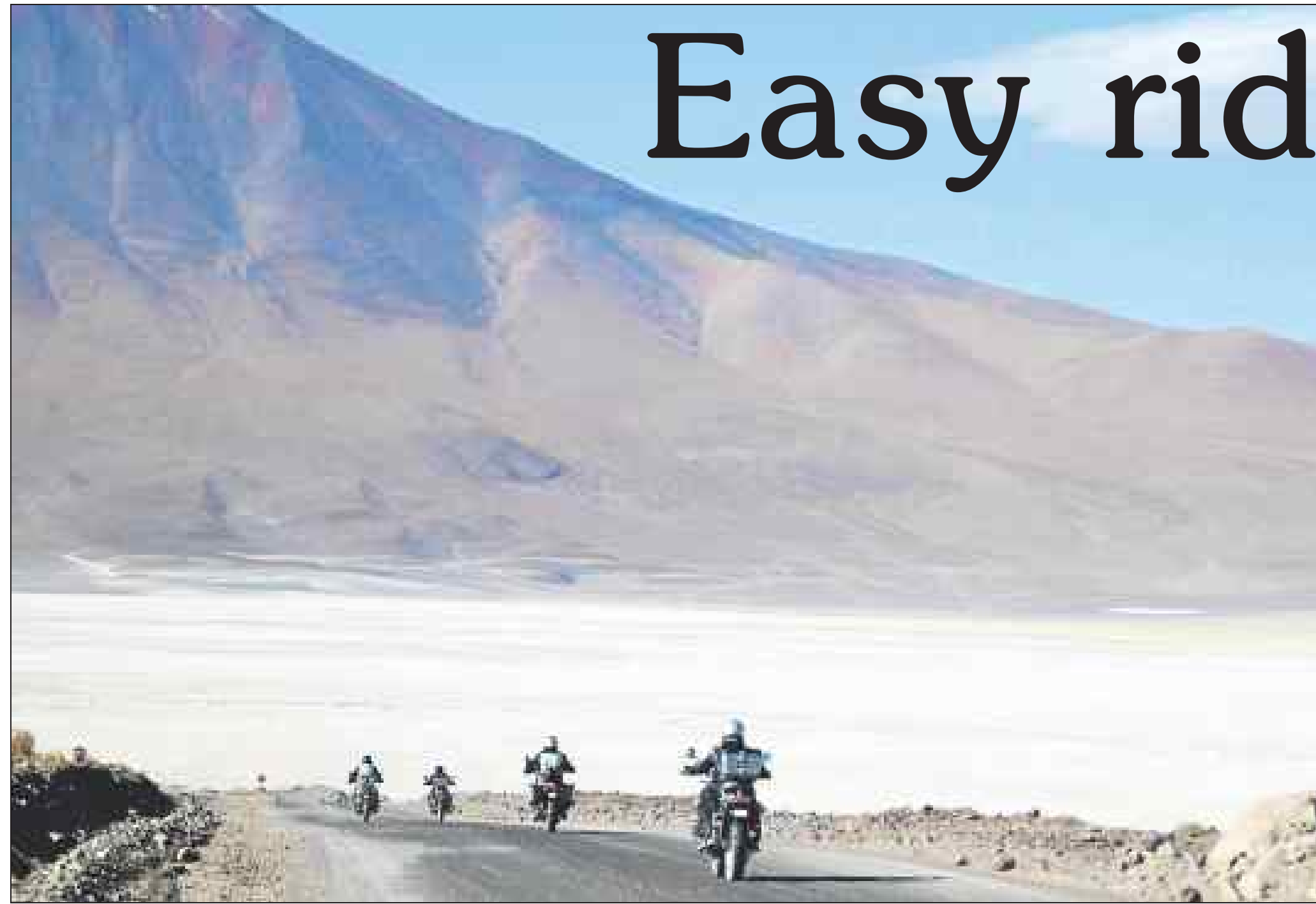
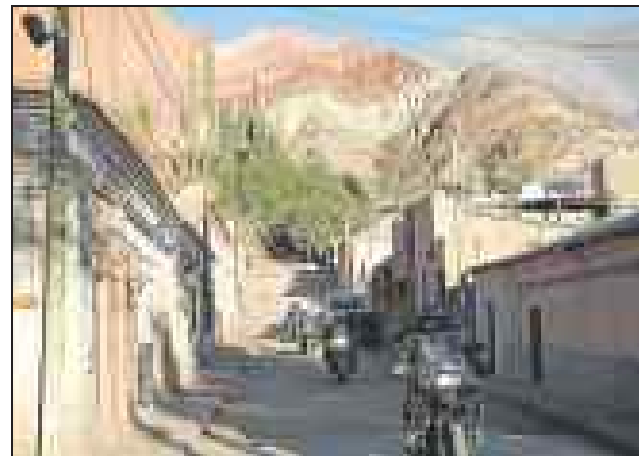


South America is a diverse and beautiful continent, and there's no better way to explore it than on the back of a bike

Easy riding, amigos



The long and winding road . . . South America Motorbike Tours take clients on an expedition through the breathtaking landscape of the continent — from the Atacama Desert to the many small villages scattered throughout the journey.



