

## A Year in Bolivia: Benjamin Pass



From 24<sup>th</sup> January 2012 until 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2013 I was living in La Paz, Bolivia. I travelled to Bolivia with Inter Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE) – an international charity dedicated to furthering peace and cultural awareness through international exchange and volunteering in social projects in a large variety of countries. I chose an international exchange project after two years spent living and working in rural Japan. My experience there, fully engaging with the language, the culture, discovering so much of a complex and fascinating country caught between East and West, tradition and modernity, fuelled my desire to continue travelling and learning in Latin America, to absorb as much as possible about Bolivian culture, language and life, for the new experiences, challenges and possibilities. I hoped to learn and I hoped to make a difference by volunteering in national human rights projects that engaged indigenous, and other vulnerable sections of the population. This prospect presented the opportunity to build on my theoretical legal, human rights, and



anthropological university study, and prepare myself for a career in this area in the future. Bolivia, with its increasing social awareness and mobilisation, complex, varied and vibrant history, culture and geography, violent Colonial and post-Colonial past, and a present filled with daily strikes, blockades and protests, represented a fascinating challenge. Furthermore, after Evo Morales, the first indigenous President, declaring Bolivia a pluri-national country that would no longer discriminate against the sixty-five

percent indigenous majority and embrace coca production, I wanted to witness for myself the change he had apparently effected on Bolivian society.

My reasons for choosing ICYE included the helpfulness of national and international staff, and the transparency of the organisation and its goals and commitments, evidenced through numerous agreements with a diverse range of local organizations in the realm of social work and participating host families of local and indigenous origin. After previous experience living, studying, and working abroad, I was looking for a program that would make a difference, and ICYE captured my interest. Since arriving in Bolivia, I have been impressed with various aspects of ICYE-Bolivia, from their initial help in finding suitable projects and organising daily Spanish classes, to continuing support, activities and camps organised throughout the year. The knowledge of the staff on the issues facing Bolivian society, their thoughts and hopes for the future, and their commitment to furthering development and understanding through international exchange has been an inspiration.

I came to Bolivia with little Spanish speaking ability, but this has greatly improved after spending a year living with a host family, involvement in two national human rights organizations and socialising mainly with Bolivian friends. Initially, the Spanish classes were a huge help, and I continued the classes, paying privately, for a further four months. In addition, practicing with the host family and friends, speaking whenever possible with conversation littered with mistakes, aided my conversational ability and improved my confidence. The improvement of my Spanish has opened up a range of activities and opportunities that I wouldn't have previously thought possible, from organising legal workshops, to speaking at congresses and other public events, as well as affording me the possibility to speak to a wide-range of people, learning of their experiences, histories and cultural backgrounds, improving my understanding of Bolivian culture and society.



*The host family and I having a barbeque in February to mark the start of Carnival.*



For the past year I have lived with a host family, consisting primarily of two parents, a son and a daughter, both in their twenties, and a young employee, who helps with household chores. I have found the experience to be extremely beneficial, improving my Spanish, participating in family life, learning of various events, customs, foods and family activities that I may not otherwise have been exposed to. The family has involved me in all their activities and has been extremely welcoming and receptive to sharing their daily life. Although more socially conservative than my family back in the UK, in terms of expectations and restrictions placed on their children, compared to most families in Bolivia, are extremely liberal. Being gay, there existed the possibility of not being accepted or being treated with suspicion by the family, although any anxieties I had were allayed by their respect for difference and openness to knowing more about sexual orientation, something they'd not previously contemplated, even attending various activities at an LGBT organisation I work for. Living with a host family involved patience, flexibility and compromise. Living in such close proximity with new people invariably resulted in occasional conflict and disagreement, but I found it best to approach such situations diplomatically and situations were usually resolved without incident. It was also a great opportunity to understand differences, promote dialogue and learn a great many things. I will be keeping in touch with the host family, who continue to be involved in international exchange, and hope to visit them again in the future.



