

# BolivianExpress

Gratis Magazine





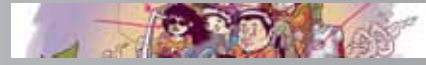
*This Issue is Dedicated to Sharoll Fernandez*

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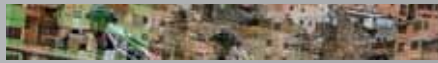
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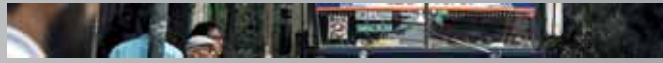
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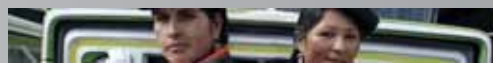
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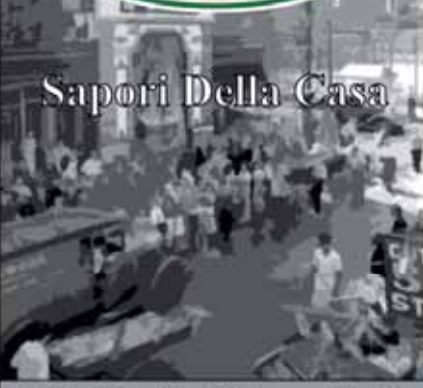
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La Paz Bolivia

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ABIERTO DE LUNES A SABADO

# EDITHORIAL

The country is home to an estimated 1.2 million vehicles, of which over 300 thousand can be found in La Paz alone, a figure that has risen 90% in the past fifteen years. Bridges and roads are constantly being built but the traffic seems to grow at twice the rate.

Heads peer out of the windows of minibuses shouting destinations; young men and women dressed as zebras teach people to cross the road; women wearing Robocop-style helmets enforce traffic routes to prevent **trameaje**; a 50-year-old blue bus known as 'El Inmortal' continues to grumble in circulation. A steel spider web is also being spun up above: the **teleférico** has arrived, and dangling cabins henceforth associated with Swiss ski resorts will soon be part of the world's largest network of urban transit cable cars.

This superorganism is evolving beyond the infrastructure. With the gradual disappearance of the **vocador** comes the rise of a new character known as el datero who, in exchange for some coins, tips off public transport drivers allowing them to better plan their routes: 'the 230 just passed, followed by an empty 355'. Local minibuses have invariably been adapted to fit an extra row of seats (the move is consistent with the anatomy of most locals, but remains a practical joke on anyone taller than 5'9"—ie most tourists). And roaming alongside 1967 Land Cruisers are living-room-sized-2013 Hummers, unviably huge compared to the narrow streets of the city centre. It's retro-futuristic, anarcho-anachronistic, organised chaos in all its glory.

Whether or not you are aware of it, you are also part of this superorganism. The moment you set foot out of your house you are plunged into a whirling world of pedestrians, vehicles, smog and chatter. E pluribus unum: 'one out of many'; each element seemingly follows a logic of its own, yet somehow it all comes together as a single whole on the busy arteries of La Paz. Missed connections, chance encounters, transport strikes, and the daily honking wars are all part of this choreography.

As if caught in a **trancadera**, these musings are (appropriately, we think) going nowhere. We invite you to stay put, hop on the Bolivian Express and start flicking the pages. We'll help you get to nowhere twice as fast. ✖

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

By Amaru Villanueva Rance

**The solution** for high altitude sickness  
**La solución** contra el mal de altura  
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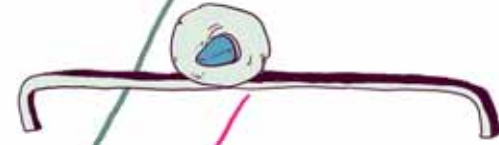
# ANATOMY of a TRUFI

TEXT: ALISON WALSH  
ILLUSTRATION: OSCAR ZALLES

CHOLITA PLUS POLLERA PLUS SHAWL PLUS BABY PLUS BAGS OF FOOD AND SHOPPING. THAT IS WEDGED BETWEEN HER HEAD AND THE ROOF (AND THIS CANNOT FALL OFF, HOWEVER HARD IT TRIES).



SWEATING BUSINESSMAN HAS NO ROOM TO TAKE OFF HIS JACKET OR LOOSEN HIS TIE.



MYSTERY OBJECT ON THE ROOF. PURPOSE: UNKNOWN.

LOUD MUSIC AND SUSPECT CHOICE OF TRACKS. USUALLY CHICHA/TECHNO-RAP/1980S BRITISH BALLADS.

TOURIST LOOKING FOR UNKNOWN LANDMARK. TRUFI WAS NOT DESIGNED WITH HIS ANATOMY IN MIND; HIS KNEES BENT UP AGAINST HIS CHEST PAY THE PRICE.

ORNAMENTAL SEATBELTS. USING THEM IS CONSIDERED SOCIALLY UNACCEPTABLE.

INDIVIDUAL BUNCH OF FLOWERS ALLIGNS THIS PASSENGER TO NEITHER GOD NOR DE SPY?



360° SIGNS AND STICKER WHICH INDICATES IT IS A "TRUFI 1" (NEVER TRUFI 2!)



BRIGHT FLUFFY COVER FOR THE DASHBOARD. VARIOUS OBJECTS HANG FROM THE REAR VIEW MIRROR (PINE-TREE-SHAPED AIR FRESHENER, MYSTERIOUS CD, VIRGIN MARY...)

WOMAN TRAVELS COLORE STYLE (HARD-HAT) OUT OF THE WINDOW. HIGH FLYING IN THE WIND AND INTO NEIGHBOR'S FACE(S). IDEAL MOMENT TO APPLY STERECTIA.



A FLAG SIGNALS THE APPROACH OF THE TRUFI. IT DOESN'T DO MUCH FOR THE AERODYNAMICS THOUGH.

ENGINE MAKES A RUMBLING NOISE, ESPECIALLY WHEN GOING UP A HILL: IF IT STALLS, IT'LL NEVER GET GOING AGAIN.

IF THE DRIVER WANTS TO CHANGE HIS ROUTE MID-JOURNEY, WELL, HE CAN'T ALL HE HAS TO DO IS LEAN OVER, SQUASH THE TWO PASSENGERS NEXT TO HIM AND CHANGE THE SIGN.

A STRAY DOG RUNS AFTER THE CAR, IN HOPE OF ADOPTION/DEFEAT OF THE WHEELED METALLIC BEAST. HE HAS NEVER YET SUCCEEDED BUT CARRIES ON UNDETERRED.

