

# INCA

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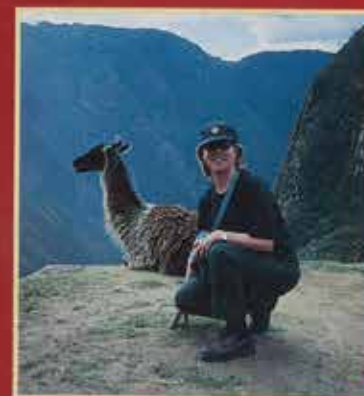
## Expedition



8,000ks of stunning scenery ...



The trucks were leathal on the ice, but at least dodging them kept you warm!



Jennifer Regan gets up close to a llama

## South America on a KLR

Story and Photography by John Bennett

**PANCHO VILLA** Moto-Tours' best expedition in the truest sense is the 34-day Inca Expedition, basically a 8,000k trail ride across the Andes mountains covering Bolivia, Peru, Chile and Argentina. This was the organisation's second such trip, the route compiled after years of meticulous planning to find the best out-of-the-way roads, towns and mountain passes. Riders had the option of bringing their own bikes from the USA or, as I did, renting a late model KLR from the tour organisers. The bikes were shipped by container from Houston, Texas, to Vina del Mar, a delightful coastal town in Chile.

### Heading Off

On the way to the start Jennifer and I had a two day stop at Easter Island, just to get acclimatised to the South American way of life. It is a beautiful island of fewer than 3,000 people and over 600 Malcolm Fraser look-alike stone statues called Moai. The beaches were fantastic – pristine white sand and crystal blue water – while the seafood and Chilean wines were plentiful and very reasonable in price.

The group met in Santiago, Chile. It was a group of real adventurers, aged mid-thirties to early sixties, mainly Americans, Canadians, Jennifer and I from Australia, and the Spanish speaking staff, Willy from Argentina and Alberto from Mexico. Our leader was the well-known and well-travelled adventurer, Helge Pedersen. I strongly recommend reading his book '10 Years on 2 Wheels', available through his website – [www.globoriders.com](http://www.globoriders.com) – which has wonderful photos and describes in detail his epic trip covering 77 countries and 400,000ks. Three of the 18 riders had partners on the back and the rest rode solo. Many riders had a GPS fitted to their bikes and I was amazed at how well they worked.

With great excitement we unloaded our bikes from the container, enjoyed a welcoming dinner at the Yacht Club of Chile where we first experienced the local firewater, pisco sours, which is similar to a margarita but stronger. The next morning we rode straight up into the High Andes with the scenery becoming more and more spectacular as we climbed. We then started a series of hairpin bends where we gingerly passed trucks and rode through a ski resort where the road zigzagged under the chairlift and skiers skied over the tunnels we went through. Snow began falling when we reached the pass and the road became treacherous – the hardest part was avoiding the big trucks sliding down the black ice.

In the immigration area into Argentina, Helge Pedersen, our esteemed leader and traveller extraordinaire, lost his passport and when I found it on a bench I made a big deal out of it and said he owned me one! Eventually we made a late arrival into Mendoza, a bustling, exciting city which was really alive at midnight on Saturday.

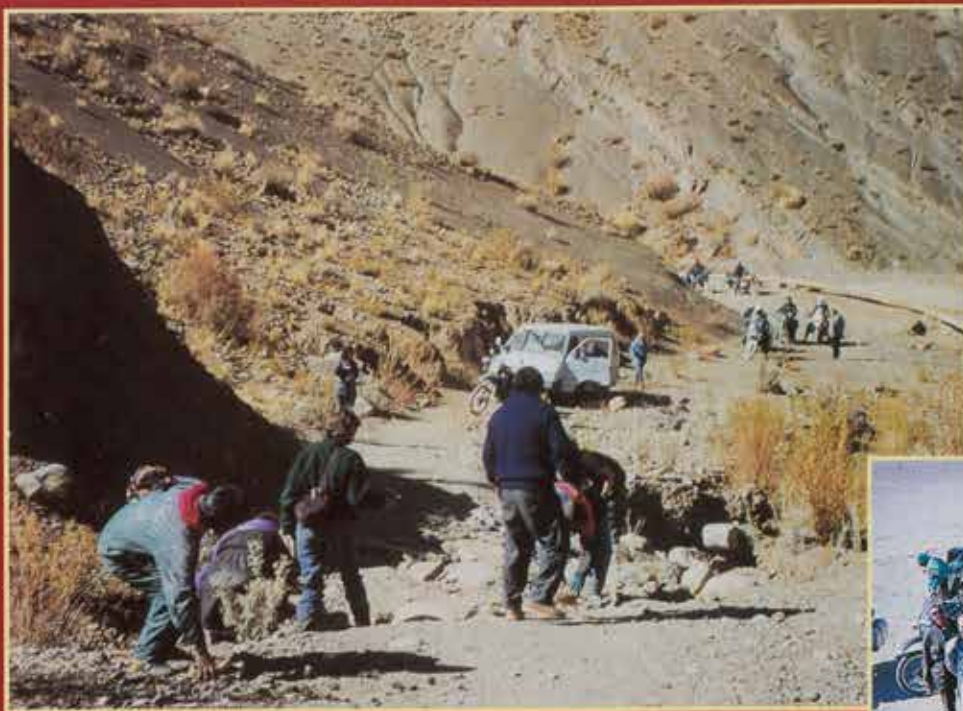
### Don't Cry for Me ...

