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Lisa Ballard

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The Disappearing Rainbow Mountain

Pilgrims flock to a magical peak in Peru that a melting glacier revealed four years ago

Lisa Ballard

A SONG ECHOED IN MY OXYGEN-STARVED BRAIN. “SOMEWHERE OVER the rainbow, skies are blue. / And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true. / Someday I’ll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me.” I trudged up the crest of a rainbow with Judy Garland’s voice in my head. This rainbow was formed not by the prismatic effect of water in the air, but by sediments piling on top of each other under an ancient sea that heaved upward about 25 million years ago. Getting to the top of that rainbow, the 16,522-foot Mount Winikunka in Peru, was indeed an exercise in leaving the clouds behind. On the day of my climb, there would be no lollygagging at the trailhead if we wanted to get a view.

“Let’s get going,” urged Jaime (pronounce HIGH-mee), my guide. “We need to get on top before the clouds move higher.”

The sun had just pierced the morning sky, illuminating an array of glaciated peaks that resembled a jagged coastline beside a sea of white cotton. Curls of steam from my coffee mug billowed into the crisp, subfreezing air mingling with the puffs that issued from my mouth with each shallow breath. I gulped down the last of the warm brew, stashed the mug in our little “breakfast tent,” and shouldered my day pack.

Mount Winikunka is called many names: Mount Vinicunca, Montaña de Siete Colores (Mountain of Seven Colors), Montaña de Colores, and Rainbow Mountain. It is the high point in a compact range also called the Rainbow Mountains about 60 miles southeast of Cusco. Like many alpine places, it creates its own daily weather pattern. The clouds sink as the air cools at night, then rise again as the sun warms the atmosphere. The cloud sea below us had already sent ahead fingers of its impenetrable, white bulk as it began its daily crawl higher and higher.



Lisa Ballard on the summit of Rainbow Mountain with her guide, Jaime. Their day started at 3 A.M. with a muddy 60-mile drive, then a 2.5-mile hike to the top. LISA BALLARD

I followed Jaime toward the broad, obvious start of the route amid a large temporary village of tents, tarps, and makeshift shelters. Local Quechuan alpaca herders were just starting their day. Women wearing thick, hand-embroidered skirts and broad, black, flat-topped hats fringed with red fabric placed bottled sports drinks and granola bars on small, portable tables. Some boiled choclo, a Peruvian corn-on-the-cob with super-sized kernels, cultivated in the region since the Incan Empire. Others sold hats and mittens made from alpaca fur, and a few more saddled horses.



Vinicunca, or Rainbow Mountain, is the high point in a compact range also called the Rainbow Mountains about 60 miles southeast of Cusco. LARRY GARLAND/AMC

Very recently—in January 2016—the Rainbow Mountains became the site of a thriving cottage industry catering to visiting hikers. That was when the first guided hike went up the mountain. The route has since exploded in popularity, thanks mainly to posts on Instagram, Facebook, and mainstream travel media such as *National Geographic Traveler*, the *New York Times*, and *Travel and Leisure*.

Coming off a four-day trek to Machu Picchu with the outfitter, Alpaca Expeditions, I had a full day in Cusco before my journey back to the United States. “You can take a tour to see amazing places in Cusco or you can hike the Rainbow Mountains,” emailed Bonnie Shindelman, my contact at Alpaca Expeditions who was coordinating my trip. “How much hiking do you want to do? It’s all quite challenging, but I figure you are a pro.”

The Rainbow Mountains? I had never heard of them, which is what prompted me to find out more. In fact, there are two mountains called Rainbow, this one in Peru, and the Fourteen Colored Mountain, also called Hornocal or Hornacal, in northern Argentina. The vibrant photos that appeared over and over online when I searched for information showed the range in Peru. After looking at the surreal Technicolor mountains, striped with vibrant red, pink, orange, green, and turquoise, there was no doubt, I had to go there!

Getting there was not so simple. Jaime, a driver, and I left the inn where I stayed in Cusco at 3 A.M. It took three hours to cover the 60 miles to the trailhead, the last hour of which we spent winding slowly up a muddy two-track road. We were among the first to reach the oversized parking lot, which is when I learned how much the route had recently exploded in popularity. In just three years, it had become one of the most visited sites in Peru.

Jaime estimated 1,500 to 2,500 people per day attempted the 2.5-mile climb during the peak months of June through August. Luckily, I was there in September. Perhaps 500 people would follow me up the mountain that day, and not everyone would make it. The trailhead sits at about 15,000 feet, and we would climb another 1,500 feet. Most of the vertical gain comes during the last half-mile of the climb.

Jaime and I left the tent village behind, following the broad footpath. The locals and the landscape provided plenty of distraction from the cold and lack of oxygen. Though we could not yet see the rainbow-like stripes of the ridge, the towering, snowcapped peaks gave me much to ogle, along with the mixed herds of alpacas and llamas that grazed placidly here and there across the treeless, inclining meadows. On a parallel trail next to us, Quechuan men and women led horses up and down the trail, peering at us inquiringly.