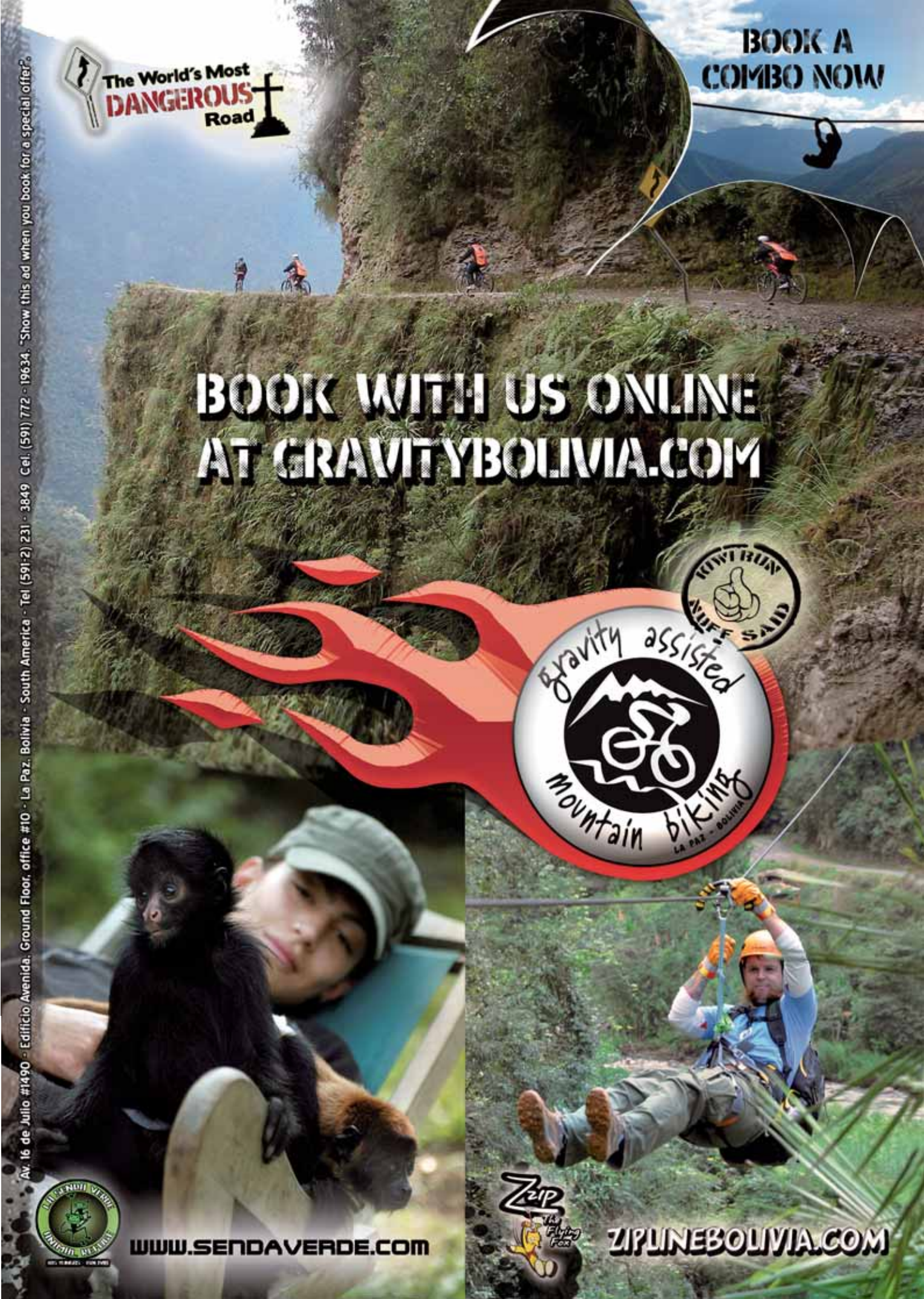


UPON SPOTTING A FARE, THE DRIVER SHERVES TO PICK UP THE PASSENGER. NEITHER INDICATING NOR USE OF REARVIEW MIRROR ARE REQUIRED.



CHANGING GEAR IS A COMPLEX PROCESS INVOLVING THE DRIVER'S HAND, THE GEARSTICK, AND THE FIFTH PASSENGER'S THIGH.

THE OFF-WHITE TRUFI, LIKE ALL OLD VEHICLES IN LA PAZ, BOASTS A BUMPER FULL OF DENTS; ROUGHLY ONE FOR EVERY YEAR IT HAS BEEN IN OPERATION.



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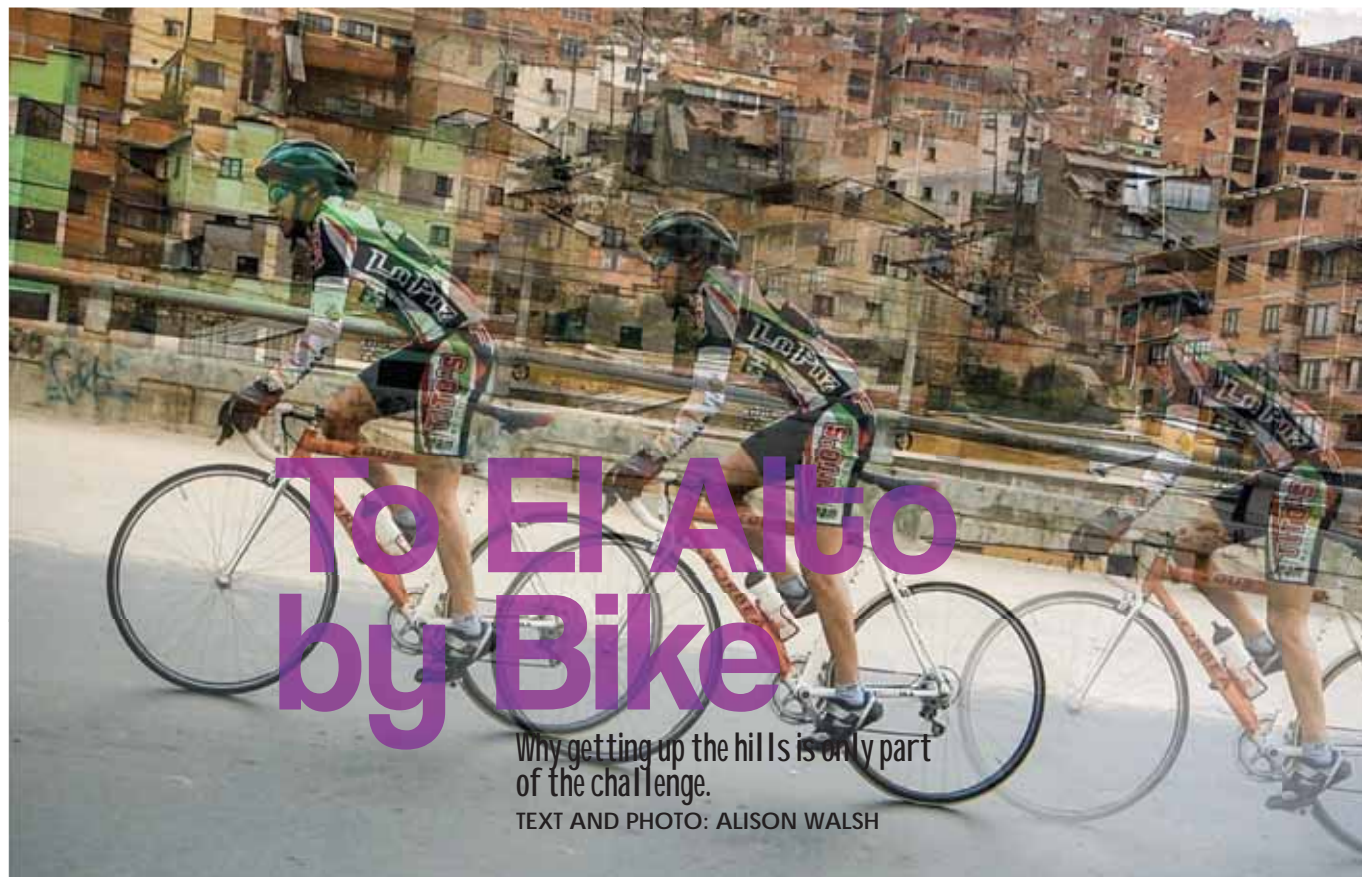
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# To El Alto by Bike

Why getting up the hills is only part of the challenge.

