

Revolutionary roads



Fifty years after the death of Che Guevara in a small Bolivian town, his memory lives on in permanent and makeshift memorials. By **Sarah Gilbert**



“Do not shoot! I am Che Guevara and worth more to you alive than dead.” Just over 24 hours later on 9 October 1967, Guevara’s corpse was laid out on a stretcher and put on display to the world’s press atop the sink in the barren hospital laundry of the Señor de Malta Hospital in Vallegrande.

This small town in eastern Bolivia was founded in 1612, and it has kept its colonial foundations. But Vallegrande’s real claim to fame is its inextricable link to the world’s most recognisable revolutionary: Argentine-born Ernesto “Che” Guevara.

In 1965, Guevara had left Cuba to turn his attention to other countries, vowing to create “a hundred Vietnams”. After a failed expedition to the Congo, he arrived in Bolivia in late 1966, disguised as a middle-aged Uruguayan businessman named Adolfo Mena Gonzalez. With his small band of revolutionaries numbering no more than 50, he set about recruiting Bolivian peasant farmers to his cause. But the US soon heard of his plans, and sent CIA agents and military advisers to help the army of then-president, René Barrientos.

The revolutionaries had based themselves in the scrubland around

Nāncahuazu, where the heat sapped their energy and food was in short supply. There was scant support from the locals and they were plagued with illness.

For months they were hunted across the region’s tough terrain, until, after a tip-off from a local farmer, on 8 October 1967, Bolivian rangers surrounded the guerrillas in the Quebrada del Churo. After a brief firefight, the wounded Guevara was captured and taken to the schoolhouse in the village of La Higuera.

The next day, following orders from the Bolivian president, Guevara was executed. His body was strapped to the landing skids of a helicopter and taken to Vallegrande, about 21 miles away. Within the open-fronted laundry’s walls an autopsy was carried out. At the time of his death, Guevara was already a hero to many; the poster boy for the revolution, in part thanks to the image taken by a Cuban photographer in 1960.

But on the day of his death, it was a very different image that was broad-

cast around the world: his beret was gone; his long hair and beard were unkempt and his emaciated frame was laid bare. People who saw

his body were struck by how Christ-like he looked. Some even said that it was as if his eyes – it is said they reopened on the helicopter journey – were following them around the room. Fidel Castro was already planning a martyr’s funeral in Havana.

After the photoshoot, Guevara’s hands were cut off and sent to La Paz, then to Argentina to verify that the fingerprints matched. After dark,

Bolivian soldiers and the CIA buried his body in an unmarked communal grave, where it remained for 30 years.

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makeshift morgue is now a shrine where graffiti pays homage to Guevara’s memory, including his famous slogan, “*Hasta la victoria siempre*” – “Until victory, always”.

Down a track, plaques and a mural mark the Fosa de Guerrilleros, the area where some of the bodies were found. Nearby, the leftist Bolivian President Evo Morales inaugurated the Ernesto Che Guevara Cultural Centre last year – a low-slung white building with an auditorium, handicraft shop and a library.

Stones in the mausoleum mark Guevara’s original resting place. It is filled with black-and-white photographs of Che. There’s also a plaque honouring the 37 fighters that died alongside him here – from Cuba, Bolivia, Argentina and Peru. A garden of remembrance is decorated with their memorial stones.

Today Guevara cuts a more controversial figure. But whatever you think of him, it is clear is that the legend of Che lives on. Especially in Vallegrande. THE INDEPENDENT

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