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# Focus on BOLIVIA

## Community Service Program

### Adult Program

*"In life there are things that happen that you will never forget. It seems that my experience in Bolivia is one of them. Sometimes I have laughed, sometimes I've cried, I have had fun, I've enjoyed. I have found friends and a family that loves me and a new world has opened in front of me. But I have also found myself."*

*Katrien Meeuseen, sojourner from Belgium*

Bolivia was once part of the Inca empire, and even though the nation was later ruled by Spain, today much of the population retains old Indian styles of clothing, music and festivals, speaking both Spanish and either *Quecha*, an Incan language, or *Aymará*, which is even older. The land climbs from low-lying equatorial rain forests in the east to nearly Arctic-cold mountains in the west, where the majority of Bolivians live. In fact, La Paz, two miles above sea level, is the world's highest capital city, and most mountain passes leading to it rise above 15,000 feet. Because of these daunting heights and a relatively undeveloped tourism industry, travelers to Bolivia tend to be adventurous and intrepid.

### **Community Service Programs**

AFS's Community Service program gives you the opportunity to share in and contribute to the life of a community in Bolivia by living and working alongside its members in a community service organization. At the organization, you will be asked to pitch in and offer assistance in whatever capacity might be needed and to share the knowledge and experience you have gained from your home culture in the process. No one expects you to be an expert with all the answers to local problems or the ability to change local conditions. Rather, you are expected to be a willing participant in a process of mutual discovery. This experience will present you with innumerable learning opportunities both personally and professionally.

Worldwide, AFS Community Service program participants contribute their talents and energies to a variety of social programs that range from protecting the environment to teaching children or adults, from assisting the elderly and the disabled to defending human rights, from enhancing public health to helping local businesses become established.

Past participants in Bolivia have been active in social projects working with street children, protection of the environment, and helping children and teenagers with drug problems. However, all specifics—including assignments, orientations, logistics and activities—vary depending on the program cycle.

## ***AFS & Your Experience***

AFS Bolivia has been in existence since 1956. It offers Community Service programs along with school-based programs and annually hosts more than 100 AFS students and 40 participants in the Community Service program coming from 23 countries such as Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Thailand and the United States. They are supported by a network of 250 AFS volunteers with chapters covering all major cities.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers. Once in your host country you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

### **Arrival orientation**

AFS Bolivia staff members meet participants at their arrival airport and escort them to a day of rest and of getting to know one another. The next day is devoted to providing general information about Bolivia, the community service projects and the customs of host families. There is also a review of AFS rules and safety tips. Afterward, participants travel by plane or bus to meet their host families.

After arrival in their host communities, participants receive 40 hours of language lessons in small groups with other AFSers. These lessons are reasonably intensive so that participants can communicate on a basic level within a couple of weeks.

### **Additional orientations**

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Bolivia will provide you with a mid stay orientation. This orientation offer participants a chance to meet for several days and talk about expectations for the future of the program as well as their past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions also provide language training along with new information and ways of looking at things, while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing together people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experiences while preparing them to handle their community service assignments.

One day before the end of the program, participants will have a departure orientation, where they will have the chance to say goodbye to their exchange friends that shared the program, and to evaluate their experience.

### **Traveling with AFS**

During your stay you will have the chance to participate in some trips organized by AFS Bolivia. The expenses for these travels will be covered by AFS.

You may go on the Southern Routes Tour, a wonderful trip to Sucre and Potosí, and you can take an optional trip to the Salt Lake of Uyuni as well as a trip to the tropical part of the country so that you can get to know the cities of Santa Cruz and Trinidad.

Besides national activities, you will have some local activities organized by your local chapter.

## ***Living in Bolivia***

### **Living arrangements**

Participants in Bolivia's AFS Community Service programs live with local families, sharing their daily lives, their meals and perhaps a host sibling's bedroom.

### **Typical day**

#### **Food**

Bolivians eat a variety of foods, but meat is part of the main course at lunch and dinner (making it sometimes difficult for vegetarians). It is usually accompanied by rice or vegetables such as potatoes or shredded lettuce. Milk and cheese are part of a typical diet as well. Many foods are fried and very spicy, such as when they use *llajhua*: a sauce made of tomatoes and hot pepper.

Families customarily eat the same foods together; and it is considered inappropriate for individuals to request special foods, to prepare separate food for themselves or to raid the refrigerator.

#### **Clothing**

Typical clothing styles vary within Bolivia and depend on the area in which you live. For example, if you live in the tropical part (Santa Cruz and Trinidad), you will need very lightweight clothes, such as shorts, t-shirts, skirts and sandals. If you live in the valleys (Cochabamba, Sucre, Tarija), you will also need some lightweight clothes along with long pants and warmer shoes. And if you live in the highlands (La Paz, Oruro, Potosi), you will need warmer clothes and jackets.

