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My motorcycle diary: another unexpected homecoming



Seen from the road: Malcolm's photos of sunset in the Atacama Desert, Chile, and the Perito Moreno glacier in Argentina

Having reached Ushuaia and the wind-blown tip of South America I headed north into Patagonia which is split between Chile and Argentina. The weather was cold and wet but the landscape was spectacular, particularly the strikingly beautiful Perito Moreno glacier that descends from its ice field into a great lake, a palette of blue and greenish colours and sounding like a shooting range as it fractures.

Further on I was riding the famous Ruta 40, the bleak and lonely road that cuts across western Argentina and offers

fine views of the Andes and plenty of wildlife. Motorcyclists from around the world were travelling the road and I had many good evenings of conversation and drink.

Chile

I entered Chile at the Los Antiguos border and stayed in chilly cabanas while passing green forests, blue waters and lofty volcanoes. A memorable sight was the wonderful wooden churches in the Chiloé archipelago, commissioned by Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries but built by local carpenters using shipwright joints and

painted in vivid colours.

By now I was on the Pan-American Highway taking me to Santiago. In the 1980s Chile experienced spectacular economic growth and became the richest country in South America; however, the country is now in violent turmoil as young people protest at perceived wealth inequalities and difficulties in getting a good education. Leaving a restaurant one evening I got caught up in a riot and was tear-gassed by police firing gas canisters.

Atacama Desert

Chile is the longest country in the world and it took some time to reach San Pedro and the fearsome Atacama Desert. The desert was surprisingly heterogeneous with rock wasteland, salt flats, wetlands, volcano fields, geysers, wildlife retreats and protected cactus reserves. The purity of air and cloudless skies make it the best place on earth to see the stars and it was unforgettable seeing the Milky Way stretch vertically across the sky like a long arm tattooed with 100 billion stars.

Bolivia

Entering Bolivia the trip began to unravel: local TV announced all the Americas countries were closing their borders due to the coronavirus. Bolivia is the poorest country in South America with basic medical facilities, so I decided to make a dash to La Paz and return home.

It was a difficult journey due to altitude sickness, armed military checkpoints and a country-wide night-time curfew which, coupled with long days in the saddle and long queues for vital fuel, meant not eating for three days. Gustavo, a Bolivian motorcyclist I met on the road, organised an air ticket on the last flight to London and agreed to store my Triumph. A good guy.

Malcolm Dunkeld, of Leslie Road, N2, had to cut short his first attempt to ride round the world by motorbike when he was injured in the Australian outback. Setting off again over a year later to complete the South American leg, he couldn't predict that it would be Covid-19 forcing him home this time.



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Off the shelf: Helen Durden stocks up her community library.

Bring a book, take a book

A community library set up by book lover Helen Durden in her front garden in Creighton Avenue, close to Coldfall Wood, has become a hubbub of local activity and for many a highlight of their daily exercise.

Helen's husband Nicholas built the freestanding cabinet more than a year ago but it has really come into its own during the lockdown, with passers-by bringing books and browsing before leaving with a new title to read at home.

Children's books are among the quickest to go so there is always demand for more of them. Otherwise Helen's library has a range of genres and languages – and the beauty is that the selection is changing all the time.

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