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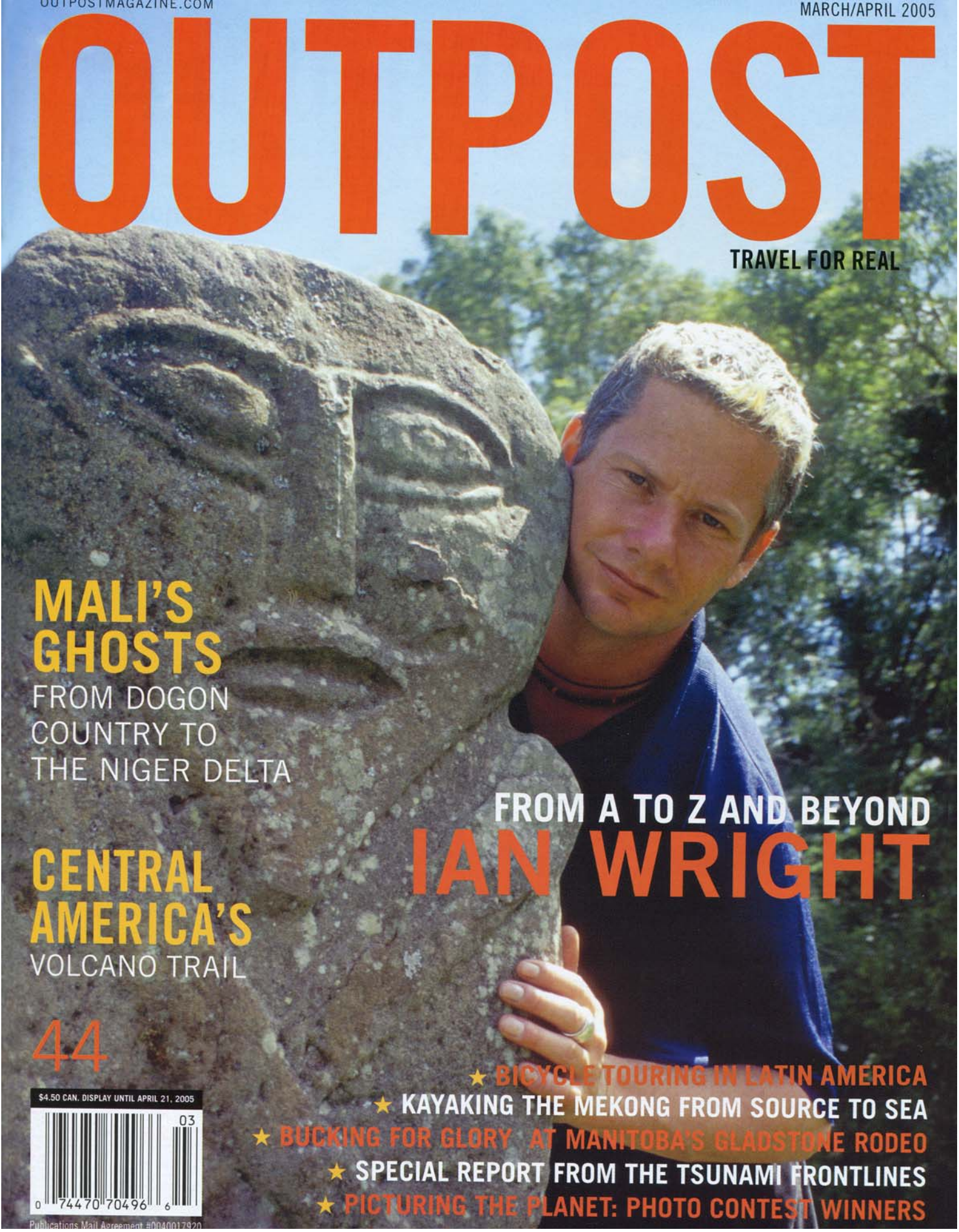

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HEADING SOUTH ON ROUTE 40, PATAGONIA

Bicycle Touring in Latin America:

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BIKE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GARETH WYNNE

TRAVELLING BY BICYCLE, one cannot help but feel superior to one's fellow travellers. For the average backpacker, travel is really no more than a series of dots on a map; the land covered by bus, train or plane remains essentially undiscovered. The bicycle traveller, on the other hand, connects those dots through a combination of sweat and perseverance and in doing so comes into much closer contact with the land and its people.

Bicycle touring forces the traveller to slow down and better appreciate his or her surroundings. It would be impossible for me to forget even a single mountain I have climbed on my bicycle, as each was won pedal stroke by pedal stroke until I reached the top. As a backpacker, I have bussed through entire mountain ranges at night fast asleep, missing everything. Bicycle travel is all about slowing down, meeting people and living close to nature. It is not about seeing how many kilometres you can cover in one day or pulling some kind of stunt to get in the record books. It's not about the bike -- it's about the travel.

