Richard Stallman's blog

Richard's blog (http://agia.fsf.org/rms-blog), from September 2004 to October 2004

Richard Stallman

Bolivia (La Paz) (August 12, 2004 to August 17, 2004)

I am now visiting La Paz, Bolivia. The city is on the edge of the altiplano, starting on the plain at 13000 feet and running down through a connected series of valleys. The result is amazing beauty. Traveling between neighborhoods often means seeing marvelous vistas. The snow-capped mountain Illimani can also be seen from much of the city.

Fig. 1: La Paz in Bolivia
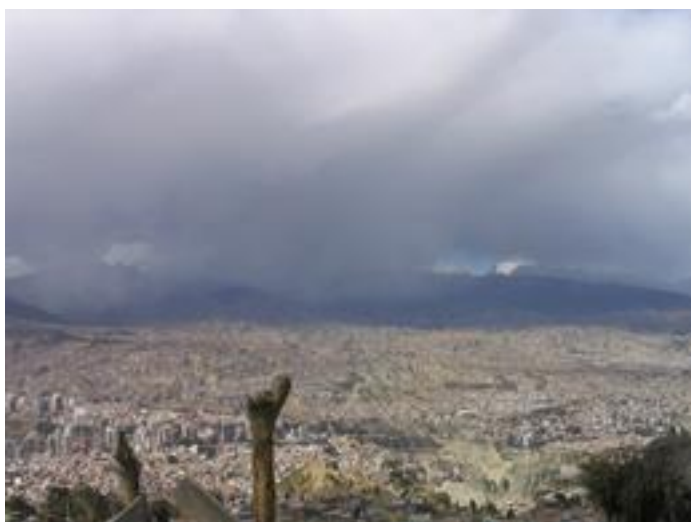
I'm staying in the house of the free software supporter who arranged my speech here. It is on the southern and lower side of the city, in the neighborhood called "Amor de Dios". As an Atheist, I do not like the name very much, but the beauty is amazing. The neighborhood is situated in a valley perhaps 1000 feet across, between a small river and a fairly steep ridge. The ridge runs up from the wall of this house.

Three long streets run parallel to the river. On the other side of the river there is a narrow park and a craggy red cliff. The river was panned for gold hundreds of years ago, and the ridge is said to have some too, but apparently not worth mining.

Today we took a walk up a stairway to a path that goes along the ridge for the length of the neighborhood. The views along the path are marvelous and sooner or later I will get the photos onto stallman.org. We also climbed another stairway to a peak on the ridge, perhaps 50 feet further up, which led to a wood-and-rope bridge that I would not have wanted to cross even if it were in good condition. That stairway was not in good condition either, and about 10 feet of it was so sloping that I was scared to climb down it, scared of falling and once again breaking an elbow or something else. My friends used a large stick to hollow out horizontal places to step, and then with help I was able to climb down. Then they joked that the city ought to pay them for the maintenance work.

The audience for my speech yesterday was disappointingly small; I am told that the students who were supposed to put up posters had a dispute with the director of the computer science department, and went on strike by not putting up the posters. How self-defeating. The other main speaker had been called away on work just a few days before, but he wrote down his speech and it was read for him.

Bolivia is land-locked, so when I said that piracy consists of attacking ships, not of sharing with your neighbor, I said that piracy isn't a problem in Bolivia. Then I remembered that Bolivians still feel strongly about the outlet to the sea that Chile conquered in 1878. So I added, "at present".

Despite the low turnout, the speech has had some good results already. People from the Ministry of Education at-

tended, and have invited me to speak at the ministry on Monday. They are already starting projects to use free software in the schools, and I hope to introduce them to people in Argentina, Brazil and Spain that can give help and advice.

On my next-to-last day in La Paz, I went to see the ancient ruins of Tiwanaku, and Lake Titicaca. My hosts and I hired a taxi for the whole day - it was the only way to go. When we got to Tiwanaku, we took a little too long eating lunch, which forced us to hurry a bit visiting the ruins and the museum.

