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LA PAZ AT NIGHT

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In our Animals issue we used two pictures by Jules Tusseau that were not credited. Disculpas Jules for the omission!

EDITORIAL

'I am the body who inhabits you, and I am here in the darkness, and I suffer you, and live you, and die you. But I am not your body. I am the night.' With these lines Jaime Saenz, one of La Paz's most celebrated residents, ends his eponymous poem about the night.

We brave the city's streets after dusk to bring you this issue of the BX. As well as the mandatory tour along some of La Paz's most popular bars, we also explore the dark side of La Paz's reputation as a party town to reveal the social ills caused by an overabundance of cheap spirits, sometimes culminating in the infamous practice of drinking oneself to death in one of the city's famed 'elephant cemeteries.' We also venture into one of the city's worst-kept secrets to report on the all-too-famous cocaine bar also known as Route 36.

Victor Hugo Viscarra famously described how the homeless must keep moving throughout the night to escape the vice-like grip of the cold, sleeping only when the sun comes out. Only a handful will find a shelter in which to rest. We track down Daniel Escalante, a former street kid who is slowly changing the fate of the city's homeless by giving them a roof and a purpose.

Stepping back onto the city's night lights, we meet some of the artists who know them most intimately. Take Matamba, the dreadlocked reggae peace warrior who has been spreading the word of Jah. Or Marco Cuba, one of the country's most accomplished DJs, who has the mysterious ability to bring the night to life at the flick of a wrist on a turntable.

A different set of characters and come to life past midnight. Indeed, many individuals use the moonlight to carry out unusual second jobs. We report how Gabriel Flores makes a living by using the wee hours to take dreamy visitors on stargazing treks. Away from the city lights, one's sights are then drawn to the night skies, where we're told we must pay closer attention to the negative space between the stars to find ancestral Andean constellations.

To finish off this issue, we take a ride back to our headquarters on the 20 de Octubre with Don Mario Durán, one of La Paz's most unique taxi drivers. Suffice it to say we'd probably do well to bring him along to our next pub quiz at Oliver's Travels – our last participation ended disastrously. But first we must head to bed. Hasta mañana readers, hasta the next issue. Sleep tight.

By Amaru Villanueva Rance

N.B. Several Spanish and Aymara words are marked in **bold** throughout this issue. Their meanings can be found in our glossary

CONTENTS

GLOSSARY

COBA	Slang word
MICROS -	The large growling monsters, otherwise known as buses
CLEFA	Glue
PACEÑO	Citizen of La Paz
BOLIVIANO	Bolivian
ATOQ	Fox (Quechuan)
HANP'ATU:	Toad (Quechuan)
HURIN PACHA	Upper world (Quechuan)
LLAMACNAWIN	Eyes of the llama (Quechuan)
MACHUCAYA	Snake (Quechuan)
MAYU	River (Quechuan)
MINIBUSERO	Minibus driver
SINGANI	A grape-derived liquor
TÉ CON TÉ	Hot tea with singani
YACANA	Llama (Quechuan)
YANA PHUYU	Dark clouds (Quechuan)
YUTU	Partridge (Quechuan)
CAMBA	Bolivian native from Santa Cruz, or generally the east of the country.
COLLA	the camba's counterpart; native from La Paz, or the western region of Bolivia

UN TRAGUITO MAS

ALCOHOLISM IN BOLIVIA: FROM SOCIAL PASTIME TO SOCIAL ILLNES

TEXT: JOANNA THOM
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN CACERES

A group of teenagers giggle as they line up outside the club. Still in school, they're not yet legally allowed to buy or consume alcohol legally, but that won't pose a problem for them. Walking straight past the bouncers, they rush in excitedly, making a beeline for the bar and placing their orders, then throwing back tequila shots and brightly coloured cocktails. When the club closes, they take a taxi to one of the numerous other clubs that stay open past legal hours. There's no shortage in the city, and they all come well stocked with alcohol. Tomorrow, August 6, is a holiday, which means they can sleep off their hangovers. Stumbling home, one of the girls trips and begins to retch violently. Her friends help her up, but it's not long before she stumbles and vomits again. This is the next generation of Bolivians, already caught up in the festival culture that characterizes the country and the alcohol that accompanies it.

Visit La Paz on any given day of the year, and you'll have a good idea of why it was named as one of the top 10 'ultimate party cities in the world' by Lonely Planet. There's nearly a festival for any given day of the year, with vibrant music, local costumes and exotic street food. There's also an excess of alcohol. And although drinking is enjoyable, the drunken bawdiness can get out of control.

Alcohol is cheap in La Paz, with a bottle of wine costing as little as 20 bolivianos (about £2) and a bottle of **singani**, a grape-based spirit not dissimilar to brandy, costs a mere 30 bolivianos (£3). This, together with the great variety of bars and clubs on offer, means that more and more Bolivians are relying on alcohol to enjoy themselves.

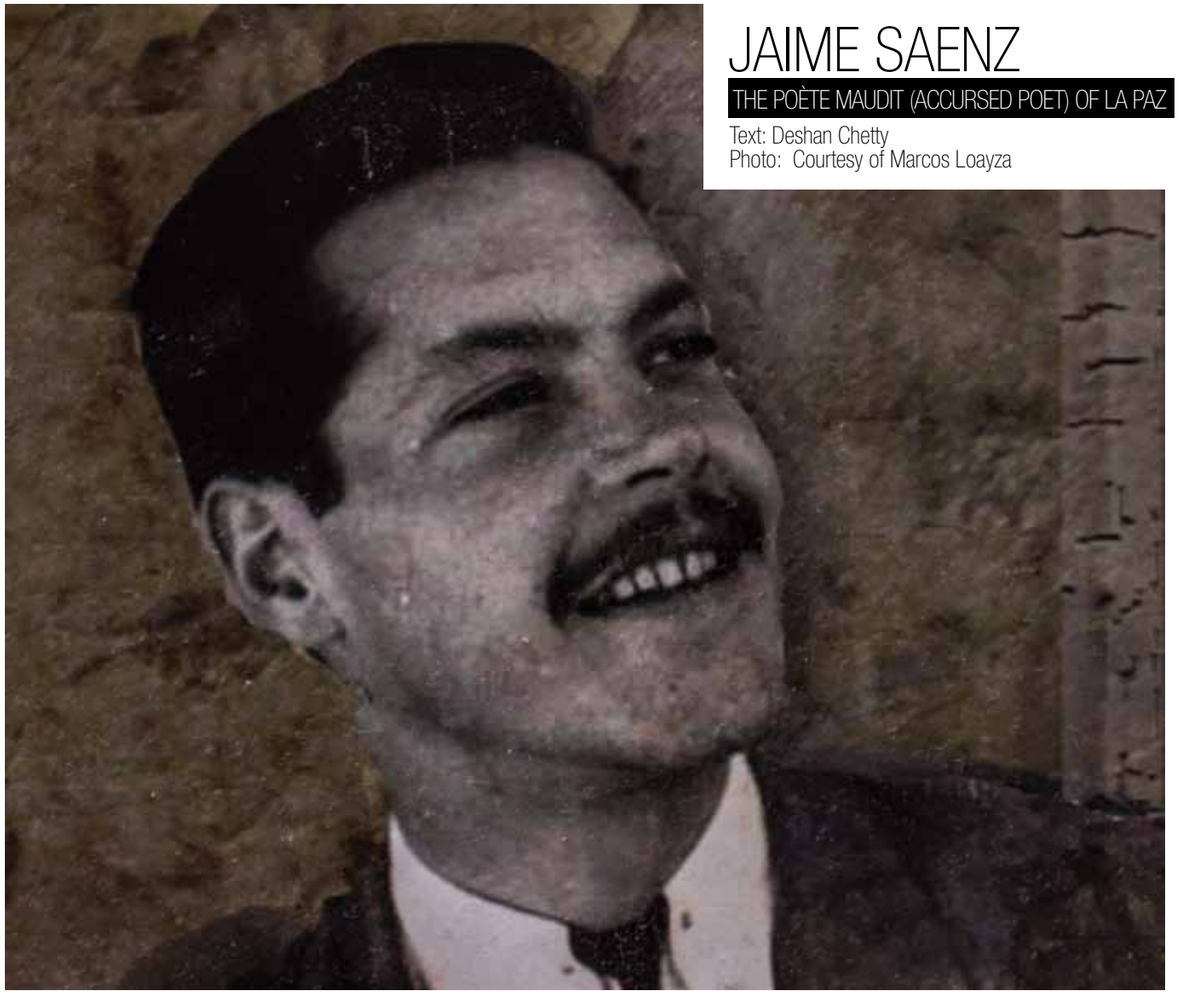
One of the members of the La Paz chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous sees alcoholism as a growing problem and cites a mixture of the old and new as the reason for its growing prominence. He says that alcoholism is a problem 'because there is a lot of tradition and because the youth search for more excuses to drink . . . There is no party without alcohol. You can't have a party without tea [**té con té**, a drink made from hot tea and **singani**]. It is the mentality.' While Bolivia's average annual alcohol consumption – 5.8 litres for those 15 years and older – isn't remarkably high, the World Health Organization predicts that the rate of consumption will grow in the coming years.

