



Bolivia

# RIDING INTO THE SKY

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**Following two days in the Chilean desert town of San Pedro de Atacama, we are cruising back to the base of Licancabur Volcano. Its ashen flanks are our signal to turn north, drop from the asphalt, and begin our ascent into a land like no other. At an elevation of about 13,000 feet and occupying 10 percent of the country, the Bolivian Altiplano is the second highest plateau in the world, the highest being Tibet, and an incredible place to ride a motorbike.**

The Bolivian Altiplano is a geographical wonderland, a mix of volcanoes and windswept plains, where sandstone-rock formations dot the horizon and time stands still. On a gray, dusty track we roll on the gas and smile as our tires send up dust plumes that hang like vapor trails in the thin air.

Chalky gravel crunches under our tires as we ease the brakes close to the shores of Laguna Verde, which is a verdant shade of green from the copper infusing the water. We cautiously cross a shallow tributary, careful to stay dry because at this elevation we'd likely freeze before drying out. The desert is up ahead, an ash-smothered valley littered with boulders, prehistoric

cast-offs from a passing glacier a millennia before. Lisa's whoops of excitement can be heard over the considerable noise of her bike. Riding the pegs jockey style we push our body weight back from the bars and over the rear of the bikes. Our now-lighter front ends skip across the myriad of four-wheel-drive tracks etched into the ground by prior visitors.

Past Laguna Salada the thermal baths of Polques mark the end of our first day, a perfect setting as boiling water bubbles from deep underground. We think about pitching our tent until we realize that the door to a new wood building close by is open. We take the chance that no one will mind us seeking sanctuary for a night and roll out

our sleeping mats. At 5:30 a.m. we're woken by daylight streaming through the dusty window. Outside a dozen tourists tumble from the back of their over-filled and battered Land Cruisers, strip to their underwear, and prance barefoot across the sharp, rocky ground before dunking themselves in the scolding waters of the spring.

#### **Thin Air and Extreme Altitude**

A thousand feet higher we hand over our passports at one of the world's highest immigration offices. The Hito Cajón border post is our entry point into Lipez. Two Bolivian officials are barely recognizable buried under what looks like a hundred blankets, but they accept our passports and apply the necessary stamps.

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It's mid-September and we are pushing northeast. We battle numb hands and limbs despite wearing electrically heated clothing and as many layers as possible. The payoff for this bundling is a landscape unlike any other on Earth, more lunar than terrestrial. I sneak a glance at my GPS, and its dusty screen reads altitude 16,134 feet, higher than many of the tallest peaks in the Rockies, and we're still climbing. By midday the ride is taking its toll; we are both struggling to take a full breath in the thin air. At an altitude of 17,246 feet our concentration is taking a pounding, as our lungs are unable to fuel our brains with oxygen. The bikes feel a little labored, but both seem to be handling the dizzying heights better than their riders.

#### **Pink Flamingos in a Painted Landscape**

Deep within the Eduardo Avaroa Andean Fauna National Reserve we are surrounded by the beige and rust-colored Andean Mountains. We speed by as lava bubbles in tall, jagged volcanoes; at their feet, baby mud volcanoes erupt and hiss through the frozen soil. It's 5 p.m. and we need to rest so we decide to kick down the side-stands of our heavily laden bikes. Our moto-cross boots easily break the white saline crust that covers the sand. We are on the shores of Laguna Colorado, a wide but shallow lagoon of iridescent red water framed by copper mountains. In the acidic water thousands of pink flamingoes stand motionless, as if posed for National Geographic. Half a dozen take flight in unison, their webbed feet slapping the crimson water as their wide wings beat the air.

A mile farther we pull up to a group of stone and mud buildings and barter a price for two of the dirty mattresses in one of the long, stone rooms. Our hostess wears a traditional bowler hat, a thin, knitted overcoat, and five to six petticoats underneath







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we stop for water at the Arbol de Piedra, a stone monolith that has been carved by the weather and looks like a forgotten alien artifact. We take as many photos as we can until our hands become unresponsive because of the cold. Needing to hydrate we are unsurprised to find that our water has turned to ice. With hopes of settling our rumbling tummies we laugh out loud upon discovering that last night's pasta is now a lump of frozen red stuff.

