

BOLIVIA

From 15th June last year for four weeks I went to Bolivia mountaineering with five other members of the Slough Mountaineering Group (SMoG).

The flight into La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, was quite spectacular. You fly in over a canyon which houses the main part of the city, then up over a plateau. The Andes and the main peaks we were here to climb on the right, and far off in the distance to the left a group of extinct volcanoes. The landing is very fast as the airport is at 4018m.

The altitude hits you as soon as your luggage is returned. We soon found a taxi down to a hotel in the centre of the city. The road winds around the outside of the canyon with the city spreading out below you, at the far end of the canyon the mountain Illimani (6402m) towers in the background.

The hotel we had chosen from the 'South American Handbook 1990' was the 'Torino' and cost 8 Bolivianos a night or £1.60. Unfortunately one of our team was feeling the altitude quite badly so he crashed out while we went to explore the city, which was right in the middle of a Fiesta. When we returned Paul had decorated the end of his bed and most of the floor in diced carrots.

Over the next couple of days Paul recovered, and for part of our acclimatisation we went on a tour to Copacabana on the shores of Lake Titicaca. Whilst there we visited the Island of the Sun, which is reputed to be the birth place of the Inca civilisation. To visit the ruins on the island you are dropped by boat at the foot of an Inca stair case, it is then a 3.5hr walk at 4000m to the Inca village which was not very spectacular but completely uncommercialised.

After our weeks acclimatisation we booked a mini-bus to take us to Zongo dam, a popular road head for the start of the climb to the most accessible 6000m peak. We had decided to spend a few days camping near by doing a few smaller peaks. Unfortunately we were carrying packs far too heavy for this altitude, 4600m, and we could only manage 1.5 miles in the 1st afternoon. The next day we climbed to a coll in order to get into the next valley. Whilst at this coll we bagged the closest peak and reached 5040m. On the way down from the coll one of our party slipped and dropped 1 gallon of fuel for the stoves!

There was nowhere dry and flat in the valley so we ended up opting for flat but snow covered. The temperatures during the day had been 20°C but as soon as the sun went down

