INCA TREASURE
IN THE CLOUD FOREST

By Peter Louise

Gold and silver may lie hidden here, but the real treasure is the land itself.

When I was living in Ecuador in South America, I heard about a lost treasure hidden by the Incas more than four hundred years ago. Seven hundred tons of gold and silver statues and religious symbols lay somewhere in the lonely Andes Mountains. I was fascinated, and I wanted to find out more.

The Llanquihue, a mysterious range of mountains, lies between the Andes and the Amazon basin of Brazil. Covered in thick clouds, the trees are dwarfed, and the branches are twisted from lack of sun. The sky is always gray, and the land is saturated in mud. It rains, sleet, or snows often so that mist hangs above the streams and the rocky slopes of volcanoes.

I was somehow drawn to those strange mountains, but before I journeyed there, I wanted to know more about the history of the Incas.

Early in the sixteenth century, the Inca empire ran 2,000 miles along the spine of the Andes from Colombia in the north to Chile in the south. In 1527, a civil war divided the empire between two brothers. Each wanted to be king. Finally, Atahualpa defeated his brother Huascar. He was about to take the throne when the Spaniard Francisco Pizarro and 170 conquistadores landed on the coast of Peru. Pizarro led his men to the snow-capped Andes to seize the Incas' gold and silver. The long civil war had weakened the Inca Empire, and the Spaniards easily captured Atahualpa.

Atahualpa asked to be set free if he could fill two rooms, one with gold and the other with silver. The Incas valued the precious metals not as money but as religious symbols. Gold represented the "Sweat of the Sun," and silver stood for "Tears of the Moon."

Pizarro agreed to set Atahualpa free if he did as he promised. So Atahualpa sent messengers throughout the Inca empire to bring the gold and silver from the temples of the sun and moon. Pizarro melted the beautiful objects down into ingots to be transported back to Spain by ship, but he did not set Atahualpa free. Instead, Pizarro killed him, and then set out to ransack more Inca temples, unaware that a caravan of sixty thousand men was on its way from the northern city of Quito, with loads of gold and silver.

When the Inca general in command heard of Atahualpa's death, he hid the treasure in the mysterious Llanquihue Mountains.

Finally, at the top, I looked down into the cloud-filled valley. I heard an earthquake rumble far below. We had reached the parano, high flat plains of grass and wet earth called "gazing bogs." The land actually shook when we stepped on it. I felt I was walking on top of the world. It hailed twice and rained constantly, a cold painful rain. Then the sun came out and turned the mist and streams silver. I was happy I'd come.

After lodging through the bogs for hours, we camped, and Segundo made a fire. The smoke billowed in great clouds, making our eyes water. We all drank tea and ate rice and beans. Then we slept as the wind whistled over the parano.

We rose before dawn. It took us another full day of painful, grueling walking to reach the volcano where the treasure was said to be buried. I was dizzy and nauseated from altitude sickness. I had no idea of the treasure's precise location, and I was so tired I hardly dared to look at the gold. Segundo only smiled and shrugged his shoulders when I asked him where he thought the Incas had buried it. He said, "I'm telling you, Pedro, the treasure is the beauty of these mountains."

The second day on the volcano it snowed, and the fog came down so thick we could not leave the butt. Segundo said again, "Pedro, the gold is in the magic of the place. Be glad that you are here and that you are safe."

My altitude sickness returned. Then I got pneumonia. Segundo said I must return immediately to a lower altitude. As we made our way down the rocks of the volcano, I heard the roar of a mighty waterfall somewhere. I felt glad I had seen the wonderful land of the lost treasure. Segundo said we had come closer to the Incas than any of them had ever come before. I was not sorry to look for the Inca treasure, for it was not mine. But I will remember the Llanquihue Mountains for the rest of my life—that wild, awesome place where even today some say the gold lies safely hidden.