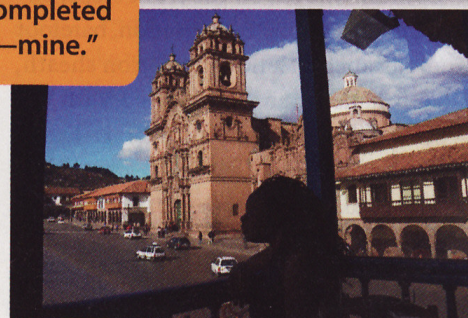


**"My race through life
can only be completed
at one pace—mine."**



During my adventures, finding faces of color like mine who weren't natives remained a rarity, and each time I spotted one, my face lit up like a child's. A close friend had humorously noted that vacation meant relaxing on a sprawling white sand beach glaring at cool turquoise waters of the Caribbean. With this in mind, I solicited friends of color, inviting them on this challenge. Energized and excited, 20 said yes, but our group quickly dwindled down to four when some discovered an arduous four-day trek was in order.

The first day mentally pitted us against each other as we tried to match strides while roughing eight miles of steep, rocky terrain. By day two, I finally decided to go at my own pace. Trying to complete the trek any other way seemed

futile. With deceiving switchbacks that made you feel like you were hiking round in circles up the mountain, there was no end in sight. Visibly disoriented on wobbly legs, I was first to reach our camp at Chakiqocha that night to applause from our porters.

After conquering 11 grueling miles the previous day, the third day's undulating terrain felt more like foot massages. Not until we reached never-ending rocky steps that threatened to take out our knees unless we appeased them by sidestepping. I pressed on, often trekking by myself for miles. It was in those precious moments when time stopped and my mind was devoid of thought that I realized I was alive—listening to my breath, absolutely conscious and present in my life.

On the final day of the trek, I stood on calf muscles hardened from constant strain, waiting for the gates to open. Exhaustion had ravaged my body, but at the forefront of my mind was my destination: the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu. Aching pain and tense muscles seemed mild inconveniences at this point.

With our headlamps illuminating small circles ahead, we rushed past each other with no love lost, finally climbing steep stairs to the Cloud Gate. The last

day had little to do with stamina. We had been reduced to basic primal emotion. The previous days of the strenuous journey had culminated at this point.

"There it is! There it is!" trekkers shrieked. I put on my glasses, and there she was ... Machu Picchu.

By trek's end, we'd traversed jungles, rocky terrain and summits over a span of 28 miles, reaching our highest elevation at 13,800 feet. We'd walked amid and marveled at centuries-old Inca ruins such as Runkuraqay and Sayacmarca. Tears of pain and joy fell. Air was thin and scarce, but at the end, we realized just how strong we'd always been.

The journey taught me two key lessons. First, the human spirit can withstand much more than we give it credit for, but more importantly, my race through life can only be completed at one pace—mine. ♥

Lola Akinmade is an avid traveler, writer and photographer.