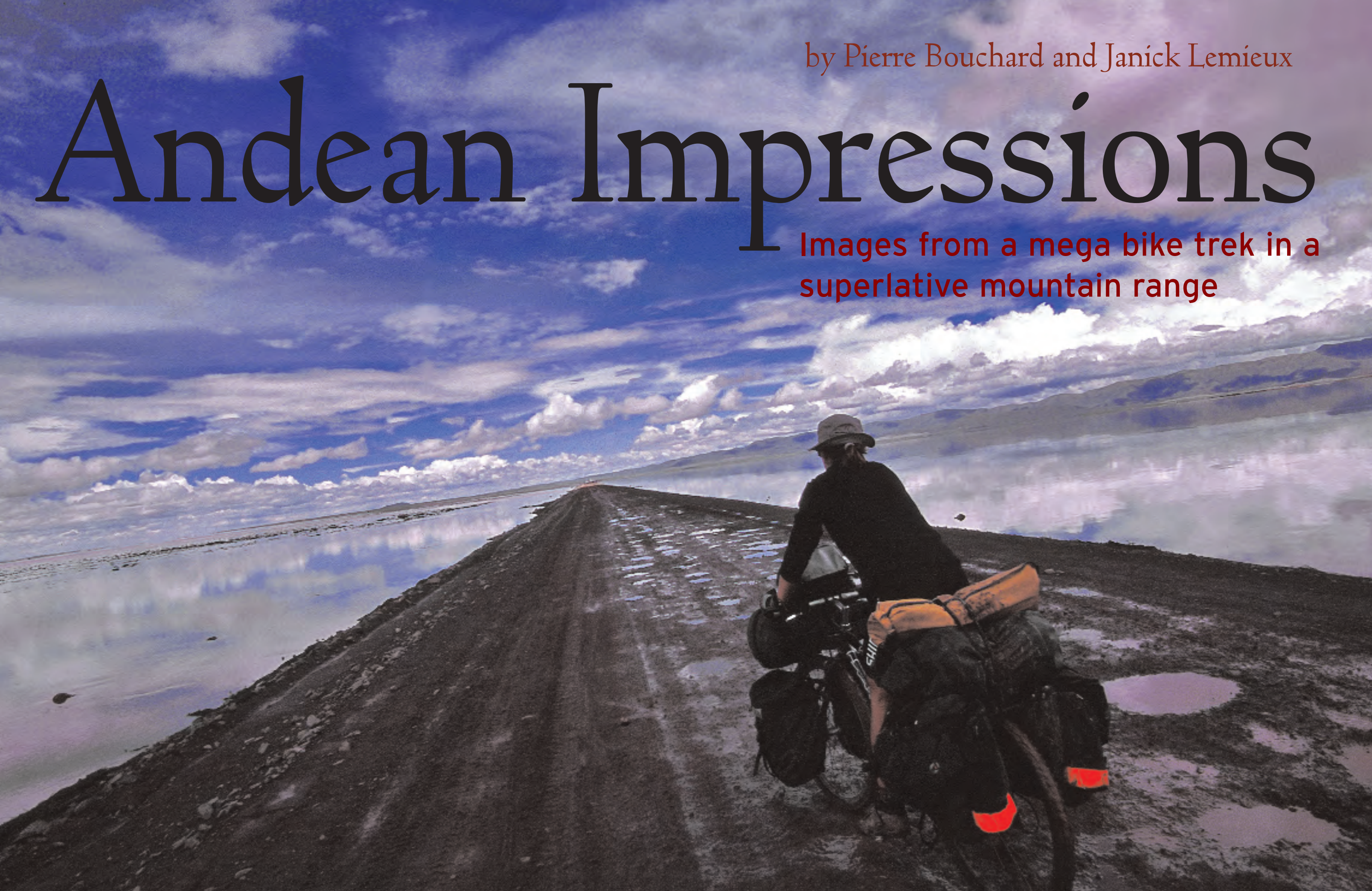


by Pierre Bouchard and Janick Lemieux

Andean Impressions

Images from a mega bike trek in a
superlative mountain range



Stretching for more than 7,000 kilometres across South America from the Caribbean Sea to Cape Horn, Venezuela to Patagonia, and towering over the Pacific like formidable ramparts, the Andes make up the spine and the heart of a continent. The Cordillera, as its dwellers affectionately refer to it, is the most massive non-submarine mountain range on earth, and gave birth to the highest peak of the Americas, Cerro Aconcagua (6,959 metres), the world's highest active volcano, Nevados Ojos del Salado (6,887 meters), and mightiest of rivers, the Amazon. It is truly a land of superlatives!

The Andes' diversified climates, fertile soils, abundant building materials, mineral treasures, and benevolent spirits nurtured many a people and civilization: Quechuas, Aymaras, Mapuches, and Onas; the cultures of San Agustín, Moche, Chavín, Nazca, Chimu, Tiahuanaco, and the Inca Empire.

Taken during an eighteen-month, 18,000-kilometer tour between Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, and Punta Arenas, Chile, we present a collection of images from our travels through this superlative region of South America.

Previous pages:

Seasons on the Altiplano. During the winter wet season, the infamous invierno altiplanico occurs. In the winter of 2002, right in the dead of Carnival season, the Bolivian pampa was literally inundated and the only negotiable way out of Oruro, and back to the drier Chilean side, was by traversing this several-kilometer-long mud bridge.



▲ **On the barren plateaus** of southern Peru, a Quechuan woman weaves a wool blanket. The Quechuan people have withstood the harsh climate of the high Andes for centuries and played the role of the most powerful and influential group amongst the mosaic of peoples that comprised the Inca Empire. Their tongue became its lingua franca and is still widely spoken in southern Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and northern Chile. Dialects of Argentina's north-west mountain communities are also derived from Quechua.

