

On Jul 20, 2017, at 7:23 PM, Blanca Surgeon <blancasurgeon@gmail.com> wrote:

Samaipata Bolivia

I went to Samaipata Bolivia on a Water Engineers For The Americas (WEFTA) trip. I am on the board of this helpful non profit in Santa Fe. We build water systems in mostly remote villages in Latin America. The water cooperative invited WEFTAs help with water and sewer improvements plus institutional development.

I travelled with two volunteer engineers. None of us knew each other. Lam and I met on the plane in Miami. We both met Jason when we arrived at the Santa Cruz Bolivia airport. Jason is from Indiana but has been living in Bolivia for several years. He speaks Spanish fluently. He lives in Cochabamba Bolivia.

Clearing immigration in Bolivia takes time. You have to get a visa which cost \$160 but it is good for ten years. There is much beauty in the country that it may take a few trips to see it. And for us a few trips to help.

A driver sent by the water coop came for us. We traveled over 3 hours from the airport to Samaipata. It is a beautiful drive. We had to stop for water and snacks. Our driver was really nice and talkative. Jason and I both translated for Lam whose Spanish is "un poquito" The conversation would start in Spanish, would move to English among us and sometimes it would be in both languages. Lam would say words in Spanish too. At some point during the drive, Jason made us laugh. He said, "Blanca asked, what did he say? and Lam translated for her." Needless to say we were a team right away.

Melissa our wonderful host in Samaipata was waiting for us at the hostel- a beautiful place-very inviting with many places to seat and relax, a house cat named Narciso, no internet, and people from all over the world to talk to. Melissa took us around the town plaza and showed us places to eat. She let us have the afternoon to ourselves. It was a beautiful sunny winter day. We were starving for food, a shower, and a bed. I had left home at 5 am Friday and it was now 2 pm Saturday. We ate a wonderful meal in town. I loved all the gorgeous happy dogs everywhere. All very educated only approached if we offered love. We returned to the hostel at about 4:30 pm

I was so happy to get in the shower and bathe from head to toes. I put my pajamas on and went outside to read under the sun. I had slept on planes so the shower renewed me. The guys came out about 7 pm. We started looking at maps of the water system. They have three different springs where they get their drinking water from. Lam had topo maps plus google earth maps on his computer. People would stop by to see what we were doing. After about an hour the guys said they wanted to go to dinner. I was ready for bed but Lam said, "come on Blanca it is the only Saturday we are going to be in Samaipata. Let's go." I said you are right. Let me go put my shoes and a jacket on and off we went. I loved it. People were out with their families. There was music and conversations all over. Not for a moment we felt unsafe. What a great little town. During dinner the restaurant cat, Stevie, came to seat with us. I miss Messi my cat so I got very close to Stevie.

Our big adventure was that we tried a Fernet Cola -Taste like oregano mint a whole bunch of herbs and licorice horrible! Yakkk. We were back a bit after 10 pm. Hoy si ya necesitaba una cama!

Sunday - Day on our own.

We chose to go to Parque Amboro to the Yunga o bosque nublado. It is an amazing place where the Andes and the amazon meet in Bolivia.

The plan was that I would join the guys for breakfast at 8 then we would go to the farmers market, which only happens on Sunday, then at 10:30 we were to start a guided tour to Amboro National Park. Well... I woke up at 8:58 am! I slept almost 10 hours. Frantic I got dressed and went to look for the guys. They had left so I went to the market by myself and totally enjoyed buying flowers local food, fruits, coffee and bread. I saw a new vegetable for the first time in my life, Achoche which you can grill stuff or add to salads. And I tried foods made with yuca. I bought choclo- a corn, fish and more yuca.

