



Diane McTurk and Banuni, the Giant River Otter

Around Latin America in 778 days

While travelling through one continent, 11 countries, 24 flights and 46 places to lay your head, Debbi Scholes also had a million and one experiences!

So, what were these experiences? Of course, major highlights were the Galapagos Islands, Iguazu Falls, Machu Picchu and Amazon rainforests, but these have been raved about by so many. Here, in no particular order, is my own list of just a few of the most extraordinary places, events and people encountered during my trip of a lifetime.

Colourful experiences

Salvador in Brazil is a colourful, magical city with a distinct edginess about it, which is all part of the appeal. And it was also the scene of one of the most amazing nights of my life. While there, we managed to get ourselves invited to a Candomble, a ritual that is a combination of what the slaves from Angola would have taken part in, mixed in with a bit of Catholicism. Two and a half hours of chanting, singing and clapping, individuals going into trances, being hit with twigs and covered by a

Photos by Howard Russell

lace curtain while being 'shugalugged' (well that was the noise she made) by a girl in a trance, having popcorn and leaves thrown at us and your finger joints almost pulled out of their sockets – the full weird works in fact.

Purely out of curiosity, during a ferry ride between Buenos Aires and Uruguay, I pooped into duty free to suss out the shopping opportunities.

Post box in Salvador



Extraordinarily, in amongst the usual booze and sweets, I found a shelf devoted to HP sauce!

Bolivia didn't disappoint in terms of being culturally different and filled with incredible sights. For me, chief amongst these are the salt flats; 12,000sq kilometres of brilliant white, well, flatness. Part of its extraordinary appeal is that the surface is divided into a series of hexagons. Formed naturally, the shapes are not nearly as precise as snowflakes but are still an extraordinary natural phenomenon.

Railway rendezvous

I'm no railway buff but the train 'cemetery' in Uyuni was a thought-provoking glimpse into a bygone era and provided the most wonderful



Hair-raising ride



The train cemetery in Uyuni

photo opportunities. Great hulks of abandoned steam trains sporting graffiti and the detritus of ages, sprawled across the deserted outskirts of the town and close-ups of engines and rusting carriages made a stark contrast to the snaps of the stunning landscapes and people we encountered.

Despite being classified as one of the top ten train rides in the world, I'd never heard of the journey by rail from Riobamba in Ecuador that runs up into the mountains and along a 1000ft cliff known as The Devil's Nose. We boarded the train in the chilly early hours when dew still lay everywhere. Including on the slippery, sloping tops of the carriages where we travellers were to perch ourselves for this hair-raising ride. This was, I think, the most adventurous journey of my life yet, as will transpire, also the most disappointing. Then, two hours into the six-hour journey, disaster struck. The engine of the train headed right while the tracks veered to the left. All we were aware of was a loud bang, but this was the end of our incredible expedition.

People and places

We crossed from Bolivia to Peru via Lake Titicaca where I had one of the most exciting encounters of my life. In a small shop in the tiny eco village at Hotel Inca Utama, I actually met

Demetrio Limachi, one of the men who helped build Thor Heyerdahl's reed boats Ra and Ra II and then navigated with Heyerdahl across the Atlantic. Naturally, I had to get his autograph on a postcard, together with a reed boat key ring as a memento of this historic meeting.

Guyana would be worth any number of travel articles on its own and, when we found out that we made up two of an annual total of only around 2000 tourists, we felt even more honoured to be there. Apart from meeting the quite magical Diane McTurk, her giant otters, naughty pet racoon called Bandit and amazing side-kick, Pat, our dazzling array of highlights included encountering a herd of hidden Manitou that lurk beneath the weeds covering the lake in Georgetown's Botanical Gardens. And, having just seen the three-part series, Lost Land of the Jaguar, it was entrancing to visit the falls at Kaieteur, taking a small plane to the top and knowing we didn't have to abseil down them like the unfortunate BBC presenter.

In fact, entrancing is only one adjective to describe this South American trip but to use more would simply develop into a whole lexicon of superlatives too numerous to explore. ■



Demetrio Limachi on Lake Titicaca

Debbi Scholes and her photographer husband travelled to South America with Journey Latin America. www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk