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Magazine





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BolivianExpress

Magazine

LIITA
GONZALES
FROM **CHOLITAS ESCALADORAS**

TALKS
**WISDOM/EVEREST/
MOTHER EARTH**







STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE:

AN INTERVIEW WITH LIITA GONZALES, CHOLITA ESCALADORA

TEXT: ZOFIA TODD
PHOTOS: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC

Liita Gonzales grew up in El Alto, splitting time between the bustling city and the agricultural community of Cañaviri, nestled an hour and a half away, in the valley between the mountains of Condoriri and Huayna Potosí. Her father was a mountain guide, and her mother a cook on his tours. She recounts her parents returning from mountaineering trips, tired and dirty. As a child, she always asked her father when she could join them on a trek, wondering what made it worth the struggle up a mountain.

When she was 28 years old, her father gave her an answer: he told her that a group of women were climbing Huayna Potosí, and that he would take her to join them. On the journey, she discovered what it felt like to be part of the clouds. Climbing with the group of indigenous 'cholitas', Liita felt a sense of community and support. She found motivation with them.

For many outside of Bolivia, the word 'cholita' may be unfamiliar. It is a local term for the indigenous Aymara and Quechua women of Bolivia, and has been reclaimed as a mark of pride in recent years. One particular group of such women, the Cholitas Escaladoras, or 'Climbing Cholitas', has gained international attention, including from National Geographic and other global media outlets. These women climb mountains in traditional attire, including their large skirts and shawls, only replacing their famous bowler hats with safety helmets.

I sat down to get to know Liita, who today is one of the famous Cholitas Escaladoras. She says she learnt what it means to be a cholita from her mother and grandmother, recalling what hard-working women they were. In many households in Bolivia, women are expected to dedicate themselves to their family: to cook, clean, and generally keep house. As a proud cholita, Liita seeks to break this mold, wearing her big skirt with pride because of the strength and resilience it represents.

BX: AS AN AYMARA WOMAN FROM THE ANDES, WHAT DOES THE MOUNTAINOUS LANDSCAPE MEAN TO YOU?

The landscape here has always represented work. My community is at the foot of the mountain, and as a child, when we worked the fields, we could see the mountain. The mountains have always inspired me with their height.

My grandmother used to tell me, "The mountains are like beings that have life. They give us water first, then we grow things there,

we sow, they give us food. We always have to have faith in them." For me, they are the landscape, but they are also beings. The mountains have life. They are like grandfathers to me.

The mountains are also where I feel best. They are my community, where I feel free, and I feel happy. It's my favourite place.

BX: WHAT POWER DOES CLIMBING IN TRADITIONAL CLOTHES GIVE YOU?

Climbing in traditional cholita clothes is a form of vindication, a way to say that we can do it, to send the message that women can break boundaries. Women stay at home, especially Aymara women. But the moment I started to climb, it was as if I were changing that.

BX: WHAT VALUES DO YOU HOPE THAT THE CLIMBING CHOLITAS PASS ON TO YOUNG BOLIVIANS?

First, to have dreams, and reach for them. My dream was always the same: to climb mountains. I've become more dreamy, challenging myself even more. Young people can achieve anything. You have to let go of shyness, of fear. Even now I feel fear, but you have to find the courage to try. Nothing is lost by trying.

Also, to take care of the planet. I see the Cordillera Real, what was once white is now all black. It saddens me. It is so important to respect the environment, and those around you.

Last, I would say to always remain humble. Even if you are a skilled climber, the mountain will teach you to be humble and to keep your head down. You never know what is going to happen up there, and there is always risk. Go with lots of humility and respect.

BX: WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?

My dream is to climb Mt. Everest. But that not only requires physical training; I have to learn English as well. I am taking English classes, as well as a High Mountain Guide course. I learn a lot from it. I'm already preparing myself, and perhaps will be able to go the year after next. But it is difficult to find sponsors in Bolivia. In some countries, it is easy, as they have the money, the equipment, everything. Here we don't have that support, but still I will achieve it. Everest is my biggest dream!

