On the 31st July, I flew to Peru along with fellow Spanish student Tom McDonald, starting the five weeks that we had together to travel around the country thanks to the £1220 given to us by the Santander Travel Grant. Personally, my aims of the trip were threefold. Firstly, I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the national history, both pre-Colombian and modern. Peru also has a rich literary history; due to this, I had chosen to study Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa in my final year, in a paper specifically designed to study two Spanish-speaking authors in considerable detail. I felt that visiting his native country was a fantastic opportunity to discover more about the author’s life and go beyond what can be learnt in the discussions in a tutorial. Lastly, my time in Peru marked the beginning of my year abroad, where linguists’ principle objective is to speak the language more fluently. A key aim of mine was to improve my listening and oral skills, and by conversing with locals my accent began to sound more like a native speaker, although blending in completely still proved difficult when you have ginger hair!

Staying in Lima offered a plethora of opportunities in exploring the Incan heritage of the country. Before coming to Peru, I had imagined that the modern cities were separate from the Incan settlements. When visiting the temple Huaca Pucllana, I realised I couldn’t have been more wrong! The temple lies in the middle of the Miraflores district, one of the richest and most upmarket areas of the city. Huaca Pucllana was an important site for ceremonies, some of which seem bizarre and brutal in the modern day. For example, children were regularly sacrificed as offerings to the Gods, and when touring the temple, we saw three tombs with human remains inside. While recognising that offerings to the Gods were an important part of their religious heritage, it still seemed somewhat paradoxical to us that an
indigenous people so technologically advanced continued to practice human sacrifice until Columbus’ arrival in the sixteenth century.

While in Lima we also visited Museo Larco, which boasts a collection of thousands of artefacts spanning numerous Peruvian indigenous peoples, some of which even extended back to ten thousand years pre-Columbian Peruvian history. The array of relics varied from jewellery, to fabric and to pottery and it was fascinating to see first-hand the intricate detail with which the Incans engineered their headwear and other items of clothing, reflecting their talent in craftsmanship.

Arequipa, Peru’s second largest city, is the birthplace of author Mario Vargas Llosa. We stayed in the city for a few days, and most notably visited Casa Museo Vargas Llosa, the house where he was born that has now been turned into a museum. The museum was probably my favourite of the entire trip; it was a compelling visual experience taking you from room to room of the house detailing the different stages of his life, beginning with his first experiences with writing stories as a child and finishing with his attempt to enter politics in 1990, a campaign which ended in defeat against Alberto Fujimori. Being in Vargas Llosa’s house was an enriching experience, and the information I picked up from the biographical tour will certainly help when I study him in my final year.

It was fascinating to see the difference between Spanish and the indigenous languages of Peru. Road signs or notices were often in Quechua or Aymara, and in many rural areas the locals’ grasp of Spanish was limited. A talk with one old man about various Quechua legends led me to realise the influence that these may have had on Latin American literature. In fact, a key feature of magic realism, perhaps the continent’s most well-known genre, is impossible or extremely unlikely events often caused by the supernatural. In an area where many take these local myths at face value, it is not difficult to see what inspired Peruvian, and more
generally, Latin American writers. This was of particular benefit for Tom, whose findings will help him in the magic realism module he is taking.

One of the most interesting things I found was the subject of religion in Peru. Many Peruvians saw the European colonisation of Peru as a negative thing, as much of their Incan culture was destroyed by the European conquistadores. Given this, I found it strange how willingly people accept Catholicism in the country, despite the fact it was essentially forced on them by the colonisers. Visiting two different islands on Lake Titicaca was perhaps the best example of this. We first arrived at the Islas Flotantes, man-made islands built from straw and reeds, where they still believe in Pachamama or ‘Mother Earth’. However, a further two hours towards the centre of the lake took us to Isla Taquile. Despite being seemingly being more isolated, the inhabitants of this island are Catholic and we were even lucky enough to observe a wedding taking place at the time. During our time in Peru we witnessed many forms of hybrid Catholicism, and I’m keen to explore more about the role of religion in Peru, and Latin America in general, in the future.

Being surrounded by Spanish speakers on a day-to-day basis immeasurably helped me improve my ability to speak the language. Peninsular Spanish varies from the Spanish spoken in Central and South America, with certain words and phrases also differing amongst Latin American countries. By chatting with Peruvians, along with travelling Spaniards and Mexicans, we were able to pick up many new slang words, some of which may not be appropriate for this report! Overall, I amassed a wider vocabulary, and by the end of the trip I was able to speak considerably more fluidly, and with fewer mistakes, than at the start. For Tom, Peru offered an opportunity to practise his Spanish after a year in Jordan, and he relished the opportunity to speak to as many people as
possible, with him very pleased with how his listening skills and spoken Spanish developed over the course of the five weeks.

Overall, it was a fantastic trip that has greatly enriched both our studies in Spanish. We are very much looking forward to returning to Oxford and using what we have learnt in Peru in both language classes and tutorials. We are extremely grateful to the Santander Travel Grant for offering us the opportunity, and hope to reap the rewards in the near future.

Tom Appleby