

Peru's Glorious Mountain

Alpamayo in northern Peru has been voted the most beautiful mountain in the world. **Terry Adby** investigates on a 10-day trek in the Cordillera Blanca

Pictures: Terry Adby and Margarita Zaldivar



Perfect peak:
Alpamayo, 5,947m



The Cordillera Blanca:
turquoise lakes
among snowy peaks



Peru is a country of iconic places, events and characters. Think Machu Picchu, *Touching the Void* and don't forget Paddington Bear from 'darkest Peru' (technically an Andean or spectacled bear – now threatened, despite the tag saying 'Please look after this bear'). Next, perhaps, is an Andean mountain in the Cordillera Blanca, known locally as *Shuytu Rahu*, or 'long slim oblong of ice that goes upwards.' Fortunately, this great pyramid of snow summits and cornices has another, more poetic Quechua name, *Allpa mayu* or Alpamayo, meaning Earth River.

Alpamayo is no Everest, and won't be featuring in a blockbuster any time soon. Instead its claim to fame

is its beauty, ever since climbers and photographers asked by a German climbing magazine voted it the 'world's most beautiful mountain' in 1966. The tag stuck even better than Paddington's cry for help.

Most beautiful mountain in the world is a claim that merits investigation and, without tackling its 60-degree slopes of fluted snow, going round the mountain seems the best option. This still involves reaching nearly 5,000m, but I hear nearby 6,768m Mount Huascarán, Peru's highest, officially has the planet's weakest gravitational pull. That must be an advantage on a high-altitude trek.

Heading towards the UNESCO Huascarán National Park via Yungay, it's clear that Alpamayo is not the only place in 'The White Range' with lots of scenic, and potentially lethal, snow and

ice. Yungay is 18km from Huascarán's hulking double summit, but that didn't save its 20,000 inhabitants on 31 May 1970, when an ice and granite shelf detached from the mountain's west wall and razed the town from the ground, if not the map. Standing where many died, I quietly pay my respects, not least as we're here to enjoy the very mountain range responsible.

Leaving Yungay, we drive into the hills above a patchwork of cultivation. The fertile environment looks idyllic, but the track through hillside farming communities is rough enough to burst two of our hefty Michelins. Still, the stop gives those not repairing the damage the chance to appreciate the white peaks appearing ahead.

Past the park entrance the deep Llanganuco valley, or *quebrada*, is

WHO'S WRITING?



Terry Adby is a member of The Outdoor Writers & Photographers Guild (www.owpg.org.uk) and co-author of *The Hillwalker's Guide to Mountaineering* (Cicerone Press). He has written on mountaineering, trekking and travel related subjects for numerous newspapers, magazines and websites, as well as on environmental, property, business and financial themes.

home to the turquoise lagoons of the 'female' Lake Chinancocha and 'male' Lake Orconcocha, together representing the duality of things Andino. Orconcocha's shores are dotted with hardy flowers and red *quenual* trees, cliffs on its far side rising directly from the blue-green waters.

A twisting ascent begins towards the Portachuelo de Llanganuco pass (4,780m). One country I know blasted a four-lane highway up its only mountain, calling the resulting travesty 'one of the world's top 10 mountain roads.' But *this* spectacular ascent up countless curves beneath peaks including Huandoy (6,395m), Pisco (5,752m), Chopicalqui (6,354m) and Huascarán truly is. Cyclists who have come up from the gentler side look shell-shocked at the coming descent, views into Llanganuco's scoured depths a lesson in the scale of glaciation.

Passing through the *portachuelo*, we drop to 4,200m and start walking. An easy ridge descends to an open valley, and a watercourse leads down to our first camp at Vaqueria (3,800m), on a grass platform, where we encounter

'Andean ice is retreating, but it's still impressive, especially several million tons at a time'

our first llamas and meet our team of cooks, carriers and animal handlers. To conserve energy ahead of the demanding week, they're playing football. The ball flips off the pitch to a stream below, where one player leaps 10ft down to get it in one hop. Well, that's the fitness test over.