La Paz, having a party atmosphere to rival the most outgoing cities, also sees more and more young people becoming dependent on alcohol to enjoy a night out. One partygoer, when asked how often he goes out clubbing and drinking, replies: 'Five times—every day from Tuesday through to Saturday.' Another claims that he spends at least 500 bolivianos on alcohol every couple of days.

This excessive alcohol consumption also pervades Bolivian culture. *El Cementerio de los Elefantes* is a well-known Bolivian film in which the alcoholic protagonist goes to die in a so-called 'elephant cemetery' in La Paz, where alcoholics leave their lives behind and drink themselves to death. These 'cemeteries' offer an extreme example of alcoholism in La Paz, and according to the AA member these are people 'who don't have direction' and 'no longer serve a purpose' – they're the exception in La Paz. However, their existence in Bolivian society indicates the overwhelming presence of alcohol.

Victor Hugo Viscarra, one of Bolivia's most famous writers – and one of La Paz's most infamous drunks – was living on the streets at the age of 15. He became the chronicler of the street drinkers, documenting the language and culture, most famously in his dictionary of **coba**, or slang words, and his short story collection *Alcoholatum y Otros Drinks*, which depicted the alcohol-fueled underworld. In addition to documenting the drinking lifestyle, Viscarra lived it, and at the age of 48, in 2006, died due to alcoholism-related complications. His writings reveal an understanding of the outcasts of Bolivian society – whom he identified with – most notably the alcoholics. He showed how the insidious presence of alcohol affects many in Bolivia, from the fringes of society to the margins of the cultural elite.

A tradition of celebration brings colour and excitement to Bolivia, but it also gives visitors and locals alike the opportunity to drink in excess. While most Bolivians know how to have a good time without descending into alcoholism, alcohol permeates the culture, and in addition to lubricating social interactions for the many, it is powerfully addictive and destructive for the few. Add to that a permissive attitude toward drinking – which makes booze (among other things) easy to obtain, even for an underage crowd – and it's easy to see why La Paz is known as a top city in which to party, and all too often to get wasted.



JAIME SAENZ

THE POÈTE MAUDIT (ACCURSED POET) OF LA PAZ

Text: Deshan Chetty
Photo: Courtesy of Marcos Loayza

As I walk through the streets, taking in the sights and sounds of the city, I begin to wonder about him. A lot must have changed about the city since his time, these streets must look different now, these buildings so tall and so new. I walk alone; as the sun begins to set on La Paz, the night starts to come to life. I can see why he was so inspired by this city. I've walked down the same alleys and corners he would have walked and tasted the vibrant electricity of the La Paz night. I've walked in the steps of Bolivia's most famous and almost mythological writers Jaime Saenz, the accursed poet of La Paz.

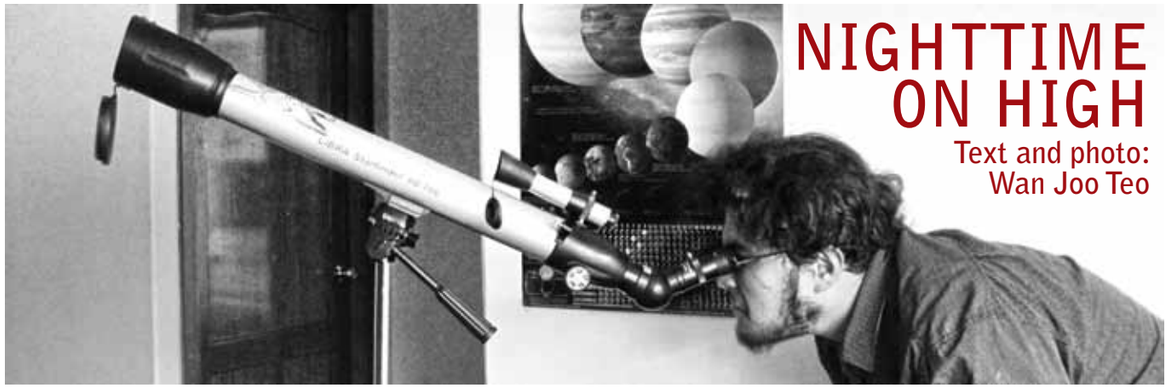
Jaime Saenz Guzman was born on the 29 October 1921 in La Paz. A city in which he would spend the majority of his life, La Paz's vibrant and colourful nightlife provided the perfect canvas for Saenz to explore his creativity. An immensely gifted writer, Saenz had an overwhelming, almost suffocating ability to wield the truth and to delve deep into the depths of the human soul. A drinker at the tender age of 15 and an alcoholic by his 20s, the truths told were of his own tortured existence.

Saenz's tale is a strange and sad one, accounting for an incredible life, full of strange twists and turns. It was a life filled with contrasts: a reject of conventional society, Saenz found himself to be an outcast, a drunken romantic haunted by his vices, a rebel poet obsessed with death, a bisexual Nazi sympathizer who wed a Jewish woman and showed an incredible sympathy for the oppressed, even going as far as to fight besides the working class against the right wing dictators who long controlled his country.

Finding comfort in the night and the ears of the deceased, Saenz spent many hours in their company. Visits to the morgue were a common feature of his life, and that's where he spent much of his time carefully meditating the parallels between life and death, the links between this world and one beyond it.

In *The Night*, the poet's final and probably most famous work, Saenz brilliantly brings together all the elements of this strange life he lived, this curse that beckoned to death to come closer with every swig of the bottle. *The Night* is divided into four parts: 'The Night,' 'The Gatekeeper,' 'Interval' and 'The Night'. The poem accompanies Saenz's mind as he watches the motions of his pen writing. We gain unbelievable insight into his overuse of alcohol, and his experiences and insight into death.

