After almost 2 years of preparation, finally boarding the plane to Mexico City to begin our ride was a relief. Although we knew there were still 101 extra ways we could have better prepared ourselves for the expedition, it felt good to know we were at last on our way. In retrospect, no amount of UK-based planning could have prepared us for the physical, cultural and logistical challenges the next 6 months would throw at us. While it is simply not possible to provide a comprehensive review of everything we experienced on the roads of Latin America, we hope to provide a document capable of providing some insight into our travels. This report, much like the expedition itself, will be split into two halves. The first section will describe our experiences in Central America, and the second will consider South America.

Central America

Physical challenges
Our ride through Central America took through the countries of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Although we encountered a range of environments, including jungle, desert and plains, the constant feature of Central America was the heat. While brief stints above 2000m in Mexico and Guatemala provided some relief from soaring temperatures, the combination of the intense heat and tropical humidity was draining. For a 3 week period in the Yucatan, Mexico, the effective temperature (which takes into account air temperature, wind and humidity) exceeded 45°C. This made riding tough. We adjusted to this by beginning each day early, and where possible we rested during the hottest part of the day. Despite this, staying sufficiently hydrated was a constant struggle and the heat meant that sleeping in the tent was extremely difficult. There was often a choice to be made: stay in the tent and be too hot and sweaty to sleep, or sleep outside the tent, where the air is slightly cooler, but risk bites from a range of local fauna.

Logistical challenges
The second challenge we faced in Central America was logistical in nature. Central America is quite densely populated, and from a safety perspective it is not advisable to be on the road after dark. This meant our wild camping options were severely limited. Neither our budget nor our route allowed for the regular use of hostels, so the solution was to ask people if we could sleep in their gardens. Although a
little daunting at first, this turned out to be a massive highlight of the trip. We found people to be extremely welcoming, especially in Mexico, and we would often spend the evening chatting and eating with families. Together with riding through its landscapes, this gave us a real sense of a country, which it isn't possible to gain when travelling by car and staying in hotels. We felt incredibly honoured and humbled by the hospitality we were afforded, often by families who would be classed as extremely poor by Western standards.

We also made use of the Warm Showers cycle hospitality network. Using a model similar to Couch Surfing, Warm Showers provides accommodation specifically to travelling cyclists. Fortunately, Central America is well represented on Warm Showers. We met a wide range of people, from retired Americans in Mexico to forest rangers in Costa Rica. While the standard of accommodation varied wildly, the warmth of the welcome was constant. Meeting fellow cyclists in this way was another highlight of our trip.

**Geography**

The geography of Central America was very varied. We rode through the Sierra Madre mountain range, the Oaxacan dessert, the jungles of Chiapas and the plains of the Yucatan. Travelling by bike allowed a sense of great connection to the environment, and we thoroughly enjoyed watching the surroundings change from one area to another. We were lucky enough to be given some excellent route advice along the way, and often changed our plans based on the advice we received. This allowed us to travel by quieter, more cycle-friendly roads, and to visit sites such as the remote hidden cenotes of the Yucatan that we would otherwise have missed. A consequence was that we took a route which was considerably less direct, which ultimately lead to the tough decision to fly from Costa Rica to Peru, rather than Ecuador, in a bid to make up lost time.

Central America was extremely challenging, mainly due to the intense heat and lack of opportunity to wild camp. However, these issues were dwarfed by the beauty of the region and its people.

**South America**

**Physical challenges**

Thankfully, the air following our half-way flight between Costa Rica and Peru was generally cooler. That didn't, however, mean that the cycling would be any easier. Within a day of leaving Lima, we were back into a desert. Initially spectacular, the monotony of the straight roads and lack of shelter from the sun were tough. Towns
were so far apart that carrying enough water was a challenge, and at one point we had to hitch a ride as strong headwinds meant we ran out of water long before reaching a town.

The second challenge the South American continent provided came with the Andes. While we had no significant problems climbing the 4000m to the Altiplano, once there, the UV exposure was dangerously high and we often suffered burns - even through several layers of clothing.

Logistical challenges

The logistical problems encountered in South America concerned our equipment. Whilst in Peru our stove broke, and spare parts sent by manufacturers MSR failed to successfully navigate customs. We were unable to find a replacement until we reached Argentina, which meant that we had to eat in local cafes each evening. Although this wasn't a problem financially (a filling meal cost around £1), it did restrict our movements slightly.

We also encountered a few problems with our bikes in Chilean Patagonia. The breath-taking Carretera Austral was unpaved, and the rocky surface caused our rear pannier racks to break. Thankfully, our roadside fixing job using cable ties and gaffer tape held up and made it to Ushuaia. We will certainly invest in better quality racks for future tours.

Geography

Nothing could have prepared us for the geography we encountered in South America. The deserts of Peru, the spectacular Andes, the pampas of Argentina and the remote wilderness of Chilean Patagonia will be etched in our memories for a long time.

Perhaps the most striking area was Chilean Patagonia. There exists only one road South, which is unpaved and broken up every few hundred kilometres by frontier towns. It is one of the last few places on earth where all the rivers and lakes are clean enough to drink from without purification. During our time cycling this region we heard about plans for the Aysen Hydro Dam – five large hydroelectric dams on this wildernesses glacial rivers to ease an energy shortage that has been threatening the country. Not only would this obstruct natural water-ways, but the industrialization would call for the road to be paved and this region made accessible to further extractive industries and multinational corporations. Thankfully, a decade-long battle against the project was won but a new battle is emerging, to block another smaller energy project on the Cuervo River.

Cultures encountered
One of the reasons we chose to complete a tour of South America on bicycle was because of the diverse array of cultures found between countries. This was not only interesting but eye opening as this type of nomadic travel immersed us in regions and cultures that we were previously unaware of. A notable mention should be made of Mexico where we encountered some of the kindest acts of hospitality received on the expedition, more often from families who had very little. They were the most welcoming nation and we felt very safe here in contrast to many generic assumptions from the West.

We discovered many large indigenous populations from the Mayans of Guatemala to the Aymara and Quechuans of Bolivia. Whilst cycling through Bolivia, we also witnessed the re-election of President Evo Morales - a result of his extraordinary socio-economic reforms that has seen a huge reduction in poverty and better indigenous rights, although the country still has a long way to go.

In Belize and Argentina we encountered communities of Mennonite Germans, many still abstaining from mechanistic society. Interestingly in Belize they appeared to be the second biggest generator of GDP next to tourism due to their agricultural reform of the country.

**Conclusion**

Following our expedition, we would unreservedly recommend both Latin America and cycle touring as an area and a means to explore. We could have prepared more (although the demands of completing a BA and a PhD were substantial), but ultimately it is simply not possible to ever be fully prepared for a trip such as this. Even if were possible, to do so would be to detract from the spirit of adventure. We hope that this expedition will serve as a springboard for further adventures in our lives, and provide us with the confidence and self-assurance to take on more ambitious challenges.