



INCA TRAILS



Our strange antics arouse the curiosity of the local children



Peru's precarious roads provide a pre-ride thrill



If you're after high adrenaline, high mountain riding with colourful culture for a backdrop, then the Peruvian Andes are hard to beat →

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Don't leave one of your gloves at the tea stop - you'll need them!

What goes up must come down... and have a damn fine time doing it too



My first encounter with Wayo Stein came at a spartan terminal bar inside Lima's busy international airport. It was just past midnight, and my head was foggy from over 18 hours of travelling.

My arrival from Colorado marked the first day of a week-long mountain biking odyssey in Peru, which sits in the heart of the towering Andes along South America's north-west coastline.

Over the last decade, the former Spanish colony has built itself a reputation as a mountain biking mecca. Peru is home to the sixth highest peak in the western hemisphere, the 22,205ft Nevado Huascarán, plus a dozen other peaks that exceed 20,000ft.

However Stein, our guide for the week, is quick to point out that sheer elevation is just one part of Peru's mountain biking equation. It's how quickly all these mountains rise – and fall – that makes this stunning landscape, once home to the legendary Inca and Norte Chico civilizations, such an alluring cycling destination. This nugget of Peruvian knowledge came during the first of many safety speeches delivered by Stein, who's been riding bikes since he could walk.

Over the years he's been

crowned Peru's national champion in both cross-country and downhill racing, but injury brought his racing career to an early end, so he went back to school. There he received a Masters in business administration and he now runs his own outfitter business, as well as serving as lead sherpa for British Columbia-based Big Mountain Adventures, which operates expert-level fat tyre tours around the world.

It's a long way down

Today, Stein keeps myself and an eclectic group of 10 foreign riders rapt as he outlines the keys to staying safe over the next seven days. The gist of it is: get ready for the time of your bike-riding lives

“Please avoid blowing out blind turns or sliding off the trail”

but never forget where you are. This is Peru, he stresses. These trails are not the highways and byways of a manicured National Park where rescue is just a mobile phone call away. Screw up here and your modes of evacuation will likely be limited to helicopter airlift or on the back of a burro (donkey). And the nearest hospital? Well, it's not going to be around the corner.

“If you don't like heights,” says Stein, “it's best to get back on the plane you flew in on. Extreme exposure, much of it measured in thousands of feet, is unavoidable. So unless you've packed a parachute, please avoid blowing out blind turns or inadvertently sliding off the edge of the trail. In most cases it's a long way down.”

With that bit of cheery advice

Left: Descending our own little stairway from heaven

Below: The setting off spot - and not a cafe or bike wash in sight...



dancing in our heads, we load ourselves and our kit onto a shuttle bus and make for our hotel. Our group includes former Canadian cross-country Olympian Andreas Hestler, 61-year-old adventure athlete Bob Faulkner, and Big Mountain Adventures owner Chris Winter who, after hearing so much about Peru from gushing guides and blown-away clients, decided he needed to come see for himself.

Such is the draw of a place where, as we discover a few days later, it's possible to start riding singletrack at 12,000ft and finish within sight of the Pacific Ocean's crashing waves. In between the topographic diversity is a visual dictionary of trail surface types.

In one jaw-dropping, arm-pumping, six-hour day, our tyres roll over slick rock, fast and flowy, steep, loose and technical terrain, plus an expansive, completely parched river bed with a surface so smooth and tacky you can lean your bike like Hermann Maier carving giant slalom turns. Throw in a seemingly never-ending procession of lips, jumps and berms and the result is a natural mountain biker's paradise destination.

Leaving Lima

On the morning of our first full day, we build up our bikes before boarding a shuttle bus and heading out of town. The contrast between city and trailhead is stark. Behind us looms Lima, Peru's sprawling capital with a population of seven million people plus another four million in the dusty barrios (suburbs). In front of us is a sparsely inhabited, parched and barren landscape.

