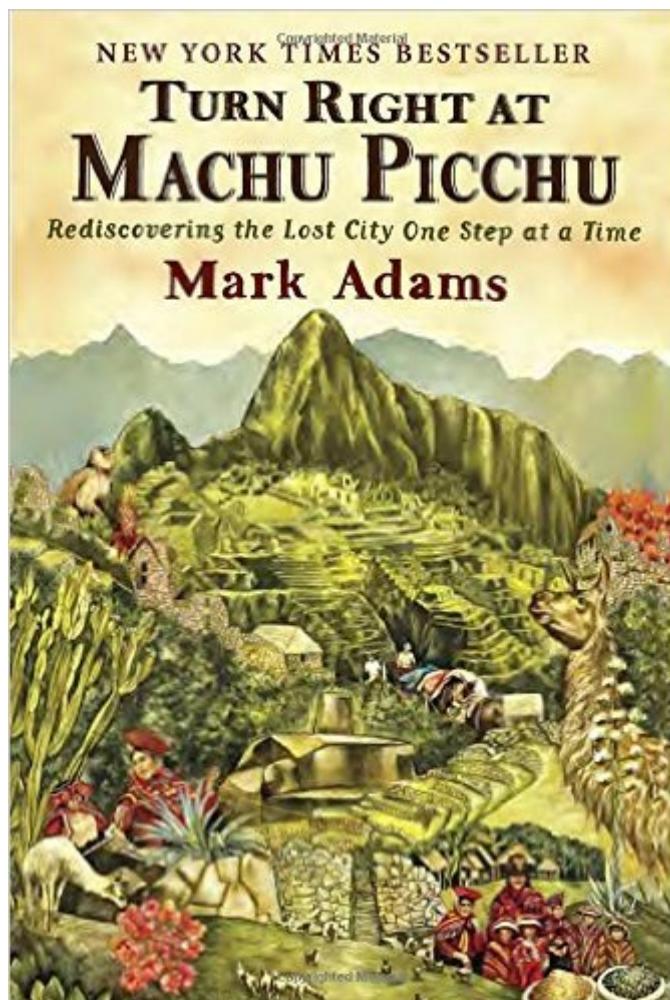


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Turn Right At Machu Picchu: Rediscovering The Lost City One Step At A Time



Synopsis

What happens when an unadventurous adventure writer tries to re-create the original expedition to Machu Picchu? In 1911, Hiram Bingham III climbed into the Andes Mountains of Peru and rediscovered Machu Picchu. While history has recast Bingham as a villain who stole both priceless artifacts and credit for finding the great archeological site, Mark Adams set out to retrace the explorer's perilous path in search of the truth "except he'd written about adventure far more than he'd actually lived it. In fact, he'd never even slept in a tent. Turn Right at Machu Picchu is Adams' fascinating and funny account of his journey through some of the world's most majestic, historic, and remote landscapes guided only by a hard-as-nails Australian survivalist and one nagging question: Just what was Machu Picchu?"

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Customer Reviews

Mark Adams' "Turn Right at Machu Picchu: Rediscovering the Lost City One Step at a Time" is a book that's a bit hard to classify. All at once, it's a serious (and seriously funny) travelogue; a smart and tightly written history; and an investigative report into the greatest archaeological discovery of the last century. Author Adams spent time writing and editing for the now defunct National Geographic Adventurer magazine and despite working with and alongside some of the world's hardest core adventure travelers, he admits to not being much of one himself. He'd visited Machu Picchu with his son, but he'd done it the tourist way. He wanted to Rediscover Machu Picchu - the way its' original discoverer, Hiram Bingham, had 100 years ago this July. He wanted to hike, climb, slog, tent and explore his way through the Vilcabamba region of Peru and finish at the site that was

