

# THE GRINGO TRAIL

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# Ecuador Part I of IV

**A CLOSER LOOK AT PINT-SIZED ECUADOR**

Ecuador is a small country of 98,985 square miles, or roughly the size of Oregon, but what it lacks in size, it makes up for in diversity.

From Quito, three climate zones are within a day's drive. In a span of three days, it's possible — if the roads aren't washed out — to see machete-wielding natives in the steamy Amazon jungle, sip tea at a climber's hut on the side of 19,460-foot Mount Cotopaxi and eat shrimp plates on the coast.

Ecuador, though, has more than geography of which to boast. According to Conservation International, it is one of 17 megadiverse countries in the world. It has 15 percent of the world's known bird species and 6,000 different species of butterfly. However, it's the people who set it apart. From Otavalo in the north to Cuenca in the south, ethnic diversity is abundant.

Quiteños (people from Quito) and residents of Guayaquil, the country's largest city, are mostly responsible for the 65 percent of Ecuadorians who are Mestizo (a mix of Spanish and Indian blood). Outside the main cities, indigenous culture is more evident, with women washing clothes along the banks of rivers in Cuenca and thatched-roof homes in the jungle and coastal areas.

The lifeblood between these areas is the Pan-American Highway, a network of roads that connects Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, with Ushuaia, Argentina. During my month-long stay in Ecuador — and for my three-month trip along the western contour of South America — I never veered too far from this highway, since it's the only dependable stretch of pavement, and I had lots of terrain to cover.

By the time I reached Peru, the highway might have had the same name as it does in Ecuador, but the similarities between the countries stopped there.



*Editor's note: This is the beginning of a four-part series documenting Tribune reporter Jeremy Evans' three-month exploration of outdoor activity in South America.*

**"GRINGO" —**  
A white person from an English-speaking country. Used in Spanish-speaking regions, chiefly Latin America.

**ORIGIN —**  
Mid-19th century: Spanish, literally "foreign, foreigner or gibberish," perhaps an alteration of *griego*, "Greek."

When it comes to global distinctions, South America's résumé could be the most impressive. **It has the world's longest mountain range** (Andes), **longest river** (Amazon) and **highest waterfall** (Angel Falls). It also has **the world's driest desert** (Atacama), **highest national capital** (La Paz) and **highest navigable lake** (Lake Titicaca). And, as Tribune reporter Jeremy Evans found out this summer, it also has a lot of gringos.

South Americans — and I am fairly certain of this — believe hot springs are glorified mosh pits. There's simply no way to convince them otherwise.

This has been the case in every South American nation I have ever visited. It's rather frustrating for North Americans, who view hot springs as relaxing places, not public swimming pools.

In Baños, Ecuador, this past July, I was certain things would be different, that our neighbors to the south wouldn't behave like hyenas.

I was wrong.

Kids launched cannonballs with alarming regularity, knees locked tightly between their elbows for added effect. The resulting splash, though, was never quite good enough, and off they went for another attempt.

When the kids tired of cannonballs, they brought out an assortment of toys more appropriate for a day at Nevada Beach. Another of their

favorite activities was cupping and squeezing their hands together, causing water to squirt into the eyes of strangers.

The recipients were usually gringos seated on the periphery. We accepted the abuse because moving somewhere else increased our chances of being struck in the ear with a plastic ball.

It was all very amusing for the parents, who played their own games like "chicken." The most interesting battles were between the females, who draped their legs over their husband's shoulders and clashed with fury.

It wasn't long before their arms became tangled and they crashed into the water. The women either landed directly on the gringos or — at the very least — created a tidal wave that splashed our faces.

For what seemed like the first time in Ecuador, we gringos were vastly outnumbered at a tourist spot.

Jeremy Evans /  
Tahoe Daily Tribune

**This self-portrait of the author, above, was taken on the summit of 19,460-foot Cotopaxi, one of the more popular peaks in South America. Although Ecuador can have bouts of stable weather, on this day the combination of sub-zero temperatures, high winds and snow covered Evans with a quarter-inch of ice. The buildup also froze his headlamp so he couldn't turn it off.**

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## The first leg

Relax, fellow white people, “gringo” isn’t considered a derogatory term in South America. It’s not exactly a term of endearment, but it is an uncomplicated way for South Americans to classify all foreigners roaming their countries. There’s even a book titled “The Gringo Trail.”

The trail’s unofficial trailhead is Quito, the capital of Ecuador. Most of the country’s annual 860,000 tourists arrive in Quito first, then head to the Galapagos Islands or begin heading south toward La Paz, Bolivia, the Gringo Trail’s terminus.

Tourism is the country’s fourth-largest industry after oil, bananas and fishing, and injects about \$500 million into the economy. So it’s only natural that Quito — nestled among emerald hillsides at 9,350 feet above sea level — has a neighborhood called “Gringolandia.”

It’s located in the city’s New Town, which is block after block of Internet cafes, hostels and restaurants. All the city’s skyscrapers are located here, and most appear to be colorful Pez dispensers silhouetted against snowcapped Andean volcanoes.

*In an effort to prove its freshness, the butcher had placed the cow’s bleeding head in a tray next to the one containing its carved-up body parts.*

At Red Hot Chili Peppers, a Mexican restaurant in the heart of New Town, travelers have written their thoughts on the wall. One person scribbled: “Gringos ... figure it out, then go home.”

