



The women that welcomed us into her house at Amantani Island of Titicaca Lake.



In some parts of Bolivia it's hard to find diesel. We bought it on black market in order to get to La Paz.



# Camminos De La Muerte (Roads Of Death)



Our Greek explorers climbed on 6000m, drove through the most dangerous road in the world, camped in endless salt lakes, entered the driest desert on earth and they still have a long way to go throughout South America...

Words by **Akis Temperidis** Photos by **Vula Netu** and **Akis Temperidis**



There are millions of llama and alpaca on the altiplano of Peru and Bolivia.

Crossing 'camino de la muerte', the well advertised 'death road' from La Paz to Coroico.



Villa de Leyva, Colombia, is another colonial town where we could live forever.

**F**irst thing you notice in Colombia is that it is by far a more modern and developed country than what you'd expect. People are friendly, well educated with a European sophistication. Women are not just beautiful, they are dangerously gorgeous! There is a reason behind that; Colombia is both white and black. Mix is the secret...

This country used to be notorious for drug trafficking, civil wars and high crime rate. This used to be true but thanks to the efforts of the latest Colombian government, crime is restricted and Colombia is on the tourist map again. As a traveller who doesn't mess with 'narcotrafico', you have nothing to fear.

We crossed Colombia all the way from the Caribbean coast to the south and we never felt unsafe. Being aware that the country is the number one producer of cocaine worldwide, we were surprised by the fact that nobody approached us to sell the white stuff. Police are omnipresent on the roads and during our 2500km trip we encountered more controls than anywhere else. Officers are discreet and polite by the way.

More than anything, Colombia is a land of contrasting colours, landscapes, cultures and living

standards. Cartagena is a colonial beauty at its heart with overwhelming beach culture around. All of Northern Colombia, from there to Barranquilla (Shakira's birthplace) and Taganga, has a Caribbean touch. Driving inland towards Bogota, you climb gradually on the northernmost part of the Andes. Before getting there, we diverted to Mompox, an isolated colonial town, next to the Magdalena River. We drove on rough gravel roads passing through remote, dusty villages and we saw the flip side of Colombia. It is like Africa there...

Getting on higher altitude was a relief. We could finally sleep in our tent without the torture of the heat. Bogota is the first of the high altitude capitals we visited. We spent our first night in a parking lot and the second night in the house of the guy who created Legion Land Rover ([www.legionlandrover.com](http://www.legionlandrover.com)), the only LR club in the country. Bogota reflects the wellness of upper class 'cachacos' on the north and the poverty of internal immigrants in the southern slums. Candelaria, the old neighbourhood downtown is a pleasant place to walk and encounter beautiful, curious students.

Truth is that we spent double the time there in Colombia than scheduled. We were delighted by Villa de Leyva, a majestic town north of Bogota that makes you feel like you travelled back to colonial times. "This is a place to live!" we said to each other the first time we strolled through the cobblestone streets to the biggest plaza we had seen in Latin America. Further to the south, we visited San Agustin, a small town built next to the source of the Magdalena River. The nearby archaeological park features the monolithic statues that were created by a mysterious no name civilization, that flourished before the Incas.

### Crossing The Equator

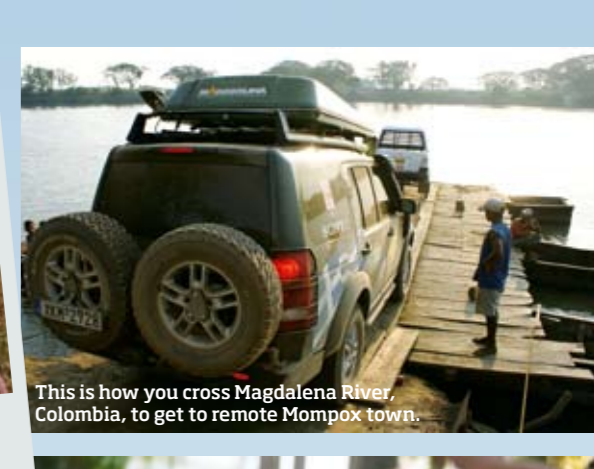
Ecuador is a totally different country to Colombia. Like Peru and Bolivia, the indigenous population is dominant. This means that in every town, you see more people dressed traditionally than western style. Ecuador is a very touristic country but still cheap. It is practical for travellers as the US dollar is the official currency, and very affordable for overlanders, thanks to the low fuel price, the lowest in all America; 1 gallon of diesel costs slightly more than 1USD! This



