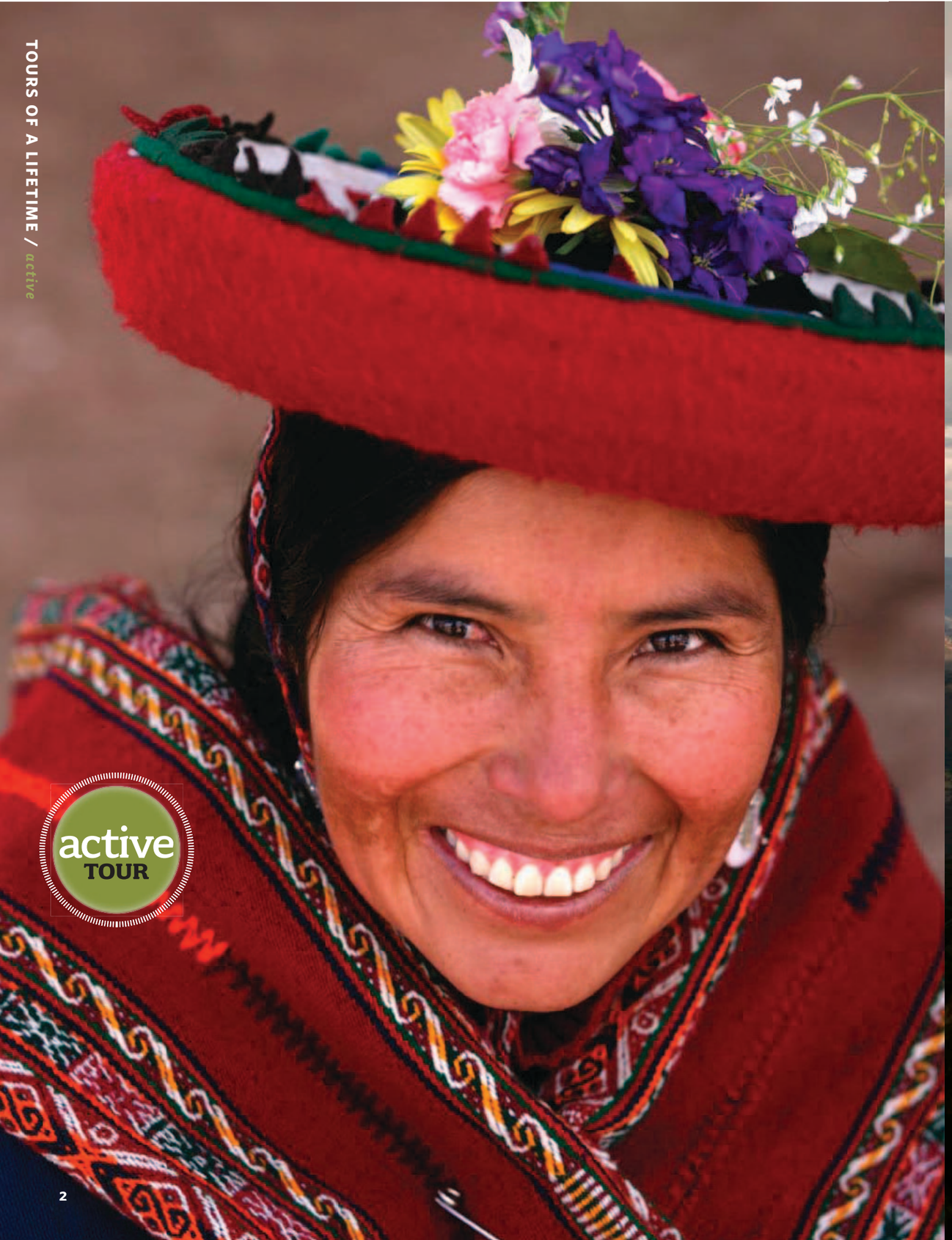


active TOUR

BY SCOTT WALLACE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON HUEY

THE HIGH ROAD TO MACHU PICCHU

STRENUOUS ADVENTURE AND SURPRISING COMFORT AWAIT THOSE WHO TAKE THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED TO THE LOST CITY OF THE INCAS.

WE CROSS A RICKETY WOODEN FOOTBRIDGE OVER A MOUNTAIN BROOK AND

pause to catch our breath. For some time now, our path has followed an ancient stone fence past boulder-strewn meadows and scraggly heath. Above us looms the snow-covered peak of Nevado Salcantay—a 20,551-foot massif that is the highest mountain in the Cordillera Vilcabamba range of the Andes. Off to the left, rising to 19,412 feet, is another pinnacle of rock and ice called Humantay. Tomorrow we'll ascend the 15,000-foot pass between the two peaks, marking the high point on our six-day, 35-mile trek to Machu Picchu, the legendary Lost City of the Incas.