TEXT AND PHOTO: ALISON WALSH

La Paz is not a cyclist's city. A child wobbling around the Plaza Avaroa, a group of lads on BMXs doing tricks, someone slowly plodding up the vicious hill to the Avenida Ecuador—there are fleeting glimpses of the existence of bikes in this city, but nothing more.

And yet, arriving at the Plaza del Obelisco early one Wednesday morning in January, amidst the chaos of **vocadores** soliciting minibus passengers, the street vendors with their sweets and barrows of **pasankalla**, and a traffic policeman attempting to establish some kind of order, you would find a rather unusual sight: fifty three cyclists, bikes and all. They're preparing for the first race of the year, a gruelling 13km up to the tollbooths that mark the entrance to El Alto. Whilst some hang around in head-to-toe sponsored kit, hobbling along in cycle shoes and making expert last-minute adjustments to equipment, there are others with grubby, battered and clunky old bikes, riders sporting woolly jumpers and tracksuit bottoms, tucked into socks to avoid accidents with gears.

Everyone I speak to tells me that cycling in La Paz is hard. Not so much because of the altitude, or even the hills, but because there's no support, no respect, no understanding.

Cristian Conitzer, head steward of this event and a key figure in the cycling world of La Paz, tells me about the nightmares of commuting by bike. With few companies offering anywhere to park, let alone shower and change, it's a logistical nightmare, and that's without mentioning the traffic, the vagaries of the weather and the less-than-ideal condition of the roads.

Cycling for sport can't be much easier. I am told that drivers aren't deliberately malicious towards cyclists, but I can't help but notice that almost every car in La Paz has a bump or scrape. Cristian agrees: 'We're bad drivers here. Every day there are lots of little accidents. And then every couple of months, a really bad one...' Woe betide the cyclist who gets tangled up in a moment of road rage or simple misjudgement. Another competitor, a keen triathlete and coach, chimes in: 'I'm not afraid for myself, but it's hard for beginners. They get scared, or it's too difficult, and so they try another sport, or give up altogether'.

The issue that keeps cropping up is one of awareness: people don't cycle themselves, don't feel comfortable with their children learning to ride a bike, and don't know how to react when they see a cyclist on the road.

And in some ways, a race like this doesn't help: the police escort closes the road, traffic piles up, those waiting along the **autopista** up to El Alto get increasingly frustrated by the non-appearance of the usually ubiquitous minibuses. The road is wide enough for cars and cyclists, and yet the space is never shared.

After the allotted half hour of road closure has passed and the winners have arrived, abandoned their bikes and gulped down plastic cups of orange squash and sachets of flavoured milk, a sudden surge of minibuses appears on the horizon, racing its way to the top. It is intimidating, for a spectator. For the novices still struggling their way up the hill, forced off the road by the sheer force of traffic, it must be terrifying.

Perhaps this is why there aren't too many cyclists in La Paz. I'm told that 'everyone' who cycles knows how to fix their bike, has friends who can bring in the parts that can't be found in Bolivia. But for those who aren't in the club, don't have someone who can mind their bike while they pop into the bank and don't know where to look on El Alto market for that spare inner tube, cycling in La Paz must be pretty tough. Nearly as tough as getting up that hill. ✕

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# CRUISING EL LAGO

Lake Titicaca's boat owners in and around the tourist town of Lake Titicaca.

Despite its being a landlocked nation there are plenty of opportunities to travel by boat in Bolivia. The country is home to the highest navigable lake in the world, the infamous Lake Titicaca. Here, the best way to travel is of course by boat. Traditionally, boats handcrafted from Totora reed were used to travel between the shores of the 8,372 km<sup>2</sup> lake and its islands. Today, however, it is possible to see all manner of aquatic transportation around the lake.

TEXT AND PHOTO: NIA HAF

Sitting at the top of Cerro Calvario looking towards the horizon, you would be forgiven for assuming that the vast expanse of water before you was an ocean. During my time in Copacabana I had to keep reminding myself that this wasn't an ocean at all, but an enormous lake, spanning 8,372 km<sup>2</sup> before cutting through the highlands of Bolivia and Peru. The idea of travelling by boat in a landlocked country may seem improbable to some, yet there is no other way of cruising Lake Titicaca. These vessels

offer a convenient and natural means of connecting the dozens of communities that live near its shores.

Walking along the beach it is impossible to avoid by boat owners trying to lure you into a 30 minute trip on a paddle boat, an excursion to the Isla del Sol, or a tour of the Islas Flotantes. The competition is fierce along the beach with so many different boats, prices and destinations. I'm bombarded from every angle by shouts of "Senorita, seniorita! Media hora solo cuarenta

bolivianos!" They needn't worry, Copacabana seems to be *the* destination for backpackers and family excursions. Hoards of tourists ready to take a ride pour from every-arriving buses into the shores of the lake.

The variety of people who own and run the lake's transportation are as diverse as the nationalities of those attracted to the holiday destination. Teenage boys, giggling 'Cholitas' and stony-faced men are among those prowling the shores in search of customers. \*



Angel takes tourists around the lake in his rowing boat from the small, quiet town of Sahuña, around 6km from Copacabana. The offer is advertised as eco-friendly and promises an authentic experience. Traditional rowing boats (totora reed boats or sailboats) are favoured over the faster, noisier, engine-powered alternatives. Angel has been rowing for 20 years but claims that today the children of Sahuña learn from a very young age.



Many women own and rent out sinister swan-shaped paddle boats on the lake. Lined up along the beach as if ready for battle, the paddle boats are a popular choice for red-faced American and European travellers. South American families, who travel to the lake during the quieter seasons to enjoy a weekend away, also favour this laid back and lighthearted way to cruise the lake.



Bigger motor boats are the most common way of reaching the 'Isla del Sol', Lake Titicaca's biggest island, where the most common form of subsistence for the local *comunarios* is agriculture. It takes an hour and a half to reach the shores of the *isla*, which explains why the operators are keen to fill every space on board before setting sail.