'Now, the other side of the night is a supremely esoteric realm,
and alcohol has conjured it.
Not anyone can pass to the other side of the night;
the other side of the night is a forbidden dominion, and only the condemned enter there.
What is the nature of the night's other side?
To put it bluntly, it is the nature of the night's other side
to sink into your spine and colonize your eyes, to see through them what it can't see on its own.'



NIGHTTIME ON HIGH

Text and photo:
Wan Joo Teo

Working Through the Day, So He Can Stargaze – and Make a Little Money – at Night

The question 'What do you do?' is fairly innocuous, but for 30-year-old Gabriel Flores, there is no simple answer. Convention dictates he tell you, in response, that he leads mountain mountain-biking trips on the infamous Death Road. To be fair, that is what takes up most of his daylight hours. In high season, he tends to be assigned four or five trips a week, and with a start as early as 6 am, his hours are as long as those of a typical office worker. Outside of June through September, however, the number of times he gets paid a week is more variable – business can get quite slow.

So Gabriel also referees motorcycle races. And he also designs company logos, publicity pamphlets, book layouts. 'Whatever needs to be done,' he says, 'I do it.' With the number of day jobs he has – sometimes all at once – you would think his nights would be reserved for rest, for friends, for curling up with wine and a book. But Gabriel regularly gives up his weekday nights, sometimes even the football Mondays he's set up with buddies, to work yet another job. And for all the variety of his days, his nights are uncharacteristically occupied by a single mission.

Three months ago, with friends Coco and Christian, Gabriel set up Moonlight Trekking, a company that offers, among other guided treks, one that takes tourists up a mountain at dusk. Around each full and new moon, Gabriel and his two partners climb what they call Tata ('Grandfather') Achumani, a mountain near the Achumani district near Zona Sur – 'It probably has an official name . . . I don't know it,' he says – on a route they devised through their own treks, and watch the sun set over El Alto. By the time they reach their campsite, it is completely dark and the city below is at its glittering finest. Christian busies himself with grilling burgers, and Gabriel and Coco set up the telescope. All three are self-proclaimed 'fanatics' of stargazing, but it is Gabriel who does most of the explaining. He points out Alpha Centauri, and tries his valiant best to join the dots, with his finger, of the 'shopping cart' that I have trouble seeing.

A systems engineer by training, I ask how Gabriel how he got interested in astronomy. 'Did you take a course?' I venture, 'or was your father an avid stargazer, perhaps?' 'No, no, no,' he shakes his head. 'I have a very nice book.'

He shows it to me. Published in 1978, it is full of brightly coloured drawings and diagrams, and instructions for DIY experiments for kids: Make Your Own Moon Crater! Construct 'The Star Spy'! 'My mother bought this when I was little,' he says, as he flips through its pages. 'This one,' he says excitedly, pointing to a step-by-step guide to constructing sun binoculars with everyday items, 'I've done.' I am about to ask him if his parents encouraged his experiments back in the day when he adds, 'Yeah, did it last year.'

At age 10, Gabriel purchased his first telescope. 'Once you see through a telescope you say, "Wow, I want to do that again."' And so he did: He taught himself about the skies with voracious reading, abundant use of the Internet ('That's all we need, isn't it?') and visits to a planetarium. Years later, in the Netherlands, he was over the moon when he chanced upon a telescope he'd been coveting for a long time at a whopping 75 percent off.

So he already had the equipment. But while setting up the company, a lot more had to be done. Gabriel and his partners had to explore different trails – could emergency vehicles access the route? Was there enough light on the path? – procure safety equipment, make and distribute flyers for publicity and pool some money to fund the bonus T-shirts they provide to their clients. All this work was undertaken in their spare time, at nights and on weekends.

Right now the young company is still getting off the ground, and after dark they're still busy working out the kinks. They're in talks with a **minibusero** about a transportation contract so Gabriel doesn't have to keep borrowing cars, hailing cabs or getting his aunt to drive customers to and from the mountain. They've just begun the arduous journey of navigating the paperwork that comes with registering a company in Bolivia. On full or new moon nights with no customers, they go out anyway, hunting for new routes, concocting plans for new stargazing options: 'Once we're more settled, we're thinking moonlight biking, moonlight hiking . . . ' They're working on generating more publicity. And of course, their first priority is to procure another telescope – they're channeling all Moonlight Trekking income into a new one they estimate can be purchased in three months, but if that fails, Gabriel's birdwatcher mother has one he intends to steal.

Gabriel still bikes the Death Road on a regular basis, and despite how much fun every ride is, juggling that with his new company is no walk in the park. Moonlight treks tend to end around or after midnight, and if there's a bike trip the next day, he is expected at the company workshop to load up equipment at 6:40 am. 'It's tough,' he says. 'Sometimes you're very tired, but you just have to put on a happy face and keep going.'

But it is clearly worth it. His fervent appeals for me to 'tell all your friends about us' and to 'remember to like our Facebook page' reveal the high hopes Gabriel has for his fledgling company. Presently they're getting about ten customers a month, but in six months they're hoping to hit that same number per week. When that happens, Gabriel will have successfully turned his amateur passion into a thriving business, and plans to halt his daytime pursuits. 'If I want my company to rise, I have to put all my focus on it,' he says. Then, there'd be no more holding down six different day jobs, no more leading biking trips on five hours of sleep. It would be a dream.

THE INCAN MILKY WAY

A PATH TO ANOTHER WORLD

TEXT: LAETICIA GREVERS
PHOTO: JUAN MANUEL LOBATON

On the border to Achumani, a neighbourhood in southeast La Paz, the star-filled sky is blocked out in places by the borders of the mountains that jump out from the earth, circumscribed in the thin air in shapes like lanky black ghosts. Here, the nighttime sky is at its clearest and the lights of the metropolis look like a reflection of the sky above, as if the stars' mirror image were being cast back from a sea. Through the radiant sky, Centauri beams down – it belongs to the eighty-six constellations that can be observed during a clear winter night. But Inca astronomy does not recognize these constellations. It is unique from Western astronomy in that it identifies dark clouds as its constellations instead of their stellar counterparts.

The centre of the Milky Way – the spiral galaxy of which our solar system is a part of, and of which we can only see the central part from Earth – contains the highest quantity of stars. It's the brightest part of the Milky Way, and it comprises several star constellations in addition to other deep-space objects, such as interstellar clouds of gas and dust. These can be observed while looking at the dark regions of the Milky Way. They are extremely visible because they contrast with the relatively bright background of galaxy's star field. The clearness of the La Paz sky permits one to make these observations with the naked eye—no telescope required here.

These interstellar clouds of gas and dust were called **yana phuyu** by the Incans, which means 'black clouds'. These dark areas against the light background of the Milky Way are identified with the silhouettes of animals. The Milky Way is called the **mayu**, the Quechuan word for 'river'. Figures of animals drink its waters and darken its luminescence with their shadows, according to the Manuscrito de Huarochirí, a testament of ancient and colonial Andean religion written around 1600. The llama, or **yacana**, is at the centre of the animal constellations in the mayu; it's the dark spot between Scorpio and the Southern Cross. Its eyes – called **llamacnawin** by the Incas – are its only bright part: the stars Alpha and Beta Centauri (the third- and fourth-brightest stars in the sky). Underneath, an upside-down baby llama drinks from its mother's breast. The prominent position of the llama in the sky mirrors itself in Incan religious ceremonies, in which black llamas were sacrificed to appease the gods. Back in our Andean skyline, a bird's nest is visible near the Southern Cross, with two black spots – **yutu** and **hanp'atu** – representing a partridge and a toad. Unfortunately, these figures are constantly under threat from the snake, machacuay, in the east and a fox, **atoq**, in the west. The fox blazes at them through its red burning eye – the star Antares.

The Incas worshipped the yacana and machacuay black clouds, who were believed to be in charge of their species. The Incas venerated them, and forbade their subjects from harming their earthly incarnations. All the animals and birds had their anologues in the sky, who were responsible for their procreation and the augmentation of their species, a sort-of cosmological Noah's Ark. They were the celestial blueprint of every living thing on Earth.

Similarly, the mayu is the ideal of a terrestrial river, the Vilcanota River. It rises in the Andes to the southeast of Cuzco, near Puno in Peru, and flows northwest for 724 kilometers before joining the lower Apurímac River to form the Ucayali River. The mayu flows in the same direction as its terrestrial equivalent.

According to legend, the Incan god Viracocha crossed the mayu to reach the **hurin pacha** (upper world) after creation had been completed. Travelled by shamans, deities and spirits in trance, the mayu is also traversed by the souls of the deceased – or by humans in dreams. It is the connection between heaven and earth.

This connection between heaven and Earth is at its most significant during the Inti Raimi celebration. Just after the June solstice, the Inca himself presided over the most important ceremony of the year, the Solemn Feast of the Sun. All Incan nobles were required to come to Cuzco for this ceremony, and all Incans, nobles and commoners alike, were encouraged to participate. The ceremony, which is still practiced, is a 'centering of the universe' around the Inca in the Temple of the Sun at Cuzco. The timing of Inti Raimi in the ritual calendar coordinates with the mayu – the galaxy that the Earth itself is a part of – aligning with the Vilcanota River, when heaven and Earth come together and the sun rises and sets in the mayu.

The mayu partitions space and connects heaven and Earth. Similarly, it incorporates the perfect, ideal model of every terrestrial creature. It is a path that leads to the other world, as opposed to the Western interpretation of the Milky Way – a representation of godly milk, a metaphor for birth. And unlike Western astrology, the Incan sky – as brilliantly lit as it was – was more notable for its dark spaces, in which the ancient legends, animals and spirits resided.

As night-time begins to envelop the streets of La Paz, thousands of street children, many of them shoe-shiners, sense opportunity and danger in equal measure. When one considers the manifold threats they have to grapple with, from freezing temperatures to violence and drug dependency, it is astonishing that so many street children survive to adulthood. Yet despite these hardships, one occasionally encounters the success of those who have made it out like Daniel Escalante Vargas, co-founder of the Luz de Esperanza homeless shelter in El Alto, and a former street kid himself.

Following the death of two of his friends, Escalante Vargas established a shelter with the help of Sister Doris Huertas where children could live free of alcohol and drugs. Huertas bought the land on which the centre now stands with help from her church and picked up its first residents by trawling the city cemetery, an area frequented by the homeless. She enlisted Escalante, who helped make it the success it is today by involving the shelter's beneficiaries in the running of the organisation.

Eloquent and polite, Escalante challenges many preconceptions of someone brought up homeless in the streets of the city. Though a childhood on the streets does not necessarily breed contempt, one might at least expect a certain degree of gruffness or unease. Rather, he speaks lucidly about the difficulties and typicality of his formative years. Born in La Paz to a working mother and a largely absent father, he first took to the streets to join his friends after school. At the age of eight, seeking a small income, he began to work aboard the city's **micros**. As the middle child of seven brothers, it was his responsibility to look after his three younger siblings, but the longer his hours became on the buses, the more he neglected his family duties.

Craving more autonomy, he became a shoe-shiner and joined a group of boys with whom he would sleep rough. While the job afforded him the opportunity to buy more than just the food that his mother was capable of providing, the luxuries he so craved remained beyond him.

He began to drink strong-proof alcohol at age thirteen (diluting it only with water) and later moved to inhaling **clefa**. Night-time in La Paz allowed him to consume such substances away from prying eyes, and morning presented him the opportunity to earn some money. He drank before and after school, and during the evenings busied himself with finding an alleyway to sleep in. Every so often, him and his friends would escape to an abandoned house that his uncle owned outside the city. It was there that Escalante would first seek to change his situation. As a first step, he moved to Santa Cruz for two years, where he found work as an assistant mechanic. Upon returning to La Paz, two of his friends died in quick succession, events which marked him profoundly and gave him the mission to change the situation of the homeless.

When I ask Escalante about the causes of child homelessness, he argues that the lack of parental investment -often worsened by long working hours- forces children outside in search of independence. He tells me that while education is important, 'the lack of affection from their parents is what forces the kids onto the street'. Escalante believes that the city's state schools should build ties with the families of those at risk of pursuing a life on the streets.

Tribalism abounds in the calles, and factions coalesce to claim and defend their localities, often by violent means. Among the homeless, this sense of community is both a defense mechanism from other such threats, and a safety net for financial hardship. Typically, a shoe-shiner needs ten clients every day in order to make enough money to eat. Should a member of the group fail to meet this threshold, the others will contribute to make up the shortfall. Similarly, shoes and other such luxuries are frequently bought with money that has been jointly saved.

Familiarity and friendship is often a conduit for many of the vices that typify life on the streets of La Paz. As such, alcohol and drug dependencies are carved into many of the expressions that during the working day are so frequently masked by balaclavas. Unsurprisingly, such addictions usually start off as a way to combat the cold, as sleep comes more readily to those who are under the influence.

A ten-year-old housed at the shelter (name undisclosed) gives a telling example of the circumstances which lead to a child becoming homeless. His parents used to travel frequently for work, leaving him with his uncle. Apparently oblivious to the child's vulnerability, the uncle kicked him out, abandoning him to his fate on La Paz's most dangerous streets, where he lived for two months. Now, although his parents have returned to the city, he remains in the shelter, as they are incapable of - or uninterested in - taking care of him.

The stories I bear witness to unfold along poignantly similar trajectories. Early familiarity with the streets combined with a craving for an income and independence often lead to jobs in shoe-shining. Eventually, so much time is spent away from home that living on the streets becomes a natural next step. Here, the ubiquity of strong proof alcohol and solvents all but ensures a period of addiction. Another resident of the shelter, 32 year-old David Mamani, suggests that this existence is a symptom of the manner in which the homeless are perceived in the city. Abandoned by the state and ignored by the rest of society, he suggests that every street-dweller creates a reality of their own; a world in which they alone exist and strive to survive. David identified himself as neither a **paceño** nor a **boliviano**, words enjoyed by those with a place and a status in society. David confesses that before the shelter's intervention, he was ready to die.

The shelter steers those it houses away from addictive substances and keeps them occupied with carpentry, pottery and the maintenance of an on-site farm. It is easy to see the value of such vocational training, and its tangible results (such as hand-crafted bunk beds) are visible everywhere.
The Luz de Esperanza project can only accommodate so many of those in danger; eradicating the problem of homelessness must start with government initiatives to restructure the sagging bonds of families in poverty.