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WELCOME TO PEÑAS:

HOW ONE BOLIVIAN TOWN IS READY TO BECOME A SUSTAINABLE ADVENTURE TOURISM DESTINATION

TEXT: ZOFIA TODD
PHOTOS: ROCKCLIMBINGPENAS AND PEÑAS TURAVENTURA

A large arch over the road on the way to town announces, 'Bienvenidos a Peñas'. It feels out of place in this nearly empty part of the Altiplano. To the left is a sprawl of rock formations, looking ready for climbing. To the right is the majestic Cordillera Real, with Condoriri standing proud.

Just past the welcome sign is a small town, its main square full of small statues paying tribute to indigenous culture. There is a colourful monument of Túpac Katari, an Aymaran leader of a major rebellion against the Spanish. He looks onto the mountains proudly.

This is Peñas.

Today, this unassuming town is home to an adventure park and a campus of the Universidad **Católica** Boliviana, which specializes in sustainable and adventure tourism. This place attracts climbers looking to escape the city and a chance to take on its 150 climbing routes, its walking paths, and even a mountain biking trail. The local community has established hostels for visitors to stay in, to make the most of the outdoor activities available. This town is also home to a producer of artisanal cheese.

Much of this activity is thanks to Padre Antonio Lavatarelli, a priest with a keen interest in mountain climbing. "I have been a mountaineer since I was young," he says. "And a beautiful parish like this felt like the perfect place to use it as a tool for social development."

Padre Antonio has been living in Peñas for nearly 15 years, and with his involvement in building the adventure park and the university, tourism has become a growing force in the town. Part of his approach is to ensure the local community remains involved. For example, the restaurants and accommodations here are run by locals, and tourists can find other food options in the local market.

The central part of the Andes, the longest continental mountain range in the world, cuts through this part of Bolivia. So it comes as no surprise that the outdoor offerings here are both expansive and unique. The Cordillera Real boasts numerous mountains over 6,000 meters above sea level, with options for both experienced and novice mountaineers. Adventure tourism is becoming increasingly popular in Bolivia, due to the accessibility of this exceptional landscape, not to mention its affordability.

Peñas is set against the backdrop of Bolivia's spectacular mountains, and serves as a quick stop on the route from La Paz to Lago Titicaca. For Bolivian climbers in-the-know, this town is already popular. Not only do they participate in the adrenaline-

pumping activities available here, they understand how town plays an important role in training guides to take tourists hiking or climbing and setting the scene for sustainable tourism in Bolivia.

Tourism slowed down in Peñas, as in the rest of Bolivia, due to the coronavirus pandemic. But much of this country is banking on a revival. Pre-pandemic, international tourism in Bolivia had steadily grown, year on year, with nearly 1.5 million visitors in 2019. And while it hasn't recovered to this volume, it has been increasing month by month over the past two years.

While returning tourists can bring positive change to many communities, many people in Bolivia understand the importance of bringing them back in a sustainable way, considering the social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism to mitigate any negative impacts, such as pollution, or profits being concentrated in one place. Many communities are making an effort to respect and conserve the local culture and environment, often employing locals as guides and other service providers.

In mountaineering in world-class destinations like Bolivia, it is important for guides to have a high level of expertise. The impressive altitude of Bolivia's mountainous region means that it is crucial for guides to have a deep understanding of the different ways that altitude can affect tourists, and how to help them if needed. Experienced mountain guides have an intricate understanding of the technique required to scale these mountains, as well as the unpredictable weather at high altitudes.

This is why Bolivia's Universidad Católica, one of the country's more prominent higher education institutions, established a campus in Peñas, with a unique emphasis on advanced studies in adventure tourism and qualifications in sustainable tourism. The university emphasizes how to care for and respect the local culture, and teaches how to guide various forms of adventure tourism.

Reyna Paye Lopez is a current student at the university in Peñas, and works part-time at the adventure park here. She had come to Peñas to study. "When I decided to study tourism, to start my career, I was particularly interested in how local communities can participate in the tourism industry, too," she smiles, explaining that she wanted to learn how a community can preserve their story and way of life while receiving tourists.

"Many young people have migrated away from Peñas to work in the cities," she says. "The university helps bring young people back into the community."

