

Volunteer Orientation Packet

*Information about traveling
to and living in Bolivia*



**Sustainable
Bolivia**





INTRODUCTION TO BOLIVIA

General Information on Bolivia

Landlocked Bolivia is the fifth-largest country in South America and is bordered by Brazil, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Paraguay. The republic is home to more than 9,000,000 inhabitants, over half of whom live below the poverty line. Given the vast size of the country and its small number of inhabitants, Bolivia has the lowest population density in all of the Americas. This density ranges from less than one person per square kilometer in the southeastern plains to about ten per square kilometer in the central highlands. Bolivia has the highest proportion of indigenous people of any country in South America, with roughly two thirds of its population descended from native inhabitants.

Terrain and Culture

Much of the land is inhabitable as it boasts some of the most isolated, highest, coldest, warmest, windiest, driest and saltiest spots in the world. From the dramatic snow peaked mountains and bleak high altitude deserts of the Andes to the lush rainforests and enormous savannas of the Amazon basin, Bolivia embraces an incredible range of landscapes and climates. Not only does it have an astounding array of ecological zones, but also a huge ethnic and cultural diversity; there are 36 different indigenous groups in the country, which helps create an incredibly rich culture and ethnic traditions.

Economy

Although Bolivia is immensely wealthy in natural resources, the average per capita income is only \$2,800. When compared to a mean of \$8,200 for other Latin American countries, Bolivia is the poorest country in South America. These conditions make it nearly impossible for the people of Bolivia to adequately plan for the future and basic necessities, such as health care and education, are often out of reach. Approximately 90% of children attend primary school but often for a year or less.

There are many reasons for Bolivia's continued economic stagnation. The plummet in the price of tin in the early 1980's is often cited as a major factor in the decline of the Bolivian economy. This was followed by another economic blow in the late 1980s and early 1990s when western countries withdrew much of their aid. Lastly, perhaps the most important factor contributing to Bolivia's economic instability was the U.S. sponsored eradication of coca. The reduction of the coca crop caused a great loss of income to the Bolivian economy, especially to the country's poorest classes.

Bolivia's poverty can have a deterring affect on visitors to the region. However it is a wonderful place to visit as it is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural wonders and remains one of the safest places to travel in the Americas.





INTRODUCTION TO COCHABAMBA

With more than 900,000 inhabitants, Cochabamba is the fourth largest city in Bolivia. Like other large cities in the region, Cochabamba entertains extremes of wealth and poverty. Downtown Cochabamba is quite modern, with restaurants, bars, shops, and internet cafes lining the streets. Although the wealthiest neighborhoods lie on the outskirts of the city, much of the poverty is found further from the city center. Lacking technology, paved roads, electricity, and plumbing, those living in the outskirts of Cochabamba find shelter in half built adobe homes - a lifestyle starkly different from the wealthy areas.

The word Cochabamba comes from the Quechua '*qhucha*' and '*pampa*', meaning swampy plain, and its fertile soils produce an abundance of wheat, grains and fruits, and the area is generally acknowledged to be the agricultural heart of Bolivia. Set in a fertile bowl in central Bolivia, Cochabamba delights with its luscious Mediterranean-like climate, earning its nickname 'the City of Eternal Spring'. In addition to having the best weather and agricultural products, Cochabamba is also the unofficial culinary capital of Bolivia. It is home to sites such as "La Cancha", reputedly the largest open-air market in South America, and a 109 foot statue of the Cristo de la Concordia (a statue of Christ overlooking the city). Additionally, Cochabamba's central location makes it an ideal starting point to explore Bolivia. A two hour bus ride in one direction delivers you to the base of Tunari, a 17,000 foot mountain, while a three hour bus ride in the opposite direction places you in the vast tropical jungles of the Chapare.





WHAT DO I NEED TO DO BEFORE MY TRIP?

Passport

For travel into Bolivia your passport should be valid for at least 6 months beyond your travel dates. The majority of nationalities will require a visa, so the passport should contain at least two blank pages. Remember that you must allow up to 20 weeks for new or renewal passport applications.

Visa

For those from most Western European countries there is no need to apply for a visa and a 90 day stay is usually granted. Those from Canada, New Zealand and Australia need not apply either, however only a thirty-day stay is granted; this can easily be extended up to 90 days at immigration. Note that proof of tickets for onward travel and the Yellow Fever Vaccination Certificate may be requested, although it is extremely common to enter the country without proof of either.

US citizens are now required to apply for a visa. This is best done at the airport in Bolivia when you arrive in either La Paz or Santa Cruz. You **DO NOT** need to go to the Bolivian Embassy prior to your trip, regardless of what you may read on the internet. You will need a completed and signed visa application form, given to you on the plane, and \$135 (**this must be in dollars without any rips, tears, or folds**). You will get a tourist visa, permitting you entry for 90 days. Sustainable Bolivia has experience with immigration law and our lawyer can help answer any of your questions.

If you book your flight with American Airlines, please use our business account number, **832032**. It does not interfere with your own miles if you have a program with American.

Insurance

Travel insurance is always a good idea, as a plan with extensive coverage may cover everything from theft to doctor's bills to emergency return. Be sure to know the details of your policy, especially if you want to do extreme sports such as mountain climbing, whitewater rafting, mountain biking or even trekking. Below are a few travel insurance agencies that we recommend.

- World Nomad (www.worldnomads.com)
- Travel Guard (www.travelguard.com)
- Worldwide Insure (www.worldwideinsure.com)



When you arrive in Bolivia

Before taking off, make sure you have all our emergency contact information so that you can get in touch with us if your time of arrival changes. It is very important to remember to try to arrive sometime during the week during business hours or pick-up from the airport may not be available. Once you get through immigration at either La Paz or Santa Cruz and have your visa in hand, you will be able to buy your airline ticket at the BOA or Amazonas counters for a flight to Cochabamba.

If for some reason there are no available flights, or if you're feeling adventurous, you can take a taxi into either Santa Cruz or La Paz to get a bus. Taxis from the El Alto airport in La Paz or the Viru Viru airport in Santa Cruz can run from 40 to 70 Bs to the bus terminal. Buses between Santa Cruz or La Paz and Cochabamba will be normal, semi-cama (semi-bed), or cama (bed bus). Regular buses are the cheapest, least comfortable option, with semi-cama being the middle option, and the cama the most expensive, albeit the most comfortable. The routes between these cities are well traveled and there will be several buses of varying quality leaving throughout the day. Please see our budget section to get an idea of how much a bus ticket will cost.

WHAT SHOULD I BRING TO BOLIVIA?

Aside of the obvious clothing and toiletries, here are some items you may find useful during your stay in Bolivia. Keep in mind that many of these items are available in Cochabamba, so if you forget something, you can usually replace it with ease.

- Hiking shoes or boots
- Rain gear if coming during the rainy season
- Prescription medicine
- Contact lens solution (this is expensive in Bolivia)
- Adaptor for your electronic plugs
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent
- A few warm clothing items, the weather during the day is usually very warm but it can get cold, especially in the winter or if you travel to La Paz. If you plan to travel to the Salar de Uyuni or anywhere on the Altiplano, a winter jacket is recommended.
- Bathing suit
- Camera
- Spare set of glasses or a prescription
- Photocopies of all your important documents (passport, airline tickets, visa, yellow card, drivers license, travel insurance) and store them in a safe place.



HEALTHCARE

For anyone traveling abroad, health is always a key concern. Traveling often affects one's health, so good physical condition is imperative. With a few simple precautions, Bolivia should pose no health problems apart from the occasional bout of travelers' diarrhea. There are English-speaking doctors in most major cities.

Medicines

Most medicines can be bought without a prescription at your local pharmacy. However, if you are currently on prescription medication it is recommended that you make sure you have enough to cover the period of travel. When buying medication remember that the shelf life is reduced in hot conditions so always check the expiration date.

Travelers' diarrhea

This is the most common illness to affect travelers in Bolivia and, although inconvenient, is treatable. The diarrhea or vomiting is mainly due to food poisoning, usually passed on by the unsanitary habits of food handlers. To avoid infection make sure that fruit and vegetables are properly cooked, or if eaten raw that they are washed or peeled; tap water is not safe to drink but bottled water is readily available. Due to high altitudes tap water should be boiled for 3 minutes if being consumed. When eating from street vendors, make sure that the food is hot and prepared in front of you and avoid anything that has been sitting in the sun for hours. Always remember to practice personal hygiene and either wash your hands or use hand sanitizer.

