

VIVA BOLIVIA!

True Adventure Riding

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Bolivia is one of those places you've heard of, but probably don't know a whole lot about. You may have seen an *Ice Road Truckers* or *Top Gear* segment on the Death Road or read something about Che Guevara and his book *The Motorcycle Diaries*. But there's a lot more.

Exploring this distant and exotic land on two wheels was on my bucket list for many years. With only about 7500 miles of paved roads and more than 43,000 miles of dirt roads, Bolivia is a perfect place for dual-sport and adventure motorcycles. When a friend told me about a small tour company—Bolivia Motorcycle adventures; www.bolivi-motorcycleadventures.com—that supplies motorcycles and provides an English-speaking guide, I jumped at the chance to go.

We started and ended our three-week tour of Bolivia in Samaipata, which is nestled in a valley at about 5000 feet elevation, 75 miles from the Santa Cruz airport. Before leaving town, we climbed up to El Fuerte, which is a fascinating mountaintop pre-Columbian religious site built by the Chané people, a pre-Inca culture. Today it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The next morning, with a half-dozen intrepid riders from Germany and Austria, we set out for 110 miles westward on Ruta 7. All of our

bikes were 650cc singles, a mix of Honda, Suzuki, and Kawasaki dual-sports. I chose a KLR650 because I have one at home that I once rode from California to Panama without a glitch. Our goal is La Higuera, the remote mountain village where revolutionary guerilla fighter Ernesto "Che" Guevara was captured and killed. Following dirt roads through steep craggy canyons, we take lunch at Villegrande. Next we visit the nearby hospital where Che's body was taken and subsequently displayed.

Finally reaching La Higuera in late afternoon, we stay in the former telegraph office, which has been converted into a rustic B & B. Che was held in the tiny school house here on October 8, 1967. He had a leg wound, but was otherwise in fair condition. At 11:50 a.m. the next day, the Second Ranger Battalion received orders from Bolivian Army Headquarters in La Paz to kill Guevara, and the orders were carried out at 1:15 p.m. We visit the small Che museum and I got to meet the old woman who served Che his last



The North Yungas Road—better known as Death Road—is the most dangerous road in the world. It's estimated as many as 200 travelers lose their lives annually along this 43-mile trail.



In the little mountain village of Pucara, where time seems to stand still, we stop for a refreshing drink and regroup for the ride to Higuera. Light, single-cylinder dual-sports are the preferred ride.

meal; she still lives in a mud-brick house there.

Come morning, we follow a rugged, narrow track over the mountain, which offers a commanding view of the surrounding valley where Che fought his last battle. We descend thousands of feet and enjoy lunch at the wide bridge over the Rio Grande. Slowly, we ascend towards the distant Nuevo Mundo volcano, which sits between Potosí and Uyuni, rising to 17,841 feet. We stop for the night at the town of Villa Serrano.

After breakfast we depart for Sucre, the constitutional capital of Bolivia. An old colonial city founded in 1538, the war for independence began in Sucre on May 25, 1809, and it seems they are still fighting! We hear rumors of political protests and road blockages, and drivers coming from Sucre describe a detour that will get us through, but it requires that we follow a riverbed and then

negotiate tiny farm roads over the mountain. We wind our way up along the steep, narrow, serpentine trail, which is suddenly jammed with trucks and buses forced off the main highway. Choking dust and near-zero visibility slow our progress, and we arrive just before sundown. Bikes and riders are filthy with road dirt and our bikes' air filters are completely packed with silt.

From Sucre we head about 95 miles down Ruta 5 for Potosí, located on a cold, barren plateau in the shadow of fabled Potosí Mountain (Cerro Rico), which is riddled with thousands of mine tunnels. Founded in 1545 as a silver mining town, Potosí produced great wealth, soon becoming the largest city in the New World. It's also one of the highest cities in the world at 13,420 feet. Potosí was the major source of silver for Spain and was the location of the Spanish colonial mint. According to official records, 45,000 tons of pure

silver were mined from Cerro Rico from 1556 to 1783. We visited the mint, which was founded in 1574 and has UNESCO World Heritage status, toured the mines, and even got to set off dynamite. Anybody want to be a miner?

From Potosí, we ride 130 miles to the town of Uyuni, where we visit the railroad graveyard on the edge of town. Century-old locomotives and rolling stock languish in the stark desert sun, slowly being picked clean by salvors. Nearby, at an elevation of 11,995 feet, is Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat. At 4086 square miles, it is 25 times the size of Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats.

