

Ulysses members ride to the "Fin del Mundo" (End of the world)

29 days of motorcycling adventure on a motorcycle from Santiago to the end of the road at Tierra del Fuego and back.



the bikes and to get on some mild gravel and practice and discuss a few dirt-riding techniques. Everyone seemed to have a reasonable level of gravel riding skills and excitement levels were high at finally being on the bikes.

As a tour operator it is very difficult to fully explain the riding conditions of some Patagonian Expeditions without putting people off. To me, Patagonia does include some challenging riding but it rewards you for your efforts with some of the most spectacular scenery and liberating riding in the world. The other challenge in adequately explaining ride difficulty is that not everyone has the same level of riding skills, so an undulating gravel road may be

extremely challenging to one rider and a breeze to another.

Now I know I could talk about the thousands of kilometers of smooth incident free riding through spectacular scenery that we encountered on the ride, but what I want to tell you about are the really adventurous days when we crossed the line between relaxing holiday and adventure. None was more exciting or challenging than the three-day ride up the Careterra Austral.

By day twenty-four of our expedition we had grown accustomed to the rigors of riding in Patagonia. We crossed the border at Los Antiguos back into Chile from Argentina ready for the challenges of the gravel roads ahead and all was going well as we skirted around the edge of Lago General Carrera (the second largest lake in South America).

It was all going well until just after lunch when the rain started. It is the truth when I say it rained for fifty-two hours straight; we had no idea at the

beginning that it would rain for so long. It is an interesting phenomenon that humans will react differently to adverse conditions and challenges and, thankfully, our hardy little group all acted with the same stoicism, fortitude and acceptance that enabled them to take on the challenge and still have a good laugh along the way.

The challenges started when we stopped for lunch on the first day on the Careterra Austral. Geoff Berg was about to wipe something clean with a rag and, when flicking the rag, a piece of dirt flew into his eye. Despite a lot of flushing with saline solution and searching under the lid we were unable to find the piece of dirt that was causing so much discomfort for Geoff. Now anyone that has met Geoff would understand that here is a man who will not give up easily, no matter the challenge, and Geoff decided to ride on.

Later in the afternoon as the weather was getting steadily worse and the riding still difficult, we stopped in a small town about 80 kms from our destination to check on everyone and change a flat tyre on the support vehicle. When Geoff approached me I could see that something was wrong. Geoff's eye had swollen to the point of closing completely and was causing him considerable pain. Only after serious convincing did Geoff relent and accept a seat in the support vehicle for the last stretch. On arriving in town Geoff decided to opt out of going to the doctors, he would rest and see what the eye would do overnight. Thankfully, it settled down completely and by next morning he was back to full recovery and out on the road riding better than ever.

On the afternoon of day two, after we had been riding up through a remote and heavily forested valley on our way to the idyllically situated hamlet of Puyuhuapi when we noticed that waterfalls had sprung up about every kilometer along



Seven motorcycles, one Land cruiser and eleven people assembled beside the pool of our hosts at Cabanas Shulz in the beautiful lakeside town of Pucon, nestled at the foot of Vulcan (Volcano) Villarica. Just 800 kms from the capital Santiago de Chile, this popular tourist town was the perfect place to start our Patagonian adventure.

I often still get nervous at the start of an expedition, I want everything to be perfect, despite knowing full well that it never is; surprises pop up, we get flat tyres and we come across road works. We had overcome the first big hurdle, having spent an evening with our new clients and we found all to be friendly, happy, adventurous people. We had four Americans, one Mexican and our four Australian Ulysses members, David and Suzanne Clarke from Melbourne, and Geoff and Noeleen Berg from Brisbane.

Our first 2-hour ride around the local area was an ideal time to introduce the riders to the Chilean traffic conditions,

the route. For some time I had in the back of my mind that floods were a possibility and my fears were on the rise when I spoke to some drivers heading back in the other direction. All of them reported that there were floodwaters ahead; some simply doubted we would get through.

Given that there were huge distances of wet gravel roads behind us to the last town and only 45 kms forward to Puyuhuapi, I was optimistic that our little band of hardy riders could cope with the rising waters, but only if there was no strong current. Forging that with our bikes would be risky to say the least.

Traversing the final mountain pass in the Queulat National Park before the floodwaters, we were faced with very steep roads with rivulets washing out ever growing gullies in the road making the corners very slippery. David Clarke came around one such corner nice and slowly but hit a depression and had his front wheel swept out from under him bringing the bike down quite hard on his foot. Although he appeared to be in quite a bit of pain, Dave was not about to let the conditions beat him and declined the offer of loading the bike on the trailer and riding in the support vehicle (We learned later that Dave had actually dislocated three toes.) The rest of the riders had moved ahead of me as everyone was getting pretty determined to get to town and out of the rain. As we neared the base of the mountain we came around a corner and my heart sank. There ahead was our group of riders on my side of a

large body of floodwater with the road disappearing into the middle of it.

When I reached the group, to my surprise they were all chomping at the bit to ride through provided I went first and was prepared to let them ride our precious bikes through the wash. I thought instinctively that this wasn't the time to hesitate, so I headed slightly to the right side of the track and kept the bike moving at a steady pace in a low gear. The track was quite slippery and the wash was getting deeper and deeper, however after about 50 metres it started to even out, and to my surprise there was no serious current; so I kept the bike steady until finally it started to climb out of the waters and made the other side.

That was all they needed to see, and very shortly one by one the whole group made their way through and were jubilant on reaching the other side. Despite being soaked to the bone, muddied and tired, there were smiles and laughs all round.

The last 30 kms were under heavy work with many ten - minute stops on 'one way' sections. The whole group was wet, tired and getting cold, so the hold ups were eroding the spirits of even the hardiest in the group; to add to this the works had torn up the roads making it very slippery and muddy. However after another two hours we idled into town just before sunset, found our hotel and hit the hot showers straight away.

The next morning we loaded up in the rain and rode out into the storm on gravel roads again. We slipped and slid for the

next six hours, the rain hadn't quite stopped but the sun was shining weakly through an opening in the clouds.

Now being from the driest continent on earth, Australia, it takes a lot to want the rain to stop, and I have even developed a form of nagging guilt in even thinking it; but this one time I was so happy for the rain to finish and the sun to appear. We rode happily for the next four days through sunshine, up through the stunning seven lakes district of Bariloche and back across the border to our starting point of Pucon, arriving happy and tired.

What can I say about having four Ulysses members on our trip? I can honestly say there were moments of sheer national pride to see their indomitable Australian spirits shine through when times were tough. There were also times when I felt like I was traveling with a group of friends, when in actual fact we had only just met.

My lasting image is of Geoff riding off with Nards sitting on the back with camera in hand, like a crazed documentary filmmaker. And I see David and Sue sharing the riding; Sue very quickly displaying to everybody that she is one damn fine rider. Most of all it was a pleasure to ride with people that made the most of every day, and that's what makes it such a pleasure to travel with Ulysses members.

Brendan Barbetti

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