

[By Ben Eastwood](#)

Not many trips end with the sense of having made a significant difference to real people in real need. But I've recently returned from such an experience in a remote community in Northern Peru. A friend introduced me to the tour, a part of a larger travel company's offerings of sustainable eco-tourism, back in December. The notion of helping and getting to know others living in a different culture appealed to me strongly.

Our group consisted of 3 travellers from Canada (Heather, David and myself) and a tour guide, from Socio Adventures. The purpose of the trip was to build a brick and mortar stove for a family that currently does all of its cooking over an open fire.

### **Proper stove saves lives**

The World Health Organization reports that the indoor air pollution from the acrid smoke rising from these inside fires is associated with one death every 20 seconds in the world's poorest countries. The brick stove eliminates the smoke and reduces the amount of firewood needed for burning by 50 per cent.

Our trek began when we flew from Lima to Cajamarca, a northern city in Peru. We were met at the airport by Ben and Celida, representatives of a small outdoor adventure company called Socio Adventures. There was a little time to experience the city before the next phase of our journey. Cajamarca is regarded as one of Peru's hidden gems and the main square is the very spot where Francisco Pizarro's men captured Inca Atahualpa in 1532 and brought down the Inca Empire.

### **Music and mountains**

The word "adventure" took on new meaning when we departed Cajamarca on a bus for a 7 hour journey to a smaller northern community known as Chota. Non-stop Peruvian music on the bus was a backdrop to the many stops along the way to let people on and off with their wares, as well as the vendors who board to sell something to eat or drink.

It may also be that the music was intended as a distraction from the scary moments as we careened very narrow roads and winding hairpin turns in the high altitudes of the Andes (and occasionally we had to stop because kids had built rock statues in the middle of the road.) The mountains are quite breathtaking in places and you want to keep your camera handy to capture on film some of the beauty.

### **Differences enchant**

When we finally arrived in Chota I immediately became aware that people were intrigued by our differences and they would stare at our white-faces and/or white-hair. We stayed one night at the El Angel hotel which was very near the main square of the town and the local market. It wasn't until the next morning, however, that we realized the large square behind our hotel, which was seen from high windows in our room, was actually the prison courtyard!

Our dining experience that evening at a nearby restaurant was our first experience of authentic Peruvian food. Corn, potatoes, rice are mainstays of a meal and there were many interesting choices and combinations of such with differing sauces, vegetables, herbs, and chicken on the menu. "Cuy" (guinea pig) is a specialty in Peru and of course it was offered too.

Early the next morning we climbed into a taxi truck for the last part of our journey to the community of Cadmalca, a 45 minute drive from Chota. Our luggage and two of our travelers opted to ride in the back of the truck to enjoy the scenery and to have direct contact with a couple of passengers who "hopped in" along the way for a short ride to their community. It took a moment at our destination point to realize that there was no road up to our Lodge and that we would be climbing up the green hillside with luggage in hand!

However, Mercedes and Enrique, local staff of Socio Adventures, were awaiting our arrival and they immediately picked up our bags and lead the way. A group of curious children also appeared to greet us and we began our introductions to the families of Cadmalca. Ben and Danielle provided strategic interventions with Spanish/English interpretation, and I quickly saw that language was not going to be a barrier in making connections with these very accepting people.

The Blue Lodge was a welcome sight! I had expected rather rustic accommodation but this newly constructed building had a large dormitory-type room on the ground floor which housed the men and a lovely large room with a hardwood floor, double bed, 2 singles, plus a sink on the second floor for the women. All of us were grateful for the ceramic tile bathroom complete with a

large shower with hot running water; toilet; sink; electric plug.

### **Safe dining**

One of the main concerns of people traveling to a third world country is how to avoid illness. Tips include: do not drink the water or ice, avoid raw vegetables and salads, stay away from seafood, only eat fruit that needs to be peeled. At Cadmalca the special needs of travelers are built into the accommodation. There is sterilized water readily available for drinking. The food is prepared in a sterile kitchen by a young woman named Felicita who had attended a cooking school in Lima. Her menu was well-balanced and consisted of delicious Peruvian dishes.

### **Starting construction**

After lunch we began to build the chimney of the stove on the patio of the Lodge. No experience was required. We were given good instruction and diagrams and help from Mercedes and consultation from Ben. The chimney was constructed out of corrugated tin (which had to be flattened and then bent into a circle and riveted closed.) The next morning we trekked higher into the fertile hills of Cadmalca to the home of our family --Nestor and Georgina and our helper, Absilon, carried the finished chimney.

We all felt excited and perhaps a little nervous. Nestor showed us the old cooking shack and the blackness of the walls and ceiling from the smoke. He then showed us a new adobe room which had recently been built especially to house the new stove.

The materials for the construction were already on site and together with Heather, Absilon, Nestor and Georgina we determined the site for the stove. By noon we had completed the first phase (of the 4' x 2' brick and mortar stove). The 2 children, Jeanette (8) and Kevin (6) rushed home at lunch to see the progress and we instantly connected with their exuberance and excitement.

We were welcomed into the home for a "coffee break" mid-morning and were served tea, or coffee, and fried corn pieces. It didn't take us long to warm to one another and we had some great funny moments as we struggled to ask questions and learn about one another with a very small repertoire of Spanish/English vocabulary.

The adobe home had a dirt floor, a table which was covered with a lace cloth, 4 chairs, a

cupboard with some dishes and food. Georgina has 3 sewing machines and there was a rack hanging from the ceiling filled with her knitted and woven items for sale. There was no bathroom and no hot water. This family of four has a very small piece of land on a hillside for grazing their 2 sheep and 2 cows.

At the end of the morning in gratitude for our assistance, I was handed a gift from the family—a sack containing 3 live guinea pigs! My surprise, I hope, was balanced with a true understanding and appreciation of the significance of this offering. Guinea pig, or "cuy" as they are called in Quechua, is an important source of protein for these families and has a long history in the Inca traditions. Out of respect for the family we made arrangements with Felicita to prepare the little animals for our lunch the next day!

The next morning we worked diligently as a team, and right on schedule the stove was completed and the chimney erected. Wow! We were all so thrilled with the finished product! The stove is 4 brick levels high, filled with rock with a brick opening built on top for the firewood. The opening is surrounded by stone and mortar and a steel cooking plate fits on top .

### **Permanent reminder**

At completion I asked Georgina if we could engrave our initials in the soft mortar somewhere on the stove. She had already decided that Heather and I should write something in big print right in the centre of the hearth—the hearth that she will be tending day after day. We wrote: "THANK YOU!" with our names on either side.

The highlight of this venture for me came just following our presentation to the family of a few gifts that we had brought from home. Georgina stood up to make a little speech and I found myself crying! She said that she didn't know how to express her overwhelming gratitude to us for what we had done for them, but that we were to know that no matter where we were or when, we would always be in her heart.

As her words were being translated and I looked around, I saw that we were all in tears. I had come to offer help to a family in need and left feeling so much richer for the gifts of friendship and connection that had been established. The vast differences of language, culture, religion, power, socio-economics, had fallen away and we experienced the true joy of a 'heart to heart' endeavour.

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