

GLOBE TROTTER

On Bolivian plateau, shivers and wonderment

There were four wool blankets on my bed, two stolen from a nearby unoccupied bunk, with a hot water bottle tucked underneath. For sleep attire I'd paired \$2 Bolivian long underwear with a down coat purchased on Cuzco, Peru's black market.



Claire Bushey

Still, I was colder than I'd ever been in my life, with no hope of heat until hours after sunrise.

For me, "south" used to be synonymous with "hot." "South" meant jungle and the equator.

Just before I left for my trip my mother suggested I take a coat. It was, after all, winter in the southern hemisphere. In my best patronizing manner I informed her it was South America and I would be fine.

Moral of the story: Listen to your mother.

There are hot spots in South America – the Amazon rainforest, the Atacama Desert by day – but so far I've avoided them, preferring to freeze in places like the Bolivian altiplano, where I huddled that night in my coat, praying for morning.

I had rented a sleeping bag from the tour company for \$5, but no one had packed it in the SUV, thanks to what a fellow traveler described as South Americans' "different attitude toward efficiency."

In fact, our entire five-person tour group struggled that night. Sleeplessness plagued us, a side effect of bedding down at 14,000 feet. Once awake, the cold kept us that way.

We'd arrived that afternoon at Laguna Colorado, a lake in the Eduardo Avaroa National Andean Fauna Reserve, in the southwestern corner of Bolivia after traversing a roadless desert in the altiplano's Conestoga wagon, the Toyota Land Cruiser. (Seat belts and working speedometers are for wimps.)

The lake was nestled in barren hills, ringed by a white shore of borax. It crumbled under my boots like pie crust as I walked toward the extraordinary water.

It was late afternoon and a chill

See BOLIVIA — F8



Claire Bushey photo

The barren landscape of the Bolivian altiplano.

Bolivia: 4,000 square miles of glittering salt

PAGE F1

blew small waves toward
They were orange.

o trick of the sunlight, La-
a Colorado, the colored lake,
s its name because of the
e growing there.

wrote in my travel journal:
didn't know such places ex-
l in the world."

hose words could just as eas-
pply to the great salt flat we
sed a day earlier. The Salar

de Uyuni is more than 4,000
square miles of glittering salt.

It tastes the same on the
plain as on the table. I licked the
ground to make sure.

Sound carries on the salt flat,
and depth perception vanishes.
Escaping oxygen honeycombs
the surface with hexagons.

There's water underneath, but
the salt, three feet thick in some
parts, can support the weight of
the Land Cruisers that ferry

tourists across it.

Tourists like us. Keith, Joe
and Pablo were friends from col-
lege. Pablo grew up in Bolivia.

Brigitte wrote for a German re-
ality TV show. We'd spent two
days sharing chocolate, leg
room and back stories, so on
that particularly awful night it
was natural that Brigitte
handed over her altitude medi-
cation to Joe, he gave me medi-
cine for my budding cold, and

everyone shared flashlights to
navigate the midnight trek to
the bathroom. (Twenty-four
hour electricity? Ha!)

The cold forces you to make
your own heat. The previous
night we searched the dark for
firewood, finally finding enough
dry brush and cactus for a bon-
fire. We split the last chocolate
sandwich cookies I had, told
ghost stories and searched for
the Southern Cross in a night

sky dark enough to reveal the
Milky Way.

Eventually, we ran out of
fuel, the fire died and we re-
turned to our freezing beds.

But the warmth from that
night remains in my memory.

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freelance journalist who worked for The
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Nights were bone-chilling cold on
the altiplano.

