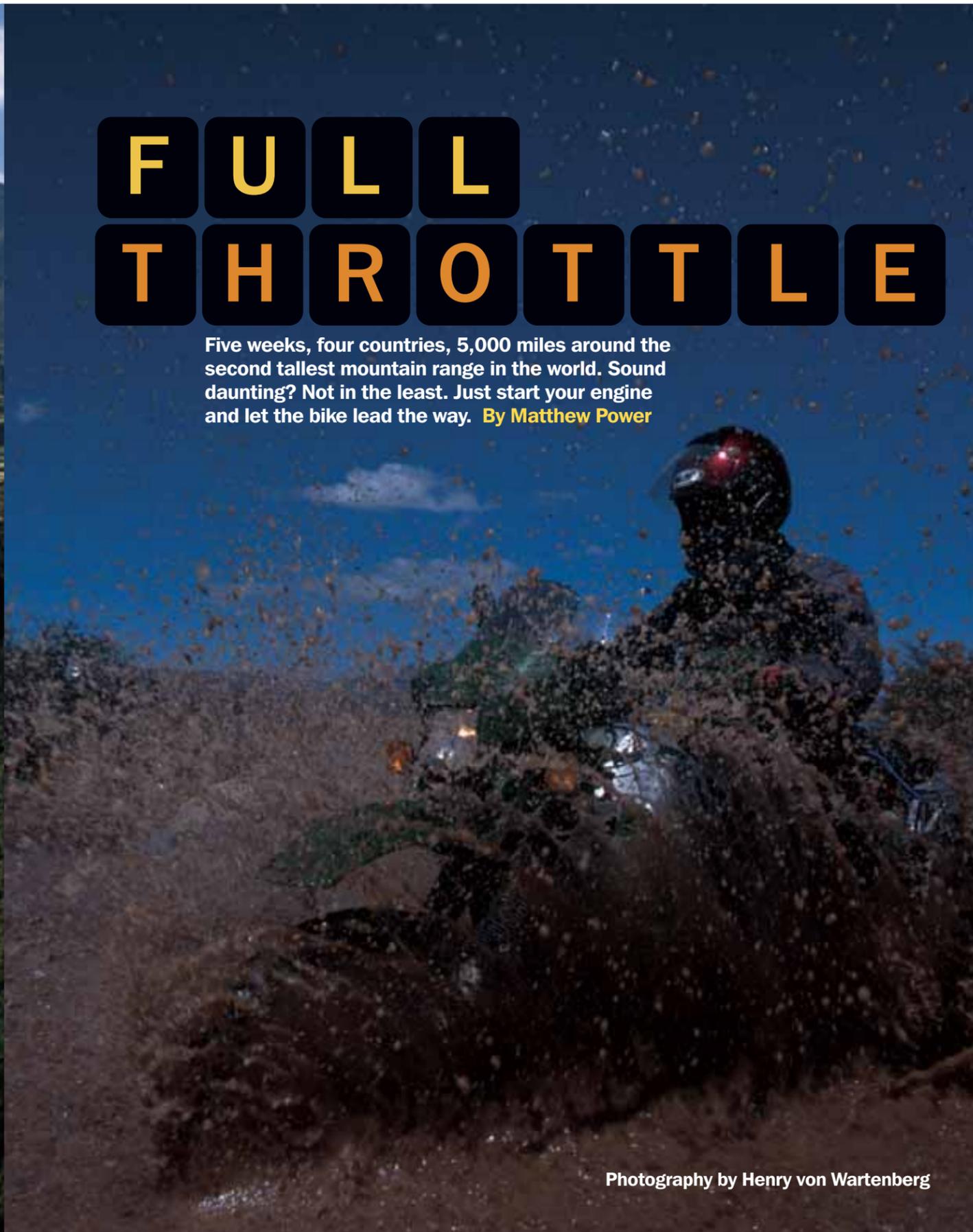


THE ANDES

INTO THE ELEMENTS: The verdant Colca River Valley, as seen from Chivay, Peru. Opposite: The author and his KLR dual-sport motorcycle play in the mud in northern Argentina.

FULL THROTTLE

Five weeks, four countries, 5,000 miles around the second tallest mountain range in the world. Sound daunting? Not in the least. Just start your engine and let the bike lead the way. **By Matthew Power**



Photography by Henry von Wartenberg



THE ANDES, FULL THROTTLE

WITH MULTICOLORED STEEL SHIPPING containers stacked skyward and giant tractor-trailers rumbling about, the freight yard in the Chilean port of Valparaíso seems like a mouse's-eye view of Christmas morning. I am standing with a dozen men, all staring anxiously at the same rusty-red present: a 40-foot-long box newly arrived by ship from Houston. The world's tallest forklift extends

its reach and plucks our present from a high stack as we hold our collective breath, imagining what would happen if it tipped over now.

