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FINDING YOUR LIMIT

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by MACHINES FOR FREEDOM | October 03, 2019 | 5 min read



Last time we checked in with Natalie she had made it to Central America on her journey from Alaska to Argentina along the Pan-American Highway. Through Colombia, past Ecuador and the equator, we hear from her now as she continues South through the unforgiving mountains of Peru. If you aren't familiar with elevation in meters, we added the conversion to feet and miles. For most of us, 13,000' paints a much clearer picture of Nat's struggles than 4,000 meters!

LIMITS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATALIE CORBETT

It was mid day in the coastal Peruvian desert, the sun was high and not a cloud in sight nor any trees for a brief respite from the harsh light of the tropical sun. I had been cycling away from Nazca since 7am, well, if you can call it cycling. More accurately, I was trudging up what was to be 2000 vertical meters over the course of about 45 kilometers with the following day promising another 2000 meters up over another 40 kilometers. (AKA, 6500' in 27 miles the first day, and 6500' in 24 miles the second). All in all I was going from just above sea level to over 4000 meters and only had to pass through hell to do it. (Yep, that's from sea level to 13,100'! You go Nat!) Dealing with the change in elevation and the hot tropical sun weren't the only issues I had to contend with, as water was proving to be a scarce commodity. I would only be able to find water once at the halfway point and once at the top of the climb, forcing me to ration what I had.

With my gear feeling heavier and my breaths more and more ineffective, I found myself taking more frequent breaks to hide in the shade of a boulder and sip from my ever depleting water supplies. I was beginning to wonder if I was going to make it today at all. Doubt acts like water seeping through cracks in a rock, slowly over time it builds up until it crumbles to the ground. I was starting to crumble.



As an adventure cyclist I never just have one plan for a day; I have short goals and long goals that I can stop at depending on my energy levels, my mood, or the weather. But today there was only one option. It involved going forward, to make it halfway up the climb and camp behind a tiny restaurant where I'd be able to refill water and my belly.

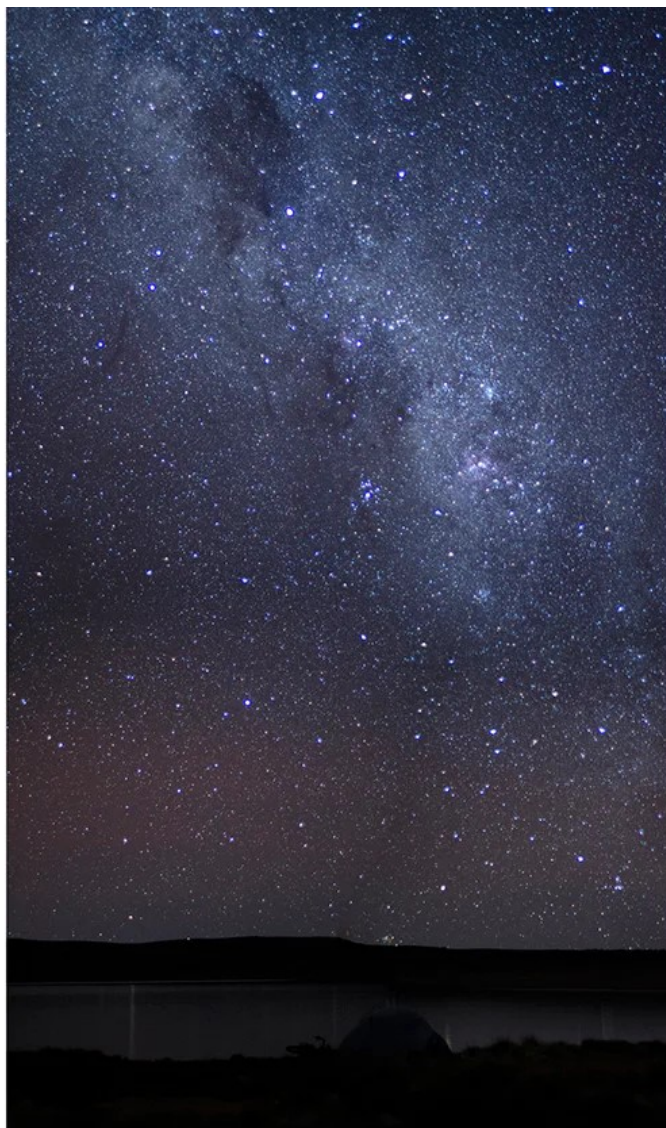
By the time 2pm rolled around, the doubts in my mind were heavily outweighing drive and I still had 11 kilometers to go. But I was bonked! I stopped on a large pull off and leaned my bike against a rock and laid on the ground. For thirty minutes I stayed in a half sleep/half awake state regaining what little strength I had left in me. In that time only three cars passed me by and none stopped to pick up the tired cyclist trying to hitchhike. It was time to admit defeat. I turned my bike around and headed downhill. I made it back to Nazca where I started my day in only thirty minutes, checked into a hostel and drank Gatorade and water to my body's content. I wasn't going to attempt that again, I had reached my limit.

I still had to make my way up that mountain, but I was not going to get up it by cycling so I had to look for another option. There is a town over the first mountain at around 3300 meters high called Puquio -- it's on the way to Cusco which means buses pass through regularly. After a day of recovery I packed my bike under a bus and headed to the town where I would spend the next few days, getting acclimated to the elevation before continuing my climb upwards to new heights I had previously not reached. I was filled with both excitement and trepidation since the misgivings of my recent failure were ever present in my mind. I had to keep telling myself that it was going to be alright, while not fully buying what I was selling.



Upon leaving the town I was filled with enthusiasm, while the intensity of the incline was similar to when I failed just days prior I now had the benefit of much cooler temperatures so I wouldn't dehydrate from sweating as quickly. I would soon find out though, that the benefit from the cooler temps would be far outweighed by the exhaustion of hauling my loaded touring bike above 4000 meters (13,000') and beyond. I stopped short of my original goal that day to sleep at 4200 meters, my head pounding as I sipped coca tea to help with the altitude sickness.

The following day I went only a short distance to camp near a lake just below 4500 meters knowing my body would need more time to adjust to life at this altitude. Every breath I took felt like I was only using one of my lungs. I spent the day resting by the lake drinking coca tea to help alleviate the headache and lethargy from the lack of oxygen and at night I saw stars and galaxies not seen by my eyes north of the Equator; moments like that remind me why I love adventure cycling and serve as good motivation to endure the hard times. My caution was rewarded by my body soon acclimating to the elevation and beginning to perform athletically again. I felt radiant and like a new woman pushing the boundaries of not only height on this trip but my own perceived notions of what I was capable of. After my false start out of Nazca this was a welcome victory.



For the first time on this trip I had to take a bus because I physically could not accomplish my goal, an experience that shows that I have learned and grown on this adventure. I was not afraid of failure, and because of that I was able to sleep safely knowing I would not have to resort to drinking my own urine again to survive. There was a time when I would have tried to continue on, not wanting to admit defeat out of some misguided self-aggrandizement and personal pride, and would likely have ended up with injury or illness. But after twenty-two thousand kilometers and routine reminders by nature of how small and insignificant I am, the lesson has finally gotten through my skull. Knowing when to stop is not a weakness but a strength.



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And See more of Natalie's adventure here.

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