

OF STARS AND SALT FLATS

An adventure from La Paz in Bolivia via the spectacular salt flats of the Salar de Uyuni to the Atacama Desert in Chile gave **Tricia Welsh** the chance to savour the region's diverse gastronomic and astronomic delights with a generous lick of salt in between.

CLOCKWISE THIS PAGE: Gustu's Llama tartare;
Chola streetfood in La Paz; Salteñas, a typical La Paz snack;
Bowler-hatted cholita



ENTHUSIASTIC SERVICE AND INNOVATIVE DISHES
SUCH AS LLAMA TARTARE WITH PICKLED EGG YOLK
AND NASTURTIUM



Silver mountain, Bolivia



BOLIVIA & CHILE

Bolivia and Chile are probably not high on most people's wish lists, but when they both come in among the top 10 of the New York Times' nominated list of places to visit in 2015, you have to stop to consider why. In probably the oddest pairing of tourism strategies ever, these two countries are spearheading tourism to their shores through novel and vastly different means: gastro-tourism (winning and dining) and astro-tourism (star-gazing).

At #8, land-locked Bolivia is the highest, most isolated and most rugged South American country. It is also one of the poorest. However, it is also one of the richest in terms of natural resources – its celebrated Cerro Rico silver mine founded in 1541 literally 'bank-rolled' the Spanish Empire during three centuries of colonial rule. The Spanish boasted production

of the mine at Potosi (which at 4100m above sea level is the highest city in the world) was such they could have built a solid silver bridge to Spain. Today's prospectors, however, acknowledge the world's largest deposit of lithium lies waiting to be tapped under the vast salt flats of Uyuni in the country's southwest.

