

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH...

Linda Botting gets out of her comfort zone on Peru's Lares Trail.

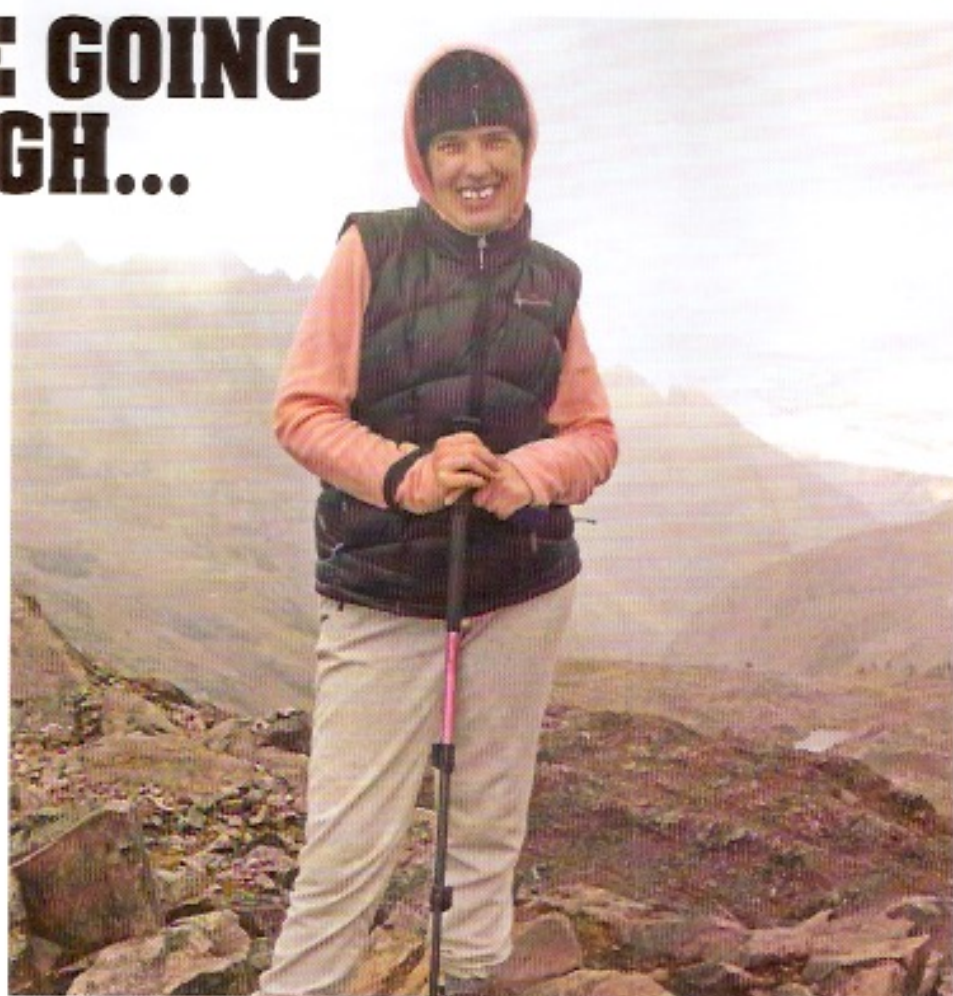
It was cold, windy and wet as I stood at the summit of Huacawasi Pass, almost 4800m above sea level. It had been a long, challenging hike to this point. However, when I looked across the picturesque, painted canvas of the Andean mountains, it was one of the most exhilarating and rewarding moments of my life.

My lifelong dream was to hike in Peru, but I am no hiker and had never hiked a multi-day trek before. Yet I was determined not to let that deter me. There are several trails to take in Peru and most people choose the famous Inca Trail. Instead I opted for the Lares Trail, a shorter, higher, more challenging route which led me through Peru's scenic, quiet, local Quechuan farming communities.

The trek started in the Sacred Valley across the Urubamba River with views over the Andes capped in white, powdered snow. It was a taste of the beauty in store for myself, five other trekkers and our guide Roddy. We were six strangers thrown together on the trek of a lifetime.

The biggest challenge for me was psychological, when you are out in the middle of nowhere, no technology or creature comforts for support, you quickly learn resilience, persistence and teamwork.

It was the most challenging thing I had ever done physically as I climbed up the foothills of



Sillaccasa Mountain through the soft, white cloud forest. I could hear my fellow trekkers breathing deeply as altitude set in. Then the clouds parted to reveal harsh, grey rocky terrain and the summit. We were almost there but it was a reminder for me to go slow, take regular breaks and monitor my breathing.

Once we summited Huacawasi Pass, it was all downhill through more of Peru's biodiverse countryside. It was time to lose the fleece jacket as landscape changed to open, green paddocks and crystal clear streams. As I made my way downhill with the group, I celebrated the fact I had completed such a challenging trek. It confirmed to me that once I put my mind to something and focus, I could achieve anything.

Trekking the Lares Trail took us passed local farmers herding flocks of llamas, donkeys, horses and alpacas along the rocky terrain. While the trail was challenging for us, we watched in awe as farmers with their herds practically jog up the hill. It was a reminder of the intense preparation needed for a trek at high altitude.

Finally, the end was in sight as we reunited with our minivan, a welcome relief for the ride to Ollantaytambo where our train for Aguas Calientes and the promise of a warm hotel bed and shower waited. ☺

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