



Bolivia's Wild Rides

Exploring one of the last great
unexplored cycling destinations

Story and Photos by Aaron Teasdale

Technically it
was a road ride.

Though in Bolivia — land of the most terrifying roads the world has ever known — that wasn't exactly reassuring. In reality, it was a ragged, serpentine ribbon of mud and rock that rockets down 11,000 feet in 49 miles. Starting from Le Cumbre, a frozen, desolate pass at 16,000 feet, it plummets through cloud and cloudforest and waterfalls that land mid-road, into muggy tangles of jungle that spill over the roadside like groping green tentacles. Astoundingly, it is the main "highway" between the capital of La Paz and the cloud forest town of Corioco. Declared the "World's Most Dangerous Road" by the Inter-American Bank, it features 10-foot widths, sheer 1,000-foot drops, and a multitude of small white crosses to remind drivers of the motorcycles, jeeps, and buses that routinely pitch off its precipices. Call it road biking Bolivian style.

Alistair Matthew, owner and chief guide of Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking (GAMB), stood atop Le Cumbre preparing a dozen clients for their upcoming plunge. Without cracking a smile he said, "If you do find yourself going off the edge, please try to leave the bike behind as they're quite difficult to come by down here."

We — myself and two of Alistair's off-duty guides who'd offered to show me around — broke off from the larger group and dropped in. The top several miles of the road are paved black and smooth, so we tucked tightly in streaking competition for pole position, leaning turns hard as the road snaked through rows of sky-scratching summits. Then, while stopping to shoot photos, we saw it. Ahead, where the valley floor broadened, a mountainside rose wall-like for a near-vertical mile into a savage cluster of 17,000-foot, shark-tooth



peaks — and up its face carved a trail. We all stopped and stared. It was a horrible, magnificent etching, cutting back and forth on itself up the impossible. Later we learned it was an old mule trail that reached a high cirque, where locals entrepreneurs chipped ice from a glacier. We knew it had to be ridden.

Muscling our way up with bikes on shoulders felt like a form of Inca punishment. The bad news was that there wasn't enough oxygen in the air to keep a gerbil conscious. The good news was that we eventually notched a likely first-descent down one of the most spectacular single-tracks on the face of the earth.

Bolivia is one of the world's last great unexplored cycling destinations. The highest and most isolated country in South America, Bolivia has 1,000 peaks over 16,000 feet.

I was there for five weeks, with Alistair as my host and frequent adventure partner. His house in La Paz was a makeshift adventure hostel, with a nearly constant flow of climbers, bikers, and all manner of globetrotting vagabonds. Alistair himself, a transplant from New Zealand, had been exploring Bolivia's backcountry by bike for over a year.

Though Bolivia has a wild and turbulent past, in recent years it has become one of South America's most stable democracies. Yes, La Paz has fairly consistent riots and there's the occasional country-wide transportation strike. Consider it local color. In general, travel in Bolivia is safe — and always an adventure.

Consider the La Paz airport. At 13,100 feet, it's the highest in the world. The first thing you notice after landing there is the spectacular row of white-crowned peaks in the distance. The second thing you notice is the distinct lack of oxygen in air. I spent my first week in the country wheezing around La Paz — the world's highest capital at 12,000 feet.

A good tactic for increasing your adventure quotient is to know as little Spanish as possible. With this strategy, every mealtime becomes a journey into the unknown. Take my first day roaming alone in La Paz, where some restaurants

are good and others are earth-shatteringly bad. I warily sized up my options, unable to read the daily specials written on chalkboards setup on the sidewalk. Finally I took the plunge and chose one that appeared to have tablecloths and no bloody animals hanging in its window. A man came to my table and started blabbering gibberish. I tried to say a few things, realized I was completely unable to communicate, and finally broke down and just said, "food good." Which seemed to work as he brought me a fine bowl of soup.

After five days of navigating restaurants and acclimatizing to rarefied air, my first cycling excursion was the World's Most Dangerous Road. Like almost all of Bolivia's roads it's much more fun, not to mention safer, on a bike than in a car. On a bike, it's bone-rattling endorphin-plunge nonpareil. In a car, it's borderline suicidal.

In time, I learned to relax during the perpetually near-death experience of driving Bolivia's roadways. The situation improved somewhat with Alistair's acquisition of a 1974 two-door Land Cruiser. An ambitious 29-year-old with visions of mountain bike guiding grandeur, he bought the stout little rig to serve as the official GAMB support and shuttle vehicle. With that in mind, he had local welders construct an enormous metal roof rack that ran the length of the vehicle with supporting legs welded to the front and rear bumpers. The result was a kind of pontoon-jeep. I suggested we put a couch on it for long drives. Befitting a mountain bike guide in Bolivia's bigger than big landscape, Alistair admitted, "I have a hard time thinking small."

