

Andy and Fiona's adventures in South America

Part1 Patagonia

By  CYCLE'S designer and test pilot

Andy Blance

I will never fly on New Year's Day again! It was difficult to get a lift to the airport, the check in staff obviously didn't want to be there and one of Delta's supervisors spotted that our bikes were oversized packages...that cost us \$200 each! We were upset by this because Hector and Bertha (our Thorn eXXp bikes) were packaged as small as non S+S coupled bikes would allow...wheels out, seat post out and pedals and forks off. At less than 40Kg, we were well within the 64Kg limit, which had made the flights via the US seem so attractive.

After a long flight to Atlanta, with poor in-flight entertainment, we were thumb-printed and sat waiting, for many hours, for our connecting flight to Santiago de Chile. We passed the time watching CNN, horrified, as the true extent of the devastation caused by the Asian Tsunami, a week before (Boxing Day 2004) became known.

The smiling check in staff at LAN Air allowed our considerably over-weight packages (25Kg allowance) onto the internal flight to Punta Arenas without surcharge.

The brightly painted, weather board houses of Punta Arenas glowed under a bright blue, cloudless sky. We unloaded the taxi outside our pre-booked accommodation, Hostal Al Fin Del Mundo; the air felt warm and almost balmy...not what we had been expecting at all!

We applied a thick coating of P20 (a non-sticky, alcohol based sun screen) necessary because of the fierce intensity of the sun's rays, due to the large hole in the ozone layer. As we walked around the town, in our shorts and tee shirts, exploring the sights and historic buildings, I couldn't help but notice that all the other "tourists" were wearing long trousers, thick socks, big boots, thick fleeces and heavily-constructed waterproof jackets...it seemed too much to hope, that they were all just a little bit odd.

We spent a few days chilling out and gradually collecting all the provisions we would need for the first stage of our journey, including plenty of rice, lentils, cardboard cartons of (surprisingly good) red wine, porridge, honey and, most importantly, tea bags (fortunately readily available throughout Chile) "Meths" (Alcohol de Quemar) for the Trangia had been difficult to obtain, so we carried 4 litres of it. We even managed a tourist trip to Isla Magdalena, in an open car ferry (!) to see the colonies of Magellanic penguins.

A change in plan

As we looked across the Straights of Magellan, we decided not to take the ferry to Tierra del Fuego for a fortnight's tour, therefore we put plan "B" into operation...we were keen to spend more time in the Andes.

When we told our hosts, at the hotel, of our intention to cycle north back to Santiago via Puerto Natales, eyebrows were raised and we were told, "There is nothing but pampas between here and Puerto Natales". We replied that it was always our intention to see a little of the Pampas, that we had done this kind of thing before and anyway, we knew that there were no big hills for a while and that furthermore, despite our age, we would be fit by the time we reached the big climbs. Although confident in our abilities, I felt a little uneasy, because I somehow sensed that the ride to Puerto Natales was not necessarily going to be the easy warm up that we had imagined. As we cycled beside the lupins, past the last of the brightly painted houses, we spotted our first Condors circling above. Soon raindrops started to fall, followed swiftly by sleet and freezing rain. It was a bizarre experience, because the sky above us was still bright blue, the rain must have come from the black clouds several kilometres away! We were putting on our waterproofs, when an Argentine trucker stopped and offered us a lift. He was surprised by our polite refusal and explained that he would be in Puerto Natales before dark and he had an empty truck, rope to tie our bikes down and a flask of hot water for Mate. I explained that we really did want to cycle and in my best Spanish agreed that, "Si, soy loco."



The Southern Pampas

I honestly don't know if we would have accepted the lift if it had come along half an hour later. The wind picked up, or perhaps we just emerged from the shelter of the hills? In retrospect, the proximity of the hills is probably the reason for Punta Arenas being used as a safe haven for centuries, if not millennia!

By the time we reached the edge of the exposed Pampas, the road surface had changed to ripio (gravel and loose stone surface) and we were struggling to maintain 4mph into the three-quarter head wind. We were constantly being blown down the steep camber of the road and into the deep, loose gravel at the road's edge. We had always known that the prevailing wind was from the West and we had concluded that, as we were travelling north, it would be no worse than if we were travelling south.

We had many cyclists' reports of riding South, but it was at this moment that we realised that the bottom of South America was bent around (by the wind?) and that we were, in fact, cycling north west! We pitched our tent in a dip by the side of the road. Being non-pressurised, we considered the Trangia safe enough to use inside one of our Stalon's porches. We made a quick meal of rice and lentils and washed it down with a mug of red wine. We were grateful that Mr. Hilleberg makes his tents so strong, as the winds, gusting to over 60mph, battered us all night long. We thought that the storm would blow itself out and this seemed to be the case when we emerged in the morning to set about making porridge with honey and a pint each of very strong tea. Unfortunately, settled weather is the exception rather than the rule in Southern Patagonia. The wind can blow for weeks at a time, if it wants to but it often seems to like to take a little rest early in the mornings.

(We later found out, from a reliable source, that, on the Southern Pampas, at this time of year, 40mph winds with gusts to 50mph were normal. We were also told that 80mph winds, with gusts to 100mph, were not unusual and, in fact, more common than flat calm days!) After several days' cycling into very strong winds, we were nearly deaf from wind roar. When we reached the fishing port (and tourist destination) of Puerto Natales, with its little boats being tossed about in gales and driving rain, we were absolutely determined to find some quiet shelter, with a real roof over our heads, for a night or two! The little family hotel boasted a stuffed Puma in the lounge, it was larger (as were its teeth, claws and the width of its bite) than I'd imagined. We were casually informed that the last person known to be killed by a Puma, in this region, was, in fact, a Puma hunter...that sounded reasonable enough to us.

Our next objective was Parque National

Torres del Paine. Fiona had read of a "back road" route which would lead us into the Torres, via the Milodon's cave and a rickety bridge (apparently down to a single plank). This would surely be one of the highlights of our trip. We set off, travelling north, loaded heavily with fresh provisions, up the grinding climb out of Puerto Natales, gradually turning into the wind again. From our exposed vantage point, we could see the vast expanse of shimmering silver gold Fjords and misty green islands to the west. To the North, we could see, on the far distant horizon, the masses of snow covered peaks that made up the Campo del Helio Sur and, in the mid distance, stood the spectacular pinnacles of the Torres. As we lost altitude we received some shelter from the Westerlies and my computer's speed crept into double figures (Fiona reached double figures before me... her computer being calibrated in kilometres!)

