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The Final Dispatch

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by MACHINES FOR FREEDOM | April 29, 2020 | 6 min read

Two years ago Natalie embarked on a 30,000 mile solo journey from Alaska to Argentina on the Pan American Highway. She is the first trans woman to accomplish such a feat and we are so grateful to have followed her journey throughout the remote and beautiful places around Arctic Alaska, the Cascades and Sierras of the western US, and the mountains and oceans of Central America. In her last essay, we hear all about her final dispatch and the complicated feelings around managing expectations in seeing new places and how it feels to,

finally, reach the end.



I had been dreaming of cycling the Carretera Austral in southern Chile for as long as I had been planning this trip. This road is world famous among the many types of overlanders that exist and I was not immune to its reputation. Stretching from Puerto Montt in the north it meanders for 1,240 kilometers south to Villa O'Higgins through countless valleys and canyons and along fjords inhabited by penguins and other marine life. My first few days were drowned in constant rainfall with temperatures rarely getting above 12°C and the road construction meant that the path was just muddy and slow going. I had begun to fear that this is what my next month would look like; weather similar to the Pacific Northwest without paved roads to make a wet existence palatable. But after my first few days of terrible weather and road conditions what I found was not what I was expecting. The road was paved for over half of its entire length and the weather I had been experiencing every day became more intermittent. What this stretch of my journey was lacking in obstacles it made up for in sheer beauty. Waterfalls abounded in all directions from either the glaciers in the mountains or the high year round precipitation, but in either case potable water was not lacking.



As I pedaled my way south, I began to feel a sense of disappointment with the Austral. In my mind this was a rough and tumble unpaved road from start to finish with a few towns sprinkled in-between but in reality I found a place that while predominantly very rural place where even the smallest kiosco had a credit card reader. I began to resent the fact that this place long regarded as a must travel for its beauty, difficulty, and remoteness was now on its way to being entire paved over, and in a way sterilized, removing much of the sense of adventure I had come to expect. It took me realizing that this place, this road does not exist for the sole pleasure of myself and other overlanders who will only inhabit it for a few short weeks or months. But for the lives and livelihoods of the many people who call this part of Chile their home. Where I once felt annoyed by the ease of travel the new pavement afforded me the locals saw shorter travel times to the next city and potentially lower prices on goods like food.



My feelings toward my time on this road had never quite reached to where my anticipation was. While this part of Patagonia is undeniably gorgeous, seriously one of the most beautiful places on earth, it sadly had to try and distinguish itself from my previous two years of cycling through the Arctic and Sub-Arctic Alaska and Yukon, the Cascades and Sierras of the western US, the mountains and oceans of Central America, and the rest of the Andes Mountains to the north that I had already ridden. If I expected to always see something so new and different wherever I was traveling I would eventually start seeing similarities and become disenchanted and discouraged. I eventually had to start thinking about how I would view and experience the Carretera Austral and Patagonia in general if I was just beginning my trip, what would I be feeling on that person's bike? First and foremost would probably be the awe and wonder of the majesty of the Southern Andes Mountains, followed by the trepidation of embarking on a bike ride this grand and in such a remote place coupled with the joy that just trying brings, and then the freedom to do what you want that I had for so long taken for granted since it had become just a normal part of my everyday life.



By the time I was approaching the end of the road at the ferry docks just south of Villa O'Higgins on one of the northern fingers of Lago O'Higgins I was beginning to realize I was ready to be done. Perhaps because I was losing the sense of wonder and seeing something new, this had been a driving force for so much of my adventure that it was time to finish. Considering I only had just over 1000 kilometers left the timing could not have been better. I still reveled in getting up every day and cycling to a place I had never been, camping wherever I got tired and looking up at the southern stars at night. My longing for something familiar back home was growing more powerful, it had been a year and a half since I had shared a hug with a friend from home and was dreaming of that feeling again.

When I finally was approaching the end, the *Fin del Mundo* sign in Ushuaia, Argentina, my final few days were quite emotional at times. For much of my time in the saddle it felt like any other day, bike for hours on end, eat, drink push harder. But whenever a road sign said the distance to Ushuaia or when I crossed my final border on bike I was reminded of where I was, what I was doing, and how soon I was going to lose it. Feeling a sense of accomplishment but also the dread of what my life will look like in a post Pan American Highway life. My final day was surreal.



For most of my trip the distance to Ushuaia needed five digits, it was strange when it finally dropped to a single one. Cresting the hill and getting my first look at the city of my destination was a moment of joy, but I still had a few kilometers along the shore to go and they were punishing from the sub-Antarctic wind that sapped all joy from me like it was heat escaping my body. When I finally made it to the sign I had expected to be overcome with joy and grief but it just felt like the end of any other day of biking on my trip, except windier. I waited my turn and snapped a few pictures and got a stranger to take one with me and Yonder before hopping back on and riding to a hostel. It all seemed so normal, I was in just another town looking for a warm and dry place to call home for a few days; something I had done countless times over the past two and a half years. I felt cheated in a way, I was expecting to be brought down by so many emotions of what I had just done and accomplished but all I felt was just the desire to be out of the wind.

It wasn't until two nights before my flight home that I finally broke down, when I was walking to the airport to meet two incoming cyclists to pick up one of their bike boxes and duffle bags to ship my stuff home in did it finally sink in that I was done. I spent the six kilometers from my hostel to the arrivals area in a state of sadness and occasional outright sobbing. These tears were a mixture of joy and elation for accomplishing such a grand goal and of sadness and loss of the life I had known for so long. This is what I was expecting to feel four days prior when arrived in town, but it took the finality of picking up the packaging needed to ship my bike home for it to really sink in. This release of emotions was necessary as it would allow me to start processing them and moving forward to my new life, plus I was quite relieved that it didn't happen in a plane full of strangers. I met with Olga and Nicolas to gather the things I came for and wished them well at the start of their own adventure but for me it was over. I can finally rest.



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