

Ocean to Ocean [O2O] - The Pacific to the Atlantic bike ride.

November – December 2022

Riders: Simon and Ben (Esher RFC), Charlie (Guy's Hospital RFC)

Support Driver: Neil (Esher RFC)

In country support: Edu, Luciano and Otto (La Plata RFC)

A slightly crazy venture across South America by bicycle

Vital Spanish vocabulary for such an expedition:

Asado, Quilmes, Malbec, Empanadas, Banos

22 Nov Simon and Ben fly to Buenos Aires (BA), Argentina pick up the van and drive for 18 hours to Santiago, Chile

25 Nov Charlie and Neil reach Chile. All drive from Santiago to Vina del Mar

26 Nov is Day 1

Amended route: 956 miles, 21 000 ft ascent to reach the Atlantic in 13 days

Day 1 – Vina del Mar to Los Andes: 85 miles 4475 ft ascent

Day 2 – Los Andes to Uspallata: 99 miles 9800 ft ascent

Day 3 – Uspallata to Las Catitas: 113 miles 1875 ft ascent

Day 4 – Las Catitas to San Luis: 123 miles 1325 ft ascent

Day 5 – San Luis to Villa Mercedes: 72 miles 175 ft ascent Reroute, Drive to Vicuna MacKenna, 1 Dec

Day 6 - Rest Day Vic Mac

Day 7- Drive to Villa Maria (5 hrs) then: Villa Maria to Marco Juarez: 71 miles 275 ft ascent

Day 8 – Marco Juarez to Rosario: 93 miles 775 ft ascent

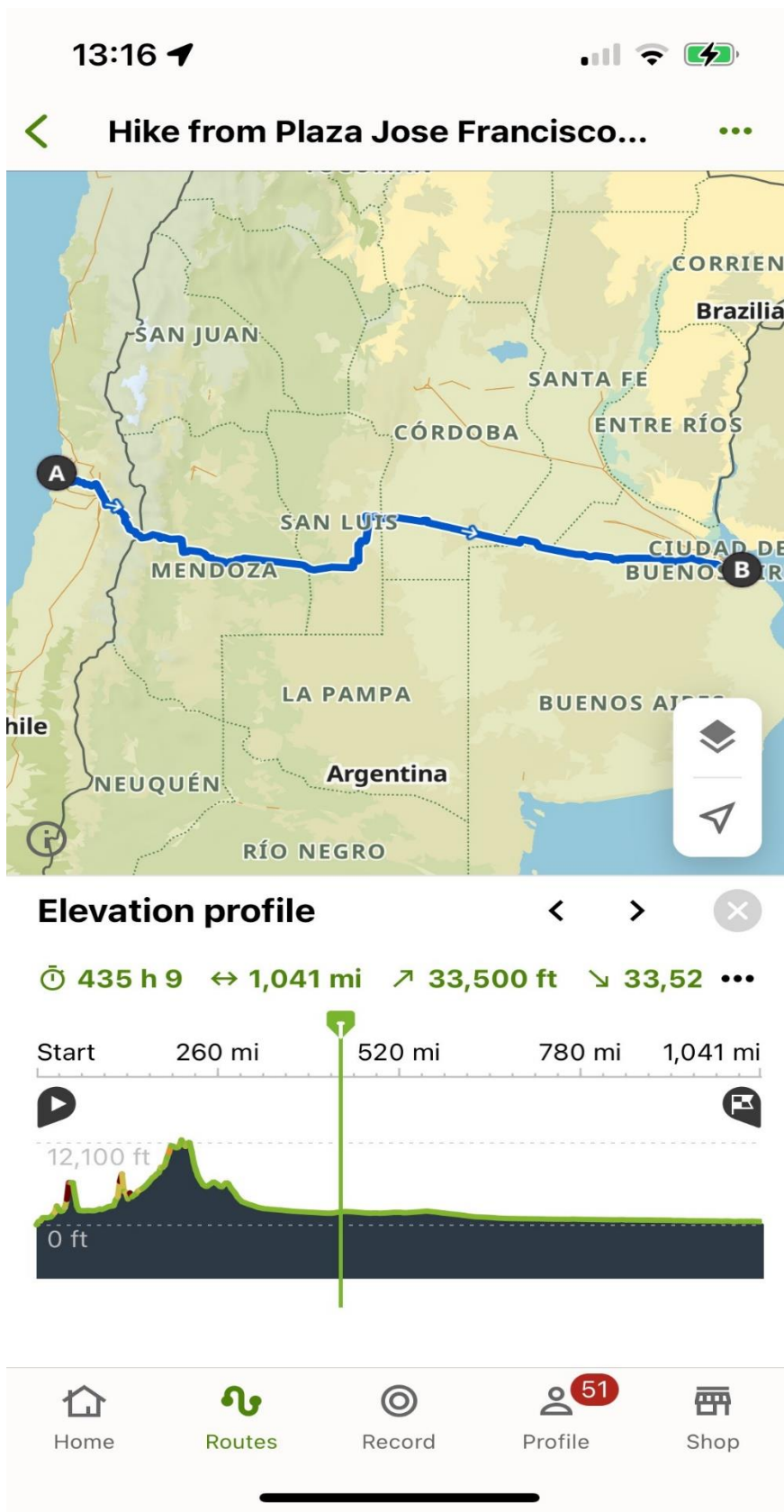
Day 9 – Rosario to Gobernador Castro: 79 miles 500 ft ascent

