

TOP 5 JOURNEYS

1. Amazon river boat ride from our jungle village to Iquitos, Peru.

Sitting on the top of the boat watching the sun set over the Amazon jungle was a mindblowing experience. The river was as smooth as glass and our boat was cruising at a speed most turtles could outrun. We ate smoked Alligator that was caught fresh earlier that morning and, as the stars began to appear, the sounds of the jungle began to sing in full-swing. The sun reflected off the few clouds present, giving the jungle an orange hue with the Southern Cross as the backdrop. An unforgettable experience - the Alligator I ate thought so too.

2. Horse ride from Vilcabamba up into the Equadorian Andes.

Dressed like John Wayne, I rode through the forest and then high up into the Andes, with my horse balanced on a dirt track no wider than a Sunday Newspaper. Both scary and exhilarating at the same time, we got to the top and drank Vodka & Orange while watching the sun set over the valley before us. Our expat-New Zealand guide got so drunk & stoned that he couldn't cook dinner for us.

3. On top of a train carriage from Vilabamba to Chacapoyas, Peru.

Climbing up onto the carriage instead of into it was a true test of sanity but after seeing the other two hundred gringos balancing on top of the train's carriages, I felt a bit better. I sat on the edge of the second carriage with my legs dangling over the edge and Peruvian children climbing over the top of me with their baskets full of food and beer for sale. The seven hour journey was awesome as we weaved our way through the mountains of Ecuador, ever-mindful that the trains regularly derail and that a derailment would mean certain death.

4. 2am in the back of an open truck towards Huaraz, Peru.

We had completed our six-day trek up into the snow-capped Andes seven hours earlier and were keen to get back to our hotel for a hot shower and a warm bed, all a simple five hour bus ride away. No buses were going our way so we decided to get any old bus as long as it was travelling in the right direction. We got stranded in the middle of nowhere at midnight trying to hitch a ride to Huaraz and stood by the side of the road until 2am, when a pick up truck stopped and offered us a ride in the back. There, six of us froze our nuts off for three hours under our sleeping bags, sitting on the cold steel floor of the truck and breathing in the truck's exhaust fumes throughout the two hour journey. The stars above, however, provided ample distraction. Certainly no Greyhound bus ride but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

5. Day-long mountain bike ride from Banos, Ecuador.

Just one week into my trip, I knew that a day long mountain bike ride

through the Ecuadorian mountains would be a true test of fitness. Screaming downhill on the Pan-American highway at 60km/h was enough to put the fear of God into me but when the road narrowed to barely two metres and bitumen turned to gravel, navigating around oncoming buses and trucks became a matter of self preservation. I lost count at the number of times I hit the brakes a touch too late, sending my back tyre sliding out towards the edge of the road, and the ominous hundred foot drop below. But the scenery...

TOP 5 MEALS

1. Howling monkey and Pirahna in the Amazon Jungle, Peru.

Our tribe's leader walked into our village with a monkey in one hand and a shotgun in the other. His wife threw the hapless primate onto the fire and began scraping it's fur off with a sharp rock. The smell of burning hair! We ate monkey, as well as pirahna caught earlier in the day, for a meal that I will never forget for as long as I roam this Earth. The taste? Strong, tough, stringy, grey meat that I am afraid defies taste. The Pirahna made up for my sudden loss of appetite.

2. Guinea Pig (Cuy), Banos, Ecuador.

I had seen Guinea Pig being eaten while watching an episode of Lonely Planet back home on TV. So, as soon as I arrived in South America, I searched in vain for the elusive little critters. After completing a day trek in the surrounding mountains, my brother and I walked into town and were surprised to see Guinea Pigs roasting on an open fire outside a local 'restaurant'. Served whole, complete with eyes, guts and little feet, we feasted on the chicken-like rodent and took it's head home to our hostel as a souvenir. Lonely planet, indeed.

3. All you can eat buffet at Machpicchu, Peru.

Having completed the Inca Trail and surviving on rice, spaghetti and hot chocolate for four-days, the US\$20 buffet sign on the 5-star hotel was too good to resist. How they even allowed four filthy bums to enter their fine establishment will always remain a mystery, but where the one and a half roasted pigs, two bowls of potato salad, plate of smoked salmon, jug of Machupicchu sauce, bowl of fruit, cheese platter, two bowls of pasta salad and bowl of chocolate mouse went, well, there ain't no mystery there, my friends.

