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Editorial Team
Caroline Risacher, Matthew Grace, Juan Victor Fajardo

BX docunit
Nicolás Taborga, William Wroblewski

Printing and Advertising Manager
Ivan Rodriguez Petkovic

Commercial Manager
Rodrigo Barrenechea

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Manuel Seoane

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Journalists
Charles Bladon, David Fegan, Fruzsina Gál, Daisy Lucker

Our Cover
Photo: Alexandra Meleán

Marketing
Rodrigo Barrenechea

Advertise With Us
rodrigo@bolivianexpress.org

Address
Calle Prolongación Armaza, # 2957, Sopocachi, La Paz

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Contact
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Editorial # 79: Celebrations

By: Caroline Risacher

In the West, Christmas is a fusion of pagan and Christian celebrations. In Bolivia, end-of-year festivities coincide with the arrival of the rainy season and the summer solstice, events that were vital for the agricultural pre-Columbian civilisations that ruled the continent. Today, the combination of Christian and indigenous traditions makes for a very special type of holiday, with a syncretism that manifests itself in parades and traditional indigenous dances performed in front of **pesebres**. One of our *Bolivian Express* elves, Charles Bladon, explores the intricacies of a Bolivian Christmas on page 22.

Indeed, an essential element of Bolivian culture and celebration is dancing. The holiday season is punctuated with parades, carnivals and opportunities to perform dances learned in school. But in this fast-paced world that we live in, different cultures and celebrations have become intertwined, their meanings sometimes lost and often hidden behind layers of newer traditions. Traditional dances evolve and slowly

start to lose their original essence. The Ballet de Bolivia attempts to preserve the primary meaning behind these traditions by combining classical ballet techniques with indigenous Bolivian dance. Fruzsina Gál interviews Jimmy Calla Montoya, the company's founder and the driving force behind these efforts, on page 30.

In this issue of *Bolivian Express*, the last of the year, we want to celebrate Bolivia and its ancient, vibrant and evolving culture. And we are looking at it through the eyes of a new generation of Bolivian artists such as the pop singer Andoro in addition to culinary pioneers and entrepreneurs who are putting Bolivia in the forefront of their projects. Daisy Lucker takes a look at the new restaurant Popular, which puts a modern and inspired twist on Bolivian cuisine in the historical centre of the city. And it's quite a success, as the restaurant's founders deliver on their inspired idea to provide contemporary Bolivian food made by Bolivians with Bolivian products. Another entrepreneur, hotel Atix co-founder Carlos Rodriguez, is also profiled

in this issue about the arduous path he took to create a successful business, on page 36. Traditions and celebrations in Bolivia are a patchwork, an **aguayo** tapestry that reflects the diversity and unity of the people of Latin America. One item that tells this story like no other, and which is central to Christmas celebrations in Bolivia, is the **panetón**, a sweet bread traditionally eaten around Christmas and paired with hot chocolate. A ubiquitous feature of Christmas in Bolivia, the *panetón* is actually a recent import from Peru (and originally brought from Europe by Italian immigrants at the turn of the 20th century). You can now find *panetones* made with such Bolivian ingredients such as coca and quinoa, and they are part of each and every Bolivian Christmas **canastón**.

By celebrating Bolivian-ness, we are also embracing the multitude of influences that accompanies it: the variety and uniqueness of this culture, the foreign and diverse influences that have helped shape the country since its formation and that are part of all of us – Bolivians, tourists, expats and the rest.

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


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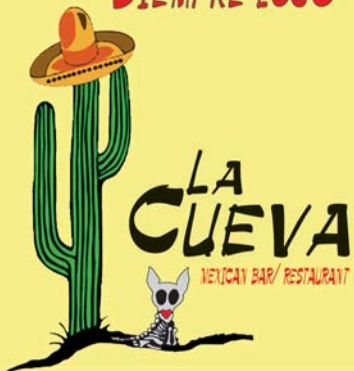
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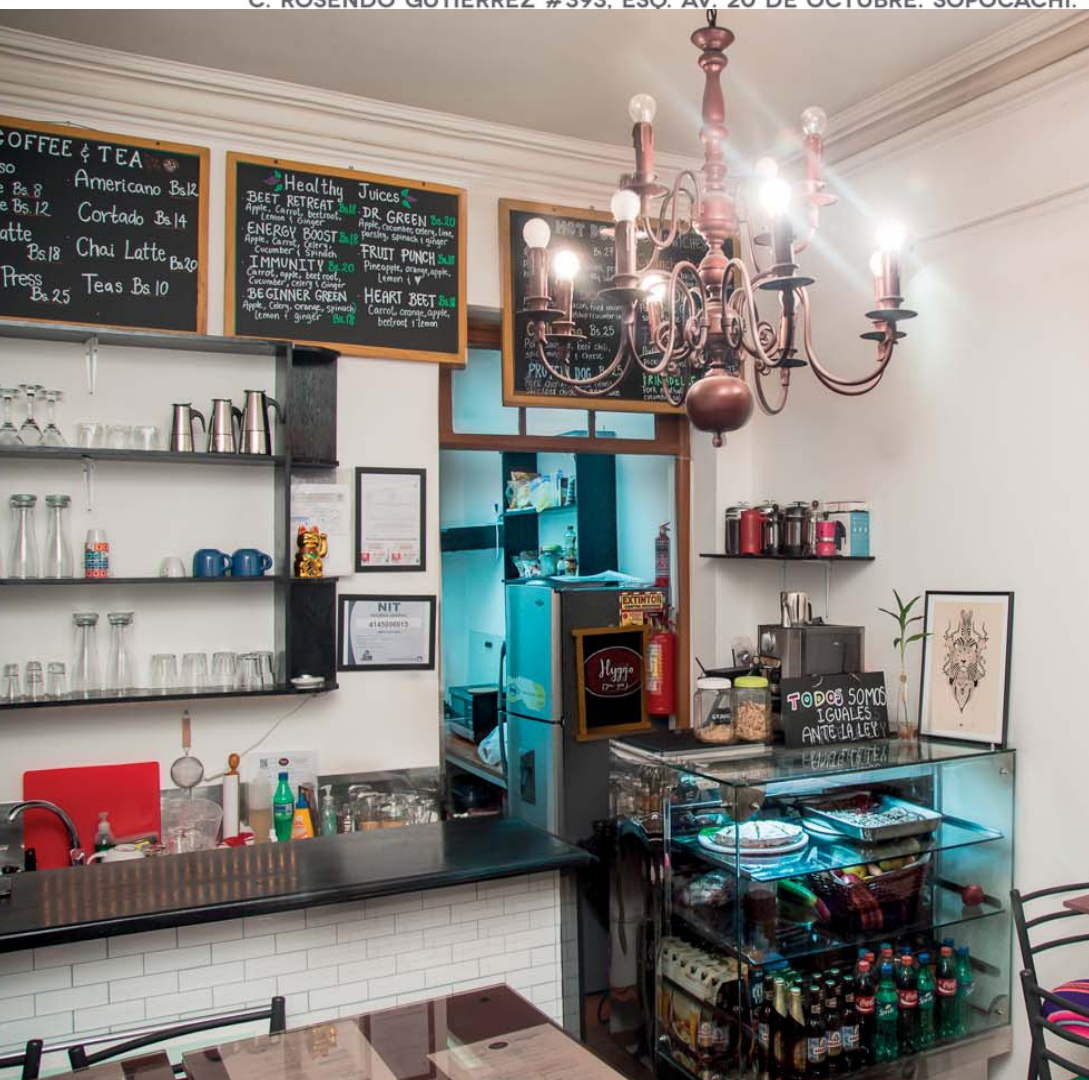
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FEELINGS FOR THE NIGHT

TEXT: CHARLES BLADON
PHOTOS: ESTEBAN TERRAZAS SARAVIA

La Paz. The sun dissipates and, with it, my urban trepidation. The night encroaches, accompanied by wonder and titillation. The night promises so much, the impossible seemingly possible only for one night.