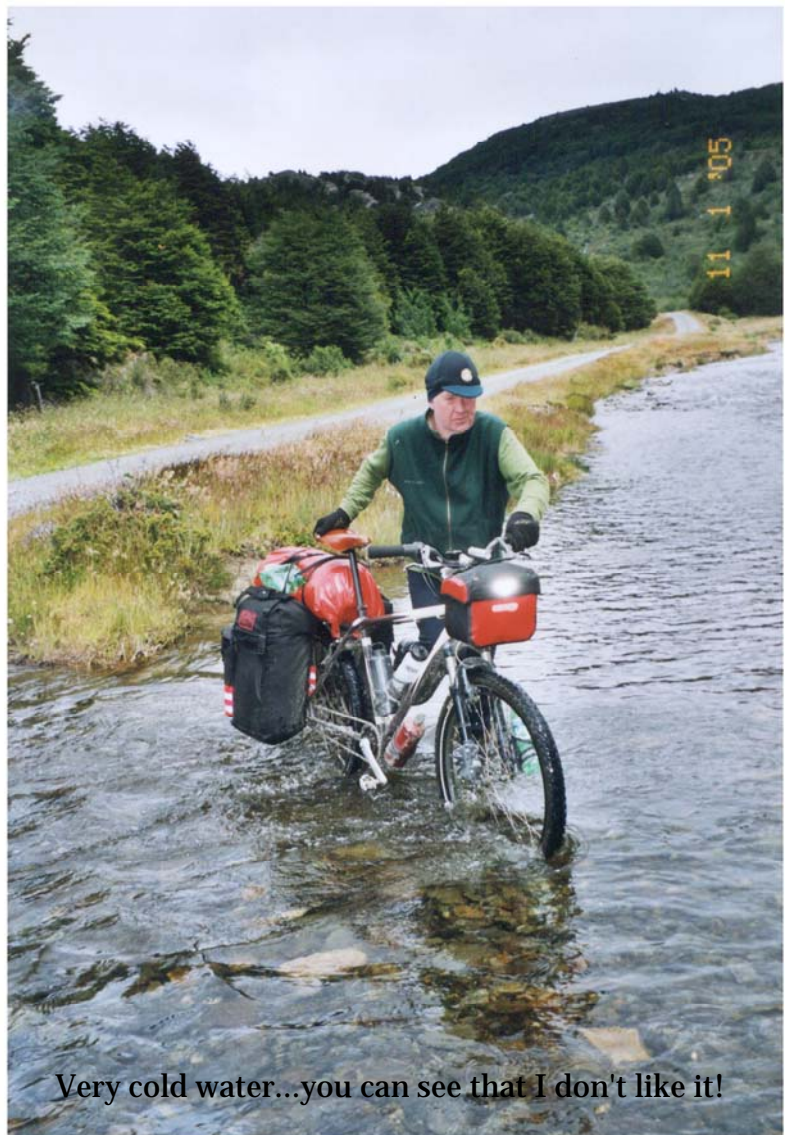
The Milodon's cave was very interesting...but how an accurate, life size, twenty foot high, fibreglass replica of the giant sloth could be made from evidence obtained from a bit of fur and some pooh was a mystery to us. We journeyed on; the wind having dropped altogether now, determined to put in a long day whilst the going was good. We passed a sign saying (we thought) "road ahead closed" certainly we had seen no traffic coming the other way. "It must be the bridge" we thought. I had been worried about this bridge when Fi was "planning" the route back in Blighty, so much so that I had invested in 25m of thin climbing rope...in case we had to wade across the river...and it was looking as if we might. Just as twilight beckoned, we saw a vehicle approaching that contained 3 German lads. They informed us that they had been turned back by a warden as the Army was dynamiting the road ahead to make a new vehicular route into the Torres. The warden soon appeared in his Jeep and the German lads translated for us. "We could not go on tonight; perhaps the Army may let us through tomorrow, if they were not dynamiting...or they may not.

We could stay at the Wardens house if we liked." The warden grinned at us and nodded. We were so tired that our limited ability to speak Spanish had been replaced with half remembered French, so the thought of having to make any polite conversation was daunting. We concluded that we would make embarrassingly poor guests, so we opted for a

tent in the woods, pitched upon spongy mossy grass, by the side of a crystal stream, fed by ice melt, from the neighbouring snowy topped mountains. After a quick meal, of rice and lentils and a mug of red wine, we slept the sleep of the righteous!

In the morning we discussed our options over a bowl of porridge and honey and a pint of very strong tea, it seemed as if we either had to backtrack 70Km and take the long route into the Torres, or try and blag it past the Army. There were only 40Km between us and the river. Fi was in favour of going on...I was not so sure but I didn't want to be a kill-joy. In my new spirit of adventure, I postulated the theory that, as we couldn't speak Spanish well enough to plead our case, our best bet was to just smile and wave and cycle through... unless we were stopped. It made sense at the time! The rain had started and we pulled on our brightly coloured waterproofs and wet socks.

We cycled past another road closed sign and when a large crane swayed towards us, carrying a massive concrete pipe, we pulled off the road...just to show how sensible we could be. We waved at the soldiers in their tented barracks, they waved back. We came to a big sign clearly saying "cerrado" and "dynamite para 20km." We hesitated and some soldiers in a tractor, towing a large bright red box trailer nodded us through. I took careful note of my computer reading. We crossed a knee deep ford...thank goodness for the wet socks...thank goodness for Rohloff! The track became a series of short, very steep hills paved in blasted rock. The Schwalbe Marathon XR tyres gripped well enough and I was glad that we'd chosen 2.25". The tractor almost caught us on the climbs but we dropped it on the descents, thanks to our suspension forks. I was very pleased with Hector and Bertha's prowess, carrying 35kg each, on this, the most severe terrain imaginable and I quietly congratulated myself for their



Very cold water...you can see that I don't like it!

