

lingua weekly

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King Carlos

By Jeremy Quinton



From *The Island of the Sun*, you can see the Andes mountains that skirt La Paz on their way up and down South America.

Look the other way, into the hazy distance, and your view rests on the Peruvian shores of Lake Titicaca. The lake is so big—the highest navigable lake in the world, they say—that you could easily mistake the lake for the sea.

Famous for its spectacular sunrises and sunsets, the island is covered by koa trees and dusty paths. More importantly, The Island of the Sun is the birthplace of the sun in Inca mythology. It was here that a number of important Inca figures made their mystical appearances. Inca ruins can be found at both ends of the island.

Walking all morning from one end to the other, we reached the ruins at the time of day when the sun was at its highest and hottest. There in the shade, near a rock, was Carlos.

A tour guide “with a difference.”

Carlos, perhaps in his early forties, carried three things. A red backpack, a much-used pencil, and a soft, timid smile. He approached us uncomfortably, almost as if he was about to ask us for something he felt he wasn't supposed to.

As an islander, he said, he simply wanted to welcome us as brothers—not visitors or tourists, he explained (to him these words sounded “cold”)—to the place where he lived and where so much had happened in the past. He explained that at the end of the tour we would be welcome to offer some money in return, if we wanted to. Most people, he said, offered about 10 bolivianos, but everyone was free to offer what they felt right.

Carlos then took us round the Chincana complex, explaining the history of the place in exquisite style, bit by bit, diverting his attention from his magical story and his brothers (us!) only to remind local school children to dispose carefully of litter.

He wanted to learn more about where we had come from, and some phrases in English too. He showed me his notebook, where he'd meticulously written down every word and phrase in English that he'd been able to collect. There were over two thousand words, I quickly estimated (more, in truth, than Carlos would ever probably need on the island...but who knows).

He drew maps and explanations with his pencil in the sand. And then, from the red backpack he took out a plastic folder containing hand-drawn maps of the island, which he'd coloured in with crayons. He also taught us some words in his language, aymará. My favourite was *waliki*—translated as *muy bien* in Spanish.

When it came to paying, it felt as if the main transaction had already taken place. Our walk back took another four hours, but for most of that we talked—or thought—about the meeting with Carlos.

When was the last time you were offered something—a product or service—and had the opportunity to name the price yourself? It hasn't happened to me lately, as far as I know.

Carlito Ramos, *yuspagara!* Thank you.