

BIKING FOR BOLIVIA

Ride for a Reason Brings Relief to Bolivia

by Matt Kettmann



Tears triumph as the most extreme of emotional expressions. We cry when we're sad, when we're scared or frustrated; we cry when we're homesick. And oddly, but perhaps most telling as to why tears rule as humankind's end road of emotion, we cry, too, when we're relieved, when we're rewarded, when we're happy.

I felt those good tears building in my scorched eyes two weeks ago, when I, along with more than a dozen other mountain bike-riding ambassadors from Santa Barbara, rode toward a crowd of nearly 200 sign-waving, firecracker-popping, drum- and flute-playing Bolivians at the tiny village of Villa Ingavi — a two-building "town" sitting lonely on the unending green flatlands of the Amazon basin.

Rio Beni Ride for a Reason Bike Team

Parker
Abercrombie
Amelia Badish
Jacob Badish
Christopher Brady
Crister Brady
Jim Brady
Laurie Collins
Russ Collins
Debra Donley
Becky Dorfhuber
Natasha
Dorfhuber
Reinhard
Dorfhuber
Michael Draghi
Pat Draghi
Rachael Himovitz
Roger Himovitz
Matt Kettmann
Carl Lauer
Claire Lauer
Laurie Lauer
Tim McMains
Caitlin Praetorius
Erin Riley
Corey Stram
Annie Villanueva
Jim Villanueva
Katy Villanueva
Sherry Villanueva
Allison West
Gravity Assisted
Guides:
Herman, JJ, and
Pedro



LAURIE COLLINS

On August 7, after five days of tough riding, the Ride for a Reason team of junior high kids, college students, and accompanying adults rode into Villa Ingavi, where hundreds awaited with welcoming waves and open arms of thanks. The next day, the team would finish their nearly 300-mile, uphill/downhill trek through Bolivia in the town of Rurrenabaque, where close to 10,000 people cheered them on.

Certainly, all the other types of tears—sore-muscle-and-severely-chafed-skin-I’m-in-pain tears, when-will-this-freakin’-mountain-end tears, and oh-God-a-wild-dog-is-chasing-me tears—had already been shed by our party. We were a dedicated and determined bunch of junior high kids, college students, and adults, and we’d just completed nearly 250 miles of rough and rugged off-pavement cycling from the tips of the Andes to the depths of the Bolivian Amazon. But as we approached Villa Ingavi, it was tears of joy that welled up behind our dusty sunglasses.

Our bright yellow flags and even brighter, though muddied, yellow shirts touted our “Ride for a Reason” as a fundraiser for the Rio Beni Health Project, a clinic-based program begun in 1997 by retired Santa Ynez Valley doctor Lou Netzer. Today, even after a fast-moving cancer killed Netzer last fall, the increasingly popular project provides the most basic kinds of care to 42 individual and countless surrounding villages near the Rio Beni, serving literally tens of thousands of the planet’s poorest people. So, traveling with the spirit of Netzer and under the banner of the project, we expected that our mission of goodwill and good health would be well received in Villa Ingavi, the first community we would encounter that had been directly helped by the project. But this was too much.

“Is that all for us?” asked one of our kids, pointing toward the increasingly boisterous assembly about one hundred yards ahead. It appeared the entire village, and perhaps everyone within a five-mile radius, had turned out. Holding colorful signs written in Spanish, English, and native languages such as Quechua and Chimane, the people of Villa Ingavi, young and old, had formed the first insurmountable barrier we’d met on this wide rocky road, a road which, as the only route between La Paz and Bolivia’s Rio Beni region, had become our too familiar foe over five days of hardcore uphill and screaming downhills while we traversed a half dozen mountain ranges.

Another teen dropped his cool façade to crow with adolescent exuberance, “We should do this more often, Mom!” and even I felt a tingle in my eyes as our difficult, usually painful, and at times perilous adventure neared its symbolic end. The resounding response that awaited us—featuring fresh watermelon slices, full plates of hot exotic food, hours of drum and flute music, and a hilariously heartfelt gymnastic performance by dozens of preteen Villa Ingavis—was the sweetest vindication I’d ever tasted, and the twinge that comes of holding back happy tears didn’t leave my eyes all night.