spot-on design. It was obvious to me that the tractor was bringing the dynamite and, if we kept ahead of it, we would be allowed through... the race was on! I really can't describe how severe the route was... on occasion we had to double push the bikes up some of the 30 degree slopes of loose rock but we kept ahead of the tractor! A large Army lorry came the other way, its big diesel engine roaring as it clawed its way along in the lowest of its splitter box gears. We waved...the occupants waved back. The tractor was, by now, a long way behind and we could no longer see it. The roaring lorry came past us again, in the other direction, we waved and smiled...they waved and smiled. We passed another sign saying "Dynamite" and another. We soon noticed that it had stopped raining and we stopped to remove our waterproof shorts and tops. The lorry came back towards us and stopped near us, we gave and received the waving smile and a passenger got out, carrying surveying equipment but he didn't speak...which seemed odd. We had ridden 20Km since the "dynamite para 20km." warning sign and we carried on for another 10km, before we felt it was definitely safe to stop. We were very hungry and we scoffed some cheese and biscuits; we congratulated ourselves for being so "daring" and we sat admiring the bikes and discussing how well they had behaved. We plodded on, feeling very tired now and very aware that the ordeal of the single-plank-bridge, over a (potentially) roaring, river was still to be negotiated. Fiona noticed a hole in the ground, with a bit of branch poking out, then another and another. "It's just holes that the

extremely stable and still perfectly safe. The explosive was not ready to be detonated and anyway, there would be a loud Claxton horn sounded, before any explosion. All the same it was a bit of a worry, there were sheer rock faces to our left, dense undergrowth to our right, which sometimes disappeared into a vertical drop and ahead of us, we could frequently see the clouds swirl around peaks of the Torres in the distance.

Fiona stopped for a pee and we decided to eat a couple of biscuits. We had stopped for no more than a couple of minutes when, very close to us (perhaps 200m away) there was the most almighty explosion that I have ever heard! The ground shook and seconds later we could hear huge rocks falling back to earth...there had been no Claxton! For several more seconds smaller rocks fell, some were very close!

Confidence, in my knowledge of explosives, had evaporated; should we turn back...past the laid charges? Should we sit tight and hope? Should we go forward? I thought it unlikely that there would be a second explosion...there was no chance that any detonating wires would have survived such a blast...so forward it was!

We jumped on Hector and Bertha and pedalled furiously, past lots of holes with wires emerging and onward, through the thick acrid smoke and dust, past large smouldering rocks which had been deposited all over the road.

Through the smoke, we could see that the road in front of us was blocked by a massive pile of debris, about 50m long and 3m high,



The "Dynamite road" had very steep climbs!

sappers have drilled ready for placing a charge" I said. Soon the holes no longer had branches sticking out...they had wires sticking out! I used to work with explosives and I knew that these wires had yet to be connected to a common wire, before the charges could be detonated. I told Fiona this and assured her that there was no danger...whilst this was not an ideal situation (!) the explosive was

which was strewn with smoking rocks. At the far end of this pile a large, tracked earthmover was moving the enormous rocks with its gigantic yellow bucket; I knew that they wouldn't set off a charge on the other side of the machine.

Two minutes ago we were exhausted, now we were both pumped up and buzzing...adrenaline is an awesomely powerful drug!

There would be very few people, in an English mountainbike park, who would have dared to have ridden over that pile of rocks on a hard-core mountainbike. We pointed Hector and Bertha at the rocks and, with over 35Kg each in the rear bags, we pedalled hard at them. managed, by both pushing down and pulling up hard on our SPD pedals, to claw, hop, jump, spin, slide and bounce our way through, without incident. Our hubs' gears changed instantly and precisely, where necessary, the frames tracked beautifully...indeed at no time did I even contemplate falling off, putting a foot down or allowing Hector to come to a halt!

We negotiated the obstacle and waved at the operator of the machine...he nearly fell off his seat!

We were not going to stop now, not until we were over the river and safe in the national park. We rode the wave of adrenaline, feeling like super-beings, past more dynamite signs, up and down many short, steep gravel slopes, hoping the effects of the adrenaline wouldn't run out before we reached the plank-bridge. Suddenly we found ourselves descending a finely surfaced, broad, gravel road, which led onto a concrete bridge, wide enough for 3 cars; the centre span of which, crossed a furious river in full spate. We dismounted and ducked under the heavy chain at the far side of the bridge, from which hung a little sign saying "Cerrado" and we laughed at the huge, retro-reflective road sign, already positioned to direct future traffic across the bridge to Puerto Natales!

We walked back to the middle of the bridge and looked at the water...we could never have waded across that...the climbing rope made a very useful washing line that evening (and for the rest of the holiday). We camped "wild" in an overgrown orchard, which belonged to an elderly Chileano, who had joints of lamb, not apples, hanging from the trees near his canvas shelter. He had a look of total contentment, as he sat, with his back protected from the wind and a blazing fire of apple wood to highlight, in amber, his deeply wizened, brown features.

We had horses, friendly dogs and the southern stars for company that night.

As we ate our rice and lentils and washed them down with mugs of red wine, we looked north, beyond a private bridge, over another river, not 600m away. There we could see the lights of luxury cabins, expensive 4 x 4s, gleaming beneath their layers of dust, were parked outside and the wealthy tourists inside were, no doubt, enjoying their own adventure holiday.

We slept like logs!

The next morning, gazing with pride and admiration at Hector and Bertha, whilst sitting, eating a bowl of porridge and honey and sipping a pint of very strong tea, we felt the mountains resonate to the sound of a whole series of explosions!



Notice the water spouts on the lake!

Part 2.Torres del Paine to Futaleufu **Winds, strong winds and yet more wind...oh** **and some fabulous mountains and glaciers.**



Can you feel the strength of the wind?

With the sounds of the explosions still ringing in our ears, we broke camp and departed for Glacier Grey. The wind rose in severity with each passing minute and, by the time we reached the turn off for the glacier it really was blowing a hooligan. The rough dirt road to the glacier was directly into the wind and we were literally blown backwards by the icy gusts. Although Glacier Grey is considered to be an awesome sight, we knew that we would be seeing many more glaciers on this stage of our journey, some even larger...so we abandoned the 17 Km side trip into the wind and continued on towards the Torres, battling with the ferocious sidewind. Whenever a gust hit us we would be blown across the road and down the camber into the deep loose gravel. Every attempt to steer the bike up the camber met with the same result, the front tyre washed out and we came to an abrupt halt!

When we eventually made it to the camp site at Pehoe, the warden ran up to us excitedly and after telling us we were mad...people don't cycle here, he insisted we follow him up a steep climb to a viewpoint, where the peaks of Las Cuernos de Torres del Paine could be seen, standing magnificent in the lengthening evening shadows. Awestruck, we soaked in the views, little realising at the time, what a rare privilege it was, at this time of year, to see these pinnacles without their woolly hats on! We felt as if we were at the roof of the world but actually we were less than 200m above sea level!

