

Sweet Sixteen

30 July 2008

The air was so thin our breaths came in deep, raspy gasps.

The wind whipped us with frigid blasts direct from Antarctica.

The sun was setting.

We knew then we left our base camp too late.

We'd already climbed thousands of feet but were short of our goal.

We were running out of light and were still not there.

Then Steph started having chest pain and difficulty breathing. My first thought was high altitude pulmonary edema, but I didn't say so.

We pushed on, knowing the route ahead offered a quicker route down than turning around.

No matter what, she would have to endure more elevation before I could get her back down into the oxygen.

Every time we thought we were there we turned and there was more - more to climb, more to endure.

Onward, upward, we had to push ahead.

Steph looked at me and said, "I need to get down, I've got to get down."

We were already higher than our campmates thought we would go, or even could go that day.

We climbed past the snow line, past the ice falls, we were amongst the glaciers.

We were close, I could feel it. Just a little more. Just one more push, one more turn, one more climb.

And then we were there.

We looked at the peaks of the Andes surrounding us. We weren't looking up at them - we were looking out at them, across at them, and in some cases, down at them.

We were at 16,035 feet / 4,887 meters.

Our first sweet sixteen.

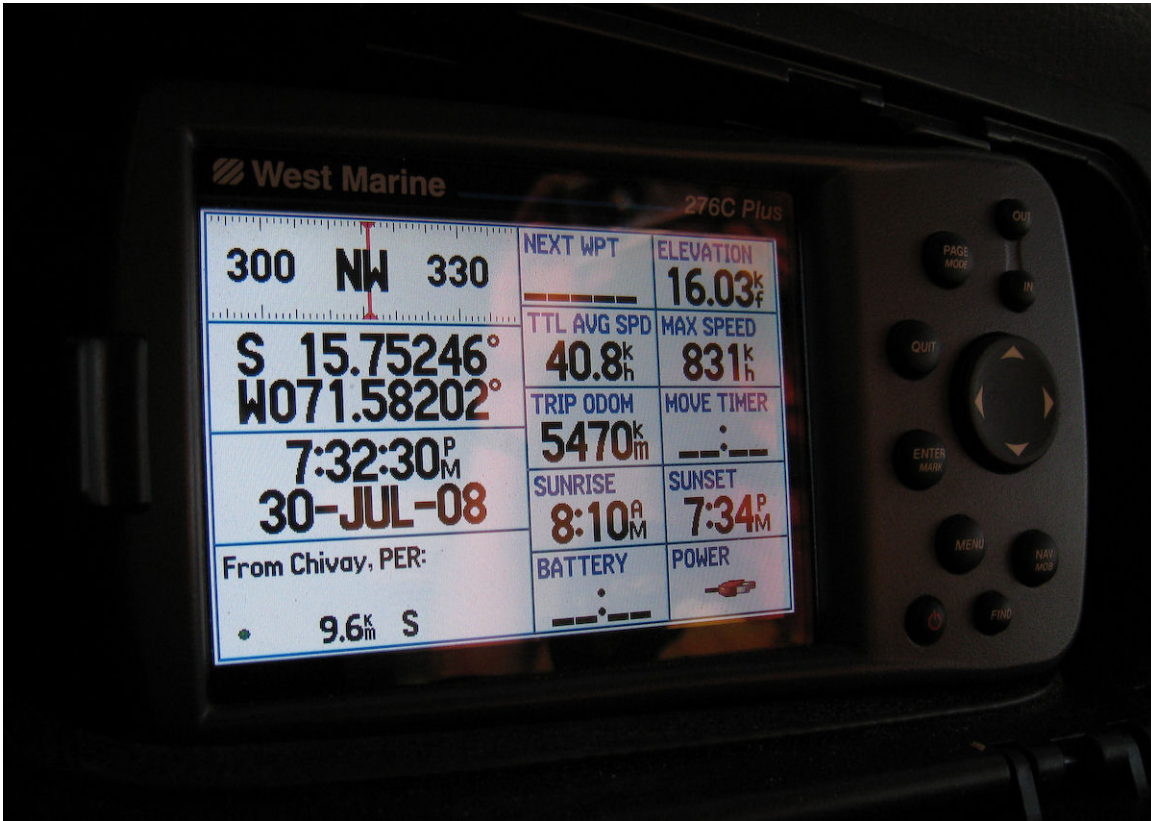
We looked at each other, amazed.

Steph smiled and I smiled back.