It's day two of our adventure, and we're still acclimating to the thin air. "This altitude is something," says Deborah Liss of Atlanta, traveling with her husband, Bill. There's no shortage of boulders to collapse on during our break.

I remove my fleece vest and stuff it in my daypack, and under a clear blue sky slather sunscreen on my face. Our guide, Manolo Lazo, hands out water bottles from his rucksack. "I've got trail mix too," he says. I gratefully scarf the carbs.

The real hike starts tomorrow, when we hit Camino Salcantay (pronounced sahl-con-TIE), literally the high road to the famous Inca ruins. The route lingers above treeline in the shadow of Andean peaks before plunging into forested canyons. We expect to have plenty of views all to ourselves, because, for Machu Picchu trekkers, this is truly the road less traveled.

In its heyday, the Inca Empire stretched for 2,500 miles along the spine of the Andes. To project influence across vast distances, master Inca architects built an impressive network of thoroughfares, including the Camino Salcantay. But since the fall of the empire, the trail has been used mostly by local farmers. Only in recent years have backpackers discovered the route. By comparison, the fabled Inca Trail, a thousand feet lower and off to the east, is a veritable interstate. In 2003, the government restricted foot traffic on the Inca Trail to 500 people a day.

From this vantage point, it's easy to see why the local peaks inspired awe among the natives who once grazed llamas on these slopes. "The Inca revered Salcantay as a god," says Lazo. "From its glaciers came the water that fed Mother Earth and made the crops grow, giving life."

If Lazo, graced with the chiseled features of an Inca warrior, sounds a bit mystical, it may be due to his 28-year tenure guiding treks and rafting trips into Peru's wildest recesses for such outfitters as Mountain Travel Sobek *(http://mtsobek.com)*, which packaged this trip. By now, Lazo knows the impact such journeys can have on his clients.

"Here they find another world," he tells me, "a reality they were missing."

For me, part of the new reality is the relative comfort of our trek. I last came to Machu Picchu some 30 years ago on a shoestring budget. I traveled third-class on train rooftops, bunked ten to a room in backpackers' hostels, and fed on sardines straight out of the can.

For two days, the tour group acclimated in Cusco, the old Inca capital, which is home to the 16th-century Cathedral of Santo Domingo *(left)*. In Chinchero, children near the market *(right)* pose for tips with their animals. *Opening pages:* Colorful clothes provide a livelihood to the organizer *(left)* of a local textile cooperative. Hikers *(right)* wind along a steep mountain trail en route to their first night's lodge.

This trip is different. In 2008, a series of four well-appointed inns opened along the Camino Salcantay. Now, each day's trek ends not in a chilly tent but in a cozy lodge with hot showers, candlelit dinners, fine wine, and, best of all, down-feather beds piled high with alpaca wool blankets.

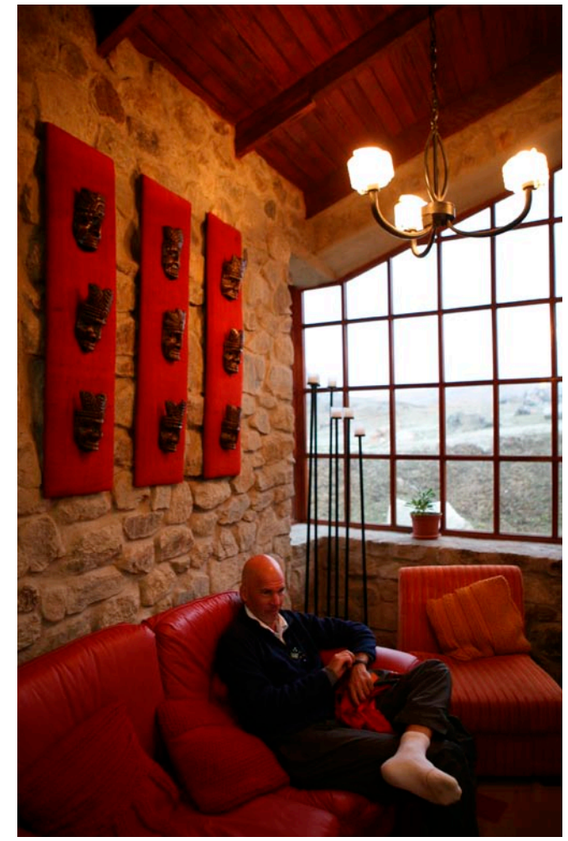
Like most of my traveling companions, I've reached an age where I prefer a certain level of comfort. Add that to arduous hiking, and you get one of the latest trends in adventure travel, called "flashpacking." I do wonder, though, if the flashy part of the tour will dilute that sense of wonder and authenticity that I reveled in as a college student.