Little did we know that our journey was far from over, that the next day’s 50 miles riding on flat ground would prove tremendously tough, and that we would be greeted with equal celebrations in a handful of similar villages. And nothing could have prepared us for the end of the next day—the wrap of our six-day, nearly 300-mile ride—when we reached the Wild-West style river outpost of Rurrenabaque, where the project is centered. Close to 10,000 people cheered us on, waving flags and giving kisses, hugs, and genuine thank-yous to all of us. It was a fitting end to a truly successful journey—a physically grueling, consciousness-shifting, first-of-its-kind adventure—that raised enough money to keep the project alive at least one more year and lifted, in the spirit of Lou Netzer and in the names of the current project team, the Rio Beni Health Project to unparalleled heights.

The Legacy of Lou

Talk to anyone in the Santa Ynez Valley and chances are that they or their children were delivered and/or treated by Dr. Lou Netzer during his more than 30 years of practicing family medicine in the bucolic valley. After decades of providing care to children and adults alike, Netzer retired in 1996, ready to spend his golden years globetrotting, writing novels and memoirs, and enjoying the finer things in life. On his first, of what was to be many journeys, Netzer stumbled upon Bolivia, the third poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, where clean water and basic hygiene remain as elusive as paved roads and honest politicians.

For any traveler, this still relatively tourist-free country landlocked in the heart of South America is a fascinating case of juxtapositions, most notably the sky-high to swampy-low geographical range of the Andes to the Amazon. Then there’s the pervasive old-crashes-into-new cultural vista of Bolivia, evidenced by the traditionally dressed ladies of La Paz selling cell phone minutes to the apparently penniless farmer boys wearing Spider-Man T-shirts and riding dual-suspension bicycles.

Meanwhile, the people of Bolivia still straddle a fine spiritual line between the relatively new rituals of Catholicism—introduced roughly a half-millennium back—and the animistic ways of yesteryear. This is a land where vans bound for annual folkloric festivals stop at prominent mountaintops and spill rubbing alcohol and coca leaves around wooden Christian crosses as tribute to Pachamama, the earth mother of pre-Incan traditions. Bolivia’s poverty is not hidden, with widespread and well-known corruption confining most of the available money to the administrative capital of La Paz. But despite economic troubles, Bolivians are unflinchingly joyous and seem to live bountiful lives of fresh fruit and hot meals, boasting big smiles and welcoming waves at every washed-out turn in the road. It’s not hard to see how a wanderer like Netzer would feel at home here, especially in one of the smaller cities, where life moves only as fast as the boys on the corner can roll the deflated motorcycle tire down the dusty street.

Following the *Lonely Planet* travel guides, Netzer made his way from the bustle of La Paz, the world’s highest capital city, northeast over the Andes to Rurrenabaque, a dirt-road town filled with dogs, chickens, and pigs, located smack dab on the Rio Beni. About a 20-hour bumpy bus ride (or 40-minute equally bumpy plane flight) from La Paz, the roughly 15,000-citizen “Rurre,” as it’s known throughout the country, is the last outpost before the great Amazonian unknown.

When Netzer ventured out of the tourist-friendly, reggae-blaring Moskeeto Bar and down the main streets, where souvenir shops abut countless adventure travel agencies offering jungle tours, he found himself amid fenced-off plots of family-owned land overflowing with thatch-roof huts, barking dogs, and waifish chickens.

In these downtrodden neighborhoods, Netzer found people getting sick, and often dying, from the most preventable illnesses, and quickly realized that the smallest supply of penicillin and cheapest load of antibacterial soap would have profoundly positive effects. Further investigation up and down the Rio Beni revealed more desperate communities, with even more deplorable



MATT KETTWMANN

The team encountered dozens of tiny, one-street villages, but the reaction was always the same: children and adults alike staring in amazement, astonished by the riders' out-of-this-world get-ups and wondering why anyone would want to bicycle from La Paz to Rurrenabaque, a route never before traveled by mountain bikers.

conditions, ranging from poor personal hygiene to recurring fatal diseases that plagued entire villages.