It wasn’t the most welcoming of comments, though it was probably written by some American drunk on \$2 margaritas. The Ecuadorian people always seemed glad to see me, unless I told them I didn’t have money.

Quito’s New Town has parks and shopping malls reminiscent of North America, but its Old Town is distinctly South American. Its patchwork of cobblestone streets leads to stunning churches, lively markets and colonial buildings.

The Old Town’s sidewalks are crowded with men wearing suits, women in dresses, and peasants begging for money. Properly dressed men, with newspapers tucked under their armpits, dine at street vendors and get their shoes shined by children in plazas.

The day after arriving in Quito on June 15, I turned up my nose at New Town and walked through Alameda Park to Old Town. Along the way, I passed by a butcher shop and, still adjusting to a new conti-



Isabelle Evans / Special to the Tribune  
**El Paillon del Diablo (The Devil’s Cauldron) waterfall thunders down a river canyon near Baños, Ecuador. It is a decible-producing waterfall that is fed by four rivers.**

ment, was a bit taken aback at what I saw.

On a table near the sidewalk lay a cow’s head that had been severed from its body. It had been slaughtered that morning.

In an effort to prove its freshness, the butcher had placed the cow’s bleeding head in a tray next to the one containing

its carved-up body parts.

There were certainly mountains and lakes and glaciers during my 3,750-mile journey from Quito to La Paz, but seeing animals’ heads dangling from hooks in meat shops became a reoccurring sight.

## Part II of The Gringo Trail appears next Tuesday



Isabelle Evans / Special to the Tribune

A popular tourist spot in Ecuador, which means “Equator” in Spanish, is the Mitad del Mundo (middle of the world) site outside Quito.



Jeremy Evans / Tahoe Daily Tribune

The mountain hamlet of Baños is a popular stop along the Gringo Trail. The waterfall-laced town located high in the Andes is on the only paved road from Quito to the Amazon.



Jeremy Evans / Tahoe Daily Tribune

The sun sets behind the Pacific Ocean in Canoa, Ecuador, a remote surf spot on the country’s west coast that has \$3 shrimp plates and a temperate climate.



Jeremy Evans / Tahoe Daily Tribune

The Andean countryside outside Quito displays its emerald tint this past June after the rainy season. This view is from near the summit of Rucu Pichincha, part of a twin-summited volcano that is almost 16,000 feet above sea level and looms over Ecuador’s capital.

# THE GRINGO TRAIL

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BY Jeremy Evans

*Editors's note: This is part of a series documenting Tribune reporter Jeremy Evans' three-month exploration of outdoor activity in South America.*

# Peru

Part II of IV

When it comes to global distinctions, South America's résumé could be the most impressive. It has world's longest mountain range (Andes), longest river (Amazon) and highest waterfall (Angel Falls). It also has the world's driest desert (Atacama), highest national capital (La Paz) and highest navigable lake (Lake Titicaca). And, as Tribune reporter Jeremy Evans found out this summer, it also has a lot of gringos.

In South America, poverty stares at you. From the bus. From the taxi. From the streets. To avoid it would mean your eyes are shut.

Heaps of trash are scattered along the highways. Most homes are unfinished projects, with rebar sprouting above crumbling mud-and-brick walls.

Finished homes tend to be clusters of shacks with cardboard or fiberglass walls. Roofs are made of similar material and always seem to be sagging. Rivers are places where people bathe, urinate, wash dishes, deposit trash and collect drinking water.

But in addition to the widespread filth, you also see lots of smiles in Third World countries. The poverty might make you cringe, but it's the only way of life residents have ever known, and I found you don't make friends by commenting on the rags people's children wear.

To be fair, there is a hierarchy to overall poverty in South America's Andean nations — Ecuador (poor), Peru (poorer) and Bolivia (poorest). So when my wife, Izzy, and I crossed the border from Ecuador, it didn't take long to know we were in Peru, which we entered by walking across a bridge at 2 a.m.

Mounds of broken glass were piled outside the immigration and police offices. Chickens were tied together and tended by enterprising men who would gladly chop off a live chicken's head and sell one for a day's pay. About a dozen men, all unshaven with cold, hard stares, hovered under a street light.

It was an odd scene considering the closest town was more than an hour away, but we didn't have much choice. The Macara border was an alternative to the more popular border crossing at Huaquillas, near the Pacific Ocean.

We met two people who had crossed at Huaquillas, where they hoped to catch a bus and continue south along the Peruvian



Jeremy Evans / Tahoe Daily Tribune

**A remote mountain lake as seen from the summit of 17,782-foot Urus Este in Peru's Cordillera Blanca, a training ground for the Himalayas.**

coastline. Instead, they were picked up by a group of men in a truck who promised to take them to their bus. An hour later, the truck stopped.

The couple were escorted out of the truck, ushered into a shack and seated at a wooden table. One of the men placed a gun on the table and asked how much money they had.

The gringos said, "about 100 U.S. dollars." The guy said it would cost "about 100 U.S. dollars" to drive them back to the bor-

der. Fair enough, they figured.

The men drove the gringos back to the border, unloaded their backpacks and even waved good bye to them. It was a well-behaved robbery: You have money, they don't. It's their way of balancing the inequity of the world, and it's difficult to argue when the opposition is fingering a loaded weapon.

Needless to say, we were relieved when a bus waited for us while our passports were stamped.

