



AFAR CHOOSES A DESTINATION AT RANDOM—BY LITERALLY  
SPINNING A GLOBE—AND SENDS A WRITER ON A

## SPONTANEOUS JOURNEY

### Beer and Coca at Dizzying Heights

**God seemed everywhere in La Paz. Many gods, actually. I had just been plopped into this Bolivian metropolis, set in a canyon**

nearly 12,000 feet up in the Andes Mountains. The city's crammed-together dwellings blanketed the entire concave landscape, from the base to the vertigo-inducing rim. Near my hotel, a few blocks uphill from the baroque-mestizo church known as Iglesia de San Francisco, shops overflowed with bright-colored Andean backpacks and ponchos marketed to tourists. Next to them stood stalls displaying an entire archeology of pre-Columbian spiritual talismans: amulets of animal deities; jars of magical herbs; dried llama fetuses in various states of development. (One of the nearly ubiquitous *cholitas* in a bowler hat told me these last were for luck—"suerte," she said, switching to Spanish from the indigenous Aymara.) I decided to try my luck with a bag of coca leaves, the chewing of which is said to help alleviate altitude sickness. Then I headed back to my hotel, where the devastating effects of my new oxygen-starved environment would make me swear someone had performed black magic on me.

The next morning, my lungs still desperately gasping for air, I met with a nomadic old friend from my expatriate days in Prague. Scotty, a native of Scotland, was eager to show me the city he had finally settled in. He led me to the Feria de Alasitas, an annual festival celebrating the god Ekeko, a deity of abundance. As Scotty explained, the festival emphasizes material wealth. Locals purchase miniature versions, *alitas*, of their wishes for the coming year—tiny houses, cars, passports, dollar and euro bills, babies, pigs, llamas, college diplomas, and even diminutive packages of snack foods—and then have them blessed by a *yatiri*, an Aymara shaman, conveniently located on the fairgrounds. As we wandered the narrow lanes flanked with booths, I considered buying an *alasitas*, but I couldn't figure out what I desired. I live in a nice apartment, I've earned two university degrees, and I have no need (or space) for a farm animal.

I hadn't made a decision when we spilled out onto a wide promenade. "¡Hola!" someone yelled in our direction. A dozen or so mostly portly (and mostly female) Bolivians sitting on plastic beer crates next to the curb waved us over. Someone deposited a plastic cup in my hand. Space was cleared on the curb for me, my body snuggled between the woman with the mullet and the woman with the gold teeth (not an uncommon fashion here, I would learn).

But just as I was about to take a sip, one of the women grabbed my wrist. "No, like this," she said, spilling some beer on the well-spattered pavement. I was told this was an offering to the earth goddess, Pachamama, an obligatory ritual performed before partaking of any alcoholic beverage.

I suddenly remembered a warning from a guidebook at my hotel: "Whatever you do, don't get caught up drinking with Bolivians." It sounded ominous, and the



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rest of the paragraph explained why: The people of this South American country can be voracious and, apparently, aggressive drinkers. Trying to slip out after a beer or two is an exercise in futility.

Factoring in a case of altitude sickness, my decision to imbibe beer in honor of the earth goddess was questionable at best. But I'm a sucker for these types of situations, which only seem to happen when I'm traveling, so I ignored the red flags. Just the scenic view from the curb—jagged, lunar-looking mountains rising in the distance beyond the city's match-stick apartment towers—was worth the risk.

It turned out there were four cups among us, and two cases of beer. As soon as someone chugalugged the *cerveza*, she'd refill the cup and pass it to the nearest empty-handed person, who would make the obligatory offering to Pachamama and repeat the process. As a group of concerned police officers looked on, we rotated shots of beer, called each other *amigo*, shook hands, and answered questions about our respective countries.

Scotty, who was translating for me, said everyone wanted to know about Obama.

"He's like your Evo," someone yelled out, referring to Juan Evo Morales Ayma, the first fully indigenous president of Bolivia.

