

# THE DEDHAM TIMES

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## **The pandemic, Peru and promissory notes**

### **The story of a Dedham resident and the struggle to get him home**

By Rich Trombetta

Stephen Loder had an uneasy feeling on March 10 as his train stopped at the station in New Rochelle, New York. Earlier that day, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that the national guard would be setting up a containment area in the New York City suburb located about 20 miles from Manhattan to help curb an outbreak of the coronavirus.

"I'm not sure this is a great idea," Loder recalls saying.

Loder, who grew up in Dedham, Massachusetts and was traveling with a childhood friend, was enroute to John F. Kennedy airport for an overnight flight to Peru where he would embark on a four-day guided hike to the Inca city of Choquequirao.

By the time they landed in Peru President Trump was preparing to issue a travel ban, stock market futures were rapidly falling and the coronavirus pandemic was about to ravage parts of America. Enduring the physical demands of the hike would become the least of his worries as government bureaucracy, a lockdown and curfew and the exponential rise in Covid-19 cases would present a more difficult challenge - getting home.

### **A hikers dream**

Hiking in Peru is on many adventurers' bucket lists. Remote villages, Incan ruins and the grandeur of the Andes mountain range welcome travelers as they make their treks through this

Latin American country. The several-day hike to Choquequirao most often begins with a 4-hour drive from the city of Cusco and includes beautiful yet arduous terrain, a chance to interact with enterprising Peruvian residents (you can buy access to satellite Wi-Fi at locations along the way) and an opportunity to view the ancient ruins that have brought archaeologists and intrigue to the area for decades.



*Stephen Loder in Peru*

On March 13 Loder set off for Choquequirao with his friend and the guide they had hired to help them navigate the remote terrain.

### **A mom's intuition**

Loder's mother, Elizabeth, a physician at Brigham & Women's Faulkner Hospital in Boston did what most parents would do - she worried. From her home in Dedham she and her husband, John, like most Americans, frequently watched and read the news. While her medical background helped with anxiety about the disease, the situation in the U.S. increased concerns about what might occur in Peru with respect to travel restrictions.

"As a mother I was nervous because of everything that was happening," she said. "On the 15th, I texted him hoping he might come in range saying that things are getting worse and there's now a travel advisory [in the U.S.] and I'm concerned that the border might close."

Stephen Loder did not have access to his messages until hours later and texted back that he didn't think they could return sooner.

“I was very uneasy, but at that point, it was like we were already there,” he said. “So we might as well stay here and enjoy ourselves as much as we can before we have to go back to all the craziness that's happening at home.”

Stephen Loder had spent March 15 touring Choquequirao, taking pictures of the vast expansiveness of the area, admiring the sophistication and yet simple nature of the ruins and beaming that he had achieved what he and his friend had set out to accomplish. Although he had been expecting rain, the day was unusually dry for the time of year, and the sun and sky provided a perfect backdrop for the memories he was creating; the tranquility a juxtaposition to the chaos that seemed to be engulfing the world.

The three travelers turned off their Wi-Fi and settled in for the night. As Stephen Loder slept, Peru would begin to transform into a country very different from the one that welcomed him when he arrived just four days earlier.

### **A government reacts**

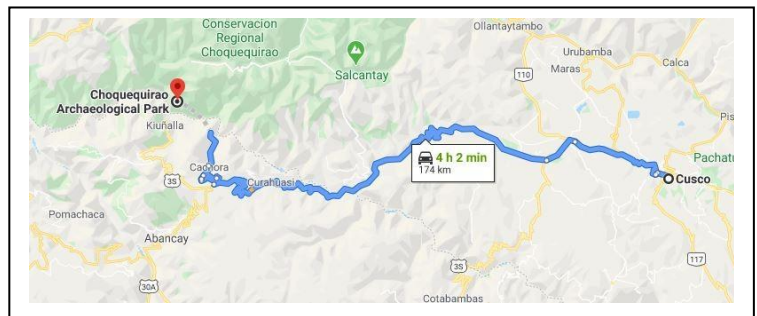
While Peru has the beauty of the Andes mountain range and mystery of the Inca ruins, it also has the less desirable reputation of political instability and corruption, and current President Martin Vizcarra has vowed to address the systemic improprieties that have plagued the country for decades. Not afraid to take bold action, he dissolved the Congress in 2019 in an attempt to advance reforms; it should have come as no surprise then on the evening of March 15 that President Vizcarra would act swiftly when the number of coronavirus cases began to rise. Vizcarra announced that the entire country of Peru would go into lockdown with a curfew enforced by military personnel in just over 24 hours at midnight on March 17. The decision sent the country into panic and travelers scrambling.

## The race against the clock

It was time to begin the hike back to Cusco, the plan being to complete a portion of the trip on March 16 and finish on March 17. But things changed in an instant.

“It was going to be a two day hike and about 3:00 p.m. we were most of the way to where we needed to be for that night. We were both really tired at this point,” Stephen Loder said. “The guide paid for Wi-Fi, turned on his email and said we need to leave right now, because they're going to close the borders and cut all internal travel at midnight.”

