

A person wearing a plaid shirt and a helmet is riding a motorcycle on a dirt road that winds through a rugged, mountainous landscape. The road is dusty and appears to be in a high-altitude region. In the background, there are large, dark, rocky mountains with patches of snow or ice. The sky is bright and clear.

In the Tracks of Che Guevara

By H. E. Sappenfield

"It is a glimpse of two lives that ran parallel for a time,
with similar hopes and convergent dreams."

Che Guevara, The Motorcycle Diaries

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In 1951 Ernesto “Che” Guevara and his amigo Granado journeyed from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Caracas, Venezuela. Two medical students with one motorcycle embarked on an experience that would inspire Guevara to become the great rebel leader and revered Latin American legend.

In 2005 Mike Beerntsen, a resident of Frisco, Colo., and a high school history teacher at Vail Mountain School, went on a comparable journey. He had taught *The Motorcycle Diaries* in the months prior, and though the routes differed, but for one section, the intent was identical: to experience and know the peoples of Latin America, and along the way have the adventure of a lifetime in an already adventurous life.

Che’s and Granado’s trip was supposed to be a joy ride from Argentina to America, but when La Poderosa II, Granado’s Norton 500, quit in Chile, their journey slowed to the pace of footsteps. “Now we were just two hitchhikers with backpacks, and with all the grime of the road stuck to our overalls, shadows of our former aristocratic selves,” Che recounted. At this pace, they saw the true lives of the people they passed.

Beerntsen had been mountaineering in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. “I was way out in some incredibly beautiful places, but you’d just bust through all the towns and never get a sense for the place. You didn’t get a chance to interact with any people except other gringo climbers.”

On June 6 Beerntsen, a minimalist owning no TV or cell phone, who could make a living as a scruffy Brad Pitt impersonator, boarded a plane for Lima, Peru. With him was amigo Tom Oberhiede. As they settled in coach, a box was being loaded below. It contained Bucephalus, his blue-gray ’97 Stumpjumper, a BOB trailer, a sleeping bag, a bivy sack, an MSR stove, a cook pot and utensils, water bottles, a first-aid kit, two long-sleeved shirts, a fleece jacket, a down jacket, rainwear, baggy Pearl Izumi cycling shorts, two pairs of long underwear, a pair of khakis for



On day one, a 100-km day, the two riders sliced through fog on the Pan Am Highway.

around town, iodine tablets for water, some tubes, extra spokes, a chain, extra cable, brake pads, a multi-tool and nine books. He was leaving to ride across the Andes of Peru and Bolivia, ending in Chile, across some of the highest mountain passes, most desolate, frigid deserts and most impoverished areas on Earth.

“ . . . all we could see was the dust on the road ahead, and ourselves on the bike.”

The Motorcycle Diaries

They left Lima at 4 a.m. to avoid traffic then pedaled north, up the coast from Lima to Barranca with the azure of the Pacific on their left and a wasteland on their right. But they rarely saw either.

“The whole coast is just sand dunes,” says Beerntsen. “The most barren desert I’ve ever seen, but it’s completely unin-

dated with fog for six months of the year, so you can’t see anything. We were just in mist, for days. But then you’d drop into these riverbeds, and it was incredibly lush sugar cane plantations and small-scale agriculture. So you’d be going along in this fog with nothing alive, and then you’d drop down into brilliant green, these verdant fields.”

Then they turned east, climbing 14,000 feet, two days of switchbacks, through the Cordillera Negra to the popular mountaineering town of Huaraz. They stayed six days at a hostel and language school, improving their Spanish before they continued east over more mountains. The roads were cobble, gravel or washboard. They were often chased by rabid-looking dogs.

“There was a day we rode 50 kilometers above 15,000 feet, so it was incredibly gorgeous because we were between the Cordillera Blanca and the Huayhuash, two of the highest ranges, and then we dropped down to Huánuco,” says Beerntsen.

The main subsistence in the Andes is terraced agriculture and mining. Ninety percent of the people are underemployed. In Huallanca, Beerntsen and Oberhiede stayed in a hostel that had no phone. Over dinner, the owner explained that as soon as the government put them up, the wires were stolen.

