

An interesting week in The Andes

Words and images: Mike Ferris



Recent charges of corruption against the Bolivian government resulted in riots, civil protests and police shootings which eventually saw the beleaguered president resign and flee the country in fear of his life. It was *déjà vu* for Aussie tour leader Mike Ferris.

In October 2003, the World On Wheels Awesome Andes tour arrived in Puno, Peru, to be informed the passage to Bolivia via the usual border crossing of Copacabana wasn't viable. The highway from there to the pseudo-capital of La Paz had been blockaded by Bolivian *campanistas*. These peasant farmers were most displeased at their President's decision to export

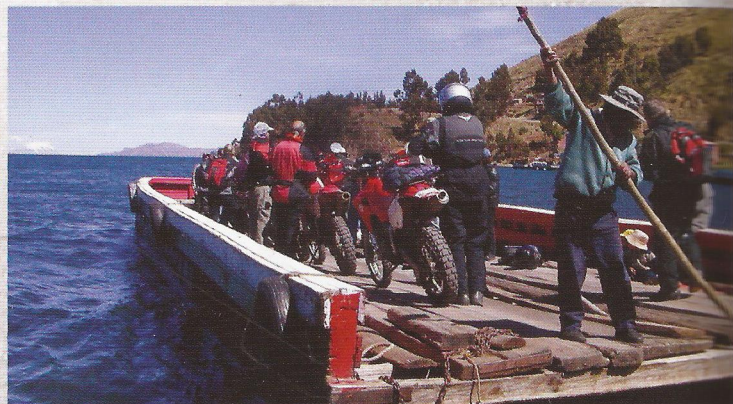
their natural gas reserves to the USA. Or, more accurately, they were displeased at his decision to pipe it through Chile to a coastal port rather than through Peru. The fact several engineering and construction companies in Chile were part-owned by the Bolivian president, and stood to win lucrative contracts, wasn't wasted on the impoverished Bolivian farmers.

It was the final straw as far as they were concerned, and they were determined to bring down a corrupt government by effectively

Above: Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat, at an elevation of 3656 metres. A feature of World On Wheels' Awesome Andes tour.

Below left: Cute as! The girls and the alpacas, both.

Below: Crossing Lake Titicaca.





closing down La Paz and several other major city centres.

Serious

On Saturday, October 11, we enjoyed visiting Peru's floating islands on Lake Titicaca and on Sunday headed for the alternative border crossing at Desagaudero. The highway from there to La Paz was the road less traveled, and, we hoped, less subjected to blockades. We managed to get

Below: Author Mike Ferris.

Right: Scenery in The Andes is sublime.



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The *campanistas* and their supporters piled rubble on the highway for almost the entire 115km



ourselves and our nine bikes through the bureaucratic hassles of immigration and customs in much smarter time than any previous border crossings, and the day looked pretty good.

We set off toward La Paz and soon discovered the 'blockades' actually consisted of rocks, boulders, logs, old tyres, wheel rims, car chassis and virtually anything the farmers could lay their hands on. They piled the rubble on the highway for almost the entire 115km.

At first it was rather entertaining. The bikes and two 4WD backup vehicles had little trouble negotiating the obstacles and we even took photos along the way.

As we approached La Paz however, we were stopped at a military checkpoint and advised we were free to proceed, but we had no chance of making it to the capital on the highway. The blockades ahead were of a much more determined nature and we would be better off taking to the smaller sidestreets, we were told.

This we did.

We reached El Alto, the northernmost extremity of La Paz, a vast impoverished area of adobe-brick, single-level dwellings

and the very heartland of the down-trodden *campanistas*. With one of our support jeeps leading the way, followed by nine bikes and then the second jeep bringing up the rear, we soon attracted unwelcome attention. We were blissfully unaware the *campanistas*, a huge network of people power divided into well-organised groups with surprisingly

"Somebody stalled a bike, and suddenly we were surrounded."

effective communications (before social media!), had declared a complete ban on all motorised traffic in their bid to bring the cities to a standstill. As we slowed to take a right-hand corner around a rural property, a dozen or so field workers started pelting us with potato-sized rocks. Fortunately, none of our riders was hit, but our trailing support jeep

sustained some sizeable dents.

