

# Cycling South West Bolivia

*Any road I can ride is a good road;  
washboard is better than sand.*  
James Pratt 2009



## CONTENTS

## PAGE

<b>Route maps of south west Bolivia</b>	<b>2 - 4</b>
▶ <i>Oruro to San Juan de Rosario or Cerdas</i>	2
▶ <i>Isla Incahuasi to San Pedro de Atacama</i>	3
▶ <i>San Juan de Rosario to Villazon + direction San Pedro</i>	4
<b>Cycling in South West Bolivia</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Kasani border near Copacabana to La Paz</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>La Paz to Oruro</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Oruro to San Juan via Tahua</b>	<b>7 - 9</b>
▶ <i>Section #01: Oruro to Quillacas</i>	7
▶ <i>Section #02: Quillacas to Tahua</i>	7
▶ <i>Section #03: Tahua to San Juan de Rosario</i>	9
<b>San Juan to San Pedro via the Lagunas</b>	<b>10 - 13</b>
▶ <i>Day #01 and #02</i>	10
▶ <i>Day #03 and #04</i>	11
▶ <i>Day #05, #06, #07 and #08</i>	12
▶ <i>Day #09 and #10</i>	13
<b>San Juan to San Pedro de Atacama via Calama</b>	<b>14 - 16</b>
▶ <i>Section #01: San Juan de Rosario to Ollagüe</i>	14
▶ <i>Section #02: Ollagüe to Calama</i>	15
▶ <i>Section #03: Calama to San Pedro de Atacama</i>	16

## Good enough reason?

No matter where you cycle in Bolivia, it will most likely be a challenge, but none more so than in the south western region. This miniature book has been compiled for those of you willing to take on the challenge of this extremely unique area of South America.

So, if you are wondering why anyone would want to compel themselves to long periods of bike pushing in deep sand and along washboard surfaces, limited options for obtaining water and food supplies and often achieving only 30 kilometres a day; it is because you will probably experience perfect starry nights; encounter incredible landscapes with wondrous rock formations; soak in thermal baths; and capture some of the pinkest flamingos in the world on camera. Good enough reason? Please read on..



# Route map south west Bolivia [edition 3: January 2012]

## Contributions by:

Sonya Spry and Aldrik Mulder of [www.tour.tk](http://www.tour.tk)  
 route Oruro - Salar de Uyuni via Irpani/Tahua - Chiguana - Ollagüe - Calama - San Pedro de Atacama - December 2009

## James Pratt

route Oruro - Salar de Uyuni via Churacari - Chiguana - Laguna Colorado - Laguna Verde - San Pedro de Atacama from December 5 till December 18, 2009

## Changes and corrections to James' route supplied by:

Jean-Christophe Boillat of [www.bici-doble.blogspot.com](http://www.bici-doble.blogspot.com) - March 2011  
 Melissa Amacher of [www.inspireout.com](http://www.inspireout.com) - October 2011  
 Sarah and Tom of [www.bicyclenomad.com](http://www.bicyclenomad.com) - December 2011

## Kevin Bauer of [www.urupica.de](http://www.urupica.de)

route Oruro - Salar de Uyuni via Chiguana - Jirira - Isla Cujiri - Colchani - Uyuni - Tupiza - Villazon - June till August 2010

## Jean-Christophe Boillat of [www.bici-doble.blogspot.com](http://www.bici-doble.blogspot.com)









route Laguna Hedionda - Atola - Uyuni and Sol de Manana access - March 2011








## Other contributors:

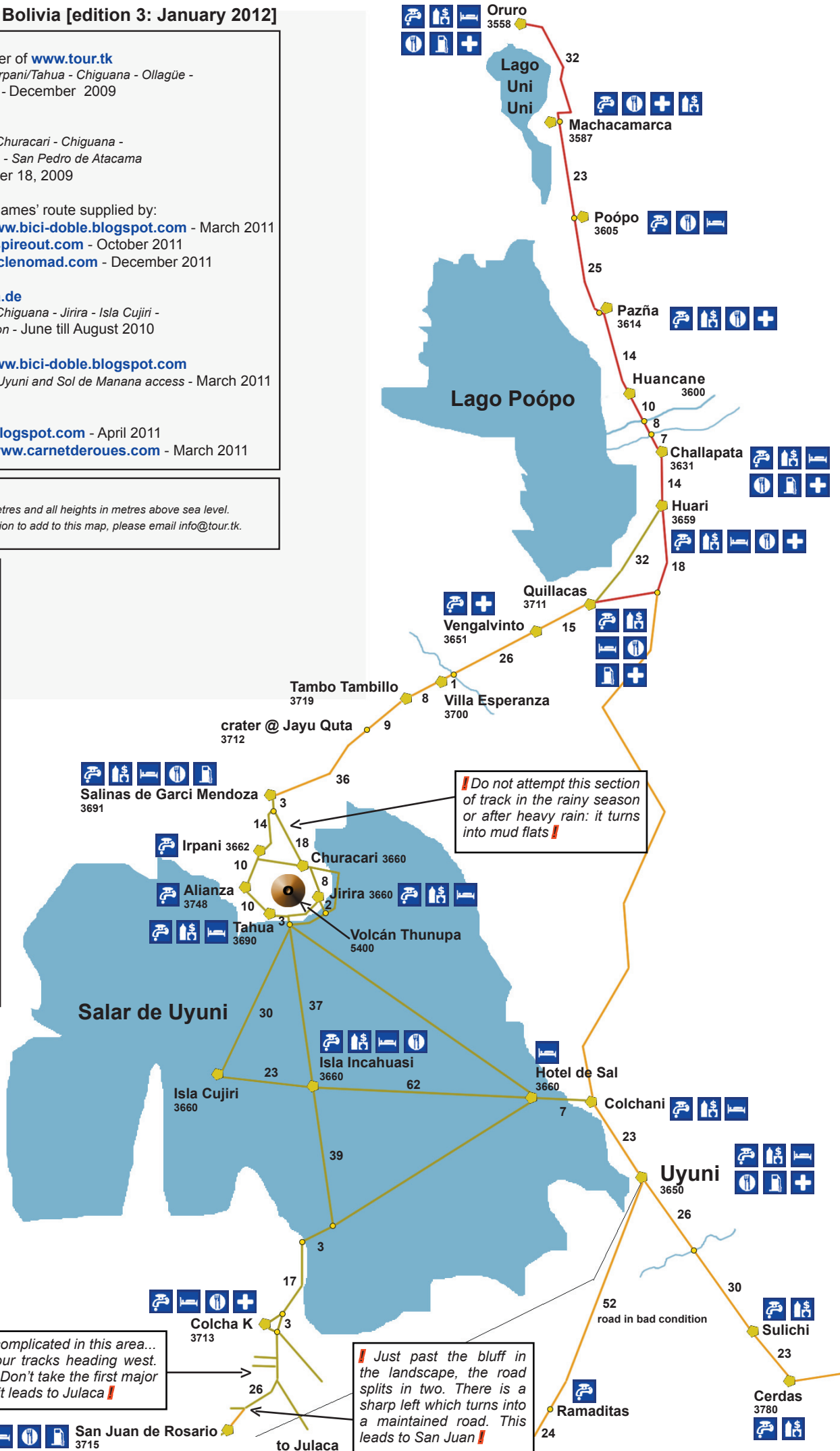
Neil of [www.pikesonbikes.blogspot.com](http://www.pikesonbikes.blogspot.com) - April 2011  
 Benoît and Anne-Sophie of [www.carnetderoues.com](http://www.carnetderoues.com) - March 2011

## LEGEND

All distances on this map are in kilometres and all heights in metres above sea level.  
 If you have any comments or information to add to this map, please email [info@tour.tk](mailto:info@tour.tk).

