

Postcards from Iquitos, Peru
By Thomas “Thos” Hawley ’66

March 16: My wife, Marijke and I are quarantined in a hotel in Iquitos, Peru. Our room looks out over the Plaza de Armas. When we arrived, the roads surrounding the Plaza were jammed with Tuktuks and the plaza itself was filled with locals. Now the streets are quiet and the plaza empty save for a few armed soldiers who are on 24 hour patrol. We arrived here on March 12 and, along with other travelers, boarded the Zaphiro, a small cruise ship, for the purpose of spending a week observing the flora and fauna of the upper Amazon.

Three days into our cruise when we were 120 miles upstream, our captain was informed that the Peruvian borders had been closed and ordered back to the port of Iquitos. By and large, the passengers accepted this news with surprising equanimity except for the undersigned who, I confess, broke into uncontrollable sobbing at the prospect of an indefinite quarantine in a remote Peruvian town.

Upon arrival, one and 1/2 days later, we were met with a large team in full hazmat gear, our temperatures taken, and loaded on a bus bound for the Iquitos Double Tree Inn accompanied by an impressive convoy of police cars with lights flashing.

March 17: There 40 travellers, from the U.S. and Canada, in quarantine with us. We cannot go outside as a result of the police stationed just outside the hotel door. However we cannot (and do not) complain since we are aware of other less fortunate travelers who are stranded either in eco-lodges or boats on the Amazon who we are advised have little communication with the outside world and are experiencing dwindling food supplies, backed up toilets, and oppressive heat. So although each member of our group is, at least outwardly, treating this as an adventure, many have private worries such as crucial prescriptive drugs that are running out.

March 18: This has been a day of high drama. We were told at 2:00 that we were booked on a plane to Lima leaving at 5:00 p.m., that there would be a police escort to the airport and that there was a humanitarian evacuation plane that would take us to Miami late tonight. So we all packed our bags and began to assemble in the lobby. At 3:00 we were told that the flight to Lima had been cancelled (and presumably the police escort, too.) The reason was that since there is a curfew in Peru commencing at 8:30 p.m. and since our flight, if delayed would arrive after that, there was no way for us to make it to our hotel which was located about 20 yards from the main doors of the airport. So we will be here for at least another night. This is so typical of “emergency” situations where there is just a lot of bad information, some of it coming from reliable sources, that is constantly raising false expectations. (“A sail, a sail! No, sorry, it’s just a cloud.”). Anyway we’re fine for now but, of course, would love to be back home.

March 19: Today nothing changed. Even the rumors of imminent salvation have gone dark. Most of us have contacted our senators or representatives but the emails we receive in return usually start with “Thank you for reaching out to us but” and then go on at way too much length to say there is nothing to be done. When (if) I get back I will dedicate the rest of my life to making the use of “thank you for reaching out to us” a felony. When asked at a press conference what was being done to bring the Americans back from Peru, Trump said he had turned the whole thing

over to the army which I'm pretty sure was the first the army had heard about that. Spirits are still high and there is a real effort among this group to help each other out. This afternoon our tour guide arranged to have a local doctor come to the hotel and write out prescriptions for those of us whose pills were running low. However, there's no way of knowing if the drugs can be found in this out-of-the-way place. It seems amazing but our cruise would still be going on if it hadn't been aborted—an indication of the slow passage of time in quarantine. People mark time by the meals which feel like they're an eternity apart. But, bottom line, we're still safe, comfortable and in good spirits.

March 20: We have been out to the United States for eight days and it feels like a month. My daughter, Inga Hawley, Senior Director, Environment and Renewable Energy, Winrock International, Washington, D.C. has come through in a big way for our group. She contacted a friend of hers in the State Department in Lima and put me in touch with him. All other attempts to contact our embassy have been met with busy signals or recordings advising that we should wash our hands, and, implicitly, stop bothering them. Inga's contact gave me the information that we needed, to wit, the contact information for the individual at State in Lima who was in charge of getting the Peruvian government to approve the flight plan of a charter jet flying to Iquitos from the U.S. The cost is huge but my State contact told me that, although there were attempts to set up humanitarian airlifts, we were better off making our own plans. So we are now taking a head count of those Americans in our group (14) who are willing to sign on to this solution. The charter plane only has room for 13 passengers so we are hoping that at least one (but no more since the cost is divided among all of us) will opt out. If no one does, I just hope we are not headed for a "Lord of the Flies" situation. (But just in case I have secretly acquired a conch shell.)