The next day's supposed 'steady 400m ascent' begins with a descent. Unfolding scenes of village life include colourful families selling colourful knitwear. Others, fleecing a sheep, also try to fleece tourists for taking photos. It's almost like they set up that scene deliberately... Donkeys mosey off trail into houses looking for water, while one llama seems more interested in reproduction than load-carrying.

Homemade honey is on sale, and the locally bred delicacy, guinea pig. With so much life it's easy to forget we're nearly 4,000m up, but these are the highest tropical mountains in the world.

Continuing up the Huaripampa Valley, named after Peru's Wari Empire which first created urban society in these sierras, the Matterhorn-shaped Chacaraju appears above the pastures. After a registration checkpoint, the river valley widens, the land laced with the reds of earth, stones and trees, the waters fed from distant heights, including Taulliraju (5,830m), notorious for hard mountaineering routes.

Crossing a rough bridge at a valley junction, fantastic ice formations are revealed up Quebrada Paria on the flanks and ridge of Pavon (5,600m) and Piramide (5,885m). Forking right up the dividing spur, we rejoin the stream's falls and pools, passing a distinctive rock spire, and meeting the renowned Santa Cruz trail (later we'll meet the mountain). Our 4,200m camp is beneath Taulliraju - the 'ice lupine'. On this hot day '400m ascent' exceeded 900m, and over 16km we returned to ▶



Bridging it: a stream crossing made easy (later rivers were crossed on horse back)

the altitude we started at yesterday. They call this 'Andean flat.'

Taulliraju's glaciers spill their cold night air across camp, and the early sun struggles with grey clouds. Animals waiting for loads include llamas, mules, donkeys and two horse 'ambulances' who, yesterday, carried fellow trekkers struggling with altitude-related issues. Before hitting the main *cordillera* we scrambled up to the incredibly scenic 4,600m Lake Churupa near Huaraz, but there's still some acclimatisation to go, and early displays of sunburn suggest breathlessness is not the only hazard.

El Alto de Pucaraju pass (4,684m) looks no more than a scrubby hillside, but a clear trail ascends the slopes, across the white rock of a water slide. In our wake, the animal train is cajoled by *arrieros* (donkey masters), who holler constantly, moving up and down the straggling line. For me, walking silently uphill is effort enough. Huaripampa opens up below, and after 2.5 hours we're at the Pucaraju Pass, beneath Taulliraju's snow summits and dramatic rock walls, draped in cloud. Huascaran and Artesonraju (6,025m) are obscured but the snows of Paron and Piramide line the south-west horizon.

Now, plunging zigzags pass an Andean tarn into a valley of flora and fauna whose micro-climate avoids glacial winds, where we contour the edge, descending into its glaciated depths past the outwash plain and dark waters of Laguna Huacracocha (3,962m), then into the green expanse of Tuctupampa, crossing its river on horseback. Only a mechanical digger and men in fluorescent uniforms working to protect local water supplies disturb the serenity and indigenous valley life. Mess tent dinner of algae soup raises some eyebrows, but the Andes' extensive natural larder includes potatoes, tomatoes and quinoa. I'm impressed by the local ingredients, and I never realised algae could taste so good.

The morning diggers graciously hold off until we leave. Early sun creeps across Tuctupampa, melting the frosts and reflecting off the marshy pools and the animals gathered around. Behind rises the 5,956m Contrahierbas massif, its name – 'against grass' – suggesting not much good stuff grows there. Views ahead give the best take yet on Taulliraju's sharp white ridge.

Now under cold cloud, we cut up to 4,383m Tupatupa pass, amid rolling

summits. The 'ambulances' are again in use. Studying the descent, I don't envy the patient, but we arrive without loss at a breezy glade, where we are threatened by rain and buzzed by caracara birds, which are hawk-like mountain falcons. While they are meant to be auspicious, there's seemingly little to get excited about when suddenly, rounding a corner, the sight is filled by a long, wide and deep ravine beneath high mountains.