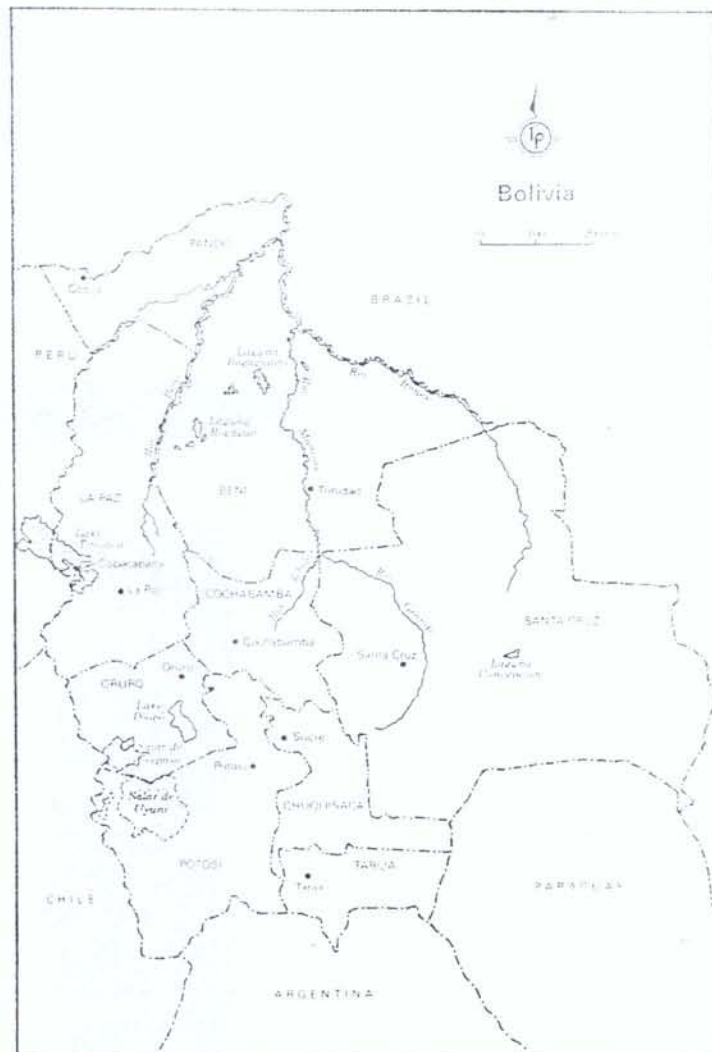


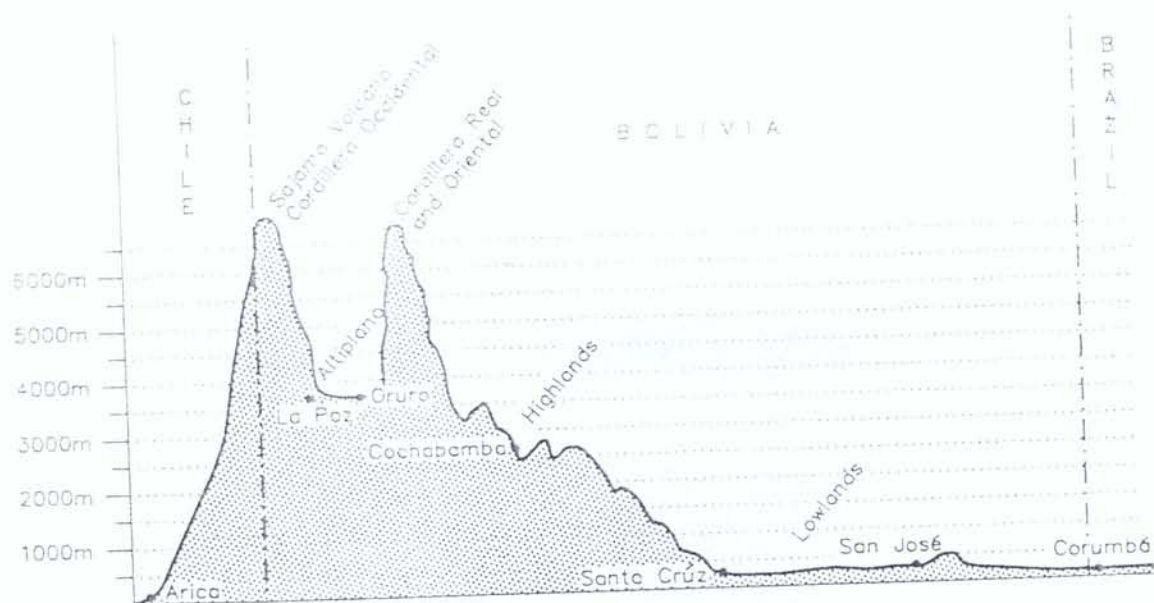
at about 6.30 it dropped to freezing; by 9pm the temperature outside the tents was -12°C . The next day we climbed a nearby peak at 5200m. Here the altitude really started to slow us down. That night we had a very windy storm, which blew most of the snow that fell away although there was still 6" in the morning. The visibility was right down so we decided to pack up, especially as we had lost so much fuel.

Two days later we had crossed the road head and dam, and had set up a new base camp ready to climb Huyana Potosi, at 6088m the highest mountain in the area. Up at 5am the next day we set off, the going was fairly easy, up a moraine slope then easy snow. By 9am we had reached a group of Americans who had bivied up there. By 1.30pm we had reached the normal bivy site but we decided that we had

time to go a little higher. We eventually stopped at 3pm at 5700m with glorious views and bright sunshine. By six o'clock we had dug an ice cave for four, where the six of us spent the night like sardines. Although the outside temperature was -15°C out of the wind, it was extremely hot in the ice cave. During the night 1' of snow fell and the skies were grey. Once we had dug our gear out we started up again which started off straight away with a 2 pitch ice climb, one of our group was cold, and not too keen on the exposure at this point, so two of them turned back. By now we had climbed into the cloud and visibility was down to 20ft, which was ok until we reached the seracs. Knowing the route to be complicated through the seracs, not knowing it, and being unable to see we had, unfortunately, to turn around at 5900m.

