The bridge was a chaotic mess, a confusing tangle of timeworn cars, deafening two-stroke motorbikes, and an endless stream of copper-skinned locals, their narrow backs laden with non-descript packages as cumbersome as small refrigerators. I felt conspicuous and vulnerable pushing my fully-loaded Trek 4300 through this shifting mass of humanity, especially after all that I’d heard about the notorious swift-fingered opportunism of this particular corner of South America. This was Paraguay, that country you’d once heard of in a sixth grade social studies class and then never heard of again. I was crossing into the unknown amidst a flurry of activity that was the perfectly antipodal beginning to a stage of my journey that would culminate on the high shores of a vast, silent lake deep in the Bolivian Andes.

I completed immigration formalities amid a small crowd of curious shoeshine boys before pedaling off into the anarchy of Paraguay’s capital of contraband, Ciudad del Este. South America’s most bustling shopping center, Ciudad del Este is capitalism on Prestac, a sort of Paraguayan Tijuana built on bootlegging and controlled by criminals, where you can find anything, from every shop, home, and rusted pickup that I passed.

Paraguay’s only major highway stretches some 215 miles west from Ciudad del Este to Asunción, the country’s almost modern capital. Although Paraguay’s finest road is a nice highway by South American standards, it left a bit to be desired from a cyclist’s viewpoint. The road’s five-foot-wide shoulder should have provided ample distance from the cargo trucks thundering past just beyond my left handlebar, but any attempt to cycle along it was thwarted by the baseball-bat-sized speed bumps that spanned its width every fifteen yards. I was forced to ride a fine line between an abrupt jolt from the booby-trapped shoulder and an even more abrupt one from the traffic on my left. The balancing act was made downright treacherous near a truck stop not far from Ciudad del Este where the pavement was coated with a slick layer of oil and grease from countless aging trucks, creating, a deadly, slick-as-ice surface for about twenty miles.

In the back of my mind, I worried that if the dangerous highway didn’t kill me, something else might. I’d been warned countless times to avoid Paraguay at all costs if I valued my life which, reportedly, would have no value to the soulless crooks who prowl this impoverished land. Indeed, one of the first things I noticed in Paraguay was a marked upgrade in security. Soldiers and police officers were positioned outside every bank or official-looking building, armed to the teeth with semiautomatic weapons half as large as they were and twice as old, by the looks of most of the baby-faced sentinels. After the mayhem of Ciudad del Este, Paraguay’s tranquil countryside did much to ease my apprehensions.

And then I was assaulted. Not by an angry mob or some petty thief, but by the dreaded triple beat of the cumbia, the aggressively repetitive “Ba ba bum, ba ba bum” that attacked me from every shop, home, and rusted pickup that I passed. Paraguayans like their cumbia, and they like it loud. When I sat down for lunch, one restaurant owner even raised the volume until the loathsome beat belched from the dusty speakers in a distorted roar that reverberated in my skull with all the musicality of a crying baby operating a jackhammer at an ‘N Sync concert.

Despite my musical differences with the Paraguayans, and although their country lacks the rugged mountain scenery and beautiful oceanside rides that attract cyclists to some other South American countries, Paraguay excels in at least one other area all-important to the touring cyclist — roadside snacks. The highway from Ciudad del Este to Asunción is lined with roadside fruit vendors and young girls in short skirts selling chispas, tasty bagel-like pastries made from manioc flour, eggs, and cheese. After a tasty bite, I’d only have to ride another few miles for a chance to wash it down with an intensely sweet cup of mosto, a liquid energy rush made from juiced sugar cane that I swear made my brain vibrate. Not quite as appetizing was the strip of roadside butchers proudly displaying their fly-covered slabs of beef in the eighty-degree sun.

My proud arrival in Asunción, one of the few South American capitals not ringed by sprawling slums, was unfortunately marred by tragedy. As I pedaled into town, a horrific supermarket fire had already claimed the lives of at least 500 people, a toll that would rise to more than 1000 by the time I left three days later. A palpable sense of grief hung like a lead curtain in Asunción’s hot, dry air. National flags throughout the city were draped with black mourning sashes and hand-scrawled cardboard posters in shop windows declared “Closed due to mourning.” Although I would have enjoyed a longer stay in Asunción, I felt awkward lingering in a city struggling to come to terms with its worst tragedy in decades. With that in mind — and finding it much more appealing to bike down rather than up the Andes — I pedaled to the Asunción bus terminal and began a grueling four-day bus journey to Potosí, Bolivia, which oddly reminded me why
I generally choose to travel by bike. At an altitude of more than 13,000 feet, Potosí is the highest city of its size in the world. Although I planned to spend three days of rest acclimatizing to the rarefied air, I instead spent my time exploring the city’s crowded narrow streets and the abysmal working conditions of the nearby mines, the real reason Potosí exists at all.

