



In Search of  
South America



*GEORGE MAHOOD*

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# TRAVELS WITH RACHEL

*In Search of South America*

George Mahood

*To our kind and generous friends and family for making this adventure possible – thank you*



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# ONE

The U.S. customs officer eyeballed me, his stony face devoid of any emotion. I was in deep trouble. I had not set foot in America since overstaying my visa by two months, during an eight-month road trip around the United States a few years earlier. There had been no problems passing through customs when I left the country, my passport glanced at only briefly on the way out, but the world had changed since then and airport security across the globe had tightened considerably. It hadn't even crossed my mind when my wife Rachel and I booked our flights to South America that I would once again have to pass through U.S. security. We were in Houston, Texas for a matter of minutes before catching a connecting flight to Quito.

The officer looked down at the passport again and back up at me, his eyes now cold and menacing. Surely this was it? Reinforcements would be called, I would be marched away by armed guards, interrogated for hours in a small cramped holding cell, stripped naked, given a full body cavity search, and then – if I was lucky – put on the first plane back to England. Our travels would be over before we had even reached the South American continent.

He looked down at my passport once more. This time studying it for a few seconds longer. He shook his head a little and raised his eyes towards mine. The edges of his mouth twitched very slightly and then stretched slowly into a smile, which turned swiftly into a grin that spread across his entire face. He let out a booming laugh that echoed around the terminal and caused those in the adjacent queues to turn and look our way. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, I now had a large audience to witness my humiliation.

He laughed again, this time trying to disguise it with a cough, and a globule of snot rocketed from his nose onto the passport in his hand. He quickly wiped it off, and it was at this point I realised he hadn't even been looking at my expired visa. He was looking at my passport photo.

It was a photo taken at the age of 17 during the year of my life that I had frizzy, shoulder-length hair. Shortly after the photo was taken I had my hair cut short, but had suffered the passport photo ever since. It was taken nine years previously. I was just a boy. A boy with really stupid hair. On every holiday since, I had been quizzed or laughed at by officials who didn't believe that I was the same person pictured. It wasn't due to expire for another year. I had been so preoccupied with worrying about my visa that I had completely forgotten about

the damn photo.

‘You have a nice day now!’ said the officer, finally pulling himself together and handing me my passport.

‘Let me guess, your hair?’ said Rachel, as we hurried to catch our connecting flight.

‘Every bloody time! At least he didn’t look at the visa. I can’t wait until this passport expires.’

It was midnight when we landed in Quito, Ecuador’s capital city. Travelling with only hand luggage, Rachel and I were the first into the arrivals hall – after only a brief snigger at my passport photo from the Ecuadorian officials. We had expected the airport to be deserted in the middle of the night, but the small terminal was bustling with taxi drivers and tour operators fighting for our custom. From our limited research before coming to South America, it appeared that rule number one when travelling in the continent was: *DO NOT get into any random cars*. We had a room booked at a hostel but had not arranged any means of getting there, so pushed dismissively through the haggling taxi drivers to a small information desk at the far end of the building.

‘Taxi? Por favor,’ I said, in my basic Spanish.

‘Si. Taxis!’ said the lady, gesturing to the huddle of drivers who had followed us to the information desk.

‘Ah, no. Telephonio taxi?’ I tried, with my thumb and little finger extended into the international sign language for telephone. Probably.

The lady shook her head and looked at me as though I had made the stupidest request in the world. I wanted to whip out my Lonely Planet and show her the bit about being wary of unlicensed cabs. Who was I kidding? This was South America. We weren’t going to get very far if we stuck to the rules.

‘I guess we just pick one of these guys,’ I said to Rachel. ‘Who shall we go with?’

‘Er... I don’t know. What does a trustworthy taxi driver look like?’

There was a smiling man to my right whose smile got even bigger when I pointed at him.

‘Yeah, he looks trustworthy,’ said Rachel as we followed him outside to his cab. ‘Good choice.’

‘And he’s small and old,’ I said. ‘I reckon I could take him down if it came to it.’

Rachel gave me a look that suggested she thought otherwise.



‘Hostal L’Auberge Inn, por favor,’ I said to the driver.  
‘Bueno,’ he said.

Ecuador was the first of three countries Rachel and I would be visiting in South America, the other two being Peru and Bolivia. We had our first night’s accommodation booked, but nothing arranged from that point onwards. No accommodation, no tours and no transport, except our return flight back to the UK from Peru’s capital Lima in six weeks’ time.

Rachel and I became friends at school. We remained close and saw each other regularly during our three years at different universities a few hours apart. We finally became a couple towards the end of our final year of university, after I had already made plans to travel across America with my friend Mark. Mark and I travelled the southern United States together for three months, he returned home, and I worked at a ski resort in Colorado for a few months, all the while trying to persuade Rachel to come to America to join me for the rest of the road trip. She eventually agreed, and we had an incredible few months exploring the back roads of the northern United States together, sleeping in the back of our rusty shitmobile named Josephine.

Being apart for almost six months and then travelling together in such a confined space had made our relationship stronger. A few months after we came home, we moved into a damp and mouldy one bedroom flat in downtown Northampton. A year later, we bought our first house together, and 18 months after that we were married.

I had been working in charity fundraising, which sounds far more exciting and altruistic than it was. My job title was Data Information Officer, which combined three dull words together to make for one exceedingly dull job. I was responsible for the accuracy of the names and the addresses of all those on the charity’s database.

There were two clocks on the wall in the communal office in which I worked. One was five minutes slow, the other five minutes fast. I timed my arrival to work by the slow clock, and when I left at the end of the day I went by the fast one. I effectively shaved 10 minutes off every working day. Once 5 pm came around (or 4.55 pm), I would leave work, walk the 1.5 miles home, and then not have to think about my job until 9am (or 9.05am) the following morning.

I was good at the job (a five-year-old could have been good at my job), and I tried to make the most of the role. I produced some phenomenal analytical reports about the average donations received from different demographics in

the East Midlands area, and the accuracy of my database's postcodes for supporters aged 65 and over in North Yorkshire is still talked about by Data Information Officers around the world.

The job was fine. It paid the bills. It wasn't in the least bit stressful or difficult. But there is only so much fulfilment you can get from a database full of names and addresses, and being a Data Information Officer gave me absolutely zero job satisfaction.

It's not as if I hadn't been warned. When I went for my job interview, the head of department – who would later become my boss – told me she didn't think I was suited to the role and even suggested I was perhaps overqualified (the only time in my life anyone has ever told me that), and that I would find the job unfulfilling and boring. I told her that I didn't mind and that I wasn't hugely ambitious in terms of a career. I just wanted a job.

I knew my job as Data Information Officer was not going to be my career forever. It was just a temporary thing to pay the bills. Only, that temporary position had stretched to over four years, and I had done absolutely nothing to try and change it.

Rachel had lacked any career aspirations too, and had worked in a series of equally tedious admin jobs for three of those four years. She then realised that something needed to change. She left her job and enrolled on a teacher training course at the local college to qualify as a primary school teacher. She spent the year before we came to South America studying hard and teaching in several school placements around the county. It was extremely challenging, she worked long hours, had lots of studying and lesson preparation to do, but there was a spark in her I had not seen before. Teaching had energised her and given her a new zest for life.

I was envious. Not envious enough to want to train to be a primary school teacher, but Rachel's career change made me realise that I didn't have to plod through life, working in a job that gave me nothing in the way of enjoyment. I didn't know what it was I wanted to do. But I knew it didn't involve staring at a database all day long.

Life had become too easy. I needed risk. I needed fun. I needed an adventure. While Rachel did her teacher training course, I saved up all my annual leave, booked a couple of months off with this accrued holiday, and told my boss I would not be returning to work. She couldn't believe it had taken me over four years. Rachel and I booked flights to South America that departed a couple of days after she qualified. She already had a permanent teaching position lined up at a school for when she returned at the end of the summer. I had

nothing.

Rachel and I had married a year earlier. We asked our wedding guests not to bring us presents – we had lived together for three years and had accumulated a house full of crap. Instead, we set up an account with a travel agent and any guests who wanted to buy us a present had the option of contributing to our honeymoon fund. This fund paid for our tickets to South America. We did have a short, cheap package holiday to Corfu immediately after our wedding – where we rarely ventured further afield than the hotel's swimming pool and restaurant – but South America was always going to be our proper honeymoon.

I had travelled fairly extensively all over Europe, the United States and Canada. But every one of my trips had been to a country where I either shared a common language or was in an environment not too dissimilar to the UK. South America represented a different kind of travelling and a different kind of challenge.

There are a lot of risks associated with travelling in South America. According to media reports, bus hijackings, street robberies, and kidnappings are not uncommon. Not to mention the thousands of deadly animals in the Amazon rainforest. A close friend of my sister was hit by a stray bullet during a raid on a bus in Peru only weeks before we flew to South America, and was lucky to escape with non-life-threatening injuries. Another friend of a friend spent weeks in a Bolivian hospital after contracting malaria.

Despite the potential dangers, South America offered so much more as a travel destination than anywhere we had ever been. It was a continent full of excitement and experiences that we would not be able to have in other parts of the world. It was because of this that it became our honeymoon destination of choice. Rachel and I were both apprehensive about the trip, and had genuine concerns about safety, security, disease and illness. Rachel was also deeply worried she might not see a pair of hair straighteners, and I feared that it would be impossible to check the football results from the middle of the Amazon jungle. But we knew that this fear could be used as a positive, and channelled into ensuring we had the holiday of a lifetime.

And so we found ourselves in a taxi, circling the dark streets of Quito for many miles before we reached the hostel. There was one building I swear we passed three times. But we made it to our accommodation without incident, and collapsed into a deep sleep.

## TWO

We woke early on our first morning in Ecuador, partly due to jetlag, but mostly because of excitement. We could hear the city streets bursting to life outside our window. Quito was wide awake, and so were we. We threw on some clothes, packed a small daysack, and headed out the door.

Quito sits at the foot of the Pichincha volcano, and the city is split quite distinctly into two halves. The southern part is the original 'old town', with its narrow streets lined with imposing colonial buildings painted in every shade of pink and orange imaginable. The 'new town' to the north is more developed, with shops, banks, office buildings and city parks. Our hostel was positioned conveniently between the two.

We walked north along Avenue Gran Columbia, passing the pretty Parque El Arbolito – where office workers were enjoying a morning coffee before work – and into the new town.

At 9,350 ft, Quito is the second highest capital city in the world. La Paz, Bolivia's capital, is the runaway winner. To ease ourselves into life at high-altitude in the Andes, and reduce the risk of altitude sickness, we ate a lavish breakfast of omelette, pancakes, fruit salad and coffee. We phoned our parents to let them know we had arrived safely, emailed friends from an internet café, and leisurely wandered the streets. We were well aware that this was as civilised as life was going to be for the next six weeks. Quito's 'new town' feels a lot like any other commercial city centre, and is far removed from the rest of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

Any possible altitude sickness we might have felt had been counteracted by the feeling of excitement at being in a continent neither of us had visited before. Mid-morning, we got a series of buses to The Mitad del Mundo – the 'Middle of the World' – which lies about 23km north of Quito. Considering it is one of Quito's biggest tourist attractions, it was surprisingly difficult to find.

'I think this is where we have to change buses,' I said, glancing out of the window and matching a street sign to one on my map.

'Really? Are you sure?' said Rachel.

'Yes. Quick, let's get off.'

The bus had slowed to a crawl but showed no signs of coming to a complete standstill. A couple of passengers stepped off the moving vehicle without a second thought.

'I guess we just jump,' I said to Rachel, as I stepped from the bus onto the

road. I turned, expecting to see Rachel following behind, but she stood frozen in the doorway.

‘Come on,’ I said.

‘Is it not going to stop? Surely it’s going to stop.’

‘I don’t think it is. Quickly. Just step off.’

She hesitated a moment longer and then the doors of the bus swung closed and she was left squashed against the other side of it.

Her eyes widened, and I could see the panic fill her face. She shouted something through the glass, but I couldn’t hear anything over the rumble of the traffic. And then the bus engine growled, it spat out a cloud of black smoke from its exhaust pipe and accelerated up the street. Rachel’s helpless eyes followed mine and I pointed frantically in the direction of the bus, not quite sure what I meant by my own gesticulation.

Moments later, the bus was gone, and we were separated in a continent we had been in for less than 12 hours. We had mobile phones, but both were out of service until we bought new SIM cards – a job which we had planned to do later that day. Rachel didn’t have a map or any money, or any idea where we were, or even where we were staying.

I decided to follow the bus in the hope that it stuck to the main road and that Rachel would have the common sense to successfully disembark at the next stop. I dodged in and out of market traders, hordes of people heavily laden with sacks of vegetables, old men on bikes, and several dogs. After about half a mile, I eventually caught sight of Rachel. She was standing at the side of the road staring at a lamppost.

‘Oh, thank god you’re here,’ she said, throwing her arms around me. ‘I didn’t know what to do. I was looking at this bus timetable but then I realised I had no idea where I am or where we were going.’

‘Let’s not get separated again, ok? Oh, and that’s not a bus timetable, it’s a list of church services.’

‘Oh. I thought it looked a bit weird.’

We caught another bus and arrived at the Mitad del Mundo just before midday. Rachel disembarked first this time. The Mitad del Mundo is a fairly tacky and incredibly touristy monument that marks the line of the equator. It serves no real purpose other than for people to go and stand with a foot either side of the equator and pose for a photo. So that’s what we did. It was surprisingly enjoyable and made the journey well worthwhile.

The location of the Mitad del Mundo was calculated during the Franco–Spanish Geodesic Mission in 1736. We were busy marvelling at the achievement

of this study when we read in our guidebook that these calculations have since proved to be inaccurate. After the introduction of GPS, the true equator was shown to be a couple of hundred metres further away. Spotting an amazing business opportunity, the owners of the land where the correct middle of the world was recorded, promptly opened their own rival attraction just next to the large Mitad del Mundo complex.

The Intiñan museum is a completely different spectacle to the official site. It is quirkier, crappier, and far more low-key, but infinitely more enjoyable. Members of staff demonstrated how water goes down a plughole anticlockwise on one side of the equator, yet clockwise only a few metres away. They also performed an illusion that involved balancing eggs on nails. Both tricks were extremely dubious, but they were performed so quickly and enthusiastically (not to mention the added confusion of the language barrier), that we couldn't help but be impressed, even if it was all an elaborate scam.

In order to further enhance the museum (pad it out a bit), visitors get to walk through gardens of cacti and totem poles and look at exhibits of traditional Ecuadorian life. It was a fun way to spend an hour and it contrasted perfectly to the grandeur of the main monument next door.

There has been further controversy in recent years, after arguments and debate began about the variations between the data of military and commercial GPS systems. It is now suggested that neither site marks the correct middle of the world. It is claimed that the nearby peak of Catequilla marks the true centre. Atop this hill, a stone circle sits, built over a thousand years ago by pre-Inca inhabitants of the area. Without any optical instruments, computers or GPS, it turns out these early settlers had already calculated the true middle of the world, simply by observing the sun, shadows and the stars.

Even with the help of a map, bus timetable, guide book, signposts and an imposing 30-meter-tall monument, Rachel and I still struggled to find it. Mankind is doomed.

Rachel and I knew no Spanish when we booked our flights to South America. We could probably have survived with a phrasebook and a smile, but we wanted to at least make an effort with the language. Spanish is the main language of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. 36 different indigenous languages are also spoken in Bolivia, but we thought it might perhaps be a little ambitious to try and learn those too.

Before the summer, we booked onto an adult education Spanish language course in Northampton. It was one hour a week for 12 weeks. The course was taught by a Spanish woman called Pilar. Pilar was in her sixties and a lovely



person but a terrible teacher. She spoke in a mixture of English, Spanish and Catalan, and during the whole 12 weeks I don't think she finished a single sentence in any language. She would start explaining something to us in English, then get confused and finish the sentence using Spanish words that she had not yet taught us, mixed up with a bit of her native Catalan. The lessons were very enjoyable, though, despite the fact we had no idea what was going on. It felt like we were back at school and we were even set homework assignments each week.

What made our lessons particularly memorable was another of the pupils – Marjorie. Marjorie was also in her sixties and keen to learn Spanish as she had just bought a holiday flat in Tenerife. It became clear early on that Marjorie was not best suited to learning a foreign language. Our group would take it in turns to read a simple line of English from our textbook and try to translate it into Spanish. When asked, Marjorie just read the words in English, but said them slowly and with a slight Spanish accent. Pillar would reiterate that she wanted Marjorie to at least try to speak in Spanish. So Marjorie would just repeat the English even slower with a slightly thicker Spanish accent. Pillar would then look a bit flustered and explain to Marjorie that she was still speaking English, but Marjorie seemed to think she was speaking Spanish fluently. Pillar looked so perplexed that she started to doubt her own language skills. Because she taught in a random blend of English, Spanish and Catalan, Pillar began to question whether it was Marjorie that was speaking incorrectly or in fact her.

During the twelve weeks of lessons, we never heard Marjorie utter a single word of Spanish. That was, until we had our graduation party at the end of the last lesson. Pillar had prepared a traditional Spanish tortilla for us, and as she handed Marjorie a slice, Marjorie instinctively said 'gracias'. Pillar froze in astonishment and the rest of the group applauded, much to Marjorie's confusion. I think I saw a tear in Pillar's eye as she realised her 12 weeks of teaching had not been completely wasted.

'De nada,' smiled Pillar. 'It's nothing.'

I have no doubt Marjorie converses in English with her Spanish neighbours in Tenerife, truly believing she is fluent in their language.

Our Spanish did improve. Not as much as we hoped, but we had developed a basic vocabulary and learned enough to get by, or at least show that we were making an effort. Like Marjorie, I have a false confidence with foreign languages and believe I am much better than I actually am. I will happily string a sentence together using a combination of the few foreign words I know, and connect them together with English words that I don't know the translation for.

We caught a bus back into Quito's old town and had a late lunch of chicken and rice at a café just off Plaza de San Francisco in the shadows of the imposing church. Late afternoon we took a taxi up to El Panecillo (the little bread loaf), which is a prominent hill to the southern end of the city. At the top, sits the magnificent statue of Le Virgen de Quito with her stunning vantage point over the city.

On the way up, our taxi was stopped by a police officer and our angry driver was taken across the road to a police vehicle where he was questioned for 15 minutes. Rachel and I sat in the back of the taxi, realising it would have been much quicker to walk. We watched some money change hands and the driver returned looking mightily fed up with his ordeal and I'm certain our fare increased to compensate for the notes he slipped the police officer.

We spent half an hour admiring the views of Quito as the evening light began to fade. The old town below us, with its pastel-coloured buildings and prominent white churches every few blocks, gave way to the steel and glass of the new town in the distance. To our left, the rugged Pichincha volcano, and looming on the horizon behind us, the ominous and permanently snow-covered cone of the volcano Cotopaxi, both making Quito look small in comparison. We caught another taxi back uptown to our hostel. This driver was waved at cheerily by the police officers on our way down.

Back at the hostel we played pool and drank beer with a Danish guy called Henrik. Beer was payed for by an honesty box next to a small fridge in the corner. Henrik didn't have any money with him, and as the beers were so cheap, I bought him beer after beer until he was dancing around the pool table swinging his pool cue like a baton twirler.

'I never been this drunk,' he slurred, as he stooped to try and pot a yellow.

'You do seem a little merry, Henrik,' I said.

'I never been drunk... EVER!' he shouted.

'Huh? Never?'

'Tonight was FIRST TIME I drink beer.'

'Wait? What? The first time you've drunk beer? How old are you, Henrik?'

'14,' he said.

'Wh...? Did you say 14?'

I could hear Rachel sniggering behind me.

'Yep. Fourteen.'

'And are you here on your own? Where are your parents?'

'My parents? They have gone for dinner. They'll be back soon.'

‘Oh shit. I think we need to get you to bed.’

‘Bed?’ he said. ‘I like bed.’

We helped Henrik up the stairs and back to his room, bouncing off the corridor walls as he went.

‘Right, you need to go to bed now, Henrik. If your mum and dad ask, tell them you are not feeling well and that it must have been something you ate.’

‘Ok,’ he smiled.

‘Goodnight, Henrik. It was nice to meet you.’

‘Nice to meet you too, George and Rachel. You English are a lot of fun.’

And with that he swung the door closed in our face.

‘Quick,’ I said to Rachel, ‘let’s get out of here before his parents get back.’

‘I can’t believe you got a 14-year-old boy drunk,’ laughed Rachel, as we walked out into the street.

‘How was I supposed to know he was 14? He looked much older.’

‘That’s what they all say.’

We got a table at a nearby pizzeria where we were seated with three other young-looking European tourists. I resisted engaging in conversation in case Rachel accused me of grooming them.

# THREE

We skipped the hostel's breakfast the following morning, in case we bumped into Henrik or his parents. We checked out of L'Auberge Inn and grabbed our first of many weird-looking and even weirder-tasting South American pastries at a nearby bakery instead.

A misty haze had hung over Quito since our arrival, giving everything a slightly grey hue. We rode a trolley towards the main bus station. Trolley, by the way, is what South Americans (and Americans) call trams. We didn't ride a supermarket trolley (or cart or basket, as they are called in America) into town. Although that would have been a lot more fun. The trolley we did ride was very enjoyable. So enjoyable in fact that we missed our stop. We were so paranoid about being separated again, that we both hesitated a split second too long and failed to get off in time.

When we eventually did disembark, we found ourselves in a heavily militarised area, with armed soldiers guarding every imposing building. There was no indication of how long we would have to wait for a return trolley, and neither of us wanted to linger for too long in the gaze of the frightening looking guards with assault rifles, so we followed the trolley line in the direction we had come, back towards the bus station.

Our very brief stay in Quito was over. The city still had so much more to offer, but it was only ever going to be our access point for exploring other parts of South America.

A three-hour bus journey took us to the town of Latacunga, or 'Latacunga Latacunga Latacunga', as Rachel and I started calling it, after the bus driver repeatedly shouted the phrase out the open door to waiting passengers at every stop. Latacunga Latacunga Latacunga – so good they named it thrice.

Despite our inability to successfully disembark the buses and trolleys in Quito at our desired stops, the public transport we had used so far had been very straightforward and nowhere near as chaotic and scary as we had been warned. Our journey to Latacunga Latacunga Latacunga was our first experience of a rural South American bus journey, and a real eye-opener of what we would come to expect from the rest of our trip. Despite all the horror stories we had heard about public transport in South America, we were not prepared for the experience.

The rules of the road in rural South America differ very slightly from other more developed places, in that they don't seem to exist. At one point on our

way to Latacunga Latacunga Latacunga, we were hurtling up a mountain road with a sheer drop to our left, all the way down to the valley floor below. A blind right-hand bend was fast approaching, when the bus driver decided to overtake the van that was chugging up the same hill. Although dangerous, this was not particularly unusual. What made it even more terrifying, however, was that the van we were overtaking was already in the process of overtaking a slow-moving tractor. So there we were, three vehicles wide, navigating a blind corner on a treacherous mountain road with only inches between the bus wheels and certain death. Rachel and I were the only tourists on a bus full of completely unflinching Ecuadorians. Rachel was dozing at the time and I decided not to alert her to our predicament. My heart rate quickened, and I felt my stomach do somersaults. It was a situation completely out of my control and the lives of an entire bus full of passengers rested solely in the hands of our idiotic driver. I closed my eyes and hoped for the best. It was scarier than any rollercoaster I have ever been on.

Fortunately, we didn't meet any oncoming vehicles, and the driver eventually pulled back over to the right side of the road. There were plenty of other incidents during this and our many other journeys when we did meet oncoming vehicles. On those occasions, there would be a loud angry blast of the horn from the approaching vehicle, followed by an even louder one from our bus in retaliation. The oncoming vehicle would then be forced to either slam on the brakes or, more likely, swerve out of the way, as braking seemed to be a considered a sign of weakness in South America. The bus driver would act like it was the most natural thing in the world, and judging by the lack of reaction from the passengers, it was.

The white crosses that littered the roadside of these rural roads suggested that the outcome was not always so lucky.

A woman resplendent in a series of brightly coloured shawls and a black panama hat popular in the area, boarded the bus in one of the many villages we stopped in. She walked down the aisle selling small plastic bags of boiled sweets. We bought a bag and she continued down the bus. Ten minutes later, another similarly-dressed woman boarded at a different stop and offered identical bags of sweets.

'No gracias,' I said, holding up the bag I had already purchased.

'Más?' she said. 'More?'

'No gracias,' I repeated. Even with continuous sucking, the bag was big enough to last us for several days.

She smiled wider, which was the Spanish for, *go on, go on, go on*.

‘No gracias,’ I said, and I even patted my stomach to demonstrate how I couldn’t possibly find room for any more boiled sweets.

She smiled and eventually continued on her way.

Ten minutes later, a third woman boarded the bus and began walking up and down the aisle selling bags of the same sweets. Again, because we already had sweets, she targeted us, thinking we would want more, despite none of the other passengers having bought any sweets.

It was unclear where these women were coming from, or when and where they disembarked, but it seemed that they would have had more success if they had diversified what they were selling. Not once during the three-hour journey did anyone try to sell us anything other than boiled sweets.

It was mid-July when we arrived in Ecuador. As we were in the Southern Hemisphere (apart from the brief moment when we stepped over the equatorial line at the Midad del Mundo), it was the middle of winter. It had been fairly mild so far, but it would get colder the further south we headed. We would be spending a lot of time high up in the Andes where the nights would be particularly cold. We also hoped to spend some time in the Amazon jungle, where temperatures remain hot and humid throughout the year. Packing our hand-luggage-sized rucksacks with clothes to cater for all climates had been a struggle, but we hoped we had everything we would need.

We definitely only had room for one bag of boiled sweets.

Latacunga (I’m bored of writing it three times) was a lively looking town, sitting directly below the slopes of the Cotopaxi volcano, but we didn’t have time to appreciate it as I spent our brief visit there fearing I was going to wet myself while we hunted frantically for a toilet.

After successfully loitering in a café long enough to look like a customer, I made it to their toilet just in time, and we had a quick browse of the town’s market before returning to the bus station to wait for a connecting bus to the village of Quilotoa, where we would be spending the night.

As a dilapidated bus spluttered into Latacunga’s bus station, what seemed like hundreds of Ecuadorians, all heavily laden with bags of food from the market, swarmed around it. The roof of the bus was piled high with people’s belongings, and, judging by the countless faces we could see at the window, it appeared to already be full.

The doors opened, and half a dozen people disembarked. Then the



assembled masses aggressively fought their way onto the bus to try and get the last few remaining seats. Rachel and I stood patiently at the back, resigned to the fact that we weren't going to be getting on this bus. The bus door stayed open and the people kept on squeezing through, until eventually, Rachel and I were the only two left standing on the tarmac.

The driver looked over to us and shouted 'Vamos!' – 'let's go.'

I pointed to Rachel and me, to ask whether he was including us in his declaration.

'Si!' he said. 'Vamos!'

Rachel and I squeezed our way up the steps, where two other passengers were already standing. We looked down to our left and every inch of space was filled with bodies or bags. The aisle was packed solidly all the way from the back, right up to the driver's seat, and Rachel and I were the only gringos on the bus.

'Aquí,' said the driver, banging his hand on the dashboard to his right. 'Here.'

'Here?' I said. 'Really?'

'Si, si!'

'Does he want us to sit on the dashboard?' asked Rachel.

'Yes, it looks that way.'

We perched nervously on the dashboard with our rucksacks on our laps and our backs against the windscreen. There aren't many bus rides that require you to sit closer to the front of the vehicle than the driver.

'What's that?' asked Rachel, pointing to a suspicious hole in the windscreen just next to us.

'Err... it looks like a bullet hole,' I said. 'I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Maybe don't lean against it though, just in case.'

The road from Latacunga began to climb past fields of crops and livestock, higher into the Andes. Compared to our death-defying ride earlier in the day, this second leg of the journey was thankfully far more sedate, as we had to stop regularly for obstacles in the road, such as herds of sheep, stray dogs and even more women selling boiled sweets.

Occasionally on the roadside, we would pass Ecuadorian families, standing with what looked like their entire worldly possessions piled up on the ground beside them: bags, animals, furniture, mattresses. Those going in the same direction as us would flag the bus down, and somehow – with the help of the driver – load all their belongings onto the roof and squash themselves into the bus too. South American local buses, as we quickly learned, are never full. We

were soon sharing the dashboard with four others.

An hour into the journey, the driver shouted something frantically to the rest of the passengers, which we assumed must have translated as ‘Duck! Duck!’ because everyone bowed their heads in what was reminiscent of the world’s most rubbish game of hide-and-seek. I glanced out the window and saw we were approaching a police checkpoint. Rachel and I instinctively ducked our heads as requested, in the hope that two white gringos with rucksacks sitting on a bus dashboard next to four others would look a little less conspicuous.

Somehow, the eagle-eyed policeman spotted us and signalled the driver to stop.

A no-nonsense officer approached the bus and stood at the bottom of the steps. He couldn’t board the vehicle, as even the lowest step was occupied by a couple of passengers. He glanced up at the heaving bus and then over to us pathetic specimens on the dashboard and gave a brief laugh and a shake of his head. He signalled through the bodies to the driver to step off the bus, and a mass of passengers climbed down the steps to allow him space to exit.

We watched from the window as angry words were exchanged between the driver and the police officer. A few notes were passed between the two, which was either a fine, or more likely a bribe, and the driver was allowed to continue his journey with all of his passengers. He didn’t seem in the least bit aggrieved when he took his place back in the driver’s seat, almost as though he had expected to have to pay a fee. The additional passenger fares from his heavily overloaded bus would have more than compensated.

# FOUR

It was mid-afternoon when we arrived in the small village of Quilotoa. Rachel and I were the only passengers to disembark at this tourist stop, and the bus continued onwards to the next town.

The settlement of Quilotoa, consisting of a small handful of buildings, sits high in the Ecuadorian Andes. The village had sprung up in recent years to cater to the growing number of tourists coming to the area. The main draw to the region is Laguna Quilotoa – a volcanic lake formed after a mighty eruption in 1280, that left behind a 3km wide crater now filled with a beautiful (and probably highly toxic) emerald green water.

Our accommodation for the night was a basic hostel – that appeared to be only partially complete – with an outside toilet a short walk from the main building. But at only \$8 for dinner, bed and breakfast, it felt like the greatest place in the world.

After dumping our bags in our room, we followed the dusty, winding path down the inside of the rocky crater to the water's edge. We sat and skimmed stones across the glasslike surface in the eerie silence, before tackling the exhausting climb back to the crater rim, just as the sun was beginning to set. It had taken us half an hour to reach the bottom and an hour and a half to get back up. We didn't pass another person in either direction, and had an entire volcanic crater to ourselves. Apparently a 'growing number of tourists' in Ecuador is two.

Once we had reached the top, I took a dramatic self-timer photograph of Rachel and me standing on the crater rim, looking down over the lake below us. It wasn't until we were back in England that I looked at our photos and realised we were standing next to an almighty dog turd, which slightly detracts from the image. Still, it was definitely a keeper.

During dinner, we were joined by four other tourists. These were the first fellow travellers we had spoken to – apart from Henrik, the 14-year-old Danish boy, who I had tried to erase all memory of.

Chris and Isla were a lovely Scottish couple, following a similar route to Rachel and me. They had already been to Peru and Bolivia, and gave us a rundown of some of their highlights. The others were Tabitha and Chloe, a couple of slightly annoying girls from London. There was a somewhat awkward atmosphere around them, and they gave the impression that the presence of other British people was spoiling their experience of Ecuador. It was almost as

though Laguna Quilotoa had been their little secret and how dare we have heard about it too.

It's a complicated dynamic when fellow backpackers get together. Each wants to appear confident as a traveller, but without coming across as a knobbish know-it-all. Just because you are united by a common language, doesn't automatically mean you have to be friends, but travelling is all about interactions, even if it is with people from your home country. It is a wonderful opportunity to learn from others, with advice and stories readily exchanged. Most conversations with fellow travellers are extremely positive. Tabitha and Chloe were thankfully in the minority.

