



# Valle de la Rocas

## Bolivia 2019

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# 1 – Introduction

## 1.1 – Aims and Objectives

Our main aim was to travel to the Valle de las Rocas in Bolivia and develop the bouldering in that area. We also hoped by documenting our trip to encourage other climbers to visit the area themselves.

Primary objectives:

- Return home safely
- Explore the poorly documented Valle de las Rocas
- Obtain first ascents of unclimbed boulders
- Document our climbs for future climbers
- Gain bouldering and expedition experience for all team members
- Be environmentally conscious and self-sufficient
- Have fun!

## 1.2 – Location

The Valle de las Rocas is in southwest Bolivia in the department of Potosí, within the province of Baldivieso and Nor Lípez. It lies 150km south of the city of Uyuni, between the villages of Villa Alota and Mallcu Villamar which are roughly 50km apart (Figure 1). The Valle de las Rocas is on the altiplano at an elevation of just under 4000m, where it provides a vast expanse of sandstone rock that is largely unclimbed and entirely undocumented.

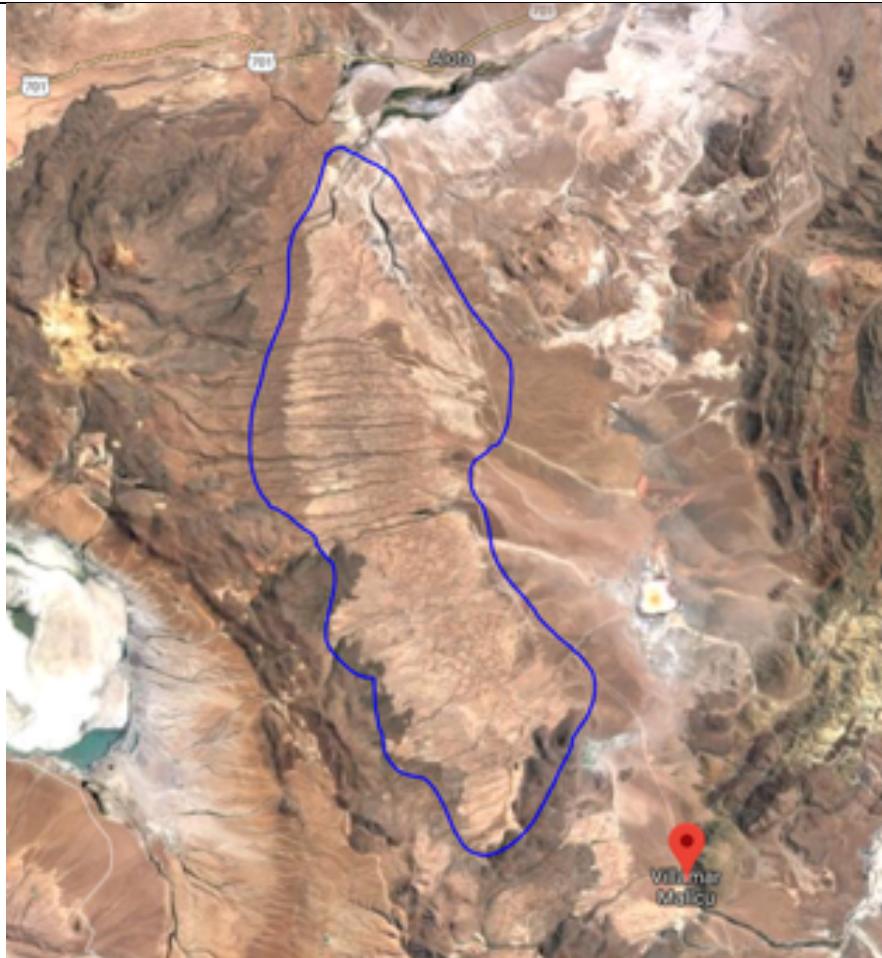


Figure 1: The Valle de las Rocas region (outlined in blue) (Source: Google Satellite Maps)

### 1.3 – Climate and Weather

The weather in the valley was pleasantly hot during the day but plummeted below freezing at sunset. Some nights urine froze for the unfortunate people who have small bladders or drank too much before bed! There was no precipitation when camping in the valley. Overall, the conditions were excellent for climbing, if a little chilly at night. Very dry and hospitable.

## 2 – Expedition Team

Charlotte Krishek

**Role:** Expedition Leader

**Age:** 22

**Academic background:** Medicine 6<sup>th</sup> year, BSc Medical Sciences with Respiratory Science (2019)

**Previous climbing experience:**

2015–present – Bouldered on many trips across the UK and in

Fontainebleau, France up to a standard of 7a/V6

2015–present – Climbed regularly indoors up to a standard of V6 bouldering or 7a+ lead climbing

2015–present – Sport climbing up to

6c outdoors and traditional climbing up to E1 across the UK

December 2017 – Winter climbing, trad climbing, dry tooling, and hiking in the Cairngorms, Scotland

September 2017 – Deep water soloing, sport climbing and multipitch climbing in Split and Omis, Croatia

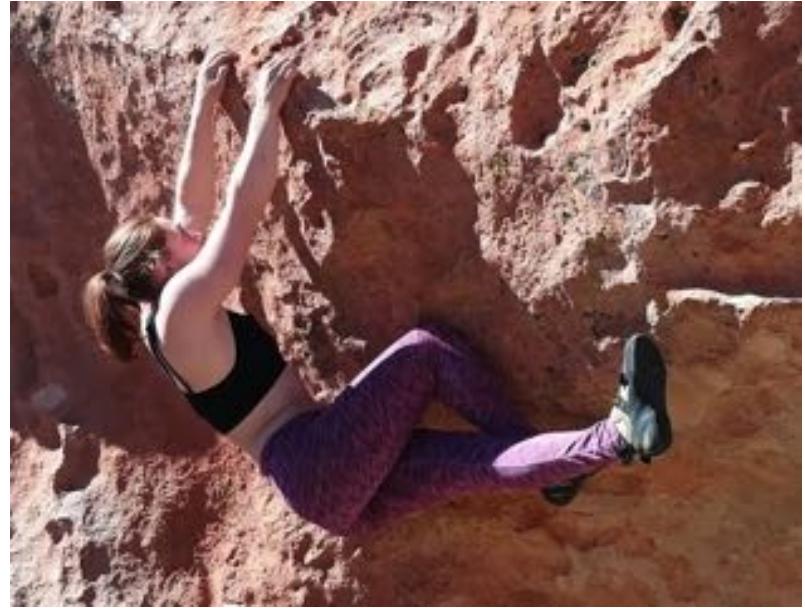
April 2018 – Sport and multipitch climbing in Chulilla, Spain