-  water tap
-  groceries
-  hostal/hotel
-  restaurant
-  petrol
-  camping facilities
-  hospital / health centre
-  hot spring / geyser

-  paved road
-  unpaved road
-  track
-  railway line
-  international border
-  fresh water river
-  (salt) lake



**! Do not attempt this section of track in the rainy season or after heavy rain: it turns into mud flats !**

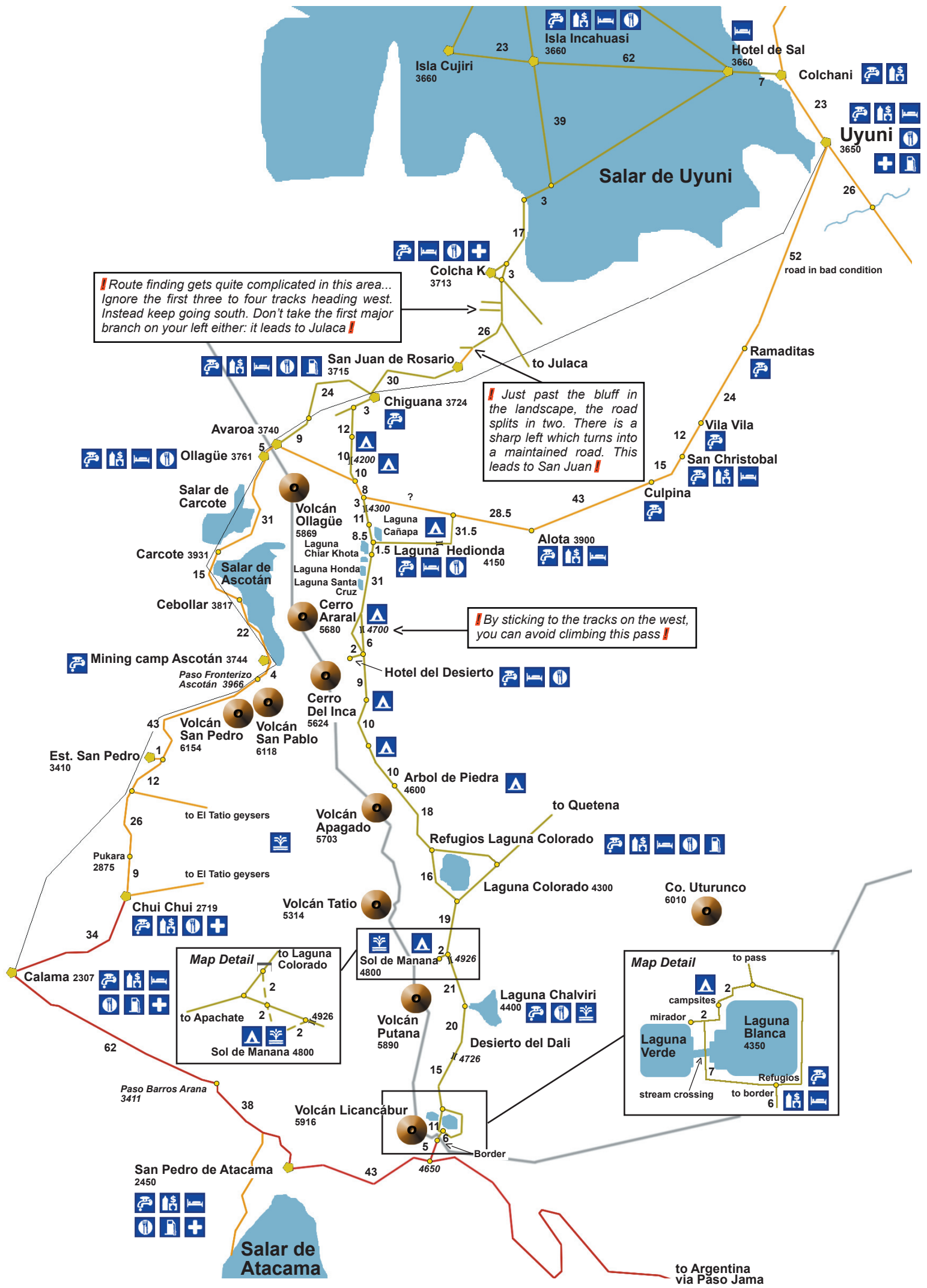
**! Route finding gets quite complicated in this area... Ignore the first three to four tracks heading west. Instead keep going south. Don't take the first major branch on your left either: it leads to Julaca !**

**! Just past the bluff in the landscape, the road splits in two. There is a sharp left which turns into a maintained road. This leads to San Juan !**

**San Juan de Rosario**  
3715

to Julaca

**Cerdas**  
3780



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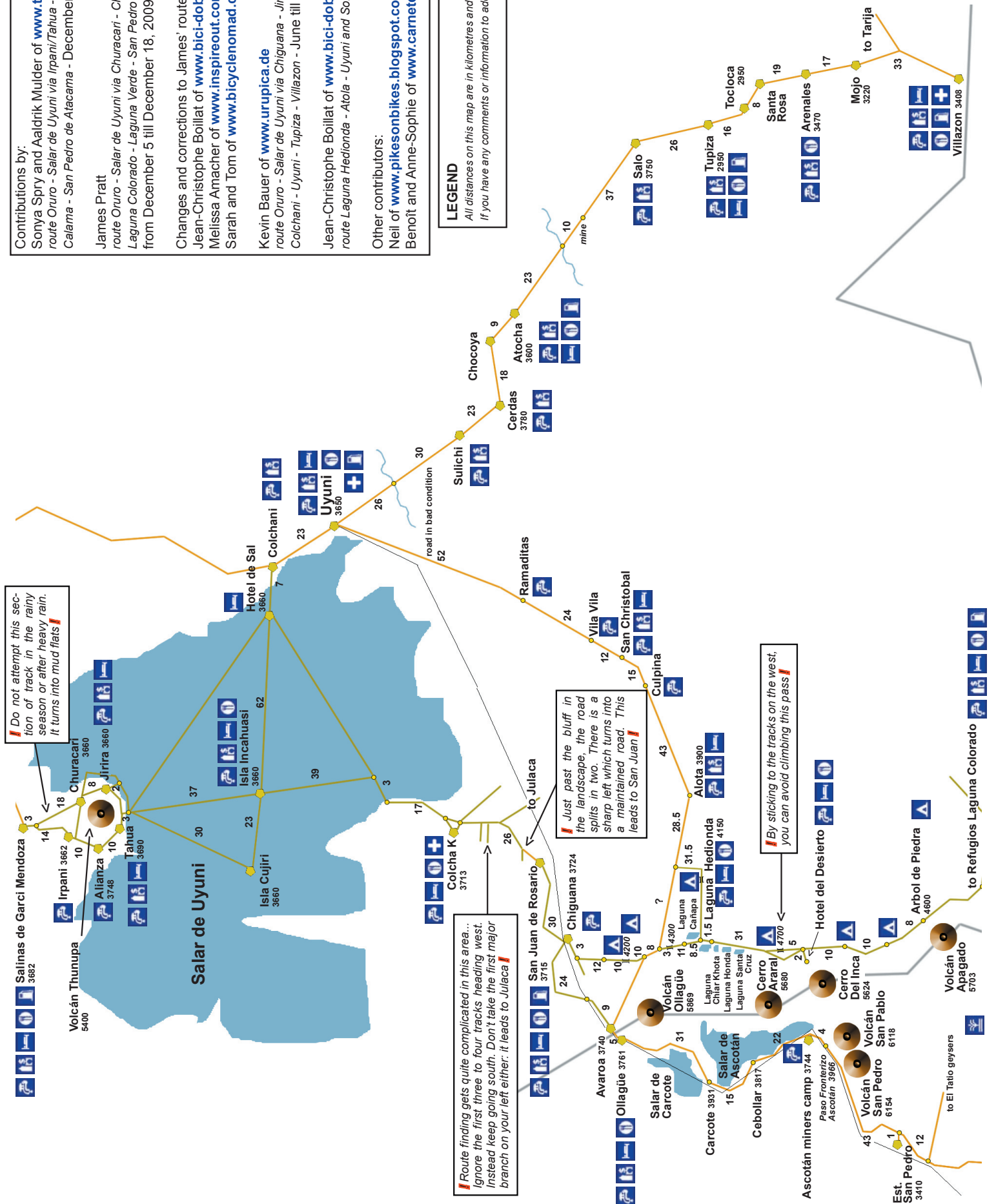
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	water tap
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	paved road
	unpaved road
	track
	railway line
	international border
	fresh water river
	(salt) lake



