

A significant moment

It is April 1978 – having ‘pushed paper’ for close on two years in a City reinsurance broking firm I have chosen to take some time off for travel. Wanderlust rather than work.

200 kms south of Bogotá, Colombia and 50 kms east of Popoyán lies the charming village of San Agustín in the Andean foothills – one could be in the Cotswolds ... rolling hills, friendly people, excellent coffee and dairy products. This village became my favourite archaeological site in the whole of South America – eat your heart out Macchu Picchu ! In San Agustín itself is the exquisite Lavapatas ... volcanic river rocks scoured out to make animal patterns for the water to flow over and around – monkeys’ tails, lizards, snakes – all beautifully done some 2,000 years ago.

A couple of English girls : Gail Bishop & Tessa Cormack are also ‘gap yearing’ before gap years have been invented and with a couple of other travellers we take up an offer of rooms at a local farm with horses from where we explore the outlying ancient stones and sites.

One glorious morning we have ridden for an hour or so to reach ‘Alto de los Ídolos’ where there is a menhir and other standing stones – as we approach the site, me on a young chestnut bay of about 15 hands, there are a few houses. Out of one of them comes a middle-aged lady in a flowing skirt who walks straight up to me, takes my right hand off the reins and thrusts into it an object –

It’s an oval amulet, made of a grey stone, carved on one side with an owl and snake motif and the reverse carved with a fly agaric mushroom set against mountains and the sun. An unexpected gift that I have kept safe over the years.