In terms of my voluntary work in Bolivia, I worked for two national human rights organisations in La Paz. Bolivia as a whole is seeing an increase in social mobilisation, awareness of rights and liberties,



and awareness of the importance of volunteering and social work, thus it is a great time to participate in the wealth of opportunities on offer, and I tried to make the most of opportunities that presented themselves. The first project I began working for since February 2012, Adesproc Libertad, works to promote the rights of the LGBT population both within La Paz and nationally. I toured the project with a member of ICYE, was introduced to the various people involved in the

project and given information regarding their various activities. I would recommend to anyone

arriving in Bolivia to visit the project to become more aware of the rights of LGBT people within the country. During my time in the project I have visited various villages, speaking to youth and holding



informative fairs to educate people on LGBT rights, of which there is very little awareness, much ignorance, confusion as to the teachings of religion, and continuing discrimination borne out of lack of education, particularly amongst rural indigenous communities. In addition, Adesproc went to various secondary schools, screening LGBT-themed movies and prompting

discussions on rights and discrimination. Combined with participation on more major projects, I've also been involved in daily office work, such as translation work, compiling reports, giving informative talks, organising the library and participation in activities in the café space which adjoins the office. Every year in June, Adesproc also organise a gay pride event through the city and a protest in November against homophobia and transphobia. Through my work with Adesproc, I have met a diverse range of people, have been involved with social, cultural and legal projects, coordinated with local government officials, lawyers, gay-rights activists and even spoken on national TV about homophobia and the situation in Bolivia compared to that in the United Kingdom.



The second project with which I have worked is Capacitacion y Derechos Ciudadanos (CDC), from April 2012. This is a legal organisation that works with vulnerable groups in society, working with indigenous groups, women, children, prisoners, LGBT people, victims of violence and discrimination, amongst others. They have a dedicated volunteer program, mainly for law students and lawyers, although I believe this can be extended to those with interest in the law yet without qualifications. The program trains volunteers to either give legal workshops and presentations or to work on specific legal cases, as well as more general activities such as fairs and promotional events. The program typically runs once a year and lasts for a year. I began in April, first submitting my CV and going for an interview, then spending every day for three weeks studying in their offices, listening to presentations from various Bolivian lawyers about national, regional and international human rights law. At the end of the three weeks was an examination, which must be passed for participation as a legal volunteer. It sounds grueling, and at times was difficult keeping up with the Bolivian students, but ultimately I have made many friends, greatly improved my Spanish and knowledge of Bolivian law and gained so much from what is a wonderful organisation and a truly unique program, dedicated to improving human rights awareness and compliance in Bolivian society. After the exam I opted to participate in their programme Capacitacion y Cultura de Paz. From June to November I



gave presentations to the police on their disciplinary regime, to victims of violence about human rights protection, and to prisoners in two prisons (San Pedro and Chonchocoro) about human rights, legal process, amongst others. I met former dictators and drug traffickers, former President's, and ministers of government in my role. Work at CDC also opened up the opportunity to attend national human rights conferences, congresses and talks. I finished my work with them in December, and I can truly say it was a wonderful, eye-opening, immensely educational experience, working with some dedicated human rights lawyers and activists. I was the only non-Bolivian to participate on the course, yet was warmly welcomed onto the programme, and was at all points treated with kindness and respect by my colleagues and by the people to whom I gave presentations and had to suffer my occasionally-faltering Spanish.



*Together with the legal volunteers and activists of Capacitacion y Derechos Ciudadanos campaigning in La Paz*

In all, I would highly recommend the experience of participating in social projects that are both enriching and eye-opening. They are a great way to learn about the importance of social work and the effect they have on the populations they serve. I have greatly valued my time at both projects, and they have taught me a number of things, about society, culture, legal rights, effective and ineffective organisation, the role of NGO's and volunteering. Not all experiences were completely positive, at times I was frustrated by various aspects of volunteering in Bolivia, for example a lack of structure and punctuality in comparison to European institutions, yet these frustrations also served as learning experiences. Bolivia is currently witnessing increased social awareness, with a number of organisations to explore and talk to, and represents a great opportunity to be involved with people trying to improve the country. In La Paz, most days and weeks see fresh protests, marches and

strikes throughout the city, there is always a cause requiring attention and understanding. During my time in Bolivia, protests and marches gaining attention in the Western press were most prominently miners protests at the allocation of a nationalised mine, a march into La Paz by disabled people angry at the lack of welfare benefits, police strikes over pay, and a march by various indigenous groups from TIPNIS, indigenous land through which the government wishes to build a new road.