As we lay in bed that night, wearing almost all of our clothes to keep warm – including a pair of sexy thermal long johns that ripped at the crotch the first time I put them on – the noise of the hustle and bustle of the Quito streets had been replaced with the sound of the wind whistling through the gaps around our window frame. We couldn't stop smiling. We were sleeping in a hostel on the edge of a volcano in the middle of who-knows-where in South America. Life was pretty bloody good.

And then I woke in the night, desperate for a wee, and had to venture to the outside toilet in the icy darkness. I cursed South America and its stupid lack of modern facilities.

We woke at 6.30am with the intention of watching the sunrise over the laguna. We hurriedly got dressed and walked up to the crater rim.

'You just missed it,' said Tabitha and Chloe smugly in unison.

'Missed what?' I said.

'The sunrise. I assume that's why you are out here so early? It was spectacular.'

'Sunrise? No, we're not bothered about the sunrise. We like to go on a morning walk, just AFTER sunrise every morning.'

'Whatever,' they both said, and wandered back towards the hostel.

Chris and Isla were also sitting at the crater's edge and we walked over to say hello.

'Don't listen to them,' said Isla. 'You couldn't even see the sun because of the cloud. You didn't miss a thing.'

After a decent breakfast, the six of us were given a lift from the hostel to the village's bus stop in the back of a pickup truck where we waited for a bus to the village of Chugchilán. When the bus arrived, the driver tried to charge us \$5

each, which was an unreasonably high fare for a local bus in Ecuador. It was clear he was charging tourist prices.

‘Doesn’t look like we have much choice,’ said Tabitha, boarding the bus with Chloe and handing over their fare. Chris and Isla refused to pay, so Rachel and I decided to make alternative travel plans with them, and we waved a fond farewell to the two London girls.

The man with the pickup truck who had dropped us off was still loitering, and we asked if he would be prepared to match the bus fare of \$5 per person to give us a ride into town. He gladly agreed and drove the four of us into Chugchilán in the back of his truck. Standing up in the back of a flatbed, with the wind in your hair, is surely one of the greatest ways to travel. The incredulous look on Tabitha and Chloe’s faces as our truck overtook their bus was one of the highlights of the day.

Chugchilán is a small and authentic farming village in central Ecuador. It has become a popular stop on the Quilotoa Circuit, which is a recognised route through towns and villages in the hilly Cotopaxi Province. We said *goodbye* to Chris and Isla and then said *hello* a few minutes later as we checked in to the same hostel together. Hostal Mama Hilda was a huge step up from our previous night’s accommodation: hot showers, comfy beds and extravagant hammocks strung up outside our rooms.

Rachel and I spent most of the day lazing around, reading our books, writing our journals and doing very little else. We took a couple of short hikes around the lush green countryside, but after a few days of an intense introduction to South America, we felt we needed time to recharge. We were on our honeymoon, after all.

We went to bed that night with the intention of waking up at 3 am to catch a bus to Sasquili market with Chris and Isla. It was supposedly legendary. However, when our alarm sounded at 3am the next morning, we realised that no market in the world can possibly be legendary enough to warrant getting up at 3 am for. We had a backup plan that was potentially far more exciting anyway. And it would allow us another six hours of sleep.

# FIVE

Rachel and I had read stories about the Chugchilán milk truck, but we didn't know if it was real or a travellers' myth. Legend claimed that if you waited by the side of the road at a certain spot in the small village of Chugchilán, a pickup truck would pass through at about 9.30am delivering the milk to the villagers. For a small fee, it was possible to hitch a ride on the back of this milk truck, all the way to the town of Sigchos.

We checked out of Mama Hilda's and waited patiently with our rucksacks by the roadside. At 9.25am we heard English voices behind us. It was Tabitha and Chloe, the London girls, who had been staying at a neighbouring guesthouse. Their faces fell when they saw us waiting by the side of the road.

'Are you waiting for a bus?' asked Tabitha.

'No,' said Rachel. 'We're waiting for a milk truck.'

'Oh,' said Chloe. 'The milk truck? You've heard about that too?'

'Yes,' said Rachel. 'Does it definitely exist?'

'I hope so,' said Tabitha. 'We heard about it from Rob's brother who used to go out with a Norwegian girl called Ria, who had this friend who worked as a waitress in Quito and knew loads of ultra-cool stuff about Ecuador that very few tourists know about. How did you guys hear about it?'

'Lonely Planet,' I said.

'Oh, right. We don't do guide books. We just go with the flow.'

It was clear that both Tabitha and Chloe were mightily disappointed to be in the company of other Brits again. And on this particular occasion, so were we.

Sure enough, after a short wait, a battered old blue and white pickup truck pulled up alongside us. There was an elderly man driving and boy of about 16 in the passenger seat, but no passengers in the back.

The boy jumped out of the truck and ran to the back and dropped the tailgate. We exchanged looks, seeking permission to board, and he nodded enthusiastically. The back of the truck was already filled with several urns of milk (it was a milk truck, after all), as well as a few boxes covered in blankets and half a dozen crates of assorted vegetables.

The four of us piled our rucksacks into a small gap and squashed ourselves onto the truck, perching on crates and urns. The boy closed the tailgate and we were off.

What followed was one and a half of the most memorable hours of the trip. The pickup truck wound its way along dusty country roads, pulling up outside



each dwelling that we passed. At each house, the residents would appear right on cue, with an assortment of vessels to hold their milk. The boy would fill the various containers from the milk urns and the customer would either hand over some money, or make payment by way of an exchange of goods.

I soon discovered that the boxes at our feet covered in blankets contained live chickens. Some people paid for their milk with a chicken or some vegetables, which were then added to the boxes or crates. Other people bought chickens or vegetables with money. Some people even paid for chickens or vegetables with their own milk. I mean, milk they had obtained from their own animals, not their own breasts. At least, I don't think it was. The milk that people paid with was added to a different urn than the other.

It was a fascinating system to watch. Strangely, no real bartering seemed to take place. Everyone knew the value of each other's goods and the system worked flawlessly.

To begin with we were just observers, witnessing a unique slice of Ecuadorian life. But it was difficult not to feel like we were getting in the way, when we were clearly getting in the way. So, we offered to help, and for the remainder of the journey we assisted the boy with filling pots of milk, stacking vegetables and passing live chickens backwards and forwards. Our poor Spanish didn't cause too many problems, and with a lot of pointing and holding up of fingers, we became a highly proficient team. Even Tabitha and Chloe had embraced the situation and I think I caught them smiling at one point.

We left the milk truck in the small town of Sigchos. Tabitha and Chloe were off to find a vegan café that was recommended to them by Tabitha's yoga teacher's cousin's ex-boyfriend who once stumbled upon this place when he was off his face on some hallucinogenic Ecuadorian drug. They invited us along. We wouldn't find it on our own as it was ultra-cool and didn't have a sign outside and very few people knew where it was or that it even existed. It was one of those places that definitely wouldn't be in any guide book. We politely declined and said our goodbyes. Part of me felt honoured that they had considered us worthy to impart their secret information to, but the other part of me was desperate to see the back of them.

We had a three hour wait in Sigchos for our connecting bus, so we had a look around the town – it didn't take very long – and then sat in the main square and ate a bowl of fried potatoes and onions bought from a street vendor. We saw Tabitha and Chloe pass a few times, trying not to look like they were still looking for the café, but clearly still looking for the café. Part of me hopes they still are.

Following a predictably scary bus journey back to Latacunga, we boarded another bus to Ambato and then another to the city of Baños, which we eventually reached at 7.30 pm; a journey of ten hours, three bus rides, and a milk truck.

Baños is known as the Adventure Capital of Ecuador. It is a popular destination for mountain biking, hiking, kayaking and horse riding in the spectacular foothills of the imposing Tungurahua – an active volcano that has experienced lots of partial eruptions in recent years. The word Tungurahua is from indigenous Quichua words meaning ‘Throat of Fire’ making it the world’s most excellently named volcano.

We checked into Plantas Y Blanco – a fairly classy hostel that boasted a beautiful roof terrace with stunning views of the surrounding countryside.

‘What do we do if it erupts?’ asked Rachel, as we had a beer on the roof terrace under the intimidating presence of the ‘Throat of Fire.

‘Run, I guess.’

‘Seriously, what would happen?’

‘I think there is usually some advance warning and then the authorities would evacuate the town.’

‘What if we don’t get any warning and it just erupts in the middle of the night and we don’t have time to escape?’

‘Then at least we will die together. Me and you. Together in the ‘Throat of Hell.’

‘That’s not even remotely funny. And I thought you said Tungurahua means Throat of Fire?’

‘It does. But ‘Throat of Hell sounds way better.’

Rachel didn’t respond to this. She just gave me a stare that was more terrifying than any volcano.

‘Let’s go out for dinner,’ I said. ‘Forget about the volcano.’

‘Dinner sounds good. Where shall we go?’

‘I don’t know. Let’s find somewhere nice. It might be our last supper.’

‘You can be a real dick sometimes.’

‘I know. I’m sorry.’

We had a couple of delicious steaks at a nearby restaurant called Marianne. If it was to be our last supper, then it was a damn good one. After a few cocktails back at the hostel bar, even Rachel admitted that if tonight was going to be our last night then it wouldn’t be a bad way to go.

As we sat chatting with full stomachs, we felt acutely aware of the strange and slightly uncomfortable dichotomy of being first world travellers in a less developed country. In the morning, we had been helping locals swap chickens for milk from the back of a rusty pickup truck, in the evening we were sipping mojitos on a roof terrace.

# SIX

Spoiler Alert - we survived the night and ate breakfast on the roof terrace surrounded by lush tropical views. It was a fantastic way to begin the day, and the fact that the pancakes didn't taste nearly as good as they looked didn't dampen our enthusiasm. #firstworldproblems

'What's the plan for today?' asked Rachel.

'I was thinking we should hire bikes and go for a bike ride.'

'Isn't it all mountains around here?'

'There's a road that we can follow that just goes downhill all the way to the jungle.'

'But then surely it's uphill all the way back?'

'It would be a one-way trip. Apparently it's easy to get a lift back to Baños on a bus.'

'Sounds like my kind of bike ride.'

Rachel's experience of cycling was somewhat limited. She could ride a bike, just about, but cycling didn't come naturally to her. We had been out for the occasional short bike ride together at home, where she would ride the 15-year-old mountain bike that she had owned since she was a child. It had slightly squeaky brakes. This squeaking annoyed Rachel so much that she refused to use the brakes, instead choosing to stop the bike by dragging her feet along the ground. During a family holiday, we hired bikes and made sure to pick one for Rachel without squeaky brakes so that she could learn that brakes can in fact be quite useful. This bike had 18 gears, which was 17 more than she had ever had need for before. She refused to use the gears, thinking it constituted cheating, and preferred to push her bike up the steep hills rather than resort to changing gear.

There wouldn't be much need for gears for our bike ride from Baños. Rachel wouldn't even have much need for pedals, as we would be mostly freewheeling. She would, however, have need for brakes, seeing as we were going to be descending a mountainous valley for the entire day. We found a bike rental shop and hired a couple of fairly decent looking mountain bikes for the day.

'See,' I said, 'this is a squeak-free bike. Are you happy?'

'Very. Thanks.'

'Do you promise to use the brakes?'

'I promise.'

Baños is a small and compact town, and it wasn't long before we had passed through its suburbs and were out in the open countryside. The views down into the vibrant green valley to our right were magnificent and the road descended at a perfect cycle friendly gradient – just steep enough to be able to freewheel at a decent speed, but not steep enough to require excessive braking.

What made the ride even more pleasant was the road surface. Many of the roads we had travelled on in Ecuador had been dirt roads, rutted and rocky or dusty and crumbling. The few that were tarmacked were littered with potholes and cracks. The road from Baños to Puyo was one of the best I had ever cycled on. We stopped at a roadside viewpoint and I started chatting to an American who was also on a bike. I began singing the praises of Ecuadorians for providing such an amazing resource for cyclists.

'It ain't done for cyclists,' he said. 'This road was mostly funded by big multi-nationals.'

'Wow. How come?' I asked, impressed that big multi-national companies were helping to provide quality roads in rural Ecuador.

'This is one of the main roads in and out of the Amazon for all the logging trucks and the tanker trucks for the oil and gas companies.'

'Oh.'

Our enjoyment of such an incredible road was now tainted with the guilt that it was only made possible by those responsible for destroying the rainforest. Still, it was a damn fine road.

The road from Baños to Puyo passes through several tunnels. We had been told that the first one was permitted for cyclists, and cycle paths were in place to skirt around the others. We had already passed through the first and had reached another much bigger one, with heavy traffic moving in both directions. There were signs of a cycle path around to the right, but a recent landslide had made it impassable and a fence was in place to block access. Despite the *no cycling* sign, we were left with no choice but to go through the tunnel.

We had no lights and the tunnel was poorly lit, so we waited for a lull in the traffic before making a break for it. The tunnel was 300m long and Rachel set off first, pedalling as fast as her legs would allow. Seeing as she was in her lowest gear and refusing to change, they were spinning pretty fucking fast. I followed closely after, keeping an eye out for vehicles approaching from behind.

Water poured through the roof of the tunnel at regular intervals. Not just the odd drip that you might expect in a tunnel, but huge gushing streams, so it felt like we were cycling through a waterfall.

We passed the halfway point without incident but then the roar of an engine echoed down the tunnel behind us. I turned to see a pair of blinding headlights bearing down on us.

‘Oh shiiiiit, we are going to die!’ shouted Rachel.

‘No we aren’t. Just stay calm.’

‘This is terrifying! Should we stop?’

‘There’s not enough space to stop. Just keep pedalling.’

Rachel’s legs span faster than I thought physically possible. I was worried she was going to snap the pedals clean off her bike from metal fatigue. There was a loud blast of a horn behind that echoed and filled the tunnel, making it sound more like a dozen vehicles.

By this point I could make out that it was a large bus. The horn blasted again, so at least the driver was aware of us. There was no room for us to pull over, and no room for him to safely overtake as there was a steady stream of vehicles coming the other way (not that this had deterred most of our other bus drivers in Ecuador). The end of the tunnel was only a hundred metres away, so I decided to stand my ground and positioned myself away from the edge of the road to prevent any urge of the bus driver to overtake.

Once we had made it back into the daylight, we pulled over to a safe spot on the side of the road and breathed a sigh of relief. The bus driver blasted his horn again and waved his fist and shouted something to us out of the open window as he passed, which I presume was Spanish for ‘Hey, gringos, I hope you have a wonderful time in Ecuador.’

We stopped off at the access point to El Paílón del Diablo – the Devil’s Cauldron – a waterfall on the Rio Verde. We bought a drink from a snack bar and the owner agreed to keep an eye on our bikes for us while we hiked down to the river. We followed a steep and slippery set of steps down to the impressive waterfall, where we crossed a dramatic suspension bridge over the Rio Verde for even better views. The waterfall was even more notable because it was called Devil’s Cauldron. If it had simply been called Rio Verde Waterfall, we probably wouldn’t have bothered stopping.

After a long slog back up the path to the road, we continued onwards on our bikes. This section of road was still busy, but there was a decent hard shoulder and plenty of room on the road. We could feel the humidity changing as we neared the rainforest, and the vegetation on both sides of us grew thicker, taller and greener the lower we went. Even the smell was noticeable; a deep earthiness that teased our senses.



We reached another tunnel, and Rachel and I agreed that no matter what, we would not be cycling through it. Our map showed an alternative route up to the left along the old road which bypassed the tunnel.

I'm not convinced we took the correct turn, because within minutes we were heaving our bikes up an incredibly steep dirt track, deeper and deeper into the wilderness. The muddy trail was devoid of traffic or any other people. We would occasionally pass a homestead in the forest, and this would fill us with hope that we were still going the right way, but whenever we tried to stop to ask for directions, an angry dog would take a dislike to us and ensure we hurried on past.

After a detour of what seemed like hours, we made it back to the main road and once again were able to appreciate the incredibly smooth and beautiful road surface that those bastard rainforest destroyers had built.

The road slowly levelled out, as the foothills of the Andes gave way to the Amazon river basin. It was late afternoon when we reached the small settlement of Mera and decided to call it a day. There was a police checkpoint to negotiate if we travelled further, and although we had our passports and nothing to hide, we were ready to finish. We had cycled about 45km, which was further than either of us had ever cycled before. Admittedly there were only a few sections where we had to pedal – most notably the thousands of revolutions Rachel managed in the tunnel – but it was still a very respectable day on the bike.

'That was amazing. Who knew cycling could be so much fun?' said Rachel.

'It was brilliant. Well done for using your brakes. Did I even see you change gear towards the end there too?'

'That was an accident. I changed it straight back. So how do we get a bus back to Baños?' asked Rachel. 'Where is the bus stop?'

'I don't think there are any bus stops. I guess we just flag down a bus and see what happens.'

'What about our bikes?'

'Who knows?'

We didn't have to wait long for a bus. As it approached, it appeared to already be full. But as we had learned from our time in South America, there is always room for more passengers. I held out my arm and the bus came to a stop alongside us.

'Baños?' I asked through the open door.

'Si,' said the driver.

‘Bicicletas?’ I said again.

‘Si, si. Paolo!’ he shouted.

A man, presumably Paolo, came down the steps, took both bikes off us and then one at a time flung them up onto the roof of the bus, which was already heavily laden with bags and the contents of people’s houses.

‘Ok?’ I asked, pointing to the bikes.

‘Si. Ok,’ said Paolo, with a look as if to say, *‘why wouldn’t they be ok?’*

I shrugged to Rachel and we boarded the bus. As it trudged back up the road that we had just cycled down, I kept looking out the back window, expecting to see our bikes bouncing down the road and off into Devil’s Cauldron. Miraculously, they were still on the roof when we got back to Baños. We gave the driver and Paolo a few dollars (even though they hadn’t asked for a fare), and took our bikes back to the rental shop.

Baños’s full name is Baños de Agua Santa – Baths of Holy Water – and the town is famous for its hot springs with supposedly magical healing properties. After a long day in the saddle, our evening was spent soothing our aching limbs in this holy water, which is basically a big brown swimming pool with a dramatic waterfall as a backdrop. We did feel remarkably healed, though, and treated ourselves to a lovely dinner at a little French restaurant (when in Ecuador...), imaginatively called ‘Le Petit Restaurant’.

# SEVEN

The following morning, we set off on another expedition – this time not on two wheels but on four legs. We hired horses. I am even worse at riding horses than Rachel is at riding bicycles, which is really saying something.

I have always been nervous around horses. As an eight-year-old boy, I was once coerced by my parents to take part in a horse race while on holiday in Somerset. It wasn't actually a horse race, as such, it was a donkey derby. But when you are an eight-year-old child, it is basically the same thing. A group of six or seven of us children were assigned a donkey each and we lined up at the starting line. The donkeys were to race around a short track marked out on a village field to the makeshift finish line, and spectators could bet real money on the outcome of the race.

My horse was called Buckaroo. It wasn't. But it might as well have been. Because, as soon as the starting pistol fired, my donkey bolted up the field like I was in a rodeo. I gripped the reins tightly and hung on for dear life. The first half of the race was petrifying as I thought my life was about to end, and I wouldn't even get the ice-cream we had been promised afterwards. But then, as the finish line approached, and I realised that victory was inevitable, I started to revel in the glory. I had asked my dad to bet £1 of my holiday money on Buckaroo, and if I won, I stood to win about £3. Being bucked around like a ragdoll was no hardship if it meant winning £3. I could see the faces in the crowd watching, a mixture of fear and happiness in their eyes as my rabid donkey approached the line. With only a couple of strides left before the finishing tape, my senseless steed came to a complete standstill and began chewing the grass. I gave the reins a tug and offered the donkey a little gentle encouragement with my heels. He refused to budge and continued to munch the grass. The rest of the donkeys all crossed the line before me and a marshal came and helped me dismount Buckaroo, still having not even completed the course.

I have ridden horses on a couple of occasions since and each time, after a catalogue of mishaps, I have vowed I would never ride one again. Rachel had riding lessons as a child so is very competent, and she had been looking forward to this opportunity in Baños for some time.

'You realise we will be riding up the slopes of the volcano?' I said, trying to put her off the idea.

'It's not going to erupt,' said Rachel. 'You said we will get a warning.'

'Well what if the warning happens when we are up on the slopes?'

‘Then I’ll have my horse to escape on.’

‘What about me? I can’t ride horses properly. You know that.’

‘You will be left alone in the Throat of Hell.’

‘It’s the Throat of Fire!’

‘No, you were right. Throat of Hell sounds much better.’

Ivan, our guide for the day, drove us in his jeep from the centre of Baños to his horses’ field in the hills above the town, ready for the start of our four-hour trek up the volcano. Envisaging the slopes of a volcano, we imagined a dark, scorched earth, with the remains of hardened lava piled up after recent eruptions. The grassy lower slopes of Tungurahua are in fact beautiful. The area is thick with dense green foliage and a network of cobbled tracks and footpaths.

Ivan looked slightly intimidating when we first met him. He was a well-built man wearing a bandana and a cowboy hat, with a pair of wraparound sunglasses and a goatee beard. If you were going to a fancy-dress party as the leader of a South American drug cartel, you would dress exactly like Ivan.

Minutes after he had introduced himself, this illusion was shattered by his continuous smile, infectious laugh and warm personality. Even though he spoke absolutely no English and our Spanish was limited, we had some hysterical conversations using a mixture of pointing, miming, Spanglish, and interpretive dance. A young foal came along with us too for some exercise. It was a genuinely brilliant few hours and changed my opinion of horse-riding dramatically. As it was only Ivan, Rachel and me, I felt no shame at being so incompetent on a horse. Yes, I was the worst rider in the group by a long way, but I was also the third best. Ivan had offered me the most docile of horses after realising my inexperience, and it was friendly and compliant throughout.

Ivan kept pointing up to the Throat of Fire above us and then shouting ‘BOOM’ and miming a huge eruption with his arms. Rachel burst into laughter every time.

‘BOOM!’ Ivan said again.

Again, Rachel chuckled.

‘Why is it funny if Ivan pretends the volcano is going to erupt, but if I do it I am being a dick?’

‘I don’t know. But it is.’

‘BOOM!’ said Ivan.

Again, Rachel laughed, and this time I couldn’t help but join in.

‘See,’ said Rachel. ‘It’s the way you say it.’

Ivan's small tour company – Ringo Horses – had been mentioned in our guide book. When we returned to his jeep, I tore out the listing from my book and gave it to him. He had no idea that his little business was featured in a book published in the UK, and stood and stared in amazement at the article for some time, despite not being able to understand a word of it. All that was written was the address and the words '*nice horses, very well looked after*'. They were indeed, and I tried my best to translate this into Spanish for Ivan. It seemed to work because Ivan gave each of his horses a kiss on the nose before ushering them back into their field.

'I need a haircut,' I said, looking at my scruffy face in the mirror after we had returned to the hostel for a shower and a change of clothes.

Days of inadequate sleep, infrequent showering and laziness at shaving had made me look like a different person. It was something I naively thought I could fix with a haircut.

'I'll do it,' said Rachel eagerly.

'Er... thanks, but unfortunately we don't have any scissors.'

'We could buy some?'

'Nah, it would probably be easier and cheaper for me to just go to a hairdresser.'

'Please let me cut it. I let you cut my hair in America. It would be nice to return the favour.'

'You mean get revenge?'

'Well, maybe.'

'Thanks, but no thanks.'

I had offered to cut Rachel's hair a few years previously when we were travelling together in America. It had not gone quite to plan. The fact that we were both inebriated at the time probably didn't help. I knew she was looking for an opportunity to get her own back.

'I'll go and see if I can find somewhere in town,' I said. 'See you in a bit.'

I found a hair salon that was adorned with posters of western men in the window, all with haircuts that were trendy in the 1980s. The posters were faded and crinkled and had obviously been there since the haircuts were still in fashion. I hadn't seen any other hairdressers in Baños, so stepped inside.

There was one other customer present; a large jovial lady who sat having her hair braided at the seat nearest the door. *Perhaps I should go for braids? Then I wouldn't even need to ask for anything, I could just point.*

A lady of indeterminable age pointed to an empty chair and I took a seat. She looked at me in the mirror and presumably asked what I would like. Things suddenly seemed a lot more complicated than I had anticipated. I had hoped that I could just point to a photo on the wall or a picture in a magazine, and ask for the same. But there were no magazines, and I certainly didn't want to look like any of the men in the posters.

It was at this point that I realised I hadn't seen a single decent haircut during our whole time in Ecuador. Not one. This is obviously the reason why the majority of South Americans wear hats.

I started to mime a scissor cutting motion to the top part of my head with my fingers, and then made a buzzing sound to mimic a set of electric clippers on the sides and back. The lady having her hair braided next to me began chuckling, as did the braider.

I knew I would be leaving with either a mullet, a perm, rat's tail, tramlines or a unique combination of all four. My hairdresser stared at my reflection in the mirror, shrugged her shoulders and said 'No entiendo' – 'I don't understand'.

'Oh well. Shave it all,' I said, mimicking the clippers all over, deciding that this was the safest option. I then held up my thumb and forefinger a little over an inch apart to show her to not cut it too short and to leave a bit of length.

'Si, bueno,' she said, reaching for the clippers.

Rather than starting with the side of my head to check I was happy with the length, she did her first stroke straight down the middle of my head from my forehead all the way to the back.

It was cropped shorter than I had ever had it cut before, but it was too late to say anything. She had given me an exceptional inverse mohawk, with a tightly shaved strip down the middle, and the remains of my big bouffant puffed up either side.

'Ok?' she asked.

What could I say? There was no way to correct it now and there was no going back.

'Perfecto!' I said, in that polite British way we respond to all bad haircuts while we quietly sob inside.

The haircut was over minutes later and she paused only slightly when trying to decide what to do to about my neck. She was so used to leaving the hair hanging long in a mullet or rat's tail that the sight of an exposed hairy neck perplexed her. So she just left it as it was and I had to shave it myself later.

'Oh god, what have you done?' asked Rachel when I returned to the hostel.

‘It’s not THAT bad, is it?’

‘It’s hideous. I can’t even look at you.’

She shielded her eyes theatrically for at least an hour and wouldn’t make eye contact with me. To be honest, I think that if I hadn’t told her I was going to the hairdresser, she probably wouldn’t even have noticed.

Rachel is not the most observant person, particularly when it comes to me. I once shaved off my beard with a razor on only half of my face, leaving a distinct dividing line that ran from the middle of my top lip all the way down my chin and neck. I’m not quite sure why I did it, and I didn’t plan to exhibit it in public. I spent two hours with Rachel after shaving, even having long face-to-face conversations with her and she still didn’t even notice. I eventually had to point it out to her, at which point she decided she couldn’t look at me again until I shaved it all off.

I told this anecdote to Rachel’s sister and she responded by telling me a story about when they were teenagers and their dad shaved off his moustache that he had sported for ALL OF RACHEL’S LIFE. She didn’t notice that either until it was pointed out to her.

‘Is it really that bad?’ I asked, as we sat having a beer on the roof terrace later that evening.

‘It’s just, well, it’s just...’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. It’s so short. And it makes your eyebrows look so prominent.’

‘My eyebrows, sorry eyebrow, IS prominent. It always has been.’

‘Yes, but now it’s longer than your actual hair.’

‘Boy, you sure know how to knock a man’s self-confidence.’

‘Sorry.’

I looked up at the Throat of Fire high above us, and with a big theatrical arm gesture shouted ‘BOOM’ in my best Ivan impression, hoping to lighten the mood.

‘Grow up, George,’ she said.

# EIGHT

It was the morning of our first wedding anniversary. Married life had been brilliant so far and I felt incredibly lucky to be with Rachel. I hoped she felt the same about me, even with my new haircut. There we were, a year on, enjoying our delayed honeymoon immensely. So how did we mark this momentous milestone in our married life? With a day of bus journeys, of course.

We did have time for a delicious breakfast burrito at Casa Hood before catching a bus to Ambato and then a connecting bus to Cuenca which we didn't reach until late evening.

Cuenca is the third largest city in Ecuador, behind Guayaquil and Quito, and is considered by most Ecuadorians to be its finest. It became a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, due to its beautiful maze of cobbled streets and its striking Spanish colonial architecture.

Rachel had been keen to stay in Baños another night, but as a surprise I had made a reservation for us in Cuenca. Apart from our first night in Quito, all of our accommodation so far had been booked when we arrived at our destinations. We had not had any trouble finding places to stay, but as it was going to be our wedding anniversary, I had thoughtfully planned a few days ahead and booked us a room, so that we weren't left homeless on our special day. And it wasn't just any old room in a hostel. I booked us a room in an actual hotel, which by Ecuadorian standards, looked pretty damn swanky... on the internet at least.

It was dark when we got off the bus in Cuenca.

'Any idea where we are going to stay?' asked Rachel.

'As a matter of fact, yes I do! Follow me!' I said.

'Where?'

'You'll see.'

We followed my map through winding streets for ten minutes until we reached an ugly building which disappointingly had a sign that bore the name of the hotel I'd booked.

'What is this place?' said Rachel.

'This,' I said, 'Is one of Cuenca's finest establishments. I've booked us a room for a couple of nights.'

'Really? That's very sweet of you. It looks... well... it looks... er... lovely.'

'I'm sure it's much nicer inside.'

Thankfully, the hotel was much nicer inside. We walked up to the front desk



and I showed the lady my passport. She snorted at my long-haired photo, then confirmed my booking. She handed me the key and directed us down a corridor to our room.

At the end of the corridor we reached a set of double doors that opened into a large dining area, half-filled with people eating their dinner.

‘Did we already walk past our room?’ asked Rachel.

‘No. I think that’s it over there,’ I said, spotting a door in the opposite wall of the dining room.

I tentatively unlocked the door and opened it to reveal a small plain room with two single beds a few feet apart. Slightly disconcertingly, there was a huge window on the wall between the bedroom and the dining room. An elderly couple sat eating their dinner only inches away from the window on the other side.

‘We can’t stay here,’ I said. ‘This is not what the room looked like on the internet.’

‘Oh, it’ll be fine,’ said Rachel, trying to stifle a giggle. ‘Look, we can close the curtain.’

She pulled at the scraggy curtain, and it hung limply over some of the window, still leaving huge gaps revealing the dining room.

‘I love it. Thank you,’ she said, giving me a hug. ‘Happy anniversary!’

‘I’m so sorry. This place looked really posh online. It’s not even as nice as some of the hostels we’ve stayed in. I’ll go and see if they have a different room.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s fine. It’s only for a couple of nights. We can just move these beds together.’ Rachel tried to drag one of the beds towards the other, but they were both bolted to the floor.

The man sitting at the table looked up from his meal and peered through our window to see what the commotion was about. I gave him a cheery wave and he immediately looked down at his meal again.

‘I’ll go and speak to reception,’ I said. ‘I’ll be back soon.’

After a lengthy discussion using a combination of my poor Spanish and my phrasebook (which unfortunately didn’t have the Spanish for ‘*our bedroom appears to be part of the dining room, you moron*’ in it), I established that they didn’t have any other rooms available.

After a bit more persuading, and some sterner words spoken, I explained that the room was not what I had requested, and I would like a refund so that we could go somewhere else. After this was eventually issued, Rachel and I left the hotel to find another.

Fortunately, the nearby Hostal Chordeleg on Columbia and Torres had a private room, which, although a hostel, was a penthouse compared to the previous place. Rather than head out again to find somewhere to eat, I went and bought a huge takeaway pizza from a nearby restaurant and a bottle of wine, and we ate dinner in our room. It was not the most romantic of wedding anniversaries, but it seemed to be quite fitting for our time in South America.

We spent the following day exploring Cuenca. The Pumapungo Museum was an eclectic mix of Inca ruins, an aviary of random birds, a museum of artefacts, and a botanical garden all rolled into one. It was an enjoyable way to spend a morning, but Cuenca was already making us feel a little claustrophobic. Our bike ride, horse ride, and hikes had by far been the highlights of our time so far in Ecuador, and we craved more adventures out in the countryside.

We had an early dinner at an energetic restaurant next to the cathedral and went to sleep, with plans to leave Cuenca first thing the following morning.

What better way to cure our claustrophobia than a cramped five-hour bus journey to Loja, where we caught a ride in a minibus to the village of Vilcabamba in southern Ecuador.

