BOLIVIA

Robin Foà

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PREFACE

Photo 1

Photo 2

Our acquaintance with Latin America began way back in 1980 with a long journey between Mexico and Guatemala. In 1984 we went to South America for the first time, and we have since returned many times. The attraction for that wonderful part of the world - the nature, the colors, the lights, the people, the stories, the music, the literature, the legends, the crafts - led me to publish four books on South America: *Altopiano Andino/Andean Highlands* (2014), *Patagonia/Tierra del Fuego* (2019), *Carretera Austral* (2020), together with my wife Rita, and *Marble Caves* (2021). This time I thought of dedicating a photo book to a single country in South America, Bolivia. An extraordinary and lesser-known country that encompasses unique diversity and beauty in a relatively limited area. From the capital La Paz at over 3500 meters high, to the Andean plateau with the largest salt lake in the world (Salar de Uyuni), to Lake Titicaca, the largest lake in South America and the highest navigable lake in the world (3812 meters), the forest, animals, plants and flowers, an extraordinary biodiversity, the costumes and bowler hats of the indigenous inhabitants of the Andes (the *cholitas*), folklore, the extraordinary history of the Jesuit missions of Chiquitania and much more.

Numerous cultures flourished in the Andean regions of the present-day Bolivia. The most important was the Tiahuanaco culture, which developed between the second century BC and the thirteenth century in the southern part of Lake Titicaca around the borders of the current states of Bolivia, Peru and Chile. Much more recent was the rule of the Incas, who were the architects of one of the major pre-Columbian civilizations that developed in the Andean highlands between the 12th and 16th centuries, reaching the point of constituting a vast empire.

The history of Bolivia was characterized in the 19th and early 20th centuries by wars with neighboring countries over border issues and above all over the rich mineral deposits and also over the extraction of rubber in the Amazon forest (Acre War). Another major conflict was the War of the Pacific (1879-1884) or Saltpeter War between Bolivia, Chile and Peru. The reasons are linked to Bolivia's access to the sea and the richness of the desert area around Antofagasta, rich in saltpeter, which was then needed to make gunpowder, and guano, which served as fuel and fertilizer. The consequences of the defeat were heavy for Bolivia which lost its only and fundamental access to the sea and over 100,000 square kilometers of territory which went to Chile. Soon after, the Chileans discovered in the area taken from Bolivia - the Atacama pampa - the largest copper deposit in the world. The loss of the only access to the Pacific Ocean - essential for the movement of precious minerals (mercury, gold, silver and more) of which the Bolivian subsoil was rich - has meant that the tension between Bolivia and Chile continues even today. In 2010, Bolivia struck an agreement with neighboring Peru, under which it obtained the use of the port of Ilo for 99 years.

Each of my books (we are now at the ninth) has slightly different features. In this, I thought of dividing it into 10 chapters: 1) The peoples of the Andes; 2) Cities; 3) Markets; 4) Andes and Andean Plateau; 5) Salar de Uyuni; 6) Lake Titicaca; 7) Folklore; 8) Refugio Los Volcanes/Amboró National Park; 9) Selva, animals, crops, indigenous populations; 10) Jesuit Missions, with a further short Appendix. Each photographic section is preceded by a brief introduction.

We went to Bolivia in 2011 and 2019. To optimize times and routes and due to the objective logistical difficulties, we were always accompanied. The first trip was organized with the help of Ricardo Amaru, a fellow hematologist who works in La Paz and who received some training in Italy. He welcomed us on our tiring arrival at El Alto International Airport, located at 4061 meters above sea level - the highest international airport in the world - after a long journey from Rome that took us first to Amsterdam, then to Miami and finally to La Paz on the same day (late night when we arrived). I had never seen the oxygen cylinders upon arrival like in El Alto [Photo 1]... On the other hand, Ricardo also had an oxygen cylinder in the car, just in case... We didn't need it, but when we got to his house he insisted that we 'oxygenated' [Photo 2]!

We had agreed with Ricardo to arrive for the university folklore day (Entrada Folclórica Universitaria) which has been held in La Paz since 1988, and which was scheduled for the day after our arrival. And then to follow the long tour along the entire Andean Plateau (Altiplano), accompanied by the guide Sonia and the driver Augustin [Photo 3].