Inside the clubs lights flash, momentary blindness followed by momentary exposure to the dance floor in its totality. Distinct booms, bass resonating to your very core inspiring movement and dance. Pure euphoria, worries truly forgotten, only paying mind to the now.

Amongst the worries and fears that grip the gentle people of La Paz also lie excitement and animation, dance resurrecting the youthful spirits drowned out by everyday life. Dancing is not escapism, dancing is rejuvenation. The night brings this so desperately yearned-for feeling. In La Paz, the night is not your enemy but your friend.

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THE BEST OF LA PAZ

OUR GUIDE TO THE MUST-TRY SPECIALTIES OF THE CITY

TEXT: FRUZZSINA GÁL
PHOTOS: FRUZZSINA GÁL

In La Paz, culinary wonders are never far off. Whether it is questionable street vendors offering a taste of tradition or renowned restaurants luring in crowds with the promise of an unrivalled experience, one need never go hungry or thirsty under the sea of terracotta-coloured buildings stretching from hill to hill. But to find the best of the best, trial and error is the only way. To save some time, money and the potential of food poisoning, here are some of the best, most delicious specialties of the sprawling city of La Paz.

WHO SAYS ONE HAS TO STICK WITH THE EXPECTED, EVEN WHEN THE TRADITIONAL IS INVOLVED?

JUICE

Lady on the corner of Calle Cervantes and Avenida Ecuador (Sopocachi)

No buzzing intersection, plaza or **mercado** can do without a joyful arrangement of colourful fruits. Whether it is only juice, fruit salad or an assortment of whatever the current season has to offer, one never has to go too far for some refreshment in La Paz. On the corner of Calle Cervantes and Avenida Ecuador is a joyful sight – a small cart filled with oranges, smelling of summer and sunshine. There is nothing better than pure, freshly squeezed orange juice amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Mercado Lanza

To wander the maze of Mercado Lanza next to Plaza San Francisco is an experience in itself, with levels folding in on themselves and stalls selling everything and anything one can think of. But to make it even more extraordinary, one must try what the depth of this eccentric market has to offer – and what better thing to go for than a glass filled to the brim with vitamin C? **Jugo de toronja**, refreshingly sour, is something everyone must try.

Antigua Miami Café

Hidden in the tourist centre of Calle Murillo is Antigua Miami, a quirky café offering the best coffees and seasonal juices. The interior design paired with the chilled atmosphere of the place is reminiscent of artistic cities with their secret spots – it is a re-imagination of a more modern, younger Bolivia. The juices complement the aesthetic – refreshing, the same old thing, but somehow new. The surroundings are merely the icing on the cake.



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SANDWICH DE PALTA

Mercado Obrajes

In other countries, avocado on toast is associated with excess money spent on Sunday brunches by young adults who cannot afford any of it. In Bolivia, **sandwich de palta** is not only a usual meal, but the go-to delicacy both of the streets and of the fanciest cafés. Mercado Obrajes might be the former, but no other place can compete with the perfect balance of flavours of this small eccentric cubby hole. Complete with **apanado**, vegetables, artisanal cheese and just the right amount of salt, this *sandwich de palta* is undoubtedly number one on the list. While they say always to choose quality over quantity, it is safe to say that Mercado Obrajes satisfies both. It will leave you wanting more.



Café Typica

To think of **San Miguel** is to think of the endless amounts of cosy cafés paired with an abundance of little shops far from the honking of the rest of **Zona Sur**. Amidst this setting, Café Typica is the perfect getaway – hidden and vine-covered, it offers escape from the noise of the city. Its *sandwich de palta*, consisting of, of course, avocado, the most incredible grilled cheese and sun-dried tomatoes, is just all the more reason to spend a sunshine-filled afternoon under the shade of umbrellas outside.



Magick

Who says one has to stick with the expected, even when the traditional is involved? A magical place for both tourists and Bolivians, MagicK offers a great *sandwich de palta*, reimagined to suit the ever-evolving image of this beautiful city. The combination of avocado, green tomatoes and sunflower seeds creates a sensation that lingers long after the iron gates have closed for the night. To make the experience even better, sprinkle some **locoto** oil on top, and thus a truly Bolivian avocado sandwich is complete.



SINGANI COCKTAIL

Magick

Singani is the heart, life and soul of Bolivia. If a restaurant does not have at least one singani-based cocktail, then it is probably not in Bolivia. MagicK does best what the people love best – chufly. Mixed either with ginger ale or Sprite, this all-time classic brings home the flavour of its base in the most refreshing, and often overly alcoholic way. Because if there is one thing Bolivians like more than a chufly, it is a strong chufly.

Gustu

Denying the genius behind Gustu would be like denying the significance of football in Bolivia – untrue and pointless. Following along the lines of the 'zero kilometre' sentiment, it is only fitting that Gustu would have singani-based cocktails, the best of which is the chancaca. Consisting of a charming mixture of **singani macerado**, **licor de naranja** and **chancaca** (a type of raw sugar, for which the drink is named), this cocktail brings all Bolivian flavours together – the strong, the sweet, the sour. Nothing better to sip on while trying to sneak in a look at the famous local at the table opposite.

Diesel

Amidst the industrial-metal interior design of Diesel lies the key to an unforgettable night – the younger sibling of the chancaca called the yungueño. Although the recipe seems unremarkable – singani and orange juice, sometimes with a dash of sugar syrup – the combination of sweet and strong brings out the best in both. However, one must watch out, as drinking a yungueño is like drinking moscato – the realisation of its strength only hits when it is already too late. But what makes a good cocktail a good cocktail, if not the abundance of lost memories that follow?

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CANDID HOLIDAY SPIRIT

TEXT: CHARLES BLADON



Chutas: Alejandro Loayza



Sale a La Paz: Michael Dunn Caceres



Mixtura: Manuel Seoane

A holiday treat from our local paceño photographers, who capture the spirit of festivity that enchant the cheerful celebrants in these photos. Happy Holidays and Happy New Year from the *Bolivian Express* crew!

THE ANDORO EXPERIENCE

TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES OF PERFORMANCE IN BOLIVIA

TEXT: CHARLES BLADON
PHOTO: CLAUDIA PRUDENCIO



'THEY AREN'T CONCERTS, THEY ARE MORE OF AN EXPERIENCE.'
—ANDORO

Andoro is no musician alone. This was made clear the moment he stepped through the front door of the coffee shop and greeted me. Andean poncho, duffle coat and denim shirt in toe, it was also clear that Andoro takes his fashion seriously. Whilst he released a five-track album this year, entitled *Inmortal*, his exploits haven't been grounded in music alone. Andoro uses his concerts to explore other mediums as well, such as visuals and fashion. He is an artist that thrives on the multifaceted nature of art, choosing both his love of fashion and music and never settling for one.

