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BUMFUZZLE

Travel in a Panel

POST CARD.

PART 4
CROSSING THE
ANDES: COLUMBIA
TO CHILE



Crossing the equator with very little fanfare.

Sitting in a Buenos Aires café watching sidewalk tango dancers slide across a cardboard floor for tips it is sometimes hard to remember all the unique lives and varied landscapes we've encountered during our trek across South America. Looking back at it now makes me laugh. To think, we did it all in our 1958 VW Panelvan which arrived on the continent in Cartagena, Colombia, on Christmas day wrapped in a shipping container like a great big present.

We'd been warned that the process of freeing a vehicle from the long arm of the Colombian customs officer would take up to a week and be a total nightmare. Yet on day one we arrived with high hopes and were soon taken under the wing of an Argentine truck driver who'd been holed up in the port offices for four days working to get his rig out. He had been unsuccessful up to that point but at least knew who to talk to, and before long he'd introduced us to Liliana, a lovely girl who for some reason took a liking to us and our extremely limited Spanish. Under her wing we were shuttled from one office to another, filling out paperwork, paying the bank fees, eating lunch in the cafeteria, and generally being very patient.

Our spirits were still high when, on just day two, Liliana came out of her office with a big smile on her face announcing that it was time to unload the bus. She led me out across the dusty lot to our container where I cracked the seal, backed the bus out, picked Ali up, and waved goodbye as we drove aimlessly away from the city.

There was always something interesting along the roads in Colombia. Hundreds of machine-gun toting military, oxen pulling wooden carts, and fresh goat milk stands. We stopped at one and watched while a lady led a goat up onto a stand and squirted the warm milk direct from the tap into my glass. I admit this was my first time, and I was doing it mostly for the shock value and the look on Ali's face, but in the end I actually enjoyed it. Alongside a big hunk of cornbread it was a pretty delicious breakfast.

About this time the bus started spewing brake fluid. It was the same wheel I'd previously replaced a wheel cylinder in, so I thought it'd be a quick fix. But when we went to work on it we found that



Another typical border town.

even while bouncing on the end of a five-foot long cheater bar the axle nut just would not crack.

Fortunately we had a friend in Bogotá. Gerson, from KlassicFab, had invited us to visit. When we arrived at his shop, home of the Funky Green Panels, he quickly put his best men on the job. One broken ratchet and two fabricated on the spot extension bars later we had the axle nut off. With that little job taken care of we settled in at his home, and ours for the next few days, for some good old-fashioned family hospitality. Grandma lived next door, and despite the communication gap she doted on us day and night.

One of the things we wanted to get for the bus while in Bogotá was new tires. Our 165x15s, despite the abundance of Beetles in Colombia, proved an impossible tire to acquire in Bogotá. We had a fun time looking though, and even spotted two Barndors; survivors that had probably come to Colombia as taxis in the 50s.

We reluctantly rolled away from our new friends and continued south. We had been in Colombia nearly a month and were looking forward to heading across the border and inching our way into the Andes, as well as the beaches.

In Ecuador we stayed with some more friends, one of the biggest benefits of having a website. Then after visiting Quito for a couple of days we headed for the coast. The road was sparsely populated by dirt poor families trying to make a living from chopping down trees one at a time and milling them into lumber. We weren't sure what we would find at the beach, and were pleasantly surprised by the small town of Canoa just a couple of kilometers across the equator, where we camped on the sand, surfed the warm waters, and soaked up the sun and cheap beer.

The border crossing into Peru, like all crossings, was no problem. Though for the first time finding the border was a bit of an issue. We found ourselves ensconced in the midst of a busy market, this one spreading right across the Pan-American itself. Three blocks from the border yet it took us an hour and one long scratch along the side of the bus from a passing bicycle to get there. Once at the offices



One of many mountaintop shrines to Jesus. Say your prayers and downshift.

Peruvian cops were a nightmare. Not because they were busy stopping us for bribes; they weren't. Instead five or six times a day they stopped us simply to talk



Mountain drive to Huaraz, Peru. At over 14,000 feet it was our highest point at that time, but wouldn't remain so for very long.

though the crossing was a breeze, and in no time at all we had left Ecuador behind.

Peruvian cops were a nightmare. Not because they were busy stopping us for bribes; they weren't. Instead five or six times a day they stopped us simply to talk. They loved the bus and proudly proclaimed it a casa rodante, a rolling house. Each town had a clutch of officers standing at the side of the road, and without fail one would wave us over. The official reason was always that we »

Around every bend in the dirt road was more beauty in the Central Highlands of Peru.

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Blues have never looked so blue and greens so green as on the altiplano.



I offered to pour the gas but she wouldn't hear of it.

didn't have a front license plate. They would look at the front of the bus and ask, "Placa?" To which we would simply reply, "No, it's on the back." while hitching a thumb over our shoulder.

Normally you'd think that would be prime bribery territory, but they'd just smile and ask where we were from. Then we'd go through the story of how we had driven from Estados Unidos. Gasps of astonishment would follow, and then sometimes we'd show them inside the back of the bus, which is when the casa rodante talk would begin. After a bit of this we would get another big smile and a backward facing wave of the hand. We were on our way.

