

# THOUSAND-MILE SOUTH AMERICAN ADVENTURE

By Bill "WEGO" Lanphier

## Second Annual Andina-Amazonica Caravana Eco-Turismo

**"J**ournalists wanted for 1300-mile, ten-day tour of South America."

The post on the Internet sounded too good to be true, particularly because the event was only a few weeks away. Still, I shot off an e-mail saying that I'd like to cover it for the magazine. Actually, that was a gross understatement. I would have done almost anything to get invited to go on a tour like that. Somehow, I hooked up with the right people and it came together.

After frantically juggling my schedule and working out many details—like getting \$300 worth of immunizations against diseases that do things like make your legs turn funny colors and fall off—I was prepared to attend

◀ The first town of any size we came to was Coroico, north of La Paz. When this photo was taken, we still had nine days and a thousand miles to go.



Photo by Juan Carlos Salvalierra

Though most of the route took us through humid rain forests with highs in the 70s and 80s, up here in the Andes at 15,000 feet, it was darn cold and the thin air made it difficult to breathe.

◀ Almost every town or village we visited had some kind of festivities planned for the tour group. Here in Caranavi—the first overnight stop—the mayor gave a presentation, editor WEGO was interviewed on local television and the ORVs paraded around the town square.

the Second Annual Andina-Amazonica Caravana Eco-Turismo, the Andes-Amazon Caravan.

The event starts at 13,000 feet elevation in the city of La Paz, Bolivia, works its way up to a 15,000-foot peak in the Andes Mountains, and then drops down into the Amazon rain forest. The tour itself starts on a





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Within two hours of leaving the Andes mountains, we were deep in the rain forest. At this point, a small waterfall above the trail showered us as we passed.

◀ Of the three ferrys we took, this was the most high tech—it was powered by a gasoline motor! The other two were human powered.

Saturday, with seven nights spent in hotels and three nights camping. The route takes off-roaders across mountains, to tiny villages, through rain forests and across several piranha-infested rivers. Although the thought of riding—or floating—130 off-road miles a day for ten days sounded tough—"frightening" is actually a better word—I was thoroughly pumped and couldn't sleep thinking about the adventure that was about to begin in South America, 4802 miles away from my home in California.

☆☆☆

## THURSDAY

I arrived a few days early in Bolivia, flying into La Paz. This urban city of 1.5 million people is the highest-elevation capital in the world and way above the timberline. I spent the first eight hours dealing with the altitude and experienced most of the typical

symptoms: the inability to take a deep breath, lightheaded-ness bordering on disorientation, dizziness, minor headache and nausea, as well as exhaustion after expending very little energy. Only after a nap, drinking two cups of coca tea (it's legal, no stronger than coffee and a good diuretic), and taking high-altitude pills, did I start to recover.

In the afternoon, I checked out Nosiglia Sport, the largest local ATV and motorcycle dealer. It's here that the 60-rider tour group, including 16 ATVers, would be meeting the next day to make last minute preparations on the machines.

## FRIDAY

My project for the day was to inspect, set up and then put two or three test miles the Honda Foreman 450ES I'd be riding. The machine had 276 miles on it, but was in good

shape. The air filter was pretty clean and it was good that the Honda had been thoroughly road tested. At Nosiglia Sport I installed my own grips, added handguards and removed a custom seat back, which bumped my camera backpack. Someone else added a rear view mirror.

## SATURDAY

Shortly after the sun rose over the surrounding mountains, the Caravana riders met at Nosiglia Sport. As the police escort arrived, I made last-minute checks of my ES. Would it survive the ordeal? What kind of shape would I be in ten days from now? I zipped up my jacket against the brisk mountain air, turned the key on the ES, hit the starter button, and began my journey.

Spectators lined the busy city streets and waved as we went by. Outside of town, even more spectators lined the streets. The motorists, despite being forced to wait as the Caravana passed by, enthusiastically cheered us on.

The paved road took us out of La Paz and to a rugged peak. Here, way, way above the timberline, it became even more difficult to breathe. Even with the airbox lid off, my stock-jettied ES could do no better than 43 mph on level ground. The air temperature hovered near freezing and I was very happy to have a warm jacket and hand protectors.

