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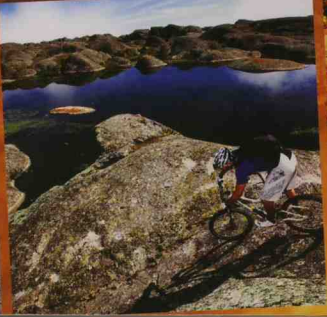
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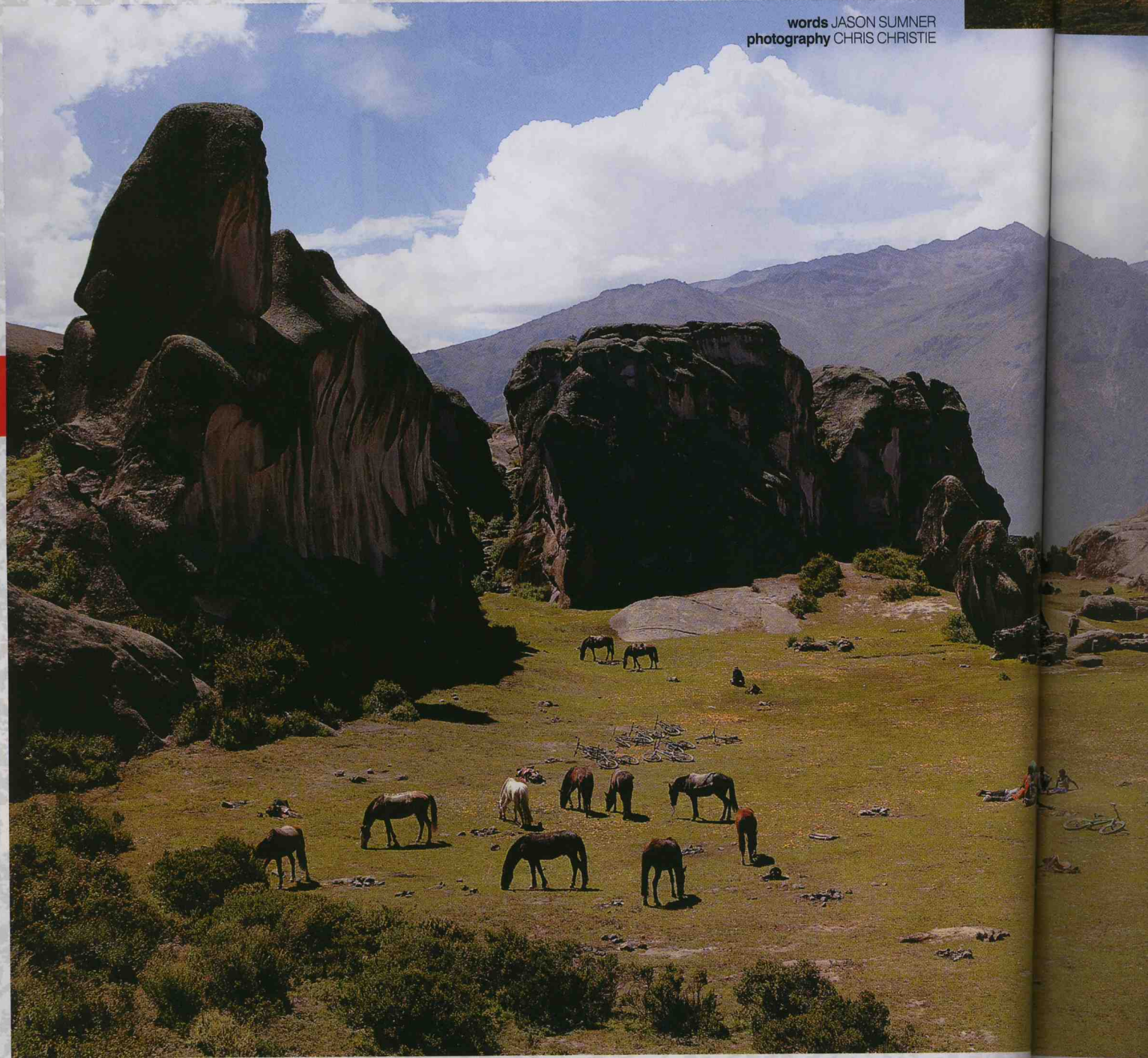
