



NOMADS LAND

There are no defensive drivers in Chile. Only offensive, and your fate is in their hands.

The traffic is relentless, matched only by the customs officials who forced me to pay multiple tariffs to enter the country. As I make my way through the snarled streets of Santiago, the buildings lining the roadway—and the roadway itself—are decades away from the title “modern,” and I can only describe the mood pervading the whole scene as raw. It’s the sense that if you mess up, it’s going to hurt a lot more than back home.

Home is Vancouver, BC, and upon arriving in the Santiago International Airport a few hours ago I was met by photographer, fellow British Columbian and adventurer extraordinaire John Wellburn, who had just come from ____ and would be my travel partner for the trip.

We need to know the background on the trip—what’s the overall/initial plan? Where are you going? Where did the idea come from? Tell us the who/what/where/when/why here, right off the bat.

As we leave the chaos of the city and head into the mountains, the feeling of rawness doesn’t disappear—in fact, as we wind our way higher into the Andes and farther from the structure and security of civilization (even as rough as Santiago’s is), it only grows. Soon we pass into Argentina, and still it remains. We are on our own here.

We are sitting at around 15,000 feet and all around rise huge, rugged mountains. The Andes stretch off in either direction, seemingly endless in their north/south march, insurmountable and un-rideable. But one zone, the zone we’ve come all this way for, has been smoothed over eons by _____. Amid the procession of rocky spires, it’s a mountain biking oasis.



A small town site, _____, rests at the base of the mountains, and we settle into an old hostel there. The owner is not shy, and almost immediately after we arrive he cranks the volume on his stereo, trying to impress us with his music library...and, despite the remoteness of this place, he does a pretty damn good job.

At first light we head out, working our way up some of the rocky fins that grow from the most predominant ridge line. As I climb, my feet sink into the sandy ground, a half a foot with each step as the elevation and lack of oxygen immediately begin to take their toll. It's a brutal climb, and my bike feels far heavier than usual as we climb towards the ridge's summit. Eventually, after catching our breath and surveying the immense terrain around us, we drop in, uncertain what to expect. I picture something Utah-esque, but this is completely different—solid, fast and after a few slashes and compressions we get the feel of this entirely new ground. It's as far from the tacky loam of home as possible—and it's incredible.

As the sun sets on our first day, the fading glow casts shadows on features otherwise invisible, and across the valley I see a vastly different landscape from that we just rode, huge boulders scattered by what looks like a volcano erupting underneath a glacier. House-sized rocks litter the area, strewn about like a waiter grinding pepper over a meal.

The next morning we get up for a frigid sunrise, what seems like 30 pounds of old wool blankets fighting off the cold. The plan is to return to the boulder field, and as we ride through the monstrous stone sentinels, we soon find ourselves following what is obviously an established trail, worn in by decades of footsteps rather than shovels or machinery. The single track winds out of sight in both directions: this is more than a game trail, but a pathway following the once-famous Trans-Andean Railway, which once connected the Argentinian city of Mendoza with the Chilean city of Los Andes but was destroyed by avalanches in 1984. Head west, and you will reach Chile; east, and it will pass through numerous small villages before revealing an ominous view of 22,841-foot Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America. It's a setting that is overpoweringly intimidating--but as insignificant as we may feel in their presence, the wonder of the single track following the railway is still in full effect. It's some of the best I've ridden in a long time.

The weather and terrain has been perfect, but the journey must continue, and we pack up with a plan to revisit Las Quevas. First, however, we must procure our transportation for the rest of the trip—dirt bikes, specifically _____, outfitted with racks to carry both our bikes and ourselves deep into areas where no one would otherwise attempt. We spend the _____-hour-long drive to San Rafeal, our base for readying the bikes, talking about plans for the racks and places to camp, all the while dreaming about the potential lines hidden in the depths of these mountains.





Our reverie is interrupted by a grinding noise from the van, and John is suddenly fighting to put in gear. He fails, and minutes later we are standing on the side of the road. Stranded.

Being a complete gringo, I ask a very gringo-esque question: “Can we just get a tow truck to a shop, then rent a car?” John humors me—not likely, but we can try, he says. His face however, betrays both the stupidity of my question and the truth of the situation. We are going to have to fix this ourselves.

