



Arequipa: Alpaca Fiesta 2003

Francis Rainsford, Michael Brooke and Su Lenk, in their separate capacities, were lucky enough to attend the major alpaca event in South America. In their three reports they bring us the flavour of Fiesta...

Su Lenk

That is what it seemed like to me as I was sitting on the terracing looking around me during time out between alpaca classes, as with each turn of the head I recognised the different Australian, American and English breeders.

The Fiesta is held in Arequipa, which is the city for alpacas. It is where the biggest textile mills are situated and where the majority of alpaca fleece is converted. It is surrounded by 3 volcanoes, and the city where the earth really does move for you.

The atmosphere was wonderful and the excitement from our group members electrified the mood further. It was like one big party. Exciting to be there and exciting to be part of the whole event. What about the alpacas and llamas? They were stunning and I believe more than 1000 animals were shown during the five days with only one judge, Dr Julio Sumar. Sadly for us, this was to be Julio's last Fiesta as its judge. He told us that he had survived nine Fiestas and it was time to move over for the young ones.

The llamas I watched with great interest as owning only two myself, I admit to not knowing much about them. But at one lull in the judging I stole away to talk to Dr Julio Sumar about the differences between the Kara (smooth coated) and Chaca (fluffy or woollen coated). It was interesting listening to his reasoning regarding the origination of the two kinds. Did you know that the Kara, being the original llama, can bear more weight on its back than the Chaca. The Kara is also the majority llama used by the campisanos, especially for their caravan trains because of this.

Each day started early for our party of 16. The Fiesta drew us in with its lectures, shops and of course the exhibiting of some truly amazing alpacas and llamas. The layout was incredible and each section all within easy reach of each other. A stroll around the textile stalls and open coffee and snack bars. On into the show arena, or wander a little further to admire the breeders alpacas and llamas whilst they awaited their turn. Chatting to the local breeders was easy for those Spanish speakers amongst us. Without this, lots of smiles and warm handshakes spoke volumes. Those animals resting between classes simply grazed alongside their pens. We even saw one cria born whose mother was out of her pen and were thus able to monitor its progress over the coming days as it ran around quite happily, and totally oblivious of the activities which surrounded it.

The opening parade on the evening of the first days' judging was like a mini carnival and very infectious, with Pisco Sour, masks and garlands being distributed in abundance. The following night we were rewarded with a magnificent firework display followed by dancing in the arena with the locals. Everything worked like clockwork and in the following days not a sign could be seen of the previous nights activities. Not even the spoils of the bonfire.

Another evening was the fashion show. I cannot remember when I last saw a hall so packed. If you could take your eyes off the beautiful models then you would have appreciated a very diverse range of designs, including some very brief hotpants and beautifully fine lace dresses

which allowed the wearer only a modicum of modesty. Men were not to be outdone either. Sadly the battery in my camera chose this moment to run out.

Some of those who braved the heights of the Chacu (roundup of the Vicuna) were rewarded by being part of the fertility blessing. This involved the nicking of the ear of a Vicuna, the blood being collected in a bowl, then a male and female Vicuna being placed on the ground side by side and the blood smeared onto them, the breeders face and the face of whom ever else was in need of increased fertility. Eventually the generator started and a shearing was watched in awe. The blanket was taken off first and carefully wrapped. This blanket, we were told, was worth 500 USD and weighed ounces, such is the beauty of their fleece.

On the last evening of the Fiesta was the banquet. This was held in a marquee of gigantic proportions and opulence. Food, wine music and a festive mood that the South Americans love so much was very contagious. After the speeches and dinner the dancing went on into the early hours.

Our group then travelled on from Arequipa for a further week of magic. Cusco, the city of the ancients; the Colca Canyon; soaring condors; sweeping vistas; countless Inca sites culminating in the charming train ride through the sacred valley of the Incas to Machu Picchu. It was truly wonderful and shared with a group of people who were a joy to be with.

Michael Brooke

Michael and Susan Brooke of Alpacas of Wessex took a party of 22 alpaca aficionados to Arequipa in Peru. They came from all over the United Kingdom – Cumbria, North Wales, Norfolk, Hertfordshire, Cornwall, Somerset and Wiltshire as well as Canada and Ecuador. An efficiently organised action-packed five days gave the many hundred visitors the opportunity to view some of the finest alpacas in Peru, to talk to those who bred them and understand so much more about the origins of the animals they are breeding at home.

Throughout the Fiesta there were huacayas, suris and llamas in the central judging ring. The principal judge, Dr. Julio Sumar, ensured that all those watching understood what qualities he was seeking in placing the animals – an education in itself that so many of us still need to understand. Fineness, density and consistency were the watchwords. The vital choice of top quality stud males kept being repeated. He was most informative and amusing and we are delighted that he has accepted the invitation from the South West Alpaca Group to judge at next year's Royal Bath and West Show in early June.

There was every opportunity to inspect the animals on show, although an elementary grounding in Spanish was fairly essential. They were housed in open pens under thatched roofs, were well watered and fed and one could not but be impressed at the way they were handled. Not all were fully trained to the halter, but quiet and gentle persuasion saw them go where they should. Quite a treat to get one's hands into such an array of splendid fleeces.

The showground is on a permanent site and must surely be the most attractive one anywhere. The city of Arequipa, the White City, and its surrounding landscape dominated by snow-capped volcanoes, provided a brilliant backdrop to all the events of the Fiesta. There were lectures and workshops to attend – Janie Hicks from Australia and Marty McGee Bennett from the USA to mention but two.