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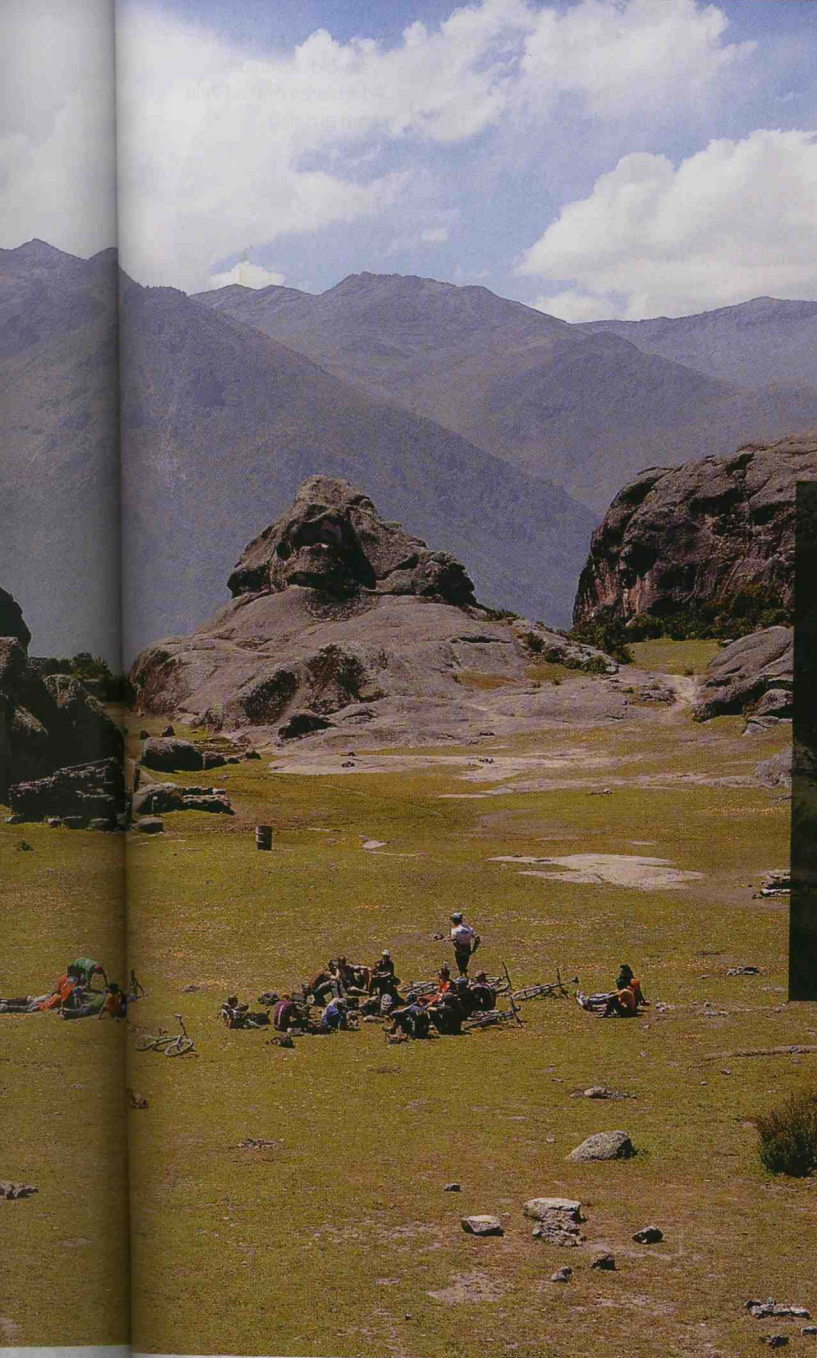
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A MOUNTAIN BIKER'S PARADISE

