

Crossing Bolivia's altiplano

– adventure at altitude

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Traversing the Bolivian altiplano reveals some of the most fascinating, remote and inhospitable places on earth – all at more than 4000 metres.

Here, we encounter the world's biggest salt flat, the Salar of Uyuni, as well as lakes, wetlands, coloured lagoons and geothermal fields.

Two years earlier, a friend commented that a trip across the highlands of Bolivia was not suitable for a woman.

As a result, my desire to explore this region was aroused. The journey's starting point is the Atacama Desert, in Chile, before crossing the border to Bolivia and penetrating deep into the contrasting landscapes – lakes, wetlands, volcanic mountain ranges and geothermal areas – that make up the altiplano.

The climax of this trip is the spectacular Salar of Uyuni, the biggest salt flat on earth. This "travesia" is a unique experience as we explore inhospitable and remote places by vehicle and by foot, most of them inaccessible by normal travel arrangements.

As this journey is at all times above 4000 metres it is important to spend four days in San Pedro de Atacama to adapt.

At the Explora Atacama resort, the four days of preparation allow us to become familiar with altitude, a kind of "test" that will check the participant's physical resistance so they will be capable of facing Bolivia's heights and unpredictable weather. We are warned that we will reach almost 5000 metres and where temperatures can drop well below minus 20 degrees.

For those used to living at sea level, the first rule is drink a lot of water and try to get used to the bitter taste of coca leaves tea – a powerful antidote for mountain sickness. Altitude illness reveals itself with many

symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, insomnia and even nightmares.

Rather than surrender, it is vital to exercise, hiking gradually at higher altitudes, until reaching the barrier of 4300 metres. Explora's adaptation programme has it all planned out for visitors.

The Atacama Desert appears initially as a stony wasteland - rain having never been recorded in some parts, The desert is as bare and shrivelled as the moon. However, there is inspiring scenery on the edge of salares (salt flats) overlooked by the world's longest mountain chain - the Andes.

During the day we enjoy the intensely blue sky, there being about 330 cloudless days each year. While at night we are hypnotised by star-filled skies. Adding to the magic of this place is the occasional fuming volcano.

In the old villages scattered around the region, all houses were built within walls of clay and stone and are a slowly crumbling testament to the past. Wildlife is sparse. Besides the llamas, able to survive at high altitude with very little water, there is a small rodent that resembles a rabbit, known as tatón tuco or bizcacha. And, no matter how hard we search, there is no sign of any insects.

The picturesque pueblo of San Pedro is enchanting, with its dusty streets and the colourful shop facades. However, those getting ready for the travesia had better think about getting acclimatised to altitude rather than going shopping. After all, we must be ready and very fit to face an entirely new environment during the next five days and nights – all above 4300 metres.



Isolated from civilisation and any other contact with human beings, we eat in silence our delicious sandwiches, cheese and crab salad, entranced by the natural wonders surrounding us.

Day 1 - from Explora Atacama to Bolivia

I really didn't fancy getting out of my Egyptian cotton bed linen this morning. I knew that from now on we wouldn't sleep on a king-size mattress, neither cuddle in a warm room, nor have electricity and much less a tub with our own Jacuzzi. Also, it could get brutally hot during the day and bitterly cold at night.

Nevertheless, hopes are running high when, at 8.15am, we left the hotel Explora to begin our journey to Bolivia. We will make the journey with another couple, from Switzerland, under the supervision of Javier, a very experienced Chilean guide, and Bolivian driver Felix.

The first stop is for paperwork at the border of Chile and Bolivia, at 4346 metres. The temperature here is just 4 degrees, with a savage wind seemingly blowing from every direction. The countryside is no man's land, with many abandoned vehicles with and dust everywhere. At this stage, my first impulse was to hide myself inside our new vehicle, a very comfy American Ford with large reclining seats. But I have spotted a skinny young fox and I try to get closer to photograph her. That's when I begin to realise that at this

altitude, even clicking the shutter consumes a huge amount of energy.