We top a ridgeline to behold a lake of almost pristine beauty, green as emeralds, nestled beneath the glacier-draped face of Humantay. "Oh, my God!" exclaims Loretta Turner, a retired real estate agent from Seattle, echoing the sentiments of all of us. She hands her binoculars to her husband, Dan. Together they watch a pair of goose-like *huayatas* glide in.

"Look, they're landing in unison," Dan says. Like the birds, the Turners are traveling in harmony, here to celebrate their 25th anniversary. Minutes later, the couple spots a pair of condors rising on air currents high overhead. "The condor seems to embody the spirituality of these mountains," Loretta says, this time handing me the binoculars for a look.

I'm worn out by the time we get back to the Soraypampa Lodge, the first and largest of the four inns, where we're spending two nights before the main trek begins. A waiter in red fleece greets me in the lobby with a steaming mug of coca tea, a mild narcotic to ease the aches and pains of the day. The inn, built of stone, timber, and adobe, is simple yet elegant, reflecting a design that's both traditional and modern. Large open spaces are graced with circular stairways and floor-to-ceiling windows flooding the interior with light.

"I originally thought these would be basic mountain huts for backpackers," says Enrique Umbert, Sr., the CEO of Mountain Lodges of Peru, which built and operates the inns. His company partners with international tour operators that organize the inn-to-inn treks. He and I are clip-clopping on horseback up a dried wash, making a quick check of the property. After traveling through Spain and Italy, often by bicycle, Umbert continues, he shifted his vision from plain and rustic to a "new concept of comfortable, artsy rural inns."



In alpaca poncho and hand-crocheted hat, Umbert could easily be mistaken for a local shepherd. He's actually a savvy commodities trader, and I realize just how savvy when he tells me what it took to persuade local farmers to sell him the land he needed for his lodges. Though the tracts were but tiny patches of the expansive terrain between Salcantay and Machu Picchu, Umbert faced deep reticence among subsistence farmers steeped in a centuries-old tradition of communal land ownership.

"So I hosted a big barbecue," he says. "I invited everyone from all around the area." Then he made a speech. "I gave them a message from the heart," recalls Umbert. "I told it to them straight: 'Your cattle are dismal. Your balance sheets are something to shed tears over. Your kids are sick. Your women are losing their teeth by the time they're 30.'"

It worked. The families voted unanimously to sell. "They were ready for a change," Umbert says. Now, all of his 40 full-time employees are locals. He has brought in agronomists to help area farmers increase crop yields and pays top dollar for them to supply produce to his lodges, sparing growers costly trips to more distant markets.

The next morning we bid farewell to Umbert, who's off to buy rice in Vietnam for a wholesale business he runs. His eldest son and general manager, Enrique Umbert, Jr., is joining us so he can look in on the three other lodges up the trail. We grab our trekking poles and head out into the mountain air.

A few hours of steady climbing brings us to a steep, thousand-foot-high moraine. To reach the pass, we must scale this monster along a series of tight switchbacks called Siete Culebras, the "seven snakes."

"Look at that!" Jay Dyer of San Jose, California, here with his wife, Nicole, is pointing toward the top of the ridge, where two paragliders, each dangling from his own single-wing aircraft, appear in the cobalt blue sky. We watch them recede down the valley and vanish into the empty landscape.

In another hour, we're standing in what appears to be a vast stone garden. Scores of cairns have been erected by travelers to thank the *apus,* or mountain spirits, for safe passage. Amid the rock piles, a creaking wooden sign marks the top of Salcantay Pass, elevation 15,223 feet.

Members of our group trade high fives

Clockwise from above: **Trekker Stephan Gagnon relaxes at the Wayraccmachay Lodge, warm and cozy despite high winds and a 12,000-foot elevation. Jay Dyer places a stone on the group cairn at Salcantay Pass, while his companions celebrate reaching the high point of their hike. "It was a cathartic moment," says writer Scott Wallace. The Soraypampa Lodge offers 12 guest rooms and unimpeded views of the Cordillera Vilcabamba.**

MORNING THE NEXT DAY FINDS US AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE LOST CITY, HIDDEN FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD FOR NEARLY FOUR CENTURIES.

