

Barry Thorne

Worked with EO	<u>from</u>	1970	<u>to</u>	1976
Age on joining EO	22/23			
Nationality	British (now also Canadian)			
Role at EO	Expedition Leader			
Expeditions/Brief Encounters etc. led or taken	Series of back and forth London / Kathmandu runs Shared leadership on the first Latin American trip ('72) with Toni Weldon & Martin Watkinson Researched alternate routings for Latin America expeditions; contributed copy for South America segment of mid-70s EO brochures Led 3 or 4 Latin American trips Got tired.			
Why did you want to work for EO?	Had just returned from solo independent travels around Latin America in 1970 and had previously spent a year volunteering in India so figured it would be great to continue travelling for a while and earn my keep instead of spending my hard-earned savings.			
Occupation before joining EO	Numerous odd-job, stop-gap employment opportunities with the sole purpose of accumulating always-inadequate funds to support endless travel aspirations.			
Occupation after leaving EO	Travel counsellor, travel book-&-map store owner, ran a (very small) specialty Asian tour company. Continued to travel to the most far-flung & odd corners of the world, recently centred on Central Asia and Himalayan regions.			
Now living in	Canada (Vancouver Island)			



Memories or anecdotes

The following story was written many years ago in response to an invitation from the Canadian Institute for Travel Counsellors to promote the then novel (in North America) concept of "Adventure Travel". This was an account of the North-bound 1974 South American transit from Buenos Aires to Caracas, in which we flirted with calamity, but survived with unforgettable euphoric memories.

I've returned several times in later years to this dramatic and stunningly beautiful region of high Andean desert, studded with smouldering volcanoes and pale turquoise lakes. And of course, the now famous and well-known largest salt pan in the world. It's still an amazing place but nowadays, in the age of smart phones, selfie-sticks and Instagram, it's too popular a destination to offer any surprises. And everyone has seen the ubiquitous photos. But, back in the day, passing through this empty, unknown and untravelled landscape was startlingly other-worldly and every vista was uniquely new and brilliant in the crystal-clear high-altitude light.

Memorable moments on Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni

As we came over the brow of the last pass en route to Bolivia's vast salt-pan, we struggled to catch our breath, not only in awe of the vista that spread out before us but also, more immediately, as a result of the oxygen-depleted air that, at an elevation of more than 12,000 feet, left us gasping at the slightest exertion. The same thin atmosphere etched the ethereal scene with crystal sharpness and startling clarity. Below us, beyond a bleak treeless shoreline of sienna and burnt ochre, a shimmering lake of brilliant aquamarine blue stretched to a distant horizon sharply delineated against a cloudless cobalt sky. This was the great Salar de Uyuni, a vast salt pan that for nine months of the year dazzles the eye with its limitless expanse of blindingly white salt. But this was the tail-end of the wet season. Three months of ominous dark storm-

clouds had scuttled across the altiplano and drenched these bleak high plains with ferocious rainfall,

turning the desert into a quagmire of viscous plasticene mud, filling the dry river-beds with swift-flowing

floods, and making the primitive dry-weather roads

virtually impassable. And the Salar de Uyuni was now

covered in a sheet of crystal-clear water a foot deep.

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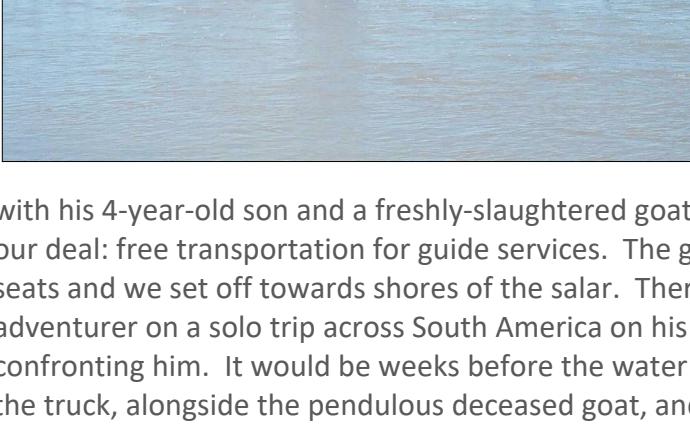
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record that we were the seventeenth vehicle to pass by that year. (Their real purpose here was to check through the twice-weekly passenger train, laden with contraband, that halted, wheezing, for border inspections on its astonishing, laborious journey between the Chilean port of Antofagasta up and over the Andes to Uyuni.)

