Bolivia was named after the famous Latin American freedom fighter Simón Bolívar.

Legend says the infamous American bandits Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid had their final shootout in San Vicente, Bolivia.

Bolivia was once twice its current size, reaching to the Pacific Ocean on the west, but it lost this territory in a war with Chile in 1879.

Bolivia is nicknamed "the rooftop of the world" because of its high elevation in the Andes Mountains.

Flesh-eating piranha fish live in the rivers of Bolivia’s Oriente region.

Bolivia has two capital cities: La Paz and Sucre. La Paz is the seat of the national government, while the judicial system is centered in Sucre.

Chacaltaya is the highest ski resort in the world at 17,785 feet (5421 m). It is so high that the resort keeps oxygen tanks on hand for any skiers who feel faint from the high altitude.

Flag

The Bolivian state flag has three horizontal stripes. The red stripe represents bravery, the green the fertility of the land, and the yellow Bolivia's mineral resources. The flag also features the national coat of arms.

National Image

Lake Titicaca is the second largest lake in South America (after Maracaibo in Venezuela). Standing on the shore it is impossible to see the other side. The Incas believed Lake Titicaca was the place where humankind was created. The border between Bolivia and Peru runs right down the center of the lake.
Bolivia is a country in the center of South America, surrounded by Brazil to the north and east, Argentina and Paraguay to the south, and Peru and Chile to the west. Slightly smaller than Alaska, Bolivia covers 424,164 square miles (1,098,580 sq km). Its three main geographic regions are the Altiplano, the Yungas, and the Oriente. The Altiplano, or High Plateau, is in the western portion of the country, nestled between two ranges of the Andes Mountains. Close to half the population of Bolivia lives on the Altiplano, one of the highest inhabited areas in the world. It is a cold, gray, windswept land that looks similar to the surface of the moon. East of the Altiplano are the Yungas, which means “warm lands.” The Yungas are a series of gentle hills, mountain valleys, and forests. Most of the food in Bolivia is grown here. The largest region in Bolivia is the Oriente, which is very flat. Tropical rainforests—part of the Amazon Basin—are found in the north part of this region, and grasslands, where large herds of cattle graze, are located in the south.

Bolivia lies south of the equator in the southern hemisphere, so when it’s winter in the United States, it’s summer in Bolivia, and vice versa. Summer, which is the rainy season, runs from November to April, while winter, which is much drier and with clear blue skies, lasts between June and September. The Altiplano is always cool with an average daily temperature of 46°F (8°C). The lower regions have milder, tropical weather. The average temperature in the Oriente is 79°F (26°C).

Population

Bolivia has close to nine million people. It has the largest indigenous (native) population in South America. Eighty-five percent of Bolivians have native Indian ancestry. Of these, 35 percent are mestizo (mixed European and native ancestry), 35 percent are full-blooded Quechua, and 30 percent are Aymará. The mestizos tend to live in the larger Bolivian cities. The Quechua live mainly on the southern Altiplano and in the valleys of the Oriente, and the Aymará live mostly on the northern Altiplano. The remaining 15 percent of the population lives mainly in the cities.

Language

Bolivia has three official languages: Spanish, Aymará, and Quechua. Aymará and Quechua were the two main languages spoken by members of the largest tribes in Bolivia before the Spanish came. All three languages have blended over the years, and some Bolivians now speak Spanish-Aymará and Spanish-Quechua dialects. So many immigrants have come to Bolivia that other languages are also spoken throughout the nation. In fact, in the south, where many Japanese have settled, people are almost as likely to converse in Japanese as in Spanish.

Can You Say It in Spanish?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>Hola</td>
<td>(OH-lah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good-bye</td>
<td>Adiós</td>
<td>(ah-dee-OHS)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Roman Catholic 95%
Protestant (Evangelical Methodist) 5%

Catholic priests were among the first Spanish settlers to reach Bolivia. While attempting to convert the native population to Christianity, they helped set up religious schools for the peasants and taught them new farming techniques. Today, 95 percent of Bolivians are Roman Catholic. The remaining 5 percent are Protestant.

