



Getting right back to where we started from

Our last newsletter left off with a celebration close at hand and edition #11 will end with one of equal calibre: four years on the road. While we might not have accomplished as much cycling this time around, travel in South America has still been an intrepid exploration of both country and character. So without any further introduction, because it is going to be hard enough to summarise six months in a couple of pages, lets get right back to where it started from.

Getting wild at heart

Leaving Barrancas, we continued our path into Argentinean desolation: where the wild winds blow; the icy rain whips; where I think I died and then came back to life several times; and where we both stuffed as many jammy dodgers in our mouths as possible at the top of a mountain pass. It was established, there and then that the iconic windswept Monkey Puzzle Tree of Patagonia is a befitting symbol indeed.

For consolation, I continued to pray to the wind gods and Ali cycled pointing roughly at 2 o'clock. My iPod shuffle was no distraction-comfort either, as I couldn't hear a damned thing above the hissing. I decided instead, to pass the gruelling time by creating a new lyrical version of that most famous Evita song: Don't blow for me Argentina. It whiled away a number hours.

Luckily in between the cycling hardships, we were happy to find out that sleeping outdoors is strongly imbedded in the Argentinean culture. You feel safe and at ease; and before you know it, invited to join in on the *asado* [bbq]; featuring strongly in the camping routine. Expect to hear the sound of crackling fires and the popping of corks around 10pm, just before they chuck half a cow on the grill plate. This sociable gathering is one sure way to meet the locals.

We stumbled upon some great spots and some great travellers too. One night in a municipal campground in Chos Malal - which I admit, sounds more like an Indian dinner than somewhere to pitch your tent - we met a truly remarkable couple. Prior to their current mode of travel: a little hire van, they had sailed around the world for 20 years. However, the real inspiration came when they told us they were almost 80 years of age. Talk about making us feel like novices.

But you wouldn't expect to meet any other sort of voyager in the wilderness of Argentina. Just the resolute few who, no matter how hard the wind howls or how many horsefly bites they receive, can't help but fall in love with Argentina's untamed spirit.

Getting to the wedding on time

In Chile, snow bonneted volcano crests; pine forests where wild fuchsias grow shocked us with their luscious nature after the barren landscape of Argentina. Besides the food confiscation fiasco at the Chilean border and suffering on extremely bad and wet back roads, we saved a little kitten and survived the maniacal driving antics of locals. Somehow, the poor road skills rubbed off onto Ali for a brief moment, when he absentmindedly ploughed into the back of me on our way to Panguipulli. Despite the hold ups, we still got to the wedding on time.

Marriage celebrations are always fun and Benjamin and Natalia's was no exception: a beautifully serene setting by the lake, coupled with memories of designer dresses, ritzy sunglasses, speedboats, barbeque-obsessions, late-night parties and sun-lazy days. We met plenty of big hearted friends and whether they like it or not, the occasion has become one of our fondest reminiscences. Not exactly the type of memories we had expected to have while cycle touring.

Getting shaken and stirred

But you just never know what to expect when you are on the road. What is dished up next is a blur of patchy bitumen interspersed between rain, dirt, mud, rocks, potholes, steep-steep inclines, more rain, more mud, more rocks, and more of that cycling drudgery that you're glad you don't have to face everyday. We hardly noticed when we crossed back into Argentina: too busy contending with the rickety route to San Martin de los Andes via Puerto Fuy. The reward: meeting up with two travellers that haven't changed a bit in their last two years of expedition.

John and Linda have been wandering around our planet for seven years and we've bumped into one another three times previously. A few dinners with the Huttons not only dishes up something delicious, but pleasurable at the same time. Seeing familiar faces adds a constant in our transient lifestyle and we're wondering where the next worldly dinner date might take place.

Our next comfort zone became the campground a few kilometres out of Bariloche. In addition to the farmyard animals taking a shine to Ali's early morning generosity with the bread, another friendly face showed up a few days later. Ours' and James' cycle paths meet once again: this time being the 9th call. In due course, the event is celebrated with a visit to a local brew house.

But it is probably a good thing we didn't go any earlier, otherwise Mother Nature's wild salsa steps on February 27 might have been misconstrued as the effect of one too many beers. I now understand what they mean when they say that there is absolutely no true psychological comprehension of an earthquake. "The earth moved under my feet" are just lyrics of a song and your senses become rather insecure when the ground starts playing up like a giddy fairground attraction. Well that's my excuse anyway, for thinking in my drowsy state, that a horse was eating our tent. Thank goodness Ali was by my side to put things straight.

