

Introduction to Bolivian Culture in La Paz

Purpose: To help students recognize and understand the cultures of La Paz and how this diversity can be applied to their lives

Level: Beginning

Objectives: Explain about the diversity of La Paz in weather, dialects and languages (different Indian tribes in La Paz), and culture. Also, help them understand geographical features of that unique city and some interesting geographical sites.

Basic Information:

Geography

La Paz is one of the most unique cities in the world. Located in the Andes Mountains, it is situated almost 12,000 feet above sea level. Thus, La Paz is the highest capitol city in the world. Beyond the outskirts of La Paz rests the majestic Mount Illimani, a mountain with an altitude of approximately 11,740 feet that can be seen from a distance of La Paz.



The whole city is shaped in the form of a big bowl. Houses, buildings, and cobblestone streets cover the area. Unlike some parts of the United States, the wealthier people typically live in the lower areas of the “bowl” while the poorer families literally live on the hillside. Even beyond bowl is a place called “El Alto,” an area which is even more impoverished than those that live on the hillside.

The People

Just as the geography of La Paz is so diverse, so also are the people. La Paz has an extremely high percentage of indigenous people, with roughly half of the population speaking the Aymara language. A majority of the indigenous people live in poverty in el Alto. This conflicts with the wealthy populations of the Zona Sur. Yet, somehow, all the people seem to get along in el Centro, the downtown area, where most of the markets, plazas and sources of entertainment are located. Another group that is found in La Paz (although they are not as common in La Paz as they are in other areas of Bolivia) are the indigenous people that speak Quechua. However, Aymara is by far the more common indigenous language. In fact, almost half of residence in La Paz speak Aymara. English is also spoken in the business community, and Spanish is spoken by the majority of people in La Paz. Many people are bilingual.



Religion

Despite all the differences in ethnicity, over 95% of the population still claims to be Catholic. The origins of the city are found in the Spanish Colonial Architecture.



The plazas in the city offer some of the best-preserved examples of colonial architecture. Pictured above is the popular Plaza Iglesia de San Francisco, with the oldest cathedral of the same name.

Weather

La Paz is said to be one of the only cities that has four seasons in one day. Because of its elevation, the weather is generally cold. However, in the afternoon it starts to warm up from the sun's rays, and in the evening there may be a lot of wind. On days when it rains, it complicates the weather situation even more. Thus someone visiting La Paz may experience intense cold, heat, rain, and wind all in the same day. Also, a good thing to remember is that the seasons in Bolivia and the United States are exactly opposite. Thus, the Winter months are from May to October and the rainy season (which is also summer) is from November to March.

Food

A common most common source for food is the potato, which can be cultivated in cold, elevated, climates. Many meals are made with potatoes that are prepared in a variety of different ways. For example, the "campesinos" in the Altiplano prepare "chuño," by freezing potatoes until they become a dark black color. This method is a form of food storage and is similar to a dehydrated potato. When they are ready to eat chuño, they

simply soak it in water until it becomes soft and then make it (by boiling it and serving it with sauce or plain, putting it in soup, etc...)

One favorite dish among the people from La Paz (“los paceños) is “plato paceño.” This meal consists of meat (la carne asada), fried cheese, “choclo” (which is a type of corn that has big kernels), and “habas” (a green vegetable that is a type of bean). Meals are generally followed with a dessert of some sort. For example, “la gelatina,” fruit, or “arroz con leche” are common ones.

Websites for more information:

Andean Culture Today (pictures)

<http://www.icstars.com/Ushop/Wara/Bolivian%20Culture/index.htm>

Culture of Bolivia <http://www.macalester.edu/courses/geog61/amartin/culture.html>

<http://www.macalester.edu/courses/geog61/amartin/physicaland.html>

<http://www.macalester.edu/courses/geog61/amartin/weather.html>

Quiz about La Paz, Bolivia

Answer the following questions.

1. How is the city of La Paz situated?
2. Where do the wealthier people live?
3. What is the primary indigenous group in La Paz? What language do they speak?
4. What is the #1 language spoken in La Paz? About how many people know other languages?
5. What is the dominant religion in La Paz?
6. What is the principle crop?
7. How are the seasons in La Paz compared to the seasons in the United States?
8. What did you find most interesting about the culture in La Paz, Bolivia? Why?

Possible Activities:

1. In groups, pretend that you work for a travel agency and create a travel brochure about the unique situations in La Paz that will attract tourists.
2. You and your friend are traveling to La Paz, Bolivia. Write your first impressions of the city.
3. You and your family recently moved to La Paz. Make a list of all the pros and cons of having such diverse weather conditions.

Vocabulary:

el chuño

la chola (o la cholita)

el cholo

paceño(-a)

aymara

Materials:

Internet resources (websites)

If available, artifacts from Bolivia