

TRAVEL BOLIVIA

On top of the world

Craig Tansley revels in a respite from fellow tourists on his odyssey across the high plains.

"Forget everything you know about Chile ... you're in Bolivia now." Guide Erich Hochhauser's face looks so wind-worn you could crack walnuts on his cheekbones. Backpackers are huddling in tiny shelters beside the border checkpoint, a 90 km/h gale having brought temperatures down to zero or below. The roads – bitumen until this point – have turned to volcanic ash. The preferred people-moving vans of Chile have all morphed into Land Cruisers, the only vehicles brutish enough for travel on the high volcanic plain where we'll reach altitudes of 5000 metres.

My driver, Rene, has negotiated this road his whole life, which is just as well, because today he won't see it. When the dust storm clears for a few seconds, I can't help bracing as Land Cruisers come at us at 80 km/h, missing us by centimetres, but Rene continues to chew calmly on his llama jerky.

Outside, the world has turned surreal. Appropriately, the high desert we're careering across is named after Salvador Dalí. Pink flamingos stand in chartreuse-green lagoons, and lava rocks the size of my apartment double as boundary markers to guide us through. We're barely an hour's drive from one of Chile's most popular tourist destinations – the Atacama Desert – but here I might be Mad Max in his V8 Interceptor; all alone save for a few hardy souls in 4WDs, their possessions packed tight on roof racks, traversing a landscape that looks just as post-apocalyptic as the movie's.

Suddenly, the wind stops entirely. And I see now we're driving on the world's largest salt flat – 12,000 square kilometres of crunchy white crust that shimmers under blue sky, surrounded by stark brown mountains and volcanoes.

There's not another vehicle in sight for the hour-long crossing – that is, until I see a silver Airstream camper parked in the middle of the flat. A beaming Bolivian in a crisp white chef's uniform approaches, holding out a tray of what look like canapés.

While the country's better-known, better-resourced neighbours Peru and Chile attract millions of international travellers each year, Bolivia remains relatively undiscovered. Right now there's no traveller within 50 kilometres. As the sun dips and the temperature drops 20 degrees in 20 minutes, I keep warm beside a wood



fire, eating a three-course meal served under a billion bulging, blinking stars, with the Milky Way visible across the entire circumference of the night sky.

Waking at dawn, the first sun rays light up Tunupa, the volcano that towers above my camper. Sleep was hard to come by last night – the stars were so bright that I felt compelled to leave the warmth of my sheepskin blankets to step outside in the frigid air and behold the sky.

Visiting the tiny farming community nestled beneath Tunupa, I watch locals plough the chocolate-coloured soil of pasture land that is separated by cobbled boundaries over 5000 years old.



Clockwise from above: a shepherd at work on Isla del Sol; Spanish colonial architecture in La Paz; accommodation on the salt flat is a luxury camper. PHOTOS: CRAIG TANSLEY

I'm driven to a large cave just beside the village; a farmer follows on a moped and kick-starts an old generator into life to light up an enormous chamber of intricate stalactites and stalagmites. I stare up at the walls as he waits, arms folded.

Tourism is like this in Bolivia; there's an innocence to it, as though you've journeyed back in time to an era that precedes the business of travel. The crowds will come, eventually – tourism is becoming one of the country's most significant industries – but for now, you can enjoy it without the visitors who flock to anywhere worth posting on Instagram.

Even the capital, La Paz, is all but empty of international tourists. And yet La Paz is Rio with a nosebleed, a metropolis built at impossible angles at about 3600 metres above sea level – the world's highest capital city. While there's a modernity to some of the city, llama fetuses hang by their necks (offerings to Pachamama, Mother Earth) at stores throughout the city, where shamans rule the streets. I walk along narrow, cobbled lanes, some still powered at night

by oil lanterns. Through gaps in the streetscape there are glimpses of soaring, snow-capped mountains and homes teetering on sheer cliffs.

At dusk, this must be the most extraordinary city on Earth: from the bar of my hotel, Casa Grande, in the lower part of La Paz, I gaze up at entire escarpments of rugged orange-brown rock that look like a suburban Grand Canyon, the twinkling lights of homes clinging to clay slopes coming at me from every direction. Each day La Paz's inhabitants climb up to their impossibly angled homes, their calves sculpted as though from bronze.

One morning I watch as a blind man negotiates his way down a street with the pitch of a ski slope, and wonder what keeps him from cart-wheeling all the way to Moon Valley, 500 metres below. In La Paz, car wheels are chocked – no handbrake should bear this much responsibility.

Even in Bolivia's most popular tourist region, Lake Titicaca, it's easy to find peace and quiet. On the Peruvian side, the world's highest navigable lake bustles with tourists,



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at Puno. But on the eastern stretches I step outside my lakeside hotel and watch the sun set across the water with just cows and llamas for company.

