

Ain't Dead Yet: A Group of Forty-Somethings Bicycles From Huaraz to Huánuco, Peru

I was starting to think this was a really BAD idea the second time Victor had to stop to have his radiator attended to. The four of us – Andy, Ed, Ana Lucía, and myself – were on our way to meet the other half of our group of would-be lunatics for what one friend in colloquial Spanish had termed “The bicycle suicide.” Because we were anxious, typical yuppie-types, we had hired a car and driver to get to Huaraz rather than take the conventional, supposedly slower bus.

Apparently, Victor was banking on his charm and luck to overcome the effects of a bad cooling system on the steep climb from the coast, and neither was sufficient. We coasted back downhill to the town of Chaquitambo, where Ana Lucía, using all the skills of her Colombian heritage, negotiated us a substitute ride. We finally arrived, beating the overnight bus by a good two hours, and checked into a pleasant, reasonably-priced hotel in the center of Huaraz.

Our unpleasant motor trip behind us, we spent the day getting used to Huaraz’s altitude (3000 plus meters, about 10,000 feet) and enjoying the spectacular backdrop of the snowcapped peaks of the Cordillera Blanca. Our itinerary called for us to meet at Blanca’s, a friendly rooming house that caters to the hordes of adventure travelers who flock to Huaraz to hike and climb.

The other half of our contingent, meanwhile, had arrived several days earlier and had already participated in a short hike to visit several mountain lakes and a glacier. Joel, Ernie, Ann, and Jim had already settled into the Huaraz version of cool.

Who were these people, so willing to throw caution to the wind and breathe thin air on a bicycle? It started about six months ago when the author began to sing the praises of Andean bicycling to a select group of friends in various places. Andy, a development banker who regularly wears a suit to work, was the first to fall for this sucker ploy. Joel, the author’s brother, was the second to declare his willingness to give it a go and forsake the quiet comforts of his statistician’s office in Washington for a gel-padded high-tech saddle and Rock Shox. He realized that a minority of one is a madman, so he talked his Frisbee buddies, Ernie, Jim, and Ann, into coming along. Ernie and Jim were both, like Charles Bukowsky, fleeing their respective number crunching operations at the Postal Service. Ann, I suppose, felt that her job as an environmental scientist gave her an obligation to occasionally sample the environment she tries to analyze. To be fair here, it should be pointed out that Jim and Ann were the exceptions to our forty-plus “rule,” but fit in so well that we accorded them honorary “seniority.”

Ed came along to make us all feel guilty – he is the executive director of an organization dedicated to obesity research, and he never tired of laughing about the fact that when he introduces himself, everyone automatically casts his eyes downward to his midriff. A

stroke of good fortune brought us Ana Lucía, Andy's Colombian counterpart who not only wears a suit to work but knows how to drive a hard bargain with recalcitrant drivers, hotel-keepers, and the like.



Cordillera Blanca near Huaraz

After assembling all the bicycles and enjoying a carb-rich dinner in the company of two parrots, we were finally ready for the main show.



Joel and Ernie with parrot

We departed the next morning from a small lake about an hour south of Huaraz. The idea was to take it a little easy that first day, since the entire trip would take place at an average of about 3300 meters above sea level, with several sections significantly higher. As we began our first slight ascent, we were greeted by a road sign warning of the dangers to drivers:

CAREFUL!

YOU ARE ENTERING A HIGH ALTITUDE AREA.

The altitude can cause fatigue. On this highway you are subject to extreme weather conditions and rockslides.

BE CAREFUL. TAKE APPROPRIATE PRECAUTIONS.



Take heed, fools!

A few miles later, we departed the main highway for one of the most incredible downhills I have ever experienced. On the horizon we could see the snow-capped peaks of the Cordillera Huayhuash, one of the less-explored mountain ranges of north-central Peru. Below us was our day's destination, Chiquián, surrounded by pastoral farm and grazing land.



Downhill to Chiquián



The author on the road to Chiquián



Waterfall by the side of the road

Our arrival in Chiquián was greeted by another sign, this time less portentous and more colorful. It promised us a little mirror of heaven right there in Chiquian.



