



## Bolivian rangers

[ from "Land Rover" - September 2005 ] by James and Kerry Cockburn

**The good old compass still comes in handy when a poor quality map leads to a five-hour detour...**

Customs and immigration was a breeze into Chile and we arrived in San Pedro de Atacama a little after lunch. The entire town's buildings are made of reddish mud/clay and very quaint. Kerry fell in love with the town immediately. We booked into a campside where we perked in the car park and had use of all the toilet facilities.

We also met Chris, a young Scottish/German guy who has been travelling around for three-and-a-half years in his customised Ex-Military Series II, Mathilda. He has driven from the UK across Siberia through Alaska and is still heading south.

He is also a bit of a dab hand with mechanics and James took great joy in both of them trying to fix all the little niggling jobs we needed to do to Lodzi. Therefore, we now have the compressor fixed, all the dash board lights working and a hidden kill switch fitted.

After resting up we headed off into the Atacama desert for a few days of rough camping. At first we attempted to drive across the salt flats on a 'track' that we had on our map. Well before you even reach the mud, you cross the fine, whitish powder that submerges the vehicle. After two hours and 5kms we turned around and changed plans. Although we used the diff lock the whole time, we were fortunate not to get bogged down.

Driving out to the Los Flamingos National Park for lunch, we took a drive up into the mountains to see two stunning lagunas, the most impressive being Laguna Miscanti, which was full of waterfowl.

### Atacama beauty

After a night camped in the Atacama desert basin, we headed for the Laguna Ceja, not far from San Pedro. A little hard to find but absolutely worth it. We both agreed probably the most beautiful camp spot we have found to date. There are about seven small dispersed Salt Laguna's of crystal water. The water is so salty you float on top and another amazing character is that the top 10cm is ice cold, below that the water is luke warm. Not being able to sink, you end up floating in the ice cold water. We hope the pictures show what a stunning setting it was.

Another night in San Pedro and we set off to Calama to undertake some necessary shopping. Our return trip was via El Tatio geysers, where we spent another night with the temperature dropping below  $-10^{\circ}$



at about 4,300m. Fortunately, Chris had given us an extra blanket but, due to the condensation of our bodies overnight, the blanket was covered in ice in the morning. On waking at 6 am we were camped in the middle of about 100 geysers ranging from little steam jets to huge boiling pools of water and spent the whole morning walking among them all.

Unfortunately the road up to the geysers was exceptionally bad with corrugations and, while high in the mountains, the brakes went all spongy and we lost them altogether. On immediate inspection, James discovered the front right brake pipe had broken off at the entry to the callipers and we had proceeded to pump all our brake fluid out over the wheel. After clamping the pipe and refilling the oil, we continued with the car pulling to the left when the brakes were applied.

### **Good as new**

Returning once more to San Pedro, James - with the help of Chris - found some spare brake pipe at the local mechanics yard and managed to make a new pipe and bracket for the connection.

Good as new, so far.

James and Chris also managed an afternoon of sand boarding in Valle de Muerte (ominously Valley of death) it was great fun, although you soon miss chair lifts when you spend ten minutes walking up 51 metres and 15 seconds coming down. Not quite snowboarding, but excellent fun.

After over a week in San Pedro where we had been following the political problems in Bolivia, we decided to head up the south west part of the country where we were assured by the tour agencies there were no road blocks or local hassles. As we left Chile we hit dirt roads like we have never come across in our lives.

Passing through some stunning scenery we camped our first night at 4,700m in some rock formations on a large freezing sand plateau. We had all the ingredients for our worst night yet: James choosing to continue driving after we had found an ideal camp spot (lower in altitude and more protected), an icing cold wind howling, not being able to get out the wind totally, everything in the car freezing before we fully decamped, the gas being too cold to light, not enough oxygen in the back cab to cook anything and both of us having severe headaches from the altitude. So, at 7.30pm, we decided to just go to bed and trying getting warm.

After a very long cold night, where the



We were thankful to cross into Chile - road signs every where - Bliss.

Our first night in Chile we found a nice quiet spot high in the mountains, near some thermal pools, where we had our first bath in days and a nice relaxing evening, until...

At midnight the trucks started driving slowly passed us (we were camped about 15 miles from the road). For some reason this was a very popular route to a very remote border crossing into Bolivia, high in the mountains and far away from everywhere. Looked dodgy to us, so who knows?

### **Active volcanoes**

We drove through some stunning scenery, surrounded by active volcanoes, wild vicunas everywhere (similar to llamas) and the most beautiful hot springs in the valley of Salar Surire where we both had full mud baths (supposedly very good for skin). It is now three days later and we can still smell the eggy sulphur perfume on our skin each time we sweat.

Disgusting.

temperature dropped to  $-12^{\circ}\text{C}$ , we woke in the morning to find we were hidden from the morning sun by the highest rock for miles around. Lodzi was too cold to start and, as we were parked in the sand, it was too heavy to push. Finally at 10am we set off – what a night.

### **Horrendous journeys**

This part of Bolivia has no official road, when the corrugation get too bad, a new track is formed. Therefore, you have almost 50 separate tracks heading across the plains with no official roads being marked. Add to this no road signs and you have the makings of a truly horrendous journey. After being lost half the second day and not seeing anybody for hours on end, we amazingly arrived at the little village of San Juan, our next night stop. Here we booked into a hostel with warmish water for a shower and no heating. The meal was superb, though. Setting off for Salar Uyuni, the largest salt flat in the world, we were immediately lost and by the time we came across a village that was on our map we were about 100kms from where we hoped to be. We were told there was access to the Salar and, after following vague directions, we managed to find the only access road into the Salar that is surrounded by water. We returned to the village to continue to Uyuni at about 4:30pm. By this stage, we had resorted to using the compass instead of the map.

