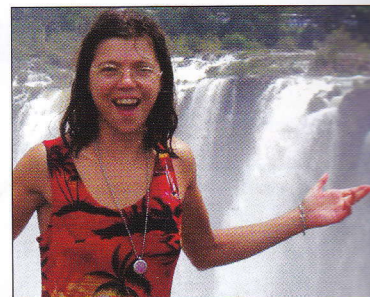


## My Roller Coaster Trip of a Lifetime!

By Sylvia Brown



Sylvia Brown went on a life-changing journey to Brazil, Peru and Argentina with her partner Steve, her brother Matthew, her wheelchair and scooter, plus Pipinette, plenty of pads, and a supply of pills.

**"This was the most challenging journey of my entire life. I pushed myself beyond my limits. But I did it, and had the best time ever!"**

**W**hen my partner Steve asked me if I'd like to go to Rio my immediate response was "Yes, let's do it!" and before I knew it we were booked on a trip which also took in the legendary Machu Picchu in Peru.

When we flew in to Rio the first thing we had to negotiate was the taxi touts at the airport. When they see a wheelchair they try to hike the fare, but we found a decent taxi driver to take us to Copacabana.

The journey filled us with fear, wonder and curiosity. It took us past shanty towns, followed by a world of riches and beauty with colossal mountains and crystal clear lakes.

At last we reached Copacabana Beach with its mighty breakers crashing onto its shores of sand like soft brown sugar with the majestic Sugarloaf Mountain behind.

At our hotel my scooter wouldn't fit into the lift, so I used the wheelchair instead. Next, I found myself crossing a ridiculously busy road and being carried onto Copacabana Beach in the glorious sunshine. I crawled down to the sea and screamed in delight as the breakers swept over me. What a tonic for jet-lag!

On Copa Beach you have to keep a constant eye on your valuables. We were doing fine until a sudden huge wave swept

over us, soaking everything. In the ensuing chaos, my wheelchair - with camera bag on the back - was briefly unattended and a dishonest drinks seller saw his chance. Steve chased up the beach after him, opened his drinks box, retrieved the bag with cameras worth \$1000, and gave the thief a punch.

That night we found a wonderful and cheap local cafe called The Grill that could even serve me Best Bet Diet food, so we ate there every night! There were salads, rice, fish, chicken, meat, potato and fruit. This, together with the fruit-filled hotel buffet breakfasts plus a few carrots, apples, rice cakes and nuts to see me through the day meant I ate very well indeed.

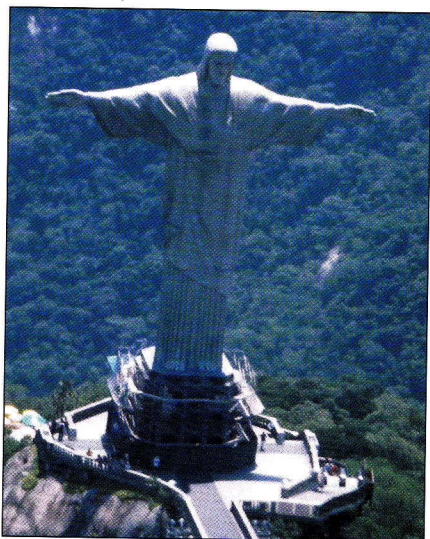
The next day it rained (it was the rainy season) so we relaxed in the hotel then went out to explore. I found the beggars on the streets heart-breaking, and we gave them coins so they could get something to eat.

The following day we found a lovely taxi-driver called Antonio who would be our personal driver. He drove us all the way to Corcovado, at the top of the mountain where the famous statue of Jesus is located. It was a very steep, bendy, hair-raising drive!