Our plan for most of our rides was to take the jeep as high as the Andes would allow, then hike up thin-aired passes, and plunge down hanging footpaths on the other side. Long the sole travel arteries for villagers, and often built by Inca or pre-Inca "road builders," these trails web Bolivia's high mountains and cloudforest valleys. Walking these trails, and also roads, is still how most Bolivians get around. Cycling, however, is a close second. Children, adults, old men — all can be seen pedaling battered, brakeless bicycles along rough dirt roads and roadside trails.



Yes, we have bananas Vendors share a laugh in the ubiquitous La Paz street markets.

As we pontooned through the small mud-brick villages that dot the Altiplano — the high, barren plain that serves as the foundation for many of Bolivia's greatest peaks — a few campesinos and campesinas, smiled and waved at the sight of our six colorful bikes lashed to the roof. Children ran alongside us pointing, "bices, bices!"

With Alistair and me on the pontoon's virgin voyage was Alistair's girlfriend Nicola, and three men from New Zealand on an adventure vacation. Our destination was Sorata. An idyllic town of palm trees and cobblestone streets, it sits in a steep valley beneath the white-crowned eminence of 21,000-foot Mount Ancohuma.

The next day's ride was initially foiled when, in classic Bolivian fashion, Sorata's lone gas station had no gas. Nor did anyone have any idea when more gas might be coming. Which would be fine if we were hard-driving yuppie stockbroker burn-outs looking for a new way of life, but we just wanted to point our bikes down their mountains and fly. Fortunately we had Louie, our vaguely French-accented hotel owner — or more accurately, Louie's friends.

After a small crowd gathered around Alistair's energetic attempts to find someone on the street with fuel to spare, Louie

took charge. Success was had at his amigo's lush, eco-friendly campground on the banks of a small river. A quick siphon job later, we weaved up the mountainside on a steep, rough, intestine of a road. Soon, the hard-charging Kiwis came into view ahead. They had opted to pedal up the 6,000 feet to the pass. I had left my machismo in the toilet in La Paz and was more than happy to sit in the Land Cruiser and bounce my head against the roof of the cab.

Now, at a lunch break overlooking the edge of the world, sharp blue ridgelines stacked in fading layers to the horizon like waves in a tempestuous sea. A singletrack dropped from the road and contoured the vast mountainside ahead of us. Two campesinos, or Indian men, came trudging up the trail several minutes apart. I suddenly felt much less tough for being on a bike.

Louie pointed to the mountains, saying, "It's somewhere between those two mountains — The City of Lost Women."

Local legend had it that there is a town where the men all left for some unknown but surely important reason, and never came back. Louie has been trying to find it for 11 years.

"Excellent," I said. "That's my kind of mountain town. Let's go."

"Except they eat the men that come," said Louie.

“Oh. OK. Let’s not,” I replied.

Louie pulled a large bottle of soda from his pack and offered some to the group. It was a local brand that featured a drawing of a dancing Inca beneath the words “Inca Cola.”

“It’s got Coca in it,” he grinned.

“Well, alright! Coca-Cola for real.”

I grabbed the bottle of carbonated elixir and started guzzling.

The top several miles of the road are paved black and smooth, so we tucked tightly in competition for pole position.

Coca, grown in the lower regions where the Andes sweep into jungle, is the driving force behind the fragile and debt-ridden Bolivian economy. A bowling-ball-sized bag of it will set you back about a dollar at any local market. Bolivians, particularly in the countryside regard coca as a gift from Pachamama, the earth mother, and chew coca leaves for their stabilizing energies, hunger suppression, and to ward off evil spirits. I thought it made a fine tea that helped quell the ill-effects of altitude.

There, at 16,000 feet I needed all the Coca-Power I could get. I handed the wonder-cola back to Louie, who was staying with Nicola and the Land Cruiser, and we dropped into a narrow, off-camber single-track that angled down the valley. For hours the valley walls rose higher, as we picked our way down Inca staircases and spun through smooth green pastures. Llamas, sloppily masticating tufts of grass, were indifferent to our passing.

