

Livin' La Vida Coca

High and rolling on Peru's Camino Real

By Mike Brcic

Our Peruvian guide, Wayo Stein, stands at the van door, having just returned from a nearby store with an innocuous pink bag in his hand. He hands it over and invites me to have a look. Inside hide numerous small green leaves, each about the size of my thumb.

"Okay, gringos. Time for your initiation into Incan culture," enthuses Wayo. "With these leaves, you will have the energy of the Incas. You will ride to the ends of the empire, like the *chasqui* couriers who ran these trails hundreds of years ago."

He's as giddy as a schoolboy. In my hand is a healthy portion of coca leaf, enough to land me seven years in a Canadian penitentiary. Unlike its notorious derivative cocaine, coca has therapeutic properties revered by the inhabitants of the Andes for thousands of years. Today, the dried leaf of the coca plant is used to improve digestion, relieve headaches and mitigate the negative effects of altitude. In spite of its apparent attributes, though, the coca plant is outlawed by most of the Western world.

I take a wad of leaves, give a short prayer of thanks — as is Incan custom — wrap the leaves around a small piece of hardened ash from the quinoa plant, known as *llipta*, and pack it into my cheek. Pungent and pleasing juice slowly seeps through my mouth. My tongue is buzzing and my cheek soon goes numb, but I feel a surge of energy. My riding companions — observers until now — tentatively follow suit. "Welcome to Peru!" exclaims Wayo. "Now we're ready to ride." We are six mountain bikers, including our guides Wayo and Russo Corravabias, a Peruvian national cross-country mountain bike champion, and we are, in both senses, high in the Andes of Peru. Our goal is to reach the city of Cusco and the Sacred Valley via a system of trails — many engineering marvels — laid out by the Incas centuries ago.

Despite living in the Canadian Rockies for a decade, I'm not prepared for the scale of the Andes. This is the longest mountain range in the world: 8,000 kilometres through seven different countries. Peru alone contains more than 1,000 peaks over 5,000 metres above sea level. Canada has five.

Today is our first taste of the Inca's most famous trail: the *Camino Real* or Royal Road. The trail isn't really a "trail" in the mountain biking sense of the word; the sport is still fairly new and undeveloped here. Riding takes place on a massive web of meandering and

intersecting foot and animal paths. The 1,500-metre descent at the end of the ride is as long and challenging as anything I've ever ridden. Loose rock and exposure force me to concentrate solely on the few metres of trail in front of me. I have to remind myself to stop and take in scenery as beautiful and enormous as any place on earth.

We pass through villages where Quechua-speaking *campesinos*, or peasants, smile curiously and wave. Wearing vibrant clothing typical of the Andes, farmers harvest potatoes from their fields and sing in the midday sun. By late afternoon, I'm lost in the rhythms of these awesome mountains. I reach into my bag of coca often. It's effective: an instant jolt more potent than any cup of coffee.

Racing against the fading sun, we pull into the remote town of Huancarama in total darkness. The rock-hard mattresses of the El Gordito Hotel are as welcoming as waterbeds. In my exhausted, satiated state, I fall asleep within minutes, grinning and fully clothed.

The next day begins with a massive breakfast of fruit salad, eggs, homemade *pan* and generous doses of *mate de coca*. The tea is ritual in Peru, as normal as coffee in North America. After two cups of this heady brew, I'm buzzing again. Soon we're on our bikes following the Urubamba River, where 6,000-metre peaks tower above small villages clinging to the pastoral landscape. To protect the wealth of this valley, the Inca built a series of fortresses, most of which survive to this day. One of these former fortresses, Ollantaytambo, is our next stop, a quaint village of 2,000 people and one of the main

jumping-off points for the journey to Machu Picchu. By bike, this is as close as we can get to one of the world's most famous landmarks.

The next morning, our 7:30 a.m. train ride through the Sacred Valley is both sublime and sordid. Lush green mountains border both sides of the Urubamba River, while hordes of trekkers, guides and porters line the tracks. UNESCO is threatening to withdraw Machu Picchu's World Heritage Site status unless Peru gets a handle on the throngs of people who crowd the Inca Trail and leave litter and pollution in their wake.