recently named one of the new Seven Wonders of the World. Adams doesn't camp and hadn't been in a tent for years leading up to his Peruvian excursion. His preparation for the trip was extensive, including dressing the part of adventurer. "Have you ever seen Mr. Travel Guy? He's the fellow who strides through international airports dressed like he's flying off to hunt wildebeests - shirt with dozens of pockets, drip-dry pants that zip off into shorts, floppy hat with a cord pulled tight under the chin in case a twister blows through the baggage claim area. All of this describes exactly what I was wearing. I could have been trick-or-treating as Hemingway." Make no mistake. Adams' trip was an uncompromising adventure. There were no soft train rides, or helicopter drops into the jungle. Adams hiked, slept in tents, climbed miles of off-the-beaten-path terrain, and used the same bathroom facilities as Bingham had almost 100 years earlier - nature. His only chance at being successful in this endeavor was to surround himself with quality guides and support. He emphasized when he hired his guide, experienced explorer and discoverer in his own right John Leivers, that he wanted his trip to be about walking in Bingham's footsteps. The real joy in reading "Turn Right at Machu Picchu" is the frank and insightful humor Adams embeds within his adventurous tales. While Leivers was his primary guide, Adams was surrounded by a colorful and interesting crowd, some of which speak only the ancient language of the Inca - quechua. One guide genuinely feared a man-eating devil goat that guarded the entrance to a farm used as a campsite. Adams points out that rumors and ghosts are abound in Peru and particularly in the Andes where "the mischievous twins of Superstition and Legend tend to thrive." Adams also struggled to communicate with Leivers because they come from such different worlds and experiences. Adams finally strikes a note of commonality when a fairly severe bout of bowel issues made his adventurer guide reminisce about his own time with the same problem. He takes seemingly meaningless interactions and with only a few words turns them into something substantive, funny and culturally eye-opening. "One of the things about Peru that I'd found it hardest to adjust to - even more so than the popularity of Nescafe in a country that grew some of the finest coffee beans in the world -- was la hora perunana, Peruvian Time. This is the code, indecipherable to North Americans, by which Peruvians determine the latest possible moment that it is acceptable to arrive for an appointment. The statement "I'll be right back" can mean just that, or it can mean that the speaker is about to depart via steamship for Cairo. The habit drove Bingham bananas and hasn't improved over time, despite a widespread government campaign to combat tardiness a few years ago." Mark's narrative parallels the expeditions of Hiram Bingham as documented in his books "Inca Land" and "Lost City of the Incas". Where Bingham went, so went Adams. What Adams sees, so wrote the famed explorer. Throughout the book, Adams provides a very smartly written and readable examination of

Bingham's extensive and dramatic expeditions. His chapters are short and each thread of his story - his own travel, the history of the Inca Conquest and Bingham's parallel journeys - are woven as seamlessly, intricately and colorfully as a prototypical Andean poncho. In Adams' parallels with Inca history, he points out the difficulty in separating fact from fiction "because virtually all the sources available are Spanish accounts of stories that had already been vetted by the Inca emperors to highlight their own heroic roles. Imagine a history of modern Iraq, written by Dick Cheney and based on authorized biographies of Saddam Hussein published in Arabic, and you'll get some idea of the problem historians face." Still Adams deftly pulls together multiple resources and his own independent research to trace the earliest beginnings of the Spanish Conquest until they finally subdued the last Inca Emperors. It was the last Inca holdout that Bingham was seeking. The historical record is confusing, but consistently pointed to a location called Vilcabamba. It was unclear whether Vilcabamba was a town, city, or region, and Bingham's search was further muddied by the historical record pointing to several "final" Inca strongholds. But search he did, and Adams followed. The first major site on Adams' agenda was Choquequirao, known as the "Cradle of Gold". The site is far less accessible than Machu Picchu despite stop-and-start initiatives by the Peruvian government to create easier tourist access through the Peruvian jungle. It's estimated that only 20-30 percent of the site has been cleared and Adams quotes his guide Leivers suggesting that "When this is all cleared, it'll be one of the most spectacular archaeological sites in the world." Much new modern analysis of Machu Picchu and the entire Vilcabamba region northwest of Cuzco, revolves around archaeoastronomy - the study of archaeological sites in relation to their positions to each other, their environment and the heavens. Leivers and his ever-present handheld GPS would pinpoint locations of buildings and objects throughout the trip and started to pull together the connective thread of the regions' ruins. Upon climbing to the mountain peak that overlooks the Machu Picchu ruins, Adams wrote, "I had to admit when I ... saw how the site aligned with the natural features surrounding it I'd felt a twinge of...something. Awe? Transcendence?" Adams points out that among the various ruins that Bingham discovered, he also brought to the world the famed Inca Trail which thousands of hikers travel each year. Many Inca trails cross the former Empire, but there's only one Inca Trail - the one that leads to Machu Picchu. Adams followed miles of Inca trail throughout his trip, but needed a second trip with Leivers to explore the Inca Trail itself, and discover the trails' relationship with Machu Picchu. The Inca Trail is dotted with ruins of various sizes. Each ruin, whether placed within a terraced valley, or providing a dramatic overlook across jungle and mountains, in its own way, builds dramatically to the point at which it connects with Machu Picchu. Explorer and National Geographic Society Explorer-in-Residence Johan Reinhard

