

## RTDNA Member Donna Francavilla Escapes Flooded Machu Picchu

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By Jamie DeLoma, Quinnipiac University

Donna Francavilla, an RTDNA member since 1980 and a CBS News freelance reporter who covers stories of national interest in Alabama, Mississippi and the Florida panhandle, hoped a trip to the ruins of Machu Picchu in the mountains of southern Peru would present an opportunity to connect with her daughter, Lisa. Instead, the excursion to the “Lost City of the Incas” threatened to be their last.



The two found themselves among approximately 2,000 tourists trapped in Aguas Calientes, a small village outside of the popular Latin American tourist attraction, cut off from food, water and shelter as a result of mudslides and rising flood waters.

“Our mother-daughter trip, designed to be one final bonding trip before I hand her off to her fiancé in marriage this May, turned out uniting us in ways we never could have anticipated, creating survival memories as we clung to each other, repeatedly asserting ‘mama-filia-familia,’ in an effort to be airlifted together,” Donna Francavilla said in an exclusive interview with the Radio Television Digital News Association.

[To view a slide show of Donna's photos, click here.](#)

Lisa Francavilla, 24, a George Washington University graduate, had wanted to remain on the continent after the trip to study Spanish so when she applied to graduate schools, she would be able to tout fluency in two languages, her mother said.

The two women planned to follow a four day, three night hiking schedule beginning Jan. 22 through the Andes Mountains, Donna Francavilla said. As a result, they brought limited clothing and money.

“During the second or third day of our climb, the guides were made aware of the landslides and flooding,” Francavilla said. “But they kept it from us, so as not to alarm us.”

[Click on the video below to see the flooding](#)

On the third day of the hike, Donna and Lisa Francavilla camped in tents at a location where a mudslide would later take the life of a person, Donna Francavilla said.

“We finished our trek and got down to the end of Machu Picchu,” Donna Francavilla said of the fourth day of the hike. “The guides arranged for us to take a bus down. The driver eventually stopped and told us that we couldn’t go any further.”

She said they crossed over a river that was brown with mud and debris.

“It was raging, it was swollen and angry,” Donna Francavilla said.

They then had to walk along suspended rail lines to Aguas Calientes, which means hot springs, on Jan. 25. It was the only route through the town, she said.

People were evacuated to the village because officials did not know where else to put them, Donna Francavilla said.

"It turned out when we got there that some people were waiting there for four or five days but couldn't get out because the trains had stopped running," Donna Francavilla said. "Our group was one of the last to come down."

Francavilla's group was diverse, and the guides said their responsibilities to the hikers were over. The guides left during the early morning hours of Jan. 26, she said.

"There were 15 people in our hiking group," she said. "I was the eldest at 49, the next oldest was 35, then most others were in their 20s. We had one [person] from Great Britain, two from Norway and 10 from Australia."

At least 10 people had died in the crisis, Donna Francavilla said. Homes and at least one hotel were washed away; the streets became impassable. And when the only train line to the town was suspended, food supplies stopped.

"Supplies began to dwindle and people began to worry really fast," she said. "It created a panicked situation for many people."

Donna Francavilla, who has covered Hurricane Katrina and F5 tornadoes, said she maintained her cool.

"I saw disasters come and go and I thought, 'OK, I know what to do: I need water, food, shelter and electricity. I knew what to do.' But, when some of those basic necessities went away, I began to worry," she said. "We quickly figured out we had to buy supplies and share batteries, flashlights and battery power. As I've seen in other disaster situations, people came together."

Her anxiety began to rise when the electricity to half the town went out, Donna Francavilla said.

"We couldn't speak Spanish. We didn't know the lay of the land. We didn't even know how to ask for the things we needed. We didn't know who to turn to ask," she said.

The Peruvian government did not have the infrastructure for an emergency plan in place, Donna Francavilla said. Rumors that U.S. citizens had paid to be rescued were running rampant in Aguas Calientes, making it dangerous to be an American.

"The people down there were very angry with the rumors," she said. "One was Brit advised us not to go out without a male escort."

People from South American countries couldn't understand why they had to wait for five days to be rescued, she said.

"It became very emotional," Donna Francavilla said. "There was a good amount of fear and passion roaming the streets."

