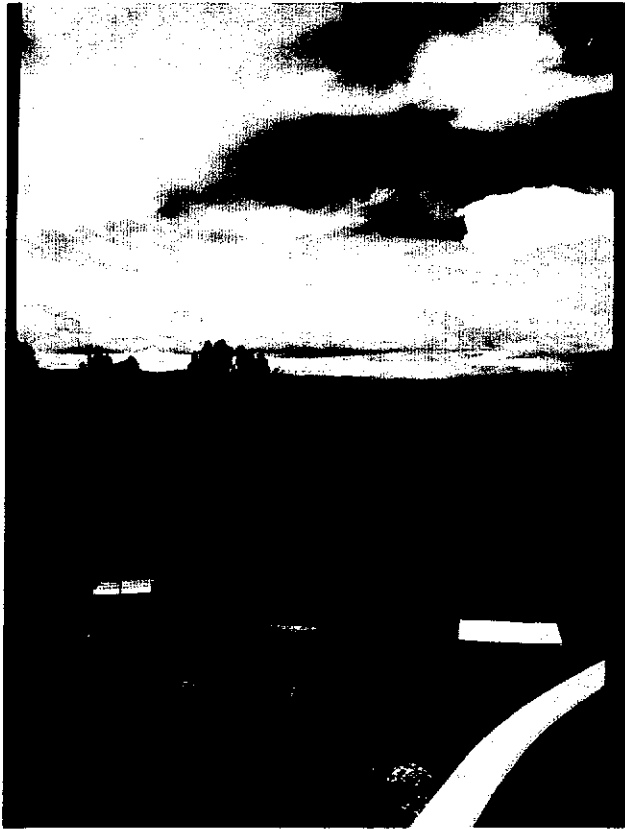


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FEB 08 2008

Sanjana Shelar  
2008 Winter Term Report  
Volunteering for Hostelling International Bolivia on La Isla del Sol



Winter Term 2008 has been an experience I will never forget. I am a freshman in Oberlin College, so this was my first Winter Term.

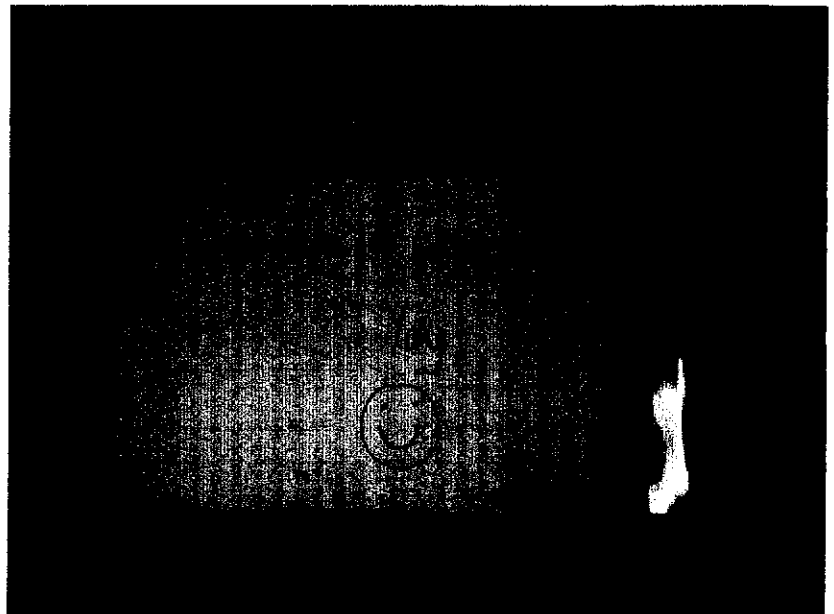
I went to live and work for a month in the most beautiful place on earth – the Island of the Sun on the Lake Titicaca in the highlands of Bolivia, with the help of a grant from the Winter Term Office. I volunteered there as an English teacher with an organization called Hostelling International Bolivia. This organization is the Bolivian chapter of the organization Hostelling International.

I spent four weeks on the island, living in the Hostelling Inka Pacha, and teaching adults from the community of Yumani basic English communication. I had a companion volunteer named Jan Rösinger, who was German. He was there also as part of Hostelling, to complete his mandatory military / social service. In fact, he is still there, continuing the work that we began together.