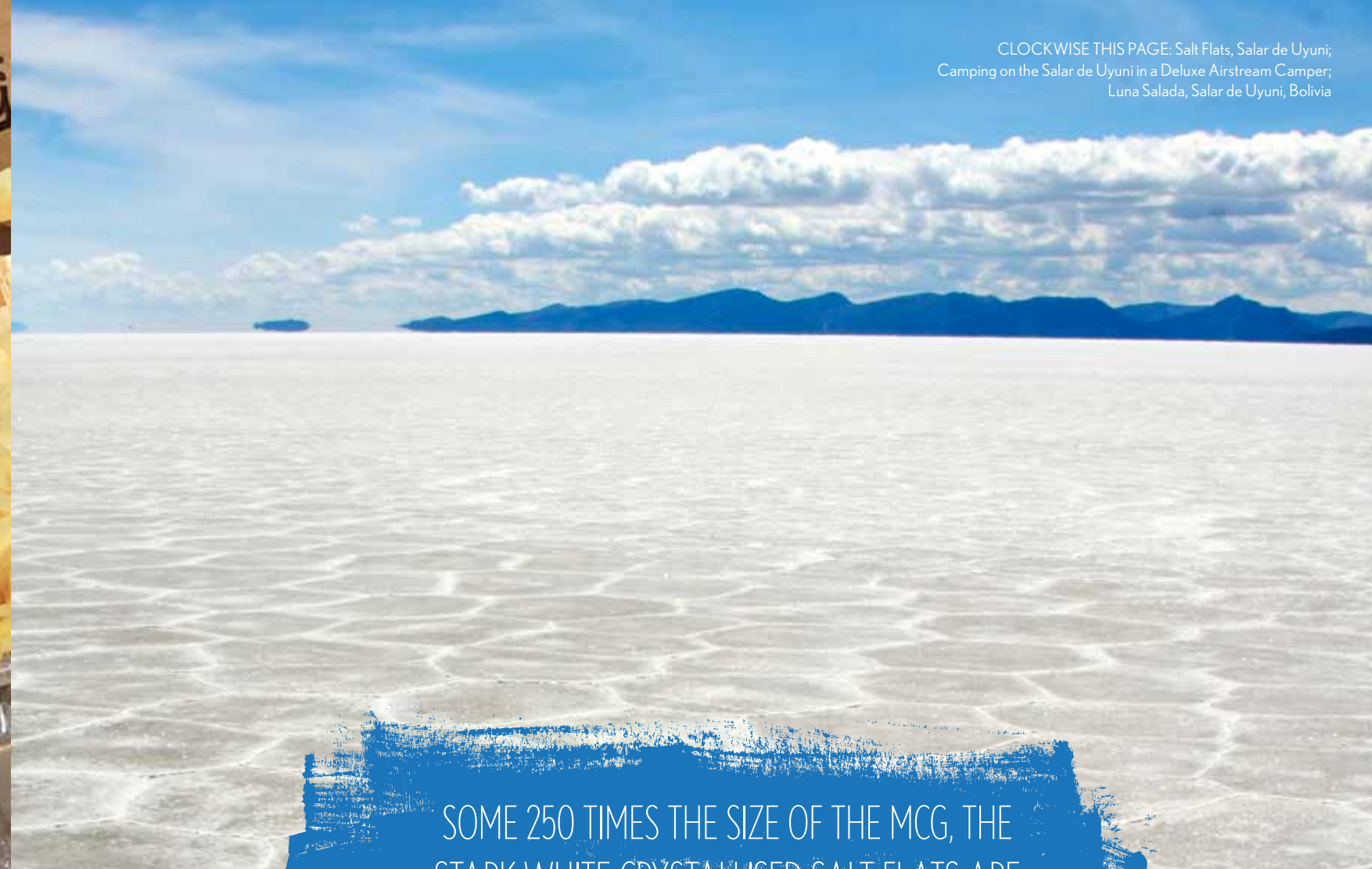
Gastro-tourism

It's through the efforts of Danish-based Claus Meyer, co-founder of Noma in Copenhagen (considered for the past few years to be the best restaurant in the world), that tourists are now flocking into Bolivia's unofficial capital of La Paz to dine at *Gustu*. This chic restaurant was set up just over two years ago primarily as a culinary school for local low-income earners to champion Bolivian produce and regional wines. It's already being touted as perhaps the best new restaurant in the world, maybe because of its pedigree, but also for its enthusiastic service and innovative dishes such as llama tartare with pickled egg yolk and nasturtium, smoked trout from Lake Titicaca with fermented kimchi-style

vegetables and llullucha (an edible bacteria) or goat cheese ice-cream with Romaine lettuce and white chocolate.

Gustu's cellar holds 2,800 bottles of exclusively Bolivian high-altitude wines from 116 different labels. A seven-course tasting menu costs 490 Bolivianos (approx \$100) and with beverage pairing, an extra 150 Bolivianos (\$30). There's also a 15-course tasting menu costing around \$200 – the equivalent at Noma might be \$690.

Through his Melting Pot Foundation, Meyer has also been instrumental in establishing a do-it-yourself street-food tour called *Suma Phayata*. At these local food stalls, you can snack on authentic dishes such as beef chorizo choripan with mustard, fresh pickled vegetables and crusty bread, spicy beef tripe soup served with potatoes and salad, fried empanadas, skewered and chargrilled beef hearts and roast pork sandwich de Chola with pickled vegetables and crackling. Dishes work out at about \$1.50 a portion. www.sumaphayata.org



SOME 250 TIMES THE SIZE OF THE MCG, THE STARK WHITE CRYSTALLISED SALT FLATS ARE THE LARGEST ON EARTH

Colonial Sucre

Bolivia's most beautiful city is its official capital, Sucre – a short flight from La Paz. It appeals with its wealth of whitewashed colonial buildings that cluster around the central city square, Plaza 25 de Mayo. Among these are the Cathedral, the first Parliament House and Casa de la Libertad where the country's declaration of independence was signed in 1825. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991, Sucre also offers a good selection of colonial accommodation such as the charming Parador Santa Maria housed in a delightful colonial residence dating from the 1500s. There is also an abundance of historic churches, museums and restaurants as well as a rich weaving tradition and artisan chocolate.