We had a shower in glacial water, heated by a wood burning boiler, cooked our usual fare and snuggled into the tent as the wind continued to roar through the night. Our plan, for the next day, was to cycle to the camp site Las Torres Chileano and walk up to the base of the Torres themselves.

We set off at the crack of noon, into a raging, swirling wind on a smooth, roller coaster dirt road with the Cuernos looming in front of us and its peaks playing peek-a-boo with us from behind clouds. The wind busied itself making 20m high water spouts on the emerald, azure and turquoise lakes. To begin with we had some shelter from the worst of the wind, except when we had to go over the exposed tops of the short steep hills. Eventually we lost this shelter and were exposed to the wind's full fury.

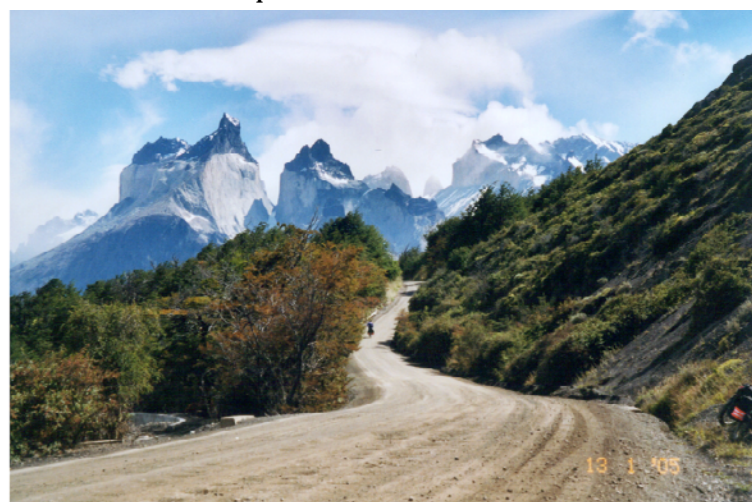
I had been looking forward to reaping the benefits of a tailwind since the beginning of our holiday. You can see headwinds coming, you can see sidewinds coming but you can't necessarily see the tailwinds coming! Suddenly I was hit in the back by a massive wall of power. I clung to

the bars...it was as if I was on a powerful motorcycle with the throttle stuck open! Luckily I still had some control over the steering as I was blown up a steep gravel slope. Even though I was braking as hard as I dared on the loose surface, I was still gathering speed...I fully expected to take off, Mary Poppins style, at the summit and I prepared myself for the inevitable...which somehow never happened; instead I rapidly learned the skills of bike surfing on a three-quarter tail wind. The wind would slam into our huge rear bags and throw us forwards and side ways, by leaning heavily into the wind and counter-steering, it was possible to accelerate rapidly, in more or less a straight line. On one col we saw a new Mercedes coach with its windscreen blown in! The French passengers cheered us as we surfed past.

Our journey took us on the road to Cerro Castillo where we encountered even more fierce sidewinds. These gusts took us from one side of the road to the other in an instant...it was very scary. We were blown off our bikes several more times. It took us over an hour of hard labour to cover one kilometre of a particularly exposed stretch, where two mountains created a funnel, the wind was so strong here that when a gust came we had to get off our bikes, lay them down and lie on top of the panniers...otherwise the bags, with bike attached, would be blown down the road. During these gusts, we had stones the size of hazelnuts (along with sand and gravel) thrown into our faces, as the wind whipped the top off the road.



These pics of Las Cuernos were taken within minutes of each other...look how quickly the clouds change!



In this amazing landscape the wind could come from practically any direction...its imminent arrival was announced by the grasses flattening ahead but there was never an early warning of tailwinds! On one straight downhill slope, I was braking fiercely because of a strong tailwind when I ran into an even stronger headwind which brought me to an immediate standstill. Bewildered, I walked back up the road and, sure enough, there was a strong tailwind, I turned and walked 30m back down the road and yes, there was a strong Head wind! We stopped for a picnic in the small quiet pocket of still air between these two opposing winds.

We reached Las Torres and camped there for a few days. We completed the walk up to the emerald glacial lake of Mirador las Torres at the base of the magnificent Torres themselves.

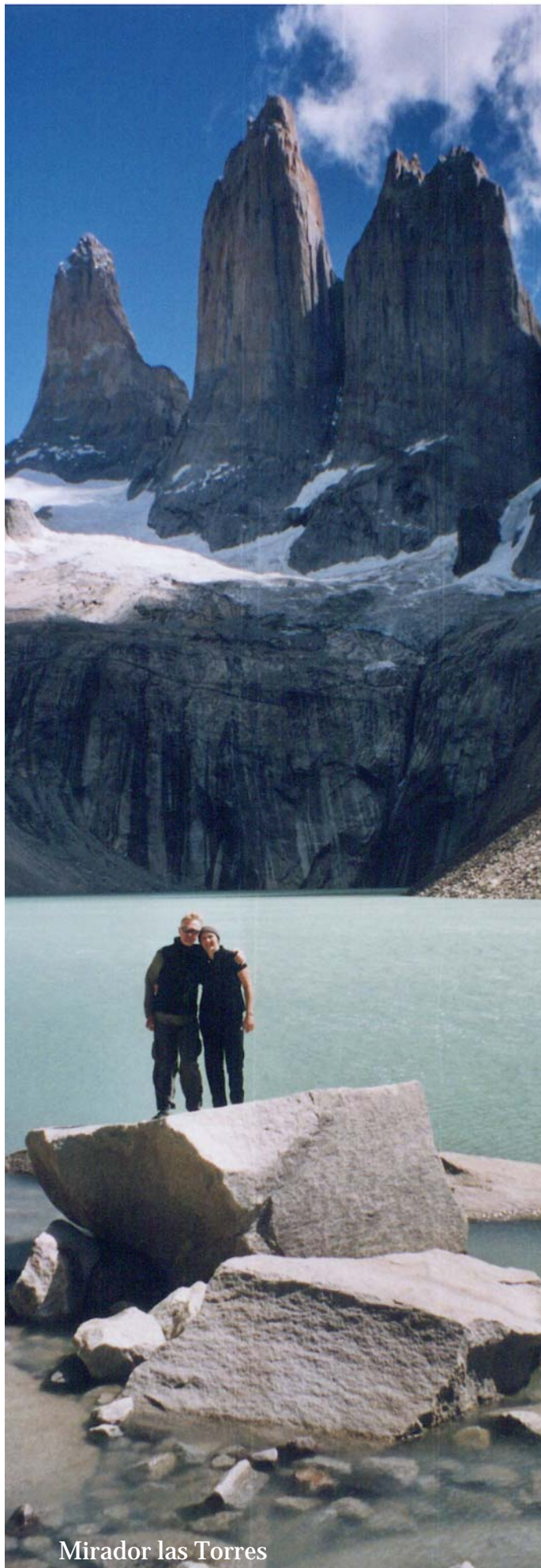
The walking track clung to the side of the mountain and, as a consequence, was quite well sheltered from the wind, although the guide books call this an exposed and windy route...they should try cycling here!

