

# “Touching the front brake would have meant certain disaster”

Cliff-edge crashes, broken limbs, altitude sickness and roasted guinea pigs – how did seven female road riders survive off-road riding in Peru?

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## THE STORY SO FAR

Karen Clarke, Angela Lewis, Yvonne Sanders, Liz Mogridge, Lisa Saxton, Paula Davis and Sally Ann Holmes have all survived major illnesses or faced terrible adversity and bounced back. And rather than sit back and count their blessings, the British-based motorcyclists all decided to embark on a 1000-mile, two-week off-road trek through Peru.

To compensate for their lack of off-road experience, they got some guidance from the Royal Signals motorcycle display team and from Dakar desert race ace Patsy Quick in the intense weeks leading up to their flight to Peru in mid October.

RiDE contributor Mel Falconer, an experienced off-roader, was with them all the way as tour leader.



“I can’t breathe,” gasped a grey-faced Paula, almost falling off her Suzuki DR650. Going from sea level to a 4100m alpine pass in just three hours can do that to fit and healthy people, never mind a three-times kidney transplant patient. With another seven days’ riding on high-altitude trails to come, it was clear some of the seven women on this off-road adventure in Peru were in for a tough time.

Waving goodbye to Paula for the rest of the day as she got on the recovery truck, which then began laboriously bumping its way down the mountain, the remaining six women left the power-free peasant village of Conococha and descended 1000m along a snaking, cliff-framed ribbon of potholed Tarmac, avoiding coca leaf-chewing lorry drivers and herds of goats strewn across blind bends, shepherded by wide-eyed campesino (peasant farmer) girls.

With a 1000-mile route ahead carving its way through the



**INTERACTIVE**

Sally and Angela emerge from the last tunnel in the Cañon del Pato into a working open coal mine





Cordillera Blanca mountain range – home to the mighty Huascarán, the highest mountain in Peru at 6768m – this was just the start.

And it wasn't long before first-crash honours were awarded to Yvonne. On the second day she and her lowered Honda XR250 parted company on an innocuous-looking corner hiding sand on the riding line and a vertiginous drop-off to the side. With a tweaked arm, picking the bike up unaided wasn't an option and unfortunately for her the next rider on the scene was heart attack sufferer Angela. With the thin air aggravating Angela's already dicey condition she ran out of breath picking up the little 250, so both women had to declare defeat and wait for sweeper rider Peter's help.

Further on the gravelly, sandy track a piece of discoloured warning tape flapped loosely across the path. Decision made and tape crossed, five minutes later the reason for the tape was obvious – the road just stopped. In its place was an excavated muddy mess, with a two-metre deep trench running down the middle. Karen, as one of the minority with some off-roading experience, volunteered to ride along the side of the cut-out bank to see how far it continued. Off she went, only to come to an abrupt halt at an impassable corner. With the bank far too narrow to turn the DR650 around without falling into the trench, Karen was stuck until one of the guides came to her rescue. Between them, they muscled the bike around in the right direction and then it was off to find a rideable diversion down the mountain.

As it turned out, the roadwork rubble might've been easier as

everyone picked their way gingerly down through a couple of tiny, boulder-strewn villages, relying on engine braking and back brake dabs, as a touch of the front brake would have spelled certain disaster on the slippery, loose terrain.

But it was the indignant crowd of locals in the middle of a wedding blocking the road that was the most unsettling experience of the day. High on celebrations and home-brew, they jostled and pushed the women around as they tried to ride through without hurting anybody. When it came to her turn, Lisa had to physically barge her way past, hitting inebriated locals with her handlebars, then quickly disappearing before any thoughts of hurling stones occurred to the less lubricated villagers.

After an eventful day like that, no wonder the riders downed a few pisco sours that night. It's the Peruvian national drink, a cocktail consisting of grape brandy, lemon or lime juice, egg whites, syrup and regional bitters.

Now a few days into the trip, with most of the group suffering from some degree of altitude sickness – symptoms include breathlessness, headaches, nausea and fatigue – the simple act of riding was also getting harder.