Salar de Uyuni

When astronaut Neil Armstrong reported from space on his historic July 1969 Apollo 11 mission that he could see a giant mirror on the face of the earth, it turned out to be the vast 12,500sq km salt flats or the *Salar de Uyuni* – covered in water. Some 250 times the size of

the MCG, the stark white crystallised salt flats are the largest on earth and offer the intrepid traveller a dramatic and extraordinary glimpse of another world. Most visitors travel by 4WD staying overnight in small village hotels on its rim.

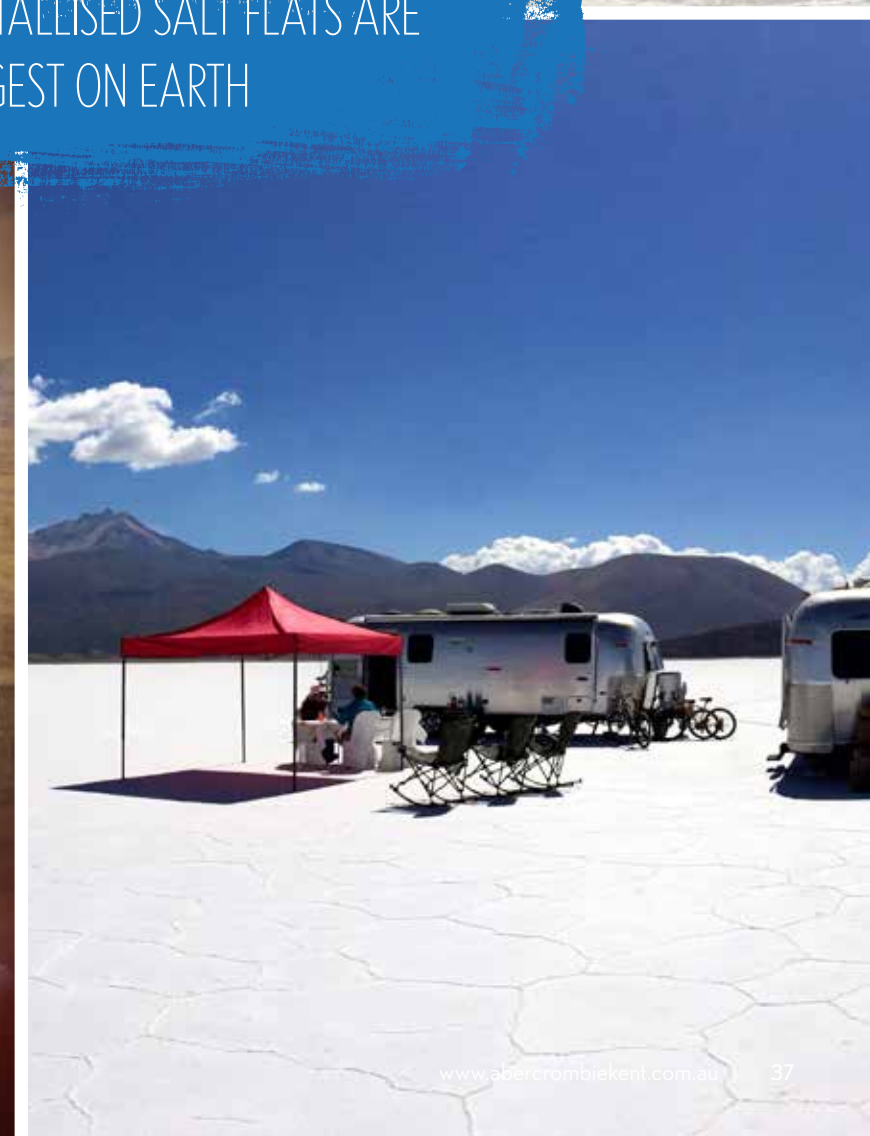
We have the best of both worlds and overnight near Uyuni in the most comfortable Luna Salada, one of just three salt hotels here built almost entirely of salt bricks cut from the lake's dried surface. It is excellent and stylishly furnished with colourful Bolivian fabrics that offset the white salt brick furniture, chairs and beds.

