

La Caravana Arcoiris por La Paz (*The Rainbow Caravan of Peace*) Iquique, Chile

By *Subcoyote Alberto Ruz* 2222 words.

About La Caravana

La Caravana is an international mobile ecovillage. For the past eight years they have traveled in buses and trucks through Central and South America sharing grassroots ecological awareness and education through music, theater, and art. Now in Iquique, Chile, La Caravana is currently home to 20 people of all ages and backgrounds, and eight different nationalities, from South America, North America, and Europe. Founded in 1996 by longtime Huehuecoyotl members Liora Adler and Alberto Ruz, La Caravana members have taught and performed in 14 countries, including Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador for more than a year each. In 2003, La Caravana was the primary host/organizer for the international Call of the Condor ecovillage and bioregional gathering in Peru.

—Ed.

First gong. It is still dark. Soon I'll need to leave the warmth of bed and get to the shower before rush time. Right now we're in Iquique, on the northern desert coast of Chile, staying in a comfortable house a block away from the beach. We're here rent-free because this is a foreclosed house—but the bank could sell it at any time. Usually we camp on beaches, in deserts, in luxurious tropical forests, on the banks of local rivers, high in the Andes, in mountain valleys, or outside small rural towns. We also spend time in big cities, more that we would like, because in cities we can get paid work to fund our basic needs and maintain our old buses and trucks.

When we know we will stay longer at one spot, we raise the big Circus tent. It provides shade, camping space, our performing stage, and meeting space to teach arts, host cultural events, offer workshops, and hold community meetings. Life in our mobile village changes every two or three months as we move to a new location, receive and train new aspiring members, create links with the native people, make ourselves known

to the local authorities, and connect with groups or local organizations with similar aims and values.

This morning a few people first walk out to the beach to do yoga, tai chi, or meditate before sunrise. Others stay in bed as long as possible, through second gong. But by third gong we're all up, forming a circle to thank the Pachamama for all her warmth, the father sun for the light, our rotating cooks who prepare the meals, the peasants who grow the food. We chant, and sometimes do a circle dance before sitting down to breakfast and talking about the day's work.

After breakfast our different "departments" do their daily work. One group leaves for the Municipal Theater to rehearse "Maya," our new play. Our kids do their schoolwork with their home-schooling teacher. Other community members may go shopping for supplies, or stage a *retake*—dressing up as clowns and stilt walkers to play music, juggle, and entertain at the big farmer's market in exchange for boxes of carrots, tomatoes, apples, lettuces, cabbages, potatoes, or corn.

Another group's task is public relations—connecting with local cultural institutions, selling workshops or performances, visiting a local newspaper or a radio or TV station for an interview. We use local media to invite people to our programs and to talk about ecology, civil rights, defense of native cultures, or just about the life in our community. We've adopted the ancient rainbow emblem from the Andes, the *wifala*, as our community flag, and we try to act as messengers of goodwill among nations and across borders.

By noon or so, we've all returned to our base camp for lunch and to take a break. Iquique is a very warm place, so an afternoon siesta is necessary for some of us. In cooler climates like Peru, with cold short days and even colder nights, we took advantage of as much daylight as possible and worked throughout the whole day.

This afternoon, we may take classes from local people. Or we may offer workshops for groups of young *cabros*—local teenagers—on dance improv, body painting for theater, clowning, trapeze, or lately, *Capoeira*, the Afro-Brazilian martial art/dance that some of our older kids really like. Most weekends we offer two-day intensive workshop on more "serious" subjects, such as introduction to permaculture, consensus decision-making, appropriate technology for desert regions, ecovillage living and ecovillage design, or introduction to the Mayan calendar of 13 moons. In the coming two weeks, we'll also offer a workshop on natural healing and preparing medicinal herbs and one for women on gender and femininity.

In each place we stop, a circle of close friends always develops after one or two weeks. So on weekends we also take trips to local places to participate in activities

organized by our new allies and friends. We share meals and activities and invite them to act in our performances. They help connect us with other local people, helping us open doors for the Caravana in town. They also invite us to parties and festivals. Often we join them in an equinox celebration, or in holding a vigil for peace in Baghdad, or in the action focalized by the Otomi people in Mexico, “Eight thousand drums for Mother Earth.” Romance and love stories are often also born from the interaction between *caravaneros* and native people.

In the afternoons many of us use the Internet. Living so far away from our beloveds, email is the only way to keep in touch. We also carry with us computers, digital cameras, video projectors, slide projectors—tools we use to keep a record of our adventures, to animate our multicultural presentations for workshops and talks, and to illustrate articles we send to magazines worldwide. We have been trying for more than a year to set up a mobile audiovisual vehicle and archive office, to keep safe our delicate instruments and not mix them with our kitchen and theater equipment and personal belongings. Each *caravanero* wears at least three or four hats: I personally am part of the documentary team, the vehicle maintenance crew, international PR, and funding. And we still need to fill key roles: good drivers, mechanics, more musicians, and a really good grant writer.

In almost eight years we have lived in 14 countries, in some more than a year, such as Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. You can imagine the variety of experiences we face at each turn of the road, from guerrilla warfare and military blockades to really poor ghetto neighborhoods and remote indigenous communities in the Amazon and Orinoco. At their 2000 annual meeting, representatives of Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA), recognized our Caravan as a mobile ecovillage, acting as an outreach and networking arm for the ecovillage and intentional communities movements internationally. It was not an easy decision for ENA, since ecovillagers and bioregionalists, being land-based and place-oriented, are often suspicious of nomadics.

