

Namaste!

Welcome to the January 2005 edition of Namaste News!

The Expedition completed an amazing tour through the unique country that is Bolivia, from the jungles of the Amazon Basin to the snow-capped Andes; from the highest cities on Earth to the Altiplano and vast salt flats...

Then into Chile for a traverse of the Atacama Desert and the Pacific Coast, before heading

across the Andes for a spot of trekking and horse-riding, hitting a high point of 4742m in the Paso Agua Negra before reaching the great cities of Mendoza and Santiago...

Packed full of features again this month as well as the regular updates, feel free to send me an email with your suggestions and ideas for future issues.

Cheers, Chris

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Global Expedition Highlights

1/1/05 Day 272
Copacabana Mile 27420



3/1/05 Day 274
Coroico Mile 27590



6/1/05 Day 277
Trinidad Mile 27930



8/1/05 Day 279
El Portal Mile 28334



11/1/05 Day 282
Sucre Mile 28660



30/1/05 Day 301
Santiago Mile 31145



Photos by Heidi Bledung & Chris Charlton

13/1/05 Day 284
Volcan Tutura Mile 28997



27/1/05 Day 298
Los Andes Mile 30845



16/1/05 Day 287
Antofagasta Mile 29630



23/1/05 Day 294
Paso Agua Negra Mile 30550



21/1/05 Day 292
Hacienda Los Andes Mile 30327

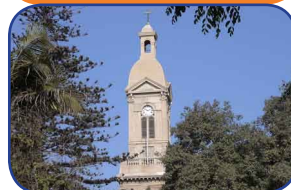


Photo: Hacienda Los Andes

20/1/05 Day 291
Hurtado Mile 30324



19/1/05 Day 290
La Serena Mile 30246



18/1/05 Day 289
Bahia Inglesa Mile 29983



Expedition Trivia...

of Days (overall): 31 (271)
Miles in month (overall): 3730 (31150)
Avg miles/day (overall): 120 (103)
Longest day (overall): 480 (527)
countries (overall): 3 (15)
of police stops (overall): 18 (72)

Top Tips this month...

Top Tip: Coroico, Bolivia
Favourite City: Santiago, Chile
Adventure Spot: Hacienda Los Andes, Chile
Place to Stay: Las Esmeraldas, Coroico
Night Spot: Los Penitentes, Argentina
Wilderness: Salar de Coipasa, Bolivia

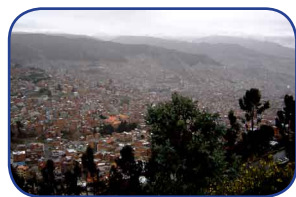
Features...

On page 5, discover what it's like to spend an amazing day on expedition crossing the Salars (salt flats) of Bolivia; and life on the road with a travelling circus...

Ever fancied trekking in the Andes? Check out some pictures on page 6 and find out more next month...

Global Expedition Update

January began with a fine New Year's Eve Party with new friends in the bright town of Copacabana on the southern shore of Lake Titicaca. Established around a splendid bay between two hills, the town has served as a site of religious pilgrimage for centuries, and it is still well known for its fiestas, and New Year was no exception.



With another day to relax by the lake, I then had an early start in order to reach La Paz for Heidi's arrival from Canada. She was joining me for a

tour of Bolivia and northern Chile.

Bolivia conjures up many traditional images of South America so I was looking forward to exploring it. According to Lonely Planet: "every corner of Bolivia will overwhelm curious and motivated travelers with cultural and natural beauty, as well as unforgettable experiences and characters to match the classic expectations of those who dream of South America..." and this turned out to be pretty accurate.

Tangible history lives on in most of Bolivia's best-known destinations. From pre-Hispanic archeological sites and living indigenous traditions to colonial architecture and the more recent headline-making political upheaval, the country's history reflects influences that have shaped South America as a whole.

Although Sucre remains the judicial capital, La Paz is the centre for commerce, finance and industry, and the de facto capital. Being the highest capital city on the planet at over 4,000m altitude, in terms of spectacular settings, La Paz is in the same league as Rio, Cape Town, San Francisco and Hong Kong. However, rather than stay at that altitude as Heidi had not had the chance for any acclimatisation, we decided to head east out of town to a wonderful place called Coroico.



