

# ENCOUNTER IN SOUTH AMERICA

by Barry Thorne

ENCOUNTER OVERLAND has been in South America for two years, operating expeditions between Buenos Aires and Caracas. It is a journey of great extremes and sudden contrasts and has some unique challenges to offer the adventurous traveller. Barry Thorne has been at the "sharp end" of the South American venture since its inception and his letter describes an incident encountered by the Northbound expedition he led earlier this year.

Dear All,

Here we are safely in La Paz, one of South America's more exotic capitals; a tumbling jumble of mud walls and corrugated tin roofs tottering down the 1000 ft sides of the crater in which the city sits, surrounded by the desolate wastes of the Altiplano and a jagged horizon of brooding snow-capped peaks.

road on which I was engaged in towing out a large tractor-trailer unit loaded with cement which had been slewed across the road for four days. Suddenly an orange blob materialised, coming in the opposite direction, whereupon we linked up in a successful 8-wheel-drive tow and got the obstacle out of the way. Camped together that night.

Deciding that spectacular scenery and a little drama (little did I know!) were due, we decided to take the route over the Andes to Northern Chile and back up to the salt-flat region of S. W. Bolivia. This road encompasses some of the most stark awe-inspiring remote scenery anywhere in the Continent, a rough track meandering for several hundred miles through the high wastelands of the Puna, a 14,000 ft lunar landscape of livid salt-flats and smouldering

rolled and lurched precariously down unaccustomed streets, scattering indignant llamas and providing the biggest spectacle of the year to amazed bowler-hatted Indians.

We camped before the vast mirror-like expanse of the Salar, and next morning we set out early, forging the first tracks for many weeks across the marshy margins of the Salar, and out, splashing through the infinite limbo of turquoise where sky and lake merged indetectably into the distance, and even the distant mountains, their conical peaks reflected perfectly into floating diamond shapes, denied one of the comforting sense of attachment of a real world.

Within an hour we were confronted at every weaving turn with a bed of soft mushy salt that the truck could only just drag itself through — we had wandered from the hard crust of crystallised salt which



The author, centre, with group.

Still, enough of the local colour, back to the trip which now that I've had time to get my breath back, is going very well, with absolutely everyone happy and involved. Buenos Aires to Salta (N. W. Argentina) went almost without incident. Iguacu is spectacular and Paraguay has a certain rustic charm, which we exploited by poking around the countryside on a very muddy track one day; but there is little but good steaks and plentiful cheap booze to sustain one's spirit on this stretch.

Met Bill and Ian (coming South) in a rather dramatic "Dr Livingstone I presume" situation on a very rough stretch of washed out trans-Chaco dirt landscape of livid salt-flats and smouldering volcanos.

volcanos. Real McKoy frontier travel stuff much enjoyed by all, not least when we descended upon a very alerted Chilean army jeep on border patrol who took no chances with us, waving and prodding sten guns at us with our hands in the air until we broke through their nervousness and convinced them that we weren't Marxist guerrillas!

Having reached the Chilean/Bolivian border the only route through was across the Salar of Uyuni, a seasonal salt lake. Our approach to the Salar was however different to last time, our guide leading us over mountain tracks that were from time to time only dried out water courses. At last we dropped through huddled Indian villages where the truck

provided a precarious route between a maze of islands that confronted us. Our guide, somewhat abashed, agreed we should return to the tiny llama herding village at the Salar's edge, to hire another local who could navigate us through this hazardous obstacle course. And so we set off again, eyes squinting in the dazzle of the unfiltered sunlight at 12,000 feet reflecting from the limitless carpet of dazzling white salt crystals and the ripples of aquamarine, weaving a seemingly illogical course, sweeping left and right as our guide picked out to us indetectable signs and markers. The salt surface was occasionally smooth as a table cloth, more frequently it was craked into giant crazy-paving like slabs,



Problems on the Gran Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia.

sometimes so deeply crevassed that we lumbered painfully forward in first gear and from time to time passed through areas pockmarked with ominous well-like holes. The water was usually about 6 in. deep, though occasionally we drove over dried-out salt banks. The spray from our bow-wave was turning the truck white and the radiator had become so encrusted with salt that it boiled frequently and had to be topped up at regular intervals.

By lunch time the truck was pointing across the lake towards an unimpeded horizon, the network of islands and spits behind us. Our village guide wished us good luck, unloaded his bicycle and peddled off into the distance from whence we had come. All afternoon we drove steadily towards a particular mountain peak that marked the location of the causeway on the far shore that would take us off the lake, but by dusk we were still far from land. We turned the truck about, to watch an incredible sunset as sky and water blazed crimson, then set about accommodating 21 people, a motorbike, a dog and a dead goat (we had picked up some hitchhikers!) in the truck for the night.

A cold dawn ended futile attempts to sleep but salt had eaten into the electrical system and the starter motor refused to turn. It was several hours before the engine sprang into life and we set out once more. Finally the markers indicating the route came into view. We were just clocking up our 97th mile on the lake when it happened... the truck crashed through the salt dust. After an hour of labour we had jacked it

up sufficiently to pull forward a few yards only to lurch once more into an even deeper hole. One side of the vehicle had sunk up to the bumper-bar while the other side stood firm on rock hard salt. The truck rested forlornly at a dizzy angle and it was evident that we needed outside help and an advance party accordingly set out to walk the remaining kilometres to the mercifully close village, to summon immediate assistance, while the bulk of the group set about retrieving essential equipment and supplies to porter to dry land.

An hour or so later one of the decrepid spluttering veteran trucks which plied between the railway line and the salt lake carrying cargoes of salt, was splashing its way across the Salar loaded with blocks, stores, jacks, the headmen from the village and the full military might of the local army command, which consisted of six scruffily juvenile recruits! And so began the labours which were to stretch over the next four days: splashing around in the early morning ice-cold waters of the lake, jacking, blocking, wedging to polyglot commands, clothes encrusted with salt, hands and feet chapped and cut by salt crystals, lifting the truck inch by inch only to have it slip again, returning to land exhausted for more materials and to re-negotiate deals, to rehire a second truck etc. etc. We were, meanwhile, established comfortably in the village schoolroom.

After a few days the situation seemed hopeless. The truck continued to sink as fast as we raised it, the engine permanently stalled and the clutch jammed in reverse gear. About this time I composed a cable,

among other things asking for instructions should the truck be irrecoverable. Fortunately there was nowhere to cable from! Meanwhile, in search of a more powerful vehicle to tow us out, I had managed to get through to the Colonel of the Bolivian Army Battalion at Uyuni who apparently ranked second only to the Pope judging I had in gaining an audience. He despatched an emissary to assess the gravity of the situation and was then persuaded to recall (allegedly from secret manoeuvres on the Chilean frontier) a heavy 10-wheel drive tank and recovery vehicle. We were however given orders to move to Uyuni to fulfil immigration requirements (we had actually crossed the frontier six days previously) and so the relative comforts of a meagre hotel were made available to us. Finally, a day later than promised, the army truck arrived and we sped over the rough roads to the lakeside only to have the Sergeant in charge of the recovery operation refuse at the last moment to take his truck on to the Salar, claiming that it too would go through the salt crust. Back at the village the locals, who were by now thoroughly involved in the rescue, rounded upon the driver and insisted that he go back to the lake. And so, late that day, the sun having already set and many attempts to tow the truck out having failed, somehow, miraculously, the truck was heaved out, amidst rapturous cheers.

Twenty yards to the left, the lake bubbled ominously — we had just missed the notorious "Big Hole" an innocuous looking but deadly quicksand patch where the truck would have sunk without trace.