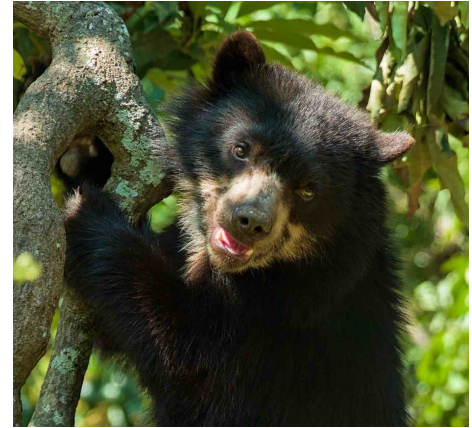


From Peruvian Coastal Ruins to Andean Surprises

After leaving the historic sites around Chiclayo, we decided it was time to trade ruins for nature. Our next stop was the Chaparrí Ecological Reserve, a conservation area in northern Peru. What makes Chaparrí truly remarkable is that it is the only privately owned reserve in the country, managed entirely by the local community. The reserve takes its name from the dramatic Chaparrí mountain that rises above the landscape.

Our main motivation for exploring the area was to search for the unique spectacled bear. Getting to the reserve was an adventure. We, foolishly, decided to follow Google maps rather than the road signs and after about 30 minutes of driving on unpaved roads, we were in no man's land until we found a small encampment of shacks and one man told us we were unquestionably... lost!

We drove back to the main road and wised up by following the road signs. Sure enough, we found a small storefront where we met Freddy!



To enter the reserve, we were required to have a guide, something we're usually skeptical about because we love exploring freely. But we had no choice and after driving that far, we didn't want to miss our chances to see the Andean bear. We are actually genuinely glad that we were forced to have a guide because we learned so much from him. Freddy, was a local young man attending university and working on his thesis. He told us he was studying ways to apply a form of "biometrics," not in the human sense, but as a system to understand the lineage and family groups of the bears. His passion for nature was obvious.

Freddy told us things we never would have discovered on our own. For example, we learned that Palo Santo, is a tree that behaves the opposite of the trees we're familiar with. Back home, trees lose their leaves in the cold; in Chaparrí, they shed them in the dry season as a survival strategy. Palo Santo also has a long tradition of being used for healing and for protecting homes.

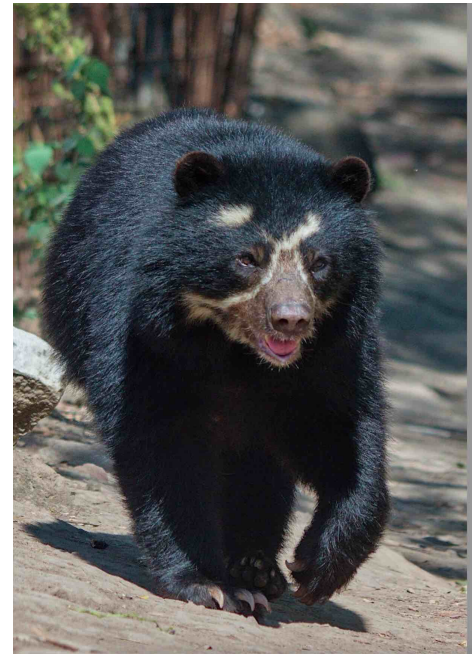


Another tree, even more fascinating, was the Pai Pai. Its trunk resembles a human bone, and if you look closely, it appears to connect through joints to other trees! Freddy explained that in ancient times, people actually used this tree to help heal bone fractures, a reminder that before modern medicine, nature was the pharmacy.



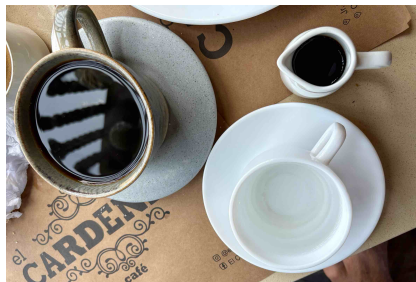
We also came across some beautiful birds, deer, a fox, snakes, and yes, we did see spectacled bears. Some were in semi-captivity as part of the reserve's rehabilitation work, but one mother bear and her baby were completely wild, roaming free.

We watched her after she climbed down from a mango tree. Seeing a bear in its natural habitat, not behind a zoo barrier, was exactly what we were looking for. The curious bear kept walking towards us, and Freddy kept telling us to move away, as one of us – the more reckless of the two you decided who that is! – wanted to get as close as possible to this innocent, curious and cute creature.



