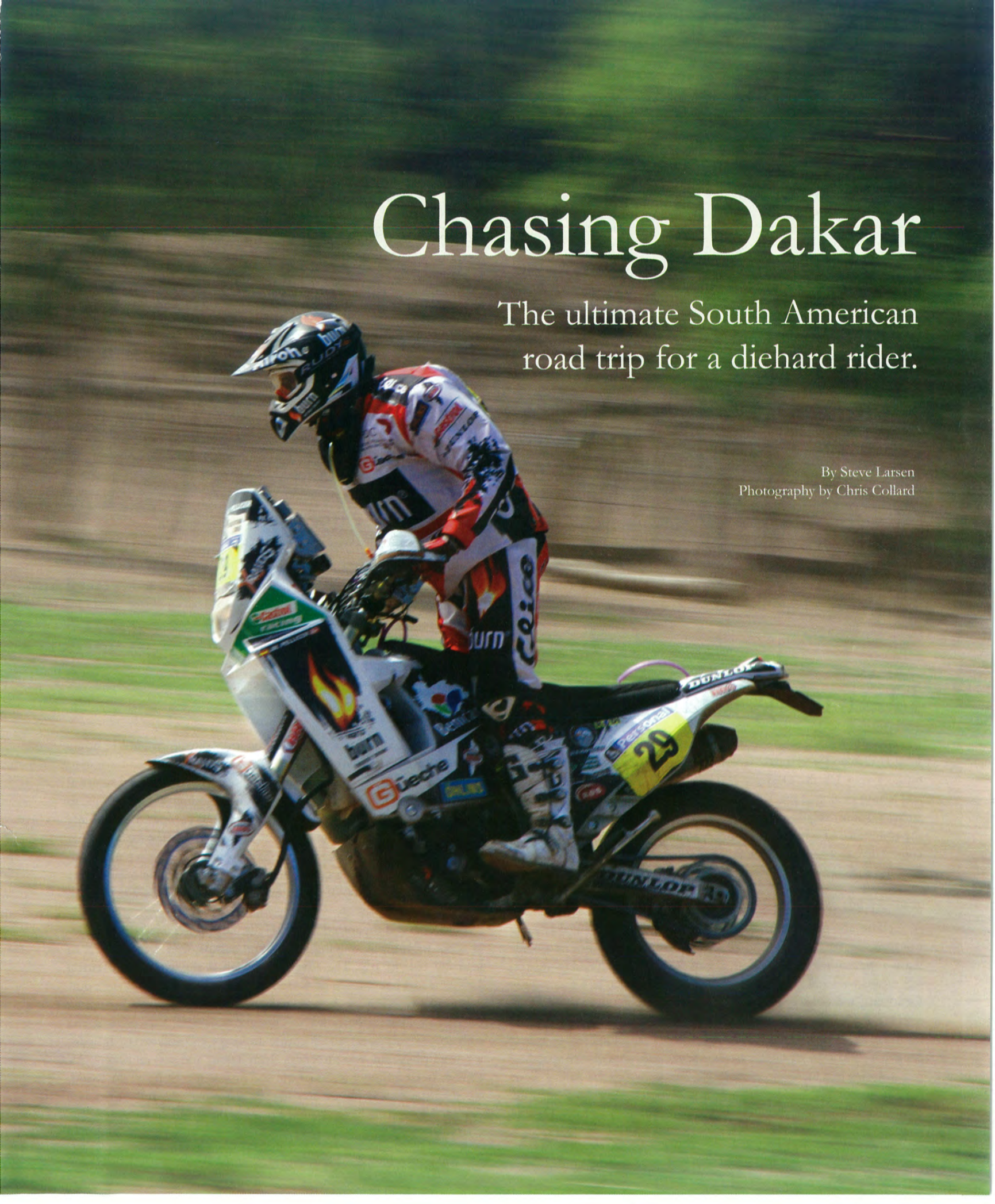
Chasing Dakar

The ultimate South American road trip for a diehard rider.

By Steve Larsen
Photography by Chris Collard



Daunting. Dangerous. Divine.

