



## The White Rock

*Hugh Thomson*

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## **The White Rock** Hugh Thomson

One man goes in search of the lost cities of the Amazon in the Inca heartland.

The lost cities of South America have always exercised a powerful hold on the popular imagination. The ruins of the Incas and other pre-Colombian civilisations are scattered over thousands of miles of still largely uncharted territory, particularly in the Eastern Andes, where the mountains fall away towards the Amazon. Twenty-five years ago, Hugh Thomson set off into the cloud-forest on foot to find a ruin that had been carelessly lost again after its initial discovery. Into his history of the Inca Empire he weaves the story of his adventures as he travelled to the most remote Inca cities. It is also the story of the great explorers in whose footsteps he followed, such as Hiram Bingham and Gene Savoy.

## **The White Rock Details**

Date : Published October 5th 2006 by Overlook TP (first published 2001)

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Author : Hugh Thomson

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## From Reader Review The White Rock for online ebook

### Felicity says

A well-crafted hybrid of memoir, travel book and history. It begins with Thomson's quixotic decision as a 21-year-old, untrained, to go to Peru and re-find an Inca ruin that had been discovered, then lost again. In the decades since, he's become a more seasoned explorer and a documentary filmmaker, and his love for the mountainous areas of Peru is a constant.

Interwoven with his descriptions of the beautiful, punishing terrain and the abandoned complexes of the Inca are anecdotes of the bizarre characters that have explored the area, the relationship between people of the mountains and of the jungle, the demands of outsiders' tourism and spirituality on the Inca's image, and the often forgotten history of the Inca's last stand. The sites he explores are part of their "rump kingdom", the Vilcabamba, from which they held off the Spanish for decades with guerrilla tactics and cagey diplomacy. While unlike the reviewer from *The New York Times Book Review*, I am content to remain an 'armchair traveler' and leave these treks to Thomson, I am inspired to read further on the fascinating history of the Inca.

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### Steven says

This book combined so many interests of mine, I don't see how I couldn't have liked it. Exploration, maps, history, travel, mountains, archaeology, family trees -- all that was missing was polar exploration, but since much of it took place at chilly altitudes, I'm still a pretty happy reader.

Thomson masterfully interweaves his own personal experiences as an explorer with accounts of colleagues, historical information and cultural observances in a way that seems effortless. His sympathy with the peoples of eastern Peru, both ancient and modern, comes through readily. I really appreciated the way the book was laid out. He starts in Cuzco, the likely cradle of Incan civilization and works his way chronologically toward this empire's sad end, using various ruins and historical sites to illustrate this historical path. Thomson's gives deference to this order in the book over the order in which he visited these areas, and I think that was a good choice.

His knowledge of the history of Incan civilization is apparent, as well as his familiarity with the history of how that civilization has been, and continues to be, discovered.

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### Whitenoisemaker says

I read this one whilst kicking around Cusco, and recommend it very highly for anyone getting into the Andean portions of Peru.

Thomson vividly and good-humouredly describes the business of both his own exploration and that of others, simultaneously giving credit where it's due and puncturing a few legends - those created by explorers and archaeologists about the Incas, and, perhaps more amusingly, those created by explorers and archaeologists about themselves.

The book is a satisfying mix of ancient history and tales of Thomson's own crazily impressive accomplishments (some guy in a pub reckons there's some ruins to be found, well, s'pose I'll fly out there and

find them, then some more, then write an excellent book about it), meaning that it rarely gets too dull for those of us who can't stomach too many accounts of climactic ancient battles.

It's particularly enjoyable to read about Thomson's return to Peru towards the book's end; his enthusiasm for the country and for the remaining exploration to be done mean that he doesn't waste time moaning like a bitter old expat hippy about 'all the bloody tourists'.

Lovely stuff that'll give you a taste of the Incas and of exploration a world away from just about any tour you can find down Gringo Alley.

(I'd also recommend his look at the guys who preceded the Incas, Cochineal Red - for my money, those were the most interesting and exotic civilisations of South America.)

