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From the infamous 'camino de la muerte' to the humble community of San Miguel in the Amazon jungle, natural wealth of Bolivia abounds. Still, these riches extend well beyond the country's natural resources and aesthetic charm. In Bolivia, I learned much about the beauty of optimism and thriftiness from those that I met in the capital city of La Paz to the residents of San Miguel; particularly from Constantino Nay, general manager of the San Miguel del Bala Eco-lodge.

CONTINUED ►

San Miguel, La Paz,  
Bolivia



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# TODO ES POSIBLE, NADA ES SEGURO: THE SAN MIGUEL DEL BALA ECO-LODGE

I encountered a beautiful chaos throughout my twelve-week experience in Bolivia—a feeling that began even before stepping foot in the Andean city of La Paz. My first flight to Bolivia was canceled last-minute and due to my subsequently late arrival, I was in the La Paz airport at 6am searching for my non-present host family, who had left thinking I had not shown up. I eventually found their apartment, and just four hours after arriving was enrolled in a local Spanish class.

One week later, I was off to the community of San Miguel, riding a monstrous bus on the incredibly narrow 'camino de la muerte.' Translated to 'the road of death', passengers rapidly descend down two steep miles of altitude, viewing the most magnificent jungle scenery and braving the most dangerous cliff-side roads on earth. I had been reassured by the residents of La Paz that the one-lane dirt road with two directions of traffic had been paved into a two-lane road, just three years earlier and was not very dangerous. It turns out that after descending from the highest mountains, the two-lane paved road disappears. It becomes a two-way, one-lane dirt path with no guard rails passing along 500-foot cliff shears. Here, I began to see Bolivian passengers grab hold of the seats in front of them and overhead compartments for safety. And yes, every now and then we encountered a vehicle going in the opposite direction.

Sparing most of the details from the frightening bus ride, I made it safely to Rurrenabaque, the riverside town housing the ecotourism offices for the San Miguel del Bala Eco-lodge. Opened in 2005, the lodge is entirely owned and operated by the Tacana indigenous Indian community of San Miguel. Profits earned through this project go

directly back into the community to support the lodge's mission: improve the standard of living, preserve the environment, revalorize the Tacana culture, and generate revenues and manage natural resources in a sustainable way.

I was welcomed in Rurrenabaque by the amiable Constantino Nay, who



would become a great friend of mine among the San Migueños. We immediately set out to improve the environmental sustainability, services,

and marketability of the eco-lodge, goals stemming from projects we had developed since the previous November. These ranged from installing solar panels to translating for tourists on jungle tours.

While undertaking these projects, I frequently came across the phrase, 'Todo es posible. Nada es seguro.' or 'Anything is possible. Nothing is certain', which, upon reflection, perfectly embodied my experience. Many of those whom I worked with though, tended to emphasize the 'nothing is certain' half of this phrase, seeming to imply that they should not be held accountable for anything that went wrong on their watch.

More often than not, this philosophy slowed our progress while adding frustrations to the previously mentioned 'beautiful chaos'. For example, the electrician whom

we had contracted back in January to install the solar panels in July was unable to fulfill the job due to an unexpectedly prolonged project outside of Uyuni, Bolivia. As his work at the time was in the deserted salt flats of Uyuni, it had been nearly impossible to

contact him. After almost every form of communication proved ineffective, I tried our last resort of radio. Standing on the roof of a building in Rurrenabaque for better reception, I radioed across the country and finally established contact with our electrician. At that moment, just two weeks before I had to leave the country, I found out he was no longer able to help.

Fortunately, Constantino had already contacted another electrician in the event that our initial plans fell through. Consistently, it was this forward thinking and accountability of Constantino that proved that although 'nothing is certain', it is still true that 'anything is possible'. Before I left Bolivia, all of our initial goals, and more, had come to fruition.

Through my experiences and research in San Miguel, I learned that the ingenuity of Constantino and his brothers led to the creation of the eco-lodge. The idea for the eco-lodge stemmed from the creation of the neighboring Madidi National Park, which prohibited access to many



natural resources for San Miguel. This issued a potentially devastating blow to the traditional lifestyle of the San

Migueños that was so rooted in the riches of the surrounding jungle. Constantino and his two brothers developed the eco-lodge concept as an alternative way to sustain the San Miguel community. They spearheaded project proposals that were awarded impressive sums of start-up capital. Their creativity is what has made the eco-lodge a successful endeavor. After having spent so much of my time in San Miguel with Constantino, I can say with confidence that he is one of those special people who inspires by simply living his daily life. As he showed me every day, though life may throw us on unexpected paths of mind-stretching chaos, even still, 'todo es posible'.

