

Inca Roads

By Mike Salisbury (abridged)

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Combed by the tall eucalyptus trees at the edge of the road, the orange rays of sun cut through the dust as I gunned the throttle and the bike folded into the curve of the river. We were trying to beat the sunset back to Cuzco from the edge of the jungle--homeward bound--dodging cows, chickens and Indians, the rainbow-wrapped descendants of the Incas who everywhere seemed to freeze stark-still as we passed on our motorcycles.

We were seven riders at the end of a two-week cross-country motorbike tour of Peru that had taken us from Lima to the seaside Paracas National Reserve, across virgin beaches, into the mountain-high sand dunes of the Great Ica Desert, and finally up to the lost city of Machu Picchu. All things considered, our luck had been good, so I wasn't surprised when I spotted the crowd gathered around a truck and guessed the group's karma had changed.

The truck was parked against a hillside along the cliff road. A few people were examining a football-sized dent in its paint. Others were standing over a figure lying in the road wearing a deeply scratched helmet bearing a Union Jack. Damn! I thought. Duncan the Plumber is dead.

Dunc--a dead ringer for Eddie the Eagle, the nearly blind one-man English ski-jumping team of the '88 Olympics--was one of the five English lads on this trip, all good-time boys in their 30s from Birmingham. Among them were a tipsy car dealer, a diamond merchant, a randy software designer and a hypochondriac pharmacist. They rode like fighter pilots and drank like Errol Flynn and regarded anyone who wasn't English to be blatantly inferior.

Except for Duncan--he wasn't one of the Fab Four yahoos or the product of an exclusive English school. He was a bit shy, with glasses as thick as his accent, and the worst luck of the trip. He'd had the most flat tyres, got petrol sprayed in his eyes, lost a camera and been sick. Never did he say a negative word about anyone. Now he'd dented a truck with his head. I scrambled off my bike, bent over him and took off his helmet, checking for signs of life. He stirred, and finally sat up, peering at me through his dense glasses while what looked like little cuckoos and tiny planets circled his head. Poor Dunc. He was having the time of his life.

Our tour guide was Flavio Salvetti, a six-foot-four, 37-year-old of Italian-Peruvian descent who looks exactly like you would imagine Tarzan to appear. (The English lads called him "Flagiloo."). Flavio provides a late-model Honda XR600, acts as multilingual guide, organizes mechanics who follow along in a radio-equipped support truck and arranges for comfortable accommodations. He will also set up neat side tours out of the saddle. Flavio does everything, from filling the gas tanks to dealing with the locals and handling the endless red tape that is infamous in South America. It's worth the price. (So is the Honda: My usual ride is a Suzuki RM250 or a Kawasaki KLX, but I was impressed. From sea level to 2.5 miles up in the Andes, through hub-deep sand and knee-deep water, over rocks and snow, hot and cold with no jetting changes and running on gasoline of suspect octane--these bikes never even hiccupped.)

On day one we headed south by bus from our colonial-era hotel in Lima to a hotel on the beach at Paracas just in time for a sunset dinner and Pisco sours. Trust me, two of these alcoholic blunderbusses is more than adequate. The lads from Birmingham, however, decided that the Pisco sour was a food group and began their trip by closing the bar at 6 a.m.

At 7 a.m. Flavio took those who could walk on a boat ride to the Ballestas Islands to see sea lions fornicating and fighting. The wobbly penguins, someone observed, were walking just like the Brits.

Later, we headed to the desert where Flavio checked out each member's riding skills. That determines the difficulty of the trails used en route and whether groups should be broken up into different rider levels. (You needn't be an expert motorcyclist to have fun on the Inca Adventure. One tour member, a female bank vice president from New York, had been riding off and on for only two years.)

The next day we rode in the waves of deserted beaches where 16th-century pirates lured ships to destruction on the rocks near Paracas. Then, turning inland on day four, we rode the seemingly endless steep dunes of the Ica desert, which was like experiencing weightlessness. Flavio showed us his cojones by throttling fast up a sand dune that looked as high as a skyscraper. He pulled a one-eighty at the top, then coasted down at half throttle. When Martin, the car dealer, tried to top that performance, he ended up tumbling to earth on his arse. "Flagiloo" 1, Birmingham 0.

Day five: We boarded a Peruvian prop plane for a side trip to view the mysterious Nazca lines: drawings miles long of birds and animals that some--notably former Swiss hotelier turned best-selling author Erich von Daniken--believe have origins in outer space. (Over to you!) After landing and feeling grateful to be on something nearer to the ground, we fired up the bikes and took off to the high, lonesome (except for the llamas), awesomely beautiful Andes of the Quechua--descendants of the Incas. We stayed with them in the mountain village of Puquio drinking wine and coca tea around a kerosene stove in the corner store downstairs from the hotel. The next morning, I learned just what a high-altitude hangover is.

