

## Summary of Mission Trip to Bolivia

May 17 – 27, 2013

I would like to thank Norm Arnold (the mission and team leader) for the opportunity to be a part of this outstanding group. Norm is a member of the Rotary Club of Alamogordo, New Mexico and the primary organizer of this trip as well as the main "driving force" behind its success. I would also be remiss if I failed to thank the entire Bridges to Prosperity organization for doing what they do, and for doing it so well. <http://bridgestoprosperty.org/> B2P has a vision of a world where poverty caused by rural isolation no longer exists. Their programs provide access to healthcare, education and markets by teaching communities how to build footbridges over impassable rivers, in partnership with organizations and professionals. They prove the value of their work through a commitment to the community and its bridge that lasts long after the opening celebration. B2P was founded by a Rotarian, and it is my understanding that Rotary Clubs have worked together closely with them for more than ten years – and still going strong. Rotary Clubs support bridges through generous grants and individual donations, as well as volunteering on B2P bridge build sites. B2P also partners with Civil Engineering students in various Universities around the US, who also volunteer their time and do much of the physical labor to build the bridges.

Members of this trip's Rotary team included: Norm Arnold, Robyn Long, Anita Pozin, Clayton Alred, Connie Perusse, Skylar Rempfer, Jim Abbott, Michelle Brideaux and her husband Burt, and me (Carey Beamesderfer.) We were met in Cochabamba, Bolivia by the B2P Operations Manager – Netta Ophir who hosted most of the travel and tour arrangements upon our arrival in Cochabamba. Each member of the team paid or had arranged for donations to cover their travel expenses, as well as room and board for the ten day period of the mission. Team members also brought along donated toys and related items that fit in an extra suitcase they brought with them on the plane.

Special thanks also goes to Robin French (Rotary Club of Alamogordo), who was not able to join us on this trip, but took the lead in marketing, coordinating and helping to organize the mission.

### The Mission:

This mission began in LaPaz, Bolivia (the main seat of government), and continued in Cochabamba (sometimes called The Garden City) which was the focal point for the team activities and the place we used as a hub for travel to and from various bridge sites.



South America



Bolivia - showing various cities

Our flight to LaPaz was uneventful and we landed safely at approximately 5:30am on Saturday, May 18.

Bolivia is a democratic republic that is divided into nine departments (states). Its geography is varied from the peaks of the Andes in the West, to the Eastern Lowlands, situated within the Amazon Basin. It is a developing country, who's main economic activities include agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, and manufacturing goods such as textiles, clothing, refined metals, and refined petroleum. The Bolivian population, estimated at 11 million, is multiethnic, including Amerindians, Mestizos, Europeans, Asians and Africans. The main language spoken is Spanish, although numerous other indigenous languages are also common. The currency is known as the Boliviano and seven Bolivianos equals approximately one US dollar.

The El Alto airport in LaPaz is approximately 13,300' above sea level. After a 30 minute bus ride we arrived at our hotel, which was at an altitude of 11,600' Upon arrival at the Ritz Apart Hotel we unpacked our suitcases, had breakfast and took some time to rest before starting the city tour of LaPaz.



Our city tour began around 2:00pm with the first stop at the Valley of the Moon (Valle de la Luna) which is approximately 6 miles from downtown LaPaz. It is composed of an area where erosion has worn away the majority of a mountain. Since it is composed of clay rather than rock, over the centuries the elements have created a beautiful work of art here; like a desert filled with stalagmites.



Valley of the Moon – We happened to be there when a wedding was in progress.

After the “moon” visit we proceeded to the top of the world, where we were treated to a spectacular view of the city of LaPaz. One of the highlights of this stop was being able to view the highest soccer stadium on Earth, along with a panoramic view of a city that sits in a bowl surrounded by the high plateau of the Andes mountains region.



City of LaPaz, Bolivia

Our tour continued into the main part of the city where we had an opportunity to visit a park area known as the Plaza Murillo, and the official residence of the President of Bolivia – the “Palacio Quemado” or the Bolivian Palace of Government.



The Government Palace doesn't come from either the colonial period or from when La Paz became the political center of the country (since 1899). The palace was built from between 1845 and 1852 and adheres to the classical school of architecture with both elegant and severe lines that have an Italian style.