Less than an hour later, we had dropped down in elevation. The one-lane dirt road was lined with thick tropical vegetation on one side, and sheer drops of up to a thousand feet on the other side—no guard rail. I stopped to peer over the edge and wondered what going a bit wide around a turn and flying off into space would feel like. How many seconds would pass with no sounds but the wind rushing by?

In every village, the residents rush to the road, smiling and waving frantically. In almost every town, we receive an official greeting with drinks. Many of the townspeople have never seen a quad, and crowd around to stare, work the levers, or simply touch the strange machine.

The roads between the towns are fast, and I'm wide open on the ES—50 mph on the speedo—most of the time. However, when I come upon another vehicle, it's a different story. The silty dust is thick and hangs in the air—mile after mile. I can barely see my front bumper. A speeding truck appears out of the dust heading straight for me. I run my quad off the side of the road into a ditch and the truck swerves at the last second.



The slow-moving and totally defenseless sloth, or "lazy bear" as the Bolivians call him, is just one of the unusual animals that run free in South America. Held up here for inspection by WBCO, the lazy bear may be slow, but his legs are strong. If he curls up around your hand, he's there to stay!

No kidding: This is the gas station in the village of Coroico, Bolivia. Gas is drawn from a 55-gallon drum into a plastic pail then siphoned—by mouth—into a tube and into the ATV's tank. Tasty! And highly dangerous! Stations in other small villages, primarily catering to the local motor scooter traffic, dispensed gasoline from one-liter glass Pepsi bottles.

Our hotel that night is reminiscent of Mike's Sky Ranch in Baja—not a Hilton, but certainly welcome after many hours of riding. As I arrive in the small town, everyone is busy working on their vehicles, so I follow suit. My air filter is totally clogged and I learn about servicing it the back-country Bolivian way: gasoline in the bottom of half of plastic gallon jug and 50W motor oil on the foam.

Here at the first overnight stop I learn another important lesson: strap everything you'll need onto the quad. The support truck, which got hung up, was not to be seen all day and arrived at the hotel with my clean

clothes two hours after we did.

Just before I was about to take a shower, the water inexplicably got cut off to the entire town. It must have been a common occurrence, because the hotel simply opened the valve on an extra stash stored on the roof.

After my shower I got weak, cold chills hit me and I became sick to my stomach. I had known not to drink the local water, so I wondered if it was something more serious. I wasn't as concerned with being sick as much as possibly having to leave the tour after the first day and hitch hike back to La Paz. To my delight, I woke up the next morning feeling a little better.

### SUNDAY

After breakfast at the hotel, we set out again and everyone was pleased that the road wasn't as dusty. The second half of the day was along basically a wide, straight, flat dirt freeway. I leaned back, put my feet up and cruised.

Sixty five miles later we arrived at our second overnight stop. Here we learned that one of the motorcycle riders had crashed and was in the tiny, one-story local hospital, so four of us went to visit. The front door was wide open allowing every type of bug free entry. Plaster was falling from the walls and—maybe to make us feel

## WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T

● Because of space limitations, I couldn't take everything to Bolivia that I wanted, but the products I did bring along were crucial to making the journey comfortable and fun. As soon as next month's issue, I will evaluate all the products I used on the Caravana, including a full report on the Foreman ES. In the meantime, here's a preview of the products tested.

**Riding gear.** MSR: ISDE jacket, Cold Pro gloves, AXO: T18 jersey, Eight 989 pants, Padlock 8 gloves, MX socks, boot insoles; Moose Racing: vented and regular riding shorts, fleece

socks; Gearne Six Days enduro boots; Underwears glove liners; Smith Speed Goggles and Roll-Offs; Shoei VFX-2 helmet.

