

cycling the **surreal** southwest of bolivia  
PHOTOS AND STORY BY TORE GROENNE



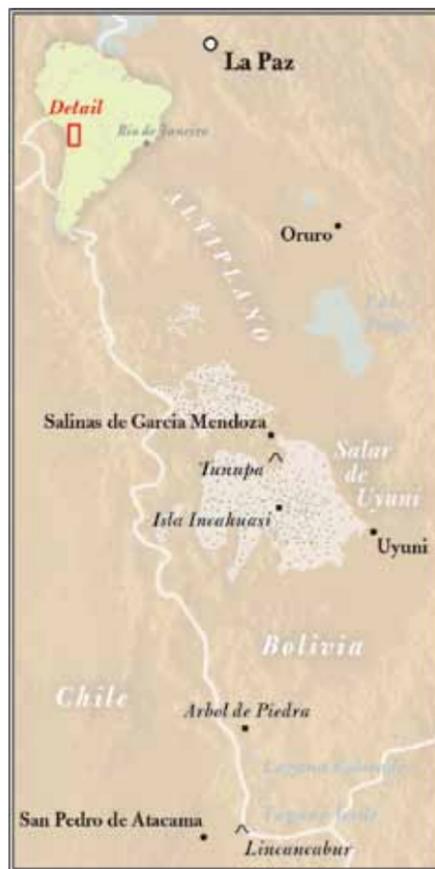
It was the third time I'd tried to make it to Bolivia's far southwest on my bike. The first time was nine years before when I set out from La Paz after being robbed to the point where I had a dollar and a half left but neither a credit card, nor a passport, nor a plane ticket home. I was 20 years old and on a four-month ride, my first ride ever, down along the Andes, and when I finally sorted things out, I soon pedaled for the seemingly safer and definitely more comfortable roads of Chile. Three years later, I passed through La Paz again, this time on a bike ride from Mexico to Argentina. I fell in love with La Paz, gorged on the delicious street food, drank with locals in shady bars, biked the breakneck "Road of Death" down to the jungle and climbed Huayna Potosi; witnessing the sunrise from the stupendous 19,974-foot summit after a frosty night climb through the clear Andean air. When I got back to high camp, my tent had been emptied. Sleeping bag, mattress, stove — all gone. Disillusioned I left Bolivia behind and once again headed for Chile and the comfort of friends and pisco sour in the desert town of Antofagasta. Ever since, I have regretted not bicycling the wilderness of Bolivia's southwest.

This time I wasn't going to let anything get in the way.

When I arrived in La Paz to meet up with my old friend Filip, who was cycling from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, the city was bustling with protest. Farmers from small towns and villages in the highlands obstructed traffic, waved banners, and shouted angry slogans. Parts of Bolivia were in a state of emergency and down in the lowlands, where people wanted more autonomy from the central government, governors were threatening to cut off oil supplies to neighboring Brazil and Argentina. Police were clashing with protesters, a gas pipeline was blown up, and after president Evo Morales sent in the military, 30 people were killed. In a country where people seem to take to the streets like we go to the movies, the protest soon spread. Filip and I had no plans of sticking around in La Paz though. Where we were going there would be no protest, no people, hardly anything.

#### Heading up and out

We were heading for the remote south-



western corner of the country; an area high in the Andes dotted with colored volcanoes, gushing geysers, painted deserts, bizarre rock formations and perfect solitude. Soon we pedaled out of the huge mountainous bowl La Paz rests in. I was breathing hard, not yet acclimatized to the altitude, as we climbed up the edge of



**Time out.** Local woman on the street in Uyuni, the last outpost of civilization in the southwest.

the Altiplano. Up there, at 13,000 feet, the sprawling suburbs, fruit stalls, honking busses, and broken glass soon gave way to an open road and endless sky, the fleeting clouds swept along by the perpetual winds of the Andean high plateau — a wind we were to become all too familiar with.

Our plan was simple: We would follow the main road to Oruro, take a series of small back roads to the mighty Salar de Uyuni, the greatest salt flat on the planet, ride across the white salt, and enter the remoteness of the south before climbing over a final pass and descending into Chile's Atacama Desert, the driest place on earth.

