Cultural Daily

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My trip to Peru 1981

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, May 9th, 2018

One day, many years ago, I said to a photographer friend, a seasoned world traveler, “I’ve always wanted to visit South America,” and he replied “What’s stopping you?” In fact, I was newly single and free to go, so in January 1981 I planned a trip to Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, then in February 1983 I traveled to Brazil for Carnival.

Years later I visited Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Colombia to attend the Mar Del Plata (1996), Vinã del Mar (1998), Montevideo (2000) and Cartagena (2002) film festivals.

Here’s some photos and memorable experiences from that first trip to South America.

Quito, Ecuador. Otavalo couple (c) Elisa Leonelli 1981

In Quito, Ecuador, I met a lovely young couple from Otavalo, with their distinctive costumes. They were shy about having their picture taken, but I was able to convince them to pose for my camera by speaking friendly words in Spanish.

Iquitos, Peru. Jivaro boy, Amazon (c) Elisa Leonelli 1981

From Iquitos, Peru we took a boat ride down the mighty Amazon river to visit a few villages in the jungle. I loved this young boy from the Jivaro tribe with his blowgun and darts.

Cuzco, Peru. Cathedral (c) Elisa Leonelli 1981

In Cuzco, Peru, where the Spanish conquerors built a huge cathedral in the main square to replace the golden Inca temple, I was so enchanted by an evening performance of folkloric dances, that I asked the dancers to pose for me the next day, in daylight, wearing the traditional costumes.

Cuzco, Peru. Folkloric dancers. Chumbivilcana (c) Elisa Leonelli 1981

From Cuzco we took the train to Machu Picchu, the sacred Inca city high up in the Andes, that the Spaniards never discovered. It is truly a magical place. My travel companion took a photo of me wearing a local alpaca sweater and wool hat.


Cuzco, Peru. Llama (c) Elisa Leonelli 1981

We hired a local driver to visit Inca ruins and village markets, and we had to ask him to stop to photograph this girl carrying a baby llama.


La Paz, Bolivia. Bowler hats (c) Elisa Leonelli

In Peru some Quechua women are fond of wearing European style man hats. In La Paz, Bolivia, most Aymará women wear British derby hats. It seems that in the 1920s a shipment of bowlers was sent to Bolivia for English railway workers, but they were too small, so local women started wearing them proudly.


Machu Picchu, Peru. Elisa Leonelli. photo by Peggy Kahana

After spending a few years honing my skills as a studio photographer, working with backdrops and lighting, movie stars and fashion models, it was exhilarating to simply walk around with one Nikon camera and a couple of lenses, photographing amazing places and people that looked so different from North Americans or Europeans. Taking my new specialty as a travel photo-journalist seriously, I wrote informative articles about every step of my journey.

You may read the text and see many more photos by clicking the links below, from the Elisa Leonelli, Photojournalist Collection at Claremont Colleges Digital Library.

Ecuador, Quito
Peru, Lima
Peru, Iquitos
Peru, Cuzco
Peru, Folkloric dancers
Peru, Machu Picchu and the Incas
Peru, Lake Titicaca and the Uros
Bolivia, La Paz

You may wish to explore foto-trip, a website about my travel photography that I build in 2008 with iWeb. Click on this link.

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