

B O L I V I A



BOLIVIA FACTS

Location Central South America, southwest of Brazil

Area 424,162 sq. miles. About the size of California and Texas combined. This landlocked country is tucked between Brazil on the east, Peru and Chile on the west, and Argentina and Paraguay on the south.

Capital Sucre is the historical and judicial capital, while La Paz is the administrative capital.

Languages Three official languages: Spanish, Quechua and Aymara

Monetary Unit Boliviano

Population 8,724,156 (2004 est.)

Terrain Comprised of a great plateau on the western side (with an average altitude of 12,000 feet) and a lowland region in the northern and eastern part of the country.

Climate The southern areas have the highest temperatures in South America, with highs of more than 104 degrees F. The south and southwest areas are arid, while the northeastern areas have abundant rainfall. The east has very hot and humid temperatures. The rainy season lasts from October to March and is longer in the north.

Agricultural Exports Soybeans, cocoa, coffee, sugar cane

The Coffee

In terms of coffee quantity, Bolivia is a small player: it ranks 38th on the list of coffee-producing nations, even behind the U.S., which ranks 35th. But in terms of coffee quality, Bolivia has been working hard to move into the big leagues. In the last few years, the country's coffee has made great strides, in part thanks to the Bolivian Specialty Coffee Association (ACEB), anti-drug money from the U.S. government and programs like the Cup of Excellence, which held its first Bolivian event last year in December.

"One of the ways in which Bolivia has suffered in the past is they had a stigma of being junk coffee," says Andrew Barnett, owner and roaster at Ecco Café and one of the judges at Bolivia's first Cup of Excellence competition. "But the best Bolivian coffees have a very sweet, very balanced cup and are deep berry in flavor. They're creamy and sweet."

But there was a reason for Bolivian coffee's previous reputation, says Nelson Valverde, president of Invalsa, an import/export company based in Bolivia. It was difficult to get consistently good coffee. "Bolivia always had the right credibilities, but the coffee was never good," he says. "Everyone would say, theoretically, excellent coffee should come out of here, so how come it doesn't?"

Part of the answer to this question lies in the same feature that gives the country its great potential: the geography. Bolivia sits high in the Andes Mountains, a location that has given rise to the country's nickname as "Rooftop of the World." With a landscape of snowy mountains, wide plateaus and tropical rain forests, Bolivia has ideal coffee-producing conditions. Yet, it is this geography, wonderfully designed to produce coffee, which has also contributed to the country's struggle to produce consistent specialty coffee. Most

farmers depulp the coffee at the farm, and then must truck it over the mountains to La Paz at a whopping 12,500 feet, where they deliver it to centralized co-ops or intermediaries.

"La Paz, which is the commercial center, is very high," Valverde says. "In order to get the coffee from the farms to the processing plants, the coffee had to be trucked up the mountain." Because the beans were half-processed, they were still wet and would freeze and then thaw again on their way over the mountain. In addition, half-processed coffee quickly became musty and foul during the long trip to La Paz. "As a result, it was not possible to predict good quality," Valverde says. "This trip was ruining the coffee. We realized we needed to process the coffee where it's grown, and then when it's dry, it can make the trip."



Now, thanks in part to USAID, which has helped to finance centralized facilities in the Yungas region, growers can process the coffees closer to home. "Once we take care of the quality issues, such as processing, the coffee's actually wonderful," Valverde adds.

Cultivation

Bolivian coffee is almost 100 percent arabica, mostly of the typica and criolla varieties. More than 90 percent of the coffee grown in Bolivia is produced in the Yungas area, a tropical region in La Paz with altitudes between 500 and 1,600 meters. Other important growing regions are Cochabamba, Santa Cruz and Tarija.

Before 1991, most farms were owned by wealthy land owners, who had Brazil's native people work for them. Then in 1991 a governmental land reform forced the larger landowners to return the farms back to the families who had originally owned them. These small farms, which range in size from 3 to 20 acres, now produce the majority of coffee



(estimates range from 85 to 95 percent), despite the fact that often, only a small percentage of the land is dedicated to coffee.

"The Bolivian coffee industry has been fine-tuning itself by producing quality in the cup and improving post-harvest techniques mostly at the wet- and dry-milling stages," says Marcos Moreno, agribusiness and marketing advisor for the Market Access and Poverty Alleviation (MAPA) project, a USAID-funded project that provides technical assistance to coffee growers in Bolivia. "This is a young coffee industry in the hands of more than 23,000 small growers who are learning to make better coffee and bring home a steady income."

"It is not a miracle what has been happening lately in Bolivia, but it is the result of hard work on behalf of coffee growers that want to showcase what

they can produce and turn around the misconception that Bolivian coffees were a bag full of unpleasant surprises," Moreno adds.

Most smallholders use little or no fertilizers or pesticides. The coffees are typically hand-picked and washed, and then sun- or machine-dried. New projects, such as those funded by the U.S. to eradicate drugs, helped build coffee processing plants in the main growing regions so that the wet coffee would no longer need to be trucked into La Paz.

Along with ACEB, the U.S. government spent \$150,000 to bring the Cup of Excellence program in Bolivia in October and December of 2004. In the first year, 13 Bolivian coffees earned the Cup of Excellence designation. First prize, with a score of 90.44, went to CENAPROC, a co-op that received more than \$11 a pound for its coffee. In addition to inspiring more farmers to participate in coming years, the hope is that the potential of this type of money will continue to turn farmers away from coca acreage and into coffee. However, at around \$2 a pound, coca still pays at least double the current price of coffee.

"To date, more than 45 sons and daughters of coffee farmers have learned to cup coffee," says Moreno. "This is an enormous leap for an industry that four years ago had perhaps only one trained cupper who did not know how to cup for positive quality traits but instead focused only on common defects. The change in attitude on behalf of the growers once they have learned to taste beautiful coffee has been pivotal in transforming this industry. They now understand why only perfectly ripe coffee beans—not the previous mix of over-mature, green or moldy coffee beans—produce a perfect cup, a quality cup."



Photos of Bolivia courtesy of MAPA Project/Chemonics International



BOLIVIA COFFEE AT A GLANCE

Coffee Arabica only, typica and criolla varieties

Flavor Sweet, fruity, well-balanced cup

Main Growing Regions Yungas, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz and Tarija

Elevation 500–1,600 meters

Flowering August–September

Harvest February–April

Processing Hand-picked, mostly washed, and sun- or machine-dried

Shipping June–December

Main Buyers Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, Chile, Japan, U.S.

ORGANIZATIONS & EVENTS

The Bolivia Specialty Coffee Association (ACEB), www.aceb.bo

Cup of Excellence, Bolivia, www.cupofexcellence.com