"I'd have felt less nervous packing my family in that crate," someone mutters.

The forklift pirouettes and sets the container down with a feather touch. Squealing doors are opened and there is a general sigh of relief: Inside are the wheels on which our group of ten die-hard motorcyclists will embark on an epic four-country, 5,000-mile journey through the heart of the Andes. The bikes are a motley fleet, from single-cylinder Kawasaki dirt bikes to bruising 1,200-cc BMW Enduros. Batteries are reconnected, tires are pumped up, and one by one the motorcycles sputter and protest and roar to life, like a pride of lions stretching awake after a lazy day on the veldt. I know the bikes are just machines, but exposed to the air after a month at sea, they seem to pulse with energy.

Our plan, traced out on a relief map of the South American continent, describes an enormous rectangle around the central Andes. Beginning at the Pacific in Valparaíso, we will cross the range into Argentina's high desert, head north to the Bolivian altiplano, ride the shore of Lake Titicaca into Peru, and reach the Inca holy city of Machu Picchu before rolling down the length of Chile's Atacama Desert and, finally, loading the bikes back on the boat. We have five weeks. It seems manageable. Fifty years ago, a young Ernesto "Che" Guevara went on a similar trip on a rattletap 1939 Norton 500, over worse roads, and he made it relatively intact—though he did kill his bike. I'm not here to follow Che, but like him I've come to the Andes chasing a dream that has called me for a long time.

A brief history: I fell in love with motorcycles in my mid-20s, with a zeal that can only be described as pathological. Motorcycling seemed

the purest expression of freedom I could imagine—exposed to the open air, stopping wherever I liked, cutting through traffic jams while commuters fumed, disconnected from the world in their air-conditioned bubbles. Over six years, I rode through India, South Africa, the American West, and New York City, running six different bikes into the ground.

Always, during those thousands of miles, I was mapping a mental route through the mysterious jungles and mountains far to the south. The South American landmass spread out from the Isthmus of Panama like a genie rubbed loose from a lamp. I added myself (in my own mind, at least) to that long list of dreamers—Pizarro, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Che—drawn by the vast territory's promise of glory. I didn't share their visions of conquest, redemption, or revolution, but I felt certain there was some sort of epiphany to be found along the ribbons of road that garland the continent.

The wild epiphany, of course, is a species best encountered in relative solitude. But as luck and logistics would have it, I find myself with a group with a slightly different agenda: seven red-blooded American men (with a Brit and a Kiwi thrown in), all motorcycle nuts, all almost twice my age. They are lawyers and CEOs, recent retirees, successful men who have worked hard their entire lives and now want a profitable return on the investment they've made in this South American motorcycle expedition. We will be led by Juan Stanglmaier, 42, a Mexican guide, and accompanied by Henry von Wartenburg, 39, an Argentine photographer. At our first meeting I made the mistake of joking that the group looked like a casting call for *Easy Rider meets Cocoon*, which turned out not to be the way to make friends on the first day of school.

I resolve to be open-minded; they're nice guys, and they've all come for their own reasons, which are as valid as mine. Over dinner, Lionel Neff, 58, one of the more boisterous raconteurs of the group, tells me how he has spent a whole year preparing his bike for this ride, his lifelong dream. He owns a stuffed-animal company in California and has financed the trip with profits from his hottest new product: a talking, flatulent Santa Claus. He does a few impressions, so we know how the sound bite goes.

We leave the port in the morning haze, and the Pacific disappears in my rearview mirror as we wind east toward the Andes, through an almost Mediterranean landscape of olive groves and dark-green avocado trees. As we climb into the arid foothills, the road is walled in by pinnacles of red stone and winds upward in hairpin switchbacks. Just when it seems that mountains ahead couldn't possibly afford us a way over, a gaping black hole appears in the rock. In the middle of the echoing, dusty blackness of the three-mile tunnel, I spot a sign: *Bienvenido a Argentina*.

Emerging, I pull off to the side of the road beside a stone cross. Henry stops with me briefly and then continues down. A professional polo player in his youth, his time on horseback has given him a preternatural sense of balance. As I follow Henry down the Argentine side of the mountains, he rides standing on his footpegs. He keeps his huge camera around his neck and can twist around backward, while

TOAST TO THE ROAD: The group gets familiar at pretrip dinner in Valparaíso, Chile (left). Opposite, clockwise from top: Speeding through Peruvian wheat fields; woman and child in Tupiza, Bolivia; a serpentine pass in northern Argentina.



rolling down a mountain with no hands, to snap action shots of other riders. Gripping the bike with his knees, he steers with his hips, leaning right into tight curves as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

"You're out of your mind!" I yell over the wind.

"It's easy!" he shouts, shimmying into a curve edged by a 200-foot drop. "Just think it and the bike will do the turning for you!"

