

# Welcome to Bolivia

*Rough around the edges, superlative in its natural beauty, rugged, vexing, complex and slightly nerve-racking, Bolivia is one of South America's most diverse and perplexing nations.*

## Adventure

Bolivia is not for the faint of heart: rattling down the World's Most Dangerous Road into sultry Yungas; soaring breathless above verdant La Paz valleys in a paraglider; pulling a catfish that outweighs you out of an Amazon river (and maybe cooking it for dinner!). Whether your tools are crampons and ice ax for scaling 6000m Andean peaks or a helmet and bravado for jumping into the abyss on a glider, Bolivia's rocks, rivers and ravines will challenge – nay, provoke – you into pushing your own personal limits.

## Culture

Bolivians love a parade, and hardly a month passes without a procession of brightly costumed celebrants honoring an important historical date or deity. You'll hear them from blocks away before the brass bands and whirligigging dancers approach and then envelop you (you may even get to join in). Amateur archaeologists can delve into a rich, multilayered treasure trove of artifacts – Bolivia has South America's largest percentage of indigenous people, so the culture is still alive and well on the streets, too. Get to know them better by participating in community-based tourism and hiring local guides when you can.

## Nature

Bolivia is so new to scientific endeavor that unique species are being discovered to this day. Tiptoe into caves of nectar bats, their 8cm tongues probing the darkness. Tread lightly on the terrain of the poisonous annelated coral snake, deadly in look and effect. Listen for the cackling call-and-response of a dozen different macaw species (among the 1000 bird species) including the world's rarest, the bluebeard, which only lives here. Multihued, brilliant butterflies and moths flit at your feet in the jungle; lithe alpacas and vicuñas stand out in the stark altiplano.

## Food & Drink

Ever had a llama tenderloin? Here's your chance: maybe with a glass of up-and-coming Tarija wine, or artisanal coca- or quinoa-based beer. Bread varies from the Frisbee-like *mama qonqachi* cheese bread of Cochabamba, to the sourdough-like *maraqueta* hard roll, to Santa Cruz' mouthwatering *cuñapes* (cheese bread balls). Vegetarians can feast on *sonsos*, the yucca-and-cheese pancake of the *camba*, and savor tropical fruit juices like *maracuya* (passion fruit) and *chirimoya* (custard apple). Fresh Amazon *surubí* tastes like it leaped onto your plate. Yungas coffee and *chuquisaceña* (Sucre) chocolate complete a perfect *postre* (dessert).



## Why I Love Bolivia

By Brian Kluepfel, Writer

My two-decade love affair with Bolivia began at the 1994 World Cup, watching the nation make its historic first appearance. Like all relationships, we've had our ups and downs – I experienced every level of emotion living in La Paz from 1999 to 2000, riding the turbulent wonder of everyday life. Bolivia wouldn't let me go: I love its birds, I love its food, and I love the endearing and easily understood Spanish and the charming folk who speak it. On holiday, your possibilities are nearly limitless. I keep my *charango* (Bolivian ukelele) tuned, because I know I'll be back.

**For more about our writers, see page 380**