

## **Reportaje SudAmericano 2005**

### **La Paz, Bolivia 23<sup>rd</sup> Diciembre 2004.**

It only took a few steps outside the fuselage before the onset of the familiar symptoms. Dizziness, headache, anoxia, heart palpitations hardly relieved by gasping lung fulls of the thin air. We had been to the world's highest capital city before but always approached by motorcycle allowing some gradual adjustment to the extremes of the climate. The novelty of experiencing a jet landing at double the normal airspeed was soon forgotten as Mary Ann also began to suffer but in the form of occasional disorientation "brown-outs".

In just 12 months since we had abandoned the swinehunt (1989 BMW R100 G/S motorcycle), pissing oil forlornly from multiple orifices onto the concrete floor of a lean-to in the suburbs, La Paz had changed. It was no longer easy to buy a phone card to ring overseas. The mobile phone disease had spread unabated to the continent's poorest country. Just the thing to improve pedestrian and biker safety – Latin American taxi and bus drivers with mobiles glued to their ears!

The swinehunt was grubby but free from the sort of corrosion suffered when stored for a year in tropical lowland Ecuador. To my surprise the installation of a new battery and a twist of the fuel tap had it spluttering into life at the first prod of the button. Our German expat friends Frank and Annette had kindly allowed us to store the bike with them. Due to the end of a placement with a governance NGO they were to return to Berlin mid 2005 with mixed feelings after several years in La Paz. Like many a world travelling motorcyclist I have had the pleasure of meeting over the years, Frank explained his reticence about returning to the suffocating regulation and population density of Europe after having tasted the space and freedom of a simpler life.

Next step was to try and fix the oil leaks on the 'hunt in preparation for the ride north to Ecuador. It had been imprinted in my mind that there were four (yes 4 – legendary BMW reliability) but could only recall the source of three back in Oz. The preparation for the three was enough work to keep me busy for weeks but fortunately I had the assistance of

Melburnian Alec, a fellow swinehunt owner. We had formed a special bond, in actual fact more like a self help group, since he returned from his Europe, Russia, numerous 'stans' and Middle East trip. After first meeting at his farewell bash I was uncivil enough to advise he had chosen the wrong bike for the trip. After two exploding gearbox events in Russia and Turkey his respect for the same sort of mythology that in a moment of rational failure I bought mine, had evaporated. Anyhow I digress – a frequent failing.

Frank led me, surrounded by an oil haze, to his recommended bike shop, with a caveat that I needed to watch all the work done on the bike closely. Fortunately within half an hour of arriving on the first Monday after X-Mass I was assigned one of the two senior mechanics. Together we got through in a day what I thought might take three. The long list of 'non-factory' special tools that had been acquired or manufactured were put to full use as no puller, pusher, extractor or drift, transported across the Oceano Pacifico in the trusty top box, was left neglected. A final dinner with Frank and Annette over Pisco Sours and local delicacies and we were off. One of the special local pleasures is pouring Bolivian 'standard' 78 octane down the swinehunt's throat. This liquid substance slightly more flammable than molten candle wax allows perfect matching of mechanical and fuel technologies.

The plan was to use the minor border crossing to Peru at Copacabana on lake Titicaca. We, well I at least as the holder of the registration document, had broken Bolivian customs law by leaving the bike for 12 months with a permit for only 90 days. I had heard reports from reliable sources (see [www.horizonsunlimited.com](http://www.horizonsunlimited.com) for border crossing facts and all other moto turismo needs) that

the officials at this crossing could be bribed. So with \$US100 in smaller denominations we set off. There was a bit of confusion about directions solved by posing questions to Bolivian police who despite their military appearance are very friendly and helpful to gringo tourists. The ride across the narrow

isthmus that traverses the southern section of the great high altitude lake must rate as one of the most magic motorcycling roads in the world. Sure it has all the right ingredients like sweeping medium speed curves, even bitumised now since our last time here in '96. What cannot be beaten is the view. The intense blue of endless expanse of water to the horizon, backed on one side by the sharp snow tipped profile of the distant Cordillera Real must be experienced to be appreciated. Even a card carrying skeptic like myself can understand why in Incan mythology the sun and the moon were born from its waters.