Indeed, venturing into rural Peru is like travelling back in time. Life here hasn't changed much since the days of the Inca Empire, which started in the Peruvian highlands in the early 13th century. Many inhabitants still subsist hand to mouth, cultivating small patches of crops and rearing farm animals to



Stunning scenery and superb singletrack combine to give you sensory overload

“Life here hasn't changed much since the days of the Inca Empire”

keep their families fed and healthy.

At its height, the Inca Empire numbered 20 million souls and covered nearly 800,000 square miles, including more than half of South America's vast western coast. But the once opulent and civilized empire went into a rapid and bloody decline in the 1530s, when Spanish conquistadors led by Francisco Pizarro and his brothers invaded. The Spanish conquest destroyed many Inca monuments and buildings, but the civilisation's reach is evident in the network of trails that criss-cross the mountains – and today, we're the beneficiaries.

Our first adventure starts in a

wide, dry valley that feeds into swoopy, smooth singletrack that rolls up and down like a stomach-churning fairground ride. The riding here is so good that you expect the place to be packed with people but, save for a few commuting villagers, it's empty except for our band of gravity-obsessed riders. In fact, during the whole seven-day trip we encountered just three other riders. “For Peruvians, cycling is an expensive sport,” explains Stein. “Bikes cost a lot of money here; much more than in North America.”

No wonder then that Stein picks up most of his spare parts during occasional visits to the US, or asks



Surreal landscapes offer perfect picnic spots

“The Andes rise abruptly, leaping vertically from the ground like knives”



You need to keep your wits about you as a mistake could end up being messy

friends to bring equipment with them when they visit. On this trip, for instance, I flew with two bikes: my own plus a new cross-country rig that Stein had bought direct from a US-based manufacturer. Even with the airline’s onerous excess baggage charge and the 10% import tax charged at the airport customs desk, the new bike was still cheaper than it would have been if bought direct from one of Lima’s few bike shops.

Hang on tight

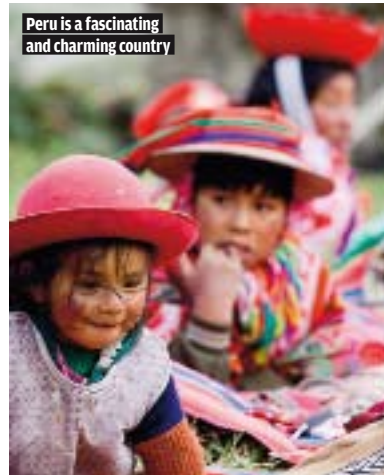
In the ensuing days we are treated to a dizzying series of amazing rides, where exhilaration and exhaustion are parcelled out in equally rapid doses. Unlike the mountains of North America and

Europe, which ascend at a relatively gentle pace, the Andes rise abruptly, leaping vertically from the ground like knives pointing upwards into the sky.

One memorable morning starts with what we later dub the ‘pucker ride’, a six-hour shuttle bus trip that begins in Lima and ends in the small town of San Pedro de Casta. The journey between the two is a white-knuckle ride on a bumpy one-lane dirt road guarded by a rock wall on one side and a 1000ft drop-off on the other.

“That’s as scared as I’ve ever been in a motor vehicle,” says Justin Mark, school teacher and part-time cross-country pro from Vancouver Island. “I’m looking down out of the window and there

Peru is a fascinating and charming country



NEED TO KNOW

On the long list of things to remember before embarking on a journey to Peru, the first is that if you break your bike it’ll be hard to find replacement parts. So bring as much extra gear as you can jam into your bike box. A spare derailleur and extra brake pads are essential, and if you haven’t already converted to a tubeless set-up, do it. There are too many jagged rocks and spiny thorns in Peru to be messing around with tubes.