Steve and Sylvie on Copacabana beach

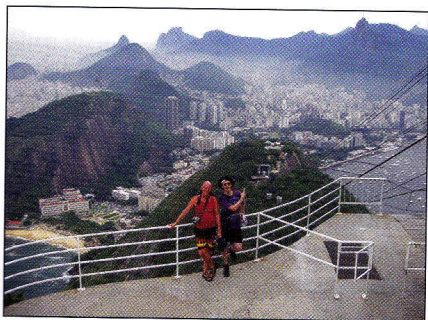




*View of Jesus at Corcovado*

### **The Views of Rio And The Jesus Statue Were Awesome**

Once we got out of the taxi, I needed the toilet urgently and was whizzed through the crowds very efficiently to the disabled toilet. Then we went up two escalators to the statue. There I was, staring at the hugest and most magnificent statue of Christ with his arms stretched out, over the backdrop of the most stunning views of mountainous Rio. Wow!



*View of Rio from Sugarloaf Mountain*

We then travelled to Sugarloaf Mountain, where we took two cable cars to the top. The views of Rio and the Jesus statue were awesome. On the way down I was too hot, tired and dehydrated to manage the steps but –without even asking for help – I found myself being carried down the steps in my wheelchair by some strong Brazilian men. Fantastic.

The next day I didn't feel too good, but Steve's mantra worked: "Plenty to eat and drink and you'll be fine".

I had started to self-catheterise on this trip to give me some relief in managing my bladder as some of the toilets were far from ideal. At least this way I could do this procedure with greater peace of mind. I threw a wobbly when I found I'd left my Pipinette pot in a café, but then I got over it, and we made a temporary one out of a plastic bottle.

### **The Most Intense and Insane Travelling Schedule!**

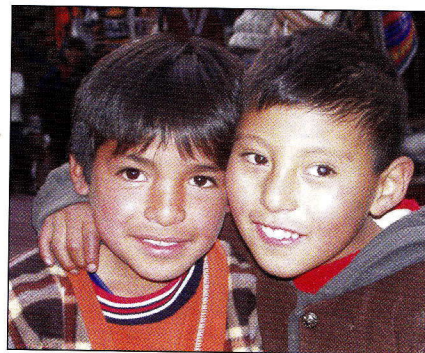
After Sugarloaf Mountain, we embarked on the most intense and insane travelling schedule I have ever taken on with MS. We got up at 5am and Antonio took us to the airport. We then flew to Lima, capital of Peru. When I couldn't manage the steps I was carried by strong Peruvian men like royalty. In Lima we were met by a tour minibus which handled our baggage, scooter and wheelchair, no problem.

The first thing that strikes you about Lima is the smog; a thin layer of cloud continually hanging over the city. On the way to the hotel we travelled along the coast and saw poverty-stricken Peruvians collecting rubbish off the dumps to make some kind of living – a shocking sight. To arrive ten minutes later at a posh hotel was very disconcerting for me.

After a rest, we ventured out and found a local cafe. We were met with friendly, smiling people, who could not help us enough. In spite of the language barrier we managed to work out what we could order with much miming and laughter. I stuck

with cooked fish, broccoli and rice, which was delicious. We also had our first taste of Inca Cola, a delightful Peruvian lime-flavoured soda.

After this we visited some shops. Little lads begging on the streets tore at my heart-strings;



*Little Peruvian lads in Cusco*

we gave them some change and they ran away delighted. By this time I was exhausted so we went back to the hotel where I collapsed in bed, my head buzzing with the events of the day.

Next morning saw another early start, with breakfast at 7. Then to the airport, where we took the short flight to Cusco. In contrast to Lima, Cusco has a healthy red glow about it, with its statues and buildings giving a Mediterranean feel to the place.

Steve went off to check out a few craft stalls and came back wearing the most wonderful leather Inca Peruvian hat (£6), adorned in many, many beautiful necklaces and followed by a whole bunch of craft sellers! We bought some coca leaves to chew, which helps you to adjust to the high altitude (3,400m above sea level) and then set off to our hotel.

Once there we were advised to lie down for a few hours, drink plenty, and chew on the coca leaves to help combat altitude sickness. It worked!