Not quite so confident in my own Jedi motorcycling talents, I hold on tighter to the handlebars and keep my eyes on the road, which loops over itself half a dozen times beneath us. I watch Henry, moving with confidence below me, arms spread like a low-flying condor. It seems that he and the bike are a single being, perfectly evolved to handle the Andean roads. I resolve to follow him to the ends of the Earth—which we are rapidly approaching.

WE REACH THE COLONIAL CITY OF MENDOZA BY nightfall, the Southern Cross winking over the broad plaza, and get our fill of red wine and Argentine steaks grilled in a giant barbecue. I ask Juan, who has been leading trips around Central and South America for six years, why he does this.

"I had an executive job at BMW," he replies, "and I spent every day dreaming of far-off places. I realized I had to change my life if I didn't want to be chained to a computer like a dog. So I got the bike."

His beautiful old BMW Paris-Dakar Enduro bears the stickers of

dozens of trips, from the Copper Canyon of Mexico to the windswept end of the line at Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world. Journeying by motorcycle seems to inaugurate one into a club—you could call it a cult—defined by an almost inexpressible need for movement, speed, discovery. For Henry and me, on whom the spell of the road is already cast, Juan's decision to relinquish his former life takes on the air of a religious conversion.

Riding north from Mendoza, the landscape is uncannily similar to the American Southwest. The saguaro cactus has its analogue in *e*



THE ANDES, FULL THROTTLE

cardon, or giant cactus, of the Argentine high desert, and forests of these anthropomorphic giants stretch for hundreds of miles across the provinces of La Rioja, Catamarca, and Salta. The main difference between Argentina and Arizona is this: There is no Phoenix. There is no I-10, or anything even approximating the United States interstate system. There is scarcely anybody here, and the unpopulated expanse is made more profound by riding a motorcycle through it.

My bike is a thumping, ugly-as-sin, green Kawasaki KLR650, loaded with gear in detachable saddlebags. The KLR is something of a legend in South America, a practical workhorse for overlanders traveling from the Darién Gap to Tierra del Fuego. KLR aficionados quip that it's a bike that can do absolutely anything—though none of it particularly well.

Henry, also on a KLR, tears along the roads in front of me, scanning the landscape for diversions. On a whim he will slam to a halt, getting on his knees to watch a tarantula crawl along the roadside before he roars off again. Semiwild herds of burros spook as we approach, kicking up clouds of dust as they run through the underbrush. Treating his bike more like a horse than ever, Henry drops off the roadside and gives chase, bouncing over washes, careening around thorn bushes, never quite catching up with the animals. He picks his way back to the road, white teeth smiling under a mask of dust. "Impresionante!" he shouts.

Loosely translated, impresionante means "awesome." Henry uses the word a dozen times a day, and a subject's degree of awesomeness—whether talking about a mountain, a girl, or a steak—can be measured by which syllable is stressed. Impresionante is a worldview, born of Henry's belief that fun is the highest good and that the most difficult road is necessarily the most fun.

Roads in South America—all difficult and most of them fun—fall into two categories: *ripio* and *asfalto*. Dirt and pavement. For a motorcycle rider these are the two polar states of being. Asfalto is speed,

Journeying by motorcycle seems to inaugurate one into a club—you could call it a cult—defined by an almost inexpressible need for movement, speed, discovery.

confidence around sharp curves, and the base substance upon which commerce is conducted and the modern world plows its way into the wilderness. It is here to there in a hurry. Ripio, from hard-packed gravel to treacherous, soft sand, is exhilaration and discovery. It is getting lost. It is the stuff of those roads that are built first, in the least visited places. Henry, skidding and cavorting in the dirt with his polo-player balance, seeks out the ripio wherever he can. "I love a dirty road!" he shouts, roaring off the pavement's edge up a dry creek bed.

Bear in mind that ripio will throw you. We thread on a dirt road through Valley of the Moon, in San Juan Province, past wind-carved sculptures of rock and fields of perfectly round accretions the size of bowling balls. Hitting a patch of deep sand, my front tire plows in. I tense up, and with a lurch, I am lying on my back, looking up at the deep blue of the desert sky. The surface was similar, I have no doubt, to the fine sand that a young Che Guevara complained of wiping out in seven times in a single afternoon.

Henry stands above me, laughing. He is a master of the malapropism: "You followed down. What a pain on the ass! You grab the bars too

THE LONG WAY ROUND
From top: The author meets a laborer and his son north of San Juan, Argentina; waiting for the school bus in northern Argentina; children outside Potosí, Bolivia; a man hopes for a lift in Jujuy, Argentina. Opposite: Tearing along the *ripio*, dirt road, in southern Peru.



THE ANDES, FULL THROTTLE

tight. You've got to be loose." He does a sort of boneless-chicken dance. "The bike knows where to go."