I came back to the hostel to meet the guys as it started raining- a light rain so we took rain jackets and left for our hike. There was six of us in the tour. It rained the entire 6 hours we were hiking not pouring rain but steady enough that by the time we were walking back the trail was a little river and we were dripping water just like everything in the forest was. It is winter in Bolivia but the park area has an amazon rain forest feel to it, so it did not bother us that it was raining. We had our warm jackets plus rain jacket on except for Lam who had to purchase a plastic poncho so small for him that it shredded upon putting on. The hike was up and down the mountains filled with giant ferns which are about 200-400 years old. It felt as we were in our own movie, water flowing downstream over rocks to the amazon and water falling from the sky and the trees and from us. The trail was slippery. We were soaking wet from toes to head and muddy as you care to imagine. We ate our late lunch under the rain. It was all fun! As long as I am not cold I am happy. There was one guy who was miserable. He was walking with an umbrella which kept him dry till it got tangled with a giant fern and he felt. He got more irritated and started yelling, in a language other than English or Spanish, either to the fern the umbrella the rain or his wife. Who knows. We had noticed his unhappiness all along. During lunch, his wife served him a sandwich which he ate with gusto. He perked up. He went to make another sandwich for himself- food was good but he cut his finger cutting the bread for his sandwich so he went back to being unhappy. Lam offered him a band aid. People offered him cut foods. He then became friendly. Lam made him talk for awhile.

After six hours we were ready to be done. We finally came out of the forest. We found our driver waiting for us on foot. The bus could not make it to the top--too much mud so we had to walk down to it. The driver said it would be about one kilometer. So we kept going. What's a bit more mud? After walking about 3 kilometers and no bus the guy with the umbrella got irritated again. You lied he yelled to the driver. This is more than one kilometer!!!

I loved walking on the road because one of the dogs walked with me. Don't encourage him, the guy with the umbrella told me, "who knows where the bus is and he has to come back" but the dog was happy to keep coming. I tried to send him back. But he even went ahead of us as if he knew where the bus was.

Well he knew where the school was. He must walk the kids to school because he was happy to roam the area. And we were happy to see our bus.

Once we were finally on the bus, the guy with the umbrella started talking. He added that he had asked how hard was the hike and the lady who sold him the tour said medium. Lies! Then nobody told him it was going to rain the whole time. Once he saw the weather he had paid; he hated the tour. "I should not have had to pay for this. They should pay me for this" he said. When we got back to town he left quickly. No good byes and no accepting any of the hot tea that was ready for us.

I loved it. I was careful. I was thankful to God and Geri my massage therapist. She fixed me up before I left so well that I could take this hike without any back pain. My back felt great. My legs and knees too. I will never forget this hike walking in the beautiful thick forest on a rainy misty day. What makes this place beautiful and rare is that it is between the amazon and the Andes. The plants are from both climates and there is such variety. Very unique.

The only problem for us was that the rain jacket plus fleece jacket and hiking shoes got soaked and we had to do more hikes. We were scheduled to see the water sources of the town.

Our host Melissa came to our rescue. She invited us to dinner and for a talk on the work with the water cooperative. She was so nice to lend us dry clothes. Nobody has dryers so our clothes would not dry overnight. We are lucky enough to be in Samaipata when they experience a "sur" a freeze. The temperature is so cold that everything freezes including us since the houses have no heat. Our hostel does not have a single heater. I came back to my refrigerator room at 9:30 pm and went straight to take the hottest shower possible. 'I can't believe people have no heat' I keep repeating as if that is going to make me warm. My feet were frozen even thou I am sleeping with two pairs of socks and two different types of sleepers plus all the clothes I have and 4 wool blankets

Monday - we start our work with the coop.

The weather this morning was 38 degrees and highest for the day was 40 and no heat in the coop office either. One of the lady board members went to get more clothes for me so I can put in in addition to what Melissa lent me. She also brought me gloves and extra socks. I had dried shoes since I took more than one pair. Lam managed to dry his shoes some. Jason went to buy shoes since he only brought one pair. Melissa lent Jason clothes from her husband since they are both tall they fit. The wet clothes from yesterday are exactly wet. The "sur" as they call the freeze changed the whole life in town. The lively lovely town we saw and enjoyed when we got in on Saturday changed. The restaurant patios and the streets were empty. The tourist seemed to have left. The gardens, the flowers and trees were sad.