A unique corner of the world deserves a different way of looking at things, writes **DAVID SCOTT**.

SOME trips sound too good to be true. Imagine, for example, riding a motorbike through South America like Che Guevara. Imagine the improbability of your next-door neighbours in Northern Tasmania doing it.

Or the unlikelihood of their trip being organised by a former Prospect High School student who married a Latin American beauty and made his home in Santiago.

But that's exactly what's happening. Next year, a group of hardy Tasmanians will fly to South America and be sent on their merry, two-wheeled way by Tasmanian John Wells, 43.

Wells went west as a young man (21 actually), to chase his fortune in the mining industry.

His journey led many places but most recently to the establishment of South America Motorbike Tours in Chile.

"Interestingly enough, we received a first group booking (a party of 10) from Launceston last week," Wells said.

This group of intrepid Launcestonians have customised a trip to ride through Bolivia and Peru over 23 days in July next year.

But Wells often takes clients further afield, covering the continent's signature attractions such as Patagonia in southern Chile and Argentina, the Atacama Desert in the north, the indigenous highlands of Bolivia and the ancient Incan world of Peru.

Wells describes South America as "just as safe as Tasmania" and varies the level of support to the needs of his tourists.

"We provide a secure environment, with support vehicle, with language, luxury accommodation. An adventure during the day but at night-time you have a chance to relax and enjoy," he said.

Bikes are fitted with a GPS so that riders can travel unguided but have the feeling that they will not disappear if something goes wrong.

"We've got their backs covered," Wells said. The GPS tracking enables people within the same group to travel at different speeds. They agree to rendezvous later that day and others can travel at their own pace or come along in the support vehicle.

"I left Australia when I was 26, 27, lived in England for a fair while and met my wife in Argentina 18 years ago. I lived here (Santiago) for a while — I was in the mining industry in Latin America, that's how we ended up here — then we said let's do what we really want to do; what we're really passionate about. That's why we got into this motorbike thing."

The relocation of the Paris-Dakar Rally to



South America gave a boost to their business early this year with Australians coming across to follow the event. The Dakar Rally is again in South America in January next year. "We've got guys from Brazil coming in, from the US and Australia," Wells said.

Most of the tours go for 15 days and Wells encourages people to bring their partners.

"The idea of what we do is that you land in Santiago, Chile, and you don't have to worry about a thing from when you arrive to when you leave.

"There's a lot of concern, fear of the unknown, about South America, about language and security and believe me, Latin America is as safe as Tasmania these days.

"It's a fantastic place.

"What we try to do is give them the adventure but also in a secure environment. We encourage them to bring their partner. And generally, those kind of once-in-a-lifetime experiences you want to share with your partner anyway."

"Maybe the ladies don't tend to rough it as much as the guys so we cater for them and make sure the places we stay in the evening are top-notch . . . lodges, exclusive boutiques, spas, thermals springs. And if they don't want to be on the back of the bike all day they can go in the support vehicle."

● A 15-day Altiplano tour through Chile, Bolivia and Peru costs \$US7532 (\$8190) a rider or \$US2906 (\$3100) a pillion/support vehicle passenger.

For more information, go to www.samtours.com

JOURNEYMAN
By **DAVID SCOTT**

From fox sceptic to true believer

Q: What's tourism got to do with foxes?

A: Everything.

TASMANIA attracts one million visitors a year and one of our best drawcards is the environment.

We've preserved a higher proportion of our state than anywhere in Australia and our bush is full of critters.

Up until a couple of months ago I was a lazy fox sceptic.

Lazy, because I was happy to go along with the notion that the Fox Taskforce was a self-perpetuating waste of money, finding just enough fox poo to justify the existence of both the fox and the taskforce.

Surely they could have found a few foxes if they were here. Show me the fox or show me the money.

But the fox taskforce has found foxes.

So, to be a fox sceptic, you have to believe that grant-hungry government types have planted carcasses with a few days' worth of Tasmanian bush tucker in their guts.

Fox Eradication Program manager Alan Johnson told The Examiner's Pip Lees in July this year that the evidence of foxes in the state was reliable.