At the border the 'migracion' was straightforward but then came the visit to Aduana (customs). I rode straight up to the guy who was standing outside his small office taking in the late morning rays. He just asked for the form which I quickly presented. Without looking at the (long expired) date he said fine and walked over and lowered the chain across the road. We didn't need any further clues to vault onto the bike and surge across the short stretch of no-mans-land to the Peruvian side of the line. What a bonus!

On the first day's travel after a long absence riding the swinehunt is always a bitter sweet experience. The joy comes from the sense of expectation of riding in Latin America. The shock is always the re-acquaintance with, frankly, just how bloody awful a motorcycle the swinehunt is to ride. This might be excused by posers on Harley Furgesons – the only thing closer to an agricultural vehicle – but Ducatisti and those of a modern oriental passion cannot possibly condone such dreadfully primitive performance and engineering. On riding out of La Paz the rear suspension was feeling a bit strange. Instead of going up and down over potholes and undulations the rear wheel felt like it was mimicking the trajectory of a drunken comet. Steering it into corners was akin to tacking into a headwind. After overnight in Puno on the lake's edge we cut down toward the coast. After short periods of being pelted by hail and smitten by sleet we leapt off the bike at a lookout at a 4,500 m pass to press our frozen gloved hands against the cylinder heads to restore some semblance of earthly sensation. It was then that Mary Ann spotted the broken frame. A tube running up from the swingarm pivot to the rear top suspension mount had

sheared straight through. Eight hours of TLC and this is the reward, Dios Mio I hate this motorcycle!

A sober approach was made the last 100 km to Arequipa. On the outskirts a prominent sign displaying "soldadura en general" led us to the gate of a happy brown man who had never known an orthodontist. After some hacking of triangular reinforcements and some squinting past a face shield whilst welding (note: get a boost for cataract surgery in the foreign aid budget from generous Foreign minister, Mr Downer) a repair of the effective rather than aesthetic type was affected, appropriately. There are only two cities in Peru where I could actually consider living. One of these in Arequipa, the other Trujillo on the northern coast. The big 'A' has an impressive Spanish colonial heart, all narrow cobbled one-way streets, white stone masonry and heavy high metal braced wooden doors in the medieval style. At 2,300m it has an ideal if rather dry climate. We were parked in the local plaza where the 'hunt as impotent and arthritic as it is, managed to attract the attention of the local police. Parking it in the central plaza on a yellow kerb might have been a clue to the offence but rather than put a ticket on it, they decided to wait to ambush the offending gringos. No doubt wanting to exchange the threatened ticket for a bribe. However from the balcony restaurant above we had the surveillance advantage, calling for another cold cerveza until inevitably they were called to do some honest policing, or perhaps a more attractive bribe opportunity? The next morning on the way out of town the fuel tank cap lock seizes in the locked position. Stone the condors, how much more crap can this bastard of a bike, this B M trouble-you, throw at me? At least removal (read destruction) of the cap is easily facilitated by one of the special tools brought – looks a bit like an abortion tool for daleks. It is then necessary to find a local spare parts shop with a replacement then a few doors down to get a breather hole drilled in it by an engineering shop.

Though this was our third time for the trip from Arequipa to the south coast the scenery never fails to amaze. A rough fusion of lunar and Sahara with far more formidable mountains than either probably comes closest.