In our 2019 trip we were instead largely based in Santa Cruz de la Sierra in southeastern Bolivia in order to visit other parts of the country. Also on this occasion we were accompanied on all our tours. We especially like to remember Negrita Boguia, who spoke Italian because she had spent some years in our country [Photo 4]. She was an invaluable guide with a deep knowledge of Bolivia and above all she knew everyone, even opening closed doors for us on some occasions. I am pleased to remember her because unfortunately this year she left us prematurely.

This book obviously does not claim to cover all of Bolivia. We got nonetheless to see a lot of the country though. And there were many surprises that far exceeded expectations and enriched our traveling. While much is known about Peru, Argentina and obviously the nearby and immense Brazil, much less is known about Bolivia, a jewel of extraordinary biodiversity nestled between Peru, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, with a tourism sector still to be developed as it deserves.

Robin Foà

Photo 3

Photo 4

1. PEOPLES OF THE ANDES

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Cartina geografica

Photo 5

The Andean Plateau in Bolivia extends for about 800 km in length and 80 km in width between southern Peru and northern Argentina, at an altitude that varies between about 3,500 and 4,000 meters above sea level [see Map]. The populations that inhabit the Andean Plateau, between Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, northern Chile and north-western Argentina are the Aymara, the Quechua, the Guarani, the Uru, and other smaller ethnic subgroups. About half of Bolivia's population is represented by indigenous Aymara and Quechua. Descendants of the ancient Uru people live in the Lake Titicaca district. The main language is Aymara, which is the official language of Peru and Bolivia, while Quechua is the most used mother tongue among the indigenous people of South America. It was the language of the Incas.

The human presence in the Andes is relatively recent. There is evidence that it goes back only 10-12,000 years, although presumably human settlement in the Andes dates back much earlier. One of the problems was adaptation to altitude related to oxygen deficiency. Bolivia has the highest percentage of the population living at ≥2,500 and ≥3,500 meters above sea level.

The Andean populations, and in particular the mythical *chola-cholitas*, are one of the symbols of Bolivia. These indigenous women have continued for centuries to dress in traditional Aymara clothes, typical of the indigenous population who have lived for at least a thousand years in the Andes, mainly in the vicinity of Lake Titicaca between Peru and Bolivia. Their clothing makes them unmistakable: a colorful *pollera* - a multi-layered skirt with flounces down to the ankles, quite voluminous and in bright colors and full of motifs and designs, very often floral - a blouse and a manta, i.e. a shawl tied at the height of the chest. Hence also the definition of *mujeres de polleras*. At its origins it was actually a traditional Spanish dress that the colonial authorities imposed on indigenous women.

The *cholas* normally have their head covered by a sombrero or *bombín*, a small bowler hat which, despite its small size compared to the circumference of the head, never falls. The hat is of hemispherical felt with a low, stiff crown. This particular hat was introduced by British railway operators in the 1920s and was adopted by the *cholitas* as an additional accessory to their attire [Photo 5]. Very particular are the original long black braids to which decorative extensions are often attached which lengthen the hairstyle and makes it more showy [Photo 6].

The term *cholita* derives from the Spanish word cholo or chola, a derogatory appellation that can be translated as 'mestizo', used for individuals of mixed descent, typically with Indian blood. For decades, the term *cholita* was therefore offensive, used by the white ruling classes of the country to indicate these girls of lower social class who, in many cases, did not even speak Spanish, but only the traditional Aymara language. This etiquette has caused them to be refused entry to restaurants, taxis, even public buses; few jobs were allowed to the *cholitas*, nannies, cooks, cleaners. For these reasons, it has long been considered a symbol of indigenous pride.

In 2006, the coming to power of Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous (Aymara) president, led to a strong rehabilitation of the *cholitas* who later became the cornerstone of the traditional Andean communities, capable of managing the economy and the affairs of the communities, obtaining political and religious positions. In 2015, eleven Aymara women, *cholitas paceñas* (originally from the department of La Paz), started mountaineering wearing traditional clothes. The goal of the *cholitas escaladoras* was to climb eight peaks over 6,000 meters [archive photos 7 and 8]. The first was the Huayna Potosí in the Cordillera Real overlooking La Paz. They then continued with their project with the conquest of the Andean mountains Monte Acotango, Parinacota, Pomerape, Illimani and Sajama, the highest mountain in Bolivia and the eighth highest volcano in the world. In January 2019, Lidia Huayllas Estrada, Dora Magueño Machaca, Ana Lía Gonzáles Magueño, Cecilia Llusco Alaña and Elena Quispe Tincutas reached the summit of Aconcagua, Argentina, flying the Bolivian flag at 6,962 meters on the highest mountain in all the Americas.