LESSONS FROM THE BOOTH

TONIGHT'S DJ IS MARCO CUBA

http:// www.marcocuba.com
http:// www.soundcloud.com/marcocuba
http://www.beatport.com/artist/marco-cuba/122443

Text: Ben Fagan
Photo: Ivan Rodriguez Petkovic

Walking into Traffic on the Avenida Arce at midnight on a Friday night wasn't exactly a mind-shattering experience. Too early to attract a substantial crowd and being served a so-so cocktail by the hovering bar staff, the night didn't seem to be headed anywhere interesting. Over the following hour, increasing numbers of people streamed into the club, each litter looking a little more tipsy than the previous one. As the empty dance floor slowly filled up, repetitive house beats had the crowd timidly bopping up and down. Yet when the clock struck one, a man in a bright turquoise shirt took over the DJ booth and started playing Mark Knight's Alright, immediately drawing frenzied club-goers to the floor from tables and bar-stools far and wide.

Marco Cuba, a Peruvian born DJ based in La Paz, plays techno and house beats and has performed at festivals and shows that have featured DJ powerhouses such as David Guetta and Seb Fontaine. DJ Marco Cuba is one of the most important and well- known figures in the Bolivian electronic music scene.

When asked about the origin of his career as a DJ, Marco Cuba speaks of his upbringing. In his house he was 'bombarded' by disco music his mother played in the house, as well as being exposed the 60's rock his father used to listen to. Speaking of what attracts him to this line of work, he mentions the appeal involved in the never-ending search and discovery of new music, constantly looking for new artists and songs. Beyond his passion for harmonies/dark beats/mixing, his profession has also given him the opportunity to travel to countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, Peru and Chile to play at various festivals and shows. While he admits that dealing with club-goers while working can be stressful, learning to control the situation from the DJ booth comes with experience. Marco Cuba loves his job and sees no obvious downsides. Well, that is, except for his one complaint: 'the loss of hearing.'

While Marco Cuba has traveled throughout Latin America mixing music (at times bemoaning the popularity of reggaeton in the region) he believes that La Paz has a distinct nightlife scene. He tells me:

People come to La Paz for many reasons and with different energies. There is a tendency to drink a lot. La Paz is incredible, it is growing and despite having huge clubs, or such a developed night scene, it has something very special that is difficult to explain.

He loves playing in many of the different clubs in the city, though can only think of two venues with sufficient scale to be considered 'proper' discotecas: Soundbar and Forum. Far from lamenting the absence of grandiose Ibiza-style clubs, he is quick to point out that it is these smaller venues that together create the vibrancy and energy for which the city has become known. When asked about his favourite place to play in La Paz, he affirms without hesitation, 'Traffic. Friday nights.'

WHITE NIGHTS

The Distorted Reality of Cocaine Tourism

Text: Rose Acton and Laetitia Grevers
Photo: Rose Acton

In a bar, a woman discretely leaves for the toilet from time to time. When she is back she seems rejuvenated– fun, talkative and enthusiastic. We are now going to a place where discretion is no longer necessary, Route 36. Possibly the world's most famous cocaine bar.

Rumours of this illicit place had raised my expectations but when we walk through the unimpressive door of a rundown apartment building I am disappointed: the interior is tacky, perhaps suitably so. Bright orange and green sofas form a tasteless ensemble; neon lights lead us to a distorted world.

A colourful mixture of people surrounds us: alpaca-jumper-clad backpackers mix with hipsters and provocative women. A group of Australian couples in their thirties are sitting next to us. On the dance floor they bend and buckle around, jumping and singing to the mix of mainstream music. This enthusiasm is only short-lived, after a few moves they leave the dance floor - back to what they are really here for - consumption. The dance floor will remain empty for most of the evening.

Route 36 epitomizes a rapidly growing trend across Bolivia - cocaine tourism. The people who visit here are not regular cocaine users; they see Route 36 as another experience on their tourist trail of South America- Machu Picchu, Death Road, Route 36. The bar moves every few months to avoid being shut down, so its location is passed on through word of mouth in backpacker hostels. This is a world made up entirely of tourists, a gringo heaven, there are no Bolivians in Route 36 (aside from the owners), mainly because they wouldn't be allowed in. This is both for security reasons and so that the bar maintains an exclusive clientele.

An important source of tourists' fascination with the infamous cocaine industry is the book Marching Powder by Rusty Young. The book describes the tale of a British drug smuggler, Thomas McFadden, who was imprisoned in the notorious San Pedro prison. McFadden began to run prison tours for tourists and describes how 'during the first year and a half all my visitors were backpackers aged in their twenties who were looking for adventure', also recounting how the best cocaine in the country could be found inside San Pedro. The book can be found on the bookshelves of many hostels, being passed between travellers, eager to read this bizarre and gripping testimony.

Today The Lonely Planet, the backpacker bible, strongly advises against visiting the prison, stating that tours are illegal and warning readers that the danger of visiting it to buy cocaine cannot be overstated. There is no protection or guarantee of tourists' safety within the prison and the Bolivian authorities have been cracking down on prison tourism: in 2009 in order to solve the problem they restricted prisoner visiting hours, a change which resulted in riots in the prison. However, with places such as Route 36 it is clear that cocaine tourism continues to flourish. McFadden famously claimed that San Pedro was the best place to party in South America and it is clear that backpackers' desire for this type of adventure hasn't waned despite the crackdown on visits to the prison.

Yet cocaine tourism is but a facet within the long and diverse history of coca leaf products. The coca leaf in its natural form is an integral feature of Bolivian culinary and medicinal traditions, grounds on which the current government defends the right to grow it. Nonetheless, it is no secret that the highest profits derived from coca come from activities associated with cocaine production. This market is perverse as is it is subversive, for while Bolivia is the second largest producer of cocaine in the world (just behind Colombia), it is not a significant consumer. Bolivian cocaine usage is confined to small segments of the elite classes and tourists, a negligible business compared with the export industry: the cocaine produced in Bolivia is exported to 174 countries, of which North America and Europe, make up 67% of global cocaine consumption, according to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime statistics 2008. Nevertheless, tourists continue to seek the thrill of cocaine at its source for two reasons: cost and purity. The further cocaine travels the more expensive it becomes, costing $108 per gram in Europe and North America versus $11 for the same amount in Central and South America. Once it has made its way across the trafficking routes it is also more likely to be cut with other products and chemicals, such as baking powder, meaning that there is an implicit guarantee of purity in Bolivian locales like Route 36.

Cocaine tourism may have made a name for itself in the country, yet it represents only a speck in the global context, in which Bolivia remains predominantly a producer. Meanwhile, the highest consumption rates worldwide are in North America, UK, Spain and Italy, while cocaine in Bolivia, cheap by international standards, still remains financially out of reach for most Bolivians, and has not become a widespread part of popular culture in the way it has elsewhere. Where Eric Clapton croons of the drug -'she don't lie, she don't lie, she don't lie; cocaine'- Bolivians are more likely to be found singing 'hoja verde de la coca...compañero de la vida' (green coca leaf... my partner for life) or 'coca no es cocaína, coca es la hoja sagrada' (coca is not cocaine, coca is the sacred leaf). This reality is often lost upon tourists who believe that route 36 might offer an authentic experience. While it remains niche, Bolivian black market entrepreneurs are tapping into tourists expectations for drug availability and selling an experience that allows tourists to feel they're getting the real deal in what is ultimately an illusory setting.

MATAMBA

BAND INTERVIEW

TEXT: ROSANNA BUTTERS

PHOTO: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC.