June 2018 – Sport climbing and multipitch climbing in Setesdal, Norway

**Relevant positions:**

2017–2018 – President of Imperial College Mountaineering Club

2018–present – Stores Manager of Imperial College Mountaineering Club



Peter Rhodes

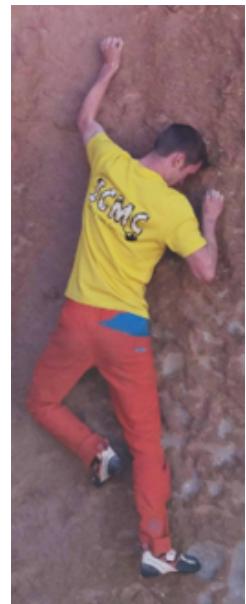
**Role:** Chief Medical Officer

**Age:** 23

**Academic background:** Medicine 6<sup>th</sup> year, BSc Medical Sciences with Pharmacology (2018)

**Previous climbing experience:**

2015–present – frequent indoor bouldering, occasional lead climbing, and outdoor bouldering experience throughout the UK including Snowdonia, the Peak district, and Scotland, as well as foreign travel experience including a week backpacking through Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2017.



Varalika Jain

**Role:** Treasurer

**Age:** 20

**Academic background:** BSc Biological Sciences (2019)

**Previous climbing experience:**

2014–2016 – Frequent hikes around Hong Kong, completed most hikes around Sai Kung Country park

October 2014 – Ascent to Everest Base Camp (5364m)

June 2016 – Ascent to Muztagh Ata Base Camp (4450m)

2015–present: Frequent indoor bouldering experience, 2–4 sessions per week

2017–present – Outdoor bouldering experience in the UK and Spain up to a max grade of 6a+

**Relevant positions:**

2018–present – Secretary of the Imperial College Mountaineering Club



## Dara Vakili

**Role:** Junior Medical Officer

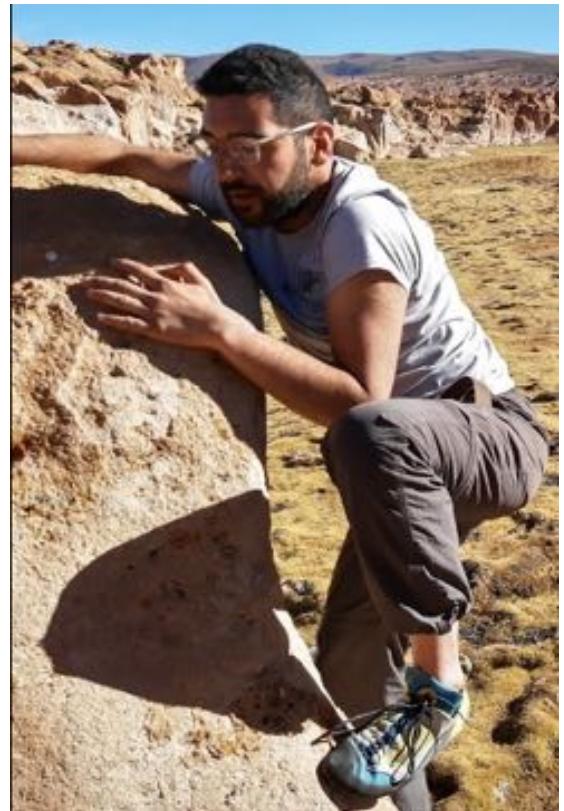
**Age:** 24

**Academic background:** Graduate Entry Medicine 2<sup>nd</sup> year (Imperial), BSc Applied Medical Sciences (2018, UCL)

**Previous climbing experience:**

**Expedition Highlights:** An ascent and rappel through the Amphu Latsa glacier in Nepal at 6000m altitude during a month trek through the Makalau national park, Nepal. Two weeks were spent trekking in a two-man team without guides and Sherpas through the Hongu Valley with a minimum altitude of 5000m with all provisions, camping and glacial climbing equipment. A month trek from Akureyri in Northern Iceland to Skogafoss in the south including a traverse of the Eyjafjallajokull glacier. A month-long expedition as part of an 11-man team in the Altai region of Siberia, Russia, including a glacial climb of the Akkem glacier.

**Climbing:** Occasional outdoor and indoor top-roping and bouldering between 2008 and 2017. Two winter ascents to the Gouter on Mont Blanc in the French Alps. Two weeks lead climbing in Rodellar in northern Spain consistently on grades 6a+–6c (July 2018). Since then, weekly training at indoor climbing gyms.



## Stuart McClune

**Role:** Official Route Grader

**Age:** 20

**Academic background:** BEng Computing (2019)

**Previous climbing experience:**

2007–present – All around climber. Bouldered all over the UK, the Alps, and Fontainebleau up to a max grade of 7b/V8. Single pitch sport climbing across Europe up to 7a+. Multipitch sport and trad climbing in the Alps, Croatia, and the UK. Single pitch trad climbing in the UK up to E4. Dry tooling up to M5 at Newtyle Quarry. Experience deep water soloing in Mallorca and Croatia. Alpine PD and some Scottish Winter climbing with a guide. Hiking experience up to altitudes of 4250m including the Inca trail.

**Relevant positions:**

2018–present – Vice President of Imperial College Mountaineering Club



## Benjamin Warmington

**Role:** Chef, Water Master

**Age:** 21

**Academic background:** MEng Biomedical Engineering 4<sup>th</sup> year

**Previous climbing experience:**

2016 – present – All around climber, bouldering up to 6b+–6c outdoors around UK. Sport outdoors up to 6b+, as well as multipitch and single pitch trad experience. Frequent indoor bouldering experience

2010–present – Mountaineering and long-distance treks in Alps, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia and in the UK up to 3900m, including a 2-week trek through the Italian dolomites/Austrian Sud Tirol carrying equipment and provisions to be self-sufficient, as well as several week-long expeditions in the UK.