Jancapampa, the local 'capital,' instantly feels special. Entering the tranquil settlement of wood, stone and terracotta, and a multitude of animals, in minutes we swap overcast skies for searing heat, and brown hillsides for slopes (and the scent) of tall eucalyptus and other exotics. Meandering streams vein the flat valley floor, issuing from the multiple peaks of Mount Pucajirca, its fat glaciers melting into a fan of waterfalls down the huge valley headwall. Andean ice is retreating, but it's still impressive, especially several million tons at a time. Down in the valley the scale is more gargantuan still, our distant tents like a blue smudge dwarfed by the almost 2,500m wall of red rock, snow, ice and falling white water directly behind. Now that is a campsite.

Scenes of everyday life include family groups out hand-drying crops and bulls locking horns in the wide open spaces. Approaching the tents, women in reds, pinks, blues and distinctive hats are sat in a line – selling beer! We're at a height where such refreshment seems appealing, if not actually advisable, and refusal seems rude (especially at Peruvian prices). Entertainment is provided by Jancapampa's happy kids, hanging around persistently for treats and chats, but never losing their charm.

The next day's dawn lights up Mount Pucajirca's east face, and breakfast in brilliant sunshine follows, as the crew busy themselves simultaneously packing up and serving up. The teamwork is a joy to watch. My old grandad used to joke: "I love work. I could watch it all day," but it's time to move on. Across the meltwaters, a climb begins through a ravine of cool woods, before the Quebrada de Yanajanca flattens to a landscape of open grasses and trees. Ahead the sprawling wall beneath the rock summits of Cerro de Pucajanca (4,946m) stretches across the horizon, looking impenetrable.

Turning parallel to it, the path



Ups and downs were known as 'Andean flat'

'We stroll on down towards Muillacocha, its glaciers glowing above the wild valley and its carpet of green drenched in golden sunlight'

becomes steeper and blockier. Someone takes a tumble, and a horse balks at a precipitous edge. Eventually, surmounting a prominent moraine, we hike up wild pastureland, past even wilder-looking horses and cattle. With a final 300m ascent we end a long upwardly-mobile morning 1,000m higher than we began, emerging directly beneath 6,000m-plus Pucajirca Norte's peaks and glaciers.

A glacial avalanche pours down the rock strata as we rest minutes from the massive shards of angled rock of El Paso de Yanacon (4,610m), the breach through Pucajanca's heights. The donkeys get nervous on the short but slippery ascent. Standing on Yanacon's windy col, Pucajirca's glaciers feel

in touching distance and, below, the empty expanse of Yantaquenua's scooped out valley stretches down to the house that marks the beginning (and apparently the end) of 4,000m Huilca. At night, in a cruel twist, I dream of walking uphill.

The morning carries a brilliance only seen at altitude. Under the bemused gaze of the local householder, we cross a stream to open grasslands, and hundreds of woolly alpaca – a sort of llama-sheep – as the family bring out a hundred or more goats, whose guard dogs have to be warned off our 'ambulances' with well-aimed pebbles.

Walking easily up Tayapampa Valley brings a first view to iconic Alpamayo. It has bigger neighbours but, at 5,947m, ▶

Perfect playground: the Cordillera Blanca

The whole of the Cordillera Blanca, in Peru's Ancash region, is within the Parque Nacional Huascaran. At 180km long and covering 720sq/km, with over 650 glaciers, 250-plus lagoons, more than 30 peaks over 6,000m, many others over 5,000m and numerous trails and high passes, you won't be short of trekking and climbing options! When planning a trip be aware that the names of places, and in particular the spellings, can vary, with Spanish, Quechua and dialects of Quechua all having an influence. Heights given for mountain summits, passes, settlements and similar can also differ.

is hardly diminutive. This, its north-east face, presents the sharp outline of a striking snow-edged blade. A grassy ascent to Mesapata Pass (4,460m) follows, a cool wind and Alpamayo to our backs. Forcing myself ahead to get a trekking group picture, I half throw myself and half fall to the floor as they pass. The mantra 'never rush at altitude' springs to mind as, gaspingly, I gain a picture, but almost lose control of my bodily functions.

