

BOLIVIA

AIR TIME

Cochabamba in Bolivia is at 2600 metres above sea level and the ferocious, mountainous majesty of the Andes towers around it. The air’s a little thin up there, but it’s the riding in this South American paradise that’ll take your breath away.

A guided tour is a great way to enjoy a foreign ride. The problems with languages, customs and unfamiliar hazards are taken care of by good guides. But that can sometimes mean things get a little too comfortable. A recce ride, on the other hand – a ride to check out a new route or suss whether or not a ride is possible – can offer all the advantages of travelling with good people, but still have the uncertainty that raises things to the levels of serious adventure.

New tour company Bolivia Bound assembled a crew of seasoned campaigners for a recce ride through Bolivia, a nation where man has tried for centuries to bend Nature to his will. Man has enjoyed a minor victory here and there, but mostly Nature runs unchecked at her ragged, wildest and most devastatingly beautiful. To ride there is to accept you ride as the Earth Mother’s guest, and only if, and where, it suits her. »»»

GROUP THERAPY

Like Nature herself, the government agencies of Bolivia can be unpredictable, and with very little notice a holiday was declared on the first scheduled day of the ride. A public holiday in Bolivia doesn't just mean everyone has a day off. In this case it meant towns and cities were closed to vehicular traffic, and with the Bolivia Bound group caught in the middle of a sizeable city there was no choice to but to sit back, soak up the atmosphere and let the day go.

It was a good chance for everyone to get to know each other.

Cory Rowden and John Wry were the Bolivia Bound guys sharing duties leading the ride and driving the support vehicle. Cory, like most of the riders, was from New Zealand, John from Canada, and both are now Bolivia-based.

Mike "Three Star" Britton, main man at Britton Adventures, was along to have a look-see with a view to taking a group to Bolivia Bound in 2012. Engineers Robin Goldsack and Mike Ross, and husband-and-wife teams Dave and Sue Greenslade and Baz and Jan Reiher rounded out the footy-mad Kiwi crew, with easy-going Brazilian IT tech Mauricio Lima the last man in.

All were experienced and capable riders, and all had ridden foreign countries. The experience was an important factor, as was having a few engineers and highly qualified navigators in the group. On a ride where nothing could be certain, these were big bonuses, and Cory and John were off to a great start before the first bike was even started.

The bikes were a trio of XR650Rs owned by Bolivia Bound, a DR650, a couple of CRFs and a BMW F800GS. The two couples had the Beemer and the DR, and the rest of the bikes went to whoever grabbed them. TBAM had nabbed the lone 2005 CRF250X and, already short of breath at the moderate altitude, revelled in the luxury of electric start. The DR and XRs were all kick-starters, and with some much higher altitude planned, it seemed a good choice. Robin grabbed the other CRF, a 450, and that was interesting, because the BMW was actually his. As it turned out he must be a wily customer. His 450 ran faultlessly for the entire tour. He had the benefit of a lightweight enduro bike with plenty of power and electric start.

Hmm...

On a sunny, Cochabamba morning the crew speared into the Bolivian traffic – which turned out to be nowhere near as frantic as might've been thought – and followed Cory heading along some impressive bitumen roads for our first taste of real altitude.

JET SET

From the tourist-friendly city of Cochabamba the group immediately began to climb, and if it seems as though there's an unusual focus on height-above-sea-level in this piece, it's because this kind of altitude just doesn't exist in Australia and NZ. Kosciusko is 2228 metres and Mt Cook is 3750 metres. Very few stand on the actual summits of those mountains to experience the lack of oxygen in the air, and even so, in Bolivia 3500 metres is "the foothills".

With no time set aside for acclimatisation, the effects of altitude need to be factored in for every rider. Not only riders, but bikes, as jetting goes to the shithouse in a big hurry. The fuel-injected BMW seemed to cope, but the carburetted bikes ran richer and richer and delivered less and less power as the group ascended. On the Altiplano at near 5000m the little CRF struggled to pull top gear on the flat. The rider was in far worse shape, so in a way Nature had once again struck a balance.

From Cochabamba the temperature dropped fast as the road wound upward. The first mechanical problems appeared almost immediately when Mike Britton's XR650R spluttered and farted and generally threatened to quit. Mike kept it going and managed to nurse it up to around 4000m, where the Honda finally refused to run at all, and Baz, Mike "Rossco" Ross and Cory flew into action, removing the jets and cleaning and sorting the fuel path. By this stage TBAM's head was spinning, our boots seemed so heavy we could hardly lift our feet and things were seeming a little surreal. The others didn't seem to notice and continued working away.

