BACKGROUND

Land and Climate
Located in the heart of South America, Bolivia is a landlocked country that is about the same size as Egypt and almost three times the size of the U.S. state of Montana. There are five distinct geographical areas: the high, cold, and dry mountain-rimmed Altiplano to the west; Los Yungas, a region of medium-elevation valleys northeast of La Paz and Cochabamba; the agricultural highland valleys in the center of the country; the Gran Chaco, a vast subtropical plain shared with Paraguay and Argentina; and the llanos and el trópico—wet, hot, forested lowlands in the east and northeast. Grasslands are also common on these lands, which makes the area good for cattle ranching. Forests cover about half of Bolivia. Bolivia is home to twenty-two national parks, seven of which have recently been opened to oil exploration.

The Andes Mountains, which run north-south through the country, climb to more than 21,000 feet (6,401 meters). They are permanently covered with snow above 16,000 feet (4,800 meters). The famous Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable body of water in the world (12,500 feet, or 3,810 meters), lies on the north end of the Altiplano.

The country has two main seasons. Summer (November–April) is the rainy season. Winter is from June to September. In La Paz, the average annual temperature is 65°F (18°C).

History

Early Civilizations

The Tiahuanaco civilization inhabited the area near Lake Titicaca between 1500 BC and AD 1200. Aymara and other groups were conquered in the 1400s by Incan armies, bringing the area into the Inca Empire. The Incas introduced the Quechua language and a new social system.

Colonization and Independence
The Spanish began their conquest in 1532, and by 1538 all of what is now Bolivia was under Spanish control. Countless indigenous people died in forced labor. Known as Upper Peru during Spanish rule, Bolivia was one of the first colonies to rebel. Political uprisings occurred frequently in the 1700s but were always crushed. It was not until the independence movement of 1809 that Upper Peru began to see success. After the 16-year War of Independence, the area gained autonomy on 6 August 1825. It was the last Spanish colony to gain freedom and was named after its liberator, Simón Bolívar.

Wars with Neighbors
Bolivia's first president was overthrown in 1828, and the country experienced decades of factional strife, revolutions, and military dictatorships. Much of its original territory was lost between 1879 and 1935 in wars with Chile, Brazil, and Paraguay. The War of the Pacific (1879–84) was most significant because Bolivia lost its access to the sea. The lack of sea access has restricted Bolivia's economic growth. Bolivians have regularly appealed to Chile for the return of the territory. In 2010, Peru granted Bolivia the right to build a Pacific port in Ilo, located in southern Peru. With this access, Bolivia hopes to increase foreign trade.

Dictatorships
The government attempted to improve conditions and
July 2015 saw hundreds of miners from more roads and hospitals, an international airport, and develop infrastructure in the region, including the building of blocked roads as part of a campaign to get the government to protestors were arrested. Previously, the miners have also the city of Potosí clash with police in La Paz. Dozens of •

Second term.

Constitutional Court decision to allow him to run for a third term. The election marked the first in polls and voted overwhelmingly to reelect President Evo Morales to a third term. The plans to export Bolivia's vast stores of natural gas drew public protests, which eventually forced him to resign. Quechua are prevalent throughout the country but are especially concentrated near Cochabamba and Sucre; the Aymara are concentrated in the Altiplano. Santa Cruz is the largest city, with over 2 million people, while La Paz is home to around 1.8 million. Population About 68 percent of Bolivia's total population is criollo (or mestizo), who are of mixed indigenous and European heritage. Some 20 percent of the people are of indigenous ancestry; the largest groups are the Quechua, Aymara, Guarani, Mojeño, Chimane, and smaller groups. Another 5 percent are of European descent. A small number are characterized as chola, a group of indigenous or mestizo women who are known by their distinctive dress that includes bowler hats. Traditionally rural inhabitants or domestic workers for urban families, cholas have historically been subject to discrimination but have seen their social status rise in recent years. An additional 1 percent of the population is black, with the remainder falling into other groups.