A little mirror of heaven

The town's friendly, outgoing people proved the sign right. Some of us were asked to play street volleyball with pre-teen girls, while others showed some of the locals how to toss a Frisbee. We found lodging in a primitive, but very picturesque lodging house run by Señora Betty on the town's main (and only paved) street.



Señora Betty in the garden of her guesthouse



A Huayhuash sunset

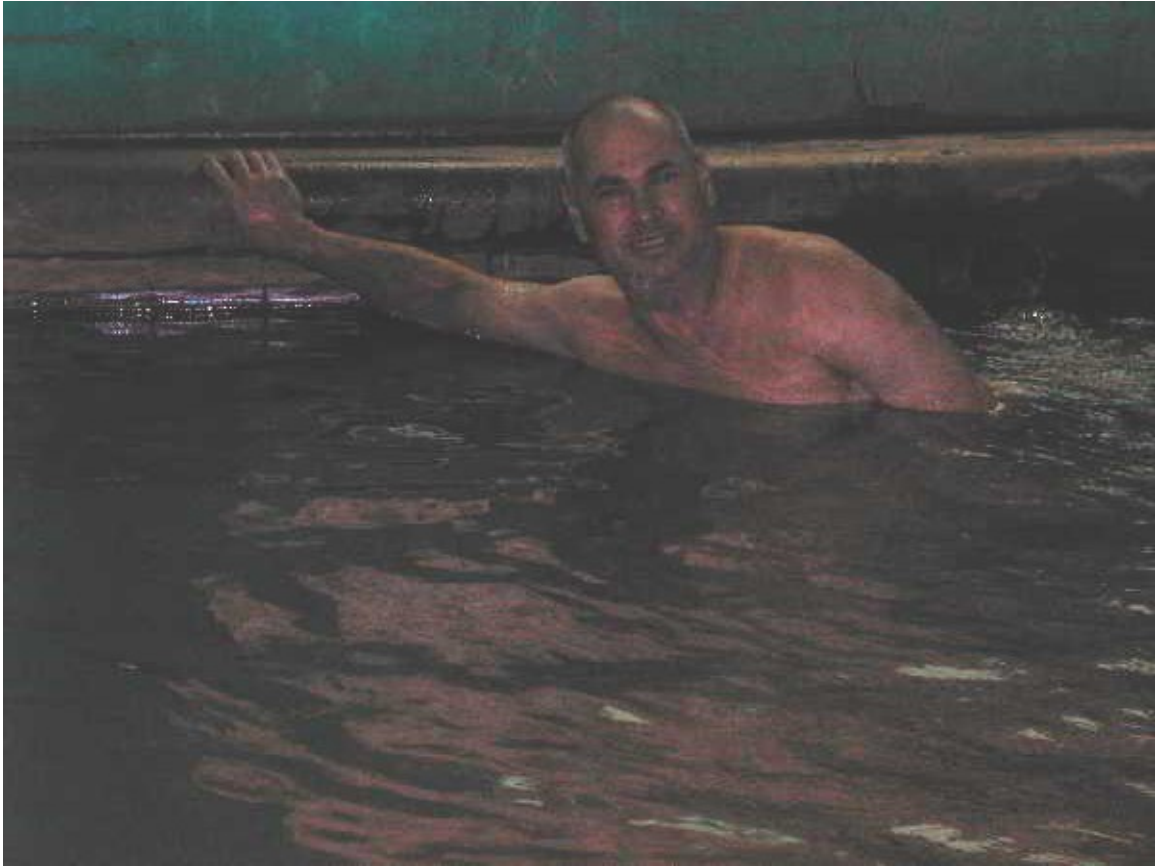
Departing Chiquián in the morning, we descended a bit farther into the valley before climbing to the town of Acquia. Acquia boasts a beautiful Plaza de Armas and not much else – while we were able to access our emails in Chiquián via a somewhat expensive internet cabina, Acquia offered no more than public telephone service.