DESPITE THE RISKS WE ARE all hungry for the dirt. The first big stretch of ripio comes a week into the trip, in northern Argentina's La Rioja Province, when we leave the pavement and thread our way up Miranda Pass, a winding washboard through a brilliant red-rock canyon, with green wheat fields in the river bottoms below. Near the top I stop with Henry and Juan, looking out over a cliff-edged valley to a little green farm by a shining creek. It's the only mark of human habitation we can see. Robert LeRoy Parker and Harry Alonzo Longabaugh, better known as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, settled on a similar spread after fleeing America in 1901; they acquired a 15,000-acre ranch in Chubut Province, where for several years they lived in a four-room cabin, giving up the thrill of the heist for a quiet life as ranchers. Gazing out over the valley, I understand why. This



seems the sort of place you would seek out if you wanted to forget that any other place existed.

There is the sound of hoof beats, and just behind us, a half dozen gauchos dressed in their Sunday best come trotting around a bend. It is a curious meeting of worlds, a group of motorized 21st-century explorers running into these holdouts of an older way of life. Gauchos are the seminomadic cowboys of the Argentine grasslands and altiplano who drive sheep and cattle to market across a country four times the size of Texas. Their subsistence-herding life has scarcely changed in 200 years, and these men show few signs of modernity. The only influence I notice is that one of the gauchos' *bolas* (a leather sling with rocks tied to both ends, which is thrown to entangle the legs of running calves) has been made with large hunks of rubber carved from a truck tire. The group is heading to a fiesta in a nearby town, a day's ride from their home.



COWBOY COUNTRY: Gauchos in La Rioja, Argentina, ride to a local party (above). Near left: Llamas graze the scrub near Salta, Argentina. Opposite: Gorging on empanadas at a roadside shop near Potosí, Bolivia.

The lead rider is a ten-year-old boy, his broad-brimmed black hat cocked up as he eyes us with a mix of curiosity and haughtiness. He asks us many questions as he can without appearing too interested. We discuss the relative merits and velocities of horses and motorcycles and the superior fuel economy of the former. Henry turns to me and whispers, "There are three things a gaucho will never give you: his horse, his guitar, and his woman. In that order."

Theirs is a difficult and impoverished life, to be sure, but encountering the gauchos in their natural environs makes it difficult not to romanticize. To the horsemen it is incomprehensible that we are traveling for no other reason but enjoyment. But to our group, the gauchos represent a degree of freedom, an unalloyed connection to this wide lonely place, which every last one of us has come here to experience. Motorcycling leaves us fully exposed to the risks of the road, to the weather, to the existential openness of the Andean landscape. But without this sort of interaction with the people that call a place home, it is sometimes too easy to insulate yourself inside a helmet, a set of assumptions, or a wall of language. The gauchos trot on in a cloud of red dust, returning us to the road.

The landscape becomes more severe as we approach the Bolivian frontier. Ducking off the road in the tiny town of Tres Morros (populated, as far as we could tell, by a child, her mother, and her grandmother), we



arrive at the Salinas Grandes salt flat. Fifty miles across, the *salina* is larger than Utah's Bonneville flats. It is part of a chain of dried-up lakes that stretches north into the Bolivian altiplano. The Salar de Uyuni, just across the Bolivian border, is one of the largest flats in the world. There is a hotel built entirely of salt at its edge, and llama trains loaded with cut salt bricks still leave regularly for the markets of La Paz. We ride out across the Salina Grande, nearly blinded by the reflected light. For much of the year the flat is a shallow lake of rainwater, but in the summer it dries out into a crystal plain, hard as concrete, composed of broad hexagonal plates. Distances are warped, speed is difficult to estimate; aside from the heat, crossing the salina is like riding over a frozen lake on a snowmobile. And, as Juan finds out, it is just as risky. Taking a shortcut back to the road, his 600-pound bike snaps through a thin crust of salt and sinks up to its panniers in a salty goo. There is no better definition of *schadenfreude* than to watch your expert guide flailing in mud like a mammoth in a tar pit.

"Amazing!" cries Jim Collum, 45, a Triumph-obsessed Brit transplanted to Lake Tahoe. "Mr. Stanglmaier has discovered the world's largest *crème brûlée*!"

THE LAST TOWN IN ARGENTINA, La Quica, sits dusty and windswept on the banks of the (Continued on page TK)

ADVENTURE GUIDE: The Central Andes

Whether you crave the freedom of a bike or prefer the comfort of a four-wheeled rig, a growing number of outfitted excursions make visiting the Andes easier than ever.

ARGENTINA'S ARID NORTHWEST

The isolated deserts surrounding Salta resemble the American Southwest—150 years ago. Experience them as the local gauchos do on a guided, four-day backcountry horseback ride with **Cabalgatas Fernando Escudero** (\$620; www.fernandoescudero.com). The northwest's remote mountain rain forests also host some of the best white water in all of Argentina. **Salta Rafting** organizes a five-day trip down the Lipeo River's Class IV and V rapids (\$800; www.saltrafting.com).

