

BOLIVIA

As an LGBTQ student thinking about studying abroad, it would be wise to consider beforehand the kind of environment in which you'd like to immerse yourself. Do you want to be out while you study abroad? Would you like to be out among your group of students? What about with your homestay family? Would you like to be part of an LGBTQ community in your host community where you are studying?

I wish I could say I considered these questions before deciding to study abroad in Bolivia. Sadly, I was not entirely prepared for the generally religious and conservative environment in which I was immersed. I did, however, find comfort, support, and community in other students, my homestay brothers, and Bolivian friends, although my experience may not be the norm.

For the majority of the program, we were living in Cochabamba, an Andean city about the same size as Charlotte. Of our group of twenty-five students, there were at least five of us who identified as LGBTQ. In addition, there was an administrator [who was a] lesbian [and] who worked for the program and was a huge resource for us. I cannot find enough words to describe how immensely important and powerful it was for me to have the support of students in my program – both queer and straight allies. When some of our speakers committed microaggressions (or one lecturer, in particular, what some might term a MACROaggression, blatantly stated students in his program should not wear earrings because it is a symbol of homosexuality), it made all the difference to be surrounded by individuals with whom we could process those conversations and events. Next piece of advice – talk with Education Abroad Advisers about the kinds of students who will be interested in your program. Do they know of any LGBTQ students who have done the program in the past? Is it possible for you to contact them and ask a couple of questions about their experience? What types of students and even majors does this program attract? Is it likely that other LGBTQ students will be attracted to this program?

While there were a number of things my program did well regarding LGBTQ students, including addressing our particular experience and safety guidelines during orientation, providing administrative resources, and surrounding us with similar/like-minded students, the program did not provide the opportunity to live with LGBTQ-friendly families. In fact, our director noted what a shame it is that they currently do not seek out those families during the homestay process. I am hopeful for this change. So another thing for you to consider might be this possibility of living with an LGBTQ-friendly homestay family.

As I mentioned earlier, I was also able to find a uniquely Bolivian support system by coming out to my host brothers (in turn one of my brothers also came out to me) and by dating a Bolivian woman. I would not say that my experience was typical by any means – to be placed with two liberal, loving brothers in such a conservative country is definitely a rarity and I consider myself fortunate. I do, however, think the size of your host city would offer some premonitory insight into how open your family and the community might be. So my next big piece of advice is to do your research. Read online about LGBTQ rights in the countries you are considering. Also, go ahead and research to see if there are any gay clubs, bars, bookstores, or discos where you would be staying. Search for any nongovernmental organizations that address LGBTQ rights, health, awareness, or community-building.

In retrospect, it is through effort and really putting myself out there that I made friends with many Bolivians and found a niche in the LGBTQ community there. These more intimate encounters added another dynamic, meaningful layer to my experience. Only through the relationships was I able to more fully understand what it's like to be queer in Bolivia. I also learned a lot about myself as well as what it means to be queer in the United States.