What had earlier appeared to be an amusing peasant protest took a decidedly nasty turn.

A tense situation

We accelerated away from this first sign of trouble, but worse lay ahead.

Our path was blocked by a trench dug fully across the gravel road and our leading jeep became stuck until the driver jumped out to lock the front hubs into 4WD. Somebody stalled a bike, and suddenly we were surrounded by a rapidly growing number of shouting field workers. We watched as they ran across the fields to us, picking up rocks as they approached. In moments the angry mob outnumbered us by about four to one, and it was quickly becoming a very ugly scene.

Fortunately, sanity prevailed. Australian passports were rapidly produced to show we were innocent tourists rather than police reinforcements – rumours were rife that the Bolivian police, unable to cope with the situation, had called upon their Chilean counterparts for support.

Right: Street marches of several thousand people were occurring daily.
 Right middle: Burning blockades.
 Right bottom: An angry mob quickly became a very ugly scene.

Our drivers (two brothers named Roberto and Samuel) did some rapid talking, the mob held a quick council of war to determine our fate, and the subsequent payment of a couple of hundred bolivianos as a 'fine' for our transgression secured our safety for the time being.

We headed off again *mas rapido* into the heart of El Alto proper.

Home

We ran several more roadblocks and small crowds, but it was then patently clear we would not make it safely to the comfort of our hotel in La Paz central. Roberto took the unilateral and courageous decision to lead us directly to his own home in El Alto. There we were able to quickly conceal the jeeps and motorbikes behind garage doors and a high mudbrick surrounding wall. In defying the no-drive directive the brothers had put their own family's safety at risk, a point which was not lost on our visibly shaken adventurers.

