

Homage to Patagonia - a Pillion's Tale

Words & Pics: Allana Goldsworthy



The forthcoming competitive nature of this trip became very apparent when we checked into the airport hotel.





was displeased to note that the room Paul and I occupied had a 'lovely' view of the car park, and was not to the same standard as that occupied by Lindy and Russell, who had scored a view of the aircraft gliding gently onto the tarmac, and they got breakfast included, and a free bottle of water and biscuits, and a showercap! I felt cheated.

We managed a few hours sleep (until 5.30 am) before making our way with our heavy bags to the check-in counter, studiously ignoring Lindy and Russell who were tucking into their breakfast as we headed to the lift. There we met up with Pam and David, who would also be sharing a motorbike on the trip.

Ah yes, the trip. We were preparing to fly from Australia to Buenos Aires on the first leg of an eighteen day motorcycle adventure trip organised by Compass Expeditions – the Patagonian Explorer.

When we arrived in Buenos Aires airport we encountered our first taste of South American chaos when we discovered that we had to stump up a whole load of taxes, and that our Aussie plastic wasn't compatible with the local credit card machines. So 200 US dollars in cash found its way from us to the airport officials.

We then faced the complicated 'taxi to the hotel' system, which involved queuing, booking, then waiting... and waiting... and waiting. But on the plus side for motorcyclists, our taxi driver informed us that the speed restriction signs were not backed up with cameras as we were used to. Woo hoo!

Our mid-town hotel, the El Conquistador, was within easy stretch of most of Buenos Aires tourist attractions. Hot weather accompanied us as we walked all day soaking up the city sights, the green and abundant public parks and art, and the odd character and quirky places common to big cities all over the world.

The warmth and atmosphere encouraged the consumption of crisp white wines and we experienced our first Argentine steak, several centimetres thick covering the whole dinner plate and cooked over an open coal fire by a sweating chef who poured incredible amounts of salt over the grilling flesh, enough to make the arteries groan.

To leave Argentina's capital without taking in a Tango show would be sacrilegious, and the one chosen turned out to be wonderful. The male dance partners just had to be in line for 'danger to delicate anatomy' money the way the women flicked their stiletto heels between their legs. Such a sexy show too, but a shame for a couple of the guys in the group who missed out by sleeping off some of their jet lag during the programme.

Another Country

The following day our group left by air for Santiago, Chile: the second stage of the journey and nearer to the start of the bike ride. On arrival we met with the rest of our Patagonia Explorer group and Brendan Barbetti the Compass tour leader.

More flights before the bikes; to the southern Chilean town of Temuco via Concepcion, the ill-fated town that was at the epicentre of the earthquake disaster that

hit Chile in February. On this leg we had our first glimpses of the high Andes, the spectacular mountain range that forms a spine of scenic splendour through seven countries of South America, covering a distance of over 7,000kms.

We then transferred to road transport in the shape of a bus fitted out for overland tours, the Big Green Machine (BGM), run by another Brendan - later on in the tour some of us would directly experience why it was necessary for the bus to be on hand. Our itinerary would take us south to the very tip of the continent, Ushuaia, hugging the mountains through the towns of Bariloche, Perito Moreno, El Calafate, the famous seven lakes ride, and the renowned and staggeringly beautiful Torres del Paine national park. Sometimes on paved roads, other times on gravel and other unmade surfaces. How would the pillion passengers cope in this environment?

The BGM took us on to Pucon, a major tourist town nestling beneath the Volcan Villarrica, a live volcano smouldering and puffing volcanic stuff from its snow capped peak.

Pucon sits on the Villarica lake and is renowned as a centre for all kinds of adventure sports including skiing, rafting, kayaking, horse riding and zip line rides. Parts of the lake are surrounded by lovely black volcanic sand beaches that were covered in tourist bodies as the holiday season was in full swing.

Hello Bikes

Great excitement from the riders at the introduction to the BMW F650GS's (I have no idea what that means!) that were lined up.



Paul had a major requirement - "I want a red one!" They all headed off for an introductory ride, having met the gorgeous Leo, the bike leader, who made it clear he would not tolerate naughty boys. Of whom there were a few on this trip.

Leo, who had travelled from Germany via Alaska to South America, where he ran into the Compass Expedition crew, turned out to be a fantastic ride leader; patient, tolerant, skilled, and with a great knowledge of the bikes and most importantly, an understanding of the egos of boys. An added advantage would be having his Argentine partner on hand, the beautiful Natalia, known as "The Fixer".

“Our taxi driver informed us that the speed restriction signs were not backed up with cameras”

So to our first time on the bikes (for the pillions) in South America. Paul and I, Ken and Pamela and Trevor and Chris decided to take a ride to a thermal hot springs a "short" distance outside Pucon. We rode blissfully past the turn off to the place and ended up on rough gravel roads, in who knows where. We gave up when we came to a river that had to be forded if we were to go any further. Being my first experience on gravel of any sort, this was not the relaxing introduction I'd hoped for. In fact I was really beginning to wonder whether this was a



bone rattling, back jarring, dust laden road works, with hardly a worker to be seen doing the bloody works. I tell you, when and if they ever finish these works, the road system in Argentina/Chile will be absolutely fantastic.

I discovered God that day too. Well, a lot of religious things were said. Oh My God. Jesus Christ, What the Hell, Bloody Hell.... We travelled through the fantastic Seven Lakes Drive, hugging the foothills of the Andes with the most fabulous mountain scenery and cobalt blue waters, which I occasionally glimpsed through the dust.

taste of roads ahead – such innocent thoughts. We back tracked and finally found the extraordinary series of thermal pools, where we dipped our bodies in the incredibly hot water in the company of many other South American tourists.

On the road

Day One on the bikes was a 345 km ride to San Carlos De Bariloche. It was a cold day; just four centigrade as we reached the pass that took us onto gravel roads to a border crossing back into Argentina, the first of many which seemed to follow a pattern. Bored officials not impressed with seventeen people on motorbikes trying to leave/enter the country. Thank goodness for Natalia and her brilliant smile and people skills!

I was then introduced to corrugation, and to the roadworks that seemed to be everywhere we travelled. Not just minor detours, but kilometre after kilometre of



We stopped off for a break and a lunch of Empanadas (a small pastry that can be filled with almost anything you desire and a popular snack in S. America, Spain and Portugal) in a small town on our route: Junin de los Andes. Where they were having what seemed to be a local Rodeo with gauchos on horses riding along the streets. Very atmospheric: and the Empanadas were delicious.

Unfortunately we also witnessed Pete and Rebecca bouncing off a pavement as they pulled out onto the road after refuelling. Horrid to see the bike go down, but a relief to see the two of them jump up without having come to any harm or injury.

But the prize, the absolute glorious prize, came at the end of the ride. The marvellous San Carlos de Bariloche. Imagine if you can a combination of Austria, New Zealand, the English Lake District and almost any other fabulously scenic place you could conjure up:







and this is Bariloche. Oh, and add chocolate manufacturing as well. Bliss.

We were accommodated in individual cabins, with views, and balconies, and sunshine. Barbeque dinner (great, but blood sausage is never going to make it onto my plate), good cheap wines. Riding life is working out okay except I did have to have firm words with Paul, who, as we pulled up at the cabins, on a gravelled hill, decided to experiment with the bike slipping backwards down the hill, with me still on board, but trying desperately to get off.

We enjoyed a day's ride around the lake here, the Circuit Chico route, where the 40km speed limit was definitely not adhered to. Then it was on to Esquel (300kms), the town where the legendary Patagonia Express, the most southerly express train service in the world, terminates. Our route, after spending fifteen minutes on gravel to save time, then became a glorious sweeping ride past lakes, with every corner producing another vista to startle all the senses. The bike riders were in heaven. I was trying to film on the handycam on the back of the bike. Such confidence! This was a good day for the pillion people – no gravel.

