

Flying South

Story and Photography by John Wellburn

Canada to Argentina and then some.

Dear *Rider* magazine,

On November 22, 2003, I left my hometown of Williams Lake, British Columbia, with no more than a desire to get away from the winter cold and see and do as much as possible along the way. For six months I rode through the United States, down the Baja Peninsula, over to mainland Mexico and all the way through Central America. I found a sailboat to take me and my bike around the Darien Gap to Colombia in the middle of hurricane season and wandered in and out of the mighty Andes through South America to Mendoza, Argentina.



Big picture: In some sections of the dry, hot sandy Panamerican highway along the coast of Peru, the wind blows the sand down over the pavement leaving a sand dune across the middle of the road. Right: A hard day of pounding through sand and rivers would finally lead me to this incredible expanse of white salt in Salar De Uyuni, Bolivia.

1. Bikes loaded onboard the sailboat that took us around the Darien Gap from Portobelo, Panama, to Cartagena, Colombia.
2. The crossing from Oruro to the Salar De Uyuni, Bolivia, was the toughest road on the trip, with 186 miles of sand and river crossings on roads that are hardly visible. People say this well-known crossing of the Rio Mulatos can swell to four times its size after just one hour of rain.
3. Time to unload the bikes.

Before I left, I had little experience with motorcycles and none on the street. My bike is a 1976 BMW R-series street bike, old enough to be easily worked on, simple yet strong, and reliable enough for a trip of this proportion. I converted it to an enduro of sorts by combining several old Beemers together, cutting and re-welding the gas tank for more fuel capacity, and adding bash guards and aluminum panniers. I spent two months prior to my departure putting my bike together, and I knew it well after that.

But like any other machine, a motorbike is just that, a machine. Nothing is ever guaranteed. When you're headed into that 500-kilometer (300-mile) stretch of barren desert where temperatures top 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees F), where people and water are nowhere to be seen, or up into mountains over 15,000 feet in elevation where oxygen levels drop to 50 percent below normal and all you see are llamas and cracked asphalt, you really hope that all those hundreds of moving parts vibrating between your legs are able to adjust to the new and sometimes hostile environment as easily as you do.

Even my breakdowns brought me together with some of the most

wonderful people. One time I got some welding done on my bike because the rear gas tank had fallen off on the highway. I found a man in Portobelo to reattach the tank. Wearing nothing but a pair of pants and sandals he lay under my bike in the dirt using coat hangers as a welding rod. He swore up and down the repair would be strong enough. I had my doubts but was willing to give it a shot. The next day, as I was riding into Colon, I heard this ping. I looked back and my gas tank was gone, somewhere back there on a crazy four-lane highway. I turned around and was suddenly hailed by a guy hanging from the door of one of the local buses. He had my gas tank, and it was OK.

Over a period of around a month and a half, my relationship with my bike and the whole concept of motorcycle travel evolved from one of near hate to unconditional love. I got used to packing and unpacking every day, tinkering with carburetors, constantly adjusting the ignition and spending days chasing papers, stamps, money changers and photocopy machines at border crossings. I soon came to realize the true freedom and advantage of motorcycle travel.

I also experienced the frustration of traveling across international borders. Every time you cross a border you have to jump through a dozen different hoops. Your bike has to be temporarily imported into every new country you enter and all your papers from the

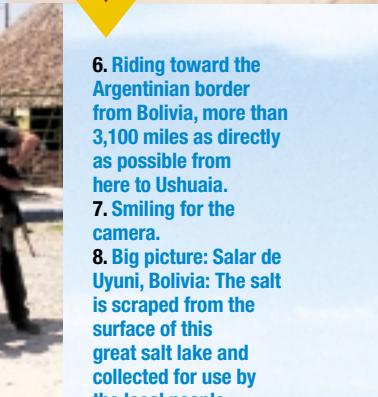
previous country need to be surrendered. I would always give myself a full day to cross a border. The requirements seemed to differ for every rider I talked to but most of their stories went more or less the same way. First, fend off the pack of kids and money changers offering to make things flow a little smoother—for a price. Next, get at least three photocopies of every document you have, have them stamped by an official and then copied again. Pay a few fees, and chase some money changers around, all the while intermittently running to check on your bike.

