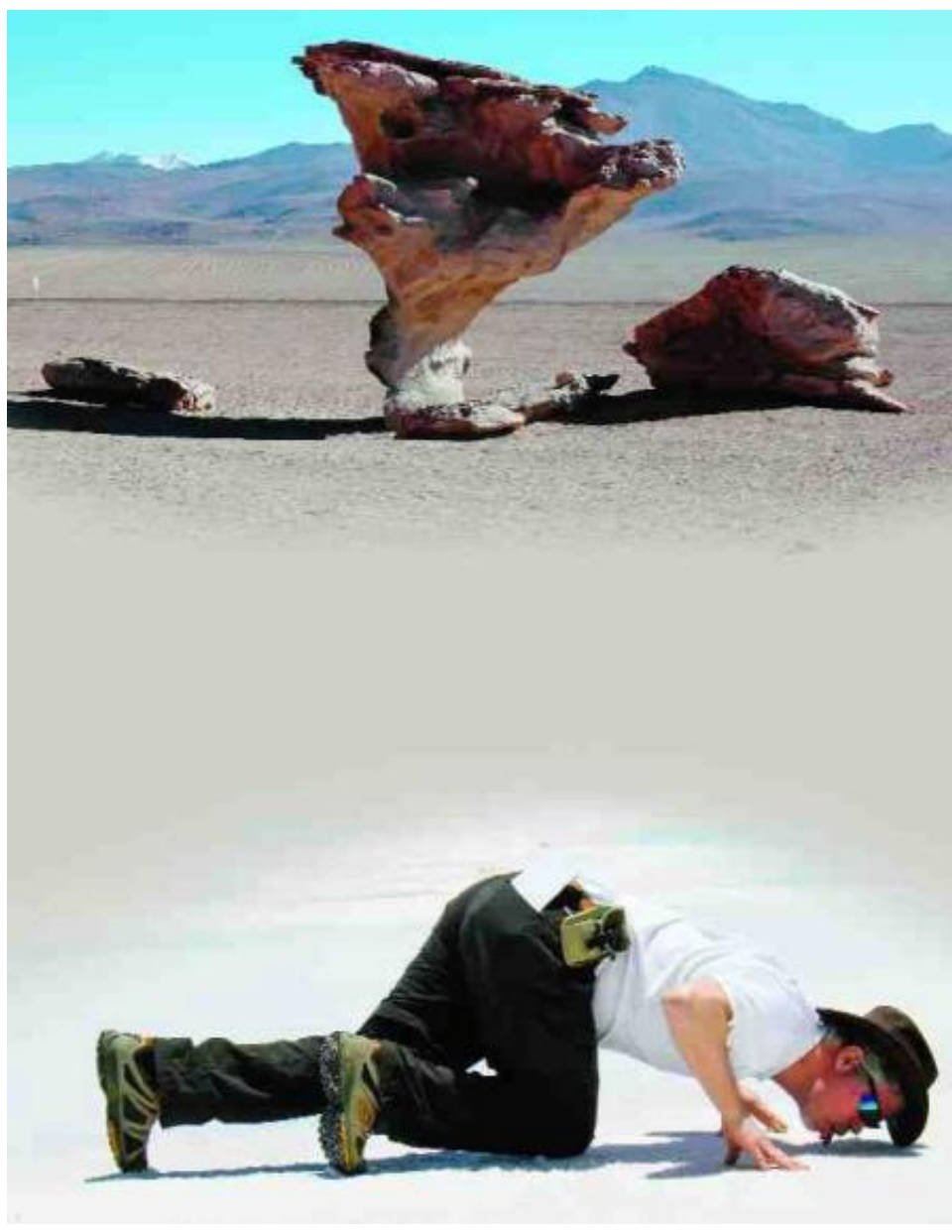




## Escape to the surreal

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BY THE CALGARY HERALD MARCH 18, 2008



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Scientists consider this arid volcanic terrain along the border of Bolivia and Chile as the closest Earth-based analogy for conditions on Mars billions of years ago. That doesn't surprise me.

I was here on a three-day tour that began in Uyuni, a town on the edge of Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flats. Covering over 10,000 square kilometres, the salar is a remnant of a giant lake that existed about 40,000 years ago.

I thought I'd escape the madness of Carnaval in Bolivia by going to the most remote corner of the country I could find. That proved to be wishful thinking. Bolivia is a country enthusiastically, even obsessively committed to Carnaval; and the party followed me to the barren, frigid western altiplano and found ways to annoy, amuse and even transform me -- right to the Argentine border.