Here, the Andes are clearly visible, some peaks rising to almost 7000 metres. I pass donkeys laden with firewood and calico-coloured fields of potato, maize and quinoa farmed by locals in traditional dress. An old hydrofoil takes me to the lake's Isla

del Sol, the Island Of The Sun, from which Incas believed the sun rose and into which it set. Agricultural terraces, thousands of years old, are cut into the sheer slopes of the island, still farmed by about 800 resident families. I walk along terraces, passing shepherds herding their flocks, to a family-run restaurant, where I sit in soft sunshine on a pre-Inca terrace above the water.

Crossing the border into Peru I stay at Puno's finest, Hotel Libertador. It's here, in a space teeming with American and European tourists on luxury package tours, where bulletin boards highlight breakfast meeting times and harried travellers swish past in pants that zip off at the knee, that I long for the lonely Bolivian high plains, a world away from modern tourism. **L&L**

The writer travelled with the assistance of Abercrombie & Kent and LATAM.



Clockwise from left: a private chef awaits hungry travellers on the world's largest salt flat; Isla del Sol on Lake Titicaca; Moon Valley, La Paz.



Need to know

Getting there LATAM operates seven one-stop flights each week from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, with onward connections throughout South America. From October 6, LATAM will also offer three non-stop flights each week from Melbourne to Santiago. Tel: 1800 126 038. For more see latam.com

Tours Abercrombie & Kent offers the 11-day "Chile, Bolivia & Peru: Deserts, Lakes & Salt Plains", a hosted, small group journey with departures in May and September 2018, from \$11,895 a person. The company also offers a nine-day private tour through Chile and Bolivia. See abercrombiekent.com.au



Yellow, Red, Blue, 1925



On White II, 1923



Composition No. 7, 1913

A PIONEER OF ABSTRACT MODERN ART

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TRAVELLER
Anthony Svirskis
TRIBE executive

First, business or economy Economy. But I'm two metres tall, so I do treat myself to an exit row on long-haul flights.
avourite travel destination Europe. My background is Eastern European and I'm lucky enough to have an EU passport. Now that TRIBE has expanded into Europe, I get to visit every few months.
avourite airport I'm not sure there is such a thing. Airports like Singapore, Dubai or Hong Kong do the best job of distracting travellers on stopovers.
If I ran my own airline I would... Move quickly towards embracing a real-time and customisable model. The low-cost carrier model, with surcharges for extras, has merit across the sector. Buyable meals, class upgrades and experiences will surely become commonplace on the long-haul carriers.
Where would you go with an unlimited travel budget? The Galápagos Islands. I'd love to see what Charles Darwin saw. I'd wrap this up into a pretty significant trip through South America.
Worst place you've been lost It's

certainly not the worst place, but I lost my way on Phi Phi Island, in Thailand, one night. That was also the last time I drank a cocktail from a bucket.
Best trip ever My first big trip out of Australia with friends. I was 20 and we backpacked around Thailand's beaches, with no particular schedule – the sense of freedom was unparalleled.
Most memorable overseas dining I was on a five-day boat tour of the Red Sea in Egypt and meals were prepared fresh from the daily catch.
In the suitcase Too many clothes. For my carry-on, I'll always be wearing a zip-up hoodie and darkish colours, as spills from those economy food trays are unavoidable. On the plane, I'll be armed with a neck pillow, noise-cancelling headphones and an eye mask.
First thing you do in a new city After long-haul, I try to go for a run as it helps with jet lag. I usually stay in Airbnb accommodation, so I'll also hit a supermarket for breakfast foods.
How do you make the most of a spare

afternoon in a strange city? If I'm solo, then it's likely to be something touristy. **Who would you most like to travel with and why?** I really enjoy travelling with friends. From a luxury viewpoint, hanging on to the coat-tails of Richard Branson would be an experience.

Spending time abroad, I realised how stable life in Australia is.

Cure for jet lag Exercise, Melatonin and sleeping tablets.
Other travel tips Don't use foreign ATMs. Australian banks charge amazing amounts for withdrawals.
Is there anywhere you'd recommend/like to go to for a special occasion? New York still blows me away. Overwhelmingly impressive and never

dull. I'm still hanging on to the dream that I'll get to live there one day.
Best overseas purchase A tailored winter jacket I bought in London.
Best travelling tale Meeting Ray Kelvin, the founder of Ted Baker in the flagship store in London. I initially thought he was just an older shop assistant, but once he introduced himself as the founder, he went straight into personal clothing advice and conversations about business. Twenty minutes later, I'd spent £400 [about \$680] on a new wardrobe I never knew I wanted. Smart guy.
Best thing about travelling Perspective. I feel so fortunate to live in Australia. When I spent significant time abroad I realised how straightforward and stable life in Australia is.
Top travel gripe The general stress levels of everyone in an airport, myself included. However, once I'm on the plane, I enjoy the flight and forced disconnection from technology.

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