However, I was glad to have that lunch, because I got to eat a soup with quinoa. Quinoa is a grain that was originally domesticated in the Andes, and I love it, and I had been surprised and a little disappointed not to find any. The reason turns out to be snobbishness: quinoa is considered "what the Indians eat", so Hispanics generally won't serve it. (How ironic that in the US you only encounter quinoa in fancy restaurants where the chefs invent new dishes all the time.) My hosts, who are great cooks, reject this snobbishness and often prepare and eat quinoa themselves, but they felt that it wouldn't be right to make quinoa for a guest like me. So they made rice instead, which isn't nearly as much fun. However, after I showed them how much I like quinoa, they decided to start. What they made that night, I loved so much that I couldn't bear to stop eating it.

We reached Lake Titicaca just before nightfall. On the way back, we were at 4000 meters in a thinly populated area, and the stars were so beautiful that I looked at them for many minutes before pulling out my computer to start to answer mail.

On Monday, my last day in La Paz, I gave a brief speech at a university, where hundreds of students had come (no publicity foul-up like the previous time), then a meeting with the Ministry of Education, where the people said they needed to use free software more in the schools, but they could not find people from whom to obtain technical support. Apparently they have no awareness of the hundreds of enthusiastic students who had come to my talks in various cities, showing a vigorous community.

Peru (Lima and Arequipa) (August 17, 2004 to August 22, 2004)

After La Paz, I went to Peru. In Lima I gave three speeches at three universities on three consecutive days, which was rather exhausting since each made a big event of it. Then I went to Arequipa, an inland city to the south of Peru. After

I gave a speech for the GNU/Linux User Group there, they took me to a bullfight.

This was not a Spanish-style bullfight where humans kill a bull. Instead, two bulls fight each other until one of them runs away. Neither the humans nor the bulls get hurt, at least not usually. Although I could see how one can find it exciting, contests don't continue to fascinate me - and the delays between the matches are long. So after 4 matches I said "let's go". (We had to go home to get my things before we could head for the airport.) The photos from Arequipa are now here (`http://stallman.org/photos/peru/arequipa`). The photos from Bolivia are here (`http://stallman.org/photos/bolivia`).

Just before leaving Lima I learned that the free software organization APESOL ("Asociación Peruana de Software Libre") has set up a web site for people to record that they offer free software support services. If I can put the right people together, maybe something similar can be set up for Bolivia, and this might show the ministry what it needs to see.

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Home (August 23, 2004)

I have been home now for almost two weeks, which is a long time for me. During this time I've set up two sets of 8-foot book-cases, where the front set rotates out to provide access to the back set. This seems to be a solution for the tall space in my new office. On Thursday I am heading for Geneva where consumer organizations are having a meeting about how to deal with WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization).

Geneva - WIPO (September 10, 2004)

This morning I arrived in Geneva for a meeting of consumer groups on how to deal with the problems caused by WIPO (an organization whose aim is to impose increased "intellectual property rights" on the public). One of my aims at the meeting is to explain why the term intellectual property rights (`http://www.gnu.`

org/philosophy/words-to-avoid.html#
IntellectualProperty) frames the issue in a way that is harmful to the public, and should be rejected entirely. I have to stay in a hotel this time - something I generally try to avoid, one reason being that hotels in Europe and many other countries participate in a system of surveillance, demanding to see your passport and record information. I wrote "submitted under protest" on the form. The hotel reception agent said, "I'm not the one asking for this; the police insist", and I responded, "Does that make it any better?"

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The hotel is supposed to have an internet facility, but it has been broken all day. The air conditioning was also not working, and by noon I called reception to report the problem. The agent came up and said, "The air conditioning system here is not very powerful - just wait another hour and the room will get cooler." I went back to work, then took a nap, and when I awoke at 3:30 it was clear the room was, if anything, warmer than before. I complained, and they admitted the system really was malfunctioning. They said that the company that was supposed to repair it was not answering the phone, and they put me in another room which was indeed somewhat cooler.

