



BOLIVIA & ARGENTINA

The cooks who climbed Aconcagua in skirts

They cooked at mountain camps for years. Then they set out for the highest peak in the Americas.

WHERE El Alto to Aconcagua

WHO The Cholitas Escaladoras, Aymara women who worked in Bolivia's climbing camps

WHEN 2015 to 2019

4 min read

The story

For years, a group of Aymara women in Bolivia lived and worked high in the Andes, close to the snow but never on top of it. Some cooked for climbers at mountain camps. Some carried loads at low altitude. Others were married to men who did that work for tourists.

They watched visitors from around the world walk past them toward the summits. Then, around 2015, a few of them asked a simple question: why not us?

A sport that was not for them

The women live in El Alto, a high-altitude city beside La Paz. Mountains are everywhere there, but climbing had long been a sport for foreign tourists. Gear, guides and park fees can cost hundreds of dollars. That is far out of reach in one of the poorest countries in South America.

Around a dozen women started anyway. Their first peak was Huayna Potosí, 6,088 metres high. At a UNESCO event in Paris in 2025, one founder of the group, Lita González, remembered how it was: they went up with motorcycle helmets and poor gear, and they climbed anyway.

Most of their equipment was rented, and they said it was sometimes not very good. It did not stop them. The next year they added Illimani, then Sajama.

The skirt

There was one more thing that set them apart. They climbed in the *pollera*, the thick, layered skirt worn by many women in El Alto and La Paz. They wore shawls too, and carried their things on their backs in a bright cloth called an *aguayo*.

Women in these cities began wearing that style, with the bowler hat, in the early 1900s. It marks the identity of the *cholita*. The word *chola* was long used as an insult. Until recently, women like these faced discrimination in public life, and the election of Evo Morales, who is Aymara, as president in 2005 started to change how people saw them.

We did it all while wearing the cholita outfit, because it is a source of pride.

ANA LÍA GONZALES, TO ALPINIST MAGAZINE, 2019

Gonzales, then 30, said the skirt reminded her of her grandmother and her city. To her it was a symbol of a fight.

6,088 m

Huayna Potosí, their
first peak

6,962 m

Aconcagua, their goal

120 km/h

winds at base camp

Waiting out the wind

In January 2019, five of them flew toward Aconcagua, in Argentina. It is the highest mountain in the Americas. The five were Gonzales, her mother Dora Magueño, Lidia Huayllas, Elena Quispe and Cecilia Llusco. Spanish filmmakers paid for a guided summit push and filmed it for a documentary.

They spent ten days walking up slowly, to let their bodies adjust. Then a storm stopped them at the big base camp, Plaza de Mulas. Every day, climbers came back down beaten and frostbitten. The Bolivian women played football with the porters and got to know the other teams.

Gonzales was not used to such wind, which reached 120 kilometres an hour. She began to lose heart.

So they did what her grandmother had taught her. They buried an offering of coca leaves and alcohol, to ask the mountain's spirits for permission to climb.

The summit

Then the weather broke. The day was clear and sunny, and the group set off on the normal route, along the mountain's north-west ridge. An Argentine guide went with them.

Alpinist, which spoke to Gonzales, reports that she and Elena Quispe reached the top. They held up Bolivia's flag and the Wiphala, the colourful banner of the

Andean native nations. The other three, including Gonzales's mother, turned back close to the summit. It was getting too late in the day to go on safely.

Other outlets list all five women at the top, so accounts differ. Gonzales herself had mixed feelings. "I'm happy I accomplished the dream, and sad we didn't all get there together."

They were told they were the first Aymara women to climb Aconcagua. A few days later, people applauded them at La Paz airport. President Morales tweeted his congratulations.

After the summit

The pictures of women in wide skirts on snow and ice travelled far. Alpinist reports that they have inspired more Bolivians to try climbing. A photographer, Todd Antony, later joined them on a glacier near La Paz to take their portraits.

Some of the women now say they dream of Everest.

How it unfolded

- **2005** Evo Morales, who is Aymara, is elected president of Bolivia.
- **2015** The women start climbing, beginning with Huayna Potosí.
- **2017** They climb Illimani.
- **2018** They climb Sajama.
- **2019** They go to Aconcagua. Gonzales and Quispe reach the top.

What makes it special

At mountain camps, the cook and the porter are part of the scenery. These women walked out of the scenery and onto the mountain, without taking off the clothes that once made people look down on them.

It is also an honest story. Not everyone got to the top, and the climbers say so themselves.

OUR TAKE

The skirt was never the obstacle. The doubt around it was. By keeping it on, the women made their point without making a speech.

What we can learn

1 Start from what you already know

These women had spent years working near the mountains, and that knowledge was their foundation.

Try this: Write down three skills your current job taught you. Use one of them on the thing you really want to do.

2 Keep the thing you are proud of

They did not change their clothes to fit a sport that had not welcomed them.

Try this: Add one real part of your background to your bio, your pitch or your next meeting.

3 Climb the smaller mountain first

Huayna Potosí came first, then Illimani and Sajama, and only then Aconcagua.

Try this: Pick the stepping-stone goal for your big goal and put a date on it this week.

4 Plan for the weather

They gave themselves ten days to adjust, and then waited out a storm at base camp.

Try this: Add buffer days to one deadline you have, so a delay does not become a failure.

5 Decide your turn-around time in advance

Three climbers turned back near the top because the hour was late.

Try this: For one risky decision, write the point at which you will stop, before you start.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

The mountain never asked what they were wearing.

Sources

Alpinist

["Cholitas Escaladoras" summit Aconcagua and make history for Indigenous women](#)

AFAR

[Bolivia's History-Making Indigenous Climbers, in Photos](#)

UNESCO

[From the Pollera to Aconcagua: The Cholitas Escaladoras Brought Their Story to UNESCO](#)

Fact-check note: Sources disagree on several points. Alpinist says Gonzales and Quispe reached the summit while three others turned back; AFAR and other outlets say all five reached the top. The summit date is given as 23 January (AFAR) or 24 January (Alpinist). The group's size is given as about a dozen or eleven, and its start as 2014 or 2015. Alpinist says Spanish filmmakers paid for the guided push; other reports credit a Bolivian ministry. The details of the trip (wind, coca-leaf offering, football) come from Alpinist's interview with Gonzales. UNESCO names Lita González as a founder; we have not confirmed whether she is the same person as Ana Lía Gonzales. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.