Bike choice depends on the kind of trip you sign up for. Big Mountain (www.ridebig.com), for example, offers cross-country and downhill excursions but even on the XC trip you’ll want a sturdy all-mountain steed. I rode a Titus Moto-Lite with 5in travel front and rear, and tubeless 2.35-inch Maxxis High Roller tyres. The set-up made climbing a little slower but it wasn’t anything my granny gear couldn’t overcome. And when going downhill the extra heft made a huge difference.

In terms of clothing, make sure to pack lots of layering options: high mountain weather is notoriously fickle, and warm sunny days can quickly turn cool and nasty. Also don’t be afraid to bring body armour – lightweight knee and elbow pads are well worth the extra weight if you do make an unscheduled dismount.



Those keys have to be here somewhere!



Epic, awe-inspiring... words don't do it justice - you need to experience it for yourself



“My friends and I would ride on the bus roof; that way we could jump off if something went wrong”

were times when I couldn't even see the road. The back wheel was so close to the edge of the road it was terrifying.”

Stein empathizes: when he first started exploring the area, he'd have to reach the beginning of his journey by public bus. He would ride up as far as he could by public transport, then climb on his bike and keep climbing until he found a trail that would take him back down again.

“Sometimes my friends and I would ride on the roof,” recalls Stein without a hint of sarcasm. “That way if something went wrong maybe we could jump before it was too late.” It sounds ridiculous, but do a Google search for ‘Peru bus crash’ and you’ll understand the need for a contingency plan. Rarely does a month pass without at least one fatal accident.

An explosive descent

Fortunately our scare is only that, and it's quickly forgotten, replaced by new adventures. The day's starting location is another jaw-dropper and, at 14,000ft, most of the clouds float below us. This is the magical Marcahuasi Stone Forest, a surreal landscape plucked straight from a Dali painting.

Thousands of years ago glaciers dragged, and then dropped, giant polished rocks across the high plateau, creating a trail that hopscotches between singletrack and smooth stone faces. A small

A fast, swoopy descent lets you breathe in the beauty of Peru

mountain lake is so perfectly still that staring into it confuses the brain. Which way is up?

The ride down from Marcahuasi is the roughest yet, with tight, steep switchbacks and bone-rattling rock gardens seemingly around every turn. Hestler's fork explodes early on, drizzling oil across the trail. But after finding the missing part – which was jettisoned into the bushes on the trailside – and then searching out a pair of zip-ties for reattachment, we roll on.

Later, another rider sheers off his rear derailleur. Then Bob Faulkner, the adventure athlete, has a serious scare, sliding off the trail and tumbling 15ft down the hillside. Thankfully he emerges with just a few bumps and bruises after grabbing hold of some shrubbery to arrest his fall. It could have been so much worse. “For a moment I was very scared for him,” admits Alfonso, our number two guide, who was riding at the tail end of the group when Faulkner disappeared over the edge.

Get your eye in and take on the tech terrain for a unique experience



On day four, we fly from Lima to Cusco. Once the thriving capital of the Incan Empire, today this city of about 400,000 people is the main jumping-off point for tourists headed for the ancient ruins of Machu Pichu or trekking on the Inca Trail. It serves a similar purpose for our party; we stay one night, then head higher into the Andes.

During the next four days we climb above 14,000ft twice more. We descend for more miles than I can count, look down on and then ride into the verdant Sacred Valley, eat lunch in small villages, give handlebar rides to curious children, and generally forget about the world we left behind.

Such is the nature of the Peruvian mountain biking experience: your mind is so constantly overloaded that there's little time for download or processing. Inspiring vistas, epic moments, adrenaline shots and general shock and awe come flying at you so fast that, just days after the trip, it's difficult to keep track of exactly what happened. My journal entries read like a 13-year-old surfer dude's: amazing, insane, awesome, holy shit, wow.

Indeed, take this account with a caveat: that it represents only a fraction's fraction of the region's perspective-altering experience, which must be seen, felt, tasted and smelt to be truly understood and appreciated. And if you ever get that chance – don't think twice, just go. It's really that good. ○