

PERU OR BUST!

Think of a salt lake, 140k across, think of a cobblestone road 120km long, think Machu Picchu ruins and mountain roads without a single straight section, and then think of travelling there on a motorcycle, and you're thinking of a trip to remember.

Last October I laid my money down and headed for South America on a Ferris Wheels Awesome Andes tour across Peru and Bolivia. Ferris Wheels' motto is "Are you living on the edge yet ... or are you still taking up too much room?" Their tours take you to the edge and let you find a place there and then help you find a way back.

We (9 Aussies, tour guide and mechanic) started in Arequipa, Peru at 2,350m above sea level, where we picked up the bikes. Mine was a BMW GS650F, others rode Kawasaki KLR 650s and Honda NX400s, all adequate for the trip though the Hondas tended to have a shorter range relative to the other bikes.

Within a couple of days we were on our way to Bolivia. First stop was the border town of Desaguadero (4,000m) on the edge of Lake Titicaca, truly at the arse end of the world – dirty, dusty, crowded and no decent restaurants, so boy we were glad when the border dance was over to get on with the riding. We headed across the Altiplano, through Urmiri, Sucre and then Potosi, famous for its silver mines. We visited a mine and it was like something out of the Victorian era – exploited miners (\$5/day), no safety standards and the miners spend most of their time high on coca and 140 proof spirits. Life spans are short and brutal.

On to the Salar de Uyuni, the largest salt pan on Earth. "Head for the island in the middle," he said, "where we'll have coffee", he said. "That way," he said, pointing, "Only 70k. Keep the volcano at 2 o'clock. You can't miss it." He was right. What fun. The salt was as firm as a bitumen road so you could open the throttle wide, and wider. The only disconcerting thing was that the horizon was so close that if you stopped for just a minute, everyone else disappeared so quickly. The road in and out of the Salar was dreadful and provided some heart-stopping moments. Though I came close, I didn't fall down.

On to La Paz, of which I didn't get to see much as I came down with salmonella poisoning and giardia which put me out of action for a couple of days. I did get to visit the floating islands near Puno on Lake Titicaca a couple of days later.

After that it was on to Inca country. Cusco and the Norton Rat's Tavern and then the train to Machu Picchu. Absolutely awesome, though try to visit in the early morning. After 10am you will be lucky to get a decent photo because of all the crowds. The bus ride to the ruins caused some heart palpitations as it was on a one-lane road, up the mountain with buses travelling both ways, and no guard rails.

Somewhere in all that travelling we found an old Inca road that was cobblestones for 120k, lots of road works, some awful gravel roads where some of the guys fell down (wrecking one bike) and some high passes across the Andes heading for the Nazca Plain. Now these mountain roads and the coast roads after the plains are perfect scratching roads – nice long entries, beautiful cambers, with very few straights, so you come out of one corner and straight over into the next. This went on for hours and with very little traffic to contend with. At the end of it, you're out of breath (remember the altitude – around 4,500m) and only one question: "Can we do it again please?"

The roads, where they were sealed were great, both in Bolivia and Peru. They know how to build roads for motorcycles. And on the coast roads which flank giant sand dunes for kilometres at a time, the Roads Department is kept busy sweeping the sand off the roads to keep them safe. So the bitumen riding is great and the gravel riding is challenging at times.

All the way through the trip, the food was varied. It ranged from restaurant quality to workers' cafes, but was always plentiful. Lots of potatoes (over 300 varieties to choose from), fresh water salmon, ceviche (fish marinated in lime juice), cuy (guinea pig) and more, and always tasty. The beer tended to be German brewed so it was always good and the Pisco (local brandy) is to be treated with respect.

A great trip with some great (and not so great) memories. But that's travel in a third world country. The rides though, are worth going back for another go.

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