

# Back for THE BEEMER

Story and photos by John Wellburn

**Eight long years had passed since world adventurer John Wellburn was forced to abandon his battered BMW in faraway Venezuela. Now, in the midst of an uncertain political climate, he's returned to collect his beloved bike. But there are problems.**

Sometimes spur-of-the-moment decisions are the best ones. I find if I think too much about something and add it all up, I probably will decide not to do it; too much risk, too dangerous. Usually, when I just go for it, and fly by the seat of my pants, everything just falls into place and works out perfectly. There is a world full of amazing people who are willing to help you and there are millions of experiences to be had.

Eight years ago, I was at the end of the road on a long journey with my 1976 R-series BMW. I left that bike with an amazing family I met in Caracas, Venezuela. My plans at the time were to take the bike apart there, return without it to Canada for the summer and at the end of the summer have the bike shipped to Europe and continue on that continent. I dismantled the bike, went back to Canada, worked for the summer and then found that it was going to cost me more to ship the bike than it would be to buy another one in Spain. Considering, she was tired and it would be a challenge to enter into

Spain with my paperwork, I decided to leave the Beemer and buy something in Spain to continue my travels.

For eight years the bike sat in pieces while I finished my travels in Europe and Africa and finally settled living half the year in Canada and half in Mendoza, Argentina.

In December 2012, all the ducks formed in a line, as they say. Two of my good friends from my hometown of Williams Lake, BC had actually pulled the trigger on a crossing of the Americas from Canada to Ushuaia, Argentina. They had been planning the trip for years but I had heard many of my friends daydream about such a trip but never follow through. Well they had left and by December were nearing the Darien Gap, where they would need to cross on a sailboat to the continent of South America. It was ON!

I was in Argentina since October and assuming the guys made it to South America, I started throwing out feelers to my friends in Caracas to see if there was any way I could just show up and



put my old Beemer back together, jump on it and meet my friends in Venezuela or Colombia after they got off the boat.

It had been at least a year or two since I had dropped Angel, my friend in Caracas, an email. Over the years I had kept at least one email a year trickling out to see if my moto was still there. Within a day, I had a reply from him but it didn't sound promising. He had moved my bike to a friend's shop outside of Caracas. After eight years in the same place, it had been moved into a more complicated spot. Also, in his first email he said he would only be there until Dec. 29, after which he would be going on vacation with his family. I mentioned I would need to fly in by at least the 26th to have enough time to search out some parts such as a battery and tires before the stores closed for New Year. Angel replied to tell me that the stores would be closed for at least two weeks, more or less starting a day after I planned on arriving. Things weren't looking good for the recovery.

I threw out an email asking if Angel knew of any moving companies that could go get the bike and move it to a hotel or hostel in Caracas where I could arrive a day later and work on it in the parking lot or something. I was grabbing at straws. Angel's response to this idea was that services such as that simply don't exist in Caracas. Once again it didn't look good.

Then, in the next email Angel must have realized I was really serious about coming this time. (Over the past eight years, I had emailed several times saying that maybe I would come and get the bike that year but never did.) Angel's email this time was extremely positive. His sailboat was down for repairs so he wouldn't be going on his sailing vacation with his family until after New Year. Moreover, he said he would bring the bike to his place in Caracas where I could work on it in his parking area! I bought a one-way flight to Caracas the moment after I read the email. Once again, my old friend Angel was demonstrating that his help and energy toward anything motorcycle is unrivaled.



**UNDER THE TARP:** Funny what the better part of a decade will do to a person's memory. The last time John Wellburn laid eyes on his 1976 R-series BMW, it was a fully operational machine. But the teardown-for-shipping routine that he put the bike through before leaving Venezuela eight years previous had been a thorough one. Nearly every component had been disassembled, leaving him with a pile of parts no taller than 18 inches under the tarp.





By the time I got my recovery kit together, Angel had lined up a battery for me, the hardest thing to find for these bikes. The kit consisted of duct tape, grease, zip ties, epoxy glue, a pack of scrub pads, one roll of wire, a new doorbell switch to replace the starter button which I remembered had started to fail, and the most important part, the rear wheel that I had been storing at my place in Argentina for all these years with hopes that one day I would recover the bike. Unlike any other motorcycle I have owned or since ridden, this old piece of machinery held a place in my heart and soul as more than just a bike but a compañero, almost a sentient being.

I let my friends know the news and they had their dates of arrival in Cartagena, Colombia on the boat nailed down. I would have five days to revive my bike and two days to meet the boys in southern Venezuela. The mission began.