## Welcome to Peru

As we approached Piura, a sprawling city of 300,000 in the country's vast coastal desert, the rising sun cast a velvet glow over an endless canvas of chocolate-brown hills and sand dunes.

It was the bleakest terrain I'd ever seen. There weren't any trees or other signs of life, except for abandoned concrete and brick structures erected along the highway's edges.

Along with Chile's Atacama Desert, the

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*“You must go left or right to lose somebody on the Gringo Trail.”*



The Cordillera Blanca from near the summit of 19,790-foot Tocllaraju.

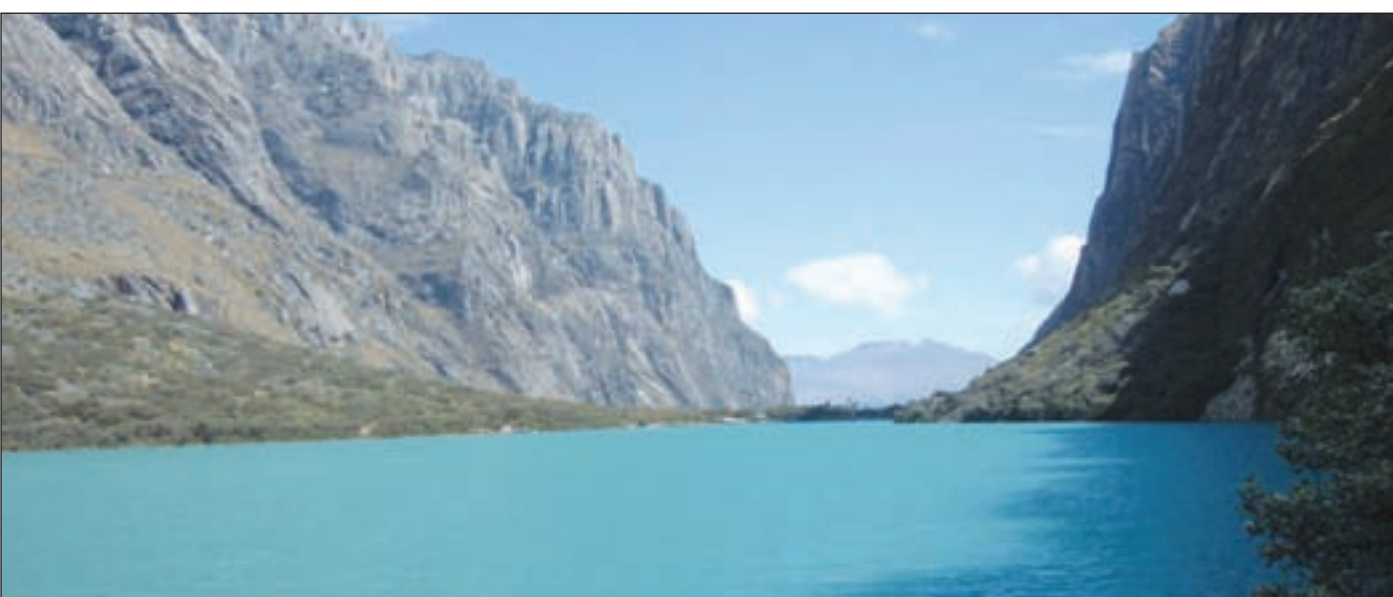
Photos by Isabelle and Jeremy Evans / Tahoe Daily Tribune



A campesino woman and her daughter sell fruit near Chivay.



A reed hut is powered by a solar panel on Lake Titicaca's floating islands. The Uros people have traditional customs and DVD players.



The glacier-fed waters of Lake Llanganuco create a turquoise hue in the Cordillera Blanca outside Huaraz, Peru's climbing hub.

somebody on the Gringo Trail,” Adam said.

When we left Vilcabamba, we said to Adam and Stacy, “See you in Peru.”

We never did. We went left, not that we had much choice.

Entering Peru from Ecuador, backpackers have a decision to make as the Gringo Trail dies out. Other than the surf spots of Mancora and Huanchaco — and the ancient ruins site of Chan Chan — there isn't much to see in northern Peru.

Some beeline for Lima to begin organizing transportation to Cuzco and Machu Picchu. Others skip Cuzco and continue south from Lima along the coast to Pisco, Nazca and Arequipa.

This “choose your adventure” option may appear to be a difficult one, but backpackers eventually congregate in the town of Puno on the shores of Lake Titicaca, near Peru's border with Bolivia. Since both options take about the same amount of time, we risked bumping into the same people in Peru as we did in Ecuador.

## Getting off the trail

We turned left toward the Andes and spent the next few weeks climbing in the Cordillera Blanca. Upon reaching Lima, we rejoined the trail, finding a new set of gringos to constantly bump into, and headed south for Pisco and Islas Ballestas, the poor man's alternative to the Galapagos Islands.

The penguins, sea lions and birds were indeed memorable, but what we remember most are the things that are no longer there. On Aug. 15, 2007, while Izzy and I were relaxing in La Paz, Bolivia, the town of Pisco was rocked by an 8.0-magnitude earthquake.

Eighty percent of the town was destroyed, and more than 500 people died. The hostel we stayed in Pisco was located across the street from the cathedral that collapsed. Images of the rubble were seen from Tokyo to La Paz.

We began receiving e-mails from friends and family wondering if we were OK. The Angora fire happened a week after we arrived in Ecuador. The Pisco earthquake happened two months later.

