



Southern Altiplano

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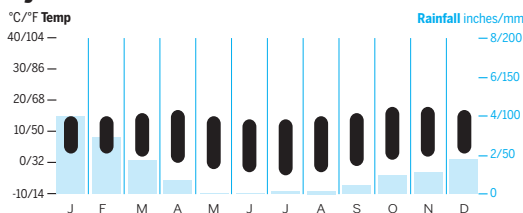
Why Go?

The harsh and at times almost primeval geography of the southern Altiplano will tug at the heartstrings of visitors with a deep love of bleak and solitary places. Stretching southward from La Paz, this high-plains wilderness is framed by majestic volcanic peaks, swathes of treeless wilderness and the white emptiness of the eerie *salar*es (salt deserts), which are almost devoid of life. At night the stargazing is spectacular, and it's as cold as you could ever imagine.

The area around Parque Nacional Sajama offers an amazing wilderness to explore, while revelers may wish to hit up Carnival celebrations in the gritty, straight-talking mining city of Oruro. Further south the Salar de Uyuni is the star attraction, and a three-day jeep tour of the region is at the top of most travelers' itineraries. From here, you can head to the warmer cactus-studded valleys around Tupiza for horseback riding and mountain biking.

When to Go

Uyuni



Aug-Oct The best time for salt-flat and wilderness trips.

Oct-Nov Good deals on *salar* tours and the chance to see the salt flat flooded.

Jan-Mar Amazing Carnival costumes and a huge water-balloon fight.

History

The prehistoric lakes Minchín and Tauca once covered most of this highland plateau. They evaporated around 10,000 years ago, leaving behind a parched landscape of brackish puddles and salt deserts. Pre-Columbian civilizations didn't leave much of a mark on the region; some time in the mid-15th century an Inca ruler sent his son Tupac-Yupanqui southward to conquer all the lands he encountered. Tupac-Yupanqui and his gang marched on across the wastelands to the northern bank of Chile's Río Maule, where a fierce band of Araucanian people inspired them to stake out the southern boundary of the Inca empire and turn back toward Cuzco.

These days, outside the major towns and cities, most people cluster around mining camps. During the late 1980s a mining crisis devastated the industry, sending miners fleeing to lower elevations. But with commodity prices up and the world's largest stash of lithium just waiting to be extracted, mining is back and, with it, controversy. In fact, much of Bolivia's social conflict now centers around contamination from mines, and the nationalization and management of the industry. Climate change and desertification is affecting the region's natural and social landscape in a major way as well, making it easier to sow lucrative quinoa crops at higher elevations and triggering a ten-fold spike in land prices.

National Parks

Parque Nacional Sajama, Bolivia's first national park, is a region of magnificent peaks, plains and wildlife habitat. It is also home to the world's highest forest and some of South America's loftiest hot springs. Even if you're not into hardcore mountaineering, an evening dip in the clear springs at the base of Volcán Sajama in the company of a few camelids is worth the trek. The Reserva Nacional de Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa is a highlight of Southwest Circuit tours and the gateway to Chile for those headed to San Pedro de Atacama.

① Getting There & Away

From La Paz, the southern Altiplano is easily accessed by bus, although off the paved main roads the ride can be long and bumpy. The route from the central highland cities of Potosí and Sucre is fairly easy, with new paved roads taking you to both Tupiza and Oruro. The overland route from Chile is a scenic mountain traverse on a

good road from Arica, and Villazón has an easy border crossing with Argentina.

The train between Oruro and Villazón, which stops in Uyuni and Tupiza, provides a fine overland alternative to grueling bus travel.

ORURO

2 / POP 201,000 / ELEV 3706M (12,158FT)

Oruro is dirty, crowded, the food sucks and there's not much to do outside of Carnaval season. Yet, there's something about this place – the largest berg in the region, a miners' city that takes no slack from anyone – that endears it to visitors, making for an oddly atavistic experience that some may find intoxicating.

In many ways Oruro (which means 'where the sun is born') is the most 'Bolivian' of Bolivia's nine provincial capitals and an intriguing place where 90% of the inhabitants are of indigenous heritage. *Orureños* (Oruro locals) are salty, hard-working and upfront people who have had it tough over the years. Locals refer to themselves as *quirquinchos* (armadillos), after the carapaces used in their *charangos* (traditional Bolivian ukulele-like instruments).

The town sits against a range of low mineral-rich hills at the northern end of the salty lakes Uru Uru and Poopó. Record-high mineral prices are creating a boom in the city – and construction is on the rise. While many visitors skip Oruro altogether, it's got decent museums and there's plenty to see in the surrounding area. It's also culturally very colorful, with a rich dance and musical heritage that culminates in the riotous Carnaval celebrations, famous throughout South America for the lavish costumes and elaborate traditions on display.

History

Founded in the early 17th century, Oruro owes its existence to the mineral-rich 10-sq-km range of hills rising 350m behind the city. Chock-full of copper, silver and tin, these hills still form the city's economic backbone.

By the 1920s Bolivia's thriving tin-mining industry rested in the hands of three powerful capitalists. The most renowned was Simón Patiño, a mestizo from the Cochabamba valley who became one of the world's wealthiest men. In 1897 Patiño purchased La Salvadora mine near the village of Uncia, east of Oruro, which eventually became the