Memorable views from Mesapata showcase Alpamayo's impressively muscle-bound neighbours, Pucajirca Central (6,046m), Pucajirca Oeste (6,039m) and 5,450m Pucarashita. Through the pass, a narrow path above the sweeping Quebrada de Mayobamba soon descends to the valley floor. Sun, wind and cloud make heat regulation hard as sloping grasslands head to Mayobamba's campsite, a corrie beyond the extensive debris of an ancient moraine. Above and to the left of the rocky dead-end hang glaciers from Nevado Tayopampa (5,675m), to the right is tomorrow's pass, and coloured scree spill down the nearest slopes.

Morning's grey clouds and red sky carry a threat, like a Scottish morning that could go either way. The sun gets to work as animals are brought in from night-time roaming, and synchronised Andean geese swoop into the corrie bowl. A stony path leads up and across

'Scenes of village life include families selling knitwear, and the locally bred delicacy, guinea pig'

bare slopes towards the notch of the Caracara Pass (4,815m), from where Alpamayo is obscured by rocks, but Quitaraju (6,036m), Abasraju (5,785m) and the three peaks of Santa Cruz (Nevado, 6,241m; Chico, 5,800m and Norte, 5,829m) don't disappoint.

From lower down, mineral-coloured Laguna Jancarurish appears beneath the rust walls and water flows of Alpamayo's glacial snout, and the enormous volume of fractured ice hanging above. It's warmer down in the Quebrada de Alpamayo, with views to the icon's long flat snow ridge, although the summit apex still has its head in the clouds. Avalanches shoot down the high slopes from its immediate neighbour, Jancarurish (5,601m).

We follow the valley river up to stepping stones, and cross to the rough bouldery ascent of the pulses of huge moraine cradling Laguna Jancarurish. From up on the moraine's edge the lagoon's turquoise depths reflect its crumbling inner walls, and clouds

above dissipate to blue sky, finally giving Alpamayo's perfect white pyramid summit the backdrop it merits. Its huge snow and ice load, shaped into crests, crevasses and bergschrunds, looks a frightening prospect. Alpamayo, for all its beauty, is an inherently dangerous climb. The first team to try, in 1948, fell 200m down the north-east face when a cornice collapsed near the summit. Incredibly they survived, but the mountain remained unclimbed until 1957 (four years after Everest).

An airy trail north-west heads back down the *quebrada* towards Muillacochoa (5,295m), bringing us to camp on the valley floor and, soon, a glowing sunset on Alpamayo's unusually horizontal ridge line, which connects its two summits. The snows remain visible all night, and the Earth River's waters echo down the valley.

Our next goal is the 4,770m Vientunan Pass, an unremitting slog west towards the edge of Huascarán National Park, in the most V-shaped part of the valley. First though, we stroll on down towards Muillacochoa, its glaciers glowing above the wild valley, its carpet of green drenched in golden sunlight, ribboned with streams and populated with galloping horses. Gradually leaving behind Alpamayo, its white summit glowing from its own reflection of the strong sun, a steady descent leads us to a ►



The essentials: bright knitwear – and beer!



View stop: dwarfed by a huge glacier

small square of Inca ruins. Then comes a larger riverside settlement, where the population must once have been significant, with a complex of buildings on one side and extensive ancient terracing opposite.