Yet there was no start for Andoro. For as long as he can remember he has always been interested in music, as if it were intrinsic to his being. 'My mother used to tell me that when I was a baby I would react to music,' Andoro explains, 'It was in my DNA. My whole world was built by sound and music. Every Christmas I'd ask for something that would make noise.' Andoro, a name he chose for himself, learned to play the harmonica before he could even pipe a word. His big break wouldn't materialise until he deviated from his studies in social communication and pursued his passion. Surrounding himself with like-minded artists, such as Vero Pérez from the jazz-pop band Efecto Mandarina, he eventually gained the confidence to take the stage.

Inspiration and support from artists, friends and partners in the artistic world helped form Andoro as we know him today. His friendship with Joaquin Sánchez (an internationally renowned visual artist) was vital in his experimentation with live visuals for performances. Sánchez allegedly gave him the piece of advice by which he seems to live by today. 'I told him I wanted to try to make it into the music business,' Andoro remembers, 'but that if it didn't work out I would try fashion instead. Then he told me: "You don't have to choose."'

His willingness to break the boundaries between the arts has bled through in his music. He says himself that his album is 'pop and electronic with experimental elements.' Incorporating further Andean influences, he states: 'From the preparation of meals to the offerings you make to **Pachamama**, everything is ritualistic in Bolivia. I want that to reflect in my music, which is why my songs sound like rituals.' *Inmortal* provides a soundtrack that Andoro feels is like a musical journey. Its diversity, from intense ritualistic spoken word to the warm soft comforts of his duets with Vero Pérez, is a key strength of his album and is metaphorical of the project itself.

As a result, his live performances are spectacles in which he uses what he has learnt from various artists. When I ask him about his concerts, he simply replies: 'They aren't concerts, they are more of an experience.' This is plain to see in the elements that factor into his performances, as Andoro tries to overwhelm the senses, making his shows truly unique.

'We have a lot of point of views working on one project,' Andoro says. 'It is a collaborative community of artists, sculptors, photographers and cinematographers. This is the strength of our endeavour.' For Andoro, this is only the beginning. In the future he hopes to host various pop-up events, using spaces such as cinemas for visual events, and hopes to get out on the streets more. 'My music is inside a bubble now,' he says, 'this is good because it's safe in the bubble and there aren't many people punching at it, but I want my music out on the streets.'

Surely enough, Andoro is only emerging as an artist. If this bubble of protection eventually pops, then the people of Bolivia will hopefully come to celebrate the diversity of his project, which is a fitting match for the times Bolivia lives in today.

WHILST HE RELEASED A FIVE-TRACK ALBUM THIS YEAR, ENTITLED INMORTAL, HIS EXPLOITS HAVEN'T BEEN GROUNDED IN MUSIC ALONE.

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CHRISTMAS IN TRANSLATION

EXPLORING THE QUIRKS AND STAPLES OF A BOLIVIAN CHRISTMAS

TEXT: CHARLES BLADON
PHOTO: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC

Turkey, Christmas trees, fairy lights, snow and a warm fire: these are a few things that instantly come to my mind when the word Christmas is thrust into conversation. Given my Western upbringing, my perception of Christmas is grounded in its setting (for me the blisteringly cold winter in England) and in the culture that has assimilated with this Christian holiday. But as Bolivia's diverse range of Christmas traditions suggest, there is no such thing as a universal Christmas experience.

In our adventure of Christmas in Bolivia, we focus on the holiday's very core, on the unique colonial traditions that have merged and evolved, giving form to local celebrations. In Bolivia, Christmas hasn't merged into one suit and presents itself in various forms that almost mimic its linguistic diversity. From delectable dishes that bear no resemblance to European Christmas staples, to familiar sound of carol singers at the doors of fellow Christmas celebrants, Bolivia offers a host of peculiar and charming traditions that are worth exploring.

BUÑUELOS

A few *paceños* have **buñuelos** instead at the stroke of midnight, saving the big meal for Christmas day itself. *Buñuelos* too play a fundamental part in a Bolivian Christmas. Similar to a doughnut with a batter of cinnamon and flour, *buñuelos* are sprinkled with powdered sugar and usually served with hot chocolate. They make for small snacks during festive entertainments, but the local Christmas Market in La Paz supplements one's need for a warm respite after a busy evening of present shopping.

PICANA/FOOD

Food invariably plays a lead role in Christmases around the world, but whilst Turkey is customary in some European households, in Bolivia, the dish of choice is **picana**. *Picana* is a stew popularly eaten on Christmas Eve, made from a whole range of meats: including, beef, chicken, pork and lamb. There are numerous recipes that usually stem from grandparents, who in turn received them from their parents and grandparents. 'We use beer, wine and vegetables,' Patricia Zamora, a local **paceña**, explains, 'but often people make it in a white broth, similar to chicken soup.' Aside from the numerous ways one can prepare *picana* for the family, what remains constant is the time at which it is eaten. More often than not, dinner takes place close to midnight after a late evening service at the local church.

CHRISTMAS MARKET

Christmas markets have been around for decades in Bolivia. La Paz's very own market off Avenida del Ejército in Parque Urbano is a Grinch's nightmare supplying all the lights, candles, Christmas trees, incense, miniature nativity sets (complete with miniature sandals for your miniature baby Jesus) and *buñuelos* one could possibly want. But this Christmas oasis, which manages to obscure itself from the unfestive hustle and bustle of the **Prado**, offers more than goods, providing festive escapism and an opportunity to envelope yourself in the Christmas spirit. Some stall owners have even made a family tradition out of setting up camp on the winding market corridors.