BOLIVIA'S HIGHLANDS

Often overshadowed by Peru's ancient sites, Bolivia has ample archaeological treasures of its own. **Wildland Adventures** visits both the pre-Inca site at Tiwanaku and the Inca ruins on Lake Titicaca's Isla del Sol (\$1,970; www.wildland.com). Bolivia's premier white-water river, the Tuichi,

plummets from the peaks north of Lake Titicaca. **Explore Bolivia** guides a 14-day excursion down its Class IV rapids (\$1,750; <http://explorebolivia.com>).

PERU'S INCA RUINS

There are scores of outfitters guiding trips up the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu; here are two standouts. **Mountain Travel Sobek's** itinerary dodges the crowds by approaching the site via a less trafficked, but equally spectacular, trail (\$3,290; www.mtsobek.com). Missoula, Montana-based **Adventure Life** combines Machu Picchu with a variety of other tours to far-flung corners of Peru (\$1,190; www.adventurelife.com).

CHILE'S ATACAMA DESERT

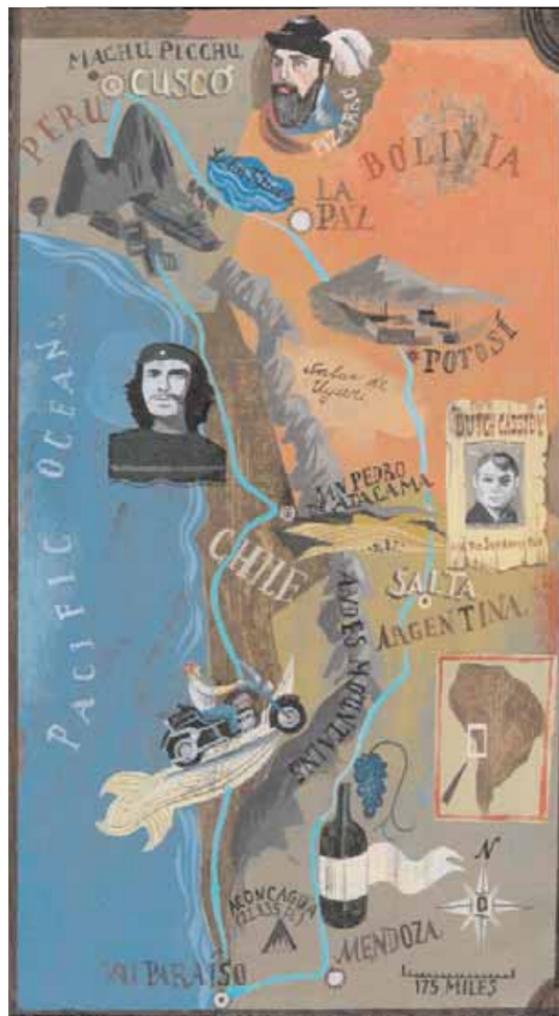
Outfitter **Chile Discover** leads six-day treks (\$1,600; www.chilediscover.com) through this austere, desiccated region,

where colorful geology, pre-Inca ruins, and natural hot springs are tucked into an otherworldly landscape. East of the desert, towering peaks form the Chilean border with Bolivia and Peru. You can climb Earth's highest volcano, 22,614-foot Ojos del Salado, on a 16-day expedition with **KL Adventure** (\$3,500; www.kladventure.com).

SEE IT ALL BY BIKE

The author traveled with **MotoDiscovery**, which offers its 34-day High Andes Expedition—on dirt and pavement through Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru—nearly every spring (\$6,950; \$2,650 for bike rental; www.motodiscovery.com). The **Ayres Adventures** 16-day trip from Foz do Iguaçu, Brazil (\$6,750, including rental of a BMW F650GS; www.ronayres.com), travels through northern Argentina into the Bolivian altiplano and finishes in Machu Picchu. —Megan Murray

MAP BY OLAF HAJEK



THE ANDES, FULL THROTTLE

(Continued from page 00)

Río Toro, where a small bridge leads across to Bolivia. We join a long line waiting at customs: Argentines crossing the border for cheap gas and traditionally dressed Bolivian Indian women in bowler hats, carrying infants in their Technicolor shawls. With Bolivia's GDP less than a twentieth of Argentina's, this border is called the Tijuana of South America.

I sit in the shade and watch one of its stranger phenomena, the *hormigas*. Hormiga is Spanish for "ant" and refers to the thousands of Bolivians who make a living shuttling loads across the border. A loophole in Bolivian customs law allows import duties to be waived for anything that can be carried across on one's back. Young boys, old women—whoever can heft a load—

of numerous legends of their demise, the outlaws were killed in a shootout with the Bolivian authorities in 1909, dying as El Che would, ghosts of Bolivia's bloody history.