Altitude

Most travelers fly into La Paz, and at 4,000m above sea level the airport is the highest in the world. Mild mountain sickness (*oroche*) is a possibility and although it doesn't affect everyone, it is wise to take some precautions. The most common symptoms of *oroche* are headaches, shortness of breath, fatigue, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, and insomnia. It can take anywhere from a few hours to a few days to begin feeling the effects of altitude sickness. The only way to combat it is with rest, painkillers, and perhaps an infusion of coca leaves, which is perfectly legal. You should walk slowly, not eat very heavy food, and avoid cigarettes and alcohol. If symptoms persist you must descend to a lower altitude and then ascend slowly in stages. You may also get medication such as Acetazolamide (Diamox) which can be used as a preventative and continued during the ascent.

Since La Paz can be quite cold, it is easy to forget how strong the sun actually is. Remember to protect yourself with a sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher and of to drink plenty of fluids.



Tropics

Malaria and dengue are prevalent in some departments. Both are spread by mosquitoes, which bite between dusk and dawn. The mosquitoes that thrive in Cochabamba do not carry disease, so although they can be annoying, they pose no threat. If planning a trip down to the Amazon basin and the tropics taking a course of anti-malarial tablets is strongly recommended. There is no antiviral treatment against dengue so the only way to avoid being bitten is to wear repellent and long sleeved clothing.

For further information consult your doctor or local travel clinic, or have a look at the websites mentioned above in the vaccinations section.

Recommended Vaccinations

- Hepatitis A or immune globulin (IG).
- Hepatitis B, if you might be exposed to blood (for example, health-care workers, medical treatment), have sexual contact with the local population or stay 6 months or more in the region.
- Rabies, if you might be exposed to wild or domestic animals through your work or recreation
- Typhoid, particularly if you are visiting developing countries in this region
- As needed, booster doses for tetanus-diphtheria and measles
- Yellow Fever vaccination
- Malaria (Malaria is not present in Cochabamba, however, if you plan to travel to the lowlands, including Santa Cruz, it is highly recommended)

Helpful Websites

World Health Organisation: www.who.int/ith

MD Travel Health: www.mdtravelhealth.com

UK: www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice

US: www.cdc.gov/travel

Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html



GENERAL INFORMATION

Budget

The cost of living in Bolivia is very low. This should give you an idea of what commonly purchased items cost:

- Public Transport – 2 to 4 Bs
- Taxis within city limits – 8-15 Bs
- Bus tickets to La Paz or Santa Cruz – 30 to 70 Bs
- Produce for one week – 20 Bs on average for one person
- Fruit for one week – 25 Bs on average for one person
- Milk – 5 Bs
- Wine – 25 to 40 Bs
- Coffee – 6 to 12 Bs
- Beer (large bottle) – 10 to 12 Bs
- 400 grams of pasta – 10 to 15 Bs
- 1 kilo ground beef – 35 Bs
- Bag of flour – 10 Bs
- Eggs – 80 cents per egg
- Lunch at a restaurant – 15 to 25 Bs for a completo (soup, a main course, salad, dessert)
- Shampoo/Conditioner – 10 to 25 Bs
- Soap – 10 Bs

The exchange rate is roughly 7 Bs to 1 Dollar or 10 Bs to 1 Euro

-Bolivia country code

+591

Time zone

GMT -4 hours (-3 in the summer)

Electrical current

220v at 50Hz. The outlets are of the 2 pin variety with round prongs (so remember to bring a converter/adaptor!) Most modern electronics are now compatible with 110v or 220v.

Communication

Internet cafes are on almost every street corner. Prices start at about 2 bolivianos (\$0.30) for the hour. Connections are generally very good, and most come equipped with a webcam and Skype. Most internet cafes will also have a call center from where you can make calls anywhere in the world. You can also buy a chip for your mobile phone for about \$5.

Postal services are generally very slow, may be quite expensive, and so are generally not recommended.

