

SOUTH

As Garth Azopardi and Jane Ledbury make their way across South America on two wheels they meet their toughest challenge — 1000 miles of trail riding on a Yamaha XS1100. Jim Shaw completes the tale of their epic trip

Chile, it turned out, allowed just about anything — except political intrigue. There were no border problems. Visas were stamped and the bike's paper work processed in 45 minutes. Within an hour the Yamaha was back out on the highway of asphalt that promised a 85 mile per hour journey through to Santiago.

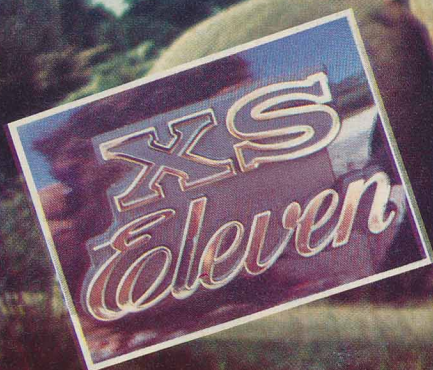
At over 40 miles per gallon, the Yamaha went through a tank of fuel at about the same interval of distance that the Chileans build gas stations. Just as it seemed that a long walk in the Chilean desert was due, another government owned filling station drifted into sight.

Santiago was reached after four days of near express speed travel. The XS had finally gotten to show its wind after having acted as burro and mountain goat over less forgiving throughfares. Weather was now becoming a problem, though. Winter had come to Chile and was easily felt in the chilly night air. July, which was bringing crowds to the beaches in Cornwall, was bringing snow to the

Andes south of Concepcion. A plan for crossing the mountain range below Santiago was given up for a more immediate assault due east of the country's capital.

With snow and ice already on the higher roads, a new rear tyre for the Yamaha was in order. 22,825 miles had been covered, and the bike's third rear tyre was already showing signs of severe strain. Santiago's market did not have a large assortment of bike accessories, but a 17in Dunlop K87 was found that fitted.

With this new rubber on board the bike was pointed eastward for its third attack on the Andes.



BY XS ELEVEN

Part 3:

The Amazon and Beyond

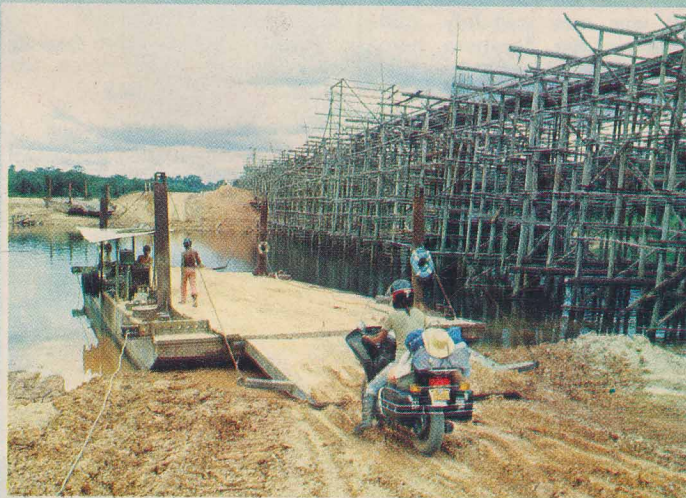
The cold was now becoming increasingly uncomfortable, a fine coating of frost forming on exposed leather gear.

At an elevation of 2825 metres (9269ft) with a light snow falling, and 120 miles of zig-zagging mountain road left behind, the XS was brought to a halt outside a railway tunnel. In winter months all traffic was being funnelled through the man-made passage. After fifteen minutes of waiting to let westbound traffic clear, the Yamaha was given the go-ahead to proceed. Inside the cavern an excruciatingly torturous route faced bike and riders. There were no lights. The 1100's headlamp was all there was and it reflected off an eerie, cold landscape. Ice stalagmites and stalagtites gripped rock walls. On the tunnel's floor iron rails and wood sleepers protruded above an icy covering.