If you have been to T-TKOS, Parque de las Cholas or Tercer Festival Intercultural del Amor these last two months you may have come across the reggae-hardcore fusion act that is Matamba y Zion. Although originally from Buenos Aires, Juan Carlos Chiorino Basurco (Matamba) has been living in Bolivia since the age of ten and is firmly rooted here, with musical links in both La Paz and Santa Cruz. Matamba has accompanied many established artists such as Shakira, The Black Eyed Peas and Los Pericos and on the 21st of September will kick off his international tour in Tacna, Peru.

When and why did you call yourself Matamba?
It's a nickname I was given when I was still in school in Santa Cruz. There was a footballer there who was dark skinned like me and he had the last name Matamba. As well as this, a 'matamba' is a palm tree. I'm very tall and thin and had curly hair, which made me look like a palm tree.

What was the inspiration for you song 'Favela'?
In Latin America we have a lot of ghettos; in some places they're called 'villas', in Chile they're called 'poblas' and in Brazil 'favelas'. Here in Bolivia they're called 'villas'. These are marginalised places where people don't give a damn, people live there because they're drug addicts, part of a gang, bad people in society…these people get labelled slum dogs, outcasts. For example in an office if something goes missing and someone from a villa is working there, the first suspect will usually be him.

So the song is meant to eliminate stereotypes?
Exactly. This is why the lyrics say "Favela nao da para ficar triste", 'The Favela isn't a reason to be unhappy', it's like a gift. The people of villas are born fighters because in a villa life is much more complicated.

Do you have Portuguese connections?
I have family roots in Salvador de Bahía so I can speak Portuguese.

Do you think that it is difficult to be a young artist in Bolivia?
Yes. The struggle never stops, the fight is on all sides. There are stereotypes about music, you are always perceived as having some sort of drug or alcohol problem, or are called bohemian or a 'good for nothing', the type who sleeps only with his guitar wherever he can. So people don't take many musicians seriously, they treat them badly. You often smoke weed, so yes, it's a problem. And then there's financial support – often people support other types of artists, there are other cultural worlds too. I don't have anything against this, I'm just saying that people support other things, fashion shows, models…what do I know…flesh sells more than one's soul.

How does the music scene in La Paz differ from that of Santa Cruz?
I think both are growing at the moment. In La Paz, yes they're taking risks and trying new things, supporting music, and this makes me very happy. They really support art and alternative music in La Paz, so there's not too much cumbia or too much reggaetón, for example. However in Santa Cruz there's also a good music scene so it's not all that different.

Would you say there was more hardcore in Santa Cruz, or here in La Paz?
It's in Santa Cruz where I first did hardcore. Hardcore has grown a lot but it has also declined a bit in Santa Cruz; while there are still hardcore bands, a tropical scene has developed in Santa Cruz, for instance there's been a lot of influence from Brazilian music, pojo and reggaetón.

Apart from hardcore, which aspects of KERUX and Contracultura influence your music today?
Hardcore is a very strong influence in my life, it makes up half of who I am. Reggae and hardcore. These are always my influences as I'm a hardcore roots man, and of course, as they defined the first band that I formed, they had a lot of influence on my music. Now we are creating 'dread style', which means a reggae sound from this part of the world, a mix of reggae and hardcore. We want to show the musical world another sound because so many metalcore bands are similar. So creating something new is really important.

The political origins of reggae are Jamaican, do you think that Bolivians can relate to these origins?
Today we live in a time very similar to that of Marley. When Marley was around there was an internal political problem in Jamaica, problems between the two parties that meant they took up arms. This is very similar to here, where people have invented problems between people, they've invented a socio-cultural problem between **cambas** and **collas**. This problem has grown and people are forgetting that they are brothers in our same country, just with different accents. This accent doesn't mean that their blood is different, that they no longer have two eyes, a nose, a mouth, fingers…so I believe that in this way Jamaica then is similar to Bolivia today. Is there hope? I believe so. There was in Jamaica then, and I see hope here today.

Does politics influence your music?
I'm not a politician, I'm social but I'm not political. Because in politics you have to be part of one political party or other. And I won't be part of one, Rasta people can't be.

In English in Rasta language there are expressions like "I and I" – do these expressions exist in Spanish Rasta language?
Yes because "I and I" is no different from "yo y yo". "Yo y yo" is a transparent mirror of me and you, however the image the I see in it is of you, it's as if I were you…if you hurt an unknown person then you are hurting yourself. "Yo y yo" is a biblical idea, it's to love your brother as yourself. It's "me and father Jah". "Yo y yo" is a concept, a way of life, it's how people should learn to act and live, isn't it?

Because language is formed by your way of life…
Of course. Rasta as a principle is like writing, culture, it's applies to and is in everything. Rasta doesn't just mean that you have dreads…So I keep fighting, and I'm only flesh and bone, I'm sad, but I'm also annoyed and everything, but I try…

In the lyrics of your songs?
That's right.

TAXI TRIVIA

a fare-CHANGING GAME

TEXT AND PHOTOS: AMARU VILLANUEVA RANCE with contributions from Selene Pinto and Sharoll Fernandez

Urban lore has it that you'll find a taxi driver roaming the city streets at night who will challenge you to a game en route to your destination. He gives you a green hardcover book - the 2012 Universal Almanack -from which you are offered to ask him any question (you are also supplied a torch which he takes out of his glove compartment). The rules are as follows: for every question he gets right your fare increases by Bs1 and for every question he gets wrong, it goes down by Bs1 accordingly (others report 50 centavo increments and decrements). It's on, Mr Mario. "What's the capital of Burma?" I ask. "Burma, also called Myanmar. The capital used to be Rangoon, now it's Naypyidaw. Do you want me to tell you the surface area and population?" He proceeds to quote them to the last digit, missing the surface area by a few kilometres. "I have a margin of error of 1%, it's sometimes hard to remember the last few numbers".

Mario Durán is a bespectacled and softly spoken man from Sucre, who works the night shift in a pretty ordinary-looking taxi. He is 65. He can often be found driving up and down the steep streets of Sopocachi, on occasion frequenting the Honguito fast food joints a couple of blocks up the road from the Plaza Avaroa, where he gets a discount in exchange for giving the workers a cheap ride home at the end of the night. "I work the night shift because I'm too old to put up with the traffic and social protests of the day time". He sleeps 4 hours when he gets home, and then another hour or two before his shift, admitting he has a problem with sleep.

Don Mario knows the exchange rate, capital, population and landmass of every country in the Almanack (though bitterly points out that in the latest edition the surface area for 105 countries has changed in relation to the previous version, sometimes by as much as two digits). His knowledge doesn't end there. He also knows an ungodly amount of information about local and international football, often to obsessive levels of granularity. "The Bolivian Football league was inaugurated on the 23rd of August 1977 at 21:47 at the Radisson Hotel" He continues: "Bolivar won the cup 17 times, followed by the Strongest who won it 9, then Blooming and Wilstermann, who have 5 championships each [he goes on listing teams and cup titles]". His general knowledge is also impressive. "Ask me any question", he assets with calm confidence, even eagerness. I proceed to ask him what are the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World, which he patiently lists, with some hesitation towards the end. He knows he's not infallible, and this is part of his charm and humanity. Don Mario is no robot, but rather a warmly engaging interlocutor.