As we had some time to spare we headed for a car wash (Uyuni's speciality due to the salt lake) and had Lodzy pressure washed all over and under for less than \$5. This also included the recommended 'Fumigas' where they spray the whole underside of the vehicle with a WD40 sort of oil for added protection against the salt. We booked into a local, cheap hotel where the only perk you had was six blankets on the bed. There was no room heating and it was so cold at night there was ice in the inside of all the windows and all the water in the room was frozen in the morning. We spent three days in Uyuni, mainly as we wanted some work done to Lodzi, increasing the security further North and in Central America. Lodzi now has a metal sheet over the lower half of the rear pod window and a couple of metal upright struts that now bolt to the bottom drop down door. More than an opportunistic deterrent than a 100 percent proof security feature.

At this stage we are now acclimatised to camping at over 3,500m and the temperature dropping to below freezing every night, but still not happy with it.

On our final night in Chile we drove about 50kms from the border to the small town of Putre and booked into a hostel where we could have a warm bed and hot shower, (the first for almost a week, thermal pool aside). Well, can you believe, the whole town had no water. Luckily in the morning, water was back on flow, so we were able to bid Chile a final farewell smelling nice and fresh for our journey back into Bolivia.

An easy border crossing the next day and we had decided to take a short drive to the base of Volcan Sajama where we once again spent a rather chilly night camping.

A fairly easy drive the following day and we arrived in La Paz just after lunch. La Paz is an amazing city nestled in a valley although still at 3,800m above sea level – the highest capital city in the world.

We had been given an 'Overlander Friendly' Swiss owned hotel address just 12kms from the city centre, where you have a dedicated car park and the use of all the hotel facilities. An easy drive through La Paz's very hectic traffic and we arrived at Hotel Oberland in one piece. Before we head further north, we had decided to undertake a Spanish refresher course and had a week's worth of lessons. La Paz is an easygoing city with an excellent Black Market and Art and Craft Market where you can literally buy anything under the sun. We spent numerous hours walking around the markets in our free afternoons and had some quality time to catch up on a few chores to the Landy.

We managed to fill our gas bottle at the local plant and, more importantly, buy replacement rear tyres as our BF Goodrich were now absolutely tattered to the point of being distorted and having holes showing the inside wire re-enforcement. Unfortunately, BF Goodrich is not represented in La Paz and the only All Terrain tyres our size (and our price range) were Dunlop. So we will give them a go.

### **Amazing experience**

Day four. We finally left Uyuni and headed out onto the Salar, an amazing experience. You drive at 90kmh over white as white salt that is frozen and dried to up to five metres thick. Below that is salt water. If you hit a shallow or soft spot, you can lose the whole car. There is white all around as far as you can see and into the horizon as with all lakes, it has islands, and we camped the night on one of the island before heading off the next day for a five hour trip to the Chilean border of Colchane, where a local tour guide had drawn the route on our useless map. We found our way off the Salar and to the first village and then turned North and the next village was about 50kms up a deteriorated dust road. Well, as the road met with a salt flat, it branched into three with no signs. Choosing one, about 25kms later we realized we were heading too far west and obviously were on the wrong route. Instead of turning round, Kerry decided from the map we could drive around this salt flat and still come out in the sama place. After driving for another five hours, we were still hopelessly lost and had only come across about two of the villages on our map were there should have been about ten.

Continuing north, we kept stopping and asking as many locals as possible. The area we were now in, we don't think, has many tourists and most of the locals have never left these little villages, let alone in a car. So the directions we kept being given, although enthusiastic, were totally wrong.

We finally ended up at dusk, in a sand storm, in the middle of a large mud/salt flat where the road just terminated into nowhere.

James then decided to drive across the rough country to some 'houses' we spotted and asked for more directions. A very helpful local then took us to the closest dirt road and sent us north where we found a spot to camp for the night.

After driving for another three hours the next morning we finally landed on the right road to the border. As we got closer to the border, we could see all the evidence of the previous week's demonstrations as there were still huge boulders on the roads and many burnt out tyres scattered all over the road.

Food here is exceptionally tasty with the main meal being consumed at lunch time and most of the restaurants closed at night. 'Menu del dia' is the best option where, for about US\$2, you get a three course meal. We have been lucky with the hygiene as neither of us has had an upset stomach...yet.

For all adventure enthusiasts, numerous tour companies offer a mountain bike from the rim of a Paz down into the Yunga valley to a village called Coroica. It is almost 95kms, all down hill, with the last 60kms being on dust roads along, reputedly, the 'world's most dangerous road' where you can cycle along a single track dust road cut into the side of the cliff, a 150m drop on one side and supporting two way traffic. We booked our tour and had a fantastic, extremely dusty day out with a group of eight other adventure seekers.

### **Campsite mutterings**

Safely back in La Paz the Overland Campsite has filled up and now contains a Unimog, two Land Rovers, two Land Cruisers, a W Camper and two assorted camper vans, all containing German and Swiss travellers.

We have found the different cultures synonymous with the vehicle you drive very entertaining. For example Land Cruiser traveller tend to discuss the route and the countries they have visited, Land Rover travellers tend to discuss the latest mechanical set backs or leaks.

A lot of useful tips or route information have been exchanged and the email contact list expands day by day.

We have now decided to continue into the rainforest and pampas region of North Bolivia as the Land Rover Td5 in the campsite has just completed what sounds like an amazing tour. We have found the Bolivian people very friendly so far and the country extremely cheap to travel in. We stock up tomorrow and head off just before lunch, finally into some warm weather again.