Deep South n Muddy

South again on the famous Ruta 40 and a long distance day, 580kms: by now we were seeing more and more wildlife close to the road. Guanacos (llama type creatures), Flamingos in pink, Rheas, an Emu-like bird, and the iconic Condors. It was remote, rugged and desolate country.

Then a lazy 286kms as we headed for Estancia La Angostura to stay on a remote

farm, one of the tour highlights. It had rained heavily the previous night and after beginning on paved roads we hit dirt roads,

which became rougher and muddier.

As Paul and I crested a hill we saw Lindy and Russell ahead of us carrying out an amazing fishtail manoeuvre through the mud, almost losing it and then recovering the bike. Let's copy them, but better! So off we went into the mud pit, fishtailed, and fell over.

Pete and Rebecca were just behind and helped us dig the bike out of the mud heap and scrape most of it off. We then got back on and very, very slowly made our way to where the others were waiting patiently to see where the hell we were. What had been very frustrating was that this

“Off we went into the mud pit, fishtailed, and fell over”

disgusting morass wove back and forth over the bright shiny newly paved beautiful road that we were not allowed to travel on. As if a couple of motorbikes was going to dent the lovely new bitumen.

Following a check it turns out that the tube to the brake fluid container had broken away in the fall. Every time we approached anything that looked like slippery mud, my knees and arms tightened around Paul so much he could not move to use the throttle. In the end the bike was loaded onto the support trailer and we both got on the bus.

After a lunch stop the road became even more challenging. Pete and Rebecca came off, Geoff came off and injured his foot and Paul took over his bike. It was nerve wracking to see the guys wobbling off into the mud; they'd taken the mudguards off as they were becoming clogged. It was a slow trip behind as we had to stop and help clear out the mud. When the bike riders finally reached bitumen, the rain arrived again; at least it helped clean some of the mud off. Peter had by then spilled the first blood of the trip, cutting his face badly and bruising his left eye.

We arrived at the Estancia, which was like the Garden of Eden. Flamingos, wild birds, water fowl, cattle, horses. We soothed our souls and lubricated our stories with lovely local wines in the large dining



room with a huge fire upon which the Gaucho, Julio, wearing his black beret and a frown, hauled a lamb carcass (sorry Fluffy!) and strung it up for the traditional Argentine BBQ.

Entertainment for the evening was delivered by two French girls, lost en route to El Chalten, who had made their way over the muddy roads in a very small VW car. And a real life episode of Casualty as the group gathered around to watch Paul put four stitches in Pete's face, assuring him all the time that he would not have his film career ruined by the scar.

Our next day was one of the major challenges of the trip. We were off to El Chalten on 'ripio' or gravel road - 325 kms of 'ripio', then around 120kms on surfaced road. However, it had rained, so the 'ripio' was in fact, 'mudio'. This ride proved to be one of the 'highlights' of the tour for the brave hearted lads and ladettes. The pillions





rode the bus whilst the riders rode and got stuck in the clayiest, stickiest, thickest mud their imaginations could conjure. They rode, got stuck, dug out the wheels, removed the mud guards, rode again, slipped over, dug themselves out again. A good proportion of the 'ride' became 'walk the bike through the mud'.

The best riders and support crew struggled and several bikes found their way onto the trailer. The road was deteriorating rapidly and other vehicles struggled, often sideways to make the hills; but it looked like a good section for Dakar rally competitors.

The scenic ride into El Chalten compensated for the difficult terrain we'd encountered: huge peaks with ice glaciers leading down to a lake. Our hotel nestled at the foot of Monte Fitz Roy with the most staggering view of the mountains from the back balcony. The tales of the day's trip were recounted around the dinner table, the mud becoming deeper and thicker with each memory. How the riders kept their eyes open after such an exhausting day was a testament to their excitement, the beer and the thrills of the adventure!

Journey's end

The ride to our next destination, El Calafate was all bitumen. The 'champion' bike riders seemed to find this disappointingly easy after the 'thrills' of riding through the mud, but the pillions were rather relieved. El Calafate is a very popular tourist town, and it was shopper's heaven. We shopped for quite a lot of wine.