Hours later, hands stained with oil and jittery from gas-station coffee, we are back on the road—with third gear as the lone weapon in our arsenal...a good one to have, if you can only choose one.

We make it to San Rafael at midnight and set up camp at our newest base: Chateau Can't say the name for security reasons. After we win the trust of the guard dogs in the compound, we set up tents and drift off into well-deserved sleep.

Breakfast the next morning consists of coffee, biscuits and conspiracy theory discussions, all served with friendly, 'Murican down-South hospitality. Our hosts are pioneers of a kind—or ex-pats, depending on how you look at it. The family, led by “George” (as we call the father), has uprooted their lives of “US vanity and overwhelming federal laws,” he says, “for a simpler, fend-for-yourself lifestyle,” and built their own personal desert oasis. _____

The motor bikes we have come seeking wait in his impressive garage. He leads us inside, and John—an experienced welder—points out a variety of welding machines, chop saws, drill presses and piles of scrap metal. While we could create anything here, we only have one thing in mind: the strange rack setups that will carry our precious cargo of bikes and camera gear thousands of miles through the rugged Andes, conquering battered Argentine highways and the rough off-roads beyond.

____ days of frantic ingenuity and iron-work sorcery later, we pull back onto the crowded city streets, filled with potholes, clueless drivers, suicidal strays and unfamiliar traffic laws. Hours and miles pass, and we leave the traffic and road signs—as well as water, fuel, food and communications—behind as the road turns from pavement to dirt. Our camp site is 40 minutes down the road, another mountain sanctuary and the first stage into our expedition.

An early rise and we're soon on the road—today's mission is an ambitious one, about five hours of off-roading through the alpine deserts of the Andes. The road climbs and winds through giant plateaus, beautiful in ways completely foreign to British Columbia.

Wildlife here has been dealt a bad card. Not much survives at all, and what does must constantly search for food and water—and if they do, there's a good chance something else has beat them to it... or using it as bait. In the Andean desert, life is left with few options beyond simple luck of the draw.





Humanity is equally as sparse. The only person we meet comes on us suddenly as we round a corner, an ___ man—holding a rifle. There is nothing else for us to do but wave, and the armed man doesn't even flinch in response. Still, surrounded by miles of emptiness, it is better than nothing...if more than a little creepy. We gas the bikes as we pass, eager to be on our way.

Many hours of epic scenery and saddle-sore later, we arrive at the ruins that will be serving us as our campsite for the evening. Stone walls line up in rows, resembling an abandoned military zone but also creating sheltered pockets to set up tents and stoves—a good thing, because an incredible wind starts battering us, and even with this cover articles of clothing, food and supplies get torn away. Behind us, a silt-filled stream drains from a small glacier—beautiful, but sand and drinking water are not an ideal mix.

John and I spend the night lying awake in our tents, fighting the wind. Even with the 30-pound rocks stacked in our shelters' corners, the nylon bloats like a skydiver's parachute, and there is little need for alarm clocks when the sun finally peaks over the jagged horizon—neither of us have slept.

The view upon exiting the tents, however, banishes any sleep from our bleary eyes. Early morning light bathes the small glacier, revealing a thread of single track dropping off into the distance—this is what we've been searching for, and we hop on our bicycles and pedal off.

The ride is easily worth the previous night's wind, as the trail winds through natural hot springs and high-alpine _____. We finish at one of the natural thermo pools, gabbering about how incredible the descent was—all time, really. It's enough that the armed soldier waiting at our tents when we return doesn't faze us...well, not really. Territorial disputes and suspicion of us being ___ can't diminish this Andean paradise.



Hours away from the nearest amenities, the question of whether we have enough gas is a very legitimate—and serious—one. Still, the day before we had spotted a line a mile or so away, a beautiful looking descent of questionable sketchiness levels. We decide we have enough gas. A line like this is worth the risk.

Two hours of motoring and hiking later, I am standing at the drop-in zone, two eagles diving at me (what am I, a goat?) as I stare down what is an even more hairball line than it appeared from afar. But I'm here, and this is the way down. I prep myself and push off, away from the attacking eagles and towards the valley floor far below.

In the world of mountain bike photography, sometimes getting the shot means doing things that in other situations would seem stupid...and foolishly dangerous. This is one of those times. It rides well, and is an amazing feeling to tick off another first descent, but this is a survival line. I am content with one lap.