# They See Me Rollin'

## TORITOS

TEXT: WILMER MACHACA  
TRANSLATION: MILA ARAOZ  
PHOTO: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC

A new form of transport has descended on El Alto. *Toritos* ('little bulls') or mototaxis, as they are otherwise known, have made it their aim to conquer the whole of this ever-expanding city.

They currently cover routes from Villa Adela to Kenko, Cumaravi, Villa Mercedes and Callipampa, and tend to work at night. A trip costs roughly the same as a

trufi (Bs 2 to Bs 3).

Alexander Apaza, mototaxi driver and radio operator for the *toritos*, tells BX that the service doesn't just cover the centre of El Alto or the Ceja area, but rather connects the scattered neighbourhoods that surround it. They come into their own during busy periods, as evenings often can be, but also when minibus drivers refuse to finish their route, with the classic argu-

ment that 'It isn't worth it for one passenger, it's here and no further'.

As Alexander explains, this is where the *toritos* can offer an alternative. The cost of the Indian manufactured Bajai mototaxi (of which 450,000 are made every year) is \$4900, roughly the same as a used taxi from the early '90s.

Expensive for a glorified

motorcycle you say? 'It's very economical, in terms of fuel and repair costs. It's a motorbike but has the financial yield of a car', Alexander explains. And its true; these astonishing three-wheeled creatures can carry up to 3 passengers. An impressive feat, considering their diddy 200cc engines. We might not be impressed just yet, but the environment is undoubtedly grateful with their arrival. ✕



# They Hatin'

## THE NEPTUNE

TEXT: CLAUDIA MÉNDEZ SANABRIA  
PHOTO: CARLOS SANCHEZ NAVAS

The Neptune, also known as the aguatero, is one of the mightiest of La Paz's police riot control water engines. It has a 2000 litre capacity and 2 power jet motors, yet this aquatic monster was not created with this purpose in mind.

In the museum of the National Police of Bolivia I meet Captain José Arancibia Mollinedo. Wearing a gray suit, pink shirt, impeccable moustache and drooping eyelids, he explains how these vehicles were originally used exclusively by fire-

fighters. Yet during the coup that took place in 1975, the police got its chance with the Neptuno, and ritually adopted it by painting it over with the same olive green as their uniforms. At one point they experimented with ammonia, which can produce a momentary loss of consciousness after coming into the slightest contact with the mouth or respiratory system. They have thankfully discontinued use of this chemical, but continued to experiment with other liquids, including red paint to mark

rioters and rebels and thus making them distinguishable and easier to capture. Captain Arancibia recalls a Carnival when the Neptune sprayed **pepinos** with water jets, provoking them to battle this aquatic monster while the crowd looked on at the comedic water battle. Yet he also recalls painful experiences such as the time he was ordered to use it against a strike of elderly war veterans. Unable to disobey the orders of his superiors, he tried hard to shoot the powerful jet of water towards their feet in

order not to cause them any harm. Such experiences were common during difficult, and at times warlike, moments during the country's history. According to Captain Arancibia, the impact of the Neptune truck on the population is based on the 'control of the psychology of the masses', since their mere presence has a powerful effect which remains the ace up the police's sleeve when masses are out of control; a common occurrence in the country. ✕







# THIS WAS KILOMETER ZERO

Text and Photos: Nia Haf



**L**a Paz's train station has been closed to passengers since 1996. The abandoned building is now engulfed by the construction site of the city's new **teleférico**, and yet there are clear reminders of the station's original purpose around every corner.

Most obvious are the unwanted graffitied trains scattered about among the hundreds of millions of dollars worth of brand new Austrian cable car equipment. In a last-ditch attempt to be remembered, the old train tracks peek out from beneath the muddy tyre marks left by heavy cranes and clumsy diggers. The gutted station building displays a tellingly empty timetable. A sign creaks in the wind, welcoming passengers that are gone by now, people who have left almost twenty years ago. This was

the starting point of the Andean Network. This was Kilometer 0.

The railway ran from La Paz to the Chilean port of Arica and became one of the most well known lines in the history of Bolivia's rail network. The infamous line never truly flourished due to the continuously poor relationship between Bolivia and Chile, the challenges of building on the Andean terrain and a lack of essential funding. It only peaked in its functioning for a very brief period of time.

The 440km train line was built under the Chilean Government supervision. It was part of a peace treaty signed in 1883, following the War of the Pacific. Bolivia had lost its coastline as a result of the war and Chile offered to build a railway to its

nearest port as reparations.

It was agreed that Chile would be responsible for maintaining the tracks on both sides of the border. However, over the years, Bolivians began to suspect that their neighbours were not fulfilling this agreement. It seemed Chile had forgotten to maintain the 233km of railroad on the Bolivian side.

As the train tracks deteriorated, so did the popularity of the train as a form of transport. Funding that was vital for maintenance of the tracks declined across the country. In the 1990's, a study claimed that \$40 billion were needed in order to restore the rapidly dilapidating train tracks. In the years that followed, most of the industries in Bolivia were privatized, including was the rail network. As a result, many lines across Bolivia were left



roads and highways also contributed to the fall of the La Paz-Arica line. Records indicate that the surface of roads in Bolivia has

grown tenfold over the past four decades, whereas the number of working locomotives in the country has more than halved.



hopelessly abandoned, rusting and decaying as the years crept by.

One hundred years have passed since the line's official inauguration in 1903. Last year, when the centenary celebration was held at Arica, further conflict and controversy surrounded the shared railroad. Chile's President, Sebastian Piñera, attended the event. Nowhere to be seen was the Bolivian delegation. In a later statement, justifying his lack of attendance, Evo Morales boldly challenged his Chilean counterpart. He dared him to ride the Bolivian section of track with him in order to prove whether the line was in full working order. Piñera accepted the challenge, but the ride is yet to be taken.

Beyond the tense relationship between Bolivia and Chile, the development of better



Transport via trucks for passengers and cargo quickly took over as the chosen form of transportation for Bolivians.

In some parts of the country, the abandonment of the rail network is itself a tourist attraction. From all over the world, tourists come to see the train cemetery in Uyuni, for example. This particular line, built by British engineers, was used by mining companies for the transportation of minerals to ports on the Pacific coast. The line collapsed in the 1940s when the mining industry crumbled. Unlike in Uyuni, the old train station in La

Paz will once again fulfill its true purpose. It will become a thriving centre of transportation.

This time, it won't be the clatter of wheels on tracks that will bring the station to life, but the almost silent swoop of the new 'teleférico'. A journey from the station will no longer mean thundering across La Paz's rugged landscape. Instead you will swiftly glide through the thin atmosphere over the city. As you rise above town you'll see the station building still standing. It has been left

virtually undisturbed amid the heavy construction which surrounds it. Considered an important part of Bolivia's past, permission to demolish the building is unobtainable.

People say the empty building will be transformed into a museum of sorts. Around which topic?, nobody seems to know. For now, the teleférico takes centre stage as La Paz's train station is regenerated. While the station's original purpose may be overshadowed by the excitement of the new cable cars, the grand building will always serve as a reminder of the La Paz-Arica line. ✕



Text: Wilmer Machaca

Translation: Mila Araoz

Photos: Alexandra Meleán A.

