

Dirt roads and tin roofs stretched for miles across the landscape as we made our descent into Bolivia. From what I could see through the small round window at my seat, there were no cars on these roads, or anything for that matter which I would consider signs of modern civilization. I was definitely worried, yet confident at the same time. This wasn't my first time in South America and I wasn't traveling alone. My girlfriend Jessica and I had previously lived in Argentina, so I knew what to expect of the outskirts of a big city. The most shocking part of our arrival was simply stepping off the plane at such a high altitude.



In only 10 minutes of being in the La Paz airport, I thought Jessica was being arrested. I was patiently waiting in line when I looked over at where she had been sitting and she was now running past customs with security at her side. It turned out that the brief scurry with security was just them directing her to the bathroom before she vomited all over the customs agent. I guess the bathroom wasn't so lucky either. At 13,000 feet, I wasn't feeling so great myself, but I toughed it out.

After getting our visas we met Dr. Uribe, who was in charge of our program. She had transportation for us to our home stays. To my surprise, she spoke entirely in Spanish and so did our driver; fortunately, I was better prepared this time than when I first arrived in Argentina. Jessica and I worried a bit as we drove through "El Alto." I began to wonder if we were in the outskirts, or if this was actually the part of the city we would be living in. It was very dirty and the buildings were tattered. Homeless dogs wandered the streets like scavengers searching piles of trash for scraps of food. The people were all dark skinned, short in stature, and wore ragged clothing. Poverty was evident. However, as soon as we made it to the edge of the plateau, we told our driver to stop. Jessica and I both pulled out our cameras as we overlooked the entire city of La Paz. It was beautiful! The roads wound down the mountain side into a city center full of large

skyscrapers and market streets that seemed to go on forever. Surrounding the city were the snow-capped mountains of the Andes and magnificent jagged rock formations that stab up throughout the city. We got back into the cab after being honked at several times, but it was worth it.

Jessica was first to be dropped off at her home stay, so we parked the car and helped her with her luggage. It was immediately after carrying her 70 pound suitcase up a flight of steps that I knew living at this altitude was going to be difficult. I took a seat in the lobby to catch my breath and it never seemed to



come. Still I was excited to meet Jessica's host mom, Mrs. Dunia Pozo. We went to the 14th floor of the apartment and were welcomed with a warm smile and of course the infamous South American kisses. The place was very nice. When I arrived at my home stay there was a similar warm feeling to the apartment. However, unlike Jessica who was living with a family, I stayed with just a single man, Mr. Jorge Fernandez. We sat down for some coca tea the first day and chatted for a while. He was a very pleasant person to live with.

After settling in the first weekend, I began my routine in La Paz. Every week day I would wake up around 7:30 a.m., have breakfast and then head off to the hospitals. Lunch was around 1:30 p.m. and then our Spanish classes started at 3:00 p.m. The classes

had eaten dinner, we would generally be exhausted. Monday nights we had medical lectures on top everything else. It's safe to say we stayed busy.



The hospital rotations were really interesting. We worked in three different public hospitals and two clinics throughout the city, shadowing doctors. Generally, we worked with other interns from Bolivia so the doctors were very good about teaching as well as quizzing us on practices and procedures. The majority of our time was spent in pediatrics, seeing patients and performing physical examinations, although we also assisted in filling out charts and prescriptions. When there weren't many patients we would often observe different parts of the hospitals and by the end of the internship we had become confident enough to assist in surgeries. The experience was remarkable! I never would have been able to do such things in the states unless I was a medical student. Fortunately, in Bolivia, the doctors just assumed I was.

Another great benefit of the internship was the development of my communication skills in Spanish. I was able to take what I learned in my classes and use it in the hospitals as well as in daily conversations. At times though, the language barrier posed a great challenge during the internship. It was really frustrating when I wanted to express

something to my host dad and wasn't able to. However, with

time it became easier. I would definitely recommend that other

students take as many conversational classes as possible before

going, even if you aren't fluent, and speak clearly for

include taking opportunities to travel and embrace the unique culture. There are many agencies that take excursions to places like the



and give to future students and embrace the unique throughout the city that Amazon, the Andes, and

other landmarks such as Lake Titicaca. I can proudly say I traveled the most dangerous road in the world, hunted anacondas in the pampas, and swam with river dolphins in the Amazon. Probably the most culturally rich experience I had though was during Carnaval, which I will surely never forget. We also got involved with volunteer work at an orphanage near one of the hospitals. This was not only a great way to help out the community, but we were also able to practice our Spanish a great deal with the children. Another important piece of advice is to be outgoing during the hospital rotations. The only way to work where you want is to ask, and all the doctors are extremely helpful.

Over the course of the internship I learned a great deal about Bolivia and their culture. The country itself is beautiful and the people are rich with heritage.

However, poverty levels are astronomical and it is impossible to walk down the street without being begged for money or food. For me this was the hardest part of the internship. I never seemed to have enough coins to help everyone. Surprisingly though this didn't deter me from wanting to stay in La Paz, rather it made me want to come back in the future to help out when I become a doctor. In the end, the internship gave me professional experience and insight into a different culture; however, above all else it reinforced my aspirations of pursuing a career in medicine.

