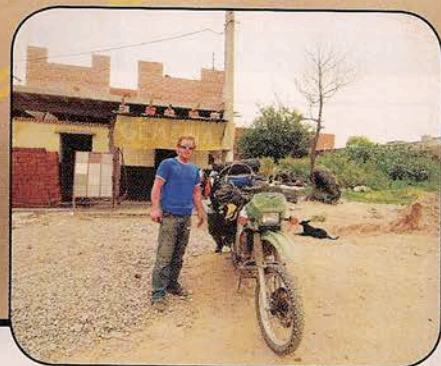
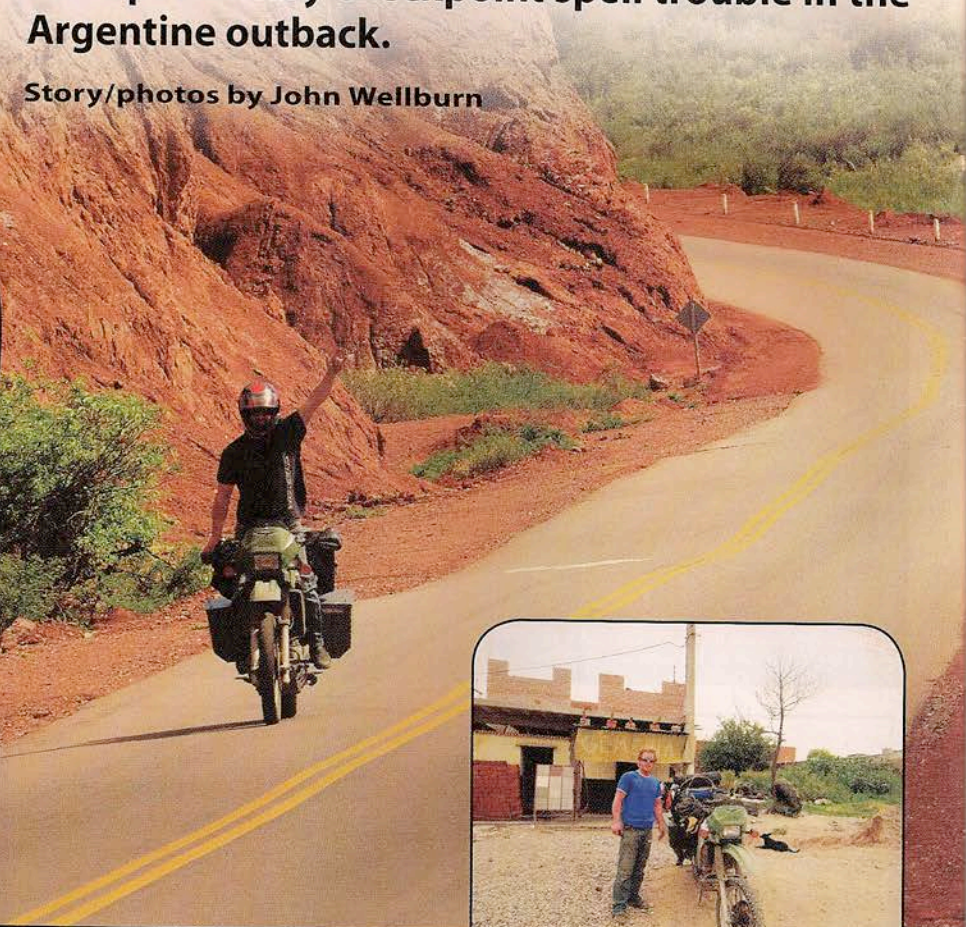


Litres of Gas

A blown tire, unsatisfactory paperwork, and a corrupt military checkpoint spell trouble in the Argentine outback.

Story/photos by John Wellburn

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I was in Argentina, heading north to do some photography for a mountain bike film and, having ridden my KLR 650 across some 1,500 kilometres of isolated terrain into the vicinity of Tucuman, I was now three quarters of the way toward my destination.

Arriving here as I did put me nicely on schedule for hassle and trouble.

Tucuman is the largest city in north Argentina, but I swear that it seems more like you've just dropped into the depths of Africa. Tucuman is dirty, poverty-stricken and full of garbage. There's really nothing like it anywhere in Argentina. Why, I don't know. When you're riding through, all you can think of is how much you would not want to break down here, of all places. It's one of those situations where you feel really out of place

and you realize that your bike is only a machine and you are just glad that it is running sooo good. Here, you don't take anything for granted.

I was almost through probably the nastiest part when BANG! A bump. My rear tire had blown. My first instinct was to simply ride as far as I possibly could, anything to get out of there. But it was too late, the tire was done. I came to a sloppy stop on the side of the road, surrounded by garbage and people who didn't look as though they were very happy.

Luckily I immediately met a group of kids who put me in the direction of a gomeria (tire fixer). His shop didn't seem too far, but it appeared I might have to go into a rough 'hood, even by Tucuman standards, to get there.

A few kilometres of pushing the bike

past people shouting things from every direction brought me to the gomeria, where we got the tire apart to discover I'd hit a nail. It was an easy fix and I got the hell out of there right away. But I have to say the whole area shook me, and all I wanted was to get out.

Finally, I escaped the chaos and was again in the natural beauty of the open road. Then, on the horizon, I saw a military checkpoint and realized with a shock that I had, unbelievably, started this journey without proper documentation for my motorcycle.

An armed man emerged from the checkpoint and walked into the middle of the road with his hand up. There was no sneaking through this one. He pulled me aside and demanded "Papers of the moto?"



I get out what I have and cringe as the guard makes his inspection. He doesn't seem the least bit concerned. "Licence," he snaps.

This too I give him. Still no concern. "Insurance of the moto?" he asks. Now I'm hooped. I tell him I have none, but don't need any.

He disagrees and tells me that I have to come inside with him to pay a fine. I'm now worried that he might be able to take my moto away.

From a shelf he produces a horrible looking document that says I need insurance, or I will have to pay a fine based on the value of 300 litres of gasoline. To me, that makes no sense. I ask him, why 300 litres?

He says, "That's just the way it is."

There's more: I have to go back to Tucuman to pay it before I can pass, he

says, and I have to leave the moto there with him.

I was in shock and went silent.

He continued to prod me, asking what I wanted to do. I didn't know.

Then I saw him flinch and instantly knew he was corrupt. I said I couldn't go back to Tucuman.

I could pay him the fine, he offered.

"How much is the fine?" I asked.

"Three hundred American dollars," he tells me. "The price of 300 litres of gas in Argentina."

Sitting in this hot little office in the middle of nowhere with just him and another cop outside, and very little traffic passing by, I knew then I had to bribe him. But first I would have to convince him that I was poor.

I told him I had no money. He didn't

believe that and started getting aggressive. I said I was a starving painter and made money only from paintings that I sold on the road.

I had to throw a price at him. I said all I could give him was 20 pesos, the equivalent of five dollars. He bought it, or was finally convinced that I wasn't like the other foreigners who pass through here and that I wasn't about to cave under the pressure.

I gave him the 20 pesos and I can't tell you how excited I was when I got my helmet on and twisted that throttle. It was the most intense adrenaline rush I've had in a long time. I could very well have given in to that corrupt cop for the 300 bucks, but I'd played his game and had come away from it with the freedom to ride away into the great wide open. **B**