

Chile offers breathtaking landscapes of every flavour along its 4300km skinny strip of coast and was the perfect setting for two College expeditions. It was also the culmination of eighteen months of planning and the expeditioners, divided into two groups, took it in turns to take responsibility roles that included being the leader, caterer, banker, journalist and security officer, as well as organisers of accommodation and transport.

We started the trip camping in the Rio Maipo valley and spent several days horse riding and trekking in the forests and snow capped mountains of the El Morado National Park. We were fortunate to be escaping from a very wet British summer, but the second group arrived in blizzard conditions and spent their first few nights under canvas in sub-zero temperatures. Nevertheless the scenery was stunning and the warmth of the local people made up for any discomfort.

An unenviable 29 hour bus ride followed, from Santiago to San Pedro in the heart of the Atacama Desert at 2440m. San Pedro was a welcome sight, a lazy, dusty oasis village and a magnet to travellers after watching miles and miles of brown desert roll by. The region receives less than 0.1mm of rainfall per annum, but its rivers are fed by melt water from the ice capped and mostly extinct volcanoes that dominate the area, including Mount Licancabur at 5916m. Acclimatisation treks to 4900m were a struggle in the sweltering heat of the day and the dunes were particularly difficult to climb. Then, after beautiful, kaleidoscopic sunsets, the temperatures plummeted overnight.

Both groups visited geysers, hot springs and the flamingo lakes that surround the rough salt flats before taking to Land Cruisers and driving over the Bolivian border. 12 hours later we were in Uyuni on the shores of the brilliant white smooth salt flats that cover an area the size of Belgium. The surface reflects the blue sky perfectly and the horizon melts into a blur. En route back to the desert mountains we passed the cactus covered sacred islands of the Incahuasi and stayed at hostels whose walls and furniture were made entirely out of salt. The salt flats eventually gave way to

barren mountains and lakes boasting vast flocks of pink flamingos. Patches of grass were guarded by family groups of wild llama and foxes scavenged in the distance.

The first group arrived at the Mount Licancabur refugio at 4300m and were enveloped in menacing storm clouds, with fresh snow falling above 5000m. The conditions were too dangerous to make an attempt at the summit and so they sought refuge back in San Pedro and the border crossing was closed behind them. The second group arrived six days later and had rather better luck, much of the snow and ice having cleared. Nevertheless, altitude sickness had already taken its toll on some members of the group and only five pupils and two staff, accompanied by experienced mountain guides, began the main ascent of Licancabur at 4am. In freezing conditions and high winds, the intrepid mountaineers fought bravely against the elements. The effects of high altitude on individuals can be unforgiving and unpredictable, but we are all hugely proud of Freddie Vawdrey and staff member Roy Witham who stuck to the challenge and reached the summit of Licancabur around midday.

Well earned rest and recuperation was enjoyed back at San Pedro, including football games against the locals and mountain biking in the wind blasted gorges known as the Devil's Throat. And then home.

Mr Martin Myers-Allen and Dr Richard Higgins, Expedition Leaders

- 1 ALI BALLARD AND DAN KIERNAN
- 2 OUR TRUSTY TRANSPORT ON THE WORLD'S LARGEST SALT FLATS IN BOLIVIA
- 3 PONY-TREKKING IN THE MAIPO VALLEY
- 4 OUR GUIDE MARTIN, HANGS FROM THE 'ROCK TREE'
- 5 MOUNTAIN BIKING IN THE VALLEY OF DEATH
- 6 DAWN OVER EL TATIO GEYSERS
- 7 DRESSING FOR HIGH ALTITUDE
- 8 VOLCANIC HOT SPRINGS
- 9 TREKKING IN THE MAIPO VALLEY
- 10 DINNER IN A BOLIVIAN SALT HOTEL
- 11 SUNRISE OVER THE ANDES