Something needed to be done, Netzer concluded, so, almost six years ago, he wrote to his friend and confidant Christopher Brady, who'd spent his professional life serving impoverished peoples from Mozambique to Honduras.

"Help," asked a perplexed Netzer. "I've started a health project."

That correspondence, now an infamous one-liner for the thousands who knew and loved Lou, prompted Brady to turn to Direct Relief International (DRI), a Goleta-based nonprofit with flawless financial accountability and an unblemished record of effectively providing medical necessities to poor and disaster-ravaged nations. Netzer soon purchased a plot of land just outside of Rurre on the Rio Beni, making the commitment to remain in Bolivia as the full-time doc, while DRI arranged to donate supplies and dollars—and the Rio Beni Health Project (in Spanish, "*El Proyecto de Salud de Rio Beni*") was born.

Just as he raised his own children, Michael and Uldine, Netzer nurtured the project to success. The adversities and daily struggles he faced are well beyond the scope of most folks' imagination. But it was fitting that Netzer, who had been the last doctor in Santa Ynez to make house calls, became the first doctor in Bolivia to make house calls. And he slowly made headway, educating younger Bolivian generations about everything from regular hand washing and oral hygiene to the use of penicillin.

But then came cancer, pitting both Netzer and the project against death. He left Bolivia for a time, returning to the Santa Ynez Valley to visit, for what was to be the last time, his good friends. Among those were Christopher Brady, who'd since become very familiar with the project, having visited Netzer in Bolivia a handful of times; and Jim Brady, Christopher's older brother and the assistant headmaster at Santa Barbara Middle School. More than a decade before, the three had talked deeply about what they truly wanted to do for the world, and by 2002, they'd all kept their word. Lou had wanted to bring health care to poor people; he'd done so in Bolivia. Christopher had wanted to encourage sustainable development in Third World countries; working for DRI, he had done so around the globe. Jim wanted to take children to the hidden corners of the world; as a cofounder of Educational Safaris, a group that leads bicycle trips on almost every continent, he'd done so.

When Netzer's cancer was declared terminal last summer, their personal mission statements came to a compelling head. As Netzer crept closer to his October 2002 death, the Brady brothers hatched the wild notion of leading a mountain bike expedition—complete with able kids—from La Paz to Rurrenabaque, in the hope of bringing both health care and financial stability to the region, while building lifelong bridges between the youth of Santa Barbara and the people of the Rio Beni. No doubt Netzer thought the plan crazy—though not unlike some of his own wild ideas over the years—but by the time he died, the wheels were in motion, and Ride for a Reason was set on the path to reality.

The Ride

When you wake up on the morning you're supposed to bike down the "World's Most Dangerous Road," eating is not the first thing on your mind. Your immediate worry is the weather—will the skies above the taxi and bus-filled streets of La Paz stay blue and allow for the 12,000-foot/50-mile descent

or will they gray over, spilling rain and snow? Luckily for us, despite threats of rain, the morning of August 1 was perfect in La Paz; the sunny skies a radiant cobalt blue, the mountain air crisp and dry, the temperature mild.

All of us were nervous—and some still a bit sick after three days of adjusting to La Paz's 12,000 foot altitude—as we piled into the vans of Gravity Assisted Mountain Bike Tours, the first and arguably best bike touring company in Bolivia. Run by New Zealander Alistair Matthews, Gravity was to lead us down the "World's Most Dangerous Road" for our first day—a common tour offered by some 40 other such companies—and then send two support vehicles and an able Bolivian biker or two for the following five days of pedaling to Rurre.

Once at the top of the pass, named La Cumbre and, at about 14,000 feet, surrounded with snowcapped peaks, we unloaded our Kona bikes and got some pointers about how not to die while a pack of llamas wandered by. After watching Zane, our guide, spill some rubbing alcohol for Pachamama, we followed in Santa Barbara Middle School tradition to form our first of many group circles, a place where our reactions to the day's events and our expectations for what lay ahead often ended in tears. Led by Jim Brady, the ride's day-to-day leader, we rubbed each other's shoulders, spoke about being safe and going slow, and held a moment of silence while focusing on the center of the circle. No doubt Jim and Christopher, and others, thought of Lou as our center, but that morning some of us were thinking about the road's well-known moniker, especially since another biker had perished on the road exactly one week before, the victim of a head-on collision with a police car.

