Southern Altiplano

The harsh, at times almost primeval geography of the Southern Altiplano will tug at the heartstrings of those with a deep love of bleak and solitary places. Stretching southwards from La Paz, it encompasses majestic volcanic peaks, swaths of treeless wilderness and the white emptiness of the salares, eerie salt deserts almost devoid of life.

There’s something otherworldly about the area, enhanced by shimmering heat hazes, hardy kiswara trees and bizarre rock formations. At night, the starscapes are spectacular, and worth enduring the bitter after-dark temperatures for. It can get seriously cold here; the altitude combined with scouring winds and lack of shelter or vegetation can sometimes make traveling here something of an endurance test.

The region has traditionally lived off mining, backed up by agriculture (corn, potatoes, quinoa) and llama herding. Oruro is a mining city par excellence: gritty, honest and straight-talking, where meat, carbohydrates and hard work rule the day. It’s well worth a visit, especially during Carnaval, but many travelers only pass through, heading with bated breath for Uyuni and the surreal landscapes of the southwest. This is the domain of the 4WD, in which people head out on multiday adventures into the rugged remote terrain.

Southeast of Uyuni is Tupiza, where the jagged cactus-studded scenery evokes memories of Sergio Leone films and lone gunslingers on fading horses. It’s a great place to jump in the saddle yourself. The western associations are further enhanced by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, whose last stand took place in the remote village of San Vicente.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Gorge your senses with the almost extraterrestrial landscapes of **Los Lípez** (see p176 and p177) region in the country’s extreme southwest
- Explore the **Parque Nacional Sajama** (p163) with its towering snow-coned volcano, Bolivia’s loftiest peak
- Strap on some serious sunglasses and wonder at the salty expanse of the **Salar de Uyuni** (p174)
- Marvel at the stunning costumes of **Oruro’s boisterous Carnaval** (see boxed text, p157)
- Whistle the theme from your favorite western as you guide your horse up the narrow gullies around **Tupiza** (p180)

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