"We believe there is overwhelming evidence to indicate there is a fox population in Tasmania. There is no doubt that if they become established they will have adverse impacts on the environment," he said.

Start chewing through our loveable little bandicoots and birds and you start chewing through the tourism appeal of our environment.

We've lost the thylacine; the devil is fighting a losing battle against cancer, the last thing we need is a breeding population of foxes.

I recently took the family to devils@cradle, a sanctuary on the road into the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park.

The guide was both frustrated and more than a little gobsmacked that Tasmanians were in denial about foxes. The evidence confirmed their presence, 100 per cent, he said.

Similarly, when The Examiner went bush to trap devils with University of Tasmania doctoral researcher Rodrigo Hamede this month, the topic of foxes arose.

"They pose the biggest threat to Tasmanian biota ever," Mr Hamede said.

"The problem is that the fox is incredibly clever, even cryptic, you can't trap them. You see them only occasionally on the mainland and there are hundreds of thousands of them there."

Mr Hamede said DNA tests of carcasses by independent laboratories proved (again 100 per cent) that foxes were present in Tasmania.

So are they already breeding in Tasmania?

"Don't wait until you find that answer. If you don't do something now it is irresponsible. It's a tragedy that this has become a political issue," he said.

So my journey was this: from lazy sceptic to fox believer in two conversations.

Filling the tourism gap

TRAVELPOINT Holidays has moved into the void left by the closure of Launceston-based Tasmania's Temptations. Last week the 2010-11 Travelpoint Holidays Tasmania brochure was launched in Hobart.

Andrew Burnes, chief executive of Travelpoint parent company AOT Group, said the brochure was "a direct response to the needs of Tasmanian tourism operators and requests of Australian travel agents".

"We brought the release date of our 2010-11 Tasmania brochure forward to November 2009 as we knew that many of the Tasmanian tourism suppliers were left high and dry when Tassie Temps ceased trading and our agent partners were looking for a central base for their customers inquiries," Mr Burnes said.



Gabriela waits on the river barge near Santa Cruz on the Jesuit circuit.

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT . . .



Q: You emphasise the safety side of the experience but you must have had some hairy moments. Can you tell us your scariest moment?

ONE of the hairiest moments I have had was actually while Gabriela and I were on a scouting mission in Bolivia. By "scouting" I mean defining a new route for one of our tours.

We were just outside of the city, Santa Cruz, and we wanted to ride the Jesuit circuit, but to do so we first had to cross the river on a barge.

After spending five days following the trail of the Jesuits and visiting the numerous missions they left behind,

we attempted to cross back over the river by the same means, but were told that due to the recent rains, the river level was too high and too fast-moving for the barge so we would have to wait about a week until it subsided.

As our intention was to continue moving north, we had to cross the river and waiting for a week didn't seem like an option.

After a lengthy discussion with the barge operators, they finally told us that we may be able to cross via a railway bridge which was about 200 kilometres from our current location.

Upon arriving at the bridge, there were about 200 other cars waiting to cross.

I didn't notice until after I had ridden across the bridge, but there

were no other motorcycles waiting to cross.

We arrived just as the cars were beginning to move, so we did what all motorcycles do, and pushed in at the front of the line (which was my first mistake).

It only took me about two seconds to realise I was in trouble.

Once I was on the bridge there was no turning back as I had 200 cars driven by Bolivians behind me, all waiting impatiently.

To my horror, I could not ride between the two railway lines (in the centre) as there was at least a foot gap between every sleeper, which would have made the 1.2 kilometre crossing unbearable and dangerous to say the least.

My only choice was to ride on the

outside of the rails, and within a split second I had to choose between the right and the left.

I took the right, but don't ask me why, as the wooden path on either side was as narrow (about 1.2 metres) as each other and both had no protection rail on the outside, which meant there was nothing between me and the river below.

If this wasn't bad enough, I soon realised that the four 12-inch wooden planks which ran parallel with the rails were loose and lifted as I rode off one and onto another.

Then 3 to 4-inch gaps started to appear between the parallel-laid planks, which became very concerning, especially when your front tyre is only 3 to 4 inches wide!

We were about 60 metres above the

water. Velocity was going to be my best friend if we were going to get across unscathed.

After getting Gaby off the back of the bike (she made the 1.2 kilometre bridge crossing trek on foot), I increased my velocity to a manageable speed, taking into consideration I only had 1.2 metres to play with and no physical barrier to stop me going off the bridge on my right hand side.

I reached a speed which enabled me to skip over all the imperfections of the wooden planks.

Upon reaching the other side, I was covered in sweat and all I could feel were my throbbing forearms.

Looking back, if someone gave us the choice again, we would have waited out the week until the river subsided.