## Cycling in South West Bolivia

In 2009, when we first headed into the heart of Bolivia, other cyclists' told us that the roads were the worst in the world; and they were not far from the truth. Heading out of La Paz, we encountered paved highways with unfinished line markings; small narrow shoulders; badly maintained surfaces; and extreme traffic. Leading up to the Salar de Uyuni and further south was a network of paths etched by 4-wheel drive traffic. In recent years, all the roads have improved immensely, though you can still expect sections of ungraded roads and at high altitude, it is hard work.

Our trip took us from the border crossing at Kasani near Copacabana to La Paz and then on to the Salar de Uyuni (via Oruro and Tahua). From here we ventured south to San Juan, where, bad roads of washboard and deep sand, helped us make the decision to head straight for Chile instead of following the tracks through to Laguna Colorado, Laguna Verde and on to San Pedro de Atacama.

However our friend, James Pratt, did complete this trip and we combined forces to compile information for everyone to use on this area. Also, another cycling buddy, Kevin Bauer, made an alternative route across the Salar de Uyuni and through to Villazon via Uyuni. Since our first edition, we have had so much feedback about our mini-guide, that it is time to update the information again. In 2009 the roads were disasterous; the most current news (2011) is that there is not as much bike-pushing to do anymore. While we try to keep the information as up-to-date as possible, please remember that this area is constantly changing. The conditions you will encounter and the circumstances that are described in this pdf are largely due to weather and high altitude at the time of cycling. This subjectivity makes it imperative that you research the most current information available before you embark on this journey. One thing we can guarantee is: this will be one of your most unforgettable cycle touring expeditions yet.

For some great websites to assist you in planning your trip, see the [credits and usage page](#) at the end of this pdf. Thank you to everyone who took time out to send in their route descriptions and data to assist in improving this resource.

### But, first some general things to consider

**Roads:** These will be your biggest nightmare in the southwest especially. There are so many tracks that at times you won't know which one to choose from. Signposting is almost non-existent and when it does appear, it is very dubious. The paths are incredibly dusty with washboard and sand surfaces, making cycling really difficult. And certainly so with your bike being heavily laden with supplies and extra water. So, expect to push for many kilometres and that said, you should also be aware that you'll face the usual hardships of travelling at high altitude too.

**Traffic:** Some jeep tour drivers will respect your presence on the sandy paths, but be prepared to encounter discourteous behaviour as well: from incessant horn honking, demanding you get out of the way to dangerous driving speeds on shifting sand which will not only make you duck for your life, but whip up a mini-dust storm as well. Many cyclists have reported these bad driving attitudes in recent times.

**Weather:** South westerly winds will undoubtedly whip up a few dust storms and almost religiously in the afternoon hours. So not only against the sun, eye protection of some sort is a must. A bottle of high factor sunscreen and some lip chap won't go astray either. Weather can turn at a moment's notice, especially at high altitudes, hence don't forget to pack the rain gear. Expect some icy cold evenings too.

**Water:** Contrary to many other blogs, water will not be your biggest problem. It is available in different forms throughout the trip. Although, (for the average capacity cyclist), you'll probably want to carry more than you will need, the longest period you will go without finding a new water source is probably around two days. You will, however, need to carry some form of purifying or filtering system.

**Food:** While you shouldn't need to go hungry, food is definitely hit and miss along the way. You can be well assured that you cannot buy fresh fruit and vegetables anywhere on the stretch, not even in San Juan. *[I had to beg for 5 onions in a local shop after I had already spent a fortune on dry goods].* San Juan is your last chance to stock up on pasta, rice, instant mashed potato, sauces, soup mixes and tinned products and there are many small stores to choose from. The refugios along the way are basically stocked with biscuit and coke supplies rather than anything substantial. That said, you are generally able to get some sort of evening meal and breakfast if you are lodging at these places. Just be prepared to work around the jeep-tour schedules.

**Accommodation:** In general, camping wild in Bolivia is easy. In the southwest, you will desperately be searching for windbreaks to pitch your tent behind, due to the dusty gales. Pitching in sand means placing stones on the pegs as well. While not all refugio owners are as welcoming as you would like after a hard day's cycle, you can generally expect to find a spot to sleep for the night, though you may need to be up and off your floor-space before the first jeep tours pass through in the morning.

**Isolation:** Things have been changing rapidly in Bolivia in recent years and the once *"life threatening isolation"* that used to jeopardize cyclists, is not really there anymore. Many tourist jeeps take these tracks, so if trouble should prevail, stick to the well used roads. You are bound to see someone within a couple of days. Additionally, you can make arrangements with tour leaders in towns to drop supplies off to you along route.

**Extra pointers:** Due to the high level of endurance involved with all routes, it is advisable to carry some sort of medicine for stomach-bowel problems. Getting sick with diarrhoea is bad enough without having the added strain of

## Kasani border crossing near Copacabana to La Paz

Allow 2-3 days; paved [221km; 1839m]

There's a long climb out of Copacabana; but a beautiful stretch of road leading around and through Lake Titicaca to the ferry crossing at San Pedro de Tiquina [2009: cost 5 bolivianos each including bikes]. The road deteriorates somewhat from here on in; and after Huarina becomes a lot busier. Single lane highway all the way until a few kilometres before El Alto, where it branches to several lanes wide. Most of the highway has not yet been finished with line markers, so it can be a little scary at times and within the confines of El Alto and the city of La Paz, you'll have to contend with crazy bus and taxi antics. Sunday is a good choice of days to cycle into La Paz, since the traffic is generally at its minimum.

There are two choices from El Alto to the city centre: the *autopista* [highway], or the road running to the right of the main highway toll booth. Both have their merits: the autopista has a wide shoulder to use; is a good road free of speed humps; and drops you out at the bottom of Iglesia de San Francisco near the main tourist area of town. The smaller road is more of a scenic route and 3 kilometres longer. It winds you down through the streets of La Paz and you should try to keep to the main road. A wrong turn could see you walking your bike down, or more annoyingly back up very steep cobbled streets. La Paz is notorious for its gradients and badly paved roads.

## La Paz to Oruro

Allow 2-3 days; paved [230km; 1338m]

Leaving La Paz city centre and riding up the steady 13 kilometres and 441 altitude metres to *El Alto* (4085m) is best accomplished via the *autopista* [main highway]: the gradient is easy and there is a wide shoulder for the entire journey.

There are enough towns and villages along the highway to Oruro for supplies and water. You will be travelling on a narrow shoulder with a single lane. After Thalor, the road widens somewhat, but it is still busy with plenty of truck traffic.