PERU

words JASON SUMNER
photography CHRIS CHRISTIE





Peru, in the most literal sense, is a mountain biker's paradise. The former Spanish colony sits in the heart of the Andes along South America's northwest flank, and is home to the sixth highest peak in the Western Hemisphere, 22,205-foot Huascarán. In fact, a dozen Peruvian peaks eclipse the mythical 20,000-foot mark, and 70 exceed 18,000 feet.

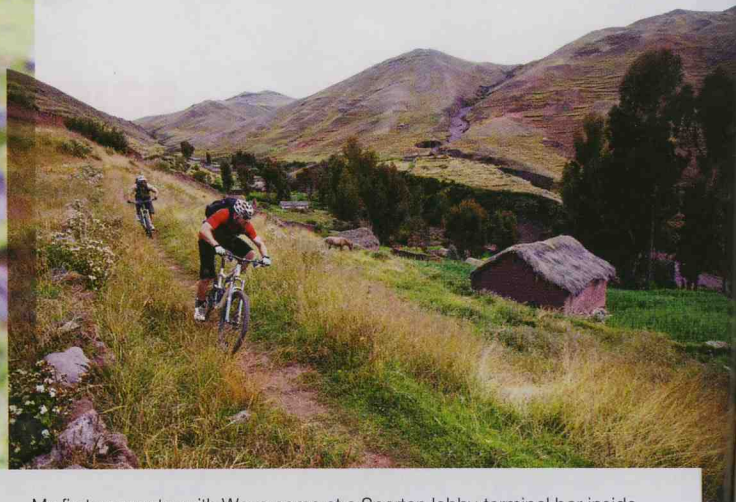
By contrast, North America boasts only four peaks that tall, and Mount Kosciuszko, the highest point in Australia rises just 7310 feet.

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 Inca Empire epicenter a life-list must for any self-respecting fat-tire enthusiast. It's possible to start riding singletrack at 12,000 feet and finish at the beach. More amazingly, skilled riders can complete the trip in about five hours and spend only the last 20 minutes on paved road.



In between the diversity of trail is the stuff of fantasy. 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 river bed 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, best to first track down Eduardo "Wayo" Stein. Wayo, the Spanish nickname for Eduardo, and Stein's preferred moniker, has been riding bikes since he could walk. At varying times has been crowned his country's cross-country and downhill national champion. He's also one of Peru's preeminent 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.



Before Wayo got into guiding, he and his friends first did a lot of exploring. Peru's trails aren't meticulously mapped, meaning he's had to rely on locals as he plotted routes. After coming up with a desired start and finish, he'd head into the hills and start asking questions.

"Normally they would say, yes there's a trail but you're crazy to ride it on a bike," explained Wayo. "But pretty soon I learned that if they said that, it would be good for mountain biking. Then the only thing I needed to know is whether or not it goes to the bottom of the valley or to the river or a town. Then I'd go and ride it."

Even then, things could get confusing. Nearly all the trails in the Andes and littered with spurs, smaller pathways that lead to rural houses or small farm plots. But Wayo learned to recognize subtle tell-tale signs that differentiated main trails from smaller ones.

"After a while you could just tell," he said. "They might be slightly smaller or have more plant growth on the sides."

My first encounter with Wayo came at 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 week-long mountain biking adventure. I was one among an eclectic group of eleven foreign riders that included 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 blown-away clients that he needed to go see for himself.