Eventually, the Peruvian military airlifted Donna and Lisa Francavilla to safety on Jan. 28.

"There was so much uncertainty; we didn't know if we would be there another week," she said.

Fortunately for Donna Francavilla and the American public, she had brought her smart phone with international roam service - despite expecting only to be on a four day trek.

"I was very fortunate that I brought my iPhone with me," she said "I contacted CBS and they were instrumental in getting the word out."

Constance Lloyd, a general manager at CBS News, said the news organization asked Donna Francavilla to report what she saw.

"We had her calling in twice a day and narrating what was going on," she said.

Donna Francavilla relayed the stories of some of the people trapped in Peru through blogs and radio broadcasts.

CBS correspondents are asked to bring their equipment with them at all times should a story break, Donna Francavilla said. She said all she needs now is her iPhone.

"I can record short audio interviews, and even video, trim the pieces and e-mail them. I can also snap pictures and video and send via the iPhone," she said. "I can write a script, and although I haven't sent the network a debrief using this method, I've already tried it out. The audio quality is good enough to put on the airwaves."

While waiting to be rescued, Donna Francavilla said she met Phillip Barth, a U.S. State Department official, who was visiting Machu Picchu when the disaster escalated.

"I attended his meetings, held on the streets, in which he hoped to inform the stranded tourists what he had learned," she said. "This man is an unsung hero. He worked long and hard to help others, spent hours on the phone. People were so grateful to him as even trying to call out of the country was difficult. The tourist office had only one phone line and one computer. Businesses charged for calls home and lines were long, money limited, etc. Phillip helped us all by providing a link between the government and U.S. citizens. And that gave us all hope and comfort."

Donna Francavilla said the experiences ignited the patriotism inside her and her daughter.

"We both swore we'd quit complaining about paying taxes," she said. "U.S. helicopters were diverted from Columbia to rescue the 400 or so Americans stranded here and assist the Peruvian government in helping those in need. Our families asked our Congressmen and the State Department for help. Our embassies/government responded quickly, efficiently and responsibly. It felt good to be American knowing those that home cared about our welfare."

However, citizens of other countries did not feel as proud with their nation's rescue efforts, Donna

Francavilla said.

“Members of our group, who mostly came from Australia, lamented they had been ‘forgotten,’” she said. “They told us their embassy representative asked them, ‘Did Aguas Calientes run out of beer? If not, what’s the problem?’ ”

American helicopters were first to come, Donna Francavilla said. They attempted to land, but the Peruvian government would not grant them permission.

A mob of South American nationals protested the attempted rescue of the Americans, she said. In order to preserve the safety of the Americans in the town, U.S. officials said they would go through the Peruvian officials, Donna Francavilla said she heard. That decision delayed their rescue by another two days.

However, the American consultant was able to ultimately expedite the exit of Donna Francavilla and her daughter, she said.

“It felt good knowing that the United States had our backs,” Donna Francavilla said. “Despite all of our economic woes of late and other imperfections, we do live in the best country on Earth.”

During their Jan. 28 rescue, people reached out and grabbed Donna and Lisa Francavilla, she said.

“It was a surreal experience,” Donna Francavilla said. “People were literally screaming in Spanish. It caused a lot of fear and chaos. The military had to form a human fence to protect us from the mob.”

She said despite her tumultuous experiences, she feels for the victims of the flooding.

“They didn’t have much to begin with and they have even less now,” Donna Francavilla said. “And that’s a tragedy.”

She said she was grateful that CBS News reported on the disaster.

“Stranded tourists told me the blog CBS published helped concerned family members learn about what it was like in Aguas Calientes,” she said. “They thanked me for writing, saying very little information was in the media, and that loved ones were relieved a journalist was among them to help get word out about what was happening.”

Lisa Francavilla decided against returning to Peru to study Spanish. Instead, she plans to study in Buenos Aires where she feels safer from natural disasters.

Donna Francavilla said she plans on returning from an excursion in Buenos Aires and Uruguay to Birmingham, Ala., on Feb. 10.

“I plan to continue freelance reporting and field producing for CBS radio and television, and writing for [Agence France Presse], and continue to grow my media consulting business,” she said. “Personally, I plan to enjoy planning my daughter’s wedding with her as the mother of the bride!”



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