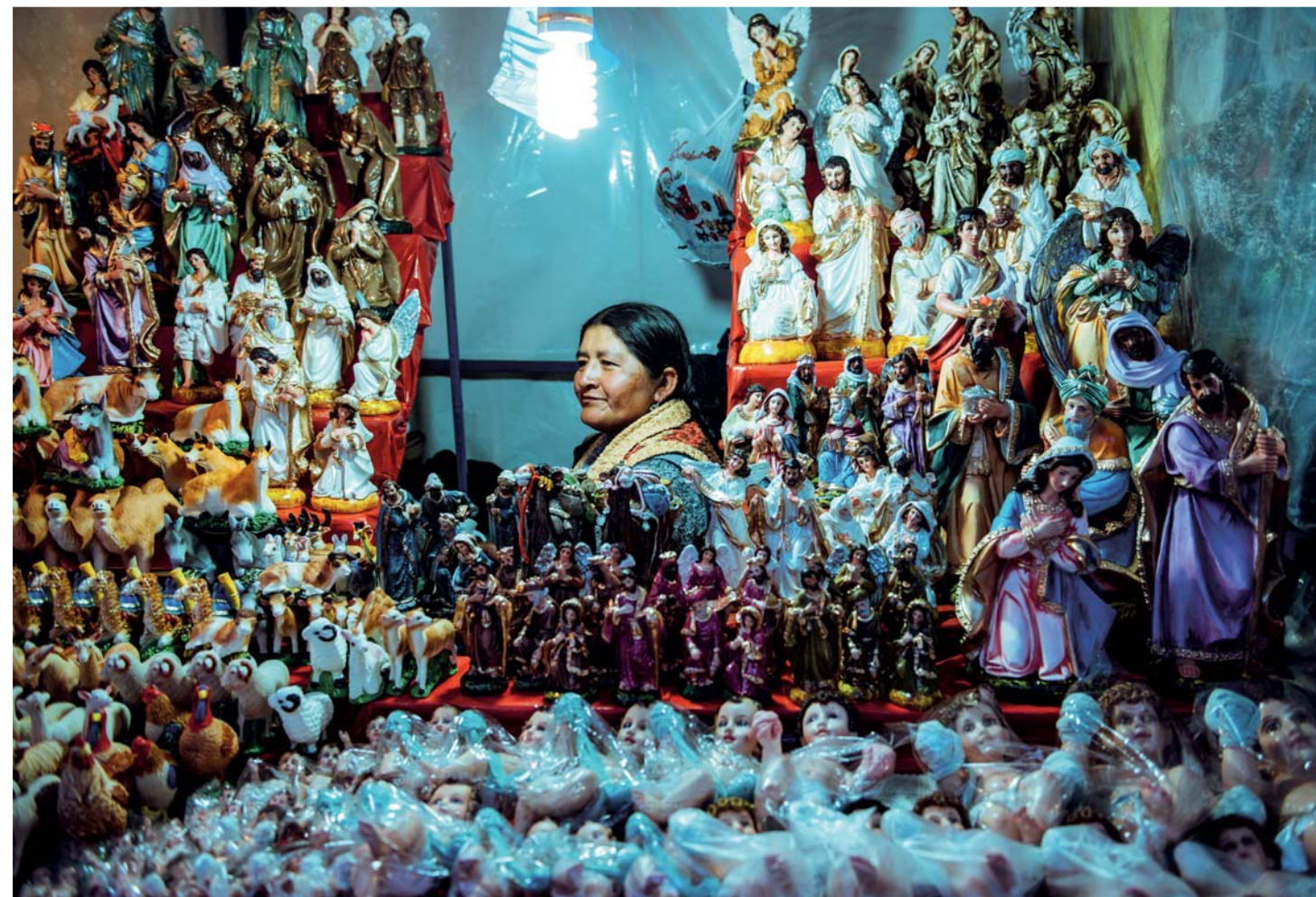
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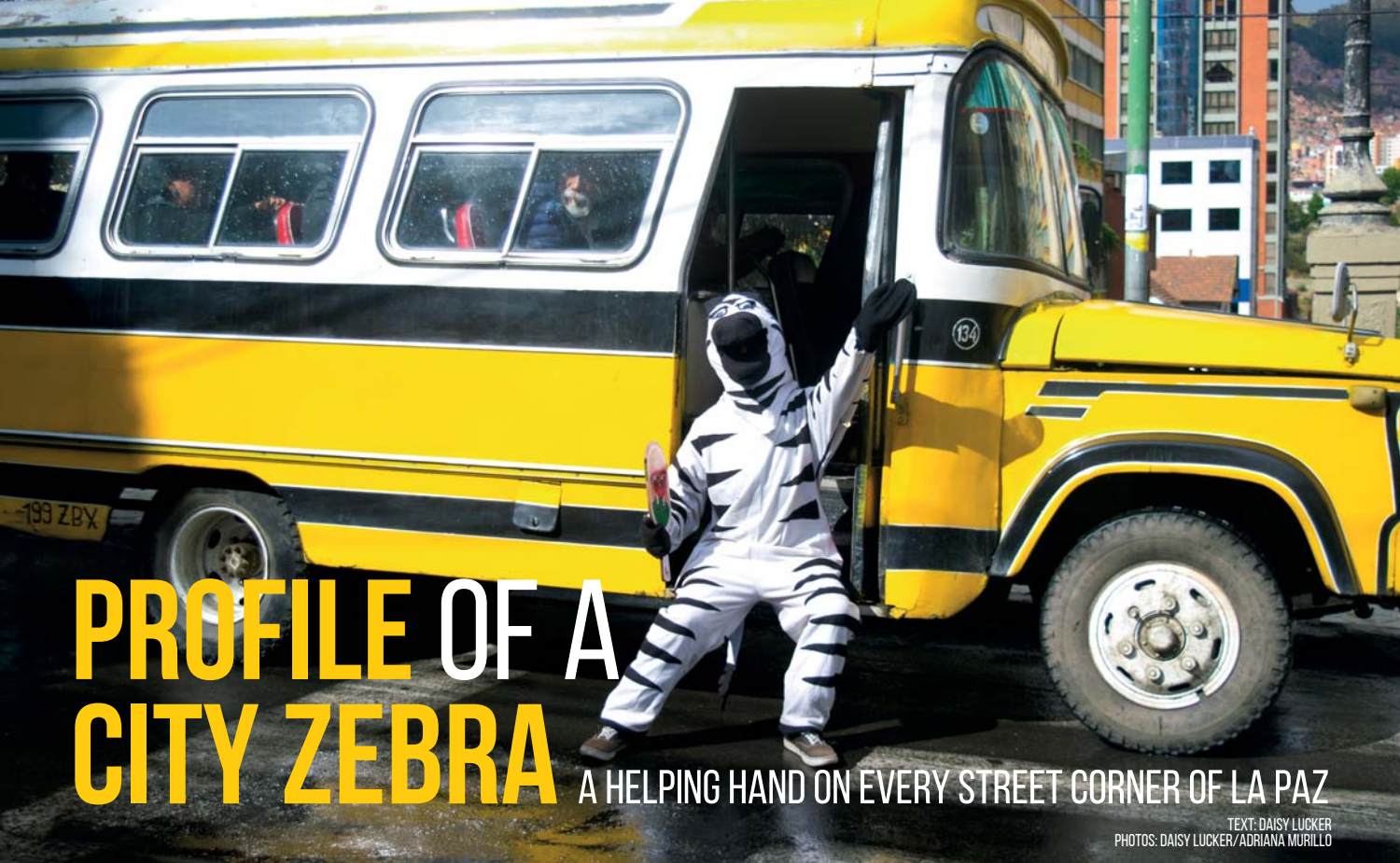
In Bolivia, the adoration of Jesus on the day of his birth is very important, with feasts and dances that center around it. Many families across the country set up elaborate displays of the nativity scene, pouring their hearts and efforts into completing these pieces of art. Shoppers have no trouble finding figurines, scenic decorations and even clothes for the figures at the Christmas market. Whilst figurines are not unique to Bolivia, and can be seen across the world in many Catholic countries, what sets them apart are the different fashion elements they incorporate. Some Jesus figures are painted with a **potosino** or Andean motif, distinct in their hairstyles (often dark curl tufts) and the clothing sold with them, similar to the ponchos one can find on **calle Sagarnaga**, but a million times smaller.

MUSIC AND DANCE

No Bolivian Christmas is complete without festive music. Whilst in Europe families gather around a warm fire to sing soft traditional carols (or more modern tunes with a pop influence), Bolivian Christmas music has an upbeat, jovial feel. Adding to the atmosphere of animated jingles, Bolivians dance to the songs, skipping, frolic and twirling. Children, parents and grandparents follow suit, all for the baby Jesus and the nativity scenes that embellish front rooms.

