



COUNTRY

OVERVIEW

& PACKING

GUIDELINES

Bolivia: Multiculturalism, Globalization, and Social Change  
Fall 2019

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# COUNTRY OVERVIEW

## GENERAL INFORMATION

The Plurinational State of Bolivia is one of only two land-locked countries in all of the Americas. Geographically, the country is approximately 1 ½ times the size of Texas, and is divided into nine governmental departments. Although the officially recognized languages include Spanish, Quechua, Aymara, and another 33 indigenous languages, approximately 75 percent of the nation's inhabitants speak Spanish as their first language.

Bolivia's rich natural resources include: silver, the second largest natural gas field in South America, and 70 percent of the world's iron, magnesium, and lithium. Despite this wealth, Bolivia remains one of the economically poorest countries in South America. Today almost two-thirds of its population, many of whom are subsistence farmers, is living in poverty. This is largely the result of economic oppression by foreign powers and decades of corrupt government officials.

Bolivia enjoys free trade agreements with many countries and is developing a growing involvement with regional economic markets, such as ALBA, Mercosur and the Andean Community (Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela).



## CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Altitude, more than anything else, determines climatic conditions in Bolivia. Students travel to areas ranging from 1,000-13,000 ft. above sea level. As a consequence, the climate ranges from hot and

humid in the tropical lowlands to dry and cold in the mountains.

The program is based in Cochabamba, a city of 800,000 which, at 9,000 feet above sea level, is said to have an eternal spring with warm days (75–80° F) and cool nights (50–60° F).

Excursions will take you to Lake Titicaca and La Paz (13,000 feet) in Bolivia's altiplano, or high plateau. This breathtaking plain (both for its austere beauty and altitude) is punctuated by soaring snow-covered peaks, with Illimani at 21,000 feet.

You will visit Sucre and the Southern Highlands, as well as the low-land semi-tropical region of Santa Cruz and the Bolivian Amazon. The rainy season in the highlands and valleys runs generally from December until April. Though the sun shines more from April through November, the nights are colder during these months.

## LOCAL CUSTOMS

In Bolivia, women greet men (and other women) with a *saludo* (i.e. “*buenos días*”) and a kiss on the cheek. Men greet men with a *saludo* and a handshake often followed by a pat on the right shoulder. Upon entering or leaving any room, Bolivians always greet everyone in the room individually. People generally do not walk around barefoot, even inside the home, so you should bring slippers or flip-flops to wear in your homestay. Bolivians do not generally eat alone. If eating a snack in front of others, you should always offer some of your food (or drink) to those with you. Upon finishing a meal, Bolivians say “*gracias*,” in which the response is “*buen provecho*.” Conversely, one might say “*buen provecho*” after the meal, and the response would then be “*gracias*”— either way is fine.

## DIET

SIT Study Abroad provides experiential learning opportunities where students become embedded in their host community. As such, we strive to accommodate serious food allergies where possible

but simply cannot ensure that all dietary restrictions or non-medically mandated diets can be accommodated.

Students are encouraged to participate in the local food culture as a central aspect of daily life. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture. Due to the unique living and learning community central to all SIT programs, we cannot separate food and eating communally (including with your host family) from the program experience. Please consider local diet seriously when selecting your program of choice. Your admissions counselor is a great resource in better understanding the local diet.

The local diet in Bolivia is centered mostly on meat and potatoes. However, many seasonal vegetables and fruits are available year round. Like in many Latin American countries, the largest meal is usually eaten in the middle of the day.

Although vegetarians are not common in Bolivia, previous students have not had a problem when advance notice is given. We provide families with classes to learn how to cook for vegetarian students. Nevertheless, when in restaurants and public spaces, you may often have to explain a few times what you want. Kosher food is generally not available in Bolivia.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform our office prior to the start of your program. We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

## SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is critical to having a successful semester. To help you do that, we have provided [Health Guidelines and Requirements](#) for your program.

It is very important that you read the Health Guidelines and Requirements document as early as possible and examine it with your medical provider. The guidelines include recommended immunizations; a suggested calendar for immunizations and other prophylaxes; and valuable

information on how to avoid exposure to common carriers of disease.

