



PART TWO: BOLIVIA



4 – LA PAZ

Friday, 10 May

It was Philip's turn to rise early this morning, soon after six o'clock. By seven we were in the hotel across the street having an excellent *desayuno continental* (continental breakfast), served by a surly waiter. We were given pineapple juice, delicious fresh bread with butter and jam, then tea or coffee.

We were ready to leave for our day-long trip by bus to La Paz, the capital city of Bolivia, at 7.45. We clambered aboard a fine roomy bus that had been parked around the corner, and set off. We quickly left the narrow streets of the bustling town and drove across the Altiplano. The journey was enjoyable, though uneventful; I fell asleep for a while.

On and on we went, then climbed up to some hills. We stopped at a little village for a short while to change US dollars into Bolivian currency. I bought a bottle of Inca Kola from a little shop in the sleepy square, and off we set again.

We soon reached another sleepy village on the border, where we had to get out and present our passports. Some of us, including myself, faced a problem as we had not been given a correct form to fill in during our flight to Lima. After a lot of pleading by Marianne, we paid \$5 and filled out a form that was given to us. It did not seem fair to have to pay for something that should have been given to us.

We then walked across the border into Bolivia and produced our passports once again for inspection at a little immigration building. They were stamped, and our names and passport numbers were written down. After this we returned to our bus, which by now had been allowed to cross the border, and continued our journey. As the road here was paved with cobblestones, it was quite bumpy.



Copacabana

We now travelled through a pretty area that was quite different from the wide open spaces that we had encountered earlier, and stopped at the small town of

Copacabana, where we had a very cheap but excellent lunch consisting of quinhua soup with bread (a meal in itself), trout with rice, and an orange. All this cost six Bolivianos or just over \$1.

After lunch we had a short period of time to walk up to the main square, where we found the large and dazzlingly white church that the town was famous for. I photographed it and had a quick peep at its rich interior before returning to the bus.

I now sat on the back seat, which turned out to be not a very good idea, for the road continued to be extremely rough and bumpy. By this stage an English couple who lived somewhere near Belfast had joined us; it turned out that they had been here before.

We now drove up into the mountains and passed more spectacular views of Lake Titicaca, which now appeared on our right. Some time later, the lake appeared on our left. If that was not confusing enough, we were then able to see it on both sides!

Next we dropped down to a ramshackle town, San Pedro, and stopped at the water's edge. This was where we had to cross the lake by ferry. It was quickly done; we piled into a couple of motor boats that took us across at top speed, and the bus drove on to a raft that looked like a large wooden box. The heat was intense as we waited on the other side, in San Pablo, for the bus to arrive.

Soon we were off again and heading for La Paz. The terrain now flattened out and we began to leave the lake behind. We crossed more of the Altiplano and suddenly, without any warning, the outskirts of the city began to appear. We drove through some untidy suburbs and then, on stopping at a toll booth, looked down into the deep valley in which the city centre was located. As Marianne had told us, it was really spectacular. She advised me not to bother trying to take a photo, for we would have plenty of opportunities later.

We now dropped down into some very narrow and crowded streets, and finally stopped in one that was full of shops selling children's cuddly toys. Our hotel, as Marianne had promised, turned out to be really excellent. The décor was tasteful everywhere and the bedroom that Philip and I shared could not have been better. This was a *real* hotel!

As soon as we had settled in, I took a quick shower while Philip tried to telephone home. I then brought all my dirty clothes down to reception to be washed. The service here was excellent. Philip went off to have a sauna and I sat down to write my diary. When Philip returned and we went downstairs to meet Marianne, there was a power cut. It turned out that the electricity in just this block of buildings had failed. We left and walked down the road to a busy but pleasant Jewish restaurant, El Lobo, where the walls were decorated with drawings that some of the previous diners had done. While we waited for our food, Marianne told us about interesting places that we could see in the city and pointed them out on a map. The food was not bad, though it was served luke warm rather than hot. I had chicken with mushroom sauce, chips and rice, and some salad. I drank water with the meal and later downed a cup of *maté de coca*. The meal cost 21.50 Bs – about \$4.

I left with a few of the others, wandered up a street where nothing but clothes and shoes were being sold, then returned to the hotel, where I wrote my diary by candlelight. After a while the electricity came on and then Philip arrived back. We both went to bed at a reasonable hour.