Always heading north, we cross the Avaroa Reserve and then uphill, on winding dusty roads, until we reach the Sol de Manana's geysers. We were now at the highest point of our whole trip – 4870 metres. Even out of breath, we are impressed by the impossibly changing colours and shapes of those lava bulbs burping and bursting out noisily from their craters.

There is no protection, fences or barriers or even a "be careful" sign. We walk with extreme caution around those fuming pools.

At midday Javier decides to stop for a picnic by the shore of a stunning lagoon called Colorado. Here, the water is pink and flocked with hundreds of pink flamingos. These birds perform choreography under the wind's spell, the colours of the water changing from turquoise to white and violet, mixing their reflection with those of the surrounding mountains.

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After 260 kilometres of dusty roads, the day ends in Cañapa, our first refuge. We are exhausted, cold and with the discomfort of altitude.

A team comprising Arturo, Hortenzia and Marta had arrived earlier and prepared some tea and cookies, as well as dinner. Our accommodation is ready too. This time we spend the night in sleeping bags and although we know the temperature can drop to minus 40, on this night it is a temperate minus 7. Each couple has their own bathroom, complete with a shower, But it's so icy the hot showers will have to wait until tomorrow.

Day 2 Descending to 3700 metres

The night is not the best of our lives. Although we had splurged on coca tea and aspirins, our heads are spinning. Only the exquisite landscape diminishes the psychological (and physical) effects of mountain sickness, which affects even the most well-intentioned adventurer.

After breakfast, Javier breaks the good - we are going down to 3750 metres. We look forward to sleeping like babies from now on. Furthermore, our refuge on the three following nights are charming casitas, made of stones, Bolivian style, but refurbished by

Explora to host their guests. Nevertheless, we are still stuck with our sleeping bags, into which we tuck, thanks to Javier, the comforting guatero, a hot water bottle that becomes vital to keep us warm all night.

Today, our programme combines a four-kilometre hike with a picnic lunch to a creek on the shores of the bucolic Lake Turquiri. Rock formations, birds of all sorts and bizcachas (a kind of rabbit with a funny tail) as well as llamas, blend into the landscape.

We drive for 130 kilometres on dust roads carved over a rocky surface. We are informed that in some parts we are actually on top of a lake that dried out some 40,000 years ago. We have entered a criss-cross of winding roads, forming an enigmatic path in the middle of nowhere. Felix, our experienced driver, was born around this area and is familiar with every corner. Today, passing through the salt flat of Chiguana, we saw an orange cargo train crossing along the foothill of the mountains. The optic effect is magical as it looks like a snake.

"It's a coincidence that we are just passing by at this same hour," observed Javier, revealing that in five years of travesia, he only witnessed this train twice.

Day 3 from Chituca to the mirages of the Salar of Uyuni

At 8 o'clock this morning, after a hearty desayuno enhanced with fresh orange juice, scrambled eggs, toasts, jellies, homemade yogurt, granola and tuna (a small green fruit which grows on the cactus leaves and looks like a kiwifruit) we leave our camp in Chituca heading towards the Salar of Uyuni, the most eagerly-anticipated destination of the whole trip.

As usual Javier briefs us the night before in preparation for the following day. Always holding a map, he gives us details of where we're going, the distance we'll be covering, the climatic changes and conditions, the altitude and how we should prepare. He completes his talk with details of local culture and the historical highlights of the region.

"Today you'll have the most visual impact of the whole experience," he assures us, a few moments before we reach the shore of the Salar of Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat. It covers 12,000 square kilometres.

We are to ride over the salar for more than 100 kilometres, a weird sensation as the salt is covered with 20 centimetres of water, the result of heavy rain last summer.





The powerful Ford slides gently over the water that is licking its tyres, rising waves and leaving visual traces. For a couple of hours, it's like being on a motorboat. From every corner, we are surrounded by islands, big and small, volcanoes and islets whose reflections dive into the salar. The density of light and movement of the clouds above are responsible for magical visual effects.

