

DESTINATION PERU

Alpaca breeder Ken Freivokh finds common ground with breeders in Peru.

It all started at Kansas Airport, returning from being the official colour checking assistant to senior US judge Jude Anderson during the US Futurity Show. We were joined at the departure lounge by Amanda Vanden Bosch, who had judged the show together with Peter Kennedy, and was now focused on her next mission, namely to finalise arrangements for

the 2016 Quechua Benefit trip to Peru. The half hour wait was enough to find my partner Liz and I firmly signed on for another trip to Peru!

Our previous trip was originally planned to attend the 2011 Alpaca Fiesta in Peru – in the event, the Fiesta was cancelled but we decided to press on with the intended trip. It turned out to be very special, as all the main breeders and producers were geared up for the Fiesta with their animals and produce, so we had their full attention. On that trip we found ourselves in the company of some very determined Australian breeders, as issues such as altitude, rain or hail did not deter them from visiting Mallkini and Rural Alianza experimental farms at circa 17,000 ft high – it was a great adventure.

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About the author

Ken Freivokh and his partner Liz Windsor founded Artwork Alpacas. The herd came into being as an extension of Ken's artistic interests which include architecture, and a design portfolio featuring superyachts, transport, industrial and residential design. Ken studied and worked in Peru for 20 years where he came to appreciate the grace and elegance of the native alpacas. When the opportunity arose he and Liz selected their own beautiful alpacas and also secured shares in top class US born herdsires to found the Artwork herd.



Whiter than white!



Mike Safley and Amanda Vanden Bosch



Vicuña Chacu Picotani

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The 2016 trip started in earnest in Arequipa, where we met Quechua Benefit co-founder Mike Safley. Quechua Benefit is a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing healthcare, education and economic empowerment to communities in highland Peru. Our party also includes senior US judge and Quechua Benefit board chair Amanda Vanden Bosch as well as Jude Anderson, fleece judge Cheryl Gehly, Quechua Benefit executive director USA Dale Cantwell, an Australian family and a dozen American breeders. We also met Quechua Benefit's medical team – we would come across them at different stages of our trip.

Not surprisingly, the first stop was the project's Casa Chapi Children's Village – what was a surprise was to find how far such project had progressed, with close to 100 children attending residential classes at such a magical setup – truly inspiring, and a cause so clearly worthy of support from the alpaca community. We were privileged to be shown the facilities, the medical centre donated by Snowmass Alpacas, the sustainable facilities and a seriously moving presentation by the enthusiastic children.

With Casa Chapi at the edge of the Colca Valley, we could not move onto alpaca business without first visiting the spectacular Condor Cross in the expectation that condors would oblige and rise, and rise they certainly did! Amazing to see such majestic birds rise on the thermals of the early morning. With the condors high above us, we headed for Puno and majestic Lake Titicaca, where we would spend the following day visiting the floating islands.

Marvellous scenery, picturesque attires and people but, ultimately, our group was growing impatient to get on with matters camelid and, with mounting enthusiasm, we headed for the most exciting and unbelievable event staged specially for the Quechua Benefit visiting team, namely, the world's largest vicuna chacu

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(communal gathering event) at Picotani.

Having driven off-road as far as we could go, followed by a short trek, we arrived at the selected site high up in the mountains where a ceremony had to take place ahead of the chaco – the ritual included coca leaves which were handed to all present together with instructions to all the community to disperse to the hills and effectively create a human fence to drive the vicunas towards improvised paddocks where they were checked, ear tagged and carefully shorn. It was a truly incredible spectacle, with more than 600 vicunas appearing at the hill tops, to be driven into ever narrowing sections and eventually into the pre-prepared fenced areas. We witnessed the symbolic marriage of a pair of vicunas by joining a smear of blood from their ears, shearing of the first few, and celebrations of the whole community. Mesmerising!

