

Youth served on Isla del Sol (*Lago Titicaca, Bolivia*)

Marking a 40th anniversary return to the Gringo trail:



At mid-morning we caught the boat from Copacabana to Isla Del Sol for the day trip booked yesterday upon arrival at our lakefront hotel. The island figures prominently in Inca lore— apparently believed to be the birthplace of the mythic Manco Capac, the son of the Inca sun-god. On the trip over to the island, I sat on the topside of the diesel-powered boat for a better view while C. elected to sit inside the covered deck. As the sun sparkled on the dark blue water, the three young gringos crouched across from me began applying sunscreen.

I winced in the danger of high-altitude ultraviolet rays on an old nose that had already hosted rogue basal cells. Yet I had foolishly clambered onto an unshaded upper deck as if to demonstrate that I was still spry! I pulled down the peak of my cap. At least the passage to the island was only an hour and a half after which I could get the sunscreen from C. down below. She was not one to take chances or to be unprepared...

In that consolation, my thoughts turned to the fact that it was 40 years ago that I had first beheld the sparkling waters of Titicaca. That view was from the bus window during a long day over an unpaved road from La Paz to Puno. Unfortunately, that day in March, '76 was to be most vividly remembered for having had to run back and squat in a maize field at every stop. Through the feverish night in Puno that followed, the stomach problems were to be complicated by 'soroche' [mountain sickness].

I glanced over again at three young travelers. The young man was taking a video, panning his cell phone across the lake in wide swoops. Back in the old days, not even boorish backpackers carried cameras. To pull one out was to be potentially reviled by locals as a gringo spy and scorned by other backpackers as a 'tourist.'

Meanwhile, one of the young women was digging in her day pack. The orange letters on the side formed the logo of 'Patagonia'— the highest of high-end gear... I also noted that all three were wearing newish hiking boots (Proletarian North Face or designer Scarpa?). I remembered that my 'haversack' at the time was one of musty brown canvas picked up at an army surplus store. The footwear at the time escapes the memory— but it could well also have been army surplus...

Of course, back then there were no guidebooks. *Lonely Planet* was in its infancy— only known for '*Europe on \$5 a Day*'. Along with a copy of *the Odyssey*, I carried only a mini-sized translation dictionary and a map of the continent torn from a Spanish grammar textbook. For accommodation, I usually relied on the recommendations of locals chatted up on long-distance buses. Today with GPS maps, digital recording and Internet pre-booking: what is left for the spontaneous joy of discovery?

In the midst of this reflection, the young woman fiddling in her Patagonia backpack pulled out a copy of '*Rough Guide*'— the same guidebook that C. and I were carrying— a touch of appropriate irony...



Our boat docked at the hamlet of Cha'llapampa, on the north side of the Isla Del Sol among a few other tourist-bearing craft. Along with the dozen other passengers, C. and I followed up the hill the young Bolivian in jean jacket who was acting as our guide. On the way, he pointed out the snacks' kiosk and drop toilets, adjacent to an interpretive center. Meeting the group a few minutes later in the austere interior, the guide recited the Inca legend of the birth of the sun, to which many of us nodded having already read the details in our guidebooks. He pointed out the door to the path that led to *Piedra Sagrada*, 2 kms, to the north, the very site where Manco Capac was believed to have emerged in earthly form. Then in halting English, the young Bolivian informed that in a half hour the boat would be leaving for Yumani, the tiny village on the south side of the island. Those not staying overnight on the island (like C. and I) had the option of walking to Yumani along a trail across the center of the island—a 3 ½ hour trek. In Yumani, we could rendezvous with the boat which would be departing for the mainland at 4:00 PM. Looking out the doorway at the rock marked trail snaking over the hill towards the *Piedra Sagrada* with knots of hikers meandering along it, the choice was obvious.

Around noon, C. and I set out across the marked trail known as the *Sagrada de la eternidad del sol* or *Willka Thaki* in the local Aymara language. Both names were used in the rustic signposts we followed in the first leg which hugged to the coast. With the stark brown terrain and dull green cacti set against the intense blue of Titicaca a hundred metres below us, C. and I picked our way along. As with other travelers, we stopped at a number of designated viewpoints to take photos. In the meantime, the altitude of more than 3,800 meters made for a strange combination of blazing sun and chill breeze.

As most other hikers seemed to be passing us, C. began to fret about making the boat departure time. Yet halfway across, when we were about to pass to a young couple taking photos from a viewpoint, she was reassured. She recognized the pair as fellow passengers on the boat over to the island. Moments later, we were walking among in a tiny group, chatting amicably with a French-Canadian girl and her French boyfriend, as well as with a Pakistani-British pharmacist from London whom we came up beside.

The conversation among fellow travelers was friendly and predictable: “*where have you been so far in Bolivia?*” “*Where are you going next?*” “*What have enjoyed most?*” “*What—if anything— was most disappointing?*”

Listening (C. did most of the talking), I had to acknowledge that this typical tourist chatter did serve as a useful exchange or of information. It also occurred that by eschewing such interactions in my earlier travel days, I surely missed out on helpful tips.

In my journey along the Gringo trail 4 decades ago, I sometimes pretended not to comprehend English. My excuse of shunning fellow gringos was ostensibly to avoid breaking the immersion in Spanish. The more pointed shunning was of reminders that my travel experiences were hardly as unique as imagined...

Yet there were a few notable exceptions of conversations in English. Coming particularly to mind was an encounter in a hotel restaurant in Quito with a white bearded man in a beret. From the table across, he saw me reading *The Odyssey*:

"Ah, the Rouse translation," said the old fellow. "I'm very familiar with it!"

He then introduced himself as a Professor *Emeritus* of English from Chicago. He went on to talk about the decay of America which he blamed on moral decline hastened by “hippies and unassimilable minorities.”

A few snippets of his talk struck me as interesting enough to later record in my journal. Still, having quickly judged him as a right-wing fossil, through much of his diatribe I was hardly paying attention. As a would-be Ulysses in the midst of a personal epic— I needed no wisdom of a wizened Laertes— even if he were a retired English Professor...

Back in the present, I startled myself by suddenly proclaiming:

“You know this trip is something of an anniversary tour for me. My first trip through Bolivia was exactly 40 year ago...”

Expecting the comment to be ignored, I was surprised when the young Frenchman asked:

"How was it different here 40 years ago?"

I took a diving breath and tried to give a 15-second summary:

"South America was a very different world than it is today. Almost every country on the continent had a military dictatorship. Peasants were suspicious of foreigners and locals rarely knew English. Even on the gringo trail, tourism was in its infancy.”

The young man turned to his girlfriend, and asked in French, for the camera. So, he’d heard nothing! Of what interest, anyway, is anything coming out of the mouth of a human fossil?

Still, I resolved not to oversensitive: let youth be served! At least the young Frenchman and his girlfriend have chosen to backpack in Bolivia rather than taking a Disney Cruise. Even with their guidebooks, their GPS and Internet they can still be counted among those seeking out brushes with *otherness*...

“Careful, it’s slippery!”

So it was, that in grasping C.’s hand on the winding stone steps towards Yumani and our boat rendezvous— I was fully resigned to the fact that the torch had been long passed...



-2015 Mar. 3