

# reader. report

# • Bolivia's big cats

TAKING TIME OUT FROM HER TRAVELS AROUND SOUTH AMERICA, **GEMMA SHARKEY** SPENT A MONTH IN BOLIVIA WORKING WITH MONKEYS AND PUMAS IN A JUNGLE ANIMAL REFUGE...



**WRITER PROFILE:**  
**NAME:** Gemma Sharkey  
**AGE:** 23  
**DETAILS:** After graduating Gemma wanted to see some of the world before embarking upon a career. She took a year out to explore Central and South America, learning Spanish and developing a passion for travel writing along the way.

**T**hat was it, I'd done it. After months of saving I decided it was now or never and went to STA Travel in Leeds to book an open ticket to Mexico City. I was keen to experience a culture different from my own and learn some Spanish along the way, and Central and South America seemed to fit the bill.

I flew to Mexico City with Air France and, after exploring Mexico and Guatemala, flew on to Colombia and then Peru with TACA airlines. I wanted to do charity work while in South America so when I heard about an animal refuge in Bolivia that took on anyone willing to

volunteer, I went for it. It was a spur of the moment decision based upon what other travellers on the road recommended. In addition, I was told Bolivia was the most authentic experience in South America, kind on the wallet and chock-full of amazing landscapes. Why on earth not?

After spending some time in Cuzco, the Inca tourist haven of Peru, I was thoroughly tourist-touted out and very much ready for the real South America. The Peru-Bolivian border is straddled by the beautiful turquoise Lake Titicaca. It's the world's highest navigable lake and a literally breathtaking sight at 3820m (Bolivia boasts a string of

superlatives, 'highest capital city' and 'highest town' among them, due to its altiplano location). The border crossing was one of the most fascinating I had encountered. I was transported across on a local taxi: a trolley pulled by a man on a bicycle.

I did feel like Little Lord Fauntleroy as the poor man puffed and panted while I soaked up the sunshine and tranquillity of the beautiful rocky landscape. For a moment it felt as if I was back in the Mediterranean on a Greek island, but an inhalation of the thin air soon reminded me where I was.

After border formalities, I arrived in the lakeside town of

Copacabana, not to be confused with the famous Rio de Janeiro beach but all the same a pleasant hippy town. From there I took an excursion to the Island of the Sun with its scenic walks and sunshine (don't forget the sun block and water, the altitude can really take its toll). After a much-needed night of sleep I continued by bus to Bolivia's capital La Paz.

Approaching La Paz the reality of South America's poorest country hits home. The centre of the city is located in the basin of a huge crater, the lip of which is covered with children dressed in rags roaming the paths. Although



Many of the sanctuary's animals are enjoying new lives away from mistreatment



Gemma with one of the mischievous monkeys at the sanctuary

the view of La Paz was unique and oddly fascinating, it came as a shock after my idyllic brush with locals on the island.

Nevertheless, La Paz turned out to be one of my favourite cities in South America. With its vibrant people, wonderful architecture and an altitude that will leave you gasping at times, La Paz is a full-on assault on the senses and an unforgettable one at that.

The city is a heady mixture of traditional markets complete with llama fetuses, witchcraft potions and handicrafts, alongside sections of high rise buildings and westernised shops. The people are also an interesting mixture; some dressed traditionally in brightly coloured embroidered tops and skirts, topped off with black felt bowler hats, and others in more Western clothes.

A highlight of La Paz for me was the informative 'Museo de

Coca', a museum exploring the history of the coca leaf and well worth a visit.

**ON THE ROAD**

After a couple of days spent meandering around La Paz and sampling its ample nightlife, I took a bus to Cochabamba and from there a bus to Villa Tunari, where the animal refuge is located. The bus journeys in Bolivia are an event in themselves; locals stock up on snacks and coca leaves to chew while women in bowler hats flank the sides of the bus offering their wares in exchange for a Boliviano (local currency) or two.

These journeys were a big part of the reason I enjoyed South America; although not always the height of comfort, they offered an insight otherwise unseen into local life and culture. As the bus moved away from Cochabamba and

its sunny spring climate, the flat plains morphed into rolling lush valleys. The weather also became more humid, and after a while a thick fog crept in, bringing a delicious tropical rain. At this point I put my head out of the window for my first taste of the jungle. It was one of those moments when you feel the exhilaration and excitement that only comes with travel coursing through your blood.

After a few hours the locals got a bit restless and were quick to tell the gringa I had reached my destination. The bus driver got out to help then left me standing in a tiny village dotted with a few shack-like buildings. A huge gushing river dominated the scene and the backdrop was lush green jungle. The humidity took effect immediately as my face was covered in a fine layer of sweat.



Bolivian children in traditional bright coloured clothes and hats



Lake Titicaca on the Peru/Bolivia border is the world's highest navigable lake



Upon entering the refuge I was welcomed by a petite Bolivian woman called Nena (the founder of the park, as I was later to find out). I was given the guided tour by one of the other volunteers and since I was happy to do anything I was assigned to work with Gato, one of the older male pumas... the thought did make me gulp with trepidation.