These famous blue buses began circulating around the city of La Paz in 1938, and have since become iconic. They barely need signs anymore as they are instantly recognisable from as far as the eye can see; even their grumble is distinctive.

The first buses were known as the *Chaucheros*, a word now used to denote the knitted purses *cholitas* carry around (presumably because the passengers who traveled on them were tightly crammed together). Today, with its 51 years



jam on Buenos Aires avenue, traverses the Max Paredes district with its busy merchants, trundles along the innumerable

passage of time. Military coups and numerous strikes have left their mark on their rusted bumpers and peeling blue

or 'leaving'. At first, it is impossible for one to understand what this means. The fluorescent 'Llegada' ('arriving') sign indicates that the bus is heading towards its stop, whilst the 'Salida' ('leaving') sign indicates the bus is heading towards the city center; a puzzle which can, perhaps, only be truly understood by those who live in Sopocachi, where the bus changes its direction.



in uninterrupted service, 'El Inmortal' remains the oldest of the 80-strong fleet of #2 buses, though several aged others are at least four decades old.

The bus route could just as easily serve as a tour service through the Old Town of La Paz. It is a journey which begins and ends in the same stop as it cuts through the eternal traffic

schools on Avenida Armentia, and winds through the residential Sopocachi district. It then repeats the same cycle.

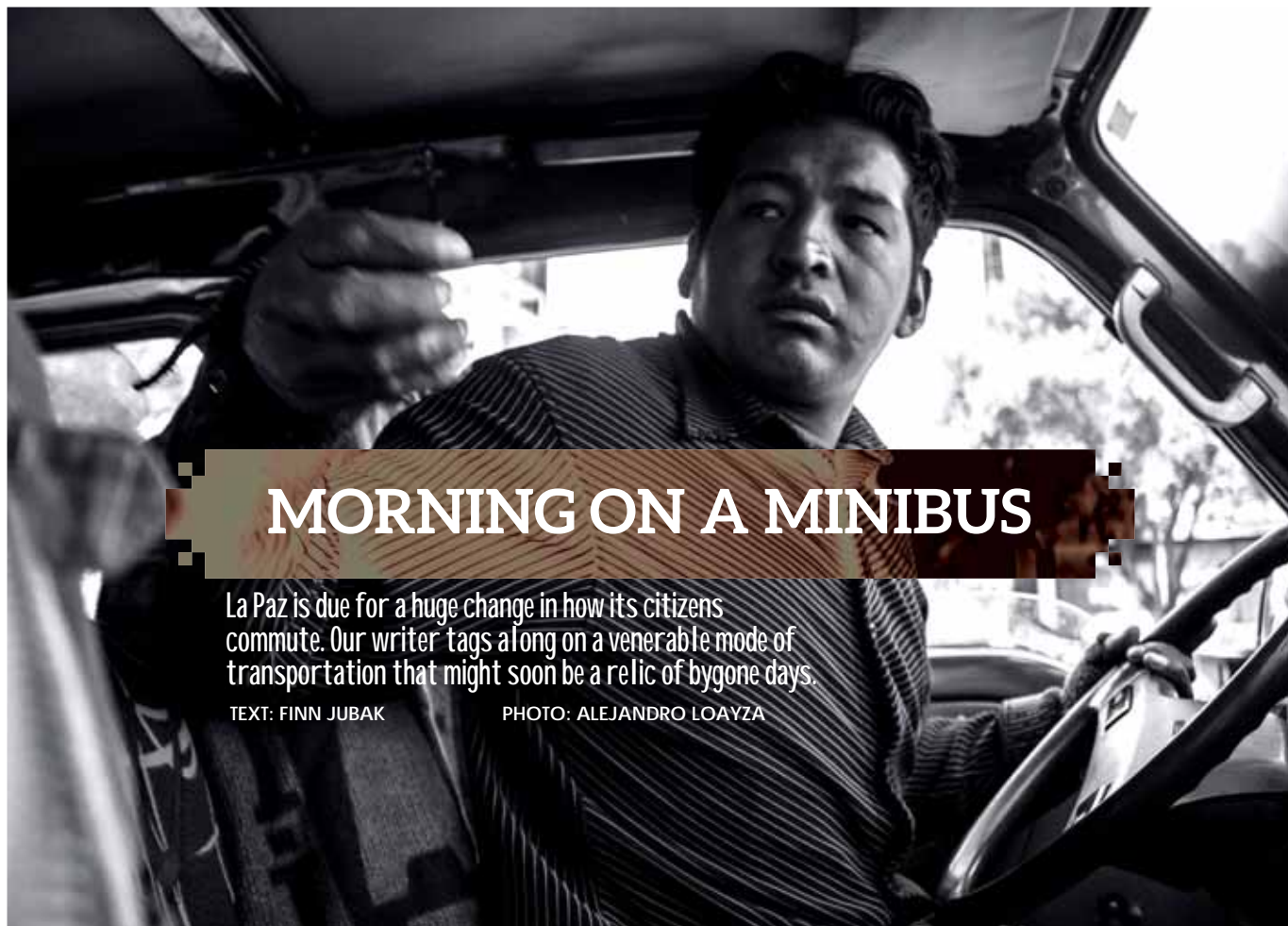
One never knows what to expect; a miner's protest, a civic parade or the majestic Señorial Illimani morenada dancers passing by. Yet the main road the #2 bus has had to travel, without a doubt, has been the

paint. Inside the bus, faith in the Copacabana Virgin is expressed through numerous ornaments. The historical Bolivian claim to the sea also finds a voice on stickers on the enormous rearview mirror.

### Arriving or Leaving?

It is true. The windscreen indicates that the bus is either 'arriving'

The Colectivo 2 survived the city's trams during the '40s, and endured the minibus invasion during the '80s and '90s. Today, in the times of the *teleférico* and *Puma Kataris* (refer to other articles in this issue to learn more), it will have to adapt to maintain its sustained popularity, especially when Supreme Decree 890 comes into effect in 2018. This law prohibits the movement of vehicles which are more than 12 years old. For the time being it is fair to say these ancient buses are neither coming nor going, but are just always there. ✕



## MORNING ON A MINIBUS

La Paz is due for a huge change in how its citizens commute. Our writer tags along on a venerable mode of transportation that might soon be a relic of bygone days.

TEXT: FINN JUBAK

PHOTO: ALEJANDRO LOAYZA

I stood in front of the Iglesia San Francisco at 5 am on a Thursday morning and watched La Paz wake up. Cholitas emerged from side streets carrying baskets of goods to be sold around the perimeter of the plaza as the road began to fill. The minibuses, though, had already been running for over an hour. Plaza San Francisco is a major hub for minibus travel, especially early in the morning when workers begin their commute between El Alto and La Paz.

