

Climbing in Bolivia:

Photos and Story
by Dianne Chisholm



a Landscape of Extremes

IN THE SUMMER OF 2004, I JOINED A SEVEN-PERSON, ONE-MONTH expedition to the Bolivian Andes. Before then I had not set foot in South America nor climbed higher than Mt. Rainier. Our team was mostly Albertan. Everyone had climbed abroad, but the Rockies were our favourite reference for framing our Bolivian experiences.

Climbing in Bolivia literally begins in the capital of La Paz and its sprawling suburbs of El Alto. The quickest access to the mountains are dirt tracks that lead out across the Altiplano from the city's east edge. Moreover, La Paz itself is mountainous—uncannily so, as it occupies a gargantuan crater where low-lying slums line the rim and high-rises erupt from the gorge. Municipal demographics are an extreme inversion of the usual distribution of wealth; corporate architecture is found at the lowest altitudes whereas rustic barrios rise on the crest of El Alto. The highest city in the world, at 3,300–4,300 metres, and the poorest city in the Western Hemisphere, La Paz is by all measures extreme. To survive or even perceive the hazards and dangers of this urban topography, one must become mountaineering-minded.

At the same time, the mind of the mountaineer must adapt to the peculiarities of La Paz. Its two million inhabitants, primarily Aymaran, evolve their own alpine techniques for city travel. Since urban Andinos are intent on survival, only foreigners attempt to wander the streets. Walking the city entails fierce strategy and fitness. Myriad hole-in-the-wall kiosks turn city streets into mazes of caves. Sharply inclined streets of crumbling cobbled stones, jagged curbs, cement crevices and rubble demand assiduous footwork and tenacious pacing. Main thoroughfares flow with public transport buses and minivans called *collectivos* that cross six or more “lanes” and jam so tightly as to make fording treacherous. Platoons of street vendors and nomadic encampments of open-air food markets bar passage routinely, while militant demonstrations, police brigades and explosive confrontations do so erratically, each bombarding pedestrians with avalanches of crowds, wares and mobilizations.

A mountaineer in survival mode, I attempt an approach of the city. I arrive a week early and make a daily trek of the near-thousand vertical metres to El Alto from where I am taking Spanish lessons in the tourist zone. I improvise routes that lead off congested motorways and housing projects, along abandoned railway tracks through canyons of eucalyptus and slender, sheep-strewn pastures where *las cholitas* wash clothes in thin, winter streams. The descent is precarious and I am stormed by the billowing fumes of commuter traffic. Back down on *El Prado*, the city's central promenade, I run into an angry procession of miners who have walked from Potosi to protest the “free trade” of Bolivia's mineral resources. Foreigners (i.e., free trading imperialists) are regarded with suspicion; tourists are targeted by vicious scams. On my second and most unnerving day in La Paz, a trio of fake police ambush me at Plaza Estudiante and steal my bank card. Days later, I stride ignorantly into the hot zone between a picket-line of teachers bearing candles, banners and loudspeakers and a phalanx of riot police armed with truncheons and tear gas. It is the night before a hotly disputed national referendum. If the pitfalls of the city are unavoidable, I regard them as objective perils, like cougars and crevasses. Thus, I stay calm.

The expedition team assembles on the evening of La Festividad del Nuestro Señor Jesús del Gran Poder, a wildly extravagant, mass folk carnival and the city's most celebrated event of the year. Auspiciously coinciding with the start of the climbing season, the Gran Poder parade is an intense initiation into Bolivian tradition. Thousands of performers

and spectators fill the streets. Dancers and musicians, heavily and boldly costumed in regional themes and colonial parodies, whirl, leap, stomp and drink in grand bacchanalian style. We watch for hours until, exhausted and overly sober, we retire from the ongoing commotion. We find ourselves “pushing the limits” of enjoyment, while glimpsing the void of cultural, and perhaps spiritual, difference.

Illimani’s glaciated, seven-pronged, 6,450-metre massif soars above La Paz’s congestion, and makes the metropolis seem bizarrely lilliputian. How strange to look up *Calle Comercio* and see a wall of glacier! What a rush to see peaks rise celestially as you taxi down into the city’s infernal core! The city’s upper and poorest levels have the best view of Bolivia’s most sacred landmark. Home to *Pacha Mama*, Illimani is an icon of endurance and resistance.

Acclimatizing at Chacaltaya, Copacabana and Isla del Sol, we trek archaic trails and scramble among sacrificial stones and astrological menhirs. At Chincana we step into the “Huellas del Sol”—the footprints of the sun. Local Aymaran guides teach us to see sacred carvings and calendric notches in rock that we might have read merely as handholds and footholds. Our outfitters are Aymaran, and acquaint us with native customs and practices. We eat Aymaran home-cooking, sturdy soups and stews of llama, chicken or lamb, various potatoes, peppers and grains, spiced with garlic, chili, cumin and oregano; and listen to the pan flute before dinner. Our chief outfitter and matriarch, Martha Quispe, does much more than to manage the cooking and transportation. She enlivens team morale, cares for her extended family (whom she brings along), feeds and entertains our porters and muleteers, negotiates with angry *campesinos* for passage through roadblocks, and interprets local superstitions and celebrations. Before our ascents, she descants spells to *Pacha Mama*, the principal deity of Aymaran cosmology. Through Martha we navigate the lived space of these mountains.

Climbing in Bolivia is, literally, more breathtaking than climbing in Canada. Our lungs constantly gasp for more air as we climb and camp daily at altitudes well above Mt. Robson (3,954 metres) and summit higher than Mt. Logan (5,950 metres). Extreme altitude alone snaps us into survival mode, though we gain in perspective what we lose in oxygen. On snow and ice we regain our climbing limbs and proceed straightforwardly up the exposed cols, ridges, buttresses and faces. We feel “at home” on this radical terrain. Yet our experience is made strange by things unique to the Bolivian landscape. The Cordillera Real has six peaks over 6,000 metres and 500 over 5,000 metres. It affords a panoramic sweep of Bolivia’s barren steppes, desert plains and solitary volcanoes. Titicaca’s great lake is to the west, the precipitous Yungas and Amazon rainforests to the east. From the Andes’ crest to the Amazon basin is an unfathomable depth, with thick steam clouds hovering over the jungle and obscuring the bottom. The starkly barren high plateau, or Altiplano, stuns us, accustomed as we are to mountains of dense forest and lush meadows.

Yet of all mountain epiphanies, the most luminous is that of the city. Looking down on the constellation of La Paz from high camp on Huayna Potosi, I sense the world turn upside down. The city offers a compass more brilliant than the Southern Cross. Its startling proximity to the Cordillera Real diminishes the space between urban and alpine realities. Landscape becomes cityscape and vice versa.

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