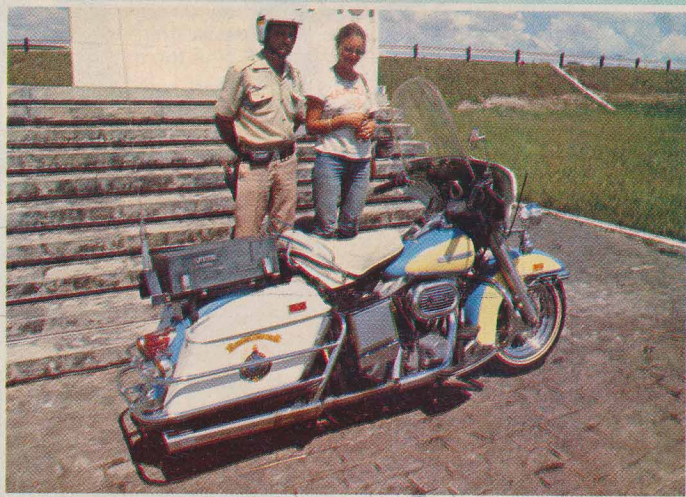
After bumping, sliding and

pushing their bike a distance of 3 kilometres in what felt like 30 days the Yamaha and its exhausted riders emerged into the real world again. Not too soon, as it turned out. Military guards had already been sent into the tunnel to see what the hold-up was all about. After receiving a verbal lashing on owning the world's slowest motorcycle, the disillusioned bikers were allowed to continue.

Argentina proved to be all downhill and under water! Record rains had brought river levels equal to or above most road surfaces in the country. In these conditions bike riding soon became a test of endurance. Four-wheeled vehicles were not above making waves, and one was never really sure what lurked beneath the water's surface. With no let-up in the deluge expected, a stop was made for plastic sheets and bags to protect both luggage and



*Above: bridge building on the road to Venezuela
Below: Happy Harley-riding Brazilian policeman*



leather riding boots. Celluloid flapping in the wind, the ride was resumed on into Buenos Aires at 25 knots.

The Argentinian capital provided rest and relaxation for seven days. Clothes were dried out, oil changed and the XS given a complete cleaning and polishing. Electrics on the Yamaha had caused no trouble, but water had been as deep as two feet on certain sections of road and had left a considerable deposit of soil in hard to reach locations. A garage handled the problem with a high pressure water spray.

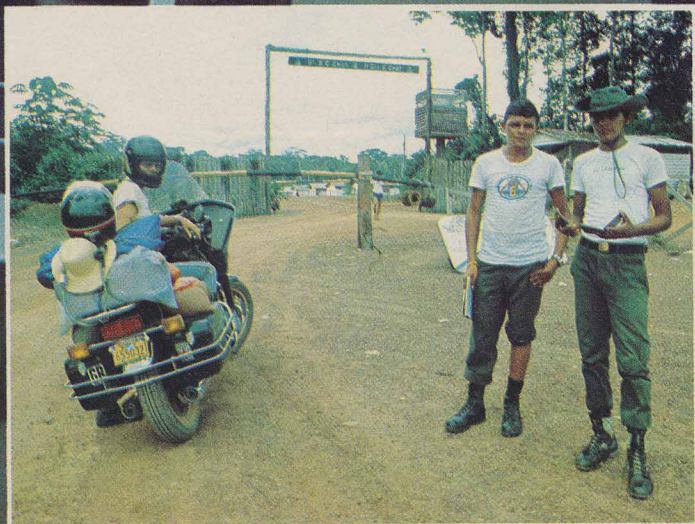
It was now mid-July, mid-winter in the Southern hemisphere, and Argentina was feeling the effects. Leaving the wet, cold weather behind Garth and Jane turned north for the next country on their list, Paraguay. The old capital of Asuncion was approached by a short ferry ride across the Parana river, itself swollen by flooding. Though the landscape was still wet, it was considerably warmer than Buenos Aires. The ancient capital held a small surprise. Bright red Italian Moto Guzzis were being used by the local

police force. The machines were antiques, but still seeing day-to-day service.

Just across the border in southern Brazil it was a collection of Harley-Davidsons which ran patrols. One Brazilian officer, spying the Yamaha and its two riders leaving the immigration post, pulled his ageing American iron alongside and motioned for the two to stop. No ticket, though. After appraising the qualities of the XS1100, and making a close inspection of its travelling equipment, he demanded only one thing: that a photograph be taken of his much superior Harley Glide!

