

# The turbulent city of peace

Founded high in the Andes by conquistadors keen to exploit its gold, La Paz has endured a tumultuous past. **Clare Hargreaves** explores the history of the Bolivian capital



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An indigenous Aymara woman in typical bowler hat and shawl sells herbs at La Paz's 'Witches' Market'

**L**a Paz is a city that literally takes your breath away. Lying at an average altitude of around 3,650 metres – making it the highest national capital in the world – Bolivia's seat of government sprawls across a bowl-like canyon in which the air is so thin it leaves you gasping. It's not just the atmosphere that's stupefying: the magnificent, snow-capped Mount Illimani towers over the city, which is a heady melting pot of colonial palaces, modern skyscrapers and markets thronged by indigenous Aymara women in vibrant shawls and bowler hats.

Given the altitude and tumbling terrain, this is an unlikely site for a capital. But dig into its past and you'll soon discover why in 1548 Spanish conquistador Alonso de Mendoza founded La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora de la Paz (the City of Our Lady of Peace) here. It wasn't the weather, despite 16th-century Spanish historian Pedro Cieza de León's words: "Here the climate is mild and the view of the mountains inspires one to think of God." No, the big draw for the Spanish was the shiny yellow metal that abounded in its now-foetid Choqueyapu river: gold.

The heart of La Paz's colonial district is Plaza Murillo ❶, the focus of Bolivia's political life (though Sucre, around 250 miles to the south-east, is the country's constitutional capital). Take in the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Italian Renaissance-style Palacio de Gobierno, the president's official residence, guarded by red-uniformed sentries. The latter is nicknamed Palacio Quemado (Burned Palace), having been badly damaged in 1875 during one of many popular uprisings – the city's name belies its turbulent past. Spot the statue of Gualberto Villarroel, assassinated by a mob in 1946 then hanged from a lamp post – one of many Bolivian presidents whose term was violently cut short.

Nearby Palacio de Los Condes de Arana ❷, built in 1775, is one of La Paz's loveliest surviving colonial palaces, its elaborate portico carved from salmon-pink granite. Today it houses the Museo Nacional de Arte, its exhibits including works by Bolivian painter Melchor Pérez de Holguín (c1660–1732), grand master of Andean colonial art.

La Paz's best-preserved colonial street is cobbled Calle Jaén ❸, lined with no fewer than four museums. The star is the Museo de Metales Preciosos, also

known as the Museo de Oro (Gold Museum), displaying fantastic pre-Columbian gold and silver artefacts. Don't miss the Treasure of San Sebastián, a collection of crowns and necklaces linked to the pre-Inca Tiwanaku empire of western Bolivia.

Heading south again, Plaza San Francisco abuts Avenida Mariscal Santa Cruz (also called El Prado), the main artery leading down to the bottom of the canyon. Dominating the plaza is San Francisco Church ❹, originally constructed in the 16th century but rebuilt in the 18th; its facade, carved by Aymara workers, is a magnificent example of mestizo-baroque style, mingling Catholic and native figures. Protests often gather in this square but on quiet days it's a fine place to people-watch while munching a *salteña*, Bolivia's version of the meat paste.

Due west is the Mercado de las Brujas (Witches' Market) ❺, which offers a fascinating window into the world of Aymara medicine and ritual. Stalls groan with herbal remedies, protective talismans and mummified llama

**In 1875 the city was rocked by one of many uprisings – the name La Paz belies its turbulent past**

foetuses. Continuing the herbal theme, the Museo de Coca ❻ is devoted to the sacred leaf that indigenous Andean people have chewed for millennia.

Descend El Prado, its high-rise buildings a world away from the shanties clinging to the canyon top. Just to the east is the Museo Nacional de Arqueología ❼, showcasing artefacts from the Tiwanaku pre-Columbian culture.

Indigenous Andean textiles are a colourful delight, so for the perfect finale head north-east to the Museo de Textiles Andinos Bolivianos ❽. Look for condors sneakily woven into colourful ponchos. There's a shop here, too, so you can take home a morsel of La Paz. 🌐

## LA PAZ IN EIGHT SITES

- ❶ Plaza Murillo**  
Magnificent Metropolitan cathedral and Renaissance-style governor's palace
- ❷ Museo Nacional de Arte**  
National art museum in a beautiful 18th-century colonial palace
- ❸ Calle Jaén**  
Colonial cobbled street lined with four museums including the Museo de Oro
- ❹ San Francisco Church**  
18th-century facade elaborately carved by Aymara craftspeople
- ❺ Mercado de las Brujas**  
'Witches' Market' laden with herbs, talismans and mummified llamas
- ❻ Museo de Coca**  
Museum about the sacred stimulant leaf, a feature of Andean culture for centuries
- ❼ Museo Nacional de Arqueología**  
A compact museum offering insights into pre-Inca Tiwanaku culture
- ❽ Museo de Textiles Andinos Bolivianos**  
Colourful examples of traditional Andean weaving

