

THE ROAD OF DEATH

JUST DON'T LOOK OVER THE EDGE...

When an international investigation named a treacherous cliffside route in Bolivia as officially the World's Most Dangerous Road, some voices across the globe demanded it was closed immediately. Others decided to hurtle down it on two wheels instead

➔ Your bike is juddering along a thin gravel track, hewn out of a rocky mountainside high in the Bolivian Andes. On your left, just inches from your tyre, a yawning abyss plunges down into the Amazon jungle almost 1,000 metres below. To your right, a hulking rockface looms menacingly overhead. And straight ahead? Well, you can't see straight ahead because the clouds of dust billowing up from the unsealed road and the thick mountain fog smother any view of what is in front of you. Welcome to the World's Most Dangerous Road.

This treacherous stretch of road in the South American country of Bolivia has gained chilling notoriety. The worst year on record (1983) saw 320 people lose their lives in the gaping valley below, including the biggest single road accident in Bolivian history when more than 100 people were sent crashing over its near-vertical edge. Only last month, 24 people died when a lorry slid over the unbarriered track, raising this year's death toll to 63 by the end of August. On average, 26 vehicles plummet over its ledge each year, claiming more than 100 lives. The year 2006, it seems, will be no different to any other.

But with high altitude, growing infamy and a list of dangers that reads like the Grim Reaper's official

handbook, it is perhaps not surprising that a road you'd think best avoided like the local roast guinea-pig stew has become the latest adventure playground for thrill-seeking adrenalin junkies from around the world. Mountain-biking down the World's Most Dangerous Road is now one of the most popular tourist activities in Bolivia – for those who dare.

The title of the 'World's Most Dangerous Road' was bestowed upon this transport route by the Inter-American Development Bank in 1995, based on the macabre ratio of deaths per mile. The 'road' itself is nothing more than a narrow sliver chiselled out of the mountainside – it's unsealed, there are no barriers guarding you from the vertiginous drops and in places the rough, potholed track is only 3.2 metres wide. This is disturbing enough – even before you find out it's also the main access route between the agricultural region of the Yungas and the bustling city of La Paz, which ensures there's a constant stream of groaning food trucks and lorries packed with local workers manoeuvring the other way.

Something none of these ominous facts reveal is that this is also one of the most stunningly beautiful roads in the world. Starting high in the ice-capped peaks of the Bolivian Andes at the town of La Cumbre, the road snakes its way around lush green cloud forest before descending into the sleepy town of Coroico in the hot, humid Amazon rainforest, taking in almost every ecosystem Bolivia has to offer. But when you're tearing downhill at 35km an hour, this may not be the first thing on your mind.

Thanks to the burgeoning reputation of this mountain adventure, a host of tour operators based in nearby La Paz, the world's highest administrative capital, now offer a number of trips to guide you downhill. And it's proven a big hit with Bolivia's increasing number of tourists. "It's the drama, the legend that has grown around it, the perceived risk, and the dramatic change of climates in such a small space of time," explains Alistair Matthew, founder of the most established and consistently recommended company, Gravity →

FAST FACTS

Official name:

Unduavi-Yolosa Highway

Nickname:

'World's Most Dangerous Road'

Location:

La Cumbre – Coroico, Bolivia

Length:

64km

Altitude:

15,500 feet (start) to 3,700 feet (finish)

Avg death toll:

100 people per year

Local rules tell you to stick to the cliff edge on the left – it's safer, apparently.

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HELP!

AN EXPERT'S GUIDE TO SURVIVING THE DEATH ROAD



Alistair Matthew is the founder of the most established and well-known company, Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking. He has personally guided more than 500 trips down the World's Most Dangerous Road – and survived.

Is the road really that dangerous?

"Absolutely – the dangers are real. Our company has delivered more than 15,000 people down the road without tragedy. But during the last six years, nine people have died riding this road with other companies. One of the huge problems is that tourists visiting Bolivia are not aware that there are no minimum safety standards and no consequences whatsoever for a company involved in a tragic accident. The difference between a cheap company and an expensive operator is not necessarily just the quality of the lunch or the free T-shirt – it is most likely to do with fundamental safety issues."



What's the best piece of advice for getting downhill alive?

"You always have to look where you want the bike to go, not at the stunning scenery over the edge, lest you become part of it. I find it is worth telling the story of 'Cracked-Skull Boy', who was staring off at something and rode his bike over an 80-metre drop. We were able to rescue him, but he's extremely lucky to be alive. We have the training and equipment (including rope rescue gear, stretchers, oxygen, etc) to deal quickly and efficiently with any incident. But if you fall further than about 100 metres there's no hurry to rescue you anyway – at that point it is referred to as 'body retrieval'."

Can anybody conquer the World's Most Dangerous Road?

"Yes, providing they listen. A major part of our instruction procedure is to put the fear of God into the riders. That is not for any extra dramatic effect – the vertical drops see to that – but to force them into behaving, and riding within their abilities. The number one cause of accidents is quite simply: 'testosterone exceeding ability'. If anyone is riding like an idiot, the guide will put you on the bus in order to save your life. Gravity has never had a rider die and we don't plan on starting today. If people ride within their ability, they will survive."