Colombian beauty during a 'cabalgata', a horse riding event.



A woman sells live turtles for cacerole on the road to Mompox.



This is how you cross Magdalena River, Colombia, to get to remote Mompox town.



Colombians are crazy about soccer like anyone else in Latin America.



A Colombian girl performs indigenous dance in downtown Cartagena.

“ Getting to a high altitude was a relief. We could finally sleep in our tent without the torture of the heat. Bogota was the first of the high altitude capitals we visited. ”

## The World Off Road Pt 7

was one reason we drove a lot there but not the only one; the diversity of the country challenges you to follow more paths. From chaotic Quito, the capital that stands on 2800m, we thought about taking a plane to the famous Galapagos Islands. Given that a four day cruise would cost our monthly budget, we preferred to drive from the Andes to the lowlands different times in order to get a good taste of the country. During a week or so in Ecuador, we visited the lively market of Otavalo, crossed the equator, camped on the windswept slopes of picture perfect Cotopaxi volcano and walked down to the turquoise-coloured volcanic Lake Quilotoa, a postcard-like landscape on 4000m. We were enthusiastic enough to get down to the humid lowlands – that seems to be a completely different country – and get back to the Andes to relax at Cuenca, maybe the nicest town – with the best cuisine - in Ecuador. Last but not least was Vilcabamba, in the so-called 'Valley of Longevity'. Apart from the hype created by expatriates of the 'flower power' generation, Vilcabamba is one more place that teases you to stay there forever, no matter what you make it to 140 years old, as some locals were able to do. A green, fertile valley on 1600m close to the equator is a place closer to paradise than any other, don't you think?



A quechua woman brings her llama downtown Cuzco to get some money from photos like this.



A young boy selling 'Che' cigarettes in Cuzco's Plaza de Armas. Che Guevara is a dominating figure anywhere in Latin America.

### Peru Reloaded...

Crossing the border and entering Peru was like getting back to the roots of our trip. In 2005, we had travelled for 20 days in the country in a Toyota LandCruiser. That trip was the ultimate test for the big one. We were testing ourselves and our budget to a lifestyle that was yet to come.

This time we had the opportunity to cross the country from north to south. Peru is one of the top travel destinations overall. It combines three distinct zones; desert country on the coast, the high standing Andes range in the middle and the Amazon basin further to the east. Depending on the route you choose, Peru is a totally different place. You can stay for months in this country and discover new things every day. Two places you shouldn't miss though are Machu Picchu and Titicaca Lake. We were lucky to have visited the most iconic Incas citadel in the past, otherwise we would have missed





Overlooking the famous salinas that were built by the Incas 500 years ago.



Crossing the picturesque Peru - Bolivia border at Yungayo, on the southern shore of Titicaca Lake.

it this time. Torrential rains created havoc in the area last January and kept Machu Picchu off-limits for months. The rail that takes you to Machu Picchu was closed until last April. The Inca trail, the classic four day trek to the ruins was closed as well. No worries though... Revisiting Cuzco, a colonial beauty built on top of an old Incas town, and exploring the villages, the ruins, the experimental crop fields and the salt flats of ingenious Inca people, was as refreshing as the yoga lesson we took on Sacsayhuaman fortress, the one that overlooks the majestic town.