It's interesting that we create personal timelines by citing where we were when something disastrous occurs. Several months may seem like a long time in that sense, but it really isn't when you need to traverse thousands of miles across some of the most impressive terrain on Earth.

In Peru, a country we had already visited in 2005, we sped up our schedule. We got into a routine of doing a tourist attraction during the day, taking a night bus to the next town, then doing a tourist attraction the next day, and so on.

Izzy and I continued this rapid-fire approach until we reached the barren shores of Lake Titicaca. It was there, while crossing into Bolivia, that we witnessed poverty that made our hearts hurt.

northern Peruvian coast is one of the driest regions on Earth. The culprit for the aridity is the Humboldt Current, which influences the Pacific coastline from southern Ecuador to Chile.

It's a cold current that creates low salt content and cools the marine air. As a result, precipitation is rarely generated. In fact, parts of the Atacama have never received rainfall. But as we entered Piura, slices of life emerged.

The streets were a menacing blend of

motorized bike taxis, exhaust-belching trucks, merchants and beggars. There appeared to be little order, with vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians fighting for position in a downright unruly manner. It was sensory overload, but against the awkwardness of the border crossing, I welcomed the chaos of Peru.

Ecuador was certainly different than Lake Tahoe, but it was tame and predictable because the Gringo Trail is well-defined there. If we wanted to avoid some-

body in Ecuador, we couldn't. And if we wanted to see somebody again, we never had to wait long.

We met Adam and Stacy, a couple from England, on “The Devil's Nose” train ride outside Riobamba. Afterward, we rushed to board our bus to Cuenca, unable to exchange e-mail addresses with our new friends.

A week later, we saw Stacy riding a horse on a dirt street in Vilcabamba.

“You must go left or right to lose

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# Bolivia

Part III of IV



Jeremy Evans

*Editor's note: This is part three of a series documenting Tribune reporter Jeremy Evans' three-month exploration of outdoor activity in South America.*

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During my three months in South America, the most uncomfortable — and the best — conversations I had were with people from the Andean nations of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. They always asked if I had pictures of my family members, but they also routinely asked how much money I earned.

These conversations certainly improved my Spanish-language skills, but no language in the world contains words that will convince someone without running water and electricity that \$30,000 per year is a small sum of money. Many backpackers will try and argue that the cost of living is much higher in the United States, so everything equals out in the end.

The theory of relativity, however, is rather patronizing when the other person must slaughter an alpaca just to feed his family. Two-thirds of Bolivia might live in poverty — and nearly half the country lives in abject poverty (living on less than \$2 per day) — but they aren't stupid people. Their lives are tough enough; the least I could do is be honest with them.

So, on a windy day in August, I spoke at length with Carlos on a dirt shoulder along the highway connecting La Paz to Arica, Chile.

My climbing partner, Jonnie, and I were waiting for transportation to the village of Sajama, which rests underneath the glacier-caked summit of 21,500-foot Mount Sajama, the highest peak in Bolivia.

Neither Carlos nor Sajama village had computers, newspapers or televisions — but Carlos had an encyclopedic knowledge of soccer. He found it particularly amusing that, in June, Argentina pounded the United States 4-1.

The wind started to pick up when a van stopped and drove us to the village, an unorganized collection of adobe huts. Several water spigots sprouted from the ground, the sole water source for the few dozen families that call Sajama home.

Village residents use propane

tanks to heat their huts and provide light. A few of the concrete buildings had been converted to makeshift restaurants and hotels. Buying food and securing accommodations, however, proved to be an interesting challenge, because there weren't any menus or front desks.

"I don't know if there will be dinner tonight," said one woman, her baby wrapped in a blanket that was draped over her shoulder. "It depends what my husband comes back with."

Needing a place to stay, Jonnie and I were directed to a one-room hut where we paid a woman \$2 per night to sleep across from her one-room hut. Throughout the night, there was an incessant tapping on the tin roof.

In the morning, Jonnie inspected the roof and found the remains of an alpaca carcass. Birds had pretty much picked it clean.

## The Tibet of the Americas

Bolivia is the highest, most isolated and rugged nation in South America. It also happens to be the continent's most impoverished as it suffers from a litany of Third World characteristics.

Three-quarters of Bolivian women are illiterate, and the country has one of the world's highest infant mortality rates (56 deaths per 1,000 births) and birth rates (3.3 births per female). Paraguay and Bolivia are the continent's only landlocked countries, though Bolivia lost its 200-mile stretch of coastline to Chile during the War of the Pacific (1879-83).

The defeat still is a source of discontentment for its citizens despite more obvious problems plaguing the nation. Even 114 years later, newspapers frequently have stories about government officials talking with the Chilean government about retrieving that stretch of coastline.

What Bolivia lacks in ocean-front real estate, it makes up for everywhere else. The western part of the country is called the

## The Gringo Trail

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**PART I** (Tuesday, Nov. 6)  
Ecuador

**PART II** (Tuesday, Nov. 13)  
Peru

**PART III** (Today)  
Bolivia

**PART IV** (Tuesday, Nov. 27)  
Argentina/Chile

Two mountain bikers descend Bolivia's North Yungas Road, which starts at the 15,000-foot pass in the Andes and ends 30 miles later in the jungle town of Coroico. It's called "The World's Most Dangerous Road" because an average of 150 people died on the road annually before March 1 of this year, when a paved road opened nearby as an alternative to the old road, which is a single-lane track without guardrails and has 1,800-foot dropoffs. The old road remains a popular mountain-bike descent.