Minutes later, the team was careening down a nicely paved road through a barren brown and striking snow-white landscape, cold air blasting up our nostrils and soon I declared it the coolest thing I'd ever done, and I've done my fair share of cool things. The road took us down, down, down, and slowly, right before a dark tunnel and drug checkpoint, the brown mountainsides turned a lush green. Past a short uphill where Andean peaks rose impressively above tropical looking river valleys, we slipped further down the road and into a cloud-shrouded fork in the road, where we ate lunch.

Afterward, Zane explained that to the left was the new, paved road, recently "completed" after decades of work, but still unable to take big rigs and buses because of unstable bridges. Oddly, big rigs and buses are pretty much the only traffic the road gets anyway, and periodically one of them spills over the sides of the crumbling old road and into 1000-foot deep ravines. Indeed, it was overturned buses that gave the road its "most dangerous" name, as more than a few of them slip off the mountainous road each year, taking hundreds of Bolivian souls with them.

So, we went to the right, on the old road still thick with fog, where we had to stay on the cliff side—betraying our American urges and holding to the left. A few miles down, we witnessed the first of many Bolivian "traffic jams," where buses and trucks defied sanity and backed up toward 1000-foot-or-more drop-offs, the edge of the road actually crumbling away beneath their tires. And just when we thought two trucks were bad, along came a third up the road, and behind us, a fourth. Further down the mountain, at a particularly precarious corner, a man with green and red warning signs stood as grave testament to the road's death tolls—his family had perished in this exact spot, years before. With his help, no one died that day.

After biking under waterfalls and accumulating a thick film of dust, we ended our ride on a super-fast downhill stretch into a one-street village that

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sat a few miles below the beautiful hilltop town of Coroico. We sipped cold Paceaña beers, Cokes, and orange-flavored Fantas, just rewards for a hard day's ride. The next day we rested while exploring quaint Coroico, whose colonial cobblestone streets boast colorful characters and impressive views of the road we'd just traveled, and the Coroico River valley, where we'd be heading next.

Though we at first welcomed a soft drizzle, thinking it an anti-dust measure for the next day's ride toward Caranavi, the drizzle became a downpour that had not ceased by morning, and we found ourselves preparing under a deluge. The roads ran with mud and we were somewhat baffled as to how to proceed. We formed our customary circle and focused in silence, some of us dwelling on the busload of 43 people that had gone over the cliffs we'd ridden just two days before. (In better news, we heard from our Bolivian guides Pedro, Herman, and J.J. that a team of bikers was able to pull four victims safely from the wreckage. The other 39, tragically, were lost.) Then we slid down Coroico's cobblestone streets and saved about an hour of backtracking by heading down a bumpy back road that Crister, Jim Brady's biking stud of a son, had found the day before while most of us rested.

Finally we were on the main road—which would be our friend and enemy for the next five days straight—riding past a village filled with African descendents called Santa Barbara, and up the first of many hills into Cholla, where we sipped hot chocolate and laughed at each other's muddy faces. As this was reputedly Bolivia's dry season, we were mildly amused that it had been pouring all day. In any case, the rain made for powerfully bursting 250-foot-high waterfalls and kept the otherwise searing heat and humidity down.

Before getting to Caranavi—a blue-collar town that most guidebooks advise leaving quickly—some of us became acquainted with wild dogs who genuinely despised bicycles and showed as much by giving high-speed chase to rear tires while barking and nipping. Along with the Bolivian men who whistled at the female members of our caravan, the dogs became regular features of the ride. I alone dealt with at least 10 separate dog-chasing incidents, including one in which I spun my gears so fast that my chain fell off as a large mutt bore down on me. (I was never bitten, thank Pachamama; though one of our party, Carl Lauer, was chomped a few days later. Carl soldiered on, impressively, and showed no ill effects. He did, wisely, seek medical treatment upon returning to the U.S.)