The Dakar Rally is to dirt riders what The Vatican is to Catholics, what Hollywood is to movie fans, or the Grand Ole Opry is to country music lovers. It's the Daytona 500 superimposed on the World Cup, and lasting as long as the Tour de France. To reach any respectable finishing position requires the physical conditioning of a triathlete and the endurance of a marathon runner; assuming said athletes could run consecutive races—thirteen to be precise—at up to 4,572 meters elevation and with only a single rest day. Insert a dual-sport motorcycle into the equation, and you will need to add superb navigational prowess and technical riding skills to your repertoire. Enter the Dakar Rally.

Talk to any off-pavement rider long enough, and the Dakar Rally will come up. We all seem to share the dream of participating or attending as a spectator. For most of us, due to the aforementioned requisites, this means we watch. Lest you think *watching* the Dakar as a spectator is for wimps, and a *real* rider would compete, allow me to enlighten you: tracking this cross-continent, multi-country route on a motorcycle is far from child's play. It requires an average of 560 kilometers of riding per day, a good amount on dirt roads, occasionally shared with speeding race vehicles just inches from your elbows. Crossing the Andes from Argentina to Chile (twice) includes 4,750 meter passes and sections so obscured with dust you'd think you were riding in a North Dakota snowstorm. Lastly, you don't receive the route directions until 12 hours prior to the next day's stage.

The Dakar is the ultimate test for professional drivers and riders at the top of their game and in peak physical condition. Yet it is unique in that the rally is open for amateurs (privateers) to compete on the same level, on the same course, and with the same rules as the pros. I felt that my moto-journalism riding experience was insufficient preparation to ride the Dakar Rally as a competitor. However, when the opportunity surfaced to join a group of adventure riders in chasing the 2011 Dakar, it was not one to pass up.

Our trip was organized by RawHyde Adventures, specialists in dual-sport motorcycle training classes and camps; they were perfect to lead this sort of trip. The adventure began at the luxurious Estancia La Paz resort just outside of Cordoba, Argentina, where we were outfitted with rental bikes. A meet-and-greet dinner united the group: an ex-Israeli military officer and his Olympic skier wife, a sea captain (the only solo female rider), an adventure-seeking CEO and two of his pals, a retired physician, two attorneys from Texas, and several others. Although from different walks of life and different regions of the world, we shared a very common thread—to test ourselves, and experience one of the most challenging motor races in the world.

The bikes were an array of rented late-model BMWs (1200, 800, and 650GSs), with the exception of a few that were shipped in from the States. We would ultimately find that the 1200GSs held up very well, the 650GS twins and 800GSs less so. Nearly one-third of our group, all experienced off-pavement adventure riders, would not complete the trip, due to equipment failure or the lack of physical stamina.

I acclimated myself to my new ride, a 2010 1200GS, and customized it with handlebar risers and a mount for my GPS. While most of us were too nervous to notice, Estancia La Paz is a sublime resort situated on spacious grounds, offering terrific food, and a staff committed to pampering its guests. It belied the torture and stress we would be putting our bodies through over the next two weeks.

First Taste of the Race

The race charged at us from its podium starting point in Buenos Aires. At a checkpoint en route to Tucumán, we got our first glimpse of the competitors. Unlike other races, there are no barriers to protect spectators from the cars, motorcycles, and massive T4 trucks that come careening in; only a slim yellow ribbon cordons off the actual check-in areas. The cars arrive first, slide to a stop, have their tickets punched, and take off—tires spinning and spraying gravel over the crowd. A helicopter made a low pass as it chased the lead vehicles into the next stage. Next were the motorcycles and ATV quads, and finally the T4s—monstrous Russian-built, diesel-powered 4WD KAMAZ trucks that crank out 1,000 horsepower and weigh almost five tons.

