


DIVERSIONS

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SOUTH AMERICAN BEAUTY

Experience the magnificent wilderness of
Bolivia's salt flats and other natural wonders



The salt flats are a natural wonder and the only place on earth where the sky and ground merge.

With travel more ubiquitous than ever before in history, the very idea of it has changed forever. Today, travel is a click of a button. Travellers book journeys online, they watch videos of where they're going to have a preview and they read endless reviews and assessments by a giant growing community of people stretching themselves to the edges of the planet and potentially off the edges of this world and into space.

However, this need to see the world, to see all of it, is about the deep desire to find something beyond ourselves. Sophisticated and in-the-know travellers are now, more than ever, seeking out places that are not on these lists, are more inaccessible and have some sustainability aspect to it – and therefore wondrous and special. Andreas Keller, a Cape Town-based sustainability professional, calls these almost

untouched wilderness areas “teachers”. He believes that nature, in her precious unspoiled beauty, speaks loudest. “Wildernesses are places where people can and should go to heal from the separation most of us feel from nature, often without knowing it.”

Enter Bolivia and its absolute privilege of access. Although the landlocked country, the poorest in South America, has averaged a 4.8 per cent growth in the past few years according to the World Bank, much of the country is largely undiscovered.

The administrative capital, La Paz, peaks at roughly 3,650 metres above sea level and has three metro areas that make up its 2.3 million residents. A city, in the sky, on the western side of Bolivia may seem

THE MAIN ATTRACTION FOR THE BOLIVIA VISITOR IS THE PRIVILEGE OF THE NATURAL SALT FLATS

PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

BOLIVIA'S STREET FOOD AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT (CABLE CAR GONDOLAS) HAVE TRAVELLERS AGOG

like just another location on the world globe but its street food and public transport – in the form of cable car gondolas – have the connoisseurs of must-see cities agog.

"With 60 per cent of Bolivians living below the poverty line, tourism has an important role for Bolivia, generating additional revenues and creating much needed jobs in the country," says David Banitt, CEO/founder, NewCO2Fuels.

He believes that ecotourism largely contributes to the environmental, cultural and economic well-being of local communities and thus "provides an incentive to empowerment while maintaining original values", Keller sees a bigger picture. "The gold standard of eco-tourism looks at the ecological footprint of the tourist, not just at the destination, but from the origin as well: from home to hammock." And one of the main attractions for the Bolivia visitor is the privilege of the natural salt flats.

It is about two hours' flight from La Paz where the adventure begins – the Uyuni Salt Flats (Salar de Tunupa). Located in the southwest of the country near the crest of the Andes Mountains, the Salar is the world's largest salt flat and is at an elevation of 3,656 metres above mean sea level.

Since the government has started to protect this area by limiting and controlling the extraction of lithium, the flats are kept unspoiled. "It's truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience" says Scott Wiseman, president,

Cox & Kings, The Americas. "The salt flat is a natural wonder and the only place on earth where the sky and ground merge, making it one of the best places on earth for unique picture opportunities".

For most of the time on the salt flats, the point is to enough the ultimate in luxury, doing nothing. A black 4x4s comes to pick you up at the airport in the middle of real nowhere. Driving around the whiteness brings a certain quiet and beauty with it.

Formed as the result of transformations between prehistoric lakes in the area, the area is covered by metres (up to 10 m) of salt crust. During rainy seasons over the past 30,000 to 42,000 years, Lake Titicaca overflowed and ran off into other lakes. Mud mixed with salt and saturated brine (lithium, magnesium chloride and sodium chloride) created this solid crust. And so it's sky, white underneath and utter silence – all in a world of extraordinary flatness. So flat in fact altimeters of earth observation satellites are calibrated here.

There are a few things to explore, like in the centre of the Salar, there are various "islands" which are the tops of remaining volcanoes that submerged

BELOW
The administrative capital of Bolivia, La Paz, peaks at roughly 3,650 metres above sea level.

BELOW RIGHT
Retro silver airstream trailers allow travellers to luxuriously enjoy the great wilderness.





LEFT
Travellers can spot llamas grazing on grassy Bolivian altiplano.

BELOW
The Salar is the world's largest salt flat and is at an elevation of 3,656 metres above sea level. Cactuses grow on the mountains near the salt flats.

thousands of years ago – offering up a lunar-like landscape with coral-like shapes and deposits of fossils and algae. For the most part its solitary with no fauna or flora – although some species of pink flamingos – the colour from eating pink algae – squawk around and once in a while a llama will appear in the distance as if lost in space.

Driving around on the 4x4s is like driving on the sky with the reflections playing with your mind. And since few people come out here and it often rains it's easy to find a perfect quiet spot to meditate on the beauty of a small lake, with nobody around.

"The fact that there are very few accommodations available in the Salt Flat makes it a very exclusive opportunity" says Ignacio Vallin, destination manager – Latin America, Cox & Kings, The Americas. "Not many people get to experience this specific region of Bolivia," and the accommodation that is available – retro silver airstream trailers. And since these are often redesigned and renovated, it's in complete lushness that you can enjoy the great wilderness. The airstreams are kitted out with sleeping areas, lounging spaces and spacious-enough bathrooms with hot water.

They have everything you would possibly require out on the salt flats – just bring that camera along. A chef cooks local cuisine, which includes all kinds of interesting potatoes, and herby cocktails are served



with the views holding court. Of course all of this with that smiley Bolivian hospitality.

Nights, which can be cold, are spent underneath forever skies clustered with stars around the fire or cruising on bicycles around what seems to be nowhere in the utter darkness. With a telescope, the universe's constellations can be perused in great detail and with guides around star chatter fills the skies. Fine whiskies and cigars then come out and the sheer joy of being so remote becomes the ultimate in pleasure.

And it is nothingness that is the exact appeal – away from the world seen. It is exactly here where the luxury of freedom and access is all yours. **T**

PLAN THE TRIP

BOOK WITH:

Cox & Kings has a history spanning more than 250 years. It will have the trip under its total control. New itineraries focus on Bolivia – with special trips to the salt flats, Lake Titicaca and the city of La Paz. www.coxandkingsusa.com

FLY WITH:

Cathay Pacific to La Paz via Los Angeles. For a special treat, try out the airline's new First Class Lounge, designed by Studioilse. cathaypacific.com

DRESS IN:

Perfect Moment, based in Hong Kong, specialises in ski wear and has exactly what's needed for the harsh weather that comes with Bolivian terrain and altitude. Try a Mini-Duvet Jacket with goose down against the cold or the iconic Mountain Mission Jacket made from Toray's Primeflex fabric for when you're out on the Salt Flats. perfectmoment.com

DON'T MISS:

Gustu, from the minds behind Copenhagen's Noma, has opened a casual fine-dining restaurant in La Paz. Ingredients are sourced locally and its social project has students working in their kitchens. restaurantgustu.com