

STUDENTS IN ACTION

# Breathtaking Bolivia

Marsha Guillaume and Ruth Trudgeon



Ten second-year College of Graduate Nursing (CGN) Master of Science in Nursing-Entry (MSN-E) students and two faculty members left California beach weather to arrive 11 hours later in the snowy peaks of a Bolivian winter. The group emerged from El Alto Airport, blinking in the bright sunlight of a cold mid-winter day in July. The thin, cold, crisp air at 13,000 feet left them breathless as did the spectacular view of the snow-covered Andean peaks in the distance. Descending into the urban landscape of La Paz, the ochre-hued buildings blended into the hillsides of the Altiplano. The view formed a tapestry of earthy colors resembling Andean ceramics. Once in downtown La Paz, students eagerly met their homestay families and then later ventured out to sample the sights and sounds of this exciting capital city.

Instruction from the host organizer: "Meet at 7 a.m. outside of Avenida Poeta, Teleferico Station. Do not forget scrubs, mask, white coat, hairnet, and gloves.

Students enthusiastically gathered outside the cable car station mesmerized by the vibrant street life. Indigenous Cholitas with colorful shawls and tiny Bowler hats perched on their head added to the wonders of their daily commute, sites quite different from the bustling Los Angeles basin.

Students were placed in either a pediatric or women's hospital or primary care clinic based on interest and availability. They were also paired based on Spanish proficiency and clinical interest. Students and faculty marveled at Bolivia's universal coverage focused on the right to health care for all. Bolivia's Sistema Unico De Salud (SUS) was introduced in 2019, focusing on improving public health expenditure, strengthening primary health services, and reducing out-of-pocket expenses for the most vulnerable. The universal right was fulfilled by a workforce dedicated to overcoming challenges in resource-constrained settings. Students saw how these efforts in health care reform have begun to advance equity, resilience, efficiency, and responsiveness. It was evident that La Paz fostered a culture of health. Targeted public health messages were posted in highly visible locations throughout the city.



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In Hospital del Niño, students observed patients with extrapulmonary tuberculosis (TB), and untreated congenital conditions such as cardiac malformation and cleft palate. The CGN students had only heard about such conditions through lectures and textbooks. Suddenly these tiny patients were a few feet away in the Pediatric ICU. These critically ill babies were expertly cared for by the interprofessional team of doctors and nurses despite the limited access to advanced technology. This expert care in a resource-strained country was a recurring theme in other clinical sites.

In the primary care setting, students set off on a one-hour bumpy bus ride to Centro De Salud Integral Chasquipampa. There, students got to witness Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racist (DEIAR)-affirming and culturally-responsive care in action. From the kindly geriatrician, who gave ample time to each of his elderly Cholita patients, to the welcoming pediatrician, they practiced cultural humility when educating patients in their own Aymara language. There was an evident commitment to establishing long-term provider-patient relationships to enhance trust and ensure continuity of care.

Bolivia's health care system stands out for its use of traditional healing practices alongside modern medicine. Clinical experiences were supplemented with case studies and guest lectures to provide students with a well-rounded understanding of health care in the context of Bolivian culture. Suddenly it became clearer why Bolivia was recognized as a pioneer of universal health care. The Bolivians have a robust culture and history of social justice, civic engagement, indigenous rights, and overarching human rights.

At the end of each day's experiences, as students glided high above the city streets in the Teleferico on their way home, the sounds of the city drifted up into the cable cars. The route home took them through vibrant neighborhoods with live music, soccer games, dogs barking, and children laughing. Each day it became apparent that elements of Bolivia's health care reform could be adapted to meet the needs of underserved and vulnerable populations back home. Students reflected on their MSN-E journey and realized that their program had prepared them to be nurse leaders in meeting the needs of vulnerable populations and advancing health equity globally.





**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM**

MSN-E students heading to their assigned clinical rotations.

PHOTO CREDIT: BLANCA MARTINEZ MUNOZ

**OPPOSITE, TOP**

In Bolivia live both Aymara and Quecha people. The Aymara women wear skirts that are slightly lower in the front than in the back.

SOURCE, AYMARA WOMEN, EL ALTO, BOLIVIA

AUTHOR, PEDRO SZEKELY FROM  
LOS ANGELES, USA

**RIGHT**

El Mercado de las Brujas  
(The Witches' Market). Popular tourist  
attraction located in Cerro Cumbre.





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### ABOVE

Guided walking tour through La Paz colorful and historical site, Calle Jaén.

Back row: Rachel Pokipala, Blanca Martinez Munoz, Marsha Guillaume, Ruth Trudgeon, Alexander Taylor, Aaron Santamaria, Rachel Brady, Paige Pearson  
Front row: Elizabeth Arias, Dyani Jacobo, Donya Moazeni, Cynthia Velasco

### OPPOSITE (TOP)

MSN-E students and faculty at the Hospital de la Mujer.

### OPPOSITE (BOTTOM)

Traditional Japanese woman and a traditional Aymara cholita street art/mural in La Paz.



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