Although we were cycling through the most magnificent of landscapes, we can only truthfully say that we enjoyed the cycling in retrospect, the relentless wind really was too difficult and its constant roar made it impossible to think straight, or even fully appreciate our surroundings.

When we eventually reached Cerro Castillo we stopped in a café for a burger and coffee. We watched in amazement...the tables and chairs moved around, as the wind raised and lowered the lino covered floor. The staff were totally unconcerned and told us that this is "quite normal".

Accommodation for the night was ridiculously expensive, so we were advised to put our tent up in the Plaza, which we did, in the shelter provided by a massive wooden wall...the wind raged above our tent all night long.

We crossed into Argentina (a very low crossing) and battled our way through pampas to El Calafate, where we discovered the delights of Argentine beef, coffee, wines and service...your money really does go a long way and the quality is truly superb. In one restaurant we met a German couple who, after we agreed to join their birthday



Mirador las Torres

celebration with champagne and banter into the wee small hours, offered to drive us the 80Km to the Perito Moreno glacier the following day.

We arrived before dawn (and before the hoards of cheering tourists) and we heard the rifle-like-sound of the ice cracking before witnessing a huge chunk fall 60m into the lake. We quickly descended to the lowest viewing platform, where we saw signs telling us not to go beyond this point, as 32 tourists had lost their lives in the last 20 years. We were mystified but being very mindful of the recent dynamite experience, we had no hesitation in complying!

A field gun-like-noise rang through the crisp air and a massive piece of ice began its plunge into the lake...when it hit the water, it seemed to explode and "shrapnel" was flung forwards for 300 meters! There were much larger pieces waiting to be calved but there really was no way of knowing when they would fall. The Perito Moreno glacier is one of the few in the world that is still advancing, its 5Km long face is over 60m high and it is certainly worth getting up early to see!

More wind and pampas found us in the small town of El Chaiten with its Lonely Planet "frontier like feel". The town's camp site facilities were inadequate but its restaurants were good and its walking trails are world class. There was no ATM machine, or credit card facilities, in El Chaiten, when we were there and it was quite normal for people to be caught out and have to make the long journey back to El Calafate to get some cash! Mt Fitzroy (when visible) dominates the skyline and glows red at sunset (probably at sunrise too but we've gone to bed by then).

Cycling to the boat

We had decided to go to South America having heard stories of the Carratera Austral, an isolated road running through "alpine" scenery in Chile. Its southernmost point is Villa O'Higgins; we were approaching from the Argentine road network to the South of this. Fi's plan was to cross back into Chile to Villa O'Higgins...this would involve a cycle on rough roads to Lago Desierto, where we would take the small boat, which runs 3 times a day to the Argentine customs, on the North shore. (It is possible to follow the walking trail through the dense forest at the side of the lake for 20Km but there are so many fallen trees that it would be a chore with a loaded bike)

A mountain pass separates the Argentine Customs from the Chilean customs at Candelaria Mansilla. There is only one route, via a very steep track which can be negotiated on foot or by horse or in two journeys by crazy people with bikes and big bags.

From Candelaria Mansilla, the onward route is by boat across Lago O'Higgins to Villa O'Higgins. The trouble was the old boat, which serviced the estancias on the lake shore, only sailed infrequently...about every 7 to 10 days, whenever the captain felt like it. This boat was being replaced by a new boat which, although it was supposed to be, was not yet in service (Jan 2005). Fiona kept emailing the boat's agents, only to be informed that each promised sailing was postponed. The boat had to be brought by lorry to the Argentine end of the lake (Lago San Martin) and the lorry had broken down with the boat on it! The lorry bringing the spare parts also broke down and then the crew walked out, as they weren't getting paid.

To while away the days waiting for a sailing, we walked some of the trails around El Chaiten, we made friends with David and Christine, the owners of a pair of Mk 1 Thorn Nomads and I helped Martin, a German cyclist, with his rear wheel rim which was puncturing his tubes and destroying his tyres. After 3 days more waiting, we were told that the boat was in the water and would sail in a week. We calculated that, if we dawdled, it would take us 3 days to reach Candelaria Mansilla but that by visiting all the glaciers on the way we could stretch it out to 5 days. We knew that carrying 5 days Supply of food, meths and wine would not be too arduous. We hung around El Chaiten for 2 more days before setting off slowly up the valley, towards the boat. On returning to our bikes from a walk up a side trip, we saw Martin and 4 other German cyclists charging down the road. We asked if they had received an update on the boat and they said no, so we carried on slowly with our sightseeing. We met David and Christine at Lago Desierto and we camped there for a couple of nights, doing some more treks and fishing during the days.

The four of us cruised up Lago Desierto, which was spectacular, the Argentine customs were friendly and the climb up the track to the top of the mountain was as steep and as difficult as I feared it would be!



Lago O'Higgins



Pushing up the steep track

The track involved a long push up a narrow steep trench created by horses' hooves. It didn't matter that we would never have got enough traction; the track was too narrow to turn the pedals in anyway. There was no way we could manage the bikes and the bags in one trip! Once the bags and bikes were reunited we plodded on slowly, often through the mud, sometimes able to cycle and sometimes having to resort to pushing. We were devastated by the sight of a cyclist coming towards us. "How did you get here?" we challenged. The poor guy was obviously taken aback...it's not the sort of greeting you expect from fellow cyclists! "On the boat" he said. "When?" we barked in unison. "This morning" he replied. Calming down, we explained our situation and that our annoyance was really that we could easily have caught the boat, if we'd known about it! We soon settled into the normal sort of cyclists' conversation, giving and receiving tips about the road ahead. From the summit of the pass, the views over Lago O'Higgins were spectacular, a turquoise lake surrounded by snow capped mountains.



