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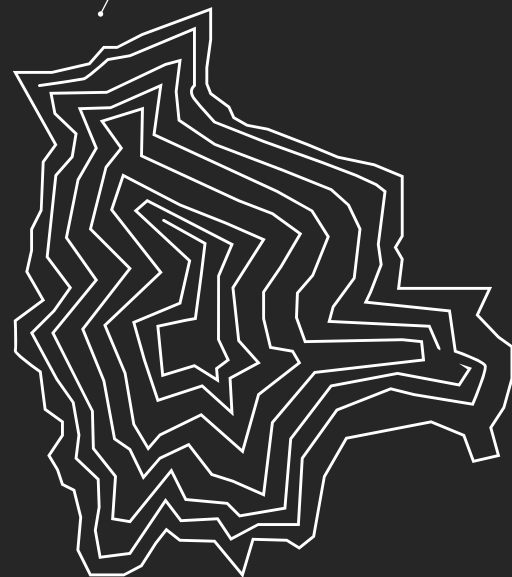
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La Paz – Bolivia
April 2017

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Editorial / #71

The Senses

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

By William Wroblewski

It's difficult to begin counting the ways that Bolivia has the power to overtake the senses. But I'll take on that fool's errand and start a list:

A walk through La Cancha, Cochabamba's famous daily open-air market – the country's largest – will inundate your eyes with the crowded sights of vendors selling everything under the sun, from vegetables and livestock to clothes and car parts. The world-famous **Carnaval** celebrations in Oruro flood your ears with the wild musical history of Bolivian folklore. Neo-Andean cuisine pouring from the newest kitchens in La Paz and Santa Cruz offers the jet set traditional, local ingredients presented with modern flair, creating new flavours for diners to savour. A pre-dawn arrival to the ceramic and glass bus terminal in Potosí can deliver a soul-searing cold your body has never felt before. The smell of burning **Palo Santo** enticing your nose at a **cha'lla** at the top of La Cumbre, the desolate, rocky mountain pass you reach on your way down to the greenery of Los Yungas and the Amazon, is one you will never forget.

I could go on and on.

In this issue of *Bolivian Express*, we used our senses as our guides to share some of the most memorable stories from Bolivia. We are celebrating the incredible diversity of this country, and telling stories of what we find to be essential Bolivian experiences.

We learn about a history of the recorded music of yesteryear, and two fanatics' efforts to preserve precious pieces of musical history. We visit a theatre where children without hearing are learning to perform their experiences and allow audiences to understand what it might be like to live with disabilities. We take a **charango** lesson from a master, one who cannot see and uses his ears, hands, and heart to feel his music. In La Paz's Zona Sur, we get a close shave with a barber offering old-time quality to the city's hip and trendy. And we visit an Italian restaurant that combines tastes of the Mediterranean with warm Bolivian hospitality.

While thinking of the sensory experiences Bolivia has to offer, it is important not to leave out its more mystical side: **yatiris** telling fortunes; human skulls protecting their caretakers; the Andean cosmovision providing new ways to see the physical and meta-physical world. With otherworldly activities carrying on amongst modern life here, one can become tuned in to one's sixth sense, looking inside oneself to make one's own reality of this place.

As you sit back and read this issue, hopefully we will awake all of your senses, and you will be prepared to take in from all sides everything Bolivia has to offer. There are many places to go, and even more stories to create. Give it your all, and with your five physical senses, and your sixth one for good measure, you can experience Bolivia for all that it is.

Then you can start making your own little list. ◊

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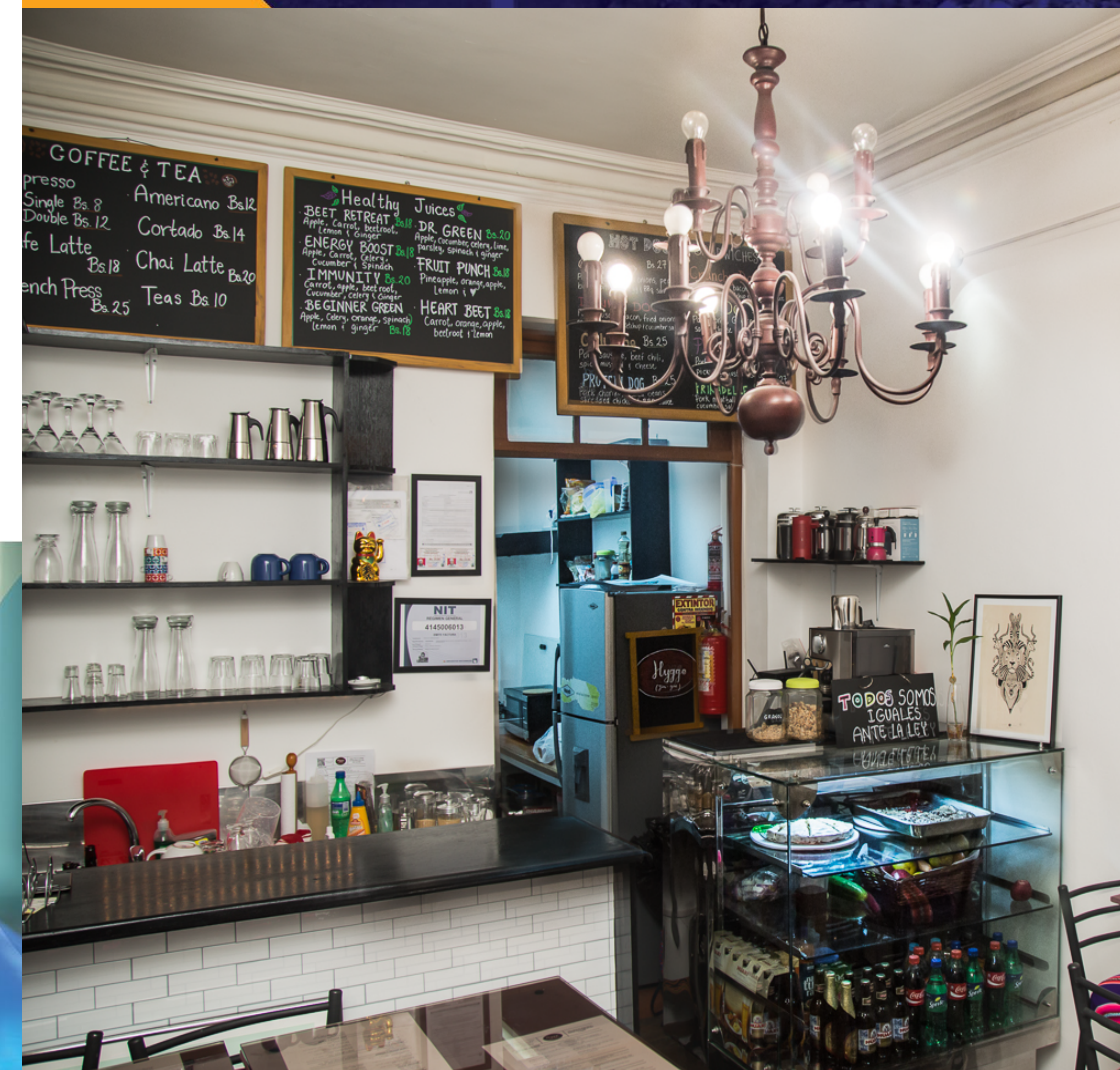
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I Taste

