



De La Salle College expedition 2016: Peru & Bolivia

This summer saw fifteen students from the sixth form take part in their month long World Challenge expedition to Peru and Bolivia. Peru was actually the destination for De La Salle's first World Challenge trip all the way back in 2002, this would be the College's ninth.

The trip is the culmination of a two year programme of fundraising and training the students must go through in order to be ready. It is planned, funded and lead by the students from the start, involving everything from organising fundraising activities for both personal and group funds to detailed itinerary meetings with representatives from World Challenge.

The trip started with a build-up day on the fifth of July, the day before we were due to fly out, giving us all the chance to get together and have a final go through of equipment and paperwork. Tim Neale, who would be the World Challenge leader for the expedition, also joined us and by the end of the day everything was clipped, stuffed and packed ready to go.

The following morning we all met at the airport, Joe, who had been picked as the group leader for that day, was given the tickets and leader manual and then it was time for the staff to take a step back and let them get us to Peru.

All students would have the opportunity to be deputy leader and leader during the expedition. Organising accommodation, transport, meals and budgets for not only their day but looking ahead to tasks that needed to be completed in advance, like the booking of R&R activities. There were also four accountants that would be responsible for keeping track of the large quantity of funds needed for a trip of this size and length.



Approximately sixteen hours later we arrived in Lima and got straight into minibuses to take us from the outskirts through the centre to Miraflores, where our hostel was located. The drive through the bustling streets of Lima proved to be quite an eye opener for the students, the constant tirade of horns as traffic darted around in every direction made even Wellington road at drop off time seem relaxed and cordial in comparison.

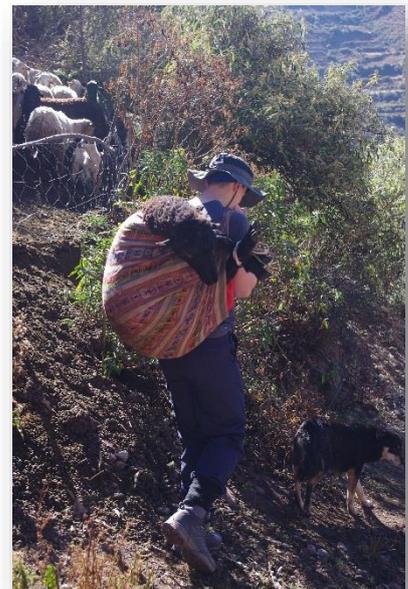
We had just two nights in Lima and there were many tasks the students needed to complete while we were there. While the internal flight from Lima to Cusco was already booked, they needed to sort out transport to the airport, transport from Cusco airport and the actual accommodation in Cusco. There were also SIM cards for the group mobiles to sort out and a meeting to arrange with World Challenge's 'in country agent' who would be giving us up to date information on the various stages of the expedition and any pitfalls that needed avoiding.

We flew into Cusco and stepped out into the clean, dry and thin air that at first seemed refreshing after leaving the muggy capital which sits at sea level on the Pacific coast. The reality of acclimatisation to life at 3,400m did not take long to become apparent however as we went up the first small set of stairs in the hostel and felt fatigue set in surprisingly quickly.

The next three days were spent getting used to the height by exploring the local area which was rich in Incan culture and offered spectacular walks through ancient ruins in the surrounding hills. Cusco itself was also a bustling and picturesque town with grand churches and busy markets to visit.

The main trek of the expedition was next, starting near Huarcocondo it would lead the group up through the mountains before dropping down to Ollantaytambo four days later. The trek was guided and catered for by a local company, consisting of three guides, two cooks and two pony handlers to go with the 16 ponies that would be carrying the majority of the heavy gear. The trek was definitely a physical challenge but hugely rewarding as the group trekked through remote mountain villages and benefited from the guides knowledge of traditional customs and skills. In one of the villages the guides asked the students to buy a sheep from a local farmer as it was needed for the evening meal, they took turns carrying it over their shoulders for the rest of the afternoon until we reached camp. They were shown how to build an oven using stones that would be used to cook the meal and were taught how the locals respect and work with the land. The days were sunny and warm and the nights clear and freezing, the sun dropping behind the mountains would bring on a rapid change in temperature that signalled the change from shorts and t-shirt to thermals and gloves.