Tight fit

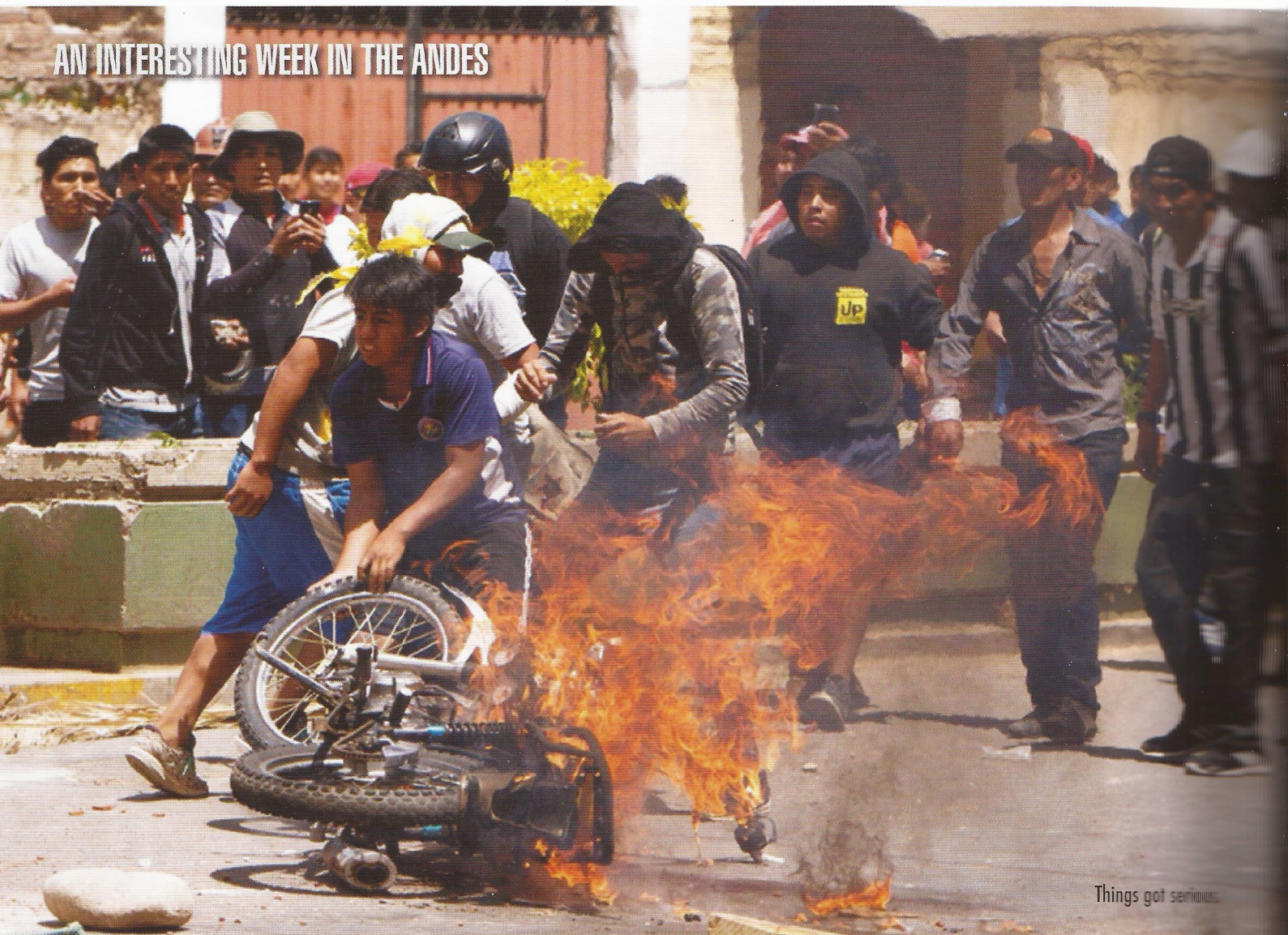
We took stock of our predicament and of our immediate environment. I've already mentioned El Alto was an impoverished sprawl of suburbia, but the living conditions of our two drivers, who had become our friends over the course of the three-week tour, was an eye-opener for all of us: an adobe mud-brick house of low rooms and very primitive facilities in the heart of the poorest nation in South America. It was just slightly above what would be called a slum in many other countries. Typically, it housed an extended family of three generations, and with our arrival an area about half the size of a tennis court held two cars, nine bikes, 10 foreigners, about 12 family members and five mangy, flea-bitten dogs.

Oh, and about 15 guinea-pigs in a little hutch – more on that later.

But the family responded magnificently to the occasion and rapidly produced food and prepared to house us for the night. We could hardly complain at being crammed five-to-a-room, two-to-a-bed when they crammed themselves in a similar fashion in the kitchen –



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Things got serious.

all for foreigners who didn't even speak any Spanish.

With a bullet

The gunfire began later that day.

Running street battles between the police and the *campanistas* raged throughout the night, and it rapidly became a full-scale insurrection. A large proportion of the common-folk rebel movement was represented by the cocaine cartels with ready access to arms and munitions, and many thousands of redneck miners, with access to dynamite and gelnignite, were involved.

Explosions rocked the surrounding suburbs and we didn't get a very good night's sleep.

Heads down

Little did we suspect we were to remain incarcerated there for five days.

The international airport, located in El Alto itself, was closed. All foreigners immediately came under suspicion, and Roberto even had the tyres on his bicycle slashed when, in search of food for us, he ventured into a nearby neighbourhood

where he wasn't recognised. Speaking of which, as the country lurched towards civil war, the price of all commodities skyrocketed and food supplies rapidly dwindled. One of our group observed

"If anyone had known our two hidden jeeps were carrying drums with 150 litres of spare fuel, it's certain we'd've been under siege immediately."

rather unnecessarily that there were now only seven guinea-pigs in the hutch.

