

A person wearing a light-colored shirt and a hat is seen from behind, riding a bicycle on a narrow-gauge rail line. The bicycle is heavily loaded with gear, including a large black bag and a green bag. An American flag is attached to the front of the bike. The trail is a dirt path with wooden rails, set in a rugged, mountainous landscape with sparse green vegetation. In the background, large, jagged mountain peaks are covered in snow under a clear blue sky.

The Adventure of a Lifetime

Railbiking Across

by Jack McNeel Photos by Peter Hoffman



Patagonia

“Not in a million years would I ever have imagined that I would someday be railbiking this romantically remote railroad through the wilds of Patagonia,” Peter Hoffman exclaimed. But that’s how he celebrated his 73rd birthday with three other team members — facing winds that threatened to sweep them off the narrow-gauge tracks, nerve-shattering bridge crossings over rushing rivers, and unkempt rails on the nearly abandoned La Trochita route.

The railroad, given international acclaim by Paul Theroux’s book, *The Old Patagonian Express*, crosses some of the most desolate country in South America — all with a striking backdrop of the Andes. La Trochita ceased operating regularly in the early 1990s and now only operates seasonal tourist trains on a short section of the line.

Railbiking, for those unfamiliar with this type of cycling, involves modifying a bicycle to ride atop a rail with an outrigger to the other rail and a leveling device for adjustment when riding around the banked curves of a railroad. The concept is simple, but the technology is complex.

The four cyclists who embarked on the 250-mile ride represented an impressive background in railbiking experience. Two were Americans, two were Swedes.

Dr. Dick Smart and Peter Hoffman were the Americans. Dick is often referred to as “the father of railbiking in the U.S.” Railbiking was actually fairly common in the late 1800s, and Sears and Roebuck even offered adaptations to make bicycles operable on railroad tracks in the early 1900s. That all changed with the advent of automobiles. 50 years elapsed before a new patent was issued for railbikes — to Dick in 1980. He estimated he has now ridden over 30,000 miles on rails.

Peter was one of the country’s top bicycle riders in the 1960s and likely would have gone to the Olympics if he had not been involved in a collision with a car the day before he was to leave for the time trials on the East Coast. He later was one of the originators of *Bicycling* magazine.

Arne Nilsson has much the same background in Sweden that Dick has in the U.S. and is called “the father of railbiking in Europe.” They met at a railbike convention in the early 1990s and have ridden together on several occasions since. The fourth member is a bicycling friend of Arne’s, Morgan Gustavsson. They range in age from 62 to 73.



A bridge too far? Canyon winds challenged the nerves of the riders. **Rest stop.** The village of Ojo de Aqua provided respite for the riders.



Local accommodations. An abandoned baggage car in Fitalancao provides a perfect sleeping solution.

The four met in Buenos Aires in late November of 2009, their railbikes stowed in suitcases, prepared to ride across Patagonia. "Everything we had when we left the plane in Buenos Aires, we took with us on the bikes," Dick explained. "First, we had a 24-hour bus ride to Esquel, the jump-off site.

"With La Trochita management supportive of our railbiking, it was an opportunity for an adventure of a lifetime," Peter commented.

The track across Patagonia requires additional adaptations for the narrow gauge of the rails and conditions encountered on the tracks. It is not kept clear by train use, so the tracks are often covered with sand or vegetation, presenting a challenge to railbikers.

"I have 34 years of experience with this technology, and I had to use every bit of it because it was technically a very difficult track to ride and everything needed to be just right," Dick Smart said.

"Arne was trip leader and prepared a list of things to take. I had good maps from Trains Unlimited, 10 liters of water, purifying pumps, all the camping gear, freeze-dried food from the U.S. (because we

couldn't get it there), clothes for every condition, gloves, an incredible assortment of tools — both metric and U.S. standard. On the airplane, we each had two 50-pound bags plus about 25 pounds of carry-on luggage. Once it was assembled, we carried between 90 and 100 pounds of gear on each bike, but it felt pretty good because you liked the stability during strong winds," he said.

Dick had traveled to Patagonia twice in preparation for this ride. In 2005, he rode La Trochita on one of its infrequent trips. "I asked ahead if I could bring a railbike. I also asked if I could get off and stay at a little village and have them pick me up on the way back. I got to inspect the track and figure out some of the difficulties it presented," he said.

In 2008, an attempt had to be aborted when Dick broke the fork on his bicycle, "and there wasn't a fork in South America." Those experiences led to the successful journey in 2009.

The picturesque town of Esquel was to be the start, but because a tourist train was making a short round-trip to Nahuel Pan, the four decided to ride La Trochita. It marked Peter's 73rd birthday, and he was

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Patagonia dreaming. Top Left: A future puestero. Top Right: A satellite phone proves useful on the rails. Above: Carrying 90 to 100 pounds of gear prevented high winds from sweeping the railbikes off the narrow-gauge rails of the La Trochita.

allowed to ride in the locomotive cab of the old American-built Baldwin engine.

