

women's Adventure

SUMMER 2010

**Moving
Mountains**
EMPOWERMENT
IN AFGHANISTAN

Paddling Out
3 WOMEN'S STORIES

- THE SKINNY ON
CLEANSING
- ANXIETY VS.
AROUSAL

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[THE DIRT]

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[LOVE ON THE ROCKS]

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Lucky for bipeds everywhere, paddling is just as fun when you're on two feet. See why this growing sport is catching on so quickly. Plus: First-timer tips from a veteran paddling instructor.

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SUMMER '2010" Editor's Letter & Contributors



In the Bangladeshi town where I lived, I was the only girl on a bike. I wore a head scarf and a conservative tunic to ride between the chicken farm that doubled as my house, the vocational training center where I taught English, and the desolate beach where I unwound by walking alongside the Bay of Bengal. My flowing scarf got caught in my chain ring once, but more often than not, the only excitement on my daily rides was... the daily ride itself.

It wasn't until after I'd read this issue's feature "Moving Mountains" (page 56) about Shannon Galpin's non-profit in Afghanistan did I even remember the giggles and stares I attracted. Like Shannon's spectators in Afghanistan, for most of the people in the small Muslim town I called home, the spectacle of a woman on a bicycle never grew old. Every day shopkeepers and schoolboys would emerge on schedule—my schedule—to watch me wind past puddles and around potholes. The heavy Chinese bike I rode was intended for a boy half my age, but I had to purchase it for more than twice what it was worth.

I didn't identify as a cyclist. I didn't wear a helmet, I didn't know how to fix a flat, and you wouldn't have caught me dead in a chamois. I didn't realize it then, but the act of defying their expectations—and my own—was empowering beyond belief. More than just getting from point A to point B, by riding my bike through my Bangladeshi town I was pushing the boundaries of everyone involved.

But who doesn't love a good boundary-pushing these days? I still do and I hope you do, too. In this issue we feature stories about women who are doing just that. This summer we're also launching an online Cycling Toolbox where, when it comes to cycling at least, you'll find how-to advice about everything from fixing a flat to joining a local racing team.

My hope is that the combination of advice and inspiration leads you into a good-natured shoving match against the boundaries you face everyday... a shoving match that you win.

Cheers,


Kristy Holland

Tara Dugan Kusumoto



It was Rita Golden Gelman's book, *Tales of a Female Nomad*, that nudged Tara Dugan Kusumoto from a corporate job in San Francisco toward new adventures in Colorado. Tara's been contributing book reviews to *Women's Adventure* since 2008, and in this issue's "Media Room" (page 18), she reviews three books, including Gelman's newest anthology of food and travel essays, *Female Nomad & Friends*. Dimity McDowell and Sarah Bowen Shea's *Run Like a Mother* also offered motivation to this new mom. "A runner's high may be just what I need for the adventures of motherhood," she says. When she's not reading, Tara loves traveling: She's covered the Paralympics in Greece, China, and, most recently, Whistler, British Columbia. A Connecticut native who grew up on the fault line of Yankees and Red Sox loyalty, Tara now lives in Summit County, Colorado, with her photographer husband, Joe.

Marie Elena Martinez



In the fall of 2005, Marie Elena Martinez decided to put her windowless office space, press-release writing, and 10-year job as a literary publicist behind her. Leaving a successful PR gig at HarperCollins Publishers, she booked a ticket to Quito, Ecuador, and followed her heart... out of the country. Over the last five years, she's visited more than 30 countries, from Argentina to India to New Zealand. Currently, she is living in New York City, where she's finishing *One Girl, Many Maps*, a memoir about searching for the meaning of life, love, and everything else that came her way in South America and Southeast Asia. She also writes freelance travel stories for publications such as *Newsday* and *The Miami Herald*. When not nursing lattes while working on her laptop in Manhattan cafés, Marie Elena is busy running marathons, scouring the city for good live music, and researching her next big adventure. This summer, as follow-up to this month's "Sense of Place" about Machu Picchu (page 34), she's tackling Africa—her sixth continent—to climb Mount Kilimanjaro for charity. Check out her website and travel blog at www.marieelenamartinez.com.