At Aguas Calientes, a small town at the base of Machu Picchu, we crowd onto the bus; the excitement and anticipation are palpable among the travellers on board. We arrive at the gates of the Lost City amid a crush of tourists. Leaving our guide behind, we quickly lose ourselves in Machu Picchu's serpentine mazes. Despite the number of tourists and the cost of getting here, it's worth every cent.

We climb the nearby peak of Huayna Picchu in the pouring



ADRENALINE COURSING, I STRUGGLE TO STAY ON THE TRAIL AND TAKE IT ALL IN: DIVING THROUGH NARROW CANYONS, RIPPING ALONG INCA IRRIGATION CANALS, THROUGH HAMLETS VIRTUALLY UNTOUCHED BY THE MODERN WORLD.



Clockwise from bottom left: a Quechuan elder; the ancient ruins of Inca stronghold Machu Picchu; descending through rural Peru; a Quechuan toddler; rolling through the high plains of the Andes, one of the longest mountain ranges on earth. Photos: Mike Brcic

rain—typical weather for this area. Upon reaching the summit, I find a place away from the tourists on an outcropping of rock. Sitting silently in the mist and rain, I gaze out over the surreal landscape. Tomorrow we'll be back on the bike. Back to the Camino Real.

For the Incas, each mountain was like a god, imbued with a spirit called an *apu*. An *apu*, like a god, possesses the power of both giving life and taking it away, and they can take a life by a variety of means: volcanic eruptions, avalanches, climatic catastrophes. On the morning of our final day, day 10 in Peru, these deities seem to have taken their vengeance on my body: I'm sick and weak, beaten down by the altitude and long days of riding. We file into the van for the last time as our driver, Joselo, straps down the bikes. Wayo assures us this day will be the icing on the cake.

We drive into the mountains for hours. It feels as if we are ascending to the roof of the world. We pass through rustic villages, past pre-Incan ruins and herds of alpacas. Farmers offer bottles of *chicha* to our open windows. The air gets thin. I chew a little harder on my coca and *llipta wad*, swallowing a big mouthful of juice.

As we arrive at the trailhead, I check my altimeter: 13,945 feet, over 4,270 metres above sea level. The scenery is barren and grey, the mountains forbidding. A few alpacas—the only other living creatures in sight—scurry as we ride through rocks the size of grapefruits, pushing body and bike to the limit. Adrenaline coursing, I struggle to stay on the trail and take it all in: diving through narrow

canyons, ripping along Inca irrigation canals, through hamlets virtually untouched by the modern world.

Near the end of our ride, we stop by a rustic house and the owner, a Quechua woman likely in her sixties, emerges and smiles a toothless grin. She points at my bike, speaks a few words in Quechua and smiles. I point at my bike and mimic riding an alpaca. This elicits a flurry of laughter and more Quechua. I sit down and absorb the moment—the ancient Camino Real at my feet, spectacular peaks high above, a laughing descendant of the Incas by my side.

We eventually arrive in the remote town of Calca soaking wet, covered in dirt and thoroughly spent. Women in traditional garb walk by and stare. Schoolchildren in bright white uniforms giggle and point at our muddy bikes and strange outfits. The sun returns and I feel much better; for now the apus are not angry. They have welcomed us into their sacred mountains.

Changing into dry clothes, reflecting on what has been the best mountain bike ride of my life, a hand slaps me on the back. I turn to see Wayo, our perennially grinning guide. He hands me a big bag of coca as a reward for my efforts. "Congratulations, my gringo friend," he says, all giddy still. "Welcome to Peru."

Mike Brcic is a Toronto and Fernie-based writer and photographer. His mountain bike tour company, Sacred Rides (formerly Fernie Fat-Tire Adventures) will be offering 10-day mountain bike holidays in Peru this year. For more information visit www.sacredrides.com

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