Late afternoon, we went out to explore Cusco. I was totally unprepared for the reception we



# Life Is For Living

were about to get when we left the hotel. We were literally mobbed by craft-sellers, pushing their wares in front of our noses, and begging us to buy things with pleading eyes.

Being on my mobility scooter made it all the harder for me, as I was down on their level. Also



*Sylvie with Mark Anthony out shopping in Cusco*

they had never seen anything quite like a scooter before, and it was such an unsettling feeling to be viewed as such a rich and privileged person.

We bought a lot of lovely things; finger puppets sold by little children, purses, wallets, rugs, Peruvian pipe music, gloves, alpaca jackets and cardigans, a fluffy Llama and an Inca chess set. Everything was very cheap and beautifully crafted. A small boy called Mark Anthony, after selling me postcards, took on the role of bodyguard and bag-carrier for us. He was generously tipped for his efforts and honesty.

After trying to lift my mobility scooter up and down many a pavement, we decided it was far better for me to drive carefully on the road with all my minders!

## **I Had Pushed My Body And Mind Way Beyond Their Limits**

The hours of shopping, on top of the effects of altitude, took their toll. I was totally exhausted. I knew I had pushed my body and mind way beyond their limits. My head was spinning and my mind racing. I packed what I would need for

the next day, which was to be the most challenging of my entire life to date.

I lay down and tried to sleep but started to shake. What I felt reminded me of what happens when I get a urinary tract infection, and I was scared. I had the long trip to Machu Picchu ahead of me the next day, so I decided to take no chances and start on my emergency supply of antibiotics.

To cover every eventuality, I had brought with me antibiotics, probiotics, vitamins, my pipinette pot, nappies, pads, catheters and mobility equipment.

I had all the necessary vaccinations and a holiday insurance which covered me for MS. Things did go wrong but we adapted and coped.

I am always very reluctant to take antibiotics because of the effect they have on gut health and the knock-on effect this can have on MS, but in this case I felt that the "quick-fix" was necessary, whether or not I had a UTI. Whatever was wrong with me I was in a mess and needed that security.

So I took the antibiotics. That night I had a touch of the runs and had symptoms of a cold too. But once I stopped shaking slept a little.

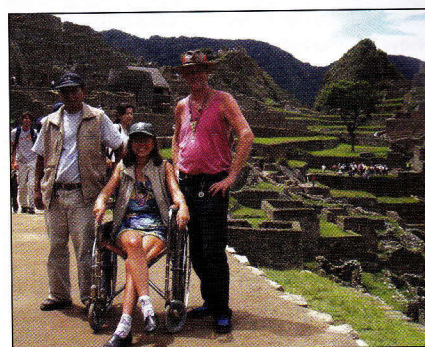
At 4.30 am we woke up for breakfast. I was still too shaky to even manage to raise a cup to my mouth, but with much reassurance from my caring brother, I set my mind determinedly on the task ahead. This started with a ride to the train station, followed by a four and a half hour train journey to Machu Picchu.

I don't know whether it was the antibiotics, the lowering altitude, or strength from some higher power, but on the train journey I began to feel a bit better. The mountainous countryside was awesome and the journey passed

pretty quickly. We then took a bus up into the mountains.

## **A Strong Peruvian Man Called Frank Carried Me On His Back All Day**

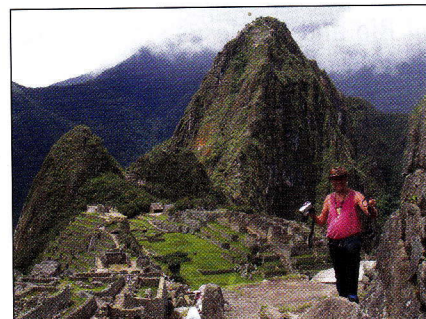
Our first obstacles were steps and cobbled ground. It was a gloriously sunny day, and I was immobilised by the heat. When our guide disappeared I started to think we'd bitten off more than we could chew on this trip. I felt such a burden on Steve and Matthew.



