

After you've been driving through the Altiplano for eight hours, things begin to look the same. Distinguishing landmarks are few and far between. The endless landscape of mountains and powdery earth blurs together, and the smothering darkness of night makes it nearly impossible to navigate after sundown. As our driver Carlos pulled over to the side of the pothole-laden road, we peered out the bus window, attempting to figure out which tiny lights in the distance could be our destination. A woman (who will remain anonymous) on the bus stood, squared her body up to the hillside, and announced, "It's over there!! My uterus is the best compass. It always knows the way!"



Brilliant ADVENTURE

By Katie Safley



While the women on the bus trusted in this innate, uterine wisdom, Mike and Carlos thought we should solicit directions from the couple standing beside their motorcycle at the edge of town. Carlos slowly pulled up and asked them if they knew the way to our destination, Mallkini Alpaca Ranch & Adventure, while waving a small handful of cash. The man excitedly said yes and pointed in the direction of the tiny, distant lights that The All-Knowing Uterus had told us to go. His wife ran to the open bus window to retrieve their reward while he hopped on the motorcycle.

After following him for only a quarter mile, he stopped at the side of the road and pointed again. That was as far as he would go. The bus turned in the direction that he signalled, and our headlights revealed a faint, rocky path parting the endless sea of shrubs and desert grasses. We put our faith in this Peruvian roadside angel, hoping to god that he sent us down the right road. After about 20 minutes of driving blindly toward what we hoped was our destination, we arrived at Mallkini, the beautiful golden hacienda owned by the Michell family. A crackling fire, welcoming smiles and a delicious feast awaited us.

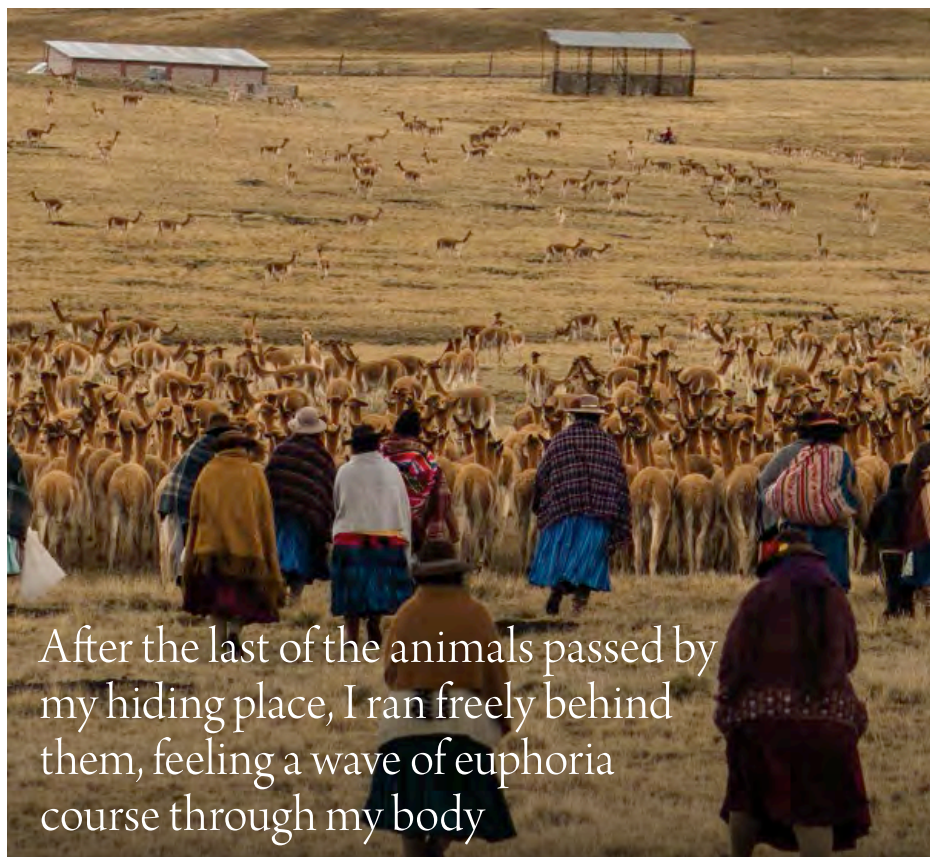
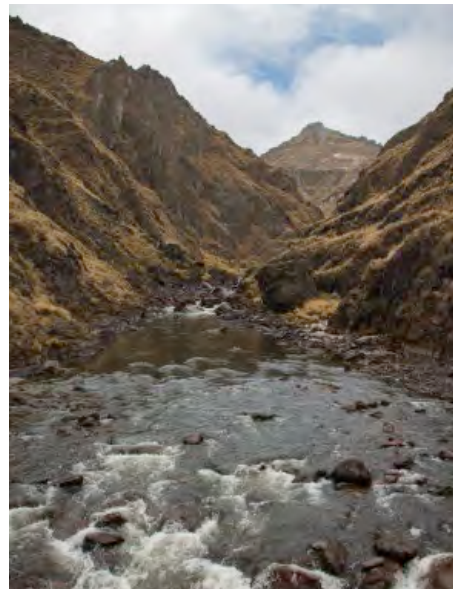
After a lovely, restful evening at Mallkini, we left bright and early for Picotani. Giddy chatter filled the vans as we headed to the vicuña chaccu that was being presented as a special gift to us. The whole community gathered to start the sacred ritual with a coca ceremony. The town mayor led us through the prayers to the Apus, or spirits of the mountains, which they believe protect the people and life that harmoniously co-exist among them. We each took three coca leaves, said a silent prayer, and placed the leaves in a small cup filled with brandy.

DOWNHILL RUN

When the ritual was complete, everyone headed for the hills. The whole town paraded up the mountain on foot, in trucks and on motorcycles. Some of us joined them in the hike, while others hid behind rocks to catch photos of the vicuña speeding down the hillside. Things took an interesting turn when lightning and hail stormed across the land we were standing upon. We turned off our cell phones and put up our hoods. We were a hardy bunch, and we would not be dissuaded from this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Luckily, it passed quickly, and after about an hour, thousands of vicuña came barreling down the slopes with hundreds of Peruvians and gringos waving their arms behind them. I have never seen anything so incredible. After the last of the animals passed by my hiding place, I ran freely behind them, feeling a wave of euphoria course through my body. The reality of 15,000 feet quickly pulled my head out of the clouds as I stopped to catch the breath that had completely escaped my lungs. As oxygen returned to my brain, I took notes from the wise people around me and walked the rest of the way to the corral.

Once all the vicuña had been rounded up into a makeshift holding pen, we were led into an arena where we were led through yet another coca ceremony, this time focusing on blessing and giving thanks to the sacred vicuña. They brought in two young vicuña and led them through a "wedding" ceremony to ensure the health and prosperity of the herd. We were showered with colourful confetti and necklaces of ribbons as we listened to the local band play and watched young teens of the community perform traditional dances with wide smiles.



After the last of the animals passed by my hiding place, I ran freely behind them, feeling a wave of euphoria course through my body