I turned on the air conditioning, which had been off while the room was unoccupied, and half an hour later I became aware that this room too was getting hotter. The air conditioning system was just heating instead! When I complained again, they admitted the air conditioning system had a central problem. All I could do immediately was turn the ventilation off and hope the room would cool a little.

I cannot sleep when I feel hot unless I am totally exhausted, so I began thinking about leaving; I said I wanted to stay in one of the company's other hotels instead, presuming that not all would have such problems, but they said I could not. I was making plans for how to go about leaving anyway, when the ventilator suddenly seemed to start spontaneously

Fig. 2: Oslo

to blow some cool air. I thought it was working - though now I am not sure - turning it up to maximum strength has not increased the cooling. I have the feeling that the staff have been manipulative, and less than truthful, at every stage of this. The hotel is part of the Manotel group, in case you're looking for hotels in Geneva not to stay in.

Norway (September 14, 2004 to September 19, 2004)

I went to Norway to speak at a Java conference, and I was probably the only person in the room who did not know the Java language. (I expect to be in Java a month from now, and I've been studying Indonesian on and off for a couple of years, but I have never learned to read Java.)

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I gave a quick explanation of free software and then explained about the Java Trap (http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/java-trap.html).

After that, and a speech at a university the next day, I went by car to the small town of Skei (pronounced somewhere between "shy" and "shay"), in the west of Norway where the fjords are. It is in the middle of mountains, some of which have glaciers. This was the first time I had been anywhere in Norway aside from Oslo. (I am guessing that the Oslo area became so populous and important because it is

the main flat part of the country.) On the way, and there, I took a lot of photos (`http://www.stallman.org/photos/norway`).

The glaciers are already considerably smaller than they once were. Go see them now, before global warming melts them.

In Skei there were also activists for computerized community currencies. They explained about how their system would work.

Luxemburg (September 27, 2004 to September 28, 2004)

Yesterday I visited Luxemburg for the first time. Now I have been in all the countries of the European Union.

My speech yesterday was something I rarely do: a debate. The first speaker was a patent lawyer. The organizers said it would be easier to set up the event if they could invite him too, and this person wasn't a cunning orator, so I took the risk - and I wiped the floor with him.

His speech presented fine examples of all the common confusions that I like to explain in my speeches about software patents. Not that he himself was confused - he was only trying to lead the audience astray. For instance he referred to "patenting software", which implies that software idea patents cover entire programs. He also described software idea patents as a way to "protect software", from which one would never guess that the main effect of software patents on software developers is to put them at risk of being sued. (See this link (`http://softwarepatents.co.uk/`) for more explanation.)

I'm told that an assistant to the relevant minister was there. Perhaps the speech will do some good. We are trying to ask various EU countries to change their votes on the issue; just a couple more small countries will be enough to win the battle.

This morning I woke up for no particular reason before 8am and could not get back to sleep. So I was willing to travel to the University of Luxemburg, where a newspaper interview was supposed to occur. Reportedly a control-freak PR person at the university had decided to make both me and the reporter go there, even though it would have been more convenient for both of us if the reporter had 'come to the place I was staying.

After that interview I took a few trains, and now I'm in Essen, Germany. After my speech here I have to take more trains to Amsterdam this evening. "Essen" means "eating", so it's delightfully ironic that my visit here is so short that I won't have time to eat.

Two hours from death? (September 30, 2004)

A week ago my plan was to give two speeches in Amsterdam on Wednesday Sep 29, then go to Paris on Sep 30. But in Geneva I learned that there was an e-Democracy conference in Paris on Sep 30 at which it would be useful for me to speak. Francis Muguet was organizing my participation, but it turned out on Tuesday that the only time I could speak was the morning.