To get there though, you have to drive along the "world's most dangerous road..." so-called because it suffers the most fatalities annually of any

road. Flanked by epic scenery, and punctuated by waterfalls in the rainy season, the La Paz - Coroico road plunges more than 3000m in 80km. It's extremely narrow and can be muddy, slippery and deeply rutted, though to be fair, it's not as treacherous as other roads in South America.

On one part of the road, we almost witnessed one of the statistics as a mini-van, clearly without much in the way of brakes, bounced off the cliff on one side of the road and only narrowly missed going over the precipice. So close in fact that one of the passengers in the back had opened the door and jumped out of the moving van in fear of his life!



Aside from that incident, a broken-down bus, and a beer lorry that had slipped into a ditch and blocked the road, the drive was enjoyable and spectacular.

The route takes you through a region known as the Yungas - the transition zone between dry highlands and humid lowlands - where the Andes fall away into the Amazon Basin. Above the steaming, forested depths rise the near-vertical slopes of the Cordillera Real, which halt Altiplano-bound clouds, causing them to deposit bounteous rainfall. Vegetation is abundant and tropical fruit, coffee, coca, cacao and tobacco grow with minimal tending.

On arrival in Coroico, a serene, tropical town perched on the shoulder of Cerro Uchumachi ("golden hill"), we found our way to the Hotel Esmeraldas and my favourite place to stay in January. It commands a fantastic view across forested canyons, cloud-wreathed mountain peaks, patchwork agricultural lands, citrus orchards, coffee plantations and dozens of small settlements.

We chose to stick around for a couple of days to enjoy the setting, the pool and we also met some fabulous people. On one evening we were just moving the Landie to a new parking spot when we were approached by a pretty girl dressed in a multi-colour sweater and her boyfriend. Being from London, Sarah had noticed the Landie and its English plates and was curious to know what we were up to.



After chatting for a bit, we found out that Sarah and Juan were part of the Circo Cuenta Teatro, a group that was touring South America giving

performances wherever they went. [See more on this travelling circus in the article on page 5.] So we all headed into town for a fantastic cheese and meat fondue! Later that night we were treated to a rendition of some of the group's songs by their camp spot in town - fantastic, one of those moments you really treasure when

you are travelling.

The next day, we popped down to say goodbye to our new travelling friends, give them a hand with starting their "Green Wagon", before heading out of town and onwards into the Oriente, the local name for the Amazon Basin. This area of Bolivia is vast and probably its least explored region.



On route, we stopped overnight in a small village perched on a hillside to appreciate the views and enjoy our campfire.

As you continue to descend out of the mountains, you get some amazing views of vast tracts of jungle that stretch to the horizon - and as the sun sets, it looks almost as if you are gazing out across the ocean.

We were hoping to make it to Rurrenbaque, a cool town in the middle of the jungle that is good for wildlife-viewing, but given the road condition and our limited time, we decided to continue on towards Trinidad, Bolivia's main town of the Oriente.

A small minority of Bolivia's population resides in the huge rainforests of the lowlands. These people depend on livestock raising and agriculture for their livelihood. Overgrazing and the use of traditional farming techniques such as slash-and-burn agriculture have led not only to deforestation, but also to soil erosion and a consequent loss of soil fertility. Because the rainforests make up such a large percentage of the country's total land area, the government is trying to draw a larger segment of the population to the area, thereby exacerbating the problem.

Bolivia does, however, protect some 16 per cent of its land area in parks or other reserves. It was the first country to enter into a debt-for-nature swap, a type of agreement allowing developing



countries to pay off national debt through nature conservation. Bolivia's swap covered about 800,000 hectares (about 2 million acres), mostly of rainforest.

Passing through this rainforest, the (largely off-) road to Trinidad passes through a number of small settlements followed by a couple of ferry rides before opening out into a surprisingly modern and bustling town. Tired from a long and bumpy day, we (or should I say I in particular) were not impressed when we reached a road block preventing our entry into town and a nice hotel to relax...

After some discussions with other drivers and picketers at the barricade we discovered that they were blockading the town in protest against the recent petrol price rises. I could empathise with the issue but not to the extent to prevent two weary travellers from reaching a nice hot shower! After some investigation on foot, I

continued on page 3...

Coming Up...to find out how to join, click below

February 2005

Climbing South America's highest mountain at 6940m, Aconcagua, then heading south through Chile/Argentina to Patagonia through delightful pacific coastal villages and some of the most beautiful national parks in the world, including the Lake District and Parque Nacional Torres del Paine...