The ride to Tucumán was just over 547 kilometers, and temperatures hovered in the mid-to-high 90s. With eleven hours of seat time, the extra water we'd been encouraged to bring came in *very* handy. We pulled into our hotel, exhausted, exhilarated, and happy to be finally underway. As we began to nod off during a post-dinner briefing on the next day's plan, we were apprised that it would be nearly 800 kilometers, with over 160 kilometers on dirt; the day after would be even more grueling. I drifted off thinking about the Andean passes we'd be crossing. To endure the full fourteen days, I'd need to take it one day at a time.

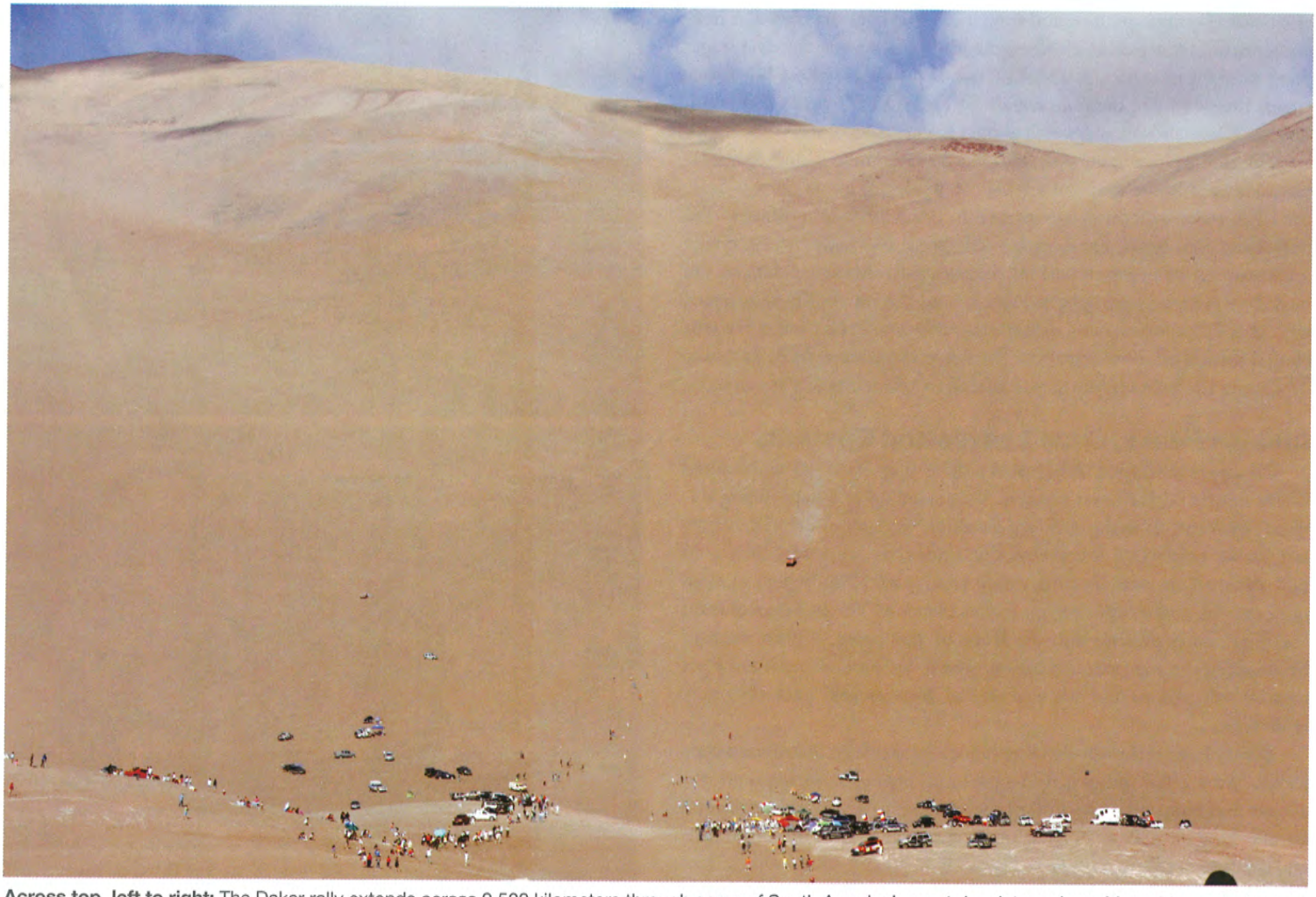
Andean Peaks, Coco Leaves and Customs

Choppers awakened us before 6 a.m. as they lifted off and trained their cameras on the front-runners. We gassed up at a *handy* filling station (72 kilometers in the opposite direction) and got under way. A mile out, as we began our assent into the Andes, we were met by a cold rain. Most of us were wearing riding suits from Klim, which worked perfectly the entire trip—except in this instance. The jackets funneled the frigid water directly into the front of our pants. Within minutes of reaching the top (the rain had stopped), we parked our bikes on a massive salt plateau and stripped down. Note to self: pack only new underwear.

Before leaving the salt flat, RawHyde's local guides distributed coca leaves. We stuffed the dry, foul–tasting greenish leaves between our cheeks and gums like a wad of chewing tobacco and slowly absorbed the resulting juice. Popular with locals, coca leaves are a mild stimulant and reputed to relieve altitude sickness.

Crossing the Argentina/Chile border stretched into a four-hour ordeal. We were missing registration paperwork on several bikes and the Chilean and Argentinian authorities did not appear to like each other (Chile didn't support Argentina during the Falkland Island skirmish with Britain, and the Argentinians are still miffed). Suffering from language limitations, we had difficulty navigating the process as officials

With media choppers in hot (and low) pursuit, the VW Red Bull team dominated the T2 four-wheeled vehicle class. Weighing in at more than 4,500 kilograms and shaking the earth as they pass, the 1,000 horsepower 4WD KAMAZ trucks, or T4 class, are no less than impressive. **Opposite:** Though the Dakar Rally has only been in South America for three years, locals have embraced the event and come out in the millions to cheer on competitors. **Opening page:** Though 14 days in duration, the 9,500 kilometers of Dakar flash by like a blurry dream.