This was where Mike Britton earned his first star for the trip. In the rarified atmosphere he kicked that XR650 over and over and over. Long after TBAM was ready to faint just from watching, Mike kept raising his foot and somehow found the energy to jump down on the kickstarter one more time.

Legend.

The carby came off that bike three times on that first day, and Baz eventually managed to lean off the mixture of the XR by threading a strand of copper wire through the main jet.

Even in our detached state this seemed amazing, and as we write it we accept it sounds a tall story, but there it is. It was one of many amazing feats of bike rescue pulled off by the Kiwis during the ride, and in fact was so well done that the bike ran that way for the rest of the trip. It wasn't perfect, but it started easily and ran well enough to get the job done. »»»





LAKE TITICACA IS ENORMOUS AND BEAUTIFUL. IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE THAT MUCH FRESH WATER IN ONE PLACE.



JUST ANOTHER MOUNTAIN PASS. EVERYWHERE IS SO STUNNING THAT VIEWS LIKE THIS SEEM NORMAL AFTER A WHILE.

With the show back on the road everyone continued to climb until the group finally found itself at the highest point of the pass, 4496m above sea level. After a look around, and a couple of riders falling asleep by the road, everyone headed to lunch from the support vehicle, fuel, and then a magnificent dirt-road run to the village of Quime, set at 2600m in a deep valley surrounded by high Andean peaks.

As an introduction to the incredible majesty of Bolivia, this afternoon ride was exceptional. The soaring, timbered peaks with their snowy caps and stark, dark, rock faces were as imposing and intriguing as only an untouched wilderness can be. The wide, smooth dirt road dodged and weaved its way between sheer mountainsides and alongside frosty white rivers gleaming in the clear afternoon sun, and despite being at nearly 4000m, only by craning a rider's head way back could he look up in wonder at the clouds and mist shrouding the higher peaks, allowing just a glimpse of the snow beneath.

All up, the first day was 340km of amazingsness.

TO DIE FOR

After a brisk 200km of dirt road on the second day, TBAM's

CRF showed signs of valve problems. Baz wasn't taking anything for granted, but, and spent a few hours checking all the systems he thought might be playing a part. With the carby and jets cleaned, plug tested, air intake inspected and the bike still not starting, it was decided valves were most likely the problem and the bike would have to be push-started until it could be dealt with in a reasonable workshop.

Fortunately, it's not too easy to find a flat place in Bolivia, so roll-starting wasn't the drama it might've been on, say, The Nullarbor.

This third day was to feature The Death Road, more correctly known as "The World's Most Dangerous Road", and brought into the spotlight in an episode of *Top Gear*.

The dirt-surfaced thoroughfare winds its way down from 3500m, clinging to the side of a mountain and offering no sissy safety features like Armco, cats' eyes or signs. Cory briefed everyone in the morning to be extremely careful and take no chances of any kind on this stretch. "Never mind whether you're on the right or left side of the road," was the message, "stay up against the wall, not the edge."

At the bottom the Kiwis claimed they weren't all that

impressed, pointing out that there were more difficult roads in NZ. There are certainly plenty in Australia, too, but we don't send articulated vehicles up and down them, especially not as two-way traffic.

Neither do the Bolivians any more, thanks to an awesome new freeway-standard road that now services the same towns. Nowadays, The Death Road in the rain is one of the most beautiful and awesome rides TBAM has ever enjoyed. The water cascades over the road and drips from the lush, drooping jungle tumbling from the rocky ledges overhanging the narrow road, and the sheer abyss from the side of road, plummeting to mist-filled valleys, adds an aura of tension. Every turn reveals a new and breathtaking view of the road ahead as it winds its way down, clutching desperately to the near-vertical mountainside.

It's truly beautiful.

WARM AND FUZZY

From the base of The Death Road everyone headed into Coroico for lunch, dealing with a slippery, hand-made cobblestone road on the hill on the way up to the town.

It's staggering to imagine how long it must've taken to lay >>>



the kilometres of rounded stones by hand. The road was wide and even, and thanks to the light rain, as slippery as a politician at Question Time.

Coroico is probably best-known as the edge of the Amazon, and it's a very popular destination – it was certainly alive with tourists of all nationalities when the Bolivia Bound group arrived – but for TBAM it will always be The Place Of Pizza.