Our time on the island was beautiful. We spent the mornings reading, studying, or walking. Often, I spent them talking to and playing with

the children around the hostel, collecting pebbles on the lake shore, running around short-winded in the very thin high mountain air.

Afternoons after lunch were for planning the lessons, and then at three, I had a class with the children, which was set up because they asked me whether I could teach them as well (this was not part of the original plan). The lessons often involved games and songs that I had heard or learned while teaching English to children in India (modified to suit the Spanish, of course). I enjoyed these lessons, but they were often frustrating, because my students didn't want to sit still, or refused to learn. That was my cue to take them outside to play games that were at once practice for their English and movement for their sleepy limbs.



After that, at five (more often at five thirty – everything's always late in Bolivia), we had the lessons for the adults. Jan and I taught them together, and they usually went a lot faster than the kids' lessons.

Sometimes, however, when one of the adults did not understand a concept that we explained, we spent the entire lesson struggling with one idea. For example, after a long break from classes for a shopping trip to La Paz, one of our students couldn't quite grasp the concept of question and answer, as it applied to English. When we asked him a question, he would ask us the question back. It took us a long time to make him

understand that these two sentences one below the other are actually question and answer, and as you change the subject of the question, the answer will change correspondingly.

By the time I left, we had reached the modal verbs with the adults, and I had just completed time (What time is it? It is \_\_\_\_\_) with the children. Jan was going to continue with teaching the past tense after I had left.



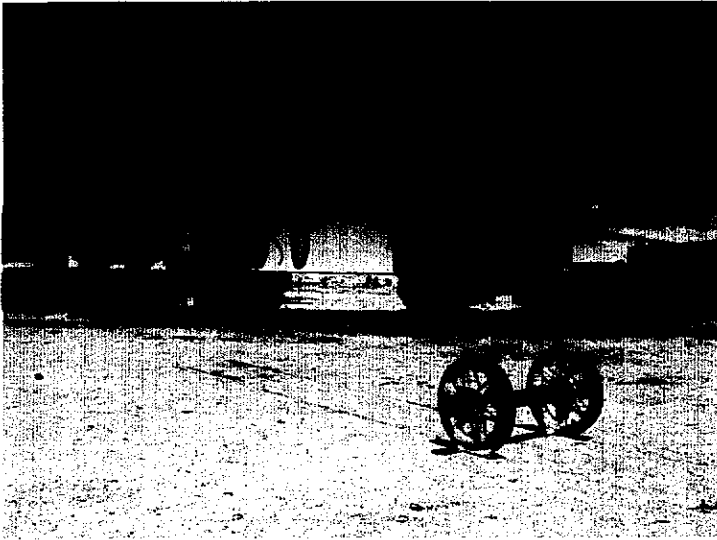
path, to the village of Yumani, where the hostel is located.

Living there, conserving every precious bit of water, washing all my clothes by hand at the well a mile away (and carrying all the wet clothes back), knowing that everything I ate was put on the table by bringing it by boat to the island from La Paz, really changed my habits. I wasn't wasteful before, but I learned to appreciate the things that I had taken for granted, simple things like electricity, running water, gas. Life on the island is more beautiful because it is so difficult. I wish to see that these people have proper water, electricity and gas service, but considering that it is an island, there is really not

My time on the island lives in my mind as a bright, clear time, in which every day shone like a polished jewel, washed clean by the torrential rain that poured all night and through the early morning, leaving the afternoons sun-filled and the earth green. We were all glad for the rain, because there is no running water on the island, so the only source of water is the rain and the Inca Fountain. The lake is sacred, so its water, though only about 30 percent salt water, cannot be used. From the Inca fountain, which is who knows how ancient, donkeys bring water up the steep mountain



much of a way to secure them. When the weather is particularly bad, all communication is cut off.



I was sad to leave. Who knows when I will visit it again? But one thing is certain - I will visit it, because I have made friends there for life.

Before going to La Isla, I also travelled around Bolivia for a week, and I visited some of the most strange, beautiful places I have ever seen, like the Salar de Uyuni, a vast salt desert, the graveyard of trains, and of course the incredible city of La Paz, the world's highest capital.

My time in Bolivia has been wonderful, an experience that has changed me forever. I will never forget it, not the places, or the people. I must keep going back.