



## **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, almost two-thirds 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 third 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. For those nationalities that require a visa, 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 at immigration. Note that proof of tickets for onward travel and the Yellow Fever Vaccination Certificate may be requested. In the past non-US volunteers staying beyond 90 days were permitted to cross the border and come back, extending their stay in Bolivia another 90 days. However, in late 2009 a memo was sent out to all border officials stating that immigration officers may do this using their own discretion. Therefore, it is no longer a guarantee that non-US citizens will be granted re-entry and another 30 to 90 days. Sustainable Bolivia is looking into ways to work around this so please enquire with a staff person if this may apply to your stay in Bolivia.

US citizens are now required to apply for a visa. This may be done directly at your local embassy or at the airport in Bolivia. You will need a completed and signed visa application form (see <http://bolivia.usembassy.gov/btouristvisarequirements.html> to download form), **which you must bring with you on your journey**, one passport photo, a copy of hotel confirmation or a letter of invitation (to be provided by Sustainable Bolivia), a copy of a round trip airline ticket, or travel agency itinerary, proof of funds (a copy of a bank statement or a credit card), a yellow fever vaccination certificate, and \$135. You will get a tourist visa, permitting you entry for 30 days, which can easily be extended for up to 90 days at the embassy in Cochabamba. Sustainable Bolivia has experience with immigration law and our lawyer can help answer any of your questions.

NB If you are a US citizen please avoid flying directly into Cochabamba from another country; it is much better to fly via La Paz or Santa Cruz and then on to Cochabamba, as immigration there will deal with your visa application much more effectively.

If you are flying with American Airlines be especially sure to have the visa application form printed and filled out prior to your trip so as to avoid any problems with the airline, which may demand it when you depart from the US.

### **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. A policy that provides emergency airlift evacuation is highly recommended. Below are a few travel insurance agencies that we recommend.

- World Nomad ([www.worldnomads.com](http://www.worldnomads.com))
- Travel Guard ([www.travelguard.com](http://www.travelguard.com))
- Worldwide Insure ([www.worldwideinsure.com](http://www.worldwideinsure.com))

## WHAT SHOULD I BRING TO BOLIVIA?

\*Items with an asterisk may be easily purchased in Cochabamba

- Hiking shoes or boots
- Inflatable travel pillow for long bus rides
- Rain gear if coming during the rainy season (November through February)
- Earplugs
- Swiss Army Knife
- Alarm clock\*
- Prescription medicine
- Tampons (available, but in limited varieties)
- Flashlight/headlamp
- Contact lens solution (if staying in rural areas)
- Electrical converter/adaptor
- Padlock(s)
- Sunscreen\*
- Hand sanitizer\*
- Sunglasses (make sure they have a proper UV-filter)\*
- Insect repellent
- Warm clothing (Cochabamba is at 2500m and La Paz at 3600m above sea level)
- Cool clothing (temperatures remain fairly warm during the day year round but will drop in the evenings, especially during the winter season)
- Bathing suit
- Camera
- Spare set of spectacles 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 stomach-related illnesses. 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 (*soroche*) is a possibility and although it doesn't affect everyone, it is wise to take some precautions. The most common symptoms of *soroche* 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. An over the counter pill called 'Sorochepil' may be purchased at the small shops in the La Paz airport. If you begin to feel the effects of the altitude while in La Paz you may purchase one of these pills for a few bolivianos and it may relieve most of your symptoms.

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
- Malaria (Malaria is not present in Cochabamba, however, if you plan to travel to the lowlands, including Santa Cruz, it is highly recommended)

### **Required Vaccinations:**

- Yellow fever vaccination  
(Don't forget to ask your doctor to fill out a "Yellow Card" as this will be asked for when applying for a visa.)

Helpful Websites:

World Health Organisation: [www.who.int/ith](http://www.who.int/ith)

MD Travel Health: [www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)

UK: [www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice](http://www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice)

US: [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)

Canada: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html)

## **GENERAL INFORMATION**

### **Bolivia country code:**

+591

### **Time zone:**

GMT -4 hours (-3 in the summer)

### **Electrical current:**

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

### **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 6.am 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. Always remember to ask for your card back

### **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, and petty crime has been on the increase in recent years. 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. Avoid taking random taxis at night.

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, in their effort to be helpful, don't always admit to not knowing something. This can happen when asking for directions, so rely on maps as well as 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:**

TAM, BoA and Aerosur are the 3 main airlines serving Bolivia. We recommend [TAM](#) and [BoA](#) over [Aerosur](#) due to past experiences and cost difference. Booking tickets online can be difficult; you may prefer to operate via a travel agent or purchase directly at the airport. However, you can make reservations in advanced on the websites of BoA and AeroSur. It is likely that your first entry point in Bolivia will be either La Paz or Santa Cruz. As long as you have your documents in order, entry into Bolivia should be no problem, but **we ask that you avoid taking an international flight (e.g. from Buenos Aires or Sao Paolo) directly into Cochabamba as immigration there can be less efficient.** Domestic air travel is relatively inexpensive and quick, especially during the rainy season when many roads may be washed out. A flight from La Paz to Cochabamba takes around 25 minutes and costs about \$50.

### **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:** LAB ([www.labairlines.com.bo](http://www.labairlines.com.bo))  
BoA ([www.boa.bo](http://www.boa.bo))  
AeroSur ([www.aerosur.com](http://www.aerosur.com))  
Amazonas ([www.amazonas.com](http://www.amazonas.com))  
Aerocon ([www.aerocon.info](http://www.aerocon.info))  
TAM ([www.tam.com.br](http://www.tam.com.br))

### **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 (*bus cama*, ideally with 3 not 4 rows), which costs significantly more, 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.

**Below is information about bus trips from Cochabamba and their average costs:**

Cochabamba to La Paz:  
7 hours  
Cost: \$5

Cochabamba to Oruro:  
4 hours  
Cost: \$3

Cochabamba to Santa Cruz:  
10 hours  
Cost: \$7

Cochabamba to Trinidad:  
26 hours  
Cost: \$8

Cochabamba to Sucre:  
10 hours  
Cost: \$6

Cochabamba to Villa Tunari:  
3 hours  
Cost: \$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.

## **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.

## **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. It can be harder to travel by land during this period, especially to the north and east.

## **Food and Drink**

### **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 mid-morning 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, 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 weary 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, as 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 Jay 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](http://www.sustainablebolivia.org)
- Currency Exchange [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com)
- Footprint [www.footprintbooks.com](http://www.footprintbooks.com)
- Lonely Planet [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)
- Bolivia.com [www.bolivia.com](http://www.bolivia.com)
- Written Press [www.prensaescrita.com/america/bolivia.php](http://www.prensaescrita.com/america/bolivia.php)