Jeremy Evans /  
Tahoe Daily Tribune



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*"I don't know if there will be dinner tonight," said one woman, her baby wrapped in a blanket that was draped over her shoulder. "It depends what my husband comes back with."*

## Bolivia at a glance

**AREA COMPARATIVE:** Slightly less than three times the size of Montana.  
**POPULATION:** 9,119,152 (July 2007 est.)  
**MEDIAN AGE:** 22.2 years  
**LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH:** 66.19 years  
**GDP PER CAPITA:** \$3,100 (2006 est.)  
**PERCENT BELOW POVERTY LINE:** 64%  
**ILLICIT DRUGS:** World's third-largest cultivator of coca (after Colombia and Peru).

Source: CIA World Factbook, www.CIA.gov

"Altiplano," a vast, barren shelf that never drops lower than 12,500 feet and is shielded by the icy crest of two Andean mountain ranges.

More than half the country is located in the Amazon Basin and, with the majority of its population being indigenous, Bolivia remains one of the more unique experiences on Earth. When countries are this poor, poverty isn't defined strictly by statistics; personal hygiene sinks to new levels. My wife, Izzy, knew something was different about Bolivia when, on the bus ride to the border, a Peruvian was critical of its neighbor.

"Bolivia is very cheap and is very poor," the man explained. "Peruvians go to Copacabana to party because it's so cheap."

It was odd hearing this from someone who lives in Peru, which also is Third World. Nevertheless, we crossed into Bolivia during the first week of August, which just so happened to be the country's biggest fiesta, as it celebrates its Independence Day for an entire week.

During the holiday, many Bolivians visit Copacabana along the shores of Lake Titicaca, which, at 50 miles wide and 100 miles long, is four times the size of Lake Tahoe, and they effectively turn the place into a circus.

A twin-summitted hill rises above the shoreline, and on its backside are rock steps cut into the hill. The amphitheater provides unobstructed views of the lake, but on the day we visited, things got a little disturbing.

One family sat in front of us and offered sips of beer to its children. A girl in a dress needed to urinate, so her mother instructed her to pull up her dress and go on the steps. A few minutes later, the mother changed the diaper of her other daughter, wiped her butt with napkins, wrapped the contents in the diaper and left it leaning against a step.

With no public bathrooms, the entire town reeked of sewage by the end of the week. While we marveled at Titicaca as well as the mountain bike descent down "The World's Most Dangerous Road" and the otherworldly landscape of the Salar de Uyuni, Izzy and I yearned to reach Bolivia's capital of La Paz, the terminus of the Gringo Trail.

After 3,500 miles on a variety of buses from Quito, Ecuador, it was hard for a young married couple to scoff at a night out for that included dinner, movie tickets to "Ocean's 13" and ice cream — all for \$10. But as I dropped Izzy off at El Alto Airport, the highest airport in the world at

## SURVIVING "THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS ROAD"

Gravity Assisted was the only mountain-bike company in La Paz when it opened in 1998. Its entire stock of bicycles consisted of three bikes.

Nine years later, it has an entire fleet of full-suspension Konas as well as two dozen competitors vying for tourist dollars by taking people down the North Yungas Road, which is appropriately titled "The World's Most Dangerous Road."

"Copying is a national pastime here," said Alistair Matthew, Gravity Assisted's owner and a native of New Zealand.

"Whether it's a pharmacy or an Internet cafe, people hope to open one next to you and, by charging 50 cents less, hope to make a million dollars."

While Matthew isn't a millionaire, he owns a profitable business that has made mountain biking the North Yungas one of Bolivia's most popular activities.

The 30-plus mile descent begins on a paved road with guardrails at a 15,000-foot pass in the Andes. After negotiating several drug checkpoints, the road quickly turns into a single-lane dirt track that traverses through some of the most spectacular terrain on Earth.

Cyclists drop more than 12,000 feet to the town of Coroico, passing waterfalls, jungle canopy and, of course, 1,800-foot sheer drops along the way. These aren't simply steep slopes, but cliffs where a crash over a ledge would require a parachute to get down alive.

As a result, the road witnessed an average of 150 vehicular-related deaths each year until March 1 of this year, when a new paved road with guardrails opened nearby. There have been 11 cyclist deaths since mountain-bike tours started on the old road, but Gravity Assisted has had 31,000 trips without a single fatality.

"Before there was no other option," Matthew said. "From Brazil and the jungle, the old road was the only way to La Paz. People didn't have a choice. I wouldn't say the old road is any more dangerous than the new road. People die on the new road because it's paved and it has guardrails, so they think they can drive faster, but cars still go over the edge. I actually prefer driving back up the old road."

over 13,000 feet, we both couldn't help but be saddened by the image of a teenage boy outside a La Paz movie theater.

