

# I'll have piranha soup - and make it snappy!

**I**HAVE had a quite extraordinary week in Bolivia, most of it has been spent in the far East of the country on the border with Brazil.

I took the 'Train of Death' to get there. Apparently the journey is so boring it will bore you to death!

Travelling overnight ensured that didn't happen, but from the little I saw in daylight hours, it seemed quite an interesting journey to me. The

train took more than 13 hours to get there so paying a few pounds extra to travel on this one, the fast option, was definitely worth it.

My first challenge was to try to explore the tourism options in the Bolivian section of the Pantanal, a huge wetlands area also in Brazil and Paraguay. This proved to be very difficult.

Two years ago the Brazilian currency crashed and it is now considerably cheaper to organise excursions from just over the border in Corumbá. The Bolivian town of Puerto

Suárez clearly has a lot of tourism potential but as it has been unable to compete on price with Corumbá, most of the businesses have now closed.

I stayed in the Hotel Bumby, which is very close to the large Lake Cáceres.

It was a very simple hotel and reminded me a bit of some former KGB prisons I have visited eastern Europe!

Still, it was quite comfortable and at less than £2 per night I wasn't complaining.

Overlooking the lake was the excellent restaurant El Mirador where I tasted Piranha soup. It was delicious! There is also a pier extending onto the lake from where you can see the amazing sunset and observe the thousands of birds which feed there.

The mosquitoes were out in force too though, and I ended up with about 30 bites on my back.

This was despite covering all my exposed flesh in repellent; the little blighters bit me through my clothes!

Deep into malaria country it wasn't what I wanted so now we just have to hope the tablets are effective!

Having failed to organ-

ise an excursion (not helped by the one tour operator failing to turn up for an arranged meeting) I went to see the nearby 4 star El Pantanal Eco-resort.

They had an incredible deal on including all meals in their wonderful à-la-carte restaurant. It was very hot and sticky, around 35 degrees, so the cold swimming pool was most welcoming. The deal also included a trip in a horse and carriage to some caves and a couple of hours in the Zona Franca duty-free shopping centre.

A city tour of Corumbá

## Letter from South America by RUSS PEARCE



was also included. It is a pretty, former colonial town which is undergoing a lot of restoration. We were able to climb the 500 steps up to a huge statue of Christ, and benefit from the incredible views stretching out over the whole Pantanal area.

The highlight of the trip though, was the day trip on the River Paraguay. It was a tranquil journey with lots of time and opportunity to see the variety of birds which are in abundance.

There were eagle, cor-

morants, herons, egrets and countless brightly coloured small birds too. I was also able to get very close to a crocodile, from the safety of the boat of course!

But the overwhelming memory I will take from this excursion is the fishing.

I am not really a keen fisherman but this was fun, especially as I caught a piranha. The first fish have ever caught!

It was a shame I had to cross into Brazil to do the trip properly, and it really does highlight some of the problems with tourism development in Bolivia.

I have now completed my two months in the tourist office, and I hope my contribution can make a small difference.

At least tourists coming into the office now have some information which is up to date, and in English.

My holiday now begins and I will be exploring other parts of Bolivia away from Santa Cruz.

There are so many amazing places to go it will be impossible to do everything I want to.

Wherever I go, though I will (of course) be writing back to let you know



Catching a pirhana.



Okay, it's cheesy, but it had to be done!