Team members at Plaza Murillo

On Sunday, May 19, the group went on tour to the Tiwanaku ruins; a tour that I missed because of some medical issues I had related to the high altitude. I'm disappointed that I missed this tour, but was told that it was an exceptional place to visit & I look forward to seeing it on the next trip to Bolivia. Here is a link to a website for those of you who wish to learn more about it. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/567>



On Monday, May 20, we were escorted to the downtown market area to see the local culture and “produce” before having lunch with the LaPaz Sur Rotary Club.



Late morning we visited the Coca Museum – The **Coca Museum** (in Spanish, **Museo de la Coca**) covers the history of the coca plant from the Andean region and related drug cocaine. It is associated with the International Coca Research Institute (ICORI) in La Paz. We were not allowed to take pictures inside the museum; however we were given a booklet in English to supplement the displays which were both educational and provocative.



Entrance to the Coca Museum

The lunchtime meeting with the Rotary Club of LaPaz Sur was wonderful. In attendance were approximately 12 local Rotarians, supplemented by the 10 of us, plus we had the opportunity to meet and talk with the members including the Club President – Juan Edgar Gomez Mendoza, and the Rotary District Governor of Bolivia – Mario Paredes. Our team leader, Norm Arnold, introduced all of us prior to him giving an outstanding presentation (in English) to the entire group, about Bridges to Prosperity.



The afternoon was spent shopping and souvenir hunting at the local craft and retail shops. Dinner that evening was with several of the LaPaz Rotarians at a local restaurant.

Tuesday morning, May 21, we checked out of the Ritz Apart Hotel and were taken to the airport for our flight to Cochabamba. We arrived at the Aranjuez Hotel late morning, and had lunch and some downtime to tour the city by foot on our own; or stay at the hotel and relax. At 4:30pm we had a very informative talk about Bolivia by Jim Shultz who leads an organization known as “The Democracy Center.” <http://democracctr.org/> (*The Democracy Center works globally to advance social, economic and environmental justice, by helping citizens understand and influence the public issues that impact their lives.*) According to their website - “Bolivia has been a main focus of the Democracy Center’s various

written publications. They have authored media stories as well as more in-depth investigations and reports which focus on the country and its dance with globalization, and more recently with climate change and its impacts.” Jim Shultz is the Founder and Executive Director of the organization. We were extremely fortunate to have him in Cochabamba when we were there. His talk was incredibly insightful and helped us all understand the history and current political situation in Bolivia.

We spent the evening with the Rotary Club of Cochabamba. The club meeting began around 7:30pm followed by a meal approximately 1-1/2 to 2 hours later. We exchanged club banners and spent time networking with the club members.



After breakfast, on Wednesday, May 22 we were off on a 4 hour bus trip to our first bridge site – Palca. Part of the allure of the trip was to see the beautiful Bolivian countryside. Riding along on roads that were not always paved, at elevations from 9,000’ – 12,000’ gave us spectacular views of rural Bolivia. We even passed one of the locals who had a flat tire. Passing on some of these roads is treacherous because of the narrow roadways and the elevation. On route we picked up four students from the University of Michigan, who were scheduled to work on the site for the next few weeks. Upon arrival we all visited (inspected) the work site, took numerous pictures, then went to the local primary school to deliver the toys we had brought from home. This was a lot of fun and the students were overwhelmed with the wonder and excitement of it all.



Views of the high lands along the route to Palca.





Palca Site – Existing Bridge



Palca Site – New Bridge in Progress



Palca Site – Crossing the old bridge



View from across the river – New Bridge



Students at the school receiving and playing with the toys from us “Rotarians at Work”