Throw in wretched campesinos living in houses not much larger than a 'home theatre' cardboard box, constructed out of floor matting. Note, grey silver crescent shaped sand dunes migrating incrementally with the convex toward the leeward. Harsh contrasts of lush green valleys where irrigation water flows down from the Andes against the arching rock and sand strewn slopes, completely bald of vegetation. Several sections of 'great ocean road' like cliff hanging roads with glimpses of the rich bird and marine animal life of the eastern Pacific. This eventually brought us to Nazca, the city beside the famous lines. On previous visits through here we had stopped only once, for lunch. This year Mary Ann's architectural office is entering a competition to design an observation tower and hotel at Nazca, so we needed to take a little more interest. The touristy thing is to engage one of the many firms operating small aircraft out of Nazca airport for a proper view of the geoglyphs. Two of the smaller figures can be seen from an angle from the existing observation tower; a shaky device that climbs to a modest height of 12 meters, restricted to 10 people at a time. Nazca is somewhat of a strange place. There seems to be a lack of civic pride, allowing the public spaces such as the central plaza to drift into general decay, as if being reclaimed by the surrounding desert. Also due to the major hotels and several hostals (backpackers) being located on the road out to the airport there is limited intermingling between residents and tourists. On first impression this might sound like a good thing; the preservation of the local culture rather than its corruption a la Cusco or Chang Mai. Trouble is local culture isn't vibrant enough on its own. There is literally nothing else to do in Nazca once you have flown over the lines; unless watching mangy dogs gnaw at their festering flesh while wallowing in dust holes appeals? This is not just a gringo thing – the locals look listless. Avoiding diseased dogs we just hung out during the day in cafeterias sipping cerveza and when thrown out late arvo migrated to the local BBQ chicken restaurant where the bar served knock out pisco sours.

The flight was quite fun, especially compared to the video beforehand which plodded along at a slow pace, dumbing down concepts as if it were aimed at US (or cable?) audiences.

Our host was some earnest British archeologist giving a little too much time, though not credibility, to quack theories from Von Daniken et al. This got interrupted after 30 mins with the call to scramble, or at least board that is, dramatic license discarded. These little planes are pretty good fun I reckon. The sort of seat of the pants aviation a motorcyclist can appreciate. Seemed like it only needed 50 meters to take off even with Gringos Grandes aboard. Young Latino guy in the front seat next to the pilot lost his enthusiasm and started heaving into a bag after 15 mins. I was starting to get a bit of a headache after closer to twice that time of intense racket from the engine and multiple right then left banked turns while squinting down a camera viewfinder, battered by desert thermals. On landing and coming to a halt on the tarmac the left doorhandle fell off – reassuring!

If you ever come to Peru the Nasca lines are worth a look but don't combine it with a weeks holiday in the town! Unlike Von Daniken I couldn't however find too much mystery here. Some of the figures represent animals (monkey, hummingbird) not found on the western desert coast. However they are common to the Amazon, on the other side of the Andes. Using gridwork and a pole or a rope, figures drawn in the sand can be extrapolated on the ground to whatever larger dimension one has the time and inclination to produce. Many culturo-religious beliefs involve some deity associated with the sky/sun/planets/moon/stars/heaven so why should they not try to please by constructing geoglyphs? Their survival depended on the regularity of meager rainfall and whatever made its way down valleys from the summer Andean snow melt. We now know this rainfall depends on the microclimate generated by the temperature of the Humbolt current but of course they didn't.

North of Nasca on the way to Lima the capital, the highlights are spread a bit thin. Let's see, there is a great restaurant nestled within a bustling friendly town called Cañete and some spectacular ocean views, that's all folks.

Even the authors of tourist guide books find it difficult to say something positive about Lima, though they can become quite defensive trying to do so. That is they were

about ten years ago when we bought our guide books but since we haven't brought any of them on this trip I can't quote anything distant or recent. I don't know Lima. Spent a few days half dying of surgical and medication related side effects there in a hotel room after the swinehunt broke my leg in '96. Rode through it using the 'freeway' three times since. It was established on the west coast as the major port to pick up the riches stolen by the Spanish from the Incans. An Atlantic location was no good as the gold, silver etc had to be lugged 4,000 km across the Amazon basin. As a result it no doubt has many fine colonial buildings and interesting markets and even good restaurants. So in contrast to the guide books how about I tell you the worst? Latin American capital and major regional, cities have had the world's highest extent of rural→urban migration for decades. Though this is a global phenomena, the region now has the highest degree of urbanisation in the developing world. Lima has the rep of ably demonstrating the problems when this occurs in an under-resourced, unplanned manner in a fragile environment. The air is choked with acrid smog and the rivers with detritus, faeces and plastic. The outer ring of grim desert shanties are a colossal, communal rubbish dump. In about an hour's through ride it can turn a yellow jacket to black, a clear visor a tint of 100% lead/carbon density and your face to Kouri make up. Give me an iron lung full of México City air in preference any day! This time we had the advantage of a sea breeze which had (relatively) cleared the air as well as reducing the temperature, luxury.