The next morning we toured the Moreno Glacier. When we arrived at the entrance to the Los Glaciers National Park the bikes became an added attraction for the other tourists. The novelty of so many motorcycles in one place caused a procession of people to jump out of their cars and stand in front of us and the bikes for photo ops. We made out we were stars.

The glacier, thirty kilometres long, five kilometres wide and 60 metres high, is Argentina's most well known natural feature. A beautiful ice blue structure towered above us as we made our way towards it by boat. The big attraction is when a large chunk breaks off, tumbling with an incredible roar into the water - it was macabre and spectacular to see natural geology this close.

We had ridden to the national park in incredibly high winds that seemed to be increasing in intensity. I was not looking forward to the ride back, and in fact had begun to question how much longer I wanted to be a pillion rider. And then 'the incident' happened.

A lovely sweeping right hand curve: why are we on the other side of the road? We're on the gravel and a tree is coming towards us. This was going to hurt, and it did. I don't bounce well, and was glad I had decided to buy decent protective bike gear.

For the next couple of minutes the only words that came muffling through my helmet were: fuck, fuck, fuck. Something, somewhere was looking after us. No vehicle came the other way, and we were able to

ride back to El Calafate. I spent a lot of time in the Big Green Machine after this tumble.

The next morning was a 340 kms ride to the Torres Del Paine national park. The wind was blowing wildly again and in fact, a mini tornado took out two of the bikes and their riders as they were lined up waiting for the off: threw them and the bikes to the ground.

It was a beautiful ride into the park. We were to camp for three nights and there is a special spot beside God for Geoff who donated his Geodesic tent to Paul and me. There was no way we could have managed with crawling in and out of the smaller tents with our injuries from the crash. Much noise emanated from our tent each time Paul or I had to move or turn over, or get in or out of the sleeping bags! Mr. Ibuprofen and Ms Panadol were our tent mates. We were "Team Disabled", and we were restricted to gentle walks/hobbles in this beautiful landscape.

It was back into the strong winds when we left Torres Del Paine, and several pillions joined me on the bus to avoid the buffeting. It was scary stuff and the type of conditions that, in Australia, would not see us venturing out on a motorcycle. But Patagonia is renowned for these conditions, and this all proved to be a part of the great adventure, for tale telling over beers at the end of the day. The locals seem to think that this was a mere breeze, telling us of the day when their house blew over the border. I have video of us arriving at a little service station. We were bent into the wind to account for the force. But the riders endured hours of this.

The final day of riding from Cerro Sombrero to Ushuaia, the town at the very tip of the continent, was a 450 km trip. I returned to the back of the bike for the final ride into Fin Del Mundo, through the Tierra del Fuego. With the patient assistance of Paul, I struggled into my bike gear, and managed to get my glove onto my right hand. I was then lifted onto the bike with the assistance of our comrades.

Despite the discomfort I didn't regret it. This was a beautiful piece of

road leading past huge lakes and mountain passes and forests with sweeping turns. Some of the group took it slowly to drink in the vistas, and to stop and take photos, others took it slowly because their pillion passenger was digging her knees and her left arm into them to make them slow down!

We arrived triumphantly at the big 'Welcome to Ushuaia' sign, and when I managed to slide off the bike I kissed the dirt. I had spent the day's ride looking over Paul's right shoulder at the odometer and counting down the kilometres.

We made it! The southernmost city in the world, and a major destination for those setting off for Antarctica. My compensation was the magnificent hotel on the shores of the Beagle Channel. We dined and drank together that night, and the following day was the final ride to the absolute end of the road.

I learned a lot on this trip. Travelling in groups is hard work, even when you're separated on the bikes. You need to exercise tolerance and pack some good humour as everyone likes to do things differently and the pressures of travel can be intensified.

To all those back home who said don't do it, it's dangerous. It was, and I've the injuries to prove it, but it was great!

Allana and her partner Paul travelled with Compass Expeditions. For more information on the Patagonia tour and others in their programme go to

www.globalexpeditions.com

