups.

How different was now the area of the Río Maputinari from how it had been a scant few decades before, when our exploration partner during the mid-1990's, southeast Peru's most renowned explorer Dr. Carlos Neuenschwander of Arequipa, had come through here to encounter and record the "Paititi tales" of his informant, Celestino, and other of his Machiguenga brethren. These *indígenas*, native tribal peoples, had all by now migrated away, and our ensuing walk along dirt paths that followed the river downstream took us directly through various Andean settlers' *chacras* alternately dedicated to cacao, citrus fruit, and coffee cultivation.

After a time, as we were crossing the river by way of a pretty substantial wooden bridge, I noted to myself how surprisingly wide the Maputinari had become. As it turned out, it wasn't the Maputinari at all, but the much larger Yavero, my having missed the meeting of the two rivers a short while back. We walked up a dusty road littered with trash, and passed the ramshackle wooden-board shacks that were the forward guard of the frontier settlement of Túpac Amaru. And there before us, in what to us was a representation of glory and competence and trustworthiness, was Pepe's hardy van, along with Pepe and his other son, Yuri. We celebrated with beer and *gaseosas*, soft drinks, bought from a roadside general store/sometime restaurant. And we soon bid goodbye to Raul, who would walk back upstream to his own *chacra* a couple hours walk away by way of horse and foot trails known only to him.

The ride back—over the high, bleak, deforested country between the valley of the Yavero and that of the Yanatile; through the now sprawling frontier towns of Quebrada and Amparaes; and on and on and on over the bumpy dirt roads through the darkness of evening, with nothing to look at to keep one's attention occupied, and yet with no room to get comfortable enough to sleep—was as immediately unpleasant as any such voyage can be. But we felt fortunate to be making it, relative to where we had found ourselves a scant 27 or so hours before, upon the side of the range high above the Maputinari...

Day 20: Thursday, the 29th of June, 2006

After midnight we dropped Saul off in Calca, and by 2 A.M. Paulino and I were brought to our lodgings in the Imperial Incan city of Cusco. Bathing, although something sorely needed, would have to wait until daylight, as now all I could contemplate was sleep.

With daylight, before Paulino would begin his return to his extended-family home in Calca and from there to his *chacra* in the valley of the Río Mapacho (the name of the middle portion of the river that further downstream is our own Yavero, and that further upstream is the Paucartambo), we sat in the Cusco's *Plaza de Armas*, central plaza, and analyzed what we had accomplished, and the methods by which we had done it.

As always, we had covered a vast distance by foot in a rapid manner, made possible by our small-scale, high-mobility, no-nonsense manner of advancing as far as we could, as fast as we could, each day. (I had maintained yet again my policy of—no matter how exhausted—never being the one to suggest that we stop, a necessary tactic for me to keep myself going no matter what.) And the unique strategy of starting beyond the furthest edge of the area we wished to explore, and working our way back inward, had turned out to be a fine idea. We had identified fairly quickly what are most likely to be the furthest tentative attempts of the Inca to probe in that direction—to the west and west-northwest of the ceremonial platform sites atop Último Punto—for the viability of instituting their terraced agriculture and beginning the Incan settling of these areas. We had found and documented a site immediately to the north of the Río Taperachi, which, like the platforms of Último Punto and Lago de Ángel, would lie within the area of the Reserve of Megantoni, but that would lie even further to the north, even to a latitude beyond the furthest point we had reached along the extension of the “Road of Stone” along the left bank of the upper Timpía in 1999. We had made what must be a first ascent of the unnamed peak between the Taperachi and the Ticumpinea, and from its vantage point attained a unique view of a portion of the *DATOS INSUFICIENTES* areas, giving us a glimpse of both the exceptional difficulty that such an area would present to further exploration, as well as the possible approaches to it, and its possible connection to the area of Último Punto. We had crossed the range between the Taperachi and the Yavero, being the first to view and descend the headwaters of the Maputinari.

We decided to leave until later a decision as to exactly which course of action was best warranted for next year. Would we return to be the first to attempt the actual exploration of the area of *DATOS INSUFICIENTES*? Would we make another more concerted attempt to follow the extension of the *camino de piedra*, the road of stone, directly north, continuing on from the points reached along it in 1993 and

1999? Or would we return to the *selva alta* of Mameria, along with its local inhabitant, and our frequent expedition partner, Goyo Toledo, to fully film that vast complex and seek more ruins in adjacent unexplored areas?

**And, with those questions in the air, so ended The 2006 PAITITI EXPEDITION:
Beyond the Pantiacolla Plateau and the Furthest Known Reach of the Incas.**