

# SEE SALT

AN EXTRAORDINARY  
ODYSSEY INTO  
BOLIVIA'S SALT FLAT. » T26

Weekend  
**T**  
**TODAY**

MAY 22 - 23, 2010

A PUBLICATION OF *MEDIA CORP*

TIMEPIECE TRENDS  
TO WATCH. » T8

PLENTY OF ROOM  
IN THE NEW  
MAZDA 8. » T18

COLUMNS » T2  
*POSTSCRIPT:*  
THE SWEET BLISS  
OF A ROOT CANAL.  
*THE FAIRER TEXT:*  
IS THAT YOUR MAN?  
I'LL TAKE HIM!

DITCH THE  
COCKTAILS AND  
MAKE SPACE  
FOR GRANDMA'S  
PORT. » T4



# TRAVEL



Aguas Calientes

## Salt of the earth

Photos Nellie Huang

### Getting to the Bolivian salt flat is an adventure on its own

Nellie Huang  
travel@mediacorp.com.sg

DEEP in the Bolivian Andes lies the Salar de Uyuni, a sparkling desert of crystalline salt. Legend tells of its hallucinogenic landscape: When submerged in rain, the salt creates a perfect — almost dreamlike — reflection of the skies.

What used to be a giant prehistoric lake is now blanketed by 12,000 sq km of pure whiteness. Far-flung and cut off from the world, the salt flat is hard to reach.

But a true explorer wouldn't let a little thing like convenience get in the way.

#### Fighting altitude sickness

Leaving a trail of dust behind us, the 4x4 Toyota heaved our considerable weight — including our food and blankets for the next four days — onto an unpaved road. The silhouette of dusty Tupiza town slowly faded behind us. Ahead lay the towering mountains we had to conquer to get to the land-locked terrains of Reserve Eduardo Avaroa National Park.

My partner and I, along with a British couple, sat tight with our belts buckled, ready for an adventure.

“Sorry about the bumps, but there

are no paved roads in this area until we get to the national park — be prepared,” warned our guide Lanzaro, with a slightly embarrassed smile.

As the jeep snaked higher through the craggy valley, my vision started to blur. Motion sickness was kicking in. Herman, our chef, handed me some coca leaves, the Andean cure for both motion and altitude sickness. We were now around 4,000m up the mountain — and would reach a peak of 5,865m during our four-day safari. That called for a reason to be paranoid.

Hours later, after having zigzagged through rock cliffs, we pulled up at the desolate town of San Antonio de Lipez. A wild llama sauntered casually past us, clad in black, furry wool and a pink tag in her ear, as if she were sashaying down her private runway. This was our stop for the night.

As the sun set, temperatures dropped to a shocking low of -10°C. We had expected basic facilities — simple stone beds and lack of electricity and showers — but not the extreme temperature. Huddling close to our Bunsen-burner heater, we shivered in our sleeping bags as the night crawled by.

#### Hot springs and pristine lagoons

I awoke to the smell of coffee and a throbbing headache. Several travellers from the other group were also dealing with a mild dose of altitude sickness.

Over the next two days, we climbed further towards 4,825m, throttling past landscapes that triggered a sensory overload: Colossal volcanic peaks poking out of the clouds, stretches of terrain pimpled with grazing llamas and haunting deserts.

Bolivia might be the poorest country

in South America, but its trademark flora and fauna have long drawn off-the-beaten-path adventurers to its untouched territories.

At Aguas Calientes (which translates to “hot water”), the thermal springs beckoned despite the cold winds. Braving the temperatures, we plunged in and were immediately comforted by a wave of warmth.

Across the Salvador Dali desert, Laguna Verde (Green Lagoon) sparkled a glorious shade of emerald green. Depending on the time of the day, the sun's interaction with the plankton in the water causes the lagoon to change colour.

“Be careful, you don't want to fall into the volcanic water,” said Lanzaro, pointing to the fumaroles in the bubbling lagoon waters.

Back on the jeep, we weaved past



Travelling in a 4x4 across the salt flat.



Laguna Colorada, the red lagoon, stained scarlet by the presence of microalgae, watching a flock of pink flamingos gliding above the water while more llamas grazed leisurely on the lagoon banks.