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### **Justin Meek says**

A modern day account of exploring Manchu Picchu in the Andes and exposition of the fascinating tale of the Incas when the Spanish invaded.

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### **Stephanie says**

"The White Rock: An Exploration of the Inca Heartland" by Hugh Thomson

This is a book about the lure of the unknown, the fabled, the view over the next horizon. In this autobiographical book, Hugh Thomson leaps from a life as an undirected youth in London, to the wildest of ideas, and that is to go exploring in Peru in the hopes of finding lost cities rumored in the accounts of the conquistadors.

This true tale could have been a story of disastrous failures; and certainly there are hardships along the way, but there are amazing successes, too. Since I have traveled in this region, the book was especially evocative to me. There is a sense of shock, followed by elation when the glint of stone in the undergrowth reveals itself to be a lost ruin and the author describes these moments with a clarity which will make you catch your breath.

Thomson also gives a wonderful description of the nearby settled towns and villages, capturing the flavor of each place and the personality of the people in a way that make you feel that you know them.

But best of all is the view from the ridge lines of the Inca, when the history which lead him there gives way to the spectacular views of the mountain tops and jungle wrapped valleys. If you can't go to Peru, this is the next best thing!

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### **Lucretia Bingham says**

Just came back from trekking in Peru, found this book delved into Inca history in a very readable way.

Having visited many of the sites he writes of, it was fun to see them described by someone else. I first saw the White Rock in 2000 then again in 2015, the Vilcabamba area is still much unchanged, unlike Machu Picchu which is increasingly overrun with tourists.

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### **Woody says**

The book chronicles Thomson's exploration of Inca ruins in the early 1980s and his return trip 20 years later. It's a compelling and well-written adventure story, interspersed with the sad and brutal tale of the Spanish conquest of the Inca empire.

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### **Richp says**

This is my first book on the Inca, so I learned a lot. I hope the author did a good job factually speaking, since I do not have separate knowledge. He does cite a good range of sources, including a number of recent explorers, recent defined as being alive in the 1982-2001 period in which he was involved prior to finishing the book.

There are three stories here, the author's memoirs of his expeditions, summaries of other explorers' expeditions, and a brief history of the Inca empire, which was large at its maximum but lasted as an Incan empire only a century.

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### **Michele says**

A fine read about the Inca civilization and the Spanish conquistadores. This is also the first person account of a young man's adventurous explorations of the ancient ruins. Fascinating combination of history and adventure for anyone, but an especially fine choice if you happen to be heading to Peru.

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### **Paul says**

Hugh Thomson first went to Peruvian Andes at the age of 22. He was seeking a ruin that had been discovered a while ago, before being lost to time again. As a fresh faced youth, he found the Inca people and the places he visited compelling, confusing but most of all intoxicating. Walking in the footsteps of the great explorers, such as Bingham, who discovered Machu Picchu and Chambi a famous South American photographer, he travels across plains, over mountains and hacks through jungles in search of the people of this land. However, this book is more than that; it is a personal journey back through time to see the sights of the ancient civilisation and to learn of how it was destroyed by the brutal Spanish conquistadors.

Drawing on his experience of making documentaries Thomson has woven together the historical account of the Incas along with details of his two expeditions to the South American continent. As he went several times with a substantial gap in between the first and second visits, he has split his account over two sections. In each part, he writes about the people and places, the heart stopping moments when travelling in the mountains and jungles and of life in the towns and villages in Peru. The first trip was with two friends, but later he went alone, employing guides to accompany him as he sought the hidden world of the Inca. Whilst

this is good, and I enjoyed it, I didn't think it was as good as Tequila Oil, his trip to Mexico. Still worth reading though for an insight into the modern lands that sit on so much history.

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## Jim says

Hugh Thomson is a man of many parts: filmmaker, explorer, writer, blogger, tour guide ... the list goes on. He also happens to be the author of *The White Rock: An Exploration of the Inca Heartland*, one of the best books I have read about visiting little-known Inca sites in that vast, little-known area northwest of Cuzco.