March 2005

Exploring Tierra del Fuego, trekking in the Patagonia mountains, then following the east coast of Argentina from Santa Cruz to Buenos Aires, including the wonderful Peninsular Valdes. Then through Uruguay before turning west to Paraguay via the spectacular Iguaca Falls...

Global Expedition Update cont...

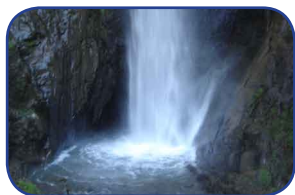
discovered that we could use the benefit of the Landie to bypass the road-blocks. Plus removing a temporary fence and crossing a small stream. Fortunately it had gotten dark by this time as I was a little concerned that protesters might have taken offence to our running the blockades. However, we got into town without incident and thankfully enjoyed that shower and a good meal.



Later I discovered that strikes and public protest in Bolivia was pretty common. For example, in reaction to Goni's return to presidential office, teachers went on strike nationwide on the day of his inauguration, and 300,000 bus drivers did the same in January 2003. It reminded me of the UK in the 1970's.

After spending the day re-stocking our supplies and having one of the spare wheel carriers re-welded in Trinidad, we left town in late afternoon in glorious sunshine. We turned off the (now tarmac) road around 80km later into Villa Banzar, a small village that rarely sees any visitors. After checking with the villager in the nearest hut, we parked up and began to set up camp. Soon we were joined by a group of local kids and adults, who all stayed for a share of our dinner and lots of friendly and entertaining chat. They also brought a special wood-smoke bucket to help ward off the swarms of mosquitos. In return for doses of our stock of rum, we were given some coca leaves to chew - well, you do have to try these things!

If outsiders know one thing about Bolivia and its neighbouring countries, it's their affiliation with the coca leaf and the refinement and trafficking of cocaine and other illicit coca derivatives. With as many as one third of the Bolivian workforce dependent on the industry, it is Bolivia's most lucrative economic mainstay, generating more than US \$1 billion a year, though it is thought



that less than half actually stays in the country. And during the past 25 years, the U.S. has spent more than US\$1.2 billion on coca eradication in Bolivia. The drug war continues...but it is hard to see how an eradication policy can work with so many dependents unless there is a credible alternative.

Finally we reached Santa Cruz, refuelled, and continued on into the Andean foothills. After spotting a steep track off the main valley road, we headed up into the hills to El Portal, a village of precisely one house, then around the mountain to the most beautiful camp spot. Set astride a mountain ridge we had a magnificent view of bright red and green volcanic mountains, and not a soul to be seen anywhere. A fabulous off-the-beaten track moment, and it felt good to be back in the mountains - no more mosquitos.

Continuing west for 100km or so, we then turned south to a town called Vallegrande in the Cordillera Oriental on the southern edge

of the Amboro National Park. Aside from the scenery, part of the reason for this choice of route was because of its historical significance. Che Guevarra, the famous revolutionary, made his last stand in this valley, finally succumbing to CIA-trained Bolivian troops. There was no battle, however, as by this time Guevarra had long since been discredited and his following had



all but dissipated. He was simply rounded up and executed in a local school yard, then secretly buried under a runway! It was only years later that his remains were recovered and transferred to Cuba.

After a night on an Andean hilltop, complete with campfire, we continued south hoping to make it to Sucre in a single day as it was only 200km. But in true Bolivian style, there was no way the track would allow us to make that kind of progress. For 2 days, over mountains, through valleys, and along river banks, we followed the ever-winding track. At one point we had to stop to help a truck, laden with everything from tables and sofas to wood and bikes, which had partially slipped off the track narrowly missing a long tumble into the ravine below.

After such adventures we decided on a spot of well-deserved luxury on arrival in Sucre. With great food, a lovely hotel in the central square of what is generally thought of as Bolivia's prettiest town, the mini-bar was ours!

Enjoying the short section of good road, we pulled into Potosi the next day, a town famous for its nearby silver mines. By the time the wandering Indian Diego Huallpa revealed his earth-shattering discovery of silver at Cerro Rico in Potosi in 1544, Spanish conquerors had firmly implanted their language, religion and customs on the remnants of the Inca empire. By 1545, Potosi had become the western hemisphere's



most populous (and highest) city. The Potosi mine became the world's most prolific, and the silver extracted from it underwrote the Spanish economy, particularly the extravagance of its monarchy, for at least two centuries.

