

Searching for the South American yeti

FOR years I'd been searching for the elusive European yeti, *Gigantopithecus modernis yeti*.

Repeatedly risking life and limb in the alpine wilderness (*Veterinary Practice*, November 2012) had yielded frustratingly little. I was starting to wonder if *Gigantopithecus* didn't like me. I therefore leapt at an invitation to visit Peru. Perhaps the South American yeti, *Gigantopithecus modernis cordillera* (or "pie grande" to the locals), would prove more friendly.

First, however, we had work to do. I'd recklessly encouraged my hosts, Peruvian animal welfare organisation Unidos por los Animales (UPA), to "work me hard".

Unfortunately they mistook my politeness for sincerity, and booked me to deliver more than 20 PowerPoint presentations on alternatives to invasive animal use within research and education, the animal welfare standards of veterinarians, and several other topics, at four animal welfare and humane education conferences in Lima and two other cities during a single fortnight!

I also had to present at eight meetings, mostly at veterinary schools, and at four major exhibitions of surgical mannequins, computer simulations and other humane teaching methods.

At least our audiences were large and enthusiastic. At one rural veterinary school two llamas even attended my lecture! And it was inspiring to learn about local initiatives. The anatomy museum at one Lima vet school included a large collection of ethically-sourced cadavers (skeletons or preserved bodies obtained from animals that have been euthanased for medical reasons, or that have died naturally or in accidents).

And at another, to overcome the prohibitive costs of acquiring venepuncture mannequins from the US, students and faculty had mastered the art of making their own.

On the last day of talks we also got to visit a ruined Inca city, half buried under the shifting desert sands, near a

veterinary school on the edge of Lima. We explored crumbling pyramids and, best of all, an enormous temple dedicated to the Sun God, towering from the largest dune.

The ultimate bus ride

Squeezed into the middle of this lecture tour on steroids was a three-day gap. This was my big chance to go

ANDREW KNIGHT describes a lecture tour to Peru in which he managed to get higher than ever in his continuing searches

searching for the pie grande. Clearly I needed to head immediately for the highest, remotest Peruvian Andes. Unfortunately, my schedule left no time for the requisite seven-hour drive, so my colleagues organised overnight buses for me.

My spirits quickly lifted, though, when I discovered their precise nature. I was shown to my fully reclining flatbed seat, complete with blankets and pillows, by an exceedingly attractive hostess keen to serve me drinks! I'd never experienced anything like it, and certainly not on public transport. All too soon, unfortunately, the breaking dawn heralded the arrival of Huaraz town at just over 3,000 metres, the gateway to the high Andes.

A UPA supporter owned the best hotel in town, and had kindly provided a complimentary room, from which I could see the world's second-highest mountain peaks rising into the clouds.

To acclimatise to the altitude, that morning I hiked up to a massive mausoleum, one of the few surviving structures of an extinct pre-Inca culture. By the intermittent light of a camera flash I enthusiastically explored all three levels of cleverly constructed tunnels. The dead of that time had clearly received better accommodations than the living.

Going higher

Having survived both the tunnels and altitude, I was, according to the hotel guide, now qualified to go higher. And

so I hired local taxis to drive me for hours along battered, dusty roads, to remote trailheads leading up into the mountains.

The first day I was thrilled to make Laguna (Lake) Churup at 4,450m, without passing out. Unfortunately, though, the secretive instincts of yetis restrict them to the remotest, icy mountain fastnesses, so I knew I'd have to go higher still.

Accordingly, on my final day I once again said my prayers to the mountain gods, donned my ultralight mountaineering sunnies, and headed deep into the wilderness. A three-hour hike took me to the end of a massive valley and up a mighty cliff, from which several waterfalls cascaded dizzily into space.

Upon reaching the top I discovered an amazing hidden valley, complete with intriguing stone ruins and a wild herd of mountain cows. Someone had obviously lived a hard life here once. Another set of mighty mountain walls towered above the end of this second valley, with a precipitous trail snaking up its side.

Finally, I crested the top, to discover a vast lake of glacial melt water, thanks to climate change, where once glaciers had towered more than 100m deep. And above it, the summits themselves, deceptively close in the thin mountain air.

I was thrilled to discover I'd arrived at Laguna 69. I was now at 4,600m, exactly the altitude at which I'd started to seriously lose my faculties during my first search for the European yeti, three years ago in the Alps.

Oddly, this time I seemed fine. I wasn't even cold! However, being so close to the equator, I hadn't quite reached the snowline yet. But in the shadows at the far end of the lake, I spied thick fingers of ice reaching down from the snowy heights above.

Ice axes and truffles

While trekking towards this ladder into the sky, giant ice blocks suddenly tumbled over the cliff far above, smashing into my trail just ahead. Equatorial sun loosening the ice's grip, or signs of the yeti at last? If so it appeared little friendlier than its alpine cousin. Why did these creatures shun me so? With great caution I proceeded across the avalanche zone, amazed by the size of the shattered ice blocks all around.

Shortly thereafter the trail turned vertical, up a frozen waterfall. Sadly, without ice axes I was stopped at



The author at Laguna Churup at 4,450m and (below) a fuller view of the area.



4,624m. There was nothing for it. I would just have to return another day, with mountaineering gear and copious friendly offerings for the yeti.

Numerous vegan truffles, mulled wines and ice axes appeared indicated. Regrettably, the latter are rare in London, but I resolved at least to dedicate myself to the study of wine and truffles. Accordingly, I have high hopes for a more positive future encounter.



A veterinary student intubating a canine mannequin and (below) students at an exhibition of "alternatives".



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Huaraz Town – 3,000m.