From Cuzco and the sacred valley every traveller heads south to Titicaca Lake. This is what we did as well. We left the car at Puno and took a two day tour at the lake. We visited the floating Uros Islands, stayed with a local family, tried simple Aymara meals and had a traditional dance, dressed in wool ponchos and alpaca hats. Titicaca tours are standardised. All tourists follow the same program but even if you hate tour groups, you should try this. You will have a good time for sure...

### Escape From Bolivia

Bolivia seems like a poorer Peru at first sight and is by far a more indigenous country. Six to ten Bolivians still speak their own language and since 2005 an indigenous ex 'cocalero' from Oruro, named Evo Morales, is the president of the country. Still, most Bolivians seem to be suspicious people. They don't trust outsiders and they have a good reason for



Traditional clubbing in Titicaca...



Uros women reflecting brightly on the surface of the wonderful Titicaca Lake.

## The World Off Road Pt 7



that. Bolivia lost its coastline to Chile during the Pacific War of 1879 and this remains a stink in its national psyche.

Copacabana, a hippie village on the southern shore of Titicaca provides the only beach in the country. Don't mention that to the locals, though...

La Paz is the most chaotic and congested capital in Latin America. It's also the highest standing in the world, squashed in a valley surrounded by Cordillera Real, on 3800m. Just for this reason, La Paz is the most breathtaking capital in the world!

Bolivia proved to be an adventure for us. Everything is cheap here so you can try some crazy things you never thought about before. Like climbing over 6000m for only 140 AUD! This is the price to climb on top of Huayna Potosi, including six meals, a bed for two nights and a guide. It is a three day adventure that starts from a warm refuge at 4700m. We had a short training session with piolet and crampons on a nearby glacier and next day we trekked to the second refuge at 5130m. The next morning – at 1:00 am! – we fitted the crampons on our snowboard-like boots and started climbing slow and steady on a steep slope of ice. It was dark, cold and painful doing that in the middle of the night. What were we thinking for trying this? The mountain should punish reckless smokers like us, who think they can defy the barrier of 6000m on their first attempt, as if it was a walk in the park. Climbing on any mountain is not a walk in the park. We were walking for four hours up to 5850 m, frozen and exhausted, when the snow started falling and the black clouds covered the sky threatening to kill two ignorant Greeks and their poor guide with a single thunderbolt. We continued despite taking a

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Bolivia has the hardest roads in South America.