◀ **Through neatly manicured orchards** of prickly pear cacti, Majes River Valley farmers harvest precious female cochineal insects for their carmine. The natural crimson-red dye is used in high-end cosmetic products, pharmaceuticals, and as a food colorant. The arid climate of southern Peru's coastal ranges and receptive markets in Europe allow this industry to flourish in the valleys surrounding the city of Arequipa.



▲ **Sampling some of the Chilean Altiplano's purity.** At 4,500 meters, we pedaled in the company of two massive volcanoes – San Pedro and San Pablo.

◀ **Early spring cycling.** Our timing was just right as road workers just cleared San Francisco pass of its penitents – an Andinist term referring to snow stalagmites usually found over elevated, cold, dry ground. Culminating at 4,700 meters above the Pacific, this Andean pass links Chile and Argentina just north of Ojos del Salado, one of the world's highest active volcano. This unworldly territory marks the southernmost limits of the altiplano.



▲ **Red-hot chilli peppers** drying under Cafayate Valley's sun. Hugging and kissing the red and arid eastern slopes of the Andes, the region of Cafayate is one of Argentina's most renowned and favored wine-producing areas as well.



▼ **Breakfast in the company of Aymara children** in a small Altiplano village hugging the base of Sajama, Bolivia's highest volcano at 6,542 meters. Anthropologists believe that these well-adapted people have been living around Lake Titicaca for millennia and are the architects and builders of the pre-Inca ceremonial city of Tiahuanaco.

▲ **As the sun sets** over the dry highlands of Ecuador's Cordillera Occidental near the town of Zumbahua, two Latacunga children pose for a picture as they walk back home after a day of scratching the soil to help potatoes, corn, or sorghum grow.



▶ **Gasping for oxygen** as we enter Portazuelo de Llanganuco, a nearly 4,900 meter-high Andean pass amidst Peru's Cordillera Blanca. This mountaineer's Mecca has one of the Andes' greatest concentrations of high peaks, over which reigns Nevado Huascarán, Peru's tallest point with an altitude of 6,768 meters. Living at the foot of the awe-inspiring mountain has proven precarious as avalanches are common. Two such events were catastrophic, burying alive 3,500 and 20,000 people in 1962 and 1970, respectively.