Business hours

Markets generally open at the crack of dawn and by 6am are in full swing. Businesses usually open at 9am and stay open until about 7pm. There is a 2 hour lunch break from 12 to 2, when everything comes to a standstill, except for restaurants serving lunch.

ATMs

ATMs/cash dispensers are readily available in most towns and have an English language option. They accept most cards and dispense in either bolivianos or dollars. In some cases the Bolivian bank or the traveler's bank will charge a fee when taking out money with a foreign card or with a foreign bank.

Travelers' Checks

Travelers' checks are not recommended, as there are no places in Cochabamba where they can be cashed.

Changing Currency

There are many locations where foreign currency may be changed for bolivianos. Vendors who change money can frequently be found on the street near the post office as well.

Currency

Bolivia's currency is called the boliviano, and comes in denominations of 10, 20, 50, 100 and 200 in notes and 10, 20 and 50 centavos in coins. Always ask for change in smaller denominations, as it is especially hard to find change in smaller towns. Most banks will often break larger bills at the teller windows.

Safety

Bolivia is one of the safest countries in all of the Americas. Naturally, some danger lies in the bigger cities. The most popular scam involves someone spilling something on you, and while you wipe it off, another pickpockets your wallet or slashes your bag. The key is to be vigilant, and always carry your bag on your front especially when in busy markets. There are several areas that are unsafe to walk around in after dark so ask our staff about areas to avoid and safe taxi services. Avoid walking around at night on your own, and never wear expensive jewelry or carry too much money on you. Always carry a copy of your passport and never get into a car with a police officer or someone else who you don't know.



Roadblocks may lead to delays and cancellations when traveling by bus, so always ask locals what the current situation is before embarking on a journey. Also, during the rainy season, floods and landslides make some roads impassable. Always prepare for trips in advance with extra snacks and water, in case of a roadblock.

Culture

When traveling to foreign places, it is important not to be judgmental of cultural norms that may seem odd to you. In Bolivia, a casual greeting upon entering and exiting a room is very important. A kiss on the cheek is common and in some places a kiss on both cheeks.



One thing that many people find both interesting and irritating is that Bolivians rarely say “I don’t know.” Rather than admitting to not knowing, a Bolivian will simply tell you wrong information. This happens a lot when asking for directions, so rely on maps more than people for getting around.

Laundry

Housekeepers are often open to doing laundry, but if you have a very large load, it is usually better to go to a local Laundromat. Either way, it costs about 10 bolivianos (\$1.35) per kilo of laundry. Also note that clothes are dried in the sun, so do not bring delicates.

TRANSPORTATION

By Air

It is likely that your first port of call will be either La Paz or Santa Cruz. As long as you have your documents in order, entry into Bolivia should be a breeze. Domestic air travel is relatively inexpensive and quick, especially during the rainy season when many roads may be washed out. You can either book online or directly at the airport. A flight from La Paz to Cochabamba takes around 35 minutes and costs about \$50-\$70.

Airport tax

The airport tax for national flights is \$2 and for international \$25 and must be paid before your departure. All airports will have a desk or cabin that might be labeled with the word *tasa* or *impuesto* (tax), where you will show your ticket and pay the fee. In exchange you will be given a sticker or ticket that must be shown with your ticket when you begin to board your flight.

Airlines in Bolivia

BOA (www.boa.bo)

Amazonas (www.amazonas.com)

TAM (www.tam.com.br)

AeroSur (www.aerosur.com)

By long distance bus (*flota*)

Buses are the most common way to get around Bolivia. There are many different companies all offering different levels of comfort, price, and safety record. The Bolivian road network has improved greatly in the past few years and travel by bus is relatively safe and cheap. You can buy bus tickets 24 hours in advance, which is advisable, however sometimes you can buy a ticket just as the bus is about to leave, for a lower price.

On the major long haul routes there may also be the option to take a sleeper bus option, which costs about twice, but means that you get more space, reclining seats, and if you're lucky, a toilet. This is especially recommended for overnight trips.

Also note that on bus rides that are four hours or less, there will not be a bathroom on the bus nor a stop made to use one.