Spanish (Castellano) is Bolivia's official language, along with 36 indigenous ones. The most common indigenous languages are Quechua and Aymara, which are quite similar to each other and share some common words (for example "yellow" is k'illu in Aymara and q'illu in Quechua). Spanish is used in government, schooling, and business and is the native tongue of about 60 percent of the population. Most people speak some Quechua. Indigenous groups speak their own languages, especially in rural areas. However, Quechua and Aymara are often liberally peppered with Spanish words. Many young indigenous-language speakers also speak Spanish. In the past, many indigenous people who had moved from rural areas to cities would speak Spanish exclusively with their families to avoid stigma. However, since President Morales took office, indigenous languages are becoming more accepted and knowledge of an area's indigenous language is required for many public employees.

Religion Bolivia has no official religion. Approximately 77 percent of the people are Roman Catholic. An active Protestant minority (evangelicos) make up some 16 percent of the population. Some indigenous belief systems are present as well. Bolivia's Altiplano mix Aymaran and Quechuan traditions with their Catholic beliefs. For instance, reverence for Pachamama, or goddess Mother Earth, is popular. People toast to her and bless things in her name. It is customary to offer a drink to Mother Earth by pouring a little water on the ground before drinking it. A ch'alla is the blessing of any
material possession or event by offering symbolic articles and alcohol to Pachamama and Achachila, gods of the mountains. Homes in rural areas may be given a ch'alla every year at Carnaval, but they may also pray to the Virgin Mary or other Catholic saints at the same time.

**General Attitudes**

In Bolivia, people enjoy getting as much pleasure out of an experience as possible, with less regard to how much time they spend. Scheduled events begin late, as all understand that arriving on time is not expected. This phenomenon is often referred to as the Hora Boliviana (Bolivian time). The Aymara view the past as something they can see in front of them but the future as unseen and therefore behind them.

Bolivians admire honesty and frown upon those who are too proud and who flaunt or talk excessively about their wealth. They do not like confrontation and avoid disagreement. Kindness, gentleness, and concern for another’s welfare are keys to friendship in Bolivia.

Divisions exist between society’s upper classes—Europeans and mestizos—and indigenous groups, who have often been barred from participating fully in society because of their race. Those who have wanted to assimilate into society have had to speak Spanish and change their way of dress. Many also adopt Spanish names. People of European and mestizo ancestry tend to believe that other groups should assimilate into society by leaving tradition behind and adopting a more Westernized culture, but the indigenous movement is working to ensure that all the benefits of a democratic society are extended to all citizens without forcing them to abandon their traditions.

**Personal Appearance**

How Bolivians dress depends on where they live and their social class. Generally, urban residents wear Western-style clothing. That generally means jeans, T-shirts, and dresses for women. Children dress neatly for school but may wear athletic attire in their leisure time. During the cooler season, people keep warm with wool hats (chullas) and sweaters, coats, scarves. While shoes are the norm in urban areas, sandals are more common in western and eastern rural areas. Specifically, leather sandals called abarcas are standard footwear in the west.

Many women in the Altiplano wear a pollera (a full, colorful skirt worn with four or five embroidered underskirts). Rural women (called cholas or cholitas) wear a pollera with a manta (shawl). They often wear their hair in two braids and may wear bowler derby hats, bonnets, or stovepipe hats, depending on where they are from.

Some indigenous people make their clothing out of wool. Common colors include red, black, and off-white. Native men might wear shin-length pants, a shirt, and a thick leather belt. They often wear a poncho and a hat. Women wear a long, dark-colored dress tied at the waist with a colorful belt. They also may wear a small shoulder cape and oval hat. Women carry babies on their backs in an aguayo (a woven square cloth). In the warmer rural areas of Llano and Chaco, the clothes are made of lighter fabrics, and women wear a tipoy (a knee-length, straight, sleeveless tunic with a flared collar and hem).

**CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES**

**Greetings**

Spanish-speaking Bolivians greet friends and acquaintances with a cheerful Buenos días (Good morning), Buenas tardes (Good afternoon), or Buenas noches (Good evening). People say “How are you?” with ¿Cómo estás? in Spanish, Imaynalla kaniki in Quechua, or Kamisaki in Aymara.

In Spanish, one adds the title Señor (Mr.), Señora (Mrs.), or Señorita (Miss) for first-time introductions or when greeting strangers. Señorita is used for any woman, unless she is older or the speaker knows she is married. Bolivians show respect for a person by using the title Don (for men) or Doña (for women) before a first name. Rural people (campesinos) even use these titles with close friends. Acquaintances do not call each other by first name.

Greetings, especially between men, are accompanied by a handshake. However, if a person's hand is wet or dirty, he or she may offer an arm or elbow. Handshakes are also used for formal introductions. Greetings for women are always accompanied by a kiss on or near the cheek. Close friends and relatives frequently greet with an abrazo. It consists of a hug, a handshake, two or three pats on the shoulder, and another handshake. It is important to greet everyone in a home. A general greeting is also expected upon encountering a group of people; for example, one might say Buenos días upon entering a small shop or restaurant. Bolivians maintain little personal space and stand close during conversation. Female friends often embrace and kiss each other on the cheek. They commonly walk arm in arm.

Spanish farewells include Hasta luego (Until later) or the casual Chau. Adiós implies good-bye for a long time. In southern areas, Adiós is also used as a quick greeting when people pass on the street. In both Quechua and Aymaran, Q'ayaqama means “See you tomorrow.”

**Gestures**

Bolivians often use hands, eyes, and facial expressions to communicate. To beckon children, one waves the fingers with the palm down. Patting someone on the shoulder signifies friendship. A raised hand, palm outward and fingers extended, twisting quickly from side to side, states “There isn’t any” or “no”—a gesture often used by taxi and bus drivers when their vehicles are full. Waving the index finger indicates a strong “no.” One covers the mouth when yawning or coughing. Eye contact in conversation is essential. Bolivians tend to be reserved, so avoiding another’s eyes may just be a sign of shyness; however, it can also communicate suspicion or lack of trust. Bolivians point to a spot on their forearm to indicate the size of something they are discussing.

**Visiting**

Bolivians enjoy visiting one another. Both arranged and unannounced visits are common. Urban visitors generally give flowers or small gifts to the host upon arrival. Hosts
might also present visitors with gifts, which are not opened in front of the giver. Hosts make their guests as comfortable as possible. 

Upon arrival, visitors are invited inside and offered a drink or light refreshments; refusing them is impolite. It is also impolite to start a conversation on the doorstep. Visitors staying a few days are welcomed with a hug and kiss on the cheek. Hosts provide special meals as a welcoming gesture, and if possible, all family members are present to greet the guests. Compliments given during the meal instead of after will bring a second helping. Guests are not asked how long they will stay, as this is interpreted as a desire to have them leave soon.

Eating
Bolivian families eat most meals together. They typically have one large and two small meals per day. Rural families might eat four meals. Lunch is the main meal of the day, though it is difficult for many people to return home for it, so they may eat it in a restaurant instead.

Upon entering a room where people are eating, Bolivians often say Buen provecho (similar to Bon appétit), to which guests respond Gracias (Thank you). Everyone (including guests) is expected to eat everything on the plate; if they do not, it is the same as telling the cook that the meal was not good. People eat meat with utensils, not hands. Generally, one is not excused from the table until all are finished eating. It is polite to say Gracias to all at the table when one finishes eating and to wish them Buen provecho upon leaving.

Dining out is most common at lunch or dinner for younger Bolivians. In restaurants, the host typically pays for the meal. A tip is usually left only when in large groups or in a nice restaurant in the city. Chicherias, bars that in Cochabamba are indicated by a white flag hanging outside the establishment, serve chicha, a home-brewed alcoholic drink made from corn.