In general, living in La Paz for a year has been a good experience. The city is bustling, chaotic, loud and vibrant, the roads crammed full with minibuses, the streets lined with kiosks, stalls, vendors, with pockets of tranquility to be found in the various plazas dotted throughout the city. The altitude and steep cliffs visible from every angle add to the slightly surreal nature of the city, particularly at night with the lights of the houses giving the impression of being in the middle of a giant stadium. There are lots of things to do in the city, always some form of entertainment, from theatre and music to bars and clubs. Undoubtedly my favourite things about the city are the minibuses, street food and markets. Minibuses which will pick you up and drop you off anywhere, whirl down the steep roads, rhythmically shouting out destinations from the windows and playing the latest Bolivian or Argentinean soundtrack. A wealth of street food, juices, smoothies on almost every corner, and the vibrant, sprawling markets littered throughout the city, with an overwhelming variety of produce, haggling over prices, building a rapport with your favourite vendors. La Paz is by no means a pretty city, and lacks peacefulness, but it is a fascinating city with a lot to offer.



*Hiking in the Bolivian jungle of Los Yungas*





During my year, I travelled to a number of other places, to Peru and Ecuador, but mainly exploring the different regions of Bolivia. Just within the country, the different regions offer great variations in terms of scenery, people, and culture. For example the differences between the laid-back, tropical lowlands, and the harsh, cold highlands, the barren landscapes of the altiplano, and the lush, green wilderness of Los Yungas, the cacti and volcano desert landscapes of the south, the picturesque vineyards of Tarija and stunning otherworldness of the Salt Flats of Uyuni. People and their perspectives vary from place to place, proud of their own regional traditions, food, dance, music. In February during Carnival, the differing dances and music of the various regions and groups can be evidenced from the thousands of performers in Carnival de Oruru amongst others. There is much to explore, and I won't mention my travels in more detail as this is something which is far more fun exploring personally without the previous stories of others.



To sum up my year in Bolivia, it has been a truly worthwhile experience. My host family and

Bolivian friends have allowed me to explore the culture of Bolivia in more depth, gain new perspectives and understandings, engage with what is a fascinating country steeped in history and tradition, beset by problems in trying to emerge into a truly representative and participatory democracy for all, yet offering hope in increasing awareness and social activism. Working with my projects provided me with invaluable experience in the realm of human rights, working with a range of groups, learning of the difficulties they face, and how increased education, participation and visibility goes a long way to improve the lives of those marginalised, ignored and discriminated against. Exploring the country, travelling, studying the language, engaging in activities, festivals, and events throughout the year, becoming a part of what is a beautiful country and continent and hopefully taking everything I've learnt and putting it to use in the future.



*(2) A copy of the article I wrote for ICYE to promote the first few weeks of my experience for the benefit of future volunteers – March 2012.*

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## A Year in La Paz: The First Few Weeks

### *Benjamin Pass*

I set off for La Paz, Bolivia on the twenty-fourth of January from Heathrow, full of excitement and expectation for my first expedition to South America, hauling a great deal of overweight luggage, despite the emotional weight-reducing turmoil of the previous few days that had stripped me of my beloved camera.



My first two days involved a tour of the airports of Bolivia, from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz to La Paz, but after around forty hours of travelling I made it to El Alto airport, 4000 metres high, to be greeted by my host brother, Juan Raul. The airport sits above the city, which is comparatively low-down at 3700 metres. El Alto, in addition to the airport, houses many of the indigenous population, many of whom run street stalls and, like most other Bolivians, constantly play chicken with the traffic. Every Thursday and Sunday El Alto also boasts the largest market in South America, and is the birthplace of Chola or Cholita wrestling, a sport gaining in popularity amongst the indigenous women of the region.

From El Alto we took steep and precarious winding roads down into the centre of La Paz. The view during the descent was magnificent - for miles into the distance all that can be seen is the mass of buildings in the lower bowl of the city, with houses cascading up and over the mountains that encircle the city. We drove to my new home, and met my host mother Vicky and father Javier. I also met my new German sister, Lena, who will be living with me for six months. My room overlooks the mountains and the Rodriguez market which runs for tens of streets and sells almost everything: including fresh food, spices, electronics, beds and car



parts. I'm constantly reminded of its presence, in the early hours of the morning the incoming buses and cars compete to see who can honk their horns the loudest, stalls are noisily erected and people talk and shout excitedly, announcing their wares and scrambling for space under the overcrowded tents. By midday things have calmed, and by the evening stalls are taken down, gigantic bags of unsold wares are heaved back onto buses, people say their farewells until the next day.