**Relevant positions:**

2018–present – Social Secretary of the Imperial College Mountaineering Club

**First Aid:**

St John Ambulance awarded certificate for Emergency and Sport First Aid

## Martha Gutteridge

**Role:** Motivational Cheerleader

**Age:** 20

**Academic background:** BSc Biological Sciences 3<sup>rd</sup> year

**Previous climbing experience:**

2016–present – Frequent indoor bouldering experience  
2018 – Experience bouldering outdoors in the peak district and deep water soloing in Spain, as well as some outdoor sport climbing  
2019 – More outdoor bouldering experience in the UK and Fontainebleau up to a grade of 6b+



## Jacob Mitchell

**Role:** Eager Newbie

**Age:** 22

**Academic background:** MEng Design Engineering (2019)

**Previous climbing experience:**

2015–present – Frequent indoor sports climbing and bouldering experience

2017 – Outdoor sports climbing, Cuba



## Benjamin Jones

**Role:** Photographer and Videographer, Backup Ben

**Age:** 21

**Academic background:** Medicine 2<sup>nd</sup> year

**Previous climbing experience:**

2005–present – Regular indoor climbing and training – boulder and lead. Currently bouldering up to V6.

Outdoor climbing experience in the Peak District with trips to North Wales and Scotland. Proficient in trad and sport.

Regular trekking experience in Europe including winter trekking across the UK including Snowdonia and Scotland.



Jon Urquidi Ferreira

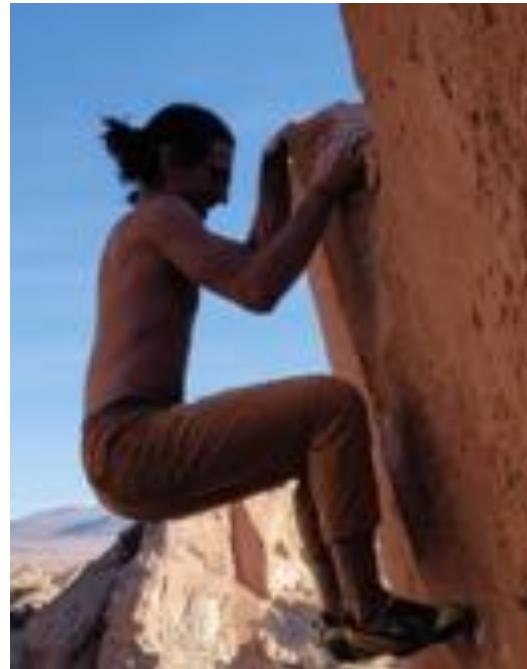
**Role:** Translator, Coordinator and Driver

**Age:** 24

**Academic Background:** Graduate Entry Medicine 2<sup>nd</sup> year, King's College London.

**Previous climbing experience:** Sport climbing in Sicily, the Spanish Pyrenees and the French Alps, bouldering in Fontainebleau. Sporadically climbing for 3 years, climbing and training regularly for the last year.

Bouldering grade V5.



## 3 – Logistics

### 3.1 – Itinerary

Dates	Plan
30 <sup>th</sup> June	Fly into El Alto International Airport, La Paz
30 <sup>th</sup> –2 <sup>nd</sup> July	Acclimatise in La Paz at 3640m, buy supplies, start travelling towards Uyuni
2 <sup>nd</sup> –4 <sup>th</sup> July	Continue acclimatising in Uyuni at 3656m, buy any remaining supplies, wait for Ben J to try and catch up with us after losing his passport
4 <sup>th</sup> July	Travel to the Valle de las Rocas at 3932m and set up camp the first camp near Laguna Negra. Some people stayed behind due to illness or missing connecting flights
5 <sup>th</sup> July	Climb in around Laguna or stay stranded in Uyuni
6 <sup>th</sup> July	Either climb around Laguna negra or collect the expedition members from Uyuni and bring them to the camp
7 <sup>th</sup> July	Change camp from Laguna negra to Valle de las Rocas
8 <sup>th</sup> –10 <sup>th</sup> July	Climb around Valle de las Rocas
11 <sup>th</sup> July	Change campsites from Valle de las Rocas to Lost Italy
12 <sup>th</sup> –17 <sup>th</sup> July	Climb and explore around Lost Italy
15 <sup>th</sup> –16 <sup>th</sup> July	Investigate the nearby National Park of Bolivia.
18 <sup>th</sup> July	Return to Uyuni
19 <sup>th</sup> July	Return to La Paz
20 <sup>th</sup> –21 <sup>st</sup> July	Experience the last of Bolivia
21 <sup>st</sup> –22 <sup>nd</sup> July	Fly back to London

### 3.2 – Transport

#### 3.2.1 – Flights

We flew from Gatwick, London to Madrid, Spain to Viru Viru, Bolivia to El Alto International Airport. El Alto International Airport is the highest international airport in the world. The return journey was the same in reverse. The journey took about 20h.

#### 3.2.2 – Cars and Driving

We hired two Hilux pick-up trucks from El Alto International Airport in order to get around La Paz and to travel to Uyuni and the Valle de las Rocas (see Figure 2). Unfortunately, one of the cars wasn't in good condition, including a reduced tire tread and concerns over the lack of

seatbelt in the back, middle seat. However, they served us well getting us and all our stuff around Bolivia.

The laws of the road proved to be slightly lacking, especially when driving in the city of La Paz. Furthermore, the speed bumps in the motorway were slightly disconcerting – especially to the less experienced drivers in the group. The cars handled the off-road sections closer to the campsites with relative ease and were invaluable when driving around the valley.

When camping in the valley, the cars were essential for journeys to restock water and some food items due to issues with water filtration. They also served as an excellent storage location for food.

We printed maps from Google Earth to avoid having to rely on technology when driving around Bolivia. However, the roads were reasonably simple to follow.

