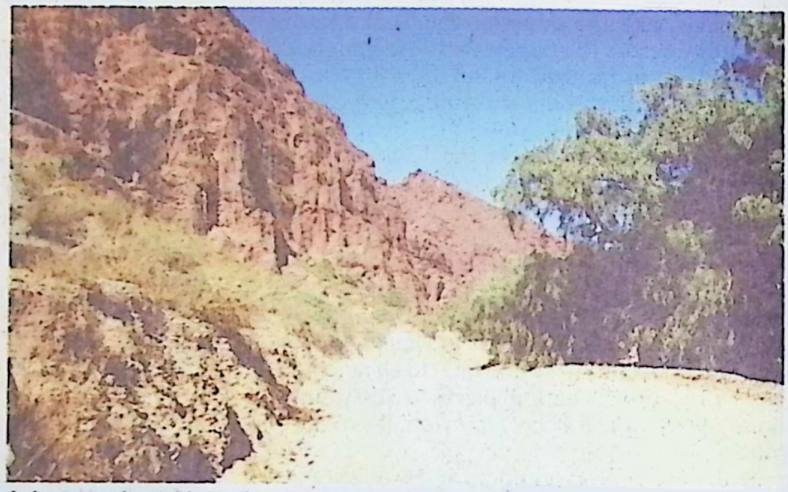
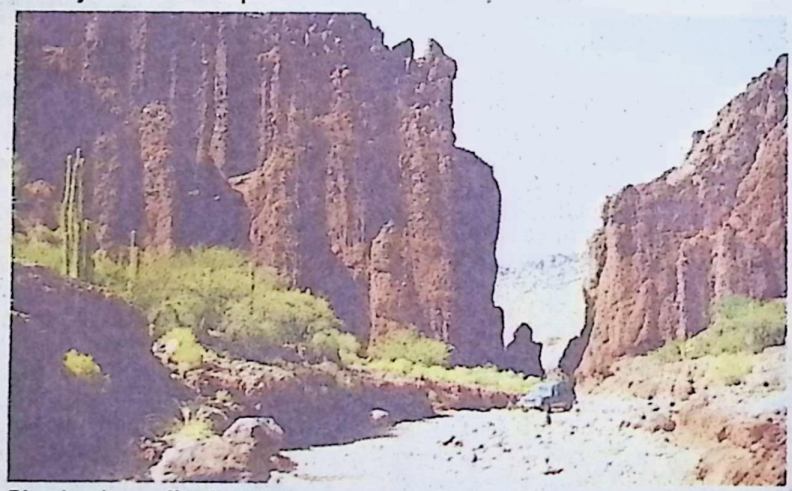
Tupiza: there should at least be a bit of galloping.

Like Butch and Sundance we were two: there was another Australian tourist, Richard. The hostel offered a lazy triathlon: a first leg by bicycle, all downhill, the second on horseback and the third by jeep, along a dirt road far up into the mountains.

I had only one question. 'Do they have a really docile, placid horse available?' I'd barely ridden before. They said they did: a dirty-white horse with a kindly disposition and his name was Sanchez.



A dusty road outside Tupiza.



Bicycles done, off to find the horses outside Tupiza.

We were led into empty country, from a stretch by the railway into just the kind of dry, rocky terrain where an American movie about the Wild West could be filmed. It was picture perfect for galloping, flying off in a trail of dust. But of course, there's a difference between how things are imagined and reality.

Thurram-thurram-thurram, imagined, is not always how it turns out.

Sanchez was quite good but it wasn't without trepidation that I sat up there on his back. I was pretty strong on the reins, thinking he should know I was in charge, and far short of galloping, if Sanchez even attempted a light trot, much less a canter, I became nervous and pulled him back. In the country of Butch and Sundance, there was a lot of slow walking that went on. On that day, Sanchez may as well have been a donkey.

Yet there was something more worrisome about his behaviour. He kept trying to twist his head around towards my leg. I didn't mind if he only wanted to sniff it but I couldn't be sure of his intentions so I pulled his head back to the front with the reins, just in case. If Sanchez is the placid horse, I'd hate to try the other ones.

'Do horses bite?' I wondered.

Nong Khai, Thailand

It's not often that one needs to consult a horse expert. They're not like doctors or hairdressers that everyday people visit time to time. Even the tom-tom owning Dhakaiyas probably know enough about horses not to spend much time consulting experts. Indeed, should I require a horse expert I wouldn't know how to go about finding one.

So it was odd that as I was re-considering Sanchez and the day in Tupiza, Annie sat beside me. She was a British horse-riding instructor living in Hong Kong, where she taught at a riding school. She was on holidays in Thailand. It was the perfect circumstance to clear up that Sanchez issue.

'Excuse me, but do horses bite?'

She was polite enough not to laugh when I explained the afternoon I spent onboard Sanchez. 'Horses do sometimes bite,' she said, 'but it's usually when you're standing in front. It's very hard for a horse to twist its neck to bite when you're sitting on it. Maybe you were pulling on the reins too hard?'

Tupiza, Bolivia

Of course there are rumours about Butch and Sundance. It's said they didn't actually die in San Vicente. There are people who said they met them, years later, living discreetly back in the United States. It's said they lived full lives and knew old age, and maybe it's true: perhaps a final showdown, imagined, is not always how it works out in reality. ■