North of Lima the road itself gets less interesting as the coastal ranges in the most part retreat, leading to frequent doses of flat and straight. After a stopover in another of our favourite bustling, friendly little towns not mentioned in any guide book, called Huaral, we made it to Trujillo. A grand majestic colonial city on the flat coastal plain. What it lacks compared Arequipa's grand backing of snowcapped Andean peaks it makes up with a kind of shrewd sophistication. Where in the high street you can order a short black with confidence it will be drinkable. Where you can note the absence of gin & tonic on the 'coktel' menu, order one any way and not be disappointed. Just be a bit

careful about the lettuce in the mixed salad, if Mary Ann is correct in her accusation over what brought on the Montezuma's' revenge that has laid us (her) up here for a day extra. Ironically the day before I committed the traveler's sin of ordering a dish called 'cebiche'. This is basically diced raw seafood and onion heavily marinated in lemon juice, vinegar, chile and other spices. This according to Lonely planet et al, more than any other Latin American menu item, has the rep for instantly turning your bowels to liquid and your arse into a roof sprinkler. So she's crook and I'm fine.

The ride from Trujillo north is plenty straight, bum paralysis inducing. Us experienced motorcycle travelers managed to run out of petrol on the most remote section. Do you really want to hear the excuses as to why? I thought not! So I pulled the auxiliary fuel tank off the pot rack and got Mary Ann to stick her thumb out. In no time a family enclosed in a box on wheels that looked no larger than a pizza oven threw a U turn and picked her up. Her going meant she could choose her company rather than being stranded on the side of the road where you can't control who might stop. This gave me two hours to curse, prod and inspect the swinehunt. I managed to discover that 90% of the remaining oil leak was due to a loose bolt, an important nut had dropped off the sub frame (possibly associated with the frame breakage between La Paz and Puno), relocate some tools from the top box to attachment points on the bike, tidy up a few details with cable ties and still had some time left over to contemplate how the universe is a slower place without combustibles. During the el niño period of the early 90's, when Oz was suffering the worst of a long drought, the opposite effect was occurring here on the other side of the Pacific. The reciprocal la niña effect brought unknown rainfall to this barren place, washing out bridges and roads as well as destroying thousands of hectares of crops that traditionally survive on subterranean water drawn wells in the dry river beds. This devastated the meager existence of many of the peasant farmers.

Piura is the last city before the Ecuadorian border 150km north. It is always hot and outside la niña phenomena every couple of centuries, never rains. Not surprisingly the

locals have taken to the motorbicycle as an appropriate means of transport. A large percentage of riders were helmeted and a similar percentage of bikes were registered compared with most of the rest of the country. Being a borderish town the cops might be a bit hotter on such things.

The next morning at 11.30 am found us rocking up to the border. Getting out of Peru is usually a quick formality. So it was with migracion, stamp and go. Previously at this border handing over the bike document, the 'transito' has been similarly painless. This time some fat bureaucratic customs official complained to me that the customs officer where we entered the country in southern Peru had put one of his stamps in the wrong position, in fact in his stamp's position. Well I was just about to fall onto my knees, flagellate, apologise profusely, turn the bike around and ride back the 2,617 km to have the form done again. Just then the official sitting next to him, with at least one foot on the rational side of the bureaucratic / reality divide, threw an arm into the air and in a Latin gesture, grunted 'no importa' and pointed out to his colleague that if he put his stamp sideways it would still fit on the form. In the time it takes for an agnostic to offer thanks to the gods we were off.