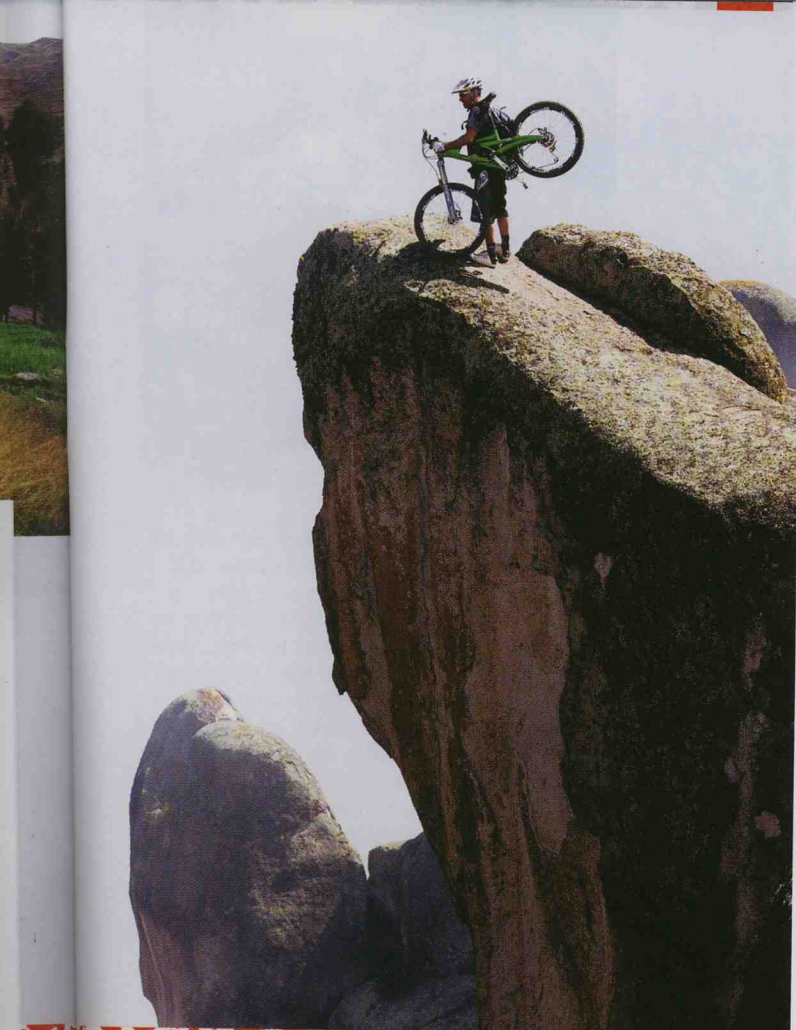
Now, Hestler, Faulkner, Winter, myself and the rest (two doctors, a teacher, a professional photographer, an engineer, a business man and another adventure athlete) were at the airport, sipping cold Cusqueña beers and listening intently as Wayo outlined the adventure ahead.

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 manicured National Park where medical rescue is just a cell phone call away.

Screw 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 probably won't be 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 to not blow out any blind turns, for you risk far more than a few bumps and bruises.



PERU



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 foreign food. Visitors to Peru frequently struggle with "bad stomach" and by the end of the trip, nearly everyone in our party had battled one intestinal ailment or another. The lesson learned: drink bottled water, avoid washed fruit and vegetables, and if possible, bring along an antibiotics stash in case you do get sick. Both doctors in our party did, which was good news for all of us.

After building up bikes on the morning of our first full day, we boarded a shuttle bus and headed out of town. Unlike the ensuing days, the drive was not long, and we were clipping into pedals an hour 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 barely-inhabited, parched, treeless and barren landscape.