### History

**AD 1200**
1200 The Aymará kingdoms rule what is now Bolivia

**1500**
1500s The Inca Quechua tribes come to Bolivia from Peru and conquer the Aymará

1532 Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro lands on the northern coast of Peru and later defeats the Incas

1538 The Spanish conquer present-day Bolivia, which becomes known as Upper Peru

1545 Silver is discovered at Potosí

**1700**
1780 Tupac Amarú leads an unsuccessful native rebellion against the Spanish
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Upper Peru declares its independence from Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1809</td>
<td>Upper Peru declares its independence from Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>The Republic of Bolivia is founded with Simón Bolívar, the Liberator, as president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>Antonio José de Sucre becomes Bolivia’s first elected president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>Bolivia is defeated in a war with Chile and is forced to give up its Pacific coastline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>The national government moves to La Paz while Sucre remains the legal capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Bolivia and Paraguay fight in the Chaco War; 65,000 Bolivians die</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Miners and peasants overthrow the military government, beginning the Bolivian Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>The Agrarian Land Reform law gives much privately owned land back to the natives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>The military takes over the government and rules for the next 18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Siles Zuazo becomes president, ending military rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The government declares much of Bolivia a natural disaster area after heavy rains cause widespread flooding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Evo Morales becomes the first indigenous (native) Bolivian president</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
President Morales orders the Bolivian military to take control of Bolivian oil and gas fields, attempting to get more money for his country in exchange for its oil and gas reserves.

**The Empire of the Sun**

The Incas’ rule was known as the Empire of the Sun because the Incas worshiped the sun god, *Inti*. At its height, the Inca empire covered parts of present-day Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Argentina, and Ecuador. The empire lasted for one hundred years, from the 15th to the 16th century. The Inca society was very complex, and various governors helped the emperor, thought to be a descendent of the sun god, rule the different districts in the land. The Incas built large cities, roadways, and bridges, some of which remain as ruins to this day. The Inca language, Quechua, has lasted through the centuries and is still spoken by several thousand Bolivians.

**Spanish Conquest**

Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro arrived in the Inca capital in 1532, when the Incas were at war over who would be the next emperor. After the war ended, the *conquistadores* captured and killed the new emperor, quickly taking control of the weakened nation. The Incas had little defense against the more sophisticated weapons of the Spanish, and many thousands caught European diseases that their bodies couldn’t fight off. Pizarro and Almagro divided South America between themselves, with Bolivia (known at the time as Upper Peru) given to Almagro. The Spanish settlers seized the land, which they converted into large plantations on which Bolivians were forced to work as slaves. A group of Catholic priests known as the Jesuits were angry about the way the government treated the Indians and tried to convince King Charles of Spain to pass laws ensuring better treatment.
The Silver Mountain

The Spanish came to South America seeking El Dorado, a legendary city of gold. Instead Diego Hualpa, a native llama herder working for the Spanish, discovered silver in Cerro Rico (Rich Mountain) in 1544. The Spanish immediately set up a mining town, Potosí (Fortune), at the base of the mountain and began sending large quantities of silver back to Spain. Thousands of people came to Potosí to make their fortunes, making it one of the wealthiest and largest cities in the New World. Local legend says the Spanish extracted enough silver from the mine at Potosí to build a bridge from Bolivia all the way to Spain. But all of this wealth came at a terrible price for the native miners who had to do most of the work. They were forced to work in harsh, unsafe conditions and were forbidden from leaving the mountain even to eat and sleep. Candles were the only form of light they saw for days on end, and thousands died each year inside the mountain. By 1825, the silver supply in Cerro Rico was almost completely used up.

The Battle for Freedom

By the early 1800s, many creoles (people of Spanish heritage born in the Americas) were getting fed up with being treated like second-class citizens. All over the Latin American colonies, creoles and natives alike were becoming more and more dissatisfied with the way they were treated by the privileged class of people who had been born in Spain. When Napoleon’s forces invaded and took over Spain, it gave the colonies a chance to rebel. In 1809, Upper Peru declared its independence from Spain. The Spanish governor in Peru immediately sent an army to put down the rebellion, but, after a bloody battle lasting 16 years, the rebels won their freedom. After liberating Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru from Spanish forces, Antonio José de Sucre (under Simón Bolívar’s command) marched his army into La Paz and named the new republic after the great Bolívar who fought for the South American colonies’ freedom from Spain. Sucre was the first president of Bolivia.

