

BOLIVIA

La Paz, Lake Titicaca & the Altiplano

10 days

Created on: 4 Sep, 2025

Day 1 Arrival in La Paz, Bolivia

Today we arrive in the city of La Paz, one of the world's highest major cities, located at 3686 m (12,090 ft) above sea level. La Paz is situated in a bowl-shaped canyon in the Cordillera Real (Royal Range) of the Andes. As one travels across the Altiplano, the ground suddenly drops away 400 m (1,312 ft) to reveal the city hidden in a bowl in the mountains.

We suggest that you take it easy today in order to Acclimatize to the high elevation (if your flight arrives late today, you might consider arriving a day early in order to rest).

□ Overnight in La Paz.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 La Paz: City Tour

La Paz is rightfully famous for its mountain setting; indeed the mountains surrounding La Paz soar to an average of 5500m (18,040 ft) above sea level. The most spectacular views of the city come on a clear evening when one can see the twinkling lights of the city stretching up the hillsides, under the snow-capped triple peak of Mount Illimani at 6402 m (21,000 ft).

□ Today we'll explore the well-preserved Spanish colonial quarter of the city where we will visit the Precious Metals Museum and the Murillo Museum. Our tour continues to Plaza Murillo where the Cathedral, the Government Palace, and the National Congress buildings are located.

Later we walk through the unusual Mercado de los Brujos, better known as the Witch's Market, where you will see all sorts of potions, herbs, and folk remedies used to guard against evil spirits; the market provides a fascinating window on the secretive world of Andean mysticism. Here (and elsewhere) you may observe the colourfully-dressed native Quechua and Ymara-speaking people. The women wear many layers of petticoats covered by a colourful dress, and over their shoulders they sling a multi-coloured striped blanket called a 'phulla' in which they carry their groceries or babies -- or both! On their heads they wear a bowler hat (which always appears to be too small) at a jaunty angle. The British brought the bowler hat to Bolivia when they were building the railway and somehow it became part of the everyday dress of Andean women.

□ A must in La Paz is to take a ride on the city's iconic cable car, from which we enjoy fantastic views. We finish today's tour with a visit to the spectacular Valley of the Moon, named for its bizarre geological formations.

Overnight in La Paz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 La Paz: Lake Titicaca & Isla del Sol

An early start today takes us to Copacabana, site of religious pilgrimage, beginning with the Incas. Every year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims travel from distinct parts of Bolivia and other Latin American countries to take part in religious festivals in Copacabana. Legend says that if the statue is removed Lake Titicaca will rise up and flood the whole Altiplano region.

After a brief visit, we board a catamaran for our exploration of Lake Titicaca and Isla del Sol. This is the most important of the thirty-six islands in the lake. Lake Titicaca, South America's largest lake, straddles the Bolivia-Peru border and is said to be the highest navigable body of water in the world at an altitude of 3810 m (12,497 ft). Lake Titicaca was once much larger than the 8560 sq kilometres (3,305 square mi) it occupies today; indeed the great city of Tiahuanaco was built at the edge of the lake, but today it is more than 25 km (15 mi) from the lake! This reduction in the lake size has had a tremendous effect on the climate of the Altiplano region over the past 1,000 years and has made this cradle of cultures able to support far fewer people today.

Our itinerary continues with a stop at the Inti Wata Cultural Complex, which includes several sections with informative displays on

traditional medicine, traditional living, and reed ship building. The complex also includes a unique sailing experience aboard a huge traditional reed vessel for a panoramic visit to the Pilkokaina Inca Palace.

We return to the catamaran for a buffet lunch on board, after which we make our way back to La Paz. Please note that, due to our early start, large lunch, and possible early start tomorrow, we do not include dinner this evening.

Overnight in La Paz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 4 La Paz: Tiwanaku Ruins

Today we visit the epic city of Tiwanaku, the capital of an ancient civilization and Unesco site, located 72 km away from the city of La Paz near the south-eastern shores of Lake Titicaca.

The Tiwanaku Empire (also Tiahuanaco or Tihuanacu) was one of the first imperial states in South America, dominating portions of what is now southern Peru, northern Chile, and eastern Bolivia for approximately six hundred years (500–1100 CE). During its greatest times, Tiwanaku was the largest city in the world and considered to be the cradle of all American civilizations. The city lies in the high river basins of the Tiwanaku and Katari rivers, at altitudes between 12,500–13,880 feet (3800–4200 meters) above sea level. Despite its location at such a high altitude, and with frequent frosts and thin soils, perhaps as many as 20,000–40,000 people lived in the city at its heyday.

After 700 years, the Tiwanaku civilization disintegrated as a regional political force. This happened about 1100 CE, and resulted, at least one theory goes, from the effects of climate change, including a sharp decrease in rainfall. There is evidence that the groundwater level dropped and the raised field beds failed, leading to a collapse of agricultural systems in both the colonies and the heartland. Whether that was the sole or most important reason for the end of the culture is debated.

On our tour we will visit the Kalasasaya (Sun) temple, the semi-subterranean Earth Temple, the Akapana Pyramid, and the legendary Sun Gate. Our tour also takes us to the museum featuring ceramic objects and tools from civilizations prior to the Incas.

Return to La Paz.