The remainder of the morning was devoted to assembling bikes and organizing equipment. Bikes were removed from suitcases. The second suitcase was fitted inside with gear placed inside that. Then they were carried on the outriggers of each bike. Additional items were placed in bags on the handlebars. Arne mounted a Swedish flag on his bike, Peter a U.S. flag, and Dick an Argentine flag honoring the host country.

It was afternoon before the first leg of the biking began. Peter talked of that day. "By then, the wind was howling down off the snow-crowned peaks of the Andes, and the temperature was in the low 40s. It was all we could do not to get blown off the tracks. The wind attacked us from one side and then the other, but nothing could defeat our spirit. The scenery was strikingly beautiful, and we were on our

way at last."

Even though the first day's ride was the shortest distance, just 20 miles, it was nearly dark when they reached their goal of La Cancha and its abandoned station. Dick pointed out that during 11 days on the rails they averaged 25 to 30 miles. "It doesn't seem like a lot, but there were strong headwinds and we were carrying a bunch of weight. The track at times would be covered with sand and sometimes with rocks and thorn bushes. Sometimes you couldn't even see the rails where they were overgrown with grass," he said.

Dinner that night was fixed with the aid of headlamps. Francisco, an Argentine friend who helped organize the trip, had ridden with the group on the first day, and his friends had arrived earlier to pick him up. Their campfire was a welcome sight, and news of warmer weather to come was equally welcomed. That night, however, the weather was anything but warm.

"The condensation on the inside of the tents had frozen during the night, but as the sun rose over the mountains, we could feel its warming grace. It was our first night sleeping on the ground, and for a bunch of old geezers, this was probably the hardest part of the trip," Peter commented. "To ease the pain, we quickly established a ritual of taking a couple of stiff shots of whiskey at the end of the ride each day."

Bridges were always a challenge. "They were some of the most nerve-shattering experiences I have encountered railbiking," Peter says. "There was little between you and the rushing waters below. Psychologically, these bridges were killers."

Dick's reaction was even more graphic: "It made your sphincter quiver a little!"

Dick had noted the abundance of wildlife on his earlier trips, and it remained a highlight.

"The wildlife was spectacular right off the bat. We probably saw more wildlife the



Open country. Friendly puesteros roam the land.



Curious onlookers. Even Patagonia's guanacos found the railbikes interesting.

second day than at any time in my life. At one point, there were all these birds in the air and guanacos crossing in front of and around us and Patagonia hares running across the track. They looked like a bobcat

in full run with their ears completely back. We saw what looked like jackrabbits too, and we saw armadillo and lots of rheas," he said.

The weather soon improved and sun-

glasses and headgear became necessities. Days were similar in that we were riding long hours, but every day and every night was different. Some nights were spent camping alongside the tracks, one night

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Show and tell. Dick Smart explains how railbikes work to a group of villagers.

the tents were set up on an old station platform, and another night they took cover from a threatening storm by sleeping in an abandoned baggage car. Two nights were spent in towns.

Many experiences fill their memories. Dick reminisced about the countryside. "It was spectacular to me how vast Patagonia is and how wonderful the landscapes are. This little tiny railroad sort of gets gobbled

up by the vastness. You look way off, miles and miles away like in the Steens Mountains of Oregon, and see a little tiny ranch house.

"You'd think there would be no one for 20 miles in any direction, but once in a while a *gaucho* would see you and make a real interesting sound like 'hieeee,' almost like an animal, way up in the mountains to tell you they had noticed you," he said.

Peter added: "Each day, we'd encounter at least one *gaucho* on horseback roaming the countryside to tend to his flock or herd. They are more correctly called *puesteros*. Our encounters were always friendly. They were curious and interested in our railbiking and would ride their horses to the tracks or to our camps to greet us."

That curiosity continued throughout the trip. "As we'd come into towns, people along the tracks wanted to stop and talk with us. We did that as much as we could," Dick explained.

He laughed about another encounter. "We were coming toward Ñorquinco, one of the towns Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid went into to buy rams for their flock of sheep. This bus was coming from there, and I saw it would cross the track in front of

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me. They saw me and stopped the bus, and all these kids, a mother and new baby, and the driver, they all got off the bus and took turns riding the railbikes. It was like a big festival." And yes, Butch and Sundance did

have a ranch here while they were evading U.S. authorities in the early 1900s.

Children were also a big part of the trip. "In those abandoned railroad communities where there were still a few people liv-

Nuts & Bolts: Railbiking Patagonia



The technical side of railbiking: Dick Smart has devoted 34 years to inventing and modifying to the railbiking equipment he used on his journey across Patagonia. Arne Nilsson's railbikes are different mechanically but function similarly. Here Dick gives some explanation of his railbike equipment.

