

Dolly Do
CFHI Bolivia Summer 2009

I MADE IT TO BOLIVIA!: 07/04/09

On the way to La Paz, I was nervous about how I would handle the altitude (the city is at 12,000 ft). A girl from Santa Cruz I had met on the plane had told me that her nails turned black the last time she visited La Paz. When we landed and I got off the plane, it wasn't as bad as I had expected until I had to wait in the long customs line that I began to notice the altitude. It felt like I was standing in a foggy cloud that made it a little difficult to breath, but I was able to manage it. Others had a harder time than I did. It was very cold in La Paz during the day; even though our packing list reminded us to bring winter clothes, I had under packed. After customs we all met with Gonzalo and were provided with taxis to our home stays.

My home: Along with one of my roommates from Georgetown, I finally arrived to our home. The home exceeded my expectations. Prior, when I had thought of Bolivia, I had only thought of a developing and poverty-stricken nation. Here was this three story home with internet, cable, and two cooks/helpers. I realized that this was the result of a big socioeconomic gap. I was staying in the home of at least a middle class family that made up a tiny percent of the entire population. My host was an older woman who lived with her mother and seventeen year old son.

Clinical: One obvious challenge was the language barrier. Although I did understand a sufficient amount of Spanish, medical Spanish was very new to me. It made it even more difficult when doctors and medical students seemed to speak a million miles an hour. Despite the challenge, overtime I began to pick things up and was starting to comprehend a lot of the material. It's amazing how fast your language skills enhance when you are constantly surrounded by the language.

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The fourth day was my favorite because I was able to ride in the ambulances. The ambulances I rode in were essentially used as a traveling clinic. We went to an orphanage and did check ups with all the children, and then parked in the outskirts of the city to see drop in patients. I finally was able see the other side of La Paz, and I witnessed a demographic who had limited access to health care and who lived in poor living conditions. It was meaningful to be in the ambulance that day, to be part of a team of medical professional bring health care to that demographic.

The following week was in Hospital del Nino, which was usually the student favorite, and I saw why. Dr. Velasco and the staff were very friendly and interactive. They knew exactly how to keep students engaged and how to provide a learning environment. Generally we did rounds in the morning and would be assigned a case to present the next day; afterwards we would follow him to the “consultorio” were he would meet with patients that day. He taught us the basic procedures of check- ups and we were able to practice on patients. Dr. Velasco and his assistant who helped the students, Paola, were wonderful. They interacted and handled heir patients with such genuine care, and they truly were concerned about the health of all Bolivians. It was an inspiration to work with doctors like this.

The third week I spent my time at a small clinic. They did a little bit of everything but had great emphasis on maternal health check-ups, contraceptives, and outreach education about health. It was a clinic to spend time in since maternal health is such a major issue in Bolivia. The doctor taught us how to measure the woman’s uterus, how to feel for the position of the baby in the womb, and how to find the baby’s heart beat. Soon we were practicing these methods ourselves on patients. The week after I went back to Hospital del Nino and enjoyed every moment there.