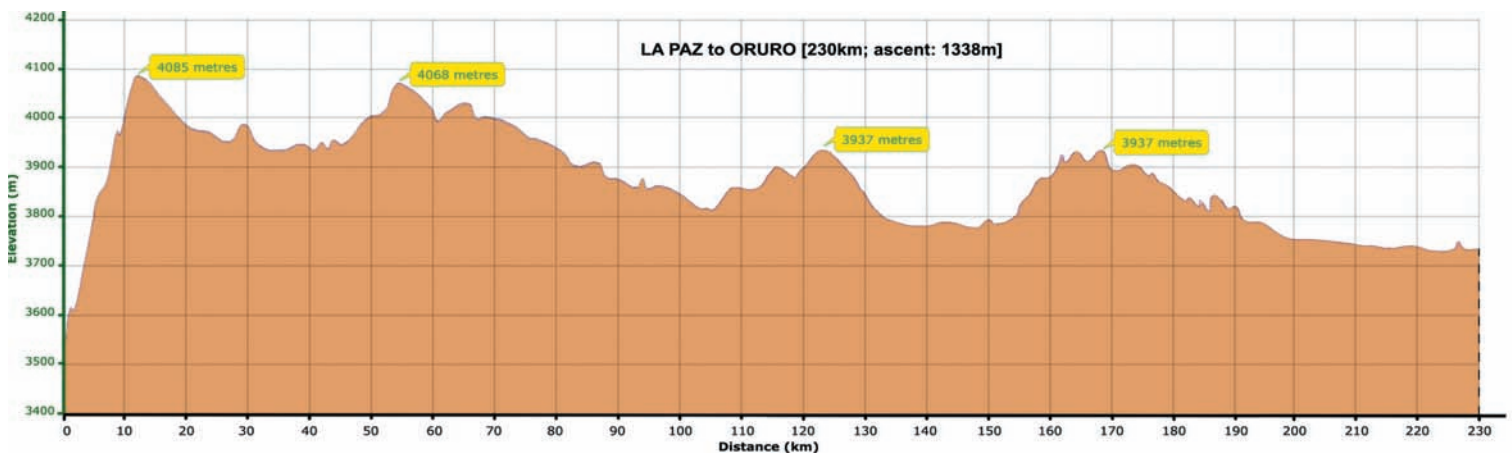
The road in general, is in reasonable repair and there are rumours of it becoming a double lane highway in the near future. There is a good chance of wind, which commonly picks up in the afternoon. Wild camping is feasible in many places along this stretch, otherwise you can find some sort of accommodation from La Paz through to Oruro. [see map or distances chart]

Make use of the great food available in Oruro too. Stock up on high energy goods that travel well. [Think nuts, dried fruit, cabbage, onions, carrots, tinned vegetables, soup mixes, milk powder, sugar and the usual pasta and grains for complex carbohydrates]. Small markets or local stores selling some fresh produce can also be found in Pazña, Challapata and Huari, though they have limited supplies. After these towns, there is little to obtain en-route until San Juan and even then, finding something fresh is quite uncommon.

Town / Village (H) = accommodation	Altitude (m)	Distance (km)	Altitude gain (m)	Distance (cumulative)	Altitude gain (cumulative)
La Paz to El Alto (H)	4085	13	441	13	441
Tholar (H)	3968	60	335	73	776
turn-off Viscachan (H= in town)	3844	24	48	97	824
Patacamaya (H)	3800	7	2	104	826
Sica Sica (H)	3917	21	157	125	983
Kokani (H)	3802	26	44	151	1027
Panduro	3926	10	133	161	1160
top climb	3960	7	65	168	1225
Caracollo (H)	3819	24	43	192	1268
Oruro (H)	3558	38	70	230	1338



typical small town accommodation in Bolivia



## Oruro to San Juan via Tahua

Allow 5-6 days; paved until Huari [424km; 1854m]

Town / Village (H) = accommodation	Altitude (m)	Distance (km)	Altitude gain (m)	Distance (cumulative)	Altitude gain (cumulative)
Oruro to Machacamarca	3587	32	94	32	94
Poópo	3605	23	65	55	159
Pazña	3614	25	86	80	245
Huancane	3600	14	14	94	259
Challapata (H)	3631	24	54	118	313
Huari (H)	3659	14	58	132	371
Quillacas (H)	3711	32	136	164	507
Vengalvinto	3651	15	21	179	528
Tambo Tambillo	3719	36	297	215	825
Salinas (H)	3691	45	251	260	1076
turn off to Llica	3673	3	24	263	1100
Irpani	3662	14	87	277	1187
Alianza	3748	10	152	287	1339
Tahua	3690	10	91	297	1430
start Salar de Uyuni	3660	3	13	300	1443
Isla Incahuasi (H)	3660	37	--	337	1443
dry land south	3660	42	--	379	1443
turn off to Colcha K (H)	3713	16	244	395	1687
to turn off Julaca	3733	3	24	398	1711
San Juan de Rosario (H)	3715	26	143	424	1854

From Huari you can keep heading south for 18 kilometres, before you hit the right hand turn-off towards Quillacas. You will soon see the rocky protrusion, where Quillacas is perched in the distance. The road department is busy paving this whole stretch; at the end of 2011, the road till Quillacas was totally paved. The distance chart above doesn't follow this road, but an unpaved track straight across the plains.

The view is immediately deserted with only salty flats, pom-pom grasses and llamas in sight. There is a 50 metre altitude gain into town, as well as a few shops for basic supplies and an alojamiento should you want to spend the night in this sleepy village.

### Section #02

#### Quillacas to Tahua [132km; 923m]

The roads can be okay in parts, but then horribly bad in other sections. Depending on the time of year, you'll encounter everything from bridges that are washed away to gravel, rocks, clay and deep sand. There is not much life around: just a few small villages. Vengalvinto, 15 kilometres after Quillacas, is the only place with a well that we could see. A kilometre before Villa Esperanza there is also a small river that locals use to fill up their water containers.



locals filling up water containers a kilometre before Villa Esperanza

### Section #01

#### Oruro to Quillacas [165km; 507m]

The initial section of bitumen highway is two lanes wide with no shoulder. This quickly forms one lane and one very large shoulder. The landscape morphs gradually from life to abandonment. Besides a few gradual inclines, the journey is relatively flat all the way to Huari.

Water sources needing purification are readily available along this stretch too [see map]; as are plenty of wild camping opportunities.

For those looking for something more formal there is accommodation in Challapata and Huari. Challapata has by far a bigger selection of shopping facilities.

From Huari onwards, things start to get a little more difficult and as a general rule of thumb, it is best to follow the electrical poles if in doubt. Also use Volcan Thunupa as your main land marker. This will get you safely to Salinas de Garci Mendoza.



wild camping near Huancane



too many choices!

Over the 36 kilometres from Vengalvinto to Tambo Tambillo, the track gradually climbs 297 altitude metres and coupled with the washboard surface, the progress is slow.

Volcan Thunupa is directly in front of you.

Nine kilometres outside of Tambo Tambillo, you'll pass the giant crater at Jayu Outa. From here, the next 36 kilometres to Salinas de Garci Mendoza is very difficult terrain with more washboard and plenty of deep sand as well. There are many tracks to choose from and road blocks suggest detours. Ignore them and wherever possible, try and stick to the main path, keeping Volcan Thunupa as much to your left as you can. This is the quickest route into Salinas.

Salinas is another sleepy village with accommodation and a pleasantly shady plaza. It also has a water tap, with supposed drinking water, though we filtered it to be on the safe side. There are a few adobe homes selling minimal produce: biscuits, chocolate bars, pasta, rice and bread if you are early enough. If you are really lucky bananas, apples and possibly tomatoes might also be available, but don't count on the fresh produce. You can tell which huts are shops as they will generally have a plastic bag hanging over the door or some piece of furniture, like a chair or even a wheelbarrow placed at the entrance. This is a sign they are open for business.



*plenty of washboard roads in the south-west of Bolivia*

The road leading to Tahua branches after 3 kilometres. Both roads are an option to get to the Salar de Uyuni, though after any amount of rain it is advisable to take the right route to Irpani / Llica. The left hand course will take you across mud flats towards Churacari and if they are wet enough, can lead to considerable hours of slipping and heaving loaded bikes through sticky compact mud.