Still no motorised transport was allowed, but all *gasolina* supplies had long since dried up anyway. If anyone had known our two hidden jeeps were carrying drums with 150 litres of spare fuel, it's certain we'd've been under siege immediately.

On the third night, the raging battle passed down our street, right by our rooms.

Our little windows only looked on the internal courtyard so we couldn't actually see the goings-on, but it was a very edifying experience to hear machine-gun fire from a range of about 10 metres, with an occasional thud of bullets into the thick adobe bedroom walls. From the direction of the airport came sounds of huge explosions.

Our group should have flown out to Australia by this time, but we certainly weren't going anywhere in a hurry.

Diplomatic inertia

Street marches of several thousand people were occurring daily by this time, from El Alto into La Paz, and poor Roberto, as head of his family, was press-ganged into participating. He returned exhausted each evening, having walked 12 hilly kilometres or so, to a gaggle of questioning, frustrated, ill-tempered and increasingly unwanted foreign house guests. Unable to even poke our heads out of the gate for fear of calling attention



Above: The host family hid and supported the Australians (guinea pigs not shown).

to Roberto's family, we amused ourselves with chess tournaments, card games, and practicing mutual English/Spanish lessons with the family children.

Meanwhile, we'd been in touch with the Australian embassy two or three times daily since the second morning. Bolivia doesn't actually have an Australian embassy, so we'd been calling the nearest one in Santiago de Chile. It has to be said the embassy was completely, utterly, totally, useless to us. Staff did nothing in five days but pay lip service and assure us things appeared to be settling down. We were told we should sit tight because we were in a much safer position than many others trapped in the airport or the city. Quite often, we were more a source of information to them than they were to us, despite the fact they had the resources of cable television, internet, and a worldwide network of highly-financed diplomatic offices to call upon, while we were incarcerated in a mud hut in the middle of a civil war with just a couple of mobile phones. We were able to inform them, for example, the German embassy had arranged a charter flight in to and out of the military airport in El Alto to evacuate 140 German nationals, despite the fact our embassy had been in conference with all its counterpart European embassies just a couple of hours earlier and hadn't been informed of such plans.

The one thing they did do for us was to inform our relatives at home we were all alive, well and relatively safe.

Friend of a friend

In the end, one of our group had a friend in Sydney who contacted a friend in Melbourne who contacted a friend in Peru

who contacted a friend in the Peruvian Air Force who somehow managed, on the evening of Thursday, October 16, to secure seats for our group on an evacuation flight from La Paz to Lima for the following morning. When the Australian Embassy staff contacted us on the morning of the 17th they had the audacity to appear jolly pleased with themselves. They had actually managed to learn (they were on to us!) we had acquired this flight on our own without any assistance whatsoever from themselves.

Same again

So our group quietly walked at least four kilometres to the airport on the Friday morning with our luggage, past still-smouldering piles of burnt tyres and various other blockade devices and through wary, suspicious *campanistas* with children calling, 'Gringo!' When we arrived we discovered, of course, it wasn't just a simple matter of enquiring where the 10:00am evacuation flight might happen to be found. We had to walk even further to the military section of the airport. The flight was then late arriving, there were many other desperate people who considered they had higher priority, we didn't actually have any tickets, etc, etc. However, in the end the miracle did occur and a relieved Aussie group finally flew out at 7:00pm bound for Lima. The ultimate irony of the whole episode was that at 4:00pm, while we were still waiting for our flight, the embattled president of Bolivia finally admitted defeat and publicly resigned from office in disgrace. He then fled the country in his private jet, bound for Miami.

And some sixteen years later, in November 2019, history was fated to repeat itself.

ADV

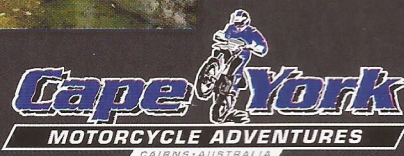


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