**Accessories.** Oury ATV grips; M.U.D. Paws; SRC Racing Hydration System; Sinisalo gear bag. ●

### ATV ATTRITION REPORT

Honda Foreman ES #1.....None  
 Foreman ES #2 .....Flat tire, intermittent electric shift failure  
 Foreman ES #3 . . . . . Intermittent electric shift failure  
 Kawasaki Prairie 400 4x4 #1 .....None  
 Prairie 400 #2.....None  
 Prairie 400 #3 .....Broken CVT belt  
 Prairie 400 #4.....Flat tire

Polaris Sportsman 500 #1.....None  
 Sportsman 500 #2 .....None  
 Sportsman 500 #3 ...Broken CVT belt  
 Sportsman 500 #4 .....Battery not charging  
 Sportsman 500 #5 ....One side of rear suspension sacked  
 Polaris Xplorer 500 #1.....None  
 Xplorer 500 #2 .....Broken CVT belt  
 Yamaha Banshee.....None (crash damage only)  
 Yamaha Warrior .....Rear axle bearing failure  
 Yamaha Wolverine 4x4.....Flat tire, worn brake pads

*(Note: Some failures may be attributed to ATV modifications or inadequate maintenance issues.)*



Our route took us to three rivers that could be crossed only by ferry. One ferry was towed by a small motorboat, another was pulled across by hand with a fixed rope and the third was moved—seeing is believing—by men pushing in the shallow water.

◀ When the rains came and the dirt roads got slick, the big dual-sport motorcycles were not the only vehicles having life. Note that the Mercedes truck bit the dust while the wood-wheel oxen-powered cart had no problem on the bridge. On this day, the quads arrived at the final destination eight hours before some of the bikes.

## '99 CARAVANA INFO

● Although I was the only non-Bolivian ATVer on the '98 Caravana, the promoters are making it pretty simple for anyone to attend the '99 event, which will be held August 1-10, 1999 and will cover about 1000 miles. A flat fee of \$2500 covers all expenses in Bolivia for 12 days, including the ten days of the tour itself. Included are all meals, lodging, fuel and rental of a shiny new Polaris Sportsman 500 4x4, Kawasaki Prairie 400 4x4 or Honda Foreman ES 450 4x4. Three motorcycles choices, Jeeps and Range Rovers are also available. Each rider is responsible for transportation to Bolivia and both La Paz and Santa Cruz have international airports.

Basic ATV maintenance, such as cleaning the air filter and adding oil, is up to each rider, but a mechanic is available for major repairs on the road. Bring your own emergency fanny pack including a flat repair kit. One pickup and two large support trucks will—barring a major natural disaster—accompany the riders. Bolivia is dotted with many grass airstrips and an airplane is available for emergencies. Bring your own or purchase new riding gear at a great price in Bolivia from Nosiglia (La Paz) or Visal Import/Export (Santa Cruz).

For more information, contact the Andina Amazonica Caravana by telephone at (country code 591) 33 47145, fax at 47345 or via e-mail at [visal.srl@mail.scbbs-bo.com](mailto:visal.srl@mail.scbbs-bo.com). ●

more at home—an employee's dirt bike was parked in the hall. The injured rider, who had broken his leg and shoulder, explained that the X-ray technician showed up drunk.

After surveying the scene and paying my respects, I went outside to hunt up some large firecrackers, which are legal in rural Bolivia. I was in luck because, directly across the street, a market carried them. When the store keeper realized I was concerned that the firecrackers wouldn't be loud enough, he proudly took one out in the street and blew it off, rattling the walls of the hospital. I pictured our pal with the broken bones grimacing. On the positive side, you have to realize that, without that hospital—even in its sub-standard condition—our pal would have been in a world of hurt for a lot longer.

### MONDAY

After the first stop today, I was asked to lead the group and off I went. The route, basically another wide-open dirt freeway interspersed with major dried-up mudholes, was pretty obvious, but the printed Caravana itinerary was in Spanish (the language for most of South America), and I didn't even know the destination for that evening. Would I lead the entire group off the conti-

nent? Or, if they didn't follow, would I end up by myself without a clue?

I led to the next stop without a hitch, but the next leg of the trip I wasn't so lucky. I passed a few people, then a bike rider blew by me and disappeared into the distance. Forty five minutes went by without passing anyone or being passed. I was pretty sure I was lost and stopped at a small restaurant in the middle of nowhere. The people there spoke no English. Just as I was about to give up and set up my tent, another bike rider rescued me. Fortunately, I had gone only about five miles out of the way.