So various people began trying to find a way I could get there early enough to do this. The last flight in the evening was too early, we discovered on Wednesday morning. There was a train leaving at 2020 which I could have taken if I ran out of the speech a little early and canceled my invitation to dinner. I was thinking of doing that when someone had the idea that people in the free software community could drive me to Paris. Ultimately we chose that solution. Three free software enthusiasts met me after dinner, borrowing my host's car.

Departure was scheduled for 10pm, but was delayed because my halo was missing. It had fallen out of its bag while that was in the back of a car, and rolled under a seat, where we did not see it. After looking in the other possible places such as the room where I had spoken, and not finding it, we searched the car thoroughly.

We should have dropped me off in Paris around 330pm, but we got lost there. They were following a navigation system in the car, and it got confused. When I recognized where we were headed and give directions, there was a misunderstanding that got us lost again. Eventually we ended up at the Etoile, and the navigation system started working. We got to Francis Muguet' apartment and they dropped me off. The three people from Amsterdam headed back, but did not arrive. They had an accident.

Despite the many things I had to do, I got about 3 hours of sleep before I had to go and speak. I gave a good short speech to a workshop (perhaps a third of the conference), and then Francis for me to do more. The French Minister of Industry was scheduled to speak that afternoon; he is the one who decides the French policy on software patents. It was arranged that I would be able to ask him a question for certain, if he accepted any.

While walking into the conference room, and discussing with Francis what I should say in my question, I received a phone call telling me that the car had crashed and one of the men who had driven with me was dead.

This was a sobering thought. I did not feel personal grief, because it was not a personal loss. The three were strangers who had helped me for the sake of free software, rather than

personal friends, and we only barely had begun to be acquainted. However, it was weighty to realize that someone had died because he had helped me get to Paris for this meeting. I did not feel guilt about his death - I did not cause the accident - but I felt a responsibility to make his death count for something.

I asked the minister whether France would sustain the European Parliament's vote against software patents. His answer showed total incomprehension; he spoke about the virtue of copyright and the "principle" of "intellectual property" (thus illustrating why people must reject the use of this term). I felt a sense of total failure. Francis told me he cried at this point.

As the minister was leaving, I had a chance to exchange a couple of sentences with him. He really did not know how patents affect software developers. Francis says that the minister wanted to talk with me further about the issue. I am on my way out of France right now, and may not have a chance to be back in Paris until it is too late. But maybe we can find someone else who can follow up on this contact.

It was only later, when I saw there had been some public discussion of whether I was in the car at the time of the accident, that I realized that I too had had a somewhat narrow escape. If the accident had happened two hours earlier, I would have been in it.

Australia (October 3, 2004 to October 18, 2004)

I was invited to Australia so as to speak at the Builder conference, which was canceled shortly before I got there (but they had already bought my tickets). This did not mean the visit was wasted, since I had arranged 9 other speeches. The Australian Senate had attached some conditions to the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement, and it looked like the US might reject the treaty as a result, which would give Australia a second chance to escape. I arranged to give several speeches about the danger of software patents.

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During the first week there I was contacted by someone who knows the parents of Hans Bakker, who died in the accident

Fig. 3: In Australia

returning from Paris. I got their address and sent them a message of condolence, which was not easy to write. Although the minister said he would meet with me, it seems this won't happen - there is only one occasion I could arrange to be in Paris between now and the vote scheduled for a month from now, and he can't make it then.

Half-way through my visit, Australia held a general election. The conservative "Liberal" party, which supports Bush and the treaty, gained support after a campaign based on lies. Howard lied to them about the war in Iraq, too.

Their previous electoral campaign, three years ago, was based on lies that boat people were throwing their own children into the water to force a rescue. After the election, navy personnel testified this was because their boat was in the process of sinking. So I was not really surprised when, a few days after the election, I heard on the radio that their optimistic economic projections were exaggerated and would not come to pass. Just goes to show, if you tolerate a government that lies about minor things like human rights and refugees and war, soon they will start lying about your money too.