For the next five days, we pedaled south. Asphalt became dirt roads and we found shelter from the burning sun in abandoned mud brick houses in eerie ghost villages. All-engulfing sand storms blocked out the sky and left us gasping for air as the sand found its way into our eyes, ears, mouths, and noses. The winds howled in our faces and we found ourselves zigzagging on flat ground to avoid cycling directly up against the storm. For hours, we averaged less than five miles an hour. Then came the washboard. It was only the beginning. Why didn't I seem to care?

#### To the salt desert

After a particularly tough day with insane head winds, we got 11 hours of comatose sleep in tiny, drowsy Salinas de Garcia Mendoza. We pedaled up on the slopes of the 18,000-foot-high extinct volcano Tunupa with its rusty red, coal black, and warm orange shades and struggled on



NATHAN TAYLOR

**Vast expanse.** The track becomes impossibly sandy and the scenery becomes truly surreal. But who cares in a landscape like this?

steep roads plagued by rocks and loose sand. Up here there were no cars, no people, nobody to ask for directions. The track kept splitting again and again and we started fearing we had taken a wrong turn. Then the landscape opened up on the other side of a small pass and I almost stopped breathing as chills rolled down my spine. In front of us, under us, was an enormous, flat whiteness stretching to the horizon. It was as if the mountains gave way to a surreal nothingness, a breathtaking kind

of otherworldly lack of scenery — the salt desert. There was no time to waste. We wanted to get out there.

We soon found ourselves pedaling on the whiteness. A chill wind swept in from the south and the tires crunched over the weird lines of loose salt forming octagons on top the hard-packed surface as we pedaled towards a little island, Isla Incahuasi, in the middle the 4,600 square miles of salt desert. We had seen it from the slopes of Volcan Tunupa but now it had disap-

peared. The horizon was empty and all sense of scale had vanished. Then, a small, dark dot started flickering in the bright light out there. It was the island.

#### An island in a legend sea

30 miles from the shore we reached the island and climbed past slender cacti 40-feet tall, some of them more than 1,200 years old, to the top. The wind was frigid. Soon the salt turned golden in the setting sun and fluffy, violet clouds drifted on

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the sky above Vólcan Tunupa. Geologists regard Salar de Uyuni, the enormous salt flats, to be the bottom an enormous lake that evaporated some 12,000 years ago, the *campesinos* living on the edges of the desert have another explanation. According to local legend, the mountain goddess Yana Pollera was intimate with both Tunupa and another volcano named Q'osco. When she gave birth to a child, the two volcano rivals fought resentfully over who was the father. Fearing for her baby's safety, Yana Pollera sent the child far to the west and worrying it would die from starvation she flooded the vast plain between them with milk. Eventually the milk turned to salt and that was what we now saw all around us.

Out here are some of the largest day-to-night temperature fluctuations anywhere on the planet. While days can be scorching hot with temperatures of 90 degrees Fahrenheit and no refuge from a burning sun, the nights can be as cold as negative 40 with the wind chill. During the day, tourists in jeeps visited the island, but when the horizon darkened we were the only ones there except for a couple of locals running a small restaurant. We spent the night in one of the two buildings on the island, happy to be sheltered from the wind.

The next day, after 70 miles on the Salar de Uyuni, we arrived in the desolate military outpost of Uyuni. We rested for a few days, ate countless pizzas, and stocked up with supplies for the next 10 days. We were ready to enter the remoteness of the extreme south west.

#### Lost?

Three days after Uyuni, we left the last Bolivian town behind us. Ahead was a week through desolation where lakes are saline and full of minerals. We knew it would be difficult finding fresh water and when we realized we had missed a small mining camp, where we had planned to stock up on water, we started worrying. Where exactly were we? There were no detailed maps of the area and our hand-drawn map offered us little assistance. Another day and we would run out of water.

The road split and we decided to take a rocky track south. Stones the size of cantaloupes made it impossible to ride a steep ascent so we hauled the bicycles up and up. We were now at 15,000 feet, and would stay at that altitude or higher for the next week. That night, we ended up

## Nuts & Bolts: Bolivia



**When to go:** The best time is in the autumn months, when the skies are clear and it hardly rains. Be prepared for frigid nights.