Due to high elevation, malaria is not present in many regions of Bolivia. You will **not** encounter malaria in the city of La Paz. While the [Health Guidelines and Requirements](#) indicate that Santa Cruz is in a malarial region, the Santa Cruz Department Malaria Service (part of the Health Ministry of Bolivia) publishes an annual report which indicates that the specific areas of Santa Cruz where we travel on group excursions are currently free of malaria. At least four weeks of malaria prophylaxis should be included if you plan to conduct your independent research in an at-risk area or if you might travel independently after the program. It is difficult to purchase prophylaxis in-country. Please consult the Bolivia [Health Guidelines and Requirements](#) for more information about prophylaxis and personal protective measures. If you decide to bring prophylaxis, you should consult your doctor to determine which malaria prophylaxis is best for you.

Some students experience *soroche* (altitude sickness) as much of Bolivia is higher in elevation than many parts of the US. For reference, La Paz is at 11,913 feet above sea level. To reduce symptoms: drink lots of water, avoid rapid movements and unnecessary exertion, eat easily-digested foods, avoid alcohol, and give your body time to adapt – a couple of days is generally enough. If you have had problems with altitude in the past or think that you may have problems once in Bolivia, you may want to consider talking to your doctor about altitude sickness medication.



There are good medical services available in La Paz, Cochabamba, and other major Bolivian cities. Our program has standing relationships with medical doctors and bilingual mental health professionals. Should you need such services during the program, do not hesitate to talk to your AD or other program staff.

**Please Note: You will need your WHO Card proving Yellow Fever vaccination in order to board any plane bound for Bolivia.**

Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, accident and illness insurance, and general program tips, please read the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) document and [Student Handbook](#).

Bolivia is a relatively safe country; however, it is wise to take certain precautions no matter where in the world you travel. Before departure, make two photocopies of all important documents and credit cards; leave one copy at home and bring one along with you. Bring a money belt or some other safe means to carry your valuables. The program will provide a secure place to store your documents while you are in Bolivia.

There are parts of Cochabamba that are not safe and should be avoided; this will be discussed further in orientation. Even in “safe” parts of the city, petty crime is always a possibility. It will be very helpful if you do not wear eye-catching jewelry or watches, or use electronics such as smartphones and mp3 players in public. In general, you should keep a close eye on your belongings, particularly in bus stations



and other busy or crowded situations. Traveling on cross-country buses is generally safe but also requires vigilance.

## HOMESTAYS



As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what constitutes a “home” may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities and expectations.

Each program’s homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. **Please note: in order to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in country. Therefore, SIT will not be able to provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.**

On this program, you will be staying in three homestays. Your primary homestay will be in

Cochabamba for eight weeks. The group is scattered around the city in clusters of 2-3 students. The families are middle class, with diverse occupations and family structures. All homes will have electricity. In some parts of the city, running water is available only at certain times of the day.

You will also have two rural homestays with possibly no electricity or running water. The first of these will be in a native Aymara community, who primarily speak Aymara, although some men and older children will speak Spanish. The second rural homestay will be with a Chiquitano indigenous group in the Bolivian Amazon Basin. During these homestays, all students will be expected to share daily activities: i.e. planting, caring for animals, cooking..

## OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Additional accommodations during excursions include stays in small hotels, cabins, and bed and breakfasts. The housing options during your Independent Study Project will vary by location, and must be approved by your academic director.

## TRANSPORTATION

You will use a variety of transportation during the semester including: planes, taxis, and buses. While staying in the program base of Cochabamba, walking and riding in small mini-buses and taxis will be your most common form of public transportation. Homestays are typically within a 30 minute bus ride to classes.

## COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

## PHONES AND E-MAIL

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working smart phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls throughout the duration of the program. For that purpose students are required to either (a) bring an open, unlocked smart phone from the U.S. to the program that is able to accept a local SIM card, and is compatible with and usable at the program location, (b) work with the academic director within the first week upon arrival in country to purchase a smart phone locally, or (c) bring a dual SIM smart phone. During orientation, with assistance from SIT Study Abroad staff, students will learn how to use their cellphone, how to purchase and use an appropriate local SIM card, and how to acquire minutes for calls and texting. SIT Study Abroad requires that each student have a local number for communication with the homestay family and program staff.

While we recognize that alternative communication methods can be free or cheaper than cell service i.e. Facetime, Skype, WhatsApp, etc. those programs alone do not satisfy our need for regular communication with the local program staff and partners, nor do they meet our emergency communication needs. Therefore, local cellular capacity on each student's phone is required for the duration of the program. Students are required to maintain a minimum amount of phone credits at all times for emergency calls. Full compliance with this policy is expected.

The program will assist students with acquiring a local SIM card for your unlocked smartphone. Since you will obtain a local phone number, do not purchase an international plan for your US phone number unless you have a dual SIM smart phone. The cost to maintain credit on the phone is approximately \$100 for the semester. Students will be responsible for maintaining minutes on their phones. If you do not have an unlocked smartphone, a smartphone can be purchased locally for approximately \$100.

Most of your Cochabamba families will have phones. However, you will not be allowed to make direct long-distance calls from those phones without a calling card.

Most students will have internet available at their homestays. For students who do not have internet available at their homestay, arrangements will be made to have internet at the program office.

## MAILINGS

Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually **expensive** and **problematic**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations and nothing other than a letter should be sent from the U.S. unless you have first coordinated with the academic director. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged.

Local program staff will work with you on a case by case basis in the event of an emergency requiring a package to be sent to Bolivia. They will give you specific instructions to give to the sender of the package depending on the situation and package being sent.

## MONEY

In addition to tuition, SIT Study Abroad program fees cover room and board throughout the program. When room and/or board are not taken with the group, students will be given a stipend to cover related expenses. SIT will cover daily commuting costs, if any, and excursions that are part of the normal program itinerary. During the ISP period, students will receive a stipend for basic room and board only, based on the cost of living at the program base. **Any domestic travel, interpretation services, or supplies necessary for the ISP are the students' responsibility.** Please plan accordingly.

Most former students have used ATM cards to access funds from their US bank accounts using their VISA or MasterCard debit cards. Debit cards that are linked to the Cirrus or PLUS networks should also work in Bolivia's major cities. However, in case your ATM card gets stolen, lost, eaten by the ATM machine, or de-magnetized, it is important to have emergency money in dollars.

Since it is not always possible to use ATM cards everywhere you might visit in Bolivia, SIT also advises you to bring a small amount of money in cash (approximately US\$100). Dollars are widely accepted in Bolivia but please note that dollar bills that are torn (even a tiny tear) will not be accepted for use so be sure to bring crisp dollar bills with you. Credit cards (VISA, MasterCard) work at many places in the major cities, but usually only for significant purchases. If necessary, it is possible to get cash advances on major credit cards in Bolivian banks. Wire transfers through Western Union to Bolivia are possible but expensive. It is better to bring all the money you might need for your semester.

The official currency of Bolivia is the Bolivian *boliviano*, which is divided into 100 *centavos*. Students can check country currency and current exchange rates at:

<http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don't inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

Following are suggestions for spending money during the program, including estimates for textbooks, ISP-related expenses, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Figures are based on recent student evaluations, though individual spending habits vary widely and **these costs are averages**.

A suggested total amount of money to budget ranges from **US\$1,050 to \$1,850**. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at

your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program, including travel costs for your planned ISP or a specific personal expense.

Check current exchange rates:  
<http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>

Please budget approximately:

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Personal spending (from past student suggestions): | \$1,000      |
| Books, printing, supplies:                         | \$130*       |
| Up-front medical costs:                            | \$40/visit   |
| Bottled water:                                     | \$100        |
| Typical Internet Café usage:                       | \$.50/hour   |
| Cell phone costs                                   | \$100        |
| Visa Costs   | \$300**      |
| Potential ISP travel expenses:                     | \$100-\$150  |
| Estimated total:                                   | \$1050-1,850 |

***\*This will cover the cost of your reading packets for the semester and will need to be paid in cash during the orientation period.***

***\*\*The cost of your initial visa before departure will range between US\$60 and \$110 prior to your arrival in Bolivia. While in country, you will need to pay an additional US\$300 in-country to extend your student visa beyond 30 days. Be sure to include this amount when factoring in your personal expenses for the semester.***



## VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term, due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal

conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the Attendance and Participation section of the [Student Handbook](#).

