

## February 2024 – Bolivia Travel Report – Lydia

People always ask me how long the plane ride is to Bolivia and how long it takes to get there. Well, for me in Alberta, it's 3 plane rides and a couple of days of travel in total! Plane #1 is about 4 hours from Calgary to Toronto. I typically fly through Toronto in order to spend a day there each way so I can visit family and friends. Plane #2 is overnight and about 6 hours from Toronto to Bogota. Plane #3 is also overnight and is about 3 hours from Bogota to La Paz. Going to Bolivia the layover in Bogota is about 17



hours (it's only about 3 or 4 on the way back). We get a hotel near the airport to catch some sleep, and sometimes we do some sightseeing in Bogota. Then it's the overnight flight to La Paz, and we land about 2:00 a.m. The best way to describe what it's like to get off the plane at 2:00 a.m. after 2 overnight flights in a row, landing at 4,100 metres above sea level, is like being drunk and walking underwater. Your brain is fuzzy and your body is even fuzzier. Twice I've seen people stop to throw up after getting off the plane. As awful as the landing time is, it's a quick drive to our accommodations as there is NO TRAFFIC in the middle of the night! That's the silver lining



As always, the trip to Bolivia last month was both emotionally and physically exhausting. This was my 7<sup>th</sup> trip (always on our own nickel), and the altitude doesn't get easier to bear. For a lucky few, this means nothing, and they don't bat an eye. For others, including me, this means being breathless and feeling a decade older for pretty much the whole trip. It's sure not a beach vacation! But the kids are so worth it. On this trip Kristy jokingly asked me "couldn't you have found a project at a lower altitude?". The truth is, the project(s) found me, so there wasn't much I could do about that! It is what it is, and the challenge with the altitude is just par for the course.

I took just over 1,500 photos. I tried to narrow it down to less than 2 dozen to send with this report. Matt took about 5,000! It will take us weeks to process all we saw and did on this trip. Thanks for your patience with us.



Bolivia is a big, beautiful, diverse country that has so much to offer. On this trip we tackled on some sightseeing to see the UNESCO event Carnivale in Oruro, and then we spent 3 more days on the altiplano visiting the Uyuni salt flats and the lagoons in the desert where the flamingoes live. 5 days at high altitude (3,700 m +) was difficult for some of us, but the sights were worth it. Carnivale, with its 50,000 dancers and 20,000 musicians, was one of the most spectacular things I have ever seen! The photos don't do it justice. It is a parade that goes on for almost 24 hours. Absolutely incredible. Highly recommended! I will go there again.

There were 8 of us on this trip, including 4 Directors (Matt, myself, Kristy and Michelle). We also had 4 donors with us, 2 of whom had never been to Bolivia before. It was a terrific group and we had a super time traveling together.

We did 3 visits to the Tahuantinsuyo Community Centre, and 2 visits to the Saturday program at Villa Ingenio. We also spent a day with the kids from both projects, and their families, at a park in southern La Paz. Originally, we were going to take them to Lake Titicaca again, but due to blockades that kept popping up all over the country, we felt it would be prudent to stay close to home. Many of the families had never been to the park, so it was still an adventure! We packed 4 buses that were quieter going



back to El Alto with so many having a snooze

😊 This day trip was again sponsored by Matt and myself.



At both



Tahuantinsuyo and Villa Ingenio we again held 'Canada Days', with us Canucks donning the red and black plaid. At Tahuantinsuyo Matt and the kids made pancakes again, and at Villa Ingenio we all chowed down on maple cookies brought from Canada. Kristy came up with the brilliant and fun idea of making a mural to celebrate the 4 seasons of Canada. For Winter the kids painted snowflakes. For Spring they coloured tulips. For Fall they coloured maple leaves, and for Summer they made boats! The highlight was having boat races in tubs of water, pushing the boats along by blowing through a straw! Lots of good fun.



At one of the visits to Tahuantinsuyo we cemented our relationship with our partner Sariry Foundation by signing our first written agreement together. It only took us 5 years! Sariry Founder Elisa and HBF President Matt signed the agreement in front of witnesses, including parents and children from the program who all gave speeches of gratitude. It was very moving.

On this trip we also signed a partnership agreement with *Helping Hands – La Paz*, a Bolivian non profit founded by a Canadian (Linda) living in La Paz, to help students attend post-secondary education. *Helping Hands – La Paz* has helped over 500 students go on to post-secondary over the last 20 years, and now children from Tahuantinsuyo and Villa Ingenio will officially be on their radar to assist. We look forward to developing this partnership going forward. We spent an emotional and exciting afternoon at their office getting to know each other and learning about each other's work. It seems natural to partner with them!



