

WE'LL TAKE YOU THERE

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SQUEALING LIKE PIGS
IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S BACKWOODS

FROM ASHES TO AZUL
CHILE'S BEST SINGLETRACK

GRAVITY GIRLS
WHY WOMEN RULE, PART II

HE DREW THE ORIGINAL STUMPJUMPER
AND TIM NEENAN IS STILL AT IT



FROM THE ANIDIES TO THE PACIFIC

DIVING INTO
NEW DIRT
AT THE
PACIFIC
ENDURO
AND
BEYOND

By Sarah Rawley



Dave Trumppore



Dave Trumppore

Above: A train of riders makes its way to the summit of La Parva ski area to begin the journey from the Andes to the Pacific Ocean.

Right: Sarah Rawley learns that foot out, flat out is the only way to navigate the antigrip soil of Chile. She finished third in the damas category.

Top Right: Seventy-five riders line up at the start of the Andes Pacifico. Full-face helmets, knee pads and heavy packs were not only required but necessary to make it through the race.

Opposite: Nate Hills shoulders his bike during one of many hike-a-bike sections of the Andes Pacifico. Hills is becoming a regular to the event, competing in the inaugural event in 2014 and already making plans to return in 2016.

Standing atop La Parva Ski Resort at nearly 12,000 feet, you feel like you are looking down on the high rises of Santiago from the moon. The thin air, barren landscape and lunar soil notorious for its “antigrip” properties are far from the bustling city within sight. Mount Tupungato, at 21,155 feet and one of the highest mountains in the Andes, casts a shadow on the largest metropolitan region in Chile.

In an hour’s drive from the city center, you are transported 7,000 feet up 40 switchbacks, on G-21 or the Road to Ferellones. This gateway road to La Parva is straddled by steep hillsides and riddled with trails—some established, like Parvaso, the local downhill training grounds. However, most are cowboy and Indian trails, barely worn into the off-camber slopes. This is where the majority of the Andes Pacifico—a four-day enduro stage race—would take



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place, traversing the country from east to west and tackling more than 30,000 vertical feet.

After its standout inaugural year in 2014, the Andes Pacifico was claimed to be the hardest enduro stage race in the world. I was told there would be nothing that could prepare me for the race. Always up for a challenge and yearning to take my racing to unfamiliar terrain, the race was the perfect chance to escape the icy grips of Colorado mid-February and explore beyond the finish line as well.

My partner in crime, Nate Hills, and I arrived in Santiago, slightly ragged from our redeye flights. We were promptly greeted by our Chilean friend, Rodrigo, full of energy to share his favorite mountain bike trails. I had introduced Rodrigo to the Whole Enchilada in Moab, Utah, four and a half years prior, and since then he had been insistent on returning the favor.

The antigrip soil in Región Metropolitana de Santiago is so unique it has its own hashtag. I was familiar with



spread out our gear in preparation for the next day. A nervous energy circulated around camp. Veterans of the race and natives of the terrain knew what was in store. Those of us who had no idea could only go off of their stories and then magnify them in our thoughts. After indulging like male teenage cross country racers in a gourmet meal, we congregated for our first briefing.

Race Director Matias delSolar's colleagues describe him as the engineer of the race and credit him for making the Andes Pacifico so popular for racers, sponsors and the media. He was joined on stage by Eduardo, aptly nicknamed "Large," the mastermind behind Montebaik, the Chilean equivalent of Pinkbike, and founder of the Montebaik Enduro Series, which spawned the first Andes Pacifico race. Nacho, said to have mapped out every square inch of the course from months and months of analyzing Google Earth, accompanied the other two with a big grin. He knew what was coming.

Matias and the crew heartily welcomed us to Chile and expressed their excitement to share their carefully crafted race route. We would be treated to 19 especiales over the course of four days, 16 stages never before raced on. The terrain would be varied—from the antigrip mountainsides high in the Andes, to careening down open fields where cows, or vacas, presented natural obstacles, to pedaling through vineyards to reach the start line. The race organizers painted an all-encompassing picture of how to best experience every aspect of Chile's most interesting and challenging mountain biking. I shuffled off to my tent, ready for a good night's sleep under the luminous Milky Way and full of anticipation for what would be thrown my way.

