

Long History: AHA Bolivia

Years ago, Anna Hosbein travelled to Bolivia to engage in some community development work with a Trappist monk. On her return flight back to the States, she sat next to Carlos Aliaga, a man who would soon after become her husband. Carlos had been working on environmental issues with campesinos (farmers) in the Cochabamba area of Bolivia when the couple met. On one of his many trips to visit the remote communities, a farmer gifted him two baby puma cubs. Someone had killed the mother puma and a local campesino was left with two cubs barely one week old in his care. The farmer didn't possess the resources needed to care for the cubs, not even having enough milk to give to his own children, and so gifted the cubs to Carlos. Carlos accepted with great gusto and took them home to his wife Anna who was seven months pregnant with their first child at the time. At the same time, an Italian man the couple knew had a full grown puma that he was going to kill because of the horrible guttural screaming noise pumas make. Carlos of course offered to care for that puma as well instead of having it killed.

With no luck, after calling all surrounding national parks and zoos to find a home for the pumas, the Aliagas decided the only recourse would be to build a habitat for the pumas in their own home. The cubs had run of the house and garden while a cage was built right next to their bedroom for the other adult puma. The couple would argue about whose turn it was to get up in the middle of the night to calm the screaming pumas or feed them their favorite meal of cow's head and lungs.

When Anna was close to giving birth to their first child however, it was decided the pumas had to find another home. Initially they rented a small, unfinished lot near the house for the cats but the lack of natural habitat for the animals was unappealing to Anna and Carlos.

Previously, Carlos had bought a piece of land on the well-known Isla del Sol for the woman who helped raise him. This woman had been an indentured servant on the Isla years ago and had escaped at the age of 14. Carlos's mother took her in when Carlos was quite young and so she helped raise him. She didn't end up going back to the property Carlos had purchased for her, so Carlos instead reached out to the Isla del Sol community to ask if they would harbor 3 grown pumas. The community welcomed the idea. Anna and Carlos then proceeded to construct a large enclosed puma habitat on the island.

After a fairly adventurous trip from Cochabamba to the Isla del Sol with 3 grown pumas in cages in the back of 2 Broncos and then a short boat trip, they finally reached the new home for the cats. Unfortunately, within the first 10 minutes of being in the enclosure, one of the pumas figured out how to jump over the high rock walls and proceeded to kill 5 goats of a neighboring farmer. Anna and Carlos grabbed the escaped puma to capture her lest she should do any more damage. The habitat obviously wouldn't do, so the

Aliagas had to have a wire mesh roof put on the space. The roof however would take up to 3 months to complete. Luckily, the local farmers came to the rescue suggesting housing the 3 large pumas in the community church, since the priest didn't show up often anyway. When all was settled on the island, Anna and Carlos then hired a caretaker to look after the pumas – all of which cost about \$200 per month, a significant sum in Bolivia.

To help finance the cost of this puma habitat, Carlos and Anna bought a stock of Bolivian handmade artisanal products and took them to the United States to sell. This little artisanal fundraising venture turned out to generate enough cash to finance the pumas for one full year. The problem was that pumas live for at least 14 years; so future financing was still a challenge.

At the time, Anna and Carlos were both working as teachers at a local private school. After some political changes in the school and differences of opinion, many teachers sought other occupations or schools to work in. Serendipitously, Anna had just received an inheritance from her grandfather so she and Carlos decided to create Project Z. Project Z essentially financed 5 of Anna's former colleagues (including Anna herself and her husband) to pursue research or social development projects of their choice for one year. During this same time, an old college friend from the U.S., Tia Wou, had contacted Anna. Tia was working with Georgio di St. Angelo in New York and wanted to create a fashion label of her own. In 1994 Tia had come up with the idea of a leather handbag that could be converted into a backpack (the "Bucket Bag") and needed a sampling and production house. Anna had witnessed the artistry of Bolivian handcrafts during the fundraising efforts for the pumas and decided she could make this her one-year project through Project Z.

Anna contacted a small local Bolivian workshop to make the initial "Bucket Bag" prototypes. Tia participated in a New York show to promote the new bag and received incredible feedback along with many orders. The two women decided to form a partnership to create a leather and cloth hand bag company called Tote Le Monde – Tia would serve as the marketer and Anna would manage the production house in Bolivia. At first, their signature was a convertible leather and fabric handbag.

Working on marketing and promotion in New York, Tia met and cultivated many new clients for the newly formed business. Many of those very first clients are still with AHA Bolivia today!

At the same time that Tote Le Monde was having success in the New York markets, Francesca of i golfini della nonna had been put in touch with Anna to do some knit production. Francesca and her mother wanted to start a high-end hand knit baby clothing line based on her Italian grandmother's work. Being ever resourceful, Anna searched Bolivia for hand knitters and, together with Janet Nagel, started doing the baby clothing production. The i golfini della nonna pima cotton pieces became very successful, leading

to Anna's decision to start an additional knit production company. One of her former colleagues of the Project Z group, Janet Nagel, started this company: Zoe Knits (based off the Project Z name).

At that point, Anna and her partners had created a knit company and a separate bag company. In order for Tote Le Monde to expand and to utilize and showcase all of the intricate handwork available in Bolivia, Anna and her partner started adding different techniques to the company's repertoire. Anna had been observing the durable market bags Bolivian women use for their weekly produce shopping and showed Tia the recyclable plastic material used to make the market bags. The partners determined the new material would be a hit and started sourcing it in several countries in South America. In 1998, the concept of the "American Market Bag" had been introduced. The classic plastic mesh "American Market Bag" is now the very popular signature line of Tote Le Monde.

After years of fruitful partnerships, both of Anna's partners decided to leave the businesses to concentrate on their families (2005). Anna then decided the most efficient thing to do would be to meld the two companies together to form one versatile and experienced production house based in Bolivia. AHA Bolivia was created to meet the needs of both handbag and knitwear production, all the while maintaining the social responsibility the company had been founded upon.