I climbed into my first minibus of the day at 5:15 am, headed for **La Ceja** ('the Eyebrow'), in El Alto. Because this is the beginning of a long-distance route along the highway, with minimal stops along the way, the driver waited until it was full before departing. Buses can fit 14 passengers sitting, and sometimes a few standing. I sat in the second row from the back, watching the **voceador**, an assistant to the driver whose job is to advertise the route by yelling it over and over again. Minibus drivers do not always employ **voceadores**, who, I was told, can cost around 70 bolivianos a day,

but they are common on these routes.

The trip from the Plaza San Francisco to **La Ceja** along the **autopista** is roughly 13 kilometers long and takes about 20 minutes. The ride was very quiet—no one said a word. This was partially because of the hour, but also because of the convention that most people do not talk on the minibus. Music constantly seeps from the radio and transforms what could be an uncomfortable silence into a peaceful and meditative one. I was experiencing the famous discomfort that is a mark of this method of transport, especially for a tall foreigner, so I let my legs fall asleep as I daydreamed along with my fellow passengers.

When the bus stopped at **La Ceja**, our **voceador** opened the door and let us out. On these long routes, there is almost no interaction between the passengers and the driver, with the **voceador** running the operation—collecting fares, giving directions. I tried to thank the driver anyway; I don't know if he heard me. None of the passengers spoke. It was still dark out as I

looked for a bus to Rio Seco. **La Ceja** was quite busy, mostly with people heading in the opposite direction I was going: those who live in El Alto but commute to work in La Paz.

Finding a bus to Rio Seco was not hard. My driver had no **voceador**, instead attempting to attract passengers by calling out through the passenger-side window. We drove down the Avenida Juan Pablo II, pausing every few seconds as the traffic slowed. Rio Seco is a major destination for buses coming in from the surrounding provinces, and at this hour was already packed with buses large and small. After my trip to Rio Seco, I caught a bus back down to Villa Fatima, all the way across town, on the far north side of La Paz. On such a long ride, it was easy to see why minibus travel is inefficient: constant stops across the city can add up to hours spent loading and unloading passengers. From Villa Fatima, I took a bus travelling to Kalahuirra, the furthest the city buses travel in the direction of Los Yungas to the north. Our driver, who travels back and forth along the steep and potholed

road between Kalahuirra and La Paz, told us that the busiest time of day for him was around 4 am. That is when provincial transport drops off people from Los Yungas who are looking to travel into the city. In order to maximize profit, drivers along routes like this have to be out and working by the early morning.

During the hours I spent riding buses back and forth across La Paz, problems like that of organization and efficiency were abundantly evident. I also wondered at the difficulty of making a living in this job. Drivers charge 1 to 2 bolivianos per ride. Subtract the money to their **voceador** (if they have one), around 40 bolivianos for food, and as much as 180 for fuel, and not much is left. Work starts before dawn and ends as late as 9 at night. It is a demanding schedule, dictated by the necessity of earning as much money as possible. The same need to attract more passengers causes the inefficiency of the

system itself, with unbearably frequent stops and long waits at the beginning and ends of routes. Combined with the pure discomfort of travelling inside these small vehicles, this contributes to their unpopularity—ask anyone on the street, and they will say that they cannot

is choking with traffic, and it is nearly impossible to get around anyway.

Maybe it's because I am a romantic, or because I have not been forced to cram inside them my whole life, but I find myself saddened that the minibus era

**THIS IS THE PARADOX OF THE MINIBUS SYSTEM: DESPITE ALL ITS FLAWS, IT IS STILL VITAL TO THE CITIZENS THAT CONSTANTLY COMPLAIN ABOUT IT.**

wait for the new Puma Katari buses to arrive in the Autumn, which will provide an alternative but likely won't end up replacing the minibuses completely.

This is the paradox of the minibus system: despite all its flaws, it is still vital to the citizens that constantly complain about it. Without the minibuses, the city would grind to a halt; most **paceños** would have no way of getting around. But because of them, the city

may well soon be over. The intimacy they create is different from anything I have experienced on public transport back home in New York City, where it is unusual even to acknowledge fellow passengers. And, cramped as the minibuses are, they are almost cozy. When I remember my ride at 5 in the morning up to La Ceja, I think of the warmth of the bus and the comforting presence of my fellow passengers so close by, sharing my experience as we ambled up the hill to El Alto. ✕

# LA ESPERA

Seconds, Minutes, Hours  
TEXT AND PHOTOS: NIA HAF

It's rush hour in La Paz and hoards of people are making their way through the city. Queues of pedestrians begin to form as people wait to return to El Alto, some heading home to a meal with their families. First there are four, five; then ten, then fifteen. Before long the queue is thirty deep and 'la espera', as people call it, officially begins. During the city's busiest hours waiting comes hand-in-hand with travelling.

At Plaza Isabel la Católica, we spoke to Xavier as he patiently

waited for a seat on a minibus that would take him home to Rio Seco, El Alto. We asked him how much time he spends on average waiting and traveling on a daily basis. 'It depends' he told us, 'but usually, it takes me one and a half hours to get from El Alto to La Paz and around two hours to get back'. Based on Xavier's waiting and travelling time this equates to:

*3.5 Hours a Day  
17.5 Hours a Week  
70 Hours a Month  
840 Hours a Year  
35 Days a Year ..  
of travelling and waiting*



And yet transport is changing in La Paz as the Puma Katari buses and the teleférico are introduced to the city. Will these new forms of transportation shrink waiting times for people coming to and from work?

People we spoke to are hopeful. Some, like Erika Gavincha at Plaza del Obe-

lisco considered the new transport systems a 'beautiful idea'. Xavier thinks 'they are a welcome addition to La Paz, working in the interest of the people'. Everyone hopes the new forms of transport will make travelling easier, quicker and much more comfortable in the city. We'll just have to wait and see. ✕



# THE BUS WARS

Minibus Drivers Are Furious About the Puma Katari Buses  
But No One Else Seems to Mind

TEXT: FINN JUBAK  
PHOTOS: NIA HAF

On January 20, minibus drivers marched across La Paz and gathered in the Plaza Mayor to protest against the rollout of the new Puma Katari buses. These 61 buses, which will run from the outskirts of the city towards the center, are part of the mayor's plan to modernise transportation in La Paz, with service scheduled to begin in November. Built by the Chinese firm King Long and with a larger carrying capacity and clearly defined stops, the Puma Katari buses will provide a more efficient and reliable alternative to the current system of minibuses that most **paceños** use to get around.

The *choferes* fear that their dominance of the city's transportation system will come to an end, and although the official position is that the buses will not be replacing existing minibus routes, the drivers have gathered around this issue

as a rallying point for other grievances. They blame the Mayor for implementing a requirement to purchase new vans and raising taxes—a 'lack of respect' which has them incensed.

**Paceños** who want an improved bus system criticize the drivers for continuing to promote the obsolete minibus system and delaying the implementation of the Puma Katari. The drivers, though, feel that the citizens are ungrateful for the service they provide.