*Frank, Sylvie and Steve at Machu Picchu*

However, after a brief moan, Steve went off to get some help, and soon came back with a strong little Peruvian man called Frank who saved the day by carrying me on his back all around Machu Picchu!!! Steve and Matthew handled the cameras and wheelchair, which we used on any flat paths, but whenever there were steps (often!) I was carried by my saviour Frank!

Machu Picchu, a 15th Century Inca citadel, is a majestic ancient ruin, hidden in the remote Andes and is arguably the outstanding highlight amongst both the natural and



*Steve at Machu Picchu*



man-made wonders of South America. This sacred city is built between two sharp peaks, the Machu Picchu (ancient or old mountain) in the south, and the Huayna Picchu (young mountain) in the south.

To actually be there among these well preserved ruins was totally unreal to me. Was I really here? Llamas grazed on the grass and popped their heads through the stone doorways. The sun shone down, giving us glorious views, with mist hanging around the vast and unusually-shaped mountains. Though the heat was debilitating I simply coped – there was far too much to see and take in not to!

As soon as we made our way back to entrance, the clouds rolled in and it began to rain. We then enjoyed a magnificent buffet before taking the bus back down the mountain. A young Peruvian lad, dressed in national costume, sang and played the pipes and drum on the way down. He was well rewarded with tips.

After the long train journey back to Cusco we went back to our hotel and slept. That was one HUGE DAY IN THE LIFE OF SYLVIE BROWN, BUT I DID IT!!!

Next day we flew to Lima. I was so happy to be able to breath easier again, even if it was smog! In Lima we found an Indian market and Steve spotted the most beautiful Peruvian Poncho and fluffy hat. Steve thought I looked so great in them he bought them for me straight away. I wore it scooting back to the hotel and got a few admiring stares – one policeman even took out his whistle, blew it, saluted and then waved me by!

After a rest we went back to our favourite cafe. The broccoli, fish and potatoes I had that night were cooked to perfection and made in heaven!



*Iguassu Falls-view from helicopter*

As if Brazil and Machu Picchu weren't enough, we then went to Argentina to see the Iguassa Falls. As we were driven over the border we could not help but notice how far less friendly and smiley this place was compared to Brazil and Peru.

We arrived at the entrance to Iguassu Falls and found our way onto a little open-air train with disabled-friendly carriages. It was gloriously sunny, but incredibly hot (36°C!) With the humidity, exhaustion and the cold I had developed it felt like I was dying. How was I going to get through this day?

I was transferred to a heavy-duty wheelchair and then found myself being pushed along a bumpy metal bridge which was to take us right up to the Falls. As I was wheeled right up to the railing I shut my eyes, stood up, and the on the count of three opened my eyes.

### **This Was The Most Amazing Moment Of My Life!**

The view left me totally speechless! I stared in disbelief at the hugest and most magnificent of waterfalls. Then suddenly the wind blew and the spray from the Falls drenched us. The relief from the heat was indescribable. Everyone was screaming! In an instant my exhaustion and

fatigue were gone and even my cold felt better.

This was the most AMAZING MOMENT OF MY LIFE. Without the hell of the humidity I could never have experienced the HEAVEN in that moment. It was unforgettable and encapsulates the essence of this whole trip: The impact, intensity, and magic of the HIGHS I experienced were only magnified and strengthened by the LOWS – the difficulties, challenges, illness, and pain I had to go through in order to gain them.

We saw the Falls from various vantage points and then took a helicopter flight. It only lasted twelve minutes and cost £30 each but was worth it for the incredible views.

I finished the BEST DAY OF MY LIFE, with a luxurious, 1 – hour, full-body massage, which was a real treat and cost just £10. I floated back to my room, in my luxurious white bathrobe feeling very pampered.

One of the best things about this trip was that I simply had no time to think about MS. There was so much to see and do, I just got on with it.

I think that sometimes we all need to BREAK SOME RULES, LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL, OVERCOME OBSTACLES and up to a point for a short time SAY 'TO HELL WITH THE CONSEQUENCES'.