The terrain on the road leading to the turn-off to Tahua is incredibly rocky and the stone signpost ambiguous. Follow the blue arrow to the left to reach Tahua; the branch to the right leads to Llica. The journey to Tahua is even more crazy: again plenty of washboard surface, rocks, boulders, sand, gravel carpets and incredibly steep climbs and falls. Using the strategy of basically keeping in course with the electrical lines means you will stay high and not waste too much energy pushing your rig up and down the undulations of sincerely bad roads.



*a bad decision to travel on the mud flats*



*follow the blue arrow to Tahua*



*rocky surfaces on the way to Tahua*

You will pass through a couple of tiny villages: the largest being Alianza about 10 kilometres from Irpani. It is a difficult 152 metres of altitude gain over this section. Tahua is a further 10 kilometres on and the roads don't improve at all. Even four-wheel drive vehicles take it slow here. You will summit the peak of the final climb, where gradients reach 17%, to see Tahua [S19°54'31.6" W67°41'51.8"] nestled on the circumference of the salt flats below.

The township and surroundings have a few accommodation options as well as a couple of water taps in the central plaza. If you are intending to travel and stay on Isla Incahuasi, you can also get your water supplies there. However, besides eating in the restaurant, food provisions above snack options on the salt flats are pretty well non-existent.



*entering the Salar de Uyuni*



## Section #03

### Tahua to San Juan de Rosario [127km; 424m]

Three kilometres east of the town centre of Tahua, when you finally hit the entrance to the Salar de Uyuni, you will immediately realise the rewards of all that hard slog against howling winds in the middle of sand tracked oblivion. What a powerfully charged sensation to be eternally surrounded by blinding white honeycomb impressions; to hear the crack and feel the crunch of salt beneath your wheel; have the shavings fly up and hit you in the face as you rocket along at unbelievable speeds on an imaginary path due south. You will never experience anything like this again. Most cyclists say it is well and truly worth the effort.

The 37 kilometre track from the start of the salt flats to Isla Incahuasi [S20°14'26.3" W67°37'38.7"] is obvious to follow. The tiny protrusion floating above the horizon becomes visible after 7 kilometres into the Salar. It gets larger and less surreal as you near its salty shoreline. For anyone wanting to stay over night, Isla Incahuasi offers a hostel and restaurant with rumoured good tucker. For the more camping minded, the 15 Bolivianos entrance fee per person also gets you a free camping spot anywhere on the island's perimeter. And for those wanting to experience a sober isolation without a price tag, anywhere else on the ten and a half thousand square kilometres of virtually horizontal salt flats is yours to explore. Though remember that getting the tent pegs into the salt could prove a bit of a problem.

The second leg of the easiest cycling Bolivia has on offer, will eventually end when you reach the finish of the salt flats after 42 kilometres [S20°35'08.0" W67°33'45.4"]. The simplicity stops and sandy tracks greet you. After the turn-off to Colcha K, which is not necessary to enter unless you intend to stay overnight, the road progressively disintergrates. On more than one occasion, you are left wondering which path to take. [see map for more details] Quite a lot of pushing is involved getting to San Juan.



heading towards Isla Incahuasi

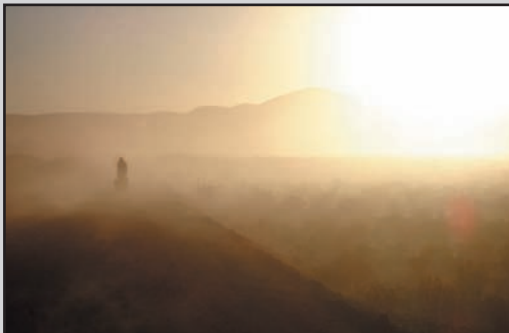


veer left as it is not necessary to enter Colcha K  
(In 2011, the sign was knocked down)



again, we choose the left lane

### Cycle touring or endurance sport?



*Cycling this section of road is more like an endurance sport than cycle touring. So, bear that in mind before planning this trip. The cold hard facts are these: the best parts of the road to cycle on are going to be the washboard, because it is the only hardened surface around. Otherwise, you will be pedalling your wheels through sand or pushing your loaded rig at more than 3500 metres above sea level. And it is not always flat either. Your other obstacle will be wind. South-westerlies are mind numbing and physically debilitating in this area. They occur mostly in the afternoon, but can sometimes surprise you with an earlier visit. Sandstorms are also a common - almost daily-event.*

San Juan is 46 kilometres from the edge of the Salar de Uyuni and is the last port of call for supplies for several days. Another viable option is to co-ordinate food and water drop-offs from jeep tours at particular points/refugios along your trip.

Reliable provisions supplied in San Juan include products like: rice, pasta, instant mashed potato, porridge oats, sugar, milk powder, mayonnaise, coffee, tea, tomato puree, tinned fruit, tinned peas, biscuits, soup mix packets, chocolate snack bars, and petrol. Finding fresh vegetables, including onions, is difficult. If you purchase a decent amount from one shop owner, he/she may delve into their stash of vegetables out the back for you. They are not readily available in the shops, so you need to ask for them - even beg as I did. Bread is also available, but finding it is difficult. Just keep asking and knocking on doors if you are really desperate. All food is expensive in San Juan.

On the sleeping front, the village has a few hostels on offer: ranging from very basic to upmarket. Electricity and hot water is not necessarily available at all accommodations during the day and in some places only for a couple of hours at night. So if you need to recharge your batteries then make sure you have the facility to do so before accepting the room.



typical food purchases available in San Juan

## San Juan to San Pedro via the Lagunas

Allow 8-10 days: [343km; ascent: 4947m; descent: 5556m]  
unpaved until Chilean Border: 43 kilometres before San Pedro

The following 10 day account is from James Pratt's journey in this region in 2009 combined with comments from other cyclists that did this trip in 2011.

### DAY #01 [46km; ascent: 543m; descent: 209m]

Leaving your last decent shopping opportunity for over a week, you head towards Volcano Ollagüe in the distance and to your right. It is 30 kilometres from San Juan to Chiquana.

The road is patchy in parts, with both sand and washboard to contend with, but rideable for 90% of the way. If you happen to choose the correct path, there are some decent surfaces of hardened mud which are easy to pick up speed on.



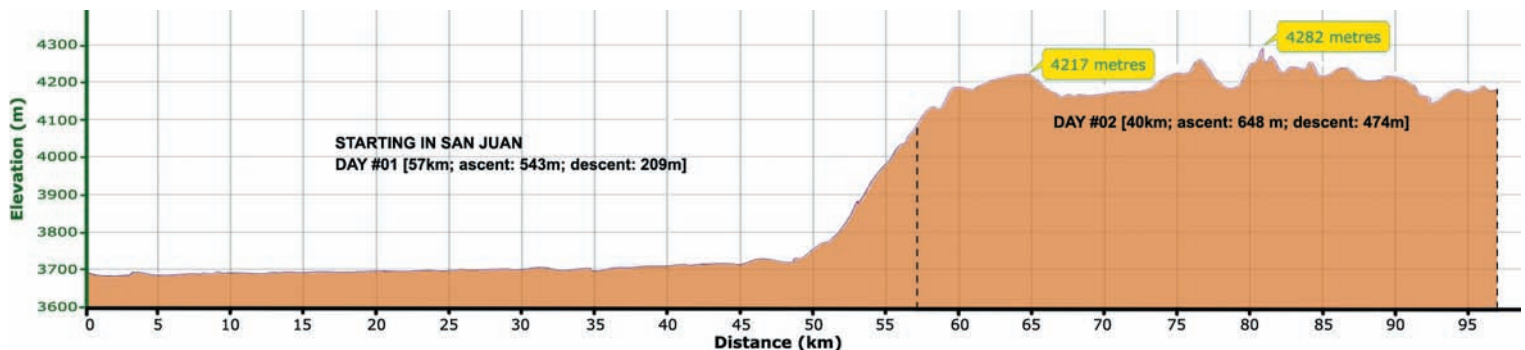
perfect windbreak for the first night



one of the better road surfaces leading towards Chiquana

Keep riding until the military camp at Chiquana. Cross over the railway line and if a guard is present, you may need to sign in before passing. Here you can also fill up on water supplies from the metal boxes by the railway [ask first of course]. Some cyclists have even managed to score a bed for the night in one of the camouflaged domes.