IT'S THE
DRAMA, THE
LEGEND, THE
RISK – AN
IRRESISTIBLE
COMBINATION



A chilling makeshift gravestone – one of hundreds on the World's Most Dangerous Road...



Rusting lorries and buses litter the valley below – grim reminders of hundreds of deaths

Bolivia. "It's an irresistible combination."

But all trips begin in the same ominous fashion: a guide throws neat alcohol over the tyres of the 4x4 that delivers you to the start of your adventure, as an offering to the spirit of Pachamama (Mother Earth) to protect you on your journey. Such rituals continue on the way down – the raggedy stray dogs that roam forlornly around the road are believed to be the departed spirits of people lost over the mountainside and local beliefs dictate they must be fed to ensure safe passage. While few cyclists succumb to the idea of canine reincarnation, it's indicative of the fear and respect the locals have for this road that these rituals are carried out with such solemn regularity.

As guided groups of mountain bikers plummet down the road, a shifting set of dangers await. Starting in the cold, barren mountains of the Cordillera Real at an oxygen-starved 15,500 feet – that's over half the height of Everest – most cyclists suffer from the nausea of altitude sickness long before they've had the chance to peer nervously over the vertigo-inducing drops. The first few kilometres are on tarmac, where the main threats are the fierce icy winds that lash around the high Andean pass, clawing at your tyres, and the thick mountain fog that muffles the warning horns of oncoming vehicles. As the tarmac ends abruptly, the mist slowly clears and

the perilous vertical drops emerge into view. This is where the notorious gravel track of the 'Carretera de la Muerte' (Road of Death), begins.

Just a short distance along this track, a solitary figure emerges clutching red and green flags. Not some rudimentary Bolivian traffic light system, this man is Mario, a local whose entire family was killed here in a bus accident in 1990. Every day since, he has kept vigil on the corner where his family died, guiding traffic around the corner. "The bus drivers, lorry drivers and travellers of this road are my new family," Mario says. He lives in a small hut on the mountainside and survives on gifts of food and money from travellers. But Mario is not the only vivid reminder of this road's gloomy history. The entire route is dotted with white crosses, overgrown tombstones, flowers and shrines to the thousands of people who have lost their lives here, and grizzly remains of vehicle wreckages lie rusting in the gorge.

Increasingly nervous, but not perturbed, cyclists continue to tear down The Road of Death as it narrows into a bone-dry track pitted with potholes. In places, the rubble from landslides is scattered across the track and waterfalls tumble down from overhanging rock faces, eroding the dirt road even further. Lorries and buses kick up loose earth into clouds of dust and force cyclists ever nearer to the edge. Though Bolivian road regulations usually

determine drivers keep to the right, this road has its own rules. Downhill traffic must stay to the left, meaning the spine-chilling drop into the jungle haunts cyclists all the way down to Coroico, the Amazonian town that marks the end – and survival – of the World's Most Dangerous Road.

For the mountain bikers, the rampaging descent is an exhilarating and death-defying adventure, littered with hazards, but studded with stupendous panoramic views. During just four and a half hours of riding time, cyclists plunge an enormous 11,800 feet in only 64km. With numbers soaring every year, the rush of defeating death on its own territory is proving to be an inescapable allure for extreme sports fans from across the globe.

Not surprisingly, the long-term future of this lethal road remains in doubt – thanks to a \$120 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank that first coined its ominous nickname, a new alternative route is being constructed on the opposite side of the valley. Ongoing financial difficulties in 2006 have delayed this life-saving project indefinitely. But even if one day the Bolivian locals who are forced to navigate this terrifying passage on a daily basis can finally migrate to the safety of the new road, there's no doubt that the adrenalin junkies – and their mountain bikes – will still be here.

MARK BAILEY

BOLIVIA FACTFILE

Bolivia is a country the size of Spain and France put together, landlocked in the centre of the continent of South America. Punctuated by the Andean mountain range, its geography ranges from giant mountains to barren plateaux and Amazonian jungle.

Despite being rich in gas and minerals, it is one of the least developed nations in South America. About two thirds of the 9 million inhabitants live in poverty and one third in extreme poverty – on less than \$1 per day. Bolivia is the world's third largest producer of cocaine.

With stunning cultural and geographical treasures, tourism in Bolivia is growing every year. Despite sporadic political uprisings, Bolivia remains a relatively safe destination. The main dangers for visitors are from petty crime, tourist scams and the poorly maintained transport infrastructure.

British Embassy, La Paz: Tel: 591-2-2433424

THE ROUTE



GRAVITY ASSISTED MOUNTAIN BIKING

The most highly-recommended company offering the chance to cycle the World's Most Dangerous Road is Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking, based in La Paz, Bolivia. Providing expert guides and top-quality Kona mountain bikes, Gravity offers one-day ride packages from just £30.

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