**Maps & Routes:** There are no real maps of the area. Follow the jeep tracks. We printed out maps from Google Earth, which were helpful in a few places. Find useful information and route descriptions at [tour.tk/pdf/cycling-southwest-bolivia.pdf](http://tour.tk/pdf/cycling-southwest-bolivia.pdf).

**Road Condition:** Anywhere between half bad and flat out horrendous. Don't expect smooth riding except parts of the way to the northern outskirts of Salar de Uyuni and across the salt plains themselves.

**Bike & equipment:** Do bring your mountain bike and don't forget the wide tires. It gets very, very windy out there so don't forget a good, sturdy tent. Nights are frigid so a warm sleeping bag is essential as is a reliable stove. No need to carry a water filter since there's no water to filter. Stock up when you can!

**Accommodations:** Your tent is the best bet but there are a few places where you can sleep indoors. Don't miss out on the room that's built out from the rocks on Isla Incahuasi in the middle of Salar de Uyuni. You might have to ask for it at the little restaurant.

**Food & Water:** After you leave Uyuni, you should be more or less self-reliant. There are a few places that have simple food available but I wouldn't count on it – better to bring what you need. Water is a real concern and be sure to bring plenty. We often cycled with 10 liters each. Stock up whenever possible!

**Transportation:** As soon as you head south from Salar de Uyuni, you are pretty much on your own. You will see quite a few jeeps with tourists but don't count on them having room for you and your bike. In between towns and villages in the rest of Bolivia, however, it's very easy to get your bike on a bus.

pitching the tents in a little bowl sheltered a bit from the howling wind. We cooked instant noodles and soon I collapsed into a deep sleep. We had no idea where we were.

It wasn't the first time Filip and I had been on a trip together. We had first met eight years before in northern Pakistan when I was 21 and had left home on a one-way ticket with my bike. Later, we sneaked together into the closed areas of Tibet, trekked with Buddhist pilgrims around holy Mt. Kailash, starved (I lost 25 percent of my body weight), and were arrested by the Chinese Public Security Bureau for

illegal entry. Then we bicycled to Europe via Nepal, India, and the Middle East. Both of us had continued to tour fanatically and four years later we had met up for a ride in the Indian Himalayas. Filip had taken an involuntary six-month break from his constant touring after breaking his neck in an all-too-close encounter with a Moroccan taxi, had a large scar on his neck but cycled the gravel roads over monumental passes without a whimper. Now he was 15 months into a trip that had started in Prudhoe Bay, destined for Tierra del Fuego, still riding the bike he had bought second-hand eight

years ago and about 75,000 miles earlier in Kathmandu.

#### On track

The next day the remnants of the road completely disappeared. In front of us, jeep tracks split and split over and over again, drawing lines in the red sands of the high altitude desert. The sun burned from clear skies and it was good to be in the saddle after a night with 10-degree temperatures inside my tent. My water bottles were starting to thaw and it felt great to work hard on the bike as we plowed through the sand. After an hour and a mere four miles, the landscape dropped below us and a mirror lake surrounded by a brim of snow-white salt appeared. Pink flamingos by the hundreds paraded in the low waters, which reflected the perfect cones of barren volcanoes. Way too fast we raced down the little descent, everything rattling, and reached the shore and a large stone that read *Laguna Cañapa*. We were on the right trail. We had just taken a little detour. Everything was alright. In this area, there would be jeeps with travelers. There would be water.

#### Lack of frustration

The track was now either rocky and bone shaking or so sandy we constantly got stuck. In either case, it was a slow, strenuous affair. The headwind was violent and constant. But somehow it was different from previous trips. I thought back to the frustration on washboard roads on the Pamir Highway deep in the mountains of Tajikistan, on steep, stony back roads in Guatemala, weeks of headwinds in Iran, and on bone-rattling descents in Tibet, which had all driven me crazy in the past. Curiously, now I felt no frustration in the howling head wind, trudging through sand deep enough for me to just let go of the bike and leave it standing without falling over. As long as we were moving ahead, who cared if it was at less than two miles-an-hour? I didn't.

