



Salar fun.

We consulted our four maps and the GPS to try to figure out the best way to get from where we were to the next town and re-fuel. On the maps, the routes always looked easy: wind around this mountain, go for a bit, find the town, have a beer. That five-hour, first-gear, sandy slog had the worst roads that wound around and around to all the little farms and one-horse villages and back on themselves before reaching our destination. Once we arrived, we realized there was a new road a mile or so away from where we exited the salar that would have taken hours off the ride. We arrived in the town too late to continue further and checked into the only hotel in town, which had rooms consisting of two beds crammed into a tiny space.

We parked the motorcycles in the hotel owner's grandmother's garden on the next block. During my entire stay in Latin America, the motorcycle was never parked on the street unsupervised. There was always a

spare room, kitchen, or guarded car park where the bikes could safely stay. Often this was at the insistence of the hotel. We were guests in their country, and our hosts wanted no misfortune to fall upon us. Awkward parking spots made me appreciate the relative lightness of our bikes compared to some of the big touring models we had seen on the road. Two years earlier my ego had taken a hit when I sold my large, manly 1150 to get the 650. Now, with 50,000 kilometres of experience and nobody around to impress with any fancy gear, I was extremely content with my decision. In addition to the ease of parking, my fuel economy was 26



Amy and Tony on the salt.

kilometres per litre of fuel. My less expensive bike also meant less money being tied up with the carnet and more money available for travelling. I also came to believe that a traveller's packing list grew to match the carrying capacity of the motorcycle; bigger bikes meant more stuff. Finally, I realized I would rarely be able to use the extra power of a larger bike. I



Getting fresh salt for the evening's pasta.

drove slowly because the roads were new to me and often I shared them with animals – most alive, some dead. After all, why rush?

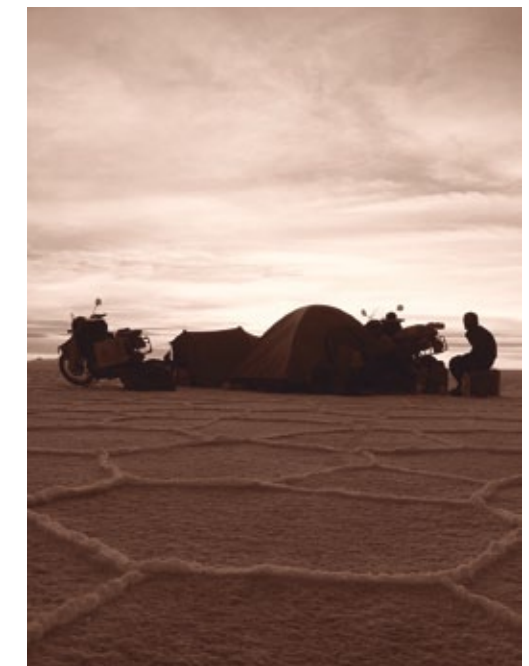
By noon the next day we were at the edge of the Salar de Uyuni and the 10 billion tons of salt it contained. The shoreline of the salar itself was mucky, so we kept to the established tracks that led from the shore out to the solid salt centre. There was a proper rock and soil island in the middle of the salar which was our first stop. I programmed the GPS coordinates and hit the "go to" button. A big arrow flashed back at me pointing in a southwest direction, and we started the 42.8 kilometre countdown towards something nobody could see yet. We accelerated through the gears and settled on a conservative 80 kph despite the lack of speed limits. I preferred not to ride fast during these magical moments. I knew they would be over soon enough and I wanted to soak in all the details of the ride. As an experiment, I closed my eyes to see how long I could manage to drive at 100 kph without looking, but it was not long.

I had been thinking about camping on the salar for several weeks, and I had no trouble convincing Amy and Tony to join in. We selected a spot by pulling in the clutch and where we stopped, we set up camp. We had been warned about the cold, being nearly out of sight of any land and high (3650 metres, 11,975 ft). I played the guitar and hollered away as the sun dropped, draping us in a massive pink and red glow before slipping behind the horizon. After dinner we each took a spot away from the others and lay out on the salt watching the stars, listening for any noises. My ears buzzed from the lack of sound. There was complete silence, and I felt a tremendous sense of personal accomplishment at having come this far.

In the morning, the salt demanded more investigation. It dried in consistent but not identical patterns. I saw shapes with five, six, seven, and eight sides. It was a 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> hopscotch field with no toilet, which made me wonder about having to go for a squat on the salar. In addition to not having a bush, rock or anything else to crouch behind, the surface was too hard to dig a cathole, and any shit left on the dazzling white surface would probably be visible from space.

Around the edge of the salt shapes, a 1/2" high salt border separated one shape from its neighbour. It was the crushing of these borders that made the driving roads on the salar noticeable, and differentiated it from the rest of the untravelled area. The solid driving surface allowed trucks to transport goods quickly and directly across the dry lake instead of using the bad dirt roads around it.

A week after the salar, we descended into Sucre with our noses burned and our lips cracked from our months at high altitude. Sucre was a



Nightfall on our salar campsite.