To the obvious set of questions regarding his seemingly-superhuman recall abilities, he tells me: "I am deductive. I inherited this trait from my mother. She was even more deductive than me, she could predict the future", he says, without suggesting she had supernatural powers, but rather clarifying that this ability came from being able to reach logical conclusions based on a set of facts. "I am also very analytical...numbers are my friends". His mother would prize him as a child for a number of small achievements. "She was very fair". Don Mario always knew he had no difficulty remembering facts, even when he was a child. However, due to financial difficulties he was never able to finish tertiary education. "At school I was always in the top set of the class. One year I was even the best student – I never dropped below fifth place".

Before becoming a taxi driver he worked as a hotel receptionist, curiously also on the night shift (day shifts, he tells me, are traditionally reserved for women). "It helped that I knew some English". He also worked in construction as a project manager, and was responsible for erecting a well-known motel in Sopocachi, as well as several social housing projects in Santa Cruz.

The economics of driving a taxi in La Paz are challenging, yet clearly work with enough regularity to keep thousands of independent maestritos in employment. Don Mario owns a vehicle, but as it's undergoing maintenance (in urgent need of a motor replacement) he has to rent one from a friend for 60 **Bolivianos** per day. On top of this he spends Bs.10 on cleaning, and Bs.50-60 in petrol. This means he has to make over Bs.130 before he can take anything home – which equates to at least 15 journeys within the city centre.

Upon meeting him, people often wonder how an individual with such a prodigious memory and ease with numbers might not have been able to build a career as something else – a statistician or geographer, perhaps. Don Mario always knew he had a gift for remembering facts, even as a small child. "At school I was always in the top set of the class. One year I was even the best student – though I never dropped below fifth place". However, due to financial difficulties he was never able to finish tertiary education. "My life has always been work. Right now my life is only this taxi – I have to work for 10-12 hours a day so have little time to expand other interests".

Through some chance encounters, he is sometimes able to project his life beyond the taxi which drives for a living. "One day I picked up Evo Morales – this was back when he was only a member of parliament". He went through the routine with him; Evo picked China from the Almanack. "He congratulated me when I got every question right…and you know what? I knew he was going to be President, because I'm deductive". How could he have known? "I could see it coming through everything happening around me: the way people think, the situation with the country's hydrocarbons; it was obvious really […] I should have told him 'You're going to be President'. I would now be in his team of advisors, or working for his government in some way, because I'm good with numbers."

Another passenger once told him about the TV show "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire", where contestants have a chance to become rich by answering a set of multiple choice questions (of increasing difficulty) correctly. "But there are no competitions like this in Bolivia. I heard there are even some memory competitions in Argentina, but not here". Without displaying any conspicuous traits commonly associated with superhuman mental abilities (such as a lack of social awareness), Don Mario is certainly a savant of sorts; the main evidence being, perhaps, his inability to explain how he does what he does. When prompted, he begins to talk about how he sorts countries by regions, and then associates them based on the last digit of their total population. It's all very unclear. What he can tell me is that he loses up to 10% of these facts within a month unless he spends 2-3 hours per week revising. Most remarkable, perhaps, is his inability to remember faces. "People are surprised when I don't recognise them […] People are born with different types of intelligence" he says, with characteristic humility.

I ask him whether he admires anyone in particular. After some thought he mentions Gandhi, but quickly qualifies his answer with digressions that take him into a universe of facts and figures about India (how many languages are spoken there, the size of it's territory, etc.), returning after several tangents to explain what a challenge it must have been to unite a country so vast and fragmented. It's clear numbers and facts occupy a much larger part of his mental vocabulary than do ideologies. He also admires Angela Merkel, yet immediately relates this to how he admires the orderliness and dedication of the German people. Similarly, when I ask him which famous personality he would like to meet, he spends some time in thought before saying "it's hard to say, the probability of meeting them is so low it wouldn't make sense to choose someone". It is in answers such as these that I begin to understand how his brain must work. Things either are, or they are not, with limited room for what they could be. I wonder whether the subjunctive tests the limits of his mind more than the innumerable facts he keeps.

What does he hope to get out of this peculiar routine with passengers? Does he use it to win bets? "It's not about winning bets, I don't use my knowledge to win money off people because people's feelings get hurt when they lose a bet. Doing this doesn't make sense. I want to encourage people to learn more, to become better prepared" He tells me of the time he was treated by a bad doctor who charged him without curing his ailment, lamenting that individuals like these are symptomatic of the country's lack of social and economic development. "The country can only move forward through knowledge. Of course, doing what I do also makes these journeys more interesting, and that is good. Bolivia is far behind other countries in the region. In terms of development indicators we're 30th out of 33 countries. Worldwide we're 136th. The country needs more knowledge". His lamenting doesn't last for long; and quickly becomes animated again when he remembers. "Why do I do this? Well some people tell me it's the best taxi ride I've ever had in my life." Don Mario smiles. "I like that."

Don Mario can be reached on 725 65424

Bolivian Express
Grupo Express Press

Cultural Calendar

September 2012

CULTURAL EVENTS AT THE BRAZILIAN EMBASSY THIS SEPTEMBER

FESTIJAZZ – Featuring Swami Jr. and Trio, from Brazil
Tuesday and Wednesday, September 4 and 5
INAUGURACION TEATRO MUNICIPAL, 8 pm

Thursday, September 6: CONCIERTO EN EL PATIO
CENTRAL DE LA UPEA (El Alto), 11 am (free entry)

Friday, September 7: AECID (Santa Cruz) 7 pm
Swami Jr. and trio will represent Brazil in FESTIJAZZ 2012, where he will perform a special performances here in La Paz on the 4th and 5th and, for the first time, in El Alto on the 6th, at the UPEA. Swami will perform alongside Bolivian musicians who will use native instruments to perform bossa nova songs and more.

Gala Brasil
Organised by the Brazilian Embassy and the Fundación Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional.
Centro Sinfónico Nacional (Calle Ayacucho 366)
Thursday and Friday, September 13 and 14
Guest artist from Brazil: Maestro Leonardo David
(Welcome drinks on Wednesday 12 at 8 pm)

Capoeira
Demonstrations and discussions about capoeira
Saturday, September 15
Plaza Principal del Tinku (El Alto)
Starting at 11 am (free entry)

Festival Viñetas con Altura
Guest: Rafael Coutinho
Saturday, September 22
Comic illustration workshop for teenagers and children, 11am Centro Cultural Brasil Bolivia
(Av. Arce corner of Cordero 2808)
Free registration: 216-6418 (limited space)

Workshop: Makeup and Fashion of the Ages
Every Wednesday in September

Cinemateca Boliviana
Brazilian Cinema Wednesdays – Series Os Anos Dourados (The Golden Years)
Information and registration
Mariel Vernanza 766-97145
Brazilian Cinema Wednesdays have been happening since 2009 in La Paz, and currently also in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, El Alto, Potosí, Sucre, Cobija and Cochabamba. The program for 2012 features children, urban tales, music, romance and comedy, migrations, the golden years of Brazilian cinema, important Brazilian figures, and a Brazilian vision of the human condition, before ending the year with a tribute to Roberto Carlos, one of Brazil's most recognized singers and artists.

Screenings: Compa Trono Teatro 6 pm, Santa Cruz (Centro Cultural Santa Cruz 5 and 8 pm), Potosí (Casa Nacional de la Moneda 4:30 pm), Sucre (Musef 7 pm), Cobija (Salón Rojo) Microcine Chasqui 6:30 pm.

