

## Two wheels in Antarctica

touring adventure



Antarctica, not the place your average motorcyclist wants to venture, but then there's nothing 'average' about Bernarda Pulko... (Photo courtesy Aerolineas Argentinas).

---

**BENKA THE BMW GYPSY, PART III**


---

# TWO WHEELS IN ANTARTICA

---



After escaping the drug wars in Colombia, and spending a few days in the Galapagos Islands, BERNARDA 'Benka' PULKO of Ptuj, Slovenia headed south on her F650 to spend Christmas in Ushuaia on the island of Tierra del Fuego before heading for Antarctica...

**A** PART from her BMW F650, which she calls her 'Novia Rojo' or Red Boyfriend, the most valuable piece of equipment in Benka's panniers is her lap-top computer. This is her life-line, both to family and for her bread and butter, with Slovenian radio and print media sponsoring her and relying on her for stories.

It is this that has maintained a sporadic cash flow that has enabled her to keep going – in conjunction with various product sponsorships and sales of T-shirts by The Chain Gang, the F650 owners club in the USA. Apart from BMW Slovenia (Ichnounion

Avto) which supplied the F650, her most valuable backer has been Coris, a Slovenian medical insurance company.

In addition to updating her website and writing for the media in her homeland, she is writing a book of her experiences. Equipped with an International Press Card which has opened many doors, she has become something of a celebrity Slovenia as she travels the world.

Indeed, even in Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world, around 1200 km further south than Invercargill, her BMW was recognised by three visiting

Kiwi Rider – January 2000 25

## Two wheels in Antarctica



*There's not a lot growing in the Andes, no matter what part of the long mountain chain you cross. This is Abra del Munano in Argentina. (Photo courtesy Aerolineas Argentinas).*

Slovenian families

Getting to Ushuaia was a real mission for Benka but despite the doubts of others who had made the trip, she made it from Bolivia to Ushuaia in seven days and later met people who had taken six months to do it.

"All the positive energies and the gods came together for me and helped me survive the hardest experience of my life. After being on the bike for one week for more than 15 hours and 1000 km per day, after all that gravel, after four falls in two days, after a flat tyre in the middle of nowhere in a windy, flat and isolated part of the world,

and at the end of my strength and energy, I was close to saying "To hell with it." and sending everything home. I was endlessly lonely," she says.

"But I made it, arriving in Ushuaia, Argentina on December 24, at 7.50 a.m. I parked the bike at the top of a hill in this most south-eastern town of the world to look over the gorgeous mountain and the Beagle Channel.

"The world seemed to change; everything started to work for me. I found a mechanic, got a new inner tube, and found someone to make a new saddle bag. On top of that I met a guy who was very

upset that I was working so hard and had no place to go for Christmas. He offered a Christmas dinner complete with family. Instantly I had a place to stay and a family dinner. As the family was of Italian ancestry, the dinner was just perfect for me, a starving traveller.

"That same day the truck driver who had helped me when I was fixing a tyre introduced me to an unusual man - a fel-

low Slovenian who had resided in Ushuaia for 50 years! From that time on, during my stay there I was treated as a member of the Arkos family. I had the use of a warm office and best of all, Slovenian food. New Year's Eve was wonderful - a lot of Slovenian jokes and Slovenian music. I just couldn't believe it. I felt almost at home.

"I had my bike parked outside and three Slovene families came in and said: 'hey, where's the owner of the bike, we know this bike,' because lots of Slovenes have read about it in their newspapers.

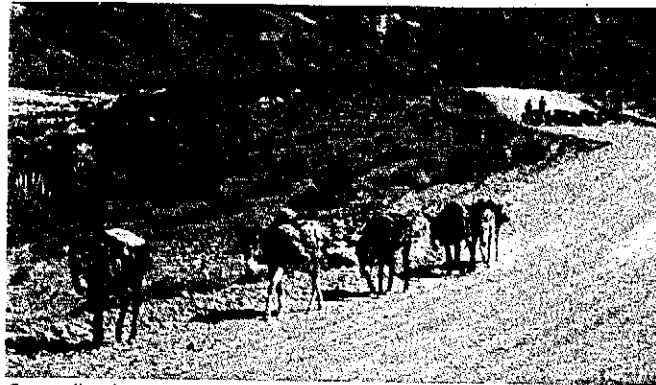
"Parking my motorcycle some-

**"South American roads range from just barely tolerable to horrible. Mostly they are in terrible condition. After a year riding them they started to bother me a bit..."**

where is worse than putting out a Slovene flag. Nobody knows the Slovene flag but everybody seems to recognise this bike, a red BMW with stickers all over it and big aluminium boxes."