LIFESTYLE
Family
Structure
The family is central to Bolivian society. Middle- and upper-class families have one or two children. Rural families often have many children, but children often die in infancy. In rural areas, extended families often live under the same roof, though children frequently migrate to cities in search of a higher quality of life. Nuclear family units are the norm in urban areas. There are a growing number of young, single mothers.

Parents and Children
Children are generally well disciplined and share in family responsibilities. The oldest daughters in a family, often called mamitas (little moms), are considered second mothers to the younger siblings. Children in rural areas take on many household duties. Boys begin to help their fathers in the fields at age eight and learn how to be self-sufficient by puberty. Girls learn to raise children and carry out domestic tasks, such as cooking and washing clothes. Although children are taught the importance of education, illiteracy is high among the poor.

Rural children grow up to be parents quickly, often marrying and starting their own families at the age of 16 or 17. They usually live in their own home, away from their parents. As a common old saying states, “El casado casa quiere” (Every newlywed wants his own house). When parents grow old, their children take them into their homes as a sign of gratitude and love.

In urban families, children devote their time to school and spend most afternoons doing their homework at home or at classmates' homes. They generally do not get jobs before graduating high school. Parents encourage their children to pursue education and often support them through college. Undergraduates do not usually marry before graduating. Once they do marry, they move out of the family home. Urban grandparents usually stay in their own homes until they need some assistance and then may live in a nursing home.

Gender Roles
Many aspects of family life vary according to region. In the western, rural region, the mother of the family is considered the “wise one” of the family. Mothers raise children without much assistance from fathers, who spend most of their time working in the fields. While the father makes most family decisions, the mother has the most influence on household affairs. Grandchildren refer to their grandmother as “mother,” rarely using the title “grandmother,” which can carry a sense of disaffection or estrangement. In the eastern rural areas, the father of the family is considered the highest authority in the household.

In urban families, fathers retain the responsibility of earning money to live on, but mothers also often work outside of the home, in addition to being the primary one completing household tasks. Wealthier families hire nursemaids and nannies, leaving the mother to take on more of an administrative role at home.

Most women work in the home. The majority lack modern conveniences such as washers, dryers, and vacuum cleaners, so their work is difficult and time consuming. This situation can prevent women from pursuing work in the formal labor force, but many run small businesses sewing, cutting hair, or selling soda and other small items from their homes. Urban women have the same rights as men in Bolivian society but fewer opportunities and are often subject to discrimination. Bolivia has one of the highest rates against violence toward women in South America, and roughly a third of girls have suffered some kind of sexual abuse.

Housing
In urban areas, apartments are common in city centers, while houses are located on surrounding hillsides. These houses make up communities called laderas. The most common housing materials are bricks, cement, sand, and stones. Inside, they usually feature two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a living room. Decorations tend to be simple, consisting of light colored walls and curtains and family photographs.

Urban homes are more likely to have running water, but many of them lack central heating, even in places where temperatures can approach freezing. Many homes harness
heat from the sun through skylights or large windows. Some Bolivian families try to generate heat at night by using a *garafa* (propane tank) or a *brasero* (brazier).

A typical rural home is made from local materials such as adobe bricks, mud, rocks, or wooden boards. The floor and walls are usually dirt, topped with straw and wood roofs. Inside, family members tend to sleep on the floor, using dried sheepskin and woven blankets for bedding. If there is a bed, then an entire family may sleep in it. Kitchens are generally freestanding structures, open on all sides and covered by a simple straw roof. Most rural homes have electricity, but a lot do not have indoor plumbing.

Bolivians conserve water by using the same water for cooking, washing, watering plants, or laundry. More modern construction is becoming common in some communities, where homes are built with cement-covered walls, corrugated iron roofs, and tiled floors.