The Chaco War

When the various South American colonies became independent countries, they did not draw clear borderlines between themselves. Bolivia fought in several battles over borders with its neighbors, including Paraguay over the supposedly oil-rich Gran Chaco region. An all-out war, funded in large part by the big oil companies, broke out in 1932. As the Paraguayan army marched further and further into Bolivian territory, the Bolivian government moved to end the fighting, signing a peace agreement in 1935. In the end, Bolivia lost the Gran Chaco region. More than 100,000 people had died on both sides, but no oil was discovered in the region.
Reform

After the Chaco War, Bolivia experienced a series of military challenges to democratic rule. However, from 1982 on, democracy won out. While native Indians are still among the country’s poorest people, they now enjoy more rights, including the right to vote and the right to regain some of their old land. However, challenges remain. In 2006, President Evo Morales, the country’s first native president, sent troops to take over Bolivia’s oil and gas fields in an attempt to force the big multinational oil companies to share more of their profits with Bolivia. It remains to be seen how President Morales and the government will use the money. Perhaps an even bigger challenge is controlling the numerous coca farms in Bolivia. Coca is used to make cocaine, much of which is shipped to the United States. The United States wants the Bolivian government to shut down all the coca farms, but the farmers have refused to do so, despite financial incentives offered by the government. Coca is a very profitable crop for Bolivian farmers, and it will be hard to convince them to grow crops that sell for less money. President Morales is not in favor of drug trafficking, but he does not want to get rid of coca altogether as he sees it as being part of the native Bolivians’ way of life.

Games and Sports

Bolivians adore fútbol (soccer). On weekends many Bolivians like to play pickup games of fútbol or go to the local stadium to watch matches. Basketball and volleyball are also popular. Some villages have bullfights, especially around festival times. In Bolivian bullfights, there is no matador (bullfighter), so all the action takes place between two bulls. In rural areas of Bolivia, children don’t often have time to play. When not at school, they must spend most of their time working on the family farm. When they do find time to relax, Bolivian kids love playing marbles and spinning tops, called trompos. Once the top is spinning well, they like to slip their fingers under it and try to keep it spinning in their hands. Little girls also like to jump rope and play clapping games or hopscotch.

Holidays
Many Bolivian holidays have been around for thousands of years. *Alacitas,* or the “festival of abundance,” is an Aymará holiday celebrated in La Paz on 24 January. The festival honors the ancient god of abundance and good luck, Ekeko. People make Ekeko dolls, usually in the form of a jolly little man with a large tummy. Then during Alacitas, they tie miniature versions of objects to these Ekeko dolls. A toy car or house tied to an Ekeko doll expresses a wish that a real car or house will be obtained during the next year.

*Carnival* is a very important festival in Bolivia. It is celebrated in the weeks leading up to Lent, a Catholic holiday. The town of Oruro is most famous for its Carnival celebration, which is known as *la Diablada,* or the dance of the devil. *La Diablada* is a week-long festival, which opens with a huge parade in the early morning that reaches the local stadium at night. There, marchers hold the devil’s dance: two people dress up, one as the devil and one as St. Michael, and perform a ritual dance in which they fight until the devil is defeated.

**Food**

The Bolivian diet centers on the potato. There are more types of potatoes in the Andes than anywhere else in the world. Potatoes are served at most meals with either rice or noodles. Bolivians do not eat much for breakfast, usually just coffee and bread. *Almuerzo* (lunch) is the largest meal of the day, and people take their time eating it. They usually have soup, followed by a main dish such as *pique a lo macho* (beef sautéed with spices, tomatoes, bell peppers, and onions, and served over French fries with slices of hot dog and hard-boiled eggs) or *sillpancho* (breaded beefsteak served over white rice, topped with fried eggs, tomatoes, bell peppers, and onions). *Salteñas,* pastries filled with spicy meat and vegetables, are a very popular mid-morning snack served on street corners. *Empanadas,* a pastry filled with meat or cheese, are also popular snacks. Bolivians like their food spicy and put a hot sauce called *llajua* on many of their dishes. One of the most popular cold drinks (*refrescos*) is called *mocochinchi,* made from boiled peaches and cinnamon.

**Schools**

The Bolivian government provides free elementary and high school education. All children between the ages of 6 and 14 are required to attend. However, most children who live in the country are needed at home to work on the family farm and don’t have time to go to school. Also, most of the high schools are in the cities, and families in the country generally cannot afford to send their children to study so far away. In 1994, bilingual education was introduced throughout the country. Prior to that time, lessons were often taught only in Spanish, and the native children who spoke languages such as Aymará or Quechua often couldn’t understand what was being said. Now rural
children are being instructed in their native languages and Spanish.