The book falls neatly into two parts. The first part covers his visits in the early 1980s, when the *Sendero Luminoso* terrorist movement was casting a pall over the mountainous parts of the country. Then, almost twenty years later, he came back and continued his travels -- seemingly as if he had never been gone in the first place.

Why Peru? As he writes on the last page of **The White Rock**:

Peru is one of the last places left where man can satisfy the primitive and elemental need to find the unknown, the confront the "other." In Peru's case, importantly in the monoculture that the world is becoming, this is also an unknown with a culture and a set of values resiliently independent of the West.

The earliest chapters show a young man with a gung-ho impulse, but as the book proceeds, we see that he has read widely and has a very good idea of what he is looking for. This comes to the fore on the excellent chapter on Machu Picchu, which Thomson wisely saves until he has seen more of the Incan culture at first hand. Some of his conclusions are not only interesting but at variance with established guidebooks and archaeological treatises.

But then, Thomson never thought much of archaeologists:

What's an archaeologist? Someone who puts his head down a hole for forty years -- but doesn't have much of an idea of what's inside the hole. They're so specialist they lose the plot. And they presume that anyone who doesn't have a bit of paper stuck on the wall as a diploma can't be intelligent. Look what they said about us, about people like our wonderful [Hiram] Bingham, about [Heinrich] Schliemann who's been criticized by pygmies who wouldn't even reach up to his boots.

Thomson will not send you into a deep sleep speculating about Period III-A potsherds as compared with Period II-D specimens.

**The White Rock** is one of those excellently informed books that, if you are interested in the subject to begin with, will send you on your own journeys of exploration to bookstores and libraries. It contains an excellent annotated bibliography which makes this book a keeper.

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## Franc says

This is the best book (of the 4 or 5 I read for my trip) on the trekking thru the land of the Incas.

## Tim Martin says

The White Rock by Hugh Thomson is a fascinating, well-written account of both the author's travels to Inca sites in Peru and Bolivia and his efforts to address the big discrepancies between popular conceptions of the Incas and the actual evidence of what they were like, an effort complicated by the fact that the Incas left no written record and much of what we know about them comes from the often biased accounts of Spanish conquistadors and from the supposition of archaeologists.

Though Thomson visited a number of Inca sites throughout the book, Machu Picchu clearly dominates, as it is the most famous Inca site, the one most likely known to the average person. The very familiarity of the place he wrote about can lead to misleading impressions of the Incas and Thomson regretted that few visitors to Peru traveled beyond it.

The author recounted a number of misconceptions regarding the site. Many suppose that it is a major site for archaeologists; it is not, as the site was thoroughly excavated by the famous (and some say "over-enthusiastic and cack-handed") Hiram Bingham in the early years of the 20th century, who acted "with the over-confidence of an age of certainty" and so thoroughly excavated the site that little was left for later researchers. In addition, later restoration efforts to prepare the site for tourists were often done with little thought for archaeological preservation.

Speaking of Hiram Bingham, he is famous for having discovered the site. Thomson wrote that it would be more accurate that he should be famous for having publicized the site. A geographer by the name of Antonio Raimondi had a site labeled as Cerro Machu Picchu on a map made in 1875 and in 1902, a full ten years before Bingham visited. Don Enrique Palma of Cuzco visited the site and left an inscription on its walls.

Tour guides and many popular books on Machu Picchu speak of the city's great religious significance, but Thomson interviewed archaeologists who said that the site was not a religious shrine at all. Occupied for less than a hundred years, largely forgotten after it was abandoned (something the Incas would not have done if it was a religious or especially a pilgrimage site), it was basically a winter quarters for the Inca emperor (known as the Inca), a country estate or leisure complex, a "gigantic hunting folly" that was "both too impractical and ostentatious" to maintain, basically an old country house and pleasure resort built on a grand scale at the height of the Inca Empire and then "left to fade away as royal tastes and fashion moved on." While the site was attractive both for its milder and warmer climate than Cuzco and its abundance of game, it was an expensive locale to live in.

