



EIA CULTURAL GUIDE

Exploring Bolivia

Engineers in Action

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Before You Arrive

About EIA

Who We Are

Engineers in Action is a U.S.-based non-profit whose local staff in Latin America provide sustained support in rural communities to build capacity, develop global awareness and improve the quality of life.

What We Do

Unfortunately, many water wells in rural South America become unusable within 18 months after installation. That's why sustainability is EIA's highest priority. With two offices staffed by indigenous engineers in South America, we are able to visit the communities we work in often and communicate regularly with the people we serve. This ensures we only install or repair what is truly needed and wanted by the community members. Our engineers help train the community on using their new technology, but they know we're always there if they need us. So, our water infrastructure remains usable and continues to improve their quality of life for many years to come.

How We Work

- IDENTIFY | Our engineers let the local people tell us what their community needs. We recognize that they know their needs best.
- NETWORK | We find the supplies and crews to complete the project, while using in- country engineers.
- SUPERVISE | We are on-site during installation to ensure the project is on track to be completed efficiently and correctly.
- TRAIN | Our team teaches the community the basic use and repair of any equipment to promote community-ownership.
- SUSTAIN | We maintain a local presence, visiting often to ensure infrastructure continues to work and serve the community's people.

Project Types

- Water
- Sanitation
- Irrigation
- Community health
- Bridges
- Playgrounds
- Community betterment

Contacts

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 - Send pictures, videos, stories for social media and engineersinaction.org

Packing List

It can be stressful trying to figure out what to bring to a foreign country. Below is a list of recommended items to bring for your trip. These are just a few recommendations, and is not mean to be comprehensive.

- Passport
- Itinerary and reservation documents
 - Digital versions are not always acceptable in South America, so printing a couple of paper copies to keep on hand is a good idea.
- Credit Card
 - Make sure to speak with your bank prior to departure.
- Backpack
 - Consider the weight of the backpack and ease of transport for extended amounts of time.
- Camera
- Phone and Chargers
- Small Flashlight
- Personal medications
 - Consider if you're prone to altitude sickness and traveler's tummy
- Toiletries including sunblock, lip balm with SPF, wet wipes
- Adequate working clothes
- A nice outfit for meetings/dinner
- Clothes for a free day of activities of your choice
- Sleepwear
- Sun glasses and hat
- Clothes that can easily be layered for the variation in temps in South America
- Warm and waterproof jackets/layers
- A pair of extra tennis shoes
- Work boots for the field
- Earplugs for sleeping

Jungle

If your project is in a more tropical region of Bolivia, it will be substantially warmer and there will be bugs. Make sure to bring malaria medication if applicable. Bring plenty of sun protection and make sure to bring plenty of cooler layers.

Altiplano

The projects in the Altiplano of Bolivia tend to be a lot cooler. However, due to the high altitude, the sun is significantly stronger. Make sure to bring clothes for when it gets warmer during the day, and clothes for when it's cold at night. Bring extra socks, clothes that layer well and a warm jacket. Sun protection is vital.

Travel Requirements

To travel into Bolivia, you will need a visa. This costs \$160 and can be purchased upon arrival at the airport. It's a good idea to have both Bolivians and US Dollars upon arrival, but not required. Make sure that the US bills you bring are crisp, new bills with absolutely no imperfections, otherwise they will not accept them. Also, it is required to have a yellow fever vaccination, so make sure you bring your vaccination book with you to prove you have the shot.

About Bolivia

Arriving in Bolivia is like stepping into a different world. You will be surrounded by new sights, sounds and smells. Bolivia maintains its authentic traditional roots of Andean and other indigenous cultures. While you will find La Paz to be a bustling city of commerce, most of the country maintains a very rural lifestyle.

In one word, Bolivia is diverse. It's a country with diverse geography, cultures, weather and people. The culture of today remains very vibrant, bringing together the traditions of many indigenous people scattered across its many regions. To understand Bolivia not only implies traveling to her cities and venturing to isolated places, seeking out her history and hidden treasures, but to connect with the people, to learn their values, experience their beautiful culture and see firsthand how they live their lives.

History

The land that is now Bolivia has been inhabited for more than 20,000 years by ancient pre-Columbian cultures such as Tiwanaku. It was part of the Incan Empire for less than a century, until the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors who brought diseases, violence, oppression, forced slavery in mines and new religious traditions that mixed with indigenous beliefs. After 16 years of fighting led by Simon Bolivar, from whom Bolivia took its name, independence was gained in 1825.

In the 1800's and early 1900's Bolivia was involved in wars with neighboring countries that resulted in the loss of a lot of territory, including access to the sea. In the 1900's there was a high turnover rate of presidents and oppressive military dictators. The current president, Evo Morales, was elected into office in 2006.

