

Part 1

Read **Passage A** carefully, and then answer **Questions 1** and **2** on the Question Paper.

Passage A: Across the Andes by bus

In this passage, the writer describes their journey, by bus, across the full length of the South American continent.

The bus was heading towards Colombia through a torrential rain storm, swerving into deep mud, its wheels turning desperately for a few moments before the engine finally died. A few curses and the persistent rain were the only sounds to break the silence. I had come to research a book on the Andes, and was intending to spend six months journeying the whole length of the world's longest continuous mountain range. The most practical option was to travel by bus. Taking more than 100 public buses, I would travel through seven countries. On the way there would be jungles, deserts, green valleys, high-mountain passes, dense forests and glaciers – every possible type of extreme and sublime landscape.

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My Andean bus adventure began in Venezuela in the middle of the tropical summer. This is a country where everyone seems to delight in warning you about the potential dangers of travelling there. I managed to escape the capital city, Caracas, unharmed, only to be told that Venezuela had some of the world's most hazardous bus drivers who drove their rickety contraptions at such speeds that the wheels would sometimes leave the ground. But, as it turned out, on driving up into the Venezuelan Andes all my thoughts turned to the excitement of reaching the mountains and observing the gradual transformation from their lush lower slopes to the bleak high-altitude moorland.

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It was not until I reached Peru that my mind as a passenger became increasingly fixed on the state of the roads beneath us. Bus travel in Ecuador had been far too easy, with well-graded, well-surfaced roads, and services so frequent and obliging that you could hail a bus anywhere along the main thoroughfares without having to wait for more than fifteen minutes. I began my Peruvian adventures on an over-filled bus seemingly held together by tape. From the hot and dusty lowland centre of Piura, with its confusion of taxis, motorised rickshaws and rundown, privately owned bus stations, I travelled to the distant mountain town of Chachapoyas. The main overland route took ages. The bus was due to set off at five in the morning, and – if I was lucky – would cover a distance of just 160 kilometres by around 10 that night. The road was a continuous dirt track barely wider than the small and inevitably battered bus. We had to climb 2 mountain passes of about 4500 metres and then descend all the way to the tropical Marañón river.

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The main challenges facing me, as I headed towards South America's southernmost point, were caused by the onset of what threatened to be an extremely severe winter. Bus services, ever more infrequent, were often suspended because of poor weather, and did not exist at all after April along Argentina's celebrated Route 4. This follows the Andes all the way from the Bolivian border down to the very end of Patagonia's largely uninhabited wilderness. I criss-crossed my way down the mountainous Argentinean-Chilean frontier, and was relieved to reach, in sub-zero but brilliantly blue conditions, Chile's Carretera Austral. This is the final section of the Pan-American Highway that ends amid fjords, forests and glaciers.

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But, however much I wanted never to lose sight of the Andes, the limitations of winter transport forced me to follow the interminably straight roads of Patagonia's unchanging

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flat and empty grasslands. The buses themselves became less frequent and carried fewer passengers. Seated on one, I thought how fitting it was that my long journey, begun in the heat and vibrancy of the tropics, should now be nearing its end like this – in the middle of winter, and alone.

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