APPROACHING THE CITY OF

Potosí from the south, the mine-riddled massif of Cerro Rico dominates the skyline. The city is one of the world's highest, at 13,107 feet, and the enormous pyramid of Cerro Rico ("rich hill" in Spanish) was once the most valuable mine in the Spanish empire. While the rest of the group goes off in search of a hotel—so they can watch the last few holes of the U.S. Open on satellite—Henry and I follow a rocky jeep trail up the side of the peak.

Juan's 600-pound bike snaps through the crust of salt and sinks up to its panniers in a salty goo. "Amazing!" cries Jim Collum, a Triumph-obsessed Brit. "Mr. Stanglmaier has discovered the world's largest crème brûlée!"

run back and forth across the border hauling refrigerators, stacks of crated beer, and sacks of potatoes. They are paid a few pesos for each trip.

The *hormigas* labor under the same sort of brutal economic hardship that spurred the young Che Guevara down the path of violent revolution: to Castro, to Cuba, and 15 years later to his death at the hands of Bolivian forces said to be operating under CIA orders. I ask the soldiers at the Bolivian Army post by the border why they have a stencil of El Che, in all his shaggy-haired, revolutionary glory, painted on their wall, but the point is lost in translation.

After six hours of waiting for the border guards to process our bikes' paperwork, just as Henry is suggesting that we load the 400-pound bikes on our backs and get in line behind the *hormigas*, we are allowed to cross the Río Toro into Bolivia. The change is instantaneous and overwhelming, the mostly indigenous population speaking Quechua and Aymara and only basic Spanish. A mile out of town the *asfalto* fades to dusty, washboard ripio, the surface of 70 percent of Bolivia's highways.

We ride with space between us to let the choking dust settle. The landscape itself has changed little since Butch and Sundance's South American escapade ended near here. Their ranch life did not last long; in 1906, indefatigable detectives from the Pinkerton Agency traced the pair to Chubut Province and sent them on the run. According to the most likely

We stop as a dusty man in a miners helmet appears from a hole in the mountainside. His name is Daniel Vilca. He is 22 and has just joined one of the mining cooperatives, making 50 pesos a day (about six dollars) dynamiting and digging copper and low-grade silver ore. Vilca carries a gas-flame light and his cheek bulges with coca leaves, which stave off hunger and fatigue. Despite the risks of tunnel collapses, silicosis, or suffocating in pockets of carbon monoxide, he's happy with his living, he says, but the real money nowadays in Cerro Rico is in leading tourists into the mines. As if on cue, a tour group pulls up in a jeep. Henry and I tag along, convincing the guide, Felipe, that our motorcycle helmets are adequate safety gear.

A few steps into the mine shaft and we are enclosed in utter darkness. The temperature of the air, thick with dust, rises noticeably. Our flashlight beams seem to be absorbed by the gloom, and we have to watch our step as side shafts drop away into the depths of the mountain. Overhead, creaking wooden supports hold back tons of loose rock. In some places we get on our hands and knees to squeeze through openings.

At last we arrive at a large chamber where we are shown a statue of Tío Jorge, the devil-deity of the mines—a clay figure with horns, glass eyes, and an erection. Scattered around him are offerings of coca leaves, half-full bottles of liquor, and half-inflated balloons. The scene gives the impression of someone passed out at a raucous New Year's party. I want to

make a joke, but while in the heart of his mines, I have no intention of questioning Tío's authority.

Once back out of the mine, Felipe opens a bag and hands Henry and me a stick of dynamite, a length of fuse, and a large bag of ammonium nitrate powder. One might question the wisdom of having dynamite freely available in a country with a long history of social unrest, but the mining industry requires it. Why not sell it to visitors too? The opportunity to set off a stick of dynamite turns me into a ten-year-old. Directed by the guide, Henry and I insert the fuse, pack the dynamite into the bag of fertilizer, and touch off the fuse with a cigarette. We drop it into a pit excavated beside the road and run up the hill.

Henry, unable to resist clowning even at the expense of being blown up, feigns a sprained ankle and limps slowly behind me, calling for help. We crouch behind a boulder as the fuse burns down, and a thunderous concussion echoes against Cerro Rico.

Ecotourism it ain't. But regardless of whether or not mining tourism is a sustainable basis for a local economy, we both conclude that blowing stuff up is awesomely impresionante.

FILTHY AND TIRED, WE FIND

the hotel where the bikes are parked and tell spooky mining stories to everyone at the bar. Two weeks of ten-hour days have worn us all down, but I've been surprised by the resilience of the whole crew, which meets at roadside dives for lunch to swap war stories of strange encounters and near misses. Despite my early reservations about traveling with a tour group, we've all suffered through the same hardships of crashes, flats, breakdowns, and brutal roads. The Easychair Riders have begun to grow on me.

