

# Bolivia Information Sheet



## INTRODUCTION

Bolivia is the highest, most rugged and most isolated country in the southern hemisphere. Surrounded by Brazil to the northeast, Peru to the northwest, Chile to the southwest, Argentina and Paraguay to the south, Bolivia is one of only two landlocked countries in the Americas. It borders and shares control of Lake Titicaca with Peru. At 3,805m this is the highest navigable lake in the world.

The country is geographically diverse and has unparalleled scenery changing from rainforests to mountains, deserts, lagoons and volcanoes. Many of the lagoons are beautifully coloured, ranging from red to green to turquoise due to the presence of minerals underneath. Bolivia also boasts amazing geological phenomena such as the Uyuni Salt Flat, the largest in the world and the Valley of the Moon. It has a fascinating history dating back to before the arrival of the Spanish, with pre-Inca ruins such as Tiwanaku. The cities of La Paz and Sucre have beautiful colonial architecture contrasting with the modern buildings of cities such as Santa Cruz.

Bolivia's varying landscapes are home to a wide range of Bolivian wildlife. Most of the mammals found here are native to the Andes and include the llama, alpaca, vicuna, guanaco, puma, wolves and deer. Smaller mammals and rodents include the chinchilla and the opossum. Anteaters, tapirs, sloths, porcupines and capybara can sometimes be found at lower elevations.

Bolivia has significant birdlife and is the only place in South America where three types of flamingo can be seen including the rare James flamingo. Condors, eagles and egrets are also common as well as owls and woodpeckers in the lower forests.

Potatoes and tobacco originated in the Andes Mountains and it is thought that the potato originated from the Lake Titicaca region.



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## 1. CLIMATE

Bolivia has a temperate climate but temperatures can differ dramatically between day and night. The climate also varies significantly across Bolivia depending on altitude and from one climatic zone to another. It ranges from tropical, humid to cold, semi-arid.

The wettest period is November to March and these are the summer months. Winter is perhaps the best time to visit (May–October), especially in the hot and humid lowlands, as it is cooler and drier. In the highlands, it rains much less and remains sunny throughout the day but it gets noticeably colder at night. The mountain areas can become very cold at night.

The climate of Bolivia varies dramatically from tropical in the eastern llanos to polar in the western Andes. The summers are warm and humid in the east and dry in the west. Winters are very cold in the west with snow around the mountain ranges, while in the western regions, windy days are more usual. The autumn is dry in the non-tropical regions.

The Llanos region has a humid tropical climate with an average temperature of 30°C and significant rainfall.

The Altiplano experiences desert–polar climates, with strong and cold winds. The average temperature ranges from 15 to 20°C but at night, temperatures fall significantly to around 0°C. Frosts and snow are frequent.

The Valleys and Yungas have a temperate climate, with high humidity and rainfall. Temperatures are lower at higher elevations.

In the Chaco region there is a subtropical semi-arid climate. Days tend to be warm and nights cool.

In the Salar de Uyuni (salt flats), the weather conditions can be extreme, from hot fierce sun during the day, to freezing temperatures at night. The temperatures typically average 20°C during the day, but during the night can dip well below freezing with the wind chill adding to the cold. It is not uncommon for temperatures in the Salar de Uyuni to reach 30°C (86°F) during the day and fall to -25°C (-13°F) at night.



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## 2. USEFUL INFORMATION

**Please be warned that Bolivia is a relatively poor country and that tourism service standards are generally inferior to most other South American countries.**

### Money

Please ensure that the US dollar notes you take with you to Bolivia are crisp, new notes. It is almost impossible to change US dollar bills that have even the slightest tear or marking on them, even at the airport. Although banks supposedly have to accept them, there are reports that some banks discount the exchange rate by 20% for dollar notes that are not in pristine condition.



