

Field Notes

by
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Finding the “Fishscale Girl”

*How one traveler's visit to the Amazon
inspired a whole new life at home*

Rosita's smiling face charms many travelers who visit her Yagua village—but perhaps none so much as Ann Hailey.



Traveler Ann Hailey of Davenport, Iowa, found a creative way to help support schools in rural Peru.



Can you remember the moment right before you fell asleep last night? Can you recall the sounds and smells of your surroundings? How about the feeling of transitioning from awake to asleep? For Ann Hailey, that moment is one that is deeply cherished and reminiscent of her dream-like travels throughout the Peruvian Amazon. One of Ann's most vivid memories is sleeping and waking up in the jungle. From the soothing buzz of the Amazon rain forest and flickering kerosene lamps, to being greeted in the morning by a warm sun and the soft beat of drums. It was one of those surreal experiences that begs the question, “Pinch me, am I dreaming?” In fact, Ann's adventure in the Peruvian rain forest was quite similar to a dream in that she could have never predicted what was to happen next: starting her own publishing company and composing a children's book that would support school systems in Peru.

Ann Hailey grew up in Arizona and her childhood travel experience included a few family car trips. Her first major trip was to Europe in the fall of 1981 with her husband and two children, who were two and six years old at the time. They celebrated their daughter's sixth birthday in Scotland. Ann's next adventure wasn't until

March of 2009 when her sister and her sister's husband asked Ann to join them on OAT's *Real Affordable Peru* adventure, which included a pre-trip extension to the Amazon Rain Forest.

From the moment they arrived every point along their itinerary was an adventure. Surrounded by the vast rain forest, Ann spent her first few days in Peru in a freestanding lodge. “We took a boat from Iquitos about 50 miles down river to the lodge where we stayed. The water and sky were immense. The rain forest was all around, but the water and sky made the biggest visual impact. The lodge was welcoming, in part because it was so open to the air. It was a holiday weekend, and during that first night local people played drums into the early morning, and it was a wonderful backdrop. I kept waking up and enjoying the music for a while, then going back to sleep,” Ann says.

As fascinated as she was by the beauty of Peru's landscape, Ann took a particular interest in the transportation and food of Peru. She quickly learned that when you live in a place that is home to one of the longest rivers in the world, boats will be the main source of transportation. If you need to get somewhere, you hop on a boat and travel down the river on what could be compared to a water highway. Motorboats cut their engines for paddlers as a common courtesy and families travel down the river to drop off their kids at school or to pick up produce for their next meal. Ann compared Peru's agricultural landscape to that of California in the sense that it's both diverse and ideal for growing crops. She thoroughly enjoyed Peruvian cuisine and was intrigued by the variety of flavors and range of tastes—even a standard potato had a unique but different taste than the ones she was used to back home. As Ann enjoyed all that Peru had to offer, she took a step back and reflected. “Other than being a beautiful place to visit, this is someone's home. They're born there, and they live there,” Ann says. She was intrigued by the Peruvian way of life.

The next highlight of Ann's trip was a tour of a constructed village that had been built in traditional style. As an authentic representation of the people and culture, it holds great historical value. Ann watched the members of the Yagua, a community of 3,000 people living in the Amazon, perform a song and dance. She

also had the opportunity to use a blowgun, which the Yagua typically use to hunt monkeys, tree porcupines, pacas, sloths, birds, and other small animals.

It was during her time here that a simple interaction with a young Yagua girl named Rosita would change Ann's life. Ann purchased a small doll made of lungfish scale, seeds, and shells from Rosita. In Spanish, Rosita said that she made the doll herself. Ann expressed how thankful she was and cherished the doll from that moment on. Although the two shared a short exchange, that memory would stay with Ann forever.

After Ann returned home to Iowa from her Peruvian rain forest adventure, she felt inspired to write a picture book about the fish-scale doll. Ann wanted to celebrate the work of an indigenous child and let Rosita know that her work is greatly appreciated. Prior to the trip, Ann never had any intentions of writing a book. However, she got right to work and started photographing the doll. *Fishscale Girl* tells a story of a doll made of lungfish scales who went into the world to have adventures. She makes her way from the Amazon River to the Mississippi and shares her experiences along the way. The main message behind *Fishscale Girl* is simple: "The little doll went out into the world and you can, too," Ann says.

Ann's daily life completely changed as she spent 20-30 hours a week working on this project. The challenge was getting *Fishscale Girl* published. She decided to start her own publishing company called Cochiy Press. ("Cochiy" is the Yagua word for parrot.) After extensive research, she set up a website and worked with a printing broker in California to have several thousand

hardcover books printed in China. The next step was finding an adopt-a-school program.

As a teacher, Ann had always been drawn to adopt-a-school programs, which support kids in public schools. She decided that the proceeds from *Fishscale Girl* should go toward supporting education in Peru, specifically the adopt-a-school program of a nonprofit group called Conservación de la Naturaleza Amazónica del Perú (CONAPAC). She contacted CONAPAC and made this dream a reality. Now, when people buy *Fishscale Girl* from her website, their purchase supports a public school for two days. Ann is very thankful for this opportunity and thrilled that everything has fallen into place. "I never dreamed that I could have a personal connection with people who live in the Amazon rain forest. But here we are, with a long-distance, collaborative relationship that supports schools and gives me all kinds of opportunities for personal growth. This doll is an ambassador in my life," Ann says.

Ann's next challenge was locating Rosita to give her the book. For help, she reached out to Sintia Smith Snyder, the administrator for CONAPAC. Sintia was able to place the final piece of the puzzle. "When Ann asked me to track her down I had to ask a few area guides and then roam the village with a photo of Rosita that Ann gave me," Sintia says. "Finally, I did find her and she and her family were most welcoming." She took many photos of Rosita making more dolls and sent them to Ann. "Once the book was published, I found my way back to the village and Rosita—who by this time was not a young girl anymore but a young lady! She was delighted to see herself in the book. I see

her now and then at the local jungle library that we operate," Sintia says.

Since releasing *Fishscale Girl*, Ann has gone on to write and release her second book called *Fishscale Girl and the Disaster*. She has plans to write a third and fourth *Fishscale Girl* book as well. Ann describes her interactions with Rosita and the Yagua community as "an experience that no money can buy." She also says of her *Real Affordable Peru* adventure, "It was a great opportunity to connect with people in a part of world that I would have no other way to connect with."



While *Fishscale Girl*'s body is made of a single lungfish scale, her arms, legs, and face are woven from other organic materials.



Rosita tightly wraps dried grass to create the doll's arms.



The arms and head are attached to the fish scale to bring the doll to life.



Left: The cover of Ann Hailey's second book, *Fishscale Girl and the Disaster*.

Meet the Yagua during a pre-trip extension of *Real Affordable Peru*, www.oattravel.com/disRAP.

To learn more about Ann's projects, visit www.cochiypress.com.