By the end of the day, the dirt on my legs had gone through its own rite of passage—from wet mud, to caked dry dirt, and back to mud via my sweat. Every village we passed, at every estancia, we caught awestruck looks. Indeed, we must have looked like men and women from Mars, and considering our brightly colored, space-age helmets, our fully-equipped bikes with fat tires and disc brakes, our camel-back pouches with plastic tubes delivering us water—plus the apparent superhuman strength/inhuman drive that kept us slogging through mud on roads never before traveled by bike—such a reckoning was perhaps not far off.

As we reached Caranavi, with the sun slipping behind the mountain range that would be the next morning's battle, the townspeople stood outside their stores with mouths agape, applauding our caravan. The bartender at our hotel that night told me she had actually done the ride to her town, but had not gone further. Tomorrow, I surmised, would truly be the road never before traveled on bike seats, and, as we found out, there's a perfectly good reason for that.

Sweet Survival

Starting a bit late, after a long breakfast—and a long night of dogs barking through the wee hours—we were ready for a couple mountain ranges. The first one wasn't so bad, taking us up the mountain behind Caranavi and through some pretty lush, rain-forested terrain. I saw a couple toucans, heard a talking parrot from a distance, and passed the most bizarre roadkill I'd ever seen; I'm still not sure what that dog-sized mass actually was. The second mountain, which started pretty much right after the first, was more than 20 kilometers uphill.

If you're a bike-riding Santa Barbaran, imagine Gibraltar Road. Now multiply its length by four, rip the pavement off, cover it with loose rock and dust and mud, and power up it. I became delusional after a while, sun-drunk and whistling "Over the Rainbow," rapping "Ice Ice Baby" in my head (perhaps explained by the fact that I'd sat next to Rob Van Winkle's wife on my LAX-to-Miami flight), and swore up a frustrated storm. I cursed the road, the mountain, and my bike, and contemplated mutiny against Jim and Christopher, who had clearly been *crazy* when they judged the road passable by bike. Somehow I made it, surviving a near death scare—mid-delusion—when 14-year-old Michael Draghi, our group's strongest kid-rider and the only under-18-year-old to complete the entire ride, came up behind me and yelled "I'm a machine", nearly bumping me off the road. It was a minor inspiration to see that some of us weren't being so badly beaten down by the road. At the top was a wooden cross, surrounded by alcohol bottles and bags of coca leaves, marking the beginning of our downhill. There were still miles to



In the simple yet functional Rurrenabaque health clinic, where the Rio Beni Health Project is centered, Dr. Tuwanda Williamson checks out the belly of a young Bolivian girl. The girl was told she was okay.

go, however, and we didn't reach the town of Sapecho, which sits on the banks of the Rio Beni, until past nightfall.

The good news was that the next day's march was supposed to be less grueling than the previous 50 miles. But, we soon learned, Jim and Christopher had apparently been napping when they drove the road back in April, because what was supposed to be *flat* was actually a disgustingly gradual uphill that made me get off my bike once or twice to walk it. It was a lesson in expectations, and I quickly understood Jim's earlier advice not to expect anything to be easy.

That afternoon, I watched in horror as Pat Draghi, mother of Michael, was chased by a particularly vicious dog. I was walking my bike at the time, maybe 50 yards behind her. Exhausted, there was little I could do but yell and hope for the best. She would be okay, though shaken to tears. As I passed her, I felt her fear and frustration as if they were mine, and realized how aware I was of the limitations I'd encountered and fears I'd surmounted.

Our eventual destination was La Cascada, which we reached after a rapid downhill that shook me so hard I still can't feel the tips of my left-hand fingers. Before being led to the one-room building where we'd sleep that night, we huddled around Jim, who encouraged us, and especially the kids, to be respectful and culturally kind. "Let's not be the scene," said Jim, coining a worthy phrase, "let's see what there is to be seen."

Our arrival was expected in La Cascada, a cute little town whose residents—like Santa Barbarans—consider their town one of the country's best, free of mosquitoes and bad weather, gifted with great jungle views and a refreshing swimming hole where a group of kids taught us to cliff dive.

That night, festivities surrounding Bolivian Independence Week began, starting with a paper lamp-filled parade weaving through the town after dark and morphing into a full night of revelry complete with dancing, drinking, singing, and political speeches about uplifting *campesinos*.