Although many *cholitas* are still seen, this tradition is gradually being lost. A process that is probably inevitable in a country that is moving towards a modern and increasingly westernized society. Indeed, on our trip to Bolivia in 2019, passing through Potosí, we saw far fewer women in traditional dress. The price of modernity at the expense of authenticity and tradition.

Indigenous pride - some 40 percent of Bolivians consider themselves to be of an indigenous people - has meant that strong indigenous roots set Bolivia apart from virtually the rest of the continent. In 2009, with the new Constitution, the name of 'República de Bolivia' was officially changed to 'Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia'. With the concept of 'plurinality', it has been possible to broaden the recognition of the great variety of belonging to the original peoples. Thirty-six indigenous languages are now considered official, on a par with Spanish, and traditional languages have their guaranteed place in education and public administration.

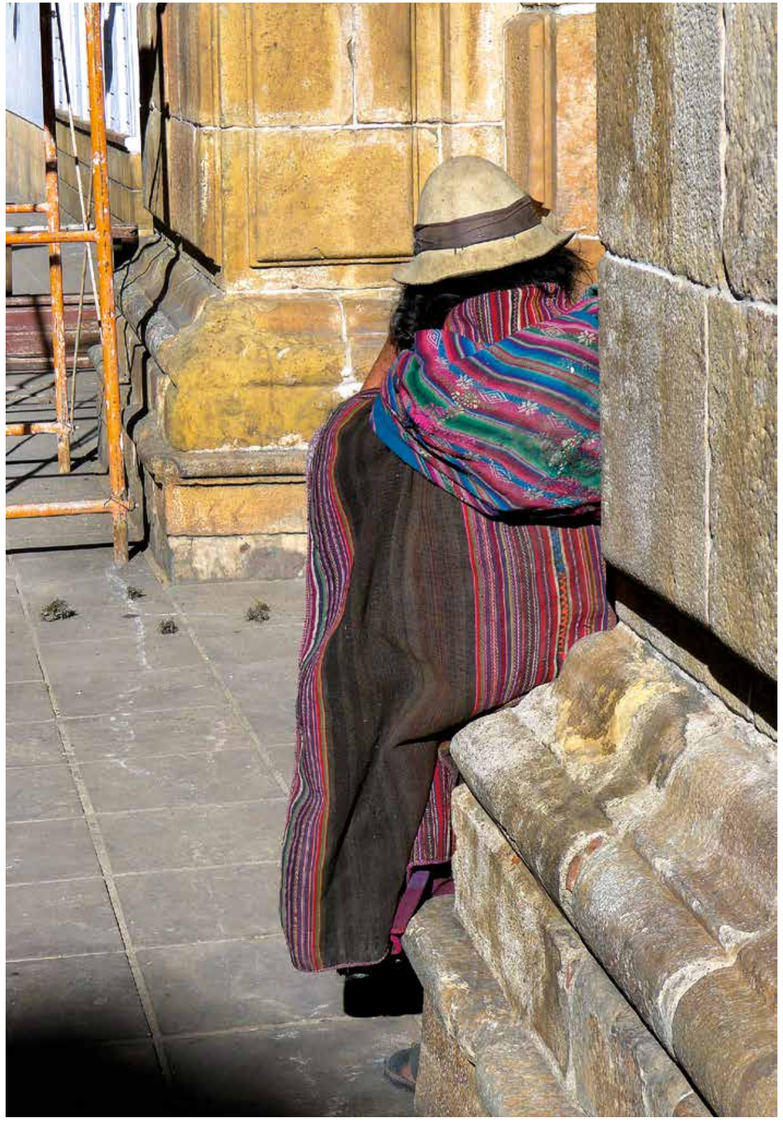
The mining industry in the Andes is one of the most important in the world and in Bolivia it has played a fundamental role since the 16th century. It all began with the discovery of silver in Cerro Rico in Potosí (see below), later supplanted by the extraction of tin. Interest has more recently turned to lithium as it is estimated that about a third of the world's reserves are found in Bolivia. The problem has always been the exploitation of Bolivia's very rich mineral resources by private and foreign companies, and the price in health and human lives paid by the Andean populations - of all ages - in the mines. It is inevitable to recall the book by Eduardo Galeano *Open veins of Latin America* published for the first time back in 1971.