I met the other volunteers who were all from different countries and age groups, the one thing in common being a love of animals. Next came the hotel where the volunteers stayed. It was more like a run-down ramshackle series of rooms run by Miss Haversham, but they were habitable and I was lucky enough to get a foam mattress, instead of the straw ones supplied in other rooms.

I was up bright and early the first morning, excited at the prospect of holding a monkey and seeing the jungle. As I walked down to have my pancakes with the other volunteers in the café, the air was filled with the buzz of insects and whistling of birds.

When I entered the park the monkeys leapt onto my body and within seconds they had discovered the hair band and remnants of a chocolate bar that lay deep in my pockets. It wasn't surprising to learn that many of the monkeys had been trained thieves in their previous lives of captivity.

At least that was all I had on me though; one volunteer underestimated their nimble fingers and found a monkey washing her digital camera in the river.

Observing capuchin, spider and squirrel monkeys all playing and interacting with each other, I noticed they were amazingly individual and within two days I could distinguish one from the other. The older ones were more bossy, especially the alpha male 'Boss' who weighed considerably more than the others and kept well away from the volunteers. I was later to see how he had henchmen to do his dirty work and bullying for him, rather like a mafia godfather. The younger monkeys were much clingier with the volunteers, and loved to interact, grooming your hair and face, and even flirting with you at times.

#### CAT CALLS

Three days later it was time for my introduction to Gato, my puma for the next month. Gato had been originally captured as a cub in the Chilean mountains by a Bolivian circus but was rescued after his first year. I also met Veronika, the Swiss girl who was absolutely besotted with her puma and was going to help me with my training. She was patient and kind, and I felt reassured. She told me that Gato had a mild nature (hence the name 'cat') but I was still

very nervous as I climbed the steep steps, lugging a sack with his food and water to the cage – it was a puma, after all. When we arrived I saw him in his cage, sandy-coloured like a lioness with beautiful green eyes and massive fluffy paws that were made to walk among mountains and kill large animals. I tried to stay calm as I entered his cage to attach his rope but my hands were trembling as I reached under that terrible and beautiful jaw to his collar. Then it was time for the walk, all 10km of it.

Gato was definitely sprightly after being in a cage all night. He leapt ahead practically wrenching my arms from their sockets as he dragged me round his trail, whipping round sharp corners covered in damp jungle undergrowth. I was beginning to wonder if I could hack it when he calmed down and the pace became much more bearable.

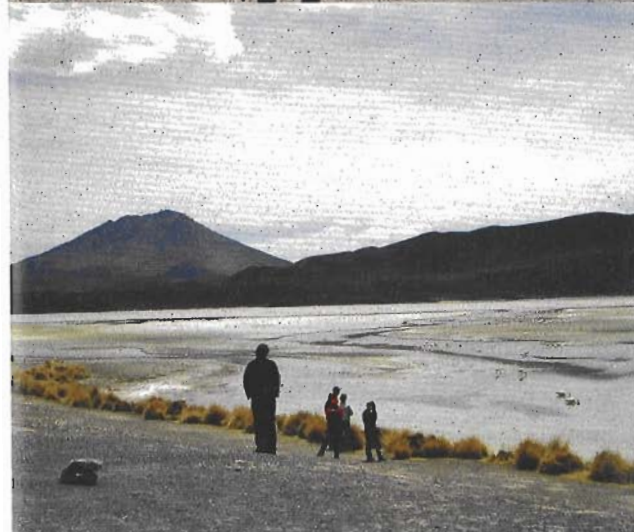
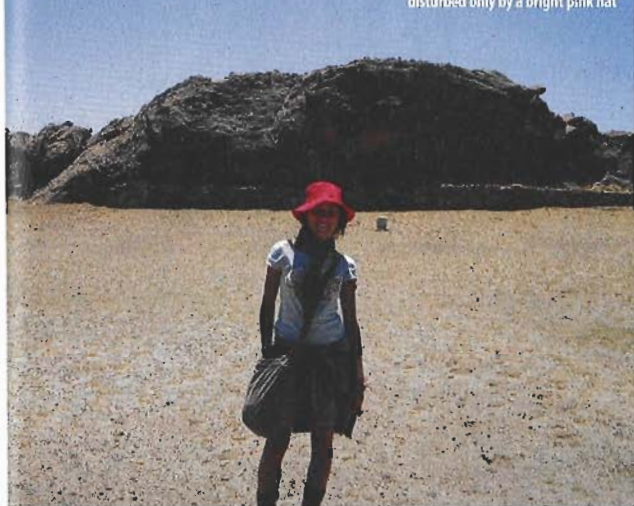
After this initial sprint he turned to me and started to play, a devilish light in his eyes accompanied by a few gentle paw swipes. Veronika told me to make a fist with my hand and put it down in front of his nose so he could smell that I wasn't afraid. I did this and after I had proved myself to him I didn't have any more attempts from him to play.

