

KINDNESS



“The people of the department of

Amazones are the kindest in Peru,” said the driver who had just picked us up. I was sitting in the back seat of his pickup, munching on a sweet banana his friend had offered me, and my husband Rob and another backpacking friend were nestled in the bed with various construction equipment.

We were hitchhiking because although the area around Chachapoyas is full of fascinating ruins, it’s sorely lacking in infrastructure for the few tourists who make it there. The entire trip had become a lesson in the kindness of strangers.

We’d just returned from our 6-hour hike to Gocta waterfall, and our guide Señora Teo had invited us to her café for home-grown pineapple juice. “*Cortesía de la casa*,” she said, pouring us seconds. “*Para que tienen buenos recuerdos del Perú y regresan*.” (Courtesy of the house, so that you all have good memories of Peru and return). Her husband put on a CD of local music to entertain us while she asked us about our families.



It had been a rough hike, no thanks to the generosity we’d experienced the night before at the hands of Señor Pepe. We’d been walking down a dark Chachapoyas street looking for dinner when we heard a quiet, pleasant drawl ask, “*Que buscas?*” (What are you looking for?)

A restaurant, I answered, and the man in the door began a discourse on good local restaurants, local history, and his door, which was one of the oldest doors in Chachapoyas. He invited us to admire the door, and we did. He invited us inside to admire his old Spanish house, then disappeared to grab us a drink.

He returned with what looked like a small white enamelware watering pot, and a single tiny shot glass. He poured himself a shot, then handed the pot to our friend, who looked at it warily, uncertain as to whether he was expected to drink from it.

Pepe raised his glass. “To meeting you all tonight,” he said, and drank. He handed the glass to our friend, who poured a shot

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and passed the pot around the circle.

I set the pot on the table, but Pepe poured himself another shot, then handed the pot to our friend once more. "*No hay primero sin segundo,*" he said over his protests. (There's no first without a second.)

His cousin arrived, and after a third shot, good conversation, and many exhortations to return to his house day or night, we were set back out on the street a little less clearheaded than before.

So it was fortunate that it was so easy to catch a ride in Amazonas. After a quick detour to show us some petroglyphs of questionable authenticity, our driver left us at his turnoff to await another ride. Five minutes later we were on our way again in a small suburban. It doesn't quite feel like hitchhiking when you get picked up by the first car that has room for you, but that's just how things go in Amazonas.