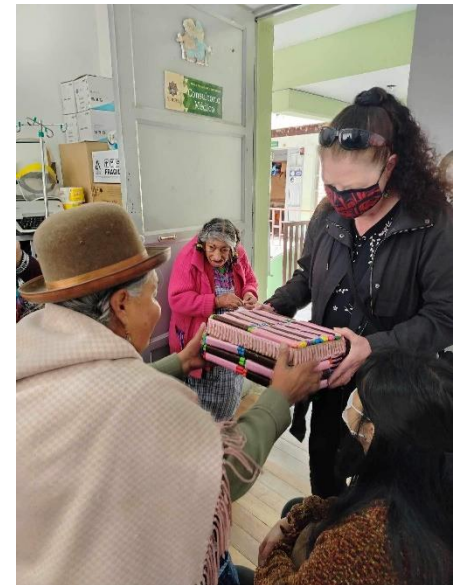
We also visited a project called Casa Kuisina in the Senkata neighbourhood of El Alto, where Help Bolivia established a 'therapy through play' ludoteca (toy library). We met with Founder



Cecilia and her team in their brand-new location in a community centre that has plenty of room to grow into. This was also an exciting and emotional day as we learned that Casa Kuisina has the same goals and values of Help Bolivia Foundation, working to help underserved children overcome obstacles in their education. Casa Kuisina also works with children with learning disabilities, and will now help assess children in Villa Ingenio for the same (including Ricardo – more about him

below). Once children have an official assessment, there are some supports they can obtain from the Bolivian government. Casa Kuisina is 5 years old and we look forward to continuing to work with them to reach more children. There is no shortage of need in El Alto!

Like we did on our previous 2 trips, this trip we again visited the Centre for abandoned seniors in La Paz. This started out in 2022 as us going to be the eyes and ears of one of our donors in Australia who also supports the seniors, but it has now turned in to something more personal and dearer to our hearts. One of the seniors, Roberto, remembers us each time we go, and now calls us his family. He was thrilled with the reading materials we again brought, and surprised us all by immediately playing a tune on the harmonica Kristy brought for him! One of the ladies brought me a beautiful shoe box she had decorated, which was very thoughtful. We presented some funds from the donor in Australia to the Centre, and left with some good memories of how we brightened their day. The beautiful box is still in Bolivia, and the children from Villa Ingenio will fill it with drawings and letters, which will be delivered to the seniors (but not the box itself!). We also started up a subscription to a daily newspaper, which everyone was happy about. We will think on ways that we can have some of the older kids visit the seniors, which I think would be beneficial to all.





At Villa Ingenio we also visited the site of the future bakery, and did a 'ground breaking' photo. Two weeks after we were there the demolition of the site began, with construction slated to start later this month. This is very exciting! We are so grateful to Fig Tree Foundation for the grant to establish this bakery to provide training and employment to parents. We are now looking at building a second floor to run the programs for children, as currently the programs are run in a church, and the arrangement is only temporary. We will develop a fundraising campaign for this Capital project later this year, as well as a monthly donor campaign to help us achieve the funds we need to grow this program to 5 days a week. We came home very determined to help these children and their families!

One of the highlights of this trip was spending so much time with our new employee and Help Bolivia representative, Aracely. She is a true gem, and we thank our lucky stars that we found her last year! What's even more amazing is that she feels exactly the same way! Aracely just graduated from law school, is always looking for ways to help her fellow Aymara, and is quite the entrepreneur. We visited her home and met her mother and grandmother, and learned more about Aymara traditions. Aracely has taken the children and their families into her heart, and goes above and beyond to help them.



Like with every trip, we are thrilled to see children we have come to know over the years thriving with the support that they are receiving thanks to our donors. They all have such sad stories. Lots of single parents either divorced, abandoned, or widowed. All live in extreme poverty. All are so very grateful for the help they are receiving. 2 families that stick out are Ricardo's in Villa Ingenio, and Roly's in Tahuantinsuyo. They have extra needs at the moment (Ricardo is likely autistic, worrying to his mother), so we have been providing additional support for them. These single mamas have full plates. We are so grateful that we are able to help.

We are also grateful for the time we got to spend with our growing list of Bolivian friends in La Paz. I can see that our time there will get longer and longer as the years go by, and eventually

the grandkids will come with us! Right now I'm thinking August 2025 for my next trip. I have lots of time to plan 😊