We are all quietly comparing notes as to which one of us we would most want to leave behind and there is, not surprisingly, near unanimity on this point and just so you know it is neither Marijke nor me. Rumors are again swirling to the effect that tomorrow State will advise us as to the planes that will be flying in to take us home; but after talking tonight to Inga about her experience in getting out of Liberia during the Ebola epidemic and the lackadaisical attitude of State, I think we should continue with our plans to solve this problem on our own.

March 21-22: No change in our condition yesterday so nothing to report. We continue to have direct contact with the State department (thank you, Inga) but it is clear they are aware of no specific details to get us out. However late yesterday we all got a message from the State Department advising that two commercial carriers had taken about 900 Americans out of Lima but there is no specific information as to when or if there will be future flights. And, of course, our condition is complicated by being in Iquitos—not Lima. Iquitos is in Northern Peru on the Amazon River. It is remote, being the only city I know of with no access in or out by vehicular traffic. There is also the question of what happens to us if we get back to the U.S. Will we be quarantined like the large cruise ship passengers? If we are landed in Miami can we find transportation to California and if not what do we do if all hotels have been closed (as they have).

Our country's inadequate response to the virus has all of us here concerned, especially since we see the Peruvians doing such a good job. In this town, there is almost no one on the street and

our hotel, for example, has built a decontamination area just inside the front door that those few staff members who are not housed on the fifth floor have to submit to. And outside almost nothing (except for the soldiers) moves. We continue to work on hiring a private charter but our last word from the State Department was that this was a “no go”. The only news channel we get is CNN which has devoted 100% of its news to the virus causing me to wonder what major new stories (Russia invading Finland? Mass bombing of civilians in Syria? Kim Kardashian undergoing liposuction?) are being ignored by the mainstream media. Just now we are watching the people in Washington DC crowding together to celebrate the Cherry Blossom Festival. Is there no hope?

A word about our group: There are 22 of us, roughly 70% of whom are birders. Birders are remarkable in their joy over simple pleasures--for example, a momentary flash of blue in the jungle foliage (identified by our naturalist as a Plum Throated Cotinga) engenders the purest joy among them. The homogeneity of the entire group is also remarkable—except for two family members, they appear to be all over 60. Except for us, they are all on their first marriage (at least this appears to be the case); with one exception none are overweight; most take some form of exercise; there is not a single person who has a good word to say about our president; they are very bright and well educated, and they all seem to be gentle souls so that (with one exception) no one has tried to grab the limelight but, instead, all have been quietly, patiently and cooperatively working to find a solution to our predicament. However, just like in high school, it was not long before the “popular group” coalesced consisting of 3 couples (of which, sadly, we are not one) with the rest of us forming the “dork” class in which we hope, however, that we are at least in its upper echelon. Each day that we are compelled to hang out with each other I cannot but think of Satre’s classic, “No Exit”, which, time permitting, I intend to read some day.

Here I simply must give a shout out to International Adventures, who organized this trip and specifically to our Peruvian guide, Dennis Osario, who has stuck with us throughout and sits at his computer all day in the lobby, trying to gather as much information as he can so he can chart the best course for us.

Today we had a visit from a self described “honorary Ambassador” from Austria (which is not exactly the person from whom we most wanted a visit) who didn’t have much to say other than to be sure to have at least \$250 in our wallets in the event we get the word to move out. Unfortunately, Marijke and I have \$20 between us having, after a boozy lunch at the trip’s inception, made a generous cash donation to the “Manatee Wildlife Fund”. Problem is, if we venture out of our hotel in search of cash, we may get arrested or, worse yet, shot so for the time being we are chalking this up as just one more of the unresolved problems we face. One thing the “Ambassador” told us was there are 10,000 Americans trapped in Peru and since our number is only 40 it may be some time before we attract much attention. (Our information is that there are closer to 2,000 Americans here.)