“This was the area where we had the most hostility. Just a couple of isolated incidents, some kids getting out of school threw some rocks at us, some people on a bus threw some oranges. They didn’t have very good aim.”

“Along the coast is where most of the Spanish descendents are, most of the wealth,” Beerntsen explains. “Then in the Andes, the Andinos subsist mostly off farming. Then you drop into Huánuco and you have the Selva, the forest and the Indigenas, the Indigenous. So you have these three distinct cultures, and most of the power and wealth is focused on the coast. The Andinos suffer the most because there’s no healthy sustenance; they can’t compete with the

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Inca ruins are found on Isla del Sol of Peru, which is steeped in the folklore of Inca creation myths.



A fishing boat rests on Lago Titicaca, Peru. Brown clumps of cultivated fields, from the wooden plows pulled by donkeys, line the fertile shore.

so we went and bought a roof rack but couldn't attach it, so he flagged down another car. The guy sold it to him on the way out of La Paz. It was a really, really strange ride."

When Beerntsen got back on his bike

four days later, he faced the toughest yet most rewarding part of his odyssey.

"The Antiplano is a high, dry plain that has essentially nothing but shepherds and sheep, some alpaca. It's too high and too cold for agriculture,"

Beerntsen says.

During the day, temperatures reached 50-60 degrees F. At night, it dipped to minus 20 degrees. There were no trees, only scruffy tufts of bunch grass and mean tiny grass with spines like cactus. Beerntsen took to sleeping with a water bottle in his sleeping bag so that he'd have unfrozen water in the morning.

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Beerntsen cruised farther south on pavement to Lago Poopo where many Indians subsist by hunting lake birds and fishing, though in recent years oil development and spills have threatened their way of life. Just past the lake, the dirt roads and Beerntsen's challenges began. Heading southwest to Salinas de Mendoza, he discovered that there were no road signs or accurate maps.

"Until that point our actions were 'heroic,' as one policeman put it, we're not sure, but we began to suspect, I think with good reason that the definitive adjective was approximating something more like 'stupid.'"

The Motorcycle Diaries

"You just had to ask people directions from town to town. You had to find shepherds and ask, 'Where am I? How do I get there?' There were roads, but they were washboard, huge washboard; there's mostly bus traffic (no one owns cars), so you were better off getting off the roads and riding across these huge, dry clay flats."

There were times where it got sandy and he had to walk his bike downhill

He took me in and he had this guest book to sign; he waved his hand, 'No,' and got out his special guest book reserved for cyclists.

and hours where he was forced onto the roads and pedaled standing up because the washboard was so intense.

"Sometimes the washboards were the same length as my BOB cart, and my bike was going up one while the cart was coming down another; it was nasty."

Avoiding gringo-tour-hub Uyuni, Beerntsen loaded up with three days worth of food and water at Garci Mendoza and rode south to the Salar de Uyuni, a 100-mile dried inland seabed.

"There's a lot of people who take jeep tours from Uyuni to Isla de los Pescadores (an oasis in the middle of the flat). I thought, 'Everybody goes this way; I'll start in the north.'"

As usual, he garnered directions from locals and definitely got off the beaten path.

"It was hovering around freezing, and as I approached, it looked like a silvery mirage in the distance. It turned out to be slushy, salty ice, and within minutes I was covered with it from head to toe. My bike was covered, my trailer. I was wearing neoprene socks and gloves and I couldn't feel my hands, my toes. Where I had been chafed by my shorts, slushy salt was rubbed into the wounds. I couldn't wash it off, so I just had to let it dry.

"At one point, I was so cold I had to change my socks. There was no place dry to stand, so I got out my Ridgerest and I was standing on it, hunched over, trying to warm my toes, but the funny part was I decided to let my chafed spots dry. So there I was, standing on my Ridgerest, holding one foot, with my pants around my ankles. 'Well this was smart,' I thought," Beerntsen laughs hard.