For decades the small village of Vilcabamba has had a reputation for having one of the oldest living populations in the world. It claimed to have many residents over the age of 100, with some reaching 120, and one even recorded as being 135. After a National Geographic story about the town's people by Dr Alexander Leaf of Harvard Medical School in 1973, the village's status as a haven for longevity grew. Scientists and tourists flocked to the area, searching for the secret to their long life. It was concluded that a combination of factors, including diet, climate, air and the relaxed way of life all contributed to this active aging population.

The population increased as Ecuadorians and tourists wanted to reap the benefits of Vilcabamba's lifestyle. Products even appeared on supermarket shelves, promising to replicate the secrets of Vilcabamba in a tablet or drink form.

This fame lasted for many years until researchers and scientists became slightly suspicious of Vilcabamba's claims. Even Dr Leaf, who published the original article, became sceptical. One of the men he interviewed in 1973 had claimed to be 122. Two years later when interviewed again he was 134. Further delving now suggests that the original reports of Vilcabamba's aging population came about due to an error in the reporting. It is common in many small communities for identical names to be passed on through generations, and birth

records of fathers or uncles were mistakenly being used to verify the birthdays of the individuals being studied. This never would have happened if I had been Vilcabamba's Data Information Officer. The elderly population seemed to enjoy the attention they were getting and the status that they gained by their perceived old age, so took some liberties when keeping track of the years. Basically, Vilcabamba is a town full of fucking liars.

We were met at the bus stop by a rep from Hosteria Las Ruinas De Quinara. We instinctively said 'no' to him, as we had grown accustomed to people trying to sell us tours, transport or accommodation. But as we were walking away, we heard the words '*swimming pool*', '*jacuzzi*', '*table tennis*', '*sauna*', '*breakfast*' and '\$7'.

'Did he say table tennis?' said Rachel.

'Yes, I think so. Shall we go?'

'Definitely.'

Rachel is a little bit obsessed with table tennis. She had a table tennis table in her garage as a child. Her sister wasn't keen on playing, and her parents were often busy, so Rachel would spend many hours playing table tennis on her own in the garage with half of the table folded up. She claims Forrest Gump learned his technique from her. With this devotion to the sport, you would expect Rachel to be some sort of elite player. She is, like me, distinctly average. But her competitive nature has made for some fierce battles between the two of us over the years.

Years later when we were planning a holiday to Dorset, we had no idea where in the county we should base ourselves. To narrow our search down, we googled '*holiday houses in Dorset with table tennis*' and booked the first place that came up. We had a fantastic week, despite seeing hardly anything of Dorset.

The hostel in Vilcabamba lived up to its billing. We spent our evening drinking cold beer and playing table tennis outside in the hostel's courtyard. If this was the lifestyle of most Vilcabambians then it's no wonder they live so long. Table tennis was given an added edge by the fact that the table was surrounded by bushes, and the ball would often have to be retrieved cautiously from amongst them, so as not to disturb the lizards, spiders, bees and who knows what else lurked in there.

I won the series 5–4. Get in!

# NINE

After moaning about the claustrophobia of Cuenca, followed by a day of buses, we set off after breakfast the following morning for a hike up to the prominent peak of Mandango that overlooks Vilcabamba. I picked up a hand drawn map from the hostel reception detailing a four-hour walk called the Mandango Trail. It was described as *moderate difficulty* on the piece of paper. Tourist guides always exaggerate these things, so if something was described as *moderate*, we assumed it would mean it was easy.

It turned out to be one of the scariest experiences of our lives.

The first section of the route meandered gently through some woodland, before beginning a steep and strenuous climb up to the first peak which was marked by a white cross. We were hot and sweaty, but the views down into Vilcabamba made it worth the effort. Rachel, who is not known for her uphill hiking abilities, felt particularly proud of her achievement upon reaching the top.

We sat and ate a couple of empanadas we had brought with us, removed a few layers, and assumed by reaching the peak we had done the worst of it.

Little did we know, we had not even got started.

Many hikers climb up to this peak and then return the same way. I say 'many', but we didn't see another person during the whole morning. The route we had set out to follow was circular and descended the mountain from the other end of the ridge from where we were standing.

We set out to traverse the ridge, and the path became narrower and narrower, with the grass slopes to either side becoming more and more precipitous, until it felt like we were walking along a balance beam. A balance beam that was high up in the Andes.

Having hiked Angel's Landing in America's Zion National Park, I was convinced that it would be the scariest walk I would ever do. The Mandango Trail probably trumped it. Not necessarily because it was more dangerous, but because this time I had Rachel with me.

'I can't do this,' she said, sitting down on her bottom, the ground disappearing to the valley floor on either side of her.

'Yes you can! Let's just take it nice and slowly and we'll make it down.'

'I can't. I really can't.'

She started sobbing uncontrollably. I walked back the few steps along the ridge towards her and noticed that my legs had turned to jelly too.

'It's going to be ok, I promise. It's just like walking along a narrow

pavement. You've never fallen off a pavement, have you?'

'Yes, I have. Plenty of times.'

'Oh. Ok, look, hold my hand. We'll just take it slowly.'

'No. I can't do it, George. I can't stand up. My legs will give way.'

'Well what are you going to do? Climb the whole way along the ridge on your arse?'

'Yes!'

So she did.

And I did too.

After I had sat down near her in solidarity, I decided that if she was going to shuffle along on her backside then I might as well do the same. Also, I realised that her fear had transferred over to me and my legs were refusing to support my weight too. I don't think I could have walked off that mountain if I had tried.

The wind picked up and it took us a long while to shuffle along that ridge on our bottoms. Rachel's sobbing had quietened to a gentle murmur.

Eventually the path began to descend, and we were both able to return to our feet to walk the last section down to the foot of the ridge.

We followed what we thought was the path back down into town, which then petered out into nothing. We spent 40 minutes on a detour trying to find our way, before retracing our steps to the foot of the ridge where we eventually found the correct path. An encounter with some angry dogs on the way back into Vilcabamba secured the Mandango Trail's place in Rachel's top five worst experiences of all time.

As we walked through the town towards the hostel, an elderly Ecuadorian man outside a bar, who possessed more gold chains than teeth, collared us.

'San Pedrillo?' he said, in a slightly hushed and shady tone.

'Qué?' I said.

'You want San Pedrillo?' he said again, this time even shadier.

'Isn't that a make of bottled water?' I said.

'No. Sanpellegrino is water. San Pedrillo is cactus juice.'

'Ah, yes. I remember. I read about it.'

'Come in. You should try it?'

'Do you want to?' asked Rachel. 'You're always keen to try the local food and drink.'

'Not this time. It said in the guidebook that's it is a hallucinogenic and can

cause flashbacks for many years.’

‘Oh.’

‘Come in,’ said the man. ‘It’s great shit.’

‘No thanks,’ I said. ‘We’ve got to go and play table tennis.’

‘Maybe we should have had some of that cactus juice,’ said Rachel, back at the hostel.

‘Why?’

‘I’m going to be having flashbacks about that Mandango Trail for the rest of my life. Perhaps hallucinogenic flashbacks would have been preferable.’

Strange feelings of elation come from conquering something seemingly unachievable. Despite her continued protestations about how much she had hated the Mandango Trail, there was definitely something in Rachel’s manner that afternoon that showed that she was secretly delighted she had done it.

We spent the afternoon at the hostel, swimming in the pool and playing table tennis (Rachel beat me 3–2, but I’m claiming I let her win after her morning’s trauma. And my table tennis bat had an annoying flappy bit of rubber on it that put me off my game). Later that evening we got the minibus to Loja where we would catch a night bus to Piura, Peru, and then onwards to the coastal town of Huanchaco. It would be a long and tedious journey of over 500 miles.

Before coming to South America, many people had suggested that we shouldn’t eat street food because of the risk to our delicate Western stomachs. Rachel had been more cautious than me. I had ignored this advice and only showed restraint when offered hallucinogenic cactus juice with life–altering side–effects. I don’t think you can fully embrace a country unless you eat its street food.

We were almost two weeks into our trip, and I hadn’t experienced even so much as a stomach grumble. I felt indestructible. So when we arrived in Loja with a couple of hours to kill before our night bus, I went off in search of something to eat. The only food available in Loja’s bus station was a suspect meat and onion concoction, served with some rice that looked suitable for building roads with, cooked by a man in a dark corner. I was very hungry so devoured a huge portion in minutes. It was a meal I would later regret enormously.

The 10.30 pm bus didn’t arrive. It turned out it didn’t even exist. After a confusing conversation with an official (well, I assumed he was an official. He was wearing a high–vis waistcoat. Perhaps he was just a normal man on his way

home from work, which would explain the confusion), we boarded a bus soon after 11 pm, which we hoped would take us to Piura in Peru by the morning.

# TEN

‘Rachel, wake up. We’re crossing the border,’ I said.

‘Huh? What? Which border?’

‘The border into Peru. I think we have to get off.’

We shuffled half-asleep from the bus, holding our passports, and spent a perplexing hour being directed back and forth over a bridge between the Ecuadorian and Peruvian control points, getting a series of exit stamps and entry stamps and visas. Both sets of officials laughed at my passport photo each time they saw it. When we eventually got back on the bus, which had thankfully waited for us, all of the other Peruvian and Ecuadorian passengers – who had a far more straightforward border crossing – were fast asleep.

We arrived in Piura at 7am. Our connecting bus to Trujillo didn’t leave for a few hours, but after our restless night crossing the border, we didn’t feel much like venturing further than the streets surrounding Piura’s bus station.

Very few of the places we had been to had banks or cash machines. The currency of Ecuador is the US Dollar, but Peru and Bolivia both have their own currencies. US Dollars are sought after across the whole of South America, so Rachel and I had various stashes hidden in pockets, money belts and our backpacks.

Since our arrival in Peru, several men had approached us offering to exchange US Dollars for Peruvian Sol. I knew it was inevitable that I would have to change money on the street, but I was a little apprehensive doing it for the first time. As we waited for the bus in Piura, I decided to give it a try on a busy nearby street. I was approached straightaway by a street cashier (I don’t think that’s their official title), and a few minutes later I had a wad of Peruvian Sol.

Over the next few weeks I learned to really enjoy the bartering. The scene always played out exactly the same each time. I would be approached by a street cashier and I would ask in my Spanglish what the exchange rate was, ‘Qué es the exchange rate?’ The street cashier would give me their first offer, and I would take a sharp intake of breath through my teeth and begin to walk away. They would then call after me, the rate miraculously changing in my favour, and I would look a little more interested. At this point, another street cashier from across the road would get wind of the deal and rush over to offer an even better deal. The two men would then start bartering with each other to fight for my custom. I would eventually offer a deal, which one of them would accept, and I



would walk away with my new currency, making sure to check the notes for any noticeable fakes first. It is possible the two street cashiers were working together, but the exchange rate was always far better than any bank or ATM, and the experience infinitely more enjoyable, so I never bothered changing money through the official channels during the rest of our time in South America.

We dozed in and out of sleep on the yellow plastic chairs for four hours in Piura bus station. We were routinely woken by large Peruvian ladies selling ‘chipas’, which were basically transparent plastic bags full of tortilla chips. They carried trays stacked with about 30 of these bags piled on top of each other. There were three women, and they all did circumnavigations of the small waiting room, calling ‘cheeepas... cheeeepas’ at regular intervals. Nobody was offering anything else for sale. Just chipas. Nobody wanted chipas. Ironically, I was now craving some of those boiled sweets offered by the continuous stream of Ecuadorian ladies on the bus during our first week. Back then I had been craving chipas.

I eventually relented to the repetitive chanting and bought a bag of chipas in the hope that it would ward off future flybys and allow us some peace and quiet. The lady who I bought it off smiled gratefully and then concentrated her sales efforts on the other side of the room. Not so, with the other two sellers. They now saw me as even more of a potential customer, despite the fact that I was holding a bag of chipas that would last me several hours.

‘Chipas?’ they said.

‘No gracias,’ I replied, with my mouth full of chipas. ‘Tengo chipas already’ – ‘I have tortilla chips already’, probably.

Then the next lady would arrive, and I would have to go through the motions again. After a while I foolishly bought another bag, and so the third seller was offended that she was the only person I hadn’t bought a bag from. So I bought a third and final bag and hid behind them for the remainder of our time in Piura’s bus station. They continued to pester me, assuming me to be some wealthy chipas addict. Rachel sat next to me engrossed in her book, seemingly oblivious to the chipas harassment that was taking place. Nobody else in the bus station bought any at all.

The bus from Piura to Trujillo, where we would get our connection to Huanchaco, was long and monotonous. Either side of us the Sechura desert stretched to the horizon. This section of Peru must be one of the most desolate landscapes on earth. It was crazy to think that just over the horizon to the west

of us were the crashing waves of the South Pacific Ocean. And just over the horizon to the east were the dramatic peaks of the Andes mountains, and beyond that the Amazon rainforest. But here, in this vast strip of land in between, there was absolutely nothing but dry and dusty desert. Occasionally we would pass a clumsily assembled roadside café, built from random sections of chipboard, but these structures looked as transient as the grains of sand they were built on.

Despite its perceived dryness, these lowlands can be prone to flooding in El Niño years. In 1998, runoff from flooded rivers led to the formation of a three-metre-deep puddle here that stretched for 90 miles. It temporarily became the second largest lake in the whole of Peru.

We arrived in Trujillo in the early evening and got a taxi to the town of Huanchaco, which we had heard wonderful things about from Chris and Isla, the Scottish couple we had met at Laguna Quilotoa. We found a room at a hostel and went out for dinner.

Huanchaco is credited as being where the Peruvian dish ceviche originated. Ceviche is a dish consisting of raw fish with lemon juice and often chili. My stomach was feeling a little delicate for the first time, so we played it safe and ordered two of the biggest burgers we had ever seen from a café with outdoor seating in a pleasant central square.

My body started doing horrible things in the night. Perhaps it was punishment for not ordering ceviche. I was forced to dash from the room to the small communal toilet across the hallway. I made this trip countless times throughout the night, my body exploding from both ends. I spent far more time sitting on and kneeling by that toilet than I did in bed. I didn't get a moment's sleep, and poor Rachel slept only intermittently between my sprints back and forth across the bedroom to the door.

It could have been the burgers, or the three bags of chipas, but Rachel had eaten both of those too. The more likely culprit was the questionable looking bowl of rice and meat I had eaten in Loja bus station the night before.

'I feel very sorry for you,' said Rachel. 'Is there anything I can get you?'

'No thanks. There's nothing you can do. Roll on, death.'

# ELEVEN

Morning couldn't come soon enough. At first light, we headed outside to explore Huanchaco, and the fresh air made me feel considerably better. I was no longer yearning for death.

Huanchaco is a pretty little seaside town, but a thick grey cloud lingered in the sky, and we realised we hadn't seen the sun since entering Peru. Due to the vast differences in atmospherics (look at me, pretending to know what I'm talking about), with the sea, desert and mountains all in close proximity to one another, it is apparently not uncommon for Peru's coastline to be shrouded in cloud for weeks at a time.

As well as ceviche, Huanchaco is also famous for its 'caballitos de totora', which are unique wicker fishing boats. The boats are a cross between a canoe and a surfboard, constructed out of tightly woven reeds, and measuring about five meters long. Fishermen have been using them in Huanchaco for 3,000 years, and some historians claim that these fishermen and their caballitos de totora were the very first surfers. These types of boat are still used today, and you can see them lined up along the waterfront, drying in the sun. If the sun ever makes an appearance.

At the end of the promenade we passed a little stall selling freshly squeezed fruit juices.

'Shall we have one?' I asked Rachel.

'Are you having one?'

'Yeah, why not?'

'Are you sure that's wise? I thought your stomach was a little delicate at the moment?'

'It's only fruit juice. Surely it will be good for me? I need to get my energy back somehow.'

'Alright then,' she said. 'Thanks.'

'Dos fruit smoothies, por favor,' I said to the man, holding up two fingers to prove that I knew the Spanish word for the number two.

He then gestured to all the fruit with his hands and said something which I interpreted as *'which of these fine fruits would you like included in your fruit juice, young sir?'*

I responded with the same gesture accompanied by a slight shrug of the shoulders, which he correctly interpreted as *'I don't really know. What would you recommend, my good man? How about a bit of everything?'*

A minute later he presented us with two huge plastic cups filled to the brim with a vibrant red concoction. This was going to be the magic medicine that would make me feel human again.

I tentatively took a sip. It tasted even better than it looked. Fresh, cold and zingy.

Rachel and I strolled back along the promenade hand in hand, sipping on our fruit smoothies, enjoying a rare moment of tranquillity on our frenetic tour of South America.

Five minutes later my stomach gave a slight gurgle that was audible to Rachel. She looked at me.

‘George, are you ok?’ she asked, a look of deep concern on her face. ‘You look, err, you look... green.’

‘I feel...’ I started to say, before an uncontrollable torrent of bright red fruit juice gushed from my gaping mouth. I have never projectile vomited in such spectacular fashion, and hope never to do so again. It was like a horizontal version of Old Faithful, as the liquid blasted several feet across the pavement and continued for quite some time. Thankfully, the waterfront was relatively quiet so early in the morning, but a few bystanders shrieked and scattered at the sight of me spewing my guts across the concrete. Rachel had retreated a few paces and stood there in awe as the display continued.

Eventually, after the episode finished, and presumably every drop of fluid from my stomach had been expended, I was able to assess the situation.

‘Oh. My. God,’ said Rachel, with a mixture of concern and amusement. ‘I have never seen anything like that before. Are you alright?’

‘Er... wow... I feel a bit better now thanks. Do you want the rest of my smoothie? I don’t think I’m quite ready for it yet.’

We walked quickly away from the trail of devastation I had left across the Huanchaco waterfront, repainting the sidewalk with the bright red contents of my stomach. To passers-by, it would have looked like a murder scene, and we hoped for a high tide to come and wash away the evidence.

‘Do you want to go back to the hotel?’ said Rachel. ‘Should you go and see a doctor?’

‘No thanks. I’ll be fine. I think I’ll just avoid any fruit smoothies, or any food for a little while.’

‘I think that’s a good idea.’

The town of Huanchaco became forever referred to between the two of us as HuanChucko from then on.

Our next planned destination was Arequipa in the south of Peru. It was almost 1,000 miles away from HuanChucko, and the thought of spending a couple of days on buses did not appeal.

It was time to get out the credit card.

It was time to book a flight.

The day didn't improve much after my projectile vomiting incident. We went to an internet café to try and book flights to Arequipa, but my credit card was declined, and a message told me to phone my bank in the UK. I then ran out of phone credit midway through the conversation to try and resolve it, which wasn't helped by my frequent dashes between the payphone and the toilet. We decided to cancel the rest of the day and have an early night.

My stomach was still a little uneasy the following morning, but I had improved significantly since the previous day. We took a taxi to Chan Chan, which is the oldest adobe city in the world, don't you know. The archaeological site was once the capital of the Chimú empire, before they were defeated by the Incas in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The entrance to Chan Chan was deserted when we arrived, apart from two women at the ticket desk. We paid our entry fee and were asked if we would like to pay an additional charge for a guided tour.

'Si, por favor,' I said.

One of the women then asked if we would like a private tour, or the cheaper group tour option. I looked back at the empty car park.

'Cuando does the group tour leave?' I asked.

'Ahora mismo,' she said. 'Right now.'

'Ok, dos boletos for the group tour, por favor.'

Sure enough, one of the women became our tour guide and our 'group', consisting of just me and Rachel, departed immediately. I gave the extra money we would have had to pay for a private tour directly to our guide as a tip at the end, and I went from being a tight selfish gringo to a wise and generous man in a split second.

The archaeological ruins of Chan Chan are vast and impressive. They extend for over 20 square kilometres. Fortunately, our tour only covered the best bits in the centre. I was still feeling sorry for myself, so was more than happy with a 'best of' tour. We walked through the remains of courtyards, storerooms, temples and gardens. As the city was built from mud and sand, centuries of deterioration from rain, wind, flood and looters had eroded the huge structures

into low walls that ended below our waists. Either that or the Chimú people were extremely small. The incredibly intricate detail on the walls remains, though, with animals, faces and elaborate patterns etched into every surface.

From Chan Chan we went to the archaeological sites of Huaca del Sol and Huaca de la Luna. These two temples were built by the Moche civilisation, which predates the Chimú by a few hundred years. This site was more popular than the other, and our group tour even included three other tourists. It was led by a student who was using tour-guiding to improve her English. She was very knowledgeable and extremely funny.

Parts of the temples were very well preserved with brightly coloured murals featuring engraved pictures of deities forming the centrepieces. It was spectacular to look at, but there was one particular attraction that caught our eye.

‘Oh my god. What’s that?’ said Rachel, pointing to a strange creature curled up asleep in the middle of one of the courtyards.

‘It’s a dog,’ said the tour guide.

‘But it’s... it’s...’ said Rachel.

‘Ugly?’

‘No, I wasn’t going to say that.’

‘You can say that,’ said the tour guide.

‘Ok. It is ugly,’ said Rachel. ‘But I was going to say, it doesn’t have any hair.’

‘That’s right. It’s a Peruvian hairless dog.’

‘A hairless dog? Has it been shaved to look like that?’

‘No. They are born like that. People in this area, including the Moche, Chimú and Inca people all kept Peruvian Hairless Dogs.’

‘It has a blond mohawk!’ I said.

‘Yes, that one is not a complete hairless. I like its hair though. He looks like that evil leader gremlin in the film Gremlins. What was his name?’

‘Stripe!’ I shouted.

‘That’s it! Stripe. Well done. He looks just like Stripe.’

He did look just like Stripe from Gremlins – ugly and evil, but you sort of wanted to give him a cuddle at the same time. All day, our tour guides had asked us questions to assess our knowledge of ancient history. Neither Rachel nor I had known the answer to a single question, and we had been ashamed of our ignorance; Rachel more so, considering she studied History and Ancient History at university. I was proud to finally know the answer to a history question, even if it was one concerning 80s movie trivia.

We stood around marvelling at Stripe the Peruvian Hairless Dog for a while and then booked a taxi to Trujillo airport.

We arrived at the airport way too early, and still unsure whether we had tickets following my credit card problems the previous day. Once the check-in desk opened, we were able to resolve the situation, and bought tickets to Lima and then a connecting flight to Arequipa.

I tentatively ate a toasted cheese sandwich at an airport cafe, which was the first solid food I had eaten since the burgers in HuanChucko 48 hours previously. Rachel kept her distance, half expecting me to violently launch the contents of my stomach across the departure lounge. Fortunately, my body was feeling a lot more stable and I managed to keep the toastie down.

# TWELVE

Our house and cats in Northampton had been left in the hands of Graeme. Graeme has been one of my closest friends since school, but he is not the most reliable or responsible person in the world.

I once lent Graeme an electric guitar and a small amplifier of mine, and when I asked him about it a year later, he admitted he had sold it to either pay to have his electricity reconnected, or to buy a bag of weed. He couldn't remember which, therefore making the latter seem more likely. He promised to pay me back one day.

A couple of months before coming to South America, Rachel and I heard a knock on the door one morning. I opened it to find two large men in black leather jackets, shaven heads, and very stern faces standing on our doorstep. One of the men thrust a piece of paper towards me.

'What's this?' I said.

'A repossession notice.'

'What do you mean?'

'We are here to take your possessions.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Read the letter,' he said, and tried to step inside. I went to close the door but he stuck his huge black steel toe-capped boot in the door frame.

'Hold on just a minute,' I said, skim reading the letter. It said that despite several attempts to get me to make adequate repayments of my debt, the collection company were left with no alternative but to take our possessions.

'There must be some mistake.'

'Are you not in debt?'

'Well, yes, a bit. But not like this. I haven't received any warnings, I just...' and then I saw the name at the top of the letter. It was addressed to Graeme.

'Ah, this letter isn't even addressed to me. It's a friend of mine.'

'Does he live here?'

'No. Leave it with me. I will sort this out straight away.'

'You've got two hours,' he said. 'If the boss doesn't tell us it's resolved in two hours then we will be back.'

I closed the door and immediately phoned Graeme and calmly and politely asked WHY THE FUCK TWO FUCKING BAILIFFS were on our doorstep trying to take our possessions.



‘I don’t know why they came to your house,’ said Graeme.

‘Well, did you give your debt collection company our address?’

‘Err... yeah, I might have.’

‘Why would you do that?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t want them to go to my flat and take all my stuff.’

‘But... you... oh never mind. You need to get this sorted...

IMMEDIATELY!’

‘It’s already sorted. There must be a mistake. I’m up to date with all my payments.’

‘Well can you phone them now and tell them to stop these blokes coming back?’

‘Can you call them for me please?’ said Graeme. ‘My phone is out of credit.’

‘Fine!’

I tried several times to phone the debt collection agency but got an engaged tone each time. An hour had passed since the men’s visit and Rachel was looking mightily pissed off.

‘It’s not my fault,’ I said, as she continued to glare at me.

‘Graeme is YOUR friend,’ she said.

‘He is OUR friend. And I didn’t give him permission to use our address.’

Thankfully the agency’s office was located only a mile from our house so I jumped on my bike and headed down there. Eventually, the staff agreed that Graeme had an adequate repayment plan in place and they phoned the heavies to call off their return.

Despite all this, Graeme is still a close and loyal friend.

Rachel, quite understandably, wasn’t too keen on the idea of him housesitting while we were away. But she didn’t want to put the cats into a cattery for six weeks, and we couldn’t find anyone who would be happy to come and feed them every day, so she agreed that Graeme was our only option.

As we waited for our flight, I left Rachel in the café and found a payphone to give him a call. He hadn’t responded to any of my emails, texts, or answered his phone on my previous attempts to call him, but that wasn’t too unusual.

I dialled his number. It went straight to voicemail.

‘Hi Graeme. It’s George. Just calling to say hi. We are at an airport in Trujillo, Peru. I think it’s probably pronounced Tru–he–oh, rather than Tru–Jillo, but I’m not sure. Anyway, just phoning to see how everything is back home? I hope everything is ok. Maybe send me a text or drop me an email sometime? Rachel and I are a little worried about you because we haven’t heard

from you. Speak soon, buddy.'

'Any luck?' said Rachel, when I returned to the café.

'No answer.'

'Where is he? I knew it was a bad idea letting Graeme house sit.'

'I'm sure it will be fine. He won't let us down.'

The Andes mountains looked stunning from the aeroplane window, their snow-capped peaks visible in the distance, and the mystery of the Amazon rainforest that lay hidden behind them. It increased our excitement about what still lay ahead of us during our time in South America. It was an even better feeling to see the distance we were covering in a matter of minutes on an aeroplane. Buses had been a memorable experience so far, and we would be spending plenty more time on them, but by flying we had effectively gained at least a day of our holiday.

Arequipa is the main gateway town to Colca Canyon, where we hoped to go and see the mighty Andean condors. But Peru's second biggest city also had a lot to offer, so we decided to spend a day or two there either side of our canyon trip.

We landed in Arequipa at 9 pm and got a taxi to a hostel recommended in our guide book. It was full, so we tried all the neighbouring hostels, but they were all fully booked too. This was the first time in South America we had struggled to find a place to stay. We eventually got a seedy and overpriced bedroom with retro neon lighting at the Posada De Sancho.

I was feeling a little more human by the following morning. The seedy overpriced bedroom was more than made up for by the view from the hostel's roof terrace where we ate breakfast. Like Baños, Arequipa sits at the foot of an active volcano. This one is the tamely named El Misti.

'Are you not worried about that volcano erupting?' I said.

'Nah,' said Rachel. 'El Misti doesn't sound nearly as scary as the throat of fire. What does it mean?'

'I don't know. The Misti, presumably.'

'See, not scary at all.'

'So it's all in the name?'

'Maybe. Also, it looks too far away to cause any harm.'

'I think that Mandango Trail has toughened you up.'

'Ha, maybe you're right.'

We spent our morning exploring one of Arequipa's most popular attractions. Built in 1579, the Santa Catalina Monastery in the centre of the city was entirely closed to the public until 1970. At its peak, it housed 450 people (nuns and servants). Nowadays, about 20 nuns live in one corner of the huge walled mini-town, and the rest of it is open to the public. The complex is strikingly beautiful, with dozens of courtyards, and warrens of cobbled streets and staircases, all painted in beautiful blues and reds. There were well stocked kitchens, rooms decked out with fine furniture, and hundreds of expensive looking paintings and artefacts. The nuns who entered here had all supposedly taken vows of poverty. It is a gorgeous and opulent mini-city within a city, and it is no wonder the nuns kept their little secret closed to the public for 400 years.

After a lunch of crepes (when in Peru...), we spent a couple of hours exploring the streets of Arequipa, and a couple more hours visiting the various travel agencies that organised tours to nearby Colca Canyon. After visiting our tenth agency, we realised they were all pretty much identical, and so picked one at random and booked a two-day tour beginning the following morning.

We enjoyed a nice evening meal at a small restaurant on one of Arequipa's back streets, and I even felt brave enough to have some wine. Things were definitely improving.

# THIRTEEN

We woke early and packed one small rucksack between us for our Colca Canyon trip. The hostel kindly agreed to look after our other bag for us while we were away and would reserve a room for our return. At least, at the time that is what I thought my conversation with the owner communicated.

The bus arrived at the expected time of 8.30am, which was a little surprising, as our experience with transport in South America was that it never ever arrived on time, and often didn't arrive at all.

Our guide was a smiley man named Juan Pablo, who had a number of jokes that didn't really make sense after he had translated them from Spanish into broken English. But we laughed a lot, because he did, and it was impossible not to be amused by his infectious enthusiasm.

Arequipa sits at 2,335m, which is already 1,000m higher than any mountain in the UK. But nothing about the city feels like you are high up, as it is surrounded by even higher peaks. As the bus began to ascend from Arequipa, higher onto the Andean plateau, I did briefly wonder whether the altitude had perhaps caused my illness. I then remembered that the one time I had projectile vomited was when I was standing at sea level, literally right next to the sea. It wasn't until reaching the mountains that I started to feel human again. Perhaps I was suffering from low-altitude sickness, which it turns out, is actually a thing.

Our visit to Colca Canyon was not scheduled until the following morning. Our tour included a stopover in the town of Chivay, before an early start on the second day to see the condors. On the way to Chivay, our bus stopped at Patapampa mountain pass which sits at 4,910 metres above sea level. This is higher than any mountain in the Alps and the Rockies. Yet the Peruvians think nothing of building a road that passes directly across it. This viewpoint is also known as the Mirador de los Volcanes, because of the eight remarkable volcanos visible from the site. It was staggering to think that each of those peaks were thousands of metres higher than the point in which we were standing.

The effect of the altitude was quickly noticeable as we took a short walk. Our breathing became laboured and we felt light-headed and slightly dizzy. Some other members of the group climbed back onto the bus straightaway, but Rachel and I had a stroll around the hundreds of stone cairns built by tourists, and the occasional stubborn green shrub that refused to accept that the top of a mountain is a ridiculous place to try to survive.

Juan Pablo made us all a cup of mate de coca – a tea made from coca leaves

and sweetened with shit-loads of sugar. Locals use coca tea to help cope with altitude sickness, although no scientific studies have ever proved its effectiveness. It is more likely that it acts as a stimulant because of its mind-altering qualities. The leaves of the coca plant are the base ingredient for cocaine, and although considered mild in its dosage, one cup of mate de coca is enough to test positive for a cocaine drug test.

‘This is delicious,’ said Rachel. ‘I could definitely get used to this. It’s much nicer than tea and coffee. I’m going to have to take some home.’

Later that day, Rachel did buy a couple of bags of coca leaves to take home. Luckily, we found out just before flying back to the UK that coca leaves are illegal in most countries outside of the Andes. Strangely, the countless traders chose not to impart this information when readily selling the leaves to tourists.

We arrived in the small town of Chivay just after midday. Our entire tour group of about 20 people were ushered from the bus into a restaurant called Casa Blanca for their ‘menu turistico’ (that’s Spanish for ‘tourist menu’, in case you were confused). This included an alpaca steak that had been cooked for so long it was impossible to identify it as meat, let alone alpaca. We were then all checked into a functional but featureless hostel before boarding the bus again to some nearby hot springs.