We turn up the hillside and see other terraces below, still in use. Amid numerous cultivated patches, an Andean family farm is carved from the tight space, packed with well-fed animals, the river beneath disappearing between the steep slopes. The massiveness of Muillacocha's plunging flanks opposite becomes ever more apparent, dwarfing the terraced slopes that, from lower down, seemed to reach up so high.

The trail zigs and zags interminably, the sun is strong, and the dusty path is plagued by biting flies that prefer their victims walking. Batting them

'Any trek worth doing includes a moment where you vow to give up trekking. This is it'

off disturbs the rhythm, leaving me exasperated. Any trek worth doing inevitably includes a moment where you cursingly vow to give up trekking. This is it. But lying on the rocky summit of the pass, breathing easier and fly-free, looking across to Muillacocha's impressive snow cap, the decision already seems premature. This ancient way even seems to offer some fundamental connection with humanity.

Our camp at Osusuri (4,650m) is perched on a ledge below, from where a false pass points the way to our highest crossing, Toropishtanan (4,850m). Space for tents, between the ravine of the Quebrado de los Cedros below and an outlying wall of Santa Cruz behind, is at a premium. There are pluses though. Condors and eagles appear from nowhere and, in the intense sunlight, even my apparently defunct solar charger bursts back to life.

A marshy stream bed runs through the camp however, and our tent is wedged amid its grasses, so close to ground water I can touch it. Any rise in water level could be disastrous, but crossing the pass I had stupidly commented that 'great weather' ►



High life: many camping spots were above 4,000m

PERU FOR YOU

Six more alternatives to the Alpamayo Circuit in the adventure Mecca of Peru

1 ALTERNATIVE INCA TRAIL: CHOQUEQUIRAO TO MACHU PICCHU

Fast gaining a reputation as one of Peru's top trekking spots, the challenging hike to the not-so-visited Inca outpost of Choquequirao takes in the rugged and beautiful Cordillera Vilcabamba, before moving on to Machu Picchu itself.

2 THE SIMPSON'S: CORDILLERA HUAYHUASH CIRCUIT

The infamous setting for Joe Simpson's epic, featuring in *Touching the Void*. Further south than Alpamayo, the Cordillera Huayhuash's 'reach out and touch' summits and snows are considered by some to offer the best trekking and climbing destination in all of South America.

3 THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH: AUSANGATE CIRCUIT

This little-visited range has some of the best scenery in the Cusco region. A high and wild trekking circuit runs through alpine valleys which are home to Quechua Indian herdsmen and some rare Andean wildlife, including vicunas (yet another version of the llama).