Abigail Sussman



A native of the East Coast, Abigail Sussman moved westward while working for the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service, and she'll be sharing some of her adventures as the new columnist for "Love on the Rocks" (page 30). In addition to documenting her encounters with mountain men, she's studied small mammals in Alaska, excavated 30-million-year-old fossils in South Dakota, and patrolled the flanks of Mount Rainier. When she's not in the backcountry, Abigail likes to bake bread, garden, ride her bike around town (in a skirt), and read to her nieces and nephew over the phone. These days she spends summers in a North Cascades fire lookout station and winters in Colorado's West Elk Mountains, writing about the intersection of natural and cultural topographies. In addition to *Women's Adventure*, her writing appears on the pages of *Backpacker*, *Backcountry*, *Powder*, *The Ski Journal*, *Mountain Gazette*, and *AdventuresNW*.



Ancient Lessons of Nature

A first-time hiker tackles Machu Picchu's Inca Trail.

BY MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ

As soon as I stepped off the plane, my head and chest tightened, and I felt my lungs working overtime, pushing through each inhalation and exhalation with the determination of a marathon runner. *Soroche*, “altitude sickness,” was quick to set in. At 11,500 feet above sea level, the old Incan capital of Cusco took some adjusting to. Located in southern Peru, the town offers a panorama of rolling chocolate brown mountains that stretch endlessly in every direction. At their apexes, there’s snow. Down below, in their valleys, are tiny towns. Automatically worried, I wondered how I would manage a trek across Machu Picchu’s famous Inca Trail, the reason I’d come to Cusco in the first place.

The Inca Trail is the 50-kilometer path from Cusco to Peru’s ancient city of Machu Picchu. Since the trail is wildly popular among tourists and historically important to the city, getting a chance to hike isn’t as easy as lacing up your boots, grabbing a walking stick, and setting out. Tour operators have to be licensed, and hikers are limited to 500 per day in groups of 16. Although hiking fatalities aren’t readily reported, stories of such tragedies are plentiful. The latest casualties involving both a hiker and guide occurred on January 26 of this year, when Andean mudslides ravaged the trail.

I had absolutely no idea what to expect. For me, hikes were the folly of other people. As a lifelong New Yorker, I de-

finied a hike as walking from the Upper East Side to Midtown or crossing Central Park. Hikes were for people who owned net-covered hats and majored in entomology. Me? Not so much. My interactions with nature included first kisses in the underbrush behind the arts-and-crafts shack at sleepaway camp, Girl Scout overnights in the community park, and art projects that consisted of tracing leaves and painting pinecones. Being exposed to the elements without an umbrella was my definition of an experiment. Besides, who *really* hiked the Andes?

It didn’t take me long to realize the answer: people just like me. It was the perfect hiking weather—clear blue sky, bright white clouds, low humidity, shining sun. I positioned myself in the front of the pack and found the one-two click of my walking stick oddly calming as we began our trek over a rickety suspension bridge. One hour in and I’d already shed the initial three layers of clothing I’d piled on. I was down to the bottom layer. This trek was going to be hard, *very hard*. We would hike uphill, then down. Uphill, then down. Hike for two hours, rest for 15 minutes. Seven or eight hours later, we would approach the Sun Gate of Machu Picchu.

The Inca Trail was at turns exhilarating, and downright frightening. There were periods of tranquility and calm, stages of awe, and instances when my body just felt too physically taxed to continue. A constant battle with altitude added to the challenge, but—even as an antidrug advocate—I found that chewing coca leaves helped, offering enormous bursts of energy at the most demanding sections.

I enjoyed walking by myself, ahead of the group, the ticks of my staff keeping me on track and marking a syncopated rhythm in my head. For the first time in my life, “one with nature” wasn’t just a catchy phrase used by hippies and ecologists—it was a feeling that echoed off mountains in every direction, an invisible hand that reached deep inside of me and grabbed on. The greenery ahead and behind was visual ecstasy;

the trail displayed more than 400 species of plants—orchids, begonias, heaven-reaching palm trees, and low-lying shrubs like the indigenous *Muña*. The rustling of animals, like pumas, bobcats, and the endangered Andean, or spectacled, bear offset the chirps of Peru’s national bird, the Cock-of-the-rock, and the buzz of insects—apt accompaniment to a symphony. The earthy, dense smell of the jungle was intoxicating; the trail was a sensory hallucination and provided a consciousness like no other.