The hot springs were crowded but quite enjoyable. For about 10 minutes. Only the bus was not due to pick us up for two hours. By the time it came, we all had skin like shrivelled testicles.

After a quick change back at the hostel, we boarded the bus again, to be driven no more than 20 metres up the road to a restaurant.

‘Are we there already?’ I asked Juan Pablo.

‘Si!’ he said, pointing to the restaurant, which was just there.

‘Ok. Would it not have been easier to walk?’

‘No, no, you have paid for the bus with your tour.’

The restaurant had been described as a ‘traditional local restaurant’, and we realised now that ‘local’ in this case referred to its proximity to the hostel, rather than its authenticity of rural South America. The place was packed from wall to wall with other tour groups all shouting to each other over the noise of an energetic South American band playing at the far end of the room.

It was an enjoyable evening and the menu turistico (tourist menu, remember?) was surprisingly good. We spoke to an English couple who were on the final leg of a year-long round the world trip, and a Portuguese lookalike of the magician David Blaine. He was travelling alone and latched onto us because

he seemed to have a bit of a thing for Rachel.

Just as it seemed the evening was drawing to a close, a troupe of ‘traditional’ dancers all pranced into the room and assembled in a line near the end of our table. They launched into an exuberant dance, and – having consumed a fair bit of wine – we all enthusiastically tapped in time to the music and smiled politely. I perhaps tapped and smiled too enthusiastically and politely, as one of the male dancers ushered for me to get up and join them. I laughed and politely declined, which I hoped would be the end of it, but he then walked over and took hold of my arm and forcibly removed me from my chair.

Before I knew it, I was one of the dancers.

I tried to encourage Rachel to join me, but she just laughed and resolutely folded her arms. I then tried to encourage Portuguese David Blaine, but he seemed to be excited about spending time alone with Rachel.

I wildly flailed my arms and legs around, mimicking the other dancers as best as I could. Each time I thought I had it nailed, they changed their style and moves. I couldn’t keep up. It was mildly amusing for the first minute or so, but the song went on for bloody ages. Rachel kept smiling for a lot longer than I did, but then even she got bored and looked more than ready for the song to finish. It eventually did, and the novelty had worn off completely by then, so we didn’t even mention it once I returned to the table.

After the meal, in an act of rebellion – and much to Juan Pablo’s disgust – Rachel, Portuguese David Blaine and I declined the offer of the bus and walked the 20 metres back to our hostel.

We were woken by Juan Pablo at 5am the following morning. After a quick breakfast, we boarded our bus to Cruz del Condor. Portuguese David Blaine had overslept and sheepishly climbed onto the bus after we had all been sitting waiting for him for ten minutes. Juan Pablo and the bus driver chuffed something angrily at him which we interpreted as *‘now we are going to miss the condors, you useless shit-for-brains’*.

It transpired that it wasn’t the condors that Juan Pablo and our driver were in a rush for. We had a couple of other planned detours along the way.

The first was quite bizarre. We were all shepherded off the bus at a small village called Yanque a few miles from Chivay, where a group of about 20 children, all in traditional costume, performed a dance for us. Thankfully this time I was not required to join them.

It was a surreal experience. It was 6am and I think we were half expected to believe these children just happened to be standing there so early in the morning

as they presumably were at villages across South America every day before school. We gave a small donation and climbed back onto the bus, hoping that our next stop would be the condors. The condors had been the focus of the Colca Canyon tour. In fact, they were the sole reason that people book the tour, yet the previous 24 hours had been padded out with hot springs, meals, musicians, and far too many dancers. We were, however, reassured to see how so many different sections of the community were benefitting from tourism in the area.

The bus continued for another ten minutes and then pulled over again.

‘Are we at the canyon now?’ said Rachel.

I looked out of the window, where a Peruvian family dressed in traditional dress (of course) just happened to be standing by the roadside with a llama and a baby alpaca. What were the chances?

‘Er, no,’ I said. ‘It looks like it’s another chance for us to meet the locals.’

‘Oh great,’ said Rachel.

We reluctantly climbed off the bus. Portuguese David Blaine didn’t even bother this time. We made all the right noises of appreciation to the family, contributed to the collection, and then went to board the bus.

‘Er, George!’ said Rachel. ‘Wait a minute.’

I turned around to see Rachel standing there with a giant eagle-like bird on her head and a look of terror on her face. A man standing next to her wearing a large leather glove was pointing at Rachel and then to me saying, ‘foto, foto, foto.’

‘What is it?’ I asked Juan Pablo.

‘Bird,’ he said.

‘Si, I know it’s a bird. Qué type of bird?’

‘Big bird,’ he laughed, before climbing back onto the bus.

‘It looks like a black-chested buzzard eagle,’ said Portuguese David Blaine, who had stepped off the bus, eager to take a photo of Rachel. I mean, to take a photo of the black-chested buzzard eagle, of course.

‘Thanks. That’s what I thought,’ I coughed.

I took a photo, knowing that it was going to cost me, and gave the man a tip. It is not every day you get to take a photo of a black-chested buzzard eagle on your wife’s head. It was far more entertaining than my dancing.

The condors were well worth the wait and all the detours and distractions along the way. Due to our delayed start (thanks a lot, Portuguese David Blaine, you useless shit-for-brains), and our various stops en route, the condors were

already in flight when we arrived.

The Cruz del Condor viewpoint at Colca Canyon is considered the best, and most reliable, place in South America for viewing these magnificent birds. There were several other tour groups already parked up, but it didn't feel in the least bit crowded and there was plenty of room to walk about and marvel at both the canyon and the condors.

The Andean condor has one of the largest wingspans of any bird in the world. The largest is the wandering albatross, which is basically just a big fat seagull that looks far less impressive than the condor, so it doesn't really count. The Andean condor is by far the greatest bird I have ever seen. They were majestic and serene and so much more remarkable than I thought a bird could be. Despite their size, they flew silently and effortlessly, their feathered wing tips out-stretched like fingers as they danced on the rising thermals.

Colca Canyon itself was a sight to behold. It is one of the deepest in the world, and Juan Pablo was proud to tell us frequently that it is 'two altitude of Grand Canyon' which loosely translates that it is twice as deep as The Grand Canyon.

Due to the viewpoint's location midway down the canyon's side, the condors were gliding directly above us, out in the canyon at the same level as us, and directly below us. We were able to see them closely from all angles.

After about 40 minutes, all the condors swooped one by one down into the canyon, presumably to hunt for their breakfast. It was like one of them had checked their watch and said, '*Right, the show's over, kids. Hasta la vista!*' We didn't even get a chance to tip them.

Juan Pablo rounded us all up and we started to make our way back to the bus. There were shouts from a couple of stragglers from our group to say that another five condors had arrived (it's possible it was the same birds, to be fair. They all looked very similar). They hung around for a twenty-minute encore (in the air, not at the viewpoint chatting to visitors), and then dispersed. In total we were able to watch the condors for an hour. It is an hour we will certainly never forget.

After a quick cup of mate de coca back at the bus, Juan Pablo took us on an hour-long walking tour along the canyon edge. He told us lots of facts about the canyon, most of which got lost in translation. For example, he told us that Colca Canyon is big enough to hold the water of four swimming pools. That makes the Grand Canyon big enough to hold the water of two.

The bus took us back towards Chivay, stopping briefly on the way to look at



some impressive Inca terraces in the valley below. Not terraces of the patio or decking variety – Incas weren't into those. An Inca terrace is a piece of sloped ground that has been landscaped into a flat surface, to make for easier farming. I looked around, eagerly expecting a group of traditionally dressed school children to serenade us, or somebody to wrap a baby alpaca around my shoulders to pose for a photo, but the place was eerily deserted. I was almost disappointed.

After a quick and tasty empanada from the market in Chivay containing an unidentified filling (hopefully not condor), our group had a long and bumpy bus ride back to Arequipa where we arrived in the evening. We said goodbye and thank you to Juan Pablo, Portuguese David Blaine and the rest of the group, and went our separate ways.

The hostel where we had left our bag and reserved a room had not reserved us a room. It was full and there were no rooms available.

'Can we have our bag por favor' I said to the lady at reception.

She grumbled something and disappeared into the back office.

'Eight dollars,' she said, passing us our bag, but not letting go of it.

'Qué? You said you would look after it because we were going to book a room for the night.'

'No rooms,' she said. 'Eight dollars.'

'But that's not our fault. You said you would reserve us a room. We are not paying for a room we don't have.'

'We wash clothes,' she said.

'What clothes?'

'Here clothes,' she said, holding up a separate carrier bag full of neatly folded laundry. 'Eight dollars.'

'Is that our clothes? We didn't ask for them to be washed.'

'Eight dollars,' she said again.

'Did... is... what... qué...?' I said to Rachel, who seemed to be very amused by the conversation.

'Just pay her the eight dollars,' said Rachel.

'What for? They didn't keep a room for us, and we didn't ask them to wash our clothes.'

'Just pay her.'

'Fine! But I'm not happy about this,' I said, slamming eight dollars on the desk before retrieving our rucksack and freshly laundered clothes and stomping off out of the hostel.

‘Why the hell are they going through our rucksack?’ I said to Rachel outside.

‘I don’t know. Maybe she thought that’s what we wanted.’

‘How can asking for a room to be reserved be mis–translated as *‘please wash our dirty clothes?’*’

‘I don’t know. Your Spanish is a bit dodgy.’

‘Thanks a lot. You can do all the negotiating from now on.’

‘No, it’s ok. Sorry, you’re doing an excellent job, really. Well, look on the bright side, at least we have a bag full of freshly washed clothes.’

‘That’s true. But we still don’t have anywhere to sleep tonight.’

That hostel had taken us a long time to find when we first arrived in Arequipa, so finding an alternative took even longer. All the surrounding hostels were full, and we started thinking about the prospect of spending the night on the street, or worse still, having to pay for an expensive hotel. We did eventually find a suitably cheap and cheerful place called Hostal Rivero, which was confusingly nowhere near a river. The room was the size of a shoebox, and there was only room for one of us to get dressed at a time, but it was perfectly adequate, and we dumped our bags and had a delicious kebab at El Turko (when in Peru...) before having an early night.

# FOURTEEN

Bolivia was the next stop on our trip. We were far from done with Peru, but as our return flight was from Lima, it made sense to spend some time in Bolivia before travelling back through Peru on our return to Lima.

I left Rachel in bed and set off first thing to try and book bus tickets to Puno, where we would get a connection to Bolivia's capital La Paz. Most of the buses we had got so far in South America had been local buses that didn't require tickets to be bought in advance. Even our bus across the border from Ecuador to Peru was paid for as we boarded it. For the more popular long-distance routes, it was advised to buy tickets beforehand to guarantee a space.

It was a long walk to the ticket office and when I arrived I was told there were no tickets available for the next two days. The following day was Peruvian Independence Day and families were all heading home for the occasion, so tickets were in high demand.

Another tourist advised me to go to the bus terminal on the edge of town where I might have success getting tickets through an agency. After a taxi ride, I managed to purchase a couple of tickets for the 10.30 pm bus to Puno later that day. By the time my taxi arrived back at the hostel it was midday. Rachel had assumed something terrible had happened to me. She had been on the verge of contacting the hospital and police stations, but realised she didn't speak much Spanish, so decided to just read her book instead.

'My stomach is going crazy. I feel awful,' she said.

'I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be gone that long.'

'No, not because of you! I think I've come down with food poisoning now.'

'Oh no!'

Our bus journey to Puno was not for another ten hours, which was probably for the best as we now had another day to explore Arequipa some more, and hopefully allow time for Rachel to recover.

I ate a huge bowl of noodles for lunch and Rachel opted to play it safe with a fruit salad. I reminded her about what happened when I had fruit with my dodgy stomach in HuanChucko.

'I'll be fine,' she said. 'I'm not going to power hose the surrounding area like you did.'

She cautiously ate a chunk of watermelon and then a look of queasiness passed over her face.

‘Are you ok?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said, putting down her spoon. ‘I don’t think I’ll risk eating any more though.’

When American anthropologist Johan Reinhard and Miguel Zárate, his Peruvian climbing partner, set off on a scientific expedition up Mount Ambato in 1995, they didn’t expect to make one of the most important archaeological discoveries of all time. As they neared the summit, Reinhard and Zárate uncovered the perfectly preserved body of an Inca girl wrapped in a blanket. She was surrounded by other artefacts like food and statues, suggesting that Juanita – as she later became known – had been killed as part of some ritual sacrifice and an offering to the gods, sometime between the years of 1450 and 1480. She was thought to be as young as 12.

Juanita has been on display in Arequipa’s Museo Santuarios Andinos ever since (apart from when she occasionally jets off on her world tours). We had a fascinating, and slightly macabre, tour of the museum, marvelling at Juanita and several other ice mummies. Many rural Peruvians still make sacrifices to the gods in return for water and good harvests, but these days the sacrifice tends to be beer (specifically Chicha), rather than children.

We spent a couple of hours playing pool in a bar later that afternoon. While Rachel was racking up the balls, I tried calling Graeme again from a payphone in the corner. I knew it would be about 10 pm in Northampton, which was the perfect time to catch him. This time he answered.

‘Graeme!’ I said. ‘You’re alive.’

‘George, man, how are you? Where are you?’

‘We are in Arequipa.’

‘What country is that in? You guys having a good time?’

‘It’s in Peru. Yeah, we are having an awesome time thanks. You’re a difficult man to get hold of. Did you get my messages and emails?’

‘Sorry, I’ve got no phone credit. I could see the answerphone message thingy on my phone but haven’t been able to check it.’

‘What about the emails?’

‘Nah, I’m trying to have a bit of a break from all that internety stuff.’

‘Oh. Ok. Well I’m glad you’re ok. We were worried about you.’

‘You mean Rachel was worried I’d burned your house down?’

‘Well... yeah, basically. So... how is the house? Are the cats still alive?’

‘Yep, the cats are both still alive. The house is fine. I haven’t burned it down,

yet. Everything is just as you left it. Father Dougal is curled up on my lap here in the garden.'

'You're in the garden? At 10 o'clock?'

'Yep. Just chilling in the garden. It's a nice warm evening.'

'Cool, sounds good. Are you just sitting there in the dark?'

'Er... yeah, kind of. And... er...you know... reading.'

'In the dark? I didn't even know you could read in the light.'

'Very funny.'

'Is that the TV I can hear in the background?'

'What?'

'You said you were outside. But I can hear the TV.'

'Nope. No TV.'

'I'm sure I can hear a TV in the background.'

'Must be interference on the line,' he said, sounding as though he was frantically searching for the TV remote control, in the dark.

'Graeme, what the hell is going on?'

'Nothing. Don't be cross. I've just rearranged things a little.'

'What do you mean you've rearranged things? Have you put the TV outside?'

'No! Don't be ridiculous. I would never take the TV outside.'

'What have you done then?'

'I am outside, but I moved the TV unit up to the patio doors so that I can watch it from the garden.'

'Ah, I see,' I said, suddenly understanding what he was up to. Graeme is a heavy smoker but has never smoked inside our house. Even though he was going to be living at our house for six weeks, we told him the rule still applied and he could only smoke in the garden. He didn't protest. 'Is it so that you can smoke and watch TV at the same time?'

'Exactly!'

'Ok, that's fair enough, I suppose. Good ingenuity. Is it not a bit uncomfortable sitting on those metal chairs to watch TV?'

'What?'

'Those metal chairs in the garden. I assume that's what you are sitting on?'

'Er... yeah.'

'Graeme! What are you not telling me?'

'Don't be mad!'

'I will be mad if you don't tell me what the fuck you've done.'

‘I did try and sit on those metal chairs, but you’re right, they are really uncomfortable.’

‘Sooooo?’

‘So, I sort of dragged the sofa outside instead.’

‘You have put our sofa in the bloody garden?’

‘Not the garden. It’s on the patio. You told me I couldn’t smoke in the house.’

‘So you moved the sitting room into the garden.’

‘Er... yeah. Kind of. I’m really sorry. I bring the sofa inside every evening and I won’t let it get wet. And I’m not dropping any ash on it.’

Part of me was angry with Graeme, but I was mostly amused and impressed by his resourcefulness, and slightly jealous that I hadn’t thought of it first. I don’t smoke, but watching TV outside on a nice warm evening did sound amazing.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Just make sure it all looks normal when we get back.’

‘I will. I promise. You’re not going to tell Rachel are you?’

‘Of course I’m not going to tell Rachel. She will go fucking mental.’

‘You got through to Graeme? How is he?’ asked Rachel nervously, when I returned to the pool table.

‘Yeah, it sounds like he’s doing really well. The house and cats are absolutely fine.’

‘Phew. That’s great to hear. Maybe I underestimated him.’

‘Yeah, I think you did.’

The six-hour bus journey was tough going and we arrived in Puno just after 3am to discover the temperature outside had dropped considerably. The ticket office was closed and there were no buses until morning, so we joined the dozens of other people huddled together on the bus station floor. Sleep was impossible, so we sat and read our books and did regular circuits of the bus station to try and keep warm.

At about 6.30am there was a mad scramble as the ticket office opened. I managed to get a spot in line and successfully bought two tickets for the first bus of the day to Bolivia’s capital La Paz, which departed half an hour later. The ticket seller assured me that the bus was ‘directo’ and that we would definitely not have to change.

‘Hello,’ said a familiar voice behind me a few minutes later.

I turned to find Portuguese David Blaine standing there with a slightly demented expression on his face.

‘Hello. Good to see you again, Portu...’ I started, before realising his name wasn’t actually Portuguese David Blaine and I didn’t even know his real name.

‘What is your name?’

‘Vasco, but people call me...’

‘David Blaine?’ I interrupted.

‘No! People call me Vaz.’

‘Oh, right, sorry.’

‘What is your name?’

‘George. Nice to meet you properly, Vaz,’ I said, shaking his hand.

‘What about your girlfriend? What is her name?’ he said, looking over to the far corner of the building where he had already clocked Rachel sitting.

‘Rachel,’ I said. ‘And she’s not my girlfriend.’

His eyes lit up.

‘Oh. Really?’

‘She’s my wife.’

‘Oh, ok. Congratulations.’

It turned out Vaz was also booked onto the 7am bus. I’m sure it was a complete coincidence. I doubt that he had been secretly following us (Rachel) since we finished our Colca Canyon tour. Anyway, he seemed a nice guy, and it was good to have some company for the bus journey to La Paz.

# FIFTEEN

Despite our sleepless night, Rachel and I were excited about visiting Bolivia, and we were even looking forward to the prospect of a scenic bus journey which would definitely be direct, and we would not have to change.

The bus ride was our most magnificent yet, hugging the shores of the majestic Lake Titicaca – the largest lake in South America. We hoped to have time to visit the lake properly on our way back into Peru.

Halfway through the journey, we reached the Bolivian border and were all asked to get off the bus. We didn't have a clue where we were going or what we were required to do, so just followed along behind everyone else. As it was Peruvian Independence Day, the place was particularly hectic, and it felt like we would be there for some time.

The Peruvian immigration was straightforward enough, and we got all the correct stamps in our passports, with only a brief snigger at my passport photo from the officials, and then joined a longer queue on the Bolivian side. After a long wait, and a longer laugh at my passport photo, we passed through this one too without any problems.

A man whom we recognised as being the co-driver from our bus then stopped our group and said something in Spanish which didn't go down too well with the other passengers. A group of Peruvian and Bolivian ladies – all dressed in long skirts and dresses, with multiple shawls and brightly coloured scarves – started yelling angrily at the young man and one shoved him in the chest.

'What did he say?' I asked Vaz, who was still lurking near us.

'He said that we have to change buses because our bus will not be crossing the border.'

'Ok,' I said. 'Why are the ladies so cross with him?'

'Because they were told the bus was direct and we definitely wouldn't have to change. Nobody told us and now we have to go back to the other bus to collect all our luggage.'

'But we've already got our bags,' I said, gesturing to our rucksacks on our backs.

'Aren't those just your day sacks? What about your proper bags?'

'No, this is all we have.'

'Wow. You travel light. I've got to go back for my bag. Save me a seat.'

We were able to walk past all the ladies who were still abusing the poor co–



driver and be the first onto the empty bus on the Bolivian side. Only it wasn't a bus. It was a really shitty little minibus about half the size of the previous one.

We took our places near the back and it was another hour before Portuguese, I mean Vaz, and the rest of the passengers returned with their luggage. They had to queue again at Bolivian immigration to show the stamp that proved they had already queued at immigration to get the stamp.

We did try to save a seat for Vaz, but one of the Bolivian ladies gave me a piece of her mind after I tried to suggest that the seat was taken. I didn't dare push it any further.

All of the seats on the bus soon filled up, yet more and more people continued to file on. I was just about to offer to give up my seat to someone more deserving, when a lady just squashed herself next to us on the two-person seat anyway. We sat there with our rucksacks on our fronts as more people continued to pile onto the bus. They kept on coming. Soon others had joined us on our seat, perched on our laps, and the aisle was stacked several people deep. Each passenger who boarded the bus issued a fresh rant at the driver who sat patiently, shrugging his shoulders every time he received a new barrage of abuse.

The bus eventually departed, but then had to stop after a couple of hundred metres because some passengers had shouted to alert the driver that several bags had fallen off the roof. There was nowhere to store everyone's luggage, so it was just tied haphazardly to the top of the minibus.

Despite being full, this bus was a 'colectivo', which meant it also stopped to pick up more passengers along the way. Each time it slowed to a stop, another tirade of insults was shouted at the poor driver. Rachel and I sat there smiling about the whole situation. We had initially been smug to get our seats. Little did we realise that we would be sharing these seats with many other people. Still, it made for a very entertaining bus journey. And at least we still had our bags with us. The bus made regular stops to pick up fallen luggage, and, judging by the extreme anger expressed by some passengers when we eventually reached La Paz, some bags never made it.

Arriving in La Paz was an unforgettable experience. From the shores of Lake Titicaca, we passed through the vast expanse of the altiplano. Most of this land lies fallow all year round. The lack of transport infrastructure, a struggling economy, and the heavy risk of both droughts and floods, mean that it is not practical to farm large sections of the altiplano. As we approached the suburbs of El Alto – La Paz's adjacent city – the area became more and more urban along the roadside, but it still didn't have the impact we had been anticipating on reaching Bolivia's capital city.

And then we turned a corner and La Paz was revealed below us in all its glory. The city sits in a huge canyon formed by the Choqueyapu River, with streets and buildings flanking the valley's sides. Its buildings and architecture won't win any beauty awards, but La Paz's setting is unrivalled.

We reached the city's main bus terminal shortly after midday and got a taxi with Vasco to a hostel. We thought we had lost him in the melee at the bus station, but he was sticking closely to us (Rachel). The first few hostels were all full but then we found one that did have one room available.

'We could share?' suggested Vaz.

'That's very kind,' I said. 'You take this room. We'll try at the hostel next door.'

'Sure?'

'Sure.'

We booked a room at neighbouring El Solario and opened the door to our room to be hit by an overpowering stench.

'What is that smell?' said Rachel, covering her mouth and nose with her hand.

'I don't know. It smells like petrol.'

'We can't sleep here.'

'Maybe if we open the windows it will go away.'

I tried the windows, but the safety catch would only allow them to open about an inch.

'We really can't stay here,' she said. 'We will die.'

The man at reception assured me the smell was floor polish. Unless they polish their floors with diesel, I think it's very unlikely. Rachel and I had slept in some pretty questionable places in the past, and didn't consider ourselves fussy (apart from our planned romantic first wedding anniversary with the beds visible to those eating in the restaurant), but on this occasion, we thought there was a good chance that if we went to sleep at El Solario, we may never have woken up again. He reluctantly gave us a refund and we got a room at nearby Happy Days Hostel instead.

La Paz famously claims to leave tourists breathless. Partly because of its setting, but mostly because of its lack of oxygen. At 3,500m, La Paz is the highest capital city in the world.

It was a city like no other we had ever visited before. Just stepping outside

the hostel door, you could feel its buzz and energy, as mopeds and taxis screeched up and down the street, seemingly on whichever side of the road they fancied.

We wandered the cobbled streets for a couple of hours, and from what we could gather, La Paz was one giant market. Every inch of space was taken up with a street seller peddling their wares. And it wasn't even a recognised market day.

Vasco joined us for dinner at a Lebanese restaurant (when in Bolivia...) called Yasseps. The food was delicious, but the staff were unwelcoming and Vasco still slightly creepy. When he heard that we had had to check out of our hotel because of the fumes, he was disappointed we had still chosen not to share with him.

Vasco had plans to head off the next day on a mountain bike ride down the '*world's most dangerous road*'. The notorious Yungas Road descends 56km from La Paz to Coroico and has become a popular destination for thrill-seeking mountain bikers in recent decades. Vaz wanted us both (Rachel) to come along with him. Rachel had said from the outset that she would never do it.

'You go ahead, George, and do it without me, if you want,' she had said, in a way that made it very clear she didn't want me to do it. I was secretly relieved that I had an excuse not to go. We said our goodbyes to Vasco and wished him safe travels.

## SIXTEEN

The altitude was noticeable as we wheezed our way around La Paz the following morning, admiring the variety of things for sale. We wanted to buy some presents for friends and family back home, but travelling so light, we had no room to carry anything at all. Having travelled successfully for three weeks with one small rucksack each, we felt like we had proven to ourselves that we could get by without too much stuff. There was no reason why we had to continue to do so.

So rather than sensibly buying a small additional rucksack to accommodate a few presents, we bought a stupidly big PVC zipped bag about a metre square, in red check pattern. These bags are popular all over South America to store everything from laundry to shopping. We figured if we were going to break our self-inflicted hand luggage allowance, we might as well break it in style.

Up until now, Rachel and I had been forced to be restrained when it came to purchases, as we simply had no room to carry anything extra. With our vast new bag to fill, we went a little crazy in the markets of La Paz. I'm blaming the altitude.

It is a fact that almost everything for sale in the Andes is either made from alpaca, or features a picture of an alpaca on it. We bought alpaca hats, alpaca scarves and alpaca gloves – all made from alpaca wool, and adorned with knitted pictures of alpacas too. We also bought a couple of ridiculous woollen ponchos that we had no need for and would most likely never wear, simply because we had room for them.

We stopped regularly at cafes to ease the effect of the altitude, and ate various snacks from street sellers. I pride myself on having a decent natural sense of direction, but lost in the rabbit warren of La Paz's streets, I didn't have a clue where we were. I'm blaming the altitude.

We stumbled upon a cinema that was only showing one film. It was, predictably, about Che Guevara. Despite being dead for 30 years, Che Guevara was still the biggest celebrity in Bolivia. The few items of clothing that didn't feature an alpaca, featured pictures of Che instead.

By the time we found out where we were, we had wandered several miles out of the city centre, so we got a taxi back to our hostel and collapsed into a deep post-shopping slumber. I blame the altitude.

The following morning, I woke early and walked up to the markets on the higher streets above our hostel. I usually hate shopping, and back in England I

will do anything to avoid it. But I couldn't get enough of the markets in La Paz.

Every corner I turned, there was a new sight to behold, and the smile on my face grew wider and wider. Almost every stall was run by a Bolivian lady, wearing her long flowing dress, shawls, petticoats and the trademark bowler hat.

These bowler hats were introduced to Bolivia by mistake. A shipment of hats, produced in England, was sent over to the British rail-workers who were stationed in the region in the mid-1800s. The hats were far too small for the men to wear, but rather than get rid of them, they were offered to Bolivian women who were led to believe these hats were all the rage for women in Europe and North America. They have been a prominent part of Bolivian heritage ever since.

These women in their bowler hats at the market were sat amongst their wares, with heaps of oranges, grapefruit, or chilies stacked up around them. I wanted to know how they created the display in the mornings. The lady presumably had to take her place at the stall, while the goods were then piled around her. She would then be unable to move for the rest of the day.

I stumbled upon the notorious Mercado de las Brujas – Witches' Market – where the definition of weird purchases is rewritten. Here you can buy an array of bizarre things, such as potions, voodoo dolls, statues, dried frogs, herbal 'stimulants' and dried llama foetuses. The llama foetuses are said to ward off evil spirits, and are often built into the foundations of new houses in Bolivia to ensure a happy household.

By the time I got back to the hostel, Rachel was up and showered and ready to start the day. I told her all about the markets. She had not wanted to come with me earlier, fearing the altitude of the higher streets would be too much, and choosing a lie-in instead.

'That sounds amazing,' she said. 'Let's go and see it.'

'But I've just got back from there.'

'Well it sounds really good. I'd really like to see the markets.'

'But I told you this morning that I was going to look at them and asked if you wanted to come and you said you didn't.'

'I didn't want to go earlier.'

'Then why do you want to go now?'

'Because you said it was really good. And I've had a nice lie-in.'

'Actually, it wasn't that great. In fact, I've just remembered how rubbish it was.'

'Too late for that. Let's go!'

We had a nice breakfast at a nearby cafe and then wandered back up to the markets again. Thankfully, Rachel was impressed, and I enjoyed it equally the second time around. Our PVC laundry bag was filling up nicely, and we added plenty more alpaca tat to take home with us.

‘What about one of the dried llama foetuses?’ I suggested.

‘What about them?’

‘Maybe we should buy one to take home?’

‘How about.... no?’

‘But they are supposed to bring good luck.’

‘I don’t care. We are not taking a dried llama foetus home. However much luck it might bring.’

‘We’ve still got room in our bag.’

‘George, forget it. If you buy a dried llama foetus, you are going on the rest of the trip on your own.’

‘I won’t be on my own. I’ll have my dried llama foetus to keep me company.’

‘Well, I hope you and your dried llama foetus have a long and happy life together.’

‘Thanks. We will.’

We had a cheap and cheerful lunch consisting of the Bolivian specialty of fried meat, fried egg and fried rice, at a little restaurant called Pot Pourri. All that walking at high altitude – and possibly the wine they served with lunch – had made Rachel sleepy. She went back to the hostel for a nap while I continued shopping. I had a giant bag to fill.

A charango is a stringed instrument, popular in the Andes. They were traditionally made using the shell of an armadillo, but are now more commonly made from wood. Charangoes were for sale all over La Paz., with entire streets devoted to them.

Back in England, I had been playing in a band for many years. So, for some strange reason, I decided to buy two charangoes – one for me and one for my guitar playing friend Mark. Mark had never shown any interest in South American musical instruments. But now that I was in La Paz, it was essential I bought two charangoes. We had a bag to fill.

I spent almost four hours that afternoon searching the shops and learning everything there was to know about an instrument I didn’t even know existed before we arrived in South America. It was extremely unlikely I would ever learn to play a charango, but at the time it felt incredibly important. The charangoes

all looked identical, but each had very subtle differences in the colour of the wood, and the pattern of the grain, which made the decision-making process so much harder.

I eventually settled on two charangoes, and bought a couple of horrendous looking padded cases for them too. Mark would be delighted.

I don't think Mark's charango ever made it out of the case for more than a couple of seconds, and neither has mine. I still have it though, just in case I decide to become a charango player later in life. At least they took up a decent amount of space in our new bag.

'Why on earth did you buy two charangoes?' laughed Rachel, when I returned to the hostel.

'Just be grateful I didn't buy any dried llama foetuses.'

'That's true.'

Later that evening, we had some over-priced and extremely disappointing cocktails at Sol Y Luna where Rachel and I had our first proper argument of the trip. It began as a slight disagreement after I tried and failed to order a bowl of olives – possibly the most middle-class argument it is possible to have – and extended into a long and heated discussion of what we would do once we returned home. More specifically, what I was going to do once we returned home. Rachel had been supportive of my decision to leave my job as a Data Information Officer, but now the realisation was setting in that I didn't have a job to go back to, it was making her understandably nervous. I tried to reassure her and tell her it would all work out ok, but we both went to bed angry. Rachel, because she was anxious about my future, and me because I didn't get my olives.

# SEVENTEEN

The concern over my career was mostly forgotten by the following morning, as were the olives, because it marked the start of one of the most highly-anticipated legs of our trip. We were going to the jungle!

We took a bus to El Alto International Airport – which, at the time, was the highest commercial airport in the world (airports at higher altitudes have since opened in China) – and checked in to our flight to Rurrenabaque – the gateway town to the Amazon rainforest.