Photo: Nick Somers



EATS, DISPUTES & LEAVES

THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING
BOLIVIA'S NEW COCA LAW

Text: Alex Walker
Photo: Nick Somers

Climbing high into Villa Fátima, I reach ADEPCOCA headquarters, whose insides remind me somewhat of a labyrinth-tardis hybrid. Weaving in and out of great chambers piled high with sacks of coca leaves primed for distribution, I am on a seemingly interminable quest to find a spokesperson for this bastion of resistance against Bolivia's new, and controversial, coca law. My voice of defiance eventually arrives in the form of the stony-faced Gerardo Ríos, the coca growers union's secretary of commercialisation.

Leaning so far across his table that, if it weren't for his sombre expression, the context could be mistaken for intimate, Ríos embarks on a well-honed spiel marking out his, and the Yungas-based ADEPCOCA's, numerous and vehement qualms with the new coca law.

'We, the **yungueños**, disagree with the new law', which expands Bolivia's recognised area of coca farming from 12,000 to 22,000 hectares, 'because it has promoted excess coca that cannot be commercialised on a national level', Ríos expands, in his characteristic machine-

gun style of delivery. But here, he fails to acknowledge the crux of this law: Morales' vision for the coca leaf's future does not play out on a national level but an international one.

Studies conducted by the national government found that Bolivia requires roughly 14,500 hectares to cater to its traditional use of the leaf, leaving 7,500 hectares that the government has committed to industrialisation projects. In recent years, the leaf – a staple of indigenous customs, culture, and everyday life – has branched out into an army

of creams, shampoos, teas, sweets, and soft drinks; the sort of medicinal, therapeutic, and aromatic medley that, but for narcotic misconceptions, would have soccer moms and millennials from southwest London swooning.

the medicinal and dietary benefits of coca unadulterated. Indeed, Juan Salvador Hurtado, whose family-run business produces a great variety of goods, says that each of his **caramelos**, or sweets, contains 'almost one handful of leaves'.



It is perhaps telling that coca has found a sort of holiday home in La Paz's tourism Mecca, the llama-wool-lined alleys off calle Sagarnaga, whose footfall is distinctly gringo-heavy. Doubtless, many of these customers are hooked in by the novelty of coca. As Linda Farthing, a founder of the Andean Information Network, puts it, 'What gringo comes to Bolivia and isn't, within the first two days, chewing coca?' Yet its novel popularity, married to its tangible nutritional benefits, suggests that there could be a global market for the leaf's industrialisation. In the words of Dr Jorge Hurtado, the founder of La Paz's Museo de Coca, 'The coca leaf has more vitamins than quinoa, and around 25% more calcium than milk.'

The current selection of edible coca-based products is united by the earthy bitterness of the leaf. While an acquired taste, of course, the products maintain

Internationally, the great misconception that has hamstrung Bolivia is the equation of the coca leaf with cocaine. In reality, the relationship is comparable to that of opium and poppy seeds. Given that you'd be hard pressed to find an artisan bagel without the latter adorning

Morales' vision for the coca leaf's future does not play out on a national level but an international one.

it, logically there should be no reason that coca could not make a similar transition into mainstream diets.

However, the leaf's history is a chequered and inhibiting one. A 1961 convention called for its abolition within 25 years and decreed coca to present a danger equivalent to that of opium and marijuana. This judgement has proved cripplingly difficult to overturn, and US repression has, in the words of Morales, 'sought to eliminate coca' altogether.

In 1995, the World Health Organisation concluded that, 'the use of coca leaves

appears to have no negative health effects and has positive therapeutic, sacred, and social functions for indigenous Andean populations'. Its findings, however, were quashed by the US and never published. Regaining relative autonomy over one of its most iconic agricultural crops is a boon for Bolivia, and the government's next, and perhaps most challenging, task will be to dispel warped Western perceptions of coca. 'Having been involved in trying to convince people around the world that coca is not cocaine for a very long time,' Farthing beams, 'I can tell you, it isn't an easy task.' But it may be achieved, she concedes, through intelligent marketing 'with a focus on its indigenous roots, its value to indigenous communities'.

In ethos, the new law protects traditional values of the leaf, promotes sustainable development in the growing regions, and aims to establish a centre for coca research in order to improve its industrialisation.

However, its passing in February of this year has caused controversy domestically that overshadows its larger international vision.

Local resistance has come from the Yungas region, whose growers interpret the law as an instrument to confer more power to coca unions in the Chapare. According to Gerardo Ríos, 'The law betrays our constitution, which commands that we protect our ancestral production of coca. Where is our ancestral coca? It is in the Yungas, not in the tropics of Cochabamba.'

Ríos regularly cites Evo Morales' perceived conflict of interests – simultaneously President of Bolivia and head of the **cocalero** unions of Cochabamba – as evidence of clear bias against ADEPCOCA. According to Farthing, however, this is a tenuous argument to make. Despite extended *yungueño* protests, the new law expands the recognised growing area in their region to 14,300 hectares. Arguably, this is disproportionate to the 7,700 hectares recognised in the Chapare

given that growers in the Yungas amount to 35,000 families, as opposed to the 45,000 of their competitors. Ríos sustains that one hectare in the Chapare can reap up to three times more coca per year than that of the Yungas, but it is this higher yield offered by the Chapare that could prove crucial for Morales' goal of global industrialisation.

According to Ríos and ADEPCOCA, however, the potential volume of excess coca betrays a dangerous lack of market research. 'We are very worried as to where this coca will go,' says Ríos, speaking mainly of the coca produced in the Chapare. 'If you ask any miner or farmer which coca he consumes, I'm sure he will tell you, "coca from the Yungas";' he adds. This alleged government naivety came to a very public fruition last month when Carlos Romero, its interior minister, claimed to the UN's Commission on Narcotic Drugs, that seven out of every ten Bolivians consume coca products daily or as a mat-

'They thought any minute everyone was going to be brushing their teeth with coca toothpaste.'