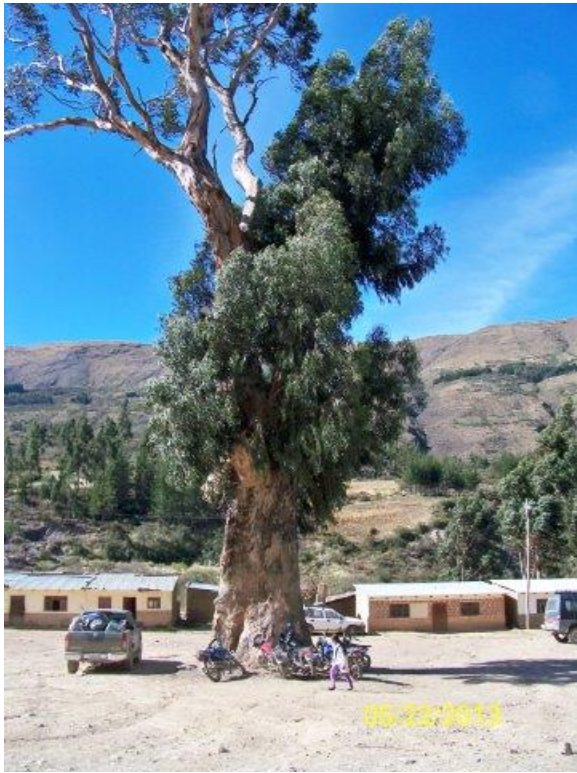
Palca Community Meeting



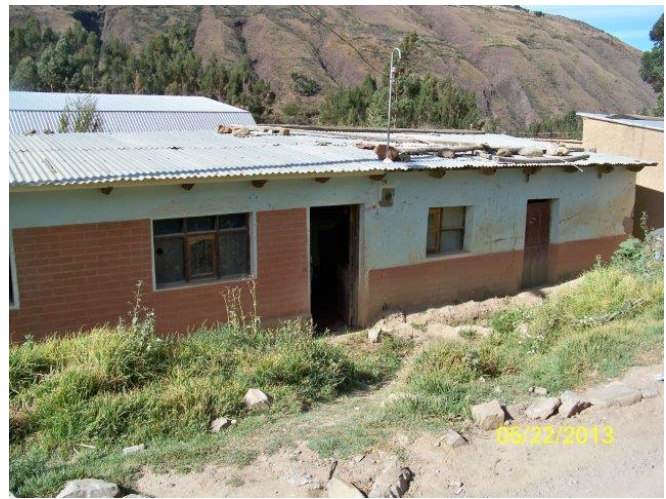
Norm with Community Leaders



Norm / Clayton handing laptop to local leader (right)

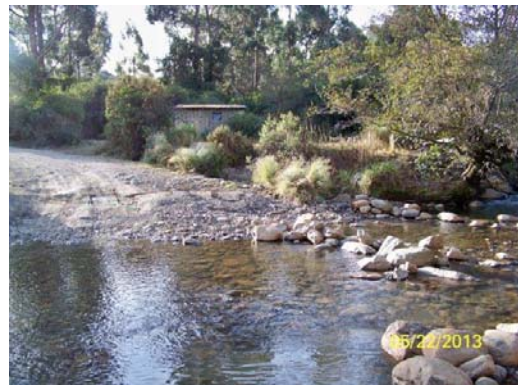


Palca Community - Tree in the center of the village



Residence for the Michigan University students while working at the Palca bridge site.

After leaving the Michigan University students at the bridge site, the rest of our team headed out to inspect another potential bridge site within an hour's drive of Palca. See pictures below.





A decision was made to spend the night in a town closer to the bridge site so as to spend less time riding the bus and more time at various bridge sites. As such we headed toward the town of Totora. On the way we came across a minor obstacle – a section of the road had washed out and there was no way to cross to continue our journey to Totora. Luckily some of the locals had already begun repairs and within a short while we were able to navigate across the make-shift bridge they had constructed. The work was hard physical labor to dig out the trench and fit it with tree branches to level the road and cover the washed-out portion. To show our gratitude, the team collected whatever snacks and gifts we could find on the bus and in our luggage, to reward the group of men who “saved the day.” - By the way – You can’t have this kind of experience by going on a Cruise ship.



And now – on to Totora. – Lying approximately 90 miles away from the city of Cochabamba, Totora, known as the “City of the Pianos” sits at 7,500’ above sea level, and the town is blessed with a warm climate. Totora was officially founded in 1876, and was declared a city by the Bolivian congress in 1894. The name comes from the Quechua word “Tjutura”, an aquatic plant which was previously abundant in the area, but has now died out. A visit to Totora feels like a trip back in time. The town’s colorful central plaza and white-washed houses with balconies that spill out into the narrow winding cobbled streets below. Our overnight stop in Totora was at a beautiful, partially restored hacienda. Our chef, Michelle, purchased food in Cochabamba prior to our visit and treated us to a lasagna dinner, complete with salad and vegetables, while her husband Burt made a cozy fire for us to enjoy while we were eating or just hanging out.



Our bus driver

On Thursday, May 23 we began our day with a tour of the town of Totora. We visited the home of the town mayor, and were allowed to see his piano concert room. This was followed by a tour of the home / business of a local merchant who made Bolivian blankets. She demonstrated the weaving process and then took us to her corn processing facility (brewery). Everyone had an opportunity to taste the brew or sample the end product – some declined.