### Drinking Water

Tap water in Bolivia is not safe to drink. Vigorous boiling for one minute is the most effective means of water purification, but at altitudes over 2000m the boiling time needs to be increased to three minutes. There are also water purifying treatments such as Micropur which are also very effective.



### Hazards, Dangers & Annoyances

Crime against tourists has increased in recent years in Bolivia, especially in La Paz and to a lesser extent in Cochabamba, Copacabana and Oruro. Be careful of pickpockets especially in crowded areas and never leave your bags unattended even in hotel foyers as there are often opportunist thieves acting as if they work at the hotel. Scams are quite common and there are also increasing numbers of fake police, false tourist police and 'helpful' tourists that you need to be wary of. If you are approached by what appears to be a plain-clothed police officer, do not show them your Passport or any valuables. Undercover police are under orders not to hassle tourists.



If taking a taxi, ensure that the taxi is a Radio Cab with the phone number and their call centre listed on a board above the cab.

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There is a strong tradition of social protest in Bolivia and demonstrations are a regular occurrence throughout the country. The demonstrations are generally peaceful, but protestors will throw stones and rocks if they become agitated. The best advice is to avoid any such demonstration. Roadblocks (bloqueos) are also quite regular and can result in long delays. During transport strikes it is best not to use taxis as they are targets for rocks for not supporting the protest.



The rainy season often leads to flooding, landslides and road washouts that can result in delays. It is always advisable to have some food, drink and warm clothes with you.



## Toilet Facilities

Toilet facilities are non-existent on nearly all buses, except for a few of the luxury ones. Public toilets (baños públicos) tend to be poorly maintained and hard on the nose! There is normally a charge to use these toilets. Carry toilet paper with you wherever you go. Please note as well that in Bolivia toilet paper is not flushed down the toilet but disposed of in the wastebaskets alongside the toilet.



## Altitude Sickness

At heights of 2,500m and above, shortness of breath and heart pounding are a normal response to the lack of oxygen in the air. For some visitors these symptoms can deteriorate into a condition known as altitude sickness or acute mountain sickness (AMS) with resulting headaches, loss of appetite, extreme tiredness, insomnia, dizziness and sometimes nausea. Symptoms usually develop within the first day or two at altitude.

To prevent altitude sickness you should try to take things easy as soon as you arrive, rest and drink plenty of fluids. Do not plan any strenuous excursions or treks until you have acclimatized for a few days. You should avoid alcohol, cigarettes and heavy foods. Drinking mate de coca, an infusion of coca leaves may help. If symptoms become more severe and prolonged you should quickly seek medical attention and make arrangements to descend to a lower altitude. After recovery you can re-ascend slowly or in stages. Some visitors use the drug Diamox to speed up the acclimatization process and counteract the symptoms of altitude sickness.

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## 3. PERSONAL GEAR RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of clothing, lightweight natural fabrics and waterproofs are best. Layering allows you to adjust to the changes in temperature, as it is often extremely cold early in the morning and at night, warming up quickly when the sun appears. Warm clothing is necessary at night in the Altiplano, especially in La Paz, Oruro and Potosí.

### What to Bring – Hotel Based Tours

Below is just a recommendation on what you should bring for your trip to Bolivia:

- Day pack (20–25L) for excursions
- Jacket – Fleece jacket or down jacket
- Rain jacket
- Long sleeved shirts and T-shirts
- Trousers
- Shorts
- Walking shoes
- Running/tennis shoes or tevas/sandals
- Sweater – lightweight wool sweater or windproof fleece
- Warm hat & gloves
- Sun hat with a wide brim
- Thermal underwear
- Sleeping bag (rated to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) & towel (**for trips that include Uyuni**)
- Swimwear (**for tours including hot springs or El Tatio geysers**)

### Accessories

- Toiletries
- Sunscreen and lip balm with an SFP 15+
- Sunglasses
- Camera with spare batteries/memory cards
- Electrical adaptor plug
- Water bottle