In the morning we ride out onto the vast salt plain, which is so large that you can see the curvature of the earth. A monument to dozens of travelers who got lost and died out on the vast salt pan greets us. We follow the GPS to Cactus Island, which is so far out into the former

lake that it's over the horizon and not even visible until you're halfway there. The vastness is difficult to comprehend and harder still to describe, but the experience is incredible, one of the coolest things I've ever done on a motorcycle.

From Uyuni we cover 200 miles on Ruta 30 through Colchani, Huari, and Challpata to Oruru. It's a long day on the Altiplano (high plains) with incredible scenery. Our next day is another long one in the saddle, riding 228 miles from Oruru to Copacabana. We follow Ruta 1 to Patacamaya and La Paz, then Ruta 2 to Sipe Sipe with a ferry crossing, and finally Copacabana. Here we visit Lago Titicaca, the world's highest commercially navigable lake (12,507 feet). Breathtaking views abound; endless blue waters surrounded by snow-capped peaks, it's one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen.

From Copacabana, we return 90 miles on Ruta 2 to La Paz. In 1898,



Clockwise from upper left: A train graveyard in Uyuni makes a great backdrop for photos. Resting in Higuera after a day of dirt riding. Flat tires are common, but quickly fixed. Miners chew coca leaves for a rush.



Our group pauses to take photos at Salar de Uyuni. The vast expanse of the 4,086 square-mile salt lake gives meaning to the word infinite.



Clockwise from upper left: Note the remains of a dead llama beneath the llama warning sign. This is the building where Che Guevara's body was displayed. Landslide on the Death Road. Doña Irma is the one who fed Che his last meal. An air filter clogged with Bolivian dust. Harsh conditions destroy brake pads, too. Drivers arguing over right of way on Death Road. Truck accidents are a distressingly common sight.

La Paz was made the de facto seat of the national government, with Sucre remaining the judiciary capital. La Paz claims to be the highest capital city in the world, and its airport is the highest international airport at 13,325 feet.

The next morning we ride up to Chacaltaya mountain lodge, which used to be Bolivia's only ski area before the glacier melted in 2009. From here we hike to the summit at 17,785 feet, with 100-mile visibility. I never knew air could be so thin!

The following day we head for another bucket-list goal, the

infamous Death Road (El Camino de la Muerte). Carved into sheer cliffs, with 1000-foot drops and no guardrails, the road descends the steep grades to the villages of La Cumbre and Coroico. About 20,000 people have lost their lives on this narrow dirt road. Our surefooted dual-sports handle the road well, and I'm almost disappointed that it's not as difficult and scary as I had anticipated! At the end we ride the "Zip the Flying Fox" zipline, which takes us almost a mile across rivers and canyons, before spending the night in the village of Coroico.

From Coroico we double back to La Paz for a night. Next we follow Ruta 1 to Caracollo, then Ruta 4 to Cochabamba. Here we have a mellow visit to the world's tallest Christ statue (higher than Rio's), and finish the day at the huge market in town.

For our last day we climb and descend steep passes, often in dense fog, along Ruta 7 to Epizana, Comarapa, and Mataral, ending back in Samaipata. An amazing journey: 1750 miles, flat tires, blockades, clogged air filters, and some of the most stunningly beautiful scenery in the world. And suddenly it's over.

BYGONE BOLIVIA

Best known for mining and agriculture, the region now known as Bolivia has been settled for thousands of years; the ancient city of Tiwanaku was inhabited as early as 1500 B.C. During the early 16th century A.D. the Spanish conquistadors violently wrested control of the Andean portion of modern Bolivia from the Inca Empire.

Bolivia has struggled through long periods of political unrest and economic woe. During the Spanish colonial period this territory was known as Upper Peru. After a 16-year war, the Republic of Bolivia was formed in 1825. Since achieving independence, Bolivia lost more than half its territory to neighboring countries through wars and internal strife. With a population of about 10 million, Bolivia today is equal in size to California and Texas combined. The main language is Spanish, but one-fifth speak Quechua (the Inca language), and 37 indigenous languages are officially recognized.

Roadblocks and protests forced us onto tiny dirt roads clogged with huge trucks. Clouds of swirling dust made visibility near zero, and every air filter had to be cleaned afterward.