However we had a very productive great day with the water cooperative folks. We went to see parts of the system. In spite of the cold, rain and mud, we hiked to see one of the three water sources. One of their drinking water intake points is such a beautiful site that I thought they could turn it into a tourists destination and make money. It has lovely water falls. But the town gets a good amount of their water supply from there so no. It is not an option. It has to stay a drinking water intake point. The site needs works but not much.

Back in the office we discussed priorities, alternatives and strategies. There are so many needs: water quality and quantity, distribution and storage, asset mapping and management, plus institutional capacity building, that I am hoping to get other volunteers involved. The board and committee members are very optimistic and energized with our partnership. I want to help with everything. Lam is more realistic. He is focussed on priorities. He has a plan, a very good plan, that includes recommendations

from very simple steps but very critical to the more sophisticated but still cost effective solutions. They felt in love with Lam and his approach that they asked him to move to town. He is practical and helpful. They wanted to keep him there.

Jason was keeping me or trying to keep me from discussing budgets and making promises. He was trying to keep us all realistic in all our planning. We are all very busy. I love working with people who are ready to do something and this group is. So I am optimistic about this new partnership. But yes I need to be realistic. There is a lot to do in the less than a year that the current board has left of their period.

We were introduced to staff from an NGO called Fundación Natura. One of their primary goals is to assist with watershed management. They are doing a great job taking care of the water source which they call "the fábrica" the watershed-it is the one place that would take care of our water quality and quantity issues if we take care of it. We agree. Their program consists first in getting an agreement between the local government, the water utility and Fundación Natura. The agreement is to together establish a fund to take care of the local watershed. This fund is used to then approach the land owners within the watershed and help them apply win-win best management practices that would protect the watershed and help them. These could be on agriculture, horticulture, irrigation and grazing. The fund pays half of what it would cost to establish critical change to benefit the water source for the community and the land owners. Sounds like a great practice. Something that perhaps we can learn from them.

What a day! It ended with a nice late dinner. And back to the refrigerator room. I usually never eat after 6 pm but here it helps to be full to withstand the cold.

Tuesday.

I woke up at about 4 am freezing!! My feet and shoulders were ice cold. I did not know what to do except for putting more layers but still I was cold. Finally I felt sleep as a pretzel and woke up thinking that I had overslept. I took the hottest shower I could stand in order to unfreeze and get dressed. Happily a about 8 am the sun came out.

We headed out to see two other intakes of the town's water. We hiked over half a day enjoying the river scenery-water going over huge rocks cascading and forming pools here and there. We held a meeting at the site of the confluence of the three water intakes seated on rocks- our voices mixing with the voice of the river. The Community has a great water. We need to make sure of its quality but quantity is good. Very good foresight by the founders of the water system and very good leadership by the current directors. We had a picnic lunch surrounded by the beautiful mountains. Melissa brought tomatoes and greens from her own garden plus she brought tortillas and lentils which I was craving so much. I totally enjoyed lunch. We all did.

Ahhh and one of the board members brought me beautiful mountain orchids. Absolutely beautiful. I wish I was allowed to bring them all the way home.

Besides doing the site visits to the water intake sites and to the wastewater lagoons, this was a critical day discussing the institutional development of the cooperative. We looked at the TMF - Technical, Managerial and Financial aspects of running the community water utility as a business. All businesses have the three components and all three have to be strong for the organization to be viable. The

directors and the the associates/community must be vigilant about the technical as well as the managerial financial aspects. The coop asked WEFTA to evaluate all three aspects. We looked in depth at the managerial aspects and the governing versus management functions. A community of the size and economy of Samaipata must have a general manager implementing the policies and procedures established by the directors. This is one of our first recommendations. A manager is key as they move forward to implement change and do projects.

There was much to do; we ran out of time to look in depth at the financial aspects. It is to be continued.