– Linda Farthing

ter of convention. The last study to that end, carried out in 2012, however, found that only three out of ten people chew coca daily. The disconnect between these figures suggests a disparity between government expectations and the reality of coca consumption in Bolivia. As Ríos suggests, it is unclear where the excess production will go if the country cannot manage to export the surplus successfully.

Given such potential pitfalls, the new law seems, at best, aspirational. It gears towards a global market, which at present is not legally viable. The government has admitted that it underestimated international opposition to its plans for exportation. According to Farthing, this is nothing new. In 2006, when Morales came to power, she recalls, 'They did not understand how anyone could think that coca was cocaine or was somehow related to it. They thought they were going to be able to change this international misdirection very easily, that any minute everyone was going to be brushing their teeth with coca toothpaste.'

Despite political resistance, it seems international businesses do hold a sustained interest in coca's globalisation. Farthing recalls a conversation with Ricardo Hegedus, whose company Windsor Tea is the country's largest coca leaf industrialiser, in which he cited daily international clamour for his product. **Mate de coca**, which is not dissimilar in organic taste to many of its competitors, although unique in its joint palliative and invigorative properties, is coca's most envisageable short-term poster-boy for globalisation.

While the indignance of ADEPCOCA and the incredulity from abroad expose the diplomatic shortcomings of his new law, should President Morales prove able to smooth over domestic political frictions and international misconceptions, Bolivia's iconic leaf could be set for a revolutionary and hugely profitable next chapter.

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BERLUSCA

AN ITALIAN CORNER IN THE
CENTRE OF LA PAZ

Text and Photo: Federico de Blasi

Hidden away in the confusing and chaotic streets between Calle Sagarnaga and Calle Santa Cruz, there is a chance to take a peaceful break from the touristic noise of the city centre and the exhausting tradings in nearby markets. In a large and bright colonial patio behind San Francisco Church lies Berlusca, a restaurant opened by the Swiss-born, half-Italian, half-Bolivian chef, Emiliano Rojas. The roots of its creator are reflected in the restaurant's kitchen: Swiss precision, Italian quality, and Bolivian warmth.

Chef Emiliano was initiated into the culinary arts almost by accident. In 2014, his parents were renting a venue to a local restaurant in La Paz's Zona Sur. When their tenants were unable to pay rent, Emiliano, fresh from studying political science in Switzerland, had an idea. At the age of 27, he bought a pasta machine and decided to open his own restaurant. His vision was to offer Italian cuisine combined with typical Latin American traditions. Thus, Fenomeno was born, Emiliano's first restaurant, where you can taste lasagnas alongside local **asado**.



Berlusca is Emiliano's latest endeavour. Opened in November of last year, it boasts a perfectly harmonious rural setting, with wooden tables surrounded by plants, and an open-view kitchen. The restaurant's namesake is the nickname of the former Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. But, for Emiliano, it means something more personal: Berlusca was the name of his small skew-eyed dog, whose passing away inspired him to name the restaurant. 'According to my mother,' he says, 'Berlusca means skew-eyed, and it's a kind of joke because Berlusconi was in power and things weren't going the right way in Italy.'

Berlusca was the name of his small skew-eyed dog, whose passing away inspired Emiliano to name the restaurant.

There seem to be few choices in Berlusca's concise and delicious menu, but there are three kinds of homemade pasta: tagliatelle, fusilli, and rigatoni, all of them available with carbonara, bolognese, pesto, or mushroom sauce (which is Emiliano's favourite). When ordering, follow Emiliano's lead, as he perfectly knows which kind of pasta pairs well with each ingredient. Vladi, one of Emiliano's collaborators, makes fresh pasta daily, using the original pasta machine with which the chef began his career. He begins at 11:30 am, producing an average of four kilograms of pasta per day. Other than wine and beer to accompany your meal, you can also choose from a menu of fruit juices made from seasonal fruits that have an impeccable taste.

Before pastas, don't forget to eat the **sopa del día** (the soup of the day), a light vegetable soup, vegan naturally, that sweetly caresses your taste buds before the main course. In fact, regarding the vegan world, Emiliano intends to create a new, completely vegan menu, including 'spaghetti di zucchini al pomodoro'. After the main course, you can order a simple dessert. A fried **plátano** accompanied by ice cream or **crema de maracuyá** makes for a great finish to a perfect lunch.

Emiliano would define his kitchen as 'honest' – honesty based on uniquely fresh flavours and a decent quantity served. 'When I go to other restaurants,' he says, 'I cannot stand to see the unsatisfied look on a customer's face because of the amount.' Well, I cannot disagree. If you are in the centre of La Paz and have had your fill of Bolivian street food, in Berlusca you can find a peaceful and also cheap place to chill out and taste excellent (and abundant) artisanal pasta.

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II Smell

Photo: Nick Somers

PALO SANTO

THE MIRACLE TREE
AND ITS USES

Text and Photo: Sophie Hogan

The smell seeps easily into my nostrils as we light the wood and put it in the holder. The smoke begins to flurry out of the holes in the cup and the fragrance gets more intense, invading my senses. The smell comes from **Palo Santo**, or holy wood, which is found throughout the continent and is used frequently in Bolivia, from the **Altiplano** to the Amazon. Belonging to the same family as frankincense, many consider the tree to be mystical, which is why it is commonly used by shamans as medicine for the local folk.



The tree also serves as a form of incense. People burn shavings from its wood to ward off 'evil spirits' from their residences. Additionally, it is said to bring good fortune and it makes the house smell absolutely gorgeous. It contains hints of citrus, as well as mint, giving it an aroma that is hard to forget. Adding to its list of useful properties, when worn as a balm it is supposed to relieve joint pain and boost the immune system. It is also said to have inhibited the growth of a certain type of breast cancer. This miracle tree seems almost too good to be true, but people have been swearing by it since the time of the Inca Empire: not bad at all for a simple tree.

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LA PAZ'S WASTEWATER CRISIS

THE RÍO CHOQUEYAPU'S JOURNEY
FROM MIGHTY AMAZON TRIBUTARY
TO THE SEWERS OF LA PAZ

Text: Caroline Risacher
Photo: Nick Somers

Toxic foamy water and muddy brown slush are rotting with a variety of discarded rubbish. The pungent aromas emanating from the Río Choqueyapu, which runs directly through La Paz, have been plaguing *paceños* for as long as memory can attest. South of the city, the foul fumes are even worse.

Wastewater from households, hospitals, and factories flows from the sewer system and into the river untreated. The water is then used to irrigate fruit and vegetable crops, which, in a virtuous but icky cycle of life, are then sold throughout the city. Unfortunately, commercial wastewater contains high levels of heavy metals. Other wastewater, the kind that could be reused effectively, is

being wasted and even contaminated. Now, with the recent water crisis in La Paz, it's urgent that alternative ways to find and care for water are instituted.