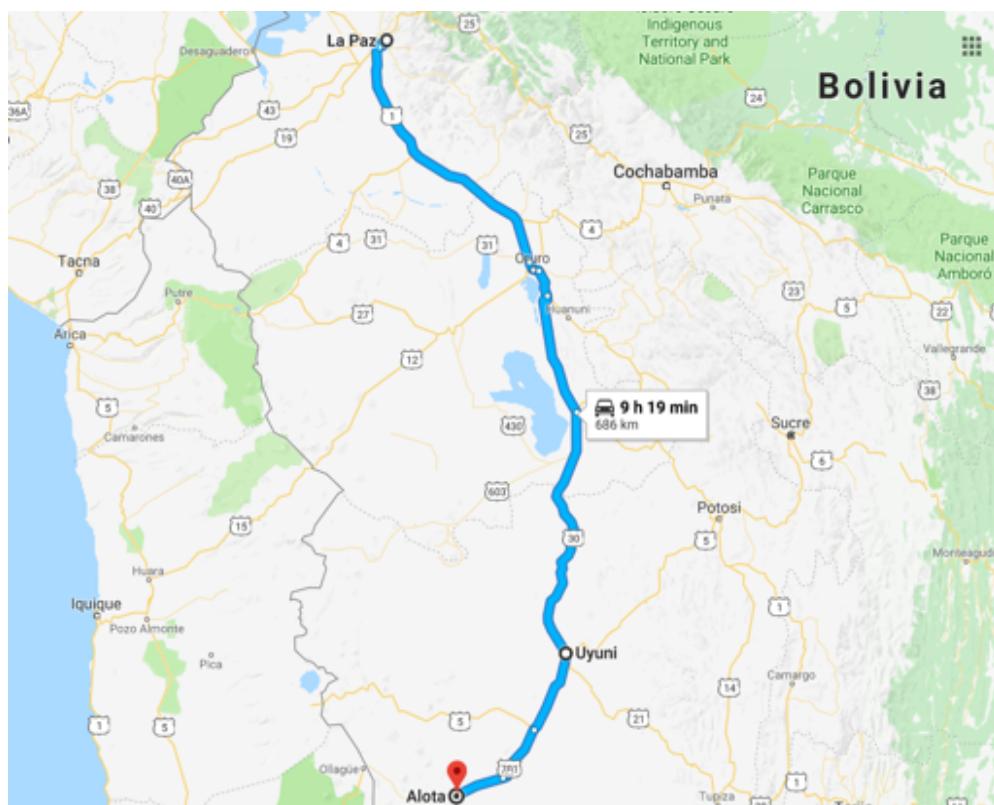


Figure 2: The route taken from La Paz to Uyuni to the Valle de las Rocas (Source: Google Maps)

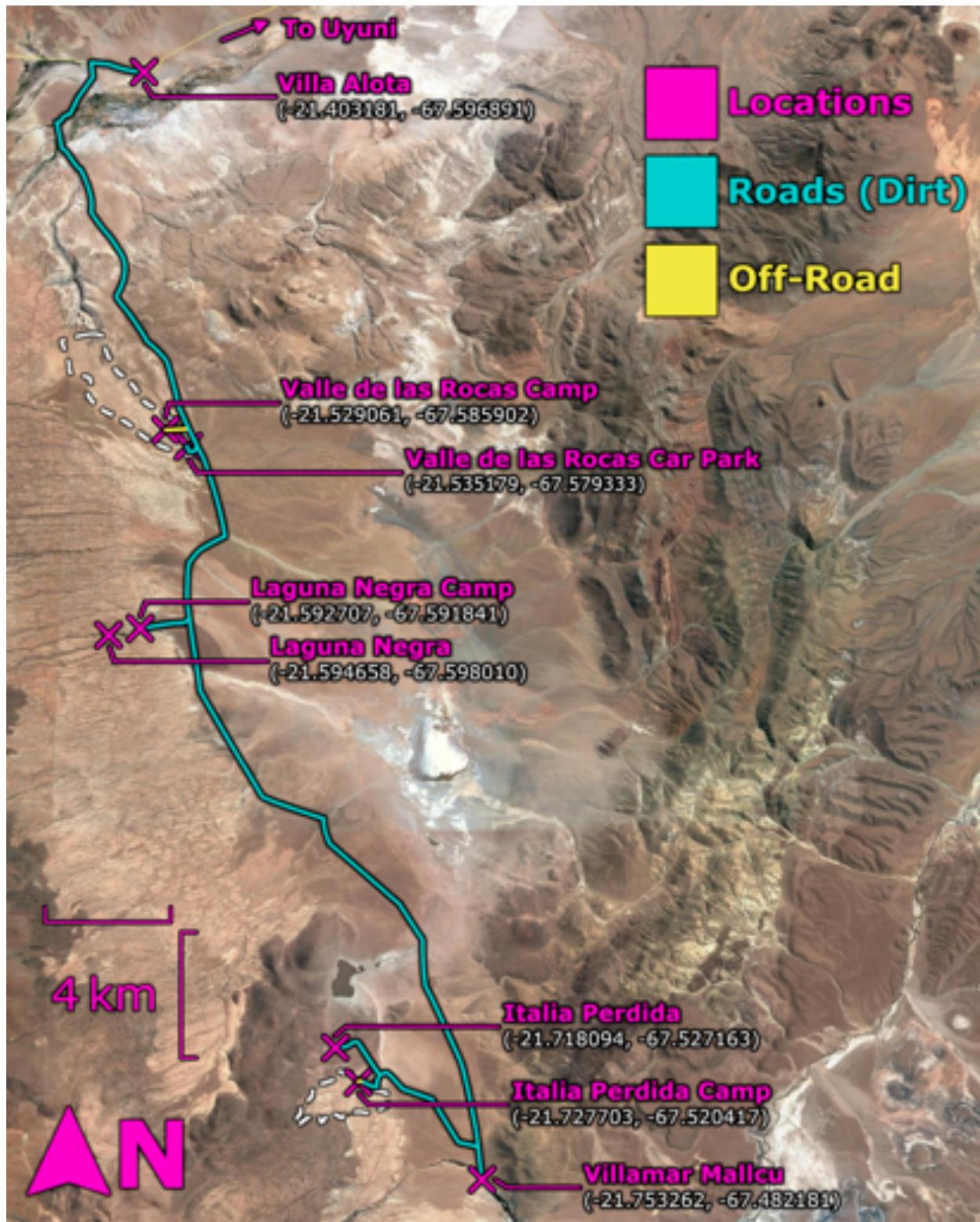


Figure 3 Our Campsites within the valley

### **3.3 – Lodging**

We spent two nights in hostel 3600 in La Paz where we acclimatised and collected supplies. After travelling down from La Paz, we spent two nights in Hotel Salcay in Uyuni. We wild camped in three different locations in the Valle de las Rocas to experience the slight variations in rock quality in different sections of the valley. On our return journey we treated ourselves to one night in Hostal La Magia de Uyuni before heading up to La Paz. Here we returned to hostel 3600 before flying back to the UK

### **3.4 – Visas and Permits**

British nationals don't need a visa to enter Bolivia, provided their duration of stay is less than 30 days. Indian passport holders required a Group 2 visa that can be obtained from the consulate before flying to Bolivia at no cost, or alternatively, can be obtained at the border for a \$95 USD fee. The length of stay permitted on entering Bolivia is initially 30 days (for British nationals and those on a tourist visa) which was sufficient for our expedition. An extension of 60 days can be acquired by applying to the Bolivian Department of Immigration, free of charge. Thankfully this was not necessary. There were no permits required for staying in the Valle de las Rocas.