Biking a bit further on, we rejoined the paved highway we had left the previous day. At this point, it was deemed that while we certainly were a fearsome bunch for having taken on the mountains in this way, we were not quite prepared for Abra Yanashalla, Yanashalla Pass, a barely discernible opening between Mount Pastoruri and the Huayhuash Cordillera at almost 5000 meters.



Over the Pass

We spent the second night in Huallanca, a small mining and farming town near the Huaraz-Huánuco departmental border. We were treated to several hours of relaxation in Huallanca's thermal baths located about 10 km from town.



Ernie in the hot spring

Huallanca offers the visitor (it gets few foreigners) a chance to see Peruvian smalltown life in all its rustic charm. In addition to the rugged scenery of its surroundings, mornings bring the local merchants out to sell their wares. The author, a fervent caffeine addict, had run out of coffee for his backpacker's espresso apparatus, so he went looking for some fresh beans. While there is no internet cabina in Huallanca, fresh coffee beans are easy to find – the only problem is, nobody has ever heard of espresso grind. So your author had to grind the beans himself.



Author grinding espresso beans in Huallanca



Huallanca street scene

Our third day took us from Huallanca to the ruins of Huánuco Pampa outside La Union. This was by far the most eventful of the four full biking days. First, we got to bicycle through a small canyon cut by one of the headwater streams of the Marañón River, one of the principal tributaries of the Amazon.



Andy biking through the canyon

Next, we crossed the main north-south Inca Trail that connects Cusco to Cajamarca. While lesser known than the heavily touristed Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, in some sense the network of pedestrian highways established by the Inca Empire during its era of power represent an incredible feat of engineering – they connected the far-flung empire with a system of roads and communications through a mountainous terrain that, to this day, has not been fully accommodated to modern travel.



Inca Trail steps



Ana Lucía near the Inca Trail

Finally, after passing through La Union, a fairly busy crossroads town that, among other things, boasted internet access, we began the long climb to Huánuco Pampa, one of the most important and least visited Inca ruins in Peru.

After pitching the tents and attempting to recuperate from the high-altitude climb, we set out to explore the ruins first by sunset. Our first stop was the Palace of the Inca, used by the ruler when he happened to hold court here.



Inca Palace at sunset

After a brief tour, we returned to camp to eat and fall wearily into our sleeping bags. Despite the howling of roaming wild dogs, we slept safely and awoke to a spectacular sunrise over the camp.



Sunrise over the camp at Huánuco Pampa

We had another tour of the ruins where we were able to marvel at the signature Inca stonework.



Doorway, Huánuco Pampa

Day Four proved to be the most challenging bicycling day. Departing from Huánuco Pampa at about 3800 meters, our challenge was to cross a ridge about 500 meters higher, passing through a number of small villages. Reaching the top, we were met by a sudden gentle – but cold – downpour that slightly dampened our spirits for the challenging long downhill into the town of Rondos. In Rondos, we decided that age had its privilege, and we boarded the bus for the final leg of our bicycle journey to the town of Jesús.

Jesús greeted us with a cold-water hotel and a warm party with *huayno* music in the evening. In the morning, we hiked to the pre-Inca ruins overlooking the town and enjoyed the view of the pastoral surroundings, that not so long ago were the scene of *Sendero Luminoso* activity but have since reached an uneasy stability marked by occasional banditry.



Ruins near Jesús



Pre-Inca skyscraper, near Jesús

Our final day was spent on the bus going to Huánuco. En route, we were able to take a last peek at the barren, snow-capped Huayhuash cordillera, only to have the contrast several hours later of Huánuco's green high jungle climate.



Goodbye to Huayhuash



Descending to Huánuco

There are probably easier ways to take a vacation. I have even heard that there are people of my age who take cruise ship vacations, spending an entire week basking in the sun. If that appeals to you, you probably won't like hopping on an aluminum beast of burden and sweating your way through the Andes' wild beauty. But who knows? Maybe next summer will find you, too, proving to yourself that you ain't dead yet.

If so, get in touch with César at <http://www.perubike.com> – he has an incredible array of adventures suitable for those of us whose Olympic days are long past but have not totally surrendered to suburban docility.

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