It's a long walk back to the motor bikes from the bottom, and the thought of another four hours of off-roading—and the possibility of running out of fuel and having to carry our motor bikes through the desert—thoroughly occupies my mind. But this is why we are here, to throw the dice and push the boundaries of what's possible. It helps that we have no other choice.

Fuel burns fast on our journey back to the paved road and onto Malargüe, a relatively large city of 25,000, and we sputter in on fumes. We gambled and won, and despite sleep-deprivation and frayed nerves we are all smiles—exhausted, hungry smiles. Even

the disturbing sound of rabid dogs is like a lullaby.

In a pinch, with a little fiddling empty soda cans and alcohol can make for great stoves, and the next morning we brew a cup of coffee and return to the road. The destination is Las Quevas and the first zone of the trip, to the lines we had so longingly left days before.

International mountain bike trips, especially those into new, wild places, are usually lessons in Murphy's Law, but up to this point our trip has been fairly easy. Murphy, however, has not forgotten us. The high Andean desert receives about two inches of precipitation a year; hard to believe, as we are soon riding through a mid-summer storm. It is absolutely dumping.

We've come too far to stop or turn back, so we motor through the weather to Las Quevas and refuge. John and I settle back into our room at the hostel, this time welcoming the worn-out mattresses and dozens of pounds of scratchy wool blankets. We can barely even compliment the hostel owner on his newest playlist before passing out in exhaustion.

With clear goals set during our previous visit, there is little hesitation as we pedal from the village towards the top of the first line. The familiar frigid temperatures once again mix with the thin, high-altitude air to tax our already tired bodies, but as we reach the summit and look down any doubts we had vanish. The line is beautiful, filled with playful natural features and room to slash and turn. We were right to return.



The weather teases us over the next few days with the hope of clear, warm skies, but with frustrating regularity the clouds roll in during the early afternoon and discourage our attempts at evening laps. Still, we are far from disappointed, sticking to morning rides and even taking advantage of a full-moon for midnight turns.

Our trip is coming to an end, and we still feel like there is so much more to do. We decide we can't wait for the mountains to grace us with perfect weather, and each of our remaining days we push over another ridge, ticking off new lines that are completely different than the last. One has a mellow grade with grippy ground; the next is hard-packed cheese grater, with abundant technical lines to every side. As we make our last descent back to our cold little house, I am struck by the potential here. I see new trails falling from every ridgeline, using the abandoned train tracks as a backbone of access that leads back to the quaint, nearly abandoned town site. There is no end. There is only more.

The next morning, those same mountains—dreamy the day before—lash out, swapping sun for another snowstorm and reminding us how truly insignificant we are in this place. The highway has already washed out from the previous storm, and if we don't get out soon we will be blocked by the next inevitable slide. We rush to load our motor bikes and prepare for the trip out of the mountains to San Rafael, where they will finally have a rest...but, as the storms advances above, Murphy strikes again and they refuse to start. Combustion needs oxygen and there is very little here.

In a display of the mechanical sorcery that created our motor bike racks, John sweet talks the machines into starting, and we struggle through the next four hours of frigid hardship. We pass vehicles stuck in the mud and gas stations with hour-long lineups, and we just slip past as officials set up a road block—the highway has washed out again.

We finagle through backgrounds and make it pass. Soon we enter San Rafael and the stormy city madness within, eventually arriving back at George's compound. Somehow, we make it through. His massive gate retracts back and we roll in.

The family's hospitality hasn't diminished, and we are showered with quiche and questions about the journey. However, I have to get to the bus depot that will return me to Santiago and the plane that will take me home. We say our goodbyes—John and I cannot be more grateful for the help George and his family has given us, and I cannot be more grateful for John's work to make this happen. We have succeeded, pushing into the unknown and riding lines that have never seen footsteps, much less tire treads.

The only thing to say is goodbye and thank you. As I load the bus a half-hour later, looking an absolute gringo in long underwear, hoodie and high-top biking shoes—the only dry gear I have—the rawness I felt upon my arrival is still there. However, this time it's different. Because after days on our own, in some of the most bru-

tal heights of the Andes, I realize it's that rawness that makes for true exploration.

