

The end of the road for Russ

I CANNOT believe that I have been in Bolivia for three whole months now and that my time is at an end.

My final week has been just as hectic as the rest of my stay, and I look forward to some well earned rest when I return to south Wales!

Once back in Santa Cruz, we headed straight up to Samaipata. This time, the journey was shrouded in smoke as the choqueos continued to burn around the whole area. Over here they still burn the fields every year, and because of the climate, the smoke hangs around in the air for days, possibly weeks.

As we headed up to our destination, visibility was down to about 100m in places, thanks to the northerly breeze blowing all the smoke towards us! It was such a shame as Trish missed out on the fantastic views which are afforded from the road.

From Samaipata, we did a day hike the following day as the smoke had cleared significantly. This time, we explored the

Volcanes region of the Amboro National Park. It's not actually volcanic, but the rock formations all around certainly would have you believe it is. At the moment it is an amazing place, almost untouched by man, but plans are under way to construct a golf course and leisure facilities on the plateau where there is a beautiful lake and astonishing views over the foothills of the Andes.

Hopefully, it will be done in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way, but only time will tell. The hike was fantastic and, for the first and only time in Bolivia (except in the zoo!), I saw a condor flying. It was awesome and when it flew close to some large vultures, you really got a feel for the size of its wingspan of almost 10 feet.

On the way back to Santa Cruz, we went back to El Fuerte, the pre-Inca ruins which I didn't really enjoy last time. This time was different, as we went with my German friend Frank, from the Roadrunner tour agency in Samaipata. He really brought the

place to life and explained things far more than the guide book had been able to.

I guess it shows that sometimes saving a bit of money by not paying for a guide doesn't pay off. Any archaeology student would die to have the chance to excavate in such a place. It's a shame the government here cannot fund such work.

Santa Cruz itself is currently experiencing Expo fever. An annual event, Expocruz is a trade fair during the early evening and turns into a massive party late at night. Many of the top restaurants from the city have temporary eateries there, and all the best Bolivian breweries have bars and nightclubs.

Major South American pop stars play on the stage in front of an excited young audience until the early hours. You can also visit the displays from global exhibitors; although it was a little unclear exactly what the British stand was showing. We did manage to find a brochure on Cardiff, though!

The Bolivian

Letter from (South) America

by
RUSS PEARCE



domestic football season is coming towards a conclusion, too. We went back to the stadium to see the second clash of El Clasico where Oriente (my adopted team) played local rivals Blooming once again.

This time they were outclassed, losing 3-1 in an exhilarating encounter with a red card apiece yet again.

The fireworks were not so dramatic this time as the game was played during daylight hours, but the smoke hanging in the skies gave the second half an eerie feel as the sunlight began to fade.

On Monday, came one of the real highlights for me. Our penultimate day in Bolivia was spent with a local child who we sponsor through a charity called Plan International. We were shown around many of their educational projects and saw just where our donations go.

It was incredible to see the new schools which would not otherwise have been built, and also to see the beginnings of a new project where lessons are given to

remote locations over the radio.

Meeting our sponsor-child, Juan-Carlos, was a very special moment. I even got to ride pillion on his motorbike (he's 10!) which, in hindsight, was probably a very brave thing to do!

Then on Tuesday, it was time to say goodbye to the city which has been my home for so long. The main plaza has been boarded up for the whole of my stay for renovation, and it will open two days after I leave.

I cannot believe I am missing the biggest celebration the city has seen in many years! Still, I return full of very happy memories, and with an incredible amount of photographs to share! As Arnie once said: "Hasta la vista - I'll be back!"

So, once again, 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, please give Denise a call on 01656 773060 for further details.