



Benedict Depla - PROJECT REPORT

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Name	Benedict Depla		
Place/s Visited	Chile (Punta Arenas to San Pedro de Atacama), Argentina.		
Start Date	24/01/15	Finish Date	23/5/15
Climate	Everything imaginable: -15C to 40C!	Communications	3g

PROJECT DETAILS

In January 2015, my friend Thomas Palmer and I set off on an epic voyage cycling across Chile. We travelled from south to north, rather than east to west, as the latter is barely a 35th of its entire length! Our journey started in the humble industrial town of Punta Arenas.

Punta Arenas is the capital city of Chile's southernmost region, named "Magallanes and Antartica Chilena". It quickly initiated us to what small-city life was like in 1st world South America: the buildings are built into quadrants, meaning that, much like its North American cousins, Chile utilises a "block" system; rather different to Europe's quaint, winding streets already! That night we slept in a hostel known as 'The End of the World Hostel' to allow us time to prepare ourselves (food and water) for the 250km ride into Patagonia's infamous headwind, which would land us in one of our most anticipated POIs en route – Puerto Natales! Little did we realise then that 8-hour days in order to cycle 50kms due to the headwind would become the norm. Yes, it really did take us 4 days to arrive.

After 4 days of camping in the wild, shouting "Hi!" to other cyclists who were finishing their trip (whizzing past without so much as a pedal stroke thanks to their insane tailwind), and discussing how underated sandwiches comprising of only mayonnaise are, arriving in Puerto Natales was a breath of fresh air. Not that we wanted a breath of fresh air, really – we had had enough of breathing – it was time to find a greasy, Americanised diner and have the biggest meal imaginable.

To those who don't know much about trekking or climbing destinations, Puerto Natales (AKA the gateway to Torres del Paine) isn't a name that will ring many bells. However, for those in the know, its name will "stiffen up the sinews, conjure up the blood", and evoke breath-taking images of the jarred granite peaks of one of the most emotionally stirring national parks still left on the planet. We stayed in Puerto Natales for a whopping 4 days, soaking up the chilled climbing vibes and making me yearn for my ill-fated Nepalese adventure, which was cancelled due to worries about safety and the avalanches. Once I had finished bemoaning the absence of my climbing and trekking gear (and that I couldn't believe I had gone to Patagonia without walking boots), we set off once more – however this time we were headed to Argentina!

Our next spot was the town of El Calafate: the home of Perito Moreno – one of the world's most famous glaciers and also home to the most stifling amount of tourists and tourist exploitation I have ever encountered. It was sickening. So much so, that Tom and I swiftly set off once more into the hills, in search for El Chalten – a well renowned sport climbing spot, and our passage to the most southerly point of the Carreterra Austral (which as a side note, was probably the most exceptional part of the entire trip).

The road that goes from El Chalten to Lago del Desierto was quite frankly the worst experience on a road bike of my life. It was deep, deep ripio (gravel) which meant our road bike tyres would slip and slide beneath us and caused the 40kms to feel like an eternity. It took the entire day. When we finally arrived at the lake, we encountered a grumpy Argentinian who reluctantly took our Chilean pesos in return for a night in his campsite. It was a spectacular spot, in the midst of a sparsely concentrated forest, with a view of a glacier falling off of a mountain peak. Worth the £2.50 a night I think!

The next day we hopped on the boat that took us across the lake. We were the only people on this barge, bar the crew, and remained frankly breath-taken by the scenery for the entire hour long voyage. Barely a word was spoken. When we got to the other side, we met some fellow cycle tourists who informed us that the road into Chile was actually a walkers' trail, unfit for a horse let alone a bike. After hearing their excruciating tales of how they managed to get from the town of Villa O'Higgins to where we were currently, Tom and I set off, and up this 6km (apparently 6 hour) slog. It turned out they were dead right! The trail was actually too steep and narrow to be able to push the bikes with panniers, so we had to take off the panniers for some sections, and push the bikes up, then walk down to get the panniers and continue. It did indeed take 6



hours! Once we were at the top, we knew from their accounts that it was 100% downhill from there on in, so we camped in-between the border of Argentina and Chile, and continued on in the morning.