Bolivian Christmas is nothing short of a spectacle. Combining South American bombast and Christian tradition, this is a Christmas unlike no other. Although no blanket statement can be made for Christmas celebrations in the country, a summarisation of the food, places and traditions is all one can make to capture the festivities that Bolivia forges.





PROFILE OF A CITY ZEBRA

A HELPING HAND ON EVERY STREET CORNER OF LA PAZ

TEXT: DAISY LUCKER
PHOTOS: DAISY LUCKER/ADRIANA MURILLO

I started on 7 February 2011. It was a Monday at exactly 3pm. I remember it very well,' says Rocio Melendres about becoming a real life zebra-crossing for the city of La Paz.

Melendres became a **zebrita** for financial reasons. Like many others in the city, she was struggling to find work. 'But I liked the project and I continued for many reasons,' she claims, 'not just for the money.'

The zebra programme is a place for individuals to develop themselves and gain experience whilst meeting and socialising with others. Focussed on the young people of La Paz and El Alto, the programme encourages individuals to become actors of social change in their surrounding communities.

Having volunteered as a zebra for more than six years now, Melendres is one of the most experienced zebras in the programme.

Like many of the other participants, becoming a zebra had a strong impact on Melendres' life: 'My life before was very different,' she explains. 'As a citizen I didn't add anything to the city. But once you are a zebra you see the city through different eyes. You fall in love with it. You want to help. [...] It helped me discover abilities I didn't know I had and it helped me choose my career in education. Now I feel more involved with myself and my city,' she says.

'Before becoming a zebra I didn't respect crossing lanes,' Melendres continues. 'I threw my trash on floor, I had bad habits. Now I put my trash in my pockets, in my bag. Many people come and find themselves through the programme. I was very shy, for example, but being a zebra helps you socialise with people and

'THE ZEBRA PROGRAMME IS IN YOUR HEART, YOU CARRY IT WITH YOU. ULTIMATELY WHAT MATTERS IS YOUR ATTITUDE.'

—ROCIO MELENDRES



NAME: ROCIO GRISEL MELENDRES CONDORI
AGE: 29
GENDER: FEMALE
OCCUPATION: BRINGING A 'PEDAGOGÍA DEL AMOR' TO THE CITY OF LA PAZ

manage teams of volunteers. It helps you become a leader, and that's what I've become.'

Although the zebras are famous for their costume and for helping you cross the city streets, they also bring happiness to many others in the city. They work all year round and train for two months during the winter. Apart from their role on the streets, the zebras also accompany senior citizens in chess games and storytelling activities and collaborate with local schools through a programme called Cultura Ciudadana, which addresses the recognition of individuals as citizens.

On the roads of La Paz, however, it's not all fun and games. 'Sometimes in the streets you find situations where you can't do anything, you feel useless,' Melendres tells me. One time, she saw a mother pulling an infant's ear and yet there was nothing she could do. As a zebra, she did not have the authority to intervene. The only thing she could do was to try and make the baby smile to get him to stop crying. Additionally, some commuters find speaking to a mask easier than speaking to a real person and find time on the street to tell Melendres about their problems. 'One time a man came to up me and was crying as he told me his story. I was crying as well under my suit, but I had to cheer him up. I listened.'

When asked what the future holds for her, Melendres replies: 'The truth is we are not going to stay here until we are old. The idea is to encourage more young people to find their path. It is important for them to know what they want to do with their lives.' That is exactly what Melendres obtained through the programme. Now she is set on finishing her studies, building on her knowledge of the project that she has been coordinating for the last two years. 'The programme is something that you hold in your heart, that you carry with you. Ultimately what matters is your attitude.'



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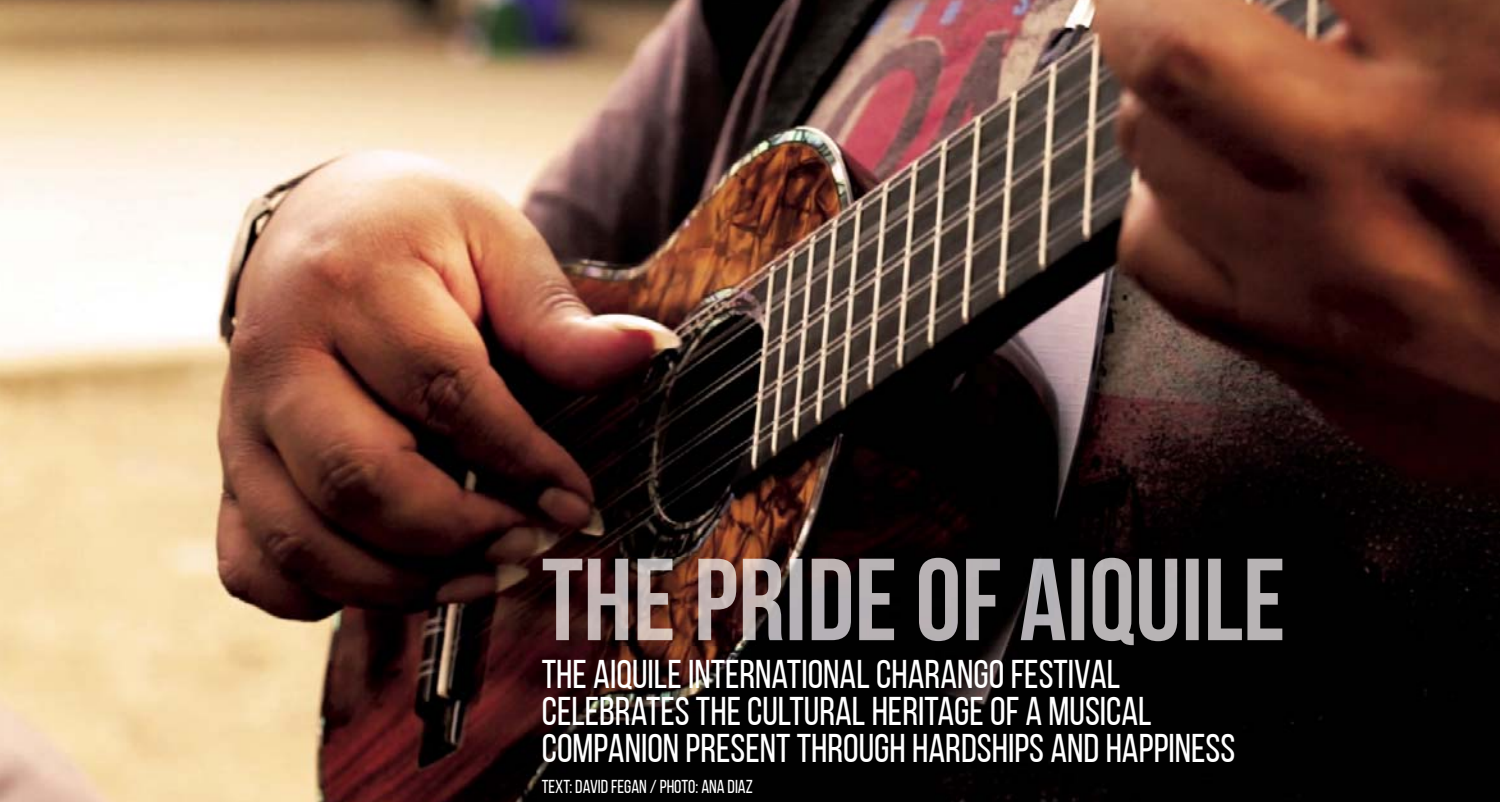