Day 10 – Gobernador Castro to Zapate: 92 miles 1300 ft ascent

Day 11 – Zapate to Lujan: 39 miles 450 ft ascent

Day 12 – Lujan to La Plata: 80 miles 1100 ft ascent (40 miles lost to heat abandonment as unacceptable risk to continue)

Day 13 – La Plata to Punta Lara: 10 miles 125 ft ascent



An approximation of the route cycled

So here we were, in Vina del Mar, Chile, about 70 miles northwest of Santiago. Having arrived in the country via several different routes we had been very kindly hosted by Otto, who had afforded us the use of his house in Santiago to assemble our bikes and then refreshed us after the long journey.



Otto, Ben, Simon and Charlie carbloading

We had then driven the last few miles down to the coast. After two years of planning, our jaunt through South America to link the Pacific to the Atlantic had started fairly inauspiciously with Ben (always name the guilty being the Esher philosophy) pranging the bus on the first afternoon as we tried to park up. Neil ‘Dogend’ Harper, Ben Robinson, Charlie Beardmore and myself, Simon Catnach were gathered in celebration of our 60th birthdays, recent and pending, and in addition to doing the O2O we were hoping to raise funds for the youth rugby sections of Esher and La Plata rugby clubs. We have had a growing affinity with La Plata RFC since they welcomed us so warmly to S. America some 11 years ago when Neil and I turned up in Uruguay looking for a game in their Veteranos competition. It’s a friendship which we value very highly and without whose input this ride probably wouldn’t have happened. So thank you Edu, Lu and the rest of the crew.

After dinner, at an exceptional Ecuadorean fish restaurant, and moderate alcohol we retired to the interestingly titled Lhotse Hostel (which is over 17 000 km away from the mountain of the same name) in anticipation of the early start at 6am. In true military fashion Charlie was up by 5-15, dressed and bike checked whilst the rest of us adopted the more relaxed civilian option of about 6-30. Bearing in mind that the world snoring championships had taken place in that shared room that still left us rather short of sleep.

We were very lucky to have Neil on the trip. He had bought a new bike specifically for this venture but on cycling home the eight miles from the bike shop he had rung the retired front row union help line and told them of the torture he had endured. They advised him that it would be far more dignified if he were to use his skills as the tour driver and thus a huge logistical problem was solved.



Charlie, Simon and Ben at the Pacific shoreline in Vina del Mar

We set off into the local sea mist and that introduced us to the next issue. Neil was driving on the right hand side of the road in a left hand drive vehicle and without a right eye. He struggled manfully and after grazing the large

wing mirrors of the motor home against our heads on three occasions he seemed to get his bearings. The first day involved a steady away climb of 85 miles into the Andean foothills to a town called Los Andes. It was a bit of a worry when Ben complained of a sore backside after 12 miles, but this seemed to settle down. An early night again and a certain amount of dread of the next day; the big one was certainly playing on my mind.

On the road nice and early we headed into the Andes proper. The climb was steady and fairly manageable and then we came to 'The Snake'. This is a series of 31 hairpin bends starting at about 7,000 ft and finishing at about 8,500 ft. Shortly after this the road becomes a series of tunnels which are illegal (and insane) to cycle in. On the way through the bends I was approached by a rather dubious, grizzly looking biker who was shouting at me. I responded as I only could by shouting back 'Inglesi' and was duly, and to my relief, high-fived as I passed him. As Charlie came past a short distance later I heard the same chap high five him too shouting 'hey loco Inglesi' and all was well. The site of all the hairpins of The Snake behind us was quite amazing.