As I walked with the bus drivers during the protest, I noticed that not a single non-bus driver had joined them; in fact, it was just the opposite. Stall owners, as well as people walking by, stopped to shout insults at the marching bus drivers, who returned fire, verbally and sometimes physically. Along the Avenida Camacho, we passed a market that had

its glass front door shattered by a rock. According to the furious shopkeepers, it was some of the marching drivers, who had gone so far as to call them *putas del alcalde* (the mayor's whores). 'What is a good citizen supposed to do? We don't want to be involved in the issues between the mayor and the *choferes*. We support the Puma Katari, but this fight has nothing to do with us', one shopkeeper told me.

Not only do the *choferes* face a mayor that seems to undervalue them, and a public that certainly does, but they are split among multiple unions, among which communication is rare and interests not always aligned. This serves to further confuse the message of an already misunderstood group of men fighting for their jobs. I spoke to four different drivers who had appeared at the protest to find out what their position was.



MARTÍN CONDE  
SINDICATO EDUARDO ABAROA  
DRIVER FOR 14 YEARS

## What is your opinion on the Puma Katari?

We are not against them. [The mayor's office] made a deal with all of the leaders of the minibus unions. They signed a deal saying that main avenues would not be used to transport the Puma Katari, but that is not happening. Also, we need the Mayor's respect... And we also demand a raise in the fares, because a tire that used to cost 300 bolivianos now costs 800. And the cost of maintenance has risen a lot as well. Those are our reasons—we are not against the whole Puma Katari system.

## If you were given the opportunity to drive a Puma Katari bus, would you accept?

No. Because we have a condition that we cannot go and offer ourselves. If we did, we would be thrown out of our syndicate. But there have been some that have gone. And we would not be accepted, either. They would see in their computer that we were part of a minibus union, and would not accept us.

## If you did not have your job as a driver, what would you do instead?

There are not many other jobs open to us. I mean, if they get rid of this source of work, the result will be unemployment for us all.



**Laureano Colque**  
Sindicato Bolivian  
Driver for 30 years

We want progress for the city of La Paz, as citizens and as transport workers. We support the **teleférico** and the new buses. But we ask at the same time that they work with us, that they do not disparage us. People do not take us into account. What is urban transport? They do not know.

**How many years have you worked as a bus driver?**

I have driven for 30 years. Since my youth. And the majority of those here started as kids, and we are growing old driving the buses. Why? Because we have families, we have kids, wives, everything. We are just ordinary people.



*(his friend interrupts):*

One thing is, they say that these Puma Kataris are worth hundreds and hundreds of thousands. That's a lie. That's Chinese money. They are worth ninety thousand, nothing more. And they are robbing it right from our wallets. Where does the money go? Half of it goes right into their pockets. And what are we supposed to do, let it happen? No. Bad investment. This transport that has come, it's all a waste. It's a hole that will never be filled. It's not stable. That's why we are mad.



**Adalid Espejo**  
Sindicato 10 de Mayo  
Driver for 20 years

The Puma Katari buses are robbing us of our livelihoods. Far from bringing modernity to the city, they are actually more like a step backwards. This is because they need diesel to run. Additionally, the mayor has not given any alternatives that will not harm our daily sustenance. People are just captivated with the new look of the buses, but in reality they are not good for the city and are not worth the high price the mayor has paid for them.



**Alvaro Rada**  
Sindicato Simón Bolívar  
Driver for 15 years

**Do you own your own bus?**

Actually, I just got one recently.

**How did you become a driver?**

I was with friends. I started off driving someone else's bus and here I am.

**What is your opinion regarding this whole problem that is happening with the Puma Katari buses?**

I do not think that the Puma Kataris are a problem for us. On the contrary, we are supporting them, because we want them to happen, to modernize a bit. What we are asking for is a raising of the fares, to match the taxes we pay, which are far too high. Not to mention that the mayor has required us to buy new vans. We made the change, but the tax is 5,000 or 6,000 bolivianos a year, which is a lot. These are things that do not have to do with the Puma Katari. We are protesting over other things. For example, the Mayor has required that we cannot do **trameaje** [dividing up designated full routes between buses to make more money]. But the Puma Kataris are going to do **trameaje** because they will only travel to the city center. The law is for everyone, not just for us. The Puma Kataris should serve to bring people from point to point, not just to the center. That's what we want.

**And if you lost your job as a minibus driver, what would you pursue as a career?**

I think I would become a mechanic. I have a degree.

**Did everyone here come of their own will, or was there some group or union that forced them to come?**

In previous years, the workers were always obligated to come, but that actually did not happen this time. We made it up to the average workers what we should do. The Federation and the Central [two La Paz transport workers unions] went and consulted with the workers as to what we should do. And it is the workers themselves who decided we should have this march. So no one has forced them. ✕

# CHOLITA POWER

TEXT: WILMER MACHACA  
TRANSLATION: MILA ARAOZ  
PHOTO: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC

It's been 10 months since El Alto introduced their Municipal Transport Guards (GMTs). It is the city's response to the friendly zebras roaming the streets of La Paz, cartwheeling across the street teaching people about road safety. The GMTs in El Alto do neither of these things. They are stern, no-nonsense women known to locals as the Power Rangers.

Since last November, 20 cholitas have joined the GMTs and have been tasked with reducing congestion in El Alto and ensuring minibus routes are adhered to.

To track them down we spoke to Raúl Vásquez, Administrative Chief of the Municipal Guard. We were summoned to meet at 8 a.m. at the bridge in La Ceja (downtown El Alto). Unmistakable, with their grey and orange waistcoats, extra-high-crown cholita hat, pollera, and (of course) their massive earrings, they approach us with signs they have confisca-

ted from the morning-shift drivers. Liliana Cruz Quispe, one of these cholitas, explains how they work by shifts. 'I start at six in the morning and have another shift at night. Now I must go to classes'. She is a Social Communications student at the local university.

With a firm 'move forward!' they usher along the drivers. To prove their worth they must succeed where others have failed. The cheerful zebras and amicable donkeys failed to gain the respect of Altiños, and so were confined in the gentler city of La Paz. El Alto has a well-earned reputation for being rebellious and indomitable.

This time the answer has from the from the *pueblo*. Despite the predictable sexist slurs they are subject to, these women have a better chance of succeeding than their forebearers. As Mr Vásquez explains: 'cholitas, women who wear the pollera, are the essence of our people'. ✕





# THE TELEFÉRICO:

## From El Alto to Zona Sur

TEXT: ALISON WALSH  
PHOTOS: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC

**L**a Paz: a unique city, scrambling its way up slopes so steep that only a madman, you would think, could possibly imagine building anything here. And its transport problems may well be unique as well. Many **paceños** have been saying for years that they're fed up with a transport system that includes 853 minibus routes and yet somehow manages to be unreliable, uncomfortable and incredibly slow. And when you're sat crushed up on an overcrowded bus, inching its way along at a fraction of the speed you could walk, you can understand why.