Perhaps it was because I spent my acclimatizing time stooping around in dank mine shafts that I found myself in a state of near collapse halfway up my first Bolivian hill about twenty minutes out of the city. Leaning heavily on my handlebars and gasping uncontrollably in spastic bursts, my lungs frantically tried to sate themselves on the thin Andean air. When my heart finally stopped pounding in my throat and I regained some semblance of composure, I scanned the stark beauty of the rugged landscape through which I was slowly passing. In all directions, the horizon rose and fell with the erratic contours of jagged peaks framed under a sky so blue you’d swear it had been digitally enhanced. Energized by the powerful serenity of my surroundings, I pushed on.

Although the cycling was tough, the rocky, winding road was a thrill ride in slow motion. At times, I clung precariously to the edge of a blood-red canyon that reminded me of the ones into which Wile E. Coyote repeatedly plummeted in the old Road Runner cartoons. A great day of riding culminated with an arduous climb to the top of a high pass, where I camped for the night under a fickle sky that alternately showed me stunning starscapes and flurries of light, driving snow. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so alone as I did that evening, and yet with the stars and mountains as my silent companions, I was never lonely.

Bolivia, sometimes referred to as the Tibet of the Americas, offers everything the bike tourist craves: wide-open spaces, beautiful mountain scenery, and plenty of opportunities to get well off the beaten path. The Bolivian paradox, however, is that the mountainous country is also rife with the things adventure cyclists loathe, like grueling climbs at oxygen-starved altitudes and roads so rough you wonder why you didn’t just stay at home, beat yourself with a paddle, and save yourself the dust shower. In Bolivia, cycling off the beaten path often means cycling a path that’s going to beat you.

Past the tiny village of Tica Tica (where I was chased out of town by a trio of grubby children yelling “Gringo!”), the road, already littered with fist-sized rocks, took a dramatic turn for the worse. It was the worst road surface I’d ever ridden, covered with the two most efficient momentum-suckers known to cycling: sand and washboard. With my hands aching from the constant jolts and cursing loudly at whoever wasn’t around to listen, I managed to grind nearly fifty miles along this ugly road to the semi-abandoned mining town of Pulacayo, beautifully perched atop an outcrop of red rock speckled with hardy tufts of greens alpine grass.

From Pulacayo, it’s mostly downhill to Uyuni, a dust bowl of a town surrounded by tattered plastic bags and rusting heaps of scrap metal sitting on the edge of the Salar de Uyuni, the largest and — at 12,000 feet — the highest salt flat in the world. As I intended to cross the Salar by bicycle, I ignored the myriad promotions of 4 x 4 excursions and, after a night of relaxation and pizza, set out toward the great white expanse beckoning on the horizon.

The first stop before actually entering the Salar is the crumbling village of Colchani, about twelve miles north of Uyuni and home to about 150 people. With its deserted streets flanked by the ruins of abandoned clay homes and littered with forgotten trash, Colchani earned itself the unfortunate moniker of “Ugliest Town I’ve Ever Seen.” The Salar de Uyuni, in contrast, is surely one of the most amazing and unique places on the globe. The result of repeated evaporating and reflooding of a massive ancient lake, the Salar de Uyuni is

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4,800 square miles of flat, blindingly white salt — an estimated ten billion tons of it — naturally arranged into a neat hexagonal grid that lends it an entirely otherworldly appearance. In the center of the Salar sits the surreal Isla Incahuasi, a rocky, cactus-studded island rising defiantly from the sea of white. What looks like a small, flat-topped island from a distance is in reality an isolated hill, 105 feet above the Salar’s surface. In the center of the Salar sits a huge cactus, believed to be the remains of a tree that once grew here, but died back due to the harsh environment. The Salar’s salty water contains many minerals, including sodium chloride, which is what makes the surface so white. The Salar is one of the most popular tourist destinations in South America, and it’s easy to see why. The area around the Salar is dotted with small towns and villages, each with its own unique culture and history. The people of the Salar are known for their hospitality and their love of the land. The Salar’s salt flats are a true wonder of the world, and a must-see for anyone visiting the area.