

The Holy Week that Wasn't

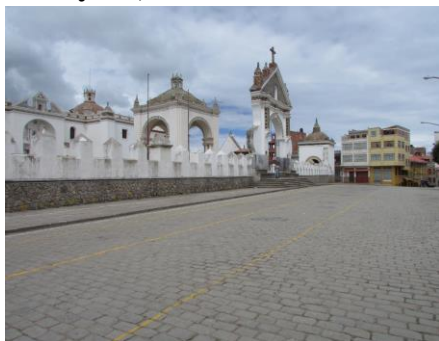
29.03.13

For more than half a millennium Copacabana has drawn thousands of South American, especially Bolivian, Catholic pilgrims during Holy Week. They come to worship at the world-famous Cathedral, to seek blessings and favors from the Virgin of Copacabana, and to climb Calvario – some on their knees – praying at the Stations of the Cross on the way up (more on this a bit later). Last year, our little village, population 8,000, hosted 40,000 pilgrims.



This year, no one came.

Above, Holy Week 2012; Below Holy Week 2013



Blockades strangled Copa on both main roads leading from here north to Puno, Perú, and south to La Paz.



Vendors, like our friend Teodora at left, who'd overstocked in anticipation of the usual mobs are glum or testy. For the past five days the municipality has mandated that all shops close in sympathy with the blockades. Though towards the end of the week, some vendors rebelled, either discreetly filling orders or inviting customers into their half-closed shops. Perishables, normally trucked in daily from La Paz, have been depleted; only rotting fruits and vegetables remain, sold by a handful of vendors who dare defy the obligatory strike. With virtually all restaurants and curb-side food vendors shuttered, the normally docile street dogs are hungry and aggressive. The hotels, hostels and most tourist sites are empty. The Cathedral is gated and locked, something we've never seen.





The blockades were imposed by the provincial government. Participation, including ours, is mandatory (those who don't attend will be fined 250 Bolivianos, about \$36, or roughly two weeks' average pay). On Wednesday, we and all the neighbors from our *zona* and the one next to ours were required to man two blockades on the La Paz road. Wednesday night about 1,000 protested at Copa's main plaza. On Thursday, two other *zonas* staged a mandatory protest higher up the mountain road to La Paz. The town arranged for 12 buses to carry them up and back again, 7 hours later.



Each *zona* has a flag. The colors of our *zona*, Munaypata, are yellow and green (above). TV crews came from La Paz.



There are two points to the blockades. We are protesting the rogue piracy of the boat pilots who ferry travelers across the Strait of Tiquina. (Because of the mountains and the lake, there are only two ways to get from La Paz to Copa: you can go north, and curve around the southern tip of Lake Titicaca, cross into Peru, then come south back into Bolivia, which takes 9 hours, or you can go more directly, crossing by boat at the Strait of Tiquina, which takes 3.5 hours.) During the Carnival festivities in the week before Lent and the first two weeks of Lent, the pilots bumped their rates up from 1.50 Bolivianos (about

22 cents) to 2 Bolivianos. That's standard practice during busy holidays. But the rates never came down, and that wasn't sanctioned by the government, which controls prices.

So the provincial government is punishing the pilots by blocking all those anticipated pilgrims and tourists from getting anywhere near Tiquina. About 90 to 95 percent of Copa's economy hinges on tourism.



Route "1" is the current La Paz-Copa road. Route "2" shows the 3 proposed bridges that would bypass Tiquina.

The second point of the blockades is that people who live and work on the Copa Peninsula have pleaded for years with the national government to build a bridge bypassing the Strait of Tiquina: it would be easier, faster, cheaper, and safer to cross, and those of us who frequently travel to and from La Paz would be forever free of the boat pilots' piracy. In addition to random rate hikes, they sometimes refuse to carry travelers across just to flex their power and control. And sometimes when they should refuse to cross, because of bad weather and high winds, they go anyway. Six months ago a barge carrying a big tourist bus flipped. The strait is so deep it was first fathomed only six years ago. The bus and its cargo – only luggage, because people must cross on the small boats as a caution against this risk – cannot be retrieved.



There are undeniable ironies. Copa's self-imposed strike hurts Copa, its vendors, and its precious tourist industry, though in the long run, clearly it's meant to help. After driving from La Paz, the news crews needed to buy gas for their vans. But Copa's only gas station was both closed for the strike, and out of gas; the delivery tanker couldn't get through the blockades.

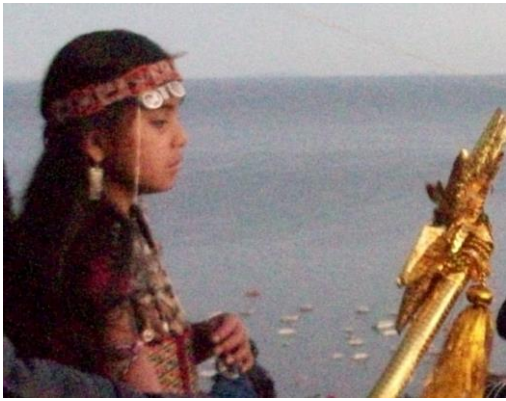
Upper center: Our zona president being interviewed by one of the many news crews in town.