### **3.5 – Language**

The most widely spoken language in Bolivia is Spanish, which is spoken by many people in the east of the country and larger cities such as La Paz. In western and more rural parts of the country, however, various indigenous languages are spoken more widely, and the number of Spanish speakers is lower. In the Potosí region to which we are travelling, the major language is Quechua, however Spanish is becoming more widespread among younger generations. Another indigenous language, Aymara, is spoken within the town of Uyuni, but this is in addition to Spanish and Quechua.

Only one of the members of the expedition spoke fluent Spanish. They were an indispensable member of the expedition team, helping with everything including car hire, shopping and sorting out any mess we ran into.

### **3.6 – Environmental Impact**

We tried to leave as little impact of our stay as we could in the valley. We deconstructed any evidence of our stay, took all rubbish and litter with us and buried any ashes left behind. We also tried to avoid interfering with any wildlife.

### 3.7 – Wildlife

Thankfully, despite avidly preparing for the potential threat of pumas, none were encountered. The main wildlife encountered were llamas, alpacas, donkeys and southern viscachas (large rodents resembling rabbits). Some small, flying biting insects were encountered at the third campsite but were not considered a threat.

# 4 – Finances

## 4.1 – Currency

The currency in Bolivia is the boliviano (Bs). The current exchange rate was £1 to 8.00 Bs. US dollars were accepted in areas of tourism. For more rural areas, bolivianos in cash were required. The ATM machines in La Paz and Uyuni did not pose many issues in retrieving cash. However, it was impossible to find an ATM outside of Uyuni so finances got a bit tight towards the end of our stay in the Valley.

Dollars are accepted in many areas of Bolivia, including rurally. However to avoid stress make sure all of your notes are pristine and without any tears as they are likely to be rejected. Also Dollars are best reserved for large purchases of at least 50 USD in value. Most people on the street will give you an exchange rate of 6.7 bolivianos to the dollar. Also we recommend not relying on these dollars for official transactions - for example when attempting to enter the Eduardo Avaroa National Park we were unable to pay for entry with dollars as the officials would not accept them.

## 4.2 - Fuel

Bolivia has different fuel prices for nationals vs foreigners - roughly 3.7 Bs and 8Bs to the litre of petrol respectively. However this is determined by the licence plate of the car rather than the nationality of the driver. In addition to this, the government regulated price of petrol means that all petrol stations have the same prices.

## 4.3 – Income

We acquired additional income from the Old Centralians Trust (£2700) and from the Royal College of Science Association Trust (£500)

#### 4.4 Budget vs Expenditure

Section	Expected Cost	Actual Cost
<b>TRAVEL</b>		
Flights London–La Paz (Return)	£ 9450.00	£ 10,347.00
Extra baggage	£ 450.00	£ 0
Car hire	£ 2,000.00	TBD
<b>ACCOMMODATION</b>		
Staying in La Paz	£ 360.00	£300
Staying in Uyuni	£ 270.00	£548.75
Staying in National Park	-	
<b>FOOD AND WATER</b>		
Contingency food	£ 180.00	£184
Normal food	£ 594.00	£344.5
Water purification tablet	£ 30.24	£32
Flexible containers	£ 180.00	£100
Water	-	£21.38
<b>MEDICAL</b>		
First aid equipment	£ 160.00	£160
Medication	£ 350.00	£22.50
Vaccinations	£ 1,656.00	£600
<b>INSURANCE</b>		
BMC Insurance	£ 1800.00	£1500
<b>OTHER</b>		
Tarp	-	£12.5
Funnel	-	£5
Jerry cans	-	£24.50
Loo roll	-	£5
Parking	-	£24.50
Tolls	-	£19.63
Fuel	-	£213.75

## Section 5 - Diary

### Day 1 – Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> June



***Picture: Preparing for the Expedition.** From right to left, back to front: Martha and Ben J, celebrating our moderately discounted emergency rations, Charlotte, Stuart, and Dara, packing, Jacob, also packing, Peter, retreating to his happy place*

Having met up the previous evening to sort through all our gear (picture), we set off from Victoria station at 14:00. After arduously lugging our innumerable and particularly hefty bags onto the Gatwick Express, we were all filled with a sense of both relief and of anticipation, knowing we had taken the first step on our long and exciting journey - until it was announced that our train had been cancelled, and we would have to hurriedly heave our bags off the train and down the platform to its soon-departing replacement.

Successfully boarding our 17:30 flight to Madrid, despite the best efforts of a seemingly endless sea of Spanish schoolchildren ahead of us at check-in, we landed at Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas

Airport, marking the start of both our three-hour layover and a blossoming hatred towards the place.

## Day 2 – Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> June

After surviving the eleven-and-a-half-hour flight to Santa Cruz de la Sierra (picture), we began our second three-hour layover, awaiting our final internal flight to La Paz. Some of the team took this opportunity to nap, while others were keen to learn as much as possible about this new and unfamiliar country, including the fact that nudity manages to make its way onto television at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning.



**Picture: The Team in Santa Cruz de la Sierra.** The expedition team weary after recently finishing their 11.5-hour flight to Santa Cruz. Not Pictured: Jon, who was enjoying the VIP lounge in Bogota airport, and Ben J, who was enjoying having lost his passport

We landed in La Paz at 09:30, but because we were unable to check into our hostel until midday, we tactically had the airline lose all but one of our bouldering pads, so that by the time they were sent from Santa Cruz on the next flight, we were right on schedule.

Bouldering pads in hand, having met up with Jon, who travelled from Madrid through Bogota, and having rented our cars (two Toyota Hilux 4x4 pickup trucks), we left the airport and commenced the downward drive into the city.



*Picture: La Paz, sprawled across the hillside*

The brickwork hills rising around us were the staggering backdrop to our first foray into Bolivian driving, with local rules of the road – including that there's only one lane of cars, unless you can fit two, and that only the intrepid may merge into traffic – quickly becoming clear.

After finally reaching the hostel and checking in, our kind hosts politely baffled by the sheer volume of our luggage, we spent the remainder of the day exploring the city- trying new food, crossing terrifying bridges, and constantly losing our breaths.

## Day 3 – Monday 1<sup>st</sup> July

Having successfully reached Bolivia and been rewarded a restful night's sleep (on a bed, rather than the shoulder of a disgruntled fellow Air Europa passenger), the group divided into teams and set off to conquer La Paz, aiming to acquire much of what we would need for our time in the desert.

