

A Devil of a Gorge

Word count: 1129

Next to an arrow pointing off the map is 'Quebrada Del Diablo - 8km'. I don't actually know what is there but a guidebook stated it was a good bike ride. The tourist information office only has Spanish speakers, so I can't ask them. With an afternoon trip to Moon Valley organised and having already walked the few streets of San Pedro de Atacama several times, I have a morning to fill in. I feel the need for a bit of exercise and figure it should only take about forty minutes to cycle. How wrong I was.

Hiring a bike for half a day, I hit the smooth dirt road out of town which turns rocky with potholes not too far out. I bump and weave between them. With no traffic it's around ten minutes before I remember that I should be on the right hand side of the road. It's flat. I would've seen anything coming.

Three kilometres out, I stop at Pukara De Quitur ruins. The red rock walls built by Inca on a rocky slope aren't particularly interesting and the information signs are translated into very bad and confusing English. I decide to check out El Mirador.

Under a blazing sun, I trudge the shadeless, rocky, 1¼ kilometre zigzagging path up to the lookout. What a view! On the vast brown plain it's surprising to see San Pedro de Atacama is a small green oasis, looking cool and inviting. Having sweltered in its dusty streets I hadn't noticed much greenery. Distant volcanoes and mountains jut across the horizon and northwards, rocky mountains roll and ripple like red muddy water, some

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thrusting sideways like an earthquake has tipped them. Strata resemble swirled rows of piped icing. I wipe sweat from my forehead, take a drink and chew on a sesame seed bar. It's tasteless, and dry like the surroundings.

Back at the entrance, I point to the words Quebrada Del Diablo on the map. The guide points over the river

The road I take runs alongside Rio San Pedro, more a trickle than a river. Sparse grass and weeds grow across the valley before giving up where red and brown hills rise. On my right, rust-coloured cliffs, like mini skyscrapers, highlight the intensely blue sky. There's no shade. Except for one passing car which throws up dust, there's no sign of life. I stop at a sign. No mention of Quebrada Del Diablo.

I pedal slowly. The valley widens. There's little sign of anybody living out here except for a couple of simple mud-brick homes over the riverbed. I'm surprised to see something so basic considering San Pedro de Atacama, although traditional looking, has hip restaurants and quite a thriving tourist industry. Further on hedges appear, corn crops, trees and the odd, one-level distant building. By now, I should've reached my destination. Despite the breeze from cycling, the heat is relentless. I'm ready to turn back but I hate giving up... Maybe it's just around the next bend...

Behind a hedge, I spot a wide-brimmed hat. I brake. "Hola!"

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A man appears, tanned and weathered, his dark eyes peer at the map I pull from my backpack. “Quebrada Del Diablo?” I shrug at his reply. “Inglés?”

He points back the way I’ve ridden.

There’s been one road!

“Mucho gracias.” I turn the bike around.

Twentyish minutes later I spot two bits of weathered wood about five centimetres wide nailed to a dead tree alongside a bushier one. They form a mini roundabout in a jumble of wide dirt trails off the road. I’d noticed the sign before but thought a sight printed on a map would merit something larger... I ride closer. Black lettering states ‘QDA. del DIABLO’.

Three of the five hours I’ve hired the bike for have gone. I get going. There are a couple of tracks in the general direction the sign points. I ride the most traveled, a straight dirt road lined with spindly trees heading towards pinkish red cliffs that look like they may topple.

The road becomes a sandy trail two or so metres wide as I enter what is like a canyon. My tyres traveling over sand sprinkled rocks and occasional backpedaling are the only sound. The trail twists and turns narrowing to half a metre where towering rock faces

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close in. Sometimes it's more open but sheer rock walls still surround. Hitting deep sand abruptly halts my wheels. I nearly fly off the bike several times.

Great boulders teeter at height, others have fallen. Above, sky and wispy white cloud are the only sign of the outside world. Water must have once roared through here, maybe it still does in winter. I ride underneath overhanging rocks, some almost forming tunnels and defying gravity. Their darkness is uninviting, but cool. It's tortuously hot.

I turn a corner. "Wow!"

Massive boulders lean precariously.

Occasionally I dismount to haul the bike over rocks. Sweat trickles down my front, my back's drenched, I taste salt on my lips. Apart from two bikers going in the opposite direction - whom I don't bother asking about Quebrada del Diablo, they speak a foreign language - I've seen no living thing. Not even an ant.

Sometimes there are several tracks. I stay on the most well-worn.

Forty five minutes have passed when the trail in the bottom of the gorge peters out.

Whitish tracks travel in all directions up brown, dusty, steep rock. There's about an inch of water in my bottle. I need lots more. Hoping for a view of elusive Quebrada del diablo, I take a high track and ride until my leg muscles burn. I ditch the bike and walk.

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The world could have ended, it's so still. From the top there's nothing except unending rock cliffs, like a rough brown ocean.

Is it just a little further on...?

“Turn back you idiot,” I say out loud, just to hear a voice and wonder what I'll never see looks like.

The only recognisable part on the return journey is an overhanging rock. I battle with the bike to get it down rocks through a narrow gap. I don't remember that part on the way out. I worry. Should have left markings ...

Forty five minutes have passed since turning back. Had I taken a wrong trail?

And then I breathe a huge sigh of relief and grin. Ahead is the straight road lined with spindly green trees. It's like spotting home after time away. Drinking my last drops of water I ride wearily towards civilisation.

Searching later on the internet for Quebrada del Diablo, nothing much comes up, but it translates as Broken Devil's Gorge. I guess what I'd ridden was Quebrada del Diablo, hell in the heat but it hadn't broken me.