Pedaling into Sorata’s stone streets at ride’s end—brightly-clothed Indian woman were selling goods from rickety, roadside stands; a stooped, wrinkled couple carefully building a home of earthen bricks; laughing children running to and fro—we were aliens on parade. Our high-tech cycle-wear and exotic, space-age bicycles accentuated the cultural gulf between us. Though we shared the same trails, there was no hiding that we gringos were from a very different world.

The next morning, children clambering all over the jeep, hanging from the win-

dows, peering inside, climbing on the roof, we were reminded that wide-eyed kids know not of gulfs. They, like nearly all the locals, laughed in astonishment (or was it disbelief?) at our plans to bike the ancient trails that laced their mountains.

After high-fives and goodbyes with the little clamberers, Nicola piloted the pontoon up another precipitous ledging lined with stands of eucalyptus and palm.

Nearing the top of a verdant valley, the horizon above us rose into a jagged line of glaciated massifs. A hairpin turn seemed to extend out into space itself, and Nicola glanced across the bottomless valley and mountains beyond, and quietly said, “It’s like looking down on the sky.”

In the U.S. this would be preserved as a showpiece national park and be teeming with retirees in Oldsmobiles. Instead, the valley walls are dotted with small villages; green, gold, and tan agricultural plots; grandmothers and granddaughters herding llamas and sheep; and entire families tilling soil on 40-degree hillsides. And then, as on every Bolivian road — no matter how high or remote, there was a leathery old man with a bulging rice sack sitting on the toad’s edge staring off across the roof of the world.

After a frigid night camping in high Andean nowhere, we marched, bikes-on-backs, up to a 16,400-foot pass. Surrounded by icy alps with spear-tip summits, we looked down on the clouds before descending an ages-old footpath into a twisting, bottomless gorge. As sheer, water-stained rock walls vaulted up thousands of feet on either side of our rocky trail, tilled earth began appearing on the valley floor. Then a herd of sheep. Then an old man sitting above the sheep on a steep, grassy slope. I waved to him as we passed, recognizing we were likely the first mountain bikers he’d ever seen, and certainly the first cyclists to ever ride this trail.

Bolivia may be the most culturally

intact, i.e. least Westernized, country in South America. Many Bolivians, particularly in the countryside, live just as their ancestors did centuries ago. Theirs is a hardscrabble agrarian existence, marked by an earth-worshipping spirituality and an almost total absence of modern technology. Perhaps not coincidentally, its citizens are also some of the, monetarily at least, poorest people in the world. For most rural Bolivians, who live largely outside the formal economic structure, this may not be a problem, but it’s more difficult to romanticize the squalid living conditions of the burgeoning number of urban poor.

These problems aside, the simplicity of life in Bolivia — much like the simplicity of traveling by bicycle — is no small part of its overall beauty. Midway through my trip, I attempted to share this sentiment with friends in an email:

It’s easy to get wrapped up in society. The internet, the CD’s, the salaries, the politics. It’s all so interesting. But at what cost? If you don’t have the time to realize you’re happy, are you happy? I’m living so simply down here it is opening my eyes. It is liberating. I have the time and the headspace to explore, breathe, write philosophical emails. In the States I kept building more things and expenses and comforts and conveniences into my lifestyle. But they just required more income to sustain, which left me little time to enjoy life. This is what I know: the more opulent the lifestyle, the more work is needed to sustain it. Things may not be as comfortable down here, but I feel better, more alive.

Adding a complimentary zing to this reconnection with the marrow of life, was the fact that I was having the most incredible cycling adventures of my life on an almost daily basis. Over the next few weeks, with a revolving cast of companions, I was able to: ride a self-supported tour across the world’s largest salt flat; pedal to a remote stone-age village and stay with a beautiful local family; explore ancient ruinsites and caves, and find an intact human skeleton alongside several human skulls; ski the world’s highest ski area and then bike down a 2,000-foot scree slope on its backside; flip over the handlebars three times on said scree slope; pay a

Nuts & Bolts: Bolivia

When To Go:

April to September is the dry season. During summer, our winter, it rains almost daily.

How To Get There:

American Airlines has daily flights from Miami to La Paz.

What To Bring:

It can be hard to find basic items in Bolivia. If, for instance, you lose your fleece, destroy your headset, and snap your Oakleys, all in the first three days of arriving (thank you very much), you are up a certain well-known creek. If, on the other hand, you need llama fetuses, Panoasonic (sic) radios, or coca leaves, simply head to the chaotic street markets. In other words: bring all your own gear, for bike and body.

Health Considerations:

The primary concern is the diabolic lack of oxygen throughout the high country.



Land-locked Bolivia sits high in the center of South America.

