BOLIVIA

WHERE EAGLES DARE NO MORE
David Vincent

For years I had been telling myself that when I had more time and money I would go and ski somewhere really adventurous. The region that always intrigued me most was South America. Now that finally I have the opportunity though the prospect looks less enticing - there has quite literally been a 'change in climate':

Bolivia's only official ski resort has been lost, because the Chacaltaya Glacier has melted. The glorious structure that sits strikingly atop a jutting pinnacle poised above the city of La Paz and its sprawling shanty town neighbour of El Alto is an ironic reminder of man's futile quest to tame nature.

The altiplana from which the Andean mountains rise is a flat plateau 4000m above sea level and has been the home of the Aymara, the main ethnic group in Bolivia, for centuries. The one crucial factor in their survival on this barren and desolate landscape has been the meltwater from the glaciers of the high Andean peaks, which also provides all the drinking water and sanitation for La Paz/El Alto and other major cities below. Now that the glaciers have gone, so too has the prospect of meltwater to grow their crops and water for their livestock. When I last visited in July 2012 there was no snow on the altiplana at all and I was told there had not been any for at least six years. Only a decade or so ago, the altiplana was covered in snow all winter long.

As a result thousands of communities across the altiplana have been forced to abandon their settlements and either seek new land to settle and farm or just give up and join the growing masses of destitute in El Alto below. For those that wish to continue farming, the tumultuous and unstable terrain of the montane regions immediately beneath the altiplana is impossible to tame - as anyone who is brave enough to travel the infamous 'Road of Death' of the Yungas region will testify.

So they move on down to the first flat land available - the edge of the Amazon basin. Here, thousands of communes have settled and helped each other clear the land in the only way they can without money or tools - 'slash and burn'. Having cleared the land with fire the soil is already depleted of nutrients for their crops, such as rice, which are unsuitable for the conditions and quickly drain any remaining nutrients from the already depleted soil.

The huge areas of new open land heat up more quickly in the tropical sun, compacting the soil and leading to violent rain storms, which then erode the water courses and further leech the soil - all of which contributes again to a vicious cycle of further slash and burn clearance. Further damage is caused to this vitally important ecosystem through the loss of biodiversity.

Reducing our own carbon footprint means that such damage can be limited to a degree. However, if we are not prepared to give up completely the sport we love, it is inevitable that our indulgences will impact negatively on those less fortunate. I believe strongly that, if we choose to tour and explore, the very least we can do is to make an effort to reduce our impact as far as possible and to make a small gesture to repair some of the damage we cause.

A flight to the Alps and back will generate about half a tonne of CO_2, the west coast of the USA/Canada ten times this amount. A helicopter flight (Bell 206 L4) generates 1 tonne per person every 20km - more than a Bolivian farmer's family generate in a whole year! We can all choose not to fly to the Alps and use less harmful means of transport. A more difficult decision is whether to take that long haul trip, which can't be done any other way.

My way of paying back my debt is to help these migrant communities in the Bolivian tropics to reduce the impact they have on the rainforest. By paying them to plant and maintain native trees on areas within their smallholdings and providing them with

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