Pretty soon Benka became something of a celebrity in Ushuaia as the local radio station ran occasional news updates so that wherever she went, people knew who she was and were very friendly.

"But there was much to do, I wasn't there just for a New Year's celebration; Antarctica was waiting. For a week I could not sleep. I was excited that I had found someone to take me to the Ice



*Generally, the roads in South America are of poor quality, with many unsealed surfaces and you never know what you may find around the next corner. (Photo courtesy Aerolineas Argentinas).*

## Two wheels in Antarctica

Continent.

"For a year I had talked to endless numbers of bureaucrats who had no idea of what needed to be done to get my F650 to Antarctica. Before I left Slovenia I had decided I wanted to visit all seven continents of the world but I had no idea how I was going to get to Antarctica.

"I had talked with bureaucrats in the United States and they were trying to push me around. And then I found a company that took tourists there but they wanted stacks of papers from they didn't know whom to say that I could go. Then they wanted to charge \$4000!

"While convalescing in a hospital in Quito, Ecuador, I learned that The Chain Gang was selling T-shirts saying 'Benka Went to Antarctica and All I Got Was This Damn T-shirt,' to collect donations for my voyage.

"Despite my careful spending, I had started to reach the bottom of my budget and all these people I didn't know were helping fund my risky attempt. That made me more determined not to give up, even though my trusty insurance company Coris was at that point looking for a return plane ticket for me!

"In the end I went to the port in Ushuaia, asked for a list of all the boats that were going to the Antarctic and then I started to organise things myself. I found a

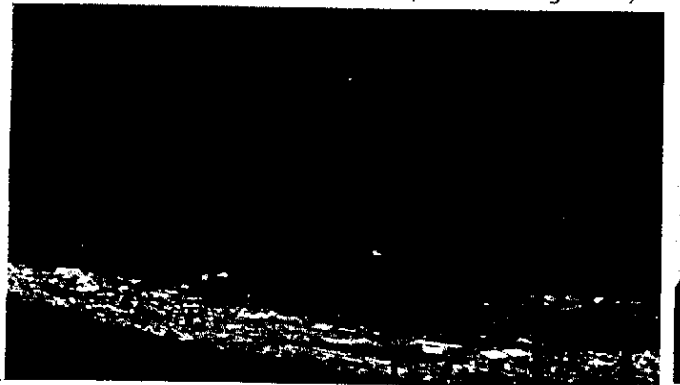
Danish boat and I talked to the captain. I told him I would pay to go as a passenger, if they would take my motorcycle. He almost fell off the boat! He said, 'I've had many strange requests in my life, but taking a motorcycle to Antarctica?'

"But in the end we did it and the entire crew got right behind me. Imagine those poor guys spending an entire season with nothing going on except for old, boring tourists, vomiting Japanese... and then there's someone who wants to take a motorcycle to the Antarctic and ride it there!

"To get there takes a while (it's about 1500 km) and Drake Passage is one of the roughest seaways in the world with swells up to 30 metres. Well they were checking my bike about every five minutes to make sure it wasn't getting loose. Of the 90 people on the *Disko*, which was the name of the boat, 12 were injured - stitches from gashes, a dislocated shoulder, a broken leg... - and it was necessary to check my bike every hour. It was lashed to the railing and covered in PVC.

"But in January 7, 1999 the *Disko* made it to Neco Harbour, Antarctica and at about 4 p.m. I was as nervous as I had ever been. The weather was bad; from the ship I could barely see the landing site. A few minutes later my lovely 'Rojo' was hanging from a crane

*Ushuaia, southernmost city in the world and Benka's point of embarkation for Antarctica. (Photo courtesy Aerolineas Argentinas).*



## Two wheels in Antartica



A travel weary Bernarda Pulko made it to Tierra del Fuego after an epic seven day ride from Bolivia.

waiting to be lowered to a Zodiac inflatable for the final leg of the trip to the last continent. The pressure was building; all I could see was water and penguins paddling over icy rocks. The Zodiac was hobbling up and down and getting the bike into it was nerve racking. One mistake and it would be on the ocean floor.

"But all the crew who helped were just so into it! It was cold, close to zero. Icebergs of all sizes were all around, and in just moments I reached all that I had worked for since June 1997. The landing was wet... but I had put a touring motorcycle where none had ever been. The penguins, my favourite animal, didn't complain. All those tiny creatures, thousands of them and just so cute, were curious about the funny, red metal visitor that made strange noises as I tried to ride along a long rock-strewn beach. I felt really guilty about leaving wheel tracks in such a pristine environment.