More lagoons and deserts before we stopped for a view of an odd-shaped volcanic rock. The arbol de piedra (tree rock), made up of distinct rock compositions, had rather strangely taken the form of a tree after years of erosion.

giant blocks of salt.

Before the crack of dawn on our final day of the tour, we were up early to catch the first rays of sunlight on the salt flat. There was not a noise around us except for the howling of strong winds and the occasional bird in the sky. The expanse of salt was so immense, we could even see the curvature of Earth at an angle.

In a desert of such magnitude, the last thing I had expected to find was an island. The Isla del Pescado (or Isla de Incahuasi) stands precariously in the middle of the vast whiteness, with giant cacti blanketing its hilltops. The view from the peak of the islet: Priceless.

There is a museum in the middle



Everything in the hotel — walls, ceiling, beds and tables — is made out of salt.



Flags at the Salt Museum.



Arbol de Piedra

of the Salar — a converted salt hotel, displaying salt figures and salt beds — but the authorities no longer allow any form of construction on the Salar so as to protect and conserve the environment.

And it should be protected. As Lanzaro pointed out, there's magic to be found in the Salar.



A wild llama taking a breather at the lagoons.

#### TRIP TIPS

##### Getting there

The nearest airport is in Bolivia's capital, La Paz. United, American and TACA Airlines fly there, with two stop-overs, for \$4,000.

##### How to get to Tupiza

Catch a bus to Oruro (3 hours, \$5, leaves hourly) and then a night train to Tupiza (11 hours, \$12, Saturday to Tuesday). Check [www.bolivia.freehosting.net](http://www.bolivia.freehosting.net) for detailed schedule. Most locals speak only Spanish so try to pick up a few words before you go.

##### When to go

The best time to visit is in dry season (April to October) when road conditions are safer. The roads are muddy and dangerous during the rainy season. Weather conditions in Uyuni can be harsh so bring plenty of warm clothes and water.

##### Tour operators

- We went on a tour organised by La Torre Tours ([www.latorretours-tupiza.com](http://www.latorretours-tupiza.com)). Tour prices depend on the season and number of people in the group. For a 4-pax group, the cost is approximately \$240 per person, with food, basic accommodation and driver included.
- Valle Hermoso Tours ([www.vallehermosotours.com](http://www.vallehermosotours.com)) offers a variety of options. You can include an extra day of volcano-climbing, an extension into Chile or choose to depart from Uyuni.
- Oasis Tours ([www.oasistours-bo.com](http://www.oasistours-bo.com)) arranges the same itinerary and has offices all over Bolivia.
- Ruta Verde Bolivia ([www.rutaverdebolivia.com](http://www.rutaverdebolivia.com)) organises private, up-market tours with comfortable accommodation options, suitable for older travellers.

**ORIENTAL ROSEWOOD STOCK TAKE**

**WAREHOUSE SALE**

Order for custom-made cushions are welcome

2 x 40 ft Container Just Arrived

RESTORATION & MAKE-OVER SERVICE OF OLD ROSEWOOD FURNITURE

Elmwood Dining Set with 6 Chairs

Free cushions & Glass Top

**\$1,588**

Rosewood Round Dining Table Set

Available in: 42", 48", 54", 60" diameter

Free cushions & Glass Top

**\$1,988**

Rosewood Corner Chairs Set (1 set / 3pcs)

Over 10 Designs

**\$688** (UP \$1,376)

42" L Rosewood Display Cabinet

**\$898**

Rosewood Study Room

**Best Buy**

Rosewood Sofa set

Free cushions & Glass Top

**\$2,988**

Rosewood Altar Table

(Free Glass Top, Many Different Designs)

**\$638**

ORIENTAL HANDICRAFT (S) PTE LTD

Blk 213, Henderson Road, #01-05/06, Henderson Industrial Park, S159553

Tel: 62709260, 63398738 Fax: 62709261

Daily Business Hours: 10am - 9pm

## HIGHER GROUND

As the jeep snaked higher through the craggy valley, my vision started to blur. Motion sickness was kicking in.

# Crime Watch

An online soccer syndicate finally gets busted!

**NEW SEASON**  
23 May, Sunday, 9:00pm  
(With English Subtitles)

**MEDIA CORP**

come home to 5