Having reached the famous ruins at the end of their journey, writer Scott Wallace follows trekkers Nicole and Jay Dyer up a stone stairway in the shadow of Huayna Picchu, the distinctive peak towering above the lost city.

Near the end of the trail, in the lush Santa Teresa Valley, Nicole Dyer pauses to meet Carmen Alvarez, age 100, and his great-granddaughter. The toddler's mother runs a kiosk at Cedropata, offering snacks and soft drinks to hikers. "The family is proud of Carmen's age," Wallace says.

and bear hugs, while rising emotions (or maybe it's the icy gusts) send tears down our cheeks. We've reached the apex of our walk. It's been just four days since we first met in Cusco, the ancient Inca capital, and wandered its magnificent cobbled streets together. But we've already bonded like a close-knit family, as though something transformative is taking place.

"We thank Mother Earth for this journey," says Jay, placing the first stone of our own votive cairn.

Nicole goes next. "This marks a new beginning for Jay and me." In fact, Jay and Nicole recently found out they're not able to have children. They hope our trek will help them move on with their lives, and it seems to be working.

Then Gary and Sue Paulson, both physicians from Alexandria, Minnesota, approach the cairn arm-in-arm, tears flowing. "Here, you put it on," Gary says to Sue, handing her a fist-size stone. His voice is barely audible in the wind. "This is for you, Andrea and Erika," Sue declares, acknowledging their twin daughters back in the States.

As Dan places a final stone atop our cairn, it occurs to me that, in a way, we are like the Inca *chaskis,* the relay runners who delivered messages along the vast web of footpaths that linked Cusco to the far-flung corners of the empire. Following in their footsteps, we too are on a mission, though perhaps a more personal, spiritual one.

We start downslope through fog into a land of sedge grasses and lichen-smeared boulders propped at bizarre angles, like so many giant dice tossed down by the gods. Behind us, the towering heights of Salcantay disappear in the clouds.

As we round a Volkswagen bus–size rock, a pair of tents appear out of nowhere, nestled on a rare patch of level ground. I hadn't noticed, but back at the pass, porters and cooks had slipped ahead of us with the pack mules, and now the unmistakable scent of roasting garlic is in the air. I follow my nose to the smaller tent. Inside, expedition chefs Roger and Lucho are hunched over pans of seasoned chicken breasts sizzling over a propane stove. *"Pollo enrollado,"* Roger says, smiling broadly. Chicken stuffed with cheese, green beans, and sausage in a mushroom cream sauce—not bad for trail food.

I duck inside the other tent to find my fellow hikers seated at a long, fully set table. They're already slurping cups of cream of corn soup when I find my place. "Here's to the cooks!" Deborah offers, hoisting her cup.

Later, over a candlelit dinner in that night's lodge, I recount my astonishment to the younger Umbert at the sight of those tents in the middle of that alpine meadow. "The hospitality business is all about expectations," he says, spearing a chunk of grilled steak with his fork. A few bottles of Chilean cabernet are making their way around the table. Outside, branches are clawing at the windows in a driving wind. That's fitting for a place called Wayraccmachay, which means "where the wind lives" in Quechua, the old Inca language still widely spoken in the Andes.

Light from the candelabra flickers on the walls, which are formed by white-washed adobe above a base of stone blocks. The design evokes the history—and fate—of the Inca, echoing architectural patterns we saw back in Cusco, where the conquering Spaniards erected their colonial buildings atop granite-block walls constructed by Inca masons.

At 29, Enrique, Jr., may seem young, but he has obviously inherited his father's business acumen. "We become specialists in managing expectations," he continues, "as well as their counterpart—surprises." Two nights ago, Enrique lured Dan and Loretta outside to view the full moon rising over Salcantay. Then he produced a bottle of bubbly and a tray of crystal champagne flutes. "To 25 years," Dan said, as the rest of us joined them, circling round to raise our glasses in the silvery moonlight.

Something extraordinarily positive is happening here in Peru. Little more than a decade ago, these mountains were in the throes of a brutal guerrilla war. Maoist rebels shot first and asked questions later, and foreign visitors were sometimes the targets. Yet, on this trip, not a single armed guard, nor a strand of barbed wire, is anywhere to be seen. "Our security comes from the commitment we made to the community," Enrique says.