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- Water purification tablets
- Insect repellent containing DEET (for lower altitudes)
- Personal First Aid Kit to include antibiotics, painkillers, plasters (Band-Aids), antiseptic cream, anti-histamines (allergic reactions), anti-diarrhoea tablets, throat lozenges, re-hydration salts, Diamox (altitude sickness) & personal medication

**Note: If travelling to Rurrenabaque and the Bolivian Amazon, please refer to the Amazon Information Sheet for details on what to pack.**



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## 4. DESTINATIONS

### La Paz



La Paz has a spectacular setting in a deep bowl surrounded by snow-capped mountains of the Altiplano. The city was built in a canyon created by the Choqueyapu River and it lies in the shadow of the towering 6,438m high Mt. Illimani, always snow-covered and visible from many parts of the city. The altitude of the city (from the main square) is 3,636 metres above sea level but the neighbouring city of El Alto where La Paz International Airport is located is at an altitude of over 4,000 metres.

La Paz is a great base from which to visit many of the Bolivia's main highlights including Lake Titicaca, Tiwanaku, Oruro, Uyuni salt flats and the Bolivian Amazon.

Some of the highlights of La Paz itself include:

- Plaza Murillo, the historical centre of La Paz that includes the Cathedral, the Government Palace, the Congress building and the Grand Hotel Paris.

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- The former home of Pedro Domingo Murillo, hero of the Bolivian independence movement, now preserved and a museum. The house displays a collection of furniture, textiles and art from colonial times.
- San Francisco Church founded in 1548 and rebuilt 1784.
- Coca Museum, a small museum detailing the history and significance of the coca plant, from its use as a medicine to Coca-Cola and Cocaine, as well as the effect of the U.S. War on Drugs.
- Calle Jaen, a cobble-stone pedestrian street with preserved colonial buildings now housing several interesting museums including the National Museum of Art and the Maritime Museum.
- "Witches Market" which gives an excellent insight into Aymara culture. Vendors sell dried llama foetuses and frogs, dried llama dung, herbs, remedies and other ingredients used in Aymara traditions and rituals. Dried llama dung is laid in the foundations of every new building.
- El Teleférico is a new cable car system and the highest urban system of its kind in the world. It runs down from El Alto as far as Zona Sur, making for a spectacular ride with views of the city spread out in the rocky valley.

Some of the most popular day tours from La Paz include:

- Moon Valley – an extraordinary moon-like landscape caused by the natural process of erosion in the mountainous, desert area to the southwest of the city.
- Tiwanaku – possibly the greatest megalithic architectural achievement of pre-Inca South America.
- Chacaltaya Club Andino Ski Centre – Well worth a visit for its spectacular views over the mountains and valleys. The ski centre has been closed since 1991, due to the glacier having retreated.
- Mountain-biking down Death Road – an 80-kilometre descent down a snaking, narrow, muddy road with hairpin turns – perfect for adrenaline-seekers!



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## La Paz Climate Chart

	AV. MAX. TEMP (°C)	AV. MIN. TEMP (°C)	RAINFALL (MM)
January	13	3	114
February	13	3	107
March	14	3	66
April	14	2	33
May	13	0	13
June	13	-2	8
July	13	-2	6
August	14	-1	13
September	14	0	28
October	16	2	41
November	16	3	48
December	14	3	76



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## Lake Titicaca



Copacabana is the main Bolivian town on the shores of Lake Titicaca at an altitude of 3,800 metres above sea level and likely to be the first port of call for those tourists travelling to Bolivia from Peru. Nestled between two hills, some believe that the name Copacabana is derived from the Aymara "kota kawana", meaning "view of the lake". The beach is rocky and the lake-water cold, but the crystal clear waters surrounded by white capped mountains provide an extraordinary setting. There are several hiking opportunities from Copacabana, but be aware of the altitude.