### Dating and Marriage

**Dating and Courtship**

In Bolivia, dating is preceded by friendship. In urban areas, the average age to start dating is around 13. Classmates meet to do their homework, watch movies, or go to the town’s central plaza. In many towns in the evenings, young men and young women like to take walks, where they stroll in groups around the plaza to make eye contact and flirt. Young men walk young women home as a sign of courtesy and while doing so may ask the girl he is interested in to be his girlfriend. The process of getting acquainted, dating seriously, and becoming engaged can take as long as three years.

**Marriage in Society**

In rural areas, some parents arrange marriages between their children and the children of their friends as a way of perpetuating the friendship between the families. Men generally marry between the ages of 20 and 25, while women marry between ages 19 and 23. Rural girls may marry as early as 16 or 17; however, people usually do not marry until they have some financial security or property. Because weddings are expensive, many rural people choose common-law marriages instead. Bolivians wear their wedding rings on the right hand.

**Weddings**

For a marriage to be legal, a civil ceremony must be performed. However, most couples also have a religious ceremony, followed by a dance and reception. The couple wears their finest clothes for the ceremony. After the religious ceremony, the newlyweds may ride away in a decorated car, driving around the city and honking so that everyone may share in the good news. They often go to the central plaza to take pictures around the fountains and gardens there. Then, family and friends meet the bride and groom at the reception place.

In some rural areas, celebrations used to last as long as a week, according to the belief that it takes seven days to establish a new family, just as it took God seven days to create the earth. Though traditions like this are giving way to modernization, others remain more common. For example, godparents still often join couples with a golden chain during the wedding ceremony that the bride then wears for a week; at the end of the week, the godparents remove it from her.

During the reception, while the newlyweds are dancing, friends and family get close and pin money on the clothes of the bridegroom or the bride. The next day, the bride and groom open their presents. Wedding guests are expected to give the newlyweds presents that will help them start their new life with a well-equipped house. Relatives and close friends, especially those in the west, may bring major presents, such as beds, televisions, dining tables, and refrigerators; and it is not uncommon to see an arriving guest followed by a pickup truck bringing furniture. Some guests or relatives may even take out a loan in order to give presents to the newlyweds. The wedding gifts are counted, and if the total is an odd number, the person who is assigned to count has to buy a gift that has not yet been given.

### Life Cycle

**Birth**

Most women give birth in hospitals, without using painkillers. In the western region, people believe that the hairier a baby is, the more blessings he or she comes with. Each parent picks a name for the baby; Bolivians usually name their babies after a grandparent. Parents in western Bolivia may also choose a name using an ancient astrological calendar with names for each day of the year; many people born on the same day have the same name.

**Milestones**

At age one, Bolivian children have their hair cut for the first time, and around that age, most Bolivian children are also baptized in the Catholic Church. Girls pass from childhood into adolescence on their 15th birthday, when the family holds a special reception. The quinceañera, as the birthday girl is called, wears a special dress and is attended by 14 "ladies" and 14 "pages" in order to represent each year leading up to her birthday. She waltzes with her own page, friends, and family members. Young men see their 18th birthday as the age of becoming a grown man. Young men are also expected to serve in the national army for a year, usually at the age of 17.

**Death**

Funerals traditionally consist of three-day ceremonies, which are still common in rural areas. Urban funerals are usually condensed versions. Mourners, dressed all in black, typically follow the coffin to the city cemetery. Wealthy or high-status Bolivians are buried above ground in private garden cemeteries. In some regions, the extended family gathers together after the burial to share an abundant feast so that the mourners do not return home in loneliness.

### Diet

Potatoes, rice, milk products, fruits, and soups (which often include quinoa, a protein-rich grain) are common staples in the Bolivian diet. Starches vary by region: yucca is eaten in the lowlands; corn is plentiful in the valleys; and potatoes are eaten daily in the Altiplano. Bolivia has hundreds of varieties of potatoes prepared in different ways. Chuños and tuntas are types of freeze-dried potatoes that are used in soups or side dishes when rehydrated. Most foods are fried and seasoned with llajua (a spicy salsa). Peanuts may be used in soups...
(such as sopa de maní) and sauces. Chicken is the most common meat. Southern Bolivians eat a lot of beef and enjoy barbecues.