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THE PRIDE OF AIQUILE

THE AIQUILE INTERNATIONAL CHARANGO FESTIVAL CELEBRATES THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF A MUSICAL COMPANION PRESENT THROUGH HARDSHIPS AND HAPPINESS

TEXT: DAVID FEGAN / PHOTO: ANA DIAZ

Buena onda is a good way to describe the people of the small central Bolivian city of Aiquile and their annual international charango festival, which celebrates and pays tribute to the cultural heritage of the small but powerfully iconic traditional Andean stringed instrument. Situated among the southern Quechua-speaking valleys of the diverse Cochabamba department, the 'Capital of Charango' is known for its dry climate, **chicha**, earthquakes, meteorites and, above all, its excellence in charango fabrication.

Combined with a familiar, friendly small-town feel, Aiquile's charango festival greets us with a warm, relaxed vibe as we arrive in the blissfully beer-inviting mid-afternoon heat ahead of the closing night of the 34th annual celebration. Festivalgoers move around in trickles and spurts after the charango-playing competitions the night before and with the **Gran Peña de las Peñas** still to come in the evening.

The all-ages appeal of the charango is on show not only in the various age categories of the previous night's competitions, but also with the youngsters who can be found enthusiastically strumming and picking the stringed instruments around town.

'Music needs to be better supported in Bolivia,' says **paceño** musician Rodolfo Ramírez Paredes. He speaks of the amazing 'feel, technique and precision' of some of these young **charanguistas** in attendance, some of whom nevertheless had difficulty in obtaining school permission to come to this year's charango festival. Their predicament is evocative of the song 'Niño Rebelde,' by the Quechuan group **Norte Potosí**, in which a father asks his son what he wants to be when he is older and responds in repeated disbelief and protestation when the son maintains that he wants to be an artist, simply because he 'likes it.'

At the other end of the age spectrum, Walter Montero is exhibiting his ornately crafted charangos in the stalls next to the Manuel de Ugarte school stadium, where the festival's main stage is set up. The former bandmate, friend and charango-making disciple of late virtuoso Bolivian **charanguista** and master craftsman Mauro Núñez, Montero is one of several master luthiers whose handiwork is on show for festivalgoers wishing to purchase a handmade instrument.

Visiting artisans and musicians also gather nearby, selling jewellery and accessories as well as sharing **chicha**, **cerveza**, coca and tunes, including rousing renditions of folkloric favourites 'Ojos Azules' and 'Leño Verde.' Among the music makers is Japanese-raised, La Paz-based Chupay Ch'akis **charanguista** Kenichi Kuwabara, who took first place in the international charango players competition the night before.

Later on in the evening, after the gentle lull of the afternoon has given way to the slowly simmering excitement of an impending barn dance, Kuwabara is duly given a barn-raising reception as he accepts his award on the main stage. Kuwabara, who initially started learning the charango from a maestro in his native Japan before moving to Bolivia, is 'very happy' with both prize and reception, as are **aiquileños** and Bolivians alike with the growing international presence at the festival, due to the unifying influence of the charango.

Then, as the last of the orange twilight finally surrenders to night and the bright stadium lights, I make the rounds to find out how festivalgoers feel about this year's edition of the festival, with a key theme among locals being 'pride.' Pride for a celebration that recognises the importance of an instrument so well made and culturally ingrained in Aiquile over the years that – although Potosí is considered the birthplace of charango (due to indigenous **potosinos** creating the vihuela-inspired instrument during the Spanish conquest and the instrument's vital place in the **campesino** culture of the region) – it is Aiquile that is known as the 'Capital of Charango.'

Aiquileños have pride that their event is becoming an ever bigger, better and more culturally diverse festival in which to share and continue spreading all that encompasses the charango – and pride that this is a feelgood festival where people can come to listen to good music and **pasarla bien**.

'The festival is well organised and getting better,' says one *aiquileño*. 'This year there are more people, I feel proud.'

'It's better than other years,' says another. 'There are more participants and more people.'

'The festival is moving forward and we feel good about this. More visitors are welcome,' says an *aiquileño* charango luthier, who also mentions that visitors to the charango festival are 'very respectful.'

Finally, as the awards ceremony wraps up some time before midnight and the *Gran Peña de las Peñas* begins, we are treated to the spectacular force of Dalmiro Cuellar and his band: charango, guitars, violins, drum kit, an extravagantly played bombo, bass and **chaqueño** rancher spirit in full flow. An invigorating, fist-pumping rendition of the **Tinku** classic 'Celia' is the highlight of a fun and energetic set. Los Kory Huayras follow, and the warm night becomes blurry as crates of beer continue to be delivered to tables, kegs of *chicha* appear on the dance floor and revellers continue until 6am, when the police eventually kick them out.

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HAUTE CUISINE IN A FASHIONABLE BOÎTE

POPULAR PUTS A MODERN SPIN ON TRADITIONAL BOLIVIAN FOOD

TEXT: DAISY LUCKER
PHOTO: ALEXANDRA MELEÁN

On 17 November, in a sun-trapped square in which cocktails flowed and canapés were distributed around the room, a new restaurant opened near Plaza San Francisco.

Co-founders Alexandra Meleán, Juan Pablo Reyes and Diego Rodas opened the doors of Popular to friends, family and journalists to show what they had to offer. The night was a great way to celebrate the exhaustive efforts they made to create this masterpiece over the previous month. Featured appetisers for the opening included three typical Bolivian dishes: **tucumanas** (mini empanadas, stuffed with chicken stew and peanut sauce) presented on rocks with charred wood, **papa rellena** (stuffed smoked potato with beef-cheek stew) and **escabeche de cerdo** (rolled pork with pickled vegetables) in quirky enamel teacups.

The old colonial-style house on Calle Murillo in which Popular is situated is a fitting location for the new restaurant, which has been receiving praise since opening just over a month ago – not only from locals, but also tourists and travellers seeking authentic Bolivian cuisine. 'It seems La Paz locals are excited about contemporary Bolivian food in a casual environment,' says co-owner Meleán. 'Tourists and travellers are both surprised and satisfied by our proposal, too. We are pleased with the response.'

Meleán says that the name, Popular, was chosen in the hope of 'reflecting the simplicity of our culinary concept: good, everyday Bolivian food inspired by the street markets, like Mercado Rodríguez, nearby.'

With a menu that changes weekly, a recent prix-fixe lunch included **anticucho** or **crema de lentejas** as an **entrada**. At our table of four, the cow's heart was popular. The dish came presented on a smooth stone, the sliced meat skewered on two charred twigs. The **carne** was tender and tasty, accompanied by the traditional **maní** dipping sauce. Then the main course: a choice of **pollo frito** or **ispi**. The **ispi**, a small fish native to Lake Titicaca, was partnered with a **puré de mote**, dried beetroot and other vegetable crisps. The **pollo frito** was served with a selection of greens, avocado, baby tomatoes and boiled potatoes. Dessert consisted of **ensalada de sandía** or **helado de canela**.