Peru was our first real foray into the high Andean mountain passes. The ridiculously small map we used to travel across South America indicated some sort of road between the coastal desert town of Casma and Huaraz, somewhere high up in the Andes. The road was one of the most beautiful, exhilarating, and challenging of our entire trip. We climbed steadily for hours and hours along a one lane muddy track, passing tiny villages, young girls herding sharp horned cattle, their mothers doing laundry in the swift running rivers, and old women lugging huge bundles of wood on their heads. It was often hard to find the men, though from looking at the steep mountainsides with perfect crop squares clinging to their side we assumed that is where they spent their days.

Pigs, chicken, sheep, dogs, and ornery mules all blocked our progress at one point or another. But it was a river that nearly turned us around after six hours of scrambling up the mountain. The road simply disappeared as the river roared down across it and dropped sharply off a small cliff. Turning around after that long on the road wasn't an option though. The instant I floored the gas pedal I asked Ali, "Are you ready?" She only had time to reply, "I don't..." before

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Loading onto the ferry to nowhere.

we plunged into the icy water. Halfway across the river the front of the bus disappeared from underneath us. I stayed on the gas and miraculously the nose and soaking wet safaris popped back up. In just seconds we were on the other side idling and laughing. I don't know how these buses do it, but I honestly don't think there is any obstacle that they can't get through with a little guts and a lot of gas.

A short while later we peaked at 4200 meters and stared across a valley at a row of snow-capped mountains stretching as far from north to south as our eyes could see. Blue skies and sunshine warmed our shoulders after the long wet ride.

That was our first high mountain pass but it wouldn't be long before we crossed 5000 meters, and then on up to 5500. At around 5800 meters we were driving along with snow falling and night approaching when suddenly a pink flamingo flew across the road just a few meters above the top of the bus. Peru was a land of extremes.

In Lima a couple of weeks later we found that our wheel cylinder was leaking again. Since these cylinders are renowned for failing I replaced it without another thought. But then while heading up into the mountains I looked down to find more brake fluid. Or so I thought at the time. Without another wheel cylinder I lazily decided that I'd just keep an eye on the brake fluid and top it off as we went along until I could find a replacement.

Three days later, high up in the Andes, a loud grumble came from the back tire. When I hit the brakes to pull off the road it felt like the whole tire was going to fall off. Within a minute the true contents of



This seemed like as good a place as any to effect some roadside repairs.

the leak was revealed. It wasn't brake fluid at all, but tranny oil. Our reduction box oil seal had failed and, not knowing anything about the gear box, I had misdiagnosed it. I had unwittingly let it run dry, and now we had a catastrophic RGB failure. With a hundred kilometers to the nearest town of any size we packed the box full of grease and limped very slowly along the rest of the day, pulling into town with our wheel spinning in big oval shaped turns on the disintegrating axle.

In Pisco, a run-down town leveled a few years back by a monstrous earthquake, we settled in at a small hotel with a big dirt parking lot where we could work on the bus. On day one we pulled the box apart and found the gears and bearings completely shredded. Day two we made the four hour bus ride to Lima. Day three we had most of the parts in our hands, and the next morning we were on the bus back to Pisco with all new bearings, seals, and gears. On the fifth day I tried unsuccessfully to get the last two inner bearings out of the gear box. Day six we spent nine hours on a roundtrip bus to Lima on a hopeless search for a bearing puller. And finally, on day seven, we welded a gear puller to the bearings, yanked them out, and put everything back together again. I wouldn't go so far as to call the experience fun, but we did meet a bunch of friendly people, and were pretty well pleased with ourselves as we drove out of town after just a week.

After the rough mountain roads of Peru it was a nice change to slide on into Chile along the Pan-American. But the best thing about Chile was the camping. The population thinned, and long stretches

We celebrated with way too many Quilmes beers and a below freezing night of camping before heading north to Buenos Aires and the ship that was waiting to take us all to Europe



Any roadside distraction is welcome in the desert.

of beach and desert called out to us to stop the bus and spend a day without another soul in sight.

Never ones to shy away from a challenging road we made a bee line for the torturous Carretera Austral which links the small towns of Chile south of where the PanAm ends. For days we wound our way through the sharp mountains passing nothing but jacked-up European Land Rovers and the ubiquitous German in his gargantuan WWII-era military transport vehicle.

I often wondered what they thought of seeing this old 1600cc powered bus on tiny tires driving the same roads as them.

Despite the rugged machismo of our VW bus the road did spell the end of our front tranny mount. We went from shifting through butter to shifting through honey. But seeing as we were in Patagonia, roughly one million miles away from what most of us consider normal life, this was simply another chance to put my mantra that you can fix anything on a bus with bailing wire and super glue, to the test. Under the bus a few twists of thick bailing wire, combined with a couple of oddly positioned wrenches, and we were shifting smoothly again.

And that's how we pulled into Ushuaia, self-proclaimed end of the world, southernmost city in the world, and also the end of one of the world's greatest road-trips, Deadhorse, Alaska to Ushuaia, Argentina. For such a small city they sure get a lot of world hype. We celebrated with way too many Quilmes beers and a below freezing night of camping before heading north to Buenos Aires and the ship that was waiting to take us all to Europe. The continent had held a little bit of everything for us and we enjoyed every bone-crunching kilometer of it. ☺

The end of the world, Ushuaia, Argentina.