We were looking forward to the next adventure as our chosen route was west to the Chilean border via the Salars, the famous and vast Bolivian salt flats set atop the Altiplano. To get there, we headed north and west from Potosi to Laguna Poopo. At a maximum depth of only 6m this enormous lake acts like a giant mirror, reflecting its surroundings perfectly.

From there, the tarmac ends and the adventure begins. Most people who venture to the Salar de Uyuni head to the town of Uyuni for a 2-3 day 4wd tour with local guides. Our route, though, took us due west across both the Salar de Uyuni and Salar de Poipasa. With some careful navigation we successfully made it to our chosen camp spot at the base of Volcan Tutura.

With a herd of llamas as camping companions we enjoyed a fantastic sunset, radiating a spectrum of orange and red hues across the volcano.

For the last 20km on the way there, we stopped to give a lift to three local indigenous people. Given the lack of room in the back, we managed to squeeze their luggage in the back



and they sat on the roofseat and enjoyed that special "roof-surfing" feeling. As we passed through a number of settlements, they laughed as they received cheers and inquisitive looks from their friends as we passed!

What I found a little surprising to learn is that the characteristic dress worn by many Bolivian Indian women was actually imposed upon them in the 18th century by the Spanish king. This distinctive ensemble, both colourful and utilitarian, has almost become Bolivia's defining image, including the ubiquitous bowler hat.

Waking up the next morning to a beautiful sunny day was great. But what a day it turned out to be...[see Heidi's article on page 5.]

Relieved to have had a good rest camping with the Bolivian Rangers after that long day, we awoke refreshed for the challenge of finding our way to the border crossing and our way out of Bolivia. The route was fantastic and took us through some of the most beautiful country we had seen in all of Bolivia. And driving across the middle of the salt flats was incredible. Perfect reflections of snow-capped peaks, volcanos and "islands" were uniquely coupled with the surreal experience of driving on bright white salt!

When we pulled out from the welcoming border post, passports duly stamped, we cheered when we hit Chilean tarmac. I think our good mood was largely filled by the realisation that we



would now make it to Antofagasta in time for Heidi to catch her flight and even a beer or four! And for future reference, allow plenty of time to explore this part of Bolivia

to avoid the time pressure!

As we blasted down out of the mountains into the northern reaches of the Atacama desert, I pondered the fact that this territory was once Bolivia. Whilst its land area is still significant - roughly 3 times the land area of the UK - almost a third of its original territory was lost between 1879 and 1935 in wars with Chile, Brazil, and Paraguay. The War of the Pacific (1879-1884) resulted in the loss of Bolivia's access to the sea, and the coastline Bolivia lost is now part of Chile. Perhaps this is partly because of the country's inner instability. Since its independence in 1825, Bolivia has experienced no less than about 190 coups. Its first president was overthrown in 1828, and the country experienced decades

continued on page 4...

Global Expedition Update cont...

of factional strife, revolutions, and military dictatorships.

After quite a distance, we eventually reached the Pacific coast and the beaches of Iquique. Stopping to enjoy a beer in a suitable beach bar, we were a bit surprised by the huge numbers of people soaking up the sun on the beach. This is partly because the coastline is vast and still



as great launch sites were everywhere and the terrain was ideal for soaring on coastal mountain thermals...

With little time to spare, we carried on in the dark to Antofagasta, checked in to our hotel and headed out for some serious dancing at X-tres, a cool club in town. Slightly worse for wear, we woke the next day and drove to the airport where Heidi caught her flight back to Canada. It felt a bit weird, but great at the same time, thinking that the next time we would meet would be in Africa for another adventure!

I spent the next day or so catching up on emails before Nazy arrived from Peru. He was joining me through northern Chile and Argentina to Santiago for 2 weeks, a time to explore and get in a bit of final training before the arrival of my climbing team for Aconcagua.

Our first night, though, was spent camping on the beach and it was a good chance to catch up since we had last met up in BC, Canada, some months before.