When they announced our flight was ready to board, we followed a group of half a dozen people through some double doors and out onto the runway.

‘That’s not our plane, is it?’ said Rachel, pointing to an aeroplane not much bigger than a minibus.

‘Uh, yeah, it looks like it might be.’

‘It can’t be. That’s not a real plane.’

‘Of course it is. It’s just a plane for fewer passengers.’

‘I thought this place we are going to is popular with tourists?’

‘It is! But that’s popular by South American backpacking standards. Not popular enough to have 747s flying into the jungle every hour. Plus, I wouldn’t want to be in a large plane trying to get enough height to fly over those bad boys.’ I pointed at the rugged peaks of the Andes mountain range that overlooks La Paz.

‘The Andes? We’re not flying over those, are we?’

‘Yes we are! The jungle is on the other side of them.’

‘I’m really not looking forward to this. What if we crash into the mountains?’

‘We won’t. They’ve been flying planes from this airport for years. The Andes do look very close though, don’t they? And very big.’

‘Stop it,’ she said. ‘You’re really not helping matters.’

The plane looked bigger from the outside than it was inside. It turned out to be smaller than most minibuses, with just 11 seats, including the pilot and co-pilot. Rachel and I sat directly behind the pilot and we could have reached out and touched him if we wanted to. We didn’t want to. We didn’t want to divert his attention away from the aircraft’s controls until we were well over the Andes and safely landed in the jungle.

The plane took off in the vague direction of the Andes, but then started banking heavily left.



‘Ah, see, I knew we wouldn’t fly over those,’ said Rachel. ‘We are obviously going around them,’

‘The Andes stretch for thousands of miles. We can’t go around them. We are definitely going to have to go over them at some point.’

The plane kept banking left, and over the course of the next five minutes had completed a full 360 degrees turn and was facing back towards the mountains, this time at a significantly higher altitude.

‘It’s a bit like one of those spiral entrances to multi-storey car parks, isn’t it?’ I said.

‘Er... no. I don’t remember ever feeling like my life was about to end driving up one of those.’

‘I have. When you are driving.’

The plane straightened up and continued on its course towards the Andes, as Rachel shot me one of her menacing looks. It was a truly incredible flight. My stomach did back flips as we crested the ridge of the mountains, the pilot pulling back heavily on the controls the entire way, and the snow-dusted crags seemed almost within touching distance.

The flight lasted about 45 minutes, and after crossing the magnificent peaks, we descended gradually down over the other side. The vegetation below us became thicker and greener, the tree canopies so densely packed together it resembled a field of genetically modified broccoli that had got way out of control.

A clearing appeared as the plane slowly approached the ground, but there was no sign of a runway or any sort of airport out of my window.

‘Where are we?’ said Rachel, squashing her face up to the glass.

‘I assume we’ll soon see Rurrenabaque and I guess there will be a runway any minute now.’

The plane got lower still, and I could see its prominent shadow on the grass below. The shadow got bigger and bigger until the plane’s wheels touched gently down onto the ground. I strained my neck to see if there was a thin patch of asphalt below us that I hadn’t been able to see properly before. There wasn’t.

‘Ok,’ I said. ‘Apparently the runway is made of grass.’

‘I am so glad I didn’t know that before we took off.’

‘Well we still have to take off again when we leave,’ I reminded her.

‘Why do you always have to say things like that?’

‘Sorry.’

Rurrenabaque Airport consisted of a rickety blue single-roomed building, just a few yards from where the plane landed. I have seen much bigger village halls. It was delightful.

Rurrenabaque is a small isolated town on the Rio Beni, a couple of hundred miles north-east of La Paz. It has increased in popularity in recent years as a starting point for excursions to the jungle and the pampas – two vastly different regions of the Amazon river basin. We were going to go on tours to visit both.

Our room at hostel El Porteño was vast and airy with an unnecessarily high ceiling and large windows. It was bigger than both the aeroplane and the airport, and the circulating air provided much needed relief from the heat.

My poor Spanish was evident when I ordered us each a toasted ham and cheese sandwich at a neighbouring cafe by pointing to the pictures of the toasted ham and cheese sandwiches on the wall, and asking for, in Spanish, what I thought was two toasted ham and cheese sandwiches. What arrived were two normal ham and cheese sandwiches, which were perfectly decent but not toasted. I think what I said must have translated as something like, *'hello, we would like two of these but definitely NOT toasted please.'*

After ten minutes in the humidity of the Amazon, the sandwiches had slowly started to resemble their photos on the menu. There is no need for ovens in Rurrenabaque. The jungle is one big toastie machine.

I was given directions to the town's Post Office, because I needed to mail a CD of photos home as a backup. When I reached the address scribbled on the back of my hand, it appeared to just be someone's house. I knocked. A lady answered.

'Dónde está the post office?' I asked.

'It's me,' she said in English. 'I am post office.'

'Oh, bueno. I would like to post this to Inglaterra por favor.'

'60 Bolivianos.'

'Gracias. Cuando does it get collected?'

From what I understood, she told me she would post it in La Paz next time she visited. I asked her when that was likely to be, and she said she wasn't sure, but it would probably be later in the month or possibly next month. I tried to backtrack on our transaction, but I had already paid her the money and secretly thought it was the greatest post office I had ever visited.

The CD of photos did make it back to our house in Northampton, but we beat it by about two months.

I was then given an address for the town's launderette, which I scribbled on the back of my other hand. Again, this proved to be someone's house. The lady – not the post office lady – took the bag of dirty clothes from us and told us it would be ready the following day.

It was fascinating to see how the entrepreneurial locals had adapted to the influx of tourists to their jungle town.

In the evening, we played pool and ate pizza in the atmospheric and touristy Moskkito Bar. By touristy, I mean that there were about half a dozen other non-Bolivians in the bar. South America was anything but touristy.

# EIGHTEEN

After breakfast the following morning, we went to the meeting point at the shore of the Rio Beni for the start of our three-day jungle tour. It transpired that Rachel and I were the only people booked onto this tour, so they merged us with three people from another group as well. As we had established with our Colca Canyon tour, all the groups are largely the same anyway.

Our new group consisted of a quiet and introverted French couple named Bernard and Andrea, and a girl from Israel named Orit, who was extremely chatty and didn't stop talking for two days.

Our guide was a round and cheerful man named Jose Luis. We expected jungle guides to be dressed either entirely in khaki, camouflage or partially shredded clothing, but Jose Luis wore a baggy pair of jeans and a skin-tight green retro Reebok t-shirt. He did, however, have a machete with him at all times. He spoke no English, but was full of enthusiasm and almost as excited as we were for the start of our jungle trip.

We climbed into a long wooden boat of dubious safety. It was basically a canoe with an outboard motor held together with duct tape. But it looked like it had been floating on that river for many decades, and we hoped it would at least last for the duration of our journey.

The Rio Beni stretches over 1,000km through the Amazon basin. It was wide, calm and the colour of chicken soup. We sat peacefully for three hours as the boat headed upriver towards our camp.

The riverbank was dotted with all sorts of exotic looking birds, perched on branches watching us pass. Each time we saw a new species, Rachel and I would point and let out an audible sign of excitement, despite the fact we had no clue what each bird was. On hearing our eagerness, our guide, Jose Luis, would look in the direction we were pointing and say, 'bird.' We would then say 'bird' and he would smile which made us smile. We never did find out what type of birds they were. But Jose Luis confirmed each time that they were indeed birds.

Compared to our countless journeys on buses, colectivos, taxis, milk floats, and aeroplanes, this river trip was the most relaxing transportation of our time in South America so far. There were no sheer drops to contend with, no deadly overtaking manoeuvres, no bumpy pot-hole ridden roads, no immigration control, no laughing at passport photos, no fear of nose-diving into the Andes mountains and no people selling boiled sweets or chipas. At regular intervals we would pass small isolated villages or houses on the riverbank, accessible only by

river, and each time a group of children would run down to the waterside and smile and wave to us as we passed. We would smile and wave back. The journey to our jungle camp was worth the fee alone.

Jose Luis branched off the Rio Beni and followed one of its tributaries – the Rio Tuichi – further into the jungle. We eventually pulled up alongside a small clearing on the riverbank, Jose Luis tied up the boat, and we disembarked. We were deep in the Amazon rainforest by this point, and had not passed any form of civilisation for well over an hour.

It was a 15-minute walk from the banks of the Rio Tuichi to our camp, following Jose Luis along a well-trodden path through the trees. Our camp was a collection of half a dozen small wooden huts on stilts in a clearing. We had assumed we would be sharing a tent or at least a dormitory with others on the tour, so it was a pleasant surprise to be given our own little cabin. The single-roomed hut was just big enough for a double bed with a basic mattress and a mosquito net hanging over it. It was far more luxurious than either Rachel or I had envisaged.

The heat and humidity had been a bit of a shock since flying in from La Paz. Our clothes, damp and sweaty, clung tightly to our bodies. But it wasn't as bad as either of us feared. Despite the temperature being in the mid-30s, it was the middle of winter, and we knew that the jungle could get a whole lot hotter.

Jose Luis had laid out some cheese and bread and salad which we ate while we chatted to our camp mates. Rachel and I used our poor Spanish to include Jose Luis in the conversation as much as possible, and Andrea (from France), who was fluent in English and Spanish (and French, obviously), translated the bits of his answers that we didn't understand. Which was most of it.

Jose Luis did, however, speak the international language of football and reeled off a list of Manchester United players. United were his favourite team. He then showed me a newspaper that a fellow guide had dropped off earlier in the day containing the previous weekend's scores. It turns out you can check football results in the jungle.

The afternoon was spent taking a leisurely three-hour walk through the rainforest with Jose Luis as our guide. I expected our jungle tour to be mostly looking at exotic jungle animals like monkeys, snakes and jaguars, with Jose Luis having to fight off surprise crocodile attacks every few minutes with his machete. But we mostly just looked at trees.

The trees were surprisingly fascinating though. We learned – through Andrea's translation – all about which types of trees were poisonous, which

were edible, which you could drink water from, and which had certain medicinal uses. Neither Rachel nor I retained any of this information, so we would just as likely accidentally poison ourselves as cure athlete's foot if forced to fend for ourselves in the jungle.

The group's favourite tree by far was the walking tree. It probably has a proper name, but in the jungle, it is just known as a walking tree. Because it walks. The tree does not have a single trunk. Instead, it has about a dozen 'legs' providing its stability. The fight for sunlight in the rainforest is key, with all plant species battling with one another to get as much sun as possible. The walking tree will never be as high as the others, so can't compete in that department. Its leaves are not as big as some other plants, so it can't contend there either. However, the walking tree more than makes up for these inadequacies with its ability to move its position on the jungle floor to find a better spot to maximise its daylight exposure. Over time, it grows new roots in the direction of the light, with some claiming these trees can move up to 20 metres per year.

More recent studies by party-poopers have suggested that this is a jungle myth, and although walking trees grow new roots and old ones die, they don't actually move anywhere. I choose to ignore these studies, because I believe in walking trees. I was marvelling at one of them on our jungle tour, I turned to say something to Rachel, and by the time I turned back again it had gone. Stick that in your study.

A friendly Danish couple named Anna and Rob joined our group during dinner after they missed the morning departure and had to wait for an evening boat.

We went on another walk after dark. It is possible it was the same walk, but it looked very different in the darkness. The thick tree canopy blocked out the moonlight and we shuffled along slowly, guided by the faint beams of our head torches.

Every so often one of the group would shriek then whisper 'lobo' – 'spider'. We would then point it out to Jose Luis and ask him if it was an 'amigo'.

'Si. Amigo,' he would usually respond, to reassure us that that particular spider was a friend to us and was not dangerous. Some of these spiders were the size of tarantulas, because, it turns out, they were tarantulas. The Amazonian tarantulas were the least of our worries, however, and according to Jose Luis they were amigos.

Occasionally, we would ask Jose Luis about a spider and he would tell us in his very serious voice, 'lobo no amigo. Muy peligroso' – 'spider is no friend – it

is very dangerous’.

Jose Luis found one such spider resting on a huge leaf. Andrea informed us (after translating Jose Luis’s words) that it was a Brazilian wandering spider – perhaps the most dangerous spider on earth. Its bite can kill a human in 25 minutes. If the bite isn’t fatal, its venom can cause its male victims to have four-hour erections. So, possibly it’s an amigo too.

Whenever Jose Luis pointed out a muy peligroso lobo, we would back slowly away from the spider, usually resulting in us getting tangled in another web behind us, and then whirling around frenziedly to try to escape. Every cracking twig, hooting of an owl, or rustle of a leaf gave cause for concern that there was perhaps some other muy peligroso animals going to jump out on us at any moment.

It was genuinely terrifying. But it became so ridiculously scary and farcical that it almost felt like we were actors in some low-budget horror movie and not taking part in real life. Our laughter – instigated largely by Orit the Israeli – was contagious and we giggled our way around the forest, crashing comically into spiderwebs at every turn. Even Jose Luis was enjoying his tour and when we arrived back to camp we all had a group hug as though we had survived some near-death experience.

# NINETEEN

The following morning, after a breakfast of bread and honey, we went on another long walk to look at more trees. Jose Luis sure liked his trees. The lobos weren't so abundant during the day, and despite there being very little in the way of jungle animals, it was extremely pleasurable to just spend time in the middle of nowhere doing very little.

We did see several snakes, a group of howler monkeys – doing their howling in the treetops above us – a small rodent-like creature, several species of ant, and a variety of different animals with wings that Jose Luis identified as '*birds*'.

We came across one huge tree wrapped in thick vines that we were able to climb. Jose Luis cut one of these vines free with his machete and we were able to take it in turns to swing Tarzan-style between the trees.

Rachel and I loved the simplicity of our time in the jungle. South America had been more than we hoped for. We had seen and experienced some amazing things, with our senses being constantly stimulated – perhaps overly so – and always moving from one place to the next. It was sometimes impossible to take it all in when there was so much going on. In the jungle, everything became so much more straightforward. Our days consisted mostly of taking leisurely walks, looking at trees, and always ending up back where we started. We were loving every minute of jungle life.

We headed back to camp for lunch, and Bernard, Andrea and Orit got a boat back to Rurrenabaque, having only booked a two-day tour. The Danish couple and Rachel and I were joined by some replacements – a young British couple named Dave and Wendy who were travelling around South America with their nine-year-old daughter Aleah for a year.

After lunch, we expected to go on another walk to look at trees, but we were surprised (and slightly disappointed) to discover that Jose Luis had an afternoon of handicrafts planned for us at the camp. Like everything in the jungle, it turned out to be far more enjoyable than we expected.

We were given a bowl of little nuts called coquito nuts. They resembled tiny coconuts, shrunk and dried to the size of a hollow grape. We sanded these nuts down using a variety of three different grades of sandpaper – depending on what stage of the process we were at. Rachel then threaded several of these nuts onto a piece of string to make a necklace.

I decided to keep sanding mine down until I had made a ring. I was going to give it to Rachel as a present that she would almost certainly never wear. It took



me two hours of delicate sanding to get the hollow coquito nut down to the size of a ring. It was smooth and black and beautifully shiny. It was almost perfect. *It just needs perhaps one last polish*, I thought, as I rubbed the sandpaper gently over it for the final time. The delicate ring cracked all the way through.

‘OH FUCKING BOLLOCKS!’ I shouted.

Jose Luis looked up from the other end of the table with an expression that suggested he didn’t know the meaning of what I had said, but he knew from my tone that I most certainly was not happy.

‘I broke the ring,’ I said, holding up my afternoon’s work – a worthless cracked shitty piece of nut.

‘Oh fur–king bol–locks,’ said Jose Luis, before erupting into laughter that echoed through the trees around us. ‘Oh fur–king bol–locks’.

‘Fucking bollocks indeed,’ I laughed. ‘Oh well. Rachel, I made this for you.’

‘Thank you. I love it,’ she said.

‘It’s broken,’ I said.

‘Yeah, I know. I kind of heard you. It’s still very sweet. Thank you.’

In the early evening, we walked down to the Rio Tuichi and swam in the shallow water as the sun began to set. We walked back to camp where over dinner we had a chance to chat to Dave, Wendy and Aleah. They were a lovely family and it was inspiring to see what incredible life experiences Aleah was gaining at such an early age from her travels with her mum and dad.

We did another night walk, this time along the river bank. Without trees for Jose Luis to talk about, his focus turned to looking for animals. There were a surprising number of animals hanging out down by the river at night. We saw frogs of all colours and shapes (mostly frog–shaped), birds, a small caiman, spiders (both amigos and no amigos), insects and what Jose Luis described as ‘lazy birds’, which seemed to be a variety of non–flying bird.

We chatted to Jose Luis around the campfire later that night – with our limited Spanish and his limited English – about his background and how he ended up as a jungle guide. He told us how he grew up in one of the communities along the Rio Beni that we had passed on our boat ride up the river. The occasional journey down the river to Rurrenabaque was as far as his world extended as a child. But he knew the jungle better than anyone. It was his playground. It was his back garden.

As a child, tourists to the area were extremely rare. But as their numbers increased in the ‘90s, he started assisting with organised tours, providing some

much-needed local knowledge. It wasn't long before he was assigned his own groups, and he had been a lead guide ever since.

During our time in the jungle, Rachel and I had worked our way through our entire Spanish repertoire that we had learned during our 12 weeks of language lessons with Pillar. We asked Jose Luis many times if we could have the bill, we asked him repeatedly where the nearest toilet was, we asked him if he had any brothers or sisters, we ordered many paellas with a large glass of sangria, and we made enquiries about what time the next train to Madrid departed.

Jose Luis was always very good-natured and seemed to enjoy listening to us speak in Spanish, even if our conversation was a bit on the irrelevant side. Little did he realise that we hadn't yet used our secret weapon on him – the phrase book. As we sat around the fire that night, we passed around my *Penguin Spanish Phrase Book* (for anyone unfamiliar, Penguin is the publisher, not a particular dialect of Spanish spoken by penguins). We all took it in turns to read random Spanish sentences from the book to Jose Luis. 90% of the scenarios in the book would never be needed by a tourist anywhere, and when spoken in the middle of the Bolivian jungle by a group of non-Spanish-speaking gringos, it made for some top-quality campfire entertainment.

*Can you fix my heels? These stains won't come out. I want to hire a large car. Can the heating be turned down? Would you like to go to the cinema? I have broken my dentures.*

To begin with, Jose Luis looked a little bemused by the whole situation, but by the time we had all taken our turn, he was crying with laughter and pleading for us to go around the circle again.

*Where is the nearest tennis court? Can I hire skiing equipment? We want to take a coach tour round the sights. Is there a jazz club here? My nose keeps bleeding. What time is the floorshow?*

Rachel and I had grown incredibly fond of Jose Luis. The more time we spent with him, the more we liked him. He was understandably proud of his jungle and relished the enthusiasm our group showed for it.

After our final jungle breakfast the following morning, we did another three-hour walk looking at more trees; Jose Luis gave us a recap of some of his favourites. We then returned to camp for lunch, before saying our goodbyes and getting a boat back to Rurrenabaque. Jose Luis wasn't coming back with us, as he had another group arriving later that day. We had only been with him three days, but it was surprisingly emotional saying goodbye to Jose Luis and his jungle camp.

The boat stopped on the way back to give us the chance to look at a group of macaws (or, to use the correct collective noun, a pandemonium of parrots) in a tree on the riverbank. We took a couple of photos, but we weren't close enough to see them properly. We smiled at the young guy driving the boat and gave him a thumbs-up, which we meant as a polite way of saying *'hey, thanks for stopping, it was good to see the macaws. Now... vamos!'* He took it to mean, *'wow, these macaws are the best thing I have ever seen. Let's hang out here a while longer.'*

We feigned interest for a few more minutes, expecting him to start up the engine at any moment, but he didn't. The other passengers on the boat had all lost interest a long time ago and were deep in conversation with each other and not paying the macaws the slightest bit of interest. Rachel and I stopped looking at them too, and hoped our lack of interest would spur him into action. But still we sat there.

I then momentarily thought he was waiting all this time for us to get off the boat, and that we had actually been moored up near Rurrenabaque all this time. I pointed to me and the rest of the group, and then to the shore, trying to ask him if we should disembark. He then said something to me in Spanish and I mistakenly said *'sí'* before realising he must have said, *'would you like to hang out here for fucking ages longer?'* because he said *'bueno'* and then he lit a cigarette and we hung out there for fucking ages longer. We were watching that bloody pandemonium of parrots off in the distance for almost an hour.

We eventually arrived back in Rurre late afternoon (we could call it Rurre now, rather than Rurrenabaque, as it was our second visit), and checked back into Hostel El Porteño.

In the evening we ate pizza and drank cocktails at the Moskkito Bar, accompanied by the sound of blaring pop music, and reminisced about our time in the jungle. It hadn't been anything like what we had expected. We imagined we would be hacking our way through dense undergrowth with machetes and dodging wild animals, but in reality, we just followed Jose Luis around lots of paths through what often felt more like a normal woodland than a jungle. But we had had the best time. It had been so much more fun than we predicted, and it was a shock to be back in the hustle and bustle of Rurrenabaque, which three days earlier had felt like the sleepiest town in the world.

As we sat and sipped our margaritas, a toad the size of a football hopped into the bar and sat in the middle of the floor. A few locals wandered in and out and didn't seem to think it out of the ordinary in the slightest. It really was the biggest toad that we had ever seen. Possibly the biggest toad that had ever lived. It sat there staring at us suspiciously, before the barman eventually ushered it

outside with a broom. It was ironic that we saw our most impressive wild animal in a cocktail bar in Rurre, rather than on our three-day jungle tour.

We played pool for half an hour, but it didn't do anything to ease the post-jungle blues, so we walked back to our hostel and had an early night.

## TWENTY

I woke early the following day and explored the streets of Rurrenabaque while Rachel slept. The town is set out in a grid system, only a few blocks long and a few blocks wide. Most of the shops, restaurants and hotels are concentrated in one small area of the town, with the surrounding streets made up of predominantly single storey wooden houses. I was walking down one of these residential streets when I saw a strange vehicle coming towards me in the middle of the road. It was the size of a car, but gliding silently. There was a large sign attached to the roof emblazoned with what looked like the word *CAKE*. I was convinced I was hallucinating. But as it got closer, I realised it was real. The contraption was a four-wheeled bicycle – or quadracycle – driven by a man with a white beard and a panama hat. The sign did indeed say *CAKE* and the front of his quadracycle had been converted into a makeshift table-top, covered with half a dozen mouth-watering cakes.

He came to a stop in front of me.

‘Buenos dias,’ I said.

‘English?’ he asked.

‘Yes, was my accent that bad?’

‘No. I thought I’d save us the hassle of speaking to each other in bad Spanish.’

‘Thanks. Are you American?’

‘Floridian,’ he said.

‘Cool. How did a Floridian end up selling cake on a bicycle in the Bolivian jungle?’

‘I saw a gap in the market,’ he said.

We chatted for a while about life in Bolivia. Each day, the Rurrenabaque Cake Man baked half a dozen cakes and then cycled around the streets of Rurre, selling slices to both tourists and locals. He didn’t feel the need to expand his range, or branch out into other products. He didn’t even need a shop name or fancy branding. The simple hand-painted sign of *CAKE* was all that he required. I was very impressed, and slightly envious of his lifestyle.

I bought a slice of coffee and walnut cake and a slice of lemon drizzle and paid my money. As he gave me my change, he thrust a leaflet into my hand.

*THE DA VINCI CODE IS RIDICULOUS*, it said.

I went to take the leaflet from him, but he held on tightly to the other end of it.

‘The Da Vinci Code is ridiculous,’ he said, staring at me intently.

‘Yeah, it’s just a fictional novel,’ I said.

‘It doesn’t reflect the true values of Christianity,’ he said, finally releasing his grip on the piece of paper.

‘Ok, thanks. I look forward to reading it. Your leaflet, I mean. Not the Da Vinci code. I won’t be reading that. It’s ridiculous.’

I laughed. He didn’t. Instead, he handed me another leaflet.

This one had the headline, *HAVE YOU BEEN IMPLANTED WITH A GOVERNMENT MICROCHIP?*

‘Err...’

‘Well?’ he said. ‘Have you?’

‘Er... no. I don’t think so.’

‘How do you know? The government are trying to control us.’

‘Which government?’

‘The American government.’

‘But I’m British.’

‘And the British government.’

‘Ok, thanks for the warning.’

‘You might already have been chipped,’ he said.

‘I’ll go and get checked out.’

I stuffed his other leaflet into my pocket, took my cake, and headed briskly back towards the hostel. He cycled slowly behind me.

‘The path of true Christianity shall be found only by those who seek...’ he said.

*But what does cake have to do with all of this?* I thought.

When I got back to the hostel I was slightly reluctant to eat the cake in case it had been drugged. But I was so hungry and it looked so good.

‘So, why did this guy pick Rurrenabaque to come and spread all his conspiracy theories?’ said Rachel, after I told her about my encounter.

‘I don’t know. Maybe he knew he would have a captive audience, especially with the lure of the cake.’

‘It is damn good cake.’

We had completed one jungle tour, but had another three-day trip still to come. Next up was the pampas, exploring the animal rich wetlands of the Bolivian Amazon.

We had been warned about the mosquitos in the pampas, so went shopping

for some Amazonian strength repellent. Rachel bought a new long-sleeved shirt especially for the trip, and I bought a new sun hat as I had lost mine somewhere in the jungle amongst the lobos.

As we waited at our designated meeting spot, it became apparent that we were again the only two to have booked spots with our tour operator. We were teamed up with four Israelis from another group – three male and a female – who were all very friendly, very hairy (except the female), and very loud.

We had a bumpy and uncomfortable three-hour jeep ride – stopping briefly for lunch – until we reached a small tributary called the Rio Yacuma. From there we travelled by boat a further three hours up river, following a network of smaller channels that interlaced through the pampas.

It suddenly became clear where all the animals we had been expecting to see in the jungle were. They were all hanging out in the pampas. Everywhere we looked there was wildlife. Crocodiles, caiman, turtles, herons, storks and sloths occupied every tree, bush and patch of ground we passed along the riverbank. It was almost like there was not enough land to house all the animals.

We reached our camp by early evening. It consisted of a couple of large wooden dormitory style bedrooms, built a few metres from the top of the river bank. We had dinner and chatted to our Israeli companions. Well, they chatted, and we sat there and listened.

After dinner, Melvin, our young and hyperactive guide, took us out in the boat on a night tour. Melvin certainly looked the part as a jungle guide, with his camouflage combat trousers and a black string vest. He complemented this look with a pristine pink cotton shirt which he wore with the buttons undone to show off his string vest. It was quite the look.

Our expectations were set fairly low for the night tour, and we didn't imagine we would see much wildlife from the boat in the dark. But we were wrong. Every sweep of torchlight that we shone across the water revealed several sets of alligator and caiman eyes. They burned red and menacingly and we didn't want to keep the torch light on them too long for fear of angering them.

Melvin switched the motor off and let the boat glide slowly parallel to the shore. Mid-conversation, he rolled up the sleeves of his pink shirt, leaned over the side of the boat and plunged his arms into the oily blackness of the river. There was a frantic splashing and Melvin sat back down on his seat, holding a small caiman in his hands, one hand supporting the middle of the animal, the other holding its jaw shut.

Moments earlier it had been a threatening pair of red piercing eyes in the water. Now it was a defenceless animal in the firm grip of a human.

‘You want to touch?’ said Melvin.

*Not really, I thought. I want you to put it back. It looks terrified.*

*But how often would I get the chance to stroke a caiman?*

I reached out and touched it and it felt exactly like I expected it to. Sort of caimany.

‘Bueno. Now put it back, por favor,’ I said.

It was an incredible feeling to be floating through the pampas with a dazzling sky above us, and nothing but the sound of nature around us. Actually, that’s not true. The sky was indeed mesmerising, without any light pollution for hundreds of miles, but we heard no evidence of nature whatsoever as our fellow group members talked incessantly throughout the boat trip, at a volume that would have been audible from every one of those incredible stars above.

We returned to camp and Rachel and I sat on the small decking at the front of our hut to play cards. While on the river, we had noticed a few mosquitoes, but the movement of our boat had kept their numbers to a minimum. Now that we were back at camp, on the damp and muddy banks of the river, word had spread amongst the mosquito population that some tasty gringos had arrived. And it was feeding time.

I have always been particularly prone to insect bites, so after noticing their presence, I put on a long-sleeved t-shirt over my t-shirt and tucked my socks into my trousers. Rachel dealt the cards.

‘Ow, get off, you bastard,’ I said swiping one away as it sucked on my exposed hand. Another bit me on my other hand, so I retrieved an extra pair of socks from my rucksack and wore them as gloves, tucked over my t-shirt. My face was now the only exposed part of my body and I made regular swipes at that to keep the buggers away, much to the amusement of Rachel, who mosquitoes seemed to show no interest in.

Before coming to South America, we had received all of the necessary malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever and Saturday night fever vaccinations, but that didn’t make the mosquitoes any less of a pain in the arse. Quite literally.

‘Ahh, you little shit!’ I shouted, squashing one on my bum cheek.

‘What’s the matter? How did it hurt you by just landing on you?’ said Rachel.

‘It bit me!’

‘No it didn’t. You’re wearing clothes.’

‘Well it bloody well did bite me! Ouch, there was another one,’ I said, flapping wildly at a patch on my back that I couldn’t quite reach.



I watched another one land on my trousers, just above my knee. I swear it looked up at me and with its eyes said, *'watch this, motherfucker'*, before it plunged its snout, or whatever the hell a mosquito bites with, through the thick fabric of my trousers and into my leg.

'WATCH THIS, MOTHERFUCKER!' I said, as I brought my hand down on top of it with far more force than was necessary, splattering its blood-filled body all over my trousers, and causing considerably more pain to my leg than the bite itself.

'George, you are being a bit dramatic. They can't bite through clothing, surely? You're being paranoid.'

'These Amazonian mosquitos can bite through anything. Believe me. I doubt you would be safe in a suit of armour.' I lifted my shirt to reveal a series of bright red bite marks which I proudly showed to Rachel.

'Alright, I believe you.'

'Why don't they ever bite you?'

'I don't know.'

'I obviously taste way better than you,' I said.

'It's because you are just sweatier and smellier than me.'

'Thanks. You're the one that married me.'

'I only married you because I knew you'd make an amazing mosquito deterrent for me in times like this.'

'Well this sweaty smelly mosquito deterrent is going to bed now to take refuge under the mosquito net, so you'll be their only option out here.'

'Mosquito net? Pah! They will chew through that in no time. There will be nothing left of you by morning. Good night, my love.'

## TWENTY-ONE

Far from being nothing left of me, by morning I had inflated to twice my usual size. Every inch of me was swollen, itchy and sore. The mosquitoes had somehow found their way through the net, or chewed through it like Rachel had warned, and feasted on me all night long. I covered myself in cream and tried to block out the discomfort as much as possible.

Anaconda hunting isn't high up on the 'things to do' list of most people's holidays. But when you are in the Amazon, for some reason it seems like a normal thing to do.

Most of the tour operators offered '*anaconda hunting*' as part of their Pampas tour package. In fact, it seemed to be their main selling point, with photos of tourists draped with giant anacondas plastered all over the ticket offices. None of the groups were able to guarantee we would find an anaconda, but all said that there was a good chance of seeing one.

When choosing our pampas tour, as they all offered what appeared to be the same package, and me being of a frugal nature, I opted for the one that was \$3 cheaper than the others.

We walked down to meet Melvin at the riverside early the following morning to set off on our anaconda hunt. We looked around at the rest of the group and noticed that they were all wearing long wellies and waterproof trousers. Rachel and I were standing there in our sandals.

'Hola,' I said to Melvin. 'Where do we get our boots from?'

'Que?'

'Our boots. Wellington boots. Cuando do we get ours from?'

'You not have any?'

'No.'

'We not have boots for you.'

'What about these guys?' I said, pointing to the Israelis.

'They booked with other company. That company give boots for anaconda hunt.'

'But when we booked it, all the tour groups said that all footwear for the anaconda hunt was provided.'

'Not us. We cheaper. People in this group bring own boots.'