Day one started from the top of La Parva. The perspective we gained heading up the switchbacks transpired into an astronaut's view of the city below. The feeling finally sunk in. I had traveled more than 5,000 miles to stand here, in this moment, ready to torpedo out of a Red Bull start gate. Within the first turns, I was immediately foot out, flat out, realizing the only way to prepare for this was to expect the unexpected.

Throughout the next four days of the race, we were tested with everything—long transitions including a three-hour hike-a-bike in record-breaking 116 degree Fahrenheit heat; steep inclines with nothing but sporadic flagging, yellow for marking



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tales of this dirt—ball bearing rocks on top of thick moon dust mixed with gravel—and assured myself that many seasons of Colorado summer riding would prepare me for sliding around within some range of comfort. I learned my first lesson right off the bat dropping into Parvaso. When you hit the brakes on antigrip soil, you accelerate ... completely counterintuitive.

I modified my technique to stop modulating my brakes as a means of controlling my direction and to stay focused

on the exit in hopes that my bike and body would follow. Two runs later, I had it nailed and thought that if I could slide my way down the country's most popular downhill trail, I might have a fighting chance at making it through the week.

The Andes Pacifico's 75 participants gathered at Camp Antawayaya, nestled deep in a valley, which made the Andes' grand scale seem even mightier. We were greeted with cold cervezas as we settled into our nomadic basecamp (tents for each of us) and



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Above: The cool and crisp coastline of Matanzas Beach welcomes riders to the finish line, where they are greeted with cold cervezas, a classic Chilean barbecue and, of course, plenty of pisco.

Top right: Riders get a private tour of Lapostolle, a vineyard on the terraces of Chile and known for world-class wines that use French expertise.

Right: Located less than one hour outside the center of Pucón, where tourists flock to the lakeside beaches, mountain bikers can find soulful riding in Villarrica National Park.

and red for “danger” to lead the way through a “festival” of switchbacks; and a surprise private tour of Lapostolle, one of the finest wineries in Chile.

Enduro racing is a unique environment where there is no separation between the pros and amateurs, men and women. We all raced the same courses and distances, enjoyed and suffered in the same conditions, and ate empanadas together at the end of the day. I learned that when world champions offer up advice at the start line, take it to heart, and it will make you faster.

The final stage of the Andes Pacifico ended at Matanzas Beach, known for its fine gray sand and windy conditions ideal for surfing and kiteboarding. As tradition would have it, the winner of the Andes Pacifico was promptly thrown in the chilly Pacific Ocean. This year, it was Nico Lau, tossed in by his closest competitor, Fabian Barel.

I traveled down to Chile with the intentions of solely experiencing the culture and terrain, but surprised myself by climbing up onto the podium in third place in the women’s race. Celebration was in store for everyone who made it through the week, and pisco sours and piscolas initiated the mantra



Nate Hills

“No Pisco, No Disco” into the morning hours of the next day.

With the first race of the season under our belts, Nate and I repacked our bags and headed 485 miles south to Pucón. Rodrigo claimed the Araucanía Region had the best mountain biking in Chile, and he would take us on his favorite ride in the world. This was intriguing, and although we had only three and a half days to drive 24 hours roundtrip and explore all of the secret riding spots, part two of our Chile challenge was on.

We arrived in Pucón around 6 p.m. The long summer days in the Southern Hemisphere provided just enough light to shuttle up Volcán Villarrica to cruise El Clasico (the classic route) with Diego, owner of Bike Pucón and former downhill national champion. Villarrica is one of Chile’s most active volcanoes, and the track began just below the volcano’s steaming peak, at the

top of the ski area. The town was recently moved up to an orange alert, and here we were standing 2,200 feet below the summit crater, where the lava lake was expected to explode very soon. The novelty wore off, and the reality set in; we had to descend an active volcano.

We dove in behind Diego off the first drop into deep ash, evidence of the last major eruption in 1992. After a week’s worth of practice on antigrip, riding through deep channels of ash felt like infinite traction. Views of the vast lake district below and Volcán Llaima in the distance were a distraction from the singletrack weaving down the ridgeline into a dense native forest. Coihue and maño trees framed the trail, and finally, I felt at home riding blind at Jedi knight speeds, dodging the flora and occasional fauna.

Diego offered a diversion from El Clasico



Above: El Clasico is a must-do ride down Volcán Villarrica, Pucón's marquee landmark. The volcano erupted on March 3, 2015.

Top Right: The aggressive terrain in Chile is not for the faint of heart ... or single-ply casing. Come prepared with proper rubber and sealant to make the most out of your days while riding.