Beyond the border, the road deteriorated considerably as we moved from arid desert to swamp-like flooded plains, and our heavy truck churned through deep ruts and struggled for traction in the mud. Equipped with sand-mats for desert travel, we frequently had to lay tracks across the mud and plunge intrepidly through fast-flowing seasonal rivers. We were quickly discovering the adventure in 'adventure travel'. Eventually, we managed to haul ourselves up the slopes of the low hills encircling the great saltpan that would provide access to the town of Uyuni and thence to the more traveled road network that would take us to La Paz. For, in this desperately poor nation and this infamous season of rains, impassable roads are a Bolivian fact of life and the Salar de Uyuni is a route used occasionally by local trucks to bypass the floods and the engulfing mud of the Altiplano's primitive roads.

We followed a rough track that wound up through the contours of these barren hills, shuddering our way through occasional bleak and melancholy villages. Weather-beaten Aymara farmers tilled the stony fields with foot-ploughs unchanged since Inca times and watched in silence as we trundled past. Their wives, ensconced in multiple layers of colourful skirts and jackets and sporting natty bowler hats, scurried between the mud-and-stone houses, shepherding their children out of the way, while supercilious llamas with red tassels in their ears observed our passing with scornful disdain. And then we came upon our first view of the dazzling, magical pale turquoise lake stretching to infinity before us like a luminous apparition. We stopped in awe. And yet I sensed a tiny mote of trepidation pass like a shadow across this surreal vision. Despite its stunning, tranquil beauty, this was not a terrain to be trifled with.

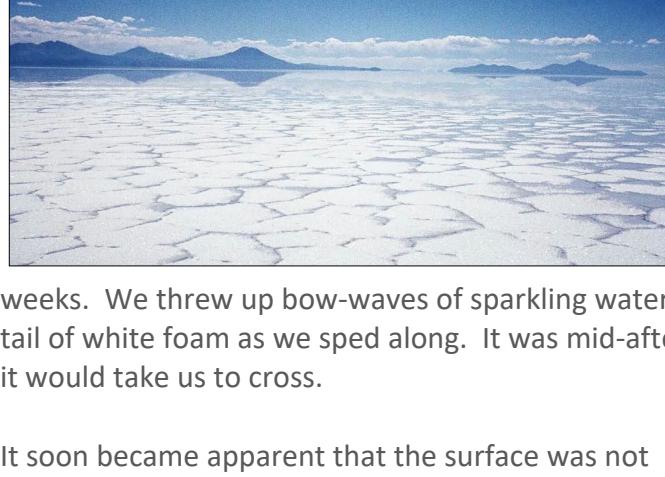
The trick to crossing the Salar de Uyuni in the wet season is in finding access points: as the water table in the vast basin rises, not only does the salt surface disappear beneath a sheet of water but, more challenging, the shoreline becomes a deadly swamp of impossible-to-cross quicksand. This barrier is



breached at various points around the circumference of the salar by rickety causeways of rocks and stones, several hundred yards long and laboriously hand-built by local villagers, that can, one trusts, distribute the weight of a passing vehicle and allow access to the firm salt surface beyond the mud. We needed a guide to help us onto the Salar and, more importantly, to help us find an off-ramp on the far side, beyond the distant horizon. Fortunately (or not, as it transpired), we soon stumbled across a candidate. Pablo was a local resident, traveling

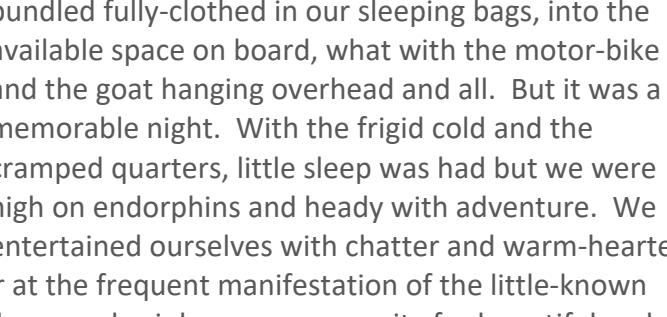
with his 4-year-old son and a freshly-slaughtered goat, who, like us, was trying to get to Uyuni. We mimed our deal: free transportation for guide services. The goat was strung up, Pablo and son were given front seats and we set off towards shores of the salar. There, amazingly, we encountered Steve, a young English adventurer on a solo trip across South America on his motorcycle, scratching his head at the dilemma confronting him. It would be weeks before the water level subsided. We loaded the bike into the back of the truck, alongside the pendulous deceased goat, and took on another passenger.

