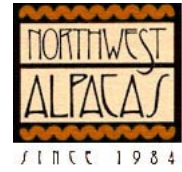




In Search Of The World's Finest Alpacas

By Mike Safley

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The phone rang. It was 6:30 a.m. on my birthday, March 16, 1995. I was half asleep when Phil Mizrahie, of The Pet Center, asked me if I would like to fly to Peru and participate in the selection of 600 alpacas. A moment later I was wide awake and said, "Yes! When do I leave?" "Next Wednesday," he said. So began an alpaca adventure I will never forget. I flew to Miami and met up with several members of the selection team. Bill Barnett had just arrived from Seattle, Mary Reed flew in from Ohio and Fred Swift whom I'd never met arrived from Vermont. We boarded the plane at 11:59 p.m., headed for Lima and a change of planes for the flight into Cusco, the ancient capital city of the Inca empire.

Cusco has been called the "navel of the world." Once home of the Inca Sun Kings and later the Spanish conquistadors. The city sets in a narrow green valley, girdled by red clay hills and towering blue-green mountains. There is a rich history to be found on every corner and many of Cusco's modern buildings are resting on perfectly cut, man-sized foundation stones, each laid in the time of the Inca. The alpaca is persistent part of the Cusco's past, so this was the ideal point of departure for our adventure.

Jim Vickers met us at the airport and we were soon joined by Anthony Sachowski. Dr. Walter Bravo caught up with us at the Hotel Cusco. As we loaded our gear into three white Toyota land cruisers, Rufino, the Peruvian veterinarian, the "government man" and "computer", our Peruvian money man joined us to round out the team. Each land cruiser came equipped with a driver and at 1 p.m. we pulled out of Cusco and headed for Macusani, center of the Alpaca universe.

Our mission had been clearly defined -- buy only the world's finest alpacas. Tom Hunt of the International Animal Exchange had organized the million details that were necessary to accomplish our goal. Jim Vickers was our leader; this was his third trip to the Altiplano, he knew the roads, which towns were safe to stop in, and, most important of all, where to find thousands of alpacas. All in all, we looked at ten thousand alpacas in eight days. We purchased six hundred and three, each one an outstanding example of the breed.

There is only one way to travel to Macusani -- over land, over mountains, and through rain choked rivers. The roads are narrow, rough, rocky, and often non-existent. The ten-hour journey reminded me of the famous rock song Shake, Rattle, and Roll.

As we broke over the mountain pass and descended down the winding path into Macusani, I realized there is nothing soft about Peru. Jagged, staggering, harsh, and stark are the adjectives which come to mind. The Indians are stoic, their faces reflecting the solitude of the Peruvian Altiplano. The alpaca is one of the few living things to prosper in these circumstances, always beautiful, faithfully providing life's basics to their Quecha Indian masters.

We made camp that evening in the Rural Alianza compound on the outskirts of town. We were tired, our kidneys and backsides pounded by the journey. But everyone was excited. Tomorrow morning we would visit Don Julio Barreda's fabled Accoyo.

Jim had decided to make Accoyo our first stop. He wanted us to begin with the best, setting the standard for our eight days of selection. We went to sleep under crystal clear skies full of diamond-like stars. Three hours later, I awoke to the sound of hail hammering the tin roof of our hut. In Peru, Mother Nature rules. Morning found the ground white with snow. Breakfast was sopa and huevos. We left town, immediately crossing our first river of the day. Peru has far more rivers than bridges and on more than one occasion I

wasn't sure our land cruiser would navigate the rushing river we were attempting to cross. Next we came upon a still mountain lake; standing in the middle was a magnificent pink flamingo! Peru constantly surprises, changes, and charms even the most experienced traveler.

Accoyo is set at the base of a huge out crop of rock. The main house is white. There is a suri and a huacaya, designed by Don Julio, painted six feet high on either side of his front door. Rock corrals run up the hill and a cook house, with smoke curling from its thatched roof, sits out back.

Don Julio knew most of us from his journeys to the United States in 1991 and 1994. He had been to my home; now I was thrilled to be at his. Everyone shook hands, took pictures, and then our host insisted we eat. I kept looking around, but there weren't any alpacas to be seen. I had waited for years to see his famous herd, now I'd wait a little longer. Over the hill they came, first appearing as white silhouettes in the snow -- over 175 females, all of them breathtaking! We went to work checking each animal. Jim Vickers and Bill Barnett checked bite, ears, vulva, feet, teats, and legs. Fred Swift, who has raised sheep for years, and I inspected their fleece. Anthony graded wool coverage, their heads, and overall appearance. Mary Reed was in charge of record keeping and Dr. Bravo ultrasounded to determine pregnancy. Every alpaca chosen had to meet everyone's approval. Rufino tagged the ears of the ones we chose and harvested a fiber sample from the mid-point of each animal.