Mention must be made of the visits to the processing plants. One saw huge bales of raw fibre being sorted by hand, quite a task as most consisted of all the fibre from a herd of animals – saddle, neck and leggings – all together, mostly by colour, but not always. This is because the majority of herd owners are paid by quantity; it is only the larger rather more professional herds who receive a bonus for pre-grading and so submit a higher quality. Also I was somewhat surprised by the relatively small amounts of fine fibre; there were many large packs of raw fibre classed as being 26 micron and indeed over: what would that become on our pastures? Peruvian alpaca is not necessarily all that some claim it to be.... Dr. Sumar's entreaties to breed up were not just for our ears. The noise and some of the working conditions in the mills caused a few raised eyebrows – but then few if any of us had seen such an operation elsewhere. Raw fibre to the finished article all carried out in one location

on one of the sites we visited cannot necessarily be a 'surgically clean operation'. We saw some excellent materials made from guanaco, vicuna, 'royal' and baby huacaya, and of course suri. But no account of the Fiesta would be complete without a mention of day two – the chaccu or vicuna round up. Those who so wished were bussed up to 4,300 metres (14,000 ft) – a bit too high for some. There the 200 or so of us were treated to dancing and a small ceremony and then split into four groups; those who could walk (and then run) the furthest down to those who certainly could not. We covered a large area and together with many local Peruvians attempted to round up a herd of some 200 vicunas into a penned area. The end of the round up was perhaps the most exciting – I was fortunate in having to handle many vicunas in order to get them facing the correct way prior to gently pushing them into the final enclosure. There then took place an age-old ceremony which ended in certain of us being 'blooded' from drops of blood taken from the ears of a male and female during a fertility rite – all carried out in a quiet and solemn ritual going back for centuries. I am told the blooding would greatly improve my fertility – that of my alpacas of course.

Francis Rainsford

The IX International Festival of South American Camelids and "Alpaca Fiesta 2003" took place in Arequipa from 10th to 16th November.

Organised by the International Alpaca Association, the event attracted some one hundred and sixty six persons from the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile and Argentina.

In addition, one hundred and fifty Peruvian alpaca and llama farmers brought one thousand of their best animals to compete in the .The Peruvian government was represented by the presence of the Vice Minister for Industry and Tourism, Dr Carlos Zamorano, and the Ambassador for Political Culture and Chancellor of the Republic, Mr Gilbert Chauny.

Due to limitations caused by Peru's current austerity law, the Ministry of Agriculture and its South American Camelids arm, the Consejo Nacional de Camelidos Sudamericanos (CONACS), was unable to donate its usual quota of prizes on this occasion and so the Organizing Committee arranged for private entities to cover the shortfall. Prizes and contributions were received from the British Embassy in Lima, the Australian Alpaca Association, the Mayor of Biella (Biella, in Italy, was twinned with Arequipa in 1984 and has always maintained its status as an important marketplace for alpaca tops), the International Alpaca Association, the InterAmerican Development Bank, Quechua Benefit (USA), Grupo Inca, Michell & Cia., Productos del Sur S.A., Internacional de Comercio S.A.C. among others.

The most sought after prizes included a two week all-expenses-paid trip to visit Australian alpaca farms organised by the Australian Alpaca Association, a 6K portable generator given by the British Embassy in Lima and a cross-country motorbike donated by the Mayor of Biella.

Two events were sold out before "Alpaca Fiesta 2003" actually got underway - the Fashion Show and Cultural Evening.

The star of the Fashion Show was the current Miss Peru, Claudia Ortiz, who returned to the city of her birth to join twenty-four other models showing garments from ten different collections to an audience of some five hundred and ninety persons.

The Cultural Evening which was held in Arequipa's historic Santa Catalina Monastery featured Renaissance and Baroque music played by Latin America's leading exponent of this art, Carmina Nova - a group of eight musicians and singers.

Six buses set off early on Thursday morning, 13th November, to take two hundred and fifty participants to the Vicuña Chaccu in Toccra - located some 4,600 metres above sea level in the Altiplano Region and a two hour drive from Arequipa - where around one hundred and forty vicuña were waiting to be rounded-up.

Three hours of patiently encircling and herding the animals resulted in the capture of seventy-three of their number where one was taken out and sheared to demonstrate the quality of the fine fleece that commands such prestige throughout the world.

The central topic that dominated the Conference and Workshop programme was concern over the general decline of the quality of alpaca fibre and how, in particular, micron fineness could be improved. Mrs Janie Hicks of the Coolaroo Alpaca Stud in Australia offered a way forward with her presentation on the SRS skin method of controlling fibre diameter in merino sheep and how the same technology could be used for alpacas.

Papers on the current advances in Peru's vicuña and guanaco populations were also given by Dr Jane Wheeler of Coordinadora de Investigacion y Desarrollo de Camelidos Sudamericanos (CONOPA) and Dr Marco Zuniga (CONACS) respectively.

Dr Julio Sumar, who has judged all nine Festivals to date, announced his retirement from future major Peruvian alpaca shows and was honoured for his services to alpaca worldwide by the International Alpaca Association who presented him with a silver commemorative plaque during the Gala Dinner that brought "Alpaca Fiesta 2003" to a close.