I hesitantly nodded. "Yes, if only Obama chewed coca leaves and was a socialist," I said. "Then he'd be our Evo." Everyone laughed. More beer was poured.

That was when I felt a tug on my arm. A toothless, diminutive man in his 60s clasped my palm. His other hand latched onto my wrist. When he spoke to me—as he did from close range and with a stare piercing right through me—small pellets of saliva launched from his sunken-in mouth and splashed on my sunburned face.

He was a witch doctor, Scotty told me.

Casto, one of the few men in the group, rushed over to interpret. The witch doctor spoke in Aymara, which Casto translated into Spanish for Scotty. "He says you have a positive spirit," Scotty said. "But he wishes he had some coca leaves. That way he could know more."

I actually had a sack of coca leaves in my shoulder bag, left over from the previous day's attempt to quell my altitude sickness. Within seconds the witch doctor and I were sitting on beer crates, facing each other. He picked out three leaves and arranged them on the curb so they were pointing in different directions, evidently an invocation from an Andean mass.

He asked me to reach into the bag and pull some out. He lifted my hand to his mouth and gently blew on the leaves, which were pinched between my indexfinger and thumb. After I did the same, I handed him the coca leaves and he explained the rules: If the leaf lands with the dark green sideface up, the outlook is positive; if it lands with the lighter side face up, it's not so good. It also made a difference, he added, which direction the leaves were pointing.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I'm a writer."

He nodded and began carefully tossing the leaves onto the curb, calling out which side was face up: "Green, green, green, light green, green, green." The witch doctor pointed to the arrangement of leaves and

smiled, his toothless, pink gums gleaming.

"You're going to have a prosperous writing career," he said.

I smiled back.

"The next part is about your health," he said, and he began tossing the leaves again. His concentration was intense. I leaned in. This time, as fewer leaves landed green side up, the witch doctor looked increasingly concerned. He was especially troubled by the final leaf he threw, light side up and pointing in a different direction from the rest.

He looked at Casto and spoke in Aymara for a minute. Casto exclaimed in Spanish: "I can't tell him that!"

My smile became a frown. I begged him to tell me.

Casto paused. "You're healthy now, but you're going to get very sick soon. *Very* sick."

And then he stopped, the message from the witch doctor seemingly truncated for my own good.

"What does that mean?" I cried. "How sick?"

I wanted details. "Is it bad, like I'm going to die soon?"

I looked at Scotty, who shrugged, and then at Casto, who just stared into the distance. The witch doctor was pounding a beer that had been handed to him. And then 15 police officers suddenly surrounded our group. They'd obviously

seen enough debauchery for one day. The ladies stood up and began yelling: "You should have better things to be doing." One of the women demanded that I take a photo to record the supposed injustice. But before I could consider the suggestion, a police officer grabbed me and Scotty by the arm and marched us away. As we stood watching the argument from afar, I began to process the bad news I'd just received. Should I take my fortune seriously?

And then, an idea. "C'mon," I said, leading Scotty over to a nearby booth. "Do you have something for health?" I asked. The teenage girl scanned the hundreds of physical manifestations of desires and pulled out a document the size of a baseball card. The tiny script read CERTIFICADO DE SALUD, an image of the Virgin Mary visible in the background. I paid the girl seven *bolivianos* (one dollar) and she pointed up the hill to the shaman's tent, where I could have my *alasitas* blessed.

The shaman had a bulbous face and looked to be in his 30s. He took my "health certificate" and studied it. He nodded, then lit a small pyre. Thick plumes of incense swirled heavenward. Holding the card over the smoke, he chanted prayers in Aymara. Then he doused my hands with rubbing alcohol and handed the card back to me. In Spanish, he said: "You are protected and will have good health."

"For certain?" I asked, hoping for more reassurance.

"The gods will be with you, even after you leave La Paz."

Scotty and I stood up and I peeled back the door of the tent. A flash of sunlight hit me in the face and we walked out bravely into the light, into this city of gods. ■

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