As we continued the tour, we covered most of the town, by walking up and down the hills on cobblestone streets and narrow passageways. Later we were given a tour of the local museum, and spent a few hours listening to the history of the town and its culture.



After lunch we headed for the next bridge site – Copachuncha – to visit the students from Duke University who were working at the site, and to witness the official signing of the contract with the local leaders of the community. “The Copachunchu Bridge is located in the rural, mountainous region of Cochabamba, Bolivia and will (upon completion) provide critical access to approximately 1000 people in the surrounding communities outside the town of Tortora. During the rainy season, the people walk three hours to the nearest crossing point to travel to Tortora that has a weekly market for the farmers to sell their produce. Also, there are approximately 30 children that would travel in the opposite direction to the school on the other side of the river.” (Courtesy of the B2P website)



On the road to the bridge site



Temporary bridge



New bridge construction in progress



Duke University Students



Temporary bridge over the river



Meeting prior to contract signing

That afternoon we returned to Cochabamba and stayed the night at the Aranjuez Hotel. The next morning, Friday, May 24, we headed for the next bridge site – Chaqui Cocha.



“Two communities, Churo Bajo and Churo Alto, are separated from Chaqui Cocha by the river. Even during the dry season, they had to go a long way around since the river gorge is steep and tall. Both sides are accessible by car but there is no vehicle connection between them. Schools are located in Churo Bajo and Chaqui Cocha. Though it would have been closer for the kids from Churo Alto to go to school in Chaqui Cocha they could not pass during the rainy season and so had to go to a much farther school or not at all.” (Courtesy of the B2P website)

When you first come upon this bridge, your jaw drops in awe!! It is the highest suspended bridge in the B2P network and spans 220'. Crossing it is a little intimidating, and standing in the middle, looking down is even more of a thrill. The locals have total confidence in the structural integrity of the bridge and use it daily to cross the 100' plus deep river gorge.

Part of our itinerary included lunch with a local family, which followed a visit to the local elementary school. Once again the Rotarians took an opportunity to present the students with gifts while we observed their classroom activities and language studies. Later our lunch consisted of locally grown potatoes and lima beans served with a hot, picante sauce. Some of us also had a sandwich which was packed for us by the Aranjuez Hotel staff.



School Classroom



Learning their Spanish ABC's



Netta giving instructions



Clayton/Netta/Michelle



Lunch – Potatoes & Beans



Mealtime gathering – Jim & Norm



Netta negotiating for potatoes



Flat tire – Luckily he had a spare



One last look at this bridge – Wow!

Later that afternoon we drove up the mountain to another bridge site – Herrera Cancha – “The river runs through the center of the community, Herrera Cancha. There are 78 families, with about 55 and 48 kids on each side. The left side has the health center, and leads to other communities, Yaranu and Villa Victoria. The right side has the school. There is no way to pass between them during the rainy season.” (Courtesy of B2P Website) See pictures on the following page:



On Saturday, May 25 we toured Simon Patiño’s Cochabamba Palace in the morning, then the local market in Cochabamba.



Internet photo of Simon Patiño's Palace



Duke University students with tour guide

The market place in Cochabamba was a sight to behold. The crowd was overwhelming and the taxi ride to and from the market was an experience that everyone should do at least once in their life.



The above picture is a photo I took from the Internet to give you a sense of what the market was like.

**Summary:** I offer my thanks and congratulations to our team leader Norm Arnold for the outstanding effort he has put in, and continues to put into this and similar B2P missions. His dedication to Bridges to Prosperity and its reach around the world is truly a reflection of his personal values and Rotary commitment. He has inspired me to invest my time and talent to meet the ongoing challenges of this and possibly future missions. I would also like to thank Robyn Long & Netta Ophir, and the Alamogordo Rotary Club for their Rotary & B2P leadership, and for helping to create this opportunity for all of us to prove that Service Above Self are not just words on a paper. Also, none of this would be possible if it weren't for Ken Frantz, Board Chair and Founder of B2P, and his outstanding organization. Lastly, this is a team effort and being part of this team has been both an honor and a privilege. We've all made new friends, learned a lot about Bolivia, and achieved a camaraderie that is rare in today's world. The mission of this team says a lot: There is hope for this world. We are making a positive difference for humanity. Keep up the good work.

***Carey D. Beamesderfer***

President – Rotary Club of West El Paso (2012-2013)

B2P Bolivia Mission Team Member – May 2013