Photo 6

Photo 7

Photo 8

boulevard cafe



2. CITIES

2. CITIES

Photo 9

Photo 10

Photo 11

Bolivia's cities are proverbially 'the highest in the world'. From the government capital La Paz which is, on average, at 3,640 meters above sea level, to Sucre, also the capital but from a legislative point of view, at 2,750 meters, to Potosí at 4,090 meters.

La Paz, known as the highest capital in the world, is located inside a natural canyon surrounded by high mountains. La Paz has expanded over the years, resulting in changes in city heights ranging from 3200 to 4100 meters. The perpetually snow-capped peak of the extinct volcano Illimani (6462 metres) towers over La Paz [Photo 9]. As already mentioned, in nearby El Alto there is the homonymous international airport, the highest in the world. La Paz is a very special, unique and fascinating city on the edge of the canyon. A mixture of indigenous cultures [Photo 10], the Illimani that dominates, traditional shops, beautiful Bolivian fabrics, Bolivian women selling, scenes of daily life, the Valley of the Moon, and much more. As mentioned, the day following our arrival was the day of university folklore, from morning until late in the evening. Masquerade balls, songs, parades in typical costumes by all the Faculties of the Universities of Bolivia. A wonderful show.

About 115 km from La Paz we stop in the town of Sica Sica (3933 meters) to admire the beautiful 17th century stone Cathedral by Fernando Noria, a National Monument.

The city of Oruro (Uru Uru was the pre-Hispanic name) was founded in 1606 as a center of silver mining in the area and, later, of tin [Photo 11]. To commemorate its mining history, the city erected a large monument to represent a miner's helmet; on the surface people, trains, the different souls of Bolivia, the forest, the plateau, etc. are reproduced. The monument is surrounded by smaller metal sculptures. Oruro is famous for its carnival, which has very ancient origins; in 2001 it was recognized by UNESCO as an Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

From there we go to Sucre, a very characteristic city, all white, in colonial style and surrounded by mountains. The heart of the historic city is a World Heritage Site. We visit the Cretaceous Park of Cal Orck'o, the place where the largest number of dinosaur footprints in the world has been found [Photo 12]. From the Museum you can see a very large vertical wall where there are very clearly identifiable dinosaur footprints. This wall was found while opening a large quarry for building material. A consequence of the movement of the Nazca plate that has raised and verticalized the territory. It is very impressive and always makes us reflect on the power of nature. We visit the Recoleta Museum and a Franciscan convent still inhabited by monks. There are four beautiful cloisters one inside the other. In the cloisters there are lovely trees, orange trees and more. The most interesting finding is a 1500-year-old Spanish cedar, which has been declared a National and Historic Monument of Bolivia in 1956 [Photo 13]. It seems that in the area there were many and only this one has remained. To fulfill a wish you have to go round the trunk three times from the right. There is an art gallery full of anonymous religious paintings from the 16th-17th century. There is a very beautiful and well-preserved choir made of madeira wood, in Spanish-style, but two natives also contributed to the carving. The church has a decorated virgin, as in many churches in Central and South America. We visit the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe and above all the annexed and beautiful chapel of the Virgin of Guadalupe which houses the most important icon for Bolivian Catholics, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of Sucre, painted by the Bolivian painter Fray Diego de Ocaña in 1601. Then we go to the nearby Casa de la Libertad, a suggestive colonial building with valuable antique furniture and objects, as well as relics of Bolivian history, site of the Bolivian parliament for years. We reach the Monastery of San Filippo Neri. There is a beautiful cloister with two floors, and you can go up to the roof of the stone church and admire the whole city and also go under the bell. It is all very nice, particularly on a very bright and sunny day with a beautiful light. We round off the visit of Sucre, which is an elegant city with very nice hotels, beautiful furniture, lovely shops [Photos 14 and 15].