The stop for the evening was a 100,000-acre working cattle ranch, 20 miles from the nearest main dirt road. The place, which works 25,000 head of cattle, has a mile-long grass airstrip and a few guest houses, where we stayed. It is owned by the father of one of the riders, so we were treated royally. Dinner consisted of rice with shredded beef, fried bananas and Bolivian Merlot wine. Tasty!

Caravana distance covered to date: 428 miles.

### TUESDAY

Early in the morning, the ranch hands were already busy cooking two whole pigs and two whole sheep for our lunch. Yes, there would be some

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leftovers! At 3 p.m. we set out on an overland route toward the next main town, with the plan to camp out that night along the way. In the rainy season, the route across the flat plains is impassable because of mud. The rainy season is over now, but the trail hasn't been worn in yet, and it's tough to find at times.

A little after dark, we stop at a very small ranch to pitch camp. Now, we are really out in the boonies and the closest main dirt road is 50 miles

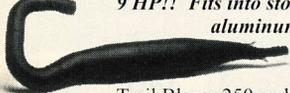


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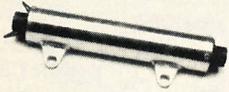
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Everyone agreed that this open-air restaurant near the small town of Trinidad had the best fish—fried and in a stew—we had ever eaten. Other unusual foods along the way included an omelet made from tomatoes, onion and locally caught turtle eggs. Most of the Bolivian ORVers wouldn't go near it, but editor WEGO gave it shot and deemed the turtle eggs milder, yet more flavorful, than chicken eggs.

away. During the five-month rainy season, the only access the family has to the outside world is via horse or their small grass airstrip, assuming they can contact someone on the two-way radio who has a plane.

The family at the ranch have no idea we are coming and are a bit startled when a herd of off-roaders appear out of the darkness and thunder onto their property. Nonetheless, they cheerfully take us in and feed everyone. I set up my tent, inflate my air mattress and crash under the stars and full moon. Almost heaven.

### WEDNESDAY

We awake to a beautiful sunrise and are fed pan de arroz. This is an amazingly tasty pancake made from mashed-up rice, yucca (a type of potato) and cheese. It's wrapped in banana leaves and cooked in a clay oven.

As we ride, the clouds roll in and it starts to rain harder and harder. My MSR riding jacket keeps me dry on top, but my boots and pants are soaked. Because I've put my camera in the support pickup and can't shoot photos anyway, I drop the hammer in the mud and rain. Big fun! The big enduro bikes flounder in the slick mud. The driver of the large support truck gives up entirely and decides to spend the night on the trail. Quads rule!

Our hotel in this town has electrical problems and, directly outside my window, hogs and roosters serenade me. This is a far cry from my slick hotel in La Paz, but then I think of the alternative—camping out in the mud and rain—and realize I don't have it so bad after all.

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Today is Bolivian Independence Day and the entire town is partying. After dinner, the Caravana participates in a big parade with brass bands, military personnel and school kids. Thousands of spectators line the streets and cheer wildly, especially for the quads and dirt bikes. It's so different from the U.S., it all seems like a dream.

## THURSDAY, WEEK 2

Because the support trucks are still stuck out on the trail, we decide to take a day off from travel and give the

dirt roads a chance to dry out a bit. I go shopping and take a nap. Despite having covered 550 miles on the ES, I'm not sore at all and eager to get back out on the trails. The bike riders, on the other hand, all complain of sore forearms from fighting the mud and trying to keep the two-wheelers upright.

## FRIDAY

Today it rains again, the trails get muddier and the two-wheelers are really hating it. We pass a truck that has crashed off a bridge. The occupants have left, but not without killing a huge anaconda snake that was unfortunate enough to come

snooping around the wreckage.

I arrive at our destination for the evening at 6 p.m., now having covered almost 700 miles. All of the bike riders have dropped their two-wheelers many times in the slick mud and many of them don't arrive until 2 a.m. Now, the support trucks have no chance of catching up and are put on a river barge to meet us in the next town.

This year's Caravana was scheduled for a time when it would be least likely to rain. With not one, but two totally unexpected downpours, we were forced to shorten the tour by 200 miles and miss out on some spectacular country, including checking out real Amazonian Indian villages.

Everything was new and exciting to me, so I was happy to go wherever the tour happened to take us.

