

Inca Treasure in the Cloud Forest

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When I was living in Ecuador in South America, I heard about a lost treasure hidden by the Incas more than 400 years ago. Seven hundred tons of gold and silver statues and religious symbols lay somewhere in the lonely Andes Mountains. I was fascinated, and I wanted to find out more.

The Llanganates, a mysterious range of mountains, lie between the Andes and the Amazon basin of Brazil. Because the peaks are covered in thick clouds, the trees are dwarfed, and the branches are twisted from lack of sun. The sky is always gray, and the land is saturated in mud. It rains, sleet, or snows often so that a mist hangs above the streams and the rocky slopes of volcanoes.

I was somehow drawn to those strange mountains, but before I journeyed there, I wanted to know more about the history of the Inca treasure.

Early in the sixteenth century, the Inca Empire ran 2,000 miles along the spine of the Andes, from Colombia in the north to Chile in the south. In 1527 a civil war divided the empire between two brothers. Each wanted to be king. Finally, Atahualpa defeated his brother Huáscar. He was about to take the throne when the Spaniard Francisco Pizarro and 170 conquistadors landed on the coast of Peru.

Pizarro led his men to the snow-capped Andes to seize the Incas' gold and silver. The long civil war had weakened the Inca Empire, and the Spaniards easily captured Atahualpa.

Atahualpa asked to be set free if he could fill two rooms, one with gold and the other with silver. The Incas valued the precious metals not as money but as religious symbols. Gold represented the "Sweat of the Sun," and silver stood for "Tears of the Moon."

Pizarro agreed to set Atahualpa free if he did as he promised. So Atahualpa sent messengers throughout the Inca Empire to bring the gold and silver from the temples of the sun and moon.

Pizarro melted the beautiful objects into ingots to be transported back to Spain by ship, but he did not set Atahualpa free. Instead, Pizarro killed him, and then set out to ransack more Inca temples, unaware that a caravan of 60,000 men was on its way from the northern city of Quito with loads of gold and silver. When the Inca general in command heard of Atahualpa's death, he hid the treasure in the mysterious Llanganates Mountains.

In January 1982, I set off to see the place for myself. After driving all day on narrow mountain roads, I arrived in the tiny village of Triunfo, where I spent the night.

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Next morning I hired three men to guide me to the mountain where I had been told the Incan general had buried the treasure. Segundo, the leader of our expedition, was a man of about 50 years — short, agile, and very strong. and he was accustomed to brisk exercise at high altitudes. But I was not. Segundo was a kind man. He waited for me when I had to stop and rest or when I drank thirstily from an ice-cold stream.

The first day was the most difficult. We climbed from 9,000 to 13,000 feet following the light green water of the stream. At the foot of a high cliff Segundo pointed and said, "Now, Pedro, you must hike up there!"

My heart fell, for I didn't think I could make it. The path shot straight up and was overgrown. The rain had turned the dirt to ankle-deep mud.

"Don't worry," Segundo assured me. "I will help."

I crawled for hours, dragging myself up that cliff with my hands and arms. Sharp-edged arrow plants cut my pants and tore gashes in my boots. I struggled to get enough oxygen into my lungs so I could breathe. At 13,500 feet, the air is thin.

Finally at the top, I looked down into the cloud-filled valley. I heard an earthquake rumble far below. We had reached the *paramo*, high, flat plains of grass and wet earth called "quaking bogs." The land actually shook when you stepped on it. I felt I was walking on top of the world. It hailed twice and rained constantly, a cold, painful rain. Then the sun came out and turned the mist and streams silver. I was happy I'd come.

After slogging through the bogs for hours, we camped, and Segundo made a fire. The smoke billowed in great clouds, making our eyes water. We all drank tea and ate rice and beans. Then we slept as the wind whistled over the *paramo*.

We rose before dawn. It took us another full day of painful, leg-cramping walking to reach the volcano where the treasure was said to be buried. I was dizzy and nauseated from altitude sickness. I had no idea of the treasure's precise location, and I was so tired I hardly cared about the gold. Segundo only smiled and shrugged his shoulders when I asked him where he thought the Incas had buried it. He said, "I'm telling you, Pedro, the treasure is the beauty of these mountains."

The second day on the volcano it snowed, and the fog came down so thick we could not leave the hut. Segundo said again, "Pedro, the gold is in the magic of the place. Be glad that you are here and that you are safe."

My altitude sickness returned. Then I got pneumonia. Segundo said I must return immediately to a lower altitude. As we made our way down the rocks of the volcano, I heard the roar of a mighty waterfall somewhere. I felt glad I had seen the wonderful land of the lost treasure.

Segundo watched over me closely as we headed back. Coming down that same steep jungle slope to the stream, I realized I'd found a friend in Segundo, himself perhaps a descendant of the very same Incas who had hidden the gold from the conquistadors. I was content not to look for the Inca treasure, for it was not mine. But I will remember the Llanganates Mountains for the rest of my life — that wild, awesome place where even today some say the gold lies safely hidden.