

# *A Glimpse of Forever...*

## *My Journey through Bolivia* by Debbie Jefkin-Elnekave

You haven't lived until you've watched the morning light etch shadowy patterns into the great rock faces of the Andes mountains; danced the night away at a folkloric *peña*; traversed the fabled Lake Titicaca to explore the birthplace of Inca civilization.

I first experienced these marvels as an exchange student living in Bolivia. With the passage of time I became gripped with an irresistible urge to return to that majestic land of my youth. I wanted to revisit the wondrous places of that year - La Paz, Tiahuanaco, Lake Titicaca - to see if they were as extraordinary as I remembered them. So, reaching back and tugging at distant but never forgotten memories, I planned my special journey to this shy, enigmatic, singular and beautiful country. I pored over journals, diaries and old photographs, determined to rediscover every treasure in that magical trove.



### **The enchantment begins**

The enchantment begins with an early morning arrival in La Paz. The highway sweeps into town in graceful curves as I descend into Bolivia's largest city and de facto administrative capital. There is an intriguing sense of duality here, of worlds overlapping. Modern buildings juxtapose ramshackle adobe huts, and Aymara women in traditional garb stand in sharp contrast to women in mini skirts.

La Paz is situated in a craterlike valley of the *altiplano*, or high plain. On one side, the triple-peaked, snowy mass of Mount Illimani stands guard. On the other side, the crater crumbles away into a field of parched, serrated geological formations known as *Valle de la Luna*, or Moon Valley. This bizarre, dreamlike landscape was formed by soft, porous rock from volcanic activity, and eroded by the elements.

The city has embraced an unbroken chain of civilizations dating back more than 4000 years. It is a melting pot, due to a succession of rulers which included the Aymara, Tiahuanaco, Inca and Spanish. Because of the presence of these various groups over the millennia, is it hard to distinguish which physical traits and cultural traditions belong to a particular group, and which are a hybrid that have resulted from contact among the societies.

### **Speaking of cultural traditions**

I plan to spend my first morning resting from the overnight flight. But jet lag and fatigue give way to excitement when the taxi driver announces that the *Entrada Universitaria* is about to begin. I can't believe my luck. Fortuitously, I have arrived for one of the largest folklore festivals of the year, and the best opportunity to experience the spirited music, vibrant costumes and exuberant dances. The first performance of the *diablada* represents the battle between good and evil. The main character is the devil, who is accompanied by the she-devil and seven deadly sins, until the archangel Miguel intervenes on behalf of heavenly forces.



Next comes the *morenada*, a satire harkening back to colonial times, in which the servants mock the social dances held in the viceroyalty's ballrooms. The *caporales* depicts a tale of wealth, splendor, tyranny and oppression during the colonial mining boom. These are but a few of the myriad dances that serve as reminders of Bolivia's varied, turbulent, and always fascinating past.



### Emblem of the ages

La Paz is a bustle of colorful markets that range from tiny sidewalk stalls, to the handicraft and witchcraft markets of Sagárnaga Street, to the sprawling food and housewares markets that span entire city blocks. No visit to La Paz would be complete without exploring them, so I set out on the second day to do just that. Everything from fine textiles to alpaca sweaters, musical instruments and silver objects can be found here, but what captivates me are the *cholitas* -native women - who preside over it all. These handsome women of indeterminate age are draped in brightly colored shawls and cascading layers upon layers of crinoline skirts. And as any self-respecting *cholita* will tell you, the ensemble would not be complete without her waist-length braids, *aguayo* (all-purpose carrying pouch) and distinctively characteristic bowler hat. In a world mired in pop culture and trends, the *cholitas* are emblems of the ages, preservers of tradition. As faddish styles inevitably close in on much of the world, it is an act of courage to hold fast to their tradition. This image strikes me with nostalgia because it is what I remember most about La Paz: the quiet self-assurance and nobility of these proud and gentle women.

I select an alpaca sweater from Doña Máxima and begin the good-natured haggling that is part of the shopping tradition. After a few minutes of bartering for my purchase, it comes back to me: don't take on a *cholita* at her own game unless you're a good loser.



### Forgotten glory

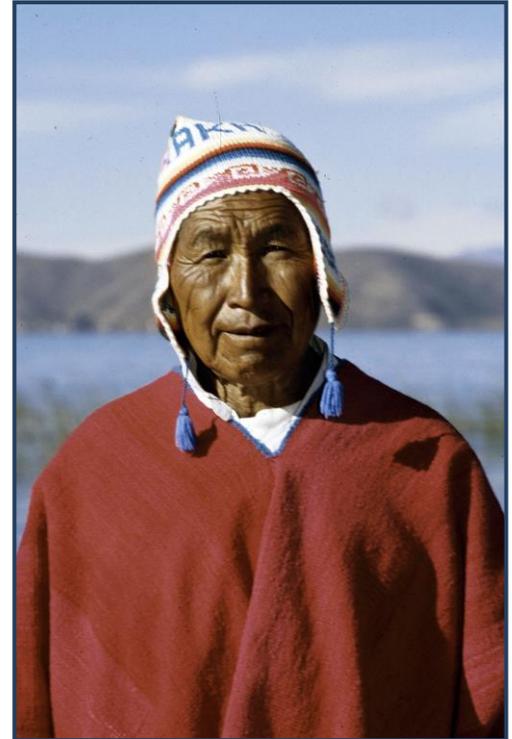
The following day I venture out of the city to the parched expanse of the *altiplano*. Few outsiders ever come here, and if you're passing through, you would find no reason whatsoever to stop. The only sign of life is the occasional adobe shack or field of winter wheat. But the *altiplano's* cold, dusty wilderness is worth crossing to explore the astonishing ruins of Tiahuanaco, a pre-Columbian archeological site recognized by Andean scholars as one of the most important precursors to the Inca Empire.