Chile is remarkable in that it spans 39 degrees of latitude (roughly 5,300 miles) and includes 83 distinct vegetation types. Its varied ecosystems include the Atacama Desert, ancient beech forests, and fjords and glaciers of the southern Andes.



combine in the Atacama to create a barren desert region, one of the driest places on Earth, with some weather stations in the northern Atacama having never received rain! It is a fabulous sight, though, particularly as afternoon cloud formations roll up the side of the coastal desert mountains.

As Chile is the world's largest copper producer, we also passed quite a number of copper mines. Enormous copper deposits were initially discovered in 1911 at Chuquibambilla, near the Bolivian border. Chile's economy is still fairly dependent on the export of this valuable ore, though in the last decade, the Chilean government has made efforts to diversify the economy in order to minimise the potentially devastating effects of fluctuations in the world price of copper.

We pulled into a small coastal resort town at Bahia Inglesa for the night at an established campsite. In fact, this was my first official campsite since leaving the Baja Peninsular of Mexico! As we pulled in through the gates we were told by the security guard that another British Land Rover had pulled in earlier that day. We drove into the campsite and found Lindsay



was awesome. As was the great English fry-up the next morning! It was a bit of shame that our routes were in opposite directions as it would have been fun to travel in convoy together for a bit, but I guess sharing top tips for places to see and routes to travel made up for that in some way. With a warm and understanding farewell, we headed south towards La Serena.

On the way, we debated the relative friendliness of the peoples of the countries we had so far visited in South America. Already I had felt a much warmer and hospitable reception in Chile than in Peru and Bolivia, but we agreed this was partly due to the fact that as Chile (and later Argentina) are more developed, people can more readily understand and appreciate what you are doing. Chileans and Argentinians, however, would probably argue its more to do with the true Latin spirit! Though even they would agree that Brazil is even different again - something to look forward to! But, as with all countries, if you can spend time with people rather than just pass through, everyone can be friendly, and South America is no exception.

Further south, we reached the beach town of La Serena. After pitching camp and some food, we headed into town for a few cocktails and a



great night out in the local beach bars. The next day, it was time to leave the coast and head inland towards the Andes. Coming from northern Chile, it was

good to see a little more vegetation as this is the start of wine region. We took a side turning from the valley on a fabulous off-road track to a village called Hurtado before stopping for the night in beautiful little campsite on the edge of a stream.

We pulled into our intended destination, the Hacienda los Andes, the next morning, some 3km away. Run by a friendly and entertaining German couple, the hacienda is a real oasis amidst the beautiful, but dry and rocky mountain scenery that surrounds it. This was to be our base for some trekking and horse-riding. That afternoon we set out to hike up a nearby mountain - after 3 hours we reached the ridge and our peak, which we named Rocky Cactus Peak after the terrain we had just crossed. We returned to the

hacienda as night was falling and cooked some food and chatted to Catherin who worked at the hacienda but had only arrived from Hamburg a week earlier.

The following day was a real treat as we enjoyed a day's ride in the mountains. And it was a pleasure to ride such fantastic horses, some of which were thoroughbreds, trained for Rodeo,



leather leggings, and pointed, high-heeled boots with spurs. A show to enjoy for sure.

On 23 January, we headed east towards the Argentine border across the high Andes via the Paso Agua Negra. After exiting Chilean customs, there is a 200km stretch of no-man's land before the Argentine border post that takes you over a high point of 4742m. Rather than drive straight through, we decided to spend 2 nights in the pass for some trekking, though you have to let border officials know because they radio ahead all vehicles that pass. Not all vehicles that enter the pass have made it through!

We had a good day on the hills, climbing from our camp at just over 3,000m to a peak at just over 4,000m before descending back to the valley floor. We named this peak 3 Condor Peak, as on up the way up we had seen the majestic beauty of 3 condors gliding along the ridge below us.

After a smooth border crossing into Argentina, we drove south through the city of San Juan, and onwards to Mendoza past endless vineyards. I wanted to come this way in order to do a bit of reconnaissance before returning on 1 February with the climbing team.

After meeting up with Sebastian who was organising some of the logistics for the Aconcagua climb, Nazy and I drove to Puente del Inca in the La Cumbre pass.



There we met Capri and Martin, instant new friends, and enjoyed their fantastic fruit smoothies followed by a wild night out in a bar in Las Penitentes where they live.

The next morning we stopped to gaze at the perfect view up the Horcones Valley to Aconcagua. It was great to see the mountain I would be climbing in only a week or so's time. Beautiful... and big! Then we dropped back down into Chile to Los Andes for 2 days of relaxation and a chance to sort my climbing gear out.