Saturday, 11 May

As nothing had been planned for today, it was wonderful not having to get up at any particular time this morning. I went downstairs for a continental breakfast at about nine o'clock; although it was rather expensive, it was very good and included a tempting selection of fresh fruit.

When ready, I met up with Graham and Chris, the two Yorkshire farmers, and set off to explore the city and its narrow streets. First of all we headed down some steep streets to the post office, stopping to look at bottles containing llama faeces in the Calle Linares (Linares Street). We were told that they were supposed to bring good luck when placed under the doorway of a new house. Afterwards, we found ourselves in a busy main street, the Mariscal Santa Cruz, where we stopped to admire the fine façade of the church of San Francisco, which had been built in the mid 1700s. It was very elaborate inside.

From here we made our way to the large main post office, where we spent some time buying stamps and postcards. I discovered the word *sello* here meant 'franking' (not 'stamp'); the word for stamps was *estampillas*. The two ladies that I dealt with were very good humoured. I bought a set of stamps for a friend of mine who was an avid stamp collector.



The Cathedral and people in Plaza Murillo, La Paz

The three of us then set off for Plaza Murillo (the main square), though keeping an eye open for a particular money-changing place en route; unfortunately we discovered that it was closed on Saturdays. The main square was colourful and full of people; the main landmark was a large and elegant cathedral. We peeped inside; it was dark and plain, and a Mass was in progress. Outside again, I succeeded in taking some shots of the local people, including the bowler-hatted women who were very superstitious about being photographed – Marianne had warned us about this. A group of musicians, all dressed in red, appeared and played some rather strange music, dancing a little as they performed it. The women wearing traditional dress here were very elegantly attired in light-coloured garments, which contrasted greatly with their bronzed faces. They were everywhere, either selling things at stalls or lugging huge bundles wrapped in colourful blankets on their backs. Many of them were selling cold drinks and refreshments.

After a while we left and strolled back towards our hotel, passing the main telephone office. Here I succeeded in getting a used telephone card from a man at a phone booth. I would give this to a young relative of mine who collected phone cards.

Climbing up through the narrow streets, we reached the restaurant where we had eaten on the previous evening, and went upstairs. By now we were quite out of breath for, although the city was in a deep valley, it was at quite a high altitude. We ordered the set lunch: a four-course meal consisting of a starter (a boiled egg and salad), a stew-like soup with bread, fried chicken with rice, and a dessert of fruit salad. The price for all this was half of what I had paid for breakfast! Although the food was not of the highest quality, there was lots of it.



A market stall in La Paz

Afterwards we went wandering around some of the local markets. Bowler-hatted women presided over stalls that offered just about everything under the sun. We walked up and down several different streets, stopping occasionally to look at or photograph what we saw. From some of the streets there were fine views of the great valley and the snow-capped mountains above it. Here it was boiling hot in the sunshine and cool in the shade. We stopped at some stalls where jumpers were

We drove from the city up to El Alto and once again enjoyed the spectacular view looking down into the valley. We did not stop for photos as it was a little misty. We then bumped across the Altiplano region along a rough road (Marianne told me that most roads in Bolivia were like this) and slowly approached the snow-capped mountains. As we neared them, a tortuous ascent began. The road was extremely uneven and we were tossed about like a boat in a storm. However, the view was stunning. On our way upwards we passed a few small though intensely blue lakes.



The Chacaltaya ski resort and nearby mountains

At last we reached the Chacaltaya ski resort, which was perched on a ridge. We were now at an altitude of about 5,400 metres (over 15,000 feet). We paid 5 Bs to enter the resort and then clambered out of the bus. Immediately I felt the effects of the high altitude, which were exacerbated, no doubt, by this morning's indisposition; by now I felt drained of energy. I took my time at first and snapped a few photographs of the breathtaking view below us, then followed the others up to a ridge. This turned out to be very hard work indeed; I had to pace my breathing with my footsteps. I made just one stop as my pulse was racing, then made it to the ridge – only to discover that another ridge lay ahead. As I realized that I had neither the

energy nor time to go any farther, I stayed put with a few of the others and rested. Once again the view was superb and I took some more photos.

Going downhill was obviously easier, though rather slippery. I took my time and was back at the bus by 11.30. As there was a delay, I had time to rest. By now I felt quite unwell.



An aerial view of La Paz

When everyone had boarded the bus, we set off again and dropped down to a more comfortable altitude. On our way back to La Paz, we stopped to take photos of the aerial view of the city. We then continued downwards to the city centre, where we dropped off some tourists who had joined us this morning, then continued to the Valley of the Moon. En route we stopped at an open-air café (one of several by the roadside) where we had a simple lunch. I ate a roll containing chicken, and drank some Sprite.



