

Incan Relay Runners

More Than Just Mail Delivery

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BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Have you ever been in a relay race? Describe how it works.
2. Describe a few types of communications systems that are common today.

Before the Spanish arrived, the Incan Empire spread all along the Pacific coast of South America. It included mountains, valleys, deserts, and rainforests. Millions of people lived in the Incan Empire, and they spoke more than 100 different dialects. You might wonder: How did they keep the empire going? How did they communicate with each other? One answer is: They had runners who could run long distances and communicate important messages. These runners were called Chasquis.

Chasquis had a lot of skills. They were very strong! They could run fast over difficult trails. They carried messages and food with them. They stayed in small cabins called “tambos.” Tambos gave them a place to rest and protected them from bad weather. Chasquis used a conch shell (called a “pututu”) to announce their arrival. When the next runner heard the pututu, he prepared to take over. This relay system meant that each runner could run fast, and a message could travel 150 miles in one day. Chasquis used this relay system to send messages all over the empire.



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The Incan Em-

pire did not use writing for their messages. Instead, they used “quipus.” Quipus were pieces of strings tied in knots. The colors of the strings and the knots contained information. The Chasquis knew how to translate the information in the quipus.



Today, communications in Peru has changed. The Chasquis don’t work as runners anymore, although their paths and some of their tambos still exist! You can also find some of the famous Incan rope bridges, and you can still use them today.

The Chasquis were highly skilled people. They were intelligent, strong, and hard-working. They passed their knowledge and traditions from generation to generation. Today, the descendants of the Chasquis support their communities by doing different projects. They get help from the government to develop their communities. They are good communicators. In Peru, we feel respect and pride for the Chasqui tradition!

Sources: <www.ushistory.org/civ/11c.asp>; <en.wikipedia.org>.

Do the Math

According to the article, a group of Chasqui relay runners could carry a message 150 miles in one day. Explain a few scenarios for how this could work, including how many Chasquis would have to run how many miles at what speed.