I pass through the sun gate, which stands in silent testimony to the forgotten glory of Tiahuanaco. Once an architectural and artistic masterpiece, this ruined city is steeped in mystery because it was so badly pillaged by Spanish conquerors that the information that could have shed light about the empire is now lost forever. There are several theories about its decline, but whatever version historians finally settle on, one thing is unlikely to change. After a thousand years, the spirits of Tiahuanaco's ancient inhabitants seem to eerily pervade and roam among the ruins.



### A turquoise jewel

The Inca and their forebears believed that the sun and their creator deity Viracocha rose from Lake Titicaca, and that it was the birthplace of their civilization. At 12,563 feet, the world's highest navigable lake is my base for the next three days of exploration. Extending like a turquoise jewel at the foot of the majestic Cordillera Real mountain range, it is lavishly blessed with sunshine, crystal clear water and millennia old terraced fields. Along the shoreline, pliant green *totora* reeds huddle together under the surface of the lake and form a tangled thicket, safe harbor for young trout still learning to navigate.



I approach an area of fully grown reeds that are being gathered from the lake, braided into heavy ropes and woven into a *totora* reed boat. To my amazement and delight, I have chanced upon Don Paolino Esteban, the master

boat builder of the *totora* for Thor Heydahl's Ra II expedition. He approaches, takes my hand, and fixes his eyes intently on mine. It is as if he is inviting me to read the history of his people in the lines of his weather-worn face. I watch with rapt attention as Don Paolino deftly fashions a boat, employing one of the oldest maritime technologies of the world: braiding the hair of nature in order to float in the hollow of her hand.



### The colors of dreams

As Don Paolino expertly crafts his *totora*, Doña Juana weaves a nubby textile nearby. This exacting work requires skillful proficiency to interlace the warp and weft, and constantly strike the weft with a llama bone to keep the threads taut. Her hands never stop moving, but she smiles contentedly as I admire the product of her attentive labor. The blanket will be sold at the handicraft market in La Paz, which is frequented by tourists from all over the world. Doña Juana beams with pride, because although she has never traveled far from her home, she knows that this blanket will. When she finally takes a break, she proudly displays her other weavings, as the early morning landscape wakes up to a blaze of geometric design and color. Russet. Crimson. Cobalt. Magenta. Scarlet. Saffron. Perhaps these are the colors of her dreams.



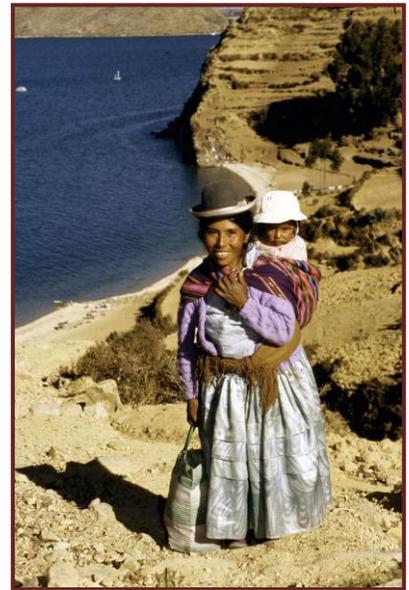


### Frozen in time

The Aymara culture and language have survived intact for centuries on Isla del Sol (Sun Island), as if the glacial breath of the Cordillera Real has frozen it in time. Land, sky and water seem to become one, but this place appears to belong more to heaven than to earth. I am overcome by an inexpressible awe that any place could be so vast, so beautiful, so silent.



As I negotiate the terraced fields, I happen upon a small group of women engaged in various activities, from gathering potatoes to tending llamas to spinning wool. As they break for lunch they notice me passing by. Doña Valentina calls out, “*Te invito*” -- I invite you -- and I accept the offer to share their lunch, as local etiquette dictates.



Before indulging, each of us splashes a spoonful of hearty quinoa soup on the ground as a customary offering to *Pachamama* (Mother Earth). As we eat, I can't help but think that it must be wonderful to live in a safe and timeless place, where you know everyone... and everyone looks out for you. Isla del Sol is a gentle reminder to those of us caught up on the 21<sup>st</sup> century treadmill, that life need not be so complicated.

### A million twinkling lights

On route back to the city, my arrival in El Alto at the top of the crater couldn't be better timed. I watch, entranced, as evening descends on La Paz and one of the world's most glorious sights slowly unfolds. The sun sets behind a distant ridge, day fades into indigo-tinted dusk, and the city reveals itself in a million twinkling lights, shimmering and dreamlike, mesmerizing and surreal. For an all too brief, magical moment, La Paz lies silent, except for the hauntingly beautiful, memory evoking melody of a pan flute, which lingers for an instant...then vanishes into night.



### A glimpse of forever

So...Is Bolivia the same country as the fond recollections of my youth? In fact, the fascination of this astonishing little corner of the world, to which I had fervently hoped to return some day, is no less than when I first stepped off the plane all those years ago. It is still a country of grace, which has yet to emerge from its shroud of secrecy. It remains shy, mysterious, enigmatic...a place whose very essence amounts to a real and rare glimpse of forever. And up here, from atop the world, Bolivia never looked so good.

This article was published as the cover feature in the Journal of the Photographic Society of America.