4. Mountain of food on a 10" dinner plate at Vilacubumba, Ecuador.

Eating rice and chicken for two weeks had become a chore so when we sat down outside the rustic, falling-apart building that doubled as a restaurant, we got the surprise of our life when the owner set down on our table a plate of garlic spaghetti, hot chips, steaming broccoli, melted cheese and chillies - all piled so high that the food quivered under it's own weight. And the best part? It cost just US\$2. We ate there for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

5. Fillet Mignon steak in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

With my Spanish phrase book in one hand, and the restaurant menu in the other, I communicated to the eager waiter that I wanted the garlic baby octopus with garlic mushrooms and tomato. The entire process took me well over fifteen minutes with my flicking from page to page in my phrase book and the waiter's repeated "Qey?" and my repeated confirmations. Half an hour later a juicy Mignon steak arrived, resembling little to the baby octopus and mushrooms I had ordered earlier. With the thought of having to go through the entire ordering process again, I decided to eat what has become the best steak ever to pass my lips.

TOP 5 HOTELS

1. Tribal hut, Amazon Jungle, Peru.

Without so much as running water or electricity, we bunked down directly on the wooden floor of our open-ended hut. With mosquitos as large as your fingernails, we spent the night flicking the eager-to-feast mozzies from our mosquito net and trying to identify the sounds of animals that were so close we could smell them. We woke in the morning to find shit next to our nets that we still debate the origin of. After four nights, we craved a proper bed - even a folded potato sack would have been welcome.

2. Delapidated building, Isle De Sol, Lake Titicaca, Bolivia.

Arriving on the famed Isle De Sol, one expected half reasonable accommodation to be on offer. Instead, we were pointed in the direction of the only hotel in town - a building made of mud bricks and the unfortunate recipient of decades of earth tremors. The stairs leading up to the first floor room were made of rotting wood that creaked under the weight of a gringo and his 16kg backpack. The balcony was no better and gave incredible incentive to open the door and get the hell inside before it gave way. The room had plaster missing, exposing the mud bricks underneath. Tiny glimpses of faded wallpaper that was probably pasted on back in the 1800's, gave the impression that this hotel was once the pride of the island. The light cord had long since been torn away so candles were the order of the evening.

3. 'Hotel Paradiso', Vilacabumba, Ecuador.

With the quality of backpacker accommodation throughout South America questionable at best, walking into the jungle-paradise resort before us was like walking from the desert into the Sheraton Mirage. Surrounded by tropical palms and a swimming pool so blue it glistened, I lay in front of the pool swinging in a hammock with a beer in one hand and a Pina Colada in the other. Even my wallet was in paradise - US\$10 a night and a view that would make any Queensland resort owner envious.

4. 'Gavin's House', Ecuadorian Andes, Vilacubumba, Ecuador.

Built by our intrepid Kiwi guide back in 1992, this towering home overlooked

the valley back into Vilacubumba and was surrounded by the Andes and tropical rainforest. After an evening of wine, vodka and a strange green leafy substance that made the stars talk back to you, I slept in a hammock looking up at the stars above. Swaying there on the porch and admiring the odd shooting star made this 'hotel' worthy of my top 5. I also learned by early morning that you cannot successfully sleep in a hammock. Even after drinking a bottle of Vodka.

5. Mud brick shack, Antiplano plains, Bolivia.

Although considered paradise after sleeping on a hard wooden floor for a week back in the jungle, the beds in our desert, lake-side shack made this place special. Our English friend, Scot, had his steel frame bed collapse from under him as soon as he climbed onto it; my bed's mattress sagged all the way onto the ground and the two bunk beds in the room? Well, no one was game enough to look at them let alone climb up into them. The broken glass in the windows made the minus-fifteen degree evening all that much more exciting and the liquid on the floor of the share-bathroom made Michael Jackson's moonwalk dance look chickenshit. I'm just glad I didn't fall over and into it...

