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Follow the Che Way

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traces the final steps of Guevara, the iconic Cuban revolutionary who was shot in Bolivia

IT'S smaller than I'd imagined, this stone shrine to the world's most famous revolutionary, where "Hasta la victoria siempre!" ("Until victory, always!") is just one of the many slogans that adorn the plaster walls.

It was 50 years ago today that here, in the austere laundry of Vallegrande's Señor de Malta Hospital, the lifeless body of Argentinian-born Ernesto "Che" Guevara was laid out and put on display to the world's press.

I was in Bolivia to follow in the final footsteps of Che, travelling east from the city of Santa Cruz through a dramatic landscape of purple mountains, cactus-studded canyons and pre-Hispanic sites to the remote village of La Higuera, where he was shot, and the colonial town of Vallegrande, where his body was taken.

In 1965, Che went underground in a bid to launch fresh Cuba-style revolutions. After a failed attempt in the Congo, he arrived in Bolivia in November 1966, but the US soon learned of his plans and sent CIA agents and military advisers to help the army of president René Barrientos.

Che and his small band of revolutionaries spent months traversing the rough jungle terrain north of La Higuera. After an hour's trek downhill, crunching over a rocky path that winds through gorse bushes and banana plants, I reached the desolate clearing at the bottom of the ravine on the Nanchuazu river, where a rock with the simple inscription "Che

vive" (Che lives) marks the spot close to where he was captured.

My guide Pablo told me it was a local potato farmer who informed on the guerrillas to the military and that "10 campesinos with guns" helped in the search for Che, including his father.

The last entry in Che's diary was in the early hours of October 8, 1967: "At 2am we stopped to rest, since it was useless to carry on marching." A few hours later they were surrounded by almost 1,800 CIA-trained

Bolivian Rangers and after a brief gunfight the wounded Che was taken to the schoolhouse in La Higuera.

Here, history was made. After a long interrogation, on October 9, Che was shot several times in the chest. Yet half a century after his death, his legend lives on in this sleepy rural backwater and it's filled with street art, monuments and tributes to the fallen Comandante. The building is a makeshift museum decorated with yellowing posters, photos and messages from global admirers paying homage to Che.

That evening I dined amid flickering candlelight in the atmospheric La Casa del Telegrafista – a whitewashed adobe building turned rustic, three-roomed hotel. My room once housed the telegraph machine from where news of Che's capture was dispatched to the outside world.

Afterwards, I paid a visit to Los Amigos bar, where French expat Christian and his wife Nanu have cre-

ated a temple to Che, with walls plastered in photographs and films of his life play on a continuous loop, and where, over a few glasses of the potent national tippie singani, Christian shared his theories of the last hours of Che's life.

While the exact details of his capture and death are still ambiguous, what is certain is that Che's body was strapped to the landing skids of a helicopter and flown to Vallegrande, about 34km away.

After photos were taken, the body of Che and his fellow revolutionaries were secretly buried in an unmarked

mass grave. They rested there until 1997, when an Argentine-Cuban team of forensic pathologists discovered them and Che's remains were taken to Cuba for reburial. The pit remains, and I wandered down a dirt track close to the city's airstrip to see the stone plaques that mark where the bodies lay.

Nearby, President Evo Morales inaugurated the new Ernesto Che Guevara Cultural Centre last year, a low-slung white building with an auditorium for 120 people, a replica of the Vallegrande laundry, a handicraft shop and library, along with a museum filled with photographs of Che during his many campaigns and a plaque honouring the 37 fighters who died alongside him in Bolivia. Outside, a garden of remembrance is decorated with their memorial stones.



I ended my Che trail in the pretty colonial town of Samaipata. It's the kind of place where travellers have arrived and never left – now more than 20 different languages are spoken here, and it's the perfect place to relax in the pure mountain air, do yoga and feast on organic produce.

And as the strains of Hasta Siempre, Comandante – written by a Cuban composer in 1965 in response to Che's farewell letter to Fidel Castro – drifted from La Boheme bar into the star-filled night, it also seemed the perfect place to raise a glass to the memory of this opinion-dividing revolutionary.

Details: Bolivia

Aracari (020 7097 1750, aracari.com) offers a six-day Ruta Del Che experience from £2,327 per person on a full-board basis at La Casa del Telegrafista in La Higuera, Plaza Pueblo Hotel in Vallegrande, El Pueblito Resort in Samaipata and the Hotel Camino Real in Santa Cruz, including transfers and excursions but not international flights.
50aniversarioche.bo



In the steps of Che: clockwise from above, the main street of La Higuera; guide Pablo Escobar; La Casa del Telegrafista; the schoolhouse in La Higuera; the laundry in Vallegrande. Inset, an iconic image of Guevara