Please note that any visitors during the course of the program must plan their own independent accommodations; SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist. Please note that you will not have a long break during the program, such as Thanksgiving or Spring Break.

Opportunity for independent travel during the program is limited and cannot be guaranteed due to the rigorous schedule and disruption independent travel may cause to semester responsibilities. Requests to travel independently will be considered on a case by case basis by the academic director. Further details regarding the independent travel policy can be found in the [Student Handbook](#).

Travel outside of Bolivia during the 15-week program (other than for medical or family emergencies or program-sponsored excursions) is strictly prohibited according to the [Conditions of Participation](#), which you signed. No student will be authorized to leave Bolivia before the final evaluation session. Your oral report at this session is an integral part of your final ISP grade.



# PACKING GUIDELINES

## LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you will likely be acquiring more belongings while abroad. Remember to bring a smaller bag to use for excursions and for carrying your books and personal items.

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the “General Health Tips” section in the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration (<http://www.tsa.gov>) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

## CLOTHING GUIDELINES

While informal dress is acceptable and common in most Bolivian settings, it is essential to keep a neat, clean appearance. Jeans with holes and sloppy T-shirts are discouraged. Most tank tops as well as long, loose-fitting shorts are acceptable in many urban settings but are inappropriate in rural areas. Women usually wear skirts or pants. People in offices, development agencies, etc., are apt to be much more open and responsive if the visitor shows respect by dressing accordingly. It is very important to have at least one set of clothes for formal occasions and one set of clothes that can get dirty during any physical work. Most former students wish that they had brought a larger selection of “nice” clothes with them for the semester, as Bolivian host families and siblings dress more formally than students usually expect. For example, bring clothes that would be appropriate to wear out at night to a club or to go dancing in a middle-to-upper-middle class urban setting.



You will experience seasonal changes during the semester. Be sure to pack accordingly. Bring a pair of sturdy shoes with good traction or hiking boots, which will keep your feet warm and dry even in the rain and mud. Be sure to bring good rain gear and a swimsuit for the tropics in addition to a warm sweater for cold nights and travel to the *altiplano*. Bear in mind, no buildings or homes have central heating. In the *altiplano*, be prepared to dress more warmly indoors than outside. Dressing in layers is the most sensible solution to Bolivia's varied daily, seasonal, and geographic climates.

## EQUIPMENT

You should bring a sleeping bag to be used for your two rural homestays. It will be quite cold during your village stay on Lake Titicaca and hot during your village stay in the Amazon basin (for this village stay, two sheets sewn together make a good “sleeping bag” You can also purchase basic sleeping bags in-country.

## COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is recommended that you bring a laptop computer. If you bring a laptop, the computer will be your personal property and responsibility. It is

recommended that you insure your computer, smartphone, or other valuables for full coverage in the event of loss or theft. SIT is not responsible for any duty tax you may have to pay when you enter the country, theft, or loss.

Former students have found it very helpful to have a laptop during the ISP period, but it is not necessary. If you plan to do your ISP in video format, we *strongly* recommend that you bring a Mac laptop computer with a video editing program (we use FinalCut Pro). Video students are also required to bring a digital video camera and an external hard drive with proper connections/cables; be sure all the connections work appropriately and are compatible. It is not necessary to bring a printer.

Electricity in Bolivia runs on 220 volt current and uses US-style plugs. Therefore, if you plan to bring any small appliances, be sure to take along a 110-volt converter appropriate for your appliance. You may also need to convert from a three-prong outlet to a two-prong outlet. These can be purchased at any Radio Shack store in the US. They are also available in Bolivia.

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters. <http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/>.

