

FLYING WOMEN OF TOTORA-BOLIVIA

Text and photographs by Ricardo Carrasco Stuparich ©

In a unique aerial event, residents of this town in central Bolivia celebrate brides-to-be, fertility, and the return of ancestral spirits.

My fellow passengers on the bus from Cochabamba were gaily dressed and spoke Quechua animatedly among themselves. We were on our way to Totora for the festival of the Swings of San Andrés, perhaps the most original tradition in Bolivia. Once a year, town inhabitants and their neighbors bid farewell to the wandering souls of their departed relatives that have come down from the mountains and, at the same time, honor their marriageable young women. Gigantic swings are hung over the cobblestone streets and adorned with handwoven sashes, flags, and paper streamers. The fiesta lasts for several days, accompanied by much corn liquor and popular songs. Although I could understand a little of the conversations about me, the landscape outside my small window was distracting. Arid, and earthen colored, with small adobe houses scattered across gentle hills, it was covered by sparse eucalyptus forests and cacti, reminding me of the countryside at home in Chile. Abruptly, the road became a rough cobbled trail, jerking us from one side to the other. Baskets, hens and sacks of rice and flour set in the aisle heaved back and forth, and passengers complained loudly. Such trails are actually quite impressive-millions of paving stones carefully arranged one after the other, stretching many miles throughout much of the department. Finally five jolting hours later that afternoon, we arrived at the small village of Totora.

As I disembarked, I noticed that the colonial houses around me were held in place by wooden beams extending across the streets. The ancient houses leaned against them, like very old people struggling to stay on their feet despite the passage of time and trying in vain to preserve their glory years. I walked along a narrow street that led to the town's main square, Carrasco Plaza. There, overlooking a mountain of merchandise, shop owner Olimpia Alba kindly offered me a very hot *trimate*, an unusual but pleasant mixture of three local herbs. Fortunately, she was fluent in Spanish and chatted away as if she had always known me.

"This is fiesta time, and you've come just in time for the celebration, the day of the Swings of our San Andrés", she said as she made the sign of the cross and straightened the woolen hat above her two long black braids. "You'll be lucky to find a place to stay now. It's the same every year. People come from Cochabamba and the towns near La Soledad. But when they can't find any place to spend the night, they go home, leaving us the same as always. Alone, just as God made us".

But, I wanted to know, what had happened to the houses?. Pretending not to hear, she went inside her shop, only to come out a few minutes later carrying a small picture of a saint. "It was the 1998 earthquake," she said bitterly, and, to judge by the expression on her worn face, she would say no more. It was dark by the time I made my way through the village to find a bed for the night. Somewhat confused, I walked through narrow alleys illuminated by a few fluorescent bulbs that gave the place a particularly desolate look. The diagonal beams looked like gigantic arrows hurled from on high in some brutal divine revenge. Finally, I reached an old rustic guesthouse, where I spent my first night in a large room whose walls were so full of cracks and crevices that they seemed about to bring the whole adobe mass crashing down and flattening me at any minute.

A town devastated by earthquake, defenseless and remote, was struggling to remain upright, and festivities were about to begin in its midst. I stepped to the small wobbly balcony to hear the distant voices of men and women singing in an open patio. The starry night filled my head with dreams that rolled across the curving rooftops.

At dawn the next day, after I had eaten several *lampaganas* (traditional pastries filled with peach or custard) downed with roasted wheat coffee, I strolled along the streets, which were rapidly filling with other visitors from Cochabamba and even as far away as Santa Cruz de la Sierra. According to Ramiro Arispe, a friendly geologist engaged in researching and preserving the history of the town, they had come to support Totorá's reconstruction.

"Totorá has 485 colonial houses, almost all of them damaged by the earthquake, which measured 6.5 on the Richter scale," Arispe said, looking around. "The only reason they didn't collapse was because their walls are made of adobe more than sixty centimeters (nearly two feet) thick. Many, or rather most, should be condemned. But after months of pleading for help in vain, their owners decided to move back in, despite the risk of being crushed to death."

