Bolivia

Geography

The Republic of Bolivia, or Bolivia, as most people know it, is a landlocked country in south central South America with the coordinates of 17 00 S, 65 00 W. It is roughly 1,098,581 square kilometers in size, approximately three times the size of Montana, with a population of 8.3 million people in 2001 according to the United States Central Intelligence Agency. Bolivia has nearly every possible landscape that can be imagined. With 20% of the land as arid or desert, 40% rainforest, 25% pasture or meadow, 2% in arable cropland, 2% as inland water, and 11% as other types of land, Bolivia is rich in a multitude of landscapes, but limited in useable land. Since it is a landlocked country, it has no coastline. It does, however, have free port rights in many of its neighboring country's ports. The seat of government is in the city of La Paz and the legal capital and seat of judiciary is in the city of Sucre. There are two branches of the Andes Mountains in Bolivia. The western range is known as the Cordillero Occidental and the eastern range is known as the Cordillero Oriental. Lake Titicaca, the world's largest navigable lake, lies along the northern expanse and Bolivia has shared rights with Peru. There are also high plateau lands that are collectively referred to as the Alti Plano, or in English, the high plains. These landscape features must be considered when one considers the lands in Bolivia, since the mountains play such a large part on the topography and the weather.

History

In 600 BC, there arose the first major civilization in this part of the world, the Tiahuanacan empire. The capitol city of Tiahuanacan was built on the northeastern shore of Lake Titicaca. This civilization suffered a sudden and still unexplained collapse around 1200 AD. From the ashes of this empire arose seven kingdoms, the main one being the Aymara people. For years, they ruled until the
Quechua people expanded and later became known as the Incans. In 1532, the Spanish explorer Pizarro arrived. On November 16, 1532, Pizarro’s men kidnapped the Incan ruler, Atahualpa. Even after the Incan people paid a huge ransom that rivaled 50 years of Europe’s silver and gold production, Pizarro had Atahualpa executed. This began the Spanish conquest and rule, which continued until 1825 when the area fought for and won its independence from Spain. Bolivia didn’t want to become a part of Peru or Argentina. It became an independent state on August 6, 1825 and was named the Republic of Bolivia for the revolutionary leader, Bolivar. Bolivar didn’t think of it as an honor, and he referred to it as Upper Peru. Bolivia has experienced over 200 major and minor periods of civil unrest throughout its long history. Despite all of this, Bolivia’s last two presidents have done much to turn over a new leaf during each of their five-year terms.

**Society**

With 8.3 million people estimated in 2001 and an estimated annual growth of 1.76%, Bolivia has the potential to become a rapidly growing land. However, over 70% of the population is deficient in proper nutrition and 57% do not have access to potable water. Seventy-six % of the population does not have the means of achieving proper sanitation. These things combine with the fact that the infant mortality rate is over 12%. This is one of the highest death rates for children in South America. The growth of a nation is very hard to achieve under these circumstances.

One of the positive things to consider about Bolivia is the fact that the school system in this country seems to actually work. After seven years of compulsory education, many people opt for three years of an intermediate school, followed by four years of college education. This brings the total literacy rate in the Republic of Bolivia to over 83% as of 1995. This figure is up from 75% in the mid-1980’s.
The majority of people in Bolivia are Roman Catholic, though the majority of them are not devout practitioners. Historically, females were the main practitioners of religion in Bolivia. This practice has caused many of the males in Bolivia to still shirk their supposed church duties. Other religions that are practiced in Bolivia are many of the Christian religions, including Protestant, Methodist, and others.

The three official languages of the Republic of Bolivia are Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara. The latter two are the languages of two native tribes found in the country. These two tribes make up 30 and 25% of the country’s ethnicity respectively. The rest of the population is made up of mestizos, who have Indian and European mixed ancestry, and 25-30 percent of these are whites, which make up 5-15% of the population.

**Agriculture**

The agriculture of Bolivia is varied, but only 2% of the land is arable. A very small amount of the land is irrigated and this helps in the production of potatoes, corn, beans, and their native cereal grain known as quinoa. These crops are all grown in the highlands and the farmers are able to sell nearly 30% of their crops for cash. The lowlands produce tubers, barley, corn, wheat, fruits, and vegetables. The main legal cash crop in Bolivia’s valleys and lowlands is soybeans. One third of the soybeans produced are kept in the country to feed their chickens, but the other two-thirds are exported to Peru, Brazil, and even to Europe.

The animal agriculture of Bolivia is diverse. Bolivians produce over six million beef cattle, 25 million chickens, 200 million eggs, 10 million lambs, 3 million llamas, one million hogs, one million goats, 350,000 alpacas, and even a small number of buffalo. The government now protects the llamas, alpacas, and few vicunas since they are the only native livestock and their numbers are low. The dairy industry of
Bolivia is not sufficient for the needs of the country. Milk and dairy products are imported from neighboring countries, mainly in the form of evaporated milk.

The number one legal export in Bolivia is timber. The rainforests of Bolivia produce many tons of lumber for the U.S. and Europe. The disadvantage of this is that many of the acres of virgin rainforest are being cut down to provide furniture grade tropical woods for the commercial markets around the world. This deforestation is a way for the rural people of Bolivia to earn hard cash in a relatively short amount of time. The second major export of Bolivia is coffee. Of the amounts that are produced, 25% of this crop is locally drunk and the remaining 75% is exported through ports in Brazil, Argentina, and Peru. Lesser cash crops include cotton, tobacco, tea, cocoa, and oilseeds.

This brings up the idea of illegal exports. Officially, Bolivia only exported $569 U.S. million annually during the mid-1980’s. Unofficially, it has been estimated that the illegal export of Bolivia at the same time, mainly in the name of cocaine, exceeded the amounts of legal exports. Bolivia is the third largest exporter of cocaine in the world. The only two countries that export more are Columbia and Peru. An estimate of between $600 U.S. million and $1 U.S. billion was made annually from the illegal exportation of coca plants and cocaine in its pure form. This is one-twentieth of the entire gross national product, which was only $20.9US billion in the year 2000. The draw of illegal activity is understandable when one considers that the average worker only made $2600US in the year 2000. The country has a 20% unemployment rate and 70% of the population lives below the poverty level.

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