Peru's president Fujimori is building roads through the country almost faster than we could ride them, and I played hooky one morning to get a look at some of them. After warming up over a road gang's tar-pot fire, I raced Duncan down the steep, new corkscrew of a mountain highway that any road racer would love. We hurled down a dirt riverbed road and then poured on the coals to make it in time for a dinner of potatoes, lima beans, corn and guinea pig in Abancay.

Halfway through the tour, we hit Cuzco, the oldest inhabited city in the New World. It is a red city, sitting in a high red desert bowl, built directly over the centre of the Inca Empire. Cuzco is a great walking town. On every square are at least two churches. If the Franciscans built a beautiful cathedral over an Inca temple, next door the Jesuits attempted to trump them both.

The Pride of Birmingham, meanwhile, had found other diversions in Cuzco. At a nearby saloon I found them dressed in '70s disco attire horrifying the stunned locals with bar tricks. One involved cupping ignited tumblers of cognac onto your bare ass and then jumping onto the bar. The tumblers stick to your buns as the oxygen is depleted, much to the bewilderment of the audience. Rude Britannia.

The 5:30 am train the next morning was full of hippies and Eurotrekkers as we made our way up the mountain to Machu Picchu. The Fab Four, wearing their shortest shorts in the freezing cold, were huddled together like sled dogs. They seemed none the worse for (literally) bar-hopping and flirted loudly with the female attendants while the train negotiated the switchbacks.

What makes Machu Picchu impressive is that, like the barefoot Quechuan peasant who climbs mountains all day with four times his weight on his back, the whole idea seems inconceivable. The Incas built a city of divine beauty in the hardest place possible. It's a hand-built city--the walls rise up alive out of the rock--set along the rim of a volcano. Alas, the wonder of the place failed to penetrate the mopheads' mental state, and so they were helicoptered out to the nearest whiskey bar.

On day ten we hit the road, or rather, path, again. Where the empty cobbled streets of Cuzco ended, the dirt trail led down out of the mountains past neat villages full of miniature people dressed in psychedelic colours and odd 19th-century civil service uniforms. We passed buses that squeezed us out to the edge of the narrow, two-track roads. On one side a cliff face, on the other a drop-off of hundreds of feet, past coca farms to the cloud forest below.

That night we were fully settled in amid the dampness of that green jungle. We stopped for the night at Manú Cloud Forest Lodge, a beautifully designed ecolodge at the base of a waterfall that was watched over by a coatimundi and a blue parrot. Tired from a full day of riding down the Andes across valleys primed with the bountiful plenty, we were famished and headed off to a local restaurant. When the waiter recommended a local combo plate of pork, chicken, beef and the Peruvian favorite--guinea pig--the yahoos blanched. "I ain't eatin' no f-ing gerbil, mate," said Rick, the pharmacist. Imagine, an Englishman balking at a meal that tastes like rodent. We left in search of vegan fare.

"Been saving up for this trip, I 'ave," Duncan told me after dinner. Moths the size of warplanes hovered in the candlelight. Duncan had climbed Kilimanjaro and mountain-biked in Nepal. Drank the water, too. But Peru, he said, was "the best 'oliday I ever 'ad." It was true. I'd never seen a man so savour an adventure. Dunc had stopped everywhere and anywhere to smell flowers, take a picture of a waterfall, or a grave, or a tree, or a pig.

That is, until some street kids stole his camera and all of his film.

But the adventure was coming to an end, which was a shame. If for no other reason than that after 12 days, I felt I'd mastered the orange Peruvian dirt on a motorcycle. It was a lot like skiing on powder: Keep your weight on the outside foot peg to hold the bike into the turn, then accelerate with the throttle. Counter steering corrects the line, just like a tail kick on a surfboard gets you around a curling wave faster than gliding.

All the way back down to Lima the ride achieved a wonderful rhythm, a kind of dance between myself and the bike, from curve to curve, connecting the dots and the images of this old country together... the Spanish hacienda where we listened from our balcony to the music from the plaza in Cuzco...falling asleep to the sound of the river as it flowed to the Amazon...the restaurant Las Brujas de Cachiche, in Miraflores...the muddy, one-lane tunnels cut into mountains, dripping with the wet of the cloud forest...surfing waves of desert sand...llamas, pink flamingos, parrots, lizards, sea lions, a jaguar.

Duncan the Plumber felt the rhythm, too. Which is why we were out in front together that last day, going fast, feeling good, doin' the dance. Until, that is, Duncan smacked the truck with his head.

He would be okay, eventually, and insisted to everyone that he would be back one day. I hope he does go back, but if you're reading this Dunc, remember what I said on that last day in Lima.

"Dude, they drive on the right in Peru."