Most students will have internet available at their homestays. For students who do not have internet available at their homestay, arrangements will be made to have internet at the program office. You will have convenient computer access at Internet cafés in downtown Cochabamba, although not necessarily near your homestays. The cost for computer/Internet use is at an Internet café is about US\$ .50/hour. Unfortunately, it is not possible to rent a laptop locally.

We do not recommend bringing iPods or other devices that isolate the students from their environment; we would like the students to be alert to their surroundings while in Bolivia at all times.

## GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of

your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Try to choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in. Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Pack a couple of small gifts for children, such as small games, bubbles, or a Frisbee. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Once you are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share.

Former students have recommended calendars, picture books, postcards, music, or gifts from your college bookstore. Extra T-shirts and music make great general gifts for people you meet outside of your family.

## WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Imported (North American) brands of toiletries, medicines, vitamins, etc., can be bought in Bolivia although locally made brands can be a more affordable substitute. For women, there are local as well as American brands of tampons available (although those with applicators are more expensive).

## ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or ask an alumni contact: <http://studyabroad.sit.edu/admitted-students/contact-a-former-student/>.



### Don't miss the Packing List on the next page!

These packing guidelines are based on suggestions from past students and your academic director.

# PACKING LIST

## GENERAL

- 1 fairly dressy outfit suitable for a wedding or important meetings and something for going out in the evenings
- 1 sweaters
- 1 fleece/down/warm jacket
- 1 rain jacket
- Underwear (10-day supply)
- Socks
- Pajamas
- Slippers and bathrobe (but shouldn't be too bulky)
- 1 pair comfortable walking shoes
- 1 pair heavy duty, water resistant shoes or hiking boots
- 1 pair sandals
- Flip-flops
- Wet weather shoes/sandals (could be one of above pairs)
- Swimsuit
- Warm sweater/fleece
- 1-2 bath/beach towels
- Sleeping bag for village stay

## WOMEN

- 1-2 dresses or skirts
- 4-5 blouses or shirts
- 2-3 pairs casual pants or good jeans
- 1-3 pairs of shorts

## MEN

- 1-2 pairs light-weight pants and 2 pairs jeans
- 4-5 shirts/ t-shirts
- 1-2 nice shirts (button-down)
- 3-4 pairs casual pants or good jeans
- 1-3 pairs of shorts

## TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- Yellow WHO Card (see the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) document for more information) with proof of Yellow Fever vaccination
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- Photocopy of visa (*if applicable*)

## HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Adequate supply of any medications you use regularly including birth control
- Small first aid kit with Band-Aids, hydrogen peroxide, moist towelettes, and over the counter drugs for minor pain, diarrhea, anti-itching, and motion sickness, as approved by your doctor
- Insect repellent with 20/30% DEET for use on skin and 100% DEET (Permethrin) for use on clothing
- Topical cream for flea bites
- Strong weather-resistant sunscreen (at least SPF 15)
- Extra eyeglasses or contacts (as Cochabamba can be very dusty, contact lens wearers are advised to bring glasses as well. Saline solution is available but expensive in Bolivia)



## OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- An open, unlocked smart phone (see Phones section for more details)
- Sunglasses and/or hat
- Travel alarm clock
- Flashlight/headlamp
- Fold-up umbrella
- Homestay family gifts
- Spanish/English dictionary
- Laptop computer for writing papers
- Pictures of your family, friends, and home to share with Bolivians
- Digital video camera and external hard drive with proper connections/cables if planning on completing a video during ISP (refer to video section in AD letter for other details)

## OPTIONAL

- Travel guide if you plan to do post-program travel (Lonely Planet is recommended)
- Camera and film
- Voltage and plug adaptors
- College or university ID
- Waterless anti-bacterial hand soap/cleansing towelettes
- Ziploc storage bags
- Durable water bottle and iodine/chlorine to sterilize water
- Key books and articles on your ISP subject, if you have already chosen a topic
- Mosquito net if you plan to do your ISP in a malarial region (US\$20 to purchase in Bolivia, although some students prefer nets with built-in frames from the US, as there is not always a convenient way to hang a simple net while in the countryside)