In October of 1998 I left Canada for two years to travel by bicycle around Latin America. I remember feeling angry with my life at the time. I was 27, I had no career, no formal education, and I was fed up with living in what I considered to be a vacuous, consumerist society (I've lightened up a little since). I needed a change. I vowed I would not return to Canada until I had become completely fluent in another language and had decided what I wanted to do with my life.

I spent a long time building what I thought would be the perfect, most indestructible touring frame. I studied endless maps, trying to figure out the best route, estimating how many kilometres I could ride each day. I bought an audio cassette course which assured me I could learn Spanish in three months. I saved, I budgeted, I trained, and I inoculated. In short, I tried to control every aspect of the trip before I left. What I soon learned, however, was that in Latin America, I could control nothing.

My indestructible bike frame broke in the middle of nowhere in Patagonia. Washed out roads during rainy season meant I had to change my route almost as soon as I started. I found it was impossible to estimate how far I would ride each day: anywhere from 8 to 180 kilometres, depending on the road surface, the wind, and the dogs. I discovered that apparently nobody in the entire continent speaks the clinically controlled Spanish dialect from my audio cassette course. And I ran out of money much sooner than I had expected. Basically, nothing worked out the way I had planned it, but really that was what made the trip so great.

LESS THAN A WEEK INTO MY TOUR, a spider bit my head. I had started my trip in Peru for the sole reason that the cheapest airfare I could find was a six month return ticket to Lima. Knowing that I would not be coming back in six months, I made a symbolic ceremony of tearing up the return portion of the ticket when I arrived. No going back now.

One of the first things I remember seeing in Lima was a woman vomiting from a car. She stopped her car in the middle of a busy intersection, flung the door open, casually vomited, then slammed the door shut and continued driving as though she did this every day. Indeed, public displays of metabolic function were commonplace. People urinated—even defecated—on sidewalks, against trees, and in city parks. A greyish-yellow haze hung over the city. Dogs on rooftops barked incessantly and desperately poor people sifted through endless piles of garbage. Charmed though I was by all of this, I was keen to begin my trip. On day two I carefully rode my bicycle south, out of the city.

As I wended through shanties on the edge of town, the haze became more yellow than grey and the desert opened up before me. The entire coast of Peru is desert. Further east are the Andes and that was where I was headed, my plan being to cross the altiplano into Bolivia, then continue into Argentina. So I rode south for two days along the coast to San Vincente de Cañete, at which point I changed direction and rode eastward and upward, following the Cañete River into the precordillera.

I had hoped that the higher I climbed, the cooler it would get, but in fact the opposite was true. The heat became absolutely sweltering as I struggled up

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the steep gravel road. Riding through tiny villages, people would come out of their houses to stare at me blank-faced, while small children ran behind me, giggling. I was still a little shy and unsure of my Spanish at this point, so I would just smile nervously and keep pedalling.

At one point, when the heat was particularly unbearable, I took my helmet off to sit under the shade of a tree, resting my head against the trunk. All of a sudden I felt something sting my head (I later learned I'd been bitten by a spider). The pain subsided quickly, however, so I shrugged it off and continued.

I was running out of money. When I left Lima, I did not realize I would not encounter another bank. On the map, some of the towns are shown as major centres, when in fact they are little more than villages—and very basic ones at that—with no phones, electricity or running water, let alone banks. I was also running out of food.

After five days of climbing, in a village called Yauyos, I realized I would have to return to Lima. I had no money, I had no food, and my scalp had become so swollen from the spider bite that my helmet no longer fit. It was time to ask for help. Though I did not realize it at the time, I was establishing a pattern which has defined all my bicycle tours since: that is, when something bad happens, something really good is just around the corner. In this case, I was treated to the hospitality of an entire village that made sure I had somewhere to sleep, plenty to eat and convinced me I needed to see a doctor to get antibiotics as soon as possible. They also informed me that I would not have been able to continue on the route I had chosen because rainy season was just starting and the roads were washed out higher up. They even arranged for me to travel back on a farm bus and roped my bicycle to the roof. The friendship and knowledge I gained through that experience far outweighed any discomfort and inconvenience inflicted by the spider.

Lima looked different when I got back. I was able to look beneath the surface squalor to see the true character of the city. The doctor who treated me was excellent (and very affordable). Everyone I met seemed friendly and helpful and I learned that Lima has a fascinating history. How had I not noticed all this before?

I decided that from that point forward I would stop trying to control this continent. Instead, I would let the weather, the land, the people and the animals dictate which direction I would point my wheels and I would accept any adventure that came my way.

