

One that almost got away!

Belated Letter from (South) America

by
RUSS PEARCE



LAST week, The Recorder carried Ross Pearce's 'final' article on his travels in Bolivia - he is now back home in Bridgend.

However, it turns out that the international e-mail gremlins were at work, and one of his despatches vanished into the ether.

Originally sent on September 16, here is Russ' account of his visit to the largest salt lake in the world:

THIS week has been quite mixed in terms of success and enjoyment.

We started off in the town of Coroico at the end of the 'World's Most Dangerous Road'. From there, we took a bus back to La Paz along the road

and the view was more terrifying from the front seats than it had been on the bikes.

I guess that's because when we were on the bikes, we were concentrating more on staying upright than on admiring the view! We also had a harsh reminder of the dangers of the road when a lorry crashed not far in front of us and delayed us for an hour or so.

Fortunately for the lorry driver he crashed into the cliff, rather than plunging over the precipice.

Back in La Paz, the British Embassy were busy letting us down. The replacement passport we were waiting for didn't arrive until lunchtime on Friday. We sat around all mornin from 9am, which put our plans back somewhat. Still, traveling is all about remaining flexible with your plans!

From La Paz, we took an overnight bus to the town of Uyuni, purportedly the coldest place in Bolivia. Fortunately at the bus station we managed to find a stall selling blankets at a reasonable price. The bus journey was very cold and at times the windows rattled open, leaving a layer of ice on the inside.

The cold night brought one reward as we stopped at around 1am for a comfort break. The sky was so clear that the whole of the Milky Way was laid out before us as we looked up to the heavens.

Uyuni is the starting point for a tour of one of Bolivia's most famous sights, the Salar de Uyuni, the largest salt lake in the world. We were taken in a jeep for the day around and across the lake.

There was a train graveyard where we saw

the eerie rusting locomotives left over from the heyday of mining in the area. Then we were taken to a mining village and bought souvenirs, llamas carved from salt!

A short drive over the lake took us to the last remaining salt hotel, where everything, even the beds, are made from salt! Then it was an hour or so across the surreal landscape, where a sea of white salt met the crystal blue sky and the horizon was shrouded in heat haze.

That brought us to the Isal del Pescadores, an island in the middle of the salt lake where giant cacti grow. The tallest was 12m high, and at a growth rate of just 1cm per year, that makes it 1,200 years old.

From Uyuni, we had a nightmare bus journey to Potosí, the highest city in the world at 4,100m

above sea level. Instead of taking six hours and depositing us at our hotel, it was a long, arduous and freezing cold 12 hours!

When we finally arrived we were in no mood to risk visiting the dangerous silver mines. That was a shame because, as we get older, we are more aware of the risks of visiting these places, and I feel brave enough right now!

Instead, we got straight on another bus to Sucre, the official capital of Bolivia. This was a wonderful city with lots of well-maintained colonial buildings. We visited an old church which is now used as a girls' school and, after climbing up to

the highest bell tower, we were rewarded by a tremendous view over the whole city.

Down in the depths, we were also able to descend into the crypt, but the lower catacombs are now off limits.

From Sucre, we flew back to Santa Cruz. Despite having to travel via La Paz, it still saved us 20 hours on a bus and was far more comfortable.

In the wet season it is necessary to fly from city to city because many of the roads are impassable. I guess local flights are to Bolivians what a return train ticket is from Bridgend to London!