Charlie grinding up The Snake very slowly in Granny gear



Refreshments, with Neil, in the shadow of Cerro de Las Vacas (13 893 ft)

We emerged on the Argentine side of the border at about 10,000 feet and enjoyed a coffee surveying our world. Somewhere near the top of the Andes in the Uspallata pass you cross the border from Chile back into Argentina, however somehow we managed to completely miss all immigration and customs. Charlie was the only one of us not to have travelled via Argentina and this left a hole in his passport details which rather came back to haunt him when he tried to pass through BA airport on the way home. Added to this, Charlie's ability to devour a 14 man buffet in minutes caused Neil to coin the

phrase, Albanian locust which seemed to stick. The top of the Uspallata pass had the most magnificent views I've ever seen. Unlike the UK where you tend to go up and then come down we were to stay at altitude for the next 60-70 miles. We were even privileged enough to see a Condor soaring above us. The weather was cool but bright and the topography undulating.

About twenty miles from our destination of the town of Uspallata. Ben and Neil decided to head to the town and get our bearings for the evening. As the weather was good, we offloaded all surplus clothing such as waterproofs. No sooner had the van disappeared around a bend then the weather closed in. Lightning and thunder, cold heavy rain and a nasty head wind replaced the Chilean sunshine, and we were utterly exhausted on arrival in Uspallata. Dinner was a quick affair and asleep by about 8pm. The day had seen us ride 99.4 miles and take in 9,800 feet of climb.

The following morning Uspallata in daylight was breathtaking. Still about 6,000ft up the air was so clean and nestling in the middle of the Andes the panoramic views were stunning. We set off into The Argentine interior for a very long day covering 113 miles. A long-undulating route following the Mendoza river down onto the desert plain. We stopped at a cafe on the outskirts of Mendoza where the owner had made safe an open drain with a piece of thin cardboard which Charlie quickly tested beyond destruction. Joking apart, the cuts he received were very close to very serious and could easily have finished his trip and it served as a clear sign of the state of health and safety in this part of the world.

We stayed that night in a small town called Las Catitas and it too was an eye opener. We had a whole house to ourselves for a price significantly less than you would get a single room in a travel lodge, and the most amazing steak meal including wine for the cost of a MacDonalds

The following morning brought into focus our next challenge. The road at Las Catitas ceased to be tarmac and became a stony surface totally unpassable for road bikes such as ours. An attempted detour again brought us to the end of tarmac and confronted us with a raging river.... And I do mean raging. The software we were using was Komoot and this system relies on previous travellers to load their routes for the future reference of others. We surmised that the contributor must have been a mountain biker travelling in the dry season!! Plan B was the motorway. It is legal to cycle on motorways in this part of the world so off we went. Legal and welcome are two very different things. It is clear that our Highway Code has yet to be translated into Spanish.



Las Catitas Hospitality

HGVs hurtling past at 60mph making no allowance for cyclists is a sobering experience. We retired to the hard shoulder, which seemed to work.



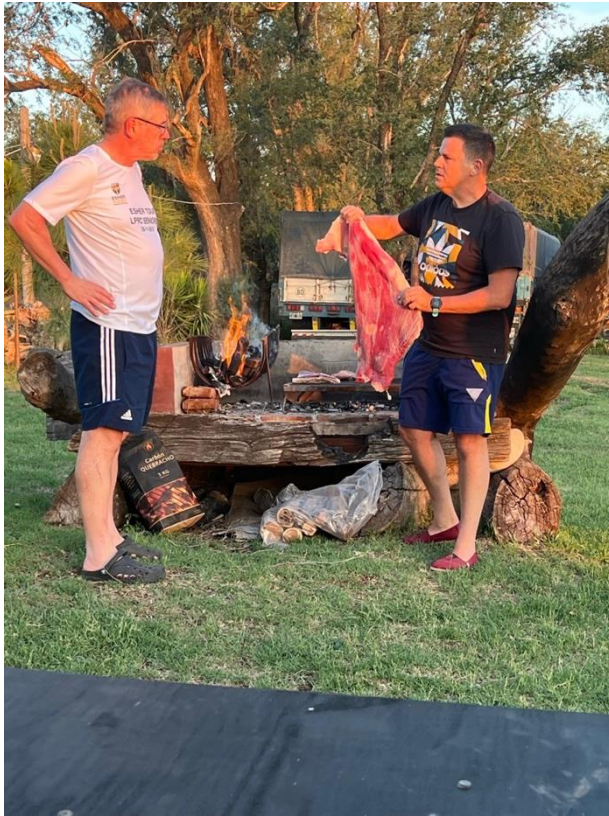
Before seeking safety of the hard shoulder – HGV inbound

The police soon got involved and were rather perplexed at what we were doing. Ben was told that he would have to stop but when he explained that we were raising funds for young Argentine rugby players they apparently amended the legislation allowing him to continue and telling him just to be careful.

