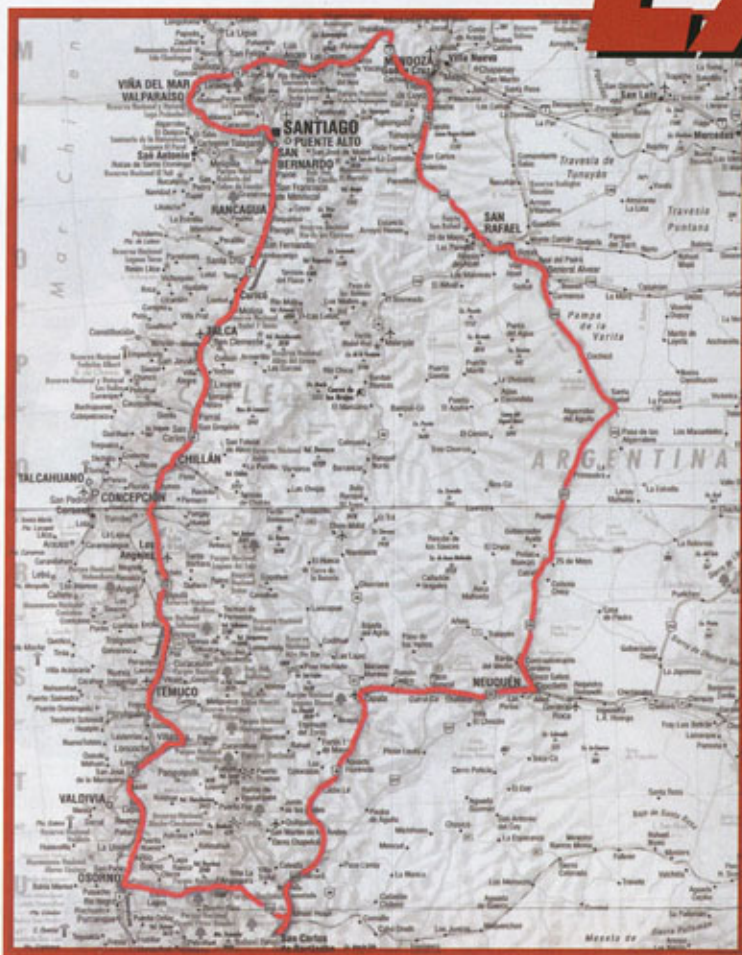


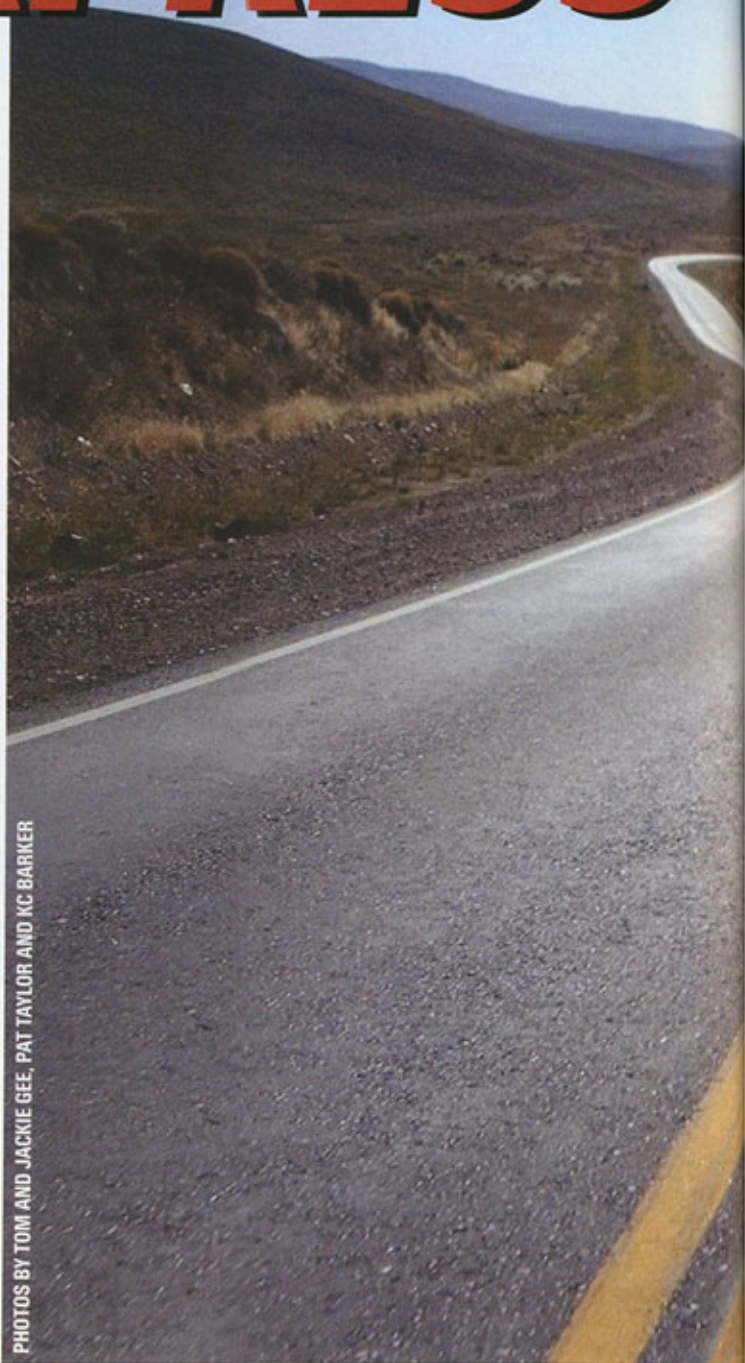
Pan-American **EXPRESS**

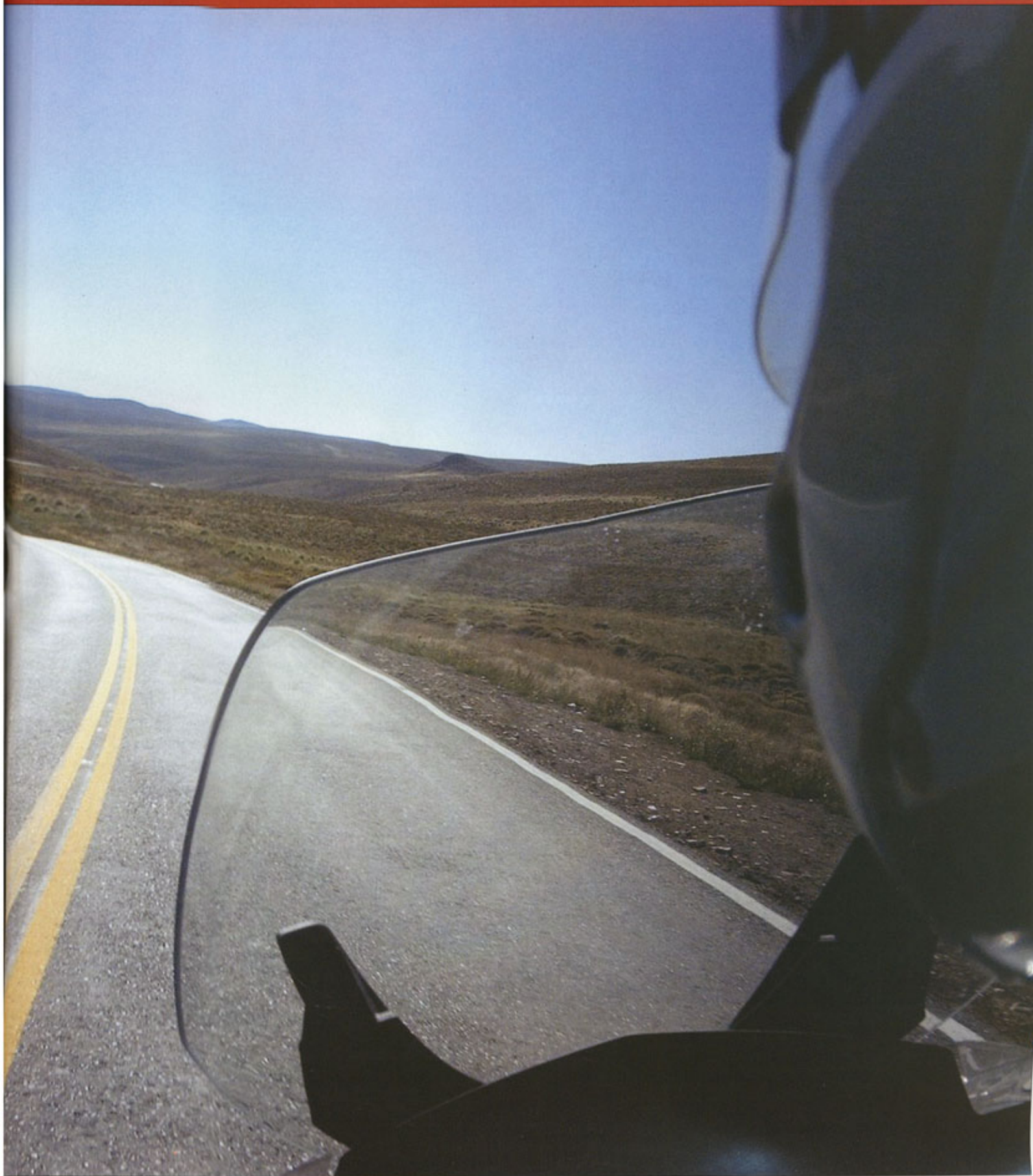


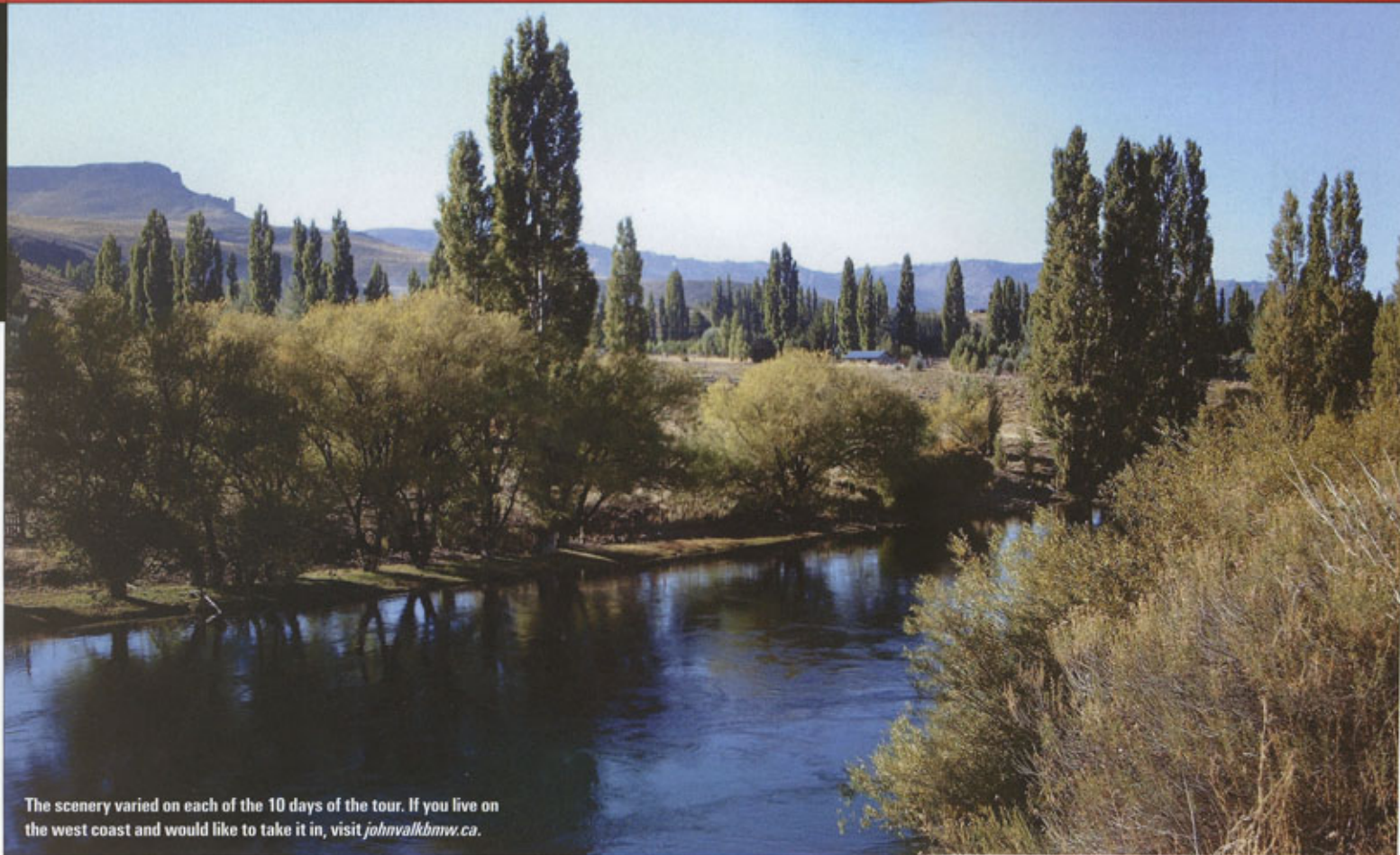
BY **KC BARKER AND VICTOR LEGINSKY**

When two west coast riders join a tour to discover South America's Pan-American Highway, they discover cultures and terrain very much different than Canada. They also discover how hard it is to say farewell for the trip home.