Breakfast usually consists of tea or coffee, bread, and perhaps cheese. In rural areas, breakfast might be a hot drink called api made of corn spiced with sugar and cinnamon. Lunch, the main meal, consists of soup and a main dish. In cities, people enjoy salteñas (meat or chicken pies made with potatoes, olives, and raisins) as a midmorning snack.

Recreation

Sports

Fútbol (soccer) is the national sport. It does not require much equipment, and kids will use almost anything for a ball, from crumpled paper to a small rock. Bolivians also love to watch the sport. Indoor soccer is also a common sport, along with basketball and volleyball. Girls also enjoy gymnastics and swimming.

Leisure

Popular leisure activities include watching television (in urban areas), visiting with friends, and attending festivals. Dancing and singing are popular at various events. In the Chaco region, people get together to drink several rounds of mate, an herbal tea.

The plaza, the center of town, is considered a main spot for recreation. Some small cities have tilines, or electronic-game centers, where middle-class kids spend much of their free time. Home internet service in Bolivia is expensive, so there is one café internet in almost every downtown block. Online chatting and LAN gaming have become a popular leisure activity. Adult women often meet to share a tecito (cup of tea) and talk. In Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, and La Paz, movie theaters have become very successful in recent years.

Vacation

During vacation times, Bolivians like to get outside to enjoy nature, spend time with their families, and visit relatives in other parts of the country. Bolivians may also take time off work on specific dates to travel to holy places to renew their faith and promises.

The Arts

Many of Bolivia's cultural traditions have their roots in pre-Inca civilizations. Textiles have changed little over time, often incorporating the same dyes and patterns that have been used for hundreds of years. Since colonial times, Bolivians have been using gold and silver to ornament architecture, jewelry, and other objects. Basket weaving and wood carving are common crafts in the Guaraní region.

Music is an integral part of Bolivian culture, and Bolivian music is played and promoted throughout the world. Its indigenous rhythms can be divided into three types: fast, happy rhythms from the east and northeast; slow, romantic, and melancholic rhythms from the Andes Mountains; and happy, romantic rhythms from the central valleys. Much of the music is characterized by distinctive instruments: panpipes (zampona), vertical flutes, various percussion instruments, and the charango, a 12-string, guitar-like instrument made from an armadillo shell. The cueca, tinku, and saya are traditional dances.

Holidays

Holidays in Bolivia include New Year's Day (1 Jan.), Creation of the Plurinational State of Bolivia (22 Jan.), Día del Mar (Sea Day; 23 March, when Bolivians remember the war with Chile in which Bolivia lost ocean access and school groups walk through the streets carrying model ships), Carnaval, Easter, Labor Day (1 May), Independence Day (6 Aug.), All Saints' Day (1 November, a day for the family to clean and decorate ancestral graves and enjoy a picnic), and Christmas (25 Dec.). On Christmas Eve, some children place their old shoes in a window for Papá Noel (Santa Claus) to take in exchange for new gifts. Children also receive gifts on Three Kings' Day (6 Jan.). Almost every pueblo (village) has unique fiestas (parties) in honor of its patron saint or the Virgin Mary. These local events are noted for their music and colorful costumes. The government moves the observation of many holidays to the day closest to the weekend in order to create extended weekends, or puentes (literally, "bridges").

Independence Day

Independence Day, held on 6 August, is the anniversary of the establishment of the republic in 1825. Two days before, students participate in parades in the cities where they live. Some wear traditional clothing, and some participate in marching bands. The president then chooses one of these cities to be the site of the country's official Independence Day celebrations and gives an official address to the country. More parades, these ones featuring people from various institutions and indigenous groups, take place as well. Later in the day, families often spend time together at a fair, amusement park, or festival.