TOP 5 LOCATIONS

1. Antiplano plains, Bolivia

Seated comfortably in the back of our 4WD and armed with a bottle of Rum, we traversed the most incredible terrain I have ever seen. Salt plains and an 'island' of cactus tall enough to live in were day one. Towering rock formations that defy gravity, snow capped mountains in the middle of the desert and a lake that glows red on day two. Craters filled with hot bubbling mud, a lake of hot boiling water and towering, dormant volcanos on day three. I rattled off six rolls of 36 film during those three days. Come in, Kodak!

2. Machupiccu, Peru.

The Inca Trail took us over the Andes and down through spectacular rain forest but the morning we trekked over the final pass and down upon Machu was unforgettable. Whisps of cloud gently floated over the ancient metropolis and Kodak once again won the day. Exploring the ancient Inca ruins was a top experience...the silence around me at times was deafening and the serenity of the complex that is Machupiccu completes the Inca experience. A sight as mindblowing as the Pyramids at Giza, Egypt.

3. Amazon Jungle, Iquitos, Peru.

Sitting in a hand-carved wooden canoe and paddling through the towering forest was almost surreal. Brightly coloured moss adorned the trees around us and plants that I couldn't even begin to identify were draped overhead. The bird life was equally stunning as were the Piranha we caught for lunch and the Aligator we caught for breakfast. Living with a tribe for a few days

was something I had always fantasised about. Eating monkey wasn't.

4. Twin-lakes and Glacier, Huaraz, Peru.

Trekking up to 4,200 metres in the Andes was half the fun but walking into a valley with icy-smooth red-coloured cliffs on one side and blue snow-covered peaks on the other was almost biblical. Before us was a glacier sitting directly in front of a turquoise lake and draped over spectacular mountains covered in ice and snow. The sight before us was a reward for all the trekking over the previous three days (plus countless blisters). We sat before the glacier for four hours watching countless avalanches and smoking an unusual green, leafy substance found days earlier. Wow, man! Look at all the ice!

5. Amazon River, Iquitos, Peru.

We were led down into the river-front port by our two young guides and were confronted by hundreds of floating shoeboxes that looked too flimsy to even sit on dry land let alone take us for our 8-hour journey down The Amazon. The sight, however, of locals and remote villagers carrying supplies along rickety wooden planks made this place a must-see for any Western traveller. Simply boarding the boat was half the fun...the ride down the Amazon was another story altogether.

TOP 5 BIG NIGHTS OUT

1. Hard Rock Bar, Banos, Ecuador.

My third night into my trip was with our Mt Druit Aussie companion, Slammer. Slammer is a big boy who looks meaner than a pissed-off Rotweiler, so drinking with the big fella' was always going to be a memorable experience. After drinking US\$1 long neck beers all night, we both switched to Rum and Cokes. By 3am the bar had run out of Rum AND beer and that made Slammer a very aggitated boy. The poor bar owner had to pacify him by offering free Shots...four shots later Slammer and I dragged each other back to our Hostel where we slept on the floor, too pissed to climb into bed.

2. Fifteen-Hour binge, The Iron House, Iquitos, Peru.

Slammer and I got quite thirsty in the humid rainforest heat so sat ourselves down at a bar in an iron building at 11am for an icy cold beer or two. By 10 o'clock that evening we were serving our own beers, together with a Rambo-like American Marine sitting at the bar with us. The next morning we woke to discover that we hadn't paid our bar tab, so we crawled back to the pub to take care of business. The Pommie owner explained we were too polaxed to pay the bill the previous night -we had drunk A\$150 worth of grog, roughly 40 beers each. We were even more shitty when told that we fell short of the drinking record at the Iron House by just 2-hours - a French woman broke that a year earlier. We did get our photo up on the wall for our effort, though.

3. Sleazy bar, Chacapoyas, Peru.

Scott and I walked into this bar playing Aerosmith music videos on a giant screen, but it was more the barmaid than the music videos, that motivated Scott to spend an entire evening at this fine establishment. After drinking jugs of beer for most of the night, Scott hopped behind the bar and began mixing cocktails for all the staff. Getting it on big-time with the barmaid, Scott sent me home at 3:30am so that I 'wouldn't get in the way'. I stumbled down the road to a chicken restaurant and was then befriended by a table of old Peruvians who finished my night off by 'finishing me off'. I woke in the morning on my bed but there was no Scott in the room...where was Scott? By 11am I began to get worried. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and there stood Scott, hungover and half naked by the doorway, having spent the night in the next room with the aforementioned barmaid. What Scott left all over the bedside table and the wall cannot be mentioned here except to say that he 'couldn't remember eating that'...