From Potosí, the Bolivian altiplano stretches for hundreds of miles, forming the world's largest high plateau after Tibet. We ride out beneath leaden skies, the road receding hypnotically to the horizon. The Andes are at their widest here, and we are ants crossing the card table of the gods. Sheep, llamas, and alpacas graze on the open rangeland, giving little warning before bolting out into the road. Mangy dogs lay by the roadside, waiting for tidbits to be thrown from the windows of passing trucks. Sometimes they chase us, snarling and snapping at our back tires, so despite the unchanging road we have to maintain constant vigilance.

To stay alert, I take to chewing coca leaves, packing a large wad into my cheek. *Erythroxylum coca*, the coca plant, has been used by the people of the Andes for centuries. High in protein and vitamins, coca relieves hunger,

THE ANDES, FULL THROTTLE

(Continued from page 00)

altitude sickness, and is generally regarded as a cure-all by locals. It is perfectly legal in Bolivia and Peru, and I bought a large bag of leaves at a coca market in Potosí for one boliviano, about eight cents. Chewing coca produces a slight numbness in the back of my throat and a heightened sensory awareness, like a triple espresso without the shakiness. The interminable road, the cold wind, and lonesomeness itself take on a softened glow. My attention focuses easily on the task of piloting the bike, all earthly concern exchanged for direction and velocity.

The spell of the road is shattered in an instant when, several hundred yards in front of me, a flock of sheep breaks across the highway and one of the bikes plows straight into them, flipping end over end like a tossed coin. The first one on the scene, I jump off my bike and find Lionel Neff, the Santa-doll entrepreneur from California, lying prone underneath his KLR. He shouts at me to get it off of him. I move the bike and keep him still and calm as Henry races off to find an ambulance. We are miles from the nearest town. When Lionel tries to shift himself, we see that his ankle is bent at a sickening angle. His armored Cordura riding gear and helmet are scuffed up, but they've saved his life.

Lionel grimaces and curses as we try and shift him into a better position. "Wasn't supposed to end this way," he says through gritted teeth. "I want to see Machu Picchu. It's not that bad. Put me back on the bike, I'll keep riding." Whether he's in shock or just the world's toughest bastard, I have to admire how well he's holding up. But I can't bring myself to tell him that his trip is finished.

We load Lionel into the back of a beat-up truck that doubles as a local ambulance and follow in a somber mood. As we enter La Paz, the altiplano, which had seemed the flat base of the world, falls away like a dropped curtain. The city is perched beneath its lip in a great bowl of earth, looking out over valleys and mountains far below. Lionel is taken to the hospital and we're told he has a tibia-fibula fracture. The Bolivian orthopedic surgeons operate that night, placing nine screws and a plate to hold the bones in place. Within a week he'll be back home in California.

The morning after surgery he's already telling dirty jokes as the group stands around his clean hospital room in our filthy riding clothes. Lionel's accident is a grim outcome of the risks we've all volunteered for; it could have happened to any one of us. Todd Ferguson, Lionel's friend who had signed on to the trip with him, considers going home too. In the end, he decides that bringing back stories for his friend is the best thing he can do.

A FEW HOURS OUTSIDE OF LA

Paz, we come around a bend and look out over one of the great miracles of the Andes, Lake Titicaca. After weeks and thousands of miles tracing a geography where water is an utter rarity, Titicaca is a revelation. The lake's surface is at 12,500 feet and is so still that the sky itself seems to have flipped over and nestled in a declivity of the mountains. At 3,200 square miles, it is the second largest lake on the continent, catchment for more than 25 rivers. We cross a neck of the lake on rickety wooden ferries, trying hard not to drop our bikes through the wide cracks in the deck planks, and trace the lake's edge toward the Peruvian border and the ancient Inca capital of Cusco.

The journey here has been a parade of extraordinary colonial cities—Mendoza and Salta, Potosí and La Paz—but Cusco is the crown jewel of the continent. At 11,150 feet, the city was the seat of the supreme Inca himself, the "Navel of the World" from which he ruled an empire of more than 12 million people. It was already centuries old when the conquistador Francisco Pizarro arrived in 1533. He wrote his regent, Spain's Charles V, of the treasure he had captured: "We can assure Your Majesty that it is so beautiful and has such fine buildings that it would be remarkable even in Spain." When Che came here on his own journey, he remarked that the "intangible dust of another era settles on its streets, rising like the disturbed sediment of a muddy lake when you touch its bottom." Winding through the cobblestone streets, where rough Spanish walls are built on top of precise Inca masonry, an abiding sense of time is evident everywhere.

Henry and I explore the depths of the marketplaces, where Quechua women preside over piles of fluorescent-pink potatoes. Henry is determined to be as fearless as the natives in his eating habits and insists that I come with him to eat ceviche and drink Inca Kola at a gritty local haunt. "You come to a place so far from home. Why would you want to eat pizza every meal?" he asks. I eat a huge bowl of the ceviche—magnificent, the fish is like butter—and never get sick, despite the dire warnings of our traveling companions.

