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OPPOSITE DANCER, FIESTA DE LA VIRGEN DE LA CANDELARIA, COPACABANA **PREVIOUS PAGE** IGLESIA DE LA MERCED, POTOSÍ



Introduction to Bolivia

With soaring Andean peaks and dense Amazonian rainforests, otherworldly salt flats and lush savanna, Bolivia is home to an extraordinarily diverse range of landscapes. The country offers scores of breathtaking attractions, including vast inland lakes, beautifully preserved colonial towns, towering volcanoes, blisteringly hot deserts, mysterious ruins and wildlife-rich national parks, yet it remains remarkably little explored. Landlocked in the remote heart of the continent, Bolivia is too often overlooked, but those who do venture here often find it to be one of South America's most captivating destinations.

The country's cultural diversity and ethnic make-up are as varied as its landscapes. Three centuries of colonial rule have left their mark on the nation's language, religion and architecture, but this is little more than a veneer overlaying **indigenous cultural traditions** that stretch back long before the arrival of the Spanish (and, indeed, the Incas). Though superficially Catholic, many Bolivians are equally at home making offerings to Pachamama (Mother Earth), dancing with the devil at Carnaval or blessing cars with libations of alcohol. While Spanish is the language of government and business, the streets buzz with the cadences of Aymara, Quechua and scores of other **indigenous languages**. Bolivia is dominated by the **Andes**, which march through the west of the country in two parallel chains; between them stretch the barren, windswept expanses of the **Altiplano**. Reached via a series of lush valleys, the country's lowlands range from dense Amazonian rainforest to vast plains of dry thornbrush and scrub. These **geographical extremes** are fascinating to explore and support an extraordinary diversity of **flora and fauna**, from condors to pink freshwater dolphins, hummingbirds to anacondas – Parque Nacional Madidi, for example, has over 860 species of bird, more than the US and Canada combined.

While it spans an area the size of France and Spain combined, Bolivia is home to only around eleven million people, who are concentrated in a handful of cities founded by the **Spanish**. Some of these, most notably Potosí and Sucre, were once among the most important settlements in the Americas (and, in the case of the former, the world), but are

ABOVE SALAR DE UYUNI **RIGHT** QUINOA FIELD, SAN JUAN

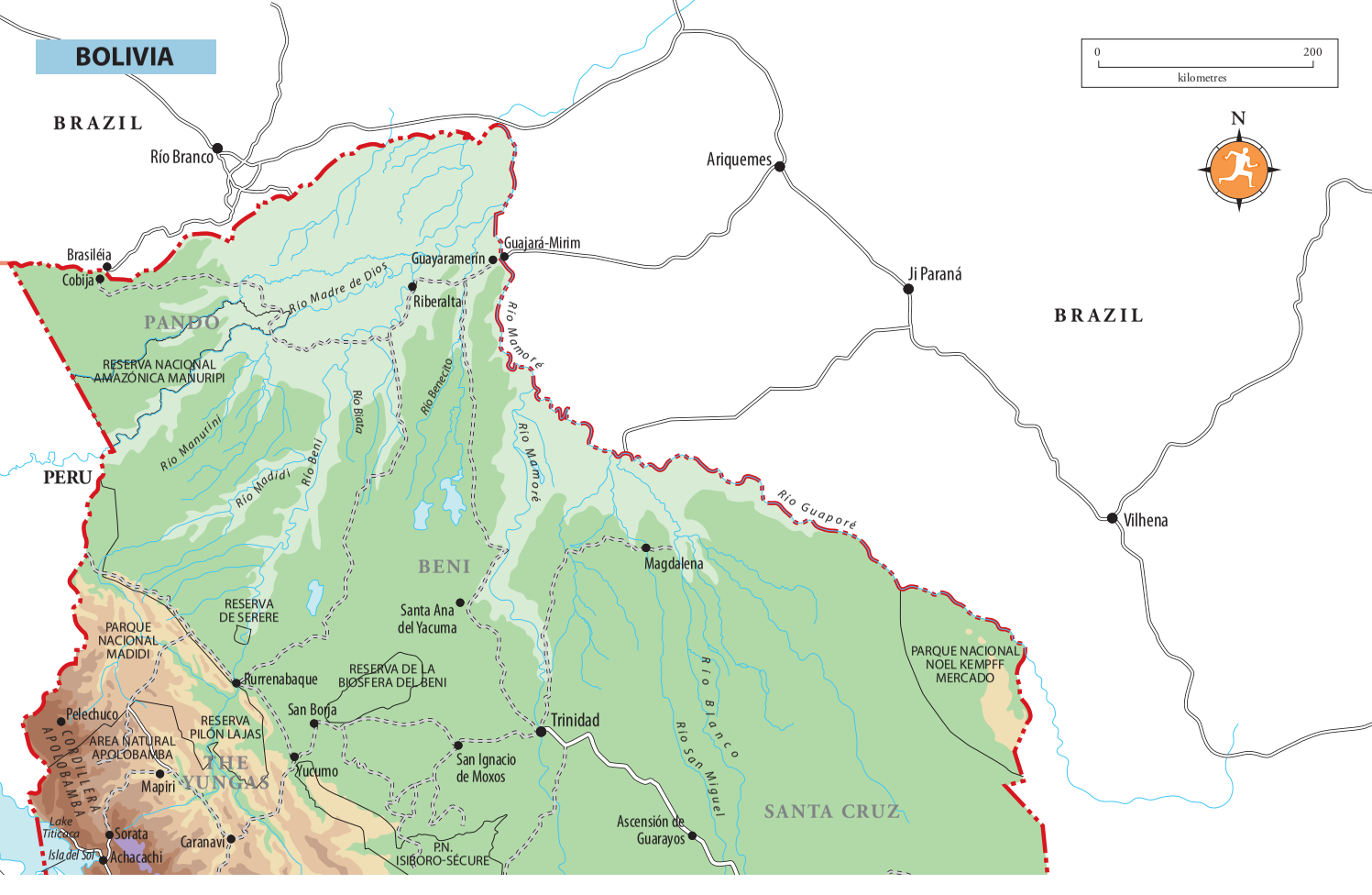
now half-forgotten, lingering in the memory of past glories and graced by some of the continent's finest colonial architecture. Others, like La Paz and neighbouring El Alto, Cochabamba and particularly Santa Cruz, have grown enormously in recent years, and are now bustling **commercial centres**. The economy is driven by agribusiness and huge oil, gas and mineral reserves, which provide both opportunities for development and serious environmental challenges, particularly for the country's vast **wilderness areas**, which have hitherto survived in near-pristine condition.

