

CYCLING THE PASO PIRCAS NEGRAS

Crossing the Andes by bike from Argentina to Chile

FEBRUARY 2010

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This pass through the Andes is from La Rioja Province in the north of Argentina NW of Cordoba to Copiapo in Region III of Chile. It is not marked on all road maps, but lies between Paso San Francisco to the north and Paso del Agua Negra to the south. The pass was officially opened in 2000 although people have been crossing this route for centuries. So far as we can discern, very few cycle tourists have travelled this way and there may be many reasons for this.

The pass is open for a couple of months of the year and you should check this out before embarking on the journey. The months that it is open (January and February) coincide with the hottest months in the region. La Rioja in Argentina rarely drops below 40°C day or night (with highs of 55°C in January) and may get torrential rain with flash flooding. The Atacama region in Chile is similarly hot but will never rain. Starting or finishing in either country will find you in a barren, inhospitable region a long way from anywhere else that you might want to be at the time of the year. Basically, whichever way you do it, the journey to the start and finish, will be long and arduous and you will be very hot until you gain sufficient altitude for the nights to get very cold (to -15°C).

The route takes you some 380km between reliable sources of provisions and over a pass reaching a maximum height of 4,481m. You remain at over 3,000m for a distance of some 150km (of which 100km is over 4,000m), there is scarce potable water en route, and although the road is largely very good, there is little traffic other than day trippers to the Laguna Brava National Park in Argentina and tankers taking water to the mines in Chile. Between the hours of 16.00 and 10.00, you will have the place pretty much to yourself. In Argentina, there is a chain of beautiful refuges dating back to Sarmiento's time some 150 years ago. These cleverly designed and well maintained structures we found to be a godsend to shelter from the astonishing wind that will plague you no matter which direction you undertake the route. You could pitch a small tent within these huts – the floors are dry earth and very dusty, but they are surprisingly warm at night.

So why undertake this crossing? It is wild, bleak, beautiful and, if you are carefully prepared, a fantastic hard ride. The mountain scenery, wildlife and the people you will meet, along with the merciless wind, will make for a trip that you will never forget. I do suggest however, that before you embark on this trip, that you gain experience of riding high altitude passes through the Andes. There are plenty of safer and more accessible passes to cross and this is not one that I would recommend to the uninitiated.

Route suggestions

This route can be ridden as a circuit with the Paso San Francisco (which is what we did). We rode the Pircas Negras first from east to west and the San Francisco from west to east. There are some excellent accounts of cycling the Paso San Francisco including, <http://panamerica.ch/map/argentina.php> and http://www.crazyguyonabike.com/doc/page/?o=3Tzut&page_id=98424&v=CP (look at the links at the bottom of this page). If you did this as a standalone trip, I would think you should allow a minimum of three weeks - assuming that you arrived screaming fit and acclimatised to heat and altitude.

We rode to the start from Uruguay (yes Uruguay!), 2,000km across the Pampas. This gave us the chance to get fit and certainly got us used to the heat. Alternatively, you could practice cycling in a sauna, which approximates very closely to the conditions that we were in. Coming from the east, Patquia claims to be the start of the road to Copiapo, and I shall describe our journey from there. However, to all intents and purposes, Vinchina is the last shop before Terra Amarillo, a few kilometres out of Copiapo.

If you decide to ride from west to east, you may have more favourable wind, but I would not expect a tail wind to blow you the whole way across. The route we took descending to Copiapo through a long bleak valley along Ruta Nacional 33 would make a hot, dry and uninspiring ascent and I would seriously consider the alternative route up the Rio Copiapo valley. This would put you onto a ripio road along the Rio Jorquero that it appeared a lot of water tankers used, and you would avoid a huge picturesque climb over a 3,115m saddle too. These routes meet near La Guardia to climb up along the Rio Turbio which would be a delight.

IMPORTANT NOTES

1. Check the details of the border opening times carefully, including the DATES. There are physical barriers across the road on the Chilean side that would be difficult to safely get round should you attempt to cross when the border is closed.
2. **ALSO**, in the 2010 season, Chilean Immigration was only open Thursday to Sunday. Argentine Immigration would therefore only allow vehicles through on these days. We were finally able to get our documentation to leave Argentina on a Monday, after a lengthy explanation (and phone calls to higher officers) that it would take us several days to reach Chilean Immigration.

About us and our kit

We are lucky to take 10 weeks at the beginning of each year to go cycle touring. We have been to South America five times and enjoy zigzagging rather aimlessly through the Andes. We are not very young or very fit, but we are determined and have faith in our excellent equipment. We carry everything we need, plus extra for a few days in case of emergency or adverse weather, and slowly work our way through the mountains. This suits us in terms of acclimatisation to the altitude, but our slow approach does become a problem where water is short. We estimate that we need a minimum of 11 litres of water a day between the two of us for drinking, cooking and basic hygiene. On that assumption, it is hard to carry more than 36 hours worth of water!