On the other, Ecuadorian side of the river, migracion was a similar smooth affair. Not so the bike. When we were here at this very same place, called Macará, two years ago it took slightly less than two hours to go into the customs head office in the town, speak to the resident customs lawyer, have them type up a letter of permission to bring the bike into the country for 90 days, get the customs boss to sign it, go back to the border, show them the paperwork and finally away. Officially Ecuador was the only country in the Americas (Alaska to Tierra del Fuego) that required a carne de passages – an automobile association document that gives a bank guarantee that if you bring a vehicle into the country and leave without it, customs can call on the nominated bank to pay the value of the vehicle to customs. In those two years things have changed. Our good friend Ricardo here in the capital with the support of thousands of international motorcyclists, local and international clubs, managed to lobby sufficiently to get the law changed. Now you

don't officially need a carnet, the vehicle itself is a guarantee. If you leave without it you forfeit it to customs. A special letter of dispensation to enter the country with a vehicle without a carnet should no longer be necessary. Thus I fully expected that, as for other countries in the region, I would fill out a form for the bike, which would be endorsed with the requisite stamps and signatures. So over six hours later I find myself still waiting, drifting into that void close to, but too wretchedly tormented to grasp, sleep. Customs and possibly other government departments here have a massive problem with delegation – there is none. The 'comandante' of southern regional customs was the only one authorized to sign the letter (no form available) was yet to return from a meeting in Loja three hours north.

In those many hours I had pulled a few rabbits out of hats. First I had produced a copy of the presidential decree to change the law including the phrase about a 'formulario' (form). This was contested by the customs lawyer with a barrage of law so dense and spoken so fast in Spanish that I was completely disarmed of any comeback. Then I tried the sympathy line, saying Mary Ann was back at the border with a stomach upset without a toilet. While there is no public toilet there the customs officers were happy to let gringo bikers use their office bog and Mary Ann had recovered from the trots a few days ago. Result was they organised a cab for Mary Ann to be brought into town to sit it out on the couch with yours truly. Together in dejection. Lastly I persisted as to whether there was not some local guardian angel (justice of the peace type) that I could swear to donate the swinehunt to customs on breaking the regulations. After some frowning of brows, consultations and shuffling through paperwork the acknowledgment came that yes, I could visit a 'notario' in the town, have them type up a letter, witness my signature and this should be sufficient. When I was sceptical about the notario's ability to get the wording exactly right, they banged out a sample of the correct wording on the computer and sent me off with rough instructions on how to find one. The address turned out to be wrong but in a small town nothing is too difficult to track down if you ask enough questions. So an hour and

\$US10 later I had two copies of the document in my pocket and was riding back towards customs when I was intercepted by the customs lawyer and driver and escorted back to the office. She (lawyer) had changed her mind about the legality of the sworn before a notario statement. She had doubts that I might still get into problems with the Ecuadorian police with the notario statement. I was just about to retort that I had always found the Ecuadorian Police charming to deal with and I would take my chances with the notario letter when she tore up both copies in front of me! At least she was good enough to refund my \$10 from her own purse which I accepted - putting on a pained face.

So there was nothing more to do but wait for the comandante, giving us a chance to observe the customs staff. The senior officials seemed to have plenty of work, whereas the support and secretarial crew had very little unless, booking holidays, talking to your rellos on the phone or dallying on the balcony watering plants are officially part of the job description. By 6pm we were back at the border delivering the officials their copy of the letter signed by the comandante. We ran into some Colombian bikers wanting to cross into Peru. Two were on Aprilia 1000 road/trail twins and the other on a KTM single. Soon after their two friends on an Africa Twin and a new Transalp arrived initiating some contention about whose fault it had been that they had become separated - our cue to leave. However with the daylight fading and light rain beginning to fall the 2-3 hour ride in the mountains at night in the rain with Latino drivers who frequently 'forget' to switch their headlight on (if they work!) coming the other way, convinced us to put up the night in Macará. This is a town within which I can find nothing to recommend. We rolled up at the best hotel whose previous glory was so faded it might as well have been conceived as a flop-house with a swimming pool. Cable TV but no hot water, what are the priorities here? Turned out the water from the cold tap was bearable enough to get under but what is the use of 40 or 60 or even 80 channels when they are all either yankee crap or local soap operas? Give me SBS and a prominent off button any day.

