

Crossing the Andes on a Tandem

From Mendoza to the foot of Cerro Aconcagua on a RANS Screamer



Story and photography
by Armin Ziegler

It was indeed a very long day, and I wasn't quite sure whether we were going to make it. My wife Karin and I decided to celebrate our retirement with a special tandem tour on our RANS-Screamer. We are both experienced tandem riders, but this first afternoon ride was quite a bit harder than we had expected.

Mendoza to Potrerillos

We started after lunch in Mendoza, a nice town in the western part of Argentina on the eastern side of the Andes and headed towards Potrerillos. We would have enjoyed the ride a bit more, if the road hadn't been up-hill all the time and if the temperature had been a bit less than 35 C. But 70 km and an ascent of 900 m was really hard. After 50 km, the last bottle of water was gone and chocolate in a liquid state does not really help much. It was already

dark when we reached Potrerillos, where we decided to look for taxi-transportation to the caba a we had booked and this caba a was still 15 km away.

We finally found the transportation at the police station. They loaded our tandem on a pickup truck and brought us with flashing blue light (but no sirens) to our caba a. As we wanted to pay for the transportation, the friendly police lady said that they would not accept it. Por ningun manera! We will never forget this.

Potrerillos to Uspallata

After a rest day in a lovely caba a we embarked on the second leg of our journey through the Andes. The road followed the Mendoza River through a gigantic gorge of some 50 km length. The gorge is not terribly narrow, but the vertical cliffs on both sides

are really impressive. In the lower part of the gorge people enjoyed river rafting in the brownish waters of the wild Mendoza River. The road and the now abandoned rail track wind their way along the river and through many tunnels, gaining elevation from 1400 m at Potrerillos to 1900 m in Uspallata. It was quite a relief to reach the plain of Uspallata after 70 km and we found a free room in the hotel Los Condores, where we immediately made for the swimming pool.

For the evening meal we wanted to have some typical local food and therefore, ordered a parrillada. I'm sure the meat was excellent, but I don't know why they had to burn it first. For our taste, it was left way too long on the fire. Later, we were told that we had to order the parillada "rojo-rojo". To conclude the

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Uspallata to Leoncito

D.O.D. (don't overdo it) was the motto of the next two days. Here in Uspallata life is very pleasant and leisurely. And of course we had to get used to high altitudes quite slowly. On the second evening, we hired a guide with a Jeep. He showed us the ancient Inca trail through the Andes. The Incas had a road network that connected a huge area of South America and extended to the south as far as the region of Mendoza. Then we continued (in the Jeep) northwards on gravel road for 40 km, where we met some Guanacos and some Avestruz (Darwin's rhea). According to our guide, it's quite rare to see these animals so close to the road.

The next highlight was the huge clay flats, a dried-out lake that hasn't seen a

drop of water for many years. As it extends over several tens of kilometres, it's ideal for "carrovelismo" (sailing carts). I couldn't resist and took the seat of the co-pilot on one of these racing carts with sails. It's daunting. At a speed of over 50 km/h we were racing over the hard surface, with me hoping that the pilot knows his job well enough.

Finally we reached the "Parque nacional del Leoncito" with its famous observatories. The landscape here is wild and steep. The gravel road winds its way through a desert ca on with just a few trees in the bottom of the valley. With the last rays from the sun behind the peaks of the Andes we reached the observatory, where an astronomer was awaiting us.

I didn't know that lectures in astronomy can be so exciting. And it's true: the southern sky is really fantastic. It's not only the Southern Cross, which actually is not a cross but (according to the Incas) an arrowhead. Only Christian seafarers could have seen a cross in this constellation. We saw Orion upside down and several shooting stars and learned a lot about the naming of star constellations. The indigenous people have been (according to the professor of the observatory) conquered twice: first as the

Right: Author Armin Ziegler poses on the road from Mendoza to Potrerillos.

Below: Between Potrerillos and Uspallata.



European invaders took away their land, and then (as a much more profound act of oppression) they were forced to abandon their religion. I guess not all visitors were happy with this interpretation of history.

Uspallata to Los Penitentes

10 o'clock in the morning and we were on our RANS Screamer on the road to Chile. Seventy km and 700 m elevation to Los Penitentes, that should be possible, even at our age. The road followed the Mendoza River through a wide gorge with red vertical walls. The air was fresh with a light headwind. At the far end of the valley,





Above: "Carrovelismo" near Barreal.

Right: Guanacos between Uspallata and Barreal.



we could see the snow-capped peaks of the cordilleran chain. The road grew steeper and at the same time the headwind increased to a middle-sized storm. Sand devils were dancing on the valley floor and the sand burnt in our eyes. After 20 km we gave up. There was no chance that we would make it to Los Penitentes in reasonable time. Furthermore, a bicycle holiday is not meant to be a torture. We decided to have a nice picnic in a sheltered place with a wonderful view over the dried-out valley with its yellow-brown colors and the Mendoza River meandering through the much too-wide valley floor. With a bit of a bad conscience, we turned our bicycle round and rushed back to Uspallata. There we loaded our "bicicleta doble" in a double decker bus and reached Los Penitentes in a much more leisurely way.

