**Spring Break Trip to Machu Picchu**

During the March 2012 semester break, a group of twenty geological engineering students (thirteen undergraduates and seven graduates) traveled to Peru, accompanied by Drs. Anderson.

Our flight arrived in the Peruvian capital city of Lima in the late evening on Friday, March 23rd. Our still-energetic group was bused from the airport to our hotel in the beautiful Miraflores district – an hour-long journey that gave our students a glimpse into Peruvian summer-time weekend nightlife. A short night and a simple buffet-style breakfast were followed by a return trip to the Lima airport and an uphill airplane ride that terminated in the two-mile high city of Cusco, the capital of the former Inca Empire.

We spent Saturday afternoon sightseeing in the heart of historical Cusco, little more than a stone’s throw away from our delightful, multi-hundred year-old hotel. Everyone was more than impressed by the Koricancha Sun Temple and the Cusco’s large indoor market (complete with pig’s heads, coca leaf tea, and literally hundreds of other unusual commodities). Even those of us who suffered from mild altitude sickness were delighted by our introduction to the past and present cultures of the Peruvian Andes.

Our group spent Sunday morning horseback riding through the mountains immediately outside of Cusco. Our horses were spirited, but relatively well-behaved, and we all dismounted with smiles on our faces and visions of magnificent scenery forever etched in our minds. The accompanying afternoon was spent touring three inspiring archeological ruins near Cusco. We were all impressed by the size of many of the massive multi-ton sculpted limestone blocks that had been transported by a culture that used neither wheels nor pack animals. Amazingly, especially for a culture without metal-chiseling tools, many of the limestone blocks fit together so snugly that a pencil lead could not have been inserted into any of the seams.

On Monday, our group visited the Tipon Inca archeological site, the Piquillaqta pre-Inca archeological site and Andahuaylillas Catholic Church (aka Peru’s Sistine Chapel). Tipon is a must-see! The centerpieces of the site are the agricultural terraces that extend up the valley and the multi-mile hand-constructed cut-rock aqueducts that once irrigated this cultivated land. Piquillaqta was impressive, mostly because of its size, but more primitive than the Inca structures it preceded. The Andahuaylillas Catholic Church was impressive, in part because of its history, as Spanish policy was to erect Churches on the razed ruins of every Incan Temple in an effort to eradicate every trace of the indigenous people's religion.

On Tuesday, we toured two breathtakingly beautiful archeological sites: Pisac and Ollantaytambo. As spectacular as the archeological sites were, for some students, the highlights of the day were the time spent at the amazing craft market in Pisac and their visit to the small hand-operated alpaca textile weaving factory.

On Wednesday morning, most of the group trekked up to the mountain-top QachiC’ata
granite quarry early Wednesday morning. Their reward was their visit to an ancient quarry, additional insight into the engineering practices of the Inca, and the discovery of a long-abandoned tomb containing the neatly-arranged remains of at least four ancient Incan people. Wednesday afternoon was spent visiting the circular terraces of Moray (Inca agricultural experimental site) and the still-operating salt mines of Maras. On Wednesday evening, we traveled by train to the small village at the base of the mountain known as Machu Picchu.

On Thursday morning we arose and boarded a bus that took us upwards to the magnificent structure archeological Incan ruin atop Machu Picchu (along multiple switchbacks and around an equal number of sharp corners). As everyone discovered, Machu Picchu is truly inspiring. The archeological structures remain much as they were when the city was abandoned by the Inca, as the site was unknown to the Spanish and was therefore neither looted nor desecrated. The view from every single location is also absolutely spectacular as the city sits atop a mountain and is encircled by mountains.

On Friday, we traveled by train and bus from Machu Picchu to Cusco and boarded a flight bound for Lima. The train trip, in daylight hours this time, was inspiring as we were visually treated to spectacular landslides, numerous spectacular Inca ruins, and majestic mountains.

That afternoon we flew back to Lima, with an air of cultural familiarity one wouldn’t normally acquire in a week’s time. Friday evening was spent sightseeing (in groups of three or more!) and shopping. Saturday morning was spent bus-touring historic Lima and exploring the catacombs, complete with literally tens of thousands of sets of neatly-arranged human remains. Saturday afternoon was free time for all!

Many of us spent Saturday afternoon relaxing on Lima’s glorious (but stone-covered) beaches. The sun was intense, but no one was careless enough to burn. The water was cool – but not cold. The waves were powerful which made wading in slowly and acclimatizing one’s tummy to the less-than-warm ocean-water a physical impossibility. Needless to say, we were all a bit sad to say good-bye to the Pacific Ocean.

We left Lima late that same evening with memories and friendships that will last a lifetime!