It is quite amazing how the terrain, vegetation and topography change radically just north of

the border as the road takes a steep climb up the Andean cordillera. Within a few kilometers you go from semi-arid desert to head in the rain clouds. We went on a, new for us, road that winds its way along and on top of ridges with fantastic views of the jungle clad mountains for a couple of hours then plunges down to the tropical coast where it becomes surrounded by banana plantations. In many ways Ecuador could be considered a characteristic 'banana republic' the fruit being the major volume export though I think petroleum from the Amazon basin brings in more dollars. In 2000 the inflation rate was >90%, they then 'dolarised' their currency, throwing out the "Sucre" and substituting US greenbacks. By 2004 inflation had fallen to <2% but Ecuador had become an expensive country by regional standards. Things tend to get rounded up to the next whole currency unit which if it's 50 Sucres to the \$US rounding up to the next ten is no big deal but 50 cents in Ecuador goes almost half way to buying you a multiple course lunch. While low inflation is good for business during the same four year period the level of poverty had remained the same at around 42% of the population - dire! The Ecuadorian business press frequently quote dolarisation as having been a schrewd financial move. They don't seem to be too good at looking over the fence. The rest of the region currently has low inflation also, without having dolarised.

Despite several assurances along the way, some an hour apart, that it was 8 hours to Guayaquil (gway-a-kill) we made it in a few less. This was our first experience of Ecuador's largest city and it looked impressive from the eastern side of the broad estuary that marks the wide confluence of Rios Babahayo and Duale to form the short Rio Guayas that empties into the eastern Pacific. Two strips of multi-storey buildings jutted up prominently from the western bank. We managed to find our way to the central city by following overhead freeway signs but turned off just north of the biggest, smokiest part. This put us into the unfashionable down and out area. Grim \$20 hotels with peeling paint and TVs and air conditioners locked up in metal cages. Clusters of desperates begging for a coin and offering to guard your moto for a few cents against their street-fellows. Six blocks further south it's another world. Glass,

chrome and tiles; an army of street cleaners scraping chewing gum off the footpath. Cops on most corners directing traffic and keeping an eye out for tourists welfare. We checked into a \$35 hotel with renovated bathrooms and ancient clock dial pulse phone system. The rooms were 'aire acondicionado' but ours was missing a few louvres behind the curtains. This created a David and Goliath challenge between the window mounted 1/3 HP undergassed rattler and local biosphere. It was a close call mid afternoon with the rattler just getting the upper hand overnight.

The purpose of visiting a megalopolis on the equator at the height of summer was to meet the esteemed Dr Daniel Valverde, head of the Latin American chapter of the World Council of Optometry. He turned out to be a really fun guy as well as a distinguished academic. We had a meal and a few beers with him and his charming wife one evening. Inevitably after the eyecare conversation the topic of travelling in Latin America came up. Daniel has done plenty as you would expect representing practitioners from México to Tierra del Fuego. He told us a hilarious story about a meeting at a restaurant in Peru (a country we have a love ~ hate relationship with). During the meeting an order was made for rum. A bottle was produced and a modest price of a few dollars quoted. Anyhow a few hours and a few bottles later, the meeting concluded, Daniel goes to pay the bill and is met with a very large number. The establishment's explanation is that the price quoted was per glass and that each bottle is equivalent of 26 glasses! So he calls the tourist police who duly arrive, chastise the restaurant for poor communication and excessive profiteering from cheap rum. The adjusted bill is settled. However outside the restaurant the tourist police want bribes for getting him off the hook!

We surged out of Guayquil in a mild sweat (the climate was actually a lot less oppressive than expected) across rich fruit growing coastal planes and began the climb back up to the capital Quito at 2,800m. This is something to be avoided late afternoon or evening. After about 4pm the cloud becomes dense and the rain sets in turning the thousand corkscrew-turn road into a invisible nightmare of corner cutting busses and trucks, and a suicide zone for cowboy overtakers in 4WD utes. In town

we made our way to the tourist district, Mariscal Sucre, named "Gringobamba" by our Irish biker friend Liam. There are lot of 'bambas' in Ecuador (eg Riobamba, Vilcabamba) so one more should go down fine with the tourism department. This area is a kind of 'Edward Said' bricks and mortar expression of what the locals think western tourists want. The result is a mix of good and bad – I should qualify that is from my gringo perspective as Said, the godfather of post-colonialism, would expect. On the positive side the variety of food exceeds anywhere else I know in Latin America. Some of it is good – Hussein's middle eastern restaurant is a gem. Some of it can be bad – overcooked dry fish on some pretentious bed of something named, but not faintly resembling, pesto. And if the premises is not a restaurant, hostel or tour agency then it will be an artesania shop. Most of these places have much the same limited variety of locally produced junk. Ponchos, crappy wall hangings, cushion covers, trashy jewelry, kitchy toy toucans and tortoises, Galapagos island T-shirts by the thousands. A recent trend toward cheap body piercing accessories – cue: stock market rush on anti-tenanus pharmaceuticals - hasn't further endeared them to us.