Despite its many attractions, and associations with the likes of Che Guevara (who was killed in La Higuera in 1967) and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Bolivia remains one of South America's least visited countries. Some blame Queen Victoria, who after a diplomatic spat is reputed to have crossed the country off the map, declaring, "Bolivia does not exist". Among those who have heard a little about Bolivia, meanwhile, **cocaine trafficking** and **political turbulence** remain the dominant images. Although there is some truth in these clichés, travellers will find that the country – one of the **safest** and **least expensive** in South America – has so much more to offer. And as much of the country is still well off the tourist trail, travelling in Bolivia gives you a real sense of breaking new ground.

Where to go

Most visitors spend a few days in the fascinating city of **La Paz**, Bolivia's de facto capital, which combines a dramatic high-altitude setting with a compelling blend of traditional indigenous and modern urban cultures. La Paz is also close to magical **Lake Titicaca**,




BOLIVIA
BRAZIL
Río Branco
Ariquemes
Brasiléia
Cobija
Guayaramerin
Guajará-Mirim
Ji Paraná
BRAZIL
PANDO
Río Madre de Dios
Riberalta
Río Mamoré
RESERVA NACIONAL AMAZÓNICA MANURIPI
Río Manurini
Río Beni
Río Madidi
Río Benecito
Río Ibáñez
PERU
Río Guaporé
Vilhena
BENI
Magdalena
RESERVA DE SERERE
Santa Ana del Yacuma
PARQUE NACIONAL MADIDI
Río Blanco
Río San Miguel
PARQUE NACIONAL NOEL KEMPFF MERCADO
Rurrenabaque
RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA DEL BENI
Pelechuco
San Borja
Trinidad
RESERVA PILÓN LAJAS
CORDILLERA APOLOBAMBA
AREA NATURAL APOLOBAMBA
THE YUNGAS
San Ignacio de Moxos
Yucumo
Mapiri
SANTA CRUZ
Lake Titicaca
Isla del Sol
Sorata
Achacachi
Caranavi
Ascensión de Guarayos
P.N. ISIBORO-SÉCURE
0
200
kilometres
N


