INTRODUCTION: A Land of Contrast

Bolivia was an unlikely country from the beginning, with no natural borders or cohesive identity. All of the country’s borders were difficult to establish—Bolivia fought wars with every neighbor and lost land to all of them. The consequences of this weak sense of national unity lie heavily on the country.

Several deep fissures divide Bolivia. One is the highland west compared to the lowland east. Not only does the physical geography and resource base differ between the two regions, but historical ethnicities are quite distinct and there is a gulf between attitudes. Many highlanders favor socialism, especially the large indigenous population who want state control over natural resources. Easterners have a more mixed ethnicity and tend to be laissez-faire. They see themselves as economically dynamic and resent the taxation and control from the faraway altiplano, the Bolivian part of the high-elevation north-south basins extending from Peru to Chile.

A second fundamental divide is an ethnic one. Bolivia’s demography is unique from all its neighbors, with the highest proportion of indigenous population in all of Latin America. These native people have historically been marginalized, with their lands taken, their labor commandeered, and their participation in government denied. Some subsist in remote villages, far from roads and the modern economy. The quality of schools and health care is minimal. The overall result is that the country faces serious development problems.

Ethnic differences are reflected in a deep urban/rural gap and conflicting political and economic philosophies. Income is much higher in urban areas, and while the country as a whole has low levels of education and health care, rural areas have vastly less. The political ideology of the indigenous is often quite different from whites or Mestizos, based on traditional values of land ownership and labor allocation that are frequently inconsistent with European structures of government, private property, and a competitive economy. Economic class disparities are the fuel that ignites Bolivia today. A traveler to Bolivia, via a book or in person, must understand the country’s turmoil, which often leads to strikes, marches, and street protests.
A third split is one in ideology—a conflict between socialism and market economics. A traditional, mostly white, urban upper class generally favors capitalism and foreign investment, while labor unions, miners, and the indigenous typically prefer socialism. They fear that Bolivian natural gas will be the last resource they have, and that if foreign companies exploit it the way they did silver and tin, Bolivia will be left with nothing.

All of these tensions are exacerbated by Bolivia’s politics. If political instability is measured by coups and attempted coups, Bolivia holds the world record, averaging one every 10 months over 125 years of independence. The country’s stormy political history is an important reason why has the lowest levels of economic development in South America.

Despite the country’s deep problems, there are many winds of change. The laws of Popular Participation in the 1990s have brought the indigenous into politics at all levels of government. They have helped empower women, requiring a third of the slate of nominations for elections to be women. Albeit with rocky politics and street protests, the country has been democratic since 1982. Bolivia elected Latin America’s first indigenous president in Evo Morales in 2005, who has been empowered by the indigenous, unions, and a sense of nationalistic protectionism, fueled by windfall government revenues from a booming natural gas industry.

No matter what one’s political and economic philosophy is—to favor open markets and foreign investment or nationalistic socialism—Bolivia is a country to watch. If this, the poorest country in South America, can channel gas revenues into development, if they can find the balance of power between an old oligarchy and a large indigenous population, they stand to find some degree of social justice that has been missing since the arrival of colonialism five hundred years ago.

For the naturalist in each of us, Bolivia offers soaring Andes, adventure treks, and ecotourism. For our curiosity of history, the country provides a complex web sure to amaze even those who have read widely. Bolivia’s captivating archeology serves up endlessly amazing sights, from the majestic ruins of Titicaca and Samaipata to the little bits of ancient pottery strewn all over the Andes. For culture seekers, the carnivals, music, textiles, archeology, and artisan products have vivid regional color, depth, and variety. But perhaps the main reason to love Bolivia is Bolivians themselves. Willing to share their rich and complex society, the visitor will find a cordial and warm people open to answering questions and welcoming your curiosity.