Our faces and kit are an ashen gray, both dusted in the volcanic ash we've been riding in all day. A herd of grazing "vicunas", a sort of llama, stare at us, transfixed by the bikes. With our energy flagging we ride north through the Pampa Siloli, steeling ourselves for the last push of the day. Rounding a low, grass-covered hillside the first of four large lakes finally confirms our position. Crossing a large, clay pan we arrive at Laguna Cañapa and in turn pass Laguna Ramditas and Chiar Khota. With the last light of the day petering out we silence the bikes. Spellbound we watch the sun sink behind the stunning Lago Hedionda.

### A Different Kind of Gas Station

Forty miles later we enter the small village of San Juan de Rosario. In the afternoon light its dusty, wide streets look like a set from a Wild West movie, and we remember that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid hid out in Bolivia for years. We stop to ask a few locals for advice; we're both in need of fuel. With their directions we find Jorge. Rummaging furiously in his pockets he triumphantly produces a small brass key then opens the door to what we presume is his home, his front room transformed into San Juan's version of a gas station. Eight large, metallic drums are clearly marked with various grades of gasoline. After handing over our precious pesos Jorge pours gas from a large plastic container into our bikes. A dirty, used soda bottle cut in two makes a great funnel.

An easily found soft track snakes its way out of town, and we climb slowly into the mountains. The bikes feel heavy. Skirting several tiny hillside pueblos we are

her black skirt. We don't understand her words, which we presume are Quechua, one of Bolivia's 36 official languages other than Spanish. With our gear stowed for the night we enjoy a walk amid a sea of tall, blonde grass that covers a nearby hillside. Lungs Fit to Burst

only avoided the same thanks to long legs. An hour later, and after countless treks back and forth, we haul our gear to the new track, ride the bikes over, and reload.

### Trees of Rock

By midday we are struggling to make it to the top of a steep valley section. We rely on throttle power to pull us up and over the narrow, rocky track as it winds around daunting terrain. At the top we are spat onto another vast plateau and are instantly hit by a side wind. "This is what nowhere looks like!" I shout to Lisa as we ride roughshod through its center. Racing through this wind-sheared expanse

"Have we gone wrong?" Lisa yells over the noise of the wind. We've been on the go now for an hour, but because we are riding in super-fine dust and sand have only managed a measly 15 miles. The GPS confirms that we are 1,500 feet off course. Lisa's already suffered one bone-crunching fall, which tore off her pannier, and I've



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stopped at a small military checkpoint at Colcha K. Four young boys in camouflage flip through our papers, trying to disguise their obvious excitement over the bikes. Each of the boys wears a rifle, the butts of the weapons almost reaching the ground. They soon waive us on our way.

### Riding Across the World's Largest Salt Desert

Without warning the track stops, rock piles blocking the way. A painted rock reads "Salar de Uyuni," a blue arrow pointing left. Lisa and I swap an excited glance and race to find first gear, each wanting to beat the other onto the surface of the world's largest salt desert. We quickly drop on to the Salar's concrete-like surface, flicking through the gears until we hit 70 mph, speeding across a barren pavement of white. This immense plain is one of the world's greatest marvels, its surface nothing more than a thick layer of pure crystallized salt. At more than 7,500 square miles, the Salar is about 25 times larger than the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah.

Riding into an abyss of white we're thankful for our tinted visors as the blinding sunlight reflecting from the surface could easily burn our retinas. Appearing like a mirage on the horizon, the island of Isla de Pescadores offers us sanctuary from a world of brilliance, its brown surface lit-

tered with cacti. Llamas forage for food on its southerly banks. As the sun sinks we are treated to a spectacle: The entire Salar looks as though it's on fire, the once-white plain now bathed in a deep red glow.

Vicky, the manager, seems eager to learn of our travels. Sheepishly we ask permission to camp on the island. To our surprise she suggests that we sleep in the newly built museum, which right now is empty. With the bikes secure and our kit stowed we excitedly talk out the remainder of the day with Vicky. The next day, on the eastern shore of the Salar in the small town of Uyuni, we make sure to wash the bikes clean of the salt that would otherwise corrode them in weeks. Under a brilliant sun we strike a northeasterly path, skirting bright red canyon rims and tall ridges as six mining centers disappear in the dusty clouds behind us.