The next challenge was the 144-mile return route through the Kahuish tunnel to the Chavin de Huantar ruins, claimed to be the world's highest road tunnel at 4516m above sea level. As the badly maintained part-blacktop, part-gravel road climbed ever higher it got

“The women were soaked through and freezing, and the combination of advancing fog and the fast approaching dusk meant visibility was non-existent”





Lake Querochocha in the Huascarán National Park, 3980m above sea level. Bikes and riders alike need to catch their breath



Looks really nice, doesn't it?



Left to right: Angela, Sally, Dr Wendy, Yvonne, Karen, Liz and (front) Adventure Peru Motorcycling guide Franco



Angela runs out of juice along the Pan American highway. The Peruvians know how to siphon fuel with the best of them



Road surface disappears as the riders approach the Kahuish tunnel



Above: Gertrude the guinea pig's days are numbered... bon appétit







When it's good, it's really good: 144 miles of hairpin bends

“Closer inspection revealed a large rusty nail embedded in the front tyre that made steering and front-end responses unpredictable”



Tall, rugged DR650s can cope with pretty much anything

progressively poorer, jack-knifing back on itself up to the tunnel. With the altitude and wind chill increasing, the girls were wringing every last bit of power out of the reliable, four-stroke DR650s and XR250s, relegated to using first and second gears at the very top.

The reason for the tunnel's diesel-polluted air became apparent on the other side. Petrol tankers and lorries laden with timber were struggling up the mountain pass, tiny specks dotted along the treacherous Tarmac. But dominating the entire high-altitude vista was a giant white statue of Christ clutching a wooden cross. Peru is predominately Catholic and its people are very religious, evident in the multitude of churches and roadside stone shrines.

Unfortunately, divine intervention wasn't on the cards for Lisa. Almost at the bottom of the valley, she rounded a sandy corner only to be met with one of the smoke-spewing trucks taking up the entire road. Panicking, she grabbed a handful of front brake, tucked the front under and went sailing over the handlebars, smashing both thighs into the bars at the same time. Luckily she escaped with a sore head and heavy bruising - to her legs and her pride - but the bike wasn't so fortunate. With the bars badly bent, the front brake had also lost all pressure and, despite mechanic/guide Franco's best efforts, it was time for the back-up vehicle and trailer to spring into action.

But things were about to get a whole lot tougher. Throughout the trip we had already suffered at the hands of the variable Peruvian climate, often setting off early with the sun beating down, but by lunchtime needing to don thermal jackets as we rode higher.

On this particular afternoon the heavens decided to open. And stay open for 24 hours. With thunder rolling off the gloomy glacial peaks, there was nothing for it but to ride through the storm. With Paula and Yvonne both ill from the unrelenting altitude, it was left to the remaining five women to get their bikes to the next overnight stop.

The women were soaked through and freezing, and the combination of advancing fog and the fast-approaching dusk meant visibility was non-existent. With the bigger Suzukis able to go faster than the little Hondas, some of the XR250 riders were struggling to keep up. There was nothing for it but to back off and keep the group together as by now it was pitch black and there was still another hour of hairpins to go. Goggles had long ago been ripped off, eyes taking the stinging rain in preference to misted-up lenses. Finally the orange glow of Huaraz welcomed the riders, whose concerns immediately shifted to

wondering if there'd be enough hot water to go around at the hotel.

The next day it was Sally Ann's turn to take a tumble, through no fault of her own. Having had very limited off-road experience before the trip she had taken it upon herself to learn as much as she could. Flinging an XR250 enthusiastically into a shale-covered corner after being shown how to carry more speed into a turn she slid off, dumping the Honda into a small gully. With both Sally and the bike upright again, the same thing happened once more at the very next corner - except this time there was a sheer drop on her side of the track. As the XR scrabbled for grip on the loose surface, somehow she remembered what she'd been taught, shifted her weight back above the back wheel and gave the bike a good handful of throttle, propelling her quickly away from the cliff edge. Closer inspection revealed a large rusty nail embedded in the front tyre that made steering and front-end responses unpredictable, much to Sally's relief. Having survived a near-fatal brain aneurysm, she was, she said, "not going to bloody die riding over the edge of a cliff".