succinctly places the Inca Trail in its' proper context, "you can't finish the Inca Trail and NOT know that this was the end point of a pilgrimage." As one might imagine, such a hard core experience would have a significant impact on one's life. As Leivers and Adams started their ascent of Mount Machu Picchu, Leivers starts to make a walking stick for himself, but finds that he's left his large hunting knife at their hotel in Aguas Calientes at the base of Machu Picchu. Adams unzipped his pack, dug around for a moment and then handed his knife to Leivers. The world-wide traveler and adventurer who's led trips across deserts and mountains said "That's good preparation, Mark. Nice sharp blade on it, too." Mark realizes "It was, I'm not ashamed to admit, one of the proudest moments of my life."

Back when Al Franken was a comedian and not a U.S. senator, he did a bit on "Saturday Night Live" in which he would describe some major event and end by asking, "how does this affect me, Al Franken?" That, to me, is the stupid heart of the stunt memoir, those books in which the author undertakes a challenge outside his or her comfort zone, and then reports back on what it means to him. Such memoirs start with the assumption that the author is much more interesting than whatever they're doing (usually false) and that just become something interesting happens to them makes them even more interesting (always false). Thankfully, Mark Adams doesn't participate in that nonsense. Although "Turn Right at Machu Picchu" starts with a similar elevator pitch ' "travel magazine copy editor gets out from behind his desk to explore Incan ruins in Peru" ' he comes back with a book that looks more outward than inward. Like a "Seinfeld" episode, there's no learning and no hugging. Adams uses three narrative threads to weave his story, starting with the Incans and their fatal encounters with the Spanish invaders during the 1500s. It's not a pretty story, starting with the most commonly known story of Francisco Pizarro and Atahualpa, in which the Incan emperor promised a room full of gold in return for his freedom, an offer which Pizarro accepted and then reneged on by having Atahualpa strangled. Over the next three decades, subsequent Incan ruler moved between building new capitals in the jungle and raiding the Spanish. The Spanish responded with raids and various atrocities until, in 1572, they declared all-out war on the rebel Incan state. The empire dissolved when its last ruler, Tupac Amaru, was captured and executed. (In one of those cross-cultural oddities that I find fascinating, his son, Tupac Amaru II, also led a failed revolt and was executed as well. Nearly 200 years later, he inspired Black Panther member Aferni Shakur, to name her future-rapper son after him.) The book's second thread involves Hiram Bingham III, the product of two generations of missionaries. His grandfather converted the natives in Hawaii and his father the natives on Gilbert Islands, and Hiram III was bound for the same destiny. But after