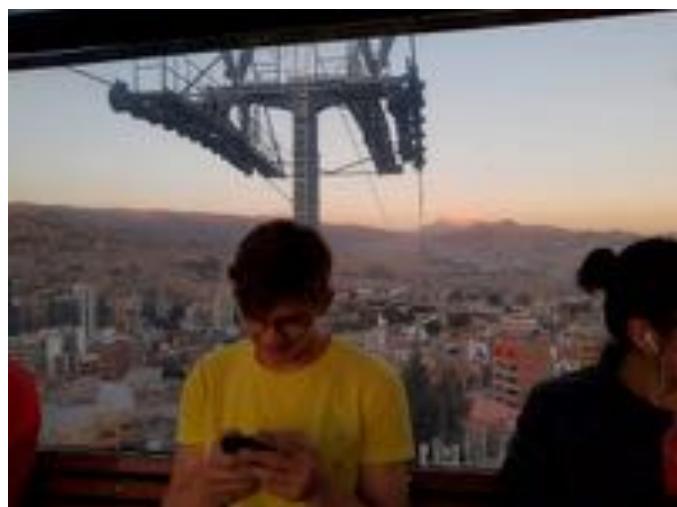
To maximise efficiency, four elite teams were formed: Team Food (Ben W, Jon, Martha, and Peter), Team Stuff (Charlotte, Jacob, and Stuart), Team Illness (led by Veera, who remained in the hostel because she felt unwell), and Team Dara (comprising Dara, who also stayed at the hostel, because he's lame).

Team Stuff got off to a rocky start. Lacking a fluent Spanish speaker and struggling to get by with Google Translate, it was difficult to track down more obscure items such as tarps and jerry cans. In the end, however, they emerged (somewhat) victorious.

Team Food, meanwhile, ventured into the city's food markets, charged with procuring basics such as oats, rice, and spices. This was an endeavor fraught with peril, for between every stall of pasta and lentils lay one of pastries and salteñas, and the team battled to stay on time and resist the beguiling Bolivian street food. Ultimately, we valiantly overcame this delectable adversity, stopping for snacks on a mere seven or eight occasions.

It is important here to note that among the spoils of our shopping spree, among the pasta, potatoes, and porridge, was a selection of uncooked beans. We would like to take this opportunity to implore anyone who follows in our footsteps to avoid these beans, with desperate, reckless urgency, at any and all costs. Time will tell as to why.

After a morning spent in the markets, the four teams combined (into the Bolivia Expedition Megazord) to have lunch at the local feminists' café. With Dara and Veera again remaining behind at the hostel, the evening was then spent seeing La Paz from above, completing a circuit of the cable car system, affording stunning sunset views of the mountain-encircled city.



**Picture: La Paz Cable Cars.** Jacob appreciating the breathtaking view



**Pictures: Hostel 3600.** Our La Paz hostel (about £9 per person per night)



**Picture: Feminists' Café**

**Picture: Woman Holding the Moon**

## **Day 4 – Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> July**

The first challenge of the day promptly introduced itself, as we battled to secure our tarps (in all their feeble polythene glory) to our freshly loaded pickup trucks. Following a not inconsiderable amount of time, effort, and experimentation, the plastic sheets were affixed, and we began the long drive to Uyuni, stopping off in El Alto – the conjoining city which unfolds from the brim of the La Paz canyon and sweeps across the plateau above it – to pick up some more supplies.

The road to El Alto swiftly put our tarp-fixing prowess to the test, and as would be the case for any examination during our time at university, we were delighted to achieve a respectable 50%. While one of the cars (called Cat Cat) survived to El Alto with its sheet still firmly fastened, the other (dubbed Roll Cage, due to its roll cage) saw the back of its tarp come loose, now a torn and tattered cape, cobalt blue and billowing in the breeze. Roll Cage was thrust into a life of caped vigilante crime fighting; one he never sought nor wanted, and one which day by day, like salt from the Salar, would erode ever more deeply into his soul. Upon reaching the plateau city, the cover on Roll Cage was reattached in the same manner as that on Cat Cat – to the anchor points on the flatbed, rather than to the roll cage itself – and posed no further problems (delivering him both from his struggle for justice, and the struggle for himself). It bears saying at this point that managing to find anything at all to use as a tarp was no small triumph, and overall the plastic sheeting served us well.

Supplies collected, lunch consumed, and Dara incapacitated (following a dare to eat a sizeable red chili pepper), we left El Alto and started heading for Uyuni. The route took us south along roads which slip through the vast expanse of the arid puna grassland, cast golden by the sun, interrupted only by the occasional town, tollbooth, or police checkpoint. While traffic was sparse, the presence of speedbumps, covertly and terrifyingly positioned at junctions on the motorway itself, ensured we remained wary.

In the light of the setting sun, we pulled over at a truck stop on the outskirts of a small town and sat down for dinner. Ben W questionably decided to sample some of the local delicacies (there of course not being anything inherently wrong with this decision, but there's a time and a place), and this rewarded him with a particularly dubious meal perhaps best be described as a floss of crispy, shredded llama (but really, best not described at all).

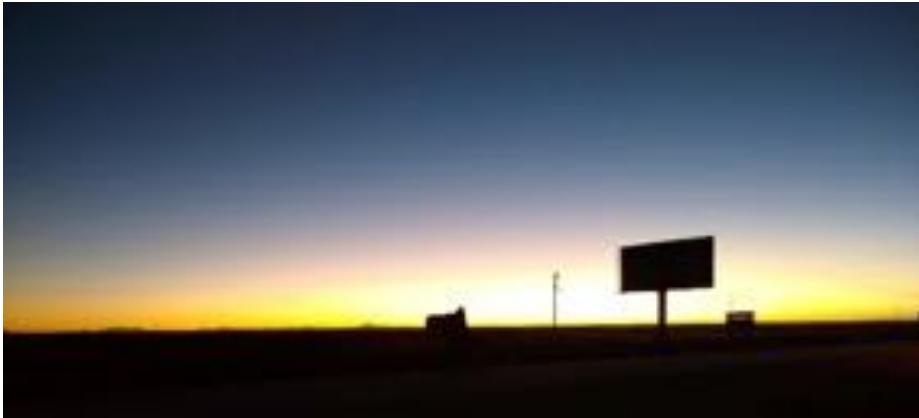
With dinner completed and our destination now not too far away, we continued into the night. Save for periodic blinding by oncoming drivers' high beams, we reached Uyuni without issue, and checked into our hotel.