The next crash of the trip almost proved to be the end of the journey for Karen. Riding back down from the Lagunas Llanganuco glacier lakes along 50 miles of winding, muddy, stony and sometimes sandy track, Karen was riding on ahead alone, being one of the group's





faster riders. Stuck behind a small bus creeping its way down the hill, she saw an overtaking opportunity on a left-hand corner and went for it. What she didn't see was the deeper than usual sand, and she high-sided her DR650, landing awkwardly on her right foot and banging her head in the process. In considerable pain, she managed to ride back, where a visit to a local clinic resulted in a heavily bandaged, very swollen, bruised foot and delayed concussion. Having suspected a fracture, everybody was relieved when Karen was given the all-clear. With the best ride of the trip yet to come, Karen opted to continue. The moto cross boots gave her foot plenty of support on the bike regardless of the pain. (On her return to the UK, Karen's foot was X-rayed again and she had indeed broken her foot. Ouch.)

Yet Karen's painful decision to ride the Cañon del Pato - the canyon of the ducks - proved to be the right one. With the roaring Rio Santa

“With headlights blazing and the deafening roar of an airhorn approaching, they could do nothing but frantically flash their much dimmer lights”



separating the two mountain ranges of the Cordillera Blanca and Cordillera Negra by only 10 metres in some places, the incredibly rocky, gravelly road has been blasted out of the cliffs on the canyon's Negra side.

Billed as the greatest bike ride of the Americas, the current route used to be the old train track from Chimbote to Caraz. It has more than 40 pitch black, sandy, one-vehicle-wide railway tunnels to negotiate. The women soon learnt to lean on their horns before entering the tunnels, as big trucks from the hydroelectric plant at the bottom of the gorge regularly trundle up and down the route and don't give way once in the tunnel. There was one scary encounter with one of these lorries midway through a long tunnel. With headlights blazing and the deafening roar of airhorn approaching, they could do nothing but frantically flash their much dimmer lights trying fruitlessly to find a way to squeeze down the side. With the lorry grinding to a halt just a couple of feet away from the leading bike, everyone jumped off and hurriedly turned their bikes around - not the easiest thing to do in a narrow, dark and sand-ridged rocky hole.

With the tunnels, dizzying drops and high concentration levels needed for the 40-mile route, the riders were exhausted, and numerous bottles of another national favourite, the fluoro-yellow bubblegum flavoured Inca Kola, found in a tumbledown shack at the side of the road, were desperately needed.

As the shack's tinny radio blasted out classic Spanish hits, it was interrupted by somebody's phone playing the unmistakable melody of Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*.

They most certainly do.



## CAN I DO IT?

- **Cost:** Two-week Northern tour is £1650 (or £1450 for pillion/4x4 passenger).
- **Included:** Bike hire, bike insurance, fuel, hotel accommodation (based on two sharing), breakfast, guides, mechanics and 4x4 back-up.
- **Not included:** International return flight to Lima, any internal flights, all other meals and drinks, personal accident/medical insurance, spending money.
- **Bikes:** Suzuki DR650s, Honda XR250s or Honda Transalps.
- **Contact:** Adventure Peru Motorcycling: [www.perumotorcycling.com](http://www.perumotorcycling.com) or 01424 838618/07768 568811. Lots of other tours offered covering Northern and Southern Peru, including a new 2010 Cloud Forest and Amazonas tour (DVD available). Visit them at the MCN Motorcycle Show in London on February 4-7.
- **Good to know:** Adventure Peru's senior tour guide Peter Gorringer has spent much of his life riding around the Americas and speaks fluent Spanish. Two Peruvians are also on the staff - affable mechanic and back-up driver Carlos Salazar and guide/mechanic Franco Britto. Both have excellent local knowledge and riding experience. UK liaison Dave Groves is very helpful and organises the tours to cater for all levels of riding ability.