Continuing, Arispe pulled me by the arm toward some pillars near Carrasco Plaza. "The people of Totorá used to be called 'bullet-eaters' because they settled their problems with guns," he said. "Look there are holes in the walls here. Colonial corridors are full of bullet holes where many died taking the law into their own hands. Those were very hard times, but there were also people with a lot of money."

After making our way through a crowd of masked young people who had gathered at the water fountain in the plaza, we explored the interior of a handsome vine-covered colonial patio surrounded by large pillars, where we discovered the dust-covered remains of a pipe organ.

"The colonial houses around the plaza once belonged to coca leaf traders," Arispe explained. "That was a very prosperous business up until 1950. Totorá was the collection center for caravans from the jungle heading for Cochabamba and La Paz. Many of the mansions still have pianos that were imported from Europe. In fact, strong mules are still called piano mules today. Can you imagine how much furniture and how many pianos they must have carried over the mountains? Also in those times of great prosperity, the first printing press in Bolivia was established here."

Impressed by his account, I walked through the town absorbed by its former grandeur that lay buried under debris or was about to be destroyed forever. Climbing a narrow road that led to the cemetery, I had a fine panoramic view of the town and its asymmetrical architecture. At a distance I could see the large beams jutting out from the roofs. They were no longer functioning merely as supports for the mansions but had been almost magically transformed into the swings that would, during the whole month of November, serve to cradle the ancestral beliefs of the people of Totorá.

Tradition holds that on November 2 the souls of the dead come down from the mountain, or *hanacpacha* (sky or world above). During that month, the swings provide a means of helping the spirits to return to their celestial abodes, for they have become very weary of wandering in the world of the living. For this purpose, the beams are adorned with handwoven sashes, flags, and paper streamers so that the souls will leave in a happy mood and take with them a good impression of the town and of their descendants.

As I returned to town, the spectacle of the swings was about to begin. The owners of the houses where swings had been set up were making a final check of the ropes, tugging at

the knots, and inspecting the structures. They would be solely responsible if there should be an accident. Many women carrying babies on their backs had come down from the mountains to see the “flying women.” Belisario Rioja, an ornithologist who returns faithfully year after year to enjoy the fiesta, explained to me, his eyes half-closed against the intense Andean light, “The really important tradition is that of the marriageable girls, or *novias*.”

The young women and others who have not been lucky in love ride the swings in the belief, and even in the certainty, that if they can touch a basket with their feet, they will find a husband. “Smiling, he continued: “Family members place small gifts inside the baskets, which, of course, symbolize the arrival of the rains and with them abundance, good harvests, and fertility.”

There is music and merriment everywhere. Corn liquor is handed out at the doors of the houses and abundantly consumed from hollow gourds. Soon many Totora inhabitants have fallen under the drunken spell of that typical drink of the high plateau. The girls who sit on the swings, however, drink *mogochinche*, or the juice of dried peaches. They need to be fully alert when they climb up to their perches. The swingers are lovely in the afternoon light, with the breeze swirling their black braids, lending them a decidedly angelic appearance.

In the meantime, two strong assistants or “pushers” pull a pair of leather cords tied to the swing seat, which hurl the girls into the air until they seem almost to touch the clouds. Joyful despite the dizzying effect of speed reflected in their faces, they would never think to ask for mercy.

“Flaming flower! Flaming flower!” They shout as they fly across the Andean sky. All the while the spectators share anecdotes, carry on business, swap basic commodities, and ultimately laugh with each other among hugs and good-natured slaps. When the pushers tire, they ask the house owners where the swings have been set up to place the basket poles within reach, to be snatched up deftly by the flying girls. Waiting their turn in line are some adult women who have been unlucky in love, confident that San Andrés will make their wishes come true.

Drunk with the images before me and enchanted by the spectrum of colors, textures, and shapes experienced, I could not contain my joy and shouted with the girls. “Flaming flower! Flaming flower!”

As the sun set in Totora and the women had helped their dead to return to *hanacpacha*, they had also brought new life, in perfect harmony with nature and tradition. Slowly, one by one, the baskets were claimed by their contented owners, who stayed to see the luck of their companions or simply vanished into the alleyways, shaking their shawls and brushing the streamers from their shoulders, perhaps on the way to meet their long-sought husbands-to-be.

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