The Choqueyapu and other innumerable smaller rivers and tributaries still run under and across the city, but they

What used to be the pride and glory of the city is now a basin of pestilential emanations running through the city.

are not immediately visible; they've either been rerouted or buried below ground, only to be seen – and smelled – down south. This is where, particu-

larly when the temperature is warm, the smell of trash and feces can overwhelm a person.

Choqueyapu in Aymara means 'river of gold'. On 20 October 1548, the Spanish explorer Alonso de Mendoza chose this site that was shimmering with gold nuggets and founded next to it the city of La Paz. Born at the top of the Chacaltaya mountain, at 4,700 metres, the river crosses La Paz from north to south, supplying some drinkable water in the north of the city, and then meets with other rivers – the Orkojawira, Achumani, and Irpavi – to form an open sewer that continues its journey to the Amazon basin.

José Díaz, a researcher at the Instituto

de Ingeniería Sanitaria y Ambiental at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, says that rivers have an autopurification capacity: naturally occurring radiation and water currents cleanse the water. According to Díaz, in the 1970s the Choqueyapu needed 30 kilometres to clean itself; now it requires 150 kilometres. Additionally, heavy metals from industrial runoff do not evaporate and accumulate in the riverbed.

Díaz blames industry as the major culprit to the pollution. Despite a 2014 law that mandates factories to treat their water, it is hardly enforced. In 2013, the Contraloría General del Estado conducted an environmental audit and published an alarming report revealing the state of contamination. Nonetheless, La Paz still doesn't have a

main water treatment plant. As Díaz explains, 'There is just no space for a plant in La Paz.'

Today, some of La Paz's wastewater is treated by small plants spread throughout the city, but only in the most basic and superficial way. Since the 1980s, government proposals have been drafted to build a large plant capable of treating the city's water. But supporters have encountered resistance and a lack of political will, as municipalities have shown reticence to raising needed taxes. One project, from 1980, conceptualised a plant in the Irpavi neighborhood, but it was rejected to allow space for the military school and the Megacenter shopping mall. In 1993, the Japanese agency JICA helped plan a facility but work stalled due to a lack of funding.

Since then, ten small plants have been built, but the need for a major water-treatment system remains.

This seems like a no-brainer, as the estimated cost of such a project has been calculated to be about US\$70 million (the *teléferico* has cost about US\$800 million so far). And indeed, on World Water Day this past March, the national government announced the investment of US\$500 million for water-treatment plants across the country.

It's urgent that alternative ways to find and care for water are instituted.

Díaz remains doubtful as to the immediate reality of the creation of a water-treatment plant. 'There is an idea to build a plant even further south, in Patacamaya, but it's a different municipality than La Paz,' he says, noting it would involve a whole new web of political and administrative complications.

In the Andean cosmovision, water from the rivers doesn't have quite the same sacred significance as rain water. Rivers are seen as entities that clean sin and take away the dead. How fitting, then, that the Choqueyapu has been buried away, hidden from sight. But there is a sense of resignation and shame when one mentions the Choqueyapu to *paceños*, as what used to be the pride and glory of the city is now a basin of pestilential emanations running through the city.

It is unfortunate that it may have taken a water crisis to awaken the authorities to the possibilities and resources that have been here all along. Eventually, *paceños* will realise that the river doesn't have to smell bad, and the authorities will realise that the treatment of water is not only a real business opportunity, but also a necessity. ♦



III Sound


Photo: Nick Somers

RESCUED FROM TIME

THE VINYL COLLECTORS SAVING
GENERATIONS OF MUSIC

Text: Sophie Hogan

Photos: Nick Somers and Sophie Hogan



Many aspects of life have been lost to history's clutches. There are arts, people, and even whole cities that are forgotten because of time's relentless passing. Music is one of the most common things that has surrendered to the passing of generations; whether they were not released, mindlessly left unrecorded or only played so that few people would hear, countless pieces of music have been abandoned.

Fernando Hurtado Valdivia and Isaac Rivera Cuevas, two men in their 30s from the Miraflores neighbourhood of La Paz, have done their best to change the fate of some of this lost music. These **paceños** have been friends since childhood and share a passion for the art of music. Their project, **Ajayus de Antaño**, or 'Spirits of Yore', has become well known throughout the city for the preservation of countless records from Bolivia's musical past, going back to the 1910s. Their selection of vinyl recordings run the gamut from Bolivian foxtrots and popular orchestral pieces to songs celebrating La Paz's star football clubs, The Strongest and Bolívar.

CONTINUES
ON PAGE 28

DANCING TILL DAWN

Electro Preste in La Paz

Text: Federico de Blasi
Photo: Sophie Hogan



In international and multicultural Bolivia, one of the best portraits of the country, at least from a cultural point of view, might be the Electro Preste. A predominantly electronic music festival, the Electro Preste also showcases Andean music, cumbia, and hip-hop. Fans from all over Latin America, the United States, and even Europe attend the festival in the Bolivian autumn, according to José Antonio Bedregal, one of the event's organisers.

On Friday 31 March, this year's festival took place in the salon Mega Zafiro, in La Paz's Garita de Lima neighbourhood, accessible by the red **teleférico** station near the Cementerio General.

Electro Preste is a mixture of traditional and folkloric Bolivian culture and modernity. As proof of this, just look at the name: it's a fusion of electro, the popular musical genre, and **preste**, once a tradition in which a saint provided protection to a person, now a type of sponsored party. Metaphorically, perhaps the idea of patronage is spot on, as DJs take turns at the console to entertain people and make them dance.

Before the party, near the *teleférico* stop, it was impossible to miss the cholitas luchadoras, wrestling their way to greet attendees as they arrived. These female Bolivian wrestlers, aged 15 to 55, competed with each other in – and out of – a ring in which anything goes. In Bolivia, this kind of **lucha libre** was born around the 1950s and soon became popular thanks to El Santo, a Mexican fighter who travelled around South America teaching the art (or artifice) of grappling. At first, only men fought, but now women have also begun to participate in the sport – and they're taking up much of the spotlight.

Nick Warren, the famous English DJ and electro-house music legend, enjoyed his first time in Bolivia.

After enjoying the wrestling, a long procession of attendees wound from the ring to the Electro Preste's location, a massive, wildly-colored building constructed in the popular, contemporary Andean style. This architectural movement was dreamt up by Freddy Mamani Silvestre, a Bolivian architect who combines imagery from the Andes – particularly the ancient ruins of Tiwanaku – with new design and architectural techniques. So far, there are more than 160 such buildings in Bolivia – astonishing when you consider that this movement is only 10 years old. It's already a symbol of Bolivian identity, particularly among the Aymara nouveau riche populating parts of El Alto.

