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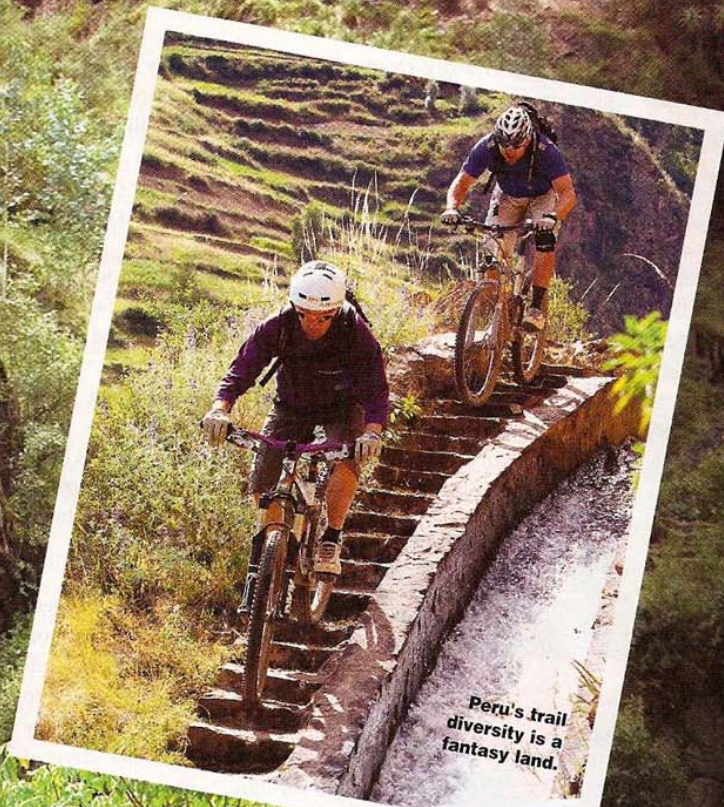
Two-wheeled Paradise

story by Jason Sumner
photos by Chris Christie

Peru, in the most literal sense, is a mountain-biker's dream. And not just in a "Wow, that was fun" way, but in a "Holy crap, this is truly two-wheeled paradise." The former Spanish colony sits in the heart of the Andes along South America's northwest flank. It's home to the sixth-highest peak in the Western Hemisphere, 22,205-foot Huascaran, plus 11 other peaks that rise above the mythical 20,000-foot mark. More amazingly, 70 Peruvian mountains exceed 18,000 feet. By contrast, North America boasts only four peaks that tall, and only southwestern Yukon's 19,551-foot Mount Logan lies within the confines of Canadian territory. But elevation is just part of Peru's mountain-bike equation. It's how quickly the country's mountains rise — and fall — that makes the former epicenter of the Inca Empire a life-list must for any self-respecting fat-tire enthusiast. Believe it or not, it's possible to start riding single-track at 12,000 feet and finish at the beach. Skilled riders can complete the trip in approximately five hours and spend only the last 20 minutes on road.

PERU

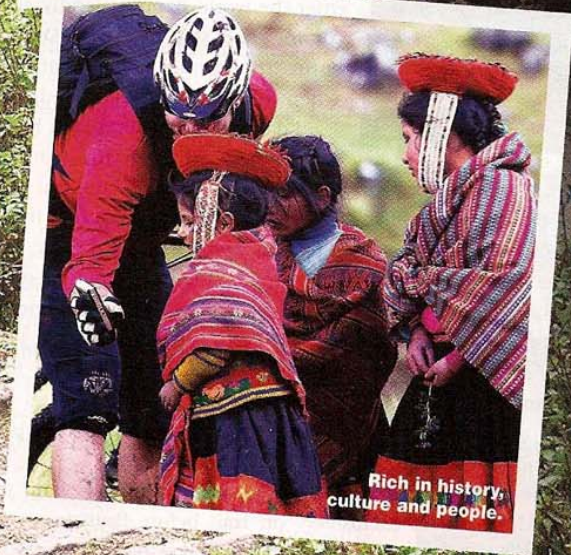
Dre and crew with
Big Mountain Bike
Adventures in Peru.



