

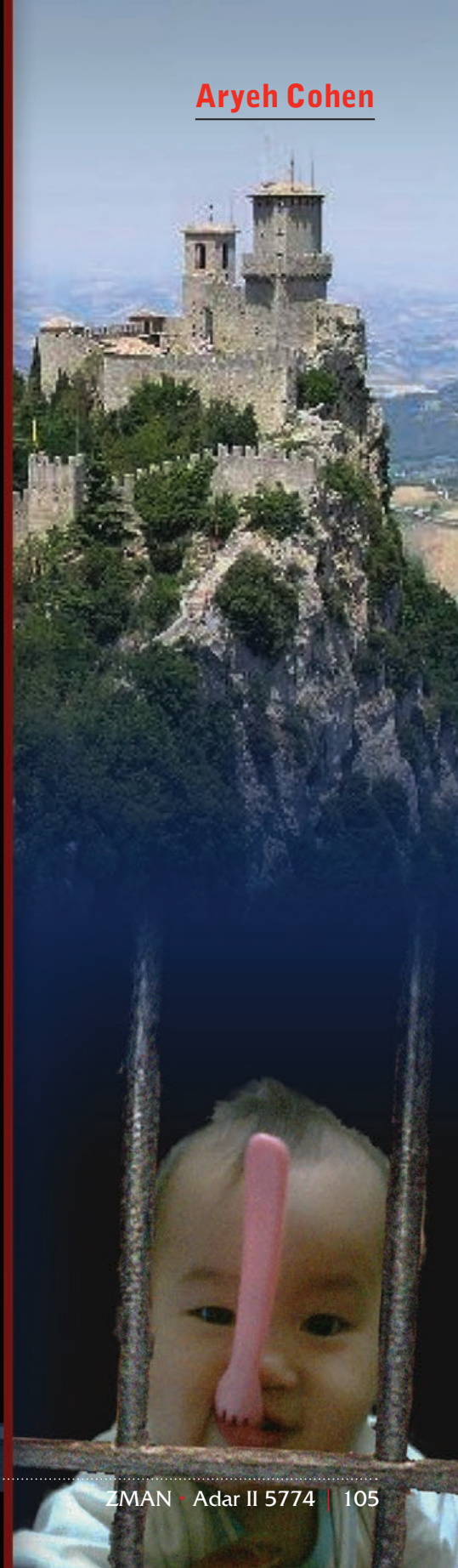
The World's Strangest Penitentiaries: Prisons To Make You Laugh... And Cry

America is known for having a tough justice system—one that can land a person in prison before he has a chance to realize he did anything wrong. And being behind bars in the US is a far cry from a walk in the park. While American prisons have brought many innocents to tears, some prisons make people laugh... at least those reading about them from outside.

Although many prisons around the world are overcrowded, unsanitary and unsafe—places where the inmates are subject to savage punishment, disease and death—some more closely resemble five-star hotels. In these places, prisoners are treated to good food and hot coffee; their cells are spacious and comfortable, resembling dorm rooms rather than prison cells, and are complete with televisions, mini-fridges, private bathrooms and scenic views—even though their inmates are some of the worst criminals.

Join us for a tour of some of the most bizarre prisons in the world.

Aryeh Cohen



Where the Cats Guard the Mice

Facility: Palmasola
Location: Santa Cruz, Bolivia

It is the worst prison on the South American continent. Over 3,000 criminals live under a reign of total anarchy. No law exists within the walls of this prison. The guards do not even enter; the facility is controlled by the inmates themselves. The jailbirds maintain their own government, complete with its own police force.

To obtain any privilege at all one has to bribe the hardcore criminals that rule—even for the right to sleep within the confines of a cell. Whoever cannot pay the fee must sleep under the open sky among the sewage and garbage bags.

We are only aware of conditions inside this prison because of one person who was sentenced to serve time there. This was Yakov Yehuda Ostreicher. As a result of a public outcry from America he was released to house arrest in Bolivia, may Hashem grant him complete freedom speedily. It was his plight that first brought the situation in Palmasola to the attention of the international media.

Ostreicher came to Bolivia in order to invest money in rice farms. The moment local officials began to suspect that he was profiting they threw him into Palmasola. He was not even formally charged in court and his possessions were confiscated. This incredibly corrupt land views any business activity that is not accompanied by generous bribes to be criminal. Under that standard, Ostreicher was declared a criminal.

It seems possible that Ostreicher was sentenced to Palmasola on the assumption that he could not last long in such a place. Beatings and murders are the norm, generally at the hands of the “prison police.”

To be appointed as prison police, one must have been sentenced to at least 30 years in Palmasola. This guarantees that the individuals who



Former FBI agent Steve Moore on a street of Palmasola prison in 2012.



Left: Ostreicher wears a bullet-proof vest to protect him from corrupt officials during his house arrest in Bolivia. Right: Ostreicher is freed in badly weakened condition after 18 months in Palmasola.

maintain “law and order” are the worst criminals. The authorities cannot possibly investigate who was behind a murder. All they can do is dispose of the body. The armed guards that surround the prison are there only to prevent escape.

Former FBI agent Steve Moore spent three days visiting Palmasola in 2012. Afterward, he wrote an article describing the experience. Here we summarize some of what he reported:

The prison is run by a council of prisoners who were not so much elected as they were the winners of a turf war. These “leaders” provide lodging, food and “order” for the prisoners—at least for those prisoners who have money to pay for it. Prisoners are not issued cells; new prisoners have to rent or buy their own cells. If they do not have money to rent or buy quarters, they sleep outside in the street amid the garbage. If a prisoner

does not have money to buy protection, he is at the mercy of any other prisoner with a desire for their blanket, or any person with a grudge or mental issue, and is therefore in great physical danger.

If a prisoner does not have enough money for food, he must eat the gruel provided by the prison daily, the greasy, soupy mixture of vegetables and questionable meat which is created in the prison kitchen/garbage dump. Sewage runs through open channels on every street,—that’s right, street. Palmasola Prison is a squalid village of small neighborhoods all within an approximately two square acre tract of swampy and uneven land surrounded by 20-foot concrete walls topped with concertina wire....

Gangs of security thugs called “Disciplina Interna” patrol the grounds and mete out “justice.” They also serve as spies for the cartel of prisoners running Palmasola.... Murders within the prison occur at the rate of about a dozen a year.... All members of the Interna are required to be “lifers” so that they will be loyal to the prison hierarchy, and also ensuring that all enforcement personnel are immensely violent murderers....

In La Paz, Bolivia’s capital, there is another prison that closely mimics Palmasola. This is the San Pedro facility which is also a village controlled by the inmates and where the prison guards do not enter. In comparison to Palmasola, San Pedro is far more sophisticated. In San Pedro, inmates can rent a prison cell, or they can “buy” it for the price of 1,800 bolivianos (around \$300). The especially rich can rent or purchase a luxury, three-story home with a kitchen and private bathroom. One prisoner even paid to have an additional room added to his cell so he could have a nice view of the city. Whoever cannot afford better accommodations is forced to sleep in overcrowded cells.

The San Pedro prison contains stores, play areas, restaurants and massive laboratories where drugs are produced. Around 80% of the prisoners at San Pedro are



Filthy swimming pool at the Palmasola prison.



Outside of the Palmasola facility.



San Pedro prison is a city in its own right.



Store in the San Pedro jail.