It was very pleasing to catch up with Mr Motorcycling Ecuador, Ricardo Rocco again. A giant of a man amongst the locals at 2 meters, his heart is even bigger, going out to all international bikers with whatever assistance he can provide. On the second night he came to pick us up in his king cab for dinner but first a diversion to another hostel to pick up Toru (Japan), Gerard (Germany) and Maria (Columbia riding pillion with Toru). Bikers riding through South America and currently in Quito. We went to a Swiss restaurant where we were joined by an Austrian, his Ecuadorian wife and Ricardo's Colombian girlfriend. A truly international evening was had by all as the conversation switched from Spanish to German to English and back again. Toru plans to sell his bike in Peru then Maria and he, a relatively recent partnership, want to open a hostel catering for Japanese tourists in Bogota, the capital of Columbia, the country immediately north of Ecuador. We have promised to go and see them there end 2005/ beginning 2006.

The next day we took the swinehunt to Ricardo's new house for storage for 6-12 months. He's chosen a great location perched on the mountainside with fantastic views in both directions of the city spreading out in the valley below snow capped mountains. Quito is a truly beautiful city so don't hesitate if you get the chance to visit the region.

Now we can settle down to a couple of days of lazing at Café Amazonas reading "El Comerico" and Tiempos del Mundo" newspapers. This place is a unique local venue, patronised by a seriously diverse and slightly weird mix of clientel. It is one of the few places with al fresco outdoor tables and these are more popular than the indoor area, though in reality it is the middle aged and older suits that congregate inside. A blaring television goes ignored as the businessmen earnestly contemplate the finer points of politics and football over a beer or café cortado. Outside on the pavement it's more of a dogs breakfast of greying Hunter S Thompson look-a-like expatriats, fresh faced tourists and local lovebird couples. The tables are a magnet for every type of huckster, begger, shoe shine boy (lustrabota), fake Oakely / Ray Ban / Rolex/ counterfeit CD / DVD or junky local craft peddler. However the interaction all takes place in good humour. Unlike similar scenarios in Peru the 'comercientes' accept the word no on it's face value and don't hang around persistently. The result is a kind of street circus which on the face appears chaotic but operates within accepted understandings. You can often just let the hours slip away with intemittent returns to the newspaper.

After studying the press it's often time for a leisurely lunch at Hussein's Lebo – the vegetarian plate of the day is truly a knockout of superbly spiced and perfumed local fare.

Tomorrow it is back to the airport for the unwelcome long flight home to Melbourne. Something like being trapped in a space – time worm hole as a day disappears over the Pacific crossing the international date line.

In vino chileno veritas,

Ralph Green  
Quito, Ecuador  
Jueves, 13 de Enero 2005.

## Photo Captions

Photo 1 : *View over Lake Titicaca South*

Photo 2 : *Eastern View – Lake Titicaca*

Photo 3 : *Copacabana, the little peak is 'Stations of the Cross' where pilgrims struggle to the top carrying huge crucifixes, flagellating themselves.*

Photo 4: *Spot weld on Swinehunt frame break – day one of trip.*

Photo 5 : *Plaza de Armas, Arequipa, Peru*

Photo 6 : *Peruvian Cops lie in wait to hit Ralphino with a fine, that is, ask for a bribe, but unknown to them the owner is up above on the restaurant balcony ordering cold beers until they have to go elsewhere.*

Photo 7 : *Colombian bikers at the Ecuador ~ Peru border.*

Photo 8 : *Pizza delivery by son of Cuchiolo, Guayaquil, Ecuador*

Photo 9 : *'The Astronaut' Nazca Lines south west Peru.*

Photos 10 & 11 : *Street festival Guyaquil, Ecuador*