

DOGS OF CUSCO



When we booked our "dog free" vacation last fall, when I really knew nothing about Cusco and much of Peru. I had always wanted to go to S. America, and my good friends were keen on seeing Machu Picchu before they started limiting tourists. With a little research, we all decided to spend some time at the base city, Cusco, where we could travel to Machu Picchu easily.. Little did I know that in this city, I would be captivated by a community of dogs in a different way than I was accustom.

Cusco sits at 11,000 feet in Peru.

When we arrived, our flight and taxi ride to our rented house exposed me to poverty and at the same time, the beauty of Cusco. Streets were crowded, and many buildings were



either very nice, or in despair. We got to our house and after unpacking, decided to explore some of the city.

Roads were crowded and very narrow, sometimes barely wide enough for our car.

There are thin sidewalks that hugged the buildings and homes. When you were walking, you needed to pay attention to buses as they passed, their mirrors could hit you. Cusco is on the side of a hill, so most of our travels involved going uphill and downhill. Most of our day trips in the city were by foot, but occasionally they were with a tour guide in a small van.



One of the first things I observed of course, were these dogs. They were quite abundant, roaming the streets and sleeping on the sidewalks. They didn't seem to have a common genetic background, as some were large, others small, and all were different colors and hair coats. I was concerned at first, seeing them dodge in and out of busy traffic, as no one seem to be in control of them.

The lesson or education I got during the next few days would make most Americans very uncomfortable. No one directing or controlling these animals, who seem to be navigating their lives without our help. Yet, at other times I got the feeling a dog belong to a family or shop, but most of the time, I saw them have no loyalty but to themselves and their own life. The people of Cusco liked them, but expected them to weave themselves into the community.



We as dog trainers and owners, don't give our dogs enough credit to be responsible in their own lives. We take control, and measure their happiness by ours. But the dogs of Cusco seemed very happy and so it was confusing at first. How could they be so

happy and authentic when there was no one to direct their lives? How could they be happy without direction or a leader?

I think most of it lies in the fact that the citizens of Cusco expect the dogs to be responsible. Not once did I see a person chasing or yelling at a dogs. We saw plenty of dogs at the food market, roaming about and stopping at the food court. Not once did I see a dog try to take advantage and beg or steal food. All were respectful, and seemed welcome at the market. Some times they traveled in the neighborhood in small groups, but most of the time I saw them alone without dog friends or human. Occasionally I would see someone throw food toward a dog, or a dog



waiting for a person to finish their meal.



Somehow they were expected to figure out the crazy traffic. It was as busy as I have seen in big cities. Yet, I never saw one dog hit by a car or bus, despite no real help to navigate traffic. We expected to see dead animals on the roadside, or in the middle of the road, but we were pleasantly surprised to not see any dog not make it in the roads.

In our short time, we happen to see some of the same individuals and many seemed to have a routine.

Sometimes it was lying out in the middle of a crowded busy sidewalk, being asleep each morning as I passed through. At other times, it was more of a route they took each day to check their territory. After one religious festival, I saw the dogs come out and scour the ground for their next meal, occasionally claiming an area and keeping other dogs astray.





or

Some of the dogs we met were friendly, some paid no attention to us or the locals. We never saw a dog barking guarding a home or shop, as each understood that didn't seem to be needed. When I would walk by a sleeping dog, he might raise his eyebrows to check on me, but we never had one jump up and run away. They existed within their community and felt at ease with those who traveled through it.

Watching those remarkable dogs, my attitude changed during the week. I was no longer nervous when I saw a dog get near a busy road, nor did I worry when I saw one running down the sidewalk without any apparent owner. I started to enjoy seeing them for what they were, and not what I thought they should be. I looked forward to passing by a shop and seeing if the same dog was asleep in front of the shop as the days before.



The rest of our group also relaxed when we saw dogs on the street. One evening we were coming home late on a bus, and we were taken through one of the poorer neighborhoods in Cusco. Each day, trash was dumped on several corners for the city to clean up during the early morning hours. Although the mounds of trash seemed

shocking to most of us, the dogs had found a place to find food. High on the mounds were several dogs scavenging through the days trash.

The badger face dog shown next to us is one that was roaming in the Sacred Valley. Of course we all immediately liked him as he looked like he possibly could have some Border Collie or sheepdog in him. He was the ambassador to the tourist attraction we were visiting. He gladly came up to us and greeted us, but soon let us know he belonged to no one and was on his way to visit another section of the exhibit. My ego was a bit deflated that he didn't want to be with us, but he was independent of our needs, and familiar only with his needs.

I thought about my dogs back home. Would they be able to survive in this environment? The dogs of mine that are the most similar would be the guard dogs for the sheep. They are responsible for themselves for the most part, and actually have taken on the responsibility of the flock. They could easily leave, or not protect their community, but they choose to stay,



and become part of the farm. They look to us for some companionship and occasional meals, but truly they are responsible for themselves and the community that they have bonded.

When we left the city, we no longer had the same attitude towards the dogs, their independence or their safety. We understood that the community's relationship with dogs was much different than ours, but possibly we could learn a few things from them. Mostly, that dogs could be more responsible than what many of us give them credit for.