



South America 101

## Experience: Biking Ecuador's Mount Cotopaxi

Words: Daniel Allen

72

"Remember," says Dutchman Jan Lescrauwaet, eyeing up the expensive camera hanging round my neck. "Please use the back brake first. Your head might be tough but your gear looks a little on the fragile side. We don't have a first aid kit for cameras."

It's early morning and we're at 15,000ft, on one rust-coloured flank of Cotopaxi, an active volcano 40 miles south of the Ecuadorean capital Quito. It's bitterly cold, it's windy, and I can't remember if my travel insurance has expired. Sitting on a rudimentary Trek mountain bike I'm about to drop 8,000ft in 20 miles.

"Don't worry," says Jan with a grin. "The steepest part of the ride is right at the beginning. If you're going to crash, at least you get it out of the way quickly.

You see those horses way, way down there. I'll see you there in about 10 minutes."

Taking shelter behind his Land Cruiser, my fellow bikers don helmets and gloves. Jan, who founded Ecuador's first mountain biking outfit — the Biking Dutchman — more than 20 years ago, hands out plastic mugs filled with piping hot ginger tea. "A spot of Dutch courage to counter the altitude," he explains with a wink, before tucking his trousers into his socks.

Then we're off. Pack leaders are soon barrelling down the steep and pockmarked track of volcanic dirt, throwing up clouds of dust as they skid round hairpin turns. I hang back with the more cautious peloton, riding in a vain and somewhat risky attempt to shoot photos.

Soon everyone's speed has picked up as riders push their bikes and reaction times to the limit. Above us the fast-moving cloud breaks to reveal Cotopaxi's snow-clad summit, topping out at over 19,000ft, while lava canyons and scrubby grassland fly past in a blur. The scenery is literally breathtaking.

All too soon I'm pulling up to the rest of the stationary group, hovering beside a group of wild horses grazing the alpine tundra. Bringing up the rear Jan has suffered a puncture, but bikes and bikers are otherwise in good shape. The air is still cold and thin, but we're supercharged on an adrenalin-fuelled cocktail of excitement, relief and anticipation. It's going to be great day in the saddle. [bikingdutchman.com](http://bikingdutchman.com)



IMAGES: DANIEL ALLEN

Opposite: Taking a break from biking Mount Cotopaxi. From Top: Wild horses graze the slopes of Mount Cotopaxi; dramatic scenery along the route

## Expeditions

### 73 The 'other Machu Picchu' PERU

Four times the size of Machu Picchu and far less visited, the Inca city of Choquequirao sits on a remote ridge in the southern Peruvian Andes. It's believed to be the last city the Incas took refuge in when fleeing the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century. Expeditions to the site are demanding, but rewards high. [choquequiraotrail.com](http://choquequiraotrail.com)

### 74 Travesias CHILE

Santiago-based travel company Explora has been offering its 'travesias' expeditions since 2005. The emphasis here is firmly nomadic, with small, guided groups making fully supported journeys through remote areas of northern and southern Chile. High altitude travesias in the Atacama and Bolivian plateaux are particularly spectacular. [explora.com](http://explora.com)

### 75 Ritacuba Blanco COLOMBIA

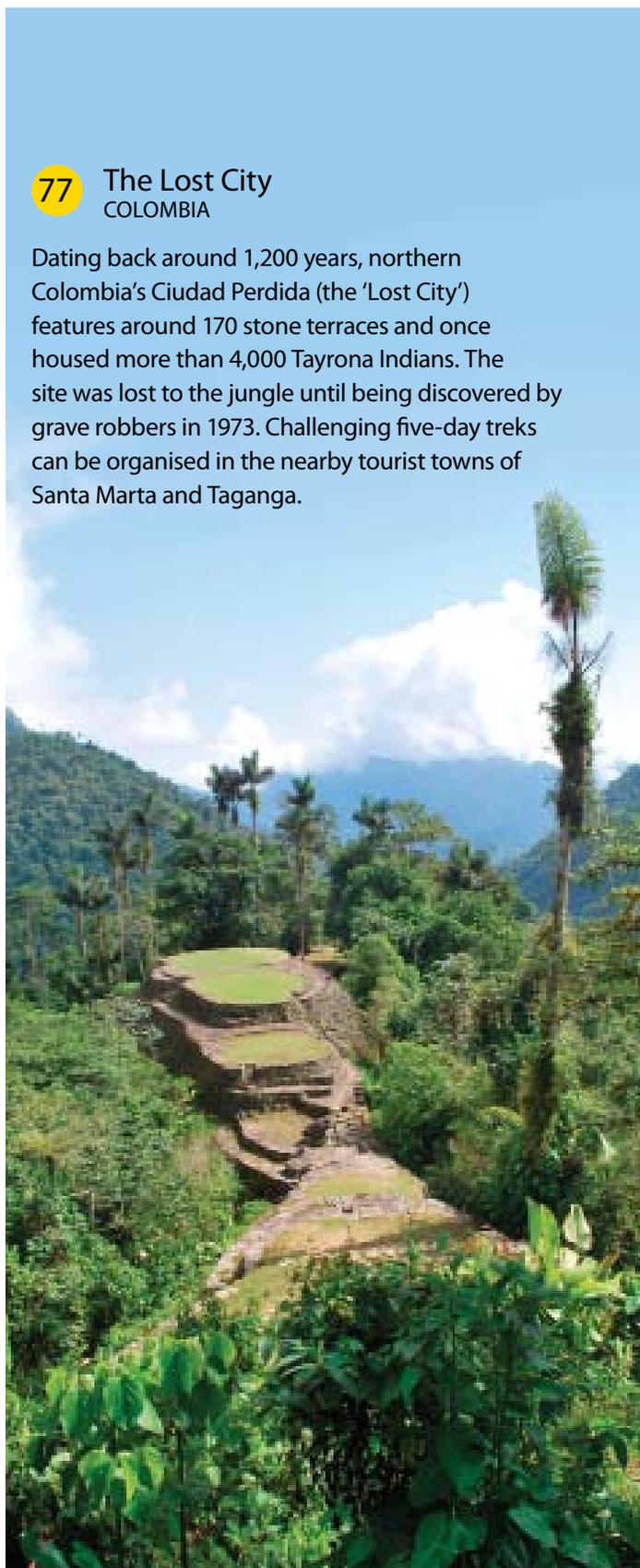
Located in the northeastern Andes, it's the highest peak in the Cordillera Oriental at 17,750ft, and although a non-technical ascent, it's a tough mountain trek taking around five days. You'll pass azure lakes and spectacular valleys before donning crampons to tackle its glacier, expected to melt and disappear by 2025.

### 76 Yungas Road BOLIVIA

Cycle the world's most dangerous road, descending more than 11,800ft over 40 miles, from snowy peaks near La Paz, to the steamy Amazon jungle. With perilous hairpin bends and sheer drops, it's not for the faint-hearted. But those who take on the challenge are rewarded with magnificent views.

### 77 The Lost City COLOMBIA

Dating back around 1,200 years, northern Colombia's Ciudad Perdida (the 'Lost City') features around 170 stone terraces and once housed more than 4,000 Tayrona Indians. The site was lost to the jungle until being discovered by grave robbers in 1973. Challenging five-day treks can be organised in the nearby tourist towns of Santa Marta and Taganga.



WORDS: DANIEL ALLEN. IMAGE: ALAMY