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COLUMN ONE

Following in Che's Footsteps

Destitute Bolivians hope to cash in on the revolutionary icon's fame by enticing tourists to the remote jungle where he was slain.

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LA HIGUERA, Bolivia — The people here pray to a man who once limped through their village in tattered clothes, a legendary guerrilla who fought his last battle on their dusty, unpaved streets and was executed in their schoolhouse.

The peasants say that if you whisper Ernesto "Che" Guevara's name to the sky or light a candle to his memory, you will find your lost goat or cow. "If you really have faith, he never fails," Juan Pablo Escobar said.

Guevara was killed in this isolated hamlet 37 years ago after his band of two dozen warriors was surrounded by the Bolivian army, having failed in his dream of launching a continent-wide revolution.

Now the peasants hope the memory of "El Che" can help rain money on their drought-stricken village. La Higuera is the last and best-known stop on the so-called Che Trail (La Ruta Che), a plan to cash in on Guevara's enduring, worldwide fame by attracting tourists to the landmarks of his quixotic final campaign.

"We have big hopes," said Roberto Aramayo Cruz, a leader of the Guarani Indian community in Lagunillas, near the farm where Guevara established his first guerrilla base camp, about 80 miles south of La Higuera. "We get a few tourists now. But when the route is well-prepared, more will come."

When Guevara died in October 1967 at the age of 39, he became an instant revolutionary icon. The famous portrait of him with a beret and flowing hair — taken from a 1960 photograph snapped by Alberto Korda at a Havana funeral — went up on countless college dorm rooms.

By the early 1970s, Guevara had come to symbolize a virile idealism.

He was seen as a machine-gun-wielding warrior with the heart of a poet. Young radicals pored over his writings, which included such aphorisms as, "The true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love."

With the passage of time, Guevara's image has been embraced by everyone from skateboarders to fashion designers. You can find Che shirts and Che pendants at trendy boutiques.

The Republica Trading Co. collection — available at retail outlets such as Bloomingdale's and Fred

Segal — includes a \$98 Che cashmere sweater. When Johnny Depp posed for the cover of GQ magazine last year, he wore a Che medallion.

A new movie, "The Motorcycle Diaries," introduces American audiences to a gentler Guevara — the bohemian Argentine who set off from Buenos Aires in 1952 on a coming-of-age motorcycle journey.

The story ends three years before the last stop in Guevara's backpacking adventures: meeting an exiled Cuban revolutionary named Fidel Castro in Mexico City. Guevara went on to become a leader of Cuba's communist government.

In Bolivia, the Guevara legend has come full circle. After growing restless in a series of administrative jobs, Guevara left Cuba in 1965 and went underground in a bid to launch new revolutions.

After a failed stint in Congo, he arrived in this South American country, where the government branded him a dangerous Marxist and vowed to crush his movement. This week, however, the government's minister of tourism will come to the region to mark the opening of the Che Trail.

"For a long time, people here did not want to accept the idea that our town was identified with Che's name," said Carlos Sosa, director of the House of Culture museum in Vallegrande, the town where Guevara was secretly buried after his execution. "His name frightened some people. But now we see the benefits."

Hoping that the spread of Che-mania will bring more than the current trickle of tourists to Vallegrande, Lagunillas, La Higuera and other towns in the mountains of central Bolivia, the international humanitarian group CARE has helped coordinate a \$600,000 program to improve tourism infrastructure and assist related businesses.

"Tourism is fundamental to the economic development of this area," said Jaqueline Peña y Lillo, project director for CARE in Bolivia. "These are towns where even a small amount of tourists will make a big difference in the quality of life."

Britain's Department for International Development provided part of the funding, citing its benefits to local Indian communities.

Bolivia's 4th army division, one of the units that defeated Guevara's rebels, is providing logistical support, Peña y Lillo said.

A poster in her office proclaims La Ruta Che's slogan, three words that begin with the letters that spell his name: "Culture. History. Ecotourism."

Next year, in a bid to generate buzz for the Che Trail, CARE will sponsor a Che Eco-Challenge, Peña y Lillo said. Participants will follow the trail through the jungle and scrubland that Guevara and his guerrillas traversed, fording rivers and scaling mountains.

That rough terrain helped do in Guevara and his troops. One of his fighters drowned while crossing a river. The heat sapped the malnourished guerrillas' strength — they ended up eating their horses. And the humidity aggravated Guevara's asthma.

When the rebel leader was alive and marching through these mountains, the local peasants lent him little support. In his "Bolivian Diary," Guevara laments not recruiting a single peasant to his army. Some peasants thought that Guevara and his men — whose months in the jungle had left them with unkempt beards and tattered clothes — were wizards.

Eventually, about 1,800 Bolivian soldiers surrounded Guevara's militia — which never numbered more

than 50 men and one woman — in a canyon near La Higuera. After a brief firefight, he was captured.

Manuel Cortez, then 20, remembers seeing the captive limp into La Higuera. Suffering from a leg wound, he walked with the help of two men, including a soldier, and was taken to the village schoolhouse.

Cortez still lives near that building. The garage-size adobe structure, whose walls have been plastered over, has been converted into a museum.

The day after Guevara's capture, Cortez was standing behind the fence of his property, he said, and overheard a conversation between the two soldiers who had been assigned to execute Guevara.

"They walked past my house, and they tossed two beer bottles down here, in front of the fence," Cortez said. "One of the soldiers said, 'Should I kill him, or you?'"

" 'Either way,' the other one said."