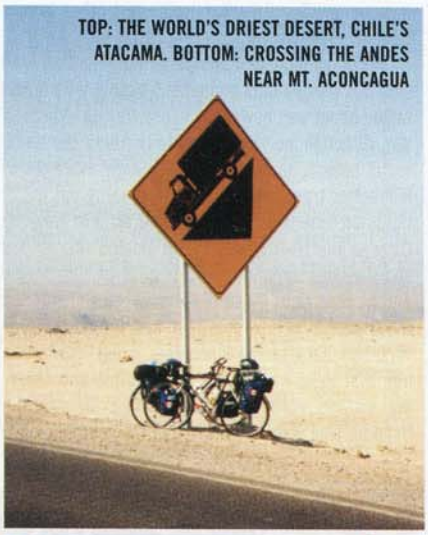
Thank you, spider.

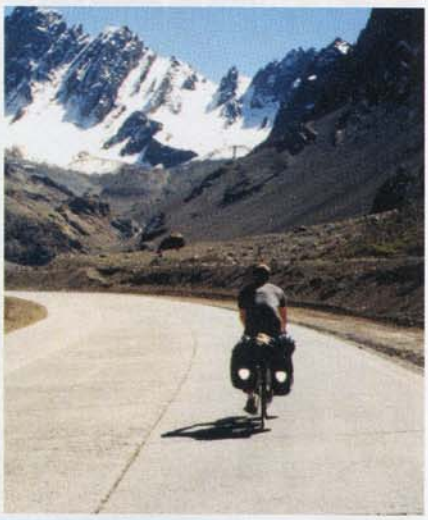
I RAN INTO OTHER DIFFICULTIES in other countries, but now I welcomed them. Instead of seeing them as obstacles, I now saw them as opportunities to learn and meet new people.

In the north of Chile, I ran out of water in the middle of the world's driest desert and was saved by a man in a truck who fed me ice cream and drove me to the nearest town. I think he was curious more than anything. In the south of Chile, I was at my wit's end being swarmed and bitten by clouds of vicious coliguachos (like horse flies, but on steroids), when an older couple on holiday from Santiago took pity on me and put me in the back of their van. They practically adopted me for two days and even put me up in fancy bed and breakfasts and took me out for dinner and drinks each night.

In Argentine Patagonia, the wind was so strong, that I was literally blown from my bike, breaking my frame in the process. The problem with asking for help in Patagonia is there is nobody around to ask. It's possible to ride for days at a stretch without seeing another human being. I was lucky, however, and after a few hours a group of vacationing Argentines from Córdoba province picked me up and insisted I accompany them on their trip. I was able to get the frame welded and reinforced, free of charge, in a small town further south. I learned a lot from Germán, Máximo and Quito and we are still good friends to this day.

The bicycle became a tool for having adventures and meeting people. The more it broke down or got me lost, the more likely I was to meet the locals and





TOP: THE WORLD'S DRIEST DESERT, CHILE'S ATACAMA. BOTTOM: CROSSING THE ANDES NEAR MT. ACONCAGUA

improve my Spanish. But I still met other bicycle travellers who hadn't figured this out yet.

In Patagonia, I kept bumping into a German man who was touring on a recumbent bicycle. All he ever talked about was how many kilometres he rode each day. Although we were essentially riding the same route, he was so concerned with daily averages of kilometres travelled that he was missing out on all the great side trips along the way. Mt. Fitz Roy, the Cave of the Hands, and Perito Moreno Glacier are some of the spectacular highlights of this region and he rode right by all of them. When I mentioned these places, he just shrugged and turned the conversation back to the kilometres. I felt like telling him that there wouldn't be a finish line and cheering crowds waiting for him when he reached Ushuaia (the southernmost city in Argentina), but I didn't. Everyone sees their trip differently. For me it was about slowing down and paying attention to my surroundings; for him it was about seeing how fast he could travel on his recumbent. He was clearly enjoying himself, so who was I to question that?

BICYCLE TOURING IN LATIN AMERICA is a great cure for the control freak. In North America we are trained to believe that we can control everything in life—our environment, our money, our time, our relationships—and when things don't go our way, we look for someone to blame, someone to sue, someone to take responsibility. This quest for control may be noble, but it is unrealistic and it is a luxury that most Latin Americans can't afford.

Perhaps this is what makes them the friendly, generous and positive people that they are. They know they can't trust that their government won't steal their money, or that an earthquake, or some other natural disaster won't destroy their homes, so they rely on each other. They have a very strong sense of community and can tell when someone is in need. As a bicycle traveller, I was often that person.

Tips for Bicycle Travel in Latin America

INSURANCE: You may find (as I did) that no company wants to insure you. Most companies will only cover up to a year and bicycle touring in Latin America is considered a high risk activity (even though it's not) and won't be covered. The solution is to pay as you go. There are excellent medical professionals in private clinics all over the continent. Not only are they extremely knowledgeable about local ailments, they are very economic as well. Also, your insurance plan may only allow you to use to public hospitals where you will have to stand in line with people from distant villages that have already been waiting for days.