At this Electro Preste, the crowd was treated to a performance by Nick Warren, the famous English DJ and electro-house music legend, who was enjoying his first time in Bolivia. Last year's event was held in a similar space in El Alto, with more than 1,500 people attending. This year, it was moved to La Paz to accommodate a larger crowd and to draw more people from the city's southern region.

José Bedregal and his crew, including Marco Cuba and Anibal Aguilar, have created an international event that remains faithful to its Bolivian essence, something thoroughly enjoyed and not forgotten by its attendees, many of whom partied until dawn. If you like electronic music and local traditions, be sure not to miss the next Electro Preste in 2018.

PROYECTO SINESTESIA

SHINING THE SPOTLIGHT ON DEAF CHILDREN AND BOLIVIA'S NEGLECT OF THE DISABLED

Text: Alex Walker
Photo: Nick Somers



It is about problem-solving, she explains: for herself, her staff, and the children. When I visit a rehearsal the following week, artistic directors Alejandro Zurita and Alejandra del Carpio recount how they had to go back to the drawing board after their initial encounters with the children. 'We tried to do a survey asking what their perspectives of theatre were, and what they wanted to achieve from our project,' Alejandra says. 'They struggled initially to understand the question, and once they did, no one was able to communicate their answer.'

'Imagine if they had to communicate something far more important about their lives, they couldn't!' Valeria posits, with wide-eyed exasperation. This idea really hit home

who moved her daughter to the Huascar Cajías centre after she had struggled to integrate elsewhere, says, 'There is often a psychological block for deaf people – they are afraid. Thanks to the project, they are learning to act, to disentangle reality.'

'What has been interesting for us,' Valeria elaborates, 'is witnessing how the children begin to open up to us through the exercises.' This is a metamorphosis I count myself extremely fortunate to witness. My presence on the sidelines of the rehearsal is met initially with puzzled expressions and timidity. However, once my sizeable frame is deemed an essential component of an imaginary 'boys vs girls tug o' war', the class embraces me wholeheartedly – even despite a heavy imaginary defeat for the boys.

This exercise is typical of the early stages of the workshop. 'We are teaching them to interpret actions, how they should behave when they are in love, when they are sad. How to control their bodies so that they can learn to communicate,' Valeria explains.

'Before, she was very shy, very timid. But, thanks to this project, she is more able to engage, to cope.'

– *Norah Meave Limachi*

Norah has noticed a tangible change in her daughter's demeanour. 'Before, she was very shy, very timid,' she says. 'But thanks to this project, she is more able to engage, to cope.'

Proyecto Sinestesia, however, is struggling to gather funds. Some financial support has come in from the Swiss embassy, but it is scrambling to prop itself up, let alone support these vulnerable children and their families.

'The Bolivian people are not conscious of this struggle,' Valeria laments. And the struggle is not simply at the institutional level. When I later ask Norah about life as a parent of a deaf daughter, she says that it can be isolating and financially precarious.

'There is a total lack of support for people with disabilities in Bolivia,' Norah says. 'The government wants to help, but it lacks any concrete plan or vision. They are not conscious because they do not live the struggle on a personal level; they are unaware of what it entails. There is no financial aid for most parents of disabled children.'

Norah and Karla travel three hours every day to and from their home in the Río Seco area of El Alto. To Norah, the struggle is difficult, but 'I have to look after my child,' she says. 'I can only be a parent, nothing else. This is the greatest difficulty that all us parents experience. It is our disability.'

On 23 and 24 June, the children of Proyecto Sinestesia will be performing a new piece of theatre, exhibiting what they have learnt at the Teatro Municipal de Cámara. Any donations to the project are hugely welcomed. Contact +59172086028 if you wish to contribute.



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There is a mountain of work still for us to do,' Valeria Salinas tells me. Her initiative, Proyecto Sinestesia – a biweekly theatre workshop at the Huascar Cajías centre, in La Paz's Miraflores neighbourhood, for deaf children – has been as much a learning curve for her team as it has for their subjects. Valeria and her directors hope that their acting workshops will help the children to express themselves more freely, and go some way towards ameliorating problems faced by those with disabilities in Bolivia.

Valeria has the perfect personality to lead this project. She's emotive, and her gestures are energised and precise. She has an infectious enthusiasm that seems to have come straight from the playground, and she becomes increasingly animated as she runs me through the progress of her project.

with the directors, Alejandra explains, when one child noticed a large scar on her wrist and then pointed to a similar one on his own. She tried to press and find out its origin, but the child in question was unable to express how it had happened.

Working alongside interpreters, the crucial first task has been establishing a method of communication. Beginning with graphic images depicting well-known stories in order to establish a collection of universal signals, the group then gave each other hand signs for their names: Valeria's, she shows me, is a right index finger swiped across the brow; mine, chosen by the children, is a right fist drawn downwards from the chin, as if mocking my genetic inability to grow a wispy beard.

With these basics established, the principal task was to coax the children out of their shells. Norah Maeve Limachi,

We sat down at the computer as Fernando set up his new turntable, from which he transfers the music into a digital recording. The first few sec-

the Andes. Today, their collection is extensive, and vinyl discs fill the bookcases in a small room of Fernando's Miraflores apartment. The records



onds were simply just crackling from the needle, the new technology not affecting the antique sound of the record. When the music began, it was clearly from an era long before most of us were around. It was a piece from the 1930s, sounding like something that might come out of a saloon. The crackling continued behind the music, which made you want to tap just the one foot; it was something you could listen to while having a relaxing drink in a bar somewhere in a small town on the **altiplano**. If any music needed to be immortalised, this was most certainly it.

'I wasn't all that interested in Bolivian music at first. It was just a little too weird for me,' says Isaac. 'I like metal a lot, from Norway and Finland, a lot of the heavy music that comes out of Northern Europe, especially because they sing about their own traditions. They have pagan traditions, and there's a lot of folkloric metal, and for me the fusion of the two is really cool.' It was from this starting point that Isaac thought to explore the folkloric traditions of Bolivia. Since then, he and Fernando have delved into a variety of bands and singers from across

are from labels like Columbia, Mendez, and Victor, the latter also being the company that made the original turntable that the pair own.

Their mission now is to begin elaborating on the history of the music.