The causeway looked woefully frail. Built for trucks much smaller and lighter than ours, it seemed dangerously inadequate for our bulk and was already sunken below the water-level in places. Fearing its imminent collapse, I disembarked all my passengers and told them to walk. Then we set off, 4-wheel-drive engaged, in a steadfast heart-in-mouth commitment from which there could be no turning back, bucking and pitching over the uneven stonework, clawing our way forward as the wheels tore out chunks of rock and filler, lurching, sinking and then climbing onward. As the ramp reached the white salt of the lake we descended into a foot of water and rolled forward onto a smooth, firm bed of salt crystals. I breathed a sigh of relief. So far, so good. Everyone piled back into the truck and Pablo squinted across the shimmering lake surface and pointed out his dead-reckoning course co-ordinates. We set sail. A euphoric sense of exhilarating freedom engulfed us as we headed out over the salar – nothing but a glass surface of endless aquamarine water below and a huge deep blue sky arching overhead. The salt surface was smooth and hard, affording us an autobahn-like ride such as we hadn't encountered in



weeks. We threw up bow-waves of sparkling water five feet high and left in our wake a massive rooster-tail of white foam as we sped along. It was mid-afternoon. I hadn't actually stopped to calculate how long it would take us to cross.

It soon became apparent that the surface was not consistently firm. We would run into soft and slushy patches of salt and, gearing down through 3, 4, 5 gears and engaging 4-wheel drive, we would weave and turn under Pablo's direction until we found solid footing and sped off again. At times we would skirt rocky islets that rose up through the salt surface and bristled with giant saguaro cacti. The afternoon wore on and, while the shore from whence we had set out disappeared over the horizon behind us, there was still no sign of land ahead. Dusk falls rapidly in tropical latitudes and by late afternoon it was evident that we were going to have to spend the night in this watery wilderness. It was turning out to be quite an adventure. We metaphorically dropped anchor as the sun went down in a blaze of crimson, set up our folding tables in a foot of water and cooked a great celebratory dinner in the



middle of the lake, everyone except Pablo and his son marveling at the sheer exquisite wonder of it all. Darkness fell like a blind and soon a canopy of stars bright as halogen lights beamed overhead in an indigo sky. It was a bit of a tight fit cramming all of us, bundled fully-clothed in our sleeping bags, into the available space on board, what with the motor-bike and the goat hanging overhead and all. But it was a memorable night. With the frigid cold and the cramped quarters, little sleep was had but we were high on endorphins and heady with adventure. We entertained ourselves with chatter and warm-hearted

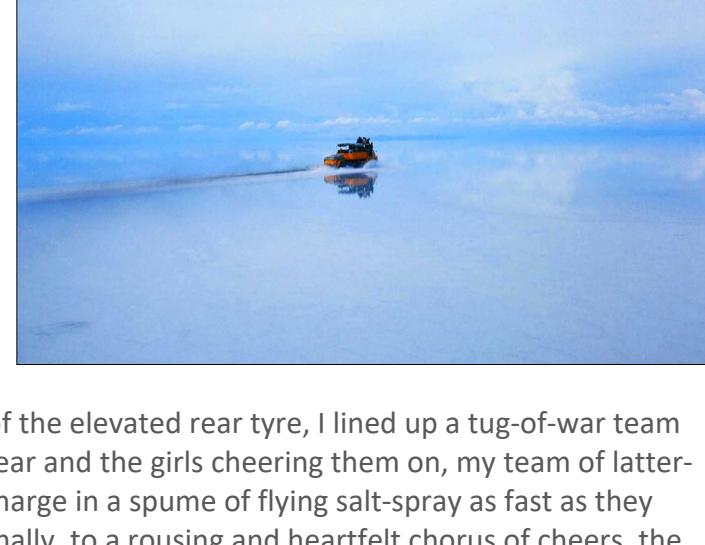
camaraderie and howled with uncontrollable laughter at the frequent manifestation of the little-known but evidently universal side effect of high altitude on human physiology – a propensity for bountiful and



irrepressible flatulence. Never had such pristine silence been so hilariously pierced as that night in the middle of the Salar de Uyuni.