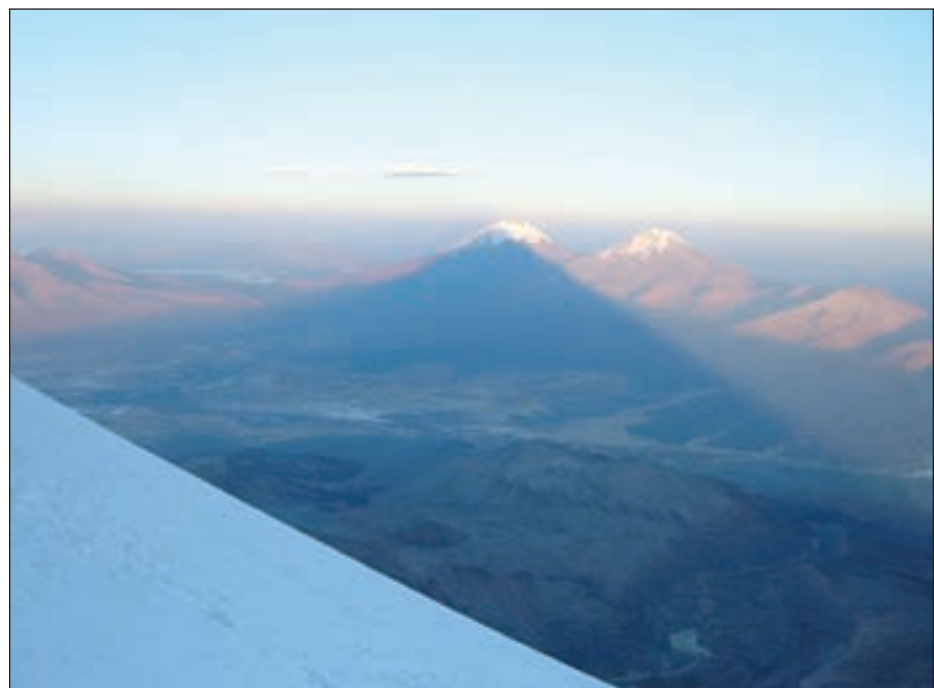
He was on his knees near some steps by the entrance, hands crossed and begging — practically moaning — for the scraps of our popcorn. Izzy left soon after back to the United States, while my journey continued to climb Sajama, then the long trek to southern tip of the continent.

**The Salar de Uyuni, above, is the world's largest salt flat and is located in the southwestern part of Bolivia. Seemingly part of another world, this area is remote, requiring a six-hour bus ride from La Paz to Oruro, then an eight-hour train ride from Oruro to Uyuni because the pavement ends at Oruro. Four-day tours begin in Uyuni, traverse the salt flat and explore the Mars-like landscape along the Chile-Bolivia border.**



Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking / For the Tribune

**The Cordillera Real rises up from barren high plains outside La Paz. The highest peak in the range is the 21,125-foot Illimani, which towers above the skyscrapers in downtown La Paz.**



Jeremy Evans / Tahoe Daily Tribune

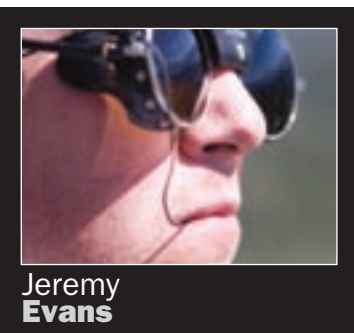
**Descending from the summit of 21,500-foot Sajama, a shadow silhouetting the pyramidal shape of the peak is seen being cast across a valley at sunrise. The two mountains in the distance are both over 20,000 feet and are located on the border of Chile and Bolivia.**

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Part IV of IV

# Patagonia



Jeremy Evans

*Editor's Note: This is part of a series documenting Tribune reporter Jeremy Evans' three-month exploration of outdoor activity in South America as he traveled on, what he calls:*

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The rain is measured in feet, not inches, in Puerto Montt, a gritty Chilean port city on the Gulf of Ancud. I stepped out of the bus station into a driving wind-and-rain storm, the rain twisting sideways as it pressed against the gulf's swirling whitecaps.

The clouds were flung low over the city, and from a bluff overlooking the gulf, the orange glow from street lights hung below the cloud layers. Wooden structures had been bruised from salt, wind and rain. Tin rooftops had been ripped off structures and blown into dark alleys, where puddles grew deep and grass busted through cracks in the sidewalks.

In early September, at this southern latitude and on the northern edge of Patagonia, austral winter was in full effect. During the day, there were only shades of gray — dull and duller — before night settled in and nothing became sweeter than a warm pub, a slab of salmon and a cold beer. But when the clouds did lift, there was nowhere else worth being than Patagonia.

If it had been sunny, I would've seen distant mountains that shielded the Patagonia Ice Field, the third-largest glacial field in the

world after Antarctica and Greenland. I would've also seen the start of the Chilean fjords, a passage of virgin forest and waterfalls that ends in Puerto Natales, the gateway to Torres del Paine National Park.

I'll always remember the citizens of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia for their big smiles, but I'll never forget the unseemly amount of foreigners who travel the Gringo Trail from Quito to La Paz. Geographically, the contrast between ocean, mountain and jungle defining those three countries certainly was unique. Patagonia, though, is painted by a different brush. But on that first day in Puerto Montt, it wasn't sunny. It was cold, damp and gray.

## Saying goodbye

Two weeks before arriving in Puerto Montt, I dropped off my wife, Izzy, at El Alto airport outside La Paz. Izzy, a kindergarten teacher, needed to return to Lake Tahoe to prepare for the upcoming school year. For the first time in two months, I headed south alone.