Having inherited the traditions of colonial miscegenation and pre-Columbian cultures, it is a multiethnic and multicultural country. The inhabitants are mostly indigenous, white descendants of Creoles, Afro-Bolivians, and to a lesser extent, European and Asian migrants.

Demographics

In Bolivia people are culturally and socially diverse, a clear reflection of the over 36 native indigenous groups that have inhabited the country's various regions for thousands of years, and a result of the historical assimilation of other races over time.

Language

Spanish, Quechua and Aymara were Bolivia's three official languages until 2009. However, Bolivia adopted a new national constitution in December 2009 that declared all native languages and dialects official languages. Spanish is used by the great majority of the population, although many of Bolivia's indigenous people are bilingual. Improving your Spanish and/or learning a few phrases in the indigenous language of your project area, if applicable (ask your EIA Project Manager), will greatly enhance your experience.

Health

The Health System of Bolivia consists of three subsystems: Public Health System, Social Security, and private and traditional medicine, which are all under the guidance of the Ministry of Health and Sports whose role is to regulate, assess, monitor and oversee the system.

Economics

The Bolivian economy is mainly focused on the extraction and export of raw materials. GDP per capita is among the lowest in Latin America being considered as a lower middle income country, with a national minimum wage of \$260 per month. The official currency is the Boliviano (BOB). The current exchange rate is around 6.85 Bolivianos for 1 USD, but the rate varies based on where you exchange your money.

Upon Arrival

Culture Shock

What it is

Leaving your comfort zone can result in an emotionally trying time. You're facing a lot of changes that can be exciting and stimulating, but it can also be overwhelming. Just relax and remember it's temporary. As you spend more time getting to know the wonderful people around you, you'll begin to understand and likely grow fond of their way of life.

Always remember that people around the globe, and even in the house next door, are different. They were raised with different values, beliefs, common practices, etiquette and priorities. Because of these differences, the things they talk about, the ways they express themselves and the importance of various ideas may be very different from what is common where you live. Be mindful that these differences are what make each of our cultures special. Never forget that as you are being introduced to new ideas and ways of life, so are those individuals around you. It's a cultural exchange you with all remember forever.

How to overcome it

It is important to realize that culture shock is temporary and normal, and that it can be overcome quite easily. Start by learning as much about your destination as possible before you travel, removing the "shock" of a new culture. If you still experience culture shock, take time to adequately process the happenings around you. A great idea is to journal so that you can remember the events of this exciting time, and reflect on your thoughts and feelings during the experience. Speaking to someone who is traveling with you is also a good way to process everything. Allow yourself to fully step outside of your own regular environment by making local friends, immersing yourself in the local way of life and learning the language to help you fully embrace in this exciting new experience. As they accept you into their community or home, also be accepting of new experiences or ideas. Find things you like about your new environment to focus on, like your work in the field or the incredible geographical areas you'll get to see.

Other helpful tips

- Do not pet dogs. It is difficult to tell which dogs are friendly, and not all dogs are vaccinated.
- Do not eat the street food. It may look delicious but there is significant risk of illness.
- Stay away from raw vegetables.
- Use the buddy system while in the city. Travel in groups.
- Make sure to download Google Maps or Maps With Me so you always know where you are.
- Do not flush toilet paper, throw it away instead.
- Do not consume ice in your drinks.
- Greeting: hand shake/hug/handshake
 - Morning: Buen Dia
 - Afternoon: Buenos Tardes
 - Evening: Buenos Noches
- Do not throw away food. Bring small bags with you to take any uneaten food with you.
- Always ensure that your passport is secure and make a photocopy in case of emergency.
- Be wary of pickpockets and make sure not to carry anything important in a backpack.

In the Field

Rural Communities

Even though rural communities are different depending on the geographical location, they have many things in common.

In Bolivia, rural workers are organized in the Federación de Campesinos (rural worker's union). This Federación is composed of representatives from all the communities in Bolivia. Every state has a representative which represents all the rural communities that belong to this state. The Federación has a role in politics and active participation in the government's decision making related to the rural sector.

The communities have an organized structure of hierarchy similar to a local civil government in the U.S. While it may vary slightly from community to community, the basic structure is:

- Community Leader (Dirigente de la comunidad): Usually elected annually
- Committees: Groups of individuals focused on specific community initiatives such as water, communication, school, health, etc.

Usually the communities have monthly meetings, and sometimes when needed they have emergency meetings. Every decision related to the community's development is done by a public vote.

When starting a project or requesting information from the community it is necessary to contact the community leader as he or she will be the one who will give you the most accurate answer. In most cases he will first ask the whole community. If not, he has the most up to date information.