Daily life in the Caravan is not always exciting, especially when we stay months working in a city, for instance. Tension grows, people start feeling restless, especially those who come for a short time and expected to be traveling more. We have other frustrations as well. Every time we come to a new home base we have to start the process all over again. And our turnover is high enough that our crew changes every three to six months. As soon as we train one group, we have to do it again with the newcomers. It’s like in any school: when the kids finally get it, they’re gone!

The economics can also be difficult. It’s not easy to feed 20 *caravaneros* in poor countries like Peru or Ecuador, working only in social and cultural projects. We have to

depend on the good will and trust of the local municipal institutions, schools, and universities. Sometimes, though not often, we'll get a grant for a specific event, such as the one we held in Ecuador to bring together 140 women community leaders for a week-long "Peace Village," to share strategies, strengthen links, and create alliances. Or last year, when we got a grant to help organize the week-long gathering in Peru, "The Call of the Condor," which brought together more than 700 people from 34 countries, representing ENA and ecovillage activists, the Bioregional Congress, traditional healers, spiritual leaders, social activists, artists, rainbow travelers, and children. We worked nonstop, from sunrise to almost the next sunrise, for 15 days before the event and a week after everyone's departure.

Evenings we stay long in the communal space—talking, socializing, reading, making music, and sometimes, like this evening, watching a video. Some do crafts, others write in their journals, and others visit with friends and plan for future events. When we're preparing for a new performance, we rehearse at least four hours a day and a couple more hours in the evening.

In our community meetings we use the consensus process as practiced in bioregional gatherings, with a facilitator, agenda, timekeeper, and vibeswatcher. Our meetings last usually from an hour and a half to sometimes two and a half or three hours when we face hot issues. One of our difficult issues, especially in the past, has been whether to allow "sacred" though usually illegal plant substances. On the road, as strangers in foreign lands, we must adhere to zero use, zero carrying, zero buying. It's too risky—we could face deportation and lose our vehicles for a couple of joints. So we don't use these substances, even though we wish it could be different.

We also argue about how long to stay in one place. Or if we should stay more in small rural communities instead of cities. Most times this decision doesn't depend only on our desires. We also face immigration laws and local officials who allocate or deny permits to work, to get paid, and to keep the buses longer than six months in the country. Not to mention delicate political situations such as countries plagued by civil wars or ruled by authoritarian governments. And the local climate, which may be too wet, too dry, too cold, or too hot. Moving helps, but sometimes we end up moving to the wrong place at the wrong moment. "Going with the flow" is not always as easy as it seems.

After rehearsing, socializing, or meeting, we usually go to bed late: our single people to the communal rooms, couples to their tents, and some to the buses, for security or privacy. Tonight I turn in late. As I relax into sleep, I contemplate our life in the Caravan.

Our future is uncertain. Our schedule and route are also uncertain. We must learn, over and over, to become unattached to things, ideas, beliefs, people, and places. Everything changes in this lifestyle; only a few factors keep the circle together—our meals, our ceremonies, our meetings, our parties, our presentations. We have a communal economy, but we cannot afford to give a salary to anyone, as we have no insurance and no medical help. We are able to sustain the project by living very, very simply, but we are not able to save for accidents, sickness, or major repairs of the buses. Last year we lost our biggest rig in the Andes, and almost lost 10 of our people too, when we totaled the bus and most of its contents. Still, we were able to pull our trip together and host the Call of the Condor event. We even managed to leave Peru just in time, the night our visas and permits expired. Now in Chile we plan to get all the way to Tierra del Fuego, visit Argentina and Uruguay, and hold another major international event in Brazil next year.

How will we do all this? Who knows. Miracles happen everyday. I consider the Caravan a living miracle. Other caravans for peace are starting to appear here and there, inspired by our example. For three decades I've preached that "No-Mad Living" is a sane alternative. I strongly recommend this way of life for community veterans to take a break away from home and get some fresh perspective, sharing what they know. And for the youth of intentional communities and ecovillages to find themselves, meet other social mutants like themselves, have fun, and serve the Mother everywhere they go.

Life in community is not always romantic or idealistic, nor is being a gypsy on the road. I have been a member of and a founder of various intentional communities since 1968, and I carry the scars to prove it. Still, I haven't found any better solution or a more satisfying alternative than tribal living. I cannot foresee the future of our species without seeing some kind of collective and cooperative organization. Caravans were here thousands of years ago, before agriculture, private property, borders, and nations. Six billion people cannot become nomadic, but I still think it is a sane alternative for some. I salute the coming Caravans, running on biodiesel, powered by solar systems, using appropriate technologies, teaching others how to live with the minimal impact on the Mother, walking softly on her skin, healing and serving communities along their path. That's my message tonight to community activists, from the far desert lands of South America.

Mexican community activist Subcoyote Alberto Ruz founded Hathi Babas and Illuminated Elephants, an international traveling theater community in the 1970s, co-founded Huehuecoyotl ecovillage in Mexico, and has coordinated of La Caravana

since 1996. He is author of Rainbow Nation without Borders (Bear & Co. New Mexico, 1989), and more recently, editor of Hay Tantos Caminos ("So Many Roads," Colofon, Mexico, 2004) www.lacaravana.org; subcoyotealberto@yahoo.com.

Pull quotes:

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