The district I am living in is called San Pedro. It is about a fifteen minute walk from the very centre and five or ten minutes from the biggest prison in La Paz, the San Pedro Prison, widely renowned for being a society in itself and the subject of a book by a former inmate, titled *Marching Powder*. San Pedro



is quite high up in the city, and thus is a colourful, bustling, chaotic, vibrant neighbourhood, which makes things constantly interesting and entertaining. The roads are filled with micros and minibuses, honking their horns, negotiating the precarious roads, with people hanging out their windows announcing the destinations. A ride on one of the buses costs around 10p (1.5 Bolivianos) which makes it significantly cheaper than the £1 (10bs) taxi fare. The streets are lined with vendors and lustrabotas - shoe shine boys, many of whom cover their faces with a balaclava and charge 15p to shine your shoes. The lustrabotas and ninos de la calle (children



of the street) also sell a newspaper called Hormigon Armado for 40p (4bs), which is run much like the Big Issue and helps pay to improve their conditions. Further down into the city, or Zona Sur, things become slightly less chaotic and more expensive, which is where the upper classes of the city live and socialise in luxurious apartments, expensive bars and exclusive boutiques.

For the first few days in Bolivia, I was whisked away from my family for an eleven hour overnight bus journey to the historical capital of Sucre, with its white colonial style buildings, for a training camp with other volunteers. It was a welcome break from the initially overwhelming altitude and an introduction to summer weather in the lowlands. The bus journey was slightly surreal, attempting sleep whilst the bus driver navigated the precarious roads at breakneck speed. Arriving in one piece, I spent three days at the camp, getting to know other volunteers and people involved with ICYE (Inter-Cultural Youth Exchange). The camp allayed anxieties and provided a wonderful insight into the history, culture and traditions of the country I am now to call home. The city itself is also far more peaceful than La Paz, and being in the southern lowlands was significantly hotter, with temperatures averaging in the thirties as opposed to temperatures between ten and fifteen degrees back in the highlands.

After a second eleven hour journey I arrived back in La Paz, and now well-adjusted to the altitude, I began my exploration of the city. There is currently a large market called Alasitas, which sells everything in miniature to be blessed for the following year, the witches market which sells dried llama foetus, and a few museums, including a museum explaining the history of the cocoa leaf in South America, and the sensationalist nonsense its production generates in the West. Spending time with my family occupies most of my time, and has been a wonderful introduction to different people and places. One weekend it was my host mothers' birthday. We travelled to Zona Sur and had crispy salty llama served with potatoes, lentils and cheese, and visited some of her friends who were very hospitable and talked very fast. This last weekend I met a number of aunts and cousins, all of whom are lovely, and made me feel like a supporting actor in a South American soap opera. In the evening Lena

and I hung out with Juan Raul and his friends, drinking the local spirit Singani with soda, called Chufly. We listened to music on their rooftop balcony, which has views of the city and the mountains, which at night creates the illusion of being in the centre of a football stadium. We eat lunch or almuerzo together every day, which is the main meal of the day, and then usually eat dinner together as well. The one day I cooked for the family, and made my way around the market bartering for vegetables and endured the death of a chicken. There are a multitude of tasty snacks to be bought, including saltenas, like pasties, but containing steaming hot liquid and far more delicious, and a hot, fruity, cinnamon flavoured drink called api which is served with a cheese and sugar pastry and can be bought from street vendors for a pound or two in the local markets or on the sides of streets.

Since arriving in Bolivia I have been having Spanish lessons, initially for two hours a day, arranged and paid for by ICYE Bolivia, and now twice-weekly at my own expense. Prior to arriving in Bolivia I also studied on a three-week intensive language course in southern Spain. The lessons have improved my Spanish greatly, and have allowed me to fully interact with my family, colleagues and make friends quickly. My ability to pay for the lessons stems directly from the bursary I received from ICYE, which will allow me to take Spanish courses throughout my year in Bolivia, as well as help towards the cost of excursions and adventures I wish to take throughout Bolivia and the continent.