On the way down we passed about 25 Austrians and their porters. They had enough equipment for Everest. One day later - we hadn't arranged any return transport as there were plenty of trucks on the road to La Paz. Unfortunately when we got to the road we found there would be no trucks today! We were just about to set up camp when the minibuses for the Austrians arrived; fortunately they were about 2hrs early so they took us to the nearest town where they organised a local driver for the rest of the journey. It was a good job they turned up as we had just cooked our last food!





That evening in La Paz we went for a massive meal in a local restaurant of steak and ice cream. Unfortunately this was too much after our meagre diet and excessive exercise the week before, and I promptly threw it up all over the table.

A few days later we were on our way to the highest mountain in Bolivia, Jankhouma at 6427m. We had hired a driver and a four wheel drive Toyota to take us there. The drive was 5.5hrs with only 1.5hrs on Tarmac - the rest on dirt tracks. Before the last 1.5hrs we stopped in the village of Millipaya to pick up two porters; we had learnt our lesson about heavy sacks. The porters were very useful as the track now became almost impassable. They frequently had to stop and clear the track of rocks. We eventually arrived and walked in for 4hrs to an intermediate campsite. Here the porters suggested that we paid them more, but as we had paid the expedition company in advance we refused, this was our downfall as they failed to turn up the next day!

Having no porters we then had to ferry our gear to another unscheduled bivvy site. I had twisted my knee the day before so this became quite a struggle. The next day was a spectacular scramble of 300m to a frozen lake and our new home for 5 days. This lake was at 5000m and surrounded at the far end by an beautiful glacier, the start to our climb. The next day I rested my knee and the others rested after their double effort the day before.

Up early in the morning - it was still bitterly cold at -12°C , we made our way across the moraine and lake as soon as it became light. After an easy snow field we came to a complex area of seracs and crevasses. By the time we had reached 5400m we had passed the worst of the crevasses and it was now extremely hot. We eventually stopped at 5800m on a huge snow dome. Myself and another climber were first there and feeling fairly fresh and wanted to continue up the ice wall behind us, but by the time the last of our group arrived they decided we had done enough today. We dug two scoops in the snow as a bivvy site had a brew then watched the sun go down. The paraffin stoves were now playing up with the paraffin going waxy.

The next day we only had enough fuel for 1 drink each. At this altitude the dry air really dehydrates you so none of us felt too good. We started up the ice wall which required two ice axes and front point crampons most of the way. By 12pm we were only halfway up and really glad we hadn't gone up yesterday. The altitude was making the going very tough, then the frozen rocks started peeling off the route above us. Right at that time I had my rucksack off so whilst trying to dodge the rocks and hold onto my sac a rock hit my arm. At first I thought it was broken, but I found eventually I could move my fingers.

After a 20min deliberation as to whether I could continue, we eventually started again. I could only use one axe which made the going really difficult. The going was now very hard as the slope increased its angle - what a way to do your first bit of ice climbing! We eventually reached a small coll and simple if loose rock climb, at about 3pm. At the top of here three of us called this a day, whilst the others went up a further 200ft to reach a height of 6100m (20,000ft).

Coming back down we abseiled, leaving slings and ice screws if necessary. It took us a lot longer than expected and we soon got caught in the dark, so my petzl head torch decided now was the time to fly off down the mountain. The wind got up and the temperature was down to minus 25°C. It was the coldest I have ever been. The ropes eventually froze and jammed, so with our single drop we made one more double abseil, followed by a single, where we abandoned our last rope. The slope was now free climbable and we eventually got to our bivvy at 10.30pm.

The next morning we had no fuel and only chocolate to eat. Two of our party climbed up to retrieve the single rope. We then descended to the base camp; the fastest pair took 2hrs whilst I took 3 with my twisted knee. The dehydration was incredible, I nearly collapsed on the way back. Back at base camp all we did was drink and eat, glad to be in safety again.

The next day we went down to the lower campsite, then had a day off. The day after we hired two porters staying with another group to carry some of our gear back to the mine. On the evening of our return we went to the restaurant I was sick in where the guy we thought was the fittest in our party promptly collapsed on the restaurant floor.

The rest of the expedition was spent in La Paz eating, drinking and buying presents. Although very tiring, it was thoroughly enjoyable and it taught us a lot about high altitude climbing. Like a rucksack can never be light enough, even with porters.

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