If this were a chapter in a book, I would name this next tale “Stuck on an Island in No Man’s Land”. The island in question wasn’t technically an island: it was actually the strip of land that is between Argentina and Chile but it is accessed on the southern side by Lago del Desierto and on the northern side by Lago O’Higgins (hence my calling it an island). When we arrived at the farm next to the ferry’s dock, the farmer quickly told us that the boat would be coming the next day so we pitched tent and were up early and expectant, waiting for our ride - and the only way out of there! We asked the farmer when the boat would arrive and he told us that in fact the boat wouldn’t be able to make it for the next 3 days, as there were serious weather conditions on the other side of the lake which meant it couldn’t sail! Bearing in mind that this is the 5th deepest lake in the world, and has one of the biggest glaciers on one side of it, we duly accepted this fact and buckled down for a long stay. I could describe in endless detail the farm and its surroundings, and the helpless calmness of our situation, but alas I would be writing a book, not a report of a bike ride! To condense an otherwise thrilling (I’m sure) tale about our marooning, we made friends with a German (Markus), and three Chileans, who were also stranded. After these mind-numbing 3 days, we finally got to the tiny ‘town’ of Villa O’Higgins. By tiny, I mean that it was too small to support even an ATM which is an issue when you are travelling light! There was no ATM for over 200kms and our money was getting very low. We stayed at a hostel (which is pretty luxurious for us, as we had only previously stayed in one thus far) called El Mosco and it was teeming with other cyclists. Markus (the German/Bavarian chap) and ourselves bought a couple of litres of beer each, made an enormous amount of a potato-based Germanic dish, and had one of the best nights imaginable, filled with laughter. It was one of occasions when language barriers and age barriers did not exist, and the fact he was on foot and we were on bikes made not the slightest difference.

The following day, in February some time, we embarked on one of the best things ever invented, thought of, conceived, or indeed any other positive adverb imaginable: the Carreterra Austral. It’s a track/road that essentially links Patagonia to Puerto Montt (Chilean mainland) and follows 1,200kms of twisty, carving, gravel roads, through mountains, over passes, around glaciers, over rivers and even through a mini jungle. If it is possible to do it, please, I beg you reader, do it. It doesn’t have to be on bike (usually takes a month) as most people do it in a 4x4 or hitchhiking, but if there is any way you can get the time, money, freedom, whatever it takes: just do it. If my future telling is still as accurate, I worry that within just a few years the Carreterra Austral will be swamped with commercialisation and the roads may well be widened and tarmacked. To summarise, it won’t be an adventure any more: it’ll be the same as walking Machu Pichu, or going on another, quasi generic, now exploited excursion. As it stands, it’s beautifully absorbing, and the adventure of it always feels full – especially south of Coyhaique!

Between the towns of Villa O’Higgins and Coyhaique there are a lot of little settlements, all very quaint, with a sort of Wild West feel to them. It could be the fact they sell firearms, chainsaws and food all in one mini market, but they were very charming. On this road north, we encountered Markus, our German friend, many a time. Upon arriving in Coyhaique, we met him again, and stayed with him for a few nights in a hostel whilst our bikes were being repaired at the local bike mechanics; I had buckled both wheels, and my bike was stuck in one gear, whilst Tom’s had so much dust inside it that it sounded like sandpaper on wood anytime anything moved! The hostel owner was an awesome guy, and actually let us stay for free for some of our stay! He was very knowledgeable about the local area, and so we planned the rest of our trip with Markus in this Hostel.

After a few pints of beer, it suddenly began to become clear that, after Puerto Montt, the only real road that goes north is the Ruta 5: the beginning of the Pan-American Highway! As you might guess, it’s a 3-lane motorway, and so it is illegal to cycle on it! Blast. Where do we go from here? There was a lot of muttering, until Markus announced that he was planning on buying a pickup truck and that, once we had finished the Carreterra Austral, we could join him. Naturally, as these (drunken) escapades go, we accepted, and within 24 hours we had all gone thirds on a 1997 red Chevrolet pick-up truck that we had bought off an old man for the equivalent of one thousand pounds! In the following days, we spent our time filling out all of the documents, changing registration, and paying our insurance. Luckily, as Chile is still rather behind the times, all of the paperwork is actual paper so it didn’t take too long, and the insurance was about ten pounds for the year! All of this sorted, Markus went off mountaineering in the car for a couple of weeks whilst Tom and I finished the final few hundred miles of the Carreterra Austral by bike. There were a few hiccups, of course, such as having to hitch-hike through a dynamite explosion zone as they were still building the road, and Tom’s pannier racks snapping because the roads were so bad, which left me carrying all of his gear as well as mine. But, as with all good things, it came to an end all too soon. In Puerto Montt we managed to make contact with our adopted Bavarian brother, dismantled the bikes and piled ourselves and our gear into the truck. It was time for a road trip!



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**Project
Highlight**

After around 5 months away I think it's almost impossible to choose one highlight. Swimming in thermal lakes at 4800m that were up to 50C was incredible, as was cycling the Carreterra Austral on road bikes, and camping between borders in Patagonia!

**Value of the
experience
to me**

Time, money, and life management have definitely improved. Understanding deadlines and doing one's best to complete objectives was definitely learnt. Working with local fishermen who live off their catch was also eye opening.



Lago O'higgins



Day 3 in Patagonia!



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San Pedro de Atacama



A daunting day 7!



Under the stars on a salt flat



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Mini jungle trip