We ride Rohloff equipped Thorn expedition touring bikes which are maintenance free for the duration of our trips, we use a Hilleberg tent, which has stood up to all the wind the Andes has thrown at it and cook on an MSR (which can be temperamental!).

The Route

We took seven nights to ride from Vinchina to Copiapo. We reached Refugio El Peñon on the third night allowing us time to acclimatise to 3,500m, after that, we were blown out by the wind and we took at least one night more than we had anticipated to reach Copiapo.

The distances given are by my odometer, taken to the lowest whole number (never rounded up), so you should always reach the point after the given kilometre (or before it if coming from the west).

Ruta 76 kilometre posts were sporadic, and are shown *in bold italics*. The ‘shortcut’ we took to Refugio Laguna Brava accounts for discrepancy in distances.

We were advised to only drink water from Refugio El Peñon and Barrancas Blancas. Other water at your discretion, but we didn’t find any that I would be prepared to drink until Rio Jorquero (which seemed better than Rio Turbio).

Place names ‘in inverted comas’ are from an information sheet supplied by tourist information in Vinchina.

You may not be familiar with all the words I have used:

Ripio - gravel roads ranging from very rough boulders to deep sand

Sealed ripio - same as ripio, but held together with a thin layer of tarmac

A° - *Arroyo* – Small stream – may be dry

Comedor – roadside eatery – may be grand or a shack

Guardaparque – National Park office/wardens accommodation with/out tourist information and facilities

Hospedaje – accommodation equivalent to a B&B (but may not include breakfast)

Obriador – road workers accommodation

Pavimento- paved road

Agua dulce – ‘sweet water’ i.e. drinking water

Paso/limite – International border, not necessarily the highest point or Pass

Caracoles – ‘snail’, twisting, hairpin mountain road

The Route-Patquia to Vinchina. Feb2010

	DISTANCE	ALTITUDE	COMMENTS
Patquia to Vinchina Rutas 150 and 76	0km	500m	PATQUIA Hotel and food (restaurant and stores). No cash machine – last one we came across at Chamental on Ruta 38.
Temperature up to 55° in January. No rivers or accessible water. Stunning scenery.			Small settlements with some local produce for sale. No streams or water evident.
	75km	1,100m	National Park tours and info. Comedor and water.
	78km		Comedor at La Torre turnoff
			Road past Talampaya climbs to 1,600m then mostly downhill. Guardparque midway. We did not stop so unaware of the facilities available.
			Pagancillo hospedaje and service station with meals, showers and provisions.
	205km		Villa Union everything including cash machines. Get dried fruit, nuts and anything special here as limited variety in Vinchina
	243km	1,500m	VINCHINA at Feb 2010, no cash machine or public internet access. Basic supplies widely available – oats, rice, fruit and veg, biscuits etc. Hotel accommodation, but no restaurants. Tourist information enthusiastic but unaware of cyclists' needs.

The Route- Vinchina to Copiapo. Feb 2010

	DISTANCE	ALTITUDE	COMMENTS
Vinchina to Copiapo Ruta 76 (Ar), Ruta 33(CI)	0km	1,500m	All services. Don't forget ARGENTINE IMMIGRATION open THURSDAY-SUNDAY, unless you are a cyclist who can blag their way through.
Ascend ripio through Quebrada de la Troya	35km		Turn right to Alta Jagüē (slight detour). Basic supplies (rice, bread, soft drinks) available.
<p>Good paved road until it ends at 80km.</p> <p>Tailwind the whole way.</p> <p>No shortage of suitable campsites.</p> <p>We were advised that there is drinking water only at El Peñon other water is likely to be salty or undrinkable.</p>	38km	1,840m	Cuerpo de Guardfauna on the left in Alta Jagüē. Camping, showers and WATER .
	40km		Continue along the road left out of the Cuerpo de Guardfauna to rejoin Ruta 76. Ascend across a vast open plain. No water visible.
	67km 340km	2,535m	'Punta de Agua'. Track to the Rio, but no visible water. Plain ends at 2,600m and the road ascends a narrowing valley.
	72km	2,735m	'Las Chacritas Campam.' workers camp.
	77km		Rio el Peñon, first bridge over red silt river, clear stream on left (uphill) side.
	80km 351km	2,945m	End of pavimento
	82km	2,875m	'Quebrada Vaca Seca vertiente agua dulce'. Clear spring and animals. Water often opaque white with salt deposits along the margins
	97km	3,560m	Refugio El Peñon described as being anywhere between 3,200-3,800m, we found it to be 3,560m. Hut, shelter and camping space. MICE. FRESH WATER pipe 100m downhill on the uphill side of the road.