Every twist and turn of the Inca Trail offered a new variation of mountain, jungle, valley, and sky—similar but different, unfailingly beautiful. The hushed flutter of our cameras’ shutters was a sad reminder that we’d never fully capture the beauty of the place. Just two hours in, I’d snapped 228 photos. At intervals I stopped and peered off to my right. My gaze reached out over the 2-foot-wide trail, and I marveled at both the outrageous outlook and the perilous drop-off, the valleys beckoning from below. Each status check of the terrain I’d already covered helped build my confidence—especially at an elevation of 12,000 feet. I could see the trail ahead of me cutting into the mountains, and the blips of colors that were other hikers—red shirts, white hats, yellow shorts—stood out against miles of vast green canvas. I could see the trail I had already tackled behind me.

When we reached *Wiñay Wayna*, Forever Young, we celebrated with hoots and hollers. It was a halfway marker that ascended one of the most exquisite parts of the trail, a place of ritual baths and elegantly curved terraces that functioned to support ancient agriculture. We trekked farther, across steep mountainsides, up fragile stairways, through

humid forests of ferns and other vegetation, over ravines, and past waterfalls.

Although I consider myself coordinated, I still struggled to take in the view and walk at the same time. The dizzying height, coupled with the narrowness of the trail, didn’t allow for multitasking. I had to shift focus from one to the

“My interactions with nature included first kisses in the underbrush and painting pinecones.”

other, sometimes literally talking myself through the tougher patches under my breath. Another perk of leading the pack was not exposing myself as a crazy novice who ranted to herself—although I imagined others might be doing the same thing. And thank God for my walking stick. Not just a trendy Inca Trail accessory, after all, it guided each and every movement, securing a foothold before making a commitment to any particular step.

It dumbfounded me each time a porter or group of porters raced by carrying massive overnight bundles on their backs and wearing flip-flops, immune to *soroche*, with stopwatches running so they could compare trail times amongst themselves. *Now you see them, now you don’t*. Porters in a game of tag. Good for them. I felt lucky just to get by.

I was the first of my group to reach *Intipunku*, the Sun Gate. An eerie quiet filtered through the park. Llamas, sheep, and wild goats roamed freely, some even posed warily for pictures. Discovered in 1911, Machu Picchu is still revealing itself and excavations are still underway. Was this mountain-top

fortress a sacred retreat, or a city inhabited by thousands of Incans? Characteristic dwellings, temples, altars, and terraces are abundant, pulley systems and irrigation channels work even today. Bright, grassy knolls roll in every direction, while carefully arranged rock formations divide the abandoned hilltop into clearly defined agricultural and urban sectors.

Each boulder was placed by hand. I looked down at my own hands; I could barely bench-press a brick—how could *people* have built Machu Picchu?

Machu Picchu lacks battle scars, and age hasn’t eroded its center. The configuration of spaces and the city’s grid are logical. But logic aside, the place is magical. As I climbed ruinous piles, strolled grassy knolls, and ventured to the edges of a suspended oasis, I was humbled by the ancient world, by Peru, by South America. I inhaled deeply, the altitude momentarily unsteady before my body slouched with exhaustion. My muscles began to burn, my contact lenses started to sting, and my stomach cried for attention. *Mission accomplished*, it said. *Now, let me rest*.

Every blister, every death-defying downward glance, each height-tested inhalation had led to this moment. The sight of Machu Picchu was unforgettable. There, in the clutches of an ancient world, atop a vast labyrinth that defined the Andes, I embraced total complacency, a calm that only I could tap. It was a first-time embodiment, a validation that came from within; there was no loneliness, no desire for accolades or acknowledgment. I was in the best company imaginable—that of the natural world. ■

This essay is adapted from a draft of Marie Elena’s travel memoir *One Girl, Many Maps*. She’s still writing, still traveling, and still looking for an agent and publisher.