Reyna sees the young people as an important bridge, especially as it can be harder to get older people on board with some of the projects.



In Aymara culture, the mountains are incredibly important and sacred, holding an important spiritual place for many. Today, older generations continue to be concerned with their protection.

Liita Gonzales is one of Bolivia's famous Climbing Cholitas, a group of women who climb mountains in traditional attire. She describes the mountains as being "like a grandfather" to her. To her and many others, mountains bring life, providing water to communities and the resources to grow food. Because of these beliefs, many guides like her have a strong spiritual connection to the mountains, something they can share with visitors.

And this is where young people like Reyna play an important role, particularly with isolated families that may only speak Aymara. She can help them feel listened to, and demonstrate that their

concerns are important and considered in the development of the community. Communication with the locals is important for the development projects, as it demonstrates that their culture and way of life will be respected.

Walk through the main square of Peñas, and the indigenous pride here is undeniable. Statues commemorating native historical figures face the mountains, the givers of life. Respect for this landscape is important to the local people, and the young people are learning to inject this into sustainable tourism practices.

Padre Antonio had big visions for the community of Peñas, and they are still taking shape. Today, this is the next important place for outdoor adventures in this spectacular landscape. This small town is alive and evolving, its future holding opportunities for locals and tourists alike.

DISCOVER BOLIVIA:

SIX UNFORGETTABLE ADVENTURES

TEXT & PHOTOS: ZOFIA TODD

Bolivia contains a spectacular variety of places to visit and activities to do. From the high glacier-capped mountains of the Cordillera Real to the lowland jungles of the Amazon rainforest, from buzzing colonial cities to the empty deserts of the Southwest, travelling anywhere in this extraordinary country will leave you with lifelong memories.

PICO AUSTRIA - A TASTE OF THE CORDILLERA REAL

For those looking to dip their toe in chilly high-altitude waters, this challenging trek provides spectacular views of the Cordillera Real. Following a two-hour drive from La Paz, it is a three-hour climb to the peak, sitting at 5,350m above sea level. Along the way, llamas feed near beautiful aquamarine lagunas, fed by the white glaciers above. At these heights, seeing the peaks of Condoriri, Pequeño Alpamayo, and Huayna Potosí, and a panoramic view of Laguna Ch'iyyar Quta can take your breath away.

The hike up to Pico Austria includes very steep paths, but it is generally considered a good option for an acclimatization hike before heading to a trickier, longer trek, such as Huayna Potosí. This is a great option for those looking for a day trek in the Cordillera Real.

'THIS IS A GREAT OPTION FOR THOSE LOOKING FOR A DAY TREK IN THE CORDILLERA REAL.'

UYUNI - MORE THAN SALT FLATS

Uyuni is known around the world for its famous salt flats. But while the Salar de Uyuni is certainly not to be missed, a three-day tour around the region proves there is more waiting to be discovered on the shores of this white desert.

Nearby lagoons of different colours are home to an abundance of flamingos, hot springs, the Salvador Dali dessert, and the Arbol de Piedra (stone tree), among other attractions. The numerous stops reveal not only incredible scenery, but also some interesting features of Bolivian history. The Train Cemetery outside of Uyuni is a collection of rusty, retired trains covered in graffiti, and scrap metal sculptures welded by local artists. The trains make a great backdrop for photographs and are fun to climb.

'NUMEROUS STOPS REVEAL NOT ONLY INCREDIBLE SCENERY, BUT ALSO SOME INTERESTING FEATURES OF BOLIVIAN HISTORY.'



Pico Austria - La Paz



Uyuni - Potosí

SUCRE - COLONIAL STREETS, COOKING CLASSES, DINOSAURS!

Sucre is the true capital of Bolivia, with La Paz serving as the seat of government activity. And these two cities couldn't be more different. The architecture of Sucre's white colonial streets gives the city a quaint feel. The birthplace of Bolivian independence, the bell of the city's San Francisco Basilica was rung to signify the start of the movement against the Spanish in 1809. Its storied and preserved past earned Sucre its designation of UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991.