The town has a local market and a selection of shore-side restaurants serving local trout (trucha), but it is famous for its large 16th-century cathedral, the Basilica of Our Lady of Copacabana, that houses the image of the Virgen de Copacabana, the patron saint of Bolivia. The dazzling white Moorish-style cathedral with its domes and colourful ceramic tiles, dominates the tiny town. This is Bolivia's most revered pilgrimage site and the statue is never moved from the cathedral as it is believed that disturbing the statue would result in a devastating flood.

The most popular day trip from Copacabana is a boat trip to Isla del Sol ("Island of the Sun"), the largest island on Lake Titicaca. Believed by Andean civilisations to be the birthplace of the Incas, ancient Incan steps lead up from a pure spring to high mountain trails above. There are no cars on the island and the inhabitants live simply, maintaining many of their old traditions and beliefs. With a number of ancient ruins, small villages and beautiful walking trails, an overnight stay on Isla del Sol is a worthwhile experience if you have the time.

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## Copacabana (Lake Titicaca) Climate Chart

	AV. MAX. TEMP (°C)	AV. MIN. TEMP (°C)	RAINFALL (MM)
January	16	4	117
February	16	3	86
March	16	3	72
April	17	1	36
May	16	-2	3
June	16	-4	3
July	16	-6	0
August	16	-4	9
September	17	-1	12
October	18	1	24
November	17	2	45
December	17	3	51



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## Potosi



Potosi lies at the foot of the 4,824m Cerro de Potosi or Cerro Rico ("Rich Mountain"). It was founded in 1545 after the discovery of the rich silver deposits in the Cerro Rico that lured Spanish conquistadors here. It was the major supply of silver for Spain during the New World Spanish Empire and it soon became one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the Americas.

Potosi is the world's highest city, located at 4,090 metres above sea level. The city was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 for its architecture and colonial charm. The wealthy history of Potosi is still reflected in the narrow streets, colonial mansions and the many churches.

A visit to Potosi is incomplete without a visit to one of the co-operative mines. Although the tour can be quite upsetting as the working conditions are still terrible and very similar to how they were in the 16th century, it does enable you to gain a better understanding of the history of the mines and the current situation. The majority of miners die of silicosis in their forties, but for most there is no other choice and around 10,000 people work in the mines today. A tour generally begins with a visit to the miners' market, where you can buy gifts for the miners including coca leaves, drinks,

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cigarettes or dynamite. You then take a sobering walk underground through the mines. Tools are basic and include pickaxes, hammers and dynamite and the ore is either taken out in wheeled carts weighing between 1 and 2 tons, or carried out on the miner's backs in 40 to 50kg loads.

Potosi was for centuries the location of the Spanish colonial mint. The former national mint, "Casa Nacional de la Moneda" now houses an impressive and informative museum displaying contemporary and religious art as well as artefacts from its time as the mint.

Potosi's churches are some of the finest examples of the mestizo-Baroque style, with beautifully carved porticos and interiors adorned with gold leaf. The fascinating Santa Teresa Convent was founded in 1685 and is still home to a small community of Carmelite nuns.

The San Francisco Convent was founded in 1547 making it the oldest monastery in Bolivia. It was demolished in 1707 and reconstructed over the following 19 years. A gold-covered altar from this building is now housed in the Casa Nacional de la Moneda. From the tower there are great views of Potosi.

A short drive from Potosi are several Hot Springs including Tarapaya and Chaqui Baño. The Ojo del Inca at Tarapaya is a large 30°C lagoon, supposedly 25m deep. Even at the edges it drops to 1.5m and so you need to be able to swim to bathe in this hot spring.

