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IE3 Medical Internship – Winter 2008  
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Upon arriving into La Paz, Bolivia I had no idea what to expect, or how much medical experience lie before me. Looking over the Bolivian landscape I immediately was thinking, “What did I get myself into?”. All I was able to see out of the tiny airplane window was tiny brick shacks with tin roofs. I learned later that this community was actually the city of El Alto, where most of the poorer citizens and indigenous populations call home. Landing in the El Alto Airport 13,000 feet above sea level, the first challenge I had to overcome was the altitude sickness. I arrived 4 days before medical rotations started though so by my first day working in the hospital I was pretty well adjusted. I was immediately greeted by the medical rotations director who helped me into a taxi and escorted me to my home stay arrangement. It was a very nice apartment building, where I had my own room and bathroom, and the best part: an amazing host family and maid!

After getting settled in La Paz, I began medical rotations the following Monday, where I was informed I would be working in “Hospital de Los Andes” which was located the city of El Alto.

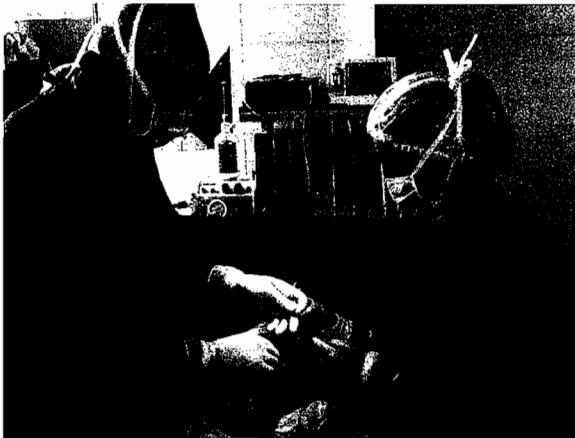


I actually was accompanied by another intern student as well which calmed my nerves since we were both going through the same first-day jitters. At least I had someone to be nervous with me! It was very helpful that our medical coordinator had arranged all the doctors to meet us at a well-known location in La Paz to escort us to the hospitals and clinics. It took a lot of stress out of finding out where I needed to be when my Spanish still needed some dusting off and a lot more practice. We met Dra. Gutierrez (Pediatrician) in a plaza near our homes where we all caught a minibus for the 45 minute drive up to El Alto and the clinic. Once we arrived, I was again witnessing the poverty that is so well hidden in the city of La Paz with its sky scrapers and all the



personalities. Working with different doctors each week allowed me to really think about what kind of doctor I wanted to be and what type of relationship I wanted to have with my patients. This aspect, for me, was the most beneficial in terms of my future career goals. For example, some doctors were very short and very upfront with their patients, while others would spend more time explaining procedures and treatments. Furthermore, some would only talk to the parents of the children and not even speak to young patient, while others would be sure to engage the sick child. It opened up my eyes to all the perspectives of practicing medicine. In order to make sure I was contributing to the internship experience, I made an effort to be on time, act professionally and really listen to the advice the doctors had to give and use it in the workplace.

The biggest challenge at the internship I suppose was the speaking Spanish in a medical setting, however this continued to improve as the weeks went on. By the last week I could easily perform a physical examination while asking the patients questions, and also communicate my own questions to the doctors. The doctors were also amazing at engaging me into the work and explaining things in Spanish which helped me understand better when it came to areas outside of my language capabilities. Another challenge was being able to stomach some of the procedures



and surgeries I was able to watch. I almost fainted a few times, but by the last days I was able to assist in surgery without getting dizzy!

Overall, it was an amazing experience that I would not take back for anything. I got more experience in the past 10 weeks than I would have ever had in the United States. I have greatly improved my Spanish speaking abilities, and have learned a lot about myself and what type of practitioner I want to be in the future. My impression of Bolivia changed through the duration of the internship as well. At first it seemed like a poverty stricken, third world country, but by the end I was able to relate and understand the people and culture, even though they were so different. The people do not live to

work, they work to live. The aspect of family is more important than having a lot of money, and I came to respect that outlook.

#### Overview of my Daily Routine:

7:30am – Breakfast prepared by the maid

8:00am – leave for hospital via walking/taxi/minibus depending on location

8:30-9am – work with doctor. This included consultations, surgeries, labors, neonatal unit, etc.

12pm-1pm – finish working and head home for lunch

1pm-3pm – lunch and nap time!

3pm-6pm – Spanish lecture (first 4 weeks)

6pm-8pm (only Mondays) – Medical lecture

Nights: Free to do homework, go to the movies, eat dinner, hang out with friends, go dancing, etc.

#### Tips for future interns:

Enjoy the country! Just because you are going to Bolivia does not mean that there isn't

amazing opportunities to travel and enjoy the city of La

Paz. Every weekend the other students and I would travel

somewhere, whether it be Lake Titicaca, Salar de Uyuni

(The salt flats), Rurrenabaque (The Amazon), Coroico, etc.

The traveling made the trip that much better and it was a

great cultural experience. Also, don't be so scared of

anything to try it. Some other students who came would never go to the discotecas (dance clubs)

or did not travel because they thought it wasn't safe. Yes, be careful, but don't let nerves stop you

from having the best and most rewarding experience possible. In terms of the medical rotations,

bring at least 3 pairs of scrubs, comfy shoes and khakis for

the hospitals. None of the doctors dress up and khakis and a

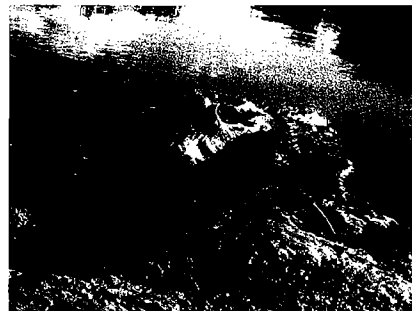
shirt will be fine. I made the mistake of bringing a bunch of

dressier clothes and I never wore them. A stethoscope is very

useful as well since you will have many opportunities to use

it and learn how to do so. In terms of money, I would stick to

credit/debit cards because travelers checks were a hassle, plus there is a fee to change them in.



ATM's are located everywhere and allowed you to take out Bolivianos (the monetary unit) or dollars and worked just fine. I would also say that if you have a laptop and want to bring it you should. I did and there was free Wifi in many of the cafes so it was very convenient. Otherwise, there are internet cafes on every corner as well.

If you have any extra time, I would recommend getting involved in other volunteer opportunities in La Paz. Our group decided to volunteer at an orphanage behind the Hospital de

Los Andes, where we would play with the kids for an hour or so twice a week. We became very close with them and it was great Spanish practice! In conclusion, have an open mind about everything and enjoy your time while you can because it goes by very fast!