Copacabana, Mecca for Pilgrims



Roughly 2000 years ago, after the fall and disappearance of the Tiwanaku culture, the Kollas (Aymará) rose to power in the Titicaca region. They worshipped the sun and the moon (considered to be husband and wife), the earth mother Pachamama; they hailed the mountains as *apus*, or protectors. Among the idols erected on the shores of the Manco Capac peninsula was Kota Kahuaña, or Copacahuana ('lake view' in Aymará), an image with a human head and a fish's body.

Once the Incans subsumed the Aymará, Emperor Tupac Yupanqui founded the settlement of Copacabana as a wayside rest site for pilgrims visiting the *huaca* (shrine) known as Titi Khar'ka (Rock of the Puma), a former site of human sacrifice at the northern end of Isla del Sol.



Before Spanish priests arrived in the mid 16th century, the Incas had divided local inhabitants into two distinct groups. The Haransaya were faithful to the empire and assigned positions of power. The Hurinsaya resisted and were relegated to manual labor. The separation went entirely against the community-oriented Aymará culture. They attributed the floods and crop failures that befell them in the 1570s to this social aberration.

The Aymará soon rejected the Inca religion and partially adopted Christianity, newly arrived with the Spanish Conquistadors, melding it in with their traditional beliefs. Locals elected La Santísima Virgen de Candelaria as their patron saint, and established a congregation in her honor. Noting the lack of an image for the altar, Francisco Tito Yupanqui, grandson of the last Inca emperor, fashioned an image of clay. Alas, his rude effort was deemed unsuitable to represent the village's patron, and was removed.

Humiliated but not defeated, Francisco journeyed to Potosí to study arts. In 1582 he began carving a wooden image. He finished it eight months later. In 1583 *La Virgen Morena del Lago* (the Dark Virgin of the Lake) was installed on the adobe altar at Copacabana. Soon thereafter the miracles began. There were reportedly innumerable early healings in Copacabana, which quickly became a pilgrimage site, and remains so today.

In 1605 the Augustinian priesthood advised the community to construct a cathedral commensurate with



the power of the image. The altar was completed in 1614, but work on the building continued for 200 years. The Moorish-style cathedral was finally consecrated in 1805, and construction was completed in 1820. In 1925 Francisco Tito Yupanqui's image was canonized by the Vatican. Today, a replica of the statue, decked in red velvet strewn with pearls, gold beads and gem stones, is displayed to the right and forward of the Cathedral's altar. The original is tucked away in a secret storage space high above the altar. The chancel soars 80 feet above the stone floor, and is said to be made of more than 12 tons of Incan silver and gold.



Nowadays, during Holy Week, thousands of pilgrims travel to Copacabana to pray to the Virgin seeking favors or giving thanks for prayers answered. Honoring family traditions more than 20 generations old, thousands of people come from all over South America, especially La Paz (about 75 miles away), by bicycle or on foot to pay tribute to the Dark Virgin of the Lake.

Last year we didn't yet know of this tradition. By mid-afternoon on Holy Thursday of 2012, thousands of travelers packed the La Paz terminal from which buses and minibuses leave for Copa. We were among the few who scored seats, and were on our way by 6 p.m. But because of all the people driving, walking and cycling along the two-lane road to Copa, the trip that normally takes 3.5 hours ended at 2 a.m. Holy Friday.

During Holy Week in Copa, many pilgrims climb Calvario, a peak rising over the Copa harbor, saying the Stations of the Cross along the way.

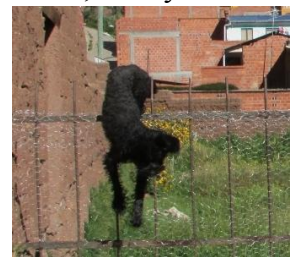


Many drag their children's strollers, trikes and bicycles along with them to have them blessed – for a fee – by priests waiting at the top. Some carry stones with them as a self-imposed penance for sins from which they seek absolution. A really bad sin calls for a big, heavy boulder, which must be carried all the way to the top. (Parts excerpted from *Bolivia*, Lonely Planet)

Wawi's Protest



While Jeff and I dutifully spent five hours Wednesday at the La Paz road blockade, our dog, Wawita (Aymará for "little baby girl"), was home alone, lonely and unhappy. She made sure we understood: she TP'd our living room rug (note to our South American readers: it was unused TP)!



She's a gregarious, adventuresome puppy, gifted with monkeylike abilities to climb a six-foot wall to visit the sheep in the field next door. Here's a 40-second video of one of her recent adventures. <http://youtu.be/4BqMVi2W-4g>

Easter Blessings to you all.

Please pray that the blockade ends this weekend.
With love, Deb and Jeff