4 THE CLASSIC: INCA TRAIL AND MACHU PICCHU

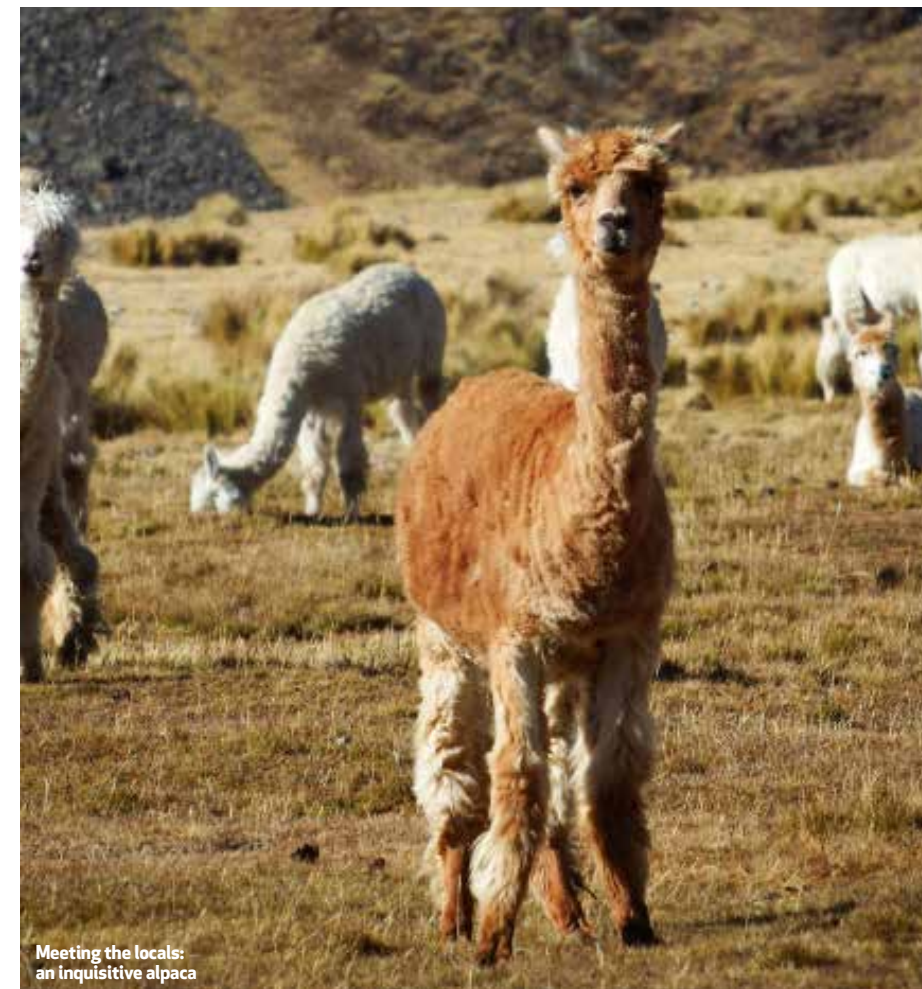
Even Karl Pilkington has done it (well, almost!). The Inca Trail is Peru's must-do, must-see trail for culture buffs and trekkers alike. The classic and most famous Inca trail of them all may not be Peru's quietest, but never fails to meet even the highest of expectations.

5 MESSING ABOUT IN BOATS: THE AMAZON

When you've come down from the mountains, slow down with the sloths and float down the Amazon on a boat ride through the Pacaya-Samiria National Park, the biggest and one of the best in Peru.

6 ON YER BIKE... ON THE PERUVIAN ALTIPLANO

The shore of sacred Lake Titicaca, the world's highest navigable body of water, is the starting point for a classic biking traverse on quiet dirt roads across the high Andes to the Sacred Valley of the Incas, and Machu Picchu.



Meeting the locals: an inquisitive alpaca

tomorrow looked 'guaranteed.' Within five minutes the white clouds grey, and then dispense their load of hail.

An intense yet blurred sunset develops, the sun's rays refracting through the falling ice, creating yellows, then shades of orange, then fiery red. The downpour gradually eases, but only the freezing temperature prevents a washout, and the night is a nervous one. We hear that one of our *arrieros* is a part-time shaman and, in the clear morning, maybe we should thank him.

Two unroped donkeys lead towards Toropishtanan through an undulating landscape of loose rock bands until, from the pass, a solitary Santa Cruz top rears up through translucent cloud, now much closer than yesterday. It gets better as, from a rocky bluff below, we gaze across Lake Cullicocha's shimmering blue expanse to where crumbling glaciers and gleaming snows soar up to the mountain's spectacular ridgeline of crests and summits. Alpamayo is sensational, but are Santa Cruz, Taulliraju and other Cordillera Blanca peaks any less impressive?

The spectacular massif dominates our descent to Cullicocha's plunging

outlet falls, where a path above a pre-Incan aqueduct rises and falls precipitously along the mountainside leading, eventually, to a campsite on a promontory at Huischca (3,992m), overlooking Haulacayan's picturesque patchwork of fertile farmland. The gaping Huaylas Valley, below, is bordered on the far side by the Cordillera Blanca's snowless counterpart, the Cordillera Negra or 'Black Range.'

