



Along the Inca Road: A Woman's Journey into an Ancient Empire (Adventure Press)

Karin Muller

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One of the engineering wonders of the world, the Inca Road was built more than five hundred years ago to link the far-flung outposts of a fabled empire -- an empire that ruled in golden splendor until the conquistadors arrived to plunder El Dorado and put a swift, cruel end to its extraordinary culture. But its legend survives in the masterful masonry of its paving blocks and the ruined glory of ghost cities such as Cuzco. In this vivid, free-wheeling expedition, Karin Muller travels the ancient route to explore its dramatic history and discover new adventures along its length and breadth. "Along the Inca Road" shares the stillness of sunrise in the haunted aerie of Machu Picchu, clings to the roof of a rattletrap bus skirting the vertiginous precipices of the Andes, carouses through the streets of an Altiplano city on Carnival, and inches warily forward as Ecuadorian soldiers probe for land mines with bayonets. Muller's ready for just about anything, whether it's challenging the Pacific surf in a traditional Inca reed boat, locking horns with a bull in a cheering Peruvian arena, or joining a crack Bolivian anti-narcotics team on a hunt for clandestine cocaine labs deep in the jungle. She initiates us into the mysteries of the spirits at a shaman's rite involving hamsters, hallucinogens, and copious libations of moonshine, and high in a mountain meadow captures a struggling vicuna, whose prized silky fleece once was reserved for the Inca god-king alone. And these are only a few of the traveler's tales from a 3,125-mile odyssey encompassing four countries and every form of transportation under the sun, from footslogging, mule train, and motorbike to state-of-the-art military vehicles. As she spins the wool of her stories into a modern tapestry of faces and memories, Muller intertwines a chronicle of the ancient Inca from their race's mythical birth on an island in lofty Lake Titicaca to their sudden plunge from the height of imperial power at the hands of a ragtag band of Spanish soldiers of fortune. We learn how they lived, worshipped, and warred, and why such a magnificent culture proved so vulnerable to invaders. As spectacular as the mountainscapes that are its breathtaking backdrop, "Along the Inca Road" is a wonderful panorama of past and present -- the kind of sharply observed portrait of a unique part of the world and its colorful people that displays the art of travel literature at its best.

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