

El Gigante Blanco: The Salt Flats of Uyuni

The *salares* or salt flats are located just over 800 km to the south of La Paz in the provinces of Campos, Quijarro, and Nor LÍpez in the Department of Potosí. We are not just talking about a few dry lakebeds. These are the largest salt flats in the world with a surface of more than 12,000 square km. To add to the spectacle, the salt flats sit at more than 12,000 feet above sea level.



As expected the scenery in this area is spectacular. In Spanish the *salares* are referred to as the gigantic whiteout. The glaring expanses of flat white plains are surrounded by Andean peaks. The immense salt beds are infrequently interrupted by cactus-covered hills that create *islas* or islands, an appropriate name since the flats are covered by several inches of water during the rainy season (November to March).

Features

Some of the major sights in the salt flats include:

- The town of Uyuni and the nearby railroad graveyard.
- The four major islands that dot the dry lakebeds such as Incahuasi.
- The Thunupa volcano.
- Various geographical attractions.

Lodging and Eating

Many visitors take in the salt flats as part of a tour. See the chapter on Travel and Tourism Services in **Instant Bolivia** (www.boliviatoday.org/publications.html) for some recommendations. A full service tour out of La Paz by an upscale tour operator will run about \$240 USD per day. Arranging a local tour out of Uyuni can be as low as \$25 USD per day.

Interesting lodging includes the famous Palacio de Sal located in Cochani. The entire facility, including some of the furniture, has been built using salt blocks. There are a couple of rustic lodges on the salt flats but most travelers stay in Uyuni, which boasts a half dozen comfortable establishments. Yet another option is the town of Tupiza.

The best restaurants in the area are located in Uyuni. Loco Pub Bar (Avenida Potosí on the corner of Calle Camacho) and the Minuteman Pizzería Restaurant (Avenida Ferroviária #60) are worth mention. The best restaurant by far is Mongo's. This famous La Paz restaurant and bar is scheduled to open a lodging facility and restaurant in the Uyuni area in July 1006.

Travel and Transportation

Most tour agencies provide four-wheel drive vans or buses from La Paz or Uyuni. Alternatively, you can take a public bus from La Paz (\$70 BS), Oruro (\$40 BS), or Potosí (\$32 BS) to Uyuni for \$15 USD or less. One recommended route is to take a taxi or bus from La Paz to Oruro and then take the train (\$100 BS) to Uyuni. This may be the most comfortable, interesting, and safest option. Some travelers use Tupiza as their gateway to the Salt Flats.

More information

Additional information regarding this tourist attraction and other travel and tourism topics is available in Bolivia Today's travel directory entitled, **Instant Bolivia** (www.boliviatoday.org).



[The Uyuni Salt Flats]