Bolivia

Country Facts
Population: 9,775,246
Languages: Spanish, Quechua, Aymara
Predominant Religions: Christian (Roman Catholic)
Time Zone: Four hours behind Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 220 volts, 110 volts. 110 Volts in La Paz; 220 Volts in the rest of the country
Telephone Codes: 591, country code; 2, La Paz city code; 3, Santa Cruz city code; 4, Cochabamba city code

Introduction:
Local tour groups have proliferated in Bolivia, with many offering hikes along the Inca Trails, the twisting roads and pathways that knit the ancient empire together. On adventurous outings, visitors glide along remote jungle rivers or cross the nesting grounds of hundreds of species of tropical birds. Other tours follow in the footsteps of “Che” Guevara. As one of the poorest and least developed countries in South America, Bolivia tends to be a little rough around the edges. However, these same “rough-cut” qualities offer special appeal for those ready to follow in the paths of the Incas.

Compassion in Bolivia:
Compassion International’s work in Bolivia began in 1978. As of 2010 more than 54,500 children participate in more than 190 child development centers. The Child Survival Program serves more than 1,100 mothers or caregivers and their babies through 22 centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 105 students. Compassion partners with churches and denominations to help them provide Bolivian children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- During personal introductions, maintain steady eye contact and offer a slight nod. Both men and women shake hands (however, if a person’s hand is wet or dirty, you may be offered an arm or elbow instead), but when greeting a woman, you should wait until she offers her hand. If you are a woman, offer your hand first.
- In smaller groups — both business and social — the host will introduce guests individually; in larger groups, you generally introduce yourself. Close friends and family members often greet each other with the traditional “abrazo”—starting with a hug, a handshake, two or three pats on the shoulder and another handshake. If your host puts you on your shoulder, it is a sign of friendship and you may return the gesture if you feel comfortable doing so. Also, women to men or vice versa give two kisses on the cheeks.
- Bolivians speak with each other at closer quarters than most people do in North America. Resist the urge to back away.
- When making conversation, sports are very popular, and they make a good icebreaker in discussions. Not so with politics, and bringing up neighboring countries can be especially
troublesome, as historically Bolivia has suffered an unbroken series of military defeats, including the loss of its coastline to Chile. There are ethnic sensitivities to be observed, as well. The country is made up of whites, mestizos [of mixed European and Amerindian ancestry] and full-blooded Amerindi ans or indígenos.

- When visiting someone, you should bring a small gift. Some gifts are considered either "bad luck" or too personal and should be avoided; these include clothing, knives, scissors or any other sharp objects such as letter openers, and any items bearing the color purple. Never give odd-numbered items. Gifts should also be modest, perhaps a token of your country or business, and only given after establishing a relationship.
- Hosts often give small gifts to their guests, which are not opened in front of the giver. Guests are expected to call their hosts by their first name preceded by a “Don” or “Dona” to show friendship.
- Women in Bolivia maintain “secondary” status, although they often form the backbone of small-scale enterprises and are generally afforded considerable personal freedom.
- Certain protocols about eating exist in Bolivia. If you enter a room where others are eating, you should say, "buen provecho" [similar to bon appetit]. You are expected to eat everything on your plate and are generally not excused from the table until everyone has finished. If you compliment the food during the meal, you will be served another helping.
- In a restaurant a 10 percent gratuity is included on the bill and an additional 5 percent may be left for good service.
- Bolivia has hundreds of varieties of potatoes that are prepared in a wide variety of ways. Most foods are fried and seasoned with a spicy salsa called llajwa [pronounced yahwa]. Chicken is the most common meat and Bolivians who live in the southern part of the country enjoy having beef barbecues. Salteña, a meat or chicken pie with potatoes, olives and raisins, is very popular in the cities.