We finally pulled into Santiago on 29th January for a couple of days to relax, explore the city and its entertaining nightlife. Ase, Greg and John duly arrived with all their kit on the 31st and Nazy was great at helping us sort our stuff out before we headed for the mountain on 1st Feb...

by Chris Charlton

Travelling Circus

Think of people from exotic locations: Jueves from Guatemala, Juan from Argentina, Edward from Colombia, Alejandro from Uruguay, and Sarah... from Dartford, England!!!, and you have the Circo Cuenta Teatro travelling circus.

Performances are free, save for any donations towards food and fuel for the "green wagon", and are given in all kinds of public places. Their intention is to make the fun and entertainment they offer accessible to all, in particular to the kids of villages that would otherwise not ever see a circus.

From juggling acts to balancing exercises to clowning around to music and song keeps the kids laughing and enthralled.



So how did this come about? Well, imagine travelling with friends and deciding to make a difference to the local people by doing what you love, what you're good at, or something completely new. In Juan's case, coming from an IT background, the travelling circus was quite a lifestyle change, but what an experience.

Touring all over South America, the group gets around in their amazing green wagon. And keeping it on the road is half the challenge!

We caught up with the group in Coroico, Bolivia, a beautiful hilltop town overlooking the Andes, and were treated to a spontaneous ensemble of their music and song. And I think the cheese and meat fondue beforehand, washed down with copious wine, helped us along nicely. They almost had me singing, and that's a dangerous thing!

As they move from place to place, sometimes their performances are planned, and sometimes not, it depends on what they find and where. And they are always developing the shows to keep them entertaining.

Aside from the core group of five, they are also joined by other travellers from time to time to join in the fun and experience a unique way to travel. In most cases, this has been great, but unfortunately not always. In one instance, one new companion decided to leave unexpectedly with some of their belongings. A sad reality of life on the road.

But they remain philosophical about such an experience, as we all must do, and took it in their stride.

Smiling, laughing, and dressed in multi-colour clothes, this group can never fail to put a smile on your face, whether just for their spirit and enthusiasm or the entertainment in their performance.

I look forward to meeting them again, somewhere else in South America. For more info, check out:

<http://www.primogenia.com/circo>

A Day in Bolivia...

January 14th, 2005....

When traveling with Chris, it's hardly unusual to wake up to yet another spectacular setting... Having chosen the sight the evening before, the landscape featured herds of llamas at the base of a gigantic volcano on the Uyugi Salt Flats.

I now rubbed the sleep from my eyes, soaked in the view and the morning sun. We wanted to cross the border into Chile that afternoon, so we scooped down a bowl of strawberries & cream, gulped up our cups o'joe, packed everything away and set off on a mission!

The day started off normally, although I'm not quite sure what is normal anymore... The road conditions were atrocious, but we had witnessed this Bolivian feature over the last couple of weeks, so as I said, all was normal! Driving through the salt flats requires a GPS and an instinctual navigator (like Chris!), as choices of roads and turn-offs range from 5 to none! It's like driving through a desert with hedges...



Everything looks the same and goes on forever!

When we hit the Salar de Coipasa, we took the opportunity to get "off-track" (whatever that still meant?!), and drove out onto the flats. A seemingly dried out sea of hardened mud... or so we thought... Having run out a ways, Chris decided to catch up with me in the Landie, and just as he pulled up closer, he hit a soft patch - and sunk. My initial reaction was "OH SHIT!", but with a little digging, the Landie accessories, a lot of muddy spinning of the tires (& crossing of the fingers!), we got it out and back onto solid ground. Giggling at the thought of what could've been, we got back on the so-called road to Llica, somewhere near the border.

Hours passed, hedges flashed by and the flats overwhelmed the horizon. We drove through many shrubby plantations, which seemed to be the main reason (aside from the flooding) for deviated roads, which were cause for much of the guess work when it came to navigating... The weirdest part of this drive, was the apparition of miniature towns, usually 5-10 houses, a basketball court, and sometimes a church. You could swear they were abandoned, run down or untouched for centuries, but as you peered into the rear view mirror, children and curious adults would be staring back at you as you drove away...