Leaving the camp, ignore the first road to the left seen roughly 500 metres down the track [cemetery in the distance]. Keep following the railway until the road clearly veers left and climbs up over the hill in the distance. After 16 kilometres the road drops slightly into a dry river bed. When the road crosses the river, walk 100 metres to your left upstream to find a man-made stonewall windbreak: perfect for pitching your tent behind and out of the wind. Enjoy this spot as this could turn out to be one of the best campsites along the way.



### DAY #02 [42km; ascent: 648 m; descent: 474m]

The roughly 10 kilometer climb up and out of the first campsite is rocky and steep, though you will still be able to cycle much of it until the 4200 metre pass. Here are two stone shelters perfect for an overnight camp. After the road passes an obvious cut in the rock, the path splits up into a number of tracks. Choose the least sandy one and head in a rough south-westerly direction until you join with the international road (10 kilometres from the pass). A strange looking signpost halfway along this stretch will indicate you are on the right path.

At the junction with the international road, turn left and follow for about 8 kilometres. Condition of the road is good, though undulating. After clearing a small pass, you'll come to a junction where you'll need to make a very definite right-hand turn down a road that doesn't look like much at all. Not making this turn will result in remaining on the international road, heading towards Alota. Continue cycling for 3 kilometres and up to another small pass [4300m].



if you see this sign; you are on the right track

The road will then undulate for a further 11 kilometres until Laguna Canapa. Between here and Laguna Hedionda, there is another small pass, with some shelter from the wind. If you have more energy and cash to spare, you could cycle on a further 10 kilometres to Laguna Hedionda: Ecolodge de Los Flamingsos. If you are just dropping in for water, note that the hotel will not sell you any bottled water at all, but it is possible to stock up on water from a local spring. It is slightly saline, but safe to drink after treatment.

**DAY #03 [29km; ascent: 575m; descent: 284m]**

The road through the rest of the lakes is relatively good. Once you clear Laguna Santa Cruz however, it disintegrates badly. Not only the climbing gradient, but lots of deep sand, mean plenty of pushing. Averaging 3 kilometres per hour for the entire afternoon is not much fun and 2 kilometres before the 4700 metre pass, you will see the first chance of the day to camp out of the wind.

Walking off in an eastward direction there is a cut in the sandy slopes which will act as a buffer of sorts. Its not perfect, but there is not much else in the area to shelter behind.

**DAY #04 [27km; ascent: 614m; descent: 453m]**

Today's journey starts with a gradual climb of 2 kilometres until a high point where you will see a few tracks. If in doubt as to which one to choose, then stay to the right to avoid any unnecessary climbing. The road then descends for 6 kilometres towards the turnoff to Hotel del Desierto on your right . Though it is 1.8 kilometres from the highway, it can be another possible water source.

From the junction the road is really difficult to cycle. The terrain is also undulating with the accent on going up. About 9 kilometres south of the turnoff to Hotel Desierto you'll reach a rocky outcrop on your right. This is a great campsite opportunity; though a further 10 kilometres on, a small road sign on the right marks an abandoned house. This is another excellent spot for camping.

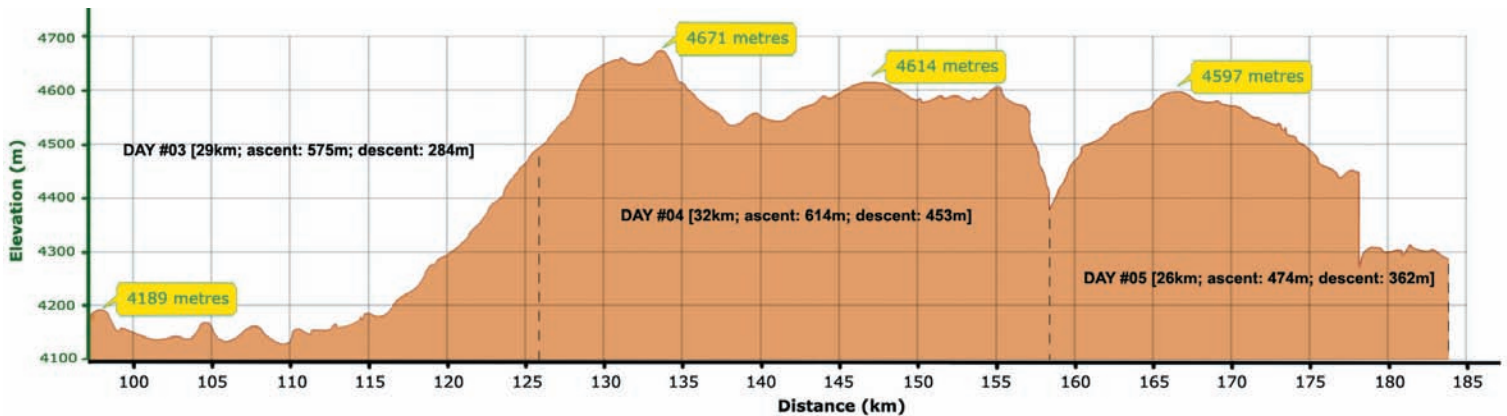
At this point you are about 10 kilometres from Arbol de Piedra: a stone tree carved from howling sandy winds. This area also has possible camping opportunities, due to a few nicely positioned windbreaks.



*plenty of pushing along this route*



*lagunas and flamingos are a common sight on this stretch*



*\* abandoned house: 20kms south of the turnoff to Hotel Desierto*



*\* the crumbling house walls make another perfect windbreak*



*Arbol de Piedra: carved by wind and sand*

**DAY #05 [28km; ascent: 474m; descent: 362m]**

The 10 kilometre stretch temporarily improves until 2 kilometres before Arbol de Piedra: landmarking your halfway point in the journey. From here until Laguna Colorado, the next 18 kilometres of road is a mix of sand and washboard. About a 70:30 ratio of pedal to push can be expected.

At the north shore of Laguna Colorado, the park entrance is visible, where you'll need to pay 150 Bolivianos for 4 days [as of 2011]. Behind the office and a little way down on your right you'll also see the Campamento Ende with 3 choices of accommodation in a row. In 2009, prices ranged from 25 to 30 Bolivianos for a bed for the night. There are no showers, but running water is available outside. This needs to be treated before consumption.

**DAY #06 [rest day]**

**What's in a Refugio?**

As well as accommodation, the Refugios have small shops selling beer, soft drinks, biscuits and snack foods. You might even be lucky to pick up some pasta as well, but don't rely on it. Soup mix, packet sauces, oatmeal and milk powder are definitely off the list. Watch out for their tinned products: they could have been sitting on the shelf for a long period of time. Also note that they also sell petrol here should you need to stock up and for a small fee you can recharge your batteries as well.

Like James, you may feel like taking a rest day at one of the lodgings. His bill for two nights accommodation amounted to 60 Bolivianos and two dinners and breakfasts cost 44 Bolivianos. The evening meal included spaghetti with tomato sauce, cheese and bread. Breakfast was a simple affair of bread, butter with tea or coffee.

**DAY #07 [37km; ascent: 978m; descent: 353m]**

The 16 kilometres running along the west side of Laguna Colorado is hard going: lots of pushing through sand until the junction with the road coming from the south. At this intersection a signpost points to Laguna Colorado [where you just came from] and to Quetena. Turn right at this junction and climb 17 kilometres on a reasonably good road. Just before the highest point there is an old customs post to pass through.