4. Some shitty bar, Central Lima, Peru.

When we collected the two girls my brother and Scot had met the night before, I thought that a nice day at the museum would follow. Instead we spent the afternoon sitting hidden away at a down-town restaurant in Lima, smoking Pot and drinking beer until we all began speaking fluent Zwaheeli. We danced on the tables, swung from the chandeliers and, well, misbehaved ourselves as best we could. I woke up the next morning some 8 hours and 500kms north of Lima with a gigantic hangover and the shock announcement that we were embarking on a six day trek the following day high up into the Andes. The last thing I remember from that previous night was crawling into the taxi back in Central Lima at 10pm the night before..."Eight hour bus ride? What eight hour bus ride!".

5. Irish Pub, Santiago, Chile.

With my Brother and his Sydney girlfriend in tow, we headed off to the other side of Santiago to have a Guinness or two at an Irish pub. After a few happy hour warm-up beers, my Brother left the pub to enjoy a romantic dinner for two with his girlfriend. I decided to remain and was instantly befriended by two English guys drinking at the next table. Five minutes before happy hour finished, we all ordered three jugs of Heinekin EACH to save a dollar or two. The night quickly descended into a haze of blurred vision and, around midnight, I recall being carried by the two Pommies to a waiting taxi. The taxi driver was then given clear instructions of where to take me (I couldn't pronounce the word 'taxi', let alone speak my own name). With my pocket full of cash from a not-so-clever mass-cash withdrawal earlier in the day, the taxi driver dropped me off way short of my hotel. The taxi driver also received a nice bundle of cash as payment...my counting and communication skills were somewhat diminished. I was then forced to walk (crawl, stumble, dribble) for over an hour through the deserted streets of downtown Santiago with little idea of where (or who) I was, or where I was going. Through only the miracle of God, I stumbled into my hotel where my Brother was fast asleep with his Girlfriend and announced in indecipherable

English what I had just achieved. The following hour was spent attempting to get into my bed, but unfortunately gravity was not my friend that evening...nor was the bedside table that I fell into, splitting open my forehead and creating a painful lump and scar that still persists. My Brother is now under explicit instruction never to leave me alone in a pub with two strangers or a ludicrous sum of cash.

And finally...

TOP 5 THINGS THAT I WILL MISS THE MOST

1. The most beautiful and most hospitable girls in the entire world, from Buenos Aires.
2. Thirteen-hour late night bus rides from hell through un-navigatable fog and dangerous, winding mountain roads.
3. Street food-stalls that made me sick, on and off, for two months.
4. Communication barriers that allowed me to speak just a few phrases in perfect Spanish such as, "Good evening Senior, I would like one beer please". Oh yeah, and my other favourite, "Goodbye".
5. Being able to wear the same underwear and clothing for days on end until they develop their own personalities and genetic make-up.

And so endeth' the story and my journey through South America...

I'll finish absolutely by sharing a brief story that was way at the top of my 'Top Five' list but warranted special mention at this point.

And it goes something like this...

Staying at the 'Paradiso Hilton' (as I dubbed it after our arrival), I decided that it would be a great idea to get in touch with our 'feminine' sides by having a facial, massage, Jacuzzi and finally, mud bath. After completing our facials (LB ate his directly from his face), we were lead into a special room by an attractive Ecuadorian woman, and told to undress in front of the giant mirror. LB and I turned away from the woman and, standing there naked in front of the mirror, then had our out-of-reach backs coated with hot mud. The woman then left the room, allowing us to apply the rest of the mud. What happened then over the next fifteen minutes was one of the funniest moments I've ever shared with someone. LB coated his teeth and tongue with the mud; I formed a Mohawk and created devil horns with my hair. When the woman walked back into the room, a look of sheer horror came over her face - I looked like the Devil incarnate and Scott looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger from the movie, Predator. Definitely what I would describe as a 'Kodak Moment'.