

Life&Style

One morning in ... La Paz

Ben Connor takes a walk, has a shoeshine and feels right at home in the Bolivian capital.

I am strolling through the busy streets of La Paz when the crowd before me parts to reveal a tiny, grubby-faced child. Dressed in a brightly coloured alpaca poncho and beanie hat, he's bobbing up and down beneath the bustle and big city buildings, singing earnestly and strumming randomly on his battered miniature guitar. I walk up to him and put some change in the box at his feet. He responds with a cherubic smile.

La Paz, capital of Bolivia, is a chaotic, charming city with its grand, crumbling buildings and colourful inhabitants. Situated on the Andean plateau in the basin of a large canyon, this is the highest capital city in the world, with an altitude of 3810m. It has one of those geographical settings that makes everyone and everything seem just that little bit more beautiful.

Plaza Pedro de Murillo, the square at the heart of the city. A large group of men in balaclavas walks towards me, pointing at my shoes and talking loudly. I have been forewarned that these are the shoe shiners; mostly teenage boys trying to acquire the necessary funds for schooling. The reason for their headgear, I have been told, is that they wish to hide their faces in order to avoid the social stigma of their lowly, but transient, trade.

Around the plaza's perimeter, and far more welcoming, are the unmasked shoe shiners with their pale blue fold-out boxes full of brushes and polishes. I look down at my boots. They've been neglected for months and the leather wrinkles up like the skin of an ageing sun-worshipper. I lower myself onto a cushioned seat beneath a blue and white parasol, engage in some friendly shoe-

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Leaving my hostel earlier that day, I descended the cobbled Yanacocha Calle which climbs the northern rim of the basin. There I stared across the canyon to the south, where rows of cream and caramel residences populate the southern steep escarpment and fluted cliffs. Further down stands the church of Iglesia de Santo Domingo, a large colonial building with a grand central arch decorated with stone alcoves, floral patterns and pillars of stone fruits.

The buildings of central La Paz are a mishmash. Dignified structures of colonial rule, with their stone reliefs and bay windows of wood-carved refinery, are wedged between multiple eyesores of cost-cutting modernity and the occasional towering glass edifice, all of them bound together by an inexplicably vast web of cables.

I turn left and find myself in

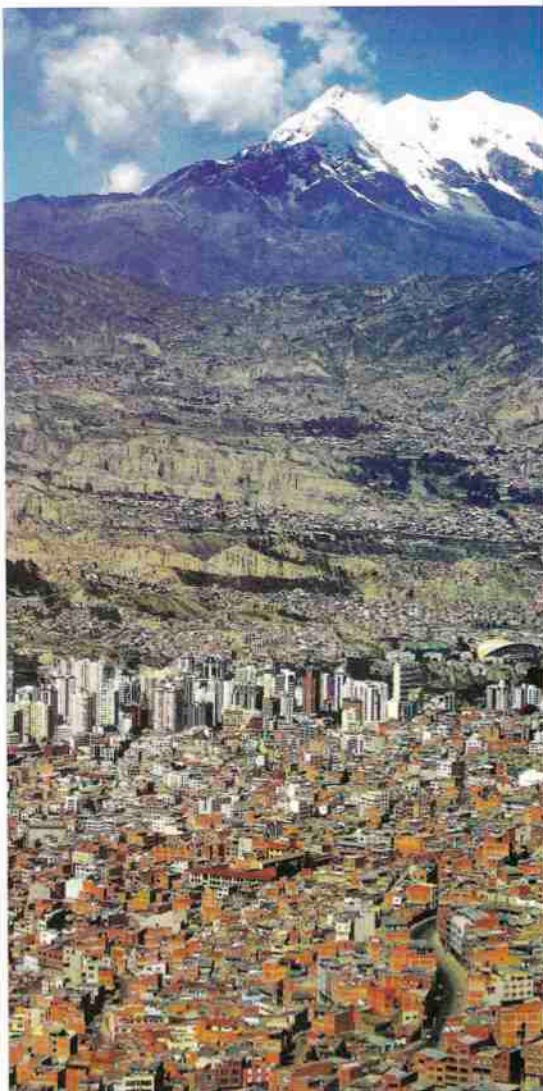
shining chitchat, then relax and take in the spectacle.

A blanket of pigeons covers the plaza's stone floor, bulging at points where bird-loving inhabitants have deposited seeds or bread. Others perch atop the heads of the five stone statues which ring the plaza.

An old man in white overalls and cap drags an ice-cream cart with striped parasol, and the pigeons scatter. Groups of friends and families gather to chat and eat ice cream.

La Paz has had a violent history. Among the many complex and disturbing events that have shaped this city, and the country as a whole, was the public hanging, in 1946, of President Gualberto Villarroel from a lamppost in this very square by a group of vigilantes.

The scene today is relatively calm. Indigenous women sit in



front of stalls, from which they sell an intriguing variety of goods. Their traditional costumes are every bit as eye-catching as something you might see on a catwalk in Milan, only in place of the latest designer creations they wear bowler hats, pleated skirts and shawls.

