

Take me to the Poncho Museum!

A LOT has happened in the past week, and most of it at high altitude.

Sitting above Lake Titicaca, I had the most amazing view of the Milky Way, something I can never see back home in Bridgend because of the light pollution from the streetlights.

The main problem though was the cold. I have become so accustomed to the heat of low level Santa Cruz that it seems most peculiar to be able to see my breath in the air and to require a fleece jacket at night.

From the lakeside town of Copacabana (not of Barry Manilow fame – that one's in Brazil!) we took a ferry over to the Isla del Sol, the Island of the Sun.

The island contains several important Inca ruins, including Chincana where a maze of stone

walls and doorways overlook the white beach and blue waters of the lake.

We also managed to fit in an eight km hike along the length of the island, quite an arduous task at an altitude of more than 4,000m, getting on for four times that of Pen-y-Fan. The sun shone brightly and we were thankful for our high factor sunscreen and water bottles.

Before returning to La Paz, we visited a couple of local museums. The first was very basic and devoted to local textiles.

The second one was amazing, though, featuring the development of the poncho as part of the national costume. It's an item of clothing most people would associate with Mexico but the museum catalogued its long history within Bolivia. I never thought I would find such a museum so interesting.

La Paz brought a sharp

Letter from (South) America

by
RUSS PEARCE



reminder to us both of the dangers of travelling. As we got off the bus outside our hotel we were both tapped on the shoulder and asked if we wanted a taxi.

In the split second that we both looked away, Trish's bag was snatched containing her passport and various other things. We spent a whole morning afterwards with the local tourist police and the British Embassy, both of whom have been very efficient.

The police were at pains to remind us that such things happen in our own country too, and not to allow the incident to cloud our judgement of Bolivia. They are correct

of course, but it's still extremely annoying and has forced us to alter our plans a little.

In La Paz, we visited the Museum of Coca where the development of the coca plant was chronicled. It is incredible to think that Coca-Cola used to contain the coca derivative cocaine, and still uses the raw leaf as part of its recipe.

The museum was very educational and showed how the coca plant has been used over the ages as a spiritual drug, a stimulant for mine workers, and then developed to provide dentists with the anaesthetic they still use today.

We also found an

interesting restaurant in the heart of the city. It was a Cuban restaurant where I ordered a dish called Ropa Vieja.

I asked the waiter what it was and he just said 'old clothes' which is the English translation. It turned out to be a delicious dish of shredded beef with onion and garlic, served with Cuban style rice and beans.

From La Paz we have ventured down to the town of Coroico. It is an unremarkable place, but the adventure was getting there.

A bus took us up to an altitude of 4,700m where we were equipped with mountain bikes and riding gear.

Then we cycled 64km down the 'World's Most Dangerous Road'. You can prove anything with statistics but this road results in more deaths per traveller than any other on the planet!

The trip took us all the

way down to 1,500m and we experienced several changes of temperature along with a continuous increase in the oxygen levels in the air. All the downhill traffic drives (or rides) at the very edge of the precipice, as the uphill drivers do not get as good a view!

At times there was so much dust in the air from passing vehicles that we had to stop for several minutes before we could see again. It was quite a sense of achievement to get to the end safe and well.

The refreshing beer at the end of the road was never more deserved!

Finally then, a reminder that I will be giving a presentation about my Bolivia trip at the Hi-Tide Inn, Porthcawl, on Wednesday, October 13.

If you are interested in coming along, contact Denise on 01656 773060 for further details.