The Valley of the Moon, near La Paz

Afterwards we continued our journey to the Valley of the Moon, which was not far away. This turned out to be an area of La Paz where there were unusual spiky

rock formations that rose from the valley floor. We scrambled around the edges, took photos and after a while returned to our hotel.

Up in our rooms, Philip and I collapsed onto our beds and rested. Philip then went off to have a sauna; I had a hot shower, rang home and wrote my diary. Later I organized some packing, then joined the others downstairs. This evening, wearing our best clothes (I just put on a tie!), we set off for an exclusive restaurant where Marianne had booked a table. As I did not have enough energy to walk, I went in a taxi with Sally and Philippa. We arrived at a very large and plush hotel with a uniformed man at the door. Walking into the building was like stepping into another world!

We waited in a bar for the others, then went up in the lift to the top floor, where we found a dimly-lit restaurant with windows overlooking a breathtaking panoramic view of the city, now illuminated. As the various buildings all around us extended up the sides of the valley, we were completely surrounded by fairy lights.

Although the service was a little slow, the food was excellent and beautifully presented – even the simple omelette that I ordered after I had consumed a bowl of chicken consommé. To fill my upset stomach I ate plenty of bread with both dishes. I sat with the two groups of Danes, who were at the end of the table, and chatted with them about various things including their own country and culture.

We did not stay too late and I returned to the hotel in a taxi with three other members of the group. I was in bed by about eleven o'clock.



Monday, 13 May

I slept well and rose at a little before seven o'clock. This morning I had a more relaxed breakfast and was therefore in good time when I joined just a few of the others at eight o'clock for today's optional excursion to Coroico, which was at a lower altitude and in a sub-tropical region. Although it was not far from La Paz, it would take us about three hours to reach it.

After a short delay we finally got started. As we drove out of the city, we had to stop at a couple of military checkpoints. We followed the river that flowed into La Paz and the valley became narrower and more dramatic. Soon we were out of the city and the scenery became quite majestic.

We then gradually rose as we approached some snow-capped mountains and stopped at the highest point of the road. Here we found a couple of altars with crucifixes, but the offerings that had been left suggested pre-Christian rituals. Our guide showed us how Mother Earth was appeased in the traditional manner by sprinkling a little alcohol on four points of the ground and on the four corners of one of the altars.



Shrines near La Paz

After this brief ceremony we returned to the warmth of the bus and continued our journey. We now began to drop in altitude and approached some mountains that were almost hidden by clouds. Soon we were engulfed by the clouds. The road now zigzagged downwards in a series of hairpin bends; as traffic on the way up had the right of way, our bus was obliged to stop and let the vehicles pass.



Mountains near Coroico

When we finally emerged from the cloud, we could see where we were going. Here the mountains were covered with trees and vegetation, and swept down to a

lush, green valley far below us. Here and there we noticed sheer drops from the side of the road; as we had been warned about these, several members of our group had decided to skip this excursion! These 'dangerous' spots did not bother me in the slightest. Like yesterday, the bus shook as it bumped over the rough surface of the road. We stopped at one point in order to let some traffic pass and then again later so that we could take photographs of the breathtaking views.

As we hurtled downwards, the temperature slowly rose. We now stripped down to tee-shirts and applied both insect repellent and suntan lotion. We stopped briefly at a checkpoint in the small village of Yolosa (the lowest point of our journey), then climbed a little to our destination: the small but pretty town of Coroico. Here we found a pleasant main square with a church, as well as some fine views of the surrounding countryside from a couple of the side streets.



Coroico and the surrounding landscape

The plan was to do a short trek from here down to the main road, but as I had forgotten to bring my shoes, I was obliged to buy a pair of reasonably sturdy runners for 38 Bs (cheaper than the previous evening's meal at 48 Bs plus a tip!).

We set off from the square and dropped downwards along a smooth path, then branched off onto a dirt track. Here the going was much more difficult and I was glad that I had bought the runners. However, just as I expected, everyone walked much faster than I did, and I was left behind, stumbling over rocks and trying not to slide or lose my balance. The punishing pace in such heat and humidity was both exhausting and frustrating as I was unable to stop and take in my surroundings. I would have loved to have taken photos of the beautiful scenery and colourful flowers that we dashed past. We were in a totally different world here, surrounded by coffee plants, coca plantations and orange trees. Our guide did stop once early in the trek to tell us about the coca; he probably explained more later, but I missed what he said.