The trek finished in Ollantaytambo at the top of the ancient valley of the Incas and we would stay there for the next couple of days before heading on. The town is sat on the river Urubamba which flows from



the Andes all the way down into the Amazon basin. The boys had booked a morning of white water rafting while we were there starting further up the river and making our way back through the rapids and waterfalls and past Ollyantaytambo. This proved a great opportunity for the boys (and leadership team!) to let their hair down and during every calm section of water inter boat battles would break out and most of us ended up having a bracing swim at some point. There was also the opportunity to do some rock jumping where the guides had marked out a safe area for us to use. All in all it was an excellent morning and definitely one of the highlights of the trip.



The next evening we took a late night train to Aguas Calientes set is at the foot of Machu Pichu. We arrived here at nearly midnight to find that our hostel had no record of our booking and were full. It was busy season and trying to find somewhere with room for 18 people proved troublesome at best, we eventually found a hostel with three triple rooms that we all squeezed into. We were up at 4:30am anyway to get the bus up to Machu Pichu so we could see the sun come up over the mountains.



Machu Pichu was an incredible place, the views were stunning in all directions with the snow-capped peaks of the Andes in the distance and the rugged mountains around Machu Pichu rising steeply out of the cloud forest below. We spent all morning exploring the site and surrounding area before heading down for lunch.

The next couple of days were spent travelling back to Cusco and then on to Lake Titicaca where we would be staying on an island helping with repairs to a local school. The lake itself is at 3,800m and is the highest navigable lake in the world, bordered by both Peru and Bolivia. After picking up building supplies, food and equipment from Puno we had a three hour boat ride to the island of Amantani. The lake was beautiful and offered great views as we picked our way through tall reed beds before heading out into the vast expanse of the main lake with the snow-capped peaks in Bolivia viewable in the distance. Amantani itself was quite large with two peaks in the centre and tiered fields on all sides tended by four or five communities spread out around the rugged coastline. We camped on the grounds of the small school we would be working in, right next to the small harbour where we arrived and were given use of the school kitchen for preparing our meals. The project we had been given involved renovating two classrooms inside and out and weeding the playground area and the boys really threw themselves into it. The students were a real credit to themselves and the College with their work ethic and willingness to get on. We did not always have the best equipment or materials but they adapted excellently to making the best of what many would have found difficult circumstances. Both classrooms and the playground were looking great by the time we had finished and for our efforts the villagers threw us a party on the final evening. Afterwards we split off into small groups as we had all been invited to stay with a local family for our last night on the island. It was great to get involved with the local community and see how their lifestyles compared to our own, and despite the language barrier the boys



did well getting involved with their host families. The next day we took the boat back to Puno, stopping for a short while on the floating Uros Islands. It was an interesting place made entirely of floating reeds but after the tranquillity of Amantani they felt incredibly touristy and artificial.

We now had a couple of day's journey to cross into Bolivia and get to the capital, La Paz, stopping in Copacabana for a night on the way. The second days coach journey had stunning views of the lake as we climbed up through the mountains on its shores before dropping back down to catch the ferry that would take us towards the Bolivian border. We all had to leave the coach and catch a small boat across the 1Km stretch of water while the coach was balanced precariously on a floating pontoon. We looked on with concern as it lurched its way across the strait towards the far bank knowing that all of our worldly possessions were still inside and were relieved when it bumped into the shore and drove back on to terra ferma. La Paz, like Lima, was a cacophony of horns and traffic noise and our hostel was right in the middle. It proved to be a great location for exploring the city with markets and narrow streets full of shops just a short walk away. We were soon on our way again however with a rather daunting thirteen hour coach ride to Uyuni, where we would start our four day 4X4 tour of the salt flats and Altiplano. For most of the group this would prove to be the highlight of the whole expedition, it was a simply fantastic experience. Each day brought incredible vistas in the barren mountainous landscape, from the salt flats themselves to volcanoes and coloured frozen lakes with flamingos walking on the ice. We had a night in a hostel made out of salt, walked around steaming geysers and had a late afternoon bath in a hot spring in the middle of nowhere while the sun set. By the end of the tour we had covered nearly 1000 miles, nearly all of which was on dirt tracks and reached 4950m altitude, 300m higher than the summit of Mt Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe. After a brief stop back in La Paz for hot showers and TLC it was time to fly home via Lima.

The boys had done a fantastic job getting us around keeping us fed, housed and all within budget. They had dealt with illness, fatigue, discomfort and homesickness and come through with flying colours and I have no doubt that this experience will have put them on a great footing for their future, wherever that may take them.