From Cusco we explore the ruins of Machu Picchu, a sacred retreat for the Inca elite, in the mountains to the north. Inhabited between about 1450 and 1550, the city was unknown in the modern world until Hiram Bingham, a Yale anthropologist, rediscovered it in 1911 and dubbed it the Lost City of the Incas. There is no open road to Aguas Calientes, the town closest to the site, so we stash our bikes in Cusco. At sunrise we climb along a PeruRail train and travel up a narrow,

jungle-clad river valley. From the railhead we follow a switchback road above the raging Urubamba River, up through jungle overgrowth, and at last enter the site we have ridden three weeks to reach. The Temple of the Sun catches the afternoon light and the terraces of Machu Picchu spread across a high saddle, surrounded on all sides by impossibly steep peaks, half-shrouded in mist.

As we wander through the ruins several llamas graze languidly on the grassy terraces. Henry (who once worked as a paparazzo, climbing trees with a telephoto lens outside of high-society parties in Buenos Aires) discovers that the creatures are rather bashful, until one paparazzi-averse llama lays back its ears and spits a mouthful of chewed grass right in his face. He takes a self-portrait, cracking up, looking like he has face-planted in pesto.

We climb a steep stone staircase to the pinnacle of Huayna Picchu, a lookout peak that towers above the 7,700-foot site. There's no guardrail and a single misstep would send me plunging a thousand feet down the cliff face into the Urubamba River Valley. Across the ridge beneath us, the thin line of the Inca Trail—the interstate system of its day—approaches the city from the Sun Gate. The trail has become so popular that in recent years the Peruvian government has limited the number of hikers to 500 a day, only on guided tours. The entire site is in danger of being loved to death.

Perhaps it is a sign of our spiritually confused times that Machu Picchu attracts more than its share of pilgrims, some 400,000 last year alone. The ancient knowledge that has been lost and the mystery that abides here lure seekers who think that they can figure it all out. As Henry and I look out over the valley, a pair of such hopefuls climb up beneath us. Facing the four directions, they proceed to blow unbelievably long and cacophonous blasts on their conch shells. Hands cover ears across the mountaintop.

"When are they going to stop?" someone complains.

"When the UFO comes," says Henry.

I'm no New Age acolyte, but, from our vantage, the cosmic lessons of Machu Picchu seem readily apparent. Two parallel creative processes are on display. The Urubamba, still audible several thousand feet below, flows north and east to join the Amazon, carving granite mountains into flowing sculptures. The Inca were master sculptors too: Without the benefit of steel or the wheel, they hewed a civilization out of these same peaks. But even as they built their city, all around them and throughout the Andes, nature was doing its best to carve the mountains down—each

THE ANDES

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raindrop carrying its load of till to the sea. This conflict and confluence between humans and wild nature is still lived today by the people of the Andes: the gauchos, the miners, the women hauling salt across the border.

Thunder rumbles around the peaks. My hair stands on end as I realize—thoughts about the struggle of man and nature aside—I'm about to become the receiving end of a great deal of static electricity. Before we get flash-fried by some Inca deity, Henry and I clamber down the stone ladders and staircases. A passing shower stretches a broad rainbow over the labyrinth of stone.

Henry enunciates the word under his breath, one syllable at a time: "Im-pre-sio-nan-te!"

The ruins empty out as the tour buses leave, and soon we have the whole place to ourselves. In the fading light I can conjure the lost world a bit, as the cloud cover is shredded by the high peaks like a silk scarf drawn across a saw blade. Henry and I hike thousands of feet down to the river along a dark jungle path, our way lit by fireflies.

THE VIEW FROM HUAYNA PICCHU

is the pinnacle of our long journey, but there are still thousands of miles left to unspool, back down the long spine of the continent. We cross the Andes again, on dirt roads over lunar landscapes. On the lip of the two-mile-deep Colca Canyon, giant Andean condors wheel high above us as the Colca River flows west toward the Pacific at the continental divide, topped with a piece of fool's gold from the mines of Potosí, as an offering to the mountain spirits. We travel down impossibly empty stretches of the Atacama Desert, one of the driest regions in the world, 700 miles without even a blade of grass to measure a crosswind. At a dust-blown highway stop, I ask a waitress if it's true it never rains here. "*Es una mentira*—It's a lie," she tells me. Even here it rains. Sometimes.

Down the length of the Atacama, Henry and I race at our motorcycles' absolute limits, throttles wide open, grinning into the wind with our heads tucked behind the handlebars. The land is alien, astonishing. Our shouts of delight are torn away by the wind. We seem in pursuit of some inexpressible mystery in which the pursuit *is* the mystery. Henry is right: If you can loosen your grip, the bike knows where to go. ▲

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HAVE A PAGE MAP