PHOTOS BY TOM AND JACKIE BEE, PAT TAYLOR AND KC BARKER








The scenery varied on each of the 10 days of the tour. If you live on the west coast and would like to take it in, visit johnvalkbmw.ca.

To reach the Pan-American Highway from Vancouver would take too long, so for our 10-day ride through Chile and Argentina we ship our bike to South America, and along with 31 others, join a tour organized by West Coast BMW dealer John Valk. Our group is mostly professionals from BC, lured by the promise of good hotels with secure bike storage and a support van

driven by a mechanic. Upon arrival, we assemble in Viña del Mar, a beach resort adjacent to Valparaíso, where our bikes await in a gloomy Chilean customs warehouse. The next morning we're up at dawn, suited and ready for the bus ride to the port where we are to clear our bikes through customs. We spend the day waiting in the sun next to our gleaming motorcycles, wading through a sea of bureaucracy. Overheated and frustrated, at

sunset we are finally released with our bikes and we ride out into the evening rush hour.

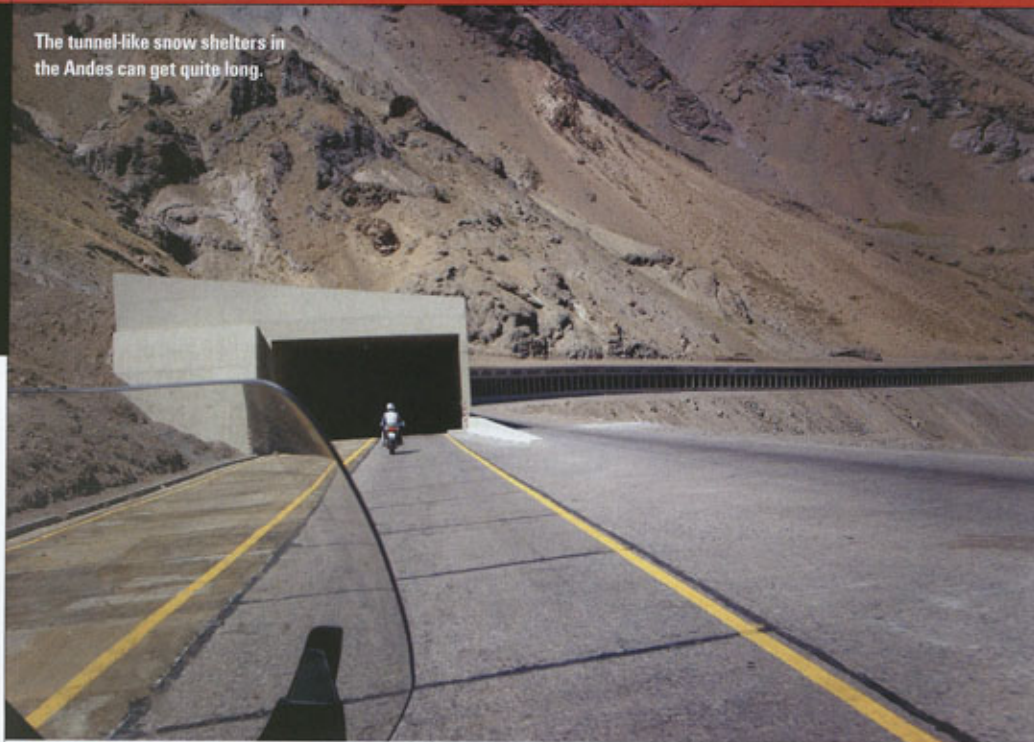
Despite fatigue and the late start, we have to cover 203 km to reach Hacienda Los Lingues, a guest ranch just north of San Fernando. Route 68 from Valparaíso to Santiago and then Route 5 south are four-lane divided freeways, so we estimate about two hours to our destination. But in Santiago there are several by-pass roads to choose 