In a cozy pizzeria near the main square (the "centro". Every respectable South American town and village has a centro) the altitude and wet were forgotten as Cory organised a parade of pizza. Roscco is a powerful eater, and he set to with a will, but even he couldn't keep up with the overwhelming supply.

Having dropped down to below 1750m the temperature had risen considerably, so, filled with warm pizza, everyone was able to sit back and admire what must be one of the world's most spectacular views. The soaring mountains, shrouded in cloud, bisected by the new road winding and twisting its way between, encircle Coroico and offer an astonishing panorama.

The new road was to be our route on a different day. On this day, the Bolivian authorities again threw in a twist and closed our afternoon route until 6.00pm. There was little alternative but to get as comfortable as possible with several hundred of our closest Bolivian friends parked in long, long queues on the edge of the dirt road and wait until we were waved through. Roscco and John couldn't cop the idea of sitting around and piss-bolted back to Coroico to organise accom, just in case the Bolivian authorities decided not to open the road at all.

That's what they said they were doing, but there seemed to be a lot of giggling and bench racing about that ride when they returned.

The road was opened later, and the result was a spirited and exciting sprint in the dark. The dust and maniac traffic on all sides livened things up all the way into the town of Caranavi, about two hours away.

This was where Mike Britton earned his second star for the trip. With no headlight, he stuck to TBAM's rear guard like a union leader to an Australian airline through the dust and darkness on a dirt road with occasional rocks, tunnels,

puddles and dust, until arriving at the destination.

Hoo-aah. He's Two-star Mike.

CITY LIFE

Early the next morning it came to light that Mauricio's XR650 wasn't running well, and after another session of diagnosis it was decided to put the bike on the support vehicle. The day's ride was originally scheduled to head towards the town of Sorata, but with the CRF becoming more and more difficult to start and the XR650 in questionable shape, the plan was changed. The city of La Paz with its teeming population of a million, huge commercial centre, hotels, nightclubs, markets and department stores, fills the crater of an extinct volcano. It also has a good Honda dealership and – gasp – lots of really hot water! The route was easy and clear, so Cory and John handed Mauricio the guide bike and jumped in the support vehicle, and everyone carried on as happily as an Argentinian immigration official rooking a poor sod Aussie tourist for an "entry tax".

The road that'd been negotiated in the dark the previous night turned out to be a heap of fun and very picturesque in the daylight, even though the warm tropical rain sprinkled down. Of course, the road was closed again for the morning, but the forewarned riders spent the time drinking coffee and soaking up the colour of the local shops and markets of Caranavi before heading out in time to see the road opened at noon.

From the dirt road it was on to the "new" road that replaced The Death Road, and if there's a Heaven for sports-bike riders, this must be it. The swooping, smooth asphalt swerves back and forth through the mountains, begging a rider to brake late, carry more speed and, most of all, look around. It's a sublime combination of scenery and tarmac, even on a dirt bike.

All those smooth curves and magnificent bridges are there for a reason of course, and the reason is because the road crosses another mountain pass. In this case it travelled up through 4500m, and, on this day, into some seriously thick, heavy, cold, impenetrable fog.

The ride across the top of the pass was as much a test of willpower as anything, with visibility down to just a few »»»



A GREAT CREW GETS HIGH. ON THE FIRST HIGH PASS ON THE MORNING OF THE FIRST DAY, FROM LEFT, BAZ REIHER, MIKE BRITTON, DAVE AND SUE GREENSLADE, MIKE ROSS, ROBIN GOLDSACK, JOHN WRY AND MAURICE LIMA. JAN REIHER WAS OFF TO ONE SIDE MUNCHING ON LOCAL PRODUCE AND ADMIRING THE VIEW.



metres, the cold biting and savage and the bikes barking harsh, abrasive blasts through their exhaust as they struggled to fire in the oxygen-poor air. Cresting the height of the pass was like flicking a switch. The green, lush jungles of the Amazon disappeared and were replaced with brown, sparse desert that seemed to stretch to impossible horizons in every direction.

Rolling down the inside of the volcanic crater into La Paz the CRF finally gasped its last and subsided quietly beside the road.

So it seemed.

Those bloody Kiwis weren't accepting that. They insisted on pushing the bastard faster and faster down the steep road until at last, out of boredom (probably), the cantankerous little motor struggled into life and hauled bike and rider through the teeming city to near the incredibly luxurious El Consulada Hotel.

Unfortunately, it was only "near" the hotel. The bike had to

be pushed the last few hundred metres along the bustling city footpaths, and somehow ended up being ridden down the stairs of an office building through the late-afternoon commuters. It was very irresponsible behaviour, and Mike Britton should be ashamed of himself for suggesting it.