I knew when flying into Venezuela that I was arriving in a particularly turbulent time politically. The country had just come out of an election where

the long standing Hugo Chavez had just finished the most elaborate campaign of his life to win the people over for another four-year term. Then, only months after winning the election he became very sick and, it was rumoured at the time, riddled with cancer. Out of fear of the doctors in his own country trying to kill him, he had opted to travel to Cuba to undergo treatment. When I arrived in Venezuela this is where it stood. The country was about to be led into another year by Chavez, a fact that disturbed many people, but the man wasn't even present to make an appearance.

ANGEL GREETED ME WITH OPEN ARMS AT THE AIRPORT IN CARACAS. It was great to see him after so long. But I hardly recognized him as he had lost over 50 pounds since I had seen him last. In the last few days, Angel had actually gone out to his friend's house where the bike was stored, and with the help of his son, had loaded the pieces into the back of his Land Cruiser and brought them to his apartment building where he had

reserved one of his parking stalls for me to work on the bike. It was all set up.

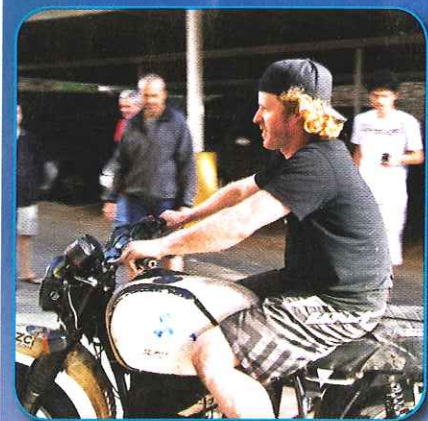
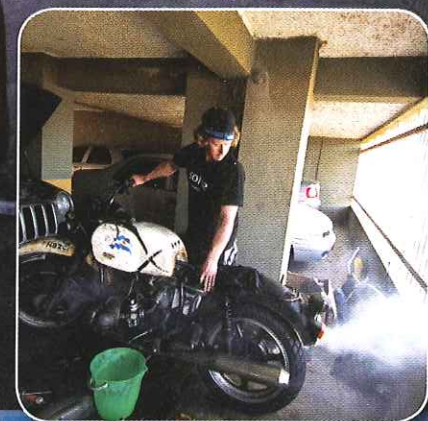
My first shock came however, when we walked over to the blue tarp that was covering the bike. The profile of the pile seemed wrong. It was only about a foot and a half high. I pulled the tarp off and the reality of my undertaking hit me for the first time. I really had taken this bike apart, everything, except the internals of the engine had been stripped. I guess I had been trying to get the bike as small as possible for shipping back home. The memory was faint but as I picked through the pile, everything was there and like a jigsaw puzzle I would have to remember how it all went back together.

We knew we only had two days to buy everything we might need to get the bike back on the road. In two days a two-week holiday would begin and everything would be closed. I began immediately cleaning with what has proved to be the best cleaner in the world, diesel. I soon had a puddle of diesel around everything, scrubbing away. People came and went from

the parkade, always saying hello and never concerned about the mess I was making. In North America what I was doing would never fly. I made a list of things I would need from the stores and we went driving.

Caracas was in a time of turmoil as Chavez took the reins of power following one of the most elaborate campaigns of all time. Angel and his family spoke sadly of his beloved Caracas and how it had become overrun with crime. In the week I was there, they would never let me go alone out of the walls of their compound. Angel had been hijacked right at the door of his apartment parking lot several months earlier and the robbers stole his motorcycle right out from under him and his wife.

Politically, the country was in a time of unknown. Yes, Chavez had won the election and would serve another term but with his illness there was rumour that he may even already be dead and if he was, the people of Venezuela wouldn't hear about it until weeks or even months later.



**UP AND RUNNING:** The reassembly of his 1976 BMW went well, though John Wellburn acknowledges the role of his old friend Angel in Venezuela, who took extraordinary measures to insure all was in place for the author when he arrived in Caracas to reclaim his weathered bike. With a little fiddling and fine-tuning, John was ready to take to the streets of the Venezuelan capital, though he had been forewarned about the dangers lurking there in some of the more troubled areas.





**BIG BANG:** Fireworks light up the skies over Caracas as New Year's celebrations rock the Venezuelan city. The festivities helped relieve some of the anxiety Venezuelans were feeling amid rumours of the death of their long-serving and controversial president, Hugo Chavez, who did indeed succumb to cancer in early 2013.