But how to go about finding a solution? Imagine plotting the most common journeys made in La Paz and El Alto on a map, then linking them up with a few brightly coloured lines. You might well end up with something resembling the plans for the new **teleférico**, a cable car system stretching from the heights of El Alto to the

between the two cities every day, it's clear that this development can't come soon enough.

As reported by The Gondola Project, a website dedicated to coverage of cable car transport projects, this will be the world's largest mass-transit cable car system (with three lines and a total distance of over 10km, eleven stations, 427 cabins and a capacity of 18,000 passengers an hour). For those of us who imagine cable cars as nice little tourist attractions, the idea of doing your daily commute on one is utterly alien. Yet this is what is envisaged here: Diego Prieto of **tuatú**, the team in charge of marketing the **teleférico**, says that there are definitely short-term plans for more lines. "There's been talk of seven, talk of eleven. We just don't know the exact figures yet." Imagine an underground system like the London tube or the Paris Métro, then string it on wires above the city. That's the vision.

**IMAGINE AN UNDERGROUND SYSTEM LIKE THE LONDON TUBE OR THE PARIS MÉTRO, THEN STRING IT ON WIRES ABOVE THE CITY. THAT'S THE VISION.**

chic neighbourhoods way down in the valley of Zona Sur. It'll be the perfect way (it is hoped) to sail over the congestion, taking in some stunning views of the city and its mountainous surroundings. That is, if you have time in the ten minutes that it will take to travel the length of the red line from La Paz' Estación Central up to 16 de Julio in El Alto. With 440,000 people commuting

Although cable car technology has been around for a long time, the concept of using it as a mass transport system is pretty new, and it's easy to overlook how big a step for the city this actually is. Marketing strategies like colouring the three lines (and their cabins and stations) red, yellow and green (the colours of the Bolivian flag) naming it

“Mi Teleférico” and organising children’s drawing competitions and an Instagram photography prize seem pretty obvious, pretty straightforward, until you realise just how important this “appropriation”, as Prieto describes it, actually is. “This is a new kind of transport system in Bolivia... for a lot of people, this will be the first time they ever go in a cable car.”

And so this is a hybrid campaign, making use of an integrated web of social media sites and a team that’s been steadily working its way around the city explaining the “ABC of the teleférico”, down to things as basic as how to get into a car. Prieto describes the “mentality change” that the teleférico will bring, referring to the WiFi access, bicycle parking and virtual libraries that will form part of each station. I can’t

environments in the world. The technology is uniquely suited to deal with extreme elevation changes and altitude challenges.” No, the fact is that the residents of La Paz are used to their transport being slow and uncomfortable, but exceedingly convenient.

## FOR ANYONE ACCUSTOMED TO STRUCTURED BUS SERVICES WITH STOPS AND TIMETABLES AND MAXIMUM NUMBERS OF PASSENGERS, LA PAZ FEELS LIKE A STEP BACK TO THE DAYS OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT PAST

For anyone used to structured bus services with stops and timetables and maximum numbers of passengers, coming here feels like a step back to the days of public transport past. And yet there is the hope that in a few months’ time, the city will be a showcase for the transport of the future.

the image of the project that it be seen as a Bolivian initiative. The \$234.6 million government investment in the project is being financed by a loan from the Banco Central de Bolivia, the operators and technicians will be Bolivian (after being selected and trained by Doppelmayr), and the maintenance will ultimately be transferred to these local experts. The Austrians may be doing the building, but the message is clear: this project is Bolivian.

This isn’t just a nice way of encouraging potential passengers or creating some catchy slogans for a presidential re-election campaign: it also adds a certain legitimacy to the acquisition of land that was needed for the project. Whilst some of it (such as the former train station) already belonged to the government, other areas had to be acquired from private ownership, with what Prieto describes as “fair compensation” for those who have had to be moved. Somehow it seems easier to swallow the taking of land for a project that can claim to be “by Bolivians, for Bolivians” than for anything that might have the taint of foreign investment.

Ultimately, whilst it is clear that the arrival of the teleférico will change La Paz, no-one knows to what extent, or how. Not the neighbours above whose houses the cars will pass continuously every twelve seconds for seven-teen hours a day, not the minibus drivers who hope to convert their service into a shuttle between these key points of arrival and departure, not the accountants who will have to balance the books to ensure that ticket prices are competitive and yet also cover the system’s operating costs (a surprising aim, since Dale’s assessment is that “virtually no public transport system is self-sustaining”). At the opening of this year’s carnival, the iconic clown-like figure of the *ch’uta* bounded out of a teleférico cabin to embrace the outgoing cholita queen: the perfect marketing image for this city’s blend of tradition and modernity. Yet it still remains to be seen whether the teleférico itself will be able to win a place in the hearts and routines of ordinary *paceños* and *alteños* ×



help but think that this is a little optimistic, being reminded of the image doing the rounds of the Internet of a minibus strung up on a cable, and an unfortunate passenger doing what comes naturally to any user of transport in La Paz, and seeing that they are passing conveniently close to where they’d like to get off, declaring “¡Aprovecharé!”.

This is perhaps the greatest problem that the team behind the teleférico has to face: not so much the technical problems of building around a crowded city or at this altitude, for, as Steven Dale of The Gondola Project explains, “Cable car systems have been designed to operate in some of the harshest alpine

It is, of course, all part of a modernisation project promoted by a Bolivian government determined to drag the country into the 21st-century. After years of lagging behind its Latin American neighbours, it’s unsurprising to hear the pride and ambition in Prieto’s statement that this teleférico is an “incomparable project... we hope that it will become the most popular in Latin America”. And part of this modernising impulse comes from outside: there are only three companies worldwide with the technical expertise to build a cable car system of this scale, and it was Austrian firm Doppelmayr who won the contract for the project. Yet it becomes clear from speaking to *túatú* how important it is for

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**LA PAZ**

<b>PACEÑOS</b>	Residents of La Paz	<b>LA CEJA</b>	Neighborhood in El Alto on the lip of the canyon in which La Paz sits; literally 'the eyebrow'.
<b>¡APROVECHARÉ!</b>	Literally meaning 'I'll take advantage', it is an expression used by passengers to announce they'll get off where the vehicle is currently stopped (for example in bad traffic or at a junction).	<b>VOCEADOR</b>	The barker on a minibus, who shouts out destinations to passengers
<b>CH'UTA</b>	A traditional figure of the La Paz carnival.	<b>TRANCADERA</b>	Traffic jam
<b>ALTEÑOS</b>	Residents of El Alto	<b>POLLERA</b>	Multi-layered skirt worn by cholitas
<b>PASANKALLA</b>	A sweet, popcorn-like snack, sold by street vendors from large wheelbarrows.	<b>PEPINO</b>	Harlequin-type character popular in Bolivian carnivals
<b>AUTOPISTA</b>	Literally meaning 'motorway', it is the name commonly given to the road linking La Paz and El Alto		
<b>TELEFÉRICO</b>	Gondola-style cable car		
<b>CHOFER</b>	Driver, generally used to denote those in the public transport sector		
<b>TRAMEAJE</b>	A method of dividing up public transport routes to increase profits		



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