

15th DECEMBER

We were all woken at 7.00am for a supposed 8.00am departure but alas this was most definitely not to be. Unbeknownst to us, two of our mules had escaped with their feet tied together during the night and leisurely headed back to the trailhead. After searching on Hamish's mule for an hour and a half the muleteer came back with no Runaways. We therefore had to make do with two less animals unfortunately for the others. One muleteer stayed behind and the loads were divided up between the poor remaining mules and we slowly headed out of camp towards Plaza Argentinas. Then the disasters started to happen. My mule seemed very confident in knowing the route along these precarious trails. We were navigating through a very narrow canyon over extremely rocky terrain with large boulders randomly sprawled across our trail. One minute we were alongside the river and the next we would be on extremely narrow trails about 60 feet above the river with a very steep drop leading down to the river. When Luis's mule started heading skywards up a narrow trail, mine absolutely refused to follow him despite Luis yelling out instructions for Dorje and I to follow his lead. I decided to listen to my mule and take a lower trail closer to the river and Dorje followed me on Camel Express. As I rounded the corner I found a scarlet faced Luis about 20 feet up pulling his mule down a steep path towards us yelling extremities. It transpired his mule had taken an old trail and when it tried to descend sharply to join our lower trail it had sent Luis flying over its ears. Luckily Luis was alright as he wrestled to get his mule down the hill. I was dying to laugh but I knew that Luis could have been potentially in a very dangerous situation so managed to contain myself. Then, as I glanced back suddenly, I saw one of our strongest mules called Nacho who was packed with two huge duffels either side and our communications box placed rather unbalanced atop of the duffels, start cartwheeling down the slope and fall about 40 feet into the river. I burst into tears as I witnessed the whole thing only to my horror to witness a second mule cartwheeling down right behind Nacho. The second mule appeared to whack its head really hard on a rock just prior to landing in the river. I was hysterical and we all rushed over to see if they had survived the falls. I was convinced that they were dead and couldn't bear to look. To my astonishment and relief they both survived the fall but Nacho had a big cut on his shoulder that was pouring with blood. I was so shaken at what had happened to those poor animals and now they were now being re loaded again. Feeling thoroughly shaken, We then continued on up the canyon on more dangerously narrow trails and we seemed to gain about 2,000 feet in elevation. Luis was walking his mule up this part and I let my mule pick her way up to the plateau. We were all breathing heavily as we finally arrived at the top of this steep part.

Finally after about 4 hours of riding we rattled into our basecamp at Plaza Argentinas. We offloaded our gear, I tried to give Nacho some bread and crackers but he wouldn't let anyone come close to him.

We met Carolina from Aconcagua Express, in contrast to the state of the mules she is a god send and is the most fantastic cook - the best at basecamp and a complete angel. Our next drama happened as we were trying to put up the huge mountain hardware dome mess tent. As we attempted to put it up, a huge gust of wind blew the tent upwards. We all clung on for dear life to try and save the tent. I thought we would be last seen Mary Poppins off down the valley!

Luckily 3 guys from Seattle came to help us and between the eight of us, our mess tent stayed at base camp.

I staked out a campsite for mine and Hamish's tent and despite the fact Luis said our tent was in the way of the Mules coming and going, I was happy being further away from the mess tent and the loo and we pitched it in my selected spot. Luis and Dorje camped next to the mess tent. Last years rules were you did not pee in the loo as everything gets helicoptered out. I was having a pee away from the loo minding my own business and the next thing I knew a ranger was standing next to me with my pants down yelling at me.

I yelled back at him given his lack of tact standing next to me with my rear exposed, but his message he delivered in my state of undress was that there was a new rule and that was you now peed in the loos!

Carolina cooked an amazing dinner and then we went to bed. Hamish and I were laughing at the loud music I heard playing into the early hours of the morning right next to Luis and Dorje's tent!!