

Sunday Market, Presidential Village Provide a Taste of Bolivian Culture

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The Chippewa Herald

Every town in Bolivia has its own market day. Sunday is market day in Cliza.

Although the main focus of this mission to Bolivia is to volunteer in dental clinics and water projects, a secondary part is educational. On our second day, we got to learn more about Bolivian culture by visiting the villages of Cliza and Tarata.

We board a bus and head southeast from Cochabamba on the main highway. The 37 kilometer drive takes us past the sights and sounds of this poor but beautiful country.

Cliza is popular with the city folks who live in Cochabamba. Many make the Sunday trip – just as Wisconsinites head “up north” to the lake on weekends – to sample the sights and sounds of the market in Cliza.

And the market is a delight of colors, textures and a variety of products.

One of the delicacies that draws city people to the Cliza market is roasted dove.

Indeed, when the bus finally stops on a dusty street in Cliza, one of the first sights we see is a food booth featuring roasted dove and guinea pigs. Stacks of stark naked doves and guinea pigs have already been boiled and roasted to a perfect brown, and sit out on platters ready for hungry customers.

The American and Canadian members of our group eye the platters, but no one digs into his or her pocket for money to sample one. Instead, we follow our two guides – Tim Johnson in front, and Julian carrying up the rear – through the market, looking like a mother duck with a brood of chicks. Our guides want to keep us together as a group for safety. There aren't a lot of tourists in this area of Bolivia. The valley is so far removed from the more popular tourist areas, the high plains of La Paz and Lake Titicaca, as well as the lowlands of Santa Cruz, the center of Bolivia's commercial life.

As we wend our way through the crowded market, we see every kind of product imaginable. A woman displays flat bread – about the size of a large saucer, round, and about a half inch high. Michelle Espinoza, a dentist with our group, stops to buy a sample. Her father grew up in Bolivia, and she and her twin sister have been back several times during their childhood. She breaks off a piece of the bread and shares it with others. For sitting out in the sun for some time, it is surprisingly moist and sweet.

The market in Cliza is a maze of buildings, booths covered by a blue plastic tarp, and open stalls, where vendors throw down a piece of canvas and spread out their wares.

Most vendors are women, and most wear traditional Bolivian dress: straw hats, colorful skirts and blouses, and the ever present sweaters to guard against the coolness of 8,500 feet above sea level. Many of the younger Bolivians are dressed in sweat pants, turtlenecks and baseball caps.

Native women who are doing their weekly shopping carry large cloth bags in which to put their purchases.

As we make our way through the market, we see one colorful scene after another.

Here is a woman waiting at the counter as a butcher cuts a big piece of red meat from the carcass of an animal that looks to be a cow.

Another woman ponders her options as she chooses from dozens of brightly striped hair bands.

Stacks of what look like green bricks stand in many stalls. Tim Johnson tells us it is the locals' favorite kind of bar soap.

You can buy four rolls of toilet tissue in plastic wrap, American style, or have a vendor help you with fresh cornmeal, spices or fruit that sit in open gunny sacks.

A stall selling dates overflows with product. The woman who owns the stall consents to having her picture taken, but like many natives, looks away from the lens. Many natives, says our guide, believe that photography steals a part of the soul.

Dr. Dan DeFazio of Albuquerque, New Mexico, bought a dozen dates from one stall. He believes that because the fruit of the date is inside its cover, he can eat it without worry. Tomorrow, he will become the first victim of our group to come down with a severe case of traveler's diarrhea, knocking him off his feet for a good 24 hours.

Bright red tomatoes, green peppers, green beans, light purple skinned onions, carrots, lettuce, cabbage and red radishes overflow from one canvas to the next. The smell and the colors are a sensory delight, booth after booth after booth.

You can buy a new shirt, a pair of headphones, a leather belt or rubber sandals at the market as well. Watches, CDs and DVDs are available, too. Debbie Sutton, Dr. David Crane's assistant, finds a set of pan flutes that she was looking to bring home.

We pass by one booth where coca leaves are being sold. The red plastic lined gunny sack is filled with green leaves that are about the size of a silver dollar.

Coca leaves, says Johnson, have been demonized by the U.S. government and the Drug Enforcement Agency. While the "Norte Americanos" use coca leaves to make coca paste, which is then refined into cocaine, Bolivians use it in over 100 products that have been woven into Bolivian life. Coca tea, for example, is served everywhere from private

homes to the finest restaurants in the country, he said. And many Bolivians chew coca leaves, as they can be used to suppress appetite or help people cope with cold weather.

The market stretches on and on, through alleys and side streets. Soda pop, scythes, hand lotion and shampoo bottles fill the shelves. In one area, a young man with a sewing machine diligently repairs the sole of a white tennis shoe.

Another important part of the market experience, says Johnson, is chi cha. When city folks come to the market on Sunday, they enjoy eating their roasted dove and drinking chi cha. As we drove through the countryside, we'd see long sticks with little white flags attached to houses and businesses. The white flag means that the latest batch of chi cha is ready and travelers can stop and buy it.

During festival, which celebrates fertility, everyone drinks chi cha and “gets drunk out of their minds,” says Johnson. Then, nine months later, lots of babies are born. The natives attribute the population surge not to the chi cha, but to the success of the festival, says our guide.

After Cliza, our bus headed to the town of Tarata. This tiny village, which looks like a colonial village from 100 years ago, is well known because it has produced three Bolivian presidents.

Our bus pulls to a stop in the center of town, at the plaza. Bolivian towns are built around the central plaza concept. Government, business and religious buildings surround the plaza, which contains huge palm trees, benches, and statues symbolizing important people and events.

We tour a museum containing a large painting of the first native son of Tarata who became president. It shows a middle age man in military uniform astride a beautiful white horse. Our guide tells how the president loved his horse and drinking chi cha.

When concerned doctors told him to cut back to one glass of the home made beer a day for health reasons, the president ordered a glass works factory to make a huge vessel so that he could technically abide by their orders, while still imbibing in as much of the liquid as he saw fit.

When the president was eventually forced from office, his political opponents cruelly plucked the eyes out of his horse and cut off its hooves to punish it just because it had received special treatment from the president, said Johnson.

Our tour took us through the narrow streets of town to a church and monastery. The church is well known because it contains the relics of a Roman guard who converted to Christianity in 60 A.D. He was beheaded by the pagan emperor for his audacity. In the early 1800s, Pope Gregory sent the remains of the guard from the catacombs of Rome to the church in Tarata as a means of solidifying the people's commitment to the Catholic Church, said Johnson. Today, the relics – pieces of the skull and hand bones -- are

contained within a wax body that is displayed in full regalia at a side altar in the church, where it is venerated by parishioners and visitors alike.

The elegant monastery was once the domain of the Jesuits, said our guide. The Jesuits brought education and religion to the area. The monastery once contained the first printing press in South America. Eventually, the Spaniards who ruled Bolivia and Paraguay threw the Jesuits out because they were becoming too powerful and represented a threat to the landowners who controlled most of the property in the country.

It wasn't until 1952 that a group of country people from Cliza, headed by its women, rose up against the landowners. Despite overwhelming odds, the reform movement prevailed, and much land was taken away from the few ruling families and distributed to people, said Johnson.

“That’s why we love our women so much,” he said.