After climbing Sajama, the highest peak in Bolivia, I entered Chile on an air-conditioned

bus and skirted the northern reaches of the Atacama Desert. Having grown up in Arizona, deserts don't do much for me, so I took a series of overnight buses from Arica on Chile's arid northern coast and aimed for Santiago in the center of the country. Not that I had much choice.

About 3,000 miles in length, Chile is the longest country in the world but also one of its narrowest, never measuring more than 100 miles wide. If I wanted to reach the bottom of the country before my flight to Reno in the middle of September, I had to get moving.

However, I first had to meet Brian Reichle, a friend from Tahoe who flew to Santiago with my snowboarding gear. Then we connected with Chris Chandler, another Tahoe resident who was living in Concepcion with his girlfriend, and headed toward La Parva and Valle Nevado ski resorts.

The snowboarding was adequate and the transportation was, to say the least, pitiful and frustrating. Chris, though, looked at the bright side.

"There is no such thing as a bad day of skiing in August."

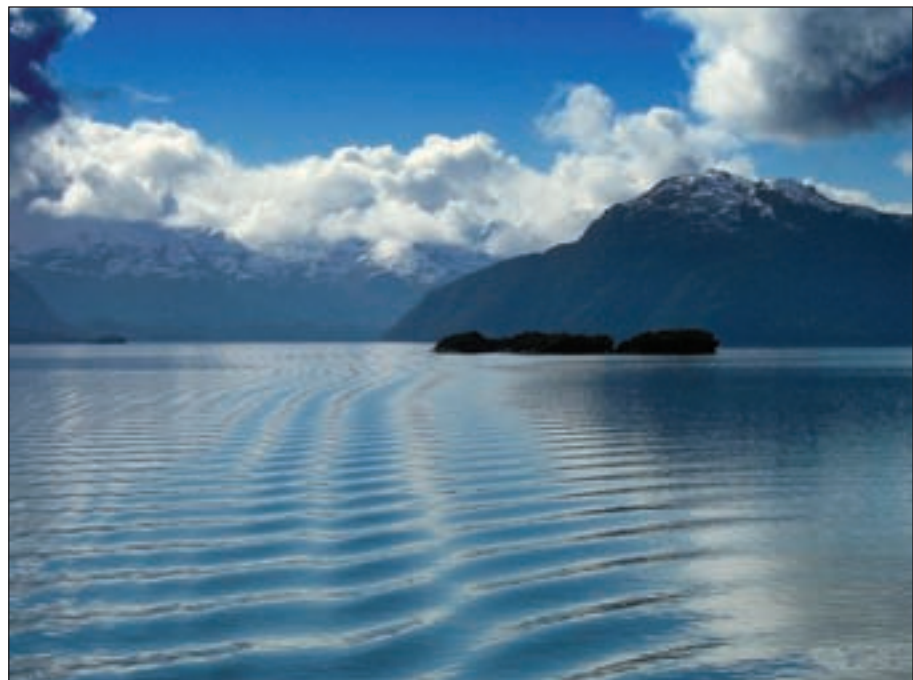
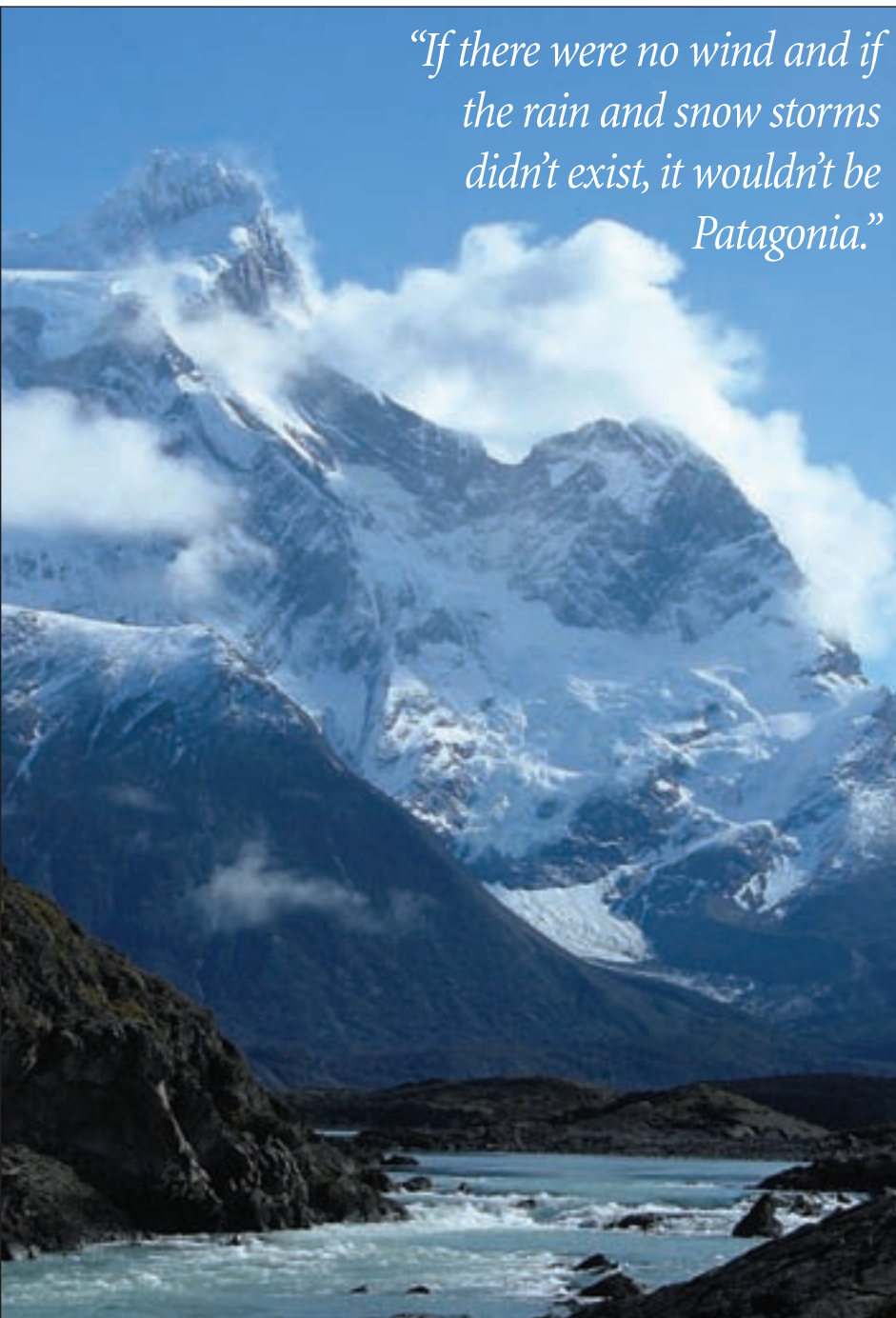
And this is true, but the magnetic force of

