



Two Months at 12,000 Feet

Reflections on La Paz

By Vicki Sairs

Reuben and I returned from our two-month adventure in La Paz, Bolivia almost four months ago and we're still processing what we experienced there. The following is a brief reflection on what I've learned so far, offered with the understanding that impressions are subject to correction and amendment as I learn more.

The big picture

Bolivia and its peoples are complex and beautiful and not easy to understand. Think of Bolivian culture as incredibly layered – historically, culturally, ethnically, and religiously. The name of the country itself underscores its diverse nature: *Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia* (Plurinational State of Bolivia).

About 55% of the country's 11,000,000 people are Amerindian, including 2.5 million Quechua speakers, 2 million Aymara speakers, and 34 other indigenous groups. All of their languages are official, as is Spanish (go, Bolivia!). About 30% of Bolivians are from mixed Amerindian European descent, with the remaining 15% classified as white (figures from Wikipedia, but probably accurate). Indigenous rights movements are very much on the rise, having received a real boost with the election of Bolivia's first Aymara president, Evo Morales, in December 2005.

Reuben and I met a Bolivian restaurant owner in Copacabana who helps run a nonprofit recycling business that employs women whose economic options are limited. She told us, "*En Bolivia, hay pobreza, pero no hay miseria.*" (In Bolivia, there is poverty but not misery.) She explained that most people had a place to stay, however humble, and food to eat, however meager. By our standards, however, many Bolivians live a tough life, with some children working in mines and on the streets, and most people carving out a life

under difficult conditions. Government instability and a history of oppression, racism and wars have all left their mark.

The good news is that many of the Bolivian people we saw are resilient, resourceful, and working very hard to make a better life for themselves and their families.

What are the people like?

The people of La Paz, *los paceños*, go about their daily lives as if they weren't living at an altitude that brings most lowlanders to their knees. At 12,000 feet, even making your bed can leave you breathless, but the *paceños* soldier on.

They travel to school and to work in crowded minibuses, in cabs, and on foot, sometimes ascending or descending many flights of stairs, depending on their destination. They set up portable kiosks on sidewalks and sell their wares to passersby; they go to offices and work late, but take highly civilized, long lunch breaks; they serve and eat all kinds of tasty food!

In La Paz, I often saw homes perched precariously on rugged dirt cliffs that looked as though they could crumble into the valley after one bad rainy season. This image stays with me as a metaphor for the lives that *paceños* have carved out for themselves in the face of great risk. Their earthly goods could be swept away from them with one stormy night, yet they carry on, making the most of what they have. I did not see much evidence of self-pity in Bolivia, although I did see a lot of hardship.

Everywhere we went, we saw indigenous people who dressed and behaved in traditional ways in spite of centuries of oppression and racism. How Bolivian *indigenas* have adapted and survived is a field of study in itself. Many of the Aymara women wear their distinctive hats, shawls and skirts with pride and flair, and carry themselves with an understated but resolute poise. These women run families and businesses; some work with Evo's administration.

Reuben and I lived in Sopocachi, a "trendy eating and drinking area" of La Paz. We strolled through well-tended parks, ate at ethnic restaurants, and drank coffee in little cafés. Reuben bought newspapers from the corner vendor, who recommended the special miniature editions that came out during the *Alasitas* festival (see Reuben's article). Our son Isaac, who lives and works in La Paz, introduced us to *Sublime* candy bars, and we found a woman who sold the white chocolate version on our street. She and her granddaughter found our son's "addiction" amusing. The little girl had a large growth under her



La Paz occupies a bowl-shaped valley in the altiplano. Skyscrapers, government buildings, multiplex cinemas, shopping plazas, market streets, aging cathedrals, and high rise apartments fill its central lower area, but the people have built homes and neighborhoods that run right up the hillsides to the altiplano above.



A mural at a park dedicated to the memory of young people who were “disappeared” by the government years ago.



A metaphor for the lives hardworking Bolivians carve out for themselves in the face of great odds.

cheek that disfigured her little face greatly, yet she smiled at us and giggled.

