

THE THRILLS OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN BOLIVIA

FOR the first time on this trip I have ventured outside the confines of the department of Santa Cruz.

I took a ride up to Trinidad, a nine-hour overnight bus journey, and did some exploring around there. Over just a few days I experienced a wide variety of transportation methods, some of which were quite breathtaking!

Getting a ticket at the bus station proved surprisingly easy, despite the apparent chaos surrounding me at every turn. I had arrived two hours before departure but it seemed that 10 minutes would have been more than sufficient.

The overnight buses come in several forms. I chose the most expensive and luxurious option of a cama bus, only about £1 more than the less salubrious offerings.

The difference with the cama was that the seats recline almost all the way back, without crushing the legs of the victim sitting behind you!

I slept reasonably well despite a video blaring out for the first two hours, mainly thanks to the fact that I have become accustomed to sleeping in earplugs.

Arrival at Trinidad was quite unexpected at 6am, as I had been expecting it to take 10 to 12 hours. Then, I had a 30 minute walk to the centre of town to find a way of getting to the small settlement of San Ignacio de Moxos, a further 100km away.

I was directed along a dusty street where a camion was loading up. This was an open-back truck which seated 30 to 40 passengers on wooden boards laid across the metal railings.

We were all treading lightly on everyone's baggage which had been unceremoniously dumped under foot! As we pulled away, I was soon very pleased not to be wearing my contact lenses. The dust was incredible and whenever something passed us in the opposite direction, everyone covered their eyes for protection.

Three hours of breathtaking scenery quickly passed but en-route we had to negotiate three river crossings. This is done by the camion edging very slowly onto a precarious raft and being steered across by the skill of the pilot of a motorised canoe.

The first one had me on edge but after that it seemed so easy! I was pleased to reach San Ignacio though, as the wooden beam I shared with five others was not the most comfortable thing I have ever sat on.

The reason for my visit to San Ignacio was the village fiesta which draws people from all over Bolivia. There is music, dancing and drinking in the streets all weekend and many, many processions.

One group dresses as indigenous Indians, complete with feathered head-dresses representing the rising sun, while another group are made up as Spanish conquistadors, with ugly face masks and black clothing.

Every hour, or so it seemed, they marched around the plaza to the sound

of the bands, and gathered at the local church. The panish entered but the Indians continued their tribal dances at the door.

I didn't really establish what it all meant, other than a mighty fine party, but I guess it is something to do with Spanish oppression.

Because of the fiesta, all hotels were full to bursting. I had to pay for all three beds in my room and, as a result, only had enough cash for one night. The nearest bank was back in Trinidad so I had no choice but to make the return journey, departing just as the bullfight was starting in the specially constructed corral on the village green.

This time I was travelling in the relative comfort of a small bus called a micro. It even had windows to protect you from the dust, but you had to be quick to close them before the clouds from passing vehicles hit!

We had a bit of a scare at the second river crossing too. With all the passengers off, but the baggage still loaded, the bus took four attempts to reach dry land before we let out our collective sigh of relief. I had visions of diving into the muddy waters to find my rucksack!

In Trinidad I found a nice hotel for half of what I had paid the previous night. The sun was scorching all weekend which was nice, except for Trinidad's open drain sewerage system.

Yes, it was a bit whiffy! Still, you soon got used to it and didn't notice after a while.

Travelling solo made any excursions very expensive, so I had to forgoe my trip down the river to meet an Indian tribe. Instead I sampled some more forms of transport. My transfer to a local ranch by taxi turned out to be on the back of a motorbike.

I then spent two hours on horseback admiring the edge of the Amazon jungle and the abundance of tropical birds. I thought the camion had been uncomfortable to sit on, but this was my first time ever on a horse!

In the afternoon, I was a passenger on a very unstable canoe as I went fishing on a lake. Despite a few nibbles at my line, I was unable to hook anything, but I'm sure the ones that got away were HUGE!

The food in Trinidad was amazing too. There are lots of river fish and, having already tried Surubi, I gave Pacu a go, but wish I had stayed with what I know!

The beef kebab I had before leaving was so huge that I had to leave two thirds of it. In a land of such poverty I felt quite embarrassed, but what can you do?

After all of that, the cama bus back to Santa Cruz seemed pretty tame. On these long night journeys, comfort breaks are given every three hours, which may disturb your sleep pattern but are quite necessary.

I just feel sorry for those living near these stops as there are no actual facilities. I can only leave the rest to your imagination!

Our South American correspondent, Russ Pearce, has been contributing some fascinating articles on the tourist potential of Bolivia, where he is currently doing voluntary work.

This week, as well as his latest report (left), we are delighted to be able to publish some photographs of his travels, sent back courtesy of the internet.



Religious art in a local church.



Street vendors are a common sight - not just on the streets.



Waterfalls can revive you after a hot day!