I have already begun exploring the country and making full use of my weekends, especially as the summer season in Bolivia translates into multitudes of fiestas. The highlight so far was the weekend beginning Saturday 18 February, Carnaval weekend, a huge party throughout the country preceding the start of Lent. I travelled to Oruru, four hours south, with some friends to mark the occasion, renowned as the biggest party in Bolivia. Arriving late morning, we clambered up to our slightly clandestine viewing point, where we could see the thousands of dancers, performers and band members creating an epic spectacle along the main streets of the city. The first parade, La Entrada, lasted from early in the morning until the evening, with



various groups performing specialised cultural dances. Beer was handed out by random spectators throughout, so by the end of La Entrada I was ready to dance.

Thankfully my dancing urges coincided with the beginning of La Diablada, with performers dressed in costumes ranging from lit-up bears to demons, sparking fireworks and flames from their heads, all to a

thundering and intense musical beat. We joined the performers on the streets, dancing and doing our best to avoid water balloons, water guns and canned foam being sprayed at us. Another staple of Carnaval, lots of watery mess.



The party continued for the next few days in La Paz, where Carnaval was still in full swing, especially along the main streets, where hordes of youngsters, armed with watery weapons, attacked anyone without aforementioned watery weapons. At the same time, performers continued to dance and bands continued to play. I walked back from the parade through the market streets, and instead of finding all the vendors attending to their stores, found them all dancing to pulsating Latino music in the streets instead. After engaging in a few dances with the slightly over-excited women, I eventually made it back to the house.



The following day, my family here, the Carrasco's, had a wonderful barbeque on their balcony for lunch. Prior to starting the barbeque however, we were invited to the antique shop at the side of their apartment, which was having a barbeque and party of their own. We were wrapped in confetti strands, given all sorts of cocktails and meat to drink and eat, and toasted everyone present. Every time we were given another beer, cocktail or wine, we raised our drinks to the health of the people present and then poured some on the floor of the shop, in acknowledgment of Pachamama, or Mother Earth or World, a goddess revered by the indigenous in Bolivia. By the time we ventured back up to the family barbeque, about fifteen family members: cousins, aunties, uncles and grandparents had gathered and had started cooking the meat and making more cocktails. We continued to eat and drink, after which it seemed appropriate to fill balloons with water and throw them at people walking on the street below. A fitting end to a messy weekend.

Aside from partying, the majority of my time during the week is spent working in my chosen project, Adesproc Libertad. It is an organisation campaigning for the rights of the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) population in Bolivia, and provides information, resources, advice, and a safe-space, essential in a country where basic legal rights are lacking in the areas of sexual orientation and gender identity. It has been running for fifteen years and is the oldest such organisation in the country. The project not only provides support for the LGBT community, but also engages the wider population. Thus far, I have accompanied my colleagues to workshops which educate professionals about the LGBT population, hoping to banish prevalent prejudice and stereotypes and increase awareness. They will also be screening LGBT-themed films in local educational institutions, hoping to generate discussion and educate. This last week I was able to engage in a debate with local lawyers hoping to introduce into law a day against homophobia and transphobia in the country. My experience

so far in the project has been overwhelmingly positive. People there have been keen to get me involved and introduce me to the various aspects of their work, and it has helped improve my Spanish and confidence in stumbling over the language. I have made a few good friends already, and we have been on evening trips to local markets for some table-football tournaments, trying different foods, and weekend excursions for picnics, sightseeing, and a tour of Tiwanaku, an archaeological site of a civilisation pre-dating the Inca empire, and place of great historical importance, being the cultural heart of the indigenous Aymara population.

In the next week or so, I will be visiting two other projects, one of which I hope to work for in tandem with Adesproc. The first is ITEI, which works for victims of state torture and violence in Bolivia, and the other is CDC, which works to promote enhanced legal rights and protection for minorities and the most vulnerable sections of the population. Both involve legal work and the promotion of the importance of human rights, closely related to my legal study at university. The legal climate relating to human rights in Bolivia is constantly evolving, but protection for many groups is still severely lacking, a fact highlighted everyday in La Paz by the harrowing demonstrations by various marginalised groups in some of the main squares. Most recently, gaining international media attention, were a group of physically disabled activists, who marched to La Paz to protest the lack of support, benefits and discrimination against the disabled population in Bolivia. The chance to be involved in volunteering for organisations working to promote human rights awareness and raise the public consciousness is a wonderful opportunity, for which I have ICYE to thank.