Peru's trail diversity is a fantasy land.



Guts and glory: Peru has it all.



Rich in history, culture and people.

In between, the diversity of trail is heretofore only fantasized. In one spectacular day, buckle up for slickrock — fast and flowy, steep, loose and technical — and a new entrant to trail lexicon: huayco, an expansive, completely parched riverbed with a surface so smooth and tacky, you'll be leaning your bike like Valentino Rossi. Throw in thousands of lips, jumps, bumps and berms, and the result is an endless playground of possibilities.

But route-finding isn't easy, so before attempting that ride, or any other in Peru for that matter, best to first track down Eduardo "Wayo" Stein. Wayo, a common Spanish nickname for Eduardo and Stein's preferred moniker, has been riding bikes since he could walk, and at varying times has been crowned his country's cross-country and downhill national champion. He's also one of Peru's pre-eminent mountain-bike guides and the lead sherpa for British Columbia-based outfitter Big Mountain Adventures, which operates expert-level fat-tire tours all over the globe.

Had Wayo not become a mountain-bike guide, he could have been an airline pilot. The dark-haired, 30-something has one of those smooth, disarming voices that is prerequisite for flying the friendly skies. But Wayo opted to stay closer to the ground, though not by much. Instead of taking off from tarmacs, he spends his days shepherding eager mountain bikers up and down some of the best — and highest — singletrack in the world.

"When I first started mountain biking, it was mostly around Lima," explained Wayo, who grew up racing BMX bikes in Peru's sprawling capital city, which is situated at the base of the precipitous Andes and along the Pacific Ocean. "Then I made friends with some people who liked going into the mountains. I started going with them and exploring different areas. Very soon, I saw that this was the place for mountain bikes."

My first encounter with Wayo came in a spartan lobby-terminal bar inside Lima's bustling international airport. It was just after midnight, and my head was spinning from an 18-hour travel day. The long trek from my Colorado home to Peru marked Day One of a 10-day mountain-biking adventure. I was the token American along for the ride with 10 Canadians affectionately dubbed the B.C. Bike Race (BCBR) mafia.

The trip itself was the brainchild of BCBR president Dean Payne, who a year earlier had broached the idea over sushi and beer the night after the second-running of his well-regarded, seven-day mountain-bike stage race. "We need to go on a truly epic adventure," he'd announced to a table of friends. "How about Peru?"

It sounded like big talk at the time, but over the ensuing months, words morphed into reality. Plans were drawn up, plane tickets bought and, finally, bags and bikes packed. Sadly, Payne pulled out of the trip at the 11th hour due to personal reasons, but the rest of the Peru crew was an equally eclectic mix, including the likes of former Canadian cross-country Olympian Andreas Hestler, 61-year-old adventure-athlete-extraordinaire Bob Faulkner and Big Mountain Adventures owner Chris Winter, who decided after hearing so much about Peru from gushing guides and clients that he needed to go down and see it for himself.

Now, Hestler, Faulkner, Winter, myself and the rest of the Canadian posse (two doctors, a teacher, a professional photographer, an engineer, a businessman and another adventure athlete) were at the airport, sipping cold Cusqueña beers and listening intently as Wayo outlined the adventure ahead.

The basic gist: get ready for the time of your lives, but never forget where you are. This is Peru, he reminded us. When we're out on the trails, it won't be on the highways and byways of some provincial park where medical rescue is just a cellphone call away.

working at all. But aside from a few small get-offs, everyone ended the day unscathed. The only change: 11 ear-to-ear grins across exhausted faces.

The ensuing days brought more of the same, with exhilaration and exhaustion parceled out in large equal doses. Day Three included what Hestler dubbed the "pucker ride," a six-hour shuttle that started in Lima and ended in the small town of San Pedro de Casta. In between was a one-lane dirt road guarded by a rock wall on one side and nothing but a 3,000-foot drop on the other.

When Wayo first started coming up here, he rode on the roof of the bus because he didn't trust the bus driver. "I figured I could jump," he recalled without a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Wayo has gotten over his fears, but the same could not be said for our crew. "Scariest part of the whole trip," declared Justin Mark, a schoolteacher and Helly Hansen-sponsored pro mountain biker. "If you looked out the window, it was straight into the abyss."