To your right, there is a turnoff to Apachate and the border with Chile. Follow the left branch for 2 kilometres. After a bit more climbing, you will reach another junction with roads off to the right. This is the turnoff to Sol de Manana which is 2 kilometres away. So, if you want to see the geysers then you'll need to climb briefly for 100 alti-metres over the bluff and drop back down a further 100 alti-metres [4880m]. If you are in for a bit of high altitude camping, then this is a great place to pitch the tent. There are plenty of windbreaks present.

**DAY #08 [22km; ascent: 105m; descent: 566m]**

After getting back to the main road, which is a 2 kilometre ride to the 4926m pass, the track to Laguna de Chalviri is not too bad. Apart from a few kilometres towards the end, where a bit of pushing is required, the journey is pretty much downhill.

There is no Refugio, but a restaurant where the owners will let you sleep on the floor. You'll need to be up and out of the way before the first jeep load of tourists come through at 6 am. Once they have all passed through, you'll have the place to yourself and most likely be dished up a superb breakfast with fresh leftovers from the tour groups. Another batch visits around lunchtime as well. The evening meal is also pretty special.

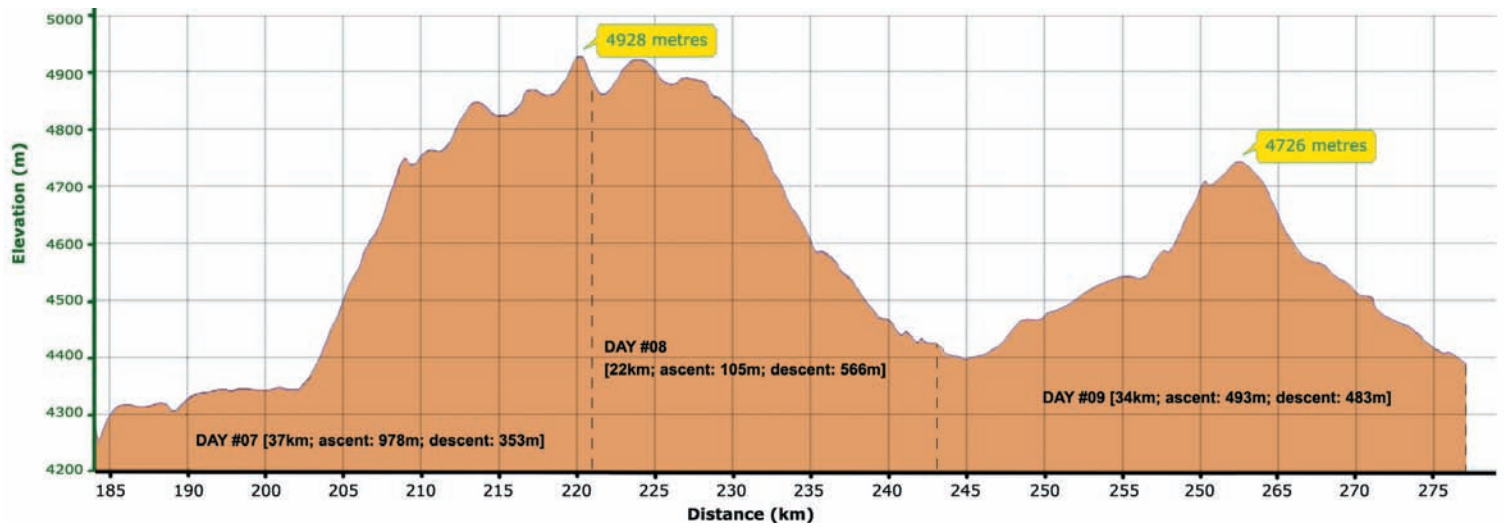
For breakfast, dinner and floor space, expect to pay around 40 Bolivianos (2009). The other bonus here is the thermal bath just across the road. Not only can you soak in it, but after treatment, the water is reported to be safe for drinking. However, with running water at the restaurant, it seems hardly worth the trouble.



*old customs post just before the pass*



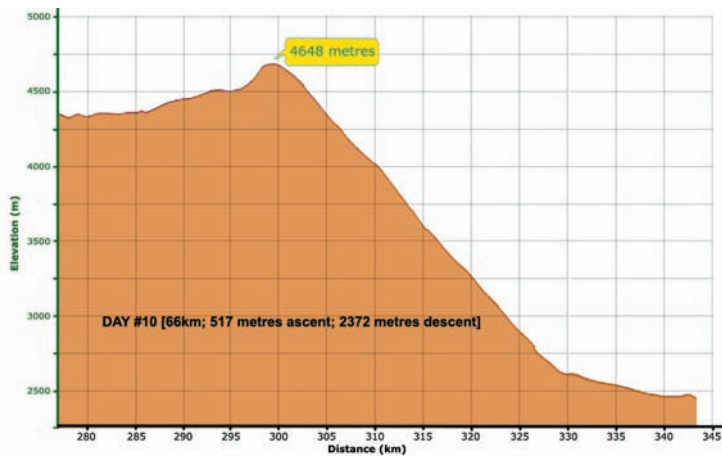
*the geysers at Sol de Manana*



**DAY #09 [37km; ascent: 493m; descent: 483m]**

Today's journey is easier in comparison with previous days. The road is still sandy in parts, but mostly cyclable. The climb through Desierto del Dali is gradual until you hit the top after 20 kilometres. From the pass [4726m], it is 15 odd kilometres of downhill riding and only a bit of pushing to Laguna Verde. A little signpost at a junction points westwards to the lake.

Turnoff to the right and follow the washboard path between Lagunas Verde and Blanca. Two kilometres down this track are opportunities for camping. If you have the perseverance for another kilometer of pedaling, then just before rounding the bluff between the two lakes you'll see a string of abandoned houses on the right-hand side. This would be an even better choice of camping spots.



sign pointing westwards to path between Laguna Verde and Laguna Blanca

**DAY #10 [65km; 517 metres ascent; 2372 metres descent]**

After the abandoned buildings, you'll round the corner to the west and be faced with a whole lot of options where the road splits up. Choose the best cycling path: they all head about 2 kilometres towards Laguna Verde Observatory (Mirador). The lake becomes green at around 9am and the tour groups are generally clear of the area between 9.30 and 10am. The next section is reasonably good road with some spectacular scenery. Cross the river between the lakes below the lookout and swing to the left and back towards Laguna Blanca. From this point you can see the nearest Refugio in the distance; situated about 7 kilometres from the observatory. [See map detail]

As you near the first Refugio, you can see another one about a kilometer in the distance. At the park entrance, also just south of you, you will need to show the ticket you purchased back at Laguna Colorado. While technically, you may only stay for 4 days, most cyclists can get away with an extra day. If it looks like proving a problem, just act as if you didn't know about the restriction.

The 6 kilometres to Bolivian immigration is, comparatively, a decent cycling road. In 2009, it cost 21 Bolivianos to exit the country and it is also wise to change over your money here. While the exchange rates are not brilliant, they are better than you'll get in San Pedro. From here, it is 5 kilometres to the main road and the best tarmac you have seen in almost two weeks.

Although it is generally a climb to 4650m, the road is a dream. So is the 43 kilometer downhill plummet to San Pedro de Atacama that begins after 5 kilometres. Chilean immigration is actually in the town itself and although you will have probably eaten through all your supplies by now, remember that fruit, vegetables, dairy and meat products are not permitted in.

San Pedro de Atacama is in a desert, but it will seem like an oasis after your recent travels with its ample amenities.



finally tarmac!