**Picture: Roll Cage:**  
the caped carsader  
takes to the streets  
to dispense  
automotive justice.



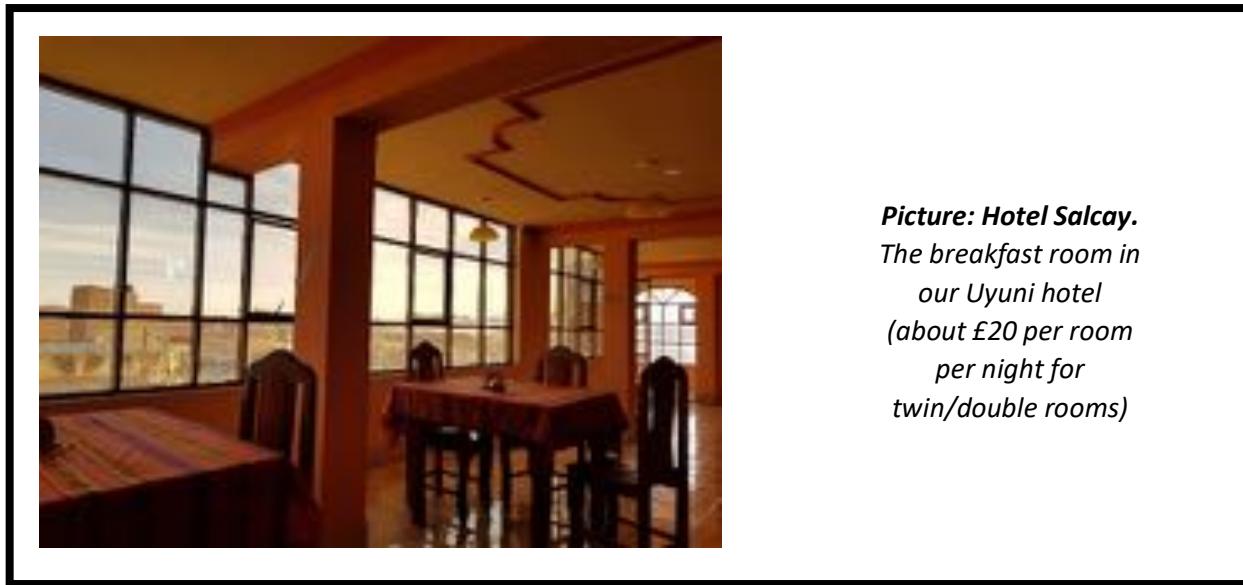
**Picture: The Puna  
Grassland**



**Picture: Twilight over  
the Road**, seen from  
the truck stop.

## **Day 5 – Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> July**

Uyuni's bitter morning air crept throughout its dusty streets, noticeably colder than La Paz. With the life in us reignited by the gas burners of the breakfast room, and the sun beginning to warm the world outside, we headed to the market to tick off the final items on our list of supplies. While our original plan had been to leave Uyuni that afternoon, we resolved to stay another night, since Ben J – who had discovered he had lost his passport a week before we were due to leave, and had scrambled to get a new one as quickly as possible – would be flying into Uyuni to join us the following morning. We thus instead ventured to the outskirts of town to explore Uyuni's train graveyard – a tangled string of abandoned carriages, once part of the Bolivian mining industry, now washed in graffiti and rust.



***Picture: Hotel Salcay.  
The breakfast room in  
our Uyuni hotel  
(about £20 per room  
per night for  
twin/double rooms)***



***Picture: The Produce Section of  
the Uyuni Marketplace. Uyuni  
has a permanent marketplace  
with food, clothes, and  
hardware, in addition to a larger  
street market which runs every  
Thursday***



*Picture: ‘♪ Hold me,  
hold me, never let  
me go until you’ve  
told me♪’—Harry  
Noble*



*Picture: JMSBC,  
Bolivia’s Newest Pop  
Sensation*

## Day 6 – Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> July

Having had our second Uyuni breakfast (where the jam tasted faintly of cheese, and the cheese tasted faintly of cheese), we began our final preparations to leave town and drive into the wild. Originally hoping to depart in the early afternoon, at about 12 o'clock we received a call from Ben J letting us know he had missed his connecting flight from La Paz to Uyuni, and wouldn't be able to get another until that evening (a further shining testament to his organisational finesse). Resisting the compulsive, vengeful urge to desert Ben in rural Bolivia, it was decided that Veera (who was still feeling quite ill) and Peter would stay behind to meet him, with everyone else heading into the valley. Dara would then return to pick up Team Uyuni (providing Veera was feeling better) the day after next. Stuart, and particularly Ben W (perhaps due to his truck stop dining escapades) had also been unwell the previous night, but had recovered to the point that they didn't feel the need to stay behind.

Water bottles and jerry cans filled, and the cars all packed up, at around 3pm Team Valley set off on the final stretch of the journey. The drive was expected to take about two and a half hours, but the poor quality of the unfamiliar roads meant that by the time we turned off onto the dusty dirt tracks towards Laguna Negra (which had been identified as a reliable source of groundwater, and so was where we initially planned to make camp), it was already past 18:00, and starting to grow dark.

Persevering through the blackness, pierced only by our headlights and the stars, eventually we made it to the lagoon, and hurriedly set up camp. For the first time since our arrival in Bolivia, we were alone in the wilderness – the *terra incognita* – away from civilisation and security, only us, the fauna, the dust, and the Laguna Negra Gift Shop (rated an astounding 4.8 stars on Google Maps).

The hour of our arrival meant Team Valley did not venture much beyond the Laguna Negra car park (the lagoon being a popular spot for guided tours of the area, but with none ever journeying farther than needed to get a few scenic photos, into the rocky valleys themselves). A pasta dinner was made quickly, as the night turned ever icier, and washing up was deferred until the morning, upon the realisation that the washing up liquid had frozen solid. It was a piercingly cold night, and a bleak start to our stay in the desert.

Meanwhile in Uyuni, the town was astir with its weekly street market. In the early evening, Peter and Veera (who was starting to feel slightly better, now that all the riffraff has cleared off to the valley) waded into the sea of stalls in search of food, and emerged with sugary fried dough and an entrancing drink like warm blackcurrant jam. Peter then met Ben J at the airport at 21:30, and was at least partly surprised to see he had, in fact, actually made it onto the plane. With Ben's storied voyage of tribulation and self-discovery coming to an end, the two of them went to join Veera at the hotel.