**Life as a Kid**

Bolivian children who live in the countryside have many chores. They help with work on the farm—plowing the fields, preparing for the harvest, and taking care of the farm animals. The children also have jobs at home, such as collecting firewood for cooking and bringing in water for cooking, bathing, and drinking. Young boys help their fathers or other males in the family in the fields and with the farm animals, while young girls help their mothers or other females in the family with chores, such as cooking, washing laundry in the river, taking care of the younger children in the family, and preparing items for sale at local markets.

Bolivian children who live in the cities usually have fewer chores to do. Their time is spent mainly playing with friends, watching television, playing video games, and going to arcades or other places designed for children. However, there are many children in the cities who work as shoe shiners, sell candies or flowers on the streets, or work on the public transportation systems collecting fares in order to help add to their family’s income.

But regardless of how hard they work, all children in Bolivia play fútbol (soccer), and it’s very common to see homemade soccer fields scattered throughout the country. Fútbol is a national obsession!

**Government**

*President:* Evo Morales

The president runs the country and picks cabinet members to help. The president is elected to a five-year term and elections are always a time of intense debate and campaigning. The Congreso Nacional (National Congress) has two houses: the 27-member Camara de Senadores (Chamber of Senators), similar to the U.S. Senate, and the 130-member Camara de Diputados (Chamber of Deputies), similar to the U.S. House of Representatives. Members of the Congreso Nacional are elected to represent their home districts. All married citizens are required to start voting at 18, and single people are required to start voting at 21.

**Money and Economy**
Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in South America. Despite rich natural resources, the majority of the population lives in poverty and the country depends on foreign aid to survive. Bolivia has no access to the sea and therefore has trouble exporting its goods. Agriculture forms a large part of the economy, but Bolivia has not been able to afford the latest in farming technology, leaving much agricultural work to be done by hand. There are mines filled with gold, silver, and tin in Bolivia, but the economy struggles when the demand for these metals is low. To address many of these problems, President Evo Morales has implemented several reforms, including giving the government control over the oil and gas industries and handing large quantities of farmland back to the native people whose land it was before the Spanish conquerors came. These large changes have made foreign companies nervous to invest in Bolivia, but Morales’s reforms have been popular with the majority of Bolivia's citizens.

Getting Around

Bolivia has a large system of roads but very few of them are paved. Similarly, the railway system is large but unorganized and trains are often late or slow. In the cities, most people travel by bus, minibus, or taxi. These vehicles are often overcrowded and slow. However, there are private minibuses and taxis known as *trufi*, which have set routes and charge fixed prices. The *trufis* can be detected by the brightly colored flags that fly on their hoods. In the countryside, there are few cars. People usually walk and often use llamas or donkeys to transport heavy loads.

Fun Facts & Contacts

Bolivian Folk Music

Folk music is an important part of everyday life in Bolivia. Bolivians love to listen or dance to folk music. Many people also love to play it, whether it’s folk songs or traditional music that is blended with more modern or international music. Some of the instruments used to create Bolivian folk music include wind instruments such as *zampoñas*, *quenas*, *quenachos*, *toyos*, *zanas*, and *rondadores*, and stringed instruments such as guitars, *charangos*, and *ronrocos*. Bolivia is especially famous for the *charango*, an instrument that looks like a small guitar. Every year in late October, Bolivia hosts the National Charango Festival, a three-day concert highlighting selected contemporary folk musicians. The festival is one of the largest in the country. It celebrates some of the wonderful variety of folk music in Bolivia.
Learn More

Contact the Embassy of the Republic of Bolivia, 3014 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 483-4410.
The Andes Mountains, which run north-south through the country, climb to more than 21,000 feet (6,401 m). They are permanently covered with snow above 16,000 feet (4,800 m).

Lake Titicaca is the highest navigable (ships are able to travel on it) body of water in the world, at 12,500 feet (3,810 m).

The highest point in Bolivia is Nevado Sajama, at 21,463 feet (6,542 m).

Lake Titicaca is the highest navigable body of water in the world, at 12,500 feet (3,810 m).

The Andes Mountains, which run north-south through the country, climb to more than 21,000 feet (6,401 m). They are permanently covered with snow above 16,000 feet (4,800 m).

The Altiplano is the most densely populated region of the country.

Bolivia is the fifth largest country in South America. It is comparable in size to California and Texas combined.

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