Getting a firm hold of the situation

We had already decided, back in the last newsletter that the wind and rain of the Ushuaian route was not the way to discover the rest of South America. Instead, and you'll most likely see the appeal, the beaches in Brazil were beckoning. In order to plan around seasons and our lackadaisical attitude over the last few months, we needed to get to Buenos Aires and quick smart. What better way than to sit the long flat blustery pampa ride out in a bus? And first class at that. There's something rather decadent about stretching out on a bed-like seat, watching a Bruce Willis blockbuster and sipping champas. Can say I felt not an ounce of guilt whatsoever.

Getting bitten and smitten

We'll breeze over Buenos Aires, since we got stuck in a dump and couldn't wait to catch the ferry to Uruguay. But that shouldn't let you sway from visiting the place. There's plenty on offer; just that we weren't in the mood for it. Montevideo on the other hand, had a gloriously old fashioned vibe and our retro hotel made up for misgivings in the Argentinean capital.

The down side of Uruguay is its expense. Even with continuous wild camping, we ploughed through the budget like a knife through melted butter. As the country's name: "river of colourful birds" suggests, they have plenty of feathery friends flying their vibrant splendour around. Unfortunately, the country is plagued with another, less attractive flying animal: the mosquito.

Our dance routine that normally took place at dawn and dusk, became a day long event, especially when the little blighters learned how to travel along on our panniers. The highlights, when we weren't writhing and swatting, were the white stretches of untouched seashore and beach villages dotting the coastline. The quaint and friendly ambience rolled over onto the highway too. It would have to be one the most relaxed cycling countries we've ever visited: with its decent roads, wide shoulders, excellent dirt tracks and very minimal traffic.

Getting the royal treatment

Besides pedalling on beaches northeast of Paranaguá and entering Rio from the south via the brilliant network of bike lanes, the highlights of Brazil are sadly nothing to do with cycling. There are not only too many vehicles for what any highway has on offer, but venturing from the bitumen means hours of battling on dirt paths with often monster gradients. Drivers are not only impatient, but totally opposed to obeying road rules resulting in kamikaze stunts combining Indian anarchy and Mexican peril. We thanked the bicycle gods sincerely for the wide shoulder and the fact that it doesn't matter what side of the road a cyclist rides on in Brazil.

It also rained in a biblical manner and the dampness soon seeped into our disposition too, making life as gloomy as the weather. All our gear was breaking down and who could blame it after four continuous years on the road. The cycling day involved more and more repairs. But when mould started growing uncontrollably inside my panniers, on the mattresses and tent, I'd had enough. Aaldrik too. You might say a couple of hardened cycle tourers like ourselves, could contend with a few hiccups and sure we can. But not everyday with no reprieve.

In contrast, it is difficult to put the generosity of Brazilians into perspective. They open up their houses, their lives, share their food and wine and knowledge; organise everything for you; help you get in contact with others who in turn give you the same warm hearted treatment. You will be looked after like royalty.

The people of Brazil make this country what it is and as traveller you'll move from one set of wide open arms to another. We'll never forget the sincerity and genuine affection of Rodrigo and Gisele; the relaxed attitude of João and Juliana, who in turn put us in contact with; another Rodrigo and Tatiana in Rio, where we were made to feel so welcome in their 9th floor apartment overlooking Ipanema Beach. And then there is Julio, who solved a major problem for us while on our way to meet up with the two coolest dudes in Belo Horizonte: Cristiano and Rachel.

Other amazing moments when nature touched our hearts were seeing oversized hamsters in the wild, known as capybaras; having a toucan take a strong liking to me; and witnessing ten times the normal volume of water flow over the legendarily impressive Foz do Iguaçu waterfalls. Entering the heart of Rio was also up there as epic experiences. The beaches are some of the most stunning city surf we have ever laid eyes on and there are a number of equally beautiful bodies on parade too.

Bizarre moments include the first time we camped overnight for free in a petrol station and made use of their shower and toilet. Due to the ridiculously overpriced accommodation in the country, this soon became an everyday occurrence and actually lost its appeal. Witnessing Brazilians supporting their team in the *Copo du Mundo* [World Cup] on Copacabana Beach however, will remain firmly embedded as a monumental occasion.