The next stop is Potosí located at an altitude of 4090 meters, founded in 1545 as a mining city. A fascinating and extraordinary city for its history, living difficulties and over the years many human tragedies, lights, colors, people. Potosí was one of the most important cities in the region at that time. The Spaniards discovered that the surrounding subsoil was rich in precious minerals (silver, gold, zinc, mercury) and by exploiting the indigenous labor they converted it into a luxurious city, becoming the largest city in the Americas, with the exception of Mexico City. It owes its fame to the Cerro Rico (Rich Mountain) looming above the city, the richest source of silver the world has seen [Photo 16]. In Spanish there is still the saying 'vale un Potosí' which means 'worth a fortune'. In the last decades of the eighteenth century the city began to depopulate, due to the discovery of richer deposits in other areas of the Spanish Empire. It has been a World Heritage Site since 1987 due to the extraordinary quantity of industrial monuments (such as the aqueducts and artificial lakes that supplied water to the silver mines) and architectural monuments, and for the colonial-style historic center of the city. Due to the precarious working conditions and to the lack of elementary protective measures, the miners have a low life expectancy (around 40 years); deaths are mainly due to silicosis and collapses in mines. It has been estimated that around 8,000,000 indigenous people died between 1500 and 1800. They chew coca to gain strength and then offer it to the devil who is the god of the mine! We see the Casa Real de la Moneda, the Royal colonial mint and the nearby Cathedral with a beautiful facade. It is

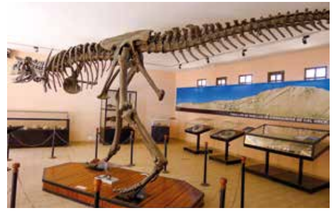


Photo 12

Photo 13

Photo 14

Photo 15

Photo 16

large, tall, airy with rich decorations on the large white columns. We go up to the bell tower, 95 steps (we are at 4090 meters!) from where we can admire the city. We visit the Convent Museum of Santa Teresa, a cloistered Carmelite monastery. There are two beautiful cloisters surrounded by wooden columns, the kitchen and the refectory, the place where the nuns were buried, the place where they met. The church has a painted wooden ceiling, carved benches, paintings and statues of saints. The complex is really beautiful, including the red external facade with white decorations. Through the gate that divided the city of the rich Spaniards from the city of the natives, we go to the church of San Benito in the barrio of the Indians. We visit the church of San Martino, with a lovely wooden beam ceiling and above all the Church and Convent of San Francisco with a nice exterior and a large interior with ten red brick domes. The most beautiful part of the visit was reaching the roof of the church which overlooks Potosí from all sides, a truly breathtaking 360° view. In the blue sky the Cerro Rico stands out, all colored, the city is surrounded by mountains which are part of the Andean Cordillera. The houses on the mountains are the color of the mountain itself and the indigenous houses, in the center of the city among its narrow streets, are colored, with tiled roofs. Potosí is truly beautiful, apart from the 4090 meters of altitude that made us suffer, with its magnificent light, the panorama, the churches, the people, the colonial architecture, the colors of the houses and walls, that look like paintings. And the indigenous women with and without children. With their beautiful colored dresses, shawls, suffering faces, chubby children with coal-colored eyes, loved, always close to their mothers. It all feels so natural. We are in 2011, will it remain like this over time...? On leaving Potosí we go through the miners' barrio and pass in front of the mines. We didn't visit a mine, due to lack of time and also because of the difficulty of the long visit, heat, cold, gas, tunnels...

On our 2019 trip to Bolivia we visit Samaipata. The pueblo is located about 120 kilometers west of Santa Cruz de la Sierra on the slopes of the Andes in a magnificent position. The etymology of the name comes from the Quechua language and means 'rest on the heights'. In fact, it owes its name to the settlement of the ancient ceremonial center - known as Fuerte - not far away, declared a World Heritage Site in 1998. The village is characteristic and well-kept, with squares full of luxuriant trees, murals. Many foreigners have moved here; they have bought lands and cultivate with biological concepts that they have passed on to the local population. We visit a small but interesting museum. Large panels show the various cultural periods leading up to the Tiwanaku culture. Various ceramics are exhibited [Photos 17 and 18]. Nestled in the mountains of eastern Bolivia, at an altitude of 1950 meters, on the edge of the Amazon Forest is the 'El Fuerte', which is supposed to be a pre-Columbian religious site, probably predating the Incas themselves. It is a huge rock carved in a beautiful location, surrounded by greenery and mountains. You see sculptures of jaguars and other animals, the back of a snake. Various niches, steps and staircases have been dug. Samaipata, not very well known, is definitely worth a visit. From Samaipata passes a path called the 'via del Che' which leads to La Higuera the place where Che Guevara was killed in 1967.