But history in Sucre does not begin in the colonial period. At the nearby Parque Cretácico, dinosaur footprints have marked the ground for nearly 70 million years. Tectonic shifts in the area mean that the footprints now trail over a near-vertical wall, and are now part of the longest trail of dinosaur footprints in the world.

For those looking for cultural connections, Sucre is a great town to take some Spanish classes, and you can inquire in most hotels or hostels for these. Cooking classes offered by La Boca del Sapo and others are a great opportunity to learn about the significance of local ingredients from passionate chefs, who guide you as you give traditional cooking methods a go.

'THE ARCHITECTURE OF SUCRE'S WHITE COLONIAL STREETS GIVES THE CITY A QUAIN'T FEEL.'

HUAYNA POTOSI - AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH

Of the world's mountain peaks above 6,000m, Huayna Potosi is said to be one of the easiest to conquer. A short drive north from La Paz, the climb takes two or three days, and you can choose to spend an extra night on the mountain to allow for time to practice your mountaineering skills on the glacier.

The Base Camp is situated at 4,800m, and from there, you trek up to 5,270m to High Camp. After a few hours to rest and take in a warm meal, you begin your ascent in the darkness of midnight. Eventually, you see the lights of La Paz and El Alto as you hop over crevasses and continue your ascent. You near the summit just after sunrise, and on a clear morning you will be greeted by a wonderful view over the valley and the entire surrounding mountain range.

Let's be clear, no mountain at this altitude is an easy climb. Huayna is considered "easy," as there is minimal technical ability needed to reach the summit. However, steely determination is a must. Climbers of any ability will arrive at the top with a strong sense of achievement, and perhaps the itch to explore more of Bolivia's incredible peaks.

'ON A CLEAR MORNING YOU WILL BE GREETED BY A WONDERFUL VIEW OVER THE VALLEY AND THE ENTIRE SURROUNDING MOUNTAIN RANGE.'



Sucre



Huayna Potosí - La Paz



Rurrenabaque - Beni

RURRENABAQUE AND THE AMAZON REGION - STEPPING INTO A WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARY

The town of Rurrenabaque is Bolivia's gateway to the Amazon rainforest and pampas. This is *the* place to discover Bolivia's diverse wildlife. There are ample indigenous-run tour operators to choose from to visit both areas, and Rurrenabaque is typically their starting point.

Bolivia is one of the more affordable countries to visit the largest and most biodiverse area of rainforest in the world. A jungle tour through Madidi National Park gives you the opportunity to see trees of incredible height and other wildlife. I was lucky enough to visit during nesting season when macaws stand guard over their precious nests. The jungle is also home to sloths, many species of frogs, and even jaguars.

The pampas tour takes you to the Yucuma River. Here in the savannah-like setting, you will almost certainly see capybaras grazing and swimming, caimans peeking out from underwater,

and various species of monkeys hanging in the trees.

Rurrenabaque offers some of the richest wildlife around, but brace yourself for the intense heat and humidity. And don't forget the bug spray!

'THIS IS THE PLACE TO DISCOVER BOLIVIA'S DIVERSE WILDLIFE.'

TAKESI TRAIL - FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE INCAS

The Takesi Trail is a 40km stretch down an ancient Incan road, from the sparse landscape of the Altiplano to the rich forests of the Yungas Valley. This road was once used by Incan foot messengers, called chaskis, and later by the Spanish, who used them to bring goods between cities across the Andes mountains.

The trail is almost entirely downhill, so it is not too strenuous. The



Takesi - La Paz

trailhead of the two- or three-day hike is easy to find, and the trip can be done without a guide. There are campsites along the way where you can stay for the night.

The trail starts with little vegetation, but as you gradually descend along the path, it becomes greener and greener until you find yourself in a lush cloud forest. You walk alongside the Sochicachi River, which offers a nice cool down from the warmer temperatures. The Takesi trail takes you down through the beautiful scenery of the valley, as you imagine yourself as an ancient runner, an important message in hand.

'THE TAKESI TRAIL TAKES YOU DOWN THROUGH THE BEAUTIFUL SCENERY OF THE VALLEY, AS YOU IMAGINE YOURSELF AS AN ANCIENT RUNNER, AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE IN HAND.'

PLANNING YOUR ADVENTURES

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