Overnight in La Paz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 La Paz - Fly to Sucre - Parque Cretacico - Sucre

This morning we fly to Sucre, the most beautiful city in Bolivia.*

Whether you call it Sucre, La Plata, Charcas, or Ciudad Blanca, the city of Sucre has a rich, varied history and a wealth of historical architecture deserving of its selection as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Sucre shares capital city status with La Paz as the legislative and administrative capital. This is the constitutional capital and home of the Supreme Court; it is also a university city with many cultural attractions. Sucre is also home to a large indigenous population who maintain their traditional clothing and customs and sell their crafts and goods available in the markets.

We begin our day with a visit to a relatively new attraction -- a set of dinosaur tracks (Parque Cretacico), discovered by accident in 1994 in a cement quarry 10 km (6 mi) from the city. The tracks are almost 70-million years old, from the Cretaceous era when a diverse population of dinosaurs were living on and stomping around in, the soft clay shores of a vast ocean inlet which covered large areas of Argentina, coming as far inland as Sucre.

After a break for lunch, we'll tour Sucre, visiting the House of Freedom Historical Museum and the Treasure Museum (Museo del Tesoro), with its displays of precious and semi-precious stones. We also include the the Asur Textile Museum and the outer facades of the churches of San Lazaro and Santo Domingo, the main historical monuments and Bolivar Park.

* Please note that this will likely be a "painfully" early departure owing to the lack of flights (one morning, one late afternoon). Though not ideal, a morning flight serves our purposes/itinerary better than the alternative. Please also note that the changeability of internal flight times over the next (up to and including our flight to Asuncion) could result in adjustments to the final itinerary.

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Overnight in Sucre.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Sucre - Potosi - Colchani

This morning we continue by road to Potosi (+/- 3 hours), a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The discovery of ore in silver-rich Cerro Rico ('rich hill') by Indian, Diego Hualpa, in 1544 prompted the foundation of the city of Potosi on April 10th, 1545 at the foot of the hill. At that time more than eighty-six churches were built and the city's population increased to nearly 200,000, making it one of the largest and wealthiest cities in Latin America and in the world. Potosi sits at an altitude of 4090m (13,500 ft) above sea level, and claims to be the highest city in the world. The area is well-known for its cool weather and sometimes even freezing rain!

On arrival we'll visit the city's principal sites, including San Lorenzo Church, where we will appreciate its beautiful façade. We'll admire the exterior of the Arch of Cobija and see the artisans' market in the colonial area of the city.

We'll also visit the Casa Nacional de la Moneda (National Mint),* one of two built to mint the silver coins used by the Spanish Empire. This impressive facility operated until 1953, or lasted for 400 years of continuous coinage. Most of the silver shipped through the Spanish Main came from Potosi. According to official records, 45,000 tons of pure silver were mined from Cerro Rico from 1556 to 1783. In Spanish there is still a saying, valer un potosi, "to be worth a potosi" (that is, "a fortune"). One theory holds that the mint mark of Potosi (the letters "PTSI" superimposed on one another) is the origin of the dollar sign.

After completing our tour of Potosi, we will continue onto our hotel in Colchani.

* We regret if our flight-driven itinerary changes closer to departure have us visiting places on a Sunday when some sites may be closed.

Overnight in Colchani.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Uyuni: Area Sightseeing

In the environs of Uyuni we will experience the highest and largest salar (salt lake) in the world (10000 sq km), surrounded by an impressive otherworldly landscape. On the lake's edge, visitors can see the local inhabitants extracting salt using ancient methods. En route we visit the villages of Chaquila and TikaTika.

After a lunch break, we visit the old railway depot in Uyuni, after which we continue to Colchani to see the artisans working on iodized salt. We visit to Incahuasi Island, located in the heart of the salt flat and the biggest of a group of islands that represents an isolated ecosystem. The island is populated with giant cacti species that measure up to 12 meters high (26.25 feet), providing an impressive overview.

Our hotel, located near Colchani village, is a regular facility with rooms, beds, a lobby and a dining room. Only one thing sets this hotel apart -- it's entirely made of salt! (Please don't lick the walls). After dinner you can stroll in the surroundings of the hotel and enjoy the stars in the unpolluted and cloudless skies.

Overnight in Colchani.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Salar Uyuni Area Sightseeing

Today's 4x4 excursion takes us to the north side of Uyuni Salt Flat, where we take a look the Coquesa Mummies, human archeological remains in a little cave near Tunupa Volcano. Ceramic, gold and copper artifacts, and articles of clothing have been discovered at some of the sites, indicating the presence of an advanced but little-known culture. Unfortunately, the sites' remoteness has left them vulnerable to amateur treasure hunters who have plundered several items of archaeological value.

□
As our visit coincides with the dry season (April to November), the salt flat surface provides the opportunity to play with photography and the salar's unique perspective.

□
We return to Colchani for overnight.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Uyuni - Fly to La Paz

Today we fly back to the capital.

As some of your fellow travellers may be continuing to our tour of Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina, this flight will occur without your Tour Leader. If so, you will be met on arrival by a local guide, who will also see to your departure arrangements tomorrow. Dinner on your own this evening.

Overnight in La Paz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 10 Depart

Departure from La Paz.

BUEN VIAJE!