Lago O'Higgins

The descent was rocky, loose and steep...very hairy but totally exhilarating, Hector and Bertha are so stable, surefooted and agile that no other bike has been able to keep up with them on the down hills! The Chilean customs officer's wife gave us home made lemonade and we made our way to the camp site.

Waiting for the boat

The campsite was in a field owned by the Mansilla family; they were in daily radio contact with Villa O'Higgins and they told us that the next planned sailing was now to be in 5 days. Apparently it had been decided, at short notice, to have a test sailing and give all the locals a free trip, on the new boat, to Glacier O' Higgins. We suspect that Martin had been told this by the other Germans and sworn to secrecy, to ensure their place on the boat, in the event that space for cyclists was limited. Martin was being driven by his hormones to get to Santiago, to reunite with the Chilean Chica whom he had met whilst he was learning Spanish there.

We took stock of the situation; there was no food (or wine!) to be bought at Candelaria Mansilla and we now had 5 more days to wait

than we had planned for. We were in a remote corner of Chile, effectively on a peninsula, to the East there were wild mountains with no certainty of a through route. To the West there was the vast expanse of the Campo del Helio Sur...a massive ice sheet which has been traversed by fewer people than have been to the South Pole! To the North there was Lago O' Higgins, which is a vast cold lake. We could return South, to Argentina, and travel via El Chaiten to El Calafate and cycle the notorious Ruta 40 through yet more pampas, to (the town of) Perito Moreno, cross into Chile via Chile Chico and cycle south on the Carratera Austral to Villa O' Higgins. This would be a 1200Km journey to get just 30Km from where we were now sitting...we needed a boat!

Fortunately, although the Mansilla family had no supplies to sell, Grandma Mansilla was prepared to let us camp with half board. We ate the typical Chilean breakfast of home made bread, home made cheese and home made raspberry preserve. And we had meat and pasta or meat and potatoes for dinner. Fiona and I had enough of that essential for life...tea and milk powder! By pooling our resources

we were able to find something to eat for lunch. Why is it when you are sitting doing nothing, you need more meals than you do when you are engaged in arduous cycling? Is it because the body genuinely recognises this as an opportunity to replenish its reserves, or is it simply boredom? The view from our tent was sublime and we constantly gazed across the lake hoping to see a boat. I serviced all the bikes. Fi enlarged her tapestry. David took more photos and Christine read her book. David and I also engaged in ever more "Pythonesque" conversations and we all slept a lot! We spent about an hour after each meal talking with Suzanna and Roxanna Mansilla, teenage sisters at University in Concepcion; we learned a little bit more Spanish but we were mostly improving the girls' already quite good English. They asked very direct questions and we had great trouble explaining that although we all earned, what seemed like huge sums of money, it mostly all went in taxes and mortgages and on food. Sr. Mansilla only had to fell some trees, run a chainsaw through them and he could extend their home in whichever direction he desired, which he frequently did! The land, in their large vegetable and fruit gardens was very fertile and they owned more than 5000 hectares of rough land, mountains, rivers and glaciers, "as far as the eye can see on this side of the lake" the girls told us.



Waiting for the boat at the Mansillas' campsite...maintenance is easy with Rohloff's 14 speed hub.





The awesome Glacier O'Higgins...the face is 2Km long and 80m high!

Mmmm...beef!

We saw the Mansillas bring their cattle down from the mountain...we could hardly miss it they came right through the camp! We watched as they paired up the cows with their calves and then separated them again into two different pens...why? Eventually there were 2 cows left who had no calves; each of these cows was offered the services of two different bulls, one cow would have neither, she was lead away. We later watched as this cow was led into our camping field and the two ropes around her throat were pulled in two different directions by horses, the animal soon collapsed quietly to the ground and Sr. Mansilla cut the animal's throat. After a few minutes the carcass was dragged by the horses about from the blood.

We watched in awe as Sr. Mansilla, using only a 7" knife, first cut the skin off and, using the skin as a clean surface to work on, proceeded to neatly butcher the animal into joints and cuts. The dogs, cats and cycle tourists waited patiently to be thrown scraps. In 45 minutes it was all over, the joints hung in the trees and we had been presented with the kidneys and a large piece of liver, we scuttled off and cooked and ate them within the hour!

The flying Dutchman.

The night before the boat was due saw several more cyclists and walkers arrive at the camp site, apparently accurate information about the boat's progress was filtering through the web. One of these cyclists, Wilhelm, a tall, strong, Dutch, one time semi professional cyclist, in his late twenties, who was travelling fairly light on a mountainbike, was particularly condescending about our estimation of cycling on the Carratera...apparently he could easily cycle twice as far in a day! He was also rather rude about Hector and Bertha. As it turned out, we saw him many times over the next 10 days, sometimes he would whiz past us and bid us farewell, because he was going to really cover some distance that day, and wouldn't see us again. Then we'd catch up with him somewhere and he'd complain bitterly about something else that had gone wrong. We think that he had been travelling for too long and had become obsessed with arriving at his destination and had lost the ability to

enjoy the journey, nevertheless we ended up warming to him, I helped him rebuild his wheel, I straightened out his derailleur with my bare hands and I freed the links in his chain. Every component on his bike was almost completely worn out and they had all been new less than 7000km ago and his chain and cassette had been replaced again even more recently!

Finally he conceded that Hector and Bertha really were the perfect bikes for the middle aged to potter about the ripio on but of course he liked to cover greater distances in a day! The last we saw of him was as he waved to us from a bus window, his bike on the roof.

The new boat.

Finally the boat arrived...it was huge; it could have easily carried 50 cyclists and their bikes! We mused about the spectacle and disruption it must have created on the roads across the Pampas. The boat was going to Glacier O'Higgins before returning to Candelaria Mansilla and then onwards to Villa O'Higgins.

Fi and I went to the glacier, visiting estancias around the lakeshore, where we watched supplies being dropped off and lamb and legs of beef being collected. The glacier had a face 2Km long and was 80m high, (we were told) we drank "Jack Daniels" from a cup carved from 10,000 year old ice and caught too much sun on the 10 hour voyage. David and Christine stayed ashore and had a slap up beef lunch with the Mansillas and joined us for the voyage to Villa O'Higgins.

We had lost about 9 or 10 days waiting for the boat but, looking back, we are all pleased to have had the experiences at Candelaria Mansilla, we did get to start riding the Carratera at its very southern-most point and we also made firm friends with David and Christine, probably for life.