He spent that night on the salt, and when he awoke, the water bottle inside his sleeping bag was solid ice.

Eventually he emerged from the slush to the hardened salt where he could really roll. He reached Isla de los Pescadores and met the island caretaker.

"He was friendly, he liked cyclists. He'd sell Cokes and candy bars to tourists from his little hut. He took me in



Cusco, Peru, is the city of many faces. In the foreground is a statue of Tupac Amaru, known for leading the last significant Inca rebellion against the Spanish; behind the statue are signs of capitalism and poverty.



Children having fun with old bike tires in Anco, Peru.

and he had this guest book to sign; he waved his hand, 'No,' and got out his special guest book reserved for cyclists."

Beerntsen wanted to see Laguna Colorado and Laguna Verde, and though jeep tours went there, the roads were so

rutted and the distance between water sources so far that Beerntsen was looking for a different route.

The caretaker knew the way, and Beerntsen had a napkin. "There's no toilet paper down there, and I got in the habit of taking napkins in restaurants," he points out.

"He talked me through, and I drew a map on the napkin. Then I navigated for seven days on it. I would stop busses and jeep tours and trucks because the roads were all unmarked and show them my napkin. People were incredibly friendly because they thought I was nuts."

He laughs, then grows serious. "This was the most grueling part of the trip. It was up and down a lot, sandy roads with terrible washboards, 16,500-foot passes, it was brutally cold, I wasn't sure where I was, I was by myself. There were a lot of weird head games. Sometimes it was the most magical place in the world, and sometimes it was the most . . . well . . ."

"It was such a brilliantly beautiful place in a strange, surreal way. Salvador Dali used to go down here to paint some of the backgrounds for his paintings. I camped in the background from one of his works, so those landscapes with the oranges and reds and white streaks, it was all real."

"But it was getting dark at seven, and it would go from 60 degrees in the day to minus 20 degrees, and I'd put on everything I owned to stay warm, even my khakis, then settle into my bivy and wake up at three or four."

He spent a night in San Juan then followed railroad tracks for miles. In three days, he reached Laguna Colorado with its pink waters and migrating pink flamingos. He stopped at Laguna Verde with its green water. He rode past geysers and bubbling sulfur beds. He crossed the border into Chile, two signs, a shack, a snoring guard, and dropped down 9,000 feet in 50 km, long and straight, hitting pavement part way and grinning wide into San Pedro de Atacama. After 63 days and 2,000 miles, his odyssey was over.

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All photos by Mike Beerntsen



For \$3 a night, you pour the flush here in Curahuasi, Peru.

When asked if he was ever afraid, Beerntsen responds, “I never felt threatened by any people. The only time I was afraid was because of where I put myself, like when I was riding across the salt flat, and all I had was a compass and didn’t know where I was.”

“There was this time that was comically scary. These teenagers standing outside this factory hopped on their bikes and started chasing me. I was cranking along for 30 km, and they eventually caught me. They just wanted to talk. I was all paranoid and all they wanted was to talk to the gringo with the cart. So it was never a threat from the people, it was more just ‘Why am I here?’”

For Che, brought up in a wealthy family, what he saw of the people changed his perspective on the meaning of his life.



At the border between Bolivia and Chile, Beerntsen, with only a \$100 bill in his shoe, woke the guard, who was asleep in the shack, and bartered for his \$1.50 crossing with candy bars.

“If I hadn’t done it, it would have been an unfulfilled aspiration, and that doesn’t sit well with me.”

Mike Beerntsen

When asked if he achieved his goal, Beerntsen responds, “When I’d meet people, their first question was always how much everything cost. I was on an old bike and still my gear was worth three years’ income to them. Often their next question would be ‘How many servants do you have?’” Beerntsen laughs. “I’m a teacher. No matter how hard you rationalize it though, for them it’s a lot harder. But that aside, I learned that a good person there would be a good person here.”

The other brilliant lesson of his trip: “To live in the moment. I could never predict. I wouldn’t know if the road was there, the town was there, where I was. I had to let go of the outcome and let things happen.”