## SATURDAY

Today we took another day off from travel, hoping the support truck would arrive and the roads would dry out. After a two-hour cruise down a nearby river that joins the Amazon in Brazil, we had an incredible fish dinner at an open-air restaurant right on the river. This magazine editing job is rough, but somebody's gotta do it.

## SUNDAY

Because of the rains, the new routing was not over tighter trails as I had hoped, but more of the wide-open dirt freeways. For four solid hours, stopping only for fuel, I held the ES wide open. I tried everything to rest my right hand throttle thumb. I'd face my palm upright and push in the thumb lever with the heel of my hand. I'd reach around the front of the grip and grab the lever with my fingers. Then there was the mental fatigue. At least I had a beautiful scenery to look at.

As darkness fell, the bugs and bats came out—a veritable blizzard of bugs—hitting my goggles, and slamming into my chest. Some kind of stinging critter got inside my goggles and did its thing under my left eye, causing it to swell up.

I made a final stop to dump in more gas from my extra containers and discovered the ES would not downshift from fifth until it had cooled. Needless to say, the machine was pretty hot from being ridden wide open for three hours and that probably played a part.

All alone in the darkness and amidst a swarm of bugs, I wondered what kind of larger critters might be hiding in jungle just a few feet away and sizing me up for a possible snack.

Thankfully, the ES can be pull-started in any gear and Honda supplies a manual backup shifter. I later found

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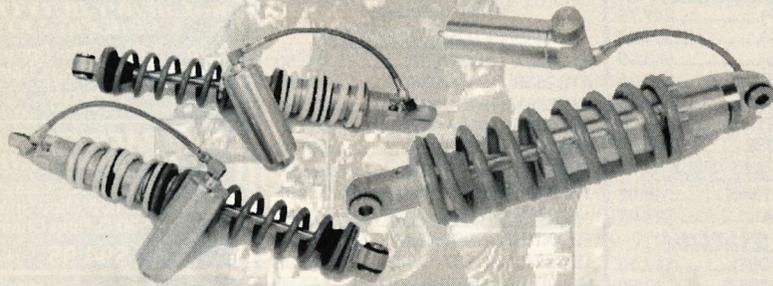
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out from Honda that some ESs had wiring harness problems causing inconsistent shifting. However, all the affected units had been tracked down before leaving the factory. We'll solve the mystery next month in our long-term ES evaluation.

### MONDAY

Because today, the last day, would be almost 200 miles of wide-open riding, half of it on pavement, I decided to install the Motion Pro twist throttle I'd brought along. Unfortunately, by the time I'd gotten dressed and loaded up the ESs racks, there was no time left to do anything but put on my helmet and go.

As the day wore on, I became more and more convinced my thumb would never make it. In desperation, I rigged up a cruise control: a bungee cord from the front rack to the thumb lever. Only because the paved road was so wide open and it would have been safe to go 30 mph faster than the ES was capable, I felt somewhat confident in the set up. However, note that *ATV Action* does not endorse this practice!

With my left thumb poised over the kill switch and my right thumb ready to flip the bungee off the thumb lever, I cruise-controlled my way down the Bolivian highway toward our final destination. A police escort led us the last 12 miles of the journey.

In downtown Santa Cruz, it took a while for it to sink in that the Caravana was really over—ten days and 1096 miles from our start in La Paz. Whew! I said goodbye to my riding pals, said goodbye to my Honda ES pal and hitched a ride to the plush Gran Hotel Santa Cruz. There, I opened a Pacena beer, soaked in the tub, wolfed down a salad and collapsed in the nice big bed.

☆☆☆☆

You can't go into the Bolivian back-country expecting things to be always easy. There are no McDonald's. You can't drink unboiled tap water or use ice cubes made from it. You can't even eat food washed in it. Not everyone speaks English. Green vegetables are nowhere to be found. Little things you would normally take for granted become very important: dry clothes, an extra bungee cord, a piece of plastic to cover your gear bag.

Was the Caravana difficult? Yes, at times. Was it fatiguing? Yes. Was it frustrating? Yes, a few times. Would I do it again? Yes—without a second thought. I like challenges. It was the trip of lifetime. □



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## Enthusiasm

By Bill Lanphier

The phrase, "Trip of a lifetime," keeps running through my mind. It's one of those phrases that is so common, it starts to lose meaning. However, it suddenly popped into my mind last week as the best way to describe the adventure I was about to begin.