Across top, left to right: The Dakar rally extends across 9,500 kilometers through some of South America's most desolate regions. Moto riders, which share much of the course with the 4WDs and T4 KAMAZ trucks, must carry enough fuel, water, and emergency tools for special stages of up to 400 kilometers. Mano de Desierto, or Hand of the Desert, is the work of artist Mario Irarrazabal. Standing 9 meters high it sits alone in the arid Atacama. American favorite Jonah Street piloted his specially prepared Yamaha YZ450 to a 14th place finish. Chasing the Dakar on a dual-sport requires sharing hundreds of miles of chokingly dusty roads with hundreds of other support and media teams. Photo by Steve Larsen. **Bottom:** The final three kilometers of the Atacama Desert, which ends in Iquique, Chile, is a precipitous 1,000-meter descent down a wall of sand.

We next encountered the motorcycle of one of our group who had ventured ahead of us alone: he was nowhere to be found. We reached the hotel and submitted a missing persons report.

pointed fingers and passed blame. The delay devoured precious daylight and it was nearly dark by the time we were through.

As the sun disappeared, temperatures dropped like a brick from a cliff. The wind whipped up with ferocity, and it became a struggle to push the bikes through the inky Andean blackness. We spent the next four hours scratching our way to the hotel in Calama. Two people came off their bikes, but survived. At a stop, the wind blew another bike over. Exhausted, frustrated, and angry at the decision to stop, the rider refused to go on; her bike was loaded onto the support truck. We next encountered the motorcycle of one of our group who had ventured ahead of us alone: he was nowhere to be found. We reached the hotel and submitted a missing persons report. My GPS had recorded its highest elevation, 4,800 meters. Tomorrow we would cross the Atacama Desert, the driest place on earth.

Parched Earth

The group headed out at first light, while I hung back to tour this desperately dry city; I would cross the southern tip of the Atacama alone. Calama averages just 5 millimeters of precipitation annually; the Atacama, no rainfall in all recorded history—none. There are no plants, no animals, and no insects; not even flies. According to Dr. Tibor Dunai from Edinburgh University, Scotland, the hyper-arid conditions date back 20 million years. The Atacama is the only place on Earth where lab-analyzed soil samples have resulted in a complete lack of life form. I rode through the arid desolation for several hours, marveling at my own audacity in taking this leg solo. The great sand sea finally ends at the Pacific Ocean, where it slowly spills into the water as it has for millennia.