The following day we had an invitation to visit grupo Mitchell's renowned Mallkini experimental farm. This was a real privilege,

as together with grupo Inca's Pacamarca farm they have defined fundamental directions for EPD (expected progeny difference) prediction programmes designed to ensure continued development and improvement of alpaca conformation and fleece quality. Of course, Amanda and Jude could not wait to visit the laboratory where Moises Asparrin and his team of vets and researchers have been making great advances on both embryo transfer and artificial insemination. It was interesting to find so many similarities with the techniques being developed in Oregon at the Pucara alpaca farm with experienced Australian expert Natasha James.

Truly in alpaca country, we then headed to Ayaviri, as we had a special invitation to attend the Andean Alpaca Fiesta in Ocuvi.

To say that we were invited was perhaps an understatement, as the small village was able to attract an excellent attendance of top quality alpacas from the entire valley, clearly thanks to having no less than four major international judges invited to join the local

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› Casa Chapi class



› Liz Windsor and Jude Anderson



› Winners with their prizes and Cheryl



› Nunoa Supreme lineup

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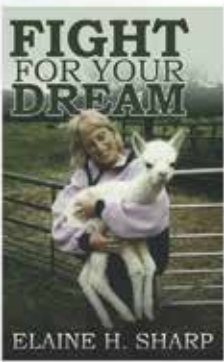


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judges and add tremendous validity to the event. I guess it was then that we all realised how special this visit truly was. Up to then, we were visitors one side, local people the other. During the Fiesta a unique bond developed – we had the alpacas in common, we were all striving for ever better traits, we were helping each other understand more and more about such magnificent creatures and, suddenly, we were so very close... The fleece was being examined for fineness, for density, for yield, the comments from both the Peruvian and the visiting judges were so very similar, the local breeders were anxious to receive the comments from the international judges, we were a larger group of people no longer separated by distance and language, but united by a common passion and interest – the whole chemistry changed, and the bond was clear and very special.

Of course, language was a slight barrier, and I was kept extremely busy translating as best I could. The odd 20 years living in Peru in the 50s and 60s did come handy, but I had to learn a few new Spanish words to describe lock, lustre, shine, saddle, etc. I cannot say that I was up to following Amanda's or Jude's oral reasoning properly – I am ashamed to say that perhaps the more complicated explanations about uniformity of micron or colour contamination were perhaps translated into a suggestion that the nails needed cutting but, as far as I could tell, it did not seem to matter, and the judgements were accepted by one and all.

If we thought that the Ocuviñi Fiesta was great, little prepared us for the Nunoa fiesta the following day – it was a long drive to a height of 5,200m (17,000 ft) and, boy, was it worth it! A famous

alpaca valley, and the exhibits were nothing short of stunning. Incredible heads, strong beautiful alpacas in their own setting. This was no village – the whole fiesta was totally improvised at the most accessible point in the open canyon, and it was so very amazing. The equivalent of the supreme judging was, as expected, largely a competition between the highly spectacular white alpacas – colours were never previously considered worthy of breeding for fleece as it was never the best colour to enable dyeing with natural dyes. As if to negate such reality, however, whites were followed by stunning fawns and browns, judged separately and with some extremely worthy winners which would easily stand their own on any American, Australian or European show. To highlight the strange perception of colours not being worthy of top placings, a group of absolutely beautiful black alpacas were paraded outside of the main competition – they would have been winners anywhere else!

Just to highlight differences further, the alpaca judging was followed by a shearing competition. It was truly surprising to see pairs of breeders just gently step on their alpacas and proceed to shear them with just hand shears – as they would have done for centuries. The traditions were further evident during the spinning competition to follow, with all the lady competitors dressed in their traditional costume. A colourful end to a memorable event, capped only by the sight of the alpaca teams returning to their homesteads on foot, on scooters, on improvised pickups at the back of most unlikely three-wheelers.

The Nunoa Fiesta exceeded all expectations, and kept us busy

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Suris at Nunoa Fiesta



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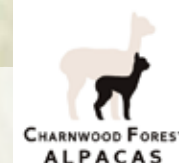
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› Winners at Ocuvi



› Colca Canyon



› Vicuna fleeces



› Shearing competition

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comparing notes all the way back to La Casa de mi Abuela (my grandma's house!), our colourful hotel in Arequipa where we had a day to compose ourselves, do some shopping and attend the farewell delicious dinner at a unique restaurant built into the walls of the Santa Catalina Convent.