Free entry until full capacity

Sala José Maria Velasco Maidana
Times: 5:30/7:30 pm
Wednesday, September 5: Carnaval Atlântida
Director: José Carlos Burle/Year: 1952/ Duration: 95 min./Genre: Comedy (black and white)
Professor Xenofantes, a specialist in Greek mythology, is contracted by the producer, Cecílio B. de Milho, as a consultant for the screen adaptation of the classic Helen of Troy. However, two employees of the studio want to transform the epic into a carnivalesque comedy.

Wednesday, September 12: Barnabé, Tú Es Meu
Director: José Carlos Burle/Year: 1951/Duration: 91 min./Genre: Comedy (black and white)
Barnabé accidentally stamps the star of David on one of his hands, the mark of the sixth heir of Solomon, whom Princess Zuleima is searching for, so now he will have to marry her or be beheaded.

Wednesday, September 19: Grande Otelo
Director: J.B. Tanko/Year: 1958/Duration: 93 min. /Genre: Documentary (black and white)
Sebastião Bernardes de Sousa Prata was the real name of Grande Otelo, a great actor with a life plagued by tragedies.

Wednesday, September 26: Treze Cadeiras
Director: Francisco Eichlord/Year: 1957/ Duration: 98 min./Genre: Drama
A hairdresser in a city in the interior of Brazil receives news that his aunt has died and that she has left him an enormous house in Rio de Janeiro. However, in the marvelous city he discovers that he has in fact inherited thirteen chairs.

Theatre
A Necesidade de Ser Polígamo
(The Need to Be Polygamous)
Premiere: El Desnivel,
Thursday September 27, 9 pm
Starring: Claudia Coronel, Martín Díaz, Pamela Sotelo, Paolo Vargas and Mauricio Saldías/ Direction and adaptation: Miguel Vargas /Assistant director: Mauricio Saldías /Production: Mariela Jordán/ Genre: Tragicomedy/Duration: 70 min.
Petunio and Marta make an exemplary couple; he brings home the bacon while she constantly updates her Facebook status and knits jumpers for the winter. At the romantic height of their relationship, he confesses to her that he has a lover and that he has devised an innovative way to multiply love and create a polygamous cell.
Information: 715-61698

For more information see www.brasil.org.bo/ml_age_cul_mes.php

[DRINKING IN LA PAZ]

TEXT: ALICE AYLING
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN CACERES

Night after night, hoards of expectant partygoers line the streets of La Paz; queuing eagerly with their IDs in hand; standing outside the myriad bars, clubs and popular nightspots. As the Sun goes down, an eclectic array of evening hang outs—each with a wide selection of spirits and drinks—opens its doors to the city.

Whether it's chilled out Reggae, a heavy dance beat or an intimate drink you desire; if it's wine, beer, or a spirited cocktail you're craving; La Paz has a venue to suit. Catering to a diverse Bolivian clientele and to the nocturnal travelling masses, the vibrant night life of La Paz will provide what you and your taste buds are looking for.

One of the popular spots for gringo tourists is the illicit establishment Blue. In complete disregard of the legal opening hours, Blue is one of the few places in La Paz where you can party till sunrise.

For Europeans, Americans and Australasians visiting La Paz, this late night option features many home comforts. It plays chart music through the night, invites provocative fancy dress and offers complimentary vodka jelly shots. These western peculiarities in a country so different from home provide respite for many a patron.

As one American explained, 'I do like that you meet a lot of people from Europe and from all over the States. Sometimes it gets kind of lonely when your Spanish is as terrible as mine, and it's nice to hang out with some of your fellow countrymen and compare experiences.'
Despite Blue's popularity, it is among the more characterless venues in La Paz. The décor is sparse, with white walls, wooden tables and a DJ booth so highly elevated above the crowd it feels removed from those on the dance floor.

The international feel of the club permeates onto the bar scene and influences the selection of drinks on offer. Of course, Paceña will be for sale, but the bright lights of the jagermeister dispenser and the tempting array of colourful yet uninventive cocktails are hard to resist for young travellers.

Sadly, Blue's efforts to draw an international crowd often extend to excluding Bolivian clients. Attending the club with local friends can prove difficult as the staff is afraid of being exposed for their (less-than-legal) hours of operation.

'The down side,' one patron said, 'is that they turn away people who are too "Bolivian", I guess in an effort to cater to the Gringos. But it smacks a little bit too much of Colonialism for me.'
Soundbar in Zona Sur is a popular spot for a smarter, more Bolivian-friendly experience. Since the venue is much larger than Blue, the dance floor dominates! The focus here is on the music. DJs play a mix of Latin American dance hits and more international tunes.

From early on in the night, the floor is packed with a young Bolivian crowd visibly engrossed in the main activity of the evening. For the size of the club, the bar is relatively modest – as are the queues for drinks. The highly priced tequila shots reflect the priority of dancing over drinking and can make the night more expensive for those in need of a little Dutch courage to hit the dance floor.

Unlike Blue, this establishment welcomes Bolivians as a priority, especially those with connections. Soundbar's VIP area is extensive if sparsely populated. But money alone will not get you in. Only those from the right type of neighbourhoods and with the right family and friends are granted the privilege.

Ttkos, in Sopocachi, is the perfect spot for a more chilled out vibe and live music. Despite its modest size and its dim lighting, this is one of the liveliest venues in the city. The neon designs on the walls and the shambolic arrangement of the furniture add to the individual character of this club. But what sets it apart from other places is the live music played in such an intimate setting.

Ttkos is a regular spot for Bolivian artists Ma Tamba and Chuquiago Reggae. It is a highly respected venue within that particular music scene. At first, its fairly sparse bar might dissuade the more discerning drinker. Do not be fooled,though, because the fruity house cocktail has become something of a legend.

They call it the Tutuma. It is a delicious concoction of papaya, **singani** and a number of top-secret ingredients. 'Me and three friends who work in bars came up with the recipe' says the manager of the bar when I enquire. 'And no, I can't tell you what it's made of.'

Served in a large wooden bowl with as many colourful straws as required, this drink is as aesthetically pleasing as it is tasty. It represents alone roughly eighty per cent of the drink sales at Ttkos.

Please beware of the toilets, as they are not for the faint-hearted. Women should be prepared to have less than total privacy when using the facilities. The absence of cubical doors and unreliable plumbing are barely tolerable but otherwise, Ttkos provides a relaxed and friendly place to spend an evening.

For a quiet and more sophisticated evening, Diesel bar offers an attractive alternative. You could mistake this upmarket watering hole for something of an industrial scrap yard. A tall wire entrance gate, abstractly placed train tracks, piles of loose piping, and an imposing brass doorway help create this illusion.

Diesel's highly stylised appearance is unusual for bars in La Paz. One could picture this bar in London, New York or any other rich western city. Its harsh, highly metallic décor is matched with a large open fire, thoughtfully dimmed lighting and atmospheric music.

The friendly waiting staff will offer non-alcoholic options to drink, but this is a place for spirits and cocktails. One can easily get lost in the extensive menu. The quality of the drinks is consistent and the prices are reasonable.

'This is where I come for the best mojitos in town and the service is great,' one patron said. 'The drinks pack a punch,' she continued, jokingly pointing at her friend struggling through her second glass of Diesel's highly potent Long Island Ice Tea.

While some punters overindulge in the liquid delights, Diesel remains one of the classier establishments in La Paz and provides the perfect spot for a romantic drink or an overdue catch-up with friends.

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