Both Fernando and Isaac found their passion for music in similar ways. Fernando's aunts influenced his love for rock music when he was just 11, giving him a mixtape full of Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and the like. Isaac remembers a specific moment when his love for music started: 'I went to this underground concert at the Casa de la Cultura, and I was quite nervous because there were all these mad rockers around me and I was just standing there, this ten-year-old, terrified. When I was 17, I really got into it, buying myself black clothing and band T-shirts.' Their mutual devotion to music led them to become impromptu collectors.

'We came across these two guys who

had a bunch of vinyl with them in the street,' Isaac says. 'They were older men. They had their record player and a speaker on a little table, and they sold us some. We'd record the music from the vinyl onto cassettes in those days. We managed to put together a pretty good collection of vinyl from those two.' They began collecting music in 2001, and by 2011 they had hundreds of records from many different sources, ranging from Bolivian fusion to international music, all played at 78 rpm. They went to music shops, hidden nooks and crannies, and even to people's homes to buy the records.

By the time 2012 rolled around, the two began to digitise their new collection, but not before running over some road bumps. 'It was difficult to digitise them at first because the discs were so fragile; the first few times we tried, the discs broke because they just couldn't handle being played and recorded after years of sitting doing nothing,' Fernando remarks. 'After a couple of tries it was okay, and we started the process properly.'

They created a Facebook page to spread the word about their project, as well as a blog. Now that most of the digitisation is complete, the pair is working to get the music out to the public. 'After a while, we noticed there wasn't really anywhere in La Paz to save and listen to this sort of music, so we began to upload the digitised music to YouTube,' says Isaac. Now their channel has over 250 subscribers, and the archive has been featured in the daily newspaper *Página Siete*.

Their mission now is to begin elaborating on the history of the music for the wider general public, and research has been their task since 2014. Their plan is to write a book to complement their digital collection, a project that they have tirelessly been devoting themselves to. Fernando and Isaac are working on their project with fervour, and are excited to explore, learn, and tell about this music for years to come.

*Isaac and Fernando's project, **Ajayus de Antaño** 78 RPM Bolivia, has pages on Facebook and Blogspot, as well as a channel on YouTube.*

IV Sight

Photo: Nick Somers

THE SALAR ON FILM

A SENSORY MARVEL PUT INTO PERSPECTIVE

Text: Sophie Hogan
Photo: Julia McGee-Russell

People experience some of the most surreal feelings while on the Salar de Uyuni. Beyond its apparent nothingness and rich amount of resources, including thousands of tons of salt, and massive lithium reserves under the salt crust, the Salar is a place unlike anywhere in the world in terms of how it deceives your senses.

A select team of filmmakers from the United States wanted to shine a light on the ongoing conflict between the salt gatherers on the Salar and the Bolivian government, which is straining their livelihoods by harvesting lithium. They eventually produced the harrowing documentary: 'Salero'. There were eight shoots over six-and-a-half years, and they have finally produced the movie

that will premiere and tour in Bolivia throughout May.

'My first exposure to the Salar and the salt flat was the surfacing of lithium reserves in Bolivia,' says Mike Plunkett, the film's director based in New York City. 'It was on the front page of every publication,' he adds. Mike remembers seeing a photo essay in the New York Times, which drew him so much he couldn't resist taking a trip there. 'It was such a surreal and visual place that felt like a lunar landscape. If I could find a character to surround it, I thought it would be a fascinating project.'

He found Moises, a **salero**, or salt harvester, hailing from the village of Colchani, now a popular tourist destination. The movie depicts Moises' simple life, dedicated to hard-work and family. His problems mount when the government begins lithium extraction and salt prices crash, forcing him to realise that his way of life may have become obsolete. For years, Mike had been following Moises' story, giving him ample time to develop his own relationship with the Salar.

'I hadn't experienced anything like it,' Mike recounts. 'If I had to compare it with something, it would be like going out in a boat way into the ocean. It's really disorienting and hard to judge distance, and it became immediately apparent that if we were going to do this story there was a lot to learn and discover.' Despite the amount of time he and his crew spent on the Salar, there was a new sense of awe with every day of filming, especially when Mike decided to spend some time alone with the salt.

'Our producer, Noah Block-Harley, and our guide dropped me off for around

three hours to do a time-lapse alone, in the middle of the salt flat. If you don't have anything else around you, it's completely silent: there's no life, no wind, nothing,' Mike remembers. 'It's unsettling, because you're alone with yourself and there's no way to escape that. I started talking out loud, shouting and rambling for three hours,' he says, chuckling slightly at the memory. 'When I got back, I realised that the sound on the camera was actually recording the whole time. I have since deleted those audio files.'

Mike and Noah remember when some French tourists were trapped out on the Salar after their car collapsed into the salt crust. One walked to the edge of the Salar to find help. 'When she reached us she was almost delirious,' Mike recalls. 'Moises and his brother had to drive out and save them. People can really die out there, because it's so easy to get lost.'

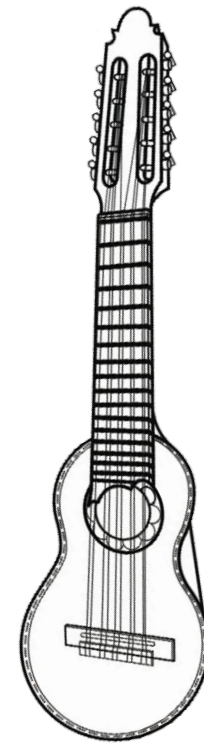
'I was out there for hours...It's unsettling because you're alone with yourself and there's no way to escape that.'

— Mike Plunkett

The absurdity of these experiences tells of the contradictory feeling the Salar can produce in those who encounter its vastness on their own. It can simultaneously make you feel as if you are the biggest thing in the world and the smallest thing in the universe. 'It's both frightening and empowering,' Mike says. 'I've never felt that way before. It's more different than anywhere else I've ever been to, in terms of the way it affected me.'

The experience of the crew, who were not just taking in the Salar as tourists, demonstrates just how perilous and breathtaking it can be, even after six or seven visits. They show that it does not matter who you are or where you're from, this vast and beautiful landscape can make you lose faith in your senses.

The feature 'Salero' will be screened in various parts of Bolivia throughout the month of May.



AGUSTÍN ALONSO

A LESSON WITH THE MAESTRO

Text: Alex Walker
Photo: Nick Somers

Agustín Alonso has been busy tending to his nest. A short walk up from Plaza San Francisco, family-made instruments line his workshop like banks of exquisite wooden wallflowers, while at the far end of the room sits a cluster of miniature furniture. Before entering, I perch in the courtyard below and listen to intricate musical phrases furiously strummed by this **charango** virtuoso. The song eases down to a harmonious end. It's time for my first lesson.

