

An Experience with Kites in Yavi Chico, a Native Indian Community in Jujuy, North of Argentina

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In mid-June, 2012, we set out on a much-anticipated journey from Barilocheⁱ, our home town in Patagonia, to La Quiaca, 2887 km north, on the border of Argentina and Bolivia. During the ascent towards the Puna (Andean Plateau) through the Quebrada de Humahuacaⁱⁱ, we silently contemplated the multicoloured hills and imposing rock formations, while sighting llamas and vicuñasⁱⁱⁱ. With its scattered Indian settlements, and rich in archaeological remains - *pucarás* (meaning fortress in Quechua), *antigales* (archaeological sites), and rock and cave paintings - we understood why La Quebrada, a caravan road for the Inca Empire in the 15th century, was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2003.

I had brought along a couple of kites, but they had remained in their bag throughout the trip, forgotten among the heap of luggage and provisions in the back of the pick-up truck, while we went sight-seeing and on long hikes. While sipping mate^{iv}, I said jokingly Roberto, "You know, we *will* fly kites in Yavi Chico". He laughed.

But it so happened that my casual remark came true and among the more vivid memories of this long voyage, is the visit we made to Escuela de Frontera N° 2 (Frontier school No. 2) Rosario Wayar, in the aboriginal community of Yavi Chico, province of Jujuy, where the kites finally came out to fly.

Yavi Chico

Situated on the border with Bolivia, and at 3400 meters above sea level, Yavi Chico is a small village with around 80 inhabitants. It is flanked by huge natural rock walls. To get there, one must take a winding gravelled road across the typical *jujeño* scenery, dotted with cactuses, prickly bushes and interesting wind and water-sculpted rock formations. Around Yavi Chico, however, there are green pastures, and several varieties of maize are grown, thanks to the rivers Quebrada de Cajas and Arroyo Yavi, whose confluence occurs near the village.

Besides the typical adobe Andean dwellings, there is a small chapel, Nuestra Señora de Luján, and close by, Escuela de Frontera N°. 2 Rosario Wayar. A welcome sign, which also offered tourist information, encouraged us to enter the premises and introduce ourselves.



The Children and the Maize

We were warmly received by the school director, María Cristina Yurquina, who showed us around. In a luminous multipurpose hall, which serves as dining-room and general meeting place, decorated with mobiles and other crafts made by the children, María Cristina gave us a detailed description of the work carried out by the school. The educational project, under the title *“El maíz, ese grano de oro americano”* (Maize, the golden American kernel), is based on using this large grain plant in an interdisciplinary way involving many aspects of school activity and daily life. More than twenty varieties of maize are produced in the area, this being the principal source of subsistence of the inhabitants. The school has a small farming project, in which traditional farming methods and knowledge are applied to raising the different plant varieties. Also corn-based dishes are prepared throughout the school year, and crafts are made, using the different-coloured grains and husks. Finally, a great deal of work is dedicated to recovering, classifying, and teaching traditional songs, legends and customs, with the object of preserving and defending the local indigenous culture. Listening to the children's ideas and daily experiences, with maize as a trigger for opening the dialogue, has served an essential purpose, explained Maria Cristina: before this project existed, communication with the children and their families was much harder to attain.

The Kites

After this very interesting introduction, during break, we flew a delta-box and a diamond kite in

the soccer and basketball court, with the children and some teachers. For some it was a novel experience, and we had a team of little helpers, excitedly jumping around us, playing with the diamond kite's tails and asking to hold the reel.





“So, would you like to do a kite workshop?”, I asked tentatively, before going to lunch.

Yes of course! After lunch, the art teacher gathered a group of eight of the older children, who had been invited to make kites. I had made a small list of the materials we would need: dowels? Plastic bags, lightweight paper perhaps? Any kind of sticky tape? Just a little worried about how and what sort of kite we could make in the hour or so we had left.

I need not have worried at all. The children brought bunches of a kind of reed or bulrush – I think it was *titora* – which I had never seen before, newly cut, light and strong enough for our purpose. There were some long rectangular pieces of transparent plastic sheet, a bit heavy, but there was no other material available, sticky tape, and cotton string. Due to the shape of the plastic sheet, the best option seemed to be square kites with long fringes. During the next forty minutes we worked together on the tables in the multipurpose hall and as a result, six transparent long-fringed squares were ready, just in time to fly before the school day ended. We did not decorate them: the children were so eager to fly their kites, that I suggested they did this with their art teacher on some other occasion.

Back to the court, under the blazing afternoon sun, we spent the next strenuous half-hour getting the kites to fly. The breeze was much milder and irregular than it had been in the morning, but fortunately, for a while, and with much effort and perspiration, we were able to get all the kites up into the sky. Running at more than three thousand meters above sea-level is absolutely exhausting! So concentrated were we on flying the kites that we did not take

many pictures, which of course I feel sorry about now.



And then it was time to say goodbye. María Cristina gave us brochures and small handicrafts, and asked us to share with others about her little school and the maize project.

I called her recently to let her know I was writing this article. She told me that they had been flying kites again and one piece of good news was that the school now has a projector and a camera, thanks to a subsidy.

All that is left to say is that should you ever visit the area, do drop by the little rural school in Yavi Chico. It could be a heartwarming experience, and a way to contribute to their valuable educational projects.



- i **Bariloche**, is a city situated in the foothills of the Andes on the southern shores of Nahuel Huapi Lake. It is a major tourism centre.
- ii The **Quebrada de Humahuaca** is a narrow mountain valley located in the province of Jujuy in northwest Argentina, 1,649km (1,025mi) north of Buenos Aires . It is about 155 km (96mi) long, oriented north-south, bordered by the Altiplano in the west and north, by the Sub-Andean hills in the east, and by the warm valleys (*Valles Templados*) in the south.
- iii The **vicuña** (*Vicugna vicugna*) is a wild South American camelid, which lives in the high areas of the Andes. It is a relative of the llama. Vicuñas produce small amounts of extremely fine wool, which is very expensive because the animal can only be shorn every 3 years and has to be caught from the wild. When knitted, the product of the vicuña's fur is very soft and warm. It is understood that the Inca valued vicuñas highly for their wool, and that it was against the law for any but royalty to wear vicuña garments.
- iv **Mate** is a traditional South American infusion, particularly in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and the southern states of Brazil. It is prepared from steeping dried leaves of yerba mate (*Ilex paraguariensis*) in hot water.