Those who maintain the notion that the site was a religious point to the great number of female skeletons unearthed at the site, labeled by many as "Virgins of the Sun." In fact later studies showed that the proportion of male and female remains was about equal; this misconception dates back to one of Bingham's colleagues, George Eaton, who in 1912 wrongly identified most of the remains as female.

Another misconception (albeit one that the Incas themselves promoted) was that they were the only or the first Andean or South American civilization. Incan rulers like the famous Pachacuti (originally known as Inca Yupanqui but who took the title Pachacuti or "Transformer of the Earth") promoted within their own society powerful origin stories, as Pachacuti, though important as he led the first wave of Inca conquests to Bolivia and Lake Titicaca, bringing an area from Colombia to Chile, some 3000 miles and about the size of continental Europe, under Inca control, carefully promulgated official versions of Inca history.

In reality, the Incas were adept at incorporating whole tribes into the Empire, as large numbers of people or

even whole populations were taken away from their homelands to serve as tribute labor elsewhere in a system called mitamayo (the workers were called mitimaes). Thomson compared the Incas to Stalin in the way that they moved around client peoples, shipping them from one part of the empire to another to do jobs, moving potentially difficult peoples into new, uninhabited (and distant) areas, even splitting towns into upper and lower sections and having them compete in providing services to the State and the town itself.

The Incas were noted for appropriating the ruins of previous civilizations, altering them as they saw fit, manipulating and distorting the meaning of the ruins and of history. In reality, the Incas, "[f]ar from imposing order on an unruly bunch of savages, ...were merely the latest dominant tribe (and a short-lived one at the that) in a series of Andean civilizations" that had existed for over 2000 years previously. The Incas built their achievements on earlier civilizations such as the Moche of the north of Peru (noted for their magnificent pottery), the Huari, and the Tiahuanaco culture (who produced magnificent stone buildings) near Lake Titicaca.

Thomson also recounted many other aspects of the Incas. He noted their careful uses of terraces and canals, giving them the ability to support thousands where only dozens now live today. I had heard of Peruvian mummies before, but I had no idea of their role in Inca society; when each Inca died, his estate or panaca continued to maintain his palace as if he were still alive, with the Inca's mummified form resident in the old palace and brought out for feast days and coronations (Thomson wrote that the "mummy lobby" was very powerful towards the end of the Inca empire and was a system open to much abuse). Other interesting topics covered include the building, planning, and maintenance of Inca roads, Inca architectural methods and styles, and the course of the Spanish Conquest, particularly the struggles of the last Inca Emperors.

The book is also a great and witty travelogue particularly of Peru, with maps and many photos.  
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### **Paige says**

I liked the book quite a bit. I only completed half of it before I hiked the Inca Trail up to Machu Picchu, and then the second half after I had finished. I think I actually enjoyed it much more with the experience of hiking the trail fresh in my mind. I was able to picture the places, buildings and landscapes that he was describing. A must read on a pre-Peru trip read list!

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### **Adam Geisler says**

The Inca are often misunderstood. Without a known written language, much of their history is based on speculation, archaeological remains, and oral tradition. It is this mysterious nature that draws many people to the old Inca empire, which was centered in Peru, but whose influence extended beyond that country's modern borders. It is also what drew Hugh Thomson to Peru. Part of the attraction of his book is his blend of carefree adventure and curiosity for history. He balances his narrative around his attempt to reach the last known refuge of the Inca as well as the famous expeditions of Hiram Bingham, and the story of the Inca's last stand against the Spanish conquest. The book succeeds in capturing the intrigue of this land, its people (both ancient and modern), and the spirit of exploration. The only noticeable flaw in Thomson's account is his failure to maintain the enthusiasm in his writing consistently as he travels deeper into the jungle of the land and the history.

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