

Exploring Bolivia


An Intersection of Nature and Culture

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Navigating a lakeside path in the Sur Lipez province of Bolivia.

 Our first discovery during our travels in Bolivia was the Road of the Jesuit Missions in the region of Chiquitania, named by the Jesuits when they noted the very small doors on the native's huts. Remaining in the shadows for over two centuries, the history of the region was more widely revealed to the public in 1986 with the film, *The Mission*, starring Robert De Niro. This group of towns, known as Las Misiones Jesuíticas, contains some of the main cultural and historical treasures of the country.

Jesuit missionaries were probably the only foreigners from colonial times to attempt reconciliation between their culture and that of indigenous peoples. They sought to keep the best of each culture and succeeded in doing so surprisingly well. The Chiquitano Indians were nomadic hunter-gatherers but they learned European



Situated high in the Andes, La Paz is a densely populated urban setting.

farming and agricultural techniques, which proved successful for their predominantly agricultural economy. In return, they showed the Europeans how to adapt to the harsh tropical environment.

We were anxious to visit San Javier, the oldest mission in the region, built in 1691, where the cathedral has been beautifully restored. Then on to San Ignacio de Velasco via a 160 km stony track, made all the more interesting when we lost the brakes in our HZJ78 Land Cruiser. However, we arrived safely in San Ignacio, where we found a trusted mechanic who solved the problem with a good welding hose. Things could have been far worse.

Despite the minor delay, it was too late in the day to begin our planned loop to the last three missions on our list. As fate would have it, we met some folks from Radio John XXIII, who interviewed us live on the radio. Further to our good fortune, a couple of listeners invited us to a churrasco (barbecue)—how could we say no...? So we spent the evening with Clara and Pablo, Native American Chiquitano, around a barbecue and were integrated into their family. They are both schoolteachers, very learned and they received us with lots of love. And the churrasco was outstanding.

The brakes on the Land Cruiser being repaired, we took a 140 km loop to our last three missions: Santa Anna, San Rafael and San Miguel. The mission at the tiny village of

Santa Anna—the smallest and most rustic—contains the only organ that has survived in the region (for over 250 years). Unlike the Jesuit missions in Brazil and Argentina, those of Bolivia are not ruined but rather are beautifully restored—paintings, sculptures, paving, everything has been redone in keeping as close to the techniques of the time.

We next left the region of Santa Cruz to climb into the Bolivian Andes. We took the old road, across the Precordillera of the Andes, on a trail that climbs to over 3,600 meters, taking us through Siberia, a forest of eternal fog and rain. The wind and mud quickly changed the color of our Land Cruiser!

In Cochabamba, we were expected by Matthias, a German who has lived for years in this city, in an ideal climate located at 2,700 meters. Matthias, his partner Marlene and we are therefore in their big house, because their hobby is to receive and assist overlanders who are in need of repair of



Sucre—Bolivia's grand administrative capital.

their four-wheel drive vehicles. Moreover, we found among them a German couple in a 60 series Land Cruiser and a couple from Lichtenstein.

Bolivia is practically the only country in South America (along with Venezuela) to market our HZJ78 Toyota, so it is relatively easy to find spare parts—and at a price ten times lower than that prevailing in Europe! So we enjoyed our stay with Matthias and Marlene and conducted a major review of the vehicle in nearby Santiago, with the assistance of a mechanic friend of Matthias.

The repairs of the HZJ78 complete, we drove towards Sucre, the country's administrative capital, to get closer to the Andes. It was in Sucre that the country's independence was declared in 1825—and even though La Paz is now the seat of government and finance, Sucre remains the constitutional capital. This beautiful town has preserved its unique Colonial architecture and was declared a World Heritage Site



The mission at San Miguel—well worth the trek.



Checking the guidebook in San Agnacio.

by UNESCO in 1991. We took our time visiting the quiet city and decided to dine in the main square. We then slept in the Land Cruiser in front of the Policia Turistica, where security was at the highest.

From Sucre to Potosi, it is a five-hour trek to reach this city perched at over 4,000 meters. Fortunately, during the eight days in Cochabamba (at 2,800 meters), we had the time to acclimatize to the altitude, which allowed us to better withstand the high elevation. The city, with its sumptuous churches, ornate colonial architecture and its simple and hospitable inhabitants, is truly a marvel.

The market in front of the bus terminal is a spectacle unto itself. We spent several hours in the Land Cruiser, discovering the vibrant life of Bolivians, arriving on colectivos—local buses—to do their shopping. It was a real show for us, with colorful traditional clothes everywhere. Colectivos then return to the remote villages, taking with them all kinds of merchandise—and we even witnessed the loading of a coffin onto the roof of one of these buses.



Lunch break on the moonscape of Uyuni.

Next we began what was surely the most amazing journey of our trip, a southwest circuit of Bolivia. This corner of Bolivia is an exceptional set of mineral landscapes, blinding white saline expanses, a harsh environment yet still a haven for many Andean species. The ground is literally overflowing

with minerals that produce an extraordinary color palette. We drove over 100 km on the white immensity of the Salar de Uyuni, with nothing on the horizon but a few mountain peaks. The show is magical, white on the horizon with the contrast of the purest blue sky.



Laguna Colorada is one of the more striking sights in Bolivia.