Angel explained that Chavez had the support of the majority in Venezuela, mostly the poorer people, whom he had convinced that he would give everything they needed in exchange for a vote. Chavez's big slogan was "Corazon de la Patria" (heart of the People). He preached that he represents the people, the "pueblo" as they say in Latin America. He gives the people free gasoline and cable TV and seduces them into believing he is fighting for them. The under-educated masses tend to believe him. Angel said that if Chavez went to his grave right now, after this huge political win, it would be almost like giving his politics and his way of ruling more power. It would be like he died for his people, and he would be seen as a martyr. So even if the man himself died, his controversial regime would continue. Despite treatment in Cuba to remove a baseball-sized tumor from his hip, Chavez died in March 2013.

By the morning of day three and the

closing of the stores, I had new tires, a new battery, and all the fluids I would need to put her back in commission. By the same afternoon I had the fork and swingarm on and with the addition of the rim I brought up with me, I had a rolling chassis.

I knew that the points in the ignition might give me a little grief, but I had a pile of used ones to pick through till I found the best ones to install. It was time to try starting the old girl.

We turned and turned the starter but the bike wouldn't fire. I was pretty sure it was the points. I replaced the plugs and then gave the points a little tweak, filled the float bowls of the carbs with gas and varoom! After nearly a decade, the motor sounded like the day the bike had left the dealer. Angel and his friends, who all have newer bikes just couldn't believe how amazing the engine sounded. One mentioned he would take the sound of that engine and make it a ring tone for his phone.

I was almost ready to hit the road, but



first it was time for a little New Year's break. This is a holiday not taken lightly in Caracas. Angel's whole family came over for the celebration and from his 15th-story apartment with a huge window facing the city we watched Caracas burst into a fireworks as the clock struck midnight. It was one of the most incredible things I have ever seen. Then, we ate and ate and ate, some of the best food ever.

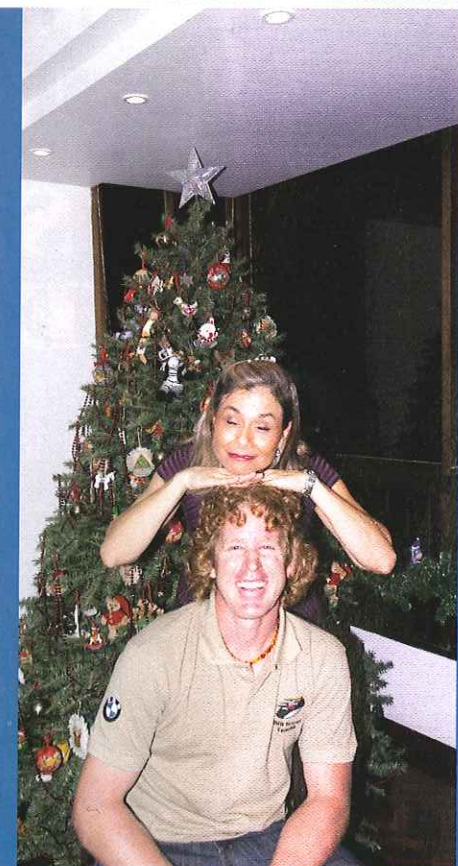
We spent the first of January recovering and I fitted the canvas bags I had brought with me on the back of the Beemer. I was now officially ready to go. I threw my leg over the saddle and I think the smile on my face said it all—for me, there is no other bike like this in the world. I have owned and road-tripped many bikes since but as I twisted the throttle and felt the throttle side cylinder pull me just slightly to the right of the bike with acceleration, it brought me right back.

I had been in Caracas for almost a week, Angel had become like a brother

to me and his family felt like my family. It is amazing that in such a short time one can become so close to others. I didn't think saying goodbye would be so hard. Angel's wife had tears in her eyes as I put my helmet on and said my last good-byes. These are good people, the joy of the planet.

My adventures were about to begin, but not quite yet. Due to the danger in the streets of Caracas, Angel wanted me to follow him out of the city, behind his Land Cruiser. This was probably a good thing as I have never been in such a complicated city. We had a quick lunch on the outskirts where I bid my final good-bye.

But 20 kilometres later my bike started to sputter and I came to a stop on the side of the road. My first instinct was to get all my valuables off the bike. I wasn't away from the city yet and kind of a sitting duck. I ran my tank bag with all my cameras and important documents over the bank of the ditch and hid them behind a tree. Now what?







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