Trekking provides important work for Peru's Quechua Indian mountain communities, and great experiences often rely on a great local crew like ours. On our hilltop lookout, they now set about the ritual preparation of a *pachamanca*, or 'earth pot': a meal of Andean meats and vegetables baked in rocks in the ground, covered with grasses and mud. Both the food and the tradition go deep, with connections between earth and the heavens central to Quechua beliefs, in which mountains play a crucial role in recycling life-giving waters between rivers in the earth and the sky. It's hard to imagine a better way to celebrate the Earth River, and the flood of other beautiful peaks of Peru's Cordillera Blanca. **AT**

Going grey: clouds threatened, but the weather mostly held



Epic landscape: Terry concluded that Alpamayo was beautiful... but so were all the other peaks



LET'S GO

Want to do what Terry did? Here's how you can...

Get there

From the UK, fly to the Peruvian capital Lima – preferred airlines by my group were Avianca and KLM. From Lima it's about an eight-hour drive to Huaraz, and from there you go via Carhuaz and Yungay into the Huascaran National Park (private 4WD essential to get very far).

When to go

The core trekking time and best chance for dry weather in the Cordillera Blanca is June, July and August, but the shoulder seasons extend this to May to September.

What to take

This trek requires pretty much normal walking and camping gear for, say, a trip to Scotland in the spring, although if you pick your time the sunny days will be warmer, and overall it will almost certainly be drier, though nights are cold because of the altitude. Reasonably light boots were fine in the conditions we faced, but the ground can be watery, there is plenty of scree and boulders, and four-season boots are certainly not over the top. Must-haves include head cover, sunglasses, sunscreen, thermal tops, a first aid kit and a good sleeping bag. Some energy gels and bars could come in useful on some of the longer ascents.

The maximum height on this trek is just under 4,900m. Inevitably there were

acclimatisation issues but, as I understand, nobody used Diamox. A solar charger is handy for electronic devices and a decent Garmin with an altimeter and compass makes life more interesting too.

Last-minute gear

If you need any last-minute kit, Huaraz has a climbing community and a number of proper outdoor shops that sell real equipment (as well as some less authentic stuff). Prices are similar to elsewhere though. You can also hire basics such as boots, water-proofs or technical climbing gear from a lady called Mila at Andean Summit in the centre of Huaraz.

Money

You can sometimes use US dollars but Peruvian money is much more useful, and better value. The currency is the Peruvian sol (or nuevo sol) and one pound sterling is approximately five soles. It's not hard to find exchange places in Lima and Huaraz, but dollars, and even euros, are easier to change than pounds sterling, with larger denominations the best.

Maps and guidebooks

The Alpenvereinskarte 03/a Cordillera Blanca Nord (Peru) Trekking Map (1:100,000) is an excellent map produced by the Austrian Alpine Club, with terrain, heights, routes, campsites, roads, tracks and names

all clearly marked (available from www.stanfords.co.uk). In Peru you may come across some cheaper, smaller, simpler maps of mountain regions by an illustrator called Felipe Diaz Bustos. They are not detailed enough for walking, but they are compact, nicely illustrated and can be useful for easy orientation, or general travel.

For general orientation I used Lonely Planet's *South America on a Budget* and Footprint's *Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador*, although both publishers do a range of country guides.

The Alpamayo Circuit passes through Andean Quechua Indian communities and a little research will give it some context and make it more meaningful (admittedly I did most of mine after the trek). A good map will make more sense of the landscape.

Who to go with

I travelled on Keswick-based KE Adventure Travel's Alpamayo Circuit trek, which is 15 days in total (12 days of trekking). It costs from £2,495 including flights, or from £1,695 land only. See www.keadventure.com.

Everything was superbly organised. KE Adventure Travel has been running treks in Peru for over 15 years, and also offers good trekking, climbing and adventure options across the border in Bolivia.

For a range of cultural and extension activities throughout South America, check out www.latinamericajourneys.guru.