**Above right: La Parva ski resort in Chile is less than an hour from the capital of Santiago, which has 5 million people and causes pollution to fill Andean valleys. La Parva has \$30 lift tickets and annual snowfall of more than 300 inches.**

# THE GRINGO TRAIL

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*“If there were no wind and if the rain and snow storms didn’t exist, it wouldn’t be Patagonia.”*



Patagonia was pulling me south. It’s truly at the end of the line, the world’s southernmost inhabited land mass.

When I was riding open bowls in the Andes, I thought of Patagonia. When I was in the lake district of Chile and Argentina, immersed in snowcapped Andean peaks and the European flavor of Bariloche, I thought of Patagonia.

Not even the famous quote of, “If there were no wind and if the rain and snow storms didn’t exist, it wouldn’t be Patagonia,” dampened my spirits. So I felt damn lucky when, two days after standing in the rain of Puerto Montt, the clouds parted and God’s strokes of brilliance beamed onto a grand stage.

A type of beauty emerged that can’t be captured with a camera lens or described with words. It can only be experienced in person, and there was nobody else I’d rather share that moment with than my dad.

After snowboarding with Brian and Chris, I picked up my dad at the Santiago airport, and we traveled south together. At times, he proved to be a frustrating companion, his controlling nature untenable for

the pace of South America, but he recognized a special place when he saw one.

Standing on the deck of a cargo boat, the Chilean fjords were one of those places.

## **Torres del Paine, here we come**

The day after arriving in Puerto Montt, my father and I boarded a ship for Puerto Natales, where glaciers and granite peaks give way to a flat, brown expanse stretching to the Atlantic Ocean. It was a three-night journey, and it included one particularly eventful crossing of the Anna Pink Bay, a notorious stretch of open ocean chop that battered our ship, treating it like an inner tube in Class V rapids.

Fifteen-foot swells crashed over the railings and temporarily flooded the lowest level of our vessel, which was about the size of a football field and was carrying construction vehicles, passenger cars and a trailer full of horses. Someone went to check on the horses in the morning to see if they were injured, but they survived unscathed. The passengers, though, weren’t as fortunate.

Throughout the night, as a I locked my

legs around a bedpost to keep from falling onto the floor, I heard a cacophony of vomiting in the hallways. There were lots of pale faces the next morning at breakfast. Some people had taken a motion-sickness pill the night before but puked anyway.

As we ate bowls of cereal and fresh fruit, ship workers pulled double duty as they scraped vomit off the ship’s toilets, doors and walls. But the morning after the Anna Pink Bay also was the first of three consecutive days of clear skies and tranquil waters.

A succession of unnamed peaks sprouted on the horizon. The land around us got much tighter, with the only traces of humans being white lighthouses on each side of narrow channels, the narrowest of which was only 180 feet wide. (Our boat was about 70 feet wide.)

Three days later, I was standing on a bluff overlooking downtown Punta Arenas, and in the distance was Tierra del Fuego, a series of islands that mark the last pieces of land until Antarctica, but I could pretty much see the end of the South American mainland.

Five days later, I was back at my desk at the Tahoe Daily Tribune.

Jeremy Evans / Tahoe Daily Tribune

**Left: Paine Grande, the tallest peak in Chile’s Torres del Paine National Park, rises above a river.**

**Top right: Ripples in the water form behind a cargo boat in the Chilean fjords in September. One cargo boat company offers cabins for travelers to ride from Puerto Montt to Puerto Natales near the tip of South America, a three-day journey that passes through some of the wildest terrain on the continent, including glaciers, waterfalls and virgin forest.**

**Bottom right: The Moreno Glacier in Argentina is one of the world’s most accessible glaciers. From a parking lot, one can walk a few minutes down a staircase to a series of balconies, where chunks of glacier seem to crash into the water every few minutes. The glacier is an extension of the Patagonian Ice Cap, the third-largest ice field in the world behind Antarctica and Greenland.**