Although this is bad news for us, it is worse news for those Americans that are still stuck in wildlife refuges or boats on the Amazon for whom, unlike us, the suffering must be acute.

March 23: [I’m about to make a brief digression to provide you with an important observation about human nature that will serve you well on your future travels, so listen carefully. There are

two types of travellers: conversationalists and narrators. Conversationalists enjoy a back and forth repartee and at least give the appearance of being interested in what you have to say. Narrators believe their mission on the cruise, and indeed on earth, is to entertain you with endless stories about themselves without any thought as to how conceivably this personal saga might be of interest to you. At some point you will be given the opportunity to choose your dining companions. Need I say it? Pick conversationalists or dine alone.]

Today the hope is that we will be able to charter a private jet that will take us from Iquitos to Miami on Tuesday. There actually seems to be some coordination between State and the government here to bring this about but, needless to say, all of us remain hopeful but skeptical.

Our tour guide, Dennis, has been monitoring the situation at the Lima airport and reports that it is truly dreadful. The incoming travellers are in lockdown inside the airport with no creature comforts (such as cots) other than those that already exist at the airport. Those trying to leave Lima, including many Americans, are locked out of the airport and some are living on the street. The only good news is that taxis are running and there is now room at the local hotels for those who can afford it.

Today, when we look out at the Plaza de Armas we see locals standing in a line that stretches for a block and then disappears around the corner. They are waiting to pick up the equivalent or \$100 cash payable by the government. A rumor that squeezed in under the locked front door of the hotel holds that Iquitos is running out of money. Unfortunately, this is the sort of rumor that, if believed by enough people, becomes a self fulfilling prophecy.

Here is some friendly advice for those of you who are corresponding with stranded Americans (or for that matter anyone else on the planet): Never, never, never say, "Milton and I feel so fortunate that we got out of the market just in time."

March 24: This morning we received an email from our State Department advising that permission for flights from Lima to the U.S and from the U.S to Lima had been delayed by the Peruvian Government. During our confinement we have received almost daily bi-polar reports from State that are alternately optimistic and pessimistic. However, even the optimistic reports don't suggest that there is any near term salvation for those of us in Iquitos. So our best hope seems to be in arranging a private charter which we have done for the 13 of us who have signed up; but so far the Peruvian Government has nixed this as well. I can't, for the life of me, understand why the Peruvian Government wouldn't want to get rid of all foreign nationals, some of whom may be infected with the virus, at the earliest possible date..

Each traveller marooned here is putting up a good face. But for many there are personal issues or issues back home that are deeply troubling. For example, eight of us rely on prescription drugs that have or will shortly run out. One member of our group has already suffered a psychotic episode which disabled him for three days and now is running out of the four psychotropic drugs upon which he depends to stabilize his condition. Several members with elderly parents in care facilities, fear that they may never see their parents alive again. An American (along with his son), not a member of our group, reportedly left a wife with stage four colon cancer for a short trip to Peru which is now entering its third week.

So far we have seen no attempt on the part of our government to identify those Americans with special needs to, if nothing else, ensure that they have priority on departing flights. On everyone's mind is the concern that sooner or later someone in our enclave may test positive for the virus which will complicate our departure and may result in a further quarantine upon arrival in the U.S.

March 25: Word has it that the State Department is planning an evacuation flight from Iquitos. We have heard these rumors before but somehow this feels different and, perhaps irrationally, most of us seem to be more upbeat than usual.

A word about the hotel's staff: most of them have been quarantined on the upper floors of the hotel since our arrival. They have not seen their families, some of whom live only blocks away, in many days, and yet they remain cheerful and gracious, and have won the admiration of all of us. Those few who come in from the outside are subjected to a rigorous decontamination process (including a complete change of clothing) in an ad hoc decontamination area that the hotel installed a week ago just inside the front door. The staff spends much of its time repeatedly decontaminating every exposed surface in the hotel which is perhaps why none of us has shown any signs of the virus, knock on wood (but only if it has been decontaminated.)

