



Borderline: Laguna Verde turns Chile; a shop full of salty souvenirs (below); chilling out at the salt hotel (bottom)

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escaped the onslaught of mass tourism thanks to its location in the most remote corner of an already out-of-the-way country. Roads, houses, water, even people are virtually non-existent on the salt flats themselves, and only marginally more evident in the surrounding wilderness.

'Two Americanos, they try to cross alone on motorcycles. They lost, they stay lost,' Felamon, our driver, explains as, shortly after our arrival in Uyuni, we sign a contract committing him to get us across the Salar to Chile in three days. Four hours of haggling in a travel agency secures him, his jeep, a cook and our Chilean visas. With departure scheduled for dawn, we have plenty of time to watch the sun set over the Mad Max desolation of the Uyuni badlands.

Sunrise finds us at the heart of a four-jeep stampede out of town. And it is only then, when seven of us find ourselves crammed into a speeding Landcruiser, that real introductions are made. Besides Felamon and our cook Lucy (who looks like a Bolivian Mrs Merton), there are Brits Maggie and Jim (in colour co-ordinated Patagonia gear), Nick from New York, and Sven, a sleepy-looking Dutchman.

Half an hour out of Uyuni the dusty earth of the Altiplano plateau gives way to the glaring white crust of the Salar, and minutes later there is nothing to see but hexagonal salt tiles stretching out like a colourless puzzle. This is Death Valley,

only not as hot and without so much as a longhorn skull to indicate life. It's difficult to imagine it was once part of a massive lake which covered most of Bolivia and that this white blanket of uninhabited nothingness stretches over 12,000 sq kms, an area roughly the size of Wales.

Anything that isn't flat and white stands out, so when we drive into Cooperativa Rosario, a small hive of industrial activity, it's a bit of a shock. Felamon proudly points at the neat rows of salt blocks and pyramids, almost invisible in the brightness of the Salar, that have been piled up by one of the few families which have the right to extract salt. Most of it is used for domestic consumption, but at the cooperative they have cottoned on to the tourist potential and now sell everything from salt deck chairs to salt ashtrays. Felamon explains that villagers still trade it for goods such as maize and coca, but Sven seems far more interested in checking that the white stuff is definitely only the kind you put on your chips and casually licks a layer off one of the pyramids. Soon, we're all at it, convincing Felamon that his passengers are all one llama short of a herd.

But when we come to Hotel de la Playa



– the salt hotel – plonked in the middle of the bleached wilderness, he, unlike the rest of us, doesn't find it strange at all. You can stay here for around \$20 a night. Everything is salt here – the chairs, tables, rubbish bins and even the beds, which I have to say don't look too inviting.

But we really begin to suspect Lucy of putting more than iodine in our water when, later in the day, we spot what looks like a spine-covered flying saucer hovering over the horizon. It turns out to be the Isla Pescado – a desolate island covered with 10-metre high cartoon-like cacti. Set against the 180-degree view of the salt flats, and the distant Volcán Tunupa, >