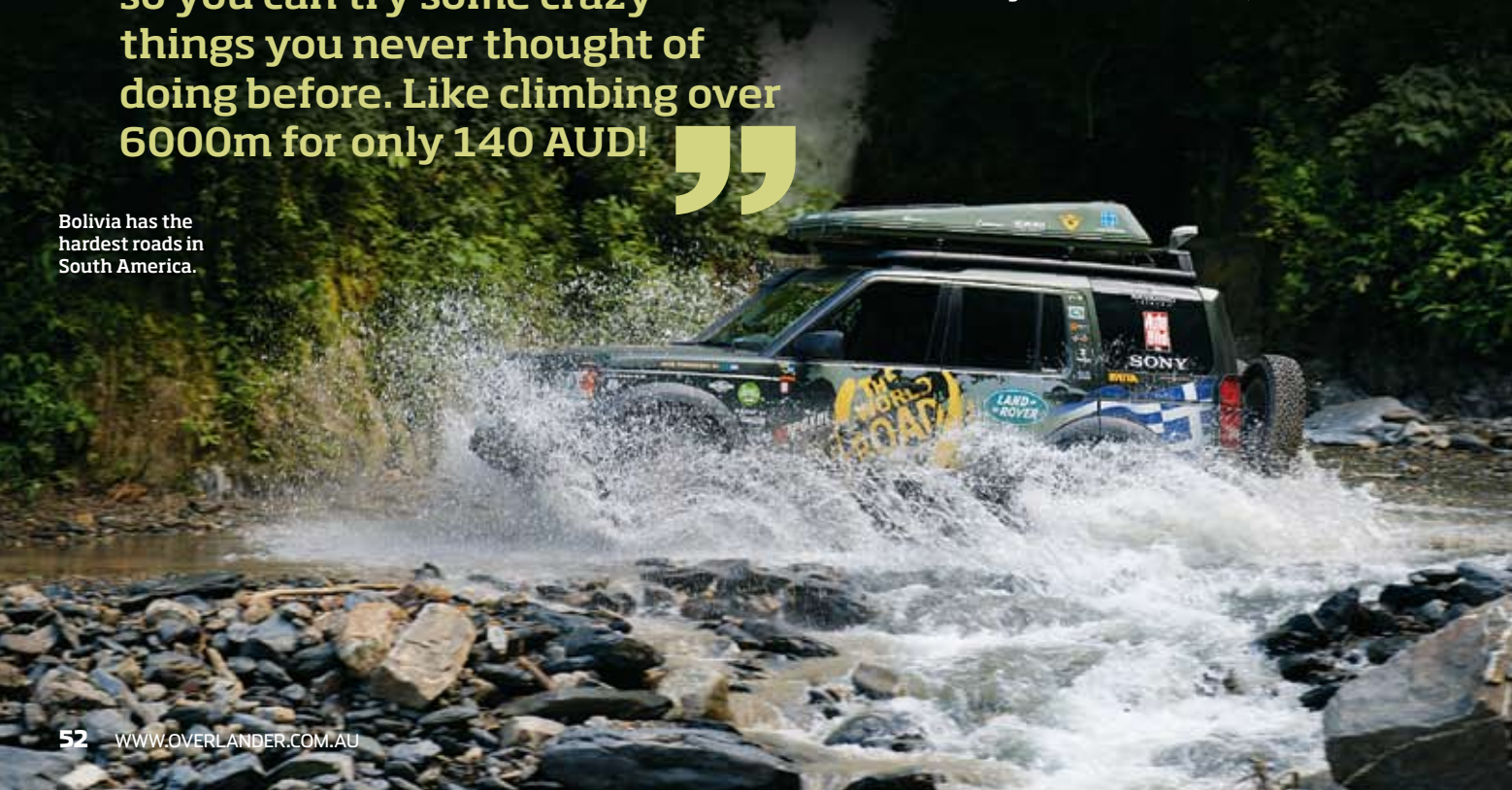


Crossing 'camino de la muerte', the well advertised 'death road' from La Paz to Coroico.

break every ten steps to breathe. At one moment the guide asked me to touch his jacket. I sensed a spark – which meant static charge – a major signal for an oncoming bolt. The same moment we turned back and started descending pretty fast. We didn't break the mighty barrier of 6000m but we survived, thank God!

Back in La Paz we were ready for more adventures. Instead of taking the road on the Andes Plateau to Potosi, we took the 'camino de la muerte', the notorious 'death road' to Coroico. This is a 2m wide gravel road that hangs on steep cliffs and descends from the Andes to the Yungas, the coca growing highlands between the mountains and the jungle. The 'camino' has killed hundreds of people in the past but recently it was bypassed by a new road and now is mostly used by bike tours as an adrenaline activity. How does it feel driving there in a big, fat Discovery3? Sometimes you feel your left wheel hanging off the road, which is serious trouble because the depth is abysmal at some points. But let's be honest; we have done several more dangerous and less advertised routes during our trip. Camino de la muerte is more hype than thrill actually...

A far more thrilling experience was the long loop through the Bolivian jungle. We did more than 1800km from La Paz to Cochabamba, two cities that are only 300km apart. We drove for two days on bone cracking gravel roads through hot and dusty, jungle villages until the road disappeared in the flooded basin. Now what? We should load our car in an old wooden barge to make it to Trinidad. The 50km trip took five hours. We had to use our headlights and all our anti-mosquito cream to stroll through the flooded fields and deserted villages around Mamore River, which looked



more like a lake after the rain season.