The election outcome could give them control of the Senate, which could mean that Australia wastes its second chance and approves the treaty.

I spent much of election day going to visit a lorikeet named Scratchy, who I had had a wonderful time with on my previous visit several years ago. However, Scratchy was not in a friendly mood this time - he was in love with his bell, and didn't really want to play with anyone, and tended to nip at people.

Just before leaving Australia, I visited a couple of cockatiels that sat on my hand and shoulder and chattered. I tried to

teach them to say "Are you a bird?", but it must take more time than that.

Malaysia (October 19, 2004 to October 21, 2004)

I spent two days in Malaysia, where I had my first chance to try conversing in Malay (it is pretty similar to Indonesian, which I have been studying), and a chance to try the particular food tradition of people of mixed Malay and Chinese descent. My host said it was the only one likely not to be too spicy for me. However, one of the dishes that the waiter said was "not spicy at all" turned out to be too spicy for me to eat.

The next day was my speech, which went well. In the evening I visited the twin towers of Kuala Lumpur, which were beautiful. In the photos I took, they appear to curve towards each other - I think that is due to distortion in the wide-angle lense that I needed in order to get the whole of them into one photo.

Jakarta (October 21, 2004 to October 22, 2004)

The following day I managed to converse a little with the taxi driver on the way to the train to the airport. When I arrived in Jakarta, I was surprised to see a man with a sign with my name on it waiting at the exit from the jetway. It turned out he had been sent there to help me get through immigration and customs easily. Everything went completely smoothly with his help, and I was able to converse with him too. Also with my hosts that were with me in the car coming back, and at lunch. Most of them didn't eat, they just watched, as it is Ramadan. I took the opportunity to explain to them in Indonesian that MacDonalds' "fast food" is meant for helping people fast - not for eating.

It was quite a pleasure to feel that I can now speak a fourth language. However, it is a constant effort and I can only do it when I am feeling very awake. This morning I am finding it hard to handle sentences that yesterday I could handle easily.

We went to an outdoor dinner at the university where I am speaking, with many of the students involved in free software there. Bats were flying around just above our heads, as we had an appetizer which I first thought was made of broad and thick mushrooms soaking in coconut sauce. But they were not mushrooms, they were a sort of pancake that only looks like a mushroom to me. I sang the free software song.

Then a musical group began playing and singing in a style called campur sari, which is a fusion of western and Javanese music that I gather is rather popular; but it is too much western pop for my tastes. For a while they stopped and some girls performed a dance in a style from Aceh, mostly sitting down either each separately or in a line, involving a lot of clapping and moving in different synchronized groups that move through each other. That was interesting.

Then a singer came out and began singing "You're just too good to be true". I don't like American popular music terribly much, so I decided to flirt/tease by catching her eye and pretending I thought she was talking about me.

I was surprised by the response: she motioned for me to come and sing with her. (I should not have been surprised, because I've read about that custom.) Partly I tried to sing along with her, to the extent I remember that song (I'd never wanted to sing it), and partly in humoristic response, saying "You'll learn more about me soon".

Then she asked me to dance along with her, so I improvised a dance, combining my Balkan folk dance experience and what I've seen of Indonesian dancing. It was a big hit. But after about three minutes I was worn out and had to sit down. At that point I was a bit too tired to figure out how to explain this to her in Indonesian (she wanted me to continue). I had to say it in English, and then I felt disappointed with myself. She invited a few others to dance. Later several of us danced together. It was a lot of fun. I chatted with her (in English) for a while after her performance was done, as I waited for people to try to solve a network problem that prevented me from doing ssh to the GNU servers. The problem was impossible to solve, so I had to go to another building to do that mail transfer.

Copyright information

About the author

Richard Stallman is the founder of the GNU Project, launched in 1984 to develop the free software operating system GNU. The name "GNU" is a recursive acronym for "GNU's Not Unix".