In Iquique we were reunited with our missing rider. It turned out that after several hours in the frigid wind and a series of increasingly close calls, he pulled over and waved down the first motor coach that came by, who dropped him at the nearest hotel. He was relegated to the chase wagon for the remainder of the trip.

A Dakar highlight is watching competitors finish the stage in Iquique. From the edge of the Atacama, they drop straight down the face of a 1,000-meter high sand dune: one of the highest in the world. From our vantage point near the nightly bivouac, it appeared nearly vertical. Due to the nature of sand and the steepness of the slope, racers have little choice but to stay on the power and head straight down. For spectators, it is one of the most eye-popping sporting events ever. Hundreds of high-performance vehicles, charging at full throttle, barrel straight down a hill of fine, deep sand with no way to stop or steer.

We took the opportunity in Iquique to take a much needed rest day, letting the race proceed to Arica.

A Desert Checkpoint

Rested and with Iquique behind us, our goal was to reach the next checkpoint before the racers. It sat in the center of a vast sand table that stretched to the horizon in every direction. This stop was extremely remote and had only a handful of spectators. It was also a fuel top-up for the motos, and a mandatory 15-minute waiting period. Imagine walking along the bench at a Super Bowl game, chatting casually with the players. We were able to converse with Simon Pavey (on one of the few BMWs), Marc Coma (who would go on to win the rally on his KTM) and Cyril Despres of France (who would take second). This is what it is like to chase the Dakar.

The next morning we made a leisurely start south, taking time to stop at the "Hand of the Desert." Chilean artist Mario Iarrázabal created the sculpture, which rises over 9 meters from the desert floor; it is said to emphasize human vulnerability and helplessness.

We spent the rest of the day on good pavement, fighting only the interminable Chilean winds. Riding in windy conditions, even at a brisk 80 kph, can be managed. However, when the wind gathers up sand from the desert, it changes from a hearty breeze to a sandblaster—not much fun. We take it with few complaints, though, because our attention is

The bivouac, which moves each day during the 14-day rally, is a mobile city of nearly 2,500 souls. It is entirely fenced in and includes a commercial kitchen and dining area for 500, hospital, and media center. Eighteen hours after this photo was taken, the area was no more than barren desert. **Across bottom, left to right:** Late night food service in the dining area. GPS units are prohibited at Dakar. Instead, teams receive a tulip-chart route book for each days stage. Moto riders, because their hands must stay on the grips, receive a 30-foot scroll that they feed onto a hand-operated drum. Though the Dakar has been extremely popular with Europeans since its inception, the last decade has attracted high-profile U.S. teams like Speed Energy's Robby Gordon. Each night Gordon's team would pull into the bivouac and unveil an entire machine shop. Lined up like gladiators ready for battle, 4,500 kilogram, 1,000 horsepower KAMAZ race and support trucks await their early-morning start.

focused on tonight when we'll get to experience the bivouac before heading to our lodging in Copiapo.

Hi-Tech Nomads

The bivouac is a 2,500-person roaming city, and is the epicenter from which all things Dakar emanate. It moves each day and is every rider's nightly destination. It consists of compact pit areas where support trucks, tents, cots, welders, motos, and sleeping pads occupy every square foot. There is a dining area that serves thousands each day, a tent hospital with a full operating room, and a television production facility.

Professional riders/drivers (with big sponsors) have support teams that tear down and rebuild the vehicles or bikes while they sleep. Independent drivers, or privateers, make their own repairs, and manage on just 3-4 hours of rest. Over the course of the race, this takes a toll and contributes to the immeasurable fatigue riders experience in later stages. We bring food to Simon Pavey, a 43-year-old Australian who trained Charley Boorman and Ewan McGregor for their famous adventures. He ate while he serviced his BMW G450X for the next stage.