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The next day, we left the flatness of the salar to climb up the Andes to explore mountain lakes, each more beautiful than the other. The track is rough, with lots of corrugated iron brittle for both the vehicles and their passengers. We camped alone the first night, near the Laguna Cañapa, inhabited solely by a colony of flamingos. Having breakfast at the edge of the laguna, with the flamingos walking softly on the frozen lake, was an unforgettable experience.

After a half-day of travel the next day—sometimes gravel, sometimes sand—in a magical setting of high altitude, we reached Laguna Colorada, one of the high points of this circuit. This lake—red in color and situated high up at 4,278 meters—covers approximately 60 sq. km but the depth never exceeds 80 cm. Its intense color comes from algae and plankton that thrive in the mineral-rich water.

Planning ahead, we brought antifreeze additive for the diesel, allowing us to enjoy using our Eberspächer heater, despite the temperature of -17 F in the morning. We thus spent several nights in the Land Cruiser at elevations around 4,300 meters—freezing outside but quite pleasant in the vehicle.

We then discovered the geysers of Sol de Mañana, at 4,925 meters—our record elevation! With its bubbling mud pools,



Waiting for portraits to be taken in La Paz.

fumaroles and the stench of sulfur vapors, it was an amazing sight.

We next arrived at the other highlight of this loop, the Laguna Verde. This beautiful blue-green lake (at 4,400 meters) is nestled in the southwest corner of Bolivia, near the Chilean border. The extraordinary green color is due to the high concentration of carbonates of lead, sulfur, arsenic and calcium. An icy wind continuously whipped the lake's surface, covering it in places with brilliant green and white foam. Behind the lake rises the cone of Licancabur at 5,960 meters, whose summit would have housed an ancient Incan crypt. Best of all, we were near the Laguna Verde, a thermal bath where bathed in hot

water (over 100° F), in sumptuous surroundings—a nice reward after hours of challenging tracks.

A final camp at 4,400 meters (yet 5° F) and we started heading north, this loop passing further east than on the way. We bought 40 liters of diesel from a salt mine, ensuring our security for the return to Uyuni.



Festively festooned llamas, perhaps considering whether to spit.

In Quetena, we stopped in a tiny pueblo to buy bread and were greeted by a couple of Bolivian llama breeders, who were asking the owners to bake bread. No sooner said than done, our host prepared hotcakes on his small wood stove. The time advancing, we decided to spend the night and thus shared a touching moment with our two Bolivians, who were happy to take us to see their llamas—they have one hundred. And yes, they do actually spit.

Finally, after over 950 km of track, we returned to our starting point of Uyuni. From there, another 320 km of corrugated iron will lead us to Oruro, where we will find the paved road. But midway, we heard a loud metallic sound. The rough trail had managed to break the ties of a stabilizer bar.



Taking a refreshing dip in the pools of Sol de Mañana.

Fortunately, some 15 kilometers away, we found a mechanic who soldered the damage and we continued our journey.

In Oruro, with much relief we located a paved road that will take us to La Paz, Bolivia's main city. Nuestra Señora de La Paz—commonly called simply La Paz—is the largest city in Bolivia. The city of La Paz has developed in the Chuquiago Marka Valley, surrounded by the mountains of Huayna Potosi (6,094 meters) and Nevado Illimani (6,460 meters), not far from Lake Titicaca.

We shared our days between a La Paz city tour, maintenance on the Land Cruiser and updating of our website. The Plaza Murillo is one of the many beautiful squares of the city, surrounded by the Cathedral, built in 1835, but Paz La Paz owes much of its charm to the animation of its daily life. The activity is concentrated in neighborhoods that overlook the center, where a labyrinth of steep streets climb to the sky. Women with long black braids, wearing bowler hats and carrying brightly colored shawls, watch the steaming pots and sell all kinds of items.

Before leaving La Paz, we wanted to make the trip to Coroico, "the most dangerous road in the world," also called the Road of Death (an average of 26 vehicles each year drove off the cliffs before the opening of the new road). This new asphalt road enabled us reach Coroico relatively quickly. Indeed, it is best to take the Road of Death in the direction of the climb to La Paz. This gravel track is 3.2 meters wide, just sufficient to allow passage of a vehicle. There are towering peaks of 6000 meters looming above and the huge rock overhangs are quite scary.

Although vehicles drive on the right in Bolivia, the downstream traffic switches to the outside by the precipice near the entrance to the Road of Death, therefore requiring a lane to travel on the left, allowing descending drivers to better align their wheels near the edge. As we went down that runway in the direction of the climb, we were against the sidewall, which is a little less scary but the peaks were still dizzying!

After this stressful drive, we left La Paz for Lake Titicaca, which proved much more beautiful on the Peruvian side because the view includes the snowy mountains in the background. And we were delighted

to take a barge across the lake to reach Copacabana. Like Machu Picchu in Peru, Lake Titicaca is a true symbol of the South American continent. Crossed by the oldest Native American civilizations, Lake Titicaca has always exerted a great fascination on travelers and conquerors. Lake Titicaca is the largest lake in South America and the highest navigable lake in the world. Located in the

Andes at 3,810 meters above sea level, it covers 8,562 square kilometers.

And thus, after more than a month and a half to discover this wonderful country of Bolivia, we entered Peru and pointed our Land Cruiser toward new adventures.

PHOTOS BY GWENDOLYN PRAKASH

The North Yungas Road—better known as the Road of Death—snakes between La Paz and Coroico.