Copacabana
P.N. COTAPATA
Santa Barbara
Coroico
Coripata
Chulumani
Tiwanaku
LA PAZ
Illimani (6439m)
CORDILLERA REAL
ALTIPLANO
Patacamaya
P.N. TUNARI
P.N. CARRASCO
Quillacollo
Cochabamba
Totora
Volcán Sajama
PARQUE NACIONAL SAJAMA
Oruro
P.N. TOROTORO
CORDILLERA ORIENTAL
Aiquile
AREA NATURAL DE MANEJO INTEGRADO EL PALMAR
Samaipata
Vallegrande
Lago Poopo
Challapata
La Higuera
Sucre
Tarabuco
Salar de Coipasa
Potosi
Salar de Uyuni
Uyuni
Tumusla
Azurduy
Camiri
CHUQUISACA
CHAPARE
Buena Vista
P.N. AMBORO
Santa Cruz
Concepción
San Javier
San Ramón
San Ignacio de Velasco
San Miguel
Santa Ana
San Rafael
San Matías
Estancia Quimone
AREA NATURAL SAN MATÍAS
Batallon Pando
San Francisco
Río López
Santo Corazón
San José de Chiquitos
Rincón del Tigre
Sebastian
La Cal
Roboré
P.N. KAA-IYA DEL GRAN CHACO
Tucavaca
San Lorenzo Nuevo
Puerto Suárez
Candelaria
El Carmen
Corumbá
P.N. OTUQUIS
CHACO
PARAGUAY
Avaroa
Volcán Ollagüe
RESERVA NACIONAL DE FAUNA ANDINA EDUARDO AVAROA
Laguna Colorada
El Puente
RESERVA BIOLÓGICA CORDILLERA DEL SAMA
Villamontes
Tupiza
San Pablo de Lipez
Tarija
Yacuiba
Villazón
La Quiaca
RESERVA NACIONAL TARIQUÍA
Calama
Laguna de Vilama
CHILE
ARGENTINA
Metres
5000
4000
3000
2000
1000
500
200
0

the massive azure lake that straddles the Peruvian border, and is a good base for exploring the magnificent **Cordillera Real**.

Just north of La Paz the Andes plunge into the Amazon basin through the lush valleys of the **Yungas**. The Yungas towns of **Coroico** and **Chulumani** are perfect places to relax, while Coroico also makes a good spot to break the overland journey from La Paz to the Bolivian **Amazon**. The best base for visiting the Amazon is **Rurrenabaque**, close to the near-pristine rainforests of **Parque Nacional Madidi** and the wildlife-rich **Río Yacuma**. More adventurous travellers can head east across the wild savannas of the Llanos de Moxos via the **Reserva de la Bíosfera del Beni** to the regional capital **Trinidad**, the start of exciting trips north along the Río Mamoré towards Brazil or south towards Cochabamba.

South of La Paz, the bleak **southern Altiplano** – stretching between the eastern and western chains of the Andes – is home to some of Bolivia's foremost attractions. The dour mining city of **Oruro** springs to life during its Carnaval, one of South America's most enjoyable fiestas, and the legendary silver-mining city of **Potosí** offers a treasure-trove of colonial architecture and the opportunity to visit the Cerro Rico mines.

Further south, Uyuni is the jumping-off point for expeditions into the astonishing landscapes of the **Salar de Uyuni** and the **Reserva de Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa**, a remote region of high-altitude deserts and half-frozen, mineral-stained lakes, populated by flamingos. Further south lie the cactus-strewn badlands and canyons around **Tupiza** and the isolated but welcoming city of **Tarija**.

To the north of Potosí, Bolivia's official capital, **Sucre**, boasts fine colonial architecture, but the city is very different in character: charming and refined, it is set in a warm Andean valley in the midst of a region noted for its textiles. Further north, the modern city of **Cochabamba** has less obvious appeal, but offers a spring-like climate and a friendly welcome. Not far from here are the rainforests and coca fields of the **Chapare region**, but for most travellers Cochabamba is just somewhere to break the journey between La Paz and **Santa Cruz**, the country's eastern capital and a brash, modern and lively tropical metropolis. Beyond a lively nightlife scene, the city has few attractions itself, but is a good base for exploring the **eastern lowlands**, including the rainforests of **Parque Nacional Amboró** and the idyllic town of **Samaipata**. Scattered across the lowlands east of Santa Cruz, the immaculately restored **Jesuit missions of Chiquitos** provide one of Bolivia's most unusual attractions, while a train line heads east to the Brazilian border and the wildlife-rich wetlands of the **Pantanal**.