Despite being exhausted and having to hike across difficult trails, the race was on. Moving quickly and at times almost running, the three were aware of the stakes. It was 3 p.m. and they needed to complete their hike by 7 p.m. From there they would need to confirm a shuttle bus back to Cusco, an almost four-hour drive. The group did the math - if everything went according to plan they would arrive just before the lockdown and curfew went into effect.



“We got to a ranger station where they had checked us in before the hike and there was no one there,” he said. “There was just a sign up on the door that said per this government decree, the trails are closed and no one is allowed to go visit the Inca site anymore. So we sat there waiting for a van to take us back.”

While they waited the gravity of the situation began to sink in. A pickup truck with two police officers and a group of nurses in protective gear arrived warning the group they needed to leave the area.

“It felt like the beginning of a zombie movie or something, where all these people in masks, hazard gear show up and tell you that the world is going to end or something,” he said.

A van showed up at 8 p.m. to bring them back to Cusco. While speeding to the city Stephen Loder was able to access cell service and, with the help of his mother, reserved a room at a Hilton Garden Inn to avoid having to stay at a hostel where sanitary conditions were questionable, food would be sparse and internet connections could be spotty.

“The driver, he wanted to get back for his own reasons,” he said. “So he was driving very fast through these narrow mountain roads all the way back to Cusco. We got back about 11:40 p.m. and had just enough time to grab some food and other supplies at a bodega and then check into the hotel. And that was the end of that initial phase of the journey.”

### **Minutes determined their fate**

In addition to possibly having to stay at the hostel if the hotel had not been available, there was an even more dramatic scenario that entered Stephen Loder’s mind.

“I wonder if we might have been able to smooth-talk our way through one of the blockades,” he said. “One of the branches of the Peruvian military was setting up the roadblocks. And we were just in the nick of time to get past them.”

If they had been even a few minutes late and the “smooth-talking” didn’t work in that scenario there was a possibility that he would have had to spend a week or two in one of the more remote villages.

“There were some Americans who are stuck in extremely remote areas, out in the Amazon or up in the mountains,” he said. “I think that would have been a much scarier thing to go through.”

## Twitter users drive action

Back in Dedham Elizabeth Loder searched for information about the situation in Peru, relying on Twitter to keep her up to date in real time as to what was happening on the ground. Hashtags such as #americansstuckinperu and #stuckinperu quickly became a go to resource over the coming days to help her assess the situation and determine how to get Stephen home.

“There were some very enterprising people who set up these Facebook groups and were tweeting regularly about what was happening,” she said. “That was really useful for everybody.”



While Americans waited and searched for help, one U.S citizen was able to leave the country - Ambassador Krishna R. Urs. He and several members of his staff were evacuated on March 20 due to “medical reasons,” further complicating matters and increasing confusion with families in the United States and travelers in the Latin American country.

“Initially, we thought maybe the US Embassy would start flying people out. But there was really no word from them,” Stephen Loder said. “Their initial message was basically you are stuck here for 15 days, shelter in place, follow the local laws and guidelines associated with COVID-19 and plan to exit the country in early April.”

To compound matters, multiple news organizations including [NBC News](#) began reporting that Peru and the United States were in “negotiations” as to how to get Peruvians in the U.S. back to Peru and Americans from Peru back to the United States. The U.S. Ambassador and much of the embassy staff had left and now people like Stephen Loder found themselves like chess pieces in a game of international diplomacy.



### **Help says they’re coming...but you gotta pay them cash**

Finally, on March 24 there was a dramatic shift. Although many would agree that the United States has become politically polarized with constant fighting between Democrats and Republicans, the situation in Peru served as a means to bring people from both sides together. Florida Sen. Marco Rubio learned about what was happening and took action tweeting that “This morning a competent official has taken direct control & will personally go to #Peru to get Americans home as soon as possible.” Other politicians from both sides of the aisle also got involved. The cavalry was on the way - with an invoice.

Stephen Loder received an email on March 28 indicating he needed to be at the Cusco airport by 9 a.m. the next day for a flight to Miami via Lima. His friend would have to wait an additional night. Taking a shuttle bus from the hotel, he arrived at the airport to find “about a thousand people” waiting in line to depart.

“There were actually situations that we saw on Facebook where the mother [would get]



*People wait at the airport at Cusco*

called for a flight and then her children wouldn't be on the flight,” he said. “So they'd have to go to the airport and have the children wait in a standby line. They weren't even sure that they would be able to get on a flight with their family, so it was kind of a bit of a disorganized process.”

Scenes of Americans being rescued during the pandemic are inspiring; the fact that many of those citizens are handed a promissory note requiring that the evacuee reimburse the United States for the flight is perplexing to people like Stephen Loder. To board the flight out of Peru he had to commit to paying \$900 under the terms [of the agreement](#) or accrue interest and penalties including denial of a U.S. passport. Even if the price was higher he would have paid because it was his only way out.

“This whole process of staying in a hotel for two weeks and buying a flight back cost more than the trip initially,” he said. “I personally don't think that it's unfair because for me I put myself in the stupid position of being stuck there. But if you can't afford to stay here for two weeks what can you do? There was nothing, no information available for people in that position. So we were very lucky.”

And how did his mom react when he was finally home?

“I don't think I'd ever seen her that happy.”