Presentation was on point, and so were the flavours in both dessert dishes. The ice cream came with a **tawa tawa** (a type of deep-fried Bolivian pastry) and a honey dipping sauce. Every item complemented the others. The fruit salad featured roasted watermelon presented in a bamboo bowl, with lemon syrup and caramel escorting the fruit. Fresh-squeezed juice and a selection of bread and pickled vegetables were provided with the meal – in addition to, as the menu states, an extra dose of **amor**.

The passion that's evident in the preparation and presentation of Popular's food is also what brought together the three co-owners. They all met when working together at the Atix Hotel's Ona Restaurant in **Zona Sur**. 'Juan and Diego were hired to run the kitchen,' explains Meleán. 'As the in-house photographer, I photographed all of the dishes they initially proposed for the culinary concept of the restaurant. We all share a love for beautifully plated and delicious Bolivian food. So, naturally,



HOY
SE SIRVE

popular

ENTRADA
Escabeche de cerdo
Crema de lentejas
SEGU

we became friends.' This care and attention for details shows through in the way food is presented in the restaurant, with rustic stones, bamboo bowls and quirky enamel dishes. The team pays explicit attention to detail.

THE PARTNERS AIMED TO CREATE AN EXCELLENT PRIX-FIXE LUNCH MENU THAT WON'T BREAK THE BANK.

Opening Popular has been a learning experience for the partners. Although their background aided them during the development process, finding the right market and approach was tricky. And even if the restaurant runs exceptionally smoothly now, Meleán says that the project originally came together on the fly. 'We have had to improvise a little,' she says. 'As owners, we are all equally invested in the project. I, for one, am currently learning how to wait tables.' But the most challenging complication in opening the restaurant, Meleán says, was remodeling the space and 'creating a modern yet laid-back environment.'

Modest pricing is another factor the partners had to consider, in addition to the quality and presentation of the dishes. They aimed to create an excellent prix-fixe lunch menu that won't break the bank. And, for Bs 45, they provide an unforgettable experience. Soon, Popular will also be open in the evenings, featuring more dishes along with alcohol pairings at a slightly higher price.

Meleán stresses the importance of Bolivian culture and tradition to the restaurant: 'Our menu features local Bolivian food, and we prefer to work with seasonal products, which are often in limited supply.' Nevertheless, limited supply can benefit the finished product. 'Changing our prix-fixe lunch menu every week is an exercise in creativity and resourcefulness,' Meleán says. 'It's true: the ever-changing menu frequently includes traditional Bolivian dishes with an exciting modern twist.'

The restaurant is also a creative space which is used to collaborate and share ideas with chefs from other kitchens. On 15 December, Hay Pan's Sukko Stach will be visiting Popular to cook some of his favourite dishes.

And there's already talk of expansion. Although this the partners' first project together, they want to expand on their concept of Bolivian cuisine. 'There is no limit to what we can do,' says Meleán.

BALLET DE BOLIVIA

REDEFINING THE SOCIAL BOUNDARIES OF AN ARTFORM

TEXT AND PHOTO: FRUZSINA GÁL



To think of ballet is to think of a well-constructed image of a tall, slender, fair-toned dancer in front of an elegant, rich, fair-toned audience. The art of pirouettes and tutus has always retained an elitist, if not racially discriminative, tone throughout history and around the world. Its origins in Europe have given it a sense of exclusivity that has not allowed much room for progress. But here in La Paz, once the curtains open and the applause dies a contrasting sight becomes visible – a short, dark-skinned Bolivian, standing out amongst the expected.

Ballet schools in Bolivia are changing ever so slowly. The transformation might be gradual and singular to a small number of groups, such as Ballet de Bolivia (BDB), but the initiative reflects an overarching change in the country towards a more inclusive interpretation of this particular dance style.

Jimmy Calla Montoya, Director of BDB, emphasises the importance of Bolivian identity not only as an essential part of his ballet, but also as the core of his institution. He has danced for the Ballet Folklórico Nacional de Bolivia and has had his own ballet school for six years now. Having travelled around the Bolivian countryside and learned first-hand about indigenous dances, Calla believes the ballet scene is slowly becoming more inclusive – although it hasn't been easy. Originally, classical ballet in Bolivia was limited to people who had money and descended from Spaniards and **criollos**. As one of the first few non-white Bolivian dancers, Calla remembers being called one of the 'dark ones' at the start of his career.

'I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW WHAT WE ARE WEARING, WHAT IT REPRESENTS, WHAT IT MEANS.'
—JIMMY CALLA MONTOYA, DIRECTOR OF BALLET DE BOLIVIA

'Classical ballet is European and the physical prototype is of a European, not a native South American,' he explains. 'The most shocking in my case was that I was brown, and in 1997 this problem was a lot more prominent. The issue of discrimination also transpired in my transfer to traditional ballet. When I applied [to Ballet Folklórico Nacional] they objected to my features. At the time, dancers wanting to represent Bolivia in European shows still had to have light skin and light eyes.'

But as Calla says, ballet in Bolivia is becoming ever more inclusive, if only in small measures. On a national level, Ballet Folklórico Nacional now accepts all dancers, which is a sign of progress. At BDB, Calla recruits artists who have a body for ballet, independently of their skin tone, and who can learn the skills that he is looking for.

One of Calla's objectives in founding BDB was to give the opportunity to all Bolivians, regardless of their skin colour and stature, to dance and to learn about ballet. The other important motivation was to reclaim a national heritage that he felt was being lost. According to Calla, when transposed to the urban, more international context of Bolivian cities, traditional dances have been stylised to a point that they have lost their essence. 'A lot of the traditional symbolism has been lost,' he explains. BDB is his attempt to preserve the soul and spirit of Bolivia. He hopes to showcase Bolivian culture to the rest of the world by intertwining the technique of classical ballet and the symbolism of indigenous dances. 'There are a lot of codes from our existing cultures that we don't know about,' Calla says. 'The indigenous, the original – almost no one knows about it.'

With such matters at the forefront, what results is folkloric ballet that conveys a concrete sense of Bolivian identity. During the first five years of Calla's school, BDB only performed outside of Bolivia as a strategy. The traditional garments and clothes came from indigenous towns, but the ballet itself was created for a foreign audience. They performed in Chile, Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and have received invitations to perform in Europe too. This year, however, Calla has decided to bring the dance back to its roots for the first time. The school performed this year at Casa de las Culturas, in La Paz, to represent the legend of the Loco Paya-Paya, a forbidden dance from the **Yungas** that is performed between midnight and 5am. For Calla, it is essential that his dancers do research and understand the concept behind every dance creation. He believes it's what separates BDB from the rest of ballet organisations.

'In La Paz there are a lot of groups that call themselves "ballet"; Calla says, 'and whose directors have never seen or studied the art. My ballet is the opposite, full of **morenos** to represent the varied fabric of our culture. My goal is for this ballet to become the reference, interwoven with the native. I want people to know what we are wearing, what it represents, what it means.' In this sense, BDB is a counteroffer to existing groups that Calla believes invent indigenous dances and erase Bolivian culture instead of cultivating it. His current school consists of 35 people, all of whom have to learn about the origin of a dances before they can perform it.