We bade farewell to David and Christine who knew that they would not keep up with us on their narrow 1.75" tyres and dropped bars. In any case, they had a different agenda, still having 5 months left before their flight home from La Paz, whilst Fi and I had just over 6 weeks to get to our flight from Santiago de Chile.

The Carratera Austral

The Carratera was the reason we had come to South America in the first place (Fi's planned route had just tacked on a bit at either end!). It is a route hastily blasted through wilderness in the eighties, at a time of great political tension between the military governments of Chile and Argentina. It was built for military vehicles. The 1200Km road comprises of:- terrible ripio, steep climbs and rickety bridges over glacial streams. In places the road clings to the cliff sides, with sheer, unprotected drops into the dense undergrowth below. There are stunning views at every turn.

The road runs parallel to the great ice fields, the Campo del Helio Sur and Campo del Helio Norte.

Nobody drives along this road at night and it offers probably the best wild cycle camping in the world...a flat pitch is usually to be found near a bridge, where plenty of space is reserved, for the time when another bridge needs to be built.

The Carratera is very "lumpy" and consequently very hard going but as the highest col is only 1100m there are no worries about altitude sickness. If you can ride 200Km a day on a lightweight bike, on a good surface, you can ride 100Km on a heavily loaded touring bike and if you can do that, you can ride 50Km on the ripio but 35-40Km will be much more comfortable, especially at the start!



Who needs tarmac and Armco?



A very tight bend!



The hanging Glacier...Ventisquero Colgante



Road works on the Carratera



Another beautiful lake



This water is very cold too!

Fortunately, although still windy, the winds on the Carratera are manageable...unlike the savage winds of the Southern Pampas.

The weather can be very bad, with heavy rain and low cloud...you need a bit of luck...we had lots of luck! We only had 2 days of rain and low cloud; in fact we recorded temperatures in the low 40's C for several days on the stretch alongside Lago General Carrera. It was a delight to be able to scoop up some icy cool, crystal clear water from the rivers and just drink it without filtering.

There are hamlets at regular intervals and many supermercados in each hamlet. This is a region where somebody's front room, if they had a extra packet of pasta to sell, could be called a supermercado. Although there was little choice, wine, tea, dried milk, porridge, rice, pasta and biscuits could always be found. The fruit and veg usually looked battered and bruised but it tasted delicious and any meat or eggs found were organic free range. There are hospedajes at regular intervals and it would be possible to ride the route without camping...but not as much fun and there would be a little more stress, I'm sure, because it is all but impossible to know how far you can ride each day. The maps are unhelpful, the weather unpredictable and there are a huge range of distractions...exciting flora and fauna, walks to glaciers and waterfalls, photo opportunities and chance meetings with cyclists or other people along the way.

We saw more glaciers than you could shake a stick at, including a fabulous hanging glacier, Ventisquero Colgante. We saw the most exquisitely beautiful lakes, in a variety of shades of blue and green. We cycled alongside the Rio Baker, a slow powerful, wide turquoise river and also beside roaring white waters. We frequently cycled with snow capped mountains on both sides of us. There are volcanoes and thermal springs to explore. We were lucky enough to see huemul (small deer, which are a national symbol and very rare). We frequently saw condors gliding effortlessly at great speed and eagles soaring overhead. There was a profusion of fuchsias along the roadside and humming birds were to be seen sipping nectar from them.

We visited Caleta Tortel, a fishing village clinging to the cliffs, with wooden walkways and stairways instead of roads. The walkways, fresh salmon and the constant sound of chainsaws are our abiding memories. This is where Prince William had worked with "Operation Raleigh". We cycled through Coyhaique, the largest town in this region and stocked up in a real supermarket but we were still pleased to leave it behind! The real beauty of this region is the enormity (and variety) of the landscape, the sense of space and the genuine feeling of being in wilderness and yet, at the same time, being in a very safe place. By that I mean, although the condition of the road was treacherous, the few vehicles that there were, all travelled slowly and were very courteous and there was never a moment's worry about criminal behaviour.

We encountered several more road works and witnessed many new bridges being built. Whilst we had the gears to cycle up anything, we had to "double push" the bikes up a couple of very loose climbs, when it became impossible to get traction. Fiona and I became expert at travelling at speed on the descents and although our front tyres really could have done with more "bite", we found that we could use the camber of the road and the deep "berms" to effect rapid changes in direction. I had a couple of scary moments in very deep gravel, there was no possibility of steering the bike or using the brakes at all; all I could do was let the bike find its own way through and hope for the best, luckily deep gravel slows a bike down rapidly!

Whoops!

Eventually we reached Villa Santa Lucia where we had to choose whether to continue on the Carratera Austral towards Puerto Montt, or turn right to Futaleufu...we still had 17 days of our holiday left and we chose the road to Futa. Within a few kilometres we found the most perfect wild campsite of the trip. The next day, as we rode the very rough and lumpy road, we saw the mighty Rio Futaleufu itself, wide fast, sometimes turquoise, sometimes much deeper blue and very often white foam! We stopped at a café and had coffee and empanadas and watched the rafters finishing their day's adventure. Shortly after this, possibly whilst daydreaming, Fiona found herself off camber on a fast right hand bend and lost the front of her bike, I heard her crash behind me; I stopped quickly and returned to find her buried under her bike with blood spurting from her head. She also complained of a sore hand and sore ribs. She was worried that she mightn't be able to use her right hand to change gear, I told her I could swap the shifter over to the left but secretly I knew that this was the end of cycling on this trip. I checked her for broken bones and moved her to a sitting position. Luckily I had a clean hanky and I cleaned up the gash in her scalp. She could see from my face that it was bad, "it'll need stitching" I said and I wondered how I could get her to the next camp site and which thread I would have to use, a vehicle trundled into view. It was a large 4 x 4 towing a trailer with several rafts and rafting equipment. I waved the vehicle down, "have you any space?" I asked. "No" came the reply. I removed the hanky from Fiona's head; "we'll make space" was the response.

The burly American rafters, from Idaho, gently carried Fiona into the front seat, I sat behind, Hector and Bertha lay in the rafts and the guys, whose seats we now occupied, clung to the outside of the vehicle. We were told that there was a small hospital in Futa and apparently, they were well practiced in stitching rafters up! One of the guys was highly trained in first aid and was alert to Fiona's condition.

The hospital saw Fiona immediately and, as they had an antique X ray machine they took some X rays, before inserting 6 stitches in her hairline. The Chilean doctor told her that no bones were broken; Fiona asked to see the X rays and pointed out the broken rib.