Where the water has evaporated, the salt creates a dense texture and geometrical drawings. And we stop for an amazing experience - a short hike on the salt flat and a picnic lunch.

On the way to our refuge, in the small village of Tahua, at 130kilometres per hour, we carry with us the effects of those surrealistic views.

Day 4 *The spilled milk of Tunupa*

Our third refuge is rustic and cosy, beside this tiny village located on the shore of the salar, an end-of-the-road kind of place only recently discovered by electricity. To find their way into this place and on the salt flat itself, travellers must follow the "apachetas", the typical local road signs made by hand with stones, indicating the right "entrances" to the land.

From the shore, depending from which angle we are viewing, the salar unfolds on the horizon like a white catwalk that could easily be taken for snow, sand or even sugar. Early in the morning, other stunning reflections create impossibly beautiful patterns, stimulating the imagination of those who have been given the privilege to experience this serenely stylish paradise.

Sunset is celebrated with French champagne in the middle of the salar, from where we'll witness the most fascinating display of lights, a spectacular show. And, when the night falls upon the Uyuni and zillions of stars sprinkle the sky, we savour the absolute silence and watch as the profile of the volcano Tunupa disappears in the dark. It's the highest volcano in the area, reaching 5432 metres. As the legend goes, Tunupa

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was the name of a beautiful woman who appeared in this region ages ago when it was inhabited by dozens of tribes. Powerful chiefs fought for her love but ended up spilling a lot of innocent blood – including that of the diva's own son. This infuriated the Andean gods who decided to turn all involved into volcanoes. And, according to the story, the salar is nothing less than the milk spilled from the breasts of an ever-crying mother.

This morning hike is very difficult – four hours up the slopes of Tunupa until we reach 4500 metres. From here we can almost lean over the impressive shore of the crater. Along the way, we pass locals at work on their quinoa fields, all natives from Coquesa,

the village located at the foot of the volcano. They walk up and down these steep hills with their heavy bundles. The quinoa is a very nutrient grain, much used in the Bolivian diet as well as in modern recipes worldwide.

These villagers are quite reluctant when facing a camera or any foreign person. So we need a strategy to get a good picture. One way is to offer cookies, chocolate, cereal bars or even some change.

Day 5 *Goodbye Uyuni and the colours of Llica*

Our last day will be long, as we again cross the Bolivian border on our way back to Chile. We farewell Uyuni and leave early in the morning for a tiny Bolivian town called Llica, known for its succulent salteñas, a kind of small pastry with chicken, peas and onion filling. We are lucky to arrive during a popular celebration.

Unfortunately, there is no marketplace in sight, so no shopping whatsoever. I had high hopes for local crafts, but there was nothing. On the way, we enjoy another picnic by the shores of another salt field, the Salar of Coipasa. At this stage, we have become accustomed to cold temperatures, dust and raw landscape - even a bit of altitude.

On our last evening we gather around the dinner table, exchanging photographs and impressions of this memorable travesia that will stay impregnated in our memories for a lifetime.

Tomorrow we will farewell our dedicated crew and drive down from 4020 metres high to Iquique, at sea level.

FACT FILE

What to take

Sunglasses, hat, hiking boots, gloves, sunscreen, lip protection, cleaning gel, diamox (altitude sickness) or aspirin, small backpack, small change (in pesos or US dollars) sweets, chocolate or candies in order to get the "authorisation" from the Bolivians if you want to photograph them, extra batteries for cameras and other equipment (there is no electricity to charge batteries), good socks for hiking.

Accommodation

Explora is the only tour operator that organises the full package for the Uyuni crossing, with the stay in Atacama inclusive. The service is personalised - with a crew of five there to take care of a group of no more than six. The travesias take place all year round, the cost from around US\$7000 per person, for a 10 days package, all-inclusive.

www.explora.com

How to get there

LAN (www.lan.com) has daily flights from New Zealand and Australia to Santiago. From Santiago, LAN and also SKY airlines (www.skyairlines.cl) have several flights to Calama.

From there, it's a 100 kilometre drive to San Pedro de Atacama.

