

come up, slowly heating the walls on the opposite side of the canyon. We packed and drank coffee while the tour buses arrived, and shortly after 8 a.m., the slow circling of the massive condors could be seen. They would stumble ungracefully out of the nest and spread their wings to catch the morning's rising air. We sat with our backs to the sun, growing warm in our heavy motorcycle clothes, and watched the birds reach the edge of the canyon where they passed closely by us, looping a half dozen times ever higher before they drifted out of view.

A quick and easy border crossing into Bolivia got us to the nearby town of Copacabana on the shores of Lake Titicaca, often touted by the guide books as the world's highest navigable lake at 3812 metres (12,464 ft) above sea level.

It was a light-hearted town, popular with the tourists for its sandy beaches and its really slow boats to the Island of the Sun where, according to Incan legend, the sun god placed his representatives on earth and went on to develop the entire Inca culture. It was an easy day trip for Amy and me, and our time on the island allowed us to broach an unpleasant topic.

The previous weeks had seen a slow but perceptible rise in irritability between us. I found myself reminiscing fondly of my solo days. I found it difficult to go from travelling alone in Central America to being mechanic, boyfriend, translator, and tour guide. Months earlier I caught onto the fact that the ability to speak the local language infinitely increased the quality of the trip. Back then, I was forced to practise my Spanish at every



Fresh and plastic flowers decorate motorcycles that stand in line to receive blessings from the monk at the Basilica of Our Lady of Copacabana.

conversation, instead of speaking English most of the day as was the case now that we were a pair. I was seeing this and other trade-offs of travelling as two rather than one, and I was doubting my decision about that.

This is not to suggest that there were no benefits to travelling as a team. Having another set of hands and pair of eyes increases security, but that's not the top of the list. The greatest reward for travelling as a team is having a partner to participate in this significant event and the opportunity to reminisce about it afterward. It's the ability to sit years later and start conversations with "Remember when...?" Or, "I saw a

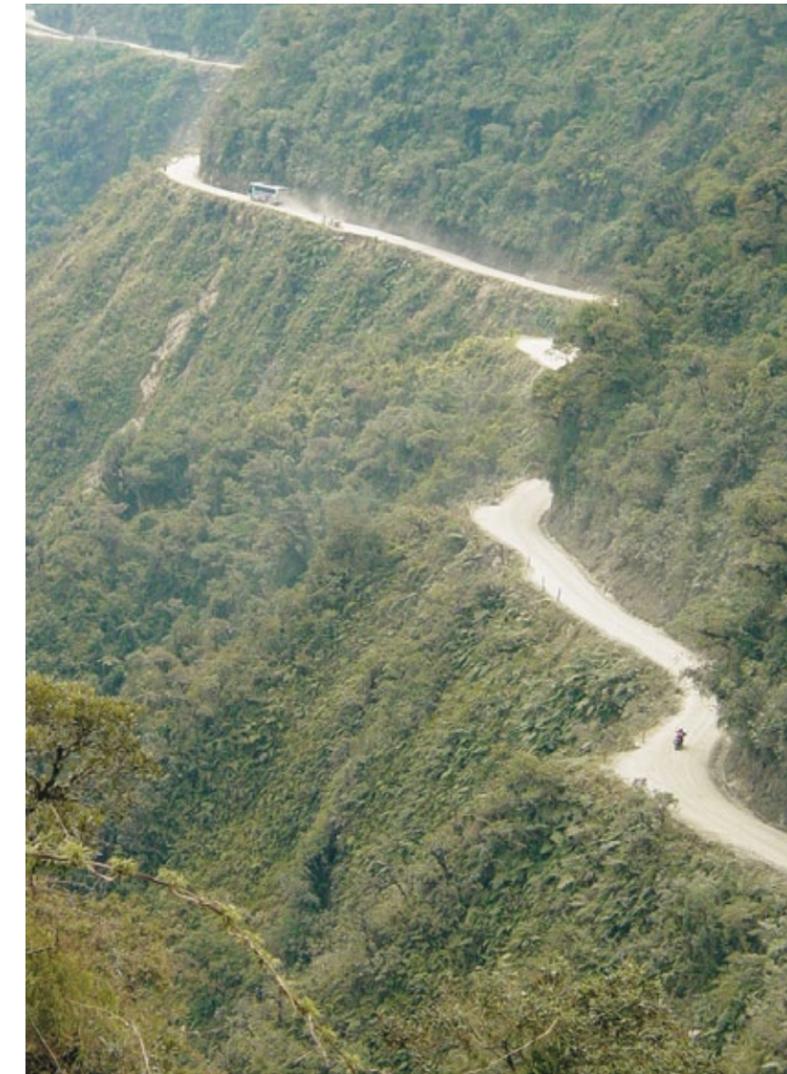
guy today who looked identical to that guy who fixed your tire in La Paz. What was the name of the restaurant next door to there – the one with that soup you loved?"

Good memories are worth sharing, and that is most easily done with someone who was there with you.

Outside of the world's highest capital city of La Paz was the World's Most Dangerous Road, so called because of the number of deaths and accidents on it. It was a narrow route that dropped 3200 metres in less than 70 kilometres, offering all conditions from blowing snow to steamy green jungle. The slippery-when-wet surface, the instability of the surrounding hillsides, and the steep roadside drop-off didn't help the safety record. Accidents caused by tired truckers and poorly maintained vehicles added to the road's dark reputation.

It was the fact that the road was one lane wide but filled with two-way

traffic that created most of the problems. When oncoming vehicles met at a narrow section of road (which is most of it) they had two options.



Amy sticks to the inside of the World's Most Dangerous Road.

The first was for one of the vehicles to back up to a location on the road that was wide enough to allow a pass. Unfortunately, putting any vehicle into reverse is a terrible blow to the machismo of Latino drivers, many of whom took their chances with the second option; creeping by each other and hoping for the best. The majority of deaths were due to drivers' underestimation of the location of their tires on the road, so much so that the local driving laws instructed drivers to keep to their left on this road. Now, a glance out of the window made downhill drivers aware of how close their tires were to the sheer drop that accompanies most of the ride. With the completion of an alternate route in 1996, the most dangerous part of this road may now be the hordes of tourists with rented mountain bikes who come to coast down the length of the road as part of an adventure outing.

We left our hotel in La Paz with one of the eight motorcyclists who also happened to be staying there. Tony, an Englishman on a Kawasaki KLR650, was travelling alone and when he heard of our plans to negotiate the remote roads, massive salt pans, and hot springs of the border area between Bolivia and Chile, he asked to join us.

We started our tour with a stop in Sajama National Park, home of Bolivia's highest volcano (6542 metres or 21,463 ft) of the same name. After an 11-kilometre sand road to the village of Sajama, we continued north for another seven kilometres to the signed turnoff of the first of our hot spring destinations. A warm, wide stream thwarted the path to our proposed campsite. It was less than knee deep, but full of melon-sized slimy rocks.

I crossed first and was promptly bucked off my bike after hitting one of the slimy melons. I picked up the motorcycle and a metre later, with wet gloves slipping on the clutch and throttle, I hit another rock and promptly dumped the BMW on the other side. I had dropped my bike only four times since the trip started, and two of them were in this sulfuric little stream. Since I was soaked to the knees, I went back and rode Amy's bike over without incident and then Tony's, too. We stopped in a sandy lot behind a mud-brick wall and hurried to set up camp. I was anxious to get