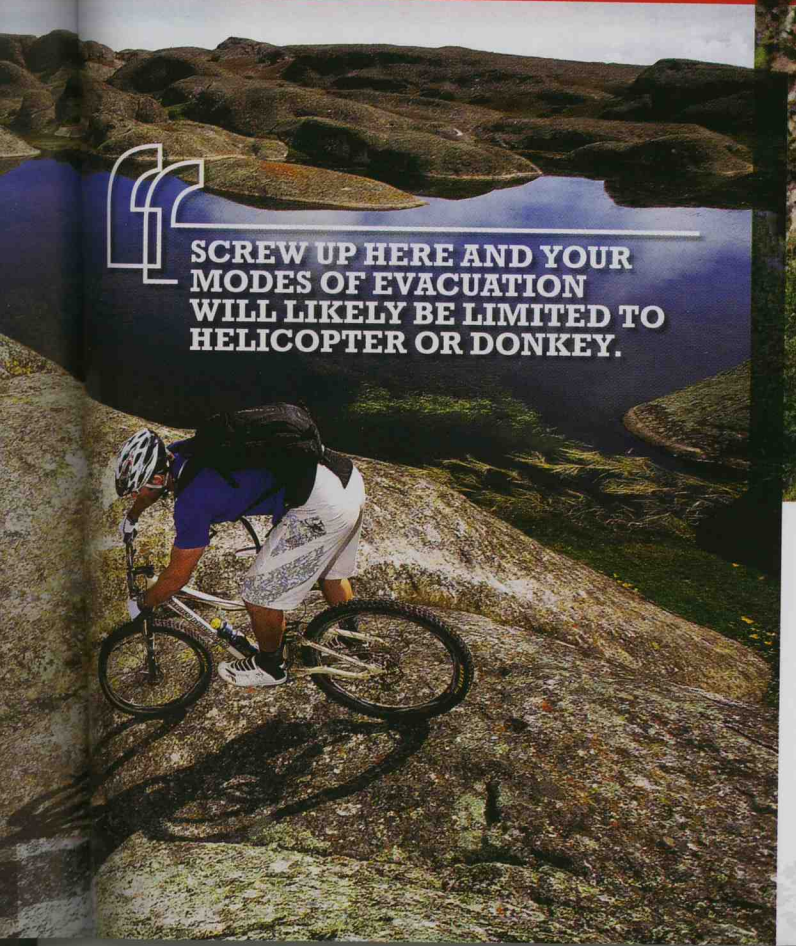
That first ride started in an expansive dry riverbed, before giving way to swoopy smooth single track that rolled up and down like an amusement park rollercoaster. You'd have expected riding this good to be packed with people, but outside of a few villagers the trail was ours alone.

"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 a thousand total, so it is never too crowded."

Wayo might as well have said, not many in Peru. During seven days of riding, we encountered exactly three other mountain bikers. In fact, save for pair of vacationing hikers, and maybe two dozen locals — and sometimes their farm animals — the trails were blissfully empty.

"For Peruvians, cycling is a very expensive sport," explained Wayo about the lack of other riders. "Bikes cost a lot of money here, even more than in North America sometimes."

Indeed, Wayo gets most of his spare parts during occasional visits to the

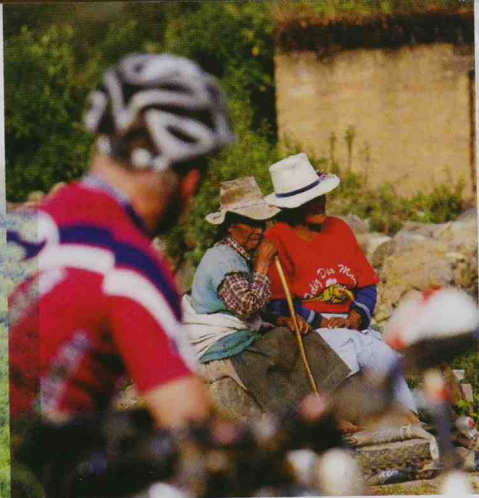


SCREW UP HERE AND YOUR MODES OF EVACUATION WILL LIKELY BE LIMITED TO HELICOPTER OR DONKEY.



U.S. And on this trip, I actually flew down with two bikes, my own and a brand new Trek cross-country rig Wayo bought direct from the American-based manufacturer. Even with the airline's onerous excess baggage charge and a 10-percent import tax charged at airport customs, the new bike was still cheaper than buying direct from one of Lima's few bike shops.