Now, here I sit eating a great breakfast in my hotel room on the 14th floor of the Hotel Presidente, looking out onto La Paz, Bolivia, a spectacular city. The plane arrived yesterday at dawn. The drive into the center of town runs along a steep hillside overlooking the waking town, about 1000 feet below. In the distance I see a rugged snow-capped peak rising up 22,000 feet, higher than any mountain in the North America.

But my adventure hasn't really begun yet. Tomorrow, with 60 other riders, I leave on a 1300-mile off-road adventure through South America. I'll be doing all the things I love to do. I'll be exploring amazing territory I couldn't see by renting a car. There are no conventional tours available to the territory we'll be covering. And I certainly wouldn't try going alone. Best of all, my sole means of transportation will be an ATV. See what I mean? Trip of a lifetime.

I enjoy coming up with things that excite me. I remember my first trip to the Pismo Dunes in California. I rented a beater ATC185 and headed off down the beach. There, I got my first glimpse of heaven: rolling sand, drop offs, razorbacks, worm trails around ice plants. It was a beautiful sunny day and I was having the time of my life. I'd found my calling.

My first trip to the Oregon Dunes was another great adventure. Running the big dunes, then heading off into the forest on a sandy trail, then around a lake, then along the pristine and rugged Oregon coastline. The pungent smell from Weyerhaeuser's sawmill permeates the air near the dunes. To most people, it reeks. To lovers of the Oregon Dunes, it means great riding is not too far away.

I love the annual 12 Hours of Pont de Vaux endurance race in France (covered in next month's issue). The



event itself is incredible. I've attended for six consecutive years now, but I still get goosebumps just before the dead-engine Le Mans-style start. The thousands of spectators grow silent as the start board is held high. The flag drops. Eighty of the top riders in the world sprint to their quads and kick the engines over. The roar can be heard miles away. The 12 hours has begun.

Sometimes I wonder if I've become jaded by all the great riding and locations to which my job has led me. But then I think of how much I still look forward to heading down the Ventura Freeway early in the morning on my way to the Pismo Dunes. Just a few hours later I'm driving down the beach to Pole 6. There, I'll take a deep breath of the clean ocean air, see my friends once again and, of course, tear around the dunes on my 330R.

It's simple things like this that remind me what ATVing is really all about. Here's a letter that was written to the magazine. This guy knows what ATVing is all about, too.

Dear ATV Action,

*I'm 13 and I love to ride my Yamaha Moto4 350 2WD. My friends have Big Bears, Foremans, Warriors and Xpresses. We have a blast riding together. Another friend has a Trail Boss 250.*

*My friends have "mini-circuits" and so do I. I made mine simply by going over it and over it and over it. I*

*have a blast! It's 1 1/2 miles long, it crosses the creek 2 times! My friend with a Warrior had his Grandpa go over it with a bulldozer and it's awesome! We have lots of fun.*

*We even have fun pulling each other out. Once my friend got stuck and the "pull out strap" wasn't long enough and I got stuck. So we called our friend and he rode his 350 4x4 Big Bear over and pulled both of us out. We were COVERED in mud. We sat around and laughed for 15 minutes.*

*Our ages are Me (Isaac) 13, Moto 4 350 2x4; Clinton 13, Big Bear 350 4x4; Ryan 13, Foreman 400 4x4; Trae 12, Warrior 350 2x4, Clint A., Trail Boss 250 2x4 and Ryan 14, Xpress 300 2x4. My point is they are all stock except for new tires. We are not professionals. We are friends and we have a BLAST!!!!!!*

*Isaac Hinkle*

*Waldron, Indiana*

Issac's enthusiasm literally jumps off the page. His letter wasn't written to impress anyone with how fast he is, or how many expensive mods he's tacked onto his ATV. His goal is simply to share his love for the sport. There is no question in my mind that, for Issac, ATVing right behind his house excites him every bit as much as my upcoming journey through South America excites me. Issac would probably love to fly to a foreign land and go on the trip of a lifetime. But he doesn't need that. There's plenty of fun to be found in his own backyard on a Moto 4. □