But the pièce de résistance is a two-night stay in one of just two Deluxe Airstream Campers that are set up on the far side of the lake, away from the daily thrum of tourists. These retro-looking 'silver bullet' vans are comfort themselves with heating, air-conditioning, twin or double beds, hot and cold running water for showers and toilet – and come with their own resident chef, Isaac, who produces outstanding meals and is ready with drinks

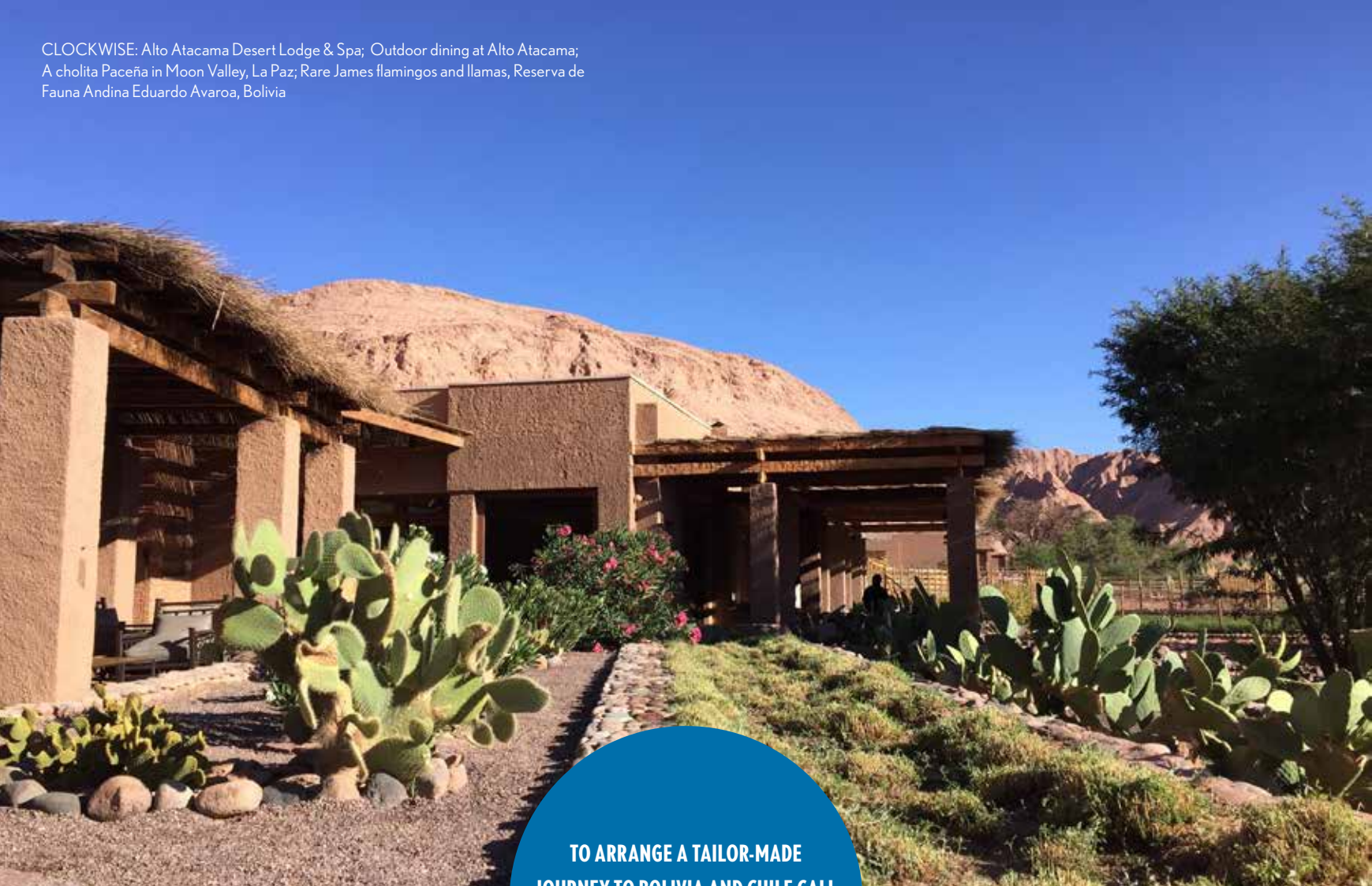
and snacks after a day on the *salar* – always with a smile.