Carnaval

Carnaval begins 40 days before Easter, on the Saturday before Ash Wednesday. The month starts with a parade that includes floats. Groups of people in elaborate matching costumes come at the end of the parade; they dance, sing, play music, and yell to onlookers. As the holiday progresses, it is marked by more parades, dancing, and Carnival Queen events. Water and paint are also common elements of celebration during this season. On the last day of Carnaval, a Tuesday, people everywhere in Bolivia perform the ch'alla ritual, which consists of sprinkling what is believed to be a sacred liquid for blessing things and making burnt offerings to Pachamama (Mother Earth). Dancing, wearing costumes, and pouring water on people (or throwing water balloons at them) are common during Carnaval. The city of Oruro holds one of the biggest Carnaval celebrations in the region.

Easter

During the Holy Week before Easter, people repent of all the wrongdoings committed during Carnaval. Catholics refrain from eating meat (only fish is allowed), and even less religious people tend to observe this custom. Each city makes its own stations of the cross display, depicting Christ on the day of his crucifixion. On Holy Thursday, people often make 12 vegetarian dishes, and that night devout Catholics may visit 12 churches. In some cities, people crawl on their knees along a processional route as an act of faith and devotion.
Government

Structure

Bolivia is divided into 9 departamentos (provinces). The president is head of state and head of government. The president and vice president are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms, with a two-term limit. The constitution provides for a runoff election in case no presidential candidate wins the majority outright.

The legislature consists of a 36-seat Chamber of Senators and a 130-seat Chamber of Deputies. Senate members are elected from party lists by proportional representation, while 70 deputies are directly elected from single-member districts, 53 deputies are elected by proportional representation, and the final 7 deputy seats are reserved for the direct election of indigenous candidates. Senators and deputies are elected to serve five-year terms. Unlike most countries, Bolivia has two capital cities: La Paz is the seat of government, where the president and legislature are located, while the Supreme Court is located in the legal capital of Sucre.

Political Landscape

Evo Morales’s Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party and its coalition have been a powerful political force since coming to power in the 2005 elections. The party, with roots in supporting coca farmers, aims to defend indigenous rights and redistribute wealth in Bolivia, in part through the nationalization of key industries. A variety of parties make up the opposition. The most important one historically is the Revolution Nationalist Movement (MNR), but its influence has declined in recent years. Citizens are able to freely organize political parties. The drafting of a new constitution in 2009 enabled a redistribution of political power, which empowered Bolivia’s indigenous people.

Economy

With natural resources such as tin, natural gas, crude oil, zinc, silver, gold, lead, and tungsten, Bolivia’s major industry is mining. Gas exports are especially important to the economy, and President Evo Morales nationalized the gas industry after taking office. Other industries include coffee and food production, textiles, and timber. Roughly a third of the labor force is engaged in agriculture. Coca (used in making cocaine) has been the largest (illicit) cash crop, though coca exports have been reduced in recent years. Efforts to stop coca trafficking are complicated by the drug’s lucrative profits and centuries-old status as a traditional crop. It has many legitimate uses in society, including medicinal and dietary ones, and is a fundamental part of the culture.

Bolivia is one of the poorest and least developed Latin American countries. Limited access to adequate health care, education, and economic opportunities affects the quality of life for most Bolivians, particularly those in rural areas. Almost half of the population lives in poverty. Improving conditions for poor and indigenous populations remains a long-term goal. Unemployment is relatively high, and underemployment and low wages are widespread.

The debt crisis and hyperinflation Bolivia experienced in the 1980s were countered with reforms and private investment that led to economic recovery in the 1990s but increased the disparity between rich and poor. The 2008 global financial crisis led to a sharp decrease in both prices and demand for Bolivia’s exports; however, a subsequent growth in the global demand for commodities that Bolivia exports has resulted in strong growth since then. The Bolivian government is working to attract more foreign investment, which is scarce. The currency is the boliviano (BOB).

Transportation and Communications

Throughout its modern history, Bolivia has been handicapped by its landlocked location and underdeveloped transportation infrastructure. Only the major highways are paved.