Right: The majestic araucaria, or monkey puzzle tree (also known locally as pehuén), towers above the other trees in the ancient Araucanía forest of Chile.

into a lava bed that was shaped from centuries of eruptions. It was like riding in Moab but on perfectly smooth layers of ebony-colored formations that provided a natural playground of features. It was the perfect ending to our 3,000-foot descent back to Bike Pucón's basecamp at a local park, where the laughter of kids circled around a pump track, and the sunset painted yet another stunning eventide into the horizon.

The prospect of Rodrigo's best ride in the world still lay ahead. Chilean time was not conducive to early morning starts, but we managed to find the trailhead by 2 p.m., stopping at a few houses along the way for directions. Chileans are, by nature, a very friendly, outgoing culture, and this was reassuring when we were seeking out the trailhead to *Paradiso Periodo*, tucked in a valley at the base of Parque Nacional Villarrica (Villarrica National Park).

We parked in a field next to a tiny cabin and house, where an elderly couple promptly



greeted us. They were private landowners who held the rights to the trailhead, and we paid 1,000 pesos each, roughly \$1.50 USD, to enter the park from their property. I would have paid 10,000 pesos just to enjoy the panorama from their lot. The surrounding peaks rose above the magical Patagonian rainforest, and Rodrigo pointed to a landmark out of sight. *Laguna Azul* (Blue Lagoon), also known as *Laguna los Patos* (Lagoon of the Ducks), would be the destination on our out-and-back journey.

We waved goodbye to our new friends, who were expecting us back by sunset, and rode away into an extensive araucaria forest

toward the base of Volcán El Mocho—an ancient volcano that, unlike Villarrica further up the chain, has remained quiet in recent years.

The ratio of pedaling to pushing soon dwindled into a significant hike-a-bike. For every root cluster, drop and sweeping corner I pushed up, I reminded myself that we would be flying down in return. We emerged above tree line, feeling victorious, but still uncertain of how much farther we had to go. Rodrigo forged ahead toward sandy dunes that contrasted the lush rainforest. The snowcapped El Mocho was now at our backs, as we progressed through a roller

Laguna Azul provides a perspective of the Andes unlike any other. The deep turquoise waters mirror the endless mountain range on the Argentine border.



Nate Hills

Expect to hike, push, pull and grind your way through the steep mountains of Chile. But once you do, the views will be worth it, such as this one of Volcán El Mocho.



Nate Hills

coaster of hills, dipping into electric green valleys fed by babbling creeks. The final push to the top of the ridge felt more like remote mountain climbing than a mountain bike ride. As we crested the top, and Laguna Azul came into view, feelings of fatigue from the Andes Pacifico and riding every day subsided.

Laguna Azul was the deepest and purest blue I had ever seen in nature. We looked down into the basin from 500 feet above, and out toward Villarrica, where a sheer layer of ash had blanketed the volcano's glacier overnight; an indiscernible black patch slithered out of the summit. The volcano was waking up. A group of horseback riders galloped down the trail toward us from the other side of the ridge, a reminder that we weren't the only ones out here.

The urge to keep riding toward the Argentine border was strong, but we knew that sunset would be upon us shortly. Rodrigo pulled his goggles out for the full Lego-man enduro effect, which meant it was time to rally.

The three hours that it took to arrive at Laguna Azul was reversed in about 45 minutes. Sounds of pure elation echoed

through the forest, and every time I thought the descent couldn't get any better, a corner packed full of hero dirt dumped into a steep root section, and my bike danced down the fall line, plastering a permasmile on my face.

We skidded back to the truck, and again, the couple swiftly greeted us, this time with cold cervezas and colas. Rodrigo was right. What a ride.

Our time in Chile was near the end, but it goes without saying, we will be back. The mountains, the people, and the riding are all beckoning us to return. The Andes Pacifico is rumored to move farther south and present an entirely new set of tracks for 2016. Our trek to Laguna Azul has inspired plans to cross the Andes between Argentina and Chile on the full route on which we embarked. With more than 2,370 miles from the northern region of Chile, said to be the driest desert in the world, to the ice fields and glaciers of Patagonia, there is still a lot of ground to be covered. 📍

Editor's Note: Villarrica erupted on March 3, 2015, exactly two weeks after Sarah and friends mountain biked El Clasico on the volcano's shoulder.