We settled into a few days of cycling a fairly flat terrain. It was much hotter than anticipated, one day hitting 44c and generally peaking above 38c most days. I didn't think I could drink that much water but we were stopping at least once an hour for hydration and sun cream. We were so concerned about the effects of the sun that particularly in the afternoons we adopted the 'Beau Geste' wet tea towel covering the neck approach. It seemed to work and we had no real ill effects.



Simon demonstrating the Beau Geste look



Luciano (Lu) and Edu joined us at Vicuña Mackenna and we rented a shack by the side of a lake for two nights. They decided that we should enjoy a traditional *Asado* (BBQ) and what a night that was. Not a place for a vegetarian but if you like your beef and lamb the reputation of Argentina is indeed well deserved. I believe we were actually drinking beer cheaper than water. At 50p a pint it was marvellous and we even found a brewery that did bitters and pale ales – and cider for Neil. Good wines were no more than £1 a bottle

Lu wrestling with several kilos of beef

The new problem from here was that the province we were now in had no hard shoulders on the motorways. It was quite scary and after Ben had used a cactus to break his fall after getting caught in the draft back of an HGV and Charlie and I had both had a couple of near misses we decided we needed a plan C. Following research (thanks, Lu and Edu) we established that a parallel motorway two hundred miles to the north had hard shoulders all the way to Buenos Aires so it was a question of rebooking all the hotels and to bed early for a 3am start.



Hard at work researching Plan C

Following a five hour bus ride north The new route worked well and we enjoyed more good riding. There was obviously a mini heat wave and we were trying to get the miles in each day before mid afternoon, when it was hottest. We dealt with this by starting in darkness each morning. The only fail on this was when we got to the bar / restaurant in Marco Juarez early on 4th December to watch the England game in the World Cup. All was going well, a few beers, a meal and a game of footie with bed by 9-30. What could go wrong?..... well an Argentinian rugby team turning up and wanting to exchange rugby stories could go wrong, and did. One of the team was a retired Colonel in the Argentine army. We discussed all matters rugby.



A quiet evening in Marco Juarez

The 93 mile ride into Rosario was pretty straightforward. The prevailing winds were supposed to be largely behind us but along with the heatwave there was a persistent moderate headwind and a slow but gentle ascent most days. Rosario is a large city on the Parana river so for a change we decided on a fish supper. Unfortunately we found a bar selling great beer and the most delicious Empanadas (*derived originally from Cornish pasties brought to Latin America by Cornish tin miners who were employed to mine silver, perhaps in April 1825 aboard the Cyrus under command Grosvenor Bunter, - great tasting*) and never even made the riverside.

We eventually got back into La Plata and made it to the Atlantic coast at Punta Lara - Ensenada. There followed three days of chilling and socialising, with fabulous hospitality as always from Lu and Edu with their families as well as the Veteranos of La Plata rugby club.

The football world cup was on and we were there as Argentina won their quarter final. We were lucky enough to meet Ursus, The Bear, probably Argentina's biggest fan. Charlie seems to have adopted the bear and now they regularly discuss philosophical and ecumenical matters



With the Veteranos of La Plata RFC



Ursus, a very wise bear indeed

A fantastic trip with nothing more serious than a few punctures to contend with mechanically. It wasn't just the ride though, it was the experience of seeing the country in such an intimate way and the friendliness we encountered from all we met.



Charlie, Ben and Simon at the Atlantic shoreline in Punta Lara

If I was going to say I'd learned a few things on this trip it would be as follows:

1. Komoot is good but needs to be corroborated especially in less travelled areas
2. There is no phrase in South American Spanish which means 'health and safety'
3. You will be lucky to ever find a more welcoming country than Argentina
4. No battle plan survives contact with the enemy
5. You can't do these trips without your support people so once again many, many thanks to Neil who despite his idiosyncrasies, was absolutely invaluable

Simon Catnach