Brazil harboured more than an over-exuberant police force. On

arrival in Rio de Janeiro, with travelling funds at a low point, employment was found. A chance visit to an English-owned pub was rewarded with three months work on an offshore oil rig for Garth and two months of



Above: military post on the Manaus road

employment as an English teacher for Jane. The income was a windfall. With it travel was resumed in early November: a long, slow and lazy jaunt up the tropical east coast of Brazil. Of the total miles travelled, these were the best. The weather remained perfect, the beaches were only a walk away from the side of the highway and things were dirt cheap.

At Belem, on the mouth of the River Amazon, the road finally gave out. The broad expanse of the world's largest river presented a physical block to further travel. 1000 miles up the Amazon at Manaus, however, maps showed a broken black line leading north to Venezuela. Was the road completed or was it still under construction? No-one seemed to know. Hostile Indians inhabited the area and had killed twelve construction workers in previous years. Only the military at Manaus would know for sure if the road was open. With this bit of information Garth and Jane took a chance and slipped the XS aboard a riverboat.

Five days later the bike was on solid ground again in the middle of Brazil's sprawling Amazon jungle. A stop was made in the seedy trading centre of Manaus just long enough to stock up on food and drinking water. Inquiries with the local military disclosed that the road north was physically open, but virtually impassable at that time of year because of torrential rains, Manaus, however, was dry. A misleading asphalt road leading north at the city's outskirts, beckoned like a siren luring a ship to destruction. On they went.

Seven miles outside town the asphalt came to an abrupt end. Through the beginnings of a light shower which had swept across the jungle Garth and Jane could make out the road they would be on for the next 1000 miles. It was of red soil, already turning into a sticky mud, and it ran straight to the horizon. There was nothing to do but go. The loaded Yamaha was eased onto the slime and just lightly accelerated. It took delicate throttle control to keep the rear tyre from breaking loose. For the rest of the day it was a tightrope walker's nightmare.

By five that evening darkness had set in. By seven, after 13 continual hours of riding in a steady rain, the expected gas stop had still not materialised. The road was pitch black. With the engine running the silence and darkness was kept at bay, but if the motor stopped the surrounding jungle rushed in frighteningly fast. A pure blackness outweighed everything

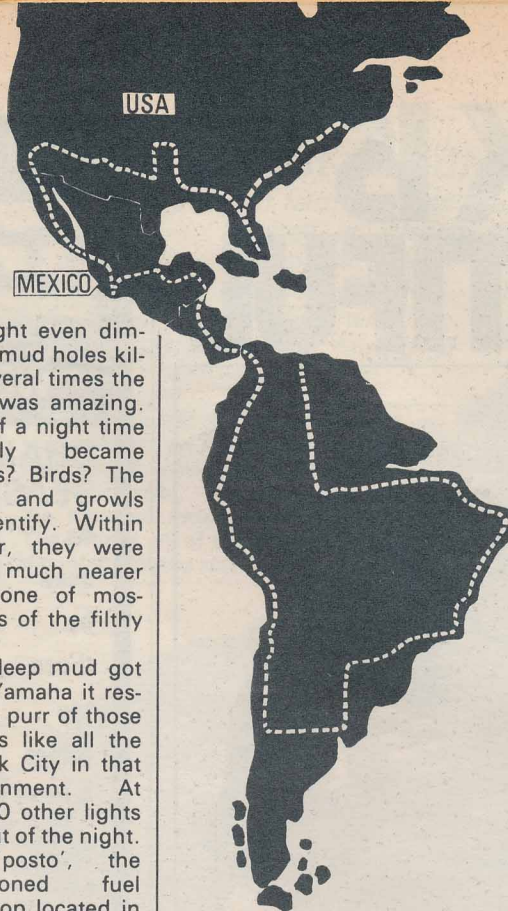
else if the headlight even dimmed. When deep mud holes killed the engine several times the complete silence was amazing. Then the noises of a night time jungle gradually became apparent. Animals? Birds? The hideous screams and growls were hard to identify. Within seconds, however, they were blotted out by a much nearer sound — the drone of mosquitoes, thousands of the filthy things.