WEFTA will certainly need volunteers to do the follow up in this beautiful community with motivated leaders. We discussed working with Fundación Natura. They are the local organization and we look forward to being in comunicación and perhaps establishing a partnership.

We ended our meetings at about 7 pm at the coop office. I was sad to separate myself from the lovely office kitty. She is a cutie and let me hold her and pet her. Nothing like my Messi back home. I have to beg for Messi's love. He sets the rules for petting him-only allowing me to get close when he is up for it not when I want to. Ah! but he loves Bina my daughter. However she is allergic to cats. She can't pet him. Pay back Messi!! What goes around comes around.

As we walked back to the hostel Lam, Jason and I did our shopping for local goods. And we went to dinner. We were back to the room before ten. The day had been beautiful sunny and warm. The night was another story. Lam was already longing for the 90 degree plus weather back home in New Mexico. Over there we may say it is too hot but when your body is shaking-cold we say it is perfect back home. Lam said he wanted a fire in his room. We saw a few big pieces of wood covering some fences which made us all dream about lighting a fire to warm up.

Wednesday

2 am - I woke up freezing although Jason had brought me an extra blanket and I created a tent in my bed with blanket below and above me. It helped but the cold came through the areas where my body touched the blankets. Thus I added my jackets to hold the blankets from touching me and went back to sleep to dream of my own bed.

This night completely froze all the gardens and trees in the area. People are having to deal with it. Many make a living from growing fruits and vegetables. Thank God they don't experience this often. Still it is devastating.

As for us, as Jason said, we got a bonus, not everyone gets to experience a "surazo" a freeze when visiting this area. I have to remember that experience when I am home and we have our first freeze and when watching the snow falling from within my warm house.

The sun came out again and warmed us up. We started the day with a visit to El Fuerte. The major tourism site. It is really a site to see. A whole top of the mountain/a carved rock with symbols that we don't know their meaning but they have been there for thousands of years.

It is a hike to get there so this is our fourth day hiking. Again I am thankful to God and people. Since my shoulder surgery I cannot lift or carry much including a back pack so I am limited on that but I got so much help. I am very thankful. I love hiking. I miss it. I need it.

At some point our guide who knew we were in town in a water related visit pointed out the source of water for El Fuerte. It is called Vagina Hill he said pointing at the different vegetation and ridges. Really!!! my friend Bogie would have said. I did not know what to do-whether to keep looking or move away as I was there with three men! Three very respectful and helpful men I should add.

We hurried back to town since we had a press conference and our final meeting to discuss next steps, roles, responsibilities and time lines. It was great to see everyone dressed up. We were ready to be in local TV!

We ended our time with the leaders with a wonderful lunch. We left with great expectations to get great work done. I am hoping to get other volunteers to go help in any of the areas, managerial, financial-from showing how to prepare an annual operating budget to doing a review of the current rates and make recommendations, to working on asset mapping and management. They need a business plan and an Operations and Maintenance Plan. The wastewater lagoons need redesign. They are ready to welcome more volunteers.

We headed to Santa Cruz to spend the night near the airport. In the evening before heading to dinner and our hotel we met with a Dutch organization that helps find funding. Local Organizations submit a proposal detailing funding needed for what and why. If the Dutch organization thinks that they can successfully find funding for those specific needs, they take on the project. They charge a fee but they do package the application and serve as intermediary. Most of the funding they find comes as grant loan combo. Funding comes from European countries. They may be an option the community would like to explore.

Dinner with Melissa and the three of us was great. She knows all the best places. We went to a sweet spot near the beautiful Santa Cruz plaza/ downtown and ate so good. Again eating late but taking it as aid for the cold.

I have to mention that Melissa is from Santa Fe New Mexico. I did not know her till last year when she was visiting her parents who are my neighbors, and because she lives in Bolivia where WEFTA has many projects and she is in the water cooperative board we discussed WEFTA. That's how great projects and collaborations come about.

As I write this I am on my second flight going home. I have one more to go. We left the hotel at 6 am and I hope to get home before midnight. Life is fantastic and a never ending blessing. I am just making the best with it.