Getting right back to where we started from

Entering Europe was also a momentous episode in our tour. A strange one too, as we found ourselves having to curb the urge to ride the wrong way up the street or embark on a bit of highway riding. The chaos was behind us and law and order now reigned. I have to admit having a bike path was sheer bliss. Even the drainage grates were cycle friendly and in the beginning I couldn't help saying "thank you" to every motorist allowing me to cycle across the road. Not having some maniac speed past and turn suddenly in front of you, after almost a year and a half of that sort of behaviour, needed some getting used to.

Seeing friends and family was of course wonderful as we went on our whirlwind tour of the Netherlands: starting in Arnhem; through to Friesland; followed by Amsterdam; Utrecht; The Hague; and ending up in Rotterdam. The generosity on everyone's behalf was simply humbling, but there is honestly not enough space in this newsletter to mention you all individually. We hope you can live with the big gratitude thank you we are placing right here.

We also appreciate the supporting companies that made the bedroom in Bolsward look like the end of year festive season had come early. Unpacking boxes with goodies to use on the last leg of our tour was just as exciting as Christmas. But then again, so was meeting James for the 10th time in Belgium. Over a day-long bike brewery tour, to celebrate 4 years on the road, we discussed in length what it was like to return from the wilds of South America. And apart from Ali's profound statement about discovering the world to be round, we all decided the weirdest thing was, after the mountains of experience and diversity our lives have witnessed in the last year, we too began viewing everything from an almost normal perspective: as if nothing had happened. Yes, definitely the weirdest thing was getting right back to where we started from.

Tales of Paris; Southern France; and North Africa to follow
Cheerio and best wishes until the 12th edition

Sonya and Aaldrik

Thank you are so plentiful this time around a whole page has been dedicated to everyone who helped us out. If we accidentally forgot to mention you here, please don't despair, we certainly haven't forgotten your kindness:

