

Bolivia Dispatch



Country Number 51

I was hoping I would be able to wow you all with my incredible trekking pictures in the foothills of the Andes and my kayak jungle safari...but it was not meant to be! Instead I have stories of making friends with riot police, getting stranded at the airport, breaking through picket lines and marching with some revolutionary protestors! The day I arrived in La Paz, without warning, the government announced it was going to stop subsidizing the price of gasoline. The price of gas rose 85% the following day. Needless to say, in South America's poorest country, this did not go over too well! I had arrived at my hotel about 1am and went to bed straight away, so had no idea of these developments. When I went downstairs in the morning to book my bus trip to Lake Titicaca I was told that all the transit workers were striking in protest of the government's actions. However, there was a meeting scheduled later that day and perhaps by 4pm the issue would be resolved. So, I decided then to just check out La Paz for the day and check back in. I climbed 2 flights of stairs back to my room and suddenly panicked...I couldn't breathe and became extremely dizzy...I was thinking oh crap, I am having a heart attack right here and now....then I remembered...we were at 13K feet! LA Paz is like the 3rd highest city in the world and I had not yet acclimatized from sea level...whew...a relief that I wasn't dying, but definitely an uncomfortable first 2 days!

As I wandered the streets my first observation was that the Bolivian ladies still mostly wear traditional dress which includes Bowler hats. I just kept thinking of the Thomas Crowne Affair movie. They were introduced in the 20's and the Quechua and Aymara women still wear them. They don't actually go on their head, but sit on top of it and the women are able to balance them that way without using any kind of pins! I headed straight to the markets which I love especially in south American and warm climates, The produce is so abundant and fresh and it makes you want to grab a basket and a stove. Mangos, Avocados, beautiful tomatoes and potatoes...like 20 different kinds! Tubers are one of the county's main crops and Bolivians are attributed with inventing the process of freeze drying which they would do with their potatoes. One of the popular dishes they have is a reconstituted freeze dried mashed potato which was amazing!



Bowler Hats!



Potato Market!



Eating Mangos! Yum



Goat
head.nose
on!



Strange Tubers

Bolivian food is very typical of South America and usually includes some type of meat and a tuber or rice. Soup and corn are staples as well but you will also find burgers and pizza in the cities. Like many poor countries, dining out is not a means of recreation, but necessity. Therefore, there are few restaurants with any real ambiance, but the food is very cheap. I had a great steak, freeze dried potatoes, veggies and a glass of the decent local cabernet for about \$11.00

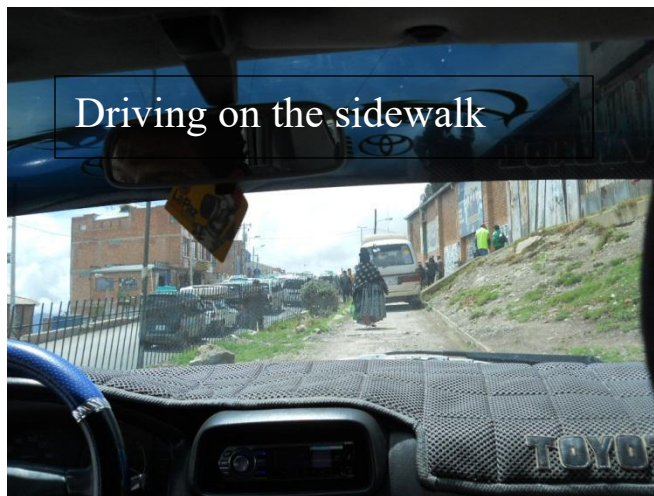
After hanging out in La Paz for 2 days, I still could not get out of the city by bus because of the strikers. I was told the airport was open however and on schedule. . So I decided to visit the colonial town of Sucre.



A local dish of big corn kernals, egg, cheese and some weird crunchy fried stuff!

The flight was \$85, so I bought the ticket at a travel agency and hopped in the cab. When we came to the toll road at the edge of the city, there were masses of people blocking the road. driver told me we had to turn around and go back or I could get out of the car and walk past the blockade and perhaps I might be able to catch a cab to the airport on the other side...neither option of course was acceptable!

...I wasn't going to spend my whole holiday in La Paz nor was a willing to pass through a blockade of hundreds of angry people with a 35 pound backpack on my back! A little down the road we could see that some cards were going over an embankment and driving on the sidewalk and were able to bypass the crowds. As always, money talks! I told the guy I would pay him an extra five bucks to follow them and he seemed to be able to muster up his courage then. With a little bit of a running start our little taxi that could- made it over the embankment, on to the sidewalk and to the airport!



Driving on the sidewalk

Sucre was a very cute colonial town. I had a great hotel room which was \$22 a night. I walked the streets, sat in café's and, practiced my Spanish. One night at dinner I met a cool couple. Jaime was from Sucre and his wife was Italian and they lived in Switzerland where he worked as a process engineer for Dupont. They invited me to go with them the next morning to a village about an hour away as they were going to look at a small building for sale as a possible investment.



Human Road Block

Since the buses weren't running and they had their own car I quickly accepted. They picked me up the with Jaime's mother and their two kids in a minivan. The countryside

was beautiful and thank God not more than an hour as the winding roads were starting to make me sick. The town, Tarabuco, was the only one the Spanish could never conquer and the native people have a reputation of being very tough and resilient. There is some story (which I have yet to research) which explains why the men world war I type helmets as their hats. The town was extremely remote and the people do not like to be photographed but here are a few glimpses:





After one and a half days in Sucre, I made arrangements to fly to Rurrenbanque...this is in the Amazon basin and I had planned a 3 day Kayak safari in the Jungle. My flight to RB was scheduled out of La Paz at 4:30pm and my flight from Sucre to LP was to arrive at noon so I was planning on a 4 hour layover. Long story short because of Labor issues my flight to LP was delayed until 4pm, thereby making a connection at 4pm impossible. I didn't want to fly back to LP and leave for RB the following day because it was doubtful whether I could get past the roadblocks. I finally went to the counter and just got on the next available flight which happened to be to Santa Cruz...Bolivia's 2nd largest and most cosmopolitan (by 3rd world standards) city. Santa Cruz was very interesting...it was much hotter (90 degrees) and had a very tropical feel. Lots of hustle and bustle and music blaring...much different from the calm outpost feel of La Paz.

Again, I just hung out, visited the sites in my guide book. Santa Cruz was definitely on edge and riot police were dispatched throughout the main square. And then one afternoon with lots of commotion a group of about 500 people came marching and protesting. I figured if you cannot beat them, might as well join them, so out of boredom and having already befriended the riot police, I proceeded to march a mile with the

protestors...clapping my hands at speeches and chanting words in Spanish I did not know.



By New Year's Eve the entire country was starting to riot with violence reported in La Paz and police shooting tear gas and the whole works. A general strike was being called for Monday which would have shut the airport down indefinitely. I decided that I did not want to have to rent a donkey and cross the Ande into Peru in order to get home, so although I still had 6 days on my planned trip, I decided to try to get home. I lucked out at the airport and was able to book a flight back leaving from a different city on a different day and TACA airlines didn't even charge me the slightest fee...of course, my segment from Miami to NYC on United the charged a \$150 change fee...I really hate US airlines!

So despite all my travel plans and adventures being ruined, I had a nice time. When traveling to third world countries you just have to be prepared for such mishaps and roll with the punches so to speak. I would like to make it back to Bolivia one day to complete the trip. The people were warm and welcoming and the country is unique and physically beautiful...oh yes..and very cheap!