Gender Roles

While men usually hold leadership positions, the opinion of community women is highly regarded and should be sought out for consideration in decision making.

Hygiene

As you know, the sanitary conditions in the rural areas are not modernized in any way. That's why you're here! Remember that what bathrooms may exist in the rural areas will likely be basic outhouse-like structures, will not have water and may not be accessible 24/7. You will also not have frequent access to showers, and probably won't have access to hot water. Drink water only from sealed water bottles and avoid eating uncooked food. Remember – modern amenities await back in your base city!

During a Project

Learner Mindset

Instead of coming as a tourist and an outside expert, come as a student and partner.

A tourist comes to take photos of the strange people doing strange things, like men urinating outside or women nursing babies in public. Tourists come once, take the pictures to show folks at home, and leave, never to return.

The lifelong student comes to grow and learn all that they can from this experience. The student comes to learn from the indigenous workers who live and work the same way as the generations centuries before them. It's also an incredible experience to be able to learn from the EIA/FIEA engineers who live with one foot in the western engineering culture and another in the indigenous cultures of rural South America.

The Partner comes to share knowledge and learn and work together, with an equal, to build something greater than what they could build alone.

Communication

Even though all the communities are different and have different behaviors, every community expects to have input. They are accustomed to making decisions as a group and should be included in planning.

It is very important to talk to the people in the community, not only about the projects, but about anything. Ask them about their crops, their families or their cattle. Make them feel that you are all working as a team and that besides the project, you also care about their lives.

A way to interact with the community is also by playing games with the children or partaking in community time. It is recommended to have daily interactions with the community members outside of the field, where you can talk about the development of the project, what they think, how they feel about it, and also talk with them as friends and get to know the families.

Listen

Listening is the first step to obtaining the community members' participation. It is always important to know what the community thinks and feels about the project, at the beginning, during the process and when the project is completed. The best way to improve the project is to have community input, and the only way to obtain that input it is through very careful listening.

In Bolivia, if you ask a yes or no question, the answer will usually be yes because it's considered rude to say no. True listening might involve asking multiple people multiple times or in different ways, with wording that gives a choice between options. Be sure to give open space for a variety of opinions to be shared, and carefully consider every suggestion offered. In Bolivia, a strong and wise suggestion might be hidden in a question or softened by polite wording. So, listen carefully with utmost respect for each person's experience and knowledge.

Participation

Participation will not always happen on its own and will sometimes need to be initiated. In some communities it will just take gathering the community members together and asking them their opinion. You and your project leader may need to organize a meeting to find what their perception of the project is and obtain their input. Never doubt asking the EIA engineers what would be the best way to initiate participation. At the very least, a meeting with the community and your team before starting the implementation (or assessment, evaluation, etc.) and a meeting before the team leaves the community should be scheduled. It will encourage the exchange of opinions and the sustainability of the project

Capacity Building for Sustainable Projects

Capacity building is the process of strengthening the knowledge, skills and attitudes of people so that they can establish and sustain their own development. (Mothake, 2006)

Why apply capacity building in your project? It is necessary for the community to have the capacity to sustain the project after your team leaves. If they don't fully understand the project and how it functions, they will not be able to address issues that may arise. If something starts to fail and they don't fix it on time, all the work and money invested in the community will be lost.

If the community is continuously participating in the development of the project, community members will have the ability to identify any issues and either address them on their own or notify EIA.

Rather than only focusing on how your team's resources can meet the community's needs, try seeking out the community's resources and capabilities as well. Do a needs and assets assessment instead of only a needs assessment. Identify local resources (natural, economic, infrastructure, organizational, leadership, governmental, etc.) then make connections between those resources. Below are two "participatory development" methods, and many more exist.

- [Asset-Based Community Development](#)
- [Participatory Rural Appraisal](#)



After Your Trip

Stay in touch

We want to hear from you! Share your favorite photos, videos and stories with our staff to be featured on engineersinaction.org or social media by emailing our communications coordinator, Amanda McConnell, at Amanda.mcconnell@engineersinaction.org. You can also tag, share or message us on [Facebook.com/engineersinaction1](https://www.facebook.com/engineersinaction1).

A feedback survey will also be sent after the travel season concludes.

It's never too early to sign up for your next trip, either. Go to engineersinaction.org/volunteer-opportunities or contact us directly for information on upcoming trips.

Conclusion

This cultural guide can serve as a helpful tool to ensure your trip to with Engineers in Action is as beneficial as possible, not only to yourself but also to the community you are visiting. If you have any questions or are unsure about something, EIA staff are always here for you and happy to help.

We wish you all the best on your travels and experiences!