Each time the deep mud got the better of the Yamaha it restarted on cue. The purr of those four cylinders was like all the lights of New York City in that dreaded environment. At kilometre post 500 other lights finally appeared out of the night. It was the 'posto', the government-sanctioned fuel station and rest stop located in the middle of nowhere. Ironically it was run by an Englishman, the only man who would stay at the outpost once Indians had begun their attacks on the highway. Outside of fuel and conversation there was little to be offered; a dingy room with its own population of rats, a meal of warm rice and bitter coffee.

With a night's rest behind them, stomachs and fuel tank full, but yesterday's wet clothes still not dry, the expedition was launched once more. The red mud track continued on to Boa Vista, a small trading village where it was said visas could be obtained for Venezuela. The rumour proved not quite correct. Visas were obtainable, but only for Brazilian nationals. The English were told they must trudge on to the border, some 370 kilometres away, and hope that the immigration officials there would let them proceed on through Venezuelan territory to Caracas.

At the border, after two days of very fatiguing travel through mud and rain, a drunken Brazilian soldier approached the bike. 'Documentos,' the man screamed. With a black eye and swollen jaw it was easy to see that the man had not had a good day of it. The situation looked bad, his temper could turn the entire five day's fight through the elements into an exasperating retreat. But the Gods smiled. With a gesture of contempt he waved the Yamaha through.

Ten miles down the road the Venezuelan border came into



view as a grown-over shanty town. Santa Helena de Uairen had nothing to recommend it, except an elusive immigration officer who had final say on any further forward travel. He was found in a small bar totally knocked out on rum. The bartender recommended the following morning as an appropriate appointment time.

The next morning, still somewhat in a stupor, the man announced that he could not issue a visa — it would have to be obtained back in Brazil. Garth mentioned that they had already left Brazil and had no visa to re-enter the country. The immigration officer, now sobering up considerably, said that was not his problem. Things entered into a very depressing stalemate until Garth mentioned in an off-hand sentence that all he wanted to do was *transit* Venezuela. That brought a flash of inspiration to the official. *Transit visas* he could issue, but they were good for only 72 hours. It took very little figuring to conclude that Caracas could never be reached in that amount of time, short of a jet flight, but the 72 hours was a ticket into the country.

The big Yamaha was pushed out onto the road again. Three hundred and forty more kilometres of mud were ploughed through at a snail's pace. The 72 hours were up and finished even before the hard part began. At the extreme northern end of the great Amazon plateau lay a sharp embankment which dropped the road 1300 metres in less

than a few miles. The rocky, washed out steps required to carry this out had been nicknamed the 'Escalador' by the Venezuelans.

There was no real road; rains had taken care of that. In its place the Yamaha was asked to carry its load down a steep series of terraced wash-outs, all littered with loose shale and debris. Unbelievably, Garth took on the entire 1300 metres without dropping the bike. At the bottom, though, rain still continued to fall lightly; the air temperature had risen considerably. There were now 76 kilometres of road to civilisation's first outpost, the town of Maturin.

Over 1000 miles from where it had petered out, tarmac was suddenly under the bike again. It had appeared like a mirage around a bend in the road and it was almost good enough to kiss. For the first time since they reached the outskirts of Belem, the XS's throttle was cracked open wide.

The sprawling oil-rich capital of Venezuela was entered on Christmas Eve. Everyone was in good spirits — including two tired but happy motorcycle riders who were encrusted in dirt — but smiling right through it. That final 1000 miles of mud had been a trial that neither wanted to undergo again, but it was now behind. Ahead lay two weeks of rest and a final sorting out of details before the two returned home.

At the city's main Yamaha agency, Venemoto, the XS1100 was given a complete check over by a visiting factory representative from Japan. He diagnosed the bike as being in perfect condition for what it had gone through. Once cleaned up it was difficult to tell that the machine had even been past the city limits. Though some enticing offers were made for the XS right there, Garth decided it was not going up for sale, not after what it had gone through. Air freight back to England was not that expensive. With 36,000 miles registered on the odometer the Yamaha was secured to a pallet.

Today the Indigo Blue machine can be found parked out in front of a row of Islington flats in London. There is no map drawn on the fuel tank or list of countries painted on the panniers to tell of its adventures. The bike looks little different to when it was first purchased off the showroom floor. Every morning it's driven off to work and every evening it's returned home. It's a commuter's machine now. And the commuter? He's patiently piling up pound notes for his next great adventure, one the Yamaha is sure to fit into.