Privateers, like Pavey, pay about $25,000 for their entry fee, which includes transport of two spare wheels and one footlocker-sized trunk (containing tools, parts, tent, and a sleeping bag) between bivouacs each day. Michelin sets up an area where they change tires for free. Another vendor provides free fabrication of parts. Food, medical assistance, and insurance are also included, as is the GPS tracking equipment that is installed on your bike.

The hospital consists of 55 doctors and a fully equipped operating room. There are also 10 roaming medical cars and three helicopters, each available to be dispatched at the first sign of trouble. Walking through the acres of tents, trailers, corrals, and brightly lit repair areas, it is hard to imagine that the entire place is torn down, packed up, trucked several hundred miles, and rebuilt the next day, often in the middle of a desert.

Paso de San Francisco

Our initial east-to-west Andean crossing was a long, tough ride. The return trip would take us over *Paso de San Francisco*, another 800-kilometer ride on roads shared with race vehicles—we were intent to not repeat the mistakes made in our first passage.

Committed to an early start, we awoke at 4 a.m., had a quick *café con leche* with cold ham and cheese sandwiches, and were on the bikes within 30 minutes. We pulled over at the base of the Andes to collect a wad of coca leaves from the truck to help stave off any altitude issues and to help keep us alert during another long day of riding. Addicting, no…really.

We ran into dust at 4,300 meters elevation, visibility dropped to near zero, and dirt clogged our helmets. Clearing a corner, my front tire dove into a soft sandy channel, throwing me to the ground. Groaning, I looked up to see two other bikes down just in front of me. Panic rushed to my head as I thought of the riders behind me, and even more dangerous, the five-ton trucks behind them. Several of us frantically pulled the bikes from the path while others ran down the hill to warn traffic. This one had us shaken, not stirred, and we were in store for more drama before the day ended.

Several riders crashed, one damaging his bike beyond repair. Another fainted from the altitude. A BMW support vehicle stopped to help; they had oxygen and were able to provide a lift to the border. The route took its toll on our support truck too. Several suspension bolts sheared off, forcing speeds to drop below 16 kph. A few miles later, the air bag suspension gave out, reducing the pace to 6 kph.

The lead group made it to the scheduled campsite in Chilecito around 9 p.m. An hour later, the second group, my group, gathered at a gas station 160 kilometers short of town. The mechanic assured us the truck could be fixed overnight. Too exhausted to go on, we decided to spend the night. The town's tourist bureau found a local resident who could provide accommodation. After dinner we were asleep in seconds.

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Our guides commandeered the homeowner's kitchen and prepared a breakfast of eggs, tortillas, and tomatoes. Curious children shyly crept into the house after having spent the night with friends (so we could have their beds). I am told our modest fee and gratuity to the family well exceeded a month's income—slightly alleviating the "rich gringo takes child's bed" headline in my mind. With only a few days left in our adventure, several riders opted to lighten their load by abandoning their sleeping bags, tents and clothing, much to the delight of the children. With just under 480 kilometers to San Juan, we were back in the saddles.

The Road to Cordoba

The group split for the last leg to Cordoba, one pod taking a longer but safer route. My riding partner and I began on the safe route, but then located a back road on the GPS. We were warned it would be difficult, but forged ahead. "We've got a good GPS unit, how hard can it be, especially given what we've been through?" The warnings proved to be unwarranted, though a few sections did turn into footpaths between backyards and fields, and at one point, through a monastery.

At the hotel that night, most of my fellow riders concluded that this had been the most dangerous, craziest, and humbling thing they'd ever done. Motorcycle legend Malcolm Smith said the Dakar was the most grueling and brutal ride he'd ever taken. Charley Boorman, a life-long rider and part of the *Long Way Round* team, attempted the Dakar in 2006. Boorman managed just five days before crashing and withdrawing. He states in his book, *Race to Dakar,* "However hard you might think it will be, however well you prepare for it, it will never be enough. It is an emotional, physical, and mental rollercoaster that demands total devotion. If you need to ask about it, you probably shouldn't do it."

Riding with the RawHyde group of adventurers was an honor. The wonders of South America, the topography, the warmth and enthusiasm of the Argentinean and Chilean people, coupled with an amazing ride puts this in the "must-do-before-you-die" category. It will reward you with months of excited anticipation as you prepare, a dozen-plus days of genuine adventure and thrills, followed by rich memories that will remain with you forever. Some of our group said, "Never again." A few others were already planning for next year. If you have the chance to go, take it.

To race or *chase* the Dakar is to immerse yourself in one of the most grueling exercises in mental, physical, and mechanical endurance. Each day requires 300-700 kilometers of seat time, including several hundred kilometers of dirt tracks, sand dunes, or water crossings.

Bruce Dorn

Bruce Dorn, DGA, began his photographic career as a still photographer for Condé Nast Publishing and *Time/Life* in the early 70s. After a segue from fashion and photojournalism into advertising work, Bruce added commercial filmmaking to his resume in the early 80s. Bruce's television commercial campaigns have earned him multiple Clios, Mobius, Addy, and Art Directors Club awards, as well as a Bronze Lion from Cannes. Bruce is a Canon Explorer of Light, a Western Digital Creative Master, a Tiffen Image-Maker, and a Corel Painter Master. In 1984, Bruce was inducted into the Directors Guild of America.

Steve Larsen

Steve Larsen is a freelance moto-journalist living in Arizona. Larsen's work regularly appears in *Motorcycle Consumer News* and *Rider Magazine.* He is an accomplished motorcycle rider, and is as comfortable at the track as he is riding in the dirt. Larsen is the only civilian to complete both the Arizona Highway Patrol motor officer training program, and the Phoenix police officer motorcycle course. This is his first article for *Overland Journal.*

Ingrid Bareuther

Ingrid (editorial journalist), and husband Joerg (agricultural engineer), escaped their conventional careers more than 10 years ago; first to the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, and then to Egypt, where they were "stranded" for a decade as scuba diving center managers and entrepreneurs. They explored the Arabian Desert by 4WD pickup and finally crossed it on foot—an unsupported 10-day trek of 160 miles from the Red Sea to River Nile. Their present project, *Arminius on Tour,* has taken them around the world for the past two years in a Unimog 1300L expedition truck. They are currently exploring South America.

Editor's Note: *As we were going to press we received the tragic news that our contributor and friend Ingrid had a fatal fall from a cliff edge in Argentina. Our hearts go out to her partner Joerg. We will miss her writing and her good humor.*

Johan Ernst Nilson

Johan Ernst Nilson began his professional life as a pianist. It was on a dare from friends that he embarked on his first overland trek—a 52-day bicycle ride from his home in Sweden to Morocco. After 20 years of exploring the world, which included climbing the Seven Summits, he desired to do something no one human had ever accomplished. He conceived the idea of trekking from 90°N to 90°S under all natural power. Johan took time between cycling Patagonia and sailing to Antarctica to share his inspirational life, and this extraordinary expedition; an exclusive for *Overland Journal.*

Tom Sheppard

Tom has an exploration career spanning 50 years, and totaling over 110,000 overland miles since 1960, including significant exploration in northern Africa, and the first-ever lateral crossing of the Sahara from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. Tom is a freelance writer/photographer and consultant, and author of the *Vehicle Dependent Expedition Guide* and the new *The Nobility of Wilderness* (Desert Winds). From the Royal Geographical Society, Tom has received the Ness Award, and the distinctive ARPS (Associate of the Royal Photographic Society) award.

Alice Gugelev

Alice was born in Russia and has spent most of her life wandering the planet—while her parents hoped she would "settle down." After living and working in Thailand, Singapore, Japan, China, India, the U.S., and Canada, Alice decided that she would never "settle," and feels most comfortable living with her family (Jay, Kurt and Maya), in a rather large, environmentally friendly truck called the EcoRoamer. Along the way, Alice worked on Wall Street (in strategy consulting), the World Bank, and at various non-profits. She started The Muskoka Foundation to inspire and equip travelers to "Use what you know, to do good as you go."