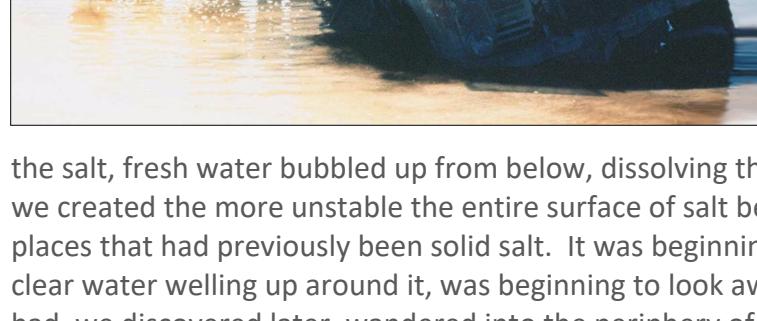
The following morning we breakfasted at first light and got ready to set off for Uyuni. I pressed the starter button and ... nothing happened. My heart sank into my gut as the realization dawned on me that the saline solution we had been splashing and frolicking around in with such gay abandon the previous day had corroded the wiring and shorted out the truck's entire electrical system. We had no power. And we were in the middle of a vast lake of brine a hundred miles across. And I was responsible for fifteen souls marooned beyond human reach. It was a bad moment.

However, as I reflected on our rather dire circumstance, I realized that it was not the first time I had experienced starter problems at an inopportune time. The beauty of the diesel engine is that combustion is a product not of a spark but of compression. There was a possible work-around for this problem if we were lucky. Before alarm took hold of my passengers, I set them to work jacking up the back end of the truck. Then, being expedition-equipped and all, I produced a one-hundred-foot length of stout rope that we always carried in our "what if" cache of extraneous supplies. Wrapping the rope around the perimeter of the elevated rear tyre, I lined up a tug-of-war team of the heftiest guys in the group. With the truck in gear and the girls cheering them on, my team of latter-day warriors was exhorted to haul on the rope and charge in a spume of flying salt-spray as fast as they could across the lake. It took several attempts but finally, to a rousing and heartfelt chorus of cheers, the engine coughed and spluttered into life. I was tempted towards religious conversion but there was no time - we were on our way again.



We resumed our course and headed out under Pablo's direction towards the eastern shore again. Eventually, first a distant mountain range, then a low shoreline hove into view. Soon we could make out a small village hunkered down at water's edge. We were almost there. Then we encountered another patch of soft salt. We wheeled around, Pablo gesticulating wildly, but it was too late. With a sickening lurch, one of the front wheels broke through the salt crust and we sank up to the axle. I managed to keep the engine

running and we laid out sand-mats to span the hole we had made, jacked the truck up and tried to back out. Once more a wheel fell through and then both wheels on one side collapsed into the salt and the truck tipped drunkenly to one side. The engine stalled. Now we were seriously stuck. I really should have converted back there while the going was good.



As we walked around to assess the situation, we began to break through the perilously thin crust of salt and sink up to our knees in oozing mud. Every time we punctured the surface of the salt, fresh water bubbled up from below, dissolving the salt crust that remained. And the more holes we created the more unstable the entire surface of salt became. Soon we were floundering knee-deep in places that had previously been solid salt. It was beginning to look very dodgy. Our hefty truck, sparkling clear water welling up around it, was beginning to look awfully precarious and tragically vulnerable. We had, we discovered later, wandered into the periphery of the infamous "Ojo Grande", the Big Spring or Well, a huge fresh-water spring that bubbled up through the salt here creating a massive and reputedly bottomless hole in the surface of the salar. A couple of years previously, the locals told us, a wayward bus had blundered into it and sunk without trace, with the loss of all aboard. Pablo was looking decidedly sheepish.

We were still a fair distance off-shore but Steve offered to ferry the girls in with a shuttle service on his motorcycle and the rest of us set out to walk. As I trudged ashore I was trying to compose the text of a tactful message to head office in London explaining how I had sunk their truck in the middle of a lake and stranded everyone in the boondocks of the Bolivian altiplano – 'Please advise'. Fortunately, there would be no way of transmitting a message anywhere any time soon.