Then it was the rider who subsided quietly beside the road and into a soft, warm bed where cappuccinos were delivered by room service.

Mmm...cappuccino from room service – a highlight of any adventure.

CLOSE SHAVE

John and Baz had whisked the two troublesome bikes off to the dealership the afternoon of arrival, and nothing could be decided until it was known whether they'd be returned, so

everyone was left with some free time the following morning.

Some shopped, some slept in, and some caught up on email and phone messages. TBAM was looking a little shaggy and there was some muttered comment from the group about a shave being in order, so a barber was found in the city's markets. Everything was going well until the barber whipped out a large pair of scissors and went to work on the TBAM nose hairs, at which time the resultant hilarity of the onlookers made the whole operation just a little too risky and play was suspended.

Geez.

The Man From Ironbark himself wouldn't've hacked that lot.

SUPREME

About mid-morning John roared into view on the CRF, valves sorted and engine purring like a kitten, and Cory had made some decisions about the route under the altered circumstances. Mauricio's XR650 wouldn't be available again for the duration of the tour, but one rider was finishing early due to commitments elsewhere, and his bike would be available. So everyone kitted up and roared off, now heading for Sorata and the iconic Lake Titicaca.

Another blast up through 4000m and then everyone descended to the shores of this incredible lake.

It's not easy to describe a freshwater lake of this size. All we can say is, imagine a sea, the far shore invisible because of the distance, but fresh water instead of salt. That's Titicaca. In the crisp, clear air, the blues of the sky and ocean were incredible.

Lunch was fresh-caught trout from the lake, and then a leisurely run down an unsealed road into the beautiful, serene village. The attraction of Sorata isn't immediately obvious because it's so quiet and tranquil. But then you realise: that's the attraction. It's a postcard-perfect site cradled between tall and rugged mountains. The smell of herbs from the gardens and the crisp taste of snow from the heights fill the place with a heady aroma, and the atmosphere is perfect to sit back and relax.

And everyone did...until the pizzas arrived.

Commercial pizza in a village as small as Sorata was a big, but very welcome, surprise and everyone took full advantage. The Hostel Las Piedras, the guesthouse accommodation for the night, was a true sanctuary of peace and quiet, offering fabulous views and comfortable rooms. The place must be an absolute mecca for artistic types from around the world.

Not bad for grubby adventure riders, either. >>>



1. Every village has its church and "centro" – the central square and meeting place. Cory, John and Rosco take advantage of the shade.

2. It takes a lot to get a Kiwi to concede a bike won't go, but it does happen...eventually.

3. The architecture of even the simplest drain can date back far beyond Australia's recorded history.

4. The world's tallest statue of Christ rises above Cochabamba. It may not be as famous as the one in Rio, but it's just a poofteenth taller.

5. All things are available if you can find the right part of the market. All the plumbing supply shops are together in one place, all the clothing stalls together in another and so forth.

6. The ferries on Lake Titicaca were a tad worn and flexy. It was hard to be sure whether the creaking was the boat or TBAM's editor's knees.



KICKING ON

After the leisure and relaxation of Sorata it was a revitalised group that set forth the next morning for Copacabana, a popular tourist destination on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

The road in to Sorata was also the road out, so it was back up and over the pass, then down to the lake itself and the apparently ancient and very flexible ferries that ply back and forth. Watching the bows of the ferry wriggle and flex and hearing the timbers creak and groan as they ride the rippling water is an adventure itself.

This was where Mike Britton earned his third star, by the way. TBAM's CRF began squealing like a Qantas passenger who's paid for his ticket in advance. The oil was checked and there seemed to be heaps, so the screaming, tortured gearbox sounds were a mystery. Then Mike piped up with, "Don't these things have separate gearbox and engine oil?"

D'oh.

With a little oil in the gearbox everything became smooth and sweet again.

The asphalt road into Copacabana is another glorious, gently winding stretch over a low pass and down to the town, where once again travellers from all nations mixed in the streets.

A few riders arrived ahead of the rest and IT legend Mauricio Lima went to check out the accom. He arrived back to inform everyone that they could stay there if they wanted, but he was going somewhere where they had WiFi and satellite TV – it was the night of the Rugby World Cup final, after all.

The Kiwis began frothing at the mouth and lumping in their trousers at the thought of the footy, and there was never really much discussion needed. In short order everyone was installed at the plush-o Hotel Gloria with views across the lake, Internet and mobile-phone access, cable TV and every convenience needed by hardcore adventure riders.