But memories of the bus ride were quickly pushed aside, replaced by a horse-porter ride to above 14,000 feet, then another amazing downhill that began in the magical Marcahuasi Stone forest. Here, glaciers had dragged, then dropped giant polished rocks, yielding a trail that hop-scotched between dirt singletrack and smooth stone faces. A placid alpine lake topped off the surreal effect.

Five days later, I am standing at the top of what will be my last ride in Peru. In the previous days, we have relocated, via airplane, to the Cusco area, then ridden high into the Andes. We've climbed above 14,000 feet several more times and descended for what seems like days.

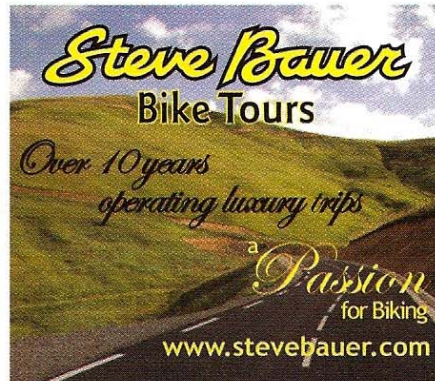
Just like around Lima, the trails near Cusco are a diverse mix of fast, flowy, steep, loose, rocky, technical — and occasionally scary. Unlike their Rocky Mountain counterparts, which ascend at a gentle pace, the Andes are abrupt, leaping from the ground into the clouds. My hands and arms are sore, worn out from so much time on the brakes.

Even more intense is an overwhelming sense of amazement. Inspiring vistas, epic moments, adrenaline shots and general awe have come flying so fast and continuous that already it's difficult to keep track of what was what and when was when. But this I do know: read this account with the caveat that it represents only a fraction's fraction of a life-changing experience that must be seen, felt, tasted and smelled to be truly understood and accurately appreciated. Indeed, Peru, in the most literal sense, is a mountain-biker's dream.

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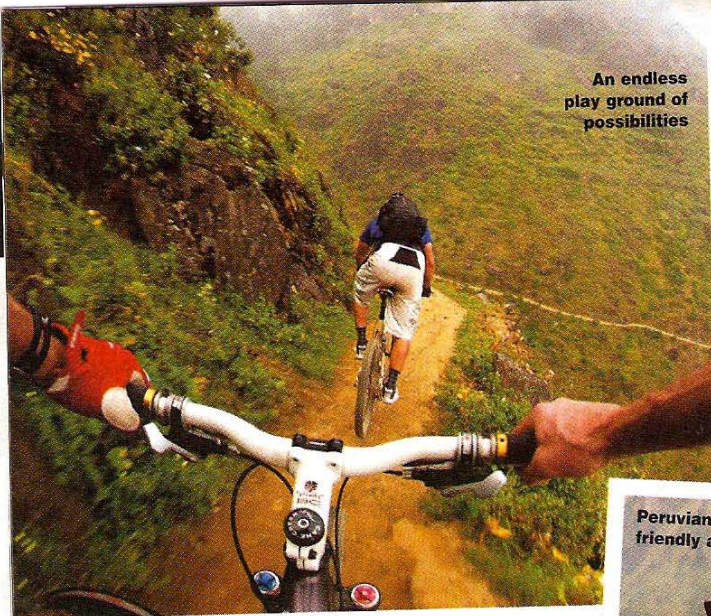
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An endless play ground of possibilities

I'd always heard Peru had some of the **best biking** in the world, but it's the **country** that's turned out to be the real **real gem**

crew up here and your modes of evacuation will likely be limited to helicopter — or donkey. And the nearest hospital, well, let's just say it's not around the corner. Oh, and if you don't like heights, too bad. Exposure — some of it counted in the thousands of feet — is non-negotiable. Best not blow out any blind, tight turns. You risk far more than scrapes and scratches.