## Potosi Climate Chart

	AV. MAX. TEMP (°C)	AV. MIN. TEMP (°C)	RAINFALL (MM)
January	15	3	92
February	15	3	86
March	16	2	55
April	16	0	13
May	15	-2	3
June	14	-3	0
July	14	-4	0
August	15	-3	3
September	16	-1	10
October	17	1	20
November	17	2	38
December	17	3	70

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## Sucre



Sucre is the constitutional and official capital of Bolivia and it was here that independence was proclaimed in 1825. It is known as the "City of Four Names" as it is also called Charcas, La Plata and Chuquisaca. It is nicknamed "La Ciudad Blanca" (The White City) due to its many white-washed colonial style houses and structures. Founded in the 16th century by Spanish colonials, the city lies in southern central Bolivia at an elevation of 2,810 metres, giving it a cool, temperate year-round climate. The city preserves a wealth of colonial architecture and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991.

The city of Sucre contains many old and classical buildings which are worth visiting including the following.

- Casa de la Libertad (House of Freedom): Built in 1621, it was here that the Bolivian declaration of independence was signed in 1825 and where Simón Bolívar wrote the constitution. It has been designated a national memorial and is considered to be the birthplace of the nation.
- National Library: Also dating back to 1621 this is the most important historical and bibliographical centre of the country with documents that date from the 9th century.

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- **Museo de la Catedral:** Situated next to the Cathedral, this is the most important religious museum of Bolivia. The museum houses a wealth of religious relics but the highlight is found in the Capilla de la Virgen de Guadalupe that was completed in 1625. Encased in the altar is a painting of the Virgin, the city's patron. Originally painted by Fray Diego de Ocaña in 1601, the work was later adorned in silver, gold and gem encrusted robes from gemstones donated by wealthy colonial parishioners.
- **Chuquisaca Governorship Palace:** Completed in 1896, this was the first Palace of Government of Bolivia, later becoming the Chuquisaca Governorship Palace when the seat of government moved to La Paz.

If you are in Sucre on a Sunday, a worthwhile excursion is to the town of Tarabuco, about 2 hours away. With its rich indigenous influences, it is known for its colourful and traditional Sunday market. Indigenous farmers and villagers travel from great distances to the market and you will find beautiful textiles, hats and hand-woven ponchos.

## Sucre Climate Chart

	AV. MAX. TEMP (°C)	AV. MIN. TEMP (°C)	RAINFALL (MM)
January	21	11	114
February	20	10	103
March	20	10	66
April	21	9	26
May	21	7	5
June	21	5	0
July	20	5	8
August	21	6	5
September	22	7	25
October	22	9	40
November	22	10	57
December	22	11	76



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## Uyuni & Salar de Uyuni (Salt Flats)



Uyuni was founded in 1889 by Bolivian president Aniceto Arce and it is still an important military base. It lies in south-western Bolivia at an altitude of 3,670 metres above sea level situated on the edge of the Salar de Uyuni, the largest salt flat in the world. The Salar de Uyuni covers 12,000 square kilometres of the Bolivian Altiplano and is fringed by the mountains of the Andes. Beneath it lies the world's largest lithium reserve estimated to be about 100 million tons.

The salt in the salt flats is over 120 metres deep and the area is remote, arid and cold. The region is stark, yet stunning, boasting extraordinary beauty with lakes and lagoons of varying colours caused by the different algae in the waters. Tranquillity is a characteristic of the landscape and the silence is captivating.

In the town itself, the Museo Arqueología y Antropológico de los Andes Meridionales is a small museum that features mummies, long skulls, fossils, ceramics and textiles. There are descriptions of the practices of mummification and cranial deformation, but these are in Spanish.

The main tourist attraction in Uyuni itself is the Cementerio de Trenes (Train Cemetery) on the site of a rail-car factory that was in operation in the 18th century. Here there is a large collection of historic rail cars and steam locomotives dating back to this time sitting and decaying in the yards.

Close to the town is the tiny village of Colchani where salt is mined, an interesting stop before you venture out onto the salt flats.

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You may want to consider staying at one of the salt hotels that are built entirely out of blocks of salt.

