

ESCAPIEM

# Keeping abreast

Illustration: JUDY GREEN

When is a chicken breast not a chicken breast? When it's a Bolivian one (or two). **Kate Armstrong** minds her language in Sucre.

I didn't intend to invite a Bolivian to my boudoir. Nor did I mean to tell him I am pregnant. In two consecutive breaths I've done both. Fortunately for me, such exchanges are common – and neither is taken seriously. As a student studying Spanish in Sucre, Bolivia, my faux pas are received with understanding and good humor.

On my first morning of lessons I am like an excited five-year-old going off to school. With new exercise books, vocabulary notepad and sharpened pencil in my satchel, I enter the courtyard of Sucre's Bolivian-German Cultural Institute (known in Spanish as Instituto Cultural Boliviano-Alemano, or ICBA). I slowly circle the 18th-century Spanish-style colonial building – the only formal school in Sucre offering Spanish courses to foreigners – and wait for my teacher, Jorge, to arrive.

My Spanish is limited to the few words in common with my rusty Italian. After initial introductions with Jorge I make my first error. I try to show off. Too eagerly I suggest that we go to the classroom. "Vamos a cama," I say, adapting the Italian *camera* for "room". I have just invited Jorge to my bed. To Jorge's credit, he keeps a straight face. He politely corrects me. "I am embarazada," I stutter, trying to express my embarrassment. I have inadvertently declared I am pregnant, not red-faced.

The rest of the lesson is more encouraging. I studiously listen and copy down words and phrases. "Charla!" – chat! – becomes the catch cry. Over several days we chalk up pages of words and repeated phrases until I feel confident to mutter words, rather than point and smile. Little by little patterns emerge in verbs, sentence construction and grammar.

Patterns of emotions, too, shape the learning experience. One minute I am satisfied, the next frustrated; rewarded then humiliated; up then down. I feel like a baby trying to ask for a bottle, knowing s/he is hungry, but crying because s/he cannot find the right syllables to express it.

ICBA is well equipped by Bolivian standards. It has excellent classroom and technological facilities to teach languages, as well as rooms to exhibit local artwork and hold dance classes. Set up more than 10 years ago by its German owner, Gerd



Mielke, it provides extra German tuition to Bolivian students, as well as Spanish to travellers. (Many Germans moved to Bolivia before and after the war; German, followed by English, is the most popular language in high schools and universities.)

Keen to throw myself into the learning process, I choose to take private lessons. My teachers and I are equally zealous to learn about each other's cultures. Each day we discuss music – from INXS to classical tunes. We also talk food – pavelva to api, a locally made corn-based drink – and sport of any kind. Renditions of football songs are a favorite especially with 30-year-old Jorge, the only male teacher and a devout soccer fan. (Translating *Up There Cazaly* is a challenge.)

Meanwhile, the female tutors, all in their mid-30s, impart social statistics, such as numbers of women in the workplace (high), the average age of marriage (low) and the divorce rate (not measurable, due to those who do not formally divorce because of its social stigma).

In Sucre's population of 132,000 there are few official guides but numerous unofficial ones. Young boys wait at the cemetery gates, eager to show visitors around the unusually green yet shabby manicured graveyard. "Choose me! Choose me!" they cry to the

approaching visitors. They are the lucky ones to have rote-learned the history of the more famous mausoleums. I am so entertained by their deliveries – like amateur actors in a school play – that I do not fully absorb their rapid historical discourse. Subsequently, later in my conversation class I cannot recall the high-profile names of those who lie in the elaborate tombs.

For the most part, I discover the

Bolivia is not well known. Even less known is the 20th-century tin baron, Francisco Arcandona, in whose honor was built the town's miniature Eiffel Tower. This four-metre chunk of steel is plonked in the middle of the shabby Parque Bolívar. Arcandona created much of the city's later-day (but now very worn) splendor. Churches and cathedrals on every block serve Bolivia's faithful – those who follow an eclectic mix of

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city's background on my own and with the help of the well-thumbed Lonely Planet guide book. Founded in 1538 as the city of La Plata, Sucre got its present name in 1825 in honor of the first president of the new republic. It is also known as La Ciudad Blanca, the White City, because of its whitewashed streets and colonial buildings. Sucre's status over La Paz as the official capital of

traditional Inca beliefs and Roman Catholicism.

Vaya tranquilo – go slowly – is an expression I learn quickly. My bustling gait and furrowed brow invite many vaya tranquilos from those unaccustomed to an impatient gringa. And "go slowly" I learn to do, be it waiting for an appointment that is an hour behind schedule, meeting a friend, or standing in a queue.

My lessons include visits to the local tourist sites: the fossilised dinosaur steps found on the side of a mountain in a cement yard; La Recoleta, the Franciscan monastery offering a superb view of Sucre; and Castillo de la Glorietta, an extremely run-down former family mansion.

At the end of each day I retire to my lodgings at the institute. It is a large wood-panelled paradise, complete with a beautifully carved wooden bedhead, an antique oak chest of drawers and original built-in cupboards. In a separate bathroom I enjoy soaking in an old, deep enamel bath tub. In many parts of South America, hot water is heated by electric wires running – completely exposed – from a switch on the wall to the shower nozzle. This switch increases your chances of both lukewarm water and an electric shock. Luckily for me, Pachamama, the Incan Earth Mother, ensures I am well-grounded.

One day, to prepare an "Australian" recipe for some Bolivian friends, I walk purposely to the poultry section of the local market to buy some chicken meat. Chickens – both plucked and unplucked – lay in lines on the counters the entire length of the market. The female Indian chicken sellers are lined up also, their plump petticoated bodies sporting identical blue aprons. They wear obligatory matching blue knitted beanies, presumably in a fruitless effort to keep their long thick black plaits out of the way. "Eight breasts of chicken, please," I ask in my best Spanish.

The chicken seller furrows her brow. Chickens are sold whole. It is a big request to cut out the breasts. Nevertheless, at the prospect of a good sale, she calls on the other chicken sellers to help her carve up the birds. Meanwhile, I leave the huddle of blue aprons and go in search of some other ingredients. Ten minutes later I return to collect my order. Chicken remains – necks, legs, innards and claws – cover the bench; some lie on the floor. On the scales are a pile of very plump and extremely large free range breasts – clearly many kilograms' worth.

I panic. "There's 16 breasts in there! I asked for eight!" I stammer. "But there are eight!" my chicken seller responds with a wide smile. I am confused, silently counting on my fingers to ensure that I've told her the correct number. She tries to explain, her hand patting the front of a chicken. She indicates – in no uncertain terms – that the two halves at the front are one breast, which, she adds, is just what I've asked for.

I argue and cajole, confident that a single breast is, well, a single breast. I feel ashamed but I'm determined to persevere with the communication challenge. What will I do with all that chicken meat? And how will they sell the damaged chicken remains? The other chicken sellers gather around, bemused by the unprecedented event.

Finally in desperation I point to my chicken seller's chest. "How many breasts do you have? One or two?" I ask. "She's got a point there," laughs one of the poultry women. ("Or two!" I think to myself in English.) We guffaw simultaneously. A collection of blue heads bob up and down.

Relieved that we can all see both sides (so to speak), I pay for my goods and farewell a happy chicken seller.