

PERU

The bridge made of grass

Every June, four Andean communities weave a new bridge of grass over a gorge, as people have for centuries.

WHERE	Q’eswachaka, Canas province, Cusco
WHO	Four Quechua-speaking communities who rebuild the Q’eswachaka rope bridge each year
WHEN	Inca times to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

High in the Andes mountains of Peru, a bridge hangs over a gorge, a narrow valley with steep sides. The Apurímac River runs far below. The bridge is made of grass.

It is called Q'eswachaka. Several sources call it the last Inca rope bridge. The Inca built many like it, hundreds of years ago. Most are gone. This one lives on because people weave it again, every year.

Rope by rope

Four Quechua-speaking communities share the work. Their names are Huinchiri, Chaupibanda, Choccayhua and Ccollana Quehue. At the end of May, families begin. They cut a tough mountain grass, soak it, and crush it with stones. Then they twist it into thin ropes.

Women and children make much of the rope. Thin ropes are twisted into thicker ropes. These are braided into six great cables. Men carry the heavy ropes to the gorge.

> **You can see the living culture in front of you today that harks back to 500 years ago.**
>
> JOSÉ BARREIRO OF THE SMITHSONIAN, QUOTED BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

4	3	2013
communities build it together	days to weave the new bridge	year UNESCO listed the tradition

Three days over the gorge

In June, the work moves to the gorge. The old bridge is cut loose. It drops into the river. Builders tie the new cables to old stone bases on each side. Then two teams weave, one from each side. They work without safety harnesses.

The work ends when the teams meet in the middle. People shout “Haylly Q’eswachaka!” Then the party begins. By local custom, only men go down to build the bridge itself.

The skills pass from parent to child. Some residents believe that if they skip the renewal, bad weather will come. They say hail and drought followed the years it was not done.

In 2013, UNESCO, the United Nations culture agency, added the tradition to its list of living heritage. Visitors now come to watch, and their money helps the communities. Next June, they will do it all again.

How it unfolded

- **Inca** Inca builders link their empire with rope bridges.
- **May** Families begin cutting and twisting grass into rope.
- **June** The old bridge is cut loose. A new one is woven in three days.
- **2013** UNESCO lists the tradition.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

The bridge is not a museum piece. It has to be rebuilt every year, so the skill must be passed on every year.

No one is the hero. Many ordinary people each do a small part, and the bridge stands because they do.

OUR TAKE

No machine and no single leader holds this bridge up. People do, by showing up together every year.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 **Share the work**

Four communities give ropes, hands and time. National Geographic says they work together without pay.

Try this: Ask two or three people to share one task with you this week.

2 Pass skills down

The weaving is taught inside families, UNESCO says.

Try this: Teach one skill to someone younger, or ask an elder to teach you one.

3 Build from small strands

Thin ropes become thicker ropes, then six great cables.

Try this: Break one big goal into three smaller strands. Start the first one today.

4 Make upkeep a ritual

Every June, they renew the bridge. They do not wait for it to fall.

Try this: Pick a fixed day each month to check something you rely on.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A bridge that is rebuilt each year never grows old.

Sources

UNESCO
Knowledge, skills and rituals related to the annual renewal of the Q'eswachaka bridge (2013)

National Geographic
This Suspension Bridge Is Made From Grass (2018)

AFP, via Prothom Alo
Gravity-defying: revamping an Inca rope suspension bridge (2023)

PromPerú
Q'eswachaka, the hanging bridge that was started by the Incas and is still being built today (2019)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on details. Age: National Geographic and PromPerú say about 500 years; AFP says about 600; the story says only "hundreds of years". Size: PromPerú gives 92 feet long, AFP about 100 feet (30 metres), National Geographic 120 feet; the story gives no length. Timing: AFP and PromPerú say June (PromPerú: the second week) and National Geographic says spring; June is autumn in Peru, so the story follows AFP and PromPerú. How often: UNESCO, AFP and PromPerú say every year; National Geographic says the bridge was replaced about every three years in the past and became an annual event partly because of tourism and safety. The four communities are named by UNESCO, National Geographic and PromPerú as Huinchiri, Chaupibanda, Choccayhua and Ccollana (Quehue); AFP says four towns in Canas province. "Only men go down to build the bridge" is local custom reported by National Geographic, AFP and PromPerú; the reasons they give are beliefs, and the story does not repeat them. The belief that skipping the renewal brings hail and drought is reported by PromPerú as testimony from residents; it is a belief, not a fact. "Last Inca rope bridge" is the description used by National Geographic and AFP; PromPerú says the only Inca bridge that survived more than 500 years. The "no pay" detail is National Geographic's; "without safety harnesses", the shout "Haylly Q'eswachaka" and the tourism income are AFP's. The rope-making steps are UNESCO's and PromPerú's. The quote is from José Barreiro, a Smithsonian researcher, in National Geographic. The pin is near the bridge. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.