A few of the 33 BMWs taking part in the tour. Riders would break into smaller, more manageable groups and meet at each day's destination.


FEATURE

The tunnel-like snow shelters in the Andes can get quite long.



After the freeway, the secondary road to the resort is a treat of lakes, small farms and cottages. March is the beginning of fall in South America and it is off-season for tourists. The roads and hotels are free of meandering vacationers, making it easier for our motorcycles to share the road with tractors and oxcarts.

The following day we head south again on Route 5. In Temuco we intersect highway 199, which takes us southeast to Pucon past ranches and airstrips and obvious wealth. It's 437 km to Pucon, where another mountain resort awaits us on a beach of black sand, next to a smoking and perfectly conical volcano. From there we turn east to Patagonia, and at 527 km, this is a long day, made longer by stops as Victor and I never pass a roadside market without poking about for a while.

We leave the Pan-American at Osorno and take Route 237 to Argentina over Paso 



Yerba maté cups at a local gift shop.

We spend the day waiting in the sun next to our gleaming motorcycles, wading through a sea of bureaucracy.



Entering the Andes.

from, suburbs to get lost in, military bases to blunder into, and in darkness we reach the Pan-American Highway heading south. When finally we arrive at the centuries-old hacienda, we're welcomed with traditional Pisco sours made of lime and Chilean firewater, and we dine on exotic cuisine and specialty wines. We then bed down next to stables of horses with pedigrees longer than ours.

On the second day we continue south on Route 5 for the 365 km ride to our next destination, Hotel Robledal in Termas de Chillan, a mountain resort 80 km east of Chillan. The Pan-American weaves through low eucalyptus blue-green hills and valleys lush with berry farms and vineyards, but there are tollbooths every 50 km. Because of toll revenue, the Pan-Am is in excellent condition, much better than the Trans Canada highway back home. Along the way gleaming gas stations offer espresso, free wireless internet, showers and salad bars—all of which seem oddly North American.



After emerging from customs at Paso Sistema Cristo Redentor, our authors descend a road that would make a superbmoto rider envious.



Cardenal Antonio Samoré. At 1,308 metres, it's a curving ride up from rainforest to a bleak rocky sierra, past a border crossing, then sharp dropping corners down to beautiful Bariloche, a resort town so similar to Whistler, BC, that we think we've taken a wrong turn. By comparison to serene Chile, Argentina is frantic and full of world-weary tourists.

In Bariloche we feast on an exquisite selection of local cheeses and smoked boar, and wash it down with yerba maté from the waiter's private reserve. Yerba maté cannot be ordered from a menu; it's an herbal tea drink sipped through a strainer that is shared with family and community.

On day six, with 474 km ahead of us, we ride north to Zapala then Neuquén. We start along a crystal river—cool, crisp and exhilarating—then on through ominous volcanic mountains. Before noon, we leave the mountain valleys and ride up an incline onto a plateau, where scattered flocks of sheep pick at scraggy bushes. Then a condor guides us to Zapala. At a truck stop café, we order what everyone else is eating, delicious pieces of grilled meat served on sizzling pans with charcoal underneath—Parrillada, the phrasebook says. The same phrasebook offers a translation for: "no internal organs for me please." We laugh and wonder why someone would need to say that. When our tray of tripe, liver and intestines arrives, the phrase suddenly makes sense.

Zapala to Neuquén is oil country, and the overheated highway is pressed into deep ruts by oil tanker and service trucks. This is the worst part of the entire ride, made even more disconcerting by the frequent roadside fatality markers. Just when we think we can no longer bear the heat, thirst, roadside litter and

barren landscape, Neuquén emerges as an oasis, irrigated and lush with vineyards and vegetable farms.

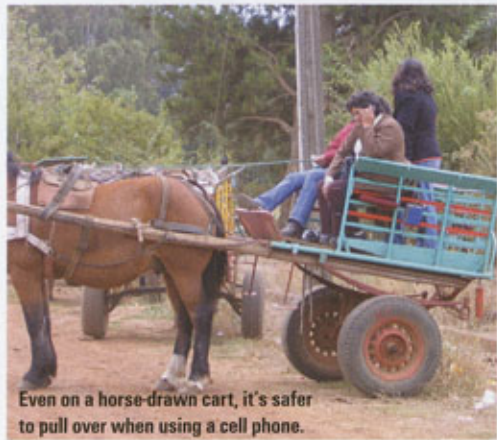
The next morning six riders are too sick to get out of bed. The illness is apparently caused by something in the water and even some locals are hospitalized. One bike and rider are loaded into the van, four stay behind to ride the next day, and Victor and I start out at noon. Leaving the oasis, we ride onto Argentina's vast pampas. A sweltering side wind shrivels us inside our riding suits. On the pampas, stock corrals are sunk into the gravelly sand to protect horses and cattle from the relentless wind. We stop frequently but must carry on. We stop at Santa Isabel, but there is no hotel—and now it's getting dark. Fortunately the support van has room for Victor and the BMW, and I join John Valk on the back of his machine. The full moon rising over the pampas barely illuminates the startled family on a horse cart who watch a single BMW zing past them like an alien creature. The day ends with 527 hard kilometres, and in San Rafael we are too tired to join the town's inhabitants who are feasting and visiting in outdoor cafés.

Mendoza, 220 km away, is our destination the next morning. Mendoza is the heart of Argentina's wine country—the Andes are getting closer. We arrive at the Hotel Cordillera early enough to walk through five downtown squares set amongst elegant stone buildings. At the covered central market we find herbs that when added to your daily yerba maté either promise to increase sexual prowess or treat diarrhea—we must learn Spanish.


Our final day takes us 422 km from Mendoza back to Viña Del Mar in Chile via the Andes. Each mountain seems to be a



Lunch in Bariloche.



Even on a horse-drawn cart, it's safer to pull over when using a cell phone.

block of different ore: one is coal black, the next iron red and the following silver. As we climb, we pass through the longest tunnel in the Andes, which leaves the impression that we haven't climbed very much. But after we emerge from customs at Paso Sistema Cristo Redentor the highway disappears. Looking almost straight down, we discover an alarming series of switchbacks, with extremely tight gravelly turns and oil transport trucks chugging downhill in low gear. I try to help Victor by leaning into the mountain until he assures me that we will crash if I don't sit still. We descend 3,863 metres to sea level through mountainside mines into valleys of vineyards and avocado farms. 

FEATURE

The Hotel Monterilla is a comforting welcome in Viña Del Mar, but nobody wants to be here. Our adventure is almost over. The riders spend an unbelievably tedious day getting the bikes back through customs and I spend the day buying cowboy boots. Then we're off to the airport and a hop to Buenos Aires. From there, it's a 20-hour plane ride home to Vancouver.

With international riding and shipping insurance, new BMW riding suits, a few extra days in Santiago and a concluding side trip to Buenos Aires, the trip is pricey. But considering the great company, excellent organization, fine accommodations, spectacular roads and delicious wine at the end of every day, it is worth it. All the bikes return home in good condition but most have bent rims from potholes. It is tempting to leave the bike in Chile and return to continue exploring, maybe even ride all the way to Tierra del Fuego. Victor and I determine that our BMW R1150RT isn't really that great for two-up riding, so we're breaking in a new K1200GT. We hope the new K bike likes flying.

CC



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