

## Plant Collecting in Bolivia – Pamela Holt

Despite being a seasoned traveller and having visited some very remote places, Pamela Holt found herself in difficulties closer to home as the M25 proved to be its usual unreliable self on her way to our meeting. We listened to Briony's announcements and had our tea break straight away, during which Pamela arrived with a flurry of bags and equipment.

It was refreshing to experience a change from a PowerPoint presentation, as Pamela had brought her slides and slide projector with her to illustrate her trip to Bolivia.

Pamela is a botanist and intrepid traveller. She trained at The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew with Alan Titchmarsh and taught Charlie Dimmock whilst a lecturer in Somerset. In 1975, she first went to South America, visiting Peru for plants. A decade later, in 1986, she teamed up with a doctor, Christine, and the two women applied for grants as an Anglo-Scottish female team launching an Andean Expedition to climb a mountain in Bolivia that had not yet been climbed by anyone British. Grants for expeditions to remote ranges were more likely to be successful and they duly obtained the funding they needed. They set off first to Peru - the reasoning behind this being to start at sea level and steadily work up to Bolivia's high country, thus acclimatising along the way. Pamela showed us slides of the journey, starting in Lima, the Peruvian capital, where the mummified body of Pizarro lies (the conquistador who led the Spanish conquest of Peru).

The two women travelled by bus and train to Lake Titicaca and took a rustic craft to Bolivia. They eventually reached La Paz, the Bolivian capital, which lies on the Andes' Altiplano plateau at more than 3,500m above sea level. Pamela showed us slides of the journey, highlighting the basic transport facilities and bleakness of the terrain.

She had asked the couple with whom they were due to stay in La Paz whether she could bring anything for them from the UK and their unusual request resulted in her hoiking a shopping trolley with her to Bolivia. La Paz is situated in a big bowl where it is warmer down in the dip than the surrounding high countryside which is desolate and cold.

Pamela and Christine spent some time trekking to get fit, carrying supplies bought in La Paz and melting snow or sterilising water from streams. They followed paths dotted with eucalyptus trees and the odd llama or the more elusive vicuña, and encountered remote villages. Some of the paths date from the 1400s, through terrain almost 5,000 meters high. They came across a school in one village and, having asked what the school might be short of, they gave a donation to buy badly needed light bulbs. In another village, Christine treated a girl with an abscess and they shared their food with the family. Bolivians in these areas did not speak Spanish so communication was through sign language and perseverance. The next morning, Pamela indicated she wanted to take a photo. The mum and daughter squeaked with alarm, disappearing into their house, only to return a short while later decked in their "Sunday Best", brightly coloured shawls and skirts, properly attired for such an important event.

Pamela took with her a book from 1911, which provided the most accurate map of this remote region. Unfortunately, however, they did not reach the

mountain they were planning to climb, as Christine started feeling ill, succumbing to pneumonia and pleurisy.

It would be natural to think Pamela would give up at this point, being a single female in a very remote land, but she trekked for a further 6 days on her own. She described some fairly hair-raising incidents to some of us before she left, including theft of her belongings (most of which were thankfully retrieved later). She was running out of food and was forced to ask the locals if she could buy basic supplies from them, although she was aware that they did not have much themselves.

She returned to Kew with the seeds and plants she had gathered. The slides showed fuchsias, lobelia, bromeliads, and gentians. A red gentian was successfully grown in the alpine house at Kew and they also have a cactus which bears Pamela's name.

She set up a fascinating display table of items from South America, including her notebook, a guide to the plants of the region, a beautifully soft alpaca/llama wool rug, a model reed boat, and painted maracas made from gourds. One of the books was "Plant Hunting for Kew" which mentions her trip. She asked for donations to Project Peru, a charity in Lima for street children.

Pamela treated us to a fascinating description of her trip to Bolivia – her slides and commentary providing us with a unique insight into her expedition. She is clearly a woman who is not fazed by experiences many of us would find daunting. You might be forgiven for thinking a talk in August wouldn't get much in the way of attendance, but we had a packed hall of members and some non-members interested in learning more about container gardening.

**Eleanor O'Connor**