The **Garcia Family** for their most amazing hospitality and welcome at their wonderful home in Panguipulli and of course **Benja and Natalia** for inviting us to their very cool wedding there; All of **Benja and Natalia's friends** (too numerous to mention) for making us feel totally at home; The **Argentinean Family** that insisted we took their cold bottle of water while we were cycling in the heat of northern Patagonia. **John and Linda** for our fourth meeting to date in San Martin de los Andes with some very nice evenings contemplating the pro's and cons of being on the road for a while; **James** for interrupting his afternoon siesta to make the 13 kilometre "out of Bariloche" stretch to join us for a bit of R+R; **Sonya's Mum and Dad** for dealing with the hassle of buying and trying to ship her a new video camera to South America; **Everyone** who thought of us and sent messages when the earthquake struck Chile; **Manu** at **Sunn Bicycles** for the news story and link on their website. **Rodrigo** for the nice report on his **blogspot** about travelling adventurers; **James** alias "the cycling lawyer" for his expert help and expert skills in eatin', drinkin' and chillin'; **Blest Brew House** for making there delicious Frambois Beer; The **staff and farmyard animals** at **Camping Los Coihues** for being really relaxed and keeping such a great campground in order; **Patrick and Elaine** for the cold water and roadside chat on our way to Uruguay's capital; **Oswaldo** for escorting us through the city centre to our hotel and the warm welcome to Montevideo; **Petrol station attendants** throughout Brazil for letting us camp each night on their premises; **Rodrigo** and **Gisele** for their heart-felt warmth and generosity while we stayed with them at their beautiful home just outside Viamao; **Oswaldo Canquerini** in Capão da Porteira for the free petrol for our stove and the therma-lunch bag present. **Dario Popular newspaper** for the spontaneous interview in Rio Grande. Everyone at **Loja do Ciclista** in Laranjeiras do Sul for their creative group thinking when trying to fix my rear wheel. And then to top it all off, offering us the labour for free; **Cristian** and **crew** at **Biketech** in Curitiba for their expertise and eagerness to help build sturdy rear-wheel for loaded touring; Our **Warmshowers** host: **João** for generously putting us up for a few days in Curitiba, cooking us his fabulously delicious pizza and **Juliana**, his flatmate for organising our stay in Rio; **Michelle and Dave** for their wonderfully thoughtful present; **Ciclone Bike** in Peruipe for their quick work in replacing Ali's brake parts and the two complimentary money belt gifts.; **Adriaan** for the time spent via skype to book our flights out of Brazil; **Helsport** tent-makers once again for their wonderfully sturdy and reliable masterpiece: the Ijsfell-2; **Klaus** for the little book and roadside chat; **Rodrigo** and **Tatia** for their beautiful hospitality while staying in their apartment overlooking Ipanema Beach, Rio de Janeiro; **Pedro** for taking the time to met up with us one evening in Rio de Janeiro; **Julio** for helping us out of a sticky situation in Três Rios when we discovered our bank card had been skimmed; The owners of **Hotel Olivier** for letting us stay overnight for half the price; **Raquel** for her bubbly welcome in her farmhouse in Rio Acima; **Rachel** and **Cristiano** in Belo Horizonte for absolutely everything they organised for us, the delicious meals, pressies and just being so cool; **Bruno** for repairing both our bikes at such short notice; **Ricardo** for the lift to the bus station in Belo Horizonte at the ungodly hour of 5.30am; **Norbert**, the German farmer who lets us camp on his property; **Theo Harmesen** for the accommodation and really cosy 'catching up time'; **Kees** at **De Gelderlander** for the great newspaper spread; **Everyone** who made the effort to come to the **SnookerCentre Zevenaar** and celebrate our return; **Frank** and **Maggie** for a delicious dinner and just being the wonderful people they are; **Jacqueline** at the **Rabobank** in Arnhem for sorting out the money issues; **Masha** and **Joost** for all the laughs, the cheese overdose, the music pressie but most of all for not having changed one little bit; **Haakon Kuit** for fitting me in for a free periodontal checkup; **Suzette** and her two gorgeous boys for a really lovely lunch; **Everyone** who came to the Metropole on Tuesday: **Paul, Jeanne, Helga, Truzanne** and **Huub**; **Aadrian, Kunny, Lennart** and **Stijn** for being such a beautiful family; **Bob** and **Janet** for catching up with us and the relaxed lunch at their house; **Reina** for everything you would normally thank your Mother for; **Elizabeth** from the **Leeuwarder Courant** for our nicest newspaper interview yet; **Harmke, Ronald** and **Rinske** for coming around for snacks, drinks and a homely chat; **Autobedrijf Kochheim** for the secondhand quick release; **Stan** and **his really lovely family** in Amsterdam for their hospitality; **Arien** and **Jan** for a warm welcome and once again an inspiring time; also for all the 'get-together' organisation; **Imagomagie** for the delicious Chinese dinner in Utrecht; **Bert** and **Maria** for taking the time out to visit us; **Veronique** and **Ylonka** for also visiting; **Evert** and **Willie** for the chance to meet up with them again and the seriously best vegetarian Chinese dinner we have ever had in our lives; **Hayley, Frans** and **Lorca** the big black sweetheart dog for everything: the dinners; bed; outings; great conversations and just an enjoyable time all round; **Friedel** and **Andrew** from **TravellingTwo** for the gloriously delicious veggie picnic; the rounds of Leffe Blonde and the terrific **podcast interview** about us; **Victor** and **Marlene** for their great companionship and delicious lunch; **Amanda** and **Chris** for the party night in Den Hague; **Marnix** for the space; great internet connection; welding Son's bike back to sturdiness; and very, very late nights; **Heiner** for the great meal and company; **Gineke** for being Gineke: such a wonderful lady; and **James** for being James and making the gallant effort to train-it to Belgium for our 4 years on the road celebration.

Also a big thank you to the companies supporting of the last leg of our what a wonderful world tour | www.tour.tk: **Rainer** at **Tubus** for the 'ask no questions' new logo back rack; **Andrea** at **Ortlieb** for the replacement map cases and clips; **Tim** at **Kool Stop** USA for the enthusiastic, almost life long supply of cantilever brake blocks; **Kamil** at **Crosso** (Poland) for the kind support of two hand made back panniers; **Richard** at **Ergon** for a set each of our favourite ergo-grips; **Victor** at **Free Spirits** for the Rohner socks; **Petra** at **VDO** for our marvelous MC1.0+ bike computers; **Bente** at **Helsport** for yet again supplying us with new tent poles; **Hille** at **Falke** for the amazing wardrobe of ergonomic sports wear when all I asked for was a couple of pairs of socks; **Aaron** at **Sea to Summit** for their generous additions to our kit: new dry sacks; compression bags; a kitchen sink and waterproof map holder