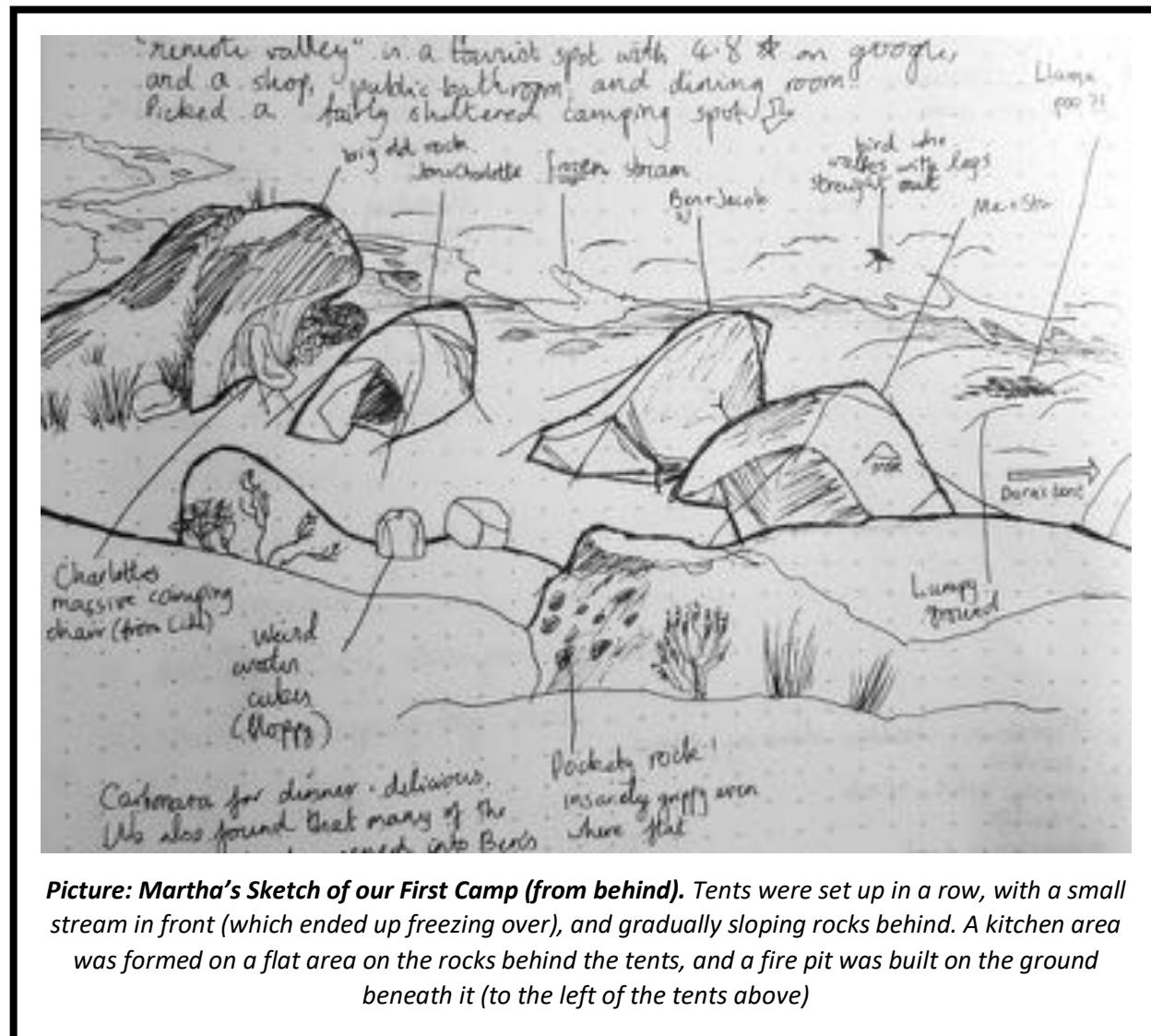
*Picture: Setting  
of the Desert  
Sun*



*Picture:  
Uyuni's  
Thursday  
Street Market,  
continuing  
into the  
evening,  
selling food,  
clothes, toys,  
and  
homeware.*

## Day 7 – Friday 5<sup>th</sup> July

We were roused by the rising sun struggling meekly to warm our frost-laden tents, and crawled out to our first view of the campsite in the light. A band of inquisitive donkeys eyed us nefariously from a distance, and everything was frozen.



**Picture: Martha's Sketch of our First Camp (from behind).** Tents were set up in a row, with a small stream in front (which ended up freezing over), and gradually sloping rocks behind. A kitchen area was formed on a flat area on the rocks behind the tents, and a fire pit was built on the ground beneath it (to the left of the tents above)

Having surveyed our camp, our attention soon turned to what lay beyond it – a boulder-strewn sandstone landscape carved by rivers now long gone; alive, awake, and longing to be explored. Breakfast was temporarily forgotten as we headed out into our surroundings, an investigation yielding icy streams all set to slide across, the full seven-donkey family we had seen from our

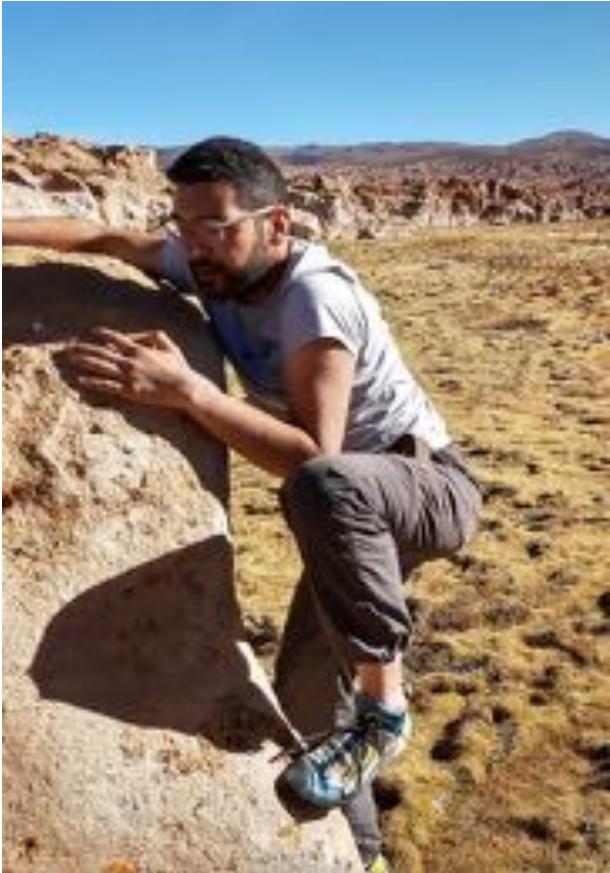
tents, countless promising rocks, and vast numbers of what we eