

# Tales of the Gringo Trail

## Introduction

Riding my scooter through the rain, the cold was clutching my bones. It was February. When I was finally sitting in the queue of my travel agency in London, I looked at a map of South America for the first time. The sales guy asked me: “Where would you like to go?” *To Lima. A friend of mine is there.* “And from there?” *No idea, which one is the cheapest airport to fly out of?* “Buenos Aires. For how long are you going?” *Three months.*

Done. Departure: London-Lima, April 3, 2002. Return: Buenos Aires-London, July 4, 2002. I had no idea what I would do in between those destinations and I didn’t care one bit. All I cared about was having a ticket out of my misery.

In the spring of 2002, I desperately needed an escape. I had just had just left a rate-race finance job, split up with my English boyfriend, and didn’t know how and where to continue my life. I was still living in London, even though I already knew that my time on “mudisland” had to come to an end. But I had no appealing alternatives in sight, should I move back to Vienna? Should I move to Spain? What kind of job was I looking for?

The weight of all those questions piled up, I was officially on the dole and felt restless and useless as hell. Until I finally admitted it: All I wanted to do is travel. I had been dreaming about it for years and now was the time to do it. If I got a new job or moved to a new place, I wouldn’t be able to go. So I called my bank in Vienna and asked about my state of affairs. I could make it. I bought my ticket the same day.

The following “Tales of the Gringo Trail” are a collection of some entries in my travel diary and the emails I sent to my friends. Their enthusiastic feedback encouraged me to compile the memories of this amazing trip full of surprises and much-needed happiness!

## Diary, April 4, 2002

Woke up in Lima this morning. For the first time, I really felt the excitement for this journey. After all the guilt trips I gave myself for embarking on it, I am finally ready for the adventure which already kicked off with an obscure coincidence yesterday.

After 24 hours on a plane, crossing Europe, the Atlantic and all of South America, I found myself greeted by Mozart's "Kleiner Nachtmusik," while a guy called Domingo was driving me from Lima airport to a hotel somewhere in a posh suburb. Mozart gave me the kind of comfort I least expected upon arrival in Peru and Domingo, the music lover, almost freaked out when he heard I was Austrian!

It's the beginning of my three-month trip through South America and I have planned absolutely nothing. My Lonely Planet guide of South America is still somewhat of a virgin. The only things I have read so far are the visa and immunization sections.

Mozart, Domingo and his van came my way, because I helped a Peruvian lady entertain her cranky four-year old daughter on the seemingly endless flight from London to Lima. Domingo is her driver who arrived with her family to pick her up. When I told her of my non-existing arrival strategy, she got worried about me and booked me into the "Hotel Aleman," where she was also staying. First night sorted, without any worries about dodgy hotels and cab drives!

I'll remember Domingo for his cheesy line: "I love seafood, I eat everything I see" and for appeasing my concerns about travelling alone. Now I am on my way to Cusco to meet Saskia.

**Email, April 12, 2002 sent from Cusco, Peru**

Buns of steel, finally I've got them! After a four-day hiking trip to Macchu Picchu, my ass is so sore, I don't know how to sit anymore. On the infamous second day of the Inca trail, we climbed up 1,600 meters, mostly zig-zagging up some ridiculously high steps made of stone. After several hours of absolute butt-torture, we arrived at a peak of 4,200 meters only to wobble down another 1,000 meters before we could hit bed. The day would have been unthinkable without the power of the bitter juice of coca leaves!

When we left our camp site that morning, we were still in the damp jungle, baking in what must have been at least 30 degrees. In the evening, we found ourselves wrapped in all our clothes inside our sleeping bags, shivering in our tents as we escaped a rain and hail storm at a temperature of about zero. We, that's Saskia and I, two Swiss guys, one Ozzie, a Canadian and a Dutch couple.

On the way to the lost city of the Incas, we got the full service: the soaking woods of the Andes, misty cloud forests and crystal snow peaks sparkling in the sunset. We had a group of porters with us and our guide Rafael, whose grumpiness earned him the nickname "The Liver." Despite his unpleasantness, The Liver bewitched us with tales of a kingdom of condors, pumas and snakes ruled by the sun and the moon.

To finally see the ruins of Macchu Picchu, we had to get up at 4am and hike through the jungle in the dark. By 7:30am we arrived at the Sun Gates, where we were rewarded with the first majestic view: Situated on a small plateau in between seemingly impassable mountains, the Inca ruins laid in front of us, undisturbed and silent. For two very sacred hours, we had the place to ourselves, before hoards of well-rested tourists lazily arrived by bus.

After four days of walking, we smelled organic and our feet were sore, but we were charged with the peaceful happiness of achievement. Rafael said "you have to be open to receive the energy of these mountains." The trip ended with a very long and soothing bath in the hot springs of "Aguas Calientes" nearby.

We are leaving Peru tomorrow, heading towards Bolivia and Lake Titicaca. I have decided to join the two Swiss guys and the Dutch couple on a trip through the Amazon instead of going to Chile. From the Bolivian border, we'll travel by boat to Manaus in Brazil. From there on, we'll fly to Salvador, get some solid partying done and then I'll find my way down the Brazilian coast to Buenos Aires.

Until the next adventure, I am sending lot's of besitos,

La Gringita

## Email, April 28, 2002, sent from Tupiza, Bolivia

Oye amigos,

I am in Bolivia right now, nursing a very sore stomach. My poor butt is hurting yet again, because I spent seven hours on a mad horse yesterday, riding through a kind of Bolivian Rockies. I have a few hours to kill before me and my diarrhoea will have to face another agonizing trip on a night bus without toilet. But first, let me share a few notes from my travel diary:

### **Lake Titicaca**

At more than 4,000 meters, the clouds seem to brush the surface of the crisp waters of Lake Titicaca. Its sheer dimension emanates a soothing silence. Touristy, dirty and loud on the Peruvian border, the lake reveals its true beauty on the Bolivian side, where you are greeted by nothing but mud-encrusted pigs, cynical llamas and dusty cacti. Chocolate bars and other essential items also sell for half than in Peru. We are all relieved to escape the gringo-commercialism we had experienced in Cusco and on the Inca trail. "Amiga, compra, compra!"

On the Peruvian side of the lake, we visited the community of the Uros, an Indian tribe that lives on islands entirely made of reed. To prevent from drowning, they have to rebuild their land every three months. What was presented to us as an idealized image of indigenous peasant life, engraved itself in our memory as a picture of poverty and illness. If I hadn't been able to communicate with the conductor of our boat, I would have never found out that these people never have enough money in their pocket to go to the shore, even if they are fatally ill. Many of them die of pneumonia, diarrhoea or rheumatism at a very young age. Despite all the misery, the community of the Uros is actually growing, because these Indians aren't allowed to own any property on the mainland!

On Bolivian water territory, we spent two days hiking on an island called Isla del Sol, which the Incas believe is the birthplace of the sun, their most important god. This is where we caught a glimpse of the untouched rural Bolivia. There were no cars and hardly any electricity. More than two thirds of the Bolivian population live below the poverty line and the manifestation of this fact provided the oh-so romantic photo images we couldn't resist: houses made of clay, llamas and wrinkled Indian women wearing funny bowler hats.

Lake Titicaca left me with an unpleasant souvenir: permanent diarrhoea. Ironically, I got it playing a card game called Shithead. My enthusiasm for the game came from an evil drink called Pisco, which must have had some dodgy ice cubes in it. Although I successfully avoided becoming Shithead, I have never been the same since.

### **The Salt Lakes**

I am writing in the faint light of a gas lamp. It's our last evening of the four-day trip to the salt lakes near the border with Chile. We are in a small village built of clay. What surrounds us is nothing but wind and a vast, bare mountain range. It's just after 7pm and it's pitch black outside. Electricity is a luxury. Today, we drove for about ten hours without spotting another soul. At sun rise, we passed some bubbling geysers, spitting boiling grey ash. The first soft sun rays of the day painted bizarre shadows next to the rocks of dormant lava. Now, 12 hours later, we are waiting for dinner; it's gonna be llama with rice. We just returned from playing Basketball with the local kids and the boys tried to compete in a game of football, gasping for air in the high altitude.

The past few days have been a visual feast: We passed the white, wet open salt planes, seemingly driving through the clouds which reflected in the water. We stayed in villages embedded in coral rocks which used to form an underwater landscape. In the majestic emptiness of the Bolivian mountain range at almost 5,000 meters, we saw lagunas, tainted by the colours of the minerals they contain. In pink, purple and turquoise waters, the only animals to accompany us were pink flamingos.

So far, Bolivia's beauty has been its bareness. And it's not just the landscape; here you can find restaurants without food, bars without beer, and bus companies without busses. The locals, as represented by our guide, are also short of words, sharing an almost cruel dry sense of humour. We offered our guide some crackers and asked how many he wanted. With a straight face he said: "Porque no todito" (Why not all?). He spared himself the "Gracias."

Bolivia's charm has, at times, also been hard to enjoy because of the high altitude. Stunning views at 5,000 meters have been accompanied by constant farting, headaches, nausea and breathlessness. At night, the temperatures dropped till below zero and you can only hope for a good llama skin to warm you, or in my case, my Austrian top-of-the-range ski underwear and a good sleeping bag.

### **The Void Between Diarrhoea and Constipation**

Any true travel diary has to contain a thorough discussion of bowel movements. We have begun to classify this daily highlight in a range from 1-7, according to the Bristol stool chart, which was introduced to me a year ago by a cynical doctor in England. The whole despair of your basic bodily functions is constant disarray was perfectly expressed by a graffiti I read on a wall in a stinky loo in a hotel in La Paz. "I would give all my clean laundry for a normal, healthy digestion," it read. Anyone who's ever been backpacking will relate to the magnitude of such profound prose. But there are also cultural divides when it comes to discussing the problem: While our American friends are concerned with questions such as "will there be a bathroom" and "will it have a flush," we Europeans tend to discuss consistency, no matter where we produce "it." In any case, the discussion of bowel movements always makes it on the dinner table!

On this tasty note, I am gonna say good-bye for now,

Hasta luego,

Nadja

### **From my diary, in Bolivia**

I could have never imagined how discriminating it can feel to be called a gringo all the time. White skin means money, that's it. Especially in Peru, people would do anything to get it. Even though it annoys the hell out of me, I can't really blame them.

But there are a few moments, when you can actually bond with the locals and feel somewhat human again. For the boys, these moments seem to happen when they join a game of football. Faces on both sides light up as they challenge each other, each defending the honour of their country as a no-doubt important football nation. Of course, at 4,000 meters and higher, the Europeans tend to lose face quite easily...

My best bonding moment so far happened in a club in Cusco. As I love to dance, I easily mingled with the local girls and soon we seemed to enjoy each others company, studying each others moves. In the early morning hours, I ended up on stage, performing a sort of line-dance to Brazilian music!

## **Email, May 22, sent from Brasilia**

Hola amigos,

I took my sore stomach to a hospital in the middle of the Bolivian jungle and got it cured with some antibiotics that killed whatever bug was having fun inside my bowels. Sadly, the hospital looked more comforting than many a ward in England! Now I am in Brasilia at the most modern airport I have ever seen and am waiting to catch a flight to Salvador, which promises drums, parties, capirinha and a lot of doing sweet nothing in the sun...

### **In Prison**

My last two weeks in Bolivia have been even better than the first two. I saw the strangest tourist attraction ever: the San Pedro prison in La Paz. For ten Dollars each, tourists stroll in there to get a guided tour by a drug dealer to see yet more drug dealers who readily offer you cocaine upon entry. A handful goes for five Pounds and it's "the best you can get in South America." For your comfort and safety, they provide you with a murderer as a bodyguard. Juan, mucho gusto. And if you ever thought of a prison as a sad place with cold steel, come and see this: it looks like a street market, buzzing with large Indian women cooking chicken, kids playing games and there's a football tournament going on. According to taste, the nice inmates can also hire prostitutes if they feel needy, or get married in a church.

### **Downhill Frenzy**

We left La Paz, the Andes and the high altitude going on a mountain bike ride along what claims to be "The World's Most Dangerous Road." It is the only one road connecting the highland and the jungle, descends 3,600 meters on a stretch of 64 kilometres, is 2-3 meters wide and cars are coming both ways. Your only alternative to going down by bike is a dodgy 30-year old public bus with a driver chewing coca and a serious death wish. Getting high on the adrenalin of the thrill, I got a careless and wiped out on a 180 degrees bend, which gave me a massive, super sexy green and purple bruise on my thigh. If I had missed the curve, I would have dropped 600 meters into some thick vegetation. In one amazing day, we exchanged a cold and bare climate for sunshine and humidity. On our first night in the jungle, we could still see the snow peaks of the Andes towering over the dripping jungle. (See also full story of the day).

### **Jungle Boogie**

From there on we went up north, coz the guidebook promised that we could hang out with tarantulas and swim with pink dolphins. In the jungle, we went on long hikes learning about medical plants, such as the contraception tree and got introduced to many a dodgy insect. We swam in a wonderfully fresh river bed, swung on lianas, and yes, there were tarantulas. They're brown and furry with orange eyes that glow in the dark. In the pampas, we spent a whole day cursing tourism as we walked around in knee-deep stinking swamps just to bump into an anaconda, which we did. Luckily, it was only 2 meters long and didn't fancy gringos. Our camp also had three pets: a pasta-eating crocodile called Juanito, the friendly piranhas were fishing on the shore, and some cheeky monkeys who were stealing our bananas. We also managed to swim with pink dolphins, they were nibbling at my toes and I freaked out.

### **Amazon Ride**

Finally, we left the gringo trail. We travelled up north to the Brazilian border to take a boat to Manaus, the rubber-metropolis in the middle of the Amazon rain forest, which is famous for an opera house. Not many tourists choose this route and our group of 5 stood out like a sore thumb. The bus was 20 hours late and when it finally arrived, the ride to the border took 36

hours, which we endured wobbling between peanut-eating locals and our backpacks. We arrived at 3am and spent the night sleeping on our stuff in front of the Bolivian immigration office. When we entered Brazil, it seemed like the sun was rising in people's faces. Everyone was dressed up and smiling, what a change to the poor and subdued Bolivians! Finally, what we had feared most, turned out to be best part of the trip so far: the boat ride to Manaus. We travelled three days and three nights on a cargo boat, sleeping in hammocks in between boxes filled with oranges, staring in to the vast horizon of the Amazon, even swimming in it, and getting to know lot's of crazy Brazilians who were blasting pop music all day.

So far, Brazil is my favourite place. They have the decency to put up loud speakers in the street, so you can listen to music all day long! Our group has now shrunk to 3 and I am left travelling with two Swiss boys. Soon, I'll have to test the waters of making new friends...

Hope you are all well,

sending besitos,

Nadja

## **From my diary, June 10**

I am on my way to Rio. For the first time on this trip, I am actually travelling alone. I had dreaded it, but now it kind of feels natural. In Peru, we were a group of eight, in Bolivia were shrunk to six, five of us continued to Brazil, and as from Manaus I was left with the two Swiss boys. All in all, I have to say that I have been very lucky with my travel companions. The only person I knew when I came was my former work college Saskia who returned to London after five weeks of my arrival. At home I would have struggled to think with whom I would want to travel for such a long time, especially given the sometimes nerve-wrecking circumstances.

That's exactly what I love about this trip: the surprises! You never know where you will be tomorrow and with who you are going to end up sharing your time. You simply cannot plan a trip like this and what's exactly what makes it special. The unpredictability of each day that gives me the sense of freedom I have been longing for. When I flew across the Amazon on my way to Lima, I didn't think I would get to go there on this trip. Yet, two days after my arrival I changed my plans to go to Chile in favour of Brazil... And now I am loving it here!

Many people I meet seem to share my story. They are in the late twenties, early thirties, have established successful careers at home and could easily settle into the picture-book life with job, family and kids. The Dutch couple had even sold their house to pay for a two-year trip around the world. It seems like we all wonder if there's more to life than a high-wage job and a stable home. Somehow we all dig the freedom, but we actually don't know what we are really looking for.

I guess most of us will go back and settle into some kind of conventional life. But I have also met numerous 30-something beach bums who got stuck getting stoned on some beach in Brazil. They are not staying because they love the country, wanna learn the language or settle down there, they are just drifting! Still, they all act like they have found the key to eternal happiness, because they have escaped all conventions. The more I get to know them, I find their unwillingness to form any ties to anybody or any responsibility immature and selfish. Actually, some of them are probably the loneliest and desperate people I have ever met.

Still, I dread the idea of taking another full-time job in London. I hated the rat-race and I am no longer willing to work like I did, just to have another fancy name on my CV. I wanna work to live, not vice versa! I am now considering moving back to Vienna, where I could work as a freelancer and live in my own flat. I would need only a third of the money I spend in London and this might give me the flexibility to embark on more trips like these. Of course, I am afraid that I will always be on the run and that that would make me lonely, too. On the other hand, the only way I will meet the kind of people who share my idea of life, is by doing what I love. I have never been so happy in my life!

## **Email, June 26, sent from Buenos Aires**

I am in my final destination Buenos Aires and I am freezing my sun-kissed ass off. Somehow my Brazilian tan really seems out of place in this fully-fledged winter! But I am not complaining, because I've just spent seven weeks in paradise.

### **Bliss on the beach**

In Brazil you stop travelling. You just hang out in different places. Every destination I went to seemed to have a magic glue to it that made moving on extremely difficult. There was no more rushing from one tourist destination to another. Brazil was about enjoying the sweet life. My favourite place was a fishing village on the Northeast coast called Itacaré. The day started with a yummy breakfast of tropical fruit and then drifted into a several hours of enjoying of a perfect kitsch day featuring sun, waves, palm trees and super soft sand. At sunset, I joined the Capoeiristas for two hours and learned how to kick, dance, play drums and sing in Portuguese. (I enjoyed it a lot, but I think cartwheels, hand stands and flips are for short people only...) In the evening, there'd be the café of the Argentinean photographer and the Capeta-lady, who mixed a drink with Guaraná that kept me bouncing til 6am. "You can't drink just one, so you drink two, then you have a least for and finally the sun is rising..." The days in this blissful existence just blended into one another and I so wished time would forget about me. One of my favourite features: In most places, the food you eat is charged by the price of the kilos you pile up on your plate!

### **Brrraaaaazil!**

I hit Brazil in fully-fledged football mania. In honour of the World Cup, the whole country is draped in green and yellow and no self-respecting citizen would ever miss any of the Brazil matches. Often, that means that normal life is coming to a complete stand-still: office hours start later, traffic stops and shops remain closed. Even if the games air at 3am, every goal sparks fireworks and a chorus yelling "Brrraaaaazil" in all corners of even the most isolated village. The football madness also successfully distracts from daily headlines in the paper about a looming financial crisis ahead of the elections in the fall, but who cares, as long as Brazil scores! Football is simply everywhere; I watched England beat Argentina inside a small bakery, witnessed the penalty that kicked Ireland out of the Cup on a small screen hidden under a table in a street market in Rio, and pretty much risked my life in Sao Paulo when I supported England in THE all important match against Brazil last week. I sooo wish I could still be in Rio to see the final, but it would have come at the price of seeing Buenos Aires. If Brazil wins, I'll miss the greatest party of my life!!!

### **Attitude is Key**

I absolutely loved Rio. And I think every self-conscious European should be forced to buy Brazilian-cut swim wear and chill at least on day on Ipanema beach. I have come to the conclusion that even not-so-perfect butts looks so much better when they are tanned, proud and liberated! Girls, rest assured the boys also look great in those tiny speedos! It's all about worshipping the body beautiful! Generally, attitude is key to life in Rio. For instance, no self-respecting male would never sit on a towel on the beach, that's for women and children. The drivers of regular public busses casually confuse Rio with a Formula One race course. Or just witness a night on a Forró dance floor (pronounced FoHOH - it's a kind of funky-folksy dance from the Northeast), it's a war zone of the sexes. While I was being twisted and turned in yet another skilful way of Brazilian body-grinding, my dance partner actually managed to unbutton my jeans without me noticing!!! And when I not-so-politely told him to have a nice day, I turned around to find a girl attacking the baffled American guy I was dating!

So yes, my time in Brazil has been a sensual feast and I couldn't help but fall in love with the joy and the enthusiasm of this amazing country. Special thanks go to Ricardo and Leticia, who I met in London in a pub two years ago, telling them how much I'd like to see Brazil. They gave me their numbers not thinking I'd ever call. But I did, and without them, Rio and Sao Paulo wouldn't have been the same!

My time in South America is almost over and I will be coming back to London next Wednesday. Do me a favour and order some sunshine, pleeeeee!

Can't wait to catch up with all of you and blast those Brazilian grooves I took with me!

Nadja

## **Email, June 27, sent from Buenos Aires**

Guys, I wasn't going to write another email to all of you, but now my journalistic instinct is taking over and I feel I have to report a slice of history. Buenos Aires is turning into a mad house and being a tourist here really seems out of place. I just got locked into an Internet Café because the biggest demonstrations since last December are unfolding on the streets as people are demanding new elections.

Police are lining the streets everywhere and this city, which is supposed to be buzzing with music and street life, is buzzing with anger. Yesterday, I watched a group of very elegant women in fur coats bang on the barricaded doors of their bank in the financial district, shouting: "Thieves, give us our Dollars back!" This sentence is screaming off the walls everywhere.

Nevertheless, I was trying to maintain my enthusiasm as a tourist and turned down an invitation to join the demonstration in favour of trying one of those juicy steaks everyone was raving about. I found it in an almost empty restaurant. It's really sad to the grandeur of Buenos Aires deteriorate. A few days ago, a cab driver pointed out an empty commuter bus to me. "When life was still good and people had work, this bus would have been so full, people were hanging out of the windows," he told me. "What are you doing in our country when it looks like this?" I got the feeling he wasn't a cab driver by choice.

Shopping has also been a mixed pleasure. While you can find amazing design and quality in super stylish shops, I could not help but notice the hurt pride of the sales people when they watched us drool over the bargains we snatched. "We're pretty much giving away our stuff for free," one of them hissed to her colleague, not knowing I could understand them. What used to cost one Dollar now goes for 25 Cent.

Now, at the end of my perfect trip, I am falling off my pink backpacker cloud. For the first time, I realize the difference between going on holiday and travelling. On holiday, you are just trying to get as much pleasure as possible out of every place you visit, but travelling means seeing places as they really are.

Thanks for all the great feedback you have been giving me and I shall see you all soon,

Nadja

### **From my diary, on the plane back to London**

I am sitting on the plane going back home. It was cold and rainy in Buenos Aires, but even that didn't make saying good-bye any easier. I am crying because I don't want to leave this wonderful continent. At the same time, I am very grateful for the amazing time I have spent here, because every day seemed like a gift I gave to myself. After all the anxiety prior to this trip, this is a really good feeling.

Still, I am very afraid of what is to come. I am scared of lying in my bed in Elephant & Castle again, feeling choked by the pressure of having to come up with an answer to the question "What to do where?"

In Sao Paulo I felt the "urban angst," the road rage and the aggression in the streets of a big city again. It freaked me out, so I guess I took my decision already. Last week I told Sam to rent out my room in her house. This probably means going back to Vienna where I would enjoy a less stressful and outdoorsy life. But what if it doesn't suit me? Didn't I always think Vienna was stifling? I briefly considered staying in Rio, but I haven't got it in me to become a thirty-something beach bum. I want some stability and comfort in my life, but I hope I can find it in such a way that it doesn't bore or suffocate me. Seems like coming home is part of the trip, too...

My departure was sweetened by a French guy called Regis. I met him in the youth hostel in Buenos Aires. Like a silly teenager, I fell for his charm and the adventurous sparkle in his eyes. But while I am on my way back to a European summer, he is preparing to go skiing in Argentina. It would have been nice to join him. We were dreaming of renting a car together and moving on to warmer places where you could windsurf and scuba dive.

The night before I left, I hesitated to go out. I didn't need another party to top things up and I was tired. Regis understood. "You look satisfied," he said, kissing me. "You have that glow of a person who's had a good time."

## **Getting Down is Not the Problem**

**Mountain biking in Bolivia is not for the faint-hearted. Descending 3,600 meters on a windy gravel road through the jungle in a day, you wanna make sure you catch that curve. The Bolivian adrenalin rush was an absolute highlight of my three-months backpacking trip through South America. Here's a review of the day:**

My hands are shaking as I am clinging on to my handlebars. Fighting gravity on a 3 meter-wide gravel road, I am struggling to stay in control of my mountainbike. "Whatever you do, don't look down," I tell myself, because right next to me yawns an abyss of up to 600 meters.

If you want to get from Bolivian highland into the jungle, you are facing a harsh reality: The landscape drops 3,600 meters over a distance of 64 kilometers. And there's only one road that connects the capital La Paz with Coroico, the first town in the rainforest. For a very good reason, this road is called "The world's most dangerous road."

So if you really need to get down, you have a choice: Either you put your life into the hands of a desolate 1970's bus driven by a death-defying local, or you decide to be your own boss and take a mountain bike.

A number of tour operators with a sharp sense for business have turned this geographical challenge into a cash-cow and are offering adventure mountain bike tours on the road. As I put little faith in the local public transport, I opt for the individual thrill on the bike.

On the busride to our point of departure, I begin to wonder if we all got lured into some sort of tourist sect. John, our guide, tells us with professional serenity that almost on every tour someone gets injured and that, yes, some people have died.

"Don't worry," John smirks reassuringly. "They all get down, the question is how."

We are starting on a car-park about half an hour away from La Paz. We're at 4,750 meters, our bones are stiff from the cold and our only consolation is the amazing view over some peaks of the Andes glowing in the morning sun. The guides do some last checks on our bikes. Most important features: brakes and front-wheel suspension.

The first section of the trip is pure pleasure. You blast down an asphalt serpentine road until your gears give up resistance and you pick up maximum speed. As you buzz through the most spectacular mountain scenery, the day picks up heat.

After a bit less than an hour, another Bolivian reality awaits us. We are approaching a drug check point. At the crossroads between the jungle and the highland, the police searches everyone for drugs - and they don't care if you are on a bike or a truck.

The unavoidable ordeal and is a good excuse to order some chicken sandwiches. Our bodies can do with the extra fuel as we are approaching the only stretch on the trip that requires cycling uphill. Three steep passes.

From there on, the thrill begins. The highland is behind us and we are entering a sub-tropical valley called Las Yungas. All of a sudden, it's humid and boiling hot. In front of us lies the

world's most dangerous road: Barely three meters wide, rocky, wet, with one bend chasing the next and cars coming both ways.

John hands out last warnings: "Shift your weight in the bend, avoid the front brakes and don't overestimate yourselves." But for some of us the sweet taste of adrenalin is stronger than fear. After only a few meters a very fit Dutch guy flips over his handle bars and lands in the ditch. Luckily it was the one adjacent to the mountain.

It doesn't take long until your hands become sore from pulling the breaks. Still, the scenery is amazing: Fresh water is dripping from the jungle, the sun sizzling on our skin and the air filled with exotic noises. No time to feel romantic though as trucks keep coming both ways. They honk their horns ahead of every bend to warn whoever is behind it. You gotta be quick.

Sadly, two thirds down the line, we stop at a black plaque commemorating an Israeli girl in her early twenties that lost her life in this curve. It's a somber reminder not to get carried away.

While we watch the overcrowded public busses skid past us with two wheels in the air, we begin to appreciate the privileges of tourism: We're followed by a modern bus which is carrying our stuff and a driver who knows a bit about first aid.

In the early afternoon, we approach Coroico, known as Bolivia's Eden. It's pure bliss: After eight hours of speed thrill, we've finally exchanged the bare and chilly Bolivian highland for the soaking rainforest.

Totally exhausted and clotted with mud we celebrate our arrival with ice cold beer. Conclusion: The Dutch guy broke his wrist; that's a pretty low injury score for a day. On the photos of the finish you can spot the faint sparkle of the distant snow peaks towering over the jungle.

link: [www.gravitybolivia.com](http://www.gravitybolivia.com)

cost: \$49

Gravity is closed during the rainy season from December 1 to February 1.