The American rafters helped us find a cabana with a bath; Fi couldn't take a shower because she had to keep the dressings dry.

I went rafting on the Futa, with an American outfit, on what is generally agreed to be the best white water in the Southern Hemisphere, we shot some grade #5+ rapids (the highest grading that is raftable). I had full US spec safety equipment and we had the company of a multitude of safety boats and kayaks. It was exciting but nowhere near as exciting as surfing the ripio on a loaded touring bike!

On another day Fi and I went fly fishing on the Futa, with a local guide, we ended up shooting grade #4 rapids without any safety equipment or safety boats...now that was scary! Unfortunately Fi pulled the break apart whilst casting and was forced to concede that she had to abandon any hope of riding the bike again, on this holiday.

Argentina by bus...a different kind of holiday.

After 6 days in the cabana, Fiona's ribs allowed us to get moving again. We got a lift in a big pickup, courtesy of more American rafters, to Esquel in Argentina, where we enjoyed one of the best 3 course meals we have ever had...for less than £15 (for the 2 of us!) including a glass of champagne each and a bottle of fine red (between us).

We caught the bus to the small, stylish city of San Carlos de Bariloche (Argentina's St Moritz) where we stayed in a small hotel for 3 nights. We enjoyed more good food, chocolate, fine ice creams and superb wines; Fiona managed a big walk in the mountain ski resort of Cerro Catedral, where we saw more than a dozen condors wheeling overhead. The views over Lago Nahuel Huapi, to the snow capped peaks of the Andes, were so spectacular that we vowed to return to this region.

We caught the night bus to Mendoza, a magnificent city, which has been producing wine for more than 500 years. Mendoza is particularly famous, nowadays, for its excellent red Malbec wine. We found an hotel and we wandered around the city, trying to hire a car to explore the high mountains but it needed to be large enough to carry our bikes and kit. We also wanted a one way hire, so that we could leave it in Santiago. Soon everything closed for siesta, apart from the restaurants. Whilst we were eating lunch in a small park, we became victims of a well rehearsed distraction robbery, in which Fiona lost her bag containing, camera (film...luckily), wallet (almost empty), "Icebreaker" felted merino wool vest (a great loss) and, worst of all...her passport!

Once we noticed the theft, we were immediately helped by a local, who was genuinely upset by our fate. He took us to the tourist office, who were very helpful, they asked if we had money...I still had my wallet, they made phone calls and sent emails to cancel Fi's cards. They even took us to the police station and made sure that we were able to report the robbery without delay and receive the necessary paperwork for an insurance claim. The Police assured us that it was a Bolivian gang that had robbed us.

The British Consulate could not help us, we had to deal with the embassy in Buenos Aires 1040Km away. The Embassy could issue a new passport, in 24 hours but they would have to send us the application form, we would have to return it and then they could send the passport. They thought it could all be done in about 7 or 8 days...the trouble was we now had 5 nights, until our flight from Santiago, which was 340Km in the opposite direction, over the Andes in Chile.

In need of cheering up, we spent a bit of a wild night eating, drinking and playing pool, until 5 in the morning, with some Irish American back packers. The next afternoon, unable to fly to BA without a passport, we decided to catch the night bus to Buenos Aires. We had fully reclining seats; it was the most comfortable 12 hour journey I have made. We went to the Embassy and completed the forms; Fiona's new passport would be ready at noon the next day. We saw as many of the sights as we could (BA is a beautiful city) and stayed up late again. The next day we collected the passport, saw some more sights and caught the night bus back to Mendoza. We spent time collecting the materials to make bike boxes and Fi got a bad case of food poisoning. We stayed in our room that night and the next day caught the bus to Santiago. The route over the Andes was spectacular. We passed close to Cerro Aconcagua, at 6960m it is the highest mountain in the world, outside the Himalayas but, as we later found out, it is only visible (from this road) at a single Mirador, 100m or so off the road. When we crossed the border at 3200m via the Las Cuevas tunnel, we crossed from summer into winter. There had been heavy snow during the night and the route, by which we had originally planned to return to Santiago, was impassable. The Paso Cristo Retendor (3900m) is the old, historic route over the pass. It was the only route from Mendoza to Santiago, before the tunnel was built.

As the plane took off, we knew that, God willing, we would be back the next year.

Notes on the lessons learned on this first trip.

- [1] The Ripio will destroy anything that is not 100% up to the job.
- [2] 2.25" tyres are much quicker on ripio than 1.75"
- [3] A front tyre with big side knobs is to be preferred, when travelling on Ripio.
- [4] Rohloff rules on the ripio, our hubs needed no maintenance and always functioned perfectly.
- [5] Sensible people never attempt to cycle tour on the far southern pampas in Southern Patagonia.
- [6] Argentina offers higher quality at (much) lower prices than Chile.
- [7] The further south you go, the more everything costs (except petrol).
- [8] The Argentines and Chileans are very helpful and very friendly.
- [9] Learning a bit more Spanish would make it easier to benefit from local helpfulness.
- [10] Don't crash your bike; it can curtail your cycling holiday.
- [11] If you do crash your bike, don't head butt big rocks.
- [12] When in real trouble look for an American rafter.
- [13] Don't take chances with dynamite!
- [14] When you can't ride them, bikes and panniers are a real hindrance to travel.
- [15] S+S couplings would make travelling with bikes by bus much easier.
- [16] The buses in Argentina are superb.
- [17] I prefer cycling to being in a bus.
- [18] No matter how crime free rural areas are, keep your wits about you in a big city.
- [19] If you must get robbed, go for a distraction robbery, rather than a mugging...they're safer.
- [20] If you lose a digital camera, with a big memory card, you've lost all your pics.
- [21] Even really good wine gives you a headache, if you drink enough of it.
- [22] Careful research and planning can help a trip run smoothly.
- [23] No matter how much you plan, it can all go wrong.
- [24] When it all goes wrong, make the best of it.

Further notes

The boat across Lago O' Higgins now runs regularly and reliably twice a week (Nov 2007)

The wind in the far south is *almost* impossible to cycle in during the summer...apparently it drops during their winter but then so does very heavy snow!

Fiona still does not wear a crash helmet.



Andy Blance and Fiona Grant 2007

Andy works as Thorn Cycle's designer and "test pilot". Fiona is a senior physiotherapist, working in the NHS.

Thorn are internationally renowned as British manufacturers of a superlative range of **touring bikes**. Thorn's range includes derailleur geared bikes and Rohloff equipped bikes.

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