Calla hardly has to think to sum up BDB in three words. 'It's easy,' he says, 'Indigenous. Disciplined. Passionate. Blending classical and traditional ballet fulfils me. I want it to fulfil others as well.'



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ATIX HOTEL

A NEW TAKE ON BOLIVIAN HOSPITALITY

TEXT: DAISY LUCKER / PHOTO: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC

As we stand on the rooftop of the newly built, five-star Atix hotel, owner and co-founder Carlos Rodríguez poses for a picture as the sun shines in the background. Overlooking the beautiful sights of the upscale neighbourhood of Calacoto, Rodríguez explains the construction boom that has taken place here over the last ten years. 'Things are always popping up here or there,' he stresses, as he points at the nearest building in construction, which stands tall above the developing landscape. In less than a decade, Calacoto has transformed from a town dotted with small houses to a growing urban center brimming with commercial life. These new developments are creating a bold and modern new landscape.

Originally from Sucre, Rodríguez studied in La Paz for more than 14 years. He later ventured to Kansas City in the United States as an exchange student, before deciding to pursue a career in civil engineering. His position at Maxam, one of the world's largest explosives manufacturers, took him worldwide, including Kazakhstan, Spain and Panama. Little did his employer know, however, that the plush hotels he was put up in became market research for the Rodríguez brothers' future dream of opening up a hotel. 'I was working for five years with this company abroad, and by the third year we were contemplating having a hotel,' Rodríguez tells me.

'It all seemed to fall into place when my brother got married,' explains Rodríguez. His brother's new father-in-law was also interested in joining the pair to create the hotel. 'We decided to go all in to buy land and then started talking with the banks and the architect who designed it.'

The Rodríguez brothers saw a gap in the market. From the beginning they were set on the theme of representing Bolivian materials and culture: 'There is a lot of great hotels in Bolivia, but most of them are trying to copy something from outside of the country. They are trying to do a version of the Marriott or a Bolivian version of the Ritz. We saw that nobody was doing [what we are doing],' says Rodríguez. Inspired by this Bolivian theme, they began building the hotel, choosing the designers and presenting their originality to create something new and different. Two years and eight months later, the plush hotel stands out from the rest of the highrise buildings in the area.

From the moment Rodríguez arrived at the plot of land where the hotel now stands, he decided to use the rock that originally covered La Paz during the 1920's and 1930's for its construction. Architect Stuart Narofsky flew in from New York to design the project. 'He tried to put a lot of Bolivia into the building,' Rodríguez says, 'and the interior designer was the same. She was designing the furniture and then creating it here, except for the beds, which had to meet high international standards,' he adds.

But it wasn't easy finding the right products to fill his hotel. 'We struggled a lot,' Rodríguez remembers. 'Sometimes, we would find factories, but they would only produce their own

**FROM THE BEGINNING
THEY WERE SET
ON THE THEME OF
REPRESENTING
BOLIVIAN MATERIALS
AND CULTURE.**



models. Then we would find small producers who could not produce the quantities we needed.' In the end, the construction involved four different carpenters. As Rodríguez shows us the different pieces that were created during this process, he points at the metal frame lamps hanging from the restaurant ceiling and at the tables made from tree trunks. 'If you see the furniture and lamps,' he explains, 'all of them were made here. We are really proud of it.'

The theme of Bolivia is also present on the walls of the hotel. 'We were thinking about having a lot of Bolivian artwork and thought about having one artist per floor. But that was really difficult because many of the artists didn't understand what we wanted and had their own criteria,' Rodríguez comments. However, when they came across Gastón Ugalde, known as the 'the most important living Bolivian artist' or the 'Andy Warhol Andino,' everything fell into place. Ugalde presented a selection of photographs and paintings to the hotel, some of which date back to 1990's and others which he produced during a two-month sabbatical around the natural sights of Bolivia. You can spot one of the photographs in the hotel's dining area, featuring four small children holding the A, T, I and X on an abandoned truck in the famous Salar de Uyuni.

The rooftop of the hotel houses Ona Restaurant, which translates to 'gift' in **Pukina** and strives to serve food made for Bolivians, by Bolivians and with Bolivian products. 'It is very hard,' says Rodríguez, 'because many of the products in Bolivia – including tomatoes, lemons, etc. – are imported. So you struggle.'

Success came early for Atix, as it joined the Design Hotels team in its first year of operations. Joining this selection of high quality worldwide hotels, which accepts only 4% of applications each year, allows Atix to reach a different, larger and more creative audience.

GLOSSARY

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AGUAYO	Traditional fabric from Bolivia
AIQUILEÑO	From the town of Aiquile
AMOR	Love
ANTICUCHO	Cow's heart grilled over fire and served with potatoes
APANADO	Breaded meat
BUENA ONDA	Good vibes/Cool
BUÑUELO	A doughnut-like fritter, traditionally eaten during the Christmas season
CALLE SAGARNAGA	Tourist street in the centre of La Paz
CAMPESINO	Someone from the countryside
CANASTÓN	Basket
CARNE	Meat
CERVEZA	Beer
CHANCACA	Sweet sauce made of raw unrefined sugar from sugarcane
CHAQUEÑO	From the Chaco region
CHARANGUISTA	Someone who plays the charango
CHICHA	Macerated drink made of corn
CREMA DE LENTEJAS	Lentil soup
CRIOLLO	A person from Spanish South or Central America, especially one of pure Spanish descent.
ENSALADA DE SANDÍA	Watermelon salad
ENTRADA	Appetiser
ESCABECHE DE CERDO	Rolled pork with pickled vegetables
GRAN PEÑA DE PEÑAS	One of the greatest festivals of folk music
HELADO DE CANELA	Cinnamon-flavoured ice cream
ISPI	Fish from Lake Titicaca
JUGO DE TORONJA	Grapefruit juice
LICOR DE NARANJA	Orange liquor
LOCOTO	Chili pepper
MANÍ	Peanut
MORENO	Someone with dark skin
NORTE POTOSÍ	North of Potosí
PACEÑO(A)	From La Paz
PACHAMAMA	A Mother Earth figure to the Aymara and Quechua people
PANETÓN	Italian sweet bread traditionally eaten around Christmas time
PAPA RELLENA	Stuffed potato
PASARLA BIEN	To have a good time
PEDAGOGÍA DEL AMOR	Pedagogy of love
PESEBRE	Nativity
PICANA	Soup made with various types of meat, potatoes and vegetables eaten at midnight on Christmas Eve
POLLO FRITO	Fried chicken
POTOSINO	From Potosí
PRADO	Main avenue in the centre of La Paz
PUKINA	An extinct language once spoken by a native ethnic group in the region surrounding Lake Titicaca
PURÉ DE MOTE	Andean corn purée
SAN MIGUEL	An upscale area in the south of La Paz
SANDWICH DE PALTA	Avocado sandwich
SINGANI MACERADO	Alcoholic drink made of macerated grapes
TAWA TAWA	Traditional fried dough from Potosí
TUCUMANA	Fried empanada
YUNGAS	Province of La Paz
ZEBRITA	Affectionate diminutive for the 'zebras'
ZONA SUR	'Southern Zone', an upscale area in the south of La Paz



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