The owners of the Ayelen Hotel in Los Penitentes made us really feel welcome. We must have been wandering a bit aimlessly through the hotel lobby when a young woman introduced herself as the owner of the hotel, asking whether she could do something for us. This was the starting point of a long discussion about Argentinian economy and the management of a hotel in an Argentinian resort. We had to break up the discussion in order not to miss the evening meal. And this evening meal was the best we had had

so far during our Argentinian holidays. Everything was just perfect.

Los Penitentes to Parque provincial Aconcagua

After a good night's sleep we set off to the foot of Cerro Aconcagua. We made a short stop at the Puente del Inca (which is actually built by nature not by the Incas), where one can still see the ghostly remnants of the hotel the English built in 1925. The hotel was a real luxury hotel and has been visited by the most important personalities of that time. It was destroyed in 1965 by a devastating avalanche, but its ruins are still visited by thousands of tourists each year.

Finally, at an elevation of 2800 m we reached the entrance to the Aconcagua Park. Honestly, we were not sorry to leave our tandem at the park entrance and continue on foot. After so many days of riding it was quite refreshing to walk up the steep trail leading to Mirror Lake, with the beautiful south face of Cerro Aconcagua just in front of us. At an elevation of 3000 m the trail ended for normal visitors. Only the really brave ones carry on to

the altitude of almost 7000 m. But not all of them come back, as we could see on our way back while visiting El Cimiterio de los Andes.

Today was an easy ride from Los Penitentes back to Uspallata. The scenery was gorgeous but the sun burning. The road was mostly downhill, and we were quite fast. Sharing the road with the heavy trucks is not always easy. They are fast too and not all of them make it safely home as can be guessed from the lorry debris off the road.

Uspallata is an interesting town. Originally selected by the Argentinian army for strategic purposes, it grew into a touristy centre of some kind. It has quite a large road network, but only four main roads are paved. Boutiques with goodies for tourists and restaurants make it look like a tourist centre. And everywhere these stray dogs. They are certainly friendly but there are just too many of them.

Uspallata to Mendoza

In Uspallata the air was fresh but thin, in Mendoza we were back to normal oxygen concentration but at a temperature of almost 40 centigrades. Actually, I preferred the thin air. The journey from Uspallata to Potrerillos



was wonderful, especially as we were riding downhill. In Potrerillos we selected the nicest hotel in order to recover a bit from the hardship of the previous days. Even our "bicicleta doble" got a decent place.

The next day brought us from Potrerillos to Mendoza. These 60 km downhill were a real treat. Except that 40 degrees are only bearable if you keep moving. Parts of the suburbs of Mendoza are in a desolate state with huts consisting of nothing more than brick walls and corrugated iron roofs. The town Mendoza itself, however, is quite nice with well-built buildings. We made a dash to our hotel, left our bicicleta doble in the reception hall and disappeared in the swimming pool. Only after 6 o'clock, when the temperature had dropped from 40 to 35 we ventured out for a stroll in the pedestrian area of Via Sarmiento for a cold drink.

The End

We've made it. The bicicleta doble is checked in and we are in possession of our boarding cards. Time to relax and look back.



Left: Always in good spirits.

Below: Not all come back – El Cimiterio de los Andes Los Penitentes to Uspallata.



Was Argentina (i.e. the Mendoza area) a good choice? Was it a good idea to do it on two wheels? Would we come again?

The Mendoza area with its ruta 7 offers one of the most beautiful bicycle trips. Starting at an altitude of 700 m you gradually – over a distance of 200 km – climb to an altitude of 3000 m. And these 200 km are mostly through spectacular gorges and

ca ons. The crossing of the Andes with a bicycle is really a unique experience. Had we had more time, we would have continued to Santiago de Chile.

Argentines are very friendly and open hearted. You always meet people to talk with. And they are very helpful. We will never forget the police of Potrerillos, who drove us and our bicicleta doble the 15 km to the

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A bicycle trip from 700 m up to 3000 m is a bit demanding but with average fitness, it can be done even at the age of 65. Just don't overdo it on the first day. The first section of 70 km with a climb of some 900 m was definitely too much for the first day. Gradually, our bodies got used to pedaling and to the thin air. And at the end of the trip we had the fitness we should have had at the beginning.


Our RANS Screamer tandem behaved flawlessly. We have had it now for more than 17 years. We have crossed Iceland, have followed the Pacific Coast on Highway 1 and

Above: Puente del Inca with the remnants of the hotel.

Right: Downhill ride from Los Penitentes to Uspallata.



visited Sicily. But never did we have a single mechanical problem with this bicycle.

Argentina, at least the western part with the Andes, is a wonderful country and ideal for bicycling, if you are not afraid of trucks, that is. And we certainly will come again. 



Above: A decent place for our "bicicleta doble".

Left: Not all of them make it safely home.

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