

THE TWO WORLDS OF LA PAZ – By Stephanie Jackson

Welcome to the enthralling capital of Bolivia

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"Tie a yellow ribbon to that old oak tree". I hummed a familiar homecoming song as the bus rattled and bumped along the tortuous mountain road leading to the Bolivian city of La Paz, for to me this was a nostalgic return to a city and a people I'd come to love. But there'd be no yellow ribbons heralding my arrival and no majestic oak trees, only rocks, mosses, and low cactus strewn across a rugged, though hauntingly beautiful Andean landscape, but La Paz would, as on previous visits, welcome me with dark and smiling eyes.

I smudged uncontrollable tears of happiness from my eyes as the bus wound its way slowly down into the sprawling city, secreted at the base of a vast canyon some five kilometres wide and half a kilometre deep where the high mountain plains end as abruptly and unexpectedly as at the rim of a flat earth.

La Paz, 3,600 metres above sea level and in the shadow of the perpetually snow drenched peaks of the Andes Mountains, is a city divided by two dramatically different cultures, and by poverty and wealth.

Descendants of Spanish conquerors who had arrived in 1548 rule the lower sector where skyscrapers of blackened glass and concrete, expensive coffee shops, and five star hotels line wide city streets. Banks chatter with the electronic murmur of computerized technology, and fair complexioned mannequins with blonde tresses flaunt the 'glamour' of western fashions in department store windows.

The narrow streets where Spanish horsemen once rode, and where revolutions fermented and erupted, now conceal art galleries and museums congested with exquisite gold artefacts from the Inca empire and relics from the city's turbulent past of revolution and wars with neighbouring nations.

In the city's central plaza, once the stage for revolutionary protests, Pedro Murillo, a revolutionary leader, whose name the plaza bears, was publicly hung in 1810. And in 1946 then president Villaroel, dragged from the adjacent palace by an irate mob, met the same fate in a place where today families stroll among elegant monuments and fountains, floral gardens, and shading trees.

A wide main thoroughfare slices through the city, shattering it, beyond the ornate architecture of the San Francisco church, into a tangle of narrow streets where the perpetual mayhem of the real La Paz begins, and where the spirit of this ancient city is demonstrated in all its glorious chaos.

La Paz is a city of the unexpected, where every day, in every street, in every congested market, a differing scene emerges.

The higher sector remains the preserve of indigenous people who comprise some 50 percent of the city's population of 1 million, and whose colourful dress, ancient traditions, and music remain conspicuous components of daily life.

Jubilant Latin rhythms blared from cassette shops to fill the air with ballads of love and traditional Andean folksongs. A dark eyed boy danced, dusty street kids, oblivious to the music, dozed on the cold pavement, and an old woman, bent under a heavy load, shuffled past, her harsh life not conducive to draw her to the happiness of dance

In the sprawling witches' market traditional remedies to cure all that ails society - both physical and spiritual - clutter jumbled stalls. Toucans' beaks and tattered wings, wild cat skins and dried monkeys, herbs, seeds, desiccated flowers, and dried llama fetuses to be buried as offerings to Pachamama, the mother of the earth, all hold their own unique healing secrets.

In a more conventional market, a beggar sat in silence, pleading, with silent stares, at all who passed among the confusion of pirated cassettes, tubs of fresh flowers, jumbled heaps jackets of alpaca wool, satin shawls, and skirts impregnated with glittering golden thread, imported Asian trinkets, and sacks of coca leaf (the base ingredient of cocaine, but here chewed as a stimulant to combat hunger, fatigue and all manner of ailments).

Music boomed above the incessant rumble of traffic, and on a major traffic roundabout that had been commandeered as a market site, an impromptu dance began, with traders, their stalls temporarily abandoned, joined in their spontaneous revelry by old women, toddlers, boys, and men who were captured by the rhythm as they passed by and offered little resistance.

A religious group, espousing the virtues of their Christian philosophy, pierced the density of noise with threats of damnation that went unheeded. A lady dozed at her stall, her baby slept, equally undisturbed, beside her in a cardboard box, and shoe shiners in grey balaclavas, appearing more like prospective muggers than battlers grasping at the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder, touted for business.

A portly lady in traditional dress of billowing skirts and fringed shawl, with a bowler hat perched precariously atop raven black plaited hair, strolled arm in arm with a man in the well cut suit of a businessman, and a woman pushing a wheelbarrow concealed beneath mountainous sacks of popcorn, defiantly dodged the dawdling, horn-blasting traffic.

There's some semblance of order in the streets that sprawl ever upwards further from the city's heart, and where traders providing similar goods or services cluster together. There's a fiesta costume makers' area, its dim, windowless shops illuminated with the glitter of sequins, golden thread, and ghoulish masks. Immense drums, charangos - stringed instruments constructed from the shells of armadillos, and pan pipes define the instrument makers' area. There's the meat street, the fish street, the hat makers' street, and the party street that is awash with a sea of hats, balloons, sacks of confetti, and fireworks. And there's the stationery street where the incessant chatter of typewriters mingles with the growl and hooting of argumentative cars and buses as men on the footpath prepare letters and official paperwork for less literate citizens.

The aroma of traditional cuisine wafts enticingly from crowded cafes where ancient recipes based on corn, potatoes, eggs, and llama meat replace the franchised monotony of French fries, hamburgers, and pizzas that dominates more affluent regions of the city.

Optimistic tradesmen, with seemingly limitless patience, wait on street corners for offers of work. Tattered bags of tools define their individual skills as plumbers, painters, or electricians. But a sign scrawled across a grey adobe wall - "A city where there is no work for older people and where children work is a city of ..." remains incomplete, its poignant slogan reflecting a conspicuous social problem that appears to have no imminent solution.

Drums sounded, pan pipes and trombone too, and traffic momentarily, miraculously dispersed as a small band of musicians led costumed dancers from shadowy alleyways for a brief celebration, for the most riotous days in La Paz are no longer days of revolution, but days of fiestas when Spanish and indigenous people unite in patriotic fervour as merely Pacenos - people of La Paz.