Five minutes later, Cortez was in the kitchen of his mud-walled home and heard gunfire from the schoolhouse — two bursts, a minute or so apart. Sometime later, he heard the soldiers joking and celebrating.

"They killed your Uncle Che!" they shouted with laughter as they embraced each other. "Now we get to go back to the city. No more marching through the mountains!"

Being able to talk to witnesses such as Cortez is part of the attraction for the small stream of pilgrims who come to La Higuera. Most are leftists who know well the story that made Guevara one of the 20th century's most illustrious symbols of rebellion.

Julia Cortez, the last civilian to talk to Guevara before his execution, will also tell tourists what she saw. Cortez, no relation to Manuel, was the village teacher. According to Jon Lee Anderson's widely praised biography "Che: A Revolutionary Life," the imprisoned guerrillas reprimanded her for the grammatical errors on the schoolhouse chalkboard.

Julia Cortez will speak to journalists — but only for a fee. She recently charged a German television crew \$200.

Escobar, one of two official tour guides in town, doesn't mind if tourists give him a small tip.

Guevara would have understood the villagers' need for money, he said. That's why he came to Bolivia, after all, "to help the poor."

"It has not rained here for more than a year," added Escobar, who earns his living farming. "Our crops this year were less than half what they were the year before."

The drought is the latest in a series of natural and economic calamities to befall the 150 or so residents of La Higuera, causing many families to flee.

Just a few more tourist dollars may be enough to encourage people to stay. Che Trail boosters hope to entice backpackers and trekkers who visit nearby Inca ruins and Bolivia's more picturesque towns to take a detour.

La Higuera may seem to be a poor and sad place at first glance, the villagers say. And there may not be much more to see in their Che Trail museum than a few old pictures.

But it is a place where history was made. If you scan the floor of the old schoolhouse closely, you'll see an X scratched into the surface.

"This marks the spot where El Che was sitting when they killed him," Escobar said.

On most days now, just one or two pilgrims come — the village is a three-hour drive on treacherous, unpaved roads from the nearest city, Vallegrande.

Hundreds arrive each October when leftists mark the anniversary of Guevara's death. A new hotel, called the Telegraph Operator's Lodge, offers spare but clean accommodations.

A French couple built the hotel inside the refurbished building from where news of Guevara's capture was dispatched to the outside world.

Norberto Forgione, a Buenos Aires psychologist and activist, regularly brings small groups of students on "Che tours," rounding up clientele by posting fliers at Argentine universities.

His charges bring copies of Guevara's posthumously published "Bolivian Diary." They hope to get closer to the idol by walking the ground where he fought his final battles.

Forgione worries that the area will soon become a kind of "guerrilla Disneyland."

"We run the risk of emptying Che's presence on Earth of its historical context," he said. "It's good that they improve the roads and the hotels so that more people can go. But they have to preserve and respect the history."

Visitors such as Forgione believe that when they are walking in La Higuera and other places on the Che Trail, they are walking on hallowed ground. That veneration is perhaps strongest at another stop, the hospital laundry in Vallegrande where Guevara's body was placed on public display atop a concrete washbasin.

For the Bolivian soldiers who posed with Guevara's corpse in 1967, the body was proof of their victory. But the image of Guevara in death — half-naked, with flowing hair and eyes eerily open in a Christ-like gaze — deepened the Che mystique.

Over the years, countless pilgrims have come to the laundry to scratch and scribble messages.

Some of their missives about the agnostic Guevara bespeak a near-religious adoration.

"Che: May your glory illuminate us!"

"Che, immortal commander. Ever onward to victory!"

Well aware of the area's shortcomings as a destination to all but the most devoted, the people behind the Che Trail are working hard to provide a more fulfilling experience to the casual visitor.

In the House of Culture in Vallegrande, director Sosa is trying to spruce up the museum. Unfortunately, nearly all the artifacts associated with Guevara and his band were spirited away as war trophies in the days after his execution.

CIA agent Felix Rodriguez, for example, made off with one of Guevara's Rolex watches and his supply of pipe tobacco, according to biographer Anderson. He later placed a bit of Guevara's tobacco inside the handle of his favorite revolver.

Unlike Rodriguez, a Cuban exile who fought for the U.S. at the Bay of Pigs and was the CIA's advisor to the Bolivian military, Sosa was unable to get his hands on such objects. Instead, he has procured a pair of tattered sandals that belonged to one of Guevara's guerrillas and a replica of the uniform Guevara wore when he was captured.

Vallegrande's other stop on the Che Trail is the final one — the pit near the city's airstrip where the revolutionary's body was secretly interred and rested for three decades, alongside half a dozen comrades.

An Argentine-Cuban team of forensic pathologists discovered the mass grave in 1997, and Guevara's remains were taken to Cuba for reburial. But the pit remains. Stone markers show where the bodies lay.

After the graves were discovered, Leidy Osinaga, now a 25-year-old hotel clerk, would go there to pray with her friends.

"People have beliefs," she explained. "If someone we knew was sick, we would always go, because people said he had powers."

In La Higuera, people bring flowers and light candles at the huge bust of Guevara that outsiders erected in the town square.

Every October, the village celebrates the Fiesta of San Ernesto, a feast honoring the man whose spirit rescues lost animals.

The pilgrims typically leave this patch of Bolivia feeling closer to their hero.

But other tourists might agree with the Rough Guide tour book's recent assessment:

"Unless you share their veneration of the revolutionary icon, there's little reason to come here."

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