

Letter from Peru



Peru is many things to many people. The TV will have us believe that Peru is crime and corruption. In fact, some of the so-called news are surreal. But that was 'before'. Before COVID and our endless quarantine.

Our government decided earlier than most—and we all applauded the initiative—to 'lock us up' and keep the contagion controlled. It worked. At first. Especially in the 'nice' *barrios*. But surrounding the relatively well-off enclaves, in the foothills of the Andes, are the *conos*. Places that the Brazilians call *favelas* and for which we have found the euphemism '*pueblos jóvenes*' = young villages. In other words, shanty towns.

That's where people often live from hand to mouth. You don't work, you don't eat. You don't sell, you don't eat. That's where many people live 12 or more in two rooms. That's where people can't self-isolate. The markets never stopped selling, the traders in the street never quite stopped trading. Young people never quite stopped drinking and making merry.

You may have heard about the 13 who got trampled to death in a stampede to avoid being arrested by police who busted an illegal drinking party at a bar. Illegal because of COVID. No large gatherings allowed, and curfew from 10.00 pm to 4.00 am.

And so Peru has joined the countries with the highest number of COVID cases and one of the highest number of deaths. Now this is when the holes show. For generations, Peruvian

governments have neglected the poor. No social services to speak of. For generations Peruvian governments have neglected the public health providers. Peru has modelled itself for a great part in the image of the US (we are very much under the influence of the cries of 'free market') and now we are all paying the price.

Let's leave COVID, though. It's what it is and what a mess we're all in. And nobody knows what to do. Doctors and hospitals learn on the hop, misinformation abounds, and false cures are all over the internet. I have every intention of not getting ill at all, and if I do, I would like it to be so late in the day that they've found mitigating meds, and—in any case—hubs and I have decided that we'll probably be staying home while the hospitals are overflowing. You are a doctor and must decide: you have an 80-year old and a 30-year old. Who do you let live?

At the time of writing (September 2020) it's late autumn in Peru, going into Spring. On 21 September will be the official beginning of Spring. Things are looking up. But we had a rather mild winter. It may surprise you that we have a 'winter' at all—after all, we are in the subtropics. That's warm, isn't it? Well, it's not freezing, but it can be very unpleasant indeed.

Admittedly, if temperatures get to 12°/13° it's 'arctic'. Normally, winter temperatures hover around 18°, 19°, and sometimes our nights fall to 16°/17°. But there is no central heating, except in very posh, expensive new places (it's costs quite a bit to do it well—we are a Pacific Rim earthquake country); and humidity is in the 90s (we are growing gills and mushrooms in our wardrobes). So, very slowly but surely the cold creeps in. And it's an insistent cold, getting through to your bones. Without my gas stoves I'd be lost.

From Madrid I only heard sighs and lamentations because the heat became almost unbearable. From London came happy sounds from people suddenly enjoying warm and pleasant summers, sometimes over 30°—how strange, while I wrap myself in layer after layer of alpaca, guaranteed to keep out the worst cold.

Lima is one of the few capital cities built by the sea, and it's built on a huge stretch of coastal desert. The bit of green between the town and the sea must be watered, though. And water is getting scarcer. Our glaciers are also melting, and we rely on water from the mountains via our river Rimac.



This winter we had some remarkably sunny days and received them gratefully. However, we are stuck. Nobody is in those beautiful parks, nobody is walking by the sea, except for people with dogs, of course. And their time is limited. The poop police will get you!

I'll tell you more as the days pass. Today I leave you with a poem from my collection PERU BLUES OR LADY GAGA WON'T BE BACK, hoping to give you an idea of Peru, rather than just Lima. Peru is coastal desert, fertile and often impenetrable rain forest, cloud forests, the Amazon, the Andes (in parts over 5000 m high), and often people don't know more than the places where they were born, the lives with which they are familiar.

Hidebound

The ocean is unimaginable
to those who have always lived in mountains.

The fisherman shudders
when I tell him about high peaks and no horizons.

The girl in the high rise, walls sprayed
with graffiti, twenty flats per floor,
has seen luxury on the TV
but she's smart. She knows it
for the make-believe it is.

The old man walking along the coastal
desert strip knows that you are lying
when you tell him about rain.

In the rainforest the children giggle,
mouths hidden behind small brown hands,
while I explain frozen water.
But they are happy that I am
telling such tall stories.

She washes my clothes in the lake,
a small bird perched on her shoulder.
Glad to listen to me
but she cannot believe
there is another way.