Isaac teaches math and physics at Highlands International School. Most of his students are Bolivian. His seniors took him out to celebrate his birthday and we tagged along. Some things are universal: the way little children whine at their parents to buy things for them in stores; the aloof allure of cats who are always above it all; and the giddy hilarity that overtakes young men and women when they’re having fun in close proxim-

ity. Isaac’s students didn’t disappoint.

We were warmly welcomed at a small Anglican church near our house. The pastor, Pedro Villareal, preached with humor, humility and great precision, especially when distinguishing biblical teachings from popular teachings that were problematic for the church (for example, the prosperity gospel). Emel and Susie, members of the church, invited us to their home for meals. One Sunday, we arrived to find a casket at the front of the church; a young man, a talented bass player and worship leader, had died in an accident that week, and the church was mourning his loss. It was a heart wrenching experience.

What do the people value?

Family is foundational. Single adult children often live with their parents, young people walk arm in arm with grandparents – very slowly! Families come out at night to stroll and eat snacks with their little children, sometimes much later than we would be out with toddlers. It was cheerful to see.

Friendship matters. Indigenous women working in the marketplace shared treats or jokes with their colleague in the next stall over; young women linked arms and spoke in animated voices about this, that, and the other as they marched across the student plaza downtown. The proprietor of a café that specializes in Dutch pancakes chose to stay in Bolivia rather than return to his parents’ European homeland because he didn’t want to leave the laid-back atmosphere in La Paz, where friends showed up at his door unannounced, with a guitar, a bottle of wine, and time to spare.

People care about education, waiting in line for hours and even days to get their children into kindergarten and grade school.

They care about their rights, launching protest marches with fireworks or a brass band and demonstrating peacefully (for the most part).

Politics is a lively topic, with taxi drivers ready to give you a

detailed analysis of what’s going wrong in the country. The Plaza José Carlos Trujillo, a park in our neighborhood, commemorated the deaths of dozens of young people who were “disappeared” during the 70s under the leadership of Hugo Banzer Suárez.

Bolivians care about art. A mural at this park was created by Pablo Mendoza, based on sketches by Walter Solón Romero, a Bolivian artist known for his social engagement and his beautiful depictions of Don Quijote fighting against the forces of darkness.

Bolivians are proud of their “*patrimonio*” – their heritage. The people we met were eager to have us visit other cities and regions of Bolivia to increase our understanding of all that their country has to offer.

And they care about their identity. We attended a forum on indigenous spirituality and were surprised at the intensity of the question and answer period that followed the panelists’ presentations. People were quite argumentative, a change from the reserved, polite decorum we usually saw. “I am a Quechua from Potosí, where we speak the purest Quechua,” said one woman. She wore a stylish sweater and slacks and a modern hairstyle, but clearly she identified with her indigenous heritage.

What makes them smile?

Next door to us some entrepreneurs had set up a Papa Noel’s Christmas village in a parking lot, complete with a large, brightly lit artificial tree and white batting spread out in a snowscape. Young women dressed as green-clad elves gave tours of Christmas scenes under temporary shelters. This place was popular! Parents and children crowded the sidewalk in long lines, waiting to get in. An eclectic mix of Christmas music played: “O Holy Night,” “Rocking Around the Christmas Tree,” even “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.”

General gaiety prevailed. A street vendor sold plastic swords that provided little boys with many excuses; they also sold magic wands that lit up the night. One evening, we saw two parents with a tiny little girl between them. Here’s what I wrote in my journal: *She is holding up her magic wand. It bends in her little hand – all of her, lit up in colors. Her eyes catch the light from her toy – she’s enchanted, and so are her parents. ‘Waaaauu!’ says her dad as they disappear behind us.*

What do they think about God?

How can I know, after so short a time? Read Reuben’s article for more on this.

What can I learn from them?

I can learn from the experience of hearing a soft-spoken woman say matter-of-factly, “We all know that the United States is a monster – a beast.”

I can learn that it’s possible to conduct oneself with humility without losing one’s dignity or sense of self, and I have a fresh memory of what it looks like to be brave and persevere in the face of hardship. **BB**

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