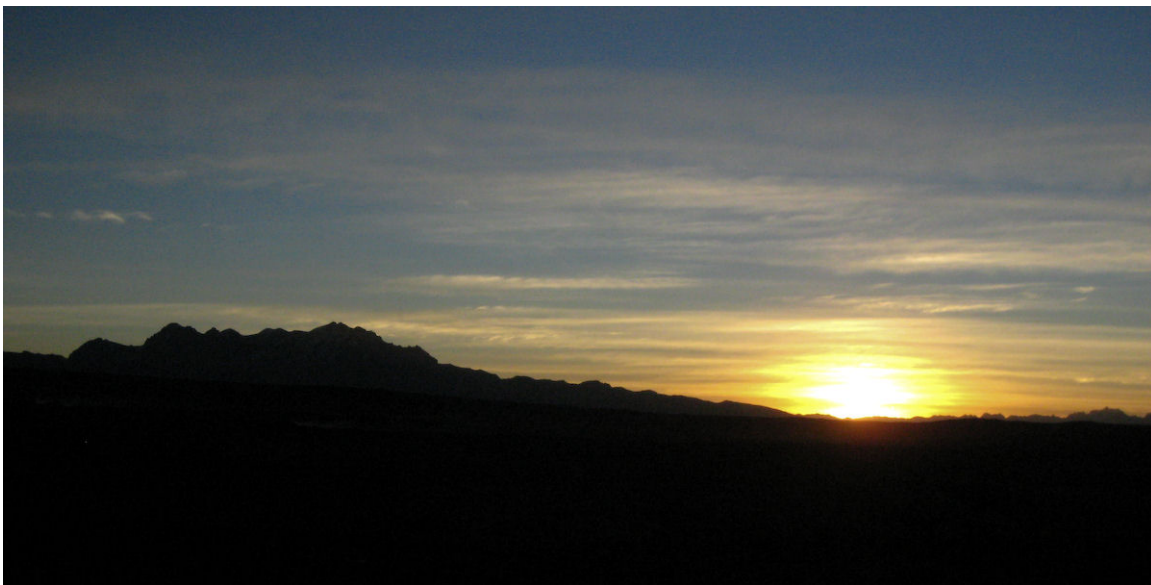
Then we did what everyone does at their first sweet sixteen.

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First, we recorded our accomplishment for posterity.



Then we looked across at the Andes and admired the sunset.

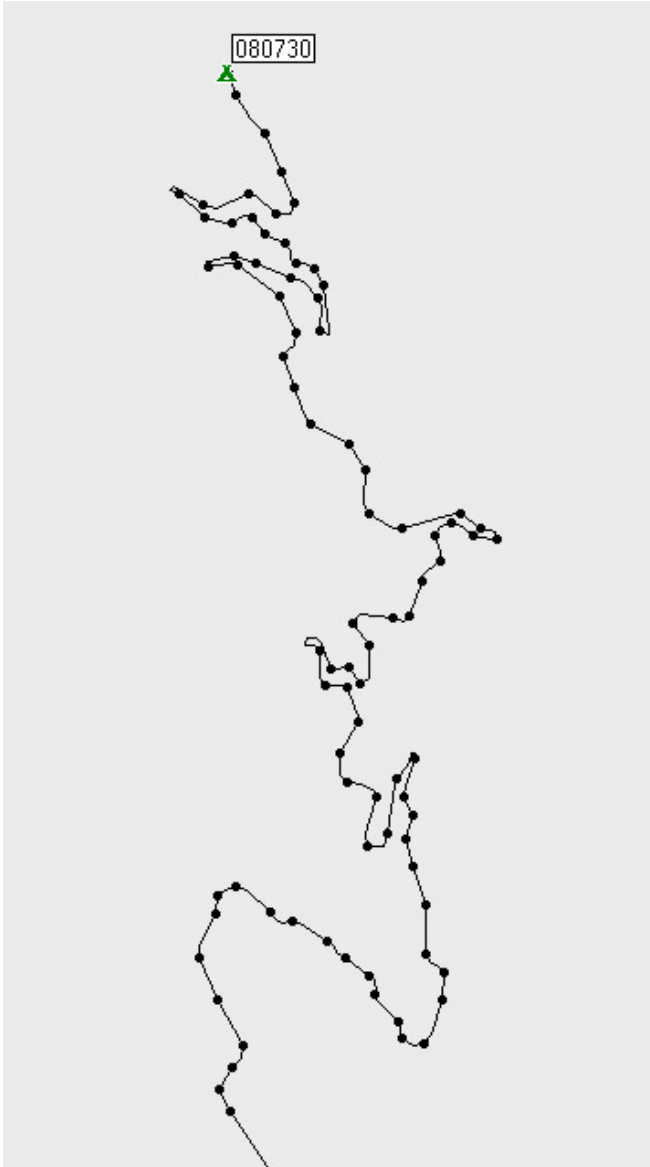


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After that we spent 49 minutes descending 4,095 feet / 1,248 meters over the next 17 miles / 27.4 kilometers of tight switchbacks and very steep grades.

In the dark.

We used all of our lights.



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Finally, we parked in front of the police station at the bottom of the grade, just outside of Chivay, gateway to Colca Canyon, and enjoyed some of Steph's favorite comfort food as a reward.



There's nothing like Mac 'n Cheese to celebrate your first sweet sixteen.

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High altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) is a life-threatening form of non-cardiogenic pulmonary edema that occurs in otherwise healthy people at altitudes above 2,500 meters (8,200 feet).

Colca Canyon is 100 km / 62 miles long, and ranges from 1,000 meters / 3,281 feet to more than 3,191 meters / 10,469 feet deep, more than twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. While conditions are often frigid at the rim, the base of the canyon can be tropical, including palm trees and orchids. The canyon surrounds Chivay, Peru.

The view from the pass into Colca Canyon includes more than 50 peaks of the Andes, some among the highest.

Our base camp was at 7,593 feet / 2,314 meters. Our highest elevation of the day was 16,035 feet / 4,887 meters at the pass. Our camp that night was at 11,940 feet / 3,639 meters.

All photos by Douglas Hackney



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>