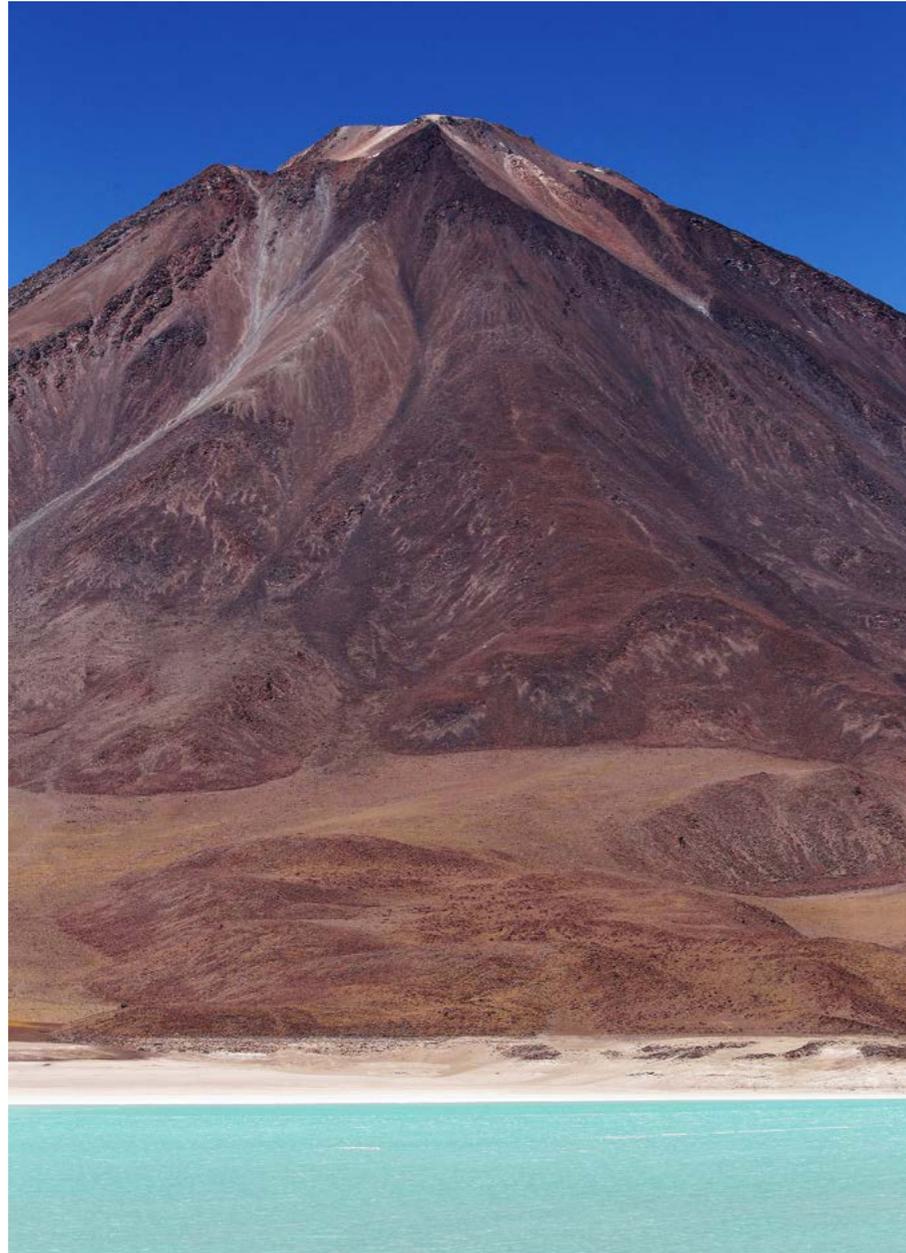


Get Surreal



Text
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Facing page
The other-worldly landscape of Bolivia's Altiplano is ringed in vast, desolate plains stained ochre and rust-brown, and speckled with turquoise lagoons that turn a brilliant emerald green when the wind blows

That the most exclusive accommodation in Bolivia is a caravan says as much about the country's paucity of luxury lodgings as it does the thrilling off-road adventures in store for travellers to this surreal, landlocked nation high in the Andes.

It's an other-worldly setting for a retro-deluxe Airstream camper built for earthly comforts, while channelling a space capsule transported in from another galaxy. Getting to it involves hurtling in a 4x4 across the dazzling expanse of the Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flats. Spread across some 11,000 square kilometres and at 3,600 metres above sea level, Bolivia's greatest attraction is a blinding-white saline sea devoid of life — except for a few hapless llamas, lizards and rabbit-like viscacha stranded on Incahuasi, a bizarre island where cacti forests tower overhead.

Spectacular at any time of year, the salt flats transform into a gigantic, mind-boggling mirror during the rainy season when their shallow, glassy waters reflect the mountains, sky and clouds. It's catnip for world wanderers, who traipse across the globe in search of photo opportunities like this.

The caravan comes with a private chef who doubles as waiter and barman, as adept at mixing an Andean-gin and tonic as whipping up chocolate soufflé in the middle of nowhere. At night, I venture outside in sub-zero temperatures to revel in the solitude and silence under a magnificent constellation of stars.

No less alien are the lagoons and deserts of the Altiplano within the Eduardo Avaroa Andean Fauna National Reserve — a stunning landscape formed millions of years ago when the planet was a heaving, seething mass. Volcanoes — some still smoking — ring the vast, desolate plain, much of it stained ochre

and rust-brown from mineral deposits. It's a land so strange that Salvador Dalí, who never visited the Altiplano, is said to have been inspired by it. Look at his works and the likeness is clear.

The patchwork of lagoons, at altitudes up to 4,500 metres, will almost certainly take your breath away. Laguna Verde, arguably the most dramatic, turns a brilliant emerald green when the wind blows, while the crimson waters of Laguna Colorada may as well be blood seeping up from the bowels of the earth, though its colour is caused by algae and minerals. Incredibly, the lagoons teem with pink flamingos, hardy birds that can withstand the extreme microclimates' salty, sulphurous waters, burning sun, freezing cold and lack of oxygen.

Travellers here are likely to overnight in the capital La Paz, a high-altitude conurbation that sprawls along a valley, precariously up clay cliffs and along a plateau. It's not the place to get your design fix, though things are changing.

The Atix, the city's first true boutique hotel, opened in late 2016. Clad in native wood and Comanche stone, the minimalist interiors are spiced up with colourful works by the country's best-known artist Gastón Ugalde. Boosting the city's luxe credentials further is the new, mid-century-meets-neoclassical Altu Qala hotel, which also houses the city's coolest café, Hb Bronze Coffeebar.

My journey concludes at Gustu, the brainchild of Noma co-founder Claus Meyer. While the modern dining room could be in Lima or London, the ingredients and menu sing of Bolivia. Quinoa from the Andes, trout from Lake Titicaca and fish from the Amazon, paired with wines from Tarija. I leave sated, but with a hunger for more of this extraordinary land.



This page
A visit to the world's largest salt flats Salar de Uyuni, set at more than 3,600 metres above sea level, is nothing short of dazzling



Facing page
The mesmerising landscape can seem devoid of life but for a few hardy creatures like these llamas is nothing short of dazzling



The sloping and barren hills make for a dramatic backdrop, and are said to have inspired Salvador Dali