

City Brights: Pia Chatterjee

Bolivia: South America's hidden jewel

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The white cars line up in front of the white basilica. There are twenty-three of them, of them white, queuing up to be blessed by the priest. Each car is decorated – they have large paper butterflies stuck onto the front, some have gilt ribbons on the doors and windows, all have streamers –

yellow, red, green festooned along the body. It is Bolivian Independence Day, and the small town of Copacabana has gone mad – it feels like all of Bolivia and half of Peru have made their way up to this tiny town at the edge of lake Titicaca. The priest is serious about his blessings – he rings his bell in front of each car, he sprinkles them with holy water, there is confetti and incense. Everyone takes pictures. Then the car drives off to the lake and waits. The shaman arrives, possibly from the island Isla del Sol, more ceremonies take place, also involving incense and water. Prayers are chanted. Then, before my amazed eyes, beer is flung onto the car. Groups of singer

arrive and are paid to sing and dance before the vehicle. Everyone drinks beer. I sit at the sidelines, watching. I too, am offered beer. I take a tentative sip. It's good. I drink some more. It's nine in the morning.

Bolivia is a country clearly at home with duality – shamans co-exist with priests, pachamama is as strongly revered as the virgin, Aymara, Quechua and Spanish are spoken with equal degrees of fluency. The geography of the country reflects this inclusiveness – for such a tiny country, Bolivia seems to have a little bit of everything (except a coast-line – but that is a topic for someone with a deeper political understanding than me.) Bolivia has a giant hinterland of Amazonian plains, dense jungle with more colorful birds and monkeys than I have ever seen before; the large salt flats in the world at Uyuni,



where Arvind and I travel to the highest elevation of our lives to see blood red lake with pink flamingos flocking against volcanoes. Further north is Titicaca – a huge cobalt blue lake, with the hills of Peru violet in the distance.



Lake Titicaca

I have loved being in Bolivia. It has challenged and confused me, it has asked me to revise my opinion of the world, and for this I am grateful. In a world that is swiftly becoming homogeneous, Bolivia is unmistakably unique – in the streets the ladies wear their traditional dress, the morning drink is a fiercely sweet *api* made from purple corn, and the day to day food, full of hominy and crisply fried fish is different from anything else I have ever eaten. We have been treated with a gentle warmth wherever we go – the eyes of our new friends are friendly and secure – everyone we speak to is kind and interested – but there is no excessive curiosity or glee. We have been told to be careful with our belongings in Bolivia, but the one day when, frazzled from our twelve hour bus ride, we leave our debit card in the ATM, it is returned to us. As we spend time in Bolivia, we feel the magic of the country overtake us. We become gentler, more compassionate, less needy. When we buy things, we do not bargain – the country is more obviously poor than any where we have ever been, and we find it impossible to haggle over a few cents here and there. When there is no h

water, or internet, or even electricity – as seems to be the case for us in remote areas of the country – I find it hard to get upset. More than 60% of the country lives below the poverty line, yet everyone we meet has found the time to chat with us, ask us about ourselves, offered help. In a place like this, it's difficult to be demanding.



Volcano, south-west Bolivia

Despite its remarkable beauty, Bolivia is not visited much by Americans. It has neither the culture of Argentina, the famous landmarks of Peru nor the beaches of Brazil. Yet, of all these places, Bolivia has my heart. Its beauty is jaw dropping, but you have to travel long, bone rattling roads to get to them. Its jungles are full of birds and animals, but as far as I could tell, Bolivians do not pursue their sighting as aggressively as in other South American forests, La Paz is dizzying in its beauty – but its elevation makes it difficult for all but the most determined of visitors. Yet, of all gems, Bolivia's real prize is its jewel hearted people. I have been befriended with more grace and kindness than I have ever been anywhere else in the world. I wish I could dismiss this aspect of our travels as accidental, thinking that I have been unusually lucky, or the people I met were unusually nice – but that would be doing my new

friends a huge disservice – from Ana at the Estrella Andina hotel in La Paz, who brought me cups of coca tea at four in the morning to help with my altitude sickness but refused the tip I offered, to her boss, who realizing how unwell I was, continued to ask Arvind about my health and offered medicine and care long after I was well, Johnny our guide from Brisa Travels in Uyuni, who worked for 3 hours on our car minus 20 degree temperature so that we would not be delayed on our trip the next day, to Mario and Adolfo at the Rosario Hotel at Copacabana, where I spent over two weeks on a writing retreat, who took me around the city, ensured that I came home safely each night, warned me when to avoid street food, and even tasted my rather poorly cooked curry and called it delicious – every single Bolivian we met in our travels was generous hearted and ready to help.

Despite the thousand things that do not work in Bolivia – it's really not that comfortable of a country – it's difficult to not be impressed with Bolivians. In my month in the country, I did not witness a single bout of anger or violence or unkindness. For a country as poor as Bolivia, it is impossible to comprehend how its citizens can go about their lives with such smiling acceptance, with such a lack of complaint.

A lot was magical about Bolivia, but for me, the most magical was its effect on me. So quick, so impatient, so instantly roused to irritation, was at my calmest, kindest, most joyful in the presence of Bolivians. And it is this gift that Bolivia has unwittingly given me – by showing me a way of life so inclusive, so instinctively kind, so undemanding, it has transformed me. After my one month in Bolivia, I feel closer to my own best self – more patient, more helpful, more tranquil, more accepting. Today I am more Bolivian. And I hope as I move further away from this glorious country and its golden people, I shall retain a little of their example – for everyone could do with a little bit of Bolivia in their souls, everyone could afford to be a little bit more changed by the gracefulness of the Bolivian spirit.

Things to remember when planning a Bolivian vacation:

La Paz is the highest capital of the world, and chances are you will get altitude sickness. Consult a doctor before you travel.

Americans need visas for Bolivia. The visa requirement includes yellow fever shots

Bolivia is a budget travelers paradise – the loveliest hotel in La Paz, the Rosario is about 60\$ a night for 2, including a fantastic breakfast. The hotel next door, the

Estrella Andina, is 35\$ for a huge bedroom with a modest breakfast. You'd be hard put to eat a meal costing more than 15\$ for two, including Bolivian wine.

The most splendid place we went to in Bolivia were the salt flats of Uyuni. However if you go, be very careful of the tour company you choose. We heard pretty serious horror stories. Our own tour company, Brisa travels, was fantastic and also very affordable (125\$ for 2 nights, including food, accommodation and guide). We also heard good things about Oasis travels. Please take a sleeping bag and remember the conditions along this trip are extremely harsh and are not recommended for the faint hearted.

While planning a trip, please consider going to the Chalalan ecolodge in the Madidi national forest. The lodge, set in the heart of the Bolivian Amazon, is the most tranquil and beautiful jungle I have ever visited, and you are certain to sight macaws, toucans and a vast array of herons and raptors. In the



Bolivian Amazon at Chalalan Eco lodge

lodge, you have the option of swimming with (very docile) caimans. It's run by the indigenous community of the area, and your dollars directly help build schools and hospitals in an area that has very few other resources.

If you are pleased with your travels, your guide, your accommodation, please leave generous tips.

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