One of the most powerful parts of our visit was hearing how Chaparrí came to be. Freddy shared that the reserve's creation had been extremely controversial. For generations, many locals hunted in these forests, and the idea of protecting the land was met with strong resistance and even threats. The people who dreamed of creating the reserve were pressured, harassed, and in some cases directly threatened by those who feared losing access to hunting grounds. Freddy's own family lived this conflict. His grandfather was a hunter and strongly opposed the conservation plan, while Freddy and his mother, who supported the creation of the reserve, faced threats because of it. Freddy tells us that things have changed and even his grandfather has come around.

From Chaparrí we drove to Trujillo, and our first stop was its Plaza de Armas. As we sat there taking in the architecture and energy of the town, we realized something interesting: in Peru, every town has a Plaza de Armas – that is the name of the main square. Unlike other countries where main squares have different names. In Colombia, for example, where many towns have a Plaza Bolívar but not every town's main central plaza is called the same. In Peru, the name is always the same, a small but fascinating detail that reflects the country's colonial history and shared cultural patterns.



While enjoying the square, we discovered something new about coffee: Café Pasado. We ordered coffee and were served a strong, concentrated brew, not diluted at all, and a cup of boiling water. As it turns out, it's up to you to add water and adjust the strength to your taste. It's such a simple concept, and once again, we realized that something as basic as having a cup of coffee depends on the local culture and can be so unique from place to place.

While in Trujillo, we visited another monumental archaeological site: Chan Chan, the adobe metropolis that once served as the capital of the Chimú civilization, long before the Incas conquered it.



Walking through its vast citadels felt like entering a maze of sand-colored walls and geometric designs. The city was divided into nine palace complexes, each reflecting a tier of social and political life. Our guide explained how the Chimú grew from earlier cultures like the Moche and later became part of the Inca Empire. Chan Chan still carries the essence of its past: patterns of waves and fish carved into the walls, ceremonial plazas, and carvings with ancient cosmology.



After a few days in Trujillo, from the desert coast, we began the long journey inland toward the Andes, taking the scenic, and far longer, route through Cañón del Pato. Very quickly, the landscape transformed: dunes faded, and rugged mountains rose sharply around us. The road narrowed into dramatic cliffside tracks. We found ourselves driving on extremely narrow, single lane unpaved roads and going through tunnel after tunnel after tunnel.



Sometimes as the road turned or a tunnel approached, we would notice the sign “toque claxon” honk the horn, and that we did, we honked the claxon at every tunnel entrance. It was funny until we arrived in Lima – spoiler alert – where all you hear around is claxons! As we drove, we encountered several road construction blockades. As we stopped waiting for the construction crew to let us continue, we stopped and took in the views of the Río Santa and the mountains around.

As we continued, mesmerized once again by the constant change in the mountains, this time noticing the shift from dry rock to lush, green slopes, we spotted the distant, snow-white peaks of the Cordillera Blanca – the highest tropical mountain range in the world.

By the time we reached our destination, a boutique hotel about ten minutes from Huaraz, it felt like we’d crossed an entire continent in a day. It was Thanksgiving and our ninth anniversary, so we treated ourselves to a nice lodging with an incredible view of the Cordillera Blanca. Right from our doorsteps we could see Huascarán, and Huandoy – another multi-peaked mountain next to Huascarán, and the name of our room for two unforgettable days.



We drove into Huascarán National Park just to get a taste, knowing we’d return later to explore more thoroughly. Even this brief visit left us in awe of the grandeur of the mountains and the ever-changing sky that seemed to dance with them.

With Taco Libre doing all the hard work, the three musketeers climbed up the mountains to el Túnel Punta Olímpica, at about 15,500 feet. As we climbed the winding roads, each turn and sharp curve had a new surprise for us. The constant change with the clouds and the sun made it seem as if the mountain was changing outfits: sometimes wearing a hat over its head, sometime covering its face with shyness and other times showing all of its splendor with nothing but the sun shining on it.



At the entrance of the tunnel, we met a local man named Manuel, who lives in Chacas, the town at the east side of the national park entrance. He insisted we try his coffee and offered to take photos and videos for us, those Instagram moments, he joked. We ended up spending 15–20 minutes with him, chatting about our travels and tasting one of his specialties: Torta Olímpica, a delicious fruitcake handmade by Manuel himself. The flavors, like the mountains around us, were unforgettable: magic, local, and full of character.

December 10, 2025