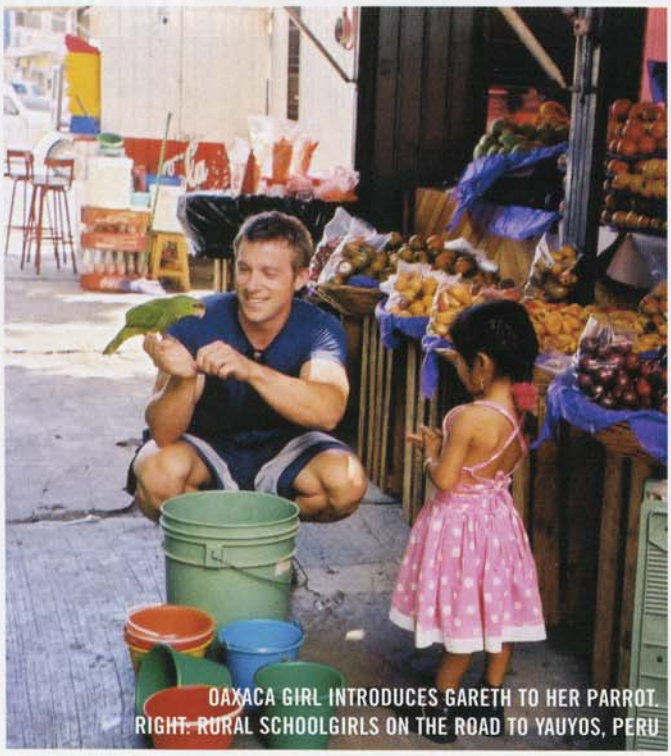
SECURITY: As a bicycle traveller, you will automatically bypass the most thief-ridden places in any city: bus and train stations. Obviously, you should keep your wits about you when you're in a dodgy area, but there's no need to overdo it. Keep valuables out of sight and walk 'with purpose.' Every street urchin in Latin America knows you're wearing a money belt, but it's still the best place to carry cash and important documents. I have spent years in Latin America and have never been robbed.

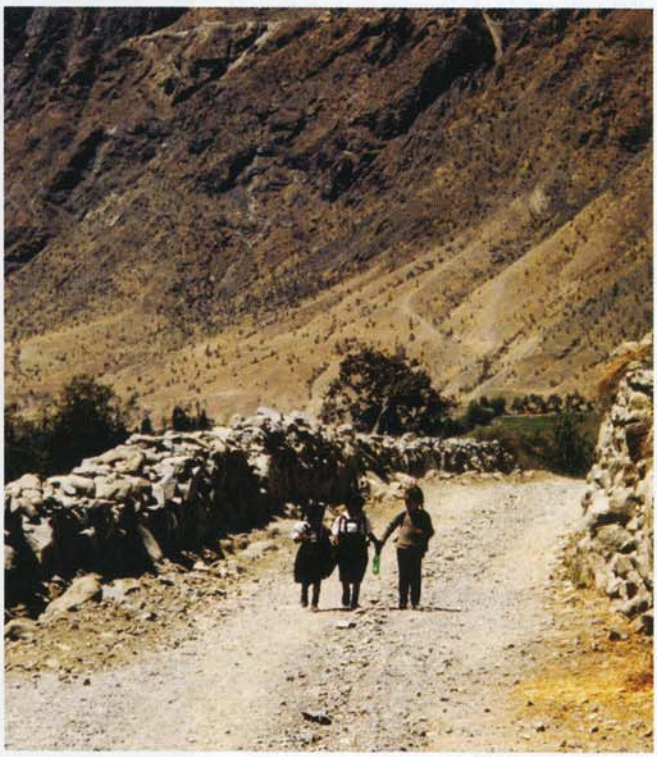
DOGS: They carry diseases and love to chase cyclists. Carry a large stick or keep a few good-sized rocks in your handlebar bag. If you get bitten, go to a doctor immediately.

RIDING AT NIGHT: Never—ever—ride at night. Headlights are considered optional for many drivers in Latin America; your reflective clothing will not be seen and neither will you.

GUIDEBOOKS: The South American Handbook (Footprint) is by far the best guidebook for this continent, but for the bike traveller, you will get more mileage from locally published maps and booklets. Sernatur outlets in Chile and YPF travel guides in Argentina are two good places to start.

CITIES: Getting in and out of big cities is problematic and dangerous. Why not store your bike at a hostel in a nearby small town (I've never had to pay for this service) and hitchhike or bus into large cities with a daypack. A week in a city environment can be a nice break from the bike.





OAXACA GIRL INTRODUCES GARETH TO HER PARROT. RIGHT: RURAL SCHOOLGIRLS ON THE ROAD TO YAUYOS, PERU