People everywhere are drawn to motorcycles, and to travelers. Almost every time I stopped they gathered around, curious about my bike and my journey. Some days a quick gas stop turned into a two-day stay in the household of a family that took me in like a long-lost relative. In Colombia I stopped at a little gas station to ask about a hotel and met a young man on his pedal bike. Fascinated by my motorcycle, he offered to guide me back down the little street of this pueblo to a hotel. There I was greeted by a wonderful family, shown to a clean little room, fed, and then taken on the grand tour of the little pueblo and introduced to everyone.

Of all the countries I've ridden through so far, Colombia is by far my favorite. I was told to go from big city to big city to sleep when traveling through Colombia and to only ride until about three in the

afternoon. However, after spending a little time in the country and witnessing how safe it felt, I no longer listened to that advice. I now have a stack of addresses and phone numbers of great friends I met in Colombia, a wrist full of bracelets and a mind full of wonderful memories.

Ecuador was very different from Colombia, and the people of Ecuador have beautiful rosy mountain cheeks and often dress in traditional clothing. There I met a large group of skateboarders who showed me a cheap, clean hotel. I'm a skateboarder myself, and we became instant friends. They invited me



6. Riding toward the Argentinian border from Bolivia, more than 3,100 miles as directly as possible from here to Ushuaia.
7. Smiling for the camera.
8. Big picture: Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia: The salt is scraped from the surface of this great salt lake and collected for use by the local people.



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4. The sign for Volcan Cotopaxi in Ecuador paints such a pretty picture of the mountain that we had to ride our bikes up to over 14,764 feet on the mountain.
5. Road from Oruro to Uyuni, Bolivia. The only things there for company were the llamas!



to one of their houses for dinner, and later we crashed a birthday party—a huge celebration in town where everyone was dancing up a storm. I wish I could have skated with them, but I couldn't because I broke my foot when I jumped a bridge in Cartagena chasing a kid who tried to steal my camera.

A traveler's mobility seems limitless on a motorbike. Like backpackers, motorcyclists have their whole life with them all the time. But on a bike you don't rely on anybody else to get you where you want to go. It's just you and your machine and whoever you meet along the way. A biker wears a badge of strength, machismo, freedom, independence and adventure that draws everyone, from little boys and girls who see you as the hero of their favorite TV programs, to grandmothers and grandfathers who recall their

own youthful days on the open road. I became aware early in my journey of how intrigued people were with what I was doing. People constantly waved at me, smiled at me, and pointed at me, even as close to home as the western United States. Almost every time I stopped I was surrounded by people curious about my bike and my journey.

And their kindness toward me, a stranger on the road, was astonishing. One time in Panama, at a little café with a bunch of motorbikes out front, I met an American who invited me to camp at one of his "areas" nearby. I followed him to a gated community where the guard raised the barrier for me and I rode through, past posh houses with manicured lawns and coffee plants and orange trees. Even though I had only asked about a place to camp, my American friend gave me the key to a new house that wasn't finished yet. I learned later that he owned the entire village and several others like it all over the world.

It wasn't all smooth sailing, though, in one case frighteningly so. I skirted the impassable Darien Gap by booking passage for myself and my bike on a sailboat, and the adventure began well before we sailed. Each time the often-drunk captain outlined our departure time, the number of passengers we'd be taking, the condition of his vessel, and even his own life story, the details changed. Along with several other passengers, I ended up piloting the boat, cooking the meals, fixing the engine, and dropping the anchor—once literally, right off the side of the boat, chain and all.

I herded my old bike across some of the most inhospitable country on the North and South American continents, and through some of the most beautiful places imaginable. As I write this, the trusty Beemer's ignition is getting by on a car battery strapped to the back seat. I'll have to fix that soon, because in a short while I'll be crossing the Amazon, from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Northern Venezuela—with my father on the back seat! Then it's on to Spain and Africa.

The journey continues. Wish me good health and good fortune—I'll write again soon.

Yours truly,
John Wellburn 



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12. When arriving at the mountain of Cotopaxi in Ecuador, I dumped my gear and rode up to the end of the road, where I was pounded by horizontal wind and rain.
13. The great grandmother who invited me into her family's home for New Year's celebrations in Mexico.

9. Ride hard, live free on the Salar De Uyuni, Bolivia.
10. This pass in Peru is the highest altitude my bike achieved on the trip, over 15,748 feet.
11. My friend Dave was fixing the clutch cable after it snapped in the middle of the road in Colombia, and in five minutes a family who wanted to help surrounded us.