We finally reached Llica around 4 PM, after a solid 5 hour drive from our peaceful morning campsite. We were thrilled to see the light at the end of the tunnel as we approached the town's entry point. We got our bubbles burst instantly though when the posted policeman told us our maps were wrong and that the border was at Chacoma, north of there.

We backtracked a ways and found another road headed north to Chacoma - where we'd supposedly be able to find the border crossing. An hour passed before we pulled into Chacoma, and we were informed of two border crossings: south via Bella Vista (20kms) or north via Colchane (40kms). We were pointed in the direction of the northern route, supposedly being the "smoothest", quickest and best alternative. Unfortunately (an hour later), the road came to a dead end. Back at Chacoma, we returned to find our buddies (still drinking!), and we insisted they guide us out to the proper road. One guy wanted US\$100 to bring us to the border. We figured we could do without his help, and headed in a new direction, south to Bella Vista, the other Frontera! Another hour flew by before we had reached Bella Vista, and spoken with the boys at

the Ranger Station, who in turn pointed us over the mountains into Cancosa, Chile.

The road heading into the mountains was easy to follow once we were on the right one... (a couple of tries before we got it right!). It was only 5kms away according to our military buddies, so our excitement grew once we finally passed the tiny Bolivia/Chile sign - they seemed to be right!!! As we came down into Cancosa, the small town appeared empty, but we noticed the police station, and decided to stop and check-in to the country. As we pulled up, one of the officers came out to greet us, however, he explained that we could not enter Chile at this check point unless we were on foot, as they did not have any customs or immigration officers to register the vehicle's entry. Vehicles, therefore, were to enter via the Colchane passage.

We did try begging & pleading, to no avail... We would have to return to Bolivia and now find this bloody route (but what a fabulous route it turned out to be)!

It was 8PM and the sun had set.

The police officers offered us a bed for the night, but needing a new plan of action, disappointed by not being able to cross the border after this very long day, and wanting to get back to the Bolivian Ranger station to get a good look at their maps, we decided to drive in the dark.

After serving us coffee and bread, the Chilean police insisted on escorting us back to the Ranger station, and asked we follow them across. They drove a pretty fancy 4x4, as we dutifully followed behind. They led us over yet a different route than the one we had just come in over... a washed up, messy, impassable track they said had washed away a couple of weeks before. They asked us to sit tight while they drove on ahead to scope things out. We were quite puzzled as to why they hadn't taken the relatively good track we had just come in on? We watched as they drove away and got themselves stuck. We couldn't believe it! Chris walked up and there they were armed with shovels, digging themselves out!!! Unbelievable!!!

We waited 'til they got out of their jam. They drove up and told us the road was best left until morning, that we should return to their barracks and set off first thing in the morning. We said OK, but turned off onto the track we had come in on, once we spotted it. Seeing us pull a U-turn and head up the hill, they stopped and came tearing back up the hill trying to catch up with us. We made it back to Bolivia in no time, no thanks to our circus clowns tagging along behind. As we entered Bolivia, the Chilean police asked to lead us in, turning on their flashing lights as we pulled up to the Ranger station. I think they were just in need of a little ego booster...

Chris spoke with the same guy we had seen earlier, set us up with a campsite and place to cook for the night. To save time navigating, they promised to help us find a guide to Colchane first thing in the morning, making an end to a quite frustrating day, rather pleasant. We warmed up some dinner, which was much needed, as the earlier strawberries had long gone, before heading out to the wind-whipped tent, for some well deserved sleep. We needed to get up early to find our guide and get our mind set on perhaps having yet another long drive ahead tomorrow... all the way to Antofagasta, where I needed to catch my flight back home. We made it to Antofagasta by midnight the next day... just 12 hours before my flight, with a couple of hours of fiesta time to spare!!! Good job Chris!



by Heidi Bliedung

People

Fellow Adventurers...



Heidi Bliedung, 32, from Dawson City, Canada, joined the expedition for the second time; this time for 2 weeks from La Paz, Bolivia to Antofagasta, Chile...



Nazzy King, 19, from Nelson, BC, Canada joined for 2 weeks from Antofagasta to Santiago for a tour of the desert coast; then trekking and horse-riding in the high Andes of both Chile & Argentina.



Ase Bente Sinnes, 28 from Sirdal, Norway; Gregor Tait, 38 from Bristol, England; Jon Cook, 43 from London, England; and Andres Jones, 31 from Mendoza, Argentina all arrived in Santiago for the start of the Aconcagua Expedition on 31 January...