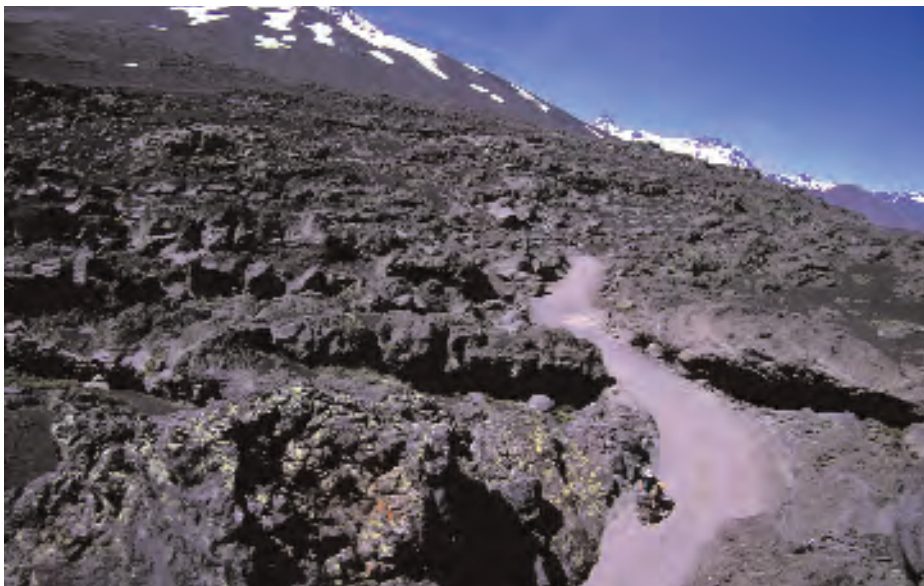
► **In the backyard** of Santiago, Chile – the capital and economic powerhouse of more than six million people – we’re coming back down from a visit to Baños de Colina on yet another bewitching cul-de-sac in the Andes. These natural thermal springs lie at about 3,000 meters above the Pacific, at the foot of San José, a giant volcano of fire and ice.



► **Entering old Cuenca** on fresh pavement. Founded in the sixteenth century by the Conquistadores, this colonial city, Ecuador’s third largest, has kept its traditions alive despite undergoing steady economic growth and being an important commercial and industrial hub of this small Andean nation.



► **A great “cyclovolcanic” moment.** We rode through Antuco’s relatively young lava field in Chile’s Laguna del Laja National Park. The lake that gave its name to the park was formed by a natural dam when Antuco regurgitated massive amounts of black molten matter just a few centuries ago.



► **There was electricity in the air** as we humbly gained access to Ascotan Salt Flats in northern Chile. In one of the scarier scenarios we faced during any of our bike sorties, lightning and thunder *almost* conspired against us. We figured it would be better to keep riding than walk in our SPDs.



▼ **Gotta make the borax.** Well protected from the sun at 4,000 meters, a miner extracts minerals the old-fashioned way in Chile’s Ascotan Salt Flats. The precious white manna lies some fifteen centimeters under layers of various salt deposits. In 2001, a day’s work was earning this Bolivian migrant worker about US\$25.



► **The Andean altiplano.** This immense high-altitude plateau that occupies parts of southern Peru, most of Bolivia, northeastern Chile, and northwestern Argentina, acts like the core of the great Cordillera. It's a mineral world endowed with pure and bold shapes, colors, and shades. Here, near Ollagüe, a dusty border outpost between Bolivia and Chile, Janick hauls herself out of the Carcote Salt Flats.



► **A rather unexpected welcome** to the Amazon River basin! While exiting Peru's Cordillera Blanca and crossing the 4,800-meter-high Pastoruri Pass, we were met by a blizzard.



▼ **Janick speculates** on the stock exchange value of borax with a Bolivian miner working at the camp of Cebollar, right in the middle of Salar de Ascotan in northern Chile. Salt flats of the Altiplano and Atacama regions, the result of evaporated salt lakes, are rich in minerals, especially nitrates.