“Taxi,” deadpanned Jaime. For those who couldn’t handle the climb on foot, for 60 Soles (\$18), one could get a ride on horseback to the spot where the trail turned vertical. We both chuckled at the absurdity of it. People who could not handle the easier part and had to ride horses certainly wouldn’t make it up the steep part.

Jaime, who was in his 60s, had guided in Peru for most of his adult life. The Rainbow Mountains intrigued him as much as they did me and every other visitor, mainly for their geology. The reds are caused by oxidizing iron (rust). The yellows result from iron sulfide or other sulfur compounds. The purples are from goethite or oxidized limonite, and the greens are from chlorite. The overall effect was nothing short of dazzling.

The stunning striations came into full view just as the hike became vertical. My pace slowed as my breathing became more and more labored. I stopped frequently, not only to catch my breath but also to take in the intriguing stripes that flowed over the top of the high saddle ahead of me and the entire ridgeline to my right. The scene looked like endless ribbons of colorful taffy.

On one of my pauses, Jaime drew my attention away from the color up high, pointing at the ground. A broad clump of pale, brown lichen covered a chunk of rock. Grasslike sedges, still dormant after the long winter at this high elevation, waved stiffly in the breeze on one side of the lichen.

“Alpacas love to eat this,” he explained, “Within the next ten years, the Rainbow Mountains will no longer look colorful because they will be covered with lichen and grass. As the Earth has warmed, it [the lichen and grass] has grown higher and higher.”

According to Jaime, in 2005, whitewater rafters on the Urubamba River took a day off on their downriver trip and went for a hike, discovering the Rainbow Mountains. The glaciers that had blanketed the area for thousands of years had just melted out, exposing the bands of color. In another ten years, scientists predict it will be covered up again, this time by the alpine flora that is already creeping up the Rainbow Mountains’ gravelly slopes. Climate change gave us this remarkable geological phenomenon and will soon take it away.

Unfortunately, the Rainbow Mountains are so valued in Peru as a tourist attraction that the wake-up call about the environment has been largely ignored. I couldn’t blame the local alpaca herders for taking advantage of the fleeting opportunity. According to the Associated Press in May 2018, about 500 villagers have moved back to their ancestral home to act as guides, provide services such as the horse-taxis, and sell choclo to visitors.



Residents of the area take advantage of the newly melted-out mountain. A horse-taxi operator guides a visitor up the trail. LISA BALLARD

As you might expect, attracting huge numbers of hikers has come with a conservation price tag. For example, a sizable alpine wetland and former refuge for migrating ducks was filled to make the trailhead parking lot, and trail erosion has occurred at an accelerated rate due to the excessive foot traffic on the largely unmaintained route. On the bright side, the Peruvian government recently blocked a Canadian mining company from exploring the Rainbow Mountains as a potential extraction site, an unusual and heartening decree given the fact that mining is a cornerstone of Peru's economy. (Peru is among the world's largest producers of copper, zinc, and silver.)

I knew none of this as I reached the saddle just below Winikunka's striped summit. I only knew I was determined to make it to the top. As I caught my breath again, a caracaras to the right of the trail gave a sharp "caw," then flew off, startled by several hikers who had suddenly appeared on the saddle from the opposite side.

Where the two approaches met, the trail turned 90 degrees and continued steeply uphill. Broad, shallow steps dug into the claylike soil, making the footing slippery. No one sprinted ahead.

A short distance below the top, Jaime and I met a Quechuan woman feeding her two pet alpacas. She smiled happily, greeting us in her native language, which Jaime also spoke. Her hat was not as broad as the ones worn by the other local women I had seen on the climb, and the fringe was blue and pink. As I petted her alpacas, Jaime translated that she was from the valley on the opposite side of the ridge. Her hat identified her village. She was not allowed to go past the summit ridge with her alpacas, which was a legal grazing boundary, but she came to that point often to enjoy the view and talk to hikers.

A few minutes later, I reached the summit. Although some blog writers claim the Rainbow Mountains are duller in real life and accuse photographers of altering the color, I found them strikingly beautiful. It was a privilege to see them, particularly since the opportunity would likely be gone in another decade.

Perhaps the legendary pot of gold is not really at the end of the rainbow. It's at the end of the trail, atop Mount Winikunka in Peru's Rainbow Mountains, a hike that I will treasure for the rest of my life.

A longtime member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, LISA BALLARD (formerly Lisa Densmore) has trekked around the globe. When she's not climbing a mountain, she writes about her adventures for various magazines and websites from her base camps in Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York. She is the author of twelve books, including eight guidebooks. Visit her at LisaBallardOutdoors.com.