Approaching the village, we found ourselves walking between 5 feet high pyramids of salt. It turned out that this was a community of salt gatherers: the villagers' occupation and livelihood was to set out onto the salar and assiduously chip and scrape the salt crystals into mounds and pyramids. The salt thus collected would eventually be loaded onto a fleet of half a dozen vintage 1920's-era Ford flat-bed trucks, stripped down to a white, salt-encrusted skeletal framework, which puttered across the salt-lake like a colony of spindly creatures escaped from a Star Wars set. The railway line that linked Uyuni with Oruro and La Paz to the north ran alongside the village and it was here in the humble village of Colchani that the salt thus gathered was transferred to railcars and trundled off for sale in the capital or trans-shipped for export.

The ruckus that our arrival had created already had the men of the village out on the salar to greet us and expound on our folly and misfortune, and poor Pablo was getting a lambasting for his navigational shortcomings. While I attempted to find some means of rescuing the truck from a watery grave, the group was graciously received with humbling hospitality by the impoverished but truly "salt of the earth" indigenous inhabitants. Our band of merry adventurers were generously settled into the one-room schoolhouse where they could stretch out their sleeping-bags and, in the coming days, fulfill the impromptu duties of ESL teachers to a bunch of wildly excited and hyperactive Aymara kids. The old men with the Model A Ford trucks drove out to where the Bedford lay beached and bloated in the sun, rubbed their chins and contemplated the situation. The combined horsepower of all their ancient vehicles would not shift that behemoth one iota. But the army might help, they suggested.

Accordingly, I set out with a delegation from the village along the rough road that ran for 15 miles beside the railway tracks to Uyuni and the Bolivian army garrison there. My predicament was expounded at great length and with much passion and waving of arms and eventually a reluctant high-ranking officer was persuaded to deploy a huge 8-wheel-drive tank-recovery vehicle to assess the situation. The next day we returned triumphantly to Colchani in an impressive military convoy to the scene of the shipwreck. The general ventured tentatively onto the salt before calculating how much trouble he would be in if his massive vehicle also sank into the abyss. Sanity dawned and he balked, refusing to go any further towards El Ojo Grande. The village men rounded upon him vehemently, challenging his manhood and stamping their feet on my behalf. Eventually a great length of steel cable was produced and a very long tow-line was attached to our stranded Bedford and hooked up to the monster tow-truck. Everyone stood well back. If the cable were to snap, the whipping line would have cut in two anyone unfortunate enough to be in the way. I gripped the steering wheel of the tilted Bedford and braced. With a long roar and big belch of black smoke, the tank recovery vehicle heaved and strained and suddenly, thankfully, I lurched forward out of the erstwhile gravesite and across the remaining thin salt crust. We shortened the line suitably and the army headed back to base with me inconsequently in tow, bouncing and lurching helplessly behind, over the rutted roads to Uyuni.

We took the truck to a backyard mechanic's shop and I asked the owner to rebuild the entire electrical system. I never ceased to be amazed at the marvels that can be worked in these remote parts of the Third World with the most rudimentary of supplies and primitive equipment, augmented with sheer ingenuity and imaginative substitution. Two days later we were up and running and ready to resume our journey. We bade a fond farewell to the assembled population of our village, who had come to our rescue and taken us under their wing with such immediate generosity of spirit.

It had been a spectacularly memorable interlude up here in this remote and dramatic land. I eventually telexed the office from La Paz, relieved to be able to briefly relate the saga of the sunken truck with the

addition of an upbeat and redemptive closing paragraph. News of our misadventure was received laconically by the maverick band of wild characters who ran the company, for all had similar tales to tell of crossing the Khyber Pass under attack by Pushtun tribesmen or taking a wrong turn in the Sahara or being rammed by an irate rhinoceros. Our close call in the Bolivian saltpan went down in the annals of the company's wild storybook as one of the great yarns in a long line of apocryphal tales from the world's untamed frontiers. Although plagued for the rest of its days with electrical problems, the old Bedford kept on

truckin'. And my fellow-travellers concurred that crossing the Salar de Uyuni had been the highlight of a remarkable journey across South America, and the ride of a lifetime.