For the first time in days, we saw the dust cloud from a jeep. It bumped towards us, three tourists stared quietly at us from the backseat, and the driver rolled down his window:

"Agua" he smiled, and handed out a bottle of water.

We would be just fine.

The rest of the day we spent moving at a snails pace through white sand, along little lakes glittering in bright blue, dark green and red colors, all surrounded by



**Last go round.** Leaving La Paz, fresh food, and protests behind.

white lines of thick salt. Flamingos seemed to be everywhere and wild flocks of vicuna kicked up sand as they galloped across the desert.

#### A tree of stone

A week after we left Uyuni, we were

sliding on the bikes through deep, white sand down from a 15,500-foot pass. In an hour and in less than three miles, everything changed colors and we moved through another surreal high altitude desert surrounded by mountains in red,

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orange, yellow, and golden shades. The road was completely gone. Like all the other days, the intense wind was in our faces, sand between our teeth. It took all my strength to even move through this low oxygen sand box. We were averaging only a little over a mile an hour. However, we didn't have anywhere we needed to be, and I found myself smiling and fully enjoying the moment. Who cared if we travelled slowly? The scenery was out of this world and life was extremely simple right then and there. We had food in the panniers and all the time we needed. I just had to move forward. And I did.

An hour before the stars would be igniting the sky, we saw strange rocks appear ahead. They looked like they had fallen directly from the sky; like they had shipwrecked in this godforsaken, beautiful wasteland of red sand. We pushed and pedaled until our shadows were long and thin and we finally reached the rocks. The most famous one, Arbol de Piedra, looked just like a petrified tree, narrow from erosion at the bottom and wide at the top.

"This is the most amazing spot I've ever pitched my tent," Filip, who had more than 60,000 miles of touring in the legs, declared when we found a shelter among the rocks.

I was too exhausted to fall asleep right away so under a tight blanket of twinkling stars I wandered around until the cold drove me into my sleeping bag. When I woke up the next morning, my water bottles were frozen solid. The thermometer showed 10 degrees.

**The end**

One day took on another in the vast emptiness. We pedaled along the rusty red Laguna Colorado, where white llamas grazed along the shore and pink flamingos trudged in the shallow water that owes its battery-acid color to algae. We crossed a 16,000-foot pass and washed nine days of dust and sweat off in the hot spring of Termas de Polques. We huffed and puffed in marble white desert and saw the perfect volcano Licancabur rise on the horizon. Behind that, the mountains would drop down to the Atacama Desert and the oasis town of San Pedro de Atacama with all its promises of endless meals, warm nights and soft beds. As some last liquid monument to the magnificence of these wild lands, we reached the bright, emerald green water of Laguna Verde. The lake is so full of minerals — led, sulfur, arsenic, chalk — that its waters don't freeze until it reaches minus 67

degrees Fahrenheit. The wind was as forceful as ever and foamy, white waves formed on the lake.

"This has been the highlight of the whole trip since Alaska," Filip told me the next day when we climbed to the top of the last pass.

I believed him. It had been more than worth the nine-year wait for this.

At the border itself, the sandy track became a paved road and more than a vertical mile under us was the Atacama Desert, the oasis, and all its glorious meals. I had lost almost 25 pounds in less than two weeks but still had the urge to turn around and head back into the wilderness. I looked over my shoulder one last time, already feeling a twitch of nostalgia, let go of the brakes, and raced down towards civilization. **AC**

*Tore Groenne is a Danish writer and journalist with a weakness for bicycling the back roads of the world's highest mountain ranges. He has pedaled from China to Denmark, through Central and South America (a few times), around North America, the Middle East, and Central Asia but keeps returning to the Himalayas. For more information about Groenne, visit [toregroenne.com](http://toregroenne.com).*