"When you see all that unspoiled beauty made out of just black and white, you just cannot believe how spectacular it is. Antarctica for me has been the most mentally draining part of my trip so far. There was just so much pressure and tension, organising it, to get the permission, convincing everybody... and after I made it, there was the challenge of getting the BMW back into the Zodiac and back out to the Disko to hoist it aboard. It took many days to get there, but it was worth the effort.

"To the Danish ship Disko and its captain, Frants Jensen, I give thanks for taking me and my motorcycle on board. Captain Jensen remarked many times about 'the crazy Slovenian woman'.

"After I got back on the Disko, I just collapsed. All the pressure was gone. Everybody around me

was drinking, being happy, yelling 'yeah, we made it!' The only other thing I did that day was buy a penguin on the boat. They had a shop selling souvenirs and I didn't buy anything on the way down but after my trip to ride my bike on the ice, I saw there was only one stuffed penguin left on the table. I thought how lonely he looked, so I bought it and called it BMW."

After the Antarctic trip, she was about to hit the road and head north when she bumped into the truck driver who had helped her fix a punctured rear tyre in a howling gale when she had originally ridden to Ushuaia.

"He was heading north and I mentioned to him I had never driven a truck. It was a 20 metre truck, not a little one. Anyway, he allowed me to get behind the wheel and for 1000 km I drove a truck north through Argentina.

"Usually I never dream about what I want to do. When I see something I want to do, I do it. So I ended up driving a huge truck."

After that she was back on the bike in northern Argentina, heading into Uruguay, Paraguay and then Brazil.

"One day I had just pulled over to pull my rain gear off. It was so humid, it was just disgusting. A car stopped, and the driver said 'hey, haven't we met in Vancouver? Aren't you the biologist' and I said 'yes I am, who are you?'. It turned out he had met another woman biologist riding a red BMW, but it wasn't me!

"Just after that a truck suddenly braked to a stop. I was thinking the driver must be crazy but you won't believe it, it was the same guy I had driven with weeks before. And he said 'you have forgotten something' and handed me a pack of batteries I had left in the cab of the truck. That was 5000 km from where I had last seen him..."

After that Benka rode on to Brazil and had a great time in Salvador. It was February, the time of year for Carnivale.

"The partying usually finished somewhere between 2 and 6 a.m. and I had writing and radio addresses to do. I also spent time investigating the native Apache and Timbalada Indians, their dances and how they live... a good journalist always seeks out information for interesting stories.

"Anyway, when this gigantic party of about two million people was finished I headed back to Sao Paulo for some fast sky-diving and then got all the paperwork to get my Red Guy ready to air freight the bike to New Zealand.

"But first of all I had to get the bike fixed. The s--- Brazilian petrol had ruined the carburettor diaphragm but fortunately the BMW shop in Sao Paulo fixed it in excellent time and also fitted a new chain after 30,000 km, a rear tyre, and gave the BMW an oil and filter change.

"After that I flew to Auckland after a very interesting and sometimes dangerous time in South America. In Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia I learned how to play my

**The weather was bad; from the ship I could barely see the landing site. A few minutes later my lovely 'Rojo' was hanging from a crane waiting to be lowered to a Zodiac inflatable"**

from just barely tolerable to horrible. Mostly they are in terrible condition. After a year riding them they started to bother me a bit. Too many pot holes, animals, broken cars and drunk, aggressive and arrogant drivers on the road.

"I got tired being constantly on the lookout for disaster so leaving South America was also a relief for me. Aside from traffic, the men made my life miserable all the time I didn't hold my helmet or stay close to my motorcycle. I've had enough of their culture of sick traditions, at least for my European background. They don't



Someone reckons the wind blows a bit in Tierra del Fuego, but they haven't been to Puysegur Point... (Photo courtesy Aerolíneas Argentinas).

third instrument, the pan flute, and improved my Spanish to the level that I could converse fluently. I also took the first steps at writing Japanese, flew an aeroplane in Venezuela. It was a Cessna 182 and it was my first time as a pilot. I had also driven a 20 metre truck with a huge steering wheel 1000 km. Yes, it was different from a motorcycle but a lot of fun!

"South American roads range

know how to treat women. I expected to be treated and respected as a human being but unfortunately I was still their conception of a woman.

"But I also left South America with a lot of new friends but most of them I met around motorcycles, or sky-diving."

• Next issue, Benka unwinds in New Zealand. 