Strong headwind, with dangerous gusts on corners.	101km		'Pie del Portuelo Laguna Brava'
	102km	4,070m	Start of climb – some tailwind.
	106km	4,335m	'Portezuela de la Laguna'. Highest point of this climb, it took us about 2.5hrs to do the 4km climb as progress was severely limited by a wind we could barely stand up in, let alone cycle.
Extreme headwind. We reached paved road by Refugio de Laguna Brava, 128km – would have reached it sooner without the 'short cut'. Excellent surface.	128km 411km	4,305m	A descent into a huge basin crossed by a rolling road leading to Refugio de Laguna Brava . NO WATER. We followed the main track (there are many tracks but no signs) to the end of the laguna then took a 'shortcut' across the end of the lake, keeping left to reach the refuge. This may have been misguided as the main route may have been more rideable and quicker. Good refuge with dirt floor. Boulder strewn ground and high winds made it impossible to camp at the refuge or around the laguna, but the refuge provided us with a cosy nights' sleep.
Beyond the Laguna we saw 4 cars per day.	140km 423km	4,390m	Refugio Valdero . Excellent hut – too windy and stony to camp outside. NO WATER.
All water appeared salty.	426km	4,481m	Highest point of the crossing. The headwind is extraordinary. Cold, dry and debilitating, we only managed 6-7kph and did 32km in a day.
Limited camping – we camped in a sandy drainage ditch.	445km		Commence long descent with stream on right. (We did not test this water – probably salty.) Evidence of rock slides across the road with sign post saying 25km of poor road.

<p>Good road, beautiful scenery, lots of camping spots.</p> <p>Less wind and good road (or is it just the relief of being restocked with fresh water that makes you feel great?)</p>	170km 452km	4,025m	Barrancas Blancas. An Obriador with bunk beds, showers, a warm welcome, kitchen and DRINKING WATER. We were given water from the kitchen, but were advised by the workmen that ‘agua dulce’ can be found in streams in front of and behind the buildings.
	171km	3,935m	A° Quebrada de los Baños. Bad water.
	175km		Sign post to Jagüē 143km
	179km	4,145m	Summit of hill – steepest climb of the route!
	182km	4,055m	Descent to A° Salado. As the name suggests, salty, but we washed up in it.
	186km	4,130m	Refugio on our left at the top of the hill. We did not visit – it is a couple of hundred meters off the road.
	187km	4,085m	Descent to A° El Zanjón – looked salty.
<p>Back to ripio.</p> <p>As you descend, increasing number of animals grazing, but some good camping spots.</p>	195km	4,165m	LIMITE – PASO PIRCAS NEGRAS. Sign post 163km to Jagüē.
	198km	4,020m	Descent followed by a rough, steep and very hard ascent.
	200km		Sign post to Puerto Caldera 255km
	203km	4,240m	Top of climb, then a whizzy caracoles descent. There is a gate on this section of road, which if closed, would be very difficult to get around.
	220km	3,180m	CHILEAN IMMIGRATION opens THURSDAY-SUNDAY. The border closed midday 28 th Feb 2010 for the year. Bottled mineral WATER AVAILABLE.

Ripio. Remains a headwind. Plenty of camping places available.	222km		Sign post 155km to Copiapo followed almost immediately by one saying 187km! Long descent through the deep valley of the Rio Turbio. Colourful canyon, indigenous land, many small camps and animals. The water appeared salty and we were advised not to drink it, but washed up in it.
Hard to spot a place to camp.	260km		Continue on left down to Rio Jorquera through La Guardia (about four houses some selling tea, soft drinks, bread and cigarettes according to their signs). Indigenous lands with arbitrary fencing and sealed ripio road.
Very bleak all the way to Tierra Amarillo. Increasing number of lorries and 4x4 trucks (mining vehicles). Still very windy, we had to pedal nearly the entire descent. Road goes from paved to ripio	279km	2,250	JUNCTION chose between continuing left along Rio Jorquera (longer route, ripio and lots of water tankers) or right, the Questa Los Castaños, sealed ripio, uphill with no visible water until the Copiapo valley. We chose uphill.
	291km	3,115m	Top of saddle.
	303km	2,350m	End of amazing caracoles descent and start of a long downhill through a dry, barren and rather ugly valley. Indigenous lands, some prospectors with wind pump wells, a few fincas and vast areas of fenced land. Lower down the valley, huge mine and massive vineyards. Turn right into the Copiapo Valley with more vineyards and lots of traffic.
	366km		Tierra Amarillo with food, shops and kiosks.
Pavimento.	382km	400m	Copiapo , with all services.