Rachel shot me an evil look.

'George, how much did you save by booking the cheaper tour?' she asked

me.

‘Er... \$3.’

‘You skimmed on \$3 for them not to provide wellies?’

‘All the tours looked identical. If I’d known they didn’t provide wellies I would of course have booked the more expensive tour.’

‘Well that’s good to know. Anyway, there is no way on earth that I am walking through a snake filled swamp in my sandals.’

‘I suppose that’s a fair enough demand,’ I said. ‘Melvin, do you have ANYTHING else we could wear? Por favor! We only have our sandals.’

‘Sandals is ok,’ he said. ‘Anacondas not bite.’

I looked at Rachel.

‘See, it’s ok. Anacondas don’t bite,’ I said. ‘It will be fine for us to wear sandals.’

I looked at Melvin, shrugged my shoulders and rolled my eyes to suggest that I knew my wife was being irrational, and why couldn’t she just lighten up and wade through a swamp and hunt for anacondas in her sandals. Secretly, I wanted to run home and cry.

‘Do you have anything we could borrow?’ I asked again. ‘I will pay the extra \$3.’

‘Wait here,’ said Melvin. ‘I look.’

In the meantime, Rachel and I put on our socks that we had brought with us, in anticipation of the knee-high waders Melvin was going to find for us.

‘We have this,’ he said, holding up a pair of retro white Puma trainers. The sole was flapping around on one of them, completely detached from the shoe, leaving a gaping hole in the toe.

‘Gracias. Is that all you have?’ I asked.

‘Si. No more.’

Rachel and I looked at each other.

‘It’s better than nothing, I guess,’ I said. ‘You wear the shoes.’

‘What? And you’ll just wear your sandals?’

‘It doesn’t look like I have much choice.’

‘What about this huge hole?’ said Rachel to Melvin. ‘Won’t animals get through that? Muy peligroso animals!’

‘No, no, no,’ he said. ‘Anacondas are very, very big. They not fit through hole. They wrap around your leg.’

He clocked the look of sheer terror on Rachel’s face.

‘It’s ok. I get tape. Fix hole,’ he said.

With Rachel's trainers sellotaped up, and me standing in my socks and sandals, we climbed aboard the boat and were ready to go. I was prepared to break the first rule of fashion (no socks with sandals) for the sake of an extra layer of protection, even if it was only a thin layer of cotton.

After a short boat journey, Melvin tied up the boat and we began the walk towards the swamps. As our group assembled by a cluster of trees on the edge of a vast area of marshland, Melvin began what we assumed would be an extensive safety briefing of what we should and shouldn't do during the hunt.

'Ok. We walk in water. If you stand on snake, you shout *MELVIN* and then stand still. Vamos!'

That was it.

'But... but...' I tried to ask, curious to know whether there was anything else in the swamp that was likely to hurt us. We had established from chatting to the Israelis on the walk that anacondas do have teeth and they can bite, but they are not venomous.

'But they still have teeth?' Rachel had asked.

'Oh yeah. Very sharp teeth,' one of them had said. 'But it's not the teeth you need to worry about. They will have crushed you to death before you die from blood loss.'

The group all laughed amongst themselves and Rachel looked as though she might pass out.

'I'm sure they are exaggerating,' I said, trying to block the images from my mind about the anacondas I had seen in films.

The murky water came midway up our shins as we waded out through the swamp. Other than the flies, there was no sign of animal life, and it seemed implausible that we would find an anaconda in this never-ending marshland.

In the distance, we could see another two tour groups, each of similar size to ours, walking along in two separate picket lines in different areas. We could also see that they were all part of the fancy \$3 more expensive groups, with their matching thigh-length waders glistening in the sun. The smug bastards.

Our group set off in similar fashion, shuffling slowly, no more than a couple of feet away from each other. It made sense to drag our feet gently through the water, rather than taking big steps. If I was an anaconda, minding my own business at the bottom of a bog, I think I would be less likely to crush someone to death if their foot casually brushed into me, rather than having my head aggressively trodden on.

I turned and noticed that Rachel was no longer next to me. She was

following directly behind, copying my footsteps precisely, to use me as a human shield against any muy peligroso animals. I pointed out that she had left an anaconda sized hole in our group's picket line, and she reluctantly resumed her position.

'How are your trainers?' I asked.

'Oh, wonderful. My feet feel totally dry and protected.'

'Really?'

'What do you think?' she said, shooting me another of those classic glares that reminded me of the \$3 I had saved by taking the cheaper tour. 'The sellotape fell off after about ten seconds. And how are your socks and sandals?'

'Absolutely wonderful. I really feel like I am at one with nature. All these losers wearing wellies are not fully embracing the experience.'

We looked around longingly at the rest of the group, all wearing substantial footwear.

'Yeah, they all look so jealous of us, with their comfy protected feet,' she smiled for the first time since we began the hunt.

We were searching for anacondas in the Bolivian jungle. Despite our less than ideal circumstances, it was impossible not to be slightly excited about the whole ludicrous situation.

The hunt was scheduled to last for three hours, and we had been warned there was a possibility that even after three hours, none of the groups would find anything. Melvin told us the other two groups had been hunting for nearly two hours already and had not yet found so much as a tadpole.

We had been walking for less than 20 minutes, when Rachel shrieked to the right of me.

'What is it?' I asked.

'I touched something big. And it moved.'

'Really?' I said, looking down at the motionless surface of the water in front of her.

'Yes, really. It was big and solid and moved when my foot touched it.'

'Are you sure it wasn't just a log? Or a rock?'

'Do logs or rocks move?'

'No... it's just... well...'

'You think I'm making it up?'

'Of course I don't think you're making it up. Maybe just being a little overly-jumpy.'

‘Something definitely moved.’

‘We should tell Melvin then.’

‘But what if it is a log or a rock?’ she said.

‘I thought you said it moved.’

‘It did.’

‘Right, then we should tell Melvin. MELVIN!’ I shouted. ‘Rachel thinks she’s found something.’

‘Stay still,’ he said. ‘I come.’

‘It’s probably just noth... OH MY GOD!... it moved again. It’s definitely alive.’

‘Stay still,’ Melvin said again, wading quickly towards us.

‘It was somewhere down there,’ said Rachel, pointing to her feet.

Melvin casually rolled up the sleeves of his pink shirt and dipped his bare arms into the brown water.

‘Ah, she got one!’ he said. ‘Big one.’

There was a brief thrashing and we caught a glimpse of the yellow patterned skin breaking the surface of the water as the snake tried to escape Melvin’s grip.

He slowly pulled both hands from the water to reveal an enormous anaconda. It was at least twelve feet long, and more than eight inches wide. It was stunning and graceful, yet at the same time powerful and petrifying. I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

There were gasps from the rest of the group as they all huddled around to get a closer look. Even Melvin, who presumably did this daily, looked childishly excited by Rachel’s find.

Melvin shouted out across the marshland to the other two tour groups that we had found one, and they all turned and began converging upon us.

‘Here, you found it, you hold it,’ said Melvin, untangling the snake from his arms and draping it around Rachel’s shoulders before she had a chance to protest. Rachel stood frozen with fear as it coiled itself around her arm.

By now, the other two groups had reached ours, and so about 25 people were assembled watching Rachel with her trophy. A barrage of questions fired in her direction in a variety of accents. *How did she find it? Did it try to eat her? Was she scared when she found it?* Rachel stood there too nervous to even speak in case it caused the anaconda to divert its attention to her neck instead.

I could see that the anaconda had begun to wrap itself even tighter around Rachel’s arm and there was a definite feeling of panic radiating from Rachel’s

stricken eyes.

‘Is it squeezing you tightly?’ I said.

She gave a hurried nod.

‘Melvin, I think it’s trying to crush her,’ I said, as Melvin had become distracted by one of the flirtatious girls from the other group.

‘Oh, lo siento. Sorry,’ he said, and it took him some considerable effort to unwrap the incredible snake from Rachel’s arm.

There was no need for the anaconda hunt to continue. We were unlikely to find another, and certainly not one as big. We spent another five minutes having the snake passed around the group, then Melvin released it back into the water and we watched it gracefully slither back under the surface. All three tour groups began the slog back towards their various camps, full of wonder about our morning’s excursion.

‘That was incredible,’ I said to Rachel. ‘Look at all these people here and you were the only one to find an anaconda.’

‘It must be the lucky Puma trainers,’ she said. ‘I’ve become quite attached to them. I might ask Melvin if I can keep them.’

‘See, it wasn’t so bad after all. And think of that \$3 we saved! We were only in there 20 minutes. It would’ve hardly been worth paying extra.’

She scowled at me to let me know that I was far from being let off the hook.

## TWENTY-TWO

With the anaconda tour far shorter than anticipated, we had a few hours free before lunch. Melvin suggested we should have a swim in the river. The Israelis all jumped about excitedly. I laughed at Melvin, assuming that he was joking, what with all the caiman we had seen, the anacondas, and the fact that we were going piranha fishing in the same stretch of river later that afternoon. Melvin didn't appear to be joking, though.

'What about the caiman?' I said.

'They not hurt you. They scared.'

'What about the very hungry ones?'

'Hmmm, maybe,' laughed Melvin. 'Swimmers no get bit by caiman here.' He paused. 'Well, not for long time.'

'What about piranhas?' I said.

'Piranhas don't eat you. Only in James Bond. They very small.'

'But if there are lots of them might they attack a person?'

'No. Only if you bleeding. Or if you in tight space.'

'What do you reckon?' I said to Rachel. 'Do you want to swim?'

'You've got to be kidding. I did the anaconda hunting in those stupid trainers, but there is no chance you will get me to swim in that river with piranhas and caiman. You can if you want. I'll come and watch.'

We all clambered into a boat and Melvin drove us a few hundred metres up the river where it was slightly wider, and the piranhas would presumably feel a little less confined, and therefore less munchy.

'Here good place to swim,' he said.

I caught a glimpse of something large breaking the surface of the water just next to the boat.

'Was that a caiman?' I asked.

'No. Pink dolphin,' said Melvin.

I looked again, and a flash of pink emerged from the water. And then another. There were at least three of them. We had heard stories about the legendary Amazon pink river dolphins, but weren't sure they actually existed and certainly didn't think we would get to see them. They were at least six-foot-long with a pointed snout – basically they were dolphins, but pink – and both beautiful and surreal.

'Dolphins mean it safe to swim,' said Melvin. 'Pink dolphin eat piranha.'



The Israelis didn't need any more persuading and had already ripped off their t-shirts and jumped over the side of the boat.

'Come on!' shouted Daniel, the most talkative of the group. 'It's amazing. When are you going to get another chance to swim with pink dolphins in the Amazon?'

I looked at Rachel who wore an expression that said it was an experience she was more than happy to live without. Daniel did have a point. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

'Our passports and our money are under the mattress in the bunkhouse,' I said to Rachel as I took off my t-shirt.

'That's not funny.'

'Sorry. I'm only joking. Maybe we should have bought a dried llama foetus after all. To ward off the piranhas and caiman.'

'That's not funny either.'

I climbed over the edge of the boat and swam quickly over to join the rest of the group. Their noisiness would surely be a deterrent to any predator. The water was warm and earthy, and the fear of what lay beneath the surface certainly made it a memorable experience. The occasional glimpse of pink in the water around us enabled me to tick the '*swimming with dolphins*' thing off my bucket list, even if a brown, piranha and caiman infested river in the Amazon is not the usual dream scenario.

'It's not piranha that hurt you,' said Melvin, once we were all safely back in the boat.

'What do you mean? I thought you said the caiman wouldn't bother us?'

'No. Not caiman.'

'Then what?'

'Candiru.'

'What is candiru?'

'Candiru a small fish.'

'What does it do?'

'It swim up inside your penis and get stuck. Then eat your penis from inside.'

'WHAT THE FUCK, MELVIN? ARE YOU SERIOUS?'

The Israelis all started laughing hysterically.

'Yeah, we were warned about those too,' said Daniel. 'But don't worry, they have to swim up a stream of urine to get into your penis, so they can only get up there if you take a piss.'

‘But I did take a piss!’ I shouted. ‘That’s the only reason I went swimming. I didn’t think I could hold it until we got back to camp.’

They all laughed even harder.

‘Oh. You should have held it, mate,’ said Daniel.

‘Why didn’t anyone warn me?’

Melvin found this hilarious too, as did Rachel, but I failed to see the funny side.

‘Why are you all laughing? How do you know about this fish, Melvin?’

‘Ray Mears,’ he said.

‘You’ve met Ray Mears? Has he been on one of your pampas tours?’

‘No, I see candiru on Ray Mears. On TV.’

‘RAY MEARS GOT HIS PENIS EATEN OFF FROM THE INSIDE BY A SMALL FISH ON TV?’

‘No!’ laughed Melvin. ‘We watch Ray Mears TV show. He talk about candiru. He very funny.’

‘I don’t think it’s supposed to be funny,’ I said.

‘He very funny.’

After lunch we went piranha fishing in the very same waters we had been swimming in. Melvin set up our fishing lines – which consisted of a hook attached to a piece of wire with some sardine flesh on the end – that we dangled into the water.

It wasn’t long before we started getting bites. For such a small fish, piranhas are disproportionally strong. We lifted them into the boat where they thrashed angrily around, still attached to the line.

The piranha is a deceptively beautiful fish from a distance. Its skin is a bright silver and orange that shimmers like a hologram. And then you look at its face and it’s the scariest motherfucker you have ever seen. Intense orange eyes that can see inside your soul and a mouth so fearsome you don’t want to look at it for too long. The teeth look like they have been drawn on by a child trying to design the ugliest monster they could imagine.

‘I can’t believe you swam with those this morning,’ said Rachel.

‘If we had done the piranha fishing before then I definitely wouldn’t have.’

Needless to say, once we had reeled in the piranha, none of us were too keen on removing the hooks from their mouths.

‘It just like normal fish,’ said Melvin.

‘Er, no it’s not, Melvin,’ said Daniel. ‘Normal fish don’t have massive big

fangs.'

We left the hook removal to Melvin.

Between us we caught half a bucket full of piranhas, which Melvin would be barbequing for our dinner. Lucky us.

## TWENTY-THREE

We were heading back to camp when someone spotted some capuchin monkeys in a bush on the riverbank. Melvin steered the boat towards them so we could get a closer look. He switched off the engine, but we were still drifting at a considerable speed towards the muddy bank. Most of us saw this coming so braced ourselves for impact. Rachel, who had been distracted by the monkeys, was not prepared, and as the boat hit the riverbank, she lost her balance and fell backwards off her seat and somehow slid arse first into the bucket of piranhas.

I watched it all happen from the next wooden bench. The look on Rachel's face is something that I will remember forever. She flailed around hysterically for a few seconds with her arms and legs in the air like an upturned turtle, as I clambered over the bench to try and help her. I reached out an arm and pulled her quickly to her feet, careful not to spill the contents of the bucket on the floor of the boat in the process.

'Holy shit! Are you ok?' I asked, trying so hard not to laugh.

'I don't know,' said Rachel, still clearly shaken, as she checked her bottom for any sign of teeth marks. 'I think so. Why the hell did he just crash the boat?'

'I don't think he did it on purpose.'

Melvin and the Israelis were all too engrossed in the monkeys and hadn't noticed Rachel's little incident with the piranhas.

'That's the scariest thing that has ever happened to me,' she said.

'Worse than the Mandango Trail?'

'Much worse!'

'It was incredible. I can't believe you just sat in a bucket of piranhas.'

'It's not as if I chose to sit there!' she snapped.

'I know, but it was genuinely one of the funniest things I have ever seen.'

'Funny? Thanks a lot. There was nothing funny about that at all. Why are you such an idiot?'

'Sorry, but you just sat in a bucket full of piranhas.'

'AND? Which part of that is funny?'

'The part where we have a bucket of some of the most notoriously dangerous animals in the world, and you somehow sat in it.'

I sensed that as the realisation was setting in that she hadn't been harmed, Rachel too was beginning to see the funny side.

'But they could have attacked me! I could have been killed or had some

severe injury.'

'Well, obviously it would not have been as funny if that happened.'

'Not AS funny? But still funny?'

'Well, no, not if you'd died or been seriously injured of course.'

'OK?' asked Melvin, sensing our little domestic dispute from the other end of the boat.

'Yes, we're fine thanks. Rachel just sat in the bucket of piranhas.'

'Haha, that very funny!' said Melvin.

'See!' I said. 'I told you it was funny.'

She gave a little smile.

'Look, I'm really glad they didn't eat you,' I said, putting my arm around her. 'Let's go and see these monkeys.'

A group of six or seven capuchin monkeys, each the size of a small cat, lurked tentatively in the bushes, their distinctive black and yellow fur clearly visible through the fauna. Melvin reached into a carrier bag under his seat and pulled out a bunch of bananas, and cut each one in half. This clearly wasn't a chance encounter, but a scheduled part of his tour. He handed us a couple of banana segments each, and then held out one of his own pieces at arm's length towards the monkeys.

Within seconds, one of the more confident monkeys emerged from its cover, climbed onto the edge of our boat and began confidently nibbling on Melvin's banana (grow up!). Melvin encouraged us all to do the same. Hold out our own, I mean, not nibble on Melvin's banana too.

Half a dozen other monkeys emerged from the undergrowth. They were all soon clambering onto the edge of the boat and feasting off the banana segments that we held in our hands. We all squealed with childish glee.

But then a feeling of guilt overcame me.

'Is this right?' I said quietly to Rachel. 'Should we be doing this?'

'You mean feeding the monkeys?'

'Yeah.'

'I know. It does feel a bit wrong,' she said.

'It feels very wrong.'

All of the jungle and pampas tour groups claimed to be proudly supporting eco-tourism, but feeding wild animals by hand didn't seem to fit in with this ethos. It was difficult for us to criticise Melvin; he was only doing it because it was popular with the tourists. And why wouldn't it be? Although we knew it

probably wasn't environmentally or ecologically correct, we couldn't escape the excitement that there were monkeys on our boat in the middle of the Amazon rainforest and that they were eating bananas from our hands.

'Isn't it just the Amazonian equivalent of feeding the ducks at the park back in England?' said Rachel. 'I bet the locals have been feeding these monkeys bananas for hundreds of years.'

'Yeah, that's probably true I suppose. I think it's more serious than that, though. Isn't it supposed to be a possible danger for the monkeys? If they get more confident around humans then they might be more susceptible to getting hunted by other predators, or even other humans. Or they might become more aggressive towards humans if they expect to be fed.'

'That makes sense. But why doesn't it cause those same problems with ducks?'

'It does! There are some seriously angry ducks at the park. Just you wait, when we get home to Northampton, it will be completely taken over by ducks.'

Once back at camp, Melvin barbecued the piranha for us to sample for dinner. There was very little meat on them. They were mostly bone, teeth and evilness.

Later that evening while Rachel and I were playing cards in one of the single beds in the dormitory, under the limited protection of our mosquito net, we heard the sound of cheering close to our hut. We stuck our heads outside to see what was going on and saw another tour group from the neighbouring hut gathered at the top of the river bank.

One of their guides was at the front of the group, grinning away as he held on tightly to a rope. The assembled crowd were egging him on with whatever it was he was doing. We followed our gaze along the rope to a huge chunk of raw meat – the skinned carcass of some dead animal. And there, at the water's edge, its eyes just breaking the surface, was a giant caiman. It lurked just a metre from the meat and only four or five metres from the tourists. The guide gave the rope a flick so that the meat moved ever so slightly. The motionless caiman kept its eyes transfixed on the bait before launching an attack. With an almighty surge, it powered its huge body – all four metres of it – towards the carcass, jaws stretched wide. The guide, who had obviously done this before, pulled the meat away just in time as the caiman's huge jaws clamped shut onto thin air. The bait now lay another metre further up the bank from the caiman. The crowd went absolutely mental.

'What the hell is he doing?' said Rachel.

‘Trying to lure a huge dangerous animal up the riverbank into a tourist camp, by the look of things.’

‘And we thought feeding the monkeys bananas overstepped the boundary of eco-tourism. This is another level.’

Neither of us wanted to be involved with this spectacle any longer so went back into our cabin and closed the door, propping a chair against it, just in case.

We lay in bed listening as the whooping and cheering got louder and louder. We half expected it to turn to shrieks as the guide or one of the tourists was gobbled up, but by the sound of things the caiman eventually got tired of the antics too and retreated to the river. Until next time, when it might venture further up the riverbank into camp in search of food. Or revenge.

## TWENTY-FOUR

Melvin woke us at 5.30am the following morning for our sunrise river cruise. Despite the early start, the Israelis were in full voice and shouted incessantly to each other like the world's most irritating alarm clock. We arrived at the designated spot to watch the sunrise, but a thick mist lingered above the river and we could only just make out the other end of the small boat we were in. Melvin did his best to describe how the sunrise would have looked had we been able to see. This was not too difficult to imagine, having seen a sunrise before.

We returned to camp for breakfast, packed our bags, and then got back on the boat that would take us all the way down the river back to the port. The early start had taken its toll on the rest of our group and they thankfully dozed for most of the way back. We stopped to watch a group of capybaras, rolling in the mud very close to the riverbank (there doesn't seem to be a collective noun for the capybara. Let's go with a 'calamity'). Resembling guinea pigs the size of large dogs, capybaras are perhaps the strangest looking animals I have ever seen. They reminded me of the *Rodents of Unusual Size* in the film *The Princess Bride*. They definitely do exist. We tried not to look at the calamity of capybaras too enthusiastically in case the guy driving the boat lit a cigarette and made us watch them for fucking ages longer. After a quick lunch at the port, we were collected by a jeep to begin the long and bumpy drive back to Rurre. We checked back into El Porteño for the third time, and after a few compulsory post-tour cocktails in the Moskkito Bar, we had an early night.

I went out in search of breakfast the following morning and found myself lured, seemingly against my will, to the adjacent street where I met the CAKE man again. He had cast some sort of spell over me and knew I would return.

'Have you thought about what I told you?' he said.

'Er... yeah,'

'And? What do you think?'

'About which bit?'

'All of it. The governmental microchipping, the Da Vinci Code... everything.'

'Well, yes, you make some great points,' I said.

'I speak the truth. That's why you came back.'

'I came back because you make even better cake.'

'The cake lasts but a moment. The issues I address last forever,' he said,



placing another leaflet into my hand after I paid for another two slices of cake.

*IS YOUR PET A GOVERNMENT SPY?* the headline said.

I stuffed it into my pocket.

‘Make sure you read it,’ he said.

‘I will. Thanks for the cake.’

After back-to-back jungle and pampas trips, it was enjoyable to spend a lazy day around Rurrenabaque, reading, writing our journals and emailing home from the town’s local internet café with dialup internet so slow it would have almost been quicker to hand deliver our messages back to the UK.

Rachel wasn’t feeling too well. I did momentarily wonder if she had been drugged by the cake man, and became concerned that we were both soon going to drift off into a deep sleep and wake up holed up in some remote jungle cabin, being quoted passages from the Da Vinci Code until we relented to the Cake Man’s conspiracy theories. However, I felt absolutely fine.

We went to a café called Tacura for lunch, but Rachel couldn’t face eating anything. I ordered one chicken burrito with my best Spanish, and even held up one finger to illustrate that we only wanted one. The lady brought two burritos and placed one in front of Rachel. I did the noble thing and ate both, because that’s the kind of thoughtful guy I am.

Having had an afternoon nap, Rachel was happy to come and sit in the Moskkito Bar in the evening, which seemed to be hosting a ‘*gringo freaks of the Amazon*’ themed night, because we spoke to an eclectic bunch of travellers. We met Kurt, an American who was driving across Bolivia on a quad bike, for no other reason than he thought it would be “rad”. We met Steve, an English guy who was so stoned that when I asked him how long he had been in Rurrenabaque, he showed genuine surprise and concern that he was even in Bolivia. He thought he was still in Argentina. We met another English guy called Tom who didn’t stop talking all evening about a band he was in back home called *The Flying Tokyo Flagship Band*. They were on the verge of greatness and everyone in the world would soon know their name. He was so enthusiastic and passionate about his band that I believed every word he said. So much so, that I wrote *The Flying Tokyo Flagship Band* on my hand so that I could remember that moment. I recently googled *The Flying Tokyo Flagship Band* to find out how things turned out. Google returned zero results. I am sure they are still on the verge of greatness.

Dave, Wendy and their daughter Aleah, whom we had met on our jungle tour, were also in the Moskkito Bar. We played pool and drank cocktails until

past midnight, comparing stories from our different pampas trips. They had been unsuccessful with their anaconda hunting, and were very envious of Rachel's find. They were not so envious of our footwear selection.

Rachel claimed to be feeling a little better as she danced clumsily around the pool table. I suggested we should perhaps quit while we were ahead and go back to the hostel.

'Ok, after this song finisheseses,' she slurred, as a familiar bassline pounded through the speakers.

'*TOMMY USED TO WORK ON THE DOCKS...*' she screamed, punching the air not even remotely in time to the music.

'Rachel, you haven't had anything to eat today. I think we should get you to bed.'

'I'm fine. Really. I feel sooooo much better. *SHE SAYS, WE'VE GOTTA HOLD ON TO WHAT WE'VE GOT...*'

It was no use trying to compete with Bon Jovi. I was never going to win. I downed the rest of my margarita and went to the bar to get another round in, raising both arms in the air on the way to join in the chorus.

'*WOAH... WE'RE HALFWAY THERE...*'

The following morning, Rachel was feeling a whole different kind of sick to the previous day as she was hit with the mother of all hangovers. She insisted that her illness had worsened, but I reminded her of the multiple cocktails she had consumed, which she had insisted at the time were medicinal.

We went for breakfast at Tacura where we had eaten lunch the day before. Rachel couldn't face the thought of any food, so I ordered one plate of eggs using my best Spanish and held up one finger to show I only wanted one. The lady brought two plates of eggs and placed one in front of Rachel. I did the noble thing and ate both, because that's the kind of thoughtful guy I am.

It was time to bid farewell to Rurrenabaque, a town we had grown very fond of during our few days there. A town that had embraced the relatively recent influx of tourists to its remote location in the middle of the Amazon jungle with style. Whether that was by charging tourists to take their mail to the post office whenever they next happened to be going to La Paz, or laundering clothes while doing their own daily wash, or giving diners two of everything even if they only ordered one, to conducting unforgettable tours into one of the world's most incredible wildernesses, to selling slices of cake and preaching extreme Christianity from a quadracycle. It was a town full of character and characters.

Taking off on the grass runway from Rurrenabaque airport was nowhere near as scary as we anticipated. Rachel's pounding headache provided her with ample distraction to stop her mind from worrying about such trivialities as crashing to certain death in the mountains.

We were back in La Paz by lunchtime and greeted by bright blue sky and cold crisp air. Having grown used to the humidity of the jungle, the thin air of La Paz was a shock to the system and didn't help Rachel's hangover, I mean, illness. I bought two vegetable pitas from a street seller, but Rachel couldn't face hers, so I did the noble thing.

We checked back into Happy Days hostel – half expecting Portuguese David Blaine to be there waiting for us – and Rachel went for an afternoon nap to try and recuperate.

Our ridiculously big shopping bag still had some space in it, so I went out in search of tat. I returned to the hostel later with two alpaca fur cushions.

'What the hell are those?' said Rachel.

'Alpaca fur cushions.'

'They are revolting,' she laughed. 'Who did you buy those for?'

'The cats.'

'The cats? You bought presents for our cats?'

'Yes. We've bought presents for nearly everyone else. And there was some space left in the bag.'

'Are you sure those cushions aren't actually made OF cat? They look remarkably similar.'

'No, of course they are not made of cat!' I said, suddenly questioning my purchase. 'The lady who sold me them said they were genuine alpaca fur.'

'Oh well, in that case they must be.'

Our cats – Father Dougal and Batfink – hissed at the cushions when they first saw them and never ventured anywhere near them again.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Our dinner of coke and popcorn the night before had worked its wonders on Rachel and she was feeling considerably better by morning. Which was a relief, because we had a full day of Bolivian public transport to contend with. After a taxi journey from our hostel to the bus station, we boarded a bus to Oruro where we got a train to Uyuni for the start of our tour of the world-famous salt flats – the Salar de Uyuni.

The train journey from Oruro to Uyuni was magnificent. The views across the dry and inhospitable altiplano were superb, but it was the speed, or lack of, that was the train's biggest appeal. It moved at little more than walking pace the entire way. It felt like it was in the process of either slowing down at a station, or about to hook-up onto a faster engine for the entire journey. A journey that lasted almost nine hours. Still, the train was state-of-the-art, by South American standards, and even had a small television showing films.

As we chugged along at a snail's pace, Rachel flicked through the photos on my camera of our trip so far.

'These are really good,' she said.

'Thanks. They are ok. I'm still getting to grips with how the camera works.'

'You should seriously think about doing photography as a career.'

'Yeah right.'

'Honestly, you should. You've talked about it in the past.'

I had been interested in photography for many years. I bought my first film SLR before going to university and spent all of my free time there in the darkroom, developing my own photos. I then took a module in digital photography, just as the medium was taking off. Our tutor bought the class some state-of-the-art digital cameras that boasted an industry-leading 1 megapixel.

Just before flying to South America, I bought my first digital SLR. It was silver and shiny, and I was worried it would attract a lot of attention on our travels, so I covered every part of it in black tape, to make it look a little less bling, and a little more like an old film SLR.

Rachel had obviously been thinking about my future, but I had become so immersed in our holiday that I had not had time to think about what would happen when we got back home. I didn't have a job to go back to, which was both exciting and terrifying.

I knew that I didn't need a job that would earn me lots of money. I didn't

need a job that would require me to travel the world. I didn't need a company car or private healthcare. I just needed something that would stimulate me, allow me a little creative input, and stop me from wishing away the days between weekends.

While working as a Data Information Officer, I had photographed the wedding of some friends of mine and enjoyed the experience enormously. I had toyed with the idea of pursuing it as a career, but knew I had a very long way to go before I could possibly start charging people for my services. I was prepared to learn, though, and put in the hard work until I was good enough.

'You could contact some local photographers when we get home and try and get some work experience,' said Rachel.

'Aren't I a bit old for work experience?'

'Of course not.'

'But I would have to work for free. That's not going to help pay the bills.'

'I'm starting my new job when we get home, so you won't have to work full time.'

'I know, but...'

'But what? You were right,' she said. 'We'll survive. Everything is going to work out ok.'

We arrived in the town of Uyuni at 10.00 pm. It was minus 20°C. Uyuni is the most popular gateway town for the Salar de Uyuni, so accommodation was in plentiful supply. We found a cheap room at Residencial Sucre – which surely translates as '*the sugar house*', and sounds a lot more like a brothel than a hostel. I did wonder at the time why they asked me if I wanted the room for a night or just an hour.

I woke with a jolt early the next morning, bursting for the toilet. I had woken several times in the night needing to go, but the air on my face had been so cold I couldn't bring myself to get out of bed. There was no holding it in any longer. I dashed from the room wearing only a pair of boxer shorts, grabbing a towel so that I could shower at the same time. During the same trip, I mean, not at the same time as going to the toilet. The bathroom was about ten metres from our room, but accessed via the outside and the cold hit me the second I opened our bedroom door. My chest compressed instantly, and combined with the altitude, it was a real effort to force in a lungful of air. I set foot on the tarmac and my bare foot instantly stuck to the layer of frost that had formed on the ground. I prised it away, springing from toe to toe until I had covered the distance to the bathroom.

The water in the shower was only marginally above freezing so my shower was over very quickly. Without any clothes to change into, I was forced to dance back to our bedroom in just my small towel. I burst through the door and startled Rachel who, until my entrance, had been fast asleep.

‘What’s wrong?’ she said, clocking the look of pain on my face.

I tried to speak but my body had contracted so much I couldn't form any words.

‘F-f-f-f-f....’ I stammered.

‘Are you ok? What happened?’

‘F–f–f–f...’

‘George, you’re scaring me. What is it?’

'F-f-f-f...ucking f-f-f-f-freezing.'

‘Why the hell would you go outside dressed like that?’

'B-b-b-b-bursting for a w-w-w-wee.'