I can't finish without mentioning that the events as described would not have taken place without Mike Safley's very close links with the various Peruvian communities, and awareness of the importance of the work carried out by the Quechua Benefit team in Peru. The vicuna chacu and the two major Fiestas were organised and timed specifically to coincide with our visit, we were looked after by the locals, and were made to feel at one with the exhibitors and organisers.

Truly memorable



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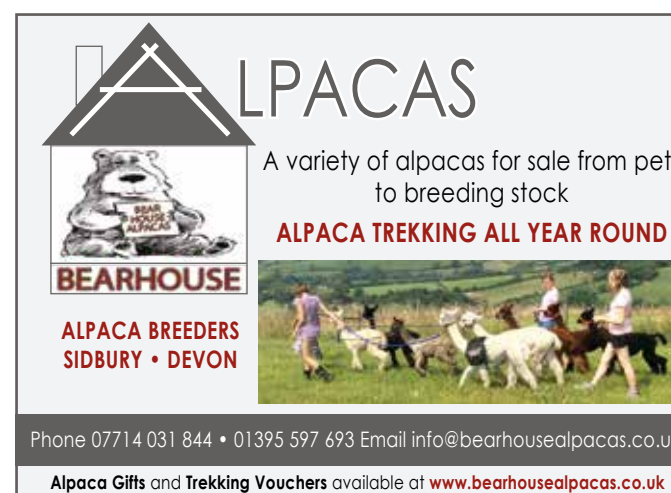
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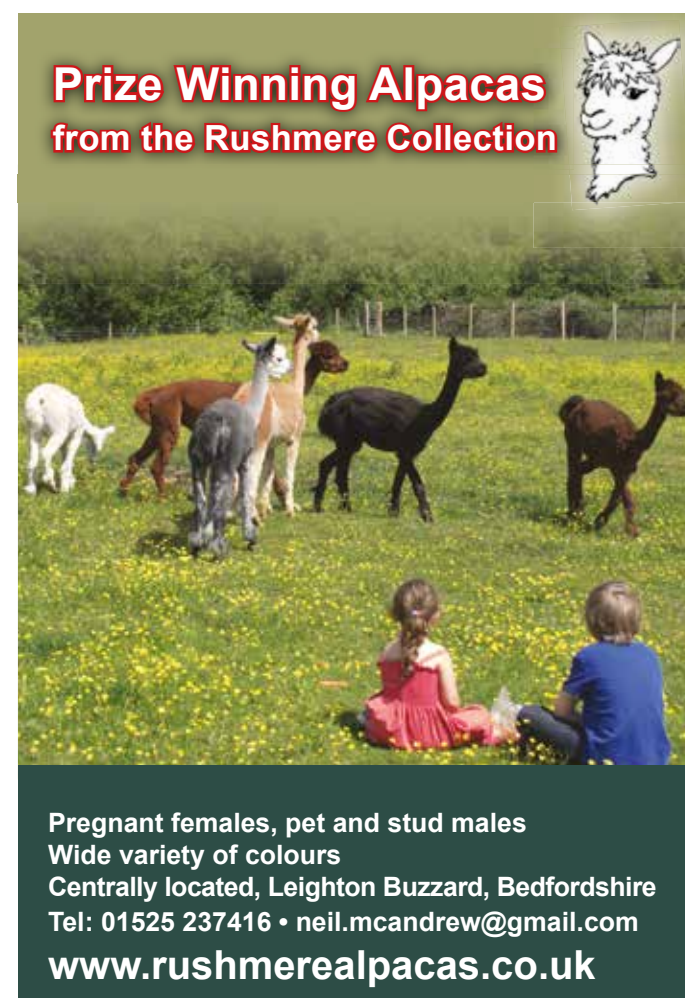
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