On our way out the next morning, lodge manager Pilar Quispe leads us past a cluster of squealing piglets to visit the stone house where she lives with her husband, Modesto, and two children. I stoop through a low doorway and wait for my eyes to adjust to the dark.

A straw bed sits in one corner, a rough-hewn wooden table in another. A fire crackles in a simple earthen stove. Except for the year she spent training at another Umbert property near Lima, Pilar has lived here all her life. A mestiza in her early 30s, Pilar has strong Indian features and long braids of jet black hair. She stands aside to allow a few of us to enter the tiny room.

"What a contrast to the lodge!" Nicole gasps, with Loretta nodding in agreement. Pilar whispers something to Enrique, who turns to the group. "Pilar and Modesto choose to live this way so they don't arouse the jealousies of their neighbors," he says, more explaining than translating. Instead, she saves money in a bank and is able to care for her ailing father, send her kids to school, and pay for doctors.

Yesterday's clouds have cleared, and behind us, Humantay rises to a saber-tooth point, sharp as the Matterhorn. This is a scene you could live in forever, but now it's time to move on.

We start down along the side of a steep canyon wall. The aquamarine waters of the Río Blanco churn 500 feet below. Within an hour, I'm shedding layers—first the windbreaker, then the fleece. The barren landscape has given way to luxuriant forest. Now I'm down to short sleeves.

As in one of those old lithographs depicting the lush forests of the New World, the trail leads through lofty tunnels formed by overhanging boughs heavy with Spanish moss, orchids, and bromeliads. Mule trains on their way uphill leave us choking in clouds of dust. We regroup in the shade of a tall mango tree.

A hand-painted sign welcomes trekkers to Los Andenes campsite, where Vicentina Gutierrez is selling bottles of Gatorade and warm Cusqueña beer from a clapboard shack. She's arguing with a local customer about a spectacled bear and her cubs that farmers are blaming for the recent deaths of several calves. "The farmers want to shoot them," she tells me. It's a reminder that this wilderness is vulnerable, that people here compete with endangered wildlife to feed their families.

THESE MOUNTAINS WERE ONCE IN THE THROES OF A BRUTAL GUERRILLA WAR. BUT ON THIS TRIP, NOT A SINGLE ARMED GUARD, NOR A STRAND OF BARBED WIRE, IS ANYWHERE TO BE SEEN.

We've dropped nearly 3,000 vertical feet by the time the path veers to the right, leading to the bottom of the canyon. Bill, in his 60s and a bit wobbly from the day's exertions, stops to chug from his water bottle. "This isn't for wimps or couch potatoes," he says. "If you haven't kept yourself in shape, you have no business being here."

I clamber across a footbridge spanning a crystal-clear torrent. Parakeets dart through the trees in a blur of bright green and yellow. A steep climb brings us to the Collpapampa Lodge, perched on a shelf overlooking the gorge where the Totora, Blanco, and Manchayhuaycco Rivers meet to form the Santa Teresa. We are in the heart of the Cordillera Vilcabamba, the last mountain refuge of the Incas.

It's Day Five, and we know our adventure will soon be over. "Getting here has been such a trip, I'd almost forgotten about reaching Machu Picchu," Nicole says. We're standing in the ruins of Llaqtapata, a *tambo,* or resting place, where chaskis and other travelers on their way to and from Machu Picchu would put in for the night. Barely visible across an expanse of jagged ridgelines rises Huayna Picchu, the mossy pinnacle looming over the ruins in all the classic photographs.

Morning the following day finds us at the entrance to the Lost City, hidden from the outside world for nearly four centuries until its rediscovery in 1911 by Yale explorer Hiram Bingham. We make our way through crowds and find ourselves gaping at Machu Picchu's high walls of precision-cut stones. Passing through trapezoidal doorways that have resisted rumbling tremors for centuries, we descend a steep staircase to reach the Temple of the Sun. It's a perfect endpoint to the journey.

I keep thinking back to the scene in the lunch tent the day we came off the pass. Enrique, Jr., lifted a cup of grape juice to offer a toast. "Here's to magic moments," he said, "which will be with us for the rest of our lives."

The cozy inns along the way did nothing to diminish our adventure, I decide. In fact, they made the high, lonely route possible for a group that might otherwise have come here by train. In our case, the journey really was more important than the destination, and when you're talking about a place like Machu Picchu, that's saying a lot.

Scott Wallace, *a freelance writer and producer based in Washington, D.C., is profiled on page TK. Photographer* **Aaron Huey** *of Seattle shot "The Place Nobody Knows" for our November/December 2008 issue.*