

3,700 MILES, 330 DAYS, 100 POUNDS OF GEAR

DAVID NGHIEM BIKED A CONTINENT AND LIVED TO TELL

DURING HIS 330-day, 3,700-mile bicycle expedition across South America last year, David Nghiem jockeyed with reckless drivers on narrow mountain roads, took a few tumbles off his custom-built bike, and busted a bunch of equipment.

But those experiences paled in comparison to the hair-raising rides through the tunnels of the Peruvian Andes — unlit, high-elevation, narrow stretches of road — on the way from Lima to the city of Huancayo.

“I call it the horizontal abyss,” says Nghiem (ENG’00). “The first tunnel, there were six or seven eighteen-wheelers coming at you, blinding you with their lights. It’s pitch-black. It’s a two-lane road, but it’s like a two-lane backcountry road. And on the right you have a ditch. You’re trying get through it, trying not to get hit by the crazy Peruvian drivers, and fighting off the light-headedness.”



And there was more. “Afterwards, I had to summit a mountain call Ticlio, about 4,000 meters above sea level, and I got altitude sickness,” he recalls. “If you can imagine getting hit on the head with a baseball bat, it’s basically like that.”

Nghiem, a biomedical engineer, recounts his adventures, good and bad, with the cheerfulness of a guy who has cheated disaster more than once. “Assessing a challenge, determining the level of risk, and reducing it to a manageable level is my specialty,” he writes on his blog. Plus, he adds in a telephone interview from his home in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, “I guess there’s a masochistic side to me that says if you want to do something wonderful in your life, you have to pay the price.”

Nghiem set out on February 1, 2007, with close to 100 pounds of gear — clothes, camping equipment, food, and a camcorder — loaded onto his mountain bike. As he pedaled from Peru, across Bolivia, into Brazil, and south to Argentina, he saw “the superlatives” of South America: the Andes, the Altiplano, the Amazon. “When you get down to the ground level,” he says, “the world is beautiful.”

He chose South America because he’s fascinated by the immigrant experience of Asian Latinos there. “Brazil has the second largest population of Japanese outside that country and the second largest population of Koreans outside that country,” says Nghiem, who is an American of Vietnamese descent. And he wanted to explore the continent’s out-of-the-way places, choosing back roads and dirt paths for most of his routes. The bike, he says, was his passport. “Almost anyone can relate to a bike. People were inviting me to stay. They would come out and say, ‘Why don’t you stay for dinner, tell us your story,’” says Nghiem, who speaks Spanish.

So while some might describe the tumbles, broken bike parts, and altitude sickness as setbacks, Nghiem, who’s working on a documentary about his trip, sees them in a different way: “There are no setbacks; there are only setups. They set you up for the next wonderful thing to happen.” **CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI**



David Nghiem (ENG’00) saw “the superlatives” of South America, including the Andes and the Amazon, during his yearlong bike expedition.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID NGHIEM