Like day one, the geographical transformation on our second day of riding was swift. Urbanity quickly thinned, giving way to small villages and farms. This time the hills and mountains were less barren, instead covered with scrubby bushes, cactus and even flowers. After two hours of driving, we rolled into a small village, stopping long enough to snap pictures of school children on recess, and some locals carefully repainting a colorful mural along the front wall of an old church.



THE TRAILS ARE A MIX OF FAST, FLOWY, STEEP, LOOSE, ROCKY, TECHNICAL - AND OCCASSIONALLY DOWNRIGHT SCARY.

While Lima thrusts headlong into the 21st century, rural Peru yields a trip back in time. Life there hasn't changed much since the days of the Incas. Many inhabitants still live hand to mouth, carving out a subsistence-level existence from the land, relying on small crops and farm animals to keep their families fed. But if initial impressions were any indication, there is no sense of self pity or yearning for a more modern life. The vast majority of Peruvians we encountered were happy, friendly and exceptionally welcoming.

"I'd always heard that Peru had some of the best riding in the world," said Hestler, who's racing career has taken him all over the globe. "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."

Marcahuasi Stone forest where glaciers dragged then dropped giant polished rocks, yielding a trail that hop-scotched between dirt singletrack and smooth stone faces. It was like riding through a Salvador Dali painting.

The next day we flew to the Cusco area, then rode even higher into the Andes, climbing above 14,000 feet, then descending for what seemed like days. Just like around Lima, the trails near Cusco are a diverse mix of fast, flowy, steep, loose, rocky, technical - and occasionally outright scary. Unlike the mountains in North America, which ascend at a gentle pace, the Andes are abrupt, leaping from the ground straight into the clouds. All the rapid descending left hands and arms sore, worn-out from so much time on the brakes.

Even more intense was the overwhelming sense of amazement. Inspiring vistas, epic moments, adrenaline shots and general awe came flying so fast and continuous that even just days after the trip it was 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 paradise. **AMB**

After briefly heading down a fire road we turned on to singletrack. This day would yield our first true appreciation for the impact the ancient Incas have on present-day mountain biking in Peru. At its height, the Inca Empire numbered 20 million and stretched nearly 800,000 square miles, including more than half of South America's vast western coast. All those people needed a way to get around, and that meant trails, lots and lots of trails.

By the time we're done with day two, we'd descended 12,000 feet in just 35 miles, riding almost exclusively on singletrack before finishing with the aforementioned huayco. Along the way brakes have been pushed to their breaking point, heating up, squealing and occasionally barely working at all. But aside from a few small tumbles, everyone ended the day unscathed. The only significant change was a dozen ear-to-ear grins striped across exhausted faces.

The ensuing days brought more of the same, with exhilaration and exhaustion parceled out in equal doses. Day three included what our group dubbed the "pucker ride," a six-hour shuttle bus trip that started in Lima and ended in the small town of San Pedro de Casta. In between was extended time on a one-lane dirt road guarded by a rock wall on one side and nothing but a 3000-foot drop-off on the other.

When Wayo first started traveling in this area, he rode on the roof of the bus because he didn't trust the bus driver. "I figured I could jump off if there was trouble," he recalled, a decided lack of sarcasm in his voice.

Wayo's since gotten over his fears, but the same could not be said for our crew. "Scariest part of the whole trip," declared Justin Mark, a school teacher and part-time pro mountain biker. "If you looked out the window it was straight into the abyss. I swear to god the back wheel was about two inches from the edge of the road."

But the bus ride scare was quickly pushed aside, replaced by new adventures. Day three's ride started atop horses. While we rode, a group of local (well-acclimatized) teens pushed our bikes a mile uphill to the trailhead at 14,000 feet. Next it was another amazing downhill that began in the magical