Buses, taxis, and trains are the most common forms of transportation. Buses, or micros, are cheap and travel towns’ main arteries, but are not safe, comfortable, or fast. More-expensive minibuses are faster and less crowded. Travelers in a hurry take taxis or less-expensive trufís, public cars which operate like buses and often stop to pick up additional passengers going the same way. Traffic jams and quarrels between drivers are common. In recent years, a modern cable car system has provided residents of La Paz transportation within the city and access to the nearby city of El Alto for a relatively affordable price.

Bicycles are common in rural areas. People riding horses or in horse-drawn carts may still be seen, but they are becoming less common. Small villages may also have a motorcycle taxi service. However, private car ownership is becoming more common.

Airlines connect major cities and allow travelers to avoid rugged terrain. However, because of its cost, flying is only used as a form of transportation for business executives or people in extreme urgency. Some people also fly to parts of Bolivia that are inaccessible by roads, such as the Bolivian Amazon.

Several radio and television stations are in operation. The way that people keep up on current events depends on their job. For example, drivers and street vendors often listen to the radio, while those who work in an office more commonly read newspapers. News often has an obvious political spin to it.

Most people throughout the country have cellular phones, and the use of landlines is declining. Though cellular phones are widely used, calling is expensive, and recently even texting has given way to free web-based applications like WhatsApp. Those without electricity may charge their cellular phones at stores for a small fee. Though cellular coverage is available in virtually all of Bolivia, there are still call centers where people make and receive calls.
Internet cafés are the most popular way to access the internet, because home internet service is too expensive for most. The postal service is considered unsecure, so people prefer to send their packages through the encomienda, or bus mail service.

**Education**

**Structure and Access**

Schooling is compulsory for Bolivians ages 5 to 18. Bolivia's educational system is organized into four levels: kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, and higher education. School conditions are poor. Most schools are public, but families with money send their children to private schools, most of which are religious. Though the drop-out rate before secondary school is relatively high, the government has taken measures to reduce it.

Bolivian students are responsible for buying their own uniforms and learning materials. Instruction is mostly in Spanish, with English commonly taught as a foreign language; however, indigenous languages may be used as well. Though declining, illiteracy remains common in rural areas due to the lack of educational infrastructure. Strikes, long distances to schools, and family labor needs contribute to this problem.

**School Life**

Teachers use traditional teaching methods in which the teacher instructs the class and assigns in-class exercises and homework to the students. Classrooms are equipped with little beyond blackboards and desks. Technology is rarely used while teaching. Students have workbooks that they are expected to keep clean and updated and turn in at the end of the year as an important component of moving on to the next grade. Cheating (chanchullo) is fairly common, and punishments vary depending on the instructor.

**Higher Education**

Military service is obligatory for males, and toward the end of their secondary education, they may simultaneously participate in a year of military service in order to be ready to go to college once they graduate. Students must pass an entrance exam to be admitted to one of Bolivia's universities. Every Bolivian state (departamento) has its own public university. There are several private universities as well. Public universities offer quality education but are often overcrowded.

Higher education usually lasts for five years; students graduate with bachelor's degrees after defending a thesis or a capstone project. A student who wants to pursue his or her education can take postgraduate courses, but these paths are not usually pursued.

**Health**

Sanitation facilities are poor. Contaminated water is the most serious health threat, resulting in cholera, hepatitis, yellow fever, malaria, and other diseases. Tap water must be boiled, but wood is hard to find and gas is expensive. Many rural areas lack running water.

Local nurses and doctors have been training responsables populares de salud (community healthcare workers) in basic skills. These trainees increase public health awareness and help serve the needs of the rural population. The infant mortality rate is high because of disease and widespread poverty. Much of the population lacks access to adequate medical care. Traditional medicine is used in many rural areas. Many illnesses affect the populace, including hepatitis, cholera, and Chagas, a parasitic disease that causes intestinal problems and early death by heart attack. The number of people affected by AIDS is growing.