Bolivia
Land of Belief

Street brothers

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On the western side of central South America sits the former Incan Empire country of Bolivia. Bordered by Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile and Peru, Bolivia is a democratic republic with a population estimated at a little over nine million.

The people of this region hold the belief that when photographed, a piece of their soul or spirit is taken away. If approached suddenly or unannounced, they will cover their faces and pull their children towards them for protection. It is important to take the time to get to know them a little before intruding on their world. Approaching strangers in a foreign land is a difficult act, even for the bravest of photographers. The day one becomes comfortable sticking a lens into someone's face may be the day that some of the compassion for the subject has been lost. Patience is the biggest virtue.

Local woman and child

Upon arriving in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, automatic gunfire was heard outside of the hotel. Locals were gathered in protest on Calle Colon. The continuation of a geographic struggle between the poor, mainly indigenous people of the highlands and the wealthier people of mostly Spanish descent who occupy the lowlands was witnessed. The struggle extends all the way back to the 16-year civil war that began with the declaration of independence from Spain in 1809 and ended with the formation of the republic in 1825. It was apparent that the struggle continues to this day. Shots were fired into the air with no intent to cause loss of life. Rather, the purpose was to draw attention to their cause…and it had the desired effect. The danger of being hit by a stray round falling to earth is very real in this country of unrest. It was not until the following morning when the weekend crowds had dispersed that it was safe to wander the streets, especially with a camera.

Research reveals the best time of year to visit Bolivia is April or May. At this time of year the weather can be bright and sunny, mainly dry with temperatures between 55 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit, but torrential downpours on most afternoons may be expected.

As mentioned, it is important when dealing with people of another culture to be patient. Spend one or two days walking amongst them with a camera over a shoulder without taking photographs. This photographer did not begin taking images until the third day. Spanish is the main language spoken in this part of the world, but it is possible to hire an English speaking cab driver, who will act as a guide for twelve hours or more a day for about thirty dollars. Using a local cab driver/interpreter makes approaching local folks much easier and will be seen as a lot less threatening.

At first glance Santa Cruz appeared like any other South American town. There were food stores, coffee shops on corners and clothing stores containing items most local folk could not afford to buy. However, a walk down any one of the many side streets a block or two from the central square revealed a different side. Here, there were plenty of indications of an area in poverty. The shops turn into local stalls. The buildings were in need of refurbishment and a good coat of paint. The people conduct most of their lives out on the streets and sidewalks, such as sleeping, making craft items, feeding their young children and begging for money and food. Bolivia's government discourages begging and asks that foreign visitors do not give the beggars money. It is, however, acceptable to buy them local food, such as empanadas, a pastry stuffed with chicken or beef and give these as a gift. There are a lot of young and single parents with hungry children. They are always grateful for food and their babies are without exception the first to be fed.

Traditional dress

Street man

When exploring Bolivia or any other foreign country it is be wise to take basic precautions to protect one's life and precious equipment. On arrival, scout out the town or village first and as the comfort level increases, slowly extend horizons beyond the main towns and search areas within a short drive of about a fifty-mile radius and extend the range outwards as one becomes more familiar with the country. The local tourist office in Santa Cruz does not recommend venturing into the remote mountain areas or thick forests in Bolivia

Young family

John Hughes

without a professional guide. This is good advice to follow.

It was on one of these short, out-of-town excursions that this photographer came across a group of young boys beneath a single lane road-rail bridge. Cars and trucks waited in one direction while a train passed over, then the traffic would cross straddling the rails on raised planks of wood. The direction of train and traffic reversed causing long lines of waiting vehicles and pedestrians at both ends. Makeshift roadside market shacks lined the area on both sides plying their goods to the temporarily captive customers. The boys, who for the most part did not have parents and lived in crude tented shelters at night, were fishing at the base of one of the concrete support legs of the bridge where it met the river's edge. It was unclear whether they cook the catch or eat it raw. These young boys, probably between three and eight years old had serious looks on their faces until shown their images on the camera monitor. This simple gesture brought out smiles and laughter and helped to overcome the language barrier.

Looking at these images carefully it is possible to notice markings on many of the children and realize they are crude tattoos. These became apparent after returning to the United States when the 12 bit NEF RAW files were scrutinized closely. One very young boy seemed to have a dirty mark on his nose. After zooming in, it became clear the mark was a tattoo of a spider web. The question remains as to why the children would mark each other in this way, especially at three years of age.

Working with lightweight equipment, one camera and one or two lenses is highly recommended. Bolivia is warm and humid most of the time and you may get caught out in one of those afternoon rainstorms as this photographer did, dropping his camera into some red mud while running backwards to capture a fast moving image. Luckily, even though the Nikon D200 and 17-55mm F2.8G zoom lens are not weather sealed, they continued to work flawlessly for another two rain soaked hours until the day's shooting was completed, and they still work to this day. The sunlight during midday is fairly harsh and camera technique is important to attain the best results. Using aperture priority to control depth of field will allow control as to how the background affects the final image. Shooting at wide open or down one stop only… two at the most… should give the right results, however be very particular on focus. The focus point should be on the subject's eyes. It

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Musician

would be wise not to photograph in direct sunlight and seek the shaded side of the street. One of the things to remember when documenting the lives of people is the final image should be natural and unmanipulated. It should be as true-to-life as possible.

Bolivians have a traditional culture and live a natural, simple, slow-paced life. A lot of the people live their lives outdoors. Most people in Bolivia can be approached with a friendly smile or greeting. Sometimes a silly joke will get a reaction. Laughter and sorrow are emotions that are common everywhere in the world. Make eye contact and treat people with respect and most folks will be very accommodating about having their picture taken. It was a privilege to meet the Bolivian people who with each click permitted this photographer to take away a little of their spirit. What an honor!

On a final note, it is very important with an unfamiliar place to do your homework. Research the areas you plan on traveling to, and be respectful of local laws and customs. Be prepared to work hard and long and expect unfruitful days. Take pictures and more pictures. In Bolivia, arise early and go to bed late to catch the best light and try to become accustomed to rejections…especially from the wonderful people of Bolivia.

Distortion of Reality Statement

The content of these photographic images is a true representation of the subject matter. No part of these images have been moved, altered, cloned, added or deleted. They have not been manipulated beyond resizing, cropping or restoration of density, saturation, contrast and color. © John Andrew Hughes 2009

Homeless woman

The card game

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