Having tried and failed to graduate beyond three chords during my teenage foray into ukulele-playing, I pity Alonso; he's got a tall order on his hands. However, much to my surprise, the expertly crafted lesson plan – which systematically tackles traditional rhythms, a discombobulating spectrum of chords, and the chromatic scale, too – sees us cover more ground than anticipated.

Born in 1961 into a family of Cochabamba-based musicians, Alonso has been blind all his life. True to clichéd imagery, this **maestro** has that intangible, guru-like quality where he seems to see through his other senses. In intermittent moments of

wizardry, he tells me that the *charango* we are playing is too small for me, that I am using the wrong fingers to strum it, and asks casually whether the sealed thermos flask placed momentarily on his counter is coffee brought for him.

Thick-set, with wide facial features and a middle-parting that wouldn't look out of place in a '90s boy band, the most striking aspect of Alonso's appearance is his right thumbnail. It is enormous. While his talon dwarfs most guitar plectrums, mine was gnawed feverishly down to the cuticle during a particularly tense game of monopoly the previous week. Alas, we have bigger fish to fry.

He tells me that he began to learn the *charango* at 15, 40 years ago. 'I love it because it is in my blood,' Alonso says of music. 'My grandparents made and played *charangos*, so all my life I have

particular: 'I found a lot of inspiration in the work of Ernesto Cavour', a Bolivian *charango* legend 21 years Alonso's senior. What he learnt from Cavour he then married to a central desire to bring community to his musicianship, and thus began teaching. 'I said, "It's

This maestro has that intangible, guru-like quality where he seems to see through his other senses.

wonderful that I play the *charango* but I want my friends to play with me". So I taught one friend the *charango*, one the guitar, and another the **quena**.'

In moments of beautiful poetic reverence, Alonso refers to himself and his instrument as 'we', as 'us', as one. When I ask about his dreams, a question he professes to like because 'a

I don't want simply to earn money, I want to spread the *charango*.'

'I invite all the youth to keep playing it,' Alonso says, as he leans forward in his seat at the end of our lesson. 'I ask the governments of my country, municipal, departmental, and central, to interest themselves more in the *charango*, to safeguard it, to spread and promote this instrument. We are the country of *charango*. We have to promote and defend that.'

When, if ever, this *maestro* hangs up his instrument, he does not want his legacy to be that of a 'blind **charanguista**.' 'People often ask me, "What is the *charango* for you? Is it your guide?" No. I guide the *charango*, my heart lives inside its body and leaves it in pure sound. The *charango* is the instrument that allows me to share what I have in my soul: the message of love, of care, of hope, sometimes even sad-



been surrounded by them.' What began a pastime became a career. 'When I got older, educated, aware, I discovered artists and I decided, "I want to be like them". I said to myself, "One day I will be great". My life began in that moment.'

Alonso speaks with reverence about the great *maestros*, his idols – one in

dream is not an occupation, a dream is something that you always hold close', he expresses a will to share his music. 'I have dreams of travelling, doing concerts and conferences of *charango*, speaking about my life; this is my world of dreams. I understand that many friends of mine go to play abroad because they earn money, but

ness.' Alonso is philosophical about his blindness: 'It is a problem, not an insurmountable obstacle. It is a problem and every problem has a solution. The eyes are not what play. You play with your ears, your hands, with you hearing, your touch – I am illuminated by the melody, the music, and my passion for both.'

V Touch

Photo: Nick Somers





Of all the things we feel in our lives, no pillow is as soft, no sun as warm on the skin, as the touch of the person we love and who loves us back. It satisfies a hunger that no other sensation can.

These touches still feel as good years later, just as they did on the first day. This collection of photos is an ode to love, each couple with their own unique story in light kisses and fair touches.

Photos: Noemi Monu
Text: Sophie Hogan



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REDEFINING THE HAIRCUT EXPERIENCE IN BOLIVIA

Text: Federico de Blasi

Beard trimming is not just a trend, it is an art. However, both beards and haircuts do follow the fashion of the times which, as we know, come and go with the regularity of the tides. This is exactly why last December, in La Paz's Zona Sur – Calle Jaime Mendoza, San Miguel, to be precise – Rodrigo Álvarez unveiled 'La Barbería La Paz', a vintage barber shop that seems to breathe that Gatsby-esque New York atmosphere of the roaring twenties, providing a nostalgic and traditional service.

The original idea behind La Barbería – 'a simple idea with a vintage style and quality service', to quote its owner – wasn't actually Rodrigo's. In

The décor smacks of an old-school barber shop, a virtual relic nowadays, in which a barber wasn't just a barber, but a counsellor too.

fact, he drew inspiration from the first time he visited a **barbería** in Santa Cruz, where he fell utterly in love with the treatment he received and the style of the shop. Then, after becoming a partner of La Barbería in Santa Cruz, he decided to open his own shop. This is a revolutionary development, considering that Bolivia has a

limited barber-shop heritage, while hairdressers have long been a part of its everyday culture. For this reason, many barbers here are from foreign countries, most of them from Latin America, but at least one from Ukraine. While the traditional barber has always – according to stereotype – been male, nowadays it is becoming an occupation independent of gender. According to Rodrigo, the first female barber in Bolivia (from Venezuela) works in La Barbería in Santa Cruz.

Another innovative and unique selling point is the service La Barbería provides to its customers. Not only does it offer a haircut or beard trimming with sophisticated techniques, such as the **toalla caliente** (a hot towel softly placed on the face that helps dilate the pores and warm up the skin to guarantee a perfect beard cut), but also a complete and lasting experience enriched by the chance to drink local whiskeys or other liquors. Furthermore, customers who – perhaps surprisingly – vary between sixteen and sixty-five years old, can choose a range of haircuts represented on a little painting in the middle of the wall, or otherwise they can bring their own photos and ask for exactly what they want.

Moreover, the décor smacks of an old-school barber shop, a virtual relic nowadays, in which a barber wasn't just a barber, but a personal counsellor too. The seats have been delicately refurbished to look as they did originally. On a small wooden sideboard sits an ancient radio dating back to 1930 which is still in perfect working condition. Around it stand a series of products prepared with natural essences (some of them homemade) for the treatment of beards and hair.

Rodrigo claims to have 'changed the paradigm of barber shops, replacing a twenty-minute service with a relaxing and long experience.' With kindness and good manners, he has turned La Barbería into a growing franchise. There are now two shops in Santa Cruz and one in La Paz. In Santa Cruz, Rodrigo and his business partner recently forged an alliance with Hotel Camino Real to create a luxury barbershop called 'Business Club'.

Due to its active social media presence, La Barbería has reached a substantial crowd with its unique ideas. It has almost 40,000 followers on four different pages on Facebook. Given La Barbería's increasing popularity, it seems there is nothing to stop its potential success in other cities in Bolivia or South America.