Santa Cruz de la Sierra is today the most populous and cosmopolitan city in Bolivia at only 400 meters above the sea and is the economic center of the country. Completely different from the charming Andean cities, it lies on a flat land at the foot of the Sierra and is more like our cities, with very chaotic traffic. It has a tropical and often humid climate. City in full development, thanks to the income from agriculture based on tropical plantations that arise where, in not so distant years, there were dense and impenetrable forests. It is the starting point for many fascinating areas of Bolivia, from the Jesuit Missions to different national parks, Samaipata Fort, etc.

Photo 17

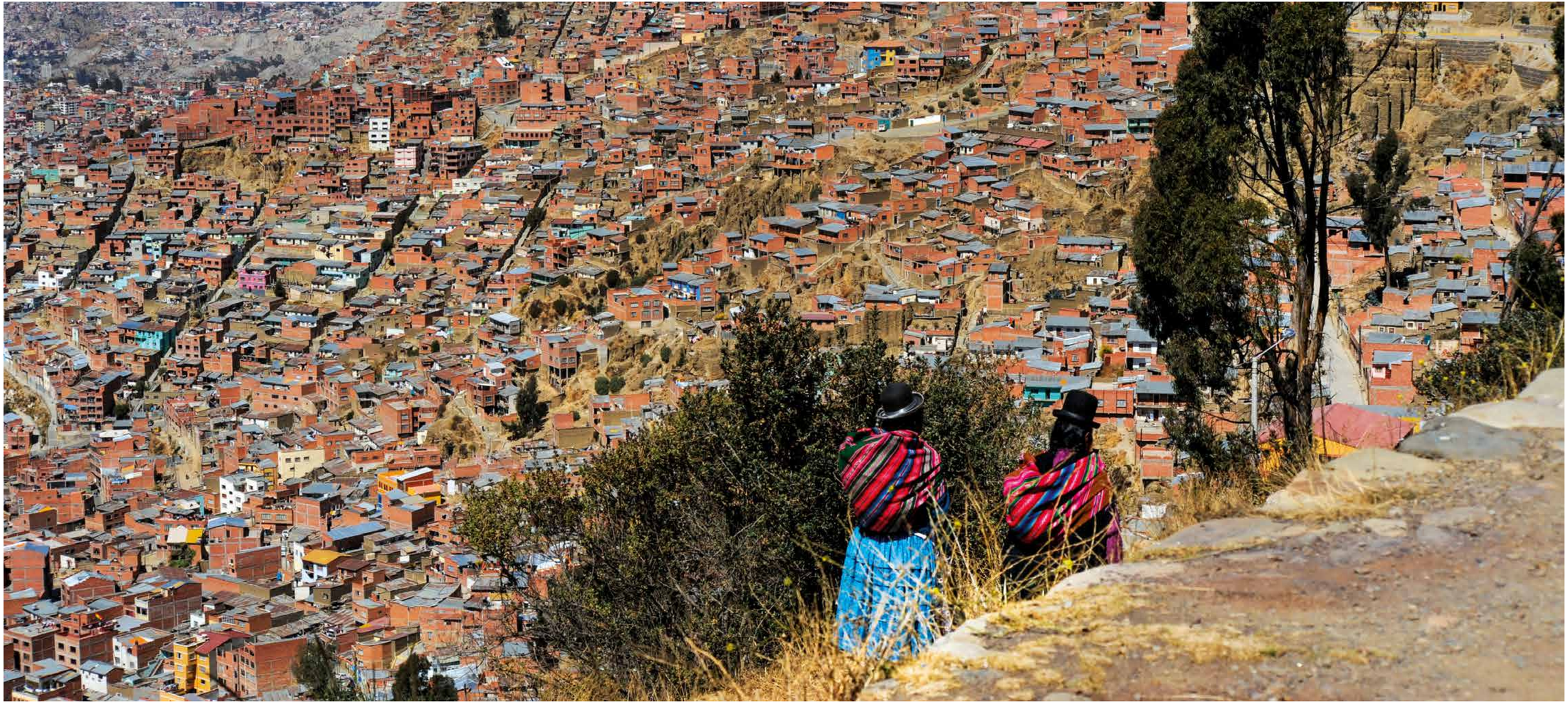



Photo 18