

# Bolivia

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Salar de Uyuni** (p207) Venture into the surreal salt deserts and take in spurting geysers, towering volcanoes and colored lagoons.
- **Carnaval** (p201) Join the revelrous crowds in Oruro and devour La Diablada and other boisterous dancing delights.
- **Lake Titicaca** (p197) Hike the length of Isla del Sol on the sapphire-blue waters of what's considered the world's largest high-altitude lake.
- **Amazon Basin Trips** (p231) Penetrate deep into the lush pampas and rainforest of the Amazon lowlands on a riverboat.
- **Tupiza** (p207) Trot, cycle and hike your way through the red rock country around the pretty town of Tupiza.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (p235) Stay in a remote community-run ecolodge in Parque Nacional Madidi and marvel at the wildlife.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 1,098,580 sq km (France and Spain combined)
- **Budget:** US\$15 to US\$25 a day
- **Capitals:** Sucre (constitutional), La Paz (de facto)
- **Costs:** La Paz bed US\$3 to US\$5, 1L bottle of domestic beer US\$1, four-hour bus ride US\$2.50
- **Country Code:** ☎ 591
- **Languages:** Spanish, Quechua, Aymara, Guaraní
- **Money:** US\$1 = B\$6.97 (bolivianos)
- **Population:** 9.8 million
- **Seasons:** high (June to September), low (October to May), rainy (November to April)
- **Time:** GMT minus four hours



## TRAVEL HINTS

Take it easy at altitude. Visit a toilet before boarding buses. Choose your tour operator carefully.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

Bolivia's border crossings include Guajar -Mirim and Corumb  (Brazil), La Quiaca and Pocios (Argentina), Tambo Quemado and Hito Caj n near San Pedro de Atacama (Chile), Yunguyo and Desaguadero (Peru) and Fortin Infante Rivarola (Paraguay).

A place of mind-boggling superlatives, landlocked Bolivia really packs a punch. The hemisphere's highest, most isolated and most rugged nation, it's also among the earth's coldest, warmest and windiest spots with some of the driest, saltiest and swampiest natural landscapes in the world. It's a land of paradoxes: South America's poorest country, Bolivia is the richest on the continent in natural resources. But the superlatives don't end here. Over 60% of the population claim indigenous heritage, including Aymara, Quechua and Guaraní, making it South America's most indigenous country.

Bolivia's natural treasures are many and marvelous, from soaring mountain peaks and surreal salt flats to steamy jungles and wildlife-rich grasslands. The cultural aspect – exploring the country's vibrant ancient traditions and preserved colonial cities – offers unparalleled delight. Most visitors stick to the well-worn paths of the *altiplano* but there's plenty to see and do elsewhere, including dense rainforests and snowcapped cordilleras.

While Bolivia is now well and truly on the travelers' radar, it's still largely raw and undeveloped. This may be a boon for intrepid travelers but it's a perennial source of problems for Bolivians. As of the last few years, notable changes have been sweeping Bolivia's formidable landscapes.

## CURRENT EVENTS

Since 2005 Bolivia has been undergoing a revolution of sorts virtually synonymous with former *cocalero* (coca grower) Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president. In January 2009 he pushed through a groundbreaking new constitution approved in a nationwide referendum by 67% of the population, granting previously unheard-of rights to the country's indigenous majority and allowing the president to seek a second five-year term.

This was stellar news for the working classes and the indigenous of the western highlands but not for everyone in Bolivia. In fact, many middle- and upper-class Bolivians, especially in the energy-rich eastern provinces, are openly critical of Morales' anticapitalist stands and socialist ideologies. This opposition led to violent protests in autonomy-hungry Santa Cruz in September 2008 (with 11 people dead) and the alleged attempt at presidential assassination in April 2009.

Another hot topic is the trial of former president 'Goni' Sánchez de Lozada who stands accused, together with 16 members of his cabinet, for 67 deaths during the 2003 protests in La Paz. The trial opened in May 2009 in absentia; Goni still lives in Maryland and the unheeded request to the US for extradition is one of the several sore points (including the controversial coca; see p167) between Bolivia and US. Since the diplomatic talks in spring 2009, the worn ties have been mending slowly.

In addition to Bolivia's internal strife, Morales has other things on his plate, such as the management of Bolivia's so far untapped

lithium reserves (the world's largest) and the upcoming election in December 2009. With his approval ratings still high, he's slated to run a second term. How he will manage to keep his polarized country in check remains to be seen. As the Bolivians themselves say, *vamos a ver...*

## HISTORY Pre-Gringo Times

Sometime around 1500 BC, Aymara people, possibly originating from the mountainous region of modern central Peru, swept across the Bolivian Andes to occupy the *altiplano* (high plain of Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina). The years between AD 500 and AD 900 were distinguished by imperial expansion and increasing power and influence of the Tiwanaku (Tiahuanaco) culture. The society's ceremonial center near Lake Titicaca rapidly became the highland's religious and political heart. In the 9th century AD, however, Tiwanaku's power waned. Ongoing submarine excavations in Lake Titicaca are attempting to identify the cause of Tiwanaku's downfall.

Before the Spanish Conquest, the Bolivian *altiplano* had been incorporated into the Inca empire as the southern province of Kollasuyo. Modern Quechua speakers around Lake Titicaca are descended from immigrants who arrived under an Inca policy of populating newly conquered colonies with Quechua-speaking tribes.

There's considerable speculation that ruins on the scale of Machu Picchu, possibly the lost Inca city of Paititi, may be buried in the Bolivian rainforest.