"Spectacular...", Heidi, Bolivia, 12/1/2005
 "Discovery...", Nazzy, Chile, 22/1/2005

Along the way...



A big thank you to all those people who we've met along the way in Jan, including:



Emma, Bev, Saskia, Leo, Deborah, Anette (Copacabana), Sarah, Jueves, Juan, Edward, Alejandro (Coroico), 2 guys & waitress (Trinidad), 3 hitch-hikers (Salinas), Cancosa border police, Rangers (Buena Vista), X-tres crowd (Antofagasta), John & Lindsay, Walter & family (Bahia Inglesa), bar crowd, Ret, Rodrigues (La Serena), Eda (Hurtado), Catherin, Clark & Manuela, Fernando (Hacienda los Andes), Sebastian & family (Mendoza), Capri, Martin & bro, Iari (Puente del Inca), Paola (Los Andes), Soledad (Santiago)...

In the News

In the News

The expedition will get a mention soon in Wanderlust magazine...

In-Country News

Should get time to catch up on local news next month...!

Previous Newsletters

Previous issues of Namaste News are also available at www.namaste.co.uk/news or click the links below if online:

- April 2004
- May 2004
- June 2004
- July 2004
- Aug 2004
- Sep 2004
- Oct 2004
- Nov 2004
- Dec 2004

Letters & Emails

Thank you for all your letters, emails, text messages, and faxes. Each month, a few excerpts will be printed here...

"...You seem to have found a great way to combine 2 adventures and ideas, and it would be great to meet and have a chat once you hit Argentina. I may be somewhere around Patagonia in March, otherwise in Buenos Aires...Good luck and abrazo (as they say down here)", Nick, Buenos Aires, Argentina

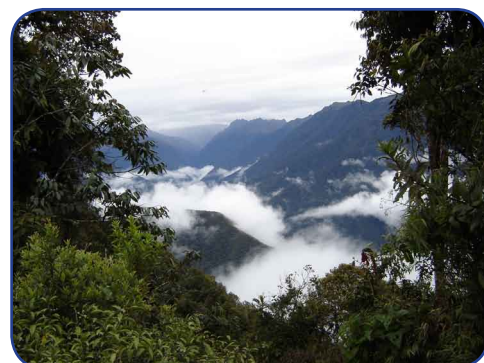
"Hope this finds you well - with no further mishaps! I read Decembers newsletter with amazement - what a lot of adventure and it sounds like you took it all in stride. I had images of me sitting with you in the landy, before a scary bridge, with you trying to get the nerve up to drive across it - and I wondered how I would have dealt with such living on the edgeness..." Mer, California, USA

"...Greetings from Costa Rica! Just wondering where you and your fancy little defender might be about now. After panama, sergio and i headed to peru for 2 weeks -- hiking around cuzco, etc...right now i am in samara with my girlfriend from canada. We plan to travel through central america... then take a short roadtrip to mexico from the north side. In the meantime, surfing and enjoying the beaches. Drop me a line and let me know where you are...", Marlise, Samara, Costa Rica

"I first saw your article in the LRO and followed on to your web site. I think your web site is wonderful. Full of colour, lots of photos, a good lay out and above all a very good informative read. I shall be going to South America in July and staying for more than a year in my td5 110...Many thanks for a good read and I will look forward to following your journey. Kind regards," Norman, England

"Just a quick email to say Happy New Year, trust that you celebrated in style in some strange part of the world. Hope that all is well with you. Matt and I had a fantastic time in Fiji - the diving there blew my mind and I loved the place, people etc etc. Think we may have found our dream, but of course its taking some working out - will of course keep you informed and then you have to come visit. Having a busy Christmas and New Year in Boracay, with lots of visitors and the usual rush of tourists at this time of year. Write when you can..." Gabrielle, Boracay, Philippines

Trekking in the Andes...



Website Update

Stage 2 Development

The first Namaste Management Guides (Project Management Series; Leadership & Management Series) and Namaste Fun Films (Climbing Denali; A Taste of North America) are now in production; and should become available from March 2005.

A record month in January for website visitors, hits and just about everything else...

Statistics

January 2005	December 2004
Hits: 54,168	Hits: 26,508
Countries: 45	Countries: 32
Downloads: 2,546 Mb	Downloads: 1,560Mb