After several hours, we had selected 71 females. Each was extremely dense. We sheared them later



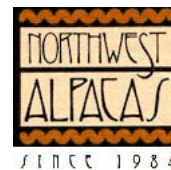
in Tacna and many of them had twelve pounds of fleece from one year's growth. They were also very crimped, with fine, uniform fleece. Subsequent micron tests performed by Yokum-McColl Testing Laboratories in Denver documented micron counts as low as 17, with standard deviations of less than 4 microns.

Next was a lunch of lamb, potatoes, and sopa. As we began eating, Don Julio told us how he selected first for density and body size, then fiber fineness. His best males sheared 16 pounds of fleece after one year's growth and had very low micron counts, standard deviations, and co-efficient of variations. After lunch, we saw exactly what he

meant as 75 males came marching through the pasture on their way to the corrals.

The next few hours were spent selecting twenty huacaya and five suri males. After the males were chosen, we picked 25 suri females. We didn't quite realize it then, but we had just seen and selected some of the finest alpacas in Peru and the world. As we continued on our journey, day in and day out, we looked over thousands of Alpacas to find maybe a hundred that met the exacting standard set that first day at Don Julio's Accoyo Ranch.

It was getting dark as we had a dinner of sopa and potatoes. In Peru there is sopa for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. For variety we would have meat and potatoes in our sopa and then change at the next meal to potatoes and meat. The next day we would eat just meat, and the day after that potatoes. Life is basic in the Altiplano and I began to wonder why the alpaca, with its luxurious fleece, multiple colors, and soft manner had chosen to call the harsh Peruvian mountains home.



In Search Of The World's Finest Alpacas

The next day was Sunday and we arrived at Conchatunca in the early morning. This ranch is vast and supports over 12,000 alpacas and 50 families. Jose Luis Gomez is the manager. He limped out to greet us and explained that he had recently broken his foot playing soccer. But, it didn't seem to slow him down as he prepared to show us several thousand alpacas.

The cowboys of Conchatunca were proud of their alpacas. We first purchased 25 colored animals from a herd of 1,000. This ranch was the only operation we found purposely breeding for color. They had a number of vicuna colored animals and we purchased one outstanding male of this coloration. It was very interesting to observe the quality of the colored alpacas. In general, they were not as good as the whites and fawns which we had inspected and we had to search through many more alpacas to find the ones which met our exacting standards. It's my opinion that we generally have better colored alpacas in the United States.

The rest of our day was spent selecting 75 white females from over 1,200 head. The Conchatunca alpacas were very dense and had uniformly attractive heads. Eventually, we came back to this ranch and purchased a few more females.

On Monday, we moved our camp to Antacalla, a ranch near the town of Nunoa. The suris we found there were exquisite. The fleece on some these alpacas tested 15 microns, which is, without a doubt, some of the finest suri fleece in the world.

The huacayas at Antacalla were not the measure of the suris. We had to look at hundreds of animals to pick just a few. After rejecting over 100 alpacas without selecting one, a cowboy from the ranch became tired of our picky manner and invited me to enter the pen with all the culls. He said, in perfect English, "Hey mister, you go" pointing at the corral full of rejected animals.

That evening we had dinner with Julio Cuba, president of Rural Alianza co-op and Jose Louis Apaza, their head veterinarian and production manager. Their co-op is the largest in Peru, the herd numbering more than forty thousand.

Fifteen years ago there were 40 alpaca co-ops in the Altiplano. After five years of Alan Garcia's recent presidency, there were only five. Garcia broke up the co-ops by mandating that the land be divided and granted to individuals along with their share of the livestock. The policy has had a disastrous effect on alpaca breeding and few large operations survived.

Rural Alianza had enough foresight to counter the trend by offering the individual families the opportunity to contribute their land and animals to a new business entity which would allow them to keep the herd together and continue as a large venture. After starting with 16,000 alpacas in 1976, they have grown and prospered. The fiber produced on their land is recognized as some of Peru's finest. Their alpacas dominate the blue ribbons at alpaca shows around Peru.

Apaza shared his breeding and selection plan with us. His first goal was to raise the absolute number of the herd. He used only his best males, but kept all his females. Once the herd numbered 40,000 he began culling. He looked first at confirmation and body size, then fleece, and finally, in the case of males, testicles.

He began culling 90% of his males, selling them for meat. The females were further culled if they failed to produce 4.5 pounds of fiber. Once this program began to take hold, he raised his fiber production requirement to 5.5 pounds per Alpaca per year. Dr. Apaza was proud of his "Plantel" herd (the royal family), saying that many of his males shear over 14 pounds after one year's growth.