"The guide-wheel carriage was especially built for the La Trochita. The front wheel is not mobile and rests on the floor of the carriage and thus doesn't touch the rail. Four guide wheels are attached to the carriage. The inboard two are the principal wheels and are angled slightly toward the rail. They adjust automatically, moving up when there is no groove beside the rail, like at a road crossing, and then back down when the groove is present. The dimensions have to be within millimeters, otherwise it doesn't perform right. Railbikes are sensitive that way and have to be tuned in.

"The guide-wheel carriage rolls along the top surface of the rail on two travel wheels that are angled slightly toward the outside edge of the rail. This mechanism keeps the inboard guide wheels running snugly against the inside surface of the rail.

"A little plow is attached to the front of the carriage. It's flexible, and when down it's exactly on the surface of the rail. The rail can be totally covered with rocks and manure and everything else and it just blasts everything off leaving a reasonably clean surface."

The rear bicycle wheel sits on the rail to provide propulsion and is kept on the rail by a self adjusting inboard guide wheel.

"The rear wheel has been tweaked a tiny bit to the outside by loosening the hub nut. This pulls it slightly left and keeps the

guide wheel rolling snugly against the inside of the rail. It's the same principle as the front.

"A leveling knob is located behind the seat. It controls the tilt of the bike. Rails are banked on curves and it's necessary to be continually adjusting the tilt of the bike to compensate for that banking, uneven roadbeds, and for violent winds."

"Then finally there is an outrigger extending from the bike's frame to the opposite rail with wheels that roll on the rail to hold you upright."

The foursome used foldable bikes that convert easily from rail to road use. Dick's bike is a 16-inch Dahon and Arne uses 18-inch Birdie. Both are folding bikes (see page 29).

When to go: Spring and summer in Patagonia are spectacular; consider shoulder season to avoid peak travel.

Where to stay: Hotels are limited in El Maitén making Esquel a more attractive base for exploration.

How to get there: Flights from the U.S. to Argentina start around U.S. \$700. Aerolineas Argentina offers flights from Buenos Aires to Esquel from U.S. \$200. www.aerolineasargentinas.com.

Useful information:

- Argentina Tourist Information
12 W. 56th St., New York, NY 10019
(212) 603-0443 www.turismo.gov.ar/eng/menu.htm.
- Railways of the Far South: www.railwaysofthefarsouth.co.uk/07agrandiose.html.
- *The Old Patagonia Express*: www.paultheroux.com/books/book-102.html.
- La Trochita: latrochita.com/elibro.htm.
- Peter in Patagonia: epeterh.blogspot.com.

About Railbiking:

- The Amazing Bentley Railbike: rrbike.freesevers.com.
- Links to railbiking websites: rrbike.freesevers.com/Railbike_LINKS.htm.
- Railbike safety: railbike.com/safety.htm
- Buying railbikes: railbike.com/buying.htm

ing, the children fast became our friends,” Peter commented. “Dick in particular was great with the kids and spent hours working with them. He had brought small toys as gifts that he gave out to eager hands. The kids did not find the language barrier a deterrent and relished the interaction with foreign strangers.”

El Maitén was the midway point and the largest town on the route. It held a shop for locomotives and lots of old railroad cars and paraphernalia. There was also a hotel about four blocks from the tracks.

“We had to transport our bikes and luggage to our lodging. The local kids were eager to help. It took as many as four small boys to carry one of our heavy suitcases, held flat with a boy at each corner. They earned one peso each for their services,” Peter said.

El Maitén was also the point where health issues forced Morgan to quit, but he wanted to remain a part of the team. Dick explained how Morgan helped. “He took a little country bus on a dirt road 200 miles to get a rent-a-car and took some of

our heavy stuff over the hills. He camped with us when the track was close enough to get to.” Morgan’s help in reducing weight greatly eased the second half of the journey that ended in Ingeniero Jacobacci.

They were able to purchase food in El

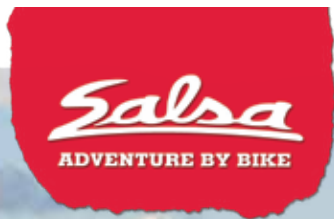
Maitén but little elsewhere. “Some of the towns were so tiny they had practically nothing to sell. In one place, we bought tomato paste in the smallest store in the world. One little town had a store so small that the guy just kept his merchandise in a cabinet in his house. He had just a few cookies,” Dick laughed.

Dick has ridden in a number of countries and many states, sometimes in rather remote areas. He summed up the ride across Patagonia very simply. “I’m proudest of this trip because it was so technically difficult, the rails were so tiny, and there were so many obstacles,” he said.

“Many have called our railbiking expedition the adventure of a lifetime. I can’t argue with that. It didn’t disappoint,” Peter concluded.

AC

Jack McNeel is a lifelong Idaho resident with a long career in wildlife conservation. He has maintained a love of bicycling and regularly rides trails in the Idaho Panhandle. He has also railbiked with Dr. Dick Smart.



EXPLORE



David and Pierre ride the beach north toward Anchor Point on an overnighter out of Homer, Alaska – Photo by Kid Bike shown – Mukluk

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