From Mendoza we headed up through central Argentina, either in the foothills of the Andes or at least in sight of this mighty mountain range – as we were for 34 days – to the beautiful oasis of San Augustin del Valle Fertil. The countryside then became more rugged and mountainous and drier each day. We were now at around 7,000 feet, running over well-formed dirt roads, with lots of river crossings and each day getting better and better. We normally arrived at our hotel by about 5 - 6.00pm, had a shower and a siesta and then went out to dinner at around 9.30pm, as restaurants in Argentina only opened at 9.00pm. Lots of time for a few quiet drinks before dinner ...

After a few days we fetched up on the Andean Altiplano – High Plateau – which is a large flat area surrounded by high mountains. Here we hit an incredible sandstorm where we could only see a foot ahead and were blown every which way. Bob and Jessa, riding a BMW 1100GS, came off badly here and had to be taken to the next hotel about 100ks away, in the support vehicle. They were patched up, the bike retrieved – after being carefully looked after by Karen sitting in the sandstorm for three hours! – and repaired by our staff, ready to ride again the next day.

A visit to the most southerly Inca ruin at Quilmes was a fascinating experience and





**In South America, sometimes you have to be prepared to repair the roads before you can use them**

then it was onto our first two-night stop at Salta to get acclimatised to the altitude, now 11,000 feet. Salta is a sophisticated city with a good selection of restaurants and night spots, and the single men on the trip had no problem finding local women to wine and dine. In fact, young Mike from San Francisco seemed to be farewelling a different young woman as we left each overnight stop.

### Butch and Sundance

As we climbed higher, now to about 12,000 feet, the track became more rugged and the drop-offs deeper at about 1,000 feet, so we had to be even more careful when passing large trucks on the tight curves. We then crossed into Bolivia where the locals were friendlier, more colourful but a lot poorer. There seemed to be fewer people and a lot more llama herds along with their smaller and plumper relative, the guanaco. Tupiza was a real traveller's town with backpackers from all over the world. It was in Tupiza that the law caught up with Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in 1908.

Tom, a professional crab fisherman from Alaska, had a bad accident the next day when his front tyre burst and he high-sided it to land on a rocky outcrop. An X-ray in Potosi showed a broken arm so he travelled in the support vehicle to La Paz and then had to fly back to the US.

The ride into Potosi was amazing, as we passed through an extensive mining area to the crest of the mountain and see Potosi lying below us on the side of Cerro Rico – Rich Hill. Potosi, the world's highest city, was founded by the Spaniards in 1545 to mine the silver found there. Its rich deposits financed the Spanish Empire for the next 200 years, albeit by exploiting the Indian miners who were virtual slave labourers. It is a quaint city with narrow cobblestone roads and magnificent Spanish architecture from the 16th and 17th century.



**Americans always have to fly the flag ...**



We left early the next day in an attempt to beat a union blockade out of town, but they beat us to it so we had to detour via the valley below and luckily remained unscathed. It was here that I had a blowout at 80kph but received only superficial damage to myself and the bike. We were now riding at 12-14,000 feet over the most desolate country I have ever seen. There were very few villages and no road signs at all but fortunately only one road to follow. It was an extremely long trip as well, about 550ks, so by 7.00pm four of us were still 200ks short of La Paz when we had another puncture and my headlight stopped working. So we decided to spend the night in Oruro, found a basic but comfortable local hotel – \$7.50 – and had an excellent dinner of chicken, pasta and cold beer for \$3.00 per head.

It was a spectacular ride into La Paz the next day as the city is in an extinct volcano crater and is surrounded by snow-covered mountains. La Paz is a fascinating Spanish-looking city where the highlight is the changing of the guard at the Governor's Palace. We had an excellent night helping Helge and Karen celebrate their 11th anniversary at a fabulous Bolivian restaurant with live, local music, eating delicious llama steaks and local lake fish.