#### **Activities**

During the work week, you will spend the most part of your time involved in your project, and a couple of hours sharing with your family, eating together, talking or watching TV. On the weekends, you will have some time to visit many cultural and natural attractions located around most of the Bolivian cities. Also, the cities have a very nice nightlife with discos, pubs, cafes and the cinema.

#### **Health**

AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Bolivia (which you can get from your government or find easily on the Internet) with your doctor at home, to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require any medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant, your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

#### **Safety**

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Bolivian. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

### **Travel**

AFS's Community Service programs allow participants to travel on their own through their host countries, typically for a week or more, to explore and absorb each region's cultural diversity.

### **Program Prices**

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases the program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host community; travel from your host community to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host family or other placement arrangement; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price are: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

## ***Country Information***

### **Geography and Climate**

Bolivia is a landlocked country roughly twice the size of France. It is bordered on the north and east by Brazil, on the south by Argentina and Paraguay and on the west by Chile and Peru.

There are five geographical regions and, because of the extreme geographical variations, Bolivia has a wide range of climates. In the highly populated *Altiplano* (highlands), a 3500m (11,480 ft.) plateau that stretches from the Peruvian border southwards to the Argentine border, the weather is cool (average 8°C/47°F). In the *Valles* (valleys), south and east of the Altiplano and where most of the agriculture is, the temperatures are milder (17°C/63°F). The *Yungas*, between the Andes and the humid Amazonian forest known as the *Chaco*, a hot, dry, impenetrable and uninhabited plain along the Paraguayan and Argentine borders, and the underdeveloped swamps and savannas of the Amazonian Basin in the northeast of the country constitute the rest of the country's geography.

La Paz, the highest city in the world, often has very cold temperatures and sometimes snow. During the dry winter period, the climate is pleasant, while the rainy summer, from November to April, is the hottest time of the year.

### **Population**

The population of Bolivia numbers 8 million. Metropolitan La Paz has a population slightly less than one million. Fifty-five percent of Bolivians are native Americans, 30% are *mestizos* (people of mixed descent) and 15% are of European descent, mostly Spanish.

### **Language**

Spanish is the official language of Bolivia, yet only 60-70% of the people actually speak it and often only as a second language since *Quechua* (an Incan language) and *Aymará* (a pre-Inca language) are widely spoken.

### **Government**

Bolivia is a republic with an elected president. The bicameral legislature is composed of the *Congreso Nacional* and the *Camara de Diputados*. La Paz is the seat of government, while Sucre is the legal capital and seat of the judiciary.

### **Religion**

The majority of Bolivians profess to be Roman Catholic (70%). However, the lack of a strong clerical structure has led to a blend of Inca and *Aymará* beliefs with Christianity in the rural areas having unique rites and superstitions.

## ***Before You Go***

### **Looking Forward**

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that if you prepare prior to leaving, you will have the best experience.

Make every effort to improve your Spanish language skills before departure. Then, to familiarize yourself with life in Bolivia, visit your local library or search the Internet. AFS International's website, [AFS.org](http://AFS.org), provides links to websites for each participating country.

Although every participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Bolivia. This returnee will be an excellent resource regarding living and working there. If you do not know a returnee, please contact your local AFS volunteer or your country's AFS office.

In addition, AFS will provide you with essential information about your host country to prepare you for immersion in a new and exciting culture.

Finally, Bolivians will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised how much they already know about your country's history and politics. Therefore, you will find it helpful to be informed about current events in your home community and country.

## Documents

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. Participants from many countries will not need a visa to enter Bolivia. Nevertheless there are some exceptions, so it is a good idea to check with the Bolivian consulate in your home country.

During your stay you will need a student visa, but AFS Bolivia will take care of that after your arrival.

## How to Apply

To become a participant in this country's Community Service Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Country data	Size	1,098,581 sq. km., 428,446 sq. mi.
	Population	8,445,134
	Official language	Spanish
	Government	Democracy
Currency	Boliviano, divided into 100 centavos	
Useful websites	<a href="http://gorp.com/gorp/location/latamer/bolivia/basic_b.htm">http://gorp.com/gorp/location/latamer/bolivia/basic_b.htm</a> <a href="http://www.Lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south_america/Bolivia">http://www.Lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south_america/Bolivia</a>	
AFS Bolivia website	<a href="http://www.afsbolivia.org">www.afsbolivia.org</a> <a href="http://afs.org/partners/bolhome.htm">http://afs.org/partners/bolhome.htm</a>	

AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>