## San Juan to San Pedro de Atacama via Calama

Allow 5-6 days; unpaved until Chui Chui [364km; 2648m]

This route will now take you directly west towards the Chilean border at Avaroa and Ollagüe instead of the southern journey to Lagunas Verde and Colorado. Most maps of this region promise tarmac as soon as you hit the crossing. This is not true. We travelled this section in late December 2009 and while the days were warm and dry, the nights were extremely cold. The strong wind added dramatically to the chill factor too, so be prepared with some warm weather gear.

It is also best to start your days as early as possible. Except for a very short section, from now on until Calama you will be travelling directly into the south-westerly winds and in the afternoon, they are at their strongest. Wild camping is not difficult as there are plenty of wide open spots on offer, but you'll be searching for something as a wind break, which will be difficult to find. Sand storms will be the other reason for seeking shelter.

### Section #01

San Juan de Rosario to Ollagüe [68km; 262m]

Town / Village (H) = accommodation	Altitude (m)	Distance (km)	Altitude gain (m)	Distance (cumulative)	Altitude gain (cumulative)
San Juan to Chiguana	3724	30	78	30	78
Avaroa (border Bolivia)	3740	33	149	63	227
Ollagüe (H)	3761	5	35	68	262
Ascotán miners camp Pazo	3744	68	527	136	789
Paso Fronterizo Ascotán	3966	4	230	140	1019
turn-off Est. San Pedro	3410	43	158	183	1177
Chui Chui	2719	47	87	230	1264
Calama (H)	2307	34	50	264	1314
Paso Barros Arana	3411	62	1102	326	2416
San Pedro de Atacama (H)	2450	38	232	364	2648

The path out of San Juan divides and sub-divides continually. Take the one you consider to be the firmest. There are some really good sections on the journey to Chiguana Military Base, which is 30 kilometres from San Juan. As a rule of thumb, keep Volcán Ollagüe in front of you.

When you get to the railway track, remain on its right and stick to the main track. Don't cross into the military base. Doing this will mean you've got hours of pushing through crumbling salt and sand, a few kilometres after the left-hand turnoff to Laguna Colorado.

The Bolivian border: Avaroa is 33 kilometres from Chiguana and the path is hard work at times.

At the Immigration office, the procedure is simple and as of 2008, it costs 21 Bolivianos for each foreigner to exit the country. A five kilometre stretch of no-man's land follows with the official crossing somewhere in between.



Bolivian immigration post at Avaroa



straying from the road means hours of travelling on crumbling salt

### Crossing the line

Chile has strict rules about what can and cannot be brought into the country when it comes to food and animal products. And they are devoted to thoroughly searching your luggage. Products such as: honey, beeswax, feathers, untreated animal hides, fruit and vegetables (whether cooked, fresh or dried), cheese and other fresh milk products, fish and meat (cooked and raw), nuts and unprocessed seeds are unconditionally banned products.

At border crossings, you receive a form in which you have to declare whether you are carrying any food. Think carefully before you answer NO. If officials find something in your bags, you could be forced to pay a \$US200 fine.

The border at Ollagüe in Chile is much more official. Not only do you have the usual immigration procedure to complete, but the SAG food inspection as mentioned above. With this in mind, make sure you have stocked up with provisions you can take across the border, before leaving San Juan. There are a few small shops in Ollagüe, as well as free internet access at the library.

There are no official money changers at the border town of Ollagüe, but a local told us to ride around and ask for Victoria or Lola. We found the son of one of them and luckily enough changed a small amount of money into Chilean Pesos - it pays to know in advance what the current exchange rate is.

There are a couple of accommodation and restaurant options in the town.

We also discovered a tap with potable water across from the exhibition hall, at the end of the right hand side of the town. You can safely drink the mains water in Chile. Stock up with at least a couple of day's supplies. We didn't find any more water until the Ascotán Miners' Camp, 68 kilometres from the Chilean border. Judging from the water line pipes, it is possible that Estación San Pedro, 1 kilometre from the road from Ascotán to Calama, has water too.



sandy tracks after Chilean border



salt mining camp at Cerbolla



slight gradient camping at Fronterizo Ascotán

## Section #02

*Ollagüe to Calama [196km; 1002m]*

The road from Ollagüe to Chui Chui is fundamentally similar to Bolivia, though more sand and salt than washboard and there are no real townships, only a few mining camps.

A small climb up and around the last bend of Salar de Carcote is rideable, but not brilliant at the top. The downhill is worse. The town of Carcote, 31 kilometres from the border and marked on our map is not a town at all. Eight kilometres further on, we hit a stretch of bitumen, which is bliss but unfortunately stops just before the salt mining camp of Cerbolla. The next tarmac you will see is not until Chui Chui.

Ascotán Miners' Camp, 22 kilometres from Cerbolla has a good supply of water. A four kilometre and 230 metre altitude gain, with gradients between 9 and 14% takes you to the peak: *Paso Fronterizo Ascotán (3966m)*. At the pass, there is an abandoned house on the left but it is full of broken glass. A bit further, on the lefthand side, there are some large rocks on slight gradient terrain that will fit a two man tent.

Another small climb ensues on washboard surface. There is absolutely nothing around except stones and sand. No life: nothing grows here. There's just a water pipe, suggesting that there may be water in Estación San Pedro, but we didn't turn off. The road is a little better, with a slightly undulating terrain, but definite downhill trend.

Chui Chui has at least one small shop selling bread and there is a water tap there as well. Otherwise a river can be easily accessed on the way out of town.

The 34 kilometre ride from Chui Chui to Calama on your first bitumen roads in weeks will seem like heaven. The city itself has major supermarkets and ample accommodation.

### Honey, who shrunk the tent?

You are surrounded by salt flats. Not only will your lips, throat and nasal passages have a hard time coping with the dry atmosphere, but it is possible your tent material will shrink as well.

Our three pole tunnel tent did to such proportions that we could no longer set it up with the same length rods. One solution is to sprinkle the tent pole sleeves with water, but in an area where this commodity is extremely precious, you will want to save it for drinking and cooking.

Instead, we solved the problem by carrying three shorter pole segments which replaced one of the longer ones on each pole. It will certainly save you lots of afternoon struggling and possibly ripping your tent stitching too.

### Section #03

Calama to San Pedro de Atacama [100km; 1384m]

Getting to the top of *Paso Barros Arana* (3411m) is a 62 kilometre climb of low gradient and nothingness views. From the top, you'll plunge below only to climb again for a short distance. A final drop into Valle Cordillera de la Sal follows, where your scenic-starved gazes will witness some pretty stunning rock formations.

San Pedro de Atacama is a tourist destination, so expect to find all that goes along with this trend. At the end of 2009, you could find a dorm bed for around 6,000 pesos per person or a budget double room with share facilities for between 14,000 and 16,000 pesos. The town has an overload of grocery stores, souvenir shops, restaurants and bars. Enjoy it while you can; you are surrounded by desert.



the slow gradual climb through barren landscape towards Paso Barros Arana



red rock formations of the Valle Cordillera de la Sal

## CREDITS AND USAGE

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- ▶ Benoît and Anne-Sophie of [www.carnetderoues.com](http://www.carnetderoues.com) for their comments and additions to this pdf

### Other great websites for cycle touring information about the region:

- ▶ [www.irisentoreopreis.nl](http://www.irisentoreopreis.nl)

Detailed sketch maps on [laguna verde](#) or [tunupa](#); simple elevation charts; and a collection of experiences and comments from several cyclists who made this journey back in 2003-4.

- ▶ [www.betzgi.ch](http://www.betzgi.ch)

Detailed sketch map, though distances tend to be a little overstated; GPS way points which are an excellent way of breaking up your journey if you are travelling with such a device; route description; and excellent elevation profile charts.

- ▶ [www.sekiji.net](http://www.sekiji.net)

great maps [free to download at [www.viajerosmapas.com](http://www.viajerosmapas.com) for GPS users] with incredibly accurate kilometre distances. Simple route description.

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