### Rafting It

Snow fell overnight so it was a great ride up over the tip of the crater through snow covered fields for the next three hours. We then reached Lake Titicaca, a beautiful blue lake with what seemed to be floating islands. We then crossed the Straits of Tiquina on rather rickety rafts onto which we rode our bikes. This was followed by a tasty seafood lunch at the backpacker town of Copacabana on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

The sighting of the crystal blue waters of Lake Titicaca meant another border crossing, this time into Peru. Just to expand your knowledge, the natives along its vast shore lines grow over 300 varieties of potatoes! The Alto Highway on the way to the lake-front

town of Puno was a real thrill for sports riders. Silk smooth, rubber-gripping twisties tempted us but the magnificent view of Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world, competed for our attention.

Once in Puno the street mercado – market – was alive with bartering activity and time allowed for an excursion by boat to witness the unusual life of Peruvians on the floating islands. Here reed boats are laboriously constructed by hand, a recognised symbol of Lake Titicaca and its people.

Cuzco was the next stop, a magnificent Spanish colonial city, well preserved and covered in Inca ruins, and our first decent break after more than two weeks of riding. Rejuvenated, we took the train up to Machu Pichu, the real highlight of the trip which was even better than most of us anticipated. We had a night in the funky town of Aqua Calientes, named after its hot springs, where the single young locals and gorgeous backpackers meet. The beer was again cheap and flowed freely.

### Higher and Higher

Another crossing of the main range of the Andes, this time to over 15,000 feet and the scenery was awe-inspiring, with massive mountains, an utterly inhospitable climate and desolation. Our oldest rider, Bill from South Carolina, lost it passing a truck down the mountain and badly damaged his knee and hand. Fortunately, the police and other riders were close at hand and for a negotiated fee of \$30 US they took him in comfort the 40ks to Chivay. Here we visited Canyon de Colca, famous for its condors, the symbol of the Andes. As the morning breeze warmed, these massive birds with wingspans reaching 13 feet sailed into view as we watched from the edge of the canyon.

We reached our highest point the next day when we climbed from 11,000 feet at Chivay to the pass at 16,400 feet and then back down into Arequipa at 7,500 feet. It was an incredible ride with great views of three different mountain ranges including the Volcan and Misti volcanoes which stand at 19,000 feet. But the highlight of Arequipa was the Santa Catalina Convent, first built in 1540 and beautifully restored. We learned how the nuns lived in those days – the parents paid a dowry for their daughters to become a nun and all nuns except novices, had their own servants.

We crossed back into Chile the next day after a ride through the barren Peruvian desert and dined on excellent Chilean seafood and wines at Arica. It then took us four days to cross the Atacama Desert, extending thousands of kilometres from Lima, Peru, south through the upper half of Chile, most of which has never recorded rain fall. Ever. I was amazed to see no vegetation at all, not like our deserts which are often filled with flowers. The road was tarred most of the way – thank heavens, after weeks of dirt – silk smooth with lots of inviting hills and sweeping bends that tempted spirited riding. However, the numerous crosses by the

roadside which represent those departed to a truly spirited state kept us alert and cautious.

### Local Copper

Officino Humblestone is the deserted ghost town of one of the world's largest nitrate plants. It was a small town in its time but when we visited the dwellings and machinery stood out like a set in a Mad Max movie. The coastal route was full of great beaches and beautiful rocky bays, dotted with fishing villages and towering dunes that came right down to the sea. We visited the world's largest – about 4.5x2.5x1.0k – open cut mine at Chuquicamata, the copper production from which accounts for 40% of Chile's export income. Then came the fascinating towns of Iquique and Antofagasta on the coast, both seaports with an unusual combination of old wooden buildings and modern skyscrapers. Our second-last stop was the beautiful Spanish colonial city of La Serena founded in 1545, the second oldest and best preserved city in Chile.

### Full Circle

The more adventurous riders took a dirt road detour through the Llanos de Challes National Park and were rewarded with some of the most spectacular scenery of the trip. The park contains numerous species of rare desert wild flowers and animal life, including a herd of guanacos, similar to llamas. The scenery had changed now to lush green valleys, interlaced with swift flowing rivers.

Back at Vina del Mar, having covered over 8,000ks, we were glad to have a break and arrived for two nights at our great hotel near the beach. The farewell dinner was at the Yacht Club of Chile where we told stories, Ron recited his great poem about the riders and we had an excellent dinner accompanied by Chilean wines and pisco sours. Everyone agreed that it had been the trip of a lifetime, tough and challenging, but even better than anticipated.

The riding was tougher than expected and the variety of mountains, quaint villages and interesting people made the trip a fantastic experience. This trip is only run once a year, in September, but there are numerous other Pancho Villa trips in Mexico, Central America and Africa. Please call John Bennett on 02 6687 1512, Fax: 02 6687 1760, email: [jbennett@nor.com.au](mailto:jbennett@nor.com.au) or visit the website: [www.panchovilla.com](http://www.panchovilla.com)