Gato's trail turned out to be the longest in the park so I got to see a lot of the jungle's glorious beauty. The tall trees had vines hanging down and





The lunar landscape of Bolivia disturbed only by a bright pink hat



I wrapped around their trunks, with the incredibly dense foliage only cleared by a path that had been hacked by machetes for Gato's trail, marked by blue arrows so I didn't get lost. We walked from 8 until 5 every day, Gato in the lead easing ahead as we scrambled over rocks and rivers, climbed steep inclines, slipped down slopes, dodged tree roots and crossed little wooden bridges in our attempts to keep up. I had a few falls but nothing major. Thankfully we had a stop at the look-out point for lunch, during which Gato would have his nap and I would read or chat with Veronika.

It had a calming effect being in the jungle every day. I grew accustomed to the damp humid air, dancing butterflies and buzz of insects. The rustling of branches overhead signalled the movement of the spider monkey family or a tribe of capuchins. One day the capuchins arrived and I hadn't zipped up my backpack. They were soon on my back rifling through what they could find, eventually settling for my water bottle. Never underestimate their skills at unlocking, unzipping or unfastening! The bugs are also a problem as it's forbidden to wear repellent potentially harmful to the animals. Covering up does the trick though.

I was a little disappointed in the beginning as I felt that Gato was distant, but as the days went by I gained his trust and he would nuzzle my knee or my hand. Eventually he allowed me to give him a bath to cool him down in the streams or touch his head so I could check for ticks around his collar. It sounds scary and

I wouldn't have dared do these things in the beginning, but it's amazing when you spend time building a bond how quickly it can form.

We had our teething problems of course. One particular time I got a bit behind and as I rounded the corner to catch up with Veronika, Gato had climbed a tree in his impatience and was waiting to pounce on me. I had never seen his eyes flash with such a predatory glare before and I was rather scared. I stood a good distance away until he had calmed down, which he eventually did and we continued on the walk as usual.

That was the thing with Gato: he'd lull you into a false sense of security with his mild nature but if you showed him the slightest disrespect, he'd find ways of letting you know who was boss.

#### VILLAGE PEOPLE

After the park closed all the volunteers would either go out to a restaurant in the village or cook in the communal kitchen. The facilities were basic but the company more than made up for it. The village was actually quite good in way of food: there was a Chinese, a café that was relatively pricey for Bolivia but sold delicious food, and other local haunts to fill the tummy. There was also a fancy dress party every week; it's surprising what you can come up with by way of a costume in the middle of the jungle and everybody gets into the spirit. I ended up as Frankenstein's bride one night!

Sadly all good things must come to an end and after a big farewell party several of the other girls and I from the park headed to Uyuni to see the surrealist landscapes of the

south. We took a three-day jeep tour from the rather bland and featureless town of Uyuni, visited solely as a starting point to the amazing landscapes of the Salar. The landscapes were out of this world: red volcanic mountains, huge flat expanses of parched earth covered in tufts of green spiky plants, lakes of dazzling colours covered by pink flamingos, spurting geysers and Dalisquerie rocks. In the end we were all pretty ready to head back to civilisation after feeling like we'd been on Mars for the past three days. But the rare scenery is a real treat for any budding photographers.

Bolivia is challenging, beautiful and unforgettable. I made some great friends at the park, not to mention the incredible experience I had with Gato and the monkeys. I could never have imagined being given that opportunity and it was utterly fantastic.

I would recommend Bolivia to anyone who wants something a bit different, and if you're willing to put up with a little discomfort, the rewards of this amazing country make it well worth it. **✎**



### infobox.

#### USEFUL CONTACTS

Gemma booked her South American trip through STA Travel. She flew with Air France to Mexico City and TACA from Mexico City to Bogotá, Colombia and on to Peru

- Suggested tour operators:
- Gap Adventures  
0870 999 0144  
www.gapadventures.com
  - Guerba Adventures  
01373 858956  
www.guerba.co.uk
  - Explore  
0870 333 4001  
www.explore.co.uk
  - Bukima  
✆ 0870 7572230  
www.bukima.com
  - Condor Journeys  
www.condorjourneys-adventures.com  
✆ 01700 841 31

Animal Refuge: Inti Wara Yassi Refugio de Animales Silvestres, 'Inti Wara Yassi' Parque Machia Villa Tunari Chapare, Cochabamba, Bolivia  
✆ 591-44-136572  
www.intiwarayassi.org

**VISA**  
No visa necessary for up to three months but you have to state that you are doing charity work at the border

**VACCINATIONS**  
It's recommended to arrange vaccinations for hepatitis A & B, tetanus-diphtheria, polio, pyphoid, and rabies