There are no designated paths or roads on the salt flats; you can drive wherever you like. With few natural features to provide navigational guidance – just the odd island or peaked volcanic cone, you are best advised to employ the services of a knowledgeable guide and driver. Driving across the salt flats is akin to skimming across water in a speedboat at full throttle; walking on the mostly hexagonally-shaped crystal surface is like crunching through fresh powder snow.

Recent inclusion of the Bolivia's famous salt flats, Salar de Uyuni, on the itinerary of the 9,000-km Dakar Rally has been integral to the number of tourists visiting the remote region. According to our guide Dante Cueta, up until the first rally in 2014, they received around 500,000 tourists annually; the figure doubled for the following year. Based on these figures they are anticipating the *salar* could easily see two million visitors in 2016.



CLOCKWISE: Alto Atacama Desert Lodge & Spa; Outdoor dining at Alto Atacama; A cholita Paceña in Moon Valley, La Paz; Rare James flamingos and llamas, Reserva de Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa, Bolivia



TO ARRANGE A TAILOR-MADE
JOURNEY TO BOLIVIA AND CHILE CALL
A&K ON 1300 551 541 OR YOUR
LOCAL TRAVEL AGENT.



While the *Salar de Uyuni* itself is Bolivia's main natural attraction and does provide endless photographic opportunities, there are equally more jaw-dropping scenes to be witnessed further south as you drive through the rugged Reserva de Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa, a high altitude (approx 5,000m) reserve boasting glacial salt lakes, coloured lagoons filled with the world's largest nesting colony of rare James flamingoes, stark landscapes dotted with llamas or rare vicuñas - all crowned with imposing volcanic mountains including Bolivia's only active one, Ollagüe. The extraordinary thing here is that we have the entire reserve to ourselves - the whole scene akin to a mythical Garden of Eden.

When we cross the border into Chile it is a bittersweet moment: we know we've just left one of the most extraordinary natural environments on the planet, but also because Bolivian tourism is still in its comparative infancy, we are looking forward to some true home comforts in the lap of the luxurious Alto Atacama, just 40kms over the border in the Atacama Desert.

To astro-tourism

Just over the jagged red-earth peaks and snow-capped volcanic cones of the Altiplano in Chile, lies the Atacama Desert - the driest desert in the world, where specifically Elqui Valley at the southern end of the desert has secured the NY Times' #5 spot in the aforementioned list. But right through this isolated region with little ambient light, high altitudes and guaranteed brilliant stellar shows each night, homespun and world-class observatories are popping up to take advantage of their remote locations. If astro-tourism is your primary goal, ensure you plan around the phases of the moon as many hotel observatories cancel their astro activities around full moon.

Of particular note is ALMA (Atacama Large Millimetre/submillimetre Array), an international astronomy facility and partnership of some eight organisations on four continents. It is the largest astronomical project in existence, gathering photons from distant corners of the universe "to help an international consortium of scientists fathom how stars form and life itself began". It opens an entirely new window on the universe allowing scientists "to unravel longstanding and

important astronomical mysteries, in search of our Cosmic Origins." Open every Saturday and Sunday morning to the public, visitors must register in advance on the website.

Even luxury eco-resort Alto Atacama Desert Lodge and Spa just out of San Pedro de Atacama has its own private observatory for guests - with no ambient light or pollution to spoil the desert experience. Built of adobe mud bricks into the side of a red earth cliff-face, this resort offers first-class facilities in a breath-taking environment. The 42-room lodge blends seamlessly with its natural surroundings and offers quiet seclusion, tranquility and unsurpassed luxury accommodation in the Atacama Desert with spa and an all-inclusive concept including meals, beverages and choice of 23 different excursions and activities such as horse-riding, 4WD excursions to see flamingoes on salt lakes, visits to the nearby San Pedro, treks through the Valley of the Moon to watch the sunset and early-morning breakfast by fumaroles and geysers at the base of volcanoes on the Altiplano. 🌌