It was another half an hour and the application of every item of clothing that I owned – including the thermal long johns with the hole in the crotch – before I was able to stop my teeth chattering and begin to feel the blood flowing once again to my extremities.

Spanning over 4,000 square miles, and sitting at 3,656 meters above sea level, the Salar de Uyuni is the world's largest salt flat. It was formed thousands of years ago after the evaporation of several prehistoric lakes. After a breakfast of Ritz Crackers (other snack crackers are available), we set off to book our Salar de Uyuni tour.

There were variations of trip durations on offer, ranging from one to four days, and there was an option of either returning to Uyuni or ending the tour at the Chilean border. After looking at the map, I suggested it would be potentially easier for us to do a three-day tour and get back to Peru via Chile, rather than retracing our steps through Bolivia on the world's slowest train.

All of the three-day tours looked identical, but after experiencing the wrath of Rachel when I had saved us \$3 on our welly-free pampas trip, I decided to splash out and not book us onto the cheapest tour. I booked the second cheapest instead. It cost \$3 more.

We settled on a tour group called Salar Paula, paid our money, and were told to be back in a couple of hours for departure. In the meantime, we left our bags at the office and went to explore the nearby Cementerio de Trenes – the train graveyard.

Uyuni was once an important transport hub in Bolivia, but for decades the

rusty carcasses of many trains have rested on the edge of the salt flat, a couple of miles outside Uyuni. Rachel and I were the only people there, and it was a slightly haunting experience to see these huge and once so powerful contraptions gradually eroded away by the salt and the rain.

The Cementerio de Trenes is now basically an adult's adventure playground, and we spent half an hour climbing the rusty ladders, walking along the train roofs and jumping from carriage to carriage like we were Indiana Jones, making the most of the experience knowing we were unlikely to ever be back there again.

An hour later, after meeting up with the rest of our tour group, we set off on our three-day tour. Our first stop was the Cementerio de Trenes, where we spent an hour climbing the rusty ladders, walking along the train roofs and jumping from carriage to carriage like we were Indiana Jones, making the most of the experience knowing we were unlikely to ever be back there again.

## TWENTY-SIX

There were six of us in our tour group: a British guy named Jos who was in South America partly on holiday and partly to research an academic paper he was writing on something I didn't understand. Jos was travelling with his Italian girlfriend Fran. We were also joined by an Italian couple who were recently married and touring South America for their honeymoon. Our tour guide, a tiny man named Valerio, didn't speak any English, but he was very cheerful and eager. The seven of us squashed into the back of a Toyota Landcruiser with our bags strapped to the roof, including our bulging bag containing ponchos, charangoes, and the alpaca cushions for our cats, and set off across the Salar de Uyuni.

The wheels of the Landcruiser crunched on the crisp salt crust as Valerio drove us out onto the Salar. It wasn't long before the town of Uyuni was a speck on the horizon behind us, and the immense salt flats stretched endlessly to the horizon in every direction. The bright blue cloudless sky contrasted perfectly with the blinding white of the salt. We had all been told to wear sunglasses throughout the tour because of the risk of snow blindness, or salt blindness. It was a surreal and otherworldly experience, and with no reference points to go by, it was impossible to gauge any perspective of how far away things were.

A small building appeared on the horizon, and despite Valerio driving at a fair speed, it took a considerable amount of time for us to reach it. The building was the Hotel de Sal Luna Salada – the salt hotel. We were given a tour of the hotel, which is built entirely from blocks of salt. The beds are made from salt, the chairs are made from salt, the tables are made from salt, the duvets are made from salt. Actually, cotton probably. I don't know. Definitely not salt.

'Hotel de Sal Luna Salada?' whispered Rachel. 'Does that translate as the hotel made of salt, moon and salad?'

'Ha, I think salad is 'ensalada'. Although I would love to see a hotel made entirely of salad. There's definitely a gap in the market for that.'

'Will our accommodation tonight be a bit like this place? I love it.'

'Er... no. I think tonight's accommodation will be a little more, well, rustic.'

'What do you mean by rustic?'

'Well, shit, I guess.'

'I bet for \$3 more we would have been staying at the salt hotel, rather than just looking at it.'

I didn't bother responding to her and just rolled my eyes.



After a quick picnic lunch outside the hotel, prepared by Valerio, we drove for another hour to the Isla De Pescado – the island of the fish. Valerio told us, via a translation from Jos, that it got its name because from a distance the island resembles a fish. It doesn't.

As we got closer to the island, we realised Isla De Pescado would be more appropriately named Isla De Cactus. It is a bizarre prominent rocky outcrop in the middle of an enormous expanse of bright white nothingness, where hundreds of giant cacti thrive. It is a setting that would look improbable even in a cartoon.

We had an hour to walk the network of rocky paths that criss-cross the island. The centrepiece is Cactu Gigante, which, based on the assumption that these plants grow 1cm per year, is 1203 years old (there was a signpost with this information on it. I didn't measure it). The views from the top of the island were phenomenal, and took our appreciation of the Salar de Uyuni to a whole new level.

What I remember most about Isla De Pescado, though, is that it is where I left my beloved purple fleece that Rachel had affectionately named 'The Big Aubergine'. By mid-afternoon, the sun was blazing down on us and I removed The Big Aubergine as we walked amongst the cacti. It is there, visible, in many of the photos that we took. But it wasn't with me later in the day when the temperature plummeted well below freezing. The temperature range in the Salar is one of the more extremes on earth. It can reach up to 20°C during the day in August and drop to minus 20°C the same night. It was a really stupid place for me to lose The Big Aubergine – the only jumper I had brought with me to South America.

Back in the truck, Valerio left the salt and headed onto the dry and dusty land that borders the Salar. The terrain became hillier as patches of vegetation became visible on the slightly more fertile land.

We arrived in the village of San Juan by early evening where we would be staying the night. We were greeted by about a dozen young children who were obviously used to the influx of tour groups to their small village, but still excited by our presence... and presents. Rachel and I had brought a few little things with us to South America to give to children – pencils, stickers, balloons – which they were very grateful for. We all had a game of football on a gravel pitch as the sun set, before being called in for dinner.

Our accommodation was a bunkhouse, where a lovely Bolivian lady cooked us a stew that looked revolting and tasted worse. But we were cold and hungry, it was hot and plentiful, and she was delightful, so we wolfed it all down.

Rachel and I were both suffering dodgy stomachs in the morning. I don't want to imply it was the lady's stew, but it was definitely the lady's stew. The entire group were all feeling ropey, but we piled into the Landcruiser and carried on regardless.

From San Juan, Valerio drove us up through rocky crags to Laguna Hedionda – the stinking lake – which more than lived up to its name. Despite the saline water and sulphurous aroma, hundreds of pink and white flamingos have made the lake their home.

We continued upwards and into the Siloli Desert. The bright white salt of the previous day had given way to sand and stone, as we drove to several more lagunas, each with water a different colour to the last.

We passed many impressive rock formations. The most famous and photographed of all is the Arbol de Piedra – the stone tree. This cleverly named rock looks like a tree, but is made of stone. Standing at seven metres high, the wind and sand have eroded the lower part over centuries, forming a trunk that makes the whole thing look precariously balanced.

Valerio was very respectful of this natural monument and, despite being the only tour group there, he wouldn't allow us to get too close to it, for fear that too much tourist activity would speed up the erosion process.

Each time we stopped, Valerio seemed keen for us not to linger too long and ushered us back into the Landcruiser almost as soon as we had set foot on the ground. The previous day he had seemed so chilled and relaxed that it was strange to see him now so agitated and concerned about the time. Jos asked him what the rush was, and Valerio looked very animated and pointed off towards the horizon and then mimed something that looked like a steering wheel, all while explaining to Jos in frantic Spanish about why he was rushing.

'He says that he is rushing so that we get the best accommodation tonight,' said Jos.

'What does he mean? I thought the accommodation is all pre-booked,' I said.

'Last night's accommodation was reserved for us, but tonight there are many different places we could stay, and Valerio says it's first come first served for the best places.'

'How bad can it be?' I asked.

Jos translated this to Valerio and his response didn't need translating. Valerio's face told us that those in the slower groups would be sleeping somewhere really shit.

‘Right, let’s get going,’ said Rachel climbing quickly into the backseat of the Landcruiser.

‘Vamos!’ we all said in unison.

Valerio laughed, turned the ignition, and then floored it.

After another hour at full–speed, we stopped for lunch at some other peculiar rocks and ate pasta and meatballs that our host the previous night had prepared for us.

‘Do you think we should eat this after how we all felt this morning after last night’s meal?’ asked Jos.

I surveyed the desolate landscape.

‘I don’t think there is a lot of choice.’

All the while during the meal, Valerio had his eyes fixed on the horizon behind us. There aren’t roads, as such, across the Salar, but well–marked tracks that the different tour groups tend to stick to.

After about five minutes, Valerio’s eyes widened. We turned to see a tiny cloud of dust in the distance. It was another tour group.

‘Vamos!’ he shouted.

We stuffed our faces full of as many meatballs as we could. Valerio threw all the bowls into a large plastic box and we were back on the move before we even had a chance to swallow.

I patted Rachel excitedly on the knee.

‘Valerio is awesome,’ I said. ‘We wouldn’t have got this level of service on the \$3 cheaper tour!’

Valerio didn’t ease off the accelerator for the next few hours. All six members of our group had booked our three–day excursion to see the wonders of the Salar. Now it was all about getting to our accommodation as soon as possible, and it added a new sense of drama and excitement to our journey.

Having slept badly the previous night, most of us began to doze in the back of the Landcruiser. We were woken after an hour by Valerio who was shouting at us excitedly.

‘Mira! Mira!’ he said, pointing erratically up the road ahead. ‘Look! Look!’

We all sat up, bleary eyed, and stared into the distance, where a flock of about half a dozen birds were congregating on the track.

‘Muy raro,’ said Valerio excitedly.

‘Those birds are very rare,’ translated Jos.

‘MUY raro,’ Valerio emphasised.

‘They are VERY rare,’ said Jos.

‘Thanks Jos, we got that,’ I said.

We watched them intently as we got closer, Valerio not taking his foot off the accelerator. The birds looked a little like guinea fowl; short and fat and happier on the ground than in the air. We continued to get nearer to them, and still Valerio showed no signs of stopping. He was presumably just going to drive around them instead.

‘MUY MUY raro,’ said Valerio.

‘Very, very rare,’ said Jos.

‘Yes, Jos, we know!’ we all shouted.

As we got within a few metres of them, it was clear that if Valerio was going to avoid the birds, he was going to have to take evasive action, so we gripped the seats in front of us to brace ourselves for the dramatic swerve.

Only Valerio didn’t swerve. He just ploughed on straight through them. I looked behind to see the limp bodies of three of the birds bouncing down the track in a cloud of feathers.

I looked at Rachel whose eyes were wider than I thought physically possible, and her hand was clamped tightly over her face to prevent herself screaming. A faint little gasp was still audible from her mouth. The Italian couple, who rarely said anything, muttered something to each other and looked completely dumbfounded. Jos, who was sat in the passenger seat next to Valerio, just stared at him with a look of disbelief. Only Fran, Jos’s fiery Italian girlfriend, knew how to vocalise what we were all feeling. She unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned into the gap between the driver and passenger seats and began a long and angry rant at Valerio in both Italian and English. Valerio didn’t understand what she was saying, but definitely got the gist of it. We all joined in and vocalised our disgust, and then Jos added some token Spanish vitriol for good measure.

Valerio looked as shocked and surprised as the rest of us, but his shock and surprise was about what he could have possibly done wrong.

Fran continued to berate him for several minutes.

‘Ellos son solo pájaros,’ whimpered Valerio.

‘What did he say?’ yelled Fran.

‘He said they were only birds,’ said Jos.

‘Only birds!’ she shouted. ‘So that makes it ok to mindlessly run them over? And they weren’t just any old birds, were they? They were rare birds.’

‘MUY raro birds,’ I added. ‘MUY MUY raro birds.’

‘Stop it, George,’ said Rachel.

It was a strange situation. My initial anger towards Valerio turned to surprise and then soon to sympathy. It was just a clash of cultures and beliefs. Valerio hadn't sped up or deliberately tried to run them over. They just happened to be in his way, and, to him, they were only birds – albeit very very rare birds – and they weren't worth slowing down or swerving for.

'That was unbelievable,' whispered Rachel, when she had finally recovered from the shock.

'Imagine what would have happened in the \$3 cheaper tours,' I said. 'They would be running over alpacas, climbing all over the stone tree and chopping down cacti left, right and centre.'

'Please stop talking.'

'Sorry. At least we are still on track for the best accommodation.'

'That's true,' smiled Rachel.

Valerio was subdued for the rest of the afternoon. He knew he had upset us and we all felt a little guilty for being so critical of his differing set of values. We stopped again late afternoon at the incredible Laguna Colorada – the Red Lagoon. This lake is famous for its blood-red water, coloured by a cocktail of sediment and algae. Vast numbers of Andean flamingo, and the world's largest population of the smaller James's flamingo, feed off these algae giving them their garish pink colour. We sat in silence and watched the birds strut their stuff across the laguna.

Valerio's encounter with the rare birds had been almost forgotten by the time we pulled up outside the night's accommodation and realised we were the first tour group to arrive. We gave Valerio a big pat on the back to show him he had redeemed himself, and he smiled for the first time in hours.

The luxury accommodation that we had bagged was a large breezeblock-built room with about a dozen single beds. It was basic but functional.

We spent the evening playing cards with the rest of our group, plus a few stragglers from another tour group who shared our dormitory. Several other groups pulled up at various intervals later in the day. The other tour guides and Valerio would have a slanging match with each other across the dusty parking area, and the irate tour group leader would wave his arms around erratically after realising all the decent accommodation was taken, before wheel-spinning away to find somewhere else to stay. We sat there smugly eating our spaghetti.

As soon as the sun went down the temperature plummeted. Valerio told us that we would need to wear everything we owned, and he provided plenty of blankets to help keep us warm. These blankets were a welcome sight, as I took a

moment to think about The Big Aubergine, all alone amongst the cacti on the Isla De Pescado. Individual beds seemed to be a big waste of body heat, so Rachel and I shared a single bed. As did Jos and Fran. With each other, I mean, not the four of us. The newly married Italian couple decided that sharing a bed in a public room was not acceptable, so remained in their separate beds. And to think that Italians are known as being one of the most passionate nationalities in the world.

Rachel and I have very different body temperatures. I sleep in no more than a pair of boxer shorts all year round. The summer duvet is plenty warm enough for me in the winter, and I would leave the window open a little all year if I was allowed. Rachel, on the other hand, favours pyjamas, thick winter duvet, socks, several blankets piled onto her side of the bed, with her thick dressing gown also draped over the top for extra warmth. The arrangement works fine at home in a double bed, with her side piled to within a few feet of the ceiling and mine several feet below.

Sharing a single bed in the sub-zero Bolivian Andes proved more problematic. After putting on everything we owned, including our ponchos, alpaca hats and gloves, Rachel then took all the blankets from my neighbouring single bed, plus a handful of others from a crate Valerio had brought in case we needed them, and piled them onto the bed. We even used the alpaca/cat fur cushions.

The weight of the bedding alone made it difficult to breathe, and I did think we would more likely die from suffocation than hypothermia. We could feel the chilly air brushing gently on our faces, but the rest of our bodies were delightfully cosy. We drifted off to sleep with mixed emotions: delight that Valerio proved his worth as the fastest driver on the Salar, but sadness and guilt for the casualties along the way.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

At 2am I woke with a start. My clothes were damp and sticky (no, not like that!). My forehead was beaded with sweat and my head was pulsating under my woolly hat. After the initial relief wore off that I hadn't wet myself or 'wet' myself, I then thought I had developed some serious fever in the night. Rachel stirred slightly as I slipped out from under the duvet. As the cool air swept over me, I felt instant relief. I had been slowly cooking to death throughout the night. I removed my hat, gloves, poncho, t-shirts, long johns and socks, and climbed back under the weight of the blankets in just my boxer shorts and slept like a baby until morning.

We were woken by a sprightly Valerio at 5am for our sunrise excursion. It took me a while to wake Rachel. She seemed to have slipped into some sort of oven-roast coma.

'How could you sleep with all those clothes on?' I asked.

'I think that's the best night's sleep I've ever had,' she said. 'I have never felt so toasty. I'm going to start sleeping with my hat, gloves, poncho and clothes on when we get home, too.'

'Nice to see the honeymoon period of our marriage is well and truly over,' I said.

The Sol de Mañana (morning sun) is a geothermal field in the south west of Bolivia, where we headed to watch the sunrise. The area covers several square kilometres and is dotted with boiling mud pools and fumaroles that spouted steam and gases from the volcanic activity below. The sky was clouded over and, yet again, we didn't see the sunrise. But it was still a magical experience, and I don't think it is possible to get up for the sunrise and regret it, even if the sun is hidden. You feel like you are winning the day before it has even started.

It was a further 30-minute drive for a dip in some hot springs before breakfast. The hot springs we had visited in Baños and in Chivay during our Colca Canyon tour were both basically over-heated, overcrowded public swimming pools. Nothing about them felt natural, apart from the dirty brown colour. The hot springs that we visited on the final morning of our Salar de Uyuni tour were far more memorable.

It was a natural spring, miles from anywhere at about 5,000m above sea level, that had been shaped and excavated to allow for people to bath in it, but still maintaining its authentic feel. It wasn't even 8am and the thin air was still bitterly cold, which made the thermal waters of the hot springs even more

welcoming. We were the first group to arrive and had the entire pool to ourselves for a while, before it slowly filled up with more gringos.

It was a fun atmosphere as tourists of many different nationalities compared stories of the Salar's magic while we bathed. It was also the first time any of us would have had a wash in three days, but we tried not to think about that too much. It was all fun and games until a big ginger Welshman, wearing absolutely nothing to hide his big ginger bollocks, ran and dive-bombed into the pool right next to us, and suddenly all we could think about was how none of us had washed in three days.

We visited one final lagoon – Laguna Verde – where I was disappointed not to see any green flamingos, before Valerio dropped Rachel and me at the Chilean border. We said goodbye to the rest of the group who were about to begin their 400km journey back to Uyuni, before going their separate ways. Rachel and I were heading up through Chile, back into Peru and then onto Cusco for the final leg of our trip.

We had another farcical border crossing, walking backwards and forwards getting various exit and entry stamps, having my passport photo laughed at multiple times by both Bolivian and Chilean officials, before boarding a bus to the pretty town of San Pedro de Atacama.

We had only intended to visit Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia on our trip, and felt a little dirty (we were) as we roamed the streets of San Pedro de Atacama while we waited for our bus to the city of Calama. It felt like we were being unfaithful to our other countries, and without wishing any disrespect to Chile, we wanted to get back into Peru as soon as possible.

On arriving in Calama, where we would get our connection to Arica on the Peruvian border, we discovered that there were no spaces on any buses to Arica that day. I tried in my broken Spanish to explain to the woman in the ticket office that there must surely be a way. In South America, there was always a way.

‘No more seats,’ she said.

‘We don’t mind standing,’

‘No standing. Not possible.’

‘Can we sit on the dashboard?’

‘Que?’ she said

‘Is there a milk truck we can catch instead?’

The lady just stared at me.



‘You know. A truck that delivers the milk. Trucko de leche, maybe? We could ride on the back. Help sell the chickens. The pollos.’

She continued to stare at me.

‘George, let’s leave it,’ said Rachel. ‘I don’t think it’s quite the same here.’

We bought tickets for a bus that left late the following night, giving us 36 hours in a city we hadn’t planned to stop in.

Before La Paz, killing time without anywhere to stay had not been a problem. We just wandered aimlessly with our meagre possessions on our backs. Since La Paz, and our senseless shopping benders, I now had a stupidly big bag, full to the brim with ridiculous souvenirs to haul with me everywhere we went. Buying that additional bag no longer felt like such a clever idea.

Chile was a world away from the parts of Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador we had travelled through. The previous day we had woken in a small village consisting of a handful of basic structures, where the children were delighted to receive some pencils and had been enraptured by a balloon. Calama, by comparison, was a bustling metropolis. A city that would not have looked out of place in the United States. The cars were bigger and better than anything we had seen in South America, the houses smarter, people walked the streets in suits, we saw more shirts and ties in the space of ten minutes than we had combined since arriving in Quito all those weeks ago. It was difficult to take it all in. La Paz had felt crazy and chaotic, but in a very different way. Being suddenly dumped back into a developed city brought with it a whole new type of anxiety. Car horns sounded, we could hear several police and ambulance sirens in the distance, and bright illuminated signs to high street stores we recognised flashed all around us. Standing there with our backpacks and our giant red checked PVC bag, in a city not unlike those we knew back home, we felt very much like we didn’t belong.

As we were walking the streets, looking for somewhere to stay, we turned to see a small dog following us. It was a brown and scraggy-looking mongrel, with big sorry eyes pleading for us to love it. Or, more likely, feed it.

We had seen hundreds of other stray dogs during our time in South America. But they had all looked and acted like strays, and either been very skittish and nervous of us, or yappy and prone to nipping. This one looked different.

‘George, look at the cutesy wootsey lickle doggy woggy,’ said Rachel in an affected baby voice.

‘It’s very sweet but don’t encourage it. It’s just a stray.’

‘How can such a cutesy wootsey lickle doggy woggy not belong to someone? Can we keep it?’

‘Er... what do you think?’

‘Yes?’

‘Of course we can’t keep it. We are backpacking in South America.’

‘We’ve only got a week left. And we can ship it home. Pleeese.’

‘No! Firstly, we don’t know for sure that it doesn’t belong to someone, and secondly, I doubt it’s even possible to ship a stray dog from Chile to the UK. And if it is, then it would probably have to stay in quarantine for months and months. It looks fairly happy here in Calamari or whatever the name of this place is.’

‘Calama. Even I know that. Look at him! I think he likes us.’

‘That’s because you keep looking at it and talking to it in a really silly voice. Don’t make eye contact.’

‘I can’t help it.’

We walked several more blocks, changing direction at random, trying to lose the dog, but it stayed closely behind us, not taking its eyes off Rachel. I did wonder if it was perhaps the reincarnation of Portuguese David Blaine.

We approached a large shopping mall and decided to go in, assuming the dog would not want to follow us, and would latch on to someone else instead. Not literally. It didn’t seem in the least bit vicious. The automated doors slid open and we stoically continued onwards, fearing eye contact would only encourage it.

Rachel was the first to look back after we were deep inside the mall.

‘Oh look, the lickle cutesy wootsey doggy woggy is still here. He’s followed us. He wants to come shopping too.’

‘That lickle cutesy wootsey doggy woggy is not coming shopping with us! We are not even going shopping.’

‘Then why are we inside a shopping centre?’

‘To try and get rid of the dog!’

We continued walking and the dog kept following. I was trying my best to ignore it, Rachel wasn’t trying very hard at all. A security guard patrolling the mall approached us at speed from the other side of the plaza. He shouted something at us, pointing angrily at the dog, which might possibly have been him saying ‘*welcome to our mall! I hope you and your cutesy wootsey lickle doggy woggy have a pleasant visit,*’ but I think was perhaps something a little less friendly.

‘No mi perro,’ I said, pointing to the dog and shrugging my shoulders. ‘It’s not my dog.’

‘No?’ he said.

‘No.’

He interpreted this as me giving him permission to kick the dog. It was only a very gentle nudge with his foot, but he then swung his foot back for a harder go. Rachel and I both shouted ‘NO’ at the same time and the security guard stopped mid swing.

‘We will take him outside,’ I said, pointing to the door.

‘Si. Bueno.’

We ushered the dog to follow us, and it duly obliged, thinking we were finally welcoming it into our family. It scampered along, its eyes now lit up with the prospect of being loved for perhaps the first time in its life.

After a few failed attempts, we eventually got it to wait on the other side of the door, as we re-entered the mall. Looking back, we could see its excited face, tongue hanging out, and a look of expectation that we would only be gone for a moment and would surely return to it very soon to love it for the rest of its life.

We never returned.

Surrounded by all of the opulence in the Calama shopping mall, we realised we didn’t want any of it. Overpriced designer clothes and jewellery felt at odds with what we had experienced of South America so far. We would have preferred a lady sat on a pile of oranges, or a stall selling dried llama foetuses any day. Or even a preacher on a quadracycle selling cake.

We walked straight through the mall without entering a single shop, and exited at the far end so that we would not be detected by our dog. Look at me, all these years later, and I’m still referring to it as ‘our dog’. I don’t think either of us have ever fully recovered. It’s probably still sitting by that shopping mall in Calama waiting for us to return.

We checked into a nearby hostel, bought a couple of oversized beers, a big piece of cheese, and a box of crackers, and sat in our room, reluctant to be a part of the developed world outside.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

By morning, this reluctance had turned to mild excitement. I sat and watched two back-to-back Premier League football matches on a TV in our bedroom, and then we went and ate lunch at a fancy Chinese restaurant (when in Chile...). We walked through the mall again, from the opposite end to where we left the dog, this time perusing a few of the shops and feeling a little more at home. Without our rucksacks, we no longer felt like vagabonds. Rachel and I both bought a pair of jeans each, as it was the first time in South America that we had seen clothing that matched fashions from this millennium.

To then complete our immersion back into big city life, we spent the afternoon watching TWO films at the cinema, back to back. A little after 8 pm, we retrieved our bags from the hostel, and headed to the bus station where we boarded a night bus to Arica close to the Peruvian border in northern Chile.

So as not to get too used to the modern world, and to ease ourselves back into the traveller lifestyle, we bought a couple of dubious looking ‘Doggies’ hot dogs from a little trader at the bus station.

‘I wonder what ever happened to that cutesy wootsey lickle doggy woggy?’ I said to Rachel, as I took a bite of my hot dog.

‘You’re sick. I can’t eat this now. You have it.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘Oldest trick in the book.’

We had taken several night buses in South America, and had accumulated a total of about ten minutes sleep combined. Our night bus across Chile was the best of the lot. The seats were comfortable, we didn’t have anyone sitting on our laps, and we slept solidly for most of the journey. It was almost as enjoyable as a milk truck.

We arrived in Arica, well rested, at 6am. We had been warned the border crossing back into Peru could be a little complicated when negotiating it by foot, and extremely time-consuming by bus. We had been advised to pay for a taxi instead, so handed our passports and a wad of dollars to a driver named Isaac and trusted him to work his magic.

The crossing was seamless and worth every cent. We didn’t even have to get out of the taxi. Isaac did all the talking, presented our documents and then drove us to the bus station in the town of Tacna on the Peruvian side of the border. He didn’t even laugh at my passport photo, so we tipped him generously.

I don't include Chile on the list of countries I have visited. I don't have a list, but if I did, Chile would not be on it. We were there for less than 48 hours, and a good chunk of that time was spent on buses. The rest was spent in a shopping mall, cinema and walking 'our dog'. We will definitely go back one day, so that I can officially add Chile to my list. If I had one.

Despite the comfort and luxury of our overnight bus trip, and the ease of our taxi journey across the border, we almost missed the sense of adventure and chaos we had felt on boarding every other bit of public transport in South America. Sitting on dashboards next to windscreens with bullet holes in, standing in milk trucks, having other passengers sitting on our laps, and suitcases falling off the roof, was part of what made travelling in South America so much fun.

This nostalgia for proper South American travel lasted only minutes. The connecting bus we caught from Tacna to Puno across Peru was one of the worst we have ever experienced. It was 12 hours on rough, winding roads. The bus had a blow out – thankfully on one of the few stretches of straight road, rather than one of the many precipitous mountain passes – which took a while to fix. We were then stopped by police who searched the entire bus, passengers, and all of our luggage. Then to top it all off, the lady sitting directly in front of us, picked nits from her son's hair for the entire journey. The one redeeming feature of the experience was a delicious lomo saltado (beef stir-fry) that we ate during one of the few rest stops along the way.

The buses we took during our time in South America varied in their state of crapness. But all – except the bus we got from Calama to Arica in Chile – were immeasurably crap. Our buses frequently broke down. In the UK, if this happens, the bus driver phones for assistance and the passengers sit and wait for a replacement to arrive. In South America, the bus driver and his co-driver disappear beneath the bus armed with some wire, duct tape and a wooden stick and will almost always have the bus up and running again within minutes. All buses in South America are essentially held together with wire and duct tape.

White crosses dotted the roadside wherever we went, signifying where fatalities had occurred following a crash or a vehicle disappearing over the edge of the cliff. Catholicism is the dominant religion in South America, and our drivers would often do the sign of the cross each time we passed one of these white crosses. But they were everywhere, so our drivers spent most of the time with one hand on the wheel and the other praying to God to keep them safe, ironically as they were driving one handed around a blind bend with a precipitous drop to one side. I'm sure God would be looking down from above

in despair saying, ‘Gracias, amigos, I appreciate all the love, but keep both hands on the wheel, por favor.’

We arrived in Puno late in the evening, after a long and tedious day’s travelling and found a hostel near to the station. Just before bed, I decided to check my email at the hostel’s lone computer. There was a message from my mum. The subject was *SAD NEWS*.

It had been over a week since we had checked our email. We had no phone signal in Bolivia or Chile and had been completely uncontactable. *Had my mum been trying to get in touch with me all this time? What was this sad news that she was about to impart?*

‘Everything ok?’ asked Rachel.

‘I don’t know. I’m a bit nervous about opening this email. It says *SAD NEWS*.’

‘Hopefully it’s nothing serious. You’d better open it.’

I clicked the email and it took an age for the dialup internet to load the text. It was short and to the point.

*Hi Dord,*

*Sad news. The next series of ER will apparently be the last. I thought you would want to know. I hope you are having a wonderful time in the Salar de Uyuni. Looking forward to hearing all about it.*

*Love, Mum xx*

‘What is it?’ said Rachel, as I shook my head in disbelief.

‘Un–be–lievable. Her ‘*sad*’ news is that *ER* is ending.’

‘*ER* the TV show?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, that is sad news. I like that show.’

‘I know, so do I. But I thought someone had died or something!’

‘Ha, well at least they haven’t.’

I replied to the email, politely asking Mum never to title an email ‘*SAD NEWS*’ again unless she had some genuinely sad news to report.

We only had time for a very quick stroll around Puno the following morning before catching an early bus to Cusco. Leaving the shores of Lake Titicaca, the bus traversed the altiplano with sweeping vistas all the way to Cusco. A lunch of perfectly ripe avocados squashed into a freshly baked roll made for a

surprisingly enjoyable journey.

Leaving our Salar de Uyuni tour at the Chilean border was intended as a shortcut, but it had taken us three days to get across Chile and Peru to Cusco. I was finding it increasingly hard to justify to Rachel that I had made the right decision, and when we bumped into someone we recognised from the hot springs on our Salar tour (not the ginger-bollocked Welshman), and found that they had been back in Cusco for over 24 hours, my reasoning didn't seem so concrete.

'Maybe they just flew back from the Salar,' I said.

'I don't think that's even possible,' said Rachel.

'Well, if we had managed to get on one of those earlier buses in Calamari we would have been here 36 hours earlier.'

'I suppose. And it was Calama, not calamari.'

'But, if we had got the earlier bus, we would never have met our dog.'

'Oh god, please stop mentioning our dog. I'm trying not to think about it.'

## TWENTY-NINE

Cusco is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the whole of South America. The city is an eclectic mix of colonial Spanish architecture, built on and around its Inca ruins. Cusco sits at the head of what is known as 'The Sacred Valley of the Incas, with the famous Inca citadel of Machu Picchu at the far end. Machu Picchu is Peru's most popular tourist attraction; the ancient Inca ruins are recognisable the world over. We had left this highlight to the end of our trip.

It was 3 pm when we arrived in Cusco. We got a taxi from the bus station to the weirdly named Hostal Royal Frankenstein, decked out with kitsch wallpaper, palm trees and murals of Frankenstein's monster. It's what the Incas would have wanted. The hostel was the most energetic and backpacker-friendly we had stayed in; the air filled with excited chatter from people about to start the Inca Trail or those just back from Machu Picchu. Hostal Royal Frankenstein even provided complimentary hair straighteners, much to Rachel's delight.