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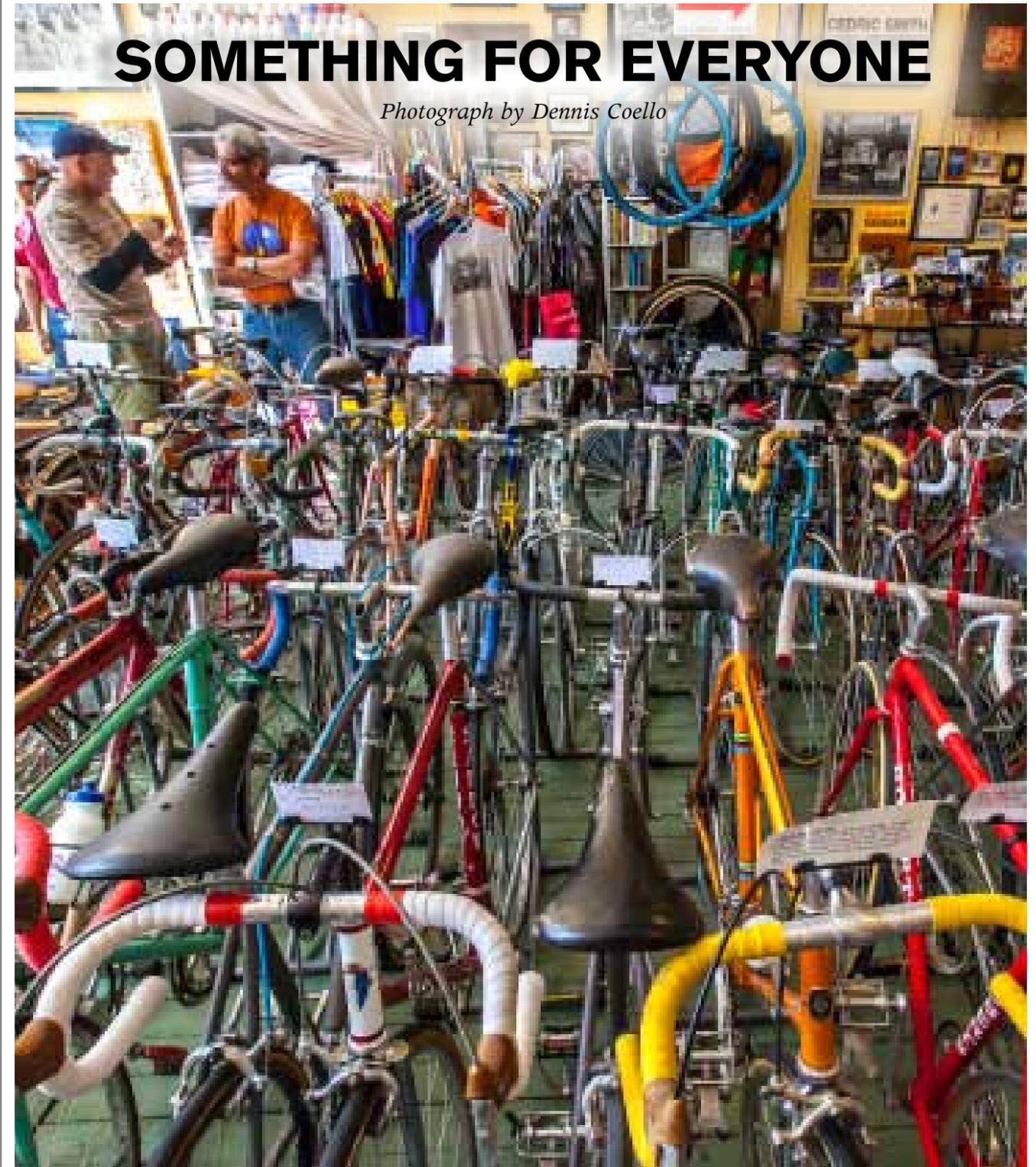
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**The rank and file of bicycle history.** If you visit the Bisbee Bicycle Brothel, budget more than a few minutes to take it all in. This bike shop may be small, but it's packed wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling with every kind of bicycle memorabilia. You can get a peek at this cycling culture treasure house next year if you sign up for Adventure Cycling's van-supported Southern Arizona Sunsets tour. The spring ride (March 9-15) includes Bisbee on the itinerary.