Plan a minimum of 3-4 acclimatization days. It may take you several weeks to feel completely “normal.” Drink only bottled water. Be prepared to get sick anyway. You’ll likely feel better, though enfeebled, in 24 hours. Also, try really hard to avoid injury — health-care outside of La Paz

is suspect. Bolivia is one of those rare countries that is so grand, so culturally intact, so unscathed by the modern world, that you can’t help but tell everyone about it, as you secretly hope the masses never arrive lest its innocence be trampled.

Guides:

Alistair’s Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking (gravity@unete.com, www.gravitybolivia.com) is the only legitimate option for the serious mountain biker. He also leads dirt-road tours and rides across the Salar de Uyuni, the world’s largest salt flat. He can help with parts or repairs and is a great resource for all Bolivia cycle — and travel-related questions. KE Adventure Travel (www.keadventure.com) leads a 19-day tour of the country’s jeep and mining roads every summer.

More Information:

Bolivia Handbook, by Alan Murphy (Footprint Handbooks) is the best, most dependable guide-book to Bolivia. The South American Explorers (www.samexplo.org) is an invaluable resource for anyone traveling anywhere in South America.

young boy one dollar to carry my bike for me to the top of a high Andean pass before plunging 9,000-drunkenly-scenic-feet down an Inca trail; decide that Bolivia could easily add one more superlative to its sizable collection—wildest cycling destination on earth.

Along the way I witnessed Bolivia’s limitless potential for mountain bike touring. Besides the rough-and-tumble road network connecting most towns and villages, centuries of mining activity and exploration has laced its highlands with dirt roads and mining tracks that offer bike access to magnificently remote pockets of the Andes. Though the country’s mountain “highways” are often narrow and exposed, cars are so few that cyclists are generally quite safe. Make no mistake how-

ever, it’s all mountain biking. With only 5% of Bolivian roads paved, a road bike there would be about as useful as skis in the Sahara. But for those willing to accept the lack of luxury and the often challenging conditions, Bolivia is a cultural and adventure bonanza.

The day before my flight home, after more than a month of pedaling otherworldly landscapes and dropping the biggest descents on the planet, Alistair and I became savagely lost on an exploratory ride deep in the jungle. Attempting to follow an Inca trail that Alistair’s map showed carving down a cloudforest ravine, we learned two things: 1. Bolivian cartographers are not to be trusted, and 2. No matter how good a trailbuilder you are, in the end the jungle always wins.

Eventually, we made it out, though only after many hours of riding, and a few expletives, after nightfall. Sitting on the plane 12 hours later, muscles I never knew I had aching from the previous day’s beating, I couldn’t help but smile. In that moment, I understood oxygen deprivation, street riots, gas stations with no gas, evil maps, and near-death wilderness mishaps are all just a part of the adventure in Bolivia, cycling’s wildest frontier. **AC**

This is Aaron Teasdale’s first story for Adventure Cyclist.

What to Look for in a Guided Tour

It's a testament to the increasing popularity and global reach of cycling adventure travel that guides are leading trips in places as far-flung as Bolivia, but there are ever-increasing numbers of close-to-home options as well.

Whether you're looking to go to Minnesota or Mozambique, there are a few key questions to ask yourself before you book a guided tour. Remember, every company is different. Some emphasize luxury, others local color. Some tours feature difficult riding and stress self-sufficiency, while others are more leisurely and well-supported. Some feature golf on days off the bike, others hiking.

The first question to ask yourself, then, is how posh do you want to go? Many tours camp at night, but just as many stay in luxury hotels. Then consider the kind of riding you want to do. Are you looking for an intense physical challenge or a mellow cruise? How many miles a day does the tour average, and over what kind of terrain? What will the weather be like? Is it vehicle supported?

Another important factor is the size of the group. Some organized tours feature hundreds of riders and are a veritable festivals on wheels. Others are more intimate, with maybe a guide or two and a handful of clients. Both can be great – it's a question of preference. Also, make sure you know what gear is expected of you. Some outfitters provide bikes (just make sure they're not junkers) while others don't.

In the end, nothing is more valuable than a reputable company and experienced guides. Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions.

How long has the company been in business? Do their guides have advanced mechanical skills? Look for testimonials in the company's literature and consider contacting a past customer or two if you're unsure. A good company will be happy to help you with all of these questions and will leave you confident in your choice.

-A.T.



Precarious Perch *An engine house hangs on for dear life at the 16,000-base of the world's highest ski area on Mount Chacaltaya.*