VI

Sixth Sense

Photo: Nick Somers





THE SIXTH SENSE

A PILGRIMAGE TO DISCOVER WHAT LIES WITHIN

Text: Alex Walker & Caroline Risacher
Illustration: Hugo L. Cuellar

Our quest to understand what the 'sixth sense' means in Bolivia began with a series of visits to La Paz's **curanderos** and **yatiris**, its (mis)fortune-tellers, identified by minuscule stools set beside them for passing customers to sit in. They are self-proclaimed windows into other worlds, conduits of a higher power. One *yatiri* proudly informed us, 'I fell to Earth in a lightning bolt.' These interpreters of cards or coca leaves profess to sense things that we, mere mortals, are unable to see or hear.

Our first encounter with these vessels of insight was underwhelming. Squeezed into a secluded nook off Sagarnaga, our *curandero* invited us to sit down either side of him. After expertly shuffling some battered Spanish **baraja** cards, he dealt them onto a mat, pointed sporadically, mumbled indiscernibly, and told us that all would be 'bien, no más'.

With relief turning to cynicism, we walked away, convinced that the best – a feeling of contact with a higher power, an inexplicable insight from a complete stranger – was yet to come.

In total, we spoke to six *yatiris*. Fortunately, not all were as vague as the first. Unfortunately, though, we are currently coming to terms with the fact that we have been cursed, that mild illness is impending, that we have to watch our spending, and that the rest of our lives will be, at best, 'fine'.

Unfortunately, we have been cursed, mild illness is impending, we have to watch our spending, and the rest of our lives will be, at best, 'fine'.

But there are solutions: one *yatiri* helpfully pointed to a nearby ATM so that we could purchase a three-month cleanse (200 bolivianos) or, for just double the price, eternal purification.

The monetary incentive, in what is very much a business for these individuals, is irrefutable. At times, their readings came off as well-rehearsed sales pitches designed to make impressionable clients spend more money. There is certainly something to be said for these individuals as spir-

itual or emotional safety nets, however. Whether by reassuring customers that everything will be 'fine' or offering soul purifications, these *yatiris* generally grant visitors the opportunity to depart with a clear conscience.

Admittedly, many of the readings did leave an impression, and were often eerily aligned with one another. Don Simón, in particular, reading coca leaves in his wooden shack set back from Sagarnaga, interpreted what he saw in ways that were, if not always correct, at least remarkable. The following day, a *yatiri* next to the cemetery produced a reading so similar that it made us question our pre-judgements.

In order to find out more, we attempted to visit a notorious love doctor in Sopocachi called Salvador. During seven-hour bonding rituals, he would invoke the powers of Tamara – a spookily well-preserved human skull – to intensify the love between his subjects. Four years ago, this self-proclaimed Cupid told *Bolivian Express* that he believes himself to be 'a deeply spiritual person', and that he 'worked with the spirits in order to achieve union'.

Unfortunately, however, Salvador's ability to channel his alleged sixth sense and communicate with the ethereal realm didn't extend into the material world, on each of our four separate and scheduled visits, we were met with

a faceless rejection from a voice behind his front-door buzzer. Whether this was, in fact, Tamara warding away our journalistic demons remains unclear. We would suggest not.

Finally, mercifully, our journey took us to the Centro Zen, a Buddhist meditation centre on Calle Hermanos Manchego. We met with Juan Manuel Torrez, or Juma, as he is known. 'I have always been following various spiritual currents in search of my home,' Juma said. When he joined the cen-

tre, however, 'something connected, I don't know what, but I felt like I had done this before.' Throughout our discussion, Juma had an aura of self-assured tranquility.

We were joined by two other companions, Alejandro and Marcela, who explained their perspectives on Zen meditation. 'In Buddhism, there is no failure, there is simply abandonment,' Alejandro said. Their congregation has

'I fell to Earth in a lightning bolt.'

– a *yatiri*

ranged from politicians and scientists to students and artists, but many have fallen by the wayside. According to Alejandro, 'It is difficult to maintain because human beings always aspire for something beyond, something different.' Zen, all three explained, is not about looking outwards but about searching within yourself for inner peace.

They each adopt the posture of the Buddha, legs folded, backs arched, shoulders down, and chests puffed outwards like peacocking pigeons. Juma explains that, teamed with deep respiration, this pose allows them to engage both mind and body in order to 'understand [themselves] on a far deeper level', and to 'overcome the difficult moments of life.'

Our search for the sixth sense, perhaps, was the curse we were warned about. Whether or not this had anything to do with the alleged spell placed on one of us by a former lover, or because our subjects were particularly interested in cultivating that sense of aloofness, of mystery, that contributes to their aura of otherworldliness, we cannot be sure.

It wasn't, arguably, the most sensible idea to task a pair of sceptics with this pilgrimage. The real curse, perhaps, was that we were looking in the wrong place all along. Our experience at the Centro Zen was far more illuminating than anything we actively sought out. Self-knowledge, Juma and his companions posit, is the path to better understanding others. Their sixth sense is not transcendent, not incandescent, but a sense of inner tranquility.

GLOSSARY

BolivianExpress

AJAYUS DE ANTAÑO - 'the spirits of yore'

ALTIPLANO - a high-altitude plateau found partially in western Bolivia

ASADO - 'grilled meat'

BARAJA - Spanish set of playing cards

BARBERÍA - 'barber shop'

CARAMELO - 'sweet'

CARNAVAL - 'carnival'

CHA'LLA - a blessing

CHARANGO - a small, wooden stringed instrument of the Andes with five sets of double strings

CHARANGUISTA - 'charango player'

CHOLITAS LUCHADORAS - Bolivian female wrestlers who perform in traditional dress

COCALERO - a coca grower

CREMA DE MARACUYÁ - 'passion fruit cream'

CURANDERO - a traditional healer, shaman or witch doctor

EDIFICIO - 'building'

LUCHA LIBRE - 'wrestling'

MAESTRO - 'master'

MATE DE COCA - 'coca tea'

PACEÑO - a person from the city of La Paz

PALO SANTO - a tree found throughout South America, literally translated as 'holy wood'

PLÁTANO - 'plantain'

PRESTE - a Bolivian tradition in which a saint provides protection to a person; a sponsored party

QUENA - a traditional wooden flute of the Andes

SALERO - a salt-gatherer, found on the Salar de Uyuni

SOPA DEL DÍA - 'soup of the day'

TELEFÉRICO - 'cable car'

TOALLA CALIENTE - 'hot towel'

YATIRI - a traditional healer in Aymara society

YUNGUEÑO - a person from the Yungas

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