Our adventure started with what amounted to an acclimatization day near the coast. We wouldn't actually be challenging the altitude, more just allowing bodies to adapt to the new surroundings and food. North Americans frequently struggle with "bad stomach," and by the end of the trip, nearly all in our party had battled one intestinal ailment or another.

After building up bikes in the morning, then venturing out into Lima for lunch, we boarded our shuttlebus and headed out of town. Unlike the ensuing days, the drive was not too long and we were clipping into pedals just 90 minutes later.

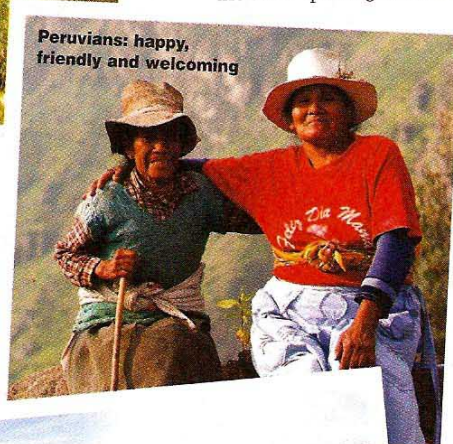
The contrast between city and trailhead was stunning. Behind us was Peru's sprawling capital, population seven million plus another four million on the outskirts. In front of us was a parched, treeless and barren landscape that reminded some in our party of mountainous Morocco or, observed Nanaimo's Andrew McLaren, Afghanistan. McLaren, a doctor by trade, has spent time in the war-torn country doing fill-in medical-team duty for the Canadian Army.

Our ride started in a dry riverbed, before giving way to swoopy, smooth singletrack, which reminded those who'd been of Fruita, Colo.'s famed 18 Road area. Peru's Pachacamac was equally fun, but unlike often-crowded Fruita, we were the only ones there.

"On the weekends, maybe you'll see a few dozen people out here," explained Wayo. "But there are not many mountain bikers in Lima, maybe 1,000 total, so it is never crowded."

Wayo might as well have said not many in Peru. During our seven days of riding, we encountered exactly three other riders. In fact, save for two on-vacation hikers and maybe two-dozen locals (and sometimes their farm animals), the trails were ours and ours alone.

"For Peruvians, this is a very expensive sport," answered Wayo, when asked about the lack of other riders. "Bikes cost a lot of money here, even more than in North America sometimes. Also, in general, we do not have the same sporting culture as other countries. Those other countries may have more riders, but I think Peru has the best trails."



Peruvians: happy, friendly and welcoming



Amazing landscapes and "never crowded" trails

Like the previous day, the geographical transformation on Day Two is swift. The urban landscape quickly thins, giving way to small villages and farms. Here, the hills and mountains are covered with scrubby bushes, cactus and even flowers. After two hours, we rolled into a small village, stopping long enough to snap pictures of schoolchildren on recess and townspeople repainting a colourful mural along the front wall of a church. It

was hard to believe that the real adventure hadn't even begun.

While Lima pushes headlong into the 21st century, rural Peru represents a trip back in time. Life there hasn't changed much since the days of the Incas. Many people still live hand to mouth, carving a subsistence-level existence out of the land, relying on small crops and farm animals to keep families fed.

But there is no sense of self-pity. If first impressions are any indication, Peruvians enter the world happy, friendly and welcoming, and stay that way. During our entire trip, smiles were plentiful even when conversation was limited.

"I'd always heard that Peru had some of the best riding in the world," said

Hestler. "But it's the country that's turned out to be the real gem. It's one of those places that really gives back what you put into it."

Four hours later, we were off bus and on bikes, briefly heading down a fire-road before turning on to singletrack. This day would yield our first true appreciation of the impact the ancient Incas have on present-day mountain biking in Peru. During its height, the Inca Empire numbered 20-million souls and stretched nearly 800,000 square miles, including more than half of South America's endless western coast. All those people needed a way to get from place to place, and that meant trails, lots and lots of trails.

By the time we're done, we've descended 12,000 feet in just 35 miles, riding almost exclusively on trail before finishing with the aforementioned *huayco*. Along the way, brakes have been pushed to their breaking point, heating up, squealing and occasionally barely