I'd been to Oruro, the epicentre of Carnaval in Bolivia, where thousands of dancers and brass bands from all over Bolivia donned elaborate masks and costumes and danced and played their instruments relentlessly, fabulously through the city in a 20-hour homage to the devil.

Many thousands more spectators watched them while throwing water balloons and spraying foam at whomever looked vulnerable.

Then exhausted and spent, the dancers crawled on hands and knees into the church at the end of the parade route to beg a blessing from the Virgin.

I, too, was exhausted and sighed with relief when I slid into my salon class seat on the train from Oruro to the Salar de Uyuni and the serenity I craved.

At 2:30 a.m., after seven hours of travel, I was among the half-asleep travellers disgorged onto the platform in Uyuni, shivering in the night chill. I'd pre-booked, knowing hotels everywhere in Bolivia are packed during Carnaval.

I heard a voice calling my name. It was Rosa, my tour operator. And the news was bad. The hotel owner's family, in town for Carnaval, had usurped my room. Luckily, she was quick to add, she had found me another hotel. Too tired to argue and realizing it would be fruitless, I submissively followed her to a predictably shabby pension. I didn't care. I was tired. Travelling in Bolivia was exhausting at the best of times, but especially during Carnaval when it seemed everyone in the country was on the move.

I awoke, still warm from my wool-blanketed bed, and hopped into the communal shower at the end of the hallway. A gush of cold water that didn't even become tepid should have tipped me off to what was to come. "Carnaval," was the explanation my disinterested innkeepers offered. Everything was running on empty. They shrugged their shoulders in bored resignation.

Outside, it was sunny and cold. Young travellers gathered in Uyuni's main plaza, finding sunny spots and wrapping gloved hands around coca tea. We were all waiting to begin the tour of the salar on

offer from several tour operators in town. I watched as groups of six or seven people piled their gear onto the roofs of various Toyota Landcruisers, got in and headed out of town.

Finally, only seven of us remained. Clearly we were in the same tour. My party of seven -- three Argentine backpackers, a Brazilian couple, a young German traveller and I -- lingered in the town square while Rosa disappeared and reappeared several times, looking worried, wringing her hands and assuring us that we would indeed depart. Our cook was AWOL. "Carnaval," she informed us, muttering under her breath, shrugging the international code of surrender.

Finally, three hours late, we headed out of town without the cook. Our driver, a broad-faced Quechua named Placido, took on the assignment. Gourmet-style meals would not be on the menu.

Arriving at the shores of Salar de Uyuni was like arriving to the edge of the Canadian Arctic, except the endless white merging with the blue horizon was salt, not snow. We frolicked like children after the first snowfall of the year, letting the salt spill from our hands, tasting it, running into the white expanse, laughing with giddy exhilaration.

We were at 3,650 metres altitude and we'd ascend to almost 5,000 metres on our tour. We snapped photos of each other, all of us radiant under the light cast by high-altitude sunshine, the white salt acting as the photographer's reflector. The young Argentine couple looked like they could have been movie stars. Their companion Cintia's green eyes took on cat-like depth.

As we travelled through the salar, we set our own tracks over the sparkling white expanse. Dark shapes of distant islands floated on the horizon, contained by the dome of deep blue sky. By the time the sky turned from blue to purple, we had crossed the salar and were in the landscape of rock and sandy soil of the altiplano. The only signs of human habitation were occasional small patches of the ancient Andean grain quinoa, cultivated on the side of heavily rutted facsimiles of roads.

The silence underscored the absence of Carnaval. I sighed with relief at my escape and concentrated on watching the striking landscape under the fading sun. Soon we pulled into the hamlet of San Juan, a drab collection of one-storey adobe-brick and cement buildings. And there it was coming up the street. Carnaval.

A straggle of indigenous villagers doused with confetti, wearing necklaces of paper streamers and carrying sprigs of quinoa paraded through dusty streets pounding on drums accompanied by discordant Andean woodwind instruments and whistles. Throughout the fiercely windy and cold night while shivering in my saggy cot in a drafty dormitory, I heard the cacophony of the homemade instruments and the men's laughter drunk with chicha. I pulled my tuque down over my ears and curled deeper into the metallic spring sag.

Early the next morning, we awoke to bright sunlight and cold. The festivities continued in the courtyard. The Toyota was covered in confetti and festooned in carnival garland and balloons. Placido leaned against it, drinking chicha with the locals and some of the other tour drivers. He poured us each the homemade maize brew to drink with him and to pour on the vehicle's wheels in a traditional

blessing.

Our 8 a.m. start time came and went. I cursed Carnaval and groaned to think of what might happen to us if Placido got drunk. But he was the figure of sobriety and we were on the trail just an hour or so behind schedule. Another group was not so lucky. Their driver got so hammered that a young Canadian traveller had to take the wheel for the day.

Rarely did we drive on roads; usually we followed tracks that zigzagged through the altiplano.

More than 70 years ago, this landscape inspired Salvador Dali's surrealistic paintings. Even though I'm familiar with his images, I wasn't prepared for the hallucinogenic experience of Dali's desert. We romped about clusters of huge twisted boulders that appeared before us, randomly protruding from a barren hillside, like extra-terrestrial flotsam. Chocolate-maple-vanilla sand swirls sprawled across ochre mountains rising from soundless endless desert, the expanse of which is breathtaking.

For lunch, Placido pulled the Landcruiser close to the shore of one of the small lakes in the area. He laid out our meal lakeside on a folding picnic table covered with a red checker tablecloth. While we ate wieners, canned meat, boiled eggs, green salad and rice, we were joined by thousands of flamingos elegantly bowing their heads as they dined on the algae under the water's wind-whipped surface. Three species of flamingos make this inhospitable landscape home.

As day left us and again I was in the icy dark sleeping on a worn-out cot, I was reminded this part of the country has the coldest recorded temperature in Bolivia at -26 C. Showers are usually not hot and buildings are not insulated or heated.

Placido woke us before dawn to another meagre breakfast of dry white bread, jam and margarine and a choice of tea or Nescafe. We missed our cook.

Frost clung to the windshield of the Toyota and we bundled up in all the clothes we'd brought along. Placido coaxed us into the vehicle and as the sun rose, we ascended to 4,800 metres to the steaming inferno of Sol de Manana geyser field. Weak morning sun shimmered through the steam, enveloping us as we nimbly walked on the crumbling cracked earth among the geysers. We were careful not to lose our tenuous grip to the earth's surface for fear of tumbling into one of the boiling, bubbling sulphuric holes that seemed to descend right into Hell.

Before long, Placido loaded us back into our four-wheel-drive chariot and deposited us in Heaven, the natural hot springs just minutes away on the edge of Laguna Colorado. Soon we were sighing with pleasure as our bodies thawed, vapour rising around us. I was euphoric, overwhelmed by the timeless bubble of our voyage, by what seemed to me like another atmospheric dimension unique to this altiplano.

How quickly things change. By midday, we found the gravel road leading us back to Uyuni and reality.

"What about the executive-class ticket I asked you to book on the train to the border?" I asked,

somewhat annoyed and expecting the worst.

"Well," Rosa said, fulfilling my fears. She'd tried, but because of Carnaval everything was full.

"Don't worry," she added when she noted my alarm. She'd managed to get me a third-class ticket. I was not happy. Rosa was unfazed.

I didn't see an option. Transportation in Bolivia is haphazard anywhere and Uyuni is notoriously difficult to get out of.

So, my Argentine companions and I bid adieu to our tour mates. After trying unsuccessfully to exchange our tickets to at least tourist class, we hunkered down in the train station to catch some shuteye before our 2 a.m. departure for the 10-hour train ride to the border.

The train arrived over an hour late. The scramble to get into the third-class car was an ominous portent of the trip to come.

My heart dropped when I found my seat. Those with assigned seating faced one another, knee-to-knee, in hard booth-style seats. Those without seats stood between our knees or sat on packages in the aisles. I jockeyed for shoulder space with a woman who sat on a box in the aisle, crowding me. After a few disgruntled words, sighs and rolling eyes, we nodded off to an uneasy sleep, back to back, supporting each other.

Finally weary and stiff, Cintia and I approached the chaos of the Bolivian-Argentine border. We looked bleakly at the mass of people milling about, waiting to get to a few church-basement tables where a handful of border guards searched suitcases. The system was clearly ineffective and we were doomed to be there all day.

"Carnaval," Cintia said, clearly exasperated. I shrugged like any Latina would. Cintia was in no mood for this. She complained of an earache and a sore stomach and still had a 24-hour bus trip to Buenos Aires. She assessed the melee. Then she turned to me, green eyes snapping and ordered,

"Vamos, chica." (Let's go, girl.)

We strode out of the brouhaha, past the baggage search and the border guards and onto Argentine soil. We left behind Carnaval and the unimaginable landscapes of this hidden corner of the Earth.

## **IF YOU GO**

The quality of the Salar de Uyuni tours varies. Talk to people who have been on a tour to get a first-hand account of their trip. Some tour operators out of La Paz or Oruro will book tours of the salar and transportation to Uyuni. Generally you must arrange your own transportation from Uyuni.

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