Machu Picchu sits high above the small town of Aguas Calientes, about 50 miles northwest of Cusco. Aguas Calientes is inaccessible by road and can only be reached by train (and then a bus ride or walk up the mountain to Machu Picchu). Or it can act as the finishing point of an organised multi-day hike following the Inca Trail. Inca Trail expeditions range from two to five days, with varying routes and distances. Rachel and I had hoped to end our time in South America by hiking the Inca Trail. But midway through our trip, we realised that for us to do the expedition, we would have to sacrifice one of our other trips because of time constraints. We decided that they were all too important to us and we would instead visit Machu Picchu by train, and save hiking the Inca Trail for another time.

With only a few days left before our flight back to the UK from Lima, it was essential that we bought our train tickets to Aguas Calientes to make sure we got to visit what promised to be one of the most memorable places of our time in South America. As soon as we had dumped our bags in the hostel, we set off to the ticket office to book our seats.

The ticket office had already closed for the day.

'Don't worry,' I said to Rachel, 'I'll make sure I'm here first thing tomorrow morning to get us tickets.'

In the meantime, we booked ourselves onto a day's Sacred Valley tour for the following morning. The Sacred Valley – or the Urubamba Valley – includes lots of archaeological Inca sites that are impressive, but nowhere near as



impressive as Machu Picchu.

The streets of Cusco were more touristy than anything we had seen in South America. But not in a bad way. It is a stunning city with beautiful cobbled streets and winding narrow passageways, and the mass of tourists and shops selling alpaca everything gave the city a real buzz. We had been made to feel extremely welcome almost everywhere we went in South America, but there was no doubt we always stood out as gringos. In Cusco, we blended in with the hundreds of other backpackers who roamed the streets, and it was nice to feel strangely invisible.

Despite the frequent upset stomachs, we had eaten well in South America, and mostly enjoyed the food. We often didn't have much choice of where or what to eat, as the towns and villages we had been staying in were so small. In Cusco, every other building was a restaurant, each with an amiable waiter or waitress standing outside, trying their hardest to entice tourists off the street. With so many places to choose from, it was overwhelming trying to make our decision.

'Where do you want to eat?' I asked Rachel.

'I don't mind. They all look good.'

'This place looks popular,' I said, looking at a brightly coloured building with tables crammed full of people both inside and out, all looking like they were having the time of their lives. A smiling waiter approached.

'English?' he said.

'Si,' we said.

'Hungry?' he said.

'Si,' I said. 'Hungry mundo.'

'Hungry in Spanish is hambriento,' he laughed.

'That's what I said!'

'Come with me.'

We followed him towards the bustling restaurant. *This is going to be so great*, we thought. We caught glimpses of the plates of food people were tucking into and it all looked incredible. We skirted in-between a couple of tables, but instead of going through the front door, the waiter went through a side door that led up some stairs adjacent to the restaurant.

'Wait, I thought we were eating down there.'

'It's full down there. We have more tables up here,' he said.

'Ok, but it's the same restaurant is it?'

'Same food, yes,' he said.

Upstairs there was a large room full of tables laid out for dinner. All were empty apart from one other couple sat at the far end of the room. They looked far from happy, and compared to the atmosphere down on street level, it was like walking into a funeral parlour. We sat down and ordered a couple of beers.

‘Is this the same restaurant?’ Rachel asked me after the waiter had left the room.

‘No, I think we’ve been scammed. Oh well, he said the food is exactly the same.’

The food wasn’t the same. I don’t know what it was, but it was one of the worst meals we had ever eaten. To make matters worse, our table by the window looked down directly onto the restaurant below, as the joyful people tucked into their plates of glorious food.

Our waiter was annoyingly delightful throughout, and it made it very difficult to resent him for luring us into this shithole. It was good to support a struggling business, even if the chef was incompetent. Or so we kept telling ourselves.

‘Maybe one day everyone will be flocking upstairs, and the tables below will be deserted,’ I said. ‘And we’ll be able to tell people we knew this place before it was famous.’

‘And before the food was edible?’ said Rachel.

I left the hostel early the following morning and went to try again to buy train tickets to the small town of Aguas Calientes for our Machu Picchu trip. I was there before opening time, but the queue already stretched around the block. I reluctantly joined the end. As the minutes ticked by, and the queue only moved ever so slightly, it became clear that I wasn’t going to reach the front of the queue before our Sacred Valley tour departed. I returned to the hostel to break the news to Rachel.

‘So, does that mean we won’t get to see Machu Picchu at all?’ she said.

‘We still have one more chance tomorrow to get tickets.’

‘And if we can’t get tickets tomorrow?’

‘Then I don’t think we will be able to visit Machu Picchu this time.’

‘I really hope we can. I’ve been looking forward to it since we booked our flights to South America.’

‘Me too. But it’s been there for hundreds of years and will be there for hundreds more. I will go to the ticket office even earlier tomorrow and will try my hardest to get tickets for a train later tomorrow.’

The Sacred Valley tour was brilliant, and we knew it would at least be part

compensation if we didn't get to see the main attraction. During the day we visited the impressive archaeological sites of Pisac, Ollantaytambo and Chinchero.

This was the first organised day tour we had been on during our time in South America. All the other tours had been multi-day trips, and they seemed to attract similar types of people to Rachel and me – albeit from many different countries. All were relatively young, fit and healthy, and prepared to rough it a little. The Sacred Valley tour attracted a completely different demographic. There were a few other backpackers on our bus, but most of the group were much older, larger and less mobile tourists, visiting Cusco as part of an organised tour of Peru. At each stop on the Sacred Valley tour, Rachel and I would explore the ruins far and wide, climbing to the highest accessible points, seeing as much of the sites as we could within our allocated time. The majority of the group would disembark at each stop and then not explore much further than the gift shop. Some decided not to even get off the bus. They were all a really lovely bunch, though, and their enthusiasm and eagerness to hear all about our trip – where we had been and what we had seen – made us feel like genuine explorers.

'You swam with piranhas?'

'You hiked the Mandango Trail?'

'You hunted for anacondas in a swamp?' said one of them, his jaw almost touching the floor.

'Yes,' said Rachel. 'And George did it wearing a pair of sandals.'

'I did wear a pair of socks with the sandals, much to my shame,' I said, before noticing he was sporting a socks and sandals combo. 'Not that there is ANYTHING wrong with that.'

We returned to Cusco at 7 pm and spent some time chatting to other backpackers at Hostel Royal Frankenstein. There was more talk about Machu Picchu and how it had been the best thing they had seen in their lives. There we were, days away from flying back to England, and we still didn't have any train tickets.

For dinner, we ignored all the enthusiastic waiters in the street, and headed straight for a restaurant called Chez Maggie which was extremely popular. While not at all Peruvian, the nachos and fajitas were probably the best thing we had eaten in weeks.

I woke before dawn the next day and walked to the ticket office long before it opened. There were two other Brits and an American already there. They were

trying to buy train tickets for the following day. I was hoping for tickets for the same day. I didn't hold out much hope.

The queue slowly built up behind me and when the ticket office eventually opened, those in front of me successfully bought their tickets and offered me a '*good luck*' as they passed.

'Dos boletos for today, por favor,' I said to the man in the ticket office.

He looked at his computer screen and shook his head, sucking air through his teeth, which is the international noise for '*I don't think so, sonny Jim. That's a big ask.*'

'Por favoooooooooor' I said, unsure whether that works the same way as '*Pleeeeeeease.*'

His eyes scanned the screen as he scrolled down with his mouse. 'No... no... no... ah... si! Tengo dos boletos para el Vistadome.'

'No entiendo,' I said. 'I don't understand.'

'I have two tickets available today. But it's for the Vistadome from Ollantaytambo to Aguas Calientes. They are the last two tickets.'

'Fantástico! Qué es the Vistadome?'

'It's a train with glass ceiling. It's more expensive. And your seats – they not together.'

'I'll take them! Muchas gracias, señor! Muchas muchas gracias.'

By the look of surprise on the man's face, I don't think he had ever seen someone so excited to buy train tickets. I skipped back to the hostel (yes, genuinely), where Rachel had just woken up.

'How did you get on?' she asked hopefully.

I put on an Oscar-winning performance of dejection.

'No luck,' I said. 'There were no tickets available for the train today.'

'Oh well. Well done for trying. You were right, Machu Picchu will still be there next time.'

'Yeah, there were no tickets for the train.... But I managed to get the last two tickets.... for the VISTADOME!'

'The Vistadome? What's that?'

'It's basically a train. But with a glass ceiling.'

'Wait? So we are going to Machu Picchu?'

'We sure are!' I said, waving the tickets. 'We get the train to Aguas Calientes this afternoon, and we go to Machu Picchu tomorrow.'

'Oh my god, that's amazing!' she said, throwing her arms around me.

I didn't think it was possible for someone to be more excited about train

tickets than me, but Rachel had managed it.

‘There is one problem, though. We are sitting at opposite ends of the carriage,’ I said.

‘Even better!’ she said. ‘Only joking. Thank you. You did brilliantly.’

# THIRTY

We bought our Machu Picchu entry tickets from an agency in Cusco to save on queueing on the day, and then caught a bus to Urumbamba and a colectivo to Ollantaytambo. We had a look around the market, ate a fruit salad each (both of us were so ecstatic about the train that we decided to live dangerously), and boarded the Vistadome to Aguas Calientes.

The Vistadome was indeed fantástico. Not so much because of the somewhat exaggerated glass ceiling (it just had a small extra row of windows on the edge of the roof), but it was a truly spectacular train journey, with wonderful scenery to either side and above. And we were on our way to Machu Picchu, baby!

Aguas Calientes is an odd little town. It has the feeling of being hastily assembled to cope with a sudden influx of tourists. Which is exactly what it was. Once a tiny rural farming settlement, it became an important transportation hub after the rediscovery and excavation of Machu Picchu by American historian Hiram Bingham in 1911.

We found a room in a hostel that had been so hastily built that it had opened for business long before it was finished. And once functioning as a hostel, it appeared they decided not to bother finishing it. Our room was on the second floor, and the staircase continued upwards after our bedroom. But there was no third floor, and the steps disappeared suddenly over the side of the building.

Aguas Calientes – meaning ‘hot waters’ – is named after the town’s hot springs, so we took an obligatory trip to the slightly smelly communal baths at the top of the town. It was just before closing time and there were only a couple of other people there. We sat in silence, looking at the steep sides of the densely vegetated valley, knowing that somewhere up above us, sat Machu Picchu. We couldn’t stop grinning.

We had an early start in the morning, so after a quick beer and a menu turístico at one of the many restaurants on the main street, we returned to our half-built hostel, ensuring that we stopped when we got to the second floor.

There are buses available to transport tourists from Aguas Calientes up the steep winding road to the entrance of Machu Picchu. We had been told by a couple of different people, and our guide book, that these buses didn’t operate early enough to get to the site in time for sunrise. If we wanted to see the sunrise, our only option was to walk up the mountain.

We woke at 4am and stuffed our few belongings into our rucksack. We had left most of our things – including our ridiculously big bag of presents – at the hostel in Cusco until our return. We had with us a change of underwear, our waterproofs, a camera, and that was about all.

Between us we had one lousy headtorch that was so weak it barely illuminated the ground in front of us. We started slowly up the road, following the switchbacks as they weaved up the hillside. We could see a couple of torch beams on the road below us, but the night was quiet and still.

When we were about halfway up, after 40 minutes of walking, we heard the rumble of an engine below us. We turned to see the sweeping headlights of a vehicle coming up the mountain. The noise grew louder and as it turned the next corner and steamed past us, we realised it was a bus.

‘What?’ said Rachel. ‘I thought buses don’t go up the mountain this early?’

‘Maybe that was just a bus for the staff or something?’

We carried on walking. A few minutes later, another bus passed us. This one was definitely not a staff bus, judging by the faces of the teenagers with their noses squashed against the back windscreen pointing and laughing at us. One little shit with a FC Barcelona baseball cap even raised his middle finger at us. Over the next half an hour, several more buses passed us.

We eventually reached the entrance gate, puffing and sweating, to be greeted by a throng of tourists from the coaches forming a chaotic queue in the dark at the entry booth.

‘So we got up especially early, walked for an hour and a half up a mountain, and we still have to queue behind this lot?’ said Rachel, looking distinctly pissed off.

‘It’s ok, follow me,’ I said, spotting a separate entrance gate for people with pre-booked tickets that was about to open. There was no queue.

As we walked past the crowd of people waiting to buy their tickets, I caught sight of the FC Barcelona baseball cap kid, looking at me disbelievingly. I raised my middle finger at him and smiled, then we flashed our pre-booked tickets at the entrance booth clerk, and we were two of the day’s first visitors through the gates into Machu Picchu.

# THIRTY-ONE

The famous view of Machu Picchu is from the Caretaker's Hut, a short walk up some steep steps to the left. Those finishing the Inca Trail tend to get their first glimpse of the site from the Sungate, an hour's hike further on. After already walking up the mountain before sunrise, the Caretaker's Hut was more than adequate for us.

As we walked slowly up to the viewpoint, still in partial darkness, we forced ourselves not to look back over our shoulders at Machu Picchu behind us. We wanted to see it for the first time from above. There were two others at the Caretaker's Hut when we arrived, and we greeted them with a whispered 'hola'. It felt too early and serene to be talking at normal volume to one another.

'Ready?' I said to Rachel, holding her hand.

'Ready!' she said, her face bursting with excitement.

We slowly turned around to look down over the ancient Inca ruins. Only they weren't there. All we could see was a thick blanket of cloud sitting snugly on top of them in the half-light.

'Oh,' I said.

'Oh,' said Rachel.

'Apparently it usually clears around sunrise,' said one of the other tourists in an American accent. Presumably because he was American, rather than someone fond of doing accents at 6.30am.

Rising above the clouds, we could see the magnificent peak of Huayna Picchu, overlooking Machu Picchu from the other end of the site. A group of llamas wandered about by the viewing area. I think they were more likely there scavenging for food from tourists, rather than to watch the sunrise, but I might be wrong.

Right on cue at 7am, we caught our first glimpse of the sun hitting the top of Huayna Picchu, as it rose over the mountains behind us. Several other tourists had arrived at the Caretaker's Hut by this point, but they were all hushed and respectful, not wanting to ruin the moment.

The famous ruins still sat in partial cloud, but as predicted, as the air warmed up, the clouds slowly dissipated, revealing Machu Picchu in all its glory. There was a collective gasp from everyone around us.

Despite the hundreds of times I had seen this view on postcards, posters, guidebooks and travel programs, I wasn't prepared for its beauty. Straddled



elegantly on the dip between two mountains, surrounded by thick green forest on all sides below, it fully deserves its place as one of the 'new' seven wonders of the world.

Machu Picchu was built in the mid-15th-century, but looks a lot older. It is widely believed to have been a royal estate, but the Incas didn't have a written language so there are no records to verify this. There is no doubt, however, that the Incas had a fine eye for a good location. Sitting at 2,430m, Machu Picchu is not as high up as it seems. It is confusingly 1,000 meters lower than Cusco. However, because of its prominence and sheer magnificence, it feels like you are standing on top of the world.

Huayna Picchu, the peak that sits above Machu Picchu, can also be climbed for views of the site from the other end. Due to the dangerous and occasionally precipitous nature of the trail, numbers are restricted to a few hundred per day. Walkers had to check in at a hut and register their details before setting off, and check out on the way back, to ensure all those who began the trip returned home.

After sitting for a while with the llamas, marveling at the view from the Caretaker's Hut, Rachel and I set off to the other end of the site to climb Huayna Picchu, before all of the day's tickets had been allocated.

The first part of the climb takes about half an hour as it ascends steeply, but the path is adequately wide and there are not too many ominous drops. Ten minutes from the top, things get a little trickier. First up there is a stone staircase that extends sharply up the side of an enormous Inca wall. There is no handrail, and a terrifying drop to one side. My legs turned to jelly on seeing it.

'Oh. My. God,' said Rachel when she locked eyes on it. 'We're not going up there, are we?'

'It looks like the only way up,' I said.

'I can't do that. Remember what I was like on the Mandango Trail?'

'You got through that in the end.'

'I had to shuffle along on my arse.'

'So did I. But this is different.'

'Yes, it's worse!'

'That's because it's almost impossible to climb stairs on your arse. Look, you've searched for anacondas in a swamp since then. And sat in a bucket of piranhas. It won't be nearly as scary as that. It's just a normal staircase.'

'Normal staircases don't result in instant death if you stumble.'

'You won't stumble.'

‘I might.’

She didn’t.

Rachel took a deep breath, and we made it slowly up the stairs, where we then had to crawl through a small tunnel in the rocks, before hauling ourselves up a metal ladder bolted to the rock.

There were several spectacular vantage points over the ruins of Machu Picchu below. We stopped at each one to rest and take in the view. The final section – now roped off to the public – is a set of 600-year-old individual stone steps jutting out of the wall up to another lookout, with a precipitous drop below each one.

‘Just the Stairs of Death to go,’ I said, instantly regretting my choice of words.

‘The what?’

‘Just these last steps to go, I said.’

‘Did you just call them the Stairs of Death?’

‘No!’

‘Yes, you did. Why would you call them the Stairs of Death?’

‘I... I... did I call them that? I don’t think I did.’

‘Yes you did.’

‘Well, that’s what they are known as.’

‘Who by?’

‘Everyone. The Stairs of Death are legendary. I mean, look at them!’

At this point, a group of four hikers came up the trail behind us, blocking our route back down.

‘Are you going up?’ one of them asked.

I looked at Rachel. ‘Are we?’

‘I guess so,’ she said, setting foot on the first stone and tentatively stepping up to the next. ‘You’d better catch me if I fall.’

Our rucksacks, which only contained the bare essentials, suddenly felt like they were full of rocks, as the apprehension of being put off balance set in. With a group of people now assembled behind us, we were forced to act bravely and push on.

We eventually reached the top and sat down to admire the sweeping views of Machu Picchu behind us. ‘Well done,’ I said, putting my arm around Rachel.

‘We made it up the Stairs of Death.’

‘STOP calling them that! We still have to go down them.’

By now, there was not a cloud in the sky, and the sun illuminated Machu

Picchu far below us.

Huayna Picchu is also a prominent archaeological site, consisting of a collection of terraces and temples. It is believed to have been the home of the city's high priest, who resided there with a group of local virgins. As you do.

The Incas are regarded as having been an incredibly advanced and forward-thinking civilisation. But as we sat looking down onto Machu Picchu, I started to wonder if they have perhaps been given too much credit. Yes, their locations were breathtakingly beautiful, and their stonework incredible, but most of their structures now lie in ruins. Perhaps the Incas were actually just a bit shit at building.

Look at the pyramids in Egypt. Built about 2560 BC. That's 4,000 years before Machu Picchu. And many of them are still standing. Britain's Stonehenge is believed to have been assembled at about the same time. It is still standing. The Pantheon in Rome was built at the beginning of the first millennium. 1500 years before the Incas. It is still immaculate. I have been to pubs that were entertaining rowdy drinkers for 500 years before the Incas even existed, and they still look as solid (and grubby) as the day they were built.

Because most Inca sites lie in ruins, they all look significantly older than they are. As I sat on top of Huayna Picchu ruminating about this theory, I began to express my cynicism about the Inca civilisation to Rachel.

'Should you be slagging off the Incas, when we are sitting on top of one of their ancient sites?' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, firstly we've got to climb down these 600-year-old steps that you have just claimed 'weren't built to last'. Secondly, weren't the Incas big believers in curses and human sacrifice?'

'Er... yeah. And?'

'Well, if I was an Inca god, then you've set yourself up as a bit of an obvious target for sacrifice now. Here you are, sitting on top of a mountain, the Stairs of Death still to navigate on the way down, and you have said that the entire Inca civilisation was 'a bit shit at building'.'

'Well... I just...'

'It's too late now. The damage is done.'

Needless to say, the descent of Huayna Picchu was a little nervy, and I never said a bad word about the Incas ever again. And it's not like I will express my opinions about them in a book.

After successfully making it back down to Machu Picchu, we spent a leisurely few hours exploring the extensive site, with its countless different rooms and terraces. I was vocally admiring the Inca stonework at every opportunity, and trying to ignore the fact that a lot of the site had been rebuilt from the crumbled remains since its discovery.

We walked back up to the now crowded Caretaker's Hut for more views of Machu Picchu in full sun, and then sat and ate our sandwiches and posed for photos with the llamas.

'What time is our train?' Rachel asked.

'4.30 pm, I think.'

'What time is it now?'

'12ish, I guess,' I said, pulling my phone from my pocket. 'Oh shit! It's 3.20 pm! How did that happen? It was only sunrise recently.'

Time had somehow been sucked away from us as we had explored Machu Picchu. Maybe it was the Inca curses? And now we were all the way up at the Caretaker's Hut on the top of a mountain, with a train to catch from Aguas Calientes at the very bottom in a little over an hour.

We hastily stuffed our water bottles and food wrappers into our rucksacks.

'Is there a later train?' asked Rachel.

'No, this was all they had. If we miss this train then we will be stuck in Aguas Calientes for another day or two, which means we will miss our flight to Lima tomorrow and then miss our flight back to England.'

We began descending the steps from the Caretaker's Hut at a ridiculous speed, accidentally photobombing many tourists' holiday snaps along the way.

Outside the entrance gate our hearts sank. There was a queue of over a hundred people waiting for the bus back down the mountain.

'We're not going to get there in time,' said Rachel.

'We can still make it!' I said.

'No, we can't! Look at that queue! We will have to wait for at least four buses until it's our turn.'

'We don't need the bus. We can run.'

'What? You can't be serious? Remember how tough it was this morning?'

'That was uphill. Now we've got gravity on our side.'

'George, I really don't think that's a wise idea. I don't think we will make it in time. We might as well accept the fact that we are going to miss our flight tomorrow and look at booking an alternative instead.'

'We've got to at least try. Vamos!'

Rachel sighed heavily, tightened her rucksack straps, and set off after me down the road. We followed the switchbacks down half of the mountain, but each time I glanced at my phone, the chances of us making the train seemed less likely. The sun was beating down on us and it was tough going.

‘Wait, what’s this?’ said Rachel as we rounded one of the many corners.

‘What’s what?’

‘This path.’

‘It looks like it cuts off the corner,’ I said. ‘That’s handy.’

‘Do you think they have them on the other corners too?’

I looked across the road to the switchback we had just traversed and noticed a small gap through the trees that would have been impossible to see in the early morning darkness.

‘Er... yeah, it looks like they do. That makes things a little easier.’

‘You mean we’ve been running around all these stupid switchbacks when we could have just gone straight down the mountain following the steps?’

‘Yes. We could have done that when we climbed up the mountain this morning too.’

We made good progress down the second half of the mountain, thanks to the revolutionary discovery of the path, and arrived back in Aguas Calientes sweatier than either of us had ever been before, which was not ideal preparation for a two-hour train journey.

With five minutes to spare until our train, I even had time to buy a Peruvian national football shirt from a market trader outside the station. It was a gift for my friend Damo, who claims his grandma invented banoffee pie. We still had a football shirt sized gap in our present bag to fill back at Hostel Royal Frankenstein.

‘See, I told you we would make it,’ I said, giving Rachel a hug.

‘Don’t get too close. I stink.’

‘Me too. At least we haven’t got to sit near each other on the train.’

We felt a strange unexpected rush of adrenaline. We had been fortunate enough to have seen one of the world’s most extraordinary sights at sunrise, and then climbed a notoriously tricky peak involving ladders, tunnels and rock ledges. But that was nothing to the feeling of elation we experienced from sitting on a train we felt certain we would miss an hour earlier. We couldn’t stop smiling at each other across the crowded carriage. The faces of those sitting next to our reeking bodies were not so enthusiastic.

After our failed attempt to get the hostel in Arequipa to hold a room for us when we visited Colca Canyon, only for them to launder our clothes instead, we were delighted to arrive back at Hostel Royal Frankenstein and discover a room reserved for us as promised, and our bags still there and clothes as dirty as when we left them. I could pretend that my Spanish had improved by this point, and that my instructions had been flawless, but the truth is the owner was German and spoke fluent English.

# THIRTY-TWO

Guinea pig, or 'cuy', as it is known, is a popular delicacy in the Andes. I had managed to avoid eating it until now, but as it was our last night in South America, I thought I should give it a try. Rachel ordered the chicken Kiev.

'Chicken Kiev. That's a nice traditional Peruvian dish to have on our last night in South America,' I said.

'Is it Peruvian?'

'No of course it's not. I was being sarcastic. It's called chicken Kiev.'

'And?'

'Kiev is in the Ukraine. So it probably originated there, I guess.'

'Or maybe the city of Kiev was named after a really popular chicken dish from Peru?'

'Er... yeah, maybe.'

I had seen cuy served to a customer in another restaurant. It was a whole guinea pig, skinned and roasted, but still with its head and legs attached. I assumed this was some freakish restaurant in rural Peru, and that here in tourist-friendly Cusco I would be served a beautifully presented fillet of guinea pig, bearing no resemblance to its former rodenty incarnation. Instead, I got the horror show too.

My plate arrived with a whole guinea pig, legs, head and all, lying on its back in the middle of my plate. But what was more disconcerting was its expression. It had its mouth wide open, baring its teeth, with its claws out ready to attack. It certainly didn't make me warm to it.

'Well, that looks, ermm, delicious,' said Rachel, taking a bite of her breaded chicken Kiev.

'Thanks,' I said. 'I can't wait to get started.'

'Great, then start.'

'Fine. I will.'

I picked up my knife and fork and began prodding it. I'm not sure why. It was definitely dead.

'No, no,' said a voice to my left. I turned to see one of the waiters standing beside me mimicking eating something with his hands.

'Oh, so I eat it like a corn on the cob? Like mazorca de maiz?' I said, delighted that I knew a phrase in Spanish.

'Si, si! Mazorca de maiz!'

‘Bueno!’ I said. ‘This meal just gets better and better.’

He then continued to stand there while I picked up the cuy, trying to work out how to hold it without its spikey claws getting in the way. I looked up to the waiter and he stood there still grinning at me and gave me a thumbs up.

I took a bite. It was much crunchier than I anticipated. Once I was through the crispy skin, it didn’t taste as bad as I was expecting. It tasted, predictably, a bit like chicken. Obviously nowhere near as good as a chicken Kiev, but good nonetheless.

‘Mmmm,’ I said to the waiter, reciprocating the thumbs up at the same time. He grinned even more.

I swallowed the mouthful and he continued to stare at me, clearly waiting for more. I rotated the guinea pig in my hands and went for another bite. This time one of its claws poked me in the eye and I let out a squeal. The waiter laughed and moved on to find his next gringo to torment.

It was a bit disconcerting having something look at me, baring its teeth as I ate. And no, I don’t mean the waiter. I made a decent effort on the cuy. It certainly wasn’t the most enjoyable meal I have ever had, but it wasn’t the worst. As we sat with our beers overlooking one of Cusco’s main squares, we reflected on what an incredible honeymoon it had been.

Our time in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador had come to an end. The following morning we caught a flight to Lima where we got our connecting flight back to the UK. South America had been more than we could have imagined. We had never before witnessed nature in such wild and extreme forms - powerful snakes, deadly spiders, terrifying yet strangely beautiful piranhas, pink river dolphins, salt flats, trees that walked (if you believed hard enough), majestic mountains, mighty rivers, curious monkeys, rodents of unusual size, hot springs, geysers, toads the size of footballs, awe-inspiring condors and countless other ‘birds’. Travelling for six weeks in the shadows of volcanoes was a humbling experience. It made us feel small and insignificant, but it also made us feel incredibly alive and appreciative of the world around us.

South America had taken us further out of our comfort zones than we ever thought possible. We had experienced things and seen places we believed were only for hardened adventurers. We had both conquered fears, and overcome many challenges, and the continent had undoubtedly made us both stronger and braver than we were before. There was nothing I would have changed. Except maybe next time I would stick to the Peruvian classic, chicken Kiev.

We arrived back home to Northampton late the following night and were



relieved to find the house still standing, the cats still alive, and the furniture mostly where we left it.

‘Graeme has done good,’ said Rachel.

‘Never in doubt,’ I said.

A couple of days after returning home, Rachel started her new career as a teacher. Over the following months, I began regularly assisting two local photographers. I shadowed them at weddings and corporate shoots, gaining valuable experience and developing my skills.

At the same time, I signed up with a few recruitment agencies and worked a series of jobs that made my role as a Data Information Officer seem exhilarating. But I didn’t care. I was no longer trapped, because I was actively taking steps to change my future.

Travelling in South America had opened my eyes to how passionate people can be about life. From the market stallholders, to the tour guides, to the bus drivers, to the street cashiers and jungle cake sellers, and the many other travellers we met during our journey, they were all so full of enthusiasm for everything they did. They were passionate about where they lived, passionate about their job – whatever it entailed – and passionate about their existence on this earth. I hoped some of this had rubbed off on me and would stay with me forever.

The photographers I had been assisting started passing paid jobs my way whenever they were double-booked. I put together a portfolio, built a basic website, did a leaflet drop around Northampton and began actively promoting myself as a photographer. I had been telling people for a while that I was a photographer, and slowly but surely, the bookings started to come in, and I started to believe it myself.

Rachel and I managed to save some money between us, and we travelled again during the school holidays the following summer. This time to Australia. And this time, I had a new passport with a brand-new photo.

When we returned to the UK from Australia the following year, I told the recruitment agencies that I was no longer looking for work. I was setting off on my own to forge a career as a photographer. A few days after making this momentous decision – and almost a year to the day after returning from South America – I had some time to kill before my next photography booking. I found myself standing at Land’s End wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts.

But that is another story.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, a huge thank you to all of our kind and generous friends and family who contributed to our honeymoon fund at our wedding. Without you all, this trip would not have been possible.

Thanks to Rachel for sharing this adventure in South America with me.

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And lastly, thanks as always to YOU for reading my book (unless you've just skipped all the way to the end to read the acknowledgements, which is absolutely fine, but a little weird). It means an awful lot to me that you have chosen to spend your time reading about an adventure of mine. Thanks again, and if you keep reading, I'll keep writing.

If you enjoyed reading *Travels with Rachel*, I would be extremely grateful if you would consider posting a short review on [Amazon](#). Reviews are SO important for authors, so any way in which you can help spread the word is hugely appreciated. Thank you.

Photos to accompany this book will be added to my Facebook page shortly, so please LIKE that to keep up-to-date. Photos for all my other books are already on there.

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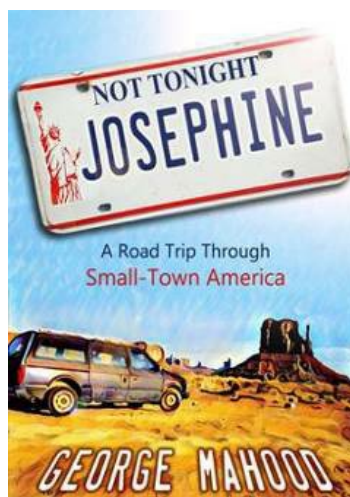
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“...George's books just keep getting better...”

“...laugh out loud funny (note to self, don't read it on the tube)...”

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[Operation Ironman: One Man's Four Month Journey from Hospital Bed to Ironman Triathlon](#)



## EVERY DAY IS A HOLIDAY

*“...laugh out loud moments on nearly every page...”*

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*“...loved the book – funny and engaging...”*

*“...read it, love it, recommend it...”*

George Mahood had a nice, easy, comfortable life. He had a job, a house, a wife and kids. But something was missing. He was stuck in a routine of working, changing nappies and cleaning up cat sick. He felt like he was missing out on a lot of what the world had to offer.

He then discovered that it was Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day. The day after that was National Curmudgeon Day, and the day after that was Inane Answering Machine Message Day. In fact, the calendar is FULL of these quirky, weird and wonderful events. He realised that somebody somewhere had created these holidays, believing that they were important enough to warrant their own official day. Surely he should therefore be more appreciative of their existence? So he decided to try and celebrate them all. As you do. He hoped that at the end of the challenge he would be transformed into a happier, more intelligent and more content person.

Follow George on his hilarious, life changing adventure as he tries to balance his normal life with a wealth of new experiences, people, facts and ridiculous



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[Download More Ketchup than Salsa now](#)

Thank you all again.

BIG love,

George

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