FACT FILE

- Named after Simón Bolívar, Bolivia won its **independence** in 1825, after nearly three centuries as a Spanish colony.
- The country's **population** is around eleven million.
- Bolivia has 36 official **languages**, though only three – Spanish, Quechua and Aymara – are still widely spoken.
- In 2001 the **highest football match** in the world was played on the top of the 6542m Sajama volcano.
- Since independence, Bolivia has lost almost half its territory, including its Pacific coast, which was captured by Chile in 1879. Despite being **landlocked**, the country still has a navy.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP QUECHUA-SPEAKING BOLIVIAN; ALPACA; ISLA DE PESCADO, SALAR DE UYUNI







When to go

Generally speaking, climate varies much more as a result of altitude and topography than it does between different seasons. Nevertheless, there are clear-cut seasonal differences. **Winter** (*invierno*) runs between May and October: this is the **dry season**, and in many ways the best time to visit, though it's also the high season for tourism, so some prices will be higher and attractions busier. In the **highlands** it's noticeably colder at night, particularly in June and July. The days are slightly shorter, but usually sunny, and the skies crystal clear, making this the best time of year for trekking and climbing. Winter is also the best time for visiting the hot and humid **lowlands**, when temperatures are generally slightly (but pleasantly) lower, although the dry season is less pronounced and rain remains a possibility all year round. A few times a year, usually between July and August, the country is swept by **cold fronts** coming up from Patagonia, known as *surazos*, which can send temperatures plunging even in the Amazon. Towards the end of the dry season in late August and September, farmers set fire to cleared forest areas across much of Bolivia, which can obscure views and cause respiratory problems.

Summer (*verano*) is the **rainy season**, which runs roughly from November to March and is much more pronounced in the lowlands; in the Amazon, road transport becomes pretty much impossible, as huge areas are flooded and everything turns to mud – though, conversely, river transport becomes more frequent. Heat, humidity and mosquitoes are also much worse. In the highlands, particularly the Altiplano, it rains much less and travel is not as restricted, though delays and road closures still occur, while trekking trails get muddier and clouds often obscure views, particularly in the high mountains, where route-finding can become impossible. Despite this, the rainy season is also a very beautiful time in the Andes, as the parched Altiplano and mountainsides are briefly transformed into lush grassland and wild flowers proliferate.

AVERAGE MONTHLY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
LA PAZ												
Max (°C/°F)	17/63	17/63	18/64	18/64	18/64	17/63	17/63	17/63	18/64	19/66	19/66	18/64
Min (°C/°F)	6/43	6/43	6/43	4/39	3/37	1/34	1/34	2/36	3/37	4/39	6/43	6/43
Rainfall (mm)	114	107	66	33	13	8	10	13	28	41	48	94
SANTA CRUZ												
Max (°C/°F)	34/93	25/77	28/82	33/91	30/86	31/88	19/66	32/90	31/88	27/81	27/81	28/82
Min (°C/°F)	24/75	23/73	25/77	24/75	19/66	23/73	16/61	20/68	23/73	20/68	17/63	23/73
Rainfall (mm)	282	180	89	78	136	1	16	16	1	65	296	203
SUCRE												
Max (°C/°F)	18/64	22/72	19/66	19/66	20/68	17/63	20/68	25/77	25/77	23/73	23/73	14/57
Min (°C/°F)	11/52	12/45	8/46	8/46	5/41	5/41	3/37	4/39	7/45	10/50	7/45	11/52
Rainfall (mm)	238	91	86	32	0	0	0	5	8	68	34	175

Author picks

Rough Guides' authors covered every corner of Bolivia to research this new edition, from the enchanting Isla del Sol to the awesome expanses of the Salar de Uyuni. Beyond the major sights, here are their personal picks.

Sacred drink of the Incas No visit to Bolivia is complete without a glass or two of thick, tart and mildly alcoholic *chicha* – the Cochabamba Valley (p.218) is particularly famous for it.

Most extreme experience Once a source of fabled wealth, the Cerro Rico mines (p.162) now offer a chance to see first hand the almost medieval working conditions that miners still endure.

Most spectacular flight The scenic La Paz–Rurrenabaque route (p.276) whisks you from snowcapped mountains to the verdant Amazon.

Eye-popping architecture El Alto (p.70) is home to one of South America's most distinctive architectural movements. The "Neo-Andean" style is most evident in the city's many *cholets*, gaudy mansions that look like they've come from another planet.

Dinosaur stampede A cement works on the outskirts of Sucre is the unlikely home for the world's largest collection – some five thousand strong – of dinosaur footprints (p.201).

Killer views The vistas of La Paz that open up as you crest the rim of the Altiplano and begin to descend into the city will take your breath away (p.52).

Best culinary experience Opened by the co-founder of Denmark's multi-award-winning *Noma*, *Gustu* in La Paz (p.84) transposes the Nordic seasonal and sustainable philosophy onto Bolivia, with delicious results.

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.





FROM TOP *CHICHA*; *CHOLET*, EL ALTO