

But where is the ocean?
Officer cadets at the naval
college of La Paz, 3,600m
above sea level.



By Angela Köckritz (text) and Frank Schultze (photos)

Sailors without a Sea

Bolivia grieves for its lost coastline. For the past 133 years, this landlocked country has been hoping for a return to its rightful size, and especially to the shores of the Pacific. Until this big day comes, Bolivia's navy continues to train tirelessly—on Lake Titicaca, 3,000m above sea level.



Real drill for a distant dream

Captain Fernando Enriques Gamarra (top right) can only offer his soldiers the experience of water on rivers and on Lake Titicaca—or in paintings. On the Day of the Sea, the Bolivian naval forces march through the streets of La Paz as the pride of the nation (top left). Otherwise, the sailors practise hand-to-hand combat or attend theory lessons at the San Pedro de Tiquina base.

Lunch in the barracks: the cadets are only served once the commandant starts eating (left). You need strong arms to hold up Bolivia's dream of the ocean: naval soldiers during strength training and at the first rowing exercise on Lake Titicaca (right). Many of them have never seen the sea.

The hard school of longing



A desolate strip

in the extreme south of Peru, a barren expanse, barely 4km². And yet, big enough to quench the yearning of an entire nation. This stretch of the Pacific coast south of the harbour town of Ilo is known as Bolivia Mar even though it is located in Peru. In 2010, the Republic of Peru leased this tiny patch to its neighbour for 99 years, making Bolivia's dream of a sea coast finally come true.

Bolivia Mar is not connected to Bolivia's heartland. However, at the handover ceremony, President Evo Morales announced plans for the coastal strip: a free trade zone with a harbour, a hotel, a beach. And a naval college to train the Bolivian naval forces.

It all started over 130 years ago—the Bolivians call it “the biggest crime of the 19th century.” In 1879, Chilean soldiers overran the Bolivian port of Antofagasta. They were incensed because Bolivia wanted to levy a tax of 10 centavos for each quintal of saltpetre mined in the coastal region, thereby violating an agreement between the two countries. They battled it out for 5 years, but it was an unequal contest—a few scattered Bolivian soldiers against a well-equipped Chilean army. At the end of the Pacific War, Bolivia had lost its 400km-long Pacific coast.

Since then, the loss of access to the sea has been fervently mourned each year on Dia del Mar, 23 March, as a national calamity. The country abandons itself to its longing for the unfathomable blue expanse of the ocean. The sea is talked about and extolled, wished for so passionately that Bolivians can almost hear the sea gulls and feel the salt on their skins. Even up in the Andes, where the Bolivian navy is stationed, at an altitude of 3,000m.

For the time being, they have to



Presidents Alan Garcia of Peru (left) and Evo Morales of Bolivia at Bolivia Mar, a coastal strip leased to Bolivia by Peru. The former's coastal lands, including saltpetre mines and a cemetery (top), were lost to Chile in the war of 1879.

practise on Lake Titicaca, the largest lake in South America, 200km wide, on the border with Peru. In the villages on the Bolivian side, the Day of the Sea is a huge event—and the marines are not the only ones celebrating.

In San Pedro de Tiquina, for instance, the townspeople don their festive best and wait patiently for their big moment. Soon, the fisherfolk and shop owners, the gladioli growers and the pensioners will march solemnly past the statue of

the hero, their heads bowed, like the sailors who troop along the dusty lanes with their weapons. The band plays: “Let us raise our voices for our coast. Soon Bolivia will get it again, its sea, its sea.”

And the sailors sigh. The Bolivian navy consist of 1,800 sailors and San Pedro de Tiquina is their most important base. The sailors in the barracks here are not just ordinary seamen. The navy employs combat divers, maintains a hospital ship, catamarans and dozens of

patrol boats—all in case of an emergency. And for when Bolivia realises its old claim to the sea.

Throughout the day, the sailors patrol the lake in their boats. If one gives one's fantasy just a little free rein, the lake can seem like the ocean for a few seconds, an entity that most of them have never actually seen. But then, in the evening, they look at pictures of the sea on the internet or on those maps in which Bolivia still has a coast.

In the Plaza Avaroa in La Paz, Bolivia's seat of government, the parade moves through the streets like a worm. The goose-stepping cadets and the girls in colourful costumes doing gymnastics on the street walk past the president, who smiles unctuously, past the urn of war hero Eduardo Avaroa, brought to the square as it is every year. Avaroa is remembered not because he won, but because he lost gloriously. “There are defeats as glorious as victory itself”, wrote the historian Eduardo Subieta.

Avaroa was an irregular troop who went to defend the bridge of Topáter, an insignificant landmark in the hinterlands. He held it from superior Chilean forces with just a handful of men until he fell, shot in the throat. But not before he hurled at the attackers that which would raise him into the pantheon of heroes: “Surrender? Your grandmother should surrender. Damn you!” Subieta cautiously acknowledges the indecorous nature of this statement, however “noble it might sound coming from the lips of a dying hero.” Every schoolchild learns the words by heart.

But how can Bolivia get its sea back? Cynics suggest waiting for climate change—that would be the quickest solution. However, there are not many who mock that suggestion. The sea is a

serious matter. For a long time, Bolivia and Chile passionately nurtured their enmity, but now they are at the negotiating table. However, it is still unimaginable that Bolivia will get independent access to the sea on Chilean territory. They are allowed to use some ports without paying any duties, and a road between Brazil and Chile via Bolivia is also being built. But the Bolivians are not satisfied. “The sea is the lung of a country,” they say.

And how would a country wedged in the middle of South America be able to breathe? By becoming landlocked, Bolivia has lost more than 50 billion US



dollars, wrote the newspaper *El Diario*. The country mourns all that it could have achieved if it still had the sea undulating along its coast. How rich, how big and how strong it would have been.

The sea will heal Bolivia. It will alleviate poverty and inequality; create unity where there is none; and wash away Bolivia's feeling of seldom having had a say in determining its own destiny.

Bolivia was once a rich nation. It had Potosí, the most productive silver mine in the entire Spanish colonial empire. The affluent even had their horses shod with silver. Bolivia was huge, extending

from the Amazon up to the Pacific Ocean, until the Argentineans came in 1862, just 37 years after the founding of the state of Bolivia, and wangled 130,000km² of land. They were followed by Brazil, Chile, Argentina again, Peru and, right at the end, Paraguay. At the end of it all, it was reduced to half its former size. Bolivia had been cut up and maimed, but the worst injury was the loss of the sea.

“It is our national trauma,” says Fernando Enriquez Gamarra, captain of the naval forces stationed at San Pedro de Tiquina. “It is the only thing that unites our country besides football,” believes sociologist Fernando Pacajes.

Bolivia ran, fell and jumped through its 187-year-long history. It lived through 189 coups, changed presidents almost by the minute, and battled its way through labour conflicts and urban riots. The country is divided between east and west, poor and rich, Indians, mestizos and whites. Today, these divisions are perhaps starker than ever before, since the wealthy regions in the east are demanding their autonomy.

But all this changes in March—the month of the sea—when the authorities hoist the flag of the sea. The conflicts are forgotten for a while. The yearning becomes more important than the strife.

Meanwhile, Bolivia Mar, the coastal strip south of Ilo, is as desolate and forlorn as it was 2 years ago when Evo Morales had announced his vision of building a hotel, naval college and harbour at the leased Pacific beach in Peru.

Will it ever turn into reality? In 1992, Morales' predecessor had also signed a similar treaty with Peru, but then didn't want to spend the funds required for developing the port. It seems quite possible that Bolivia is fated to go on dreaming of the Pacific. ■