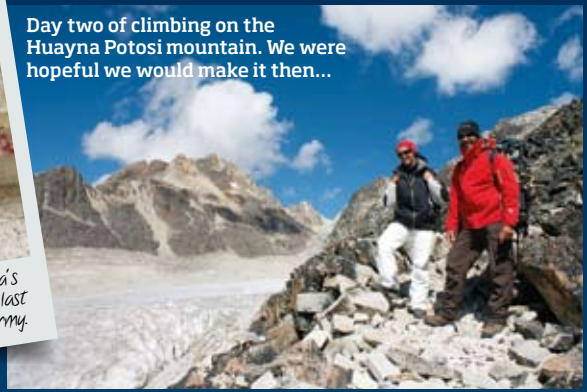
Our Bolivian adventure was not over yet. After we visited Santa Cruz, the economic capital of the country, we followed Ernesto Che Guevara's last path to Vallegrande. This is where Che was carried dead, after he was shot by Bolivian - CIA supported - troops. The revolutionary hero was buried here but his grave was found only in 1997.

Potosi is a mining town in the remote south of Bolivia, on 4100m. At the beginning of the 17th century, it had grown bigger and more prosperous than London thanks to the gold and silver mines of Cerro Rico, the hill overlooking the town. Now many people visit the town for its colonial heritage and the thrill of visiting one of the remaining mines, where millions of indigenous and black slaves died working there, just to make Spain an even wealthier empire. We entered a mine and - believe me - you wouldn't stand to work there for one hour...

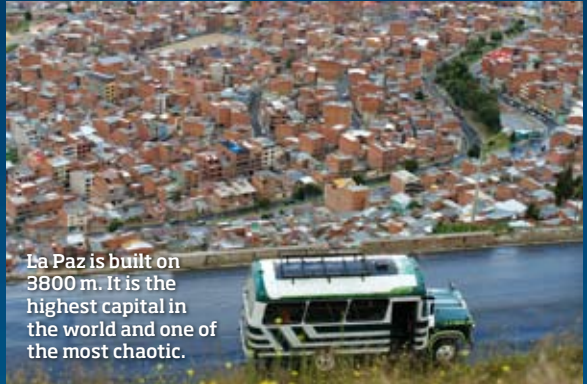
A gravel road leads further south to Uyuni. The ex military garrison is converted to a hot travel destination, thank to its unique position, right next to Salar de Uyuni, the biggest salt lake in the world. Backpackers take a three to four day tour in a 4WD to explore one of the great landscapes on earth. We took our Discovery into the salt flat that covers an area of a small country. It was thrilling at first and amusing in the end to drive for tens of kilometres on the white surface that creates some surreal illusions on the horizon. We camped in the middle of the flat by night and it was a cold and creepy experience. There was no other living creature around, just us under the bright starlight.

Next day we decided to leave Uyuni and head to the

Day two of climbing on the Huayna Potosi mountain. We were hopeful we would make it then...



In this hospital at Vallegrande village, Che Guevara's body was transferred and photographed for the last time after he was shot down by the Bolivian army.



La Paz is built on 3800 m. It is the highest capital in the world and one of the most chaotic.

southern end of Bolivia to get to Chile. A broken bolt that holds the rear wheel straight had a different idea. We were stuck in the middle of a gravel road where not cars passed for hours. We spent the whole day trying to find another bolt or to fix the same one. After a huge effort and the assistance of some good local people at Colcha K village, we could go on next day. On the off road route to Chile the bolt broke again and so we had to improvise. We tied hard the alignment bar with the shock absorber and we kept going at a very slow pace. We drove eleven hours that day to escape Bolivia. We were relieved to enter prosperous Chile and take a break in the heart of the Atacama Desert, the driest desert in the world. From here we start the final part of our long trip. After all, we are hopeful we will make it to Ushuaia, the southernmost town in the world. 📍

Driving in Salar de Uyuni is an extraterrestrial experience.



See where Akis and Vula are now on [www.theworldoffroad.com](http://www.theworldoffroad.com)