Even the local police have lost interest in us. When we arrived here in the convoy with red lights flashing (which seems like months ago), we were a focus of police attention. There was a manned squad car parked outside the hotel entrance 24 hours a day. The squad car was replaced a few days later by two armed policemen standing guard, which in turn were replaced by a single armed guard and now the only police we see are those raising and lowering the flags in the Plaza de Armas.

Flash! We just received word that at 4:00 this afternoon, thirty or so Americans, from parts unknown, will be arriving at the hotel and, as a result, we are now confined to our rooms until further notice with no exceptions. Our world which a few weeks ago expanded out across the great Amazon Basin has now shrunk to a single hotel room which is perhaps a metaphor for the coming of old age?

March 25-26: Two hours into our hotel room lock down two things happened. First, we learned that the Americans from somewhere outside had not materialized and we were again allowed to roam free inside the confines of the hotel and, second, we received an email from the State Department advising that a plane was scheduled to transport us and other Americans from Iquitos to Miami. Marijke and I celebrated by finishing off the second bottle of Vin Very Ordinaire we had purchased at the hotel bar in anticipation of our lock down and went to bed blissfully trusting that our salvation was at hand.

But we woke up sober and skeptical and it was not until we were asked to sign a mimeographed promissory note for the cost of our ticket in favor of Uncle Sam, that we knew our homecoming was a reality. With this administration, anything this transactional had to be for real. The entire hotel staff, who had been so good to us, gathered just inside the hotel doors to wave goodbye and a part of me (albeit a nano part) felt sad at leaving. I was reminded of the prisoner of Chillon

who, after being released from his jail cell, reflected, “even I regained my freedom with a sigh.”

This time our escort was an old dirty Corolla with a “for sale” sign in the back window and one warning light flashing—quite a fall from local grace. There were police everywhere en route to the airport carrying automatic weapons and wearing rather rakish face masks emblazoned with the seal of their department. We were stopped briefly at several checkpoints without incident. The bus was not allowed to go into the airport so we disembarked at the main gate, had our passports inspected, our names checked off a manifest and then walked with our luggage to the terminal about 1/4 mile distant, happy to be outdoors again at last.

At the terminal we, along with over 100 other Americans, all masked, stood in line for over three hours in a stiflingly hot, humid “check in” line before having our temperature and blood pressure checked and our tickets issued. Then we passed through security and finally, mercifully, to the air-conditioned departure lounge from which three hours later we boarded a Latam Air A 320 for Miami.

Epilogue: We accept that much of the blame for our predicament falls on us for it was clear when we left the United States that things were changing rapidly and for the worse. For many months, however, we had dreamed of exploring the upper reaches of the Amazon and so we disregarded the urgings of far more prescient family and friends to cancel the trip.

And indeed for three and one half days our dream came true as we motored up and down the world’s greatest river system and marveled at the countless species of birds, along with sloths, monkeys, snakes, coatis’, pink dolphins, and marmosets. For hours we glided on the quiet brown waters past a seemingly endless, impenetrable jungle under a magnificent constantly changing sky that baked us one minute and soaked us the next. Even when events turned against us, and our trip was cancelled, we never once regretted our decision.

We are, of course, grateful to our State Department for eventually putting us on this plane but our departure begs a number of questions; Why, for example, did our Ambassador to Peru strap on his track shoes and run to take the last plane out of Lima before its borders closed leaving his embassy without a leader; why did it take so long for Americans like us to be repatriated when other countries completed the process in a matter of days; why was it impossible for us to contact our State Department through the official channels or receive any helpful information; and why are there still thousands of Americans stranded in countries all over the world? We had a relatively easy time of it. But for many Americans who have run out of money, who have been sleeping on sidewalks, who have not had enough to eat, the answer to these questions are of utmost importance. And they deserve an answer.

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