### Spiralling into La Paz

La Paz has to be close; the traffic for the last hour has been steadily growing heavier and more manic. Riding a three-lane highway we cruise the top lip of the valley that edges in the north side of this sprawling metropolis. At a small ticket booth we pay a few pesos to ride in, and we pull over to get our first real look at one of the world's most famous cities. A vast collage of ramshackle tin and brick homes are

intermingled with tall skyscrapers, which are now reflecting the low afternoon sun. Every conceivable piece of land has been used; a city that presumably once started in the center of this long, shallow valley has grown out of control. By some miracle thousands of buildings and homes now line the steepest parts of the cliff, each one taking a precarious grasp of some piece of earth.

Taking a deep breath we join the speedway madness spiraling into the heart of La Paz. We need eyes in the backs of our heads, as half the road users seem desperate to become organ donors. Overloaded buses with aged and abused suspensions lean at alarming angles as gravity, speed and centrifugal force take hold on bends they've taken a thousand times.

Pulling up in one of La Paz's largest plazas, the Iglesia de San Francisco, Lisa pulls out her guide book, and 30 minutes later we are checked in to the Hotel España. Back at the Iglesia de San Francisco we sip on ice-cold beers and let the delicious madness that is La Paz wash over us. Bolivia is intoxicating; Bolivia is a land of superlatives; Bolivia is here for you, just waiting to be explored on two wheels. **RR**

GPS files are available for download in each digital issue purchased or included in your subscription. Log in at [www.roadrunner.travel](http://www.roadrunner.travel).



# Facts & Information

Total Mileage  
Approximately 1027 miles.



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## In General

Most of Bolivia is more than 13,000 feet above sea level. The main language is Spanish and the population is mostly Roman Catholic. The currency is the Boliviano, and \$1 is equal to 7 Bolivianos (BOB). ATMs are available in major cities and towns. In rural areas rely on cash.

Bolivia is in the Southern Hemisphere so summer is from November to March. The weather is warmer during these months, but much wetter, so the best time to travel here is winter. Winter temperatures in Bolivia's high plateaus can drop as low as -4 Fahrenheit.

## How to Get There

U.S. citizens require a passport and visa. Major airlines have daily flights from the U.S. into Bolivia's international airport, El Alto. Bolivia has several entry and exit points on land. There are asphalt road crossings from Argentina and Peru. The others from Brazil, Chile and Paraguay are all off-road routes and are difficult to travel during the rainy season.

## Food & Lodging

There is a wide range of lodging available. Hostels, guest houses and a range of hotels can be found in all major towns and cities. In the Altiplano the accommodations are very basic. Camping is possible, but make sure you are prepared for the cold if traveling in winter.



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

The breakfast on the go is the "salteña," a small pastry filled with meat and vegetables. Other snacks are "sandwich de chola," or roasted pork leg, and "chicharron," pieces of fried pork. In Bolivia the meat tends to be llama, chicken or pork. Bolivian food is not spicy, but a sauce called "la llajwa," made with tomatoes and chilies, is always available if you like it hot!

## Roads & Biking

Only 5 percent of the roads in Bolivia have asphalt. Travel during the rainy season is difficult as many roads and bridges can be washed out. U.S. citizens require an international driving license.

## Contact Information

- Up-to-date information on visa requirements and travel advice: [www.travel.state.gov/travel](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel)
- Bolivia Tourism: [www.travel-bolivia.com](http://www.travel-bolivia.com)

## Books & Maps

- *The Rough Guide to Bolivia 2* by James Read, Rough Guides, ISBN 978-1843538592, \$24.99.
- *Pocket Adventures Bolivia* by Vivien Loughheed and John Harris, Pocket Adventures, ISBN 978-1588435262, \$13.99
- *Bolivia and Paraguay Nelles map*, ISBN 978-3865742056, \$22.48

## Motorcycles & Gear

1999 BMW R 1100 GS  
2002 BMW F 650 GS  
Jacket and Pants: BMW Rally 1  
Helmets: BMW System 5  
Boots: MX boots - Alpinestars Tech 6 and Gearne SG10  
Luggage: Touratech Zega

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