Fineness is looked upon favorably when selecting animals in Peru, but since the manufacturers pay only by weight, not fineness, breeders do not place as much emphasis on fine fleeced animals. This is one criteria which Apaza thinks will change in the near future. I've also spoke with fiber buyers who are considering paying a premium for fineness. The ironic part is that manufacturers grade for fineness and often double or triple the price for alpaca which grades at 20 to 22 microns, but they won't pay producers any premium for finer fleece.

Julio Cuba began a color breeding project within Alianza three years ago. They are currently breeding all the different colors to one another. Once they have sufficient numbers of animals, they will begin breeding black to black and brown to brown. Since the colored alpacas have long been ignored in the Altiplano, he feels this project will take some time to produce the same quality found in the white herds. U.S. breeders can take heart -- we are ahead of South America in producing high quality colored animals.

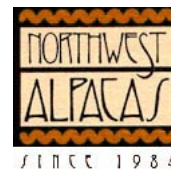
That next day, government man, dressed in his leather coat, tan polyester pants, and black loafers, sat beside me at breakfast and said, in perfect English, "My name is Edgar, good morning." These were the first words he had spoken for four days in either English or Spanish.

I learned Edgar was on the trip to ensure that no animals were purchased from FMD infested areas. He was certifying each purchase. He also told me that the Peruvian government had recently completed a census of alpacas. He said there were 2.1 million alpacas in Peru, 1% of which were suri. Louis Apaza disputed this statistic, saying there were 1.6 million alpacas in Peru and that 5% of them were suri. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

We came back through Macusani, the town where Don Julio was once mayor, on our way to a ranch named Huaripina. The green hills and mountains that surround Macusani are punctuated by herds of white alpacas tended by Indian women dressed in skirts of brilliant blue, yellow, and red. The town itself is arranged around a central square, which is dominated by a huge barrel roofed church. The streets have recently acquired lights and a beautiful new red brick school has just been built by Alberto Fuji Mori, the popular Peruvian President.

I have been traveling to Peru for five years. The change during that time has been dramatic and all for the better. Our caravan of alpaca adventurers would not have been safe only two or three years ago. The Sendero Luminoso or Shining Path terrorists dominated the highlands until just recently. Even today, Walter Bravo and Rufino urged the caravan to keep moving through certain small towns along our path.

As we approached Huaripina, traveling down what has to be the world's worst road, we could see several thousand alpacas being herded out of the hills. The fact that no one had experienced a shower for several days, and our sleeping quarters were cold and without electricity or bathrooms, made no difference to our alpaca-addicted selection team. We were totally focused on finding only the finest alpacas. Here was more opportunity. We were as close to heaven, 16,000 feet, as we would ever get and enjoying every minute of our days.



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It was at Huaripina that the team met its match. It came in the form of Jorge, a young Quecha boy. When we arrived Jorge spoke no English. By the time we left, he could say "Look, look, champion, hey mister, you like, you buy." Jorge's sales technique involved slipping up on a particularly nice alpaca, grabbing its neck and holding on until he had the animal under control. Then he would holler, "Hey, mister!" until one of us would inspect his catch. He assured us that every alpaca we purchased was a champion and he sold us a lot of them.

As the day wore on, we would give Jorge some candy or bread which he would immediately share with his young entourage. I asked Walter, "What is the Spanish word for salesman?" "Vendador," he replied. I immediately proclaimed Jorge, Peru's finest alpaca Vendador! I told him that he had a job at Northwest Alpacas anytime he pleased. I wanted to take him home with me and install him as Marketing Director at the ranch.

Our odyssey wound down and it was time to head home, prepare for the Celebrity Sale in Oklahoma City, and get ready to return to Peru for the mid-April sale in Tacna. Everyone on our team was convinced that we had truly purchased some of the world's finest alpacas. But what would the buyers think?

The Peruvian Five Star Sale was made up of twenty lots numbering fifteen alpacas each. Individual lot buyers selected their alpacas in the same order as their name was drawn out of a hat. After three days of preview, the actual picking of the animals began. When the sale was complete, 365 alpacas had been sold.

Did our team actually select the world's finest alpacas? Jude Anderson, of Australia, summed up the buyers' feelings when she said, "These alpacas are a cut above, very nice, all in all a very uniform lot." Another purchaser remarked, "They are all very impressive animals. Even the ones I've rated a little lower are very nice. I've tried to be super critical and there is just not much to dislike."

The trip, by any standard, was a success. Jim Vickers was an outstanding leader and the entire team worked well together. The alpacas, which will arrive in the U.S. later this year(1995), will add high quality genes to the genetic base of our domestic herd. I've already had calls from Australia wanting to purchase the alpacas I acquired in Tacna. Word travels fast and the U.S. is rapidly gaining the reputation of being home to some of the World's Finest Alpacas.