As the trek was much longer than I expected, I was completely exhausted and dripping with sweat when I finally clambered on the bus down on the roadway. At least everyone else felt the same way!

We now drove a short distance to a river and parked near an old wooden bridge. Just beside it was a spot near the water where a lot of bright red butterflies had

congregated. We now relaxed – some people had a swim – and sat down to a picnic lunch of food that we had bought earlier at one of the checkpoints. My lunch consisted of bread and tinned tuna fish, a banana, an orange and some chocolate, all washed down with a soft drink. We were in a very pleasant spot; it was cool here because of the water and the fact that the sun was now partially obscured by cloud.

After we had eaten and relaxed, we returned to the bus and set off for La Paz. The journey back was equally dramatic – we were able to see more of the sheer drops – but conditions were cloudier. I sat on the back seat and watched Henrietta (an English girl in our group) and Cameron becoming more intimate: just what Hugh had noticed recently. A day or two previously, when the two of them had been sitting on the back seat, I had glanced backwards and seen them exchanging what was probably their first kiss. During today's return journey Henrietta suddenly announced in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, 'Hmmm – I haven't had a good shag for quite some time!' This rather startling piece of information was greeted by a certain amount of suppressed mirth by most of us. (It goes without saying that I have changed the names of these two individuals!)

It was about six o'clock when we finally arrived back; La Paz was now bathed in beautiful late afternoon sunshine. It had been a wonderful excursion. Philip and I took hot showers, then went downstairs to pay the hotel bill. We all gathered in the restaurant at 7.30 for a meal, and soon afterwards there was another power cut. Just before it happened I had seen flashes outside, which I thought were produced by fireworks. I dined on excellent breaded chicken with chips and vegetables, then returned to my room, where I wrote my diary before going to bed.



Tuesday, 14 May

Up soon after seven. As I felt rather queasy this morning, I ate a simple breakfast in the cafeteria. Once again the service was slow as there were many people seated and waiting. I managed to be in the bus on time, but it was late leaving the hotel.

We finally drove out of La Paz for the last time and headed for Tiahuanaco (now Tiwanaku) and the border with Peru. We had the same guide as yesterday and, as we ascended to El Alto and the Altiplano, he gave us a long explanation of the ruins in

Tiwanaku, which I had read about many years previously in connection with Thor Heyerdahl. Because of this, it was one of the places that I very much wanted to see.

The road was smooth for a while, then the asphalt disappeared and we were bumping over the type of road that was more usual here in Bolivia. As we drove onwards, I dozed. I was still feeling rather unwell and was beginning to think that I might have the dreaded giardia – the dose that I had suffered some years previously in Ladakh.

We stopped briefly in Laja, a small town that had been the original capital. I glanced briefly at the fine church, which was locked, and made use of the local *baño*.



The restored ruins of Tiwanaku, near the border with Peru

We then continued our journey and soon reached the ruins of Tiwanaku, which were just outside a town of the same name. The ruins, which had obviously been restored and put back together again, were in much better shape than I had expected. Our guide brought us round them and explained everything in detail; I found it all quite fascinating. Most interesting was the Kalasasaya complex, the Ponce and Fraile monoliths (which had been erected once again), and undoubtedly the most famous part of the complex: the Puerta del Sol, which had originally been

at Pumapunbu. The carvings on this gateway were believed to be either of the creator god or a calendar. Our guide also told us that the complex had been built so that it faced westwards in order to capture the rays of the sun. He went on to tell us about the ancient irrigation system that was visible from the top of a ruined pyramid. Also on the site was a crude statue of a man that reminded me somewhat of the giant statues found on Easter Island.



The Puerta del Sol, Tiwanaku

After our tour we walked to a nearby restaurant and had some lunch; I ordered a fried egg sandwich. Afterwards I paid up, got some money changed into smaller notes (which I would give to a friend), then bought a couple of postcards to use up some small change.

We then continued our journey to the border; shortly afterwards we had to stop at a checkpoint, where we had to show our passports. One of the Danish ladies took a photograph that included a couple of the soldiers and, because of this, her film was confiscated.

At last we reached the border and went through immigration. After we received an exit stamp in our passports, we crossed a bridge back into Peru, leaving Bolivia behind.