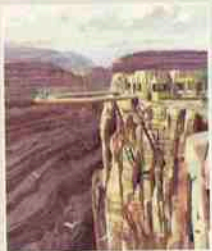
The famous hats are a purely Bolivian phenomenon, attributed to the marketing genius of a merchant with a surplus to sell who arrived in Bolivia many years ago and promptly spread the word that they were the height of fashion among Spanish women. Trends in Spain might have moved on, but the native Quechua and

Aymara Amerindians have defined their separation from their former colonisers by maintaining their own fashions.

My shoes shined, I wander down Socabaya Street to Alexander Coffee. Entering the stylish café, I walk past the ground floor counter and glass display cases of exotic looking pastries, and make my way upstairs. On the curved wall of the spiral staircase leading up to the first floor I see a large painting on a white laminate canvas: a baby samurai is floating over an ill-defined mountain landscape during a coffee bean shower.

Alexander's, I have been advised, has wireless internet

Excess Baggage



Travel news that boldly goes where no one else wants to.

■ Bungee-jumping in New Zealand? A once-in-a-lifetime experience, certainly, but almost every high-octane holidaymaker and their neon rucksack does these days. Trendspotting daredevils are shifting their attention to the Grand Canyon, where the Skywalk, a £20m glass-bottomed bridge protruding out from the west side of the canyon, is set to open on Wednesday 28 March.

The Skywalk has been created by the Hualapai, a native American tribe who own 1 million acres of the surrounding land, in an effort to attract tourists to the area and raise money to help conserve their tribal lands. Just so we've got that clear, there's you, a sturdy but see-through piece of glass, and 4000ft of nothingness down to the canyon bottom below. Baggage is intrigued, although not quite brave enough to book a flight to Nevada right this minute... (Kirstin Innes)

For more information visit www.grandcanyonwalk.com

W/F; s/d £14-£15.75/£20-£21.85.

Restaurants and Bars

Hotel Torino Restaurant. (Calle Socabayal): Good cheap meals in a great setting.

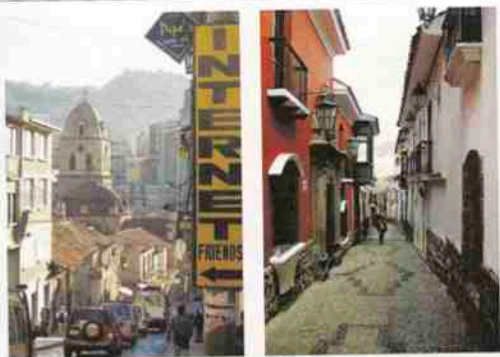
Sol Y Luna. (Calle Murtillo): A relaxed, stylish and welcoming traveller's bar.

Health and Safety

Altitude sickness is common in Bolivia and a bad bout can ruin the first few days of a trip. Coca tea, which is widely available, can help ease the effects. Tourists should not pick up unregistered cabs in the street. If intending to travel slightly further afield, ensure that you use reputable travel agencies and guides.

For more information visit [http://wikitravel.org/en/La_Paz_\(Bolivia\)](http://wikitravel.org/en/La_Paz_(Bolivia))

The highest capital city in the world, La Paz is home to bustling streets and crumbling colonial buildings



access, something of a rarity in the Bolivian capital. I order a café cortado and chocolate croissant, and settle into a window seat. Outside I notice eight policemen in crisp green uniforms, bullet-proof vests, plastic riot shields and helmets leaning against the cracked lower wall of the cathedral. I begin to feel a touch intimidated until I notice two of them are having a thumb wrestle.

Bolivia gets a lot of bad press, which has tended to focus on political riots and demonstrations in recent years. But there is a lot to recommend it – spectacular scenery, warm people, ramshackle architecture. And fantastic coffee.

FACTFILE**Getting There**

La Paz is expensive to get to and therefore best experienced within a broader South American adventure. The cheapest, most direct route is with Iberia, which flies to Lima (Peru) from London for £680 return. TACA can then fly you from Lima to La Paz for around £250 return. Buses from Lima to La Paz cost approx £25, and there's lots to see on the way, such as the Nazca Lines, Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca.

Things to do & see

Admire strange rock formations in **Valle de la Luna (Moon Valley)**. Take a stroll past the ancient colonial buildings of

the quaint, cobbled *Calle Jaén*, untouched by modernity. Investigate exotic remedies and shrivelled llama foetuses or speak with ageing fortune-tellers at the **Witches Market**. Visit the ruins of **Tiwanaku** civilisation or take a **Death Road** mountain bike tour down the most dangerous road in the world.

Recommendations:**Places To Stay**

Hospedaje Milenio (Yariacocho 860)

Central, simple and clean with hot showers and friendly, helpful staff; single/double £2.50/£3.

Hotel Rosario (Av. Illampu 704, 245-1658): The accommodation is very comfortable in this beautiful, colonial building which has free internet and