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Mountain Magic

BY LIBBYTUCKER

When I was 15, I had an exciting experience at a church camp in the mountains near Colorado Springs. Jim, an older camper, said, “There’s a haunted cemetery not far from our cabin! Let’s go find the grave of Chas McGee!” We kids grabbed our flashlights and followed Jim into the woods. After about 10 minutes, we found a small cemetery with a headstone marked “Chas McGee.” “Look!” Jim said, “There’s a light! It’s Chas!”

Running as fast as we could, we made it back to camp in just minutes. When we arrived, Jim showed us what he had brought back: Chas’s headstone. Such daring! Such audacity! Our counselor punished us the next morning, but we didn’t care, because we had discovered something magical in the mountains: a light that seemed to chase us back to camp.

Are those of us beyond our teen years too busy, too immersed in “real life,” to want to travel to mysterious places? I can testify that getting older doesn’t mean losing interest in taking exciting trips—we make “bucket lists” of places to visit and discuss them with friends and family.

Many bucket lists feature faraway wonders of the world, such as the Taj Majal, the Great Wall of China, the pyramids of Egypt, and Machu Picchu in Peru. Travelers tell stories of these wondrous places, arguing about the sites’ origins. Did aliens visit our planet in ancient times, demonstrating their superior skills by building huge, awe-inspiring monuments? Could people really build such places on their own? The mystery of these origins keeps stories circulating.

One of the world’s most mysterious sites is Machu Picchu, a lost city of the Incas that Hiram Bingham, an explorer from Yale University, discovered in 1911. Machu Picchu’s temples and terraces are extraordinarily beautiful and mysterious. Nobody knows why the Incas created Machu Picchu, but it demonstrates spiritual meaning, because it was designed so that the sun’s first rays strike the Sun Temple’s

windows on June 21, the summer solstice. The Incas abandoned this beautiful city after Spaniards conquered Peru in the 1500s. Since the publication of Bingham’s popular *Lost City of the Incas* in 1981, Machu Picchu has attracted tourists from all over the world.

Last winter my friend Rachel told me an intriguing story about Machu Picchu:

“You’d be amazed by Machu Picchu. We had the most beautiful hike up a steep trail early in the morning. The sun came up, and suddenly everything changed. It’s hard to describe what happened, but I can tell you it was a *spiritual* experience.”

Eager to experience something similar, I asked my husband to join me for an Overseas Adventure Travel trip to Peru. We took off from JFK Airport in mid-July.

It was a wonderful, adventure-packed trip; we went rafting on the Urubamba River, drank frog smoothies at an outdoor market, and visited a Peruvian family who served us guinea pig for lunch. It was several days before we got on the train to Machu Picchu.

The train’s slogan was “Inca Rail: A Mystical Experience.” As we chugged along through spectacularly beautiful mountains, we drank coca tea. After an hour and a half on the train, we piled into a bus that drove rapidly up staggering switchbacks to the gates of Machu Picchu.

“We’ll go the steepest way!” our guide told us. Bravely, feeling the burn of altitude reaction, we made our way up the uneven stone steps. Finally, at the top of the mountain trail, our eyes feasted on the famous view. It was definitely impressive! I didn’t feel spiritual, though, in the hot sun with so many other travelers jockeying



Machu Picchu, Peru. Photo by Geoffrey Gould.

for space on the slippery steps. Teenagers posed for selfies at the edge of a steep drop. Accidents seemed likely; magic did not.

Magic happens in its own way. At a small house in the foothills of the Andes two days later, our group received a blessing from a *curandero*, a healer named Nicosia. With the help of his nine-year-old daughter, Nicosia asked *Pachamama*, Mother Earth, for her blessing. He gave each of us three coca leaves and asked us to breathe on the leaves after thinking of a serene place that we valued. Placing his hands above and below our hands, he wished each person good health and happiness. As he put his hands above mine, I felt deep peace and wonder. This was true mountain magic: a flash of meaning that transcends everyday reality. ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children’s Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



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