



## **Tour of Bolivia – Summer 2007**

### **By Dave and John Ellis**

We arrived in La Paz Bolivia on June 29 at 6:00 a.m., roughly 12 hours later than we were scheduled, thanks to storms in Texas. The first thing that hit us was the fact that we were 11,940 feet (over 2 miles!) above sea level. Combined with the fact that we had just spent two nights on a plane, everything suddenly became more difficult. We did manage to find Bolivia's local airline, Aero Sur, get our bags checked, pay our airport taxes, and leave for Sucre, Bolivia's capital. Sucre is also known as *la ciudad blanca*, the white city, due to its many white buildings.

On the plane, we met up with the jovial Daniel Antezana, son of Mabel Antezana, who is the Prince distributor in Bolivia. Daniel would be our constant companion over the next ten days. Our planned tour of Bolivia included clinics and exhibitions in Sucre, La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. The visit had three goals: exhibit high-level racquetball, teach some basics (especially to juniors) and work up enthusiasm for the new O3 racquet line. Daniel was our point man, responsible for hotel and club arrangements.

### **Sucre**

We arrived in Sucre and after a few hours of much-needed rest, made our way to the main racquetball club of the five that were being used. The event was one of three Bolivian Nationals that occur annually and this particular tournament qualified players for the South American Games scheduled for late August in Cuenca, Ecuador. At the club we encountered a snag since the tournament was sponsored by a representative of another racquetball company. This prevented us from bringing out our demos immediately. It did not, however, prevent us from talking to almost everyone there about EkteLON's products. The minute that the last match of the tournament was completed, we jumped on the opportunity to show off our demos, distribute posters, and organize a "play the pro" activity. There was a lot of enthusiasm from the many people who had waited for a chance to see our new line.

From the club, we went to the awards ceremony. As our taxi came to a halt in front of the hotel, John was mobbed by a crowd that literally stopped traffic. Most were juniors who were hoping for an autograph and a poster. The awards ceremony was elaborate. It took place in a big banquet room and there were many trophies awarded. Our presence was acknowledged by the master of ceremonies. Our four key EkteLON players were honored for their championships: Ricardo Monroy, Jenny Daza, Carola Loma, and Yasmin Sabja. Except for Ricardo's doubles partner, it was a complete sweep of the open level national titles for EkteLON!

## **LaPaz**

We were off to La Paz the next morning. After having spent three days in Sucre at around 9,000 feet, it was much easier to adapt to the nearly 12,000-foot altitude in La Paz. After a late lunch with Mabel, we traveled to the club in the early evening and arrived there an hour early. Since there were many juniors there already, we immediately started to work with them. At 7:00 p.m., Daniel started a Q&A session that lasted for about 45 minutes. John then played whomever while Dave worked in the adjacent court with juniors.

## **Cochabamba**

Next stop was Cochabamba, site of the December 2007 Junior World Championships. The city has roughly the same altitude as Sucre, so there will be necessary adaptations for those who come from lower-altitude cities. The tough thing about the altitude is not so much the breathing but the bounce of the ball! A player can adapt to the thinner air in a few days. It is much tougher to figure out where the ball is going and where to set up for the next shot. Shortly after arriving, we checked into Portales, the host hotel. The hotel is very nice; visitors in December will find it enjoyable. The site of the Junior Worlds has been announced as the Country Club of Cochabamba, a well-established private club with eight courts and plenty of excellent viewing. The government, however, has allotted money for a new twelve-court facility and there is some possibility that the location will be changed to the new facility a few miles away. Several International Racquetball Federation officials were in Cochabamba looking over the situation and they agreed to return in September to check on the progress of the new facility before making their final decision.

Bolivia is racquetball heaven and Cochabamba is the leader in this “religion.” There are actually more public racquetball courts than public tennis courts in Bolivia. The press coverage of our stay was phenomenal; we were interviewed at least twenty times by newspaper and television reporters. Our first night in Cochabamba was a repeat performance of the activities in La Paz. During the second night, the exhibitions were on for real as national champion Ricardo Monroy and Carola Loma defeated John and Yasmin Sabja, 9, 8, in the Mixed Doubles match-up. John then defeated Ricardo in a captivating singles match, winning a tiebreaker, 6. The night’s events brought out 200+ spectators.

Our time in Cochabamba was punctuated by late night dinners with the Carlos Loma and Luis Iporre families. We were treated to a wonderful dinner with the Lomas which was accompanied by two live musical groups, one folkloric and the other Bolivian Mariachi. The party lasted until 3:30 a.m. on a Wednesday. Hey, does anyone work around here? The late night, along with a turned ankle, did slow Daniel down a bit. He bounced back strong after a couple of days, however.

## **Santa Cruz**

Friday, July 6, saw us off to Santa Cruz, with an altitude of only 1,365 feet above sea level. We arrived at the club with a slightly revised lesson plan. After introductions, John and Carola Loma got on the court and demonstrated basic strokes while Dave spoke to the overflow crowd outside about what was happening. The two Ektelon players then attended a twenty-minute practice session that included a wide variety of drills. After questions, John conducted a Play the Pro activity, Dave was on the adjacent court working with juniors, while Carola and Jenny Daza were on a third court playing against all who wanted to play. Dinner with the leaders of the Santa Cruz Federation concluded the evening, with discussions of future plans to attend the US Open. Relatively speaking, it was “early to bed: at 2:00 a.m.

The next night was our final night in Bolivia and the crowds were entertained with hometown favorites Ricardo and Jenny defeating John and Carola, 5, 6. Ricardo is an excellent player and makes his living teaching racquetball full-time. He is about to get married and would like to try a couple of years on the IRT tour. John played solidly against Ricardo during the singles and won the match, 11, 6. The evening concluded early with a dinner that ended at midnight (!).

### **Headed for Home**

On the long flight home, we reviewed our impressions of what we had experienced during the ten-day tour. Our first impression was that racquetball is very strong in Bolivia, with much enthusiasm and many junior players. We just could not get over the amount of press coverage we encountered. The second impression was that the Bolivian players are used to adapting to a variety of conditions. They play on different floors, with different balls, and radically different altitudes. The third impression is that Ektelon is fortunate to have the Antezana family on its side. Mabel and Daniel actually sell more Ektelon products than Prince Tennis products, an indication of the obvious strength of racquetball in Bolivia. We are predicting a great year for Ektelon there based on the enthusiasm and acceptance of the O3 Copper, White, and RG racquets. This is the message that will be spread all over Latin America, loud and clear:

***Juega Con Fuego! Play with Fire!***