The main reason for heading to Uyuni is to take a four-wheeled drive tour across the Salar, maybe heading to Tupiza or across to San Pedro de Atacama (Chile) where the landscape is equally spectacular with unique rock formations, brightly coloured lagoons often with flamingos, volcanoes, geysers and mountains. The landscapes are surreal and awe-inspiring – a photographer's dream!

## **Important Information for Uyuni and the Salar de Uyuni**

- The weather conditions in Uyuni and the Salar are extreme with very cold night temperatures and hot desert sun during the day.
- You are advised to take a **sleeping bag and towel** as often these are not provided and heating, if available may not always work. Please note as well that **hot water is not always available** and cannot be guaranteed.
- Entrance fees will apply for some activities, including Fish Island.
- It is most likely that your driver will only speak Spanish but private versions of some tours with an English-speaking guide can be organized.
- Itineraries are subject to change – this is determined by decisions made by your driver.
- If finishing the tour in San Pedro de Atacama during May, June or July (peak winter months) please be aware that you may experience unexpected delays. It is common to have border closures, road closures and route changes during this time. Alternative routes to San Pedro can be over six hours longer in duration and incur additional costs to the client in order to make the diversion (possibly in excess of \$200 per person). If you are travelling between Uyuni and San Pedro during the winter months you need to be aware and be prepared for the possibility of incurring these additional costs.
- We would recommend packing clothing suitable for a mountain environment, including sun protection and sunglasses.
- Weather at high altitude can change very quickly and the sun reflected off the Salt Lake is particularly strong.
- **Note:** During the rainy season (Nov/Mar) the visit to Uyuni Salt Lake & Isla Pescado will be possible only if weather conditions permit it.

## **Climate**

Visitors to the area need to be prepared for extreme and harsh weather conditions. In the day the sun reflects off the salt resulting in a lot of glare and heat. At night temperatures plummet and can be freezing, especially from June to August when they can reach  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  and sometimes lower.

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This region has two distinct seasons – wet and dry. The wet season runs from October to April (summer) and the dry season from May to September (winter). In the dry season the expanse of salt creates an unending dazzling white landscape. The salt flats are, however at their most spectacular after rains, when water sitting on top of the salt acts like a mirror and reflects the sky above.

## Uyuni Climate Chart

	AV. MAX. TEMP (°C)	AV. MIN. TEMP (°C)	RAINFALL (MM)
January	15	0	70
February	15	1	40
March	16	-1	22
April	17	-7	10
May	15	-13	0
June	14	-13	0
July	14	-11	0
August	15	-12	0
September	16	-10	0
October	18	-8	0
November	18	-3	0
December	17	1	30



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## 5. CUISINE

The three traditional staples of Bolivian cuisine are corn, potatoes and beans and these have been combined with a number of staples brought by the Spanish, such as rice, wheat, and meat including beef, pork and chicken. In rural areas guinea pig (cuy) and rabbits are also eaten.

Almuerzo (lunch) is the most important meal of the Bolivian day with daily life revolving around it.

Deep frying is a common cooking method of most meats, fried chicken being a very popular fast dish. A common accompaniment served with Bolivian meals is llajhua, a spicy sauce that is similar to Mexican salsa.

Some notable Bolivian dishes include the following:

*Pique a lo macho* – grilled chunks of meat in a slightly spicy sauce with tomatoes and onion, served on potatoes.

*Silpancho* or *Milanesa* – beef pounded to a thin, plate-sized patty, served on a bed of rice and potatoes with a fried egg on top.

## 6. READING LIST

- The Motorcycle Diaries – Che Guevara
- Chasing Che: A Motorcycle Journey in Search of the Guevara Legend – Patrick Symmes
- The Incredible Voyage: A Personal Odyssey – Tristan Jones
- Lizzie: A Victorian Lady's Amazon Adventure – Anne Rose
- Jungle: A Harrowing True Story – Yossi Ghinsberg
- Inca-Kola – Matthew Parris



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# Bolivia Information Sheet



**Enjoy your journey!**

If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us!

## **The Team at Chimu Adventures**

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