Dog bless you, Mauricio.

The fabulous weather continued, and while some of the group went for a boat trip on the lake to see "the floating islands" (which they didn't see), Baz went for a little blast on the BMW to see if he could find anything interesting.

Everyone met for dinner to exchange news from the pleasant afternoon and prepare for the footy that night, when the Kiwis were up against some other team (the Kiwis won, apparently).

FLYIN' HIGH

Another beautiful sunny morning saw everyone heading away from the lake and on to an old stone "road" Baz had discovered the day before.

TBAM will say little about this section. Having watched Baz sail up the road on a BMW F800GS with his wife Jan a pillion passenger, we'd prefer not discuss our own efforts on a 250cc enduro bike – except to say we'd've been fine if the sun hadn't been in our eyes.

In any case, the views from the top were again spectacular, and in short order everyone was following the support vehicle back along the road and on to the Altiplano.

We'd been touring back and forth along the Altiplano – literally the "high, flat place" – on and off during the ride, and it's yet another fascinating aspect of Bolivia.

Averaging around 3750m elevation, the Altiplano is a flat space plonked in the middle of the Andes. It stays at around 3750m for hundreds of kilometres, and the roads across it don't vary much to the right or left, either. The horizon is 360 degrees of snow-capped mountains, and the air is as clear as thin air can be.

It's yet another beautiful place in a country made up entirely of staggeringly beautiful places, and it was here the first of many punctures on Dave and Sue's DR came about.

This bike was to prove a typical DR on this trip. It motored along, fuss-free and with no fanfare, through the altitude changes, the wet, the cold and the humidity, and just kept going. Dave and Sue handled the bike well – except for when it fell off the stand and busted some plastic – but it just coped. Easy.

The puncture was repaired and everyone was back on the road in short order, heading back to La Paz. Mauricio and Mike Britton were leaving the tour early in La Paz, so the plan was to drop them there, put TBAM's CRF on the support vehicle (its valves had begun to fail again after only a single day), and enjoy a little more luxury.

Somewhere along the way Cory and John received word there was to be another road closure, this time on the only road out of La Paz.

With people due on flights the following day out of Cochabamba, Cory decided the best bet was to log a long day down the asphalt to get past the road closure. The bonus

was that allowed an approach to Cochabamba across the Altiplano desert via a long series of dirt backroads he wanted to check out.

That sounded like a great plan to everyone, and soon enough all – minus Mike Britton and Mauricio, and after more punctures on the DR and Mike Ross' XR – were watching an incredible display of brass bands and street dancers pounding and crashing its way through the streets of Oruro.

If that seemed a little strange on a weeknight, it was nothing compared to watching *Pirates Of The Caribbean* dubbed into Spanish back at the hotel.

Arrgh caramba!

ADIOS, AMIGOS!

The final day of the ride proved to be the most challenging.

It wasn't anything to do with terrain, because every minute of every day had been blessed with terrain offering heart-stopping sights and experiences. Nor was it because of elevation, because between the natural process of acclimatisation and the careful use of medications carried by the Bolivia Bound guys that hadn't really been a huge problem.

It was the excitement of travelling a new road into places none of us had been before. That and the persistence of the poxy flat tyres.

Both Sue and Dave's DR and Rossco's XR were continually having tyre troubles, and although it didn't detract much from riding the stunning brown desert, riverbeds, rail lines and other amazing Bolivian treats, it meant a very late finish to the day.

No-one really minded that too much. Lunch was a picnic of Oreo biscuits, fresh fruit and cold drinks from the support vehicle in a shady grove on a dry riverbank, and in general it was as carefree and leisurely day as any adventure rider had ever hoped for. A flat on the support vehicle was a pest and needed a conga line of people taking turns on the manual pump, but it wasn't a big deal either, really. It was just one of those things.

So it was late evening as the dusty, tired and well-worn line of riders made its way through the Cochabamba traffic to the Hotel Monserrat, where it'd all started over a week before.

A week that held a lifetime of experience, staggering scenery and, most of all, fabulous riding in great company.

It doesn't get much better than that. 🍷

THIS TRACK JUST OUTSIDE COPACABANA WAS TOO MUCH TO RESIST, BUT WAS JUST FOR FUN. THE SMOOTH DIRT ROAD NEAR THE BOTTOM OF THE PIC IS AVAILABLE TO THE LESS ADVENTUROUS.

