



Mount Huascarán still faces us as we continue the zig-zag descent down into the Ulta valley.

River and the canyon that cradled it.

It was hot, and although there was a river running in the bottom of the gorge, it was surprisingly lifeless. The towering mountains on either side were devoid of any life, and merely existed as walls of heat absorbing rock. We passed the ruins of many towns that had attempted to make a living in this desolate area. Their era was difficult to judge, as the adobe style of building was still a current construction method. The only work that it appeared the valley could support was small-claim coal mining, evident in a young man we saw walking on the road, covered from head to toe in black soot, with only the whites of his eyes visible.

At 4:30 p.m., we started looking for a hotel for the night. At a small shop we learned that there were three hotels in the next town, fifteen minutes down the road, and there was even a festival underway. What luck! We arrived in the town of Huallanca around 6 p.m., glad to be done for the day.

Signs of the festival were everywhere, from the folks in costume to the drunken men sleeping on the benches. We pulled up on the short section of the main street that was paved, enjoying the absence of dust for a few

blocks, and stopped at the police station to ask for directions.

This excerpt is from my journal from that day.

“A policeman came towards us wearing crisp green pants with a bright white shirt. He was cleanly shaven except for his manicured moustache, and was carrying two large bottles of beer and a one-litre bottle of Inca Kola (“a favourite since 1935,” says the label). He crept towards us, grinning wildly, moving his hands up to his chest and wiggling the bottles of beer at us as a child would do while saying, “Looook whaaaaat IIIIII gotttt.” He was quite drunk. He invited us in, placed his drinks down on the desk, and proceeded to explain that he was with the Peruvian police, and that this (insert sweeping arm movement) was his jurisdiction. He smelled very nice. As he told us about the hotels in the town, “There are three hotels in town,” he said, his hands moving independently of each other, and his voice shooting between squeaky high and normal. He was careful to explain which landmarks the hotels were close to for our convenience. After handshakes we prepared to leave. “But,” he continued, “there is a fiesta in town...much music and dancing (insert a little tap dancing here) so the hotels are all full. You have to go to Caras. It’s 45 minutes away and only nine kilometres of dirt road (insert image of him

holding onto imaginary handlebars and going over what appear to be very large imaginary bumps). After the nine kilometres it is all highway (insert image of him doing a wheelie).”

So off we went into the Cañon del Pato, famous for its 35 tunnels cut into the bedrock during building because the gorge was too narrow to use conventional construction techniques. In the darkness of the tunnels, Amy let me know that my taillight would sometimes go out. “That’s



One of the 35 tunnels in the Cañon del Pato.

okay,” I told her, “It matches my burnt-out headlight, and that hasn’t worked since Mexico.”

We arrived after sunset, and set up camp for a week to let Amy deal with a bad food bug and for me to deal with motorcycle maintenance.

A pebble had wedged itself between the frame of the motorcycle and the radiator. Constant vibration had eventually put a pinhole in the radiator, allowing the coolant to drip out. I whipped up a batch of J-B

Weld and coated the hole shut.

The following week, I noticed that one of the two bolts that held the motorcycle’s rear sub-frame on was missing. Actually, only the outer half of the bolt was missing, since it had sheared in two. When the extra fuel tanks were full, the bike carried 200 kilograms including my weight, a considerable amount to handle over the rough roads. We sought out a local welder and drilled out the old bolt and installed a new nut and bolt in its place. We were moving again in two hours, a time I considered quite respectable.

Peru’s most famous tourist attraction is unquestionably Machu Picchu, but that’s only for the unlucky tourists without motorcycles. For us two-wheeled visitors, the famous attractions start with the numerous mountain passes, and in particular a lonely mining road near the town of Huancavelica.

The road followed the winding way of an old train line up out of Huancavelica; the bridge trestles were long since overgrown with grass and the rails taken away. Tunnels into the mountains still acknowledged the mining history of the area. The Spanish were here in the 16th century exploiting the rich lodes of mercury used in the processing of silver ore.

We climbed quickly to over 4000 metres (13,123 ft). We were now on the highest continuous road in the world and would not drop below 4000 metres for another 150 kilometres. The immense scope of the valleys was hard to grasp – they stretched lazily from one mountain range on our left, across the road and to another mountain range on our right. There were patches of snow on the highest peaks, but with our many layers of



Repairing a broken frame bolt.



Motorcycle maintenance.