Dos and Don’ts:
- Don’t refer to Amerindi ans as indios or campesinos — call them indígenos, which means “indigenous people.” Locals are campesinos only in el campo [the countryside]. Similarly, the word camba indicates people of the lowlands. The word colla [COAL-ya] specifies those from the highlands. Avoid using these terms, which carry a certain amount of animosity — the cultures of the highlands and the lowlands are very different and have inherently different views about the direction of the country.
- Do ask before taking anyone’s picture. Brightly dressed Aymara women often object. You may find, however, that many Bolivians will change their minds if approached politely.
- Do bring gifts for the impoverished children who will inevitably approach you looking for handouts. Colored chalk, which brightens any surface, will be better than candy.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:
Bolivia ranks as one of the safest countries in South America, if not the safest. Most tourist areas are relatively safe. Petty crime can be a problem in downtown La Paz and Santa Cruz, although
it is generally limited to pickpocketing in crowded markets and on buses. One scam to be aware of: imposters identifying themselves as undercover police [authentic police will always be uniformed and will not insist you get in a taxi with them]. If approached by one of these imposters, refuse to show them your wallet or ID and insist on going to the nearest police station.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them [purse, wallet, backpack, etc.] on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

Health:
Do not drink the tap water: stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks. Sanitary conditions in market stalls may pose problems for some travelers. While Bolivians have no problem with their wares, for travelers unaccustomed to the Bolivian diet, the rule of thumb is never to eat anything you can’t see being prepared. Better still, if at all possible, do not frequent open-air market stalls unless it is for fruit that you can wash and peel yourself. Avoid eating food from street vendors, especially fried foods, as oil is often re-used. Restaurants are generally safe anywhere in the country.

In general, most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe, but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating, and choose meat and fish that are cooked thoroughly. Also avoid homemade mayonnaise, as it contains raw eggs and is a common cause of salmonella poisoning. Packaged dairy products should be safe.

The air in La Paz has about 20 percent less oxygen than the air at sea level. Drink plenty of liquids in La Paz, where humidity is low and you can easily become dehydrated. A tea made of coca leaves (mate de coca) is frequently served to visitors to help with the altitude adjustment. A medication called Diamox may be helpful as well. Ask your doctor about it before your trip. Be aware that altitude sickness has serious forms and it can be fatal if the warning signs are ignored. If you plan to trek in high altitudes, it’s imperative that you have a physical checkup.

Malaria is endemic in the lowlands, so ask your doctor about medication and bring insect repellent. Adequate hospitals can be found in La Paz and other major cities, but medical care is almost nonexistent in the countryside. Bring needed prescription medications with you.
We strongly advise you to contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations.

Money:
The local currency is the boliviano. It has been relatively stable. U.S. currency has been legal tender in Bolivia since 1985. The boliviano has low global purchasing power, and therefore foreigners will find most goods very cheap. Occasionally Brazilian reals also are used in the easternmost towns, but the exchange rate is poor.

Money changers (cambistas) are found in all major towns, usually at street corners, but are best avoided except in a pinch. If you must use one, bring a calculator and have your bills handed to you one by one, never in a roll. Casas de cambio (exchange houses), on the other hand, are quite fair and invariably offer better rates than either the cambistas or local banks.

Weather:
The best time to travel is May through November. Bolivia has no less than eight major climate zones, from tropical in the south to cool and sunny in the Altiplano and Andes. December through March is when most of the rain falls. La Paz is always very cool to cold (highs around 50–60 F / 10-15 C), so be prepared with sweaters and windbreakers. The eastern lowlands are invariably humid.

Dress:
Travelers to Bolivia should feel comfortable in just about any type of attire, extremes aside. Due to the heat (even in La Paz during the daylight hours), comfortable clothing is essential. Women may wear whatever they choose, extremes aside, without fear of recrimination — short-sleeved tops and sleeveless dresses are popular. In spite of the heat, shorts and sandals for men are very rarely worn in the cities.

The clothes you bring should be governed for the most part by where in the country you expect to travel. Bring warm clothing for the highlands (think Scotland or Canada, only windier) and very cool clothing for the lowlands. The sun is intense in the east, and a hat and sunglasses are essential if you’ll be outside for long.

All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.