Next day, after one last uphill and checkpoint, where we encountered someone's pet ostriches—who gave us a casual once-over—we hit a more pleasurably paved road. It was to be flat from then on, through the truck-stop town of Yucumo, the unending flatness dotted occasionally with stark white cows on ranches. At a bridge several miles from town, we were met by Lola, a nurse intimately tied to the success of the project. She was also riding a bike, along with some of Villa Ingavi's leaders, and she led us into town, where we were greeted with everything the village had to offer. When we met that night, we spoke of vindication, we spoke of tears of joy, and we spoke of appreciation. We were clearly overwhelmed and overjoyed by both our success and the popularity of the project. As the flutes and drums played all night, nature even showed appreciation, rewarding us with fireflies and an unforgettable sky show of lightning-filled clouds.

The last day of riding featured stops in towns such as Collana where we were greeted with gorgeous leis, fresh grapefruit, and refreshing coconut milk. At each stop Christopher, clearly the most popular gringo in the Bolivian Amazon, made speeches promising the project's continued existence. He couldn't exactly promise the wells or health posts the townspeople routinely asked for, but he assured that with their help, the *Proyecto de Salud de Rio Beni* would survive in Lou Netzer's absence.

We made it to the outskirts of Rurrenabaque around 5 p.m. There, at a fork in the road, we were met by hundreds of bike-, scooter-, and motorcycle-riding Bolivians. Spewing diesel fumes and carving wet paths through slippery mud, our caravan led us into town, past thousands of flag-waving Rurre natives, all excitedly aware of the positive changes the Rio Beni Health Project had made.

We couldn't help but wonder if they had turned out for Bolivian Flag Day, or for us, but Christopher later assured us it was the latter. "We held a mirror up to the community," he proclaimed, explaining that via our caravan, the people were able to see their own worth. We had acknowledged that they existed on an international scale, and, judging by the tears in almost everyone's eyes as they thanked us with kisses and the traditional shake-embrace-shake Bolivian greeting, that meant a lot.

The Reason

Saturday morning in Rurre. As dogs chased pigs through the dirt streets and tourists took 25-cent taxi rides on motorbikes, I woke to discover that during the previous day's constant celebration, the discomfort in my left eye had become more than a minor annoyance. I had apparently gotten dirt under my contact lens, then rubbed my eye into a painfully swollen and sunlight-sensitive problem. In short, I was going to be making a trip to the Rio Beni Health Clinic to get treatment.

Christopher arranged a ride for me with Don Modesto, an internationally traveled community organizer who's now zeroed-in on helping his own people. Modesto, whose wife Frida is the project's co-manager and one of the lead health educators in the community, picked me up in the Project's slowly dying truck and drove me the few blocks to the clinic. As this was the regular day of service for the Rurre clinic—the Project rotates days in Rurre and nearby communities between lengthy river trips to more remote locales—there was a stream of people waiting outside, young and old, man and woman.

As I waited inside, I watched Lola take information from each patient, weighing and assessing exactly as I remembered my visits to the doctor as a kid. She'd also take down information on their families and the not-so-basic services—electricity, telephone, and plumbing—their homes were equipped with. Then I was taken into Tuwanda Williamson's office to be checked out. A Chicago native, who met Lou Netzer's daughter Uldine while completing her residency in a Ventura hospital, Tuwanda has been working on the project for almost a year, and plans to stay for another. With a warm smile, mastery of Spanish, and, like Modesto, Frida, Lola, and Antonio—the man who first took Netzer into the jungles and has since become a nurse for the project—Tuwanda is completely dedicated to the project. As she checked out my eye, finding a large scratch on my cornea, she expressed mild frustration at the project's lack of equipment, but clearly was a master of improvisation. I've never been a big fan of going to the doctor, but Tuwanda's treatment was done with such a friendly touch, I couldn't help but feel more comfortable in the simple room with a stained glass window than I would be in a more sanitary, stark-white American office. She prescribed an eye-drop steroid, which Modesto and I picked up at a nearby pharmacy.