matriculating at Yale and marrying into the wealthy and connected Tiffany family, he became a university professor and turned his attention instead to exploring. Guided by a desire to travel and leave his mark like his namesakes, he journeyed across Venezuela and Colombia, traveling nearly a thousand miles in 115 days. On a subsequent trip to Peru, Bingham saw the Incan ruins and heard tales of hidden cities where their treasure was moved to keep them out of Pizarro's hands. Between 1911 and 1915, he led three expeditions, finding not only Machu Picchu, but other major Incan sites as well. With the help of National Geographic, which helped shape and promote Bingham's story, he became a celebrity, and later a U.S. senator and governor. The third string is Adams' adventures. Unlike the Spaniards and Bingham, he was motivated less by finding gold or lost cities but simply the desire to go out and do something. Married to a Peruvian woman he met in New York, he jokes that he'd probably set a record for the number of times visiting Peru without seeing Machu Picchu. With the help of an Australian guide (who looked a lot like Bingham), Adams follows in Bingham's footsteps, pausing in his narrative to describe his encounters with Peruvian mule wranglers, archeologists and the raw beauty of the landscape, where the Incan-built trails are still used, including one memorable stretch described by Bingham as "a veritable American Switzerland." "Turn Right" also takes the time to explore the volatile issues surrounding Machu Picchu. A Peruvian family claims to own the site outright. Peru and Yale University have been wrangling over the fate of the thousands of artifacts Bingham had smuggled out of the country (some with the intervention of President Taft). There's also questions about the city's purpose, whether it was a hideout in the jungle, a religious site, or the emperor's royal estate. There's also the question of what constitutes a discovery. Bingham's reputation has fallen in the years since his death as his theory that Machu Picchu was the birthplace of Incan civilization has been discredited. Plus, how can someone be given credit as the discoverer when the locals knew where Machu Picchu was all along? Bingham had arrived to find several families living at the site, a fact which disappears from his books. There's even the possibility a prospector had gotten there years before Bingham and had looted the site. These questions Adams dives into with an admirable thoroughness and conciseness. He's a genial traveling companion, capable of taking his time and willing to explore interesting side issues. At the end of the book, he ties up his threads by joining New Age shamans and other spiritual travelers at Machu Picchu for the summer solstice. As the dawn breaks to illuminate another of the city's mysteries -- how and why the Peruvians built and aligned the site so accurately -- you'll leave with a greater understanding of Peruvians, Incans, explorers, spiritualists, and maybe even middle-aged martini explorer turned traveler. And without a hug in sight.

Mark Adams became interested in the story of Hiram Bingham after all the news coverage when it was learned that he wasn't really the discoverer of Machu Picchu. And eventually Adams decided to walk in Bingham's footsteps, following the trails he took, and see Peru the way Bingham had. This book is essentially a travelogue that explores both Adams' and Bingham's journeys, and reflects on what both of them did and learned in Peru. The writing style is engaging enough to make this an easy and comfortable read. It slips a little when Adams gives us too much about his own life, coming perilously close to "too much information" territory without ever quite falling off the edge. He manages to cram a lot of detail into the narrative without becoming monotonous. At times I almost felt I was there in the jungle or high mountain passes with him because his descriptions conjured up familiar sensations. Adams also ventures into political territory at times to explain events, and does so effectively and without strong bias. Although it's easy to tell from the text that Adams is passionate about the subject, his writing manages to be dispassionate enough to make him a trusted narrator of events. The galley I read did not have any images and was missing the index, although there was a space for it. The book did include a very nice glossary and a timeline of events in Peru. I could also have used a bibliography of all the texts mentioned in the narrative, many of which I felt like reading after Adams described them so enthusiastically (Note: bibliography is in the finished book). I'd recommend this one to anyone interested in South American history, anyone who loves a good adventure tale, and anyone who wants to go on a trip to Machu Picchu. It's a nice solid read, and worth checking out.

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