



Saline solution: a mineral lake on the edge of the Salar; the shapes and lines of a windblown landscape (right and below centre)

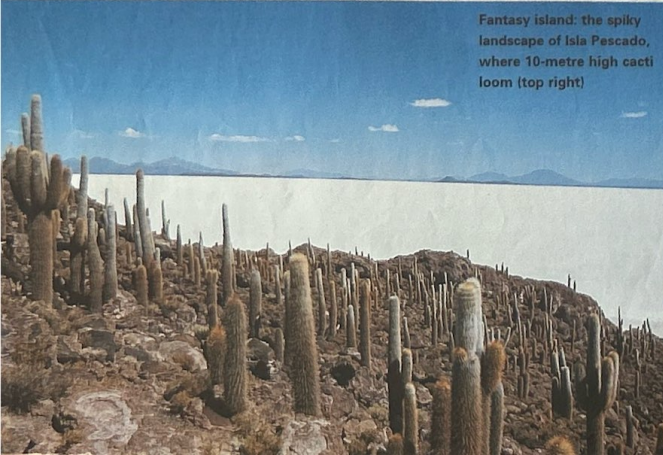


Diamond geyser: Mother Earth lets off steam on the Sol de Mañana plateau



# Salt of the earth

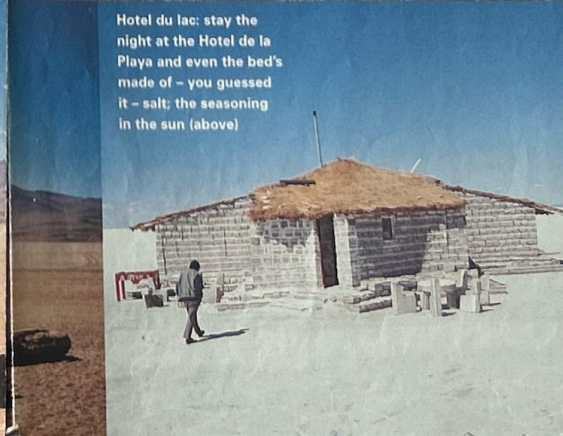
White, bright, weird. In a wind-blown corner of South America lies a hotel made of salt. Laurence Weinberger visits and is amazed. Very amazed...



Fantasy island: the spiky landscape of Isla Pescado, where 10-metre high cacti loom (top right)



Hotel du lac: stay the night at the Hotel de la Playa and even the bed's made of - you guessed it - salt; the seasoning in the sun (above)



**A** blinding white salt desert miles from anywhere is the last place you'd expect to find a hotel. But there it is, barely visible in the white haze of the largest and highest salt lake in the world, the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia. When we get up close, it's obvious this is no ordinary hotel - it's made entirely of salt. Standing on the terrace, staring at a vast expanse of nothingness, is weird enough. But when a man in a sombrero slowly cycles out of the whiteness, my grip on reality seriously starts to slip.

This is only day one of our expedition into the mad wilderness of the Bolivia-Chile borderlands. By the time we reach San Pedro de Atacama in Chile at the end of the trip, the sight of that cyclist riding through a sea of salt will seem normal compared to the dreamscapes that followed.

Our trip started in one of the world's most uninspiring places - Uyuni, a wind-blasted frontier town which time seems to have forgotten and civilisation overlooked. To most Bolivians it's the back of beyond. It's certainly a tad culturally challenged. A cinema, a few restaurants and a draughty hotel hardly make for a tourist Mecca, but then the gringos who fetch up here come for one element and one element only: salt. There are about 10 billion tons of it spread out in a great white wilderness, creating landscapes even Salvador Dali would have trouble getting his head round.

Getting there takes a bit of effort. The Salar has largely >

DEREK SEARE/TRIP/LAURENCE WEINBERGER