Bus trips from Cochabamba and their average costs

DESTINATION	TIME IN HOURS	COST
La Paz	8 to 10 Hours	\$5
Oruru	4 Hours	\$3
Santa Cruz	10 to 12 Hours	\$7
Sucre	10 Hours	\$6
Trinidad	26 Hours	\$8
Villa Tunari	3 Hours	\$2

Micros, Minibuses, and Trufis

These are Bolivia's least expensive forms of transportation. They follow set routes, but you can get on and off anywhere along the route. The number and letter system may be a bit intimidating at first, but are easy to learn. *Trufis* can be either minibuses or cars (a collective taxi), which work in the same way as





micros. Fares are generally about \$0.20.

Taxis

Taxis are also an easy but slightly more expensive way to get around town. Taxis do not come equipped with meters, so be sure to negotiate the fare before getting in. One dollar to a dollar and fifty cents is usually enough to get across town. Fares are not set and the number of people taking the cab will alter the price. Taxi drivers often do not know street names, so knowing a major landmark helps. Always carry small change, as drivers do not carry much change. Never get into a taxi that has anyone else aside from the driver already inside. Robberies often occur when two people work together to get someone inside a taxi and then rob them.

Trains

Currently, trains only travel from Oruro and go south to the Argentine and Chilean borders and from Santa Cruz to the Brazilian border. If traveling to Uyuni, it is best to take the train, as opposed to the rocky bus route.

ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD

Climate and Weather

Bolivia's extreme geographical variations offer a wide range of climatic patterns. The cities of La Paz and Potosí often experience very cold temperatures and sometimes snow, while the Altiplano region is prone to severe flooding. In the lowlands, the weather is quite tropical- very warm and humid. Cochabamba is said to have perfect weather, always sunny and warm during the day and a bit cooler at night. Bolivia's rainy season lasts from November to March.

Meals

Although Bolivian food is not internationally renowned, it is delicious and always fresh. Bolivians use locally grown produce and, because of vast regional differences, ingredients depend on your location. For example, in the altiplano, food is starchier, whereas in the lowlands, fish and vegetables dominate plates.

A typical breakfast consists of little more than coffee and a bread roll, which is usually followed by a midmorning snack. The most popular Bolivian snacks are salteñas, tucumanas, and empanadas. All three are pastry puffs stuffed with either cheese or a mixture of meat, gravy, and vegetables. Street vendors sell them until early afternoon. Lunch is the biggest meal of the day. Local restaurants serve *almuerzos* for about \$2. An *almuerzo* consists of a soup, entrée (meat, rice,





OTHER RESOURCES

and potato), dessert, and juice or soda. Dinner is lighter than lunch and can be either a meal or just bread and tea.

Although vegetarianism is not very common, there are several vegetarian restaurants in Cochabamba and fruits and vegetables are readily available at the market, which makes being a vegetarian completely do-able. If eating at a non-vegetarian restaurant, be aware that your meat substitute will most likely be more rice.

Water

It is not safe to drink the water in Bolivia. Bottled water is cheap and readily available. Hot beverages are usually made with tap water- this is fine, as long as the water has been boiled for several minutes. Additionally, be wary of ice in restaurant drinks as they are often made with tap water. If you are ever unsure of the source of your water, don't be shy to ask.

Where to Go

Cochabamba prides itself on its extensive array of restaurants. The main roads in Cochabamba are literally lined with restaurants and cafes, big and small. There are far too many good eateries in the city to list them all. Don't be afraid to go out and explore- major restaurants are safe and clean.

Recommended Bolivia related reading

- *A Concise History of Bolivia* by Herbert Klein
- *The Complete Bolivian Diaries of Che Guevara and Other Captured Documents* by Ernesto Guevara with Daniel James ed.
- *Culture Shock: Bolivia* by Mark Cramer
- *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines* by June Nash
- *Llamas, Weavings and Organic Chocolate: Multicultural Grassroots Development in the Andes & Amazon of Bolivia* by Kevin Healy
- *Bolivia: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* by Pete Good

Useful Websites

- Sustainable Bolivia www.sustainablebolivia.org
- Currency Exchange www.xe.com
- Footprint www.footprintbooks.com
- Lonely Planet www.lonelyplanet.com
- Bolivia.com www.bolivia.com
- Written Press www.prensaescrita.com/america/bolivia.php



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