Later that morning, the rest of the group came to tour the clinic, during which we peppered Frida and Tuwanda about what was truly needed by the Project. We learned that, unless you can pay the airfare to La Paz—outrageously high by Bolivian standards, where a family of farmers typically earns about 100 bolivianos, or less than \$15, per month—the only surgeries you can get in Rurre are a Caesarean section and an appendectomy. Tuwanda is routinely faced with people afflicted with everything from bug bites gone bad, stomach illnesses, and tumors. And so she's left to improvise, doing everything within her power to give her patients the medical care they need for the mere two bolivianos the Rurre clinic charges per visit. (Rural clinic visits are free.) Sobered by the clinic tour, I returned to the hotel to rest my good eye, while the rest of the team explored the village.

There was further fanfare that night, including a massive dinner with the mayor of Rurre, who presented each member of our team with official documents thanking us for our mission. Appreciative as we were, we felt it was truly the Project team of

Tuwanda, Frida, Modesto, Lola, and Antonio who were doing the real work. They deserved the applause. After all, we were just a bunch of Americans with bank accounts large enough to afford us the chance to spend a couple weeks of our summer on a crazy mountain bike expedition into the heart of the Bolivian Amazon. During the rest of our stay in Rurre, each of us sought out Tuwanda and the others and did our best to give them the thanks and praise they deserved.

The Debriefing

The skies above Rurre opened next morning into a downpour, and under a veil of rain we boarded long wooden boats for a five-hour cruise up the Rio Beni—past Lou Netzer's now dilapidated property—and the Rio Twichy toward Chalalan, an eco-lodge in Bolivia's Madidi National Park that would serve as our relaxation and debriefing spot. It was a necessary part of the trip, a time for going over what had happened and what we had done.

Even there, in the middle of the jungle—amid peccaries, tapirs, macaws, toucans, caimans, and jaguars—it was the presence of Netzer we felt most strongly. Each of the guides assured us that Netzer had been their friend, a good friend. Indeed, some of his first patients were the people of San José de Uchupiamonas, the village that operated and profited from Chalalan. Since Chalalan had opened, the people had created their own health post and, under Netzer's guidance, hired a full-time nursing staff. Unheard of in the Bolivian countryside, the people of San José were now in the market for a full-time doctor.

There, between exotic dinners, hikes, and canoe rides, I spoke with Christopher about the Project, about what the future held for it. The idea, he explained to me, was to get the Project to be run by Bolivians for Bolivians; for it to be economically and practically sustainable; and for it to truly be self-perpetuating. Much of that was already taking place, as each community selected and supported health promoters who taught children about hygiene and served as liaisons between the project organizers and the 42 participating villages. Similar training programs would be required for the installation and maintenance of drinking water wells. Aside from the occasional (and ordinary) hostility between villages, the project was functioning relatively without incident or problem, which after five years, is a beacon of hope for the future.

Similar projects had tried and failed in the Rio Beni, but this one, especially now after our nationally publicized ride, had a real chance at survival. Already, official agreements have been signed setting the stage for the transfer of operations to Bolivian municipalities. Of course, oversight from Christopher and DRI would be necessary to maintain the Project and keep it free from corruption, but it seemed realistic to hope that the Rio Beni Health Project would be a success story for the ages, and a model for similar projects elsewhere.

One afternoon in Chalalan, we sat in a big circle beneath a thatch-roof ceiling and had our last group talk. We spoke about what we would have wanted to do but didn't—visit a river village, for instance—and what had worked. I remarked that considering everything, it was a flawless journey, which reflected the group's overwhelming sentiment. Most crucially, we discussed how to keep alive this powerful momentum our pedaling had created, how to raise more money, how to get the staff the supplies they needed, and how to get them a new truck.

As we passed on our words for what to do next year, Christopher reiterated his thanks for our involvement with a simple, voice-cracking "Thanks for coming." Then Christopher—one of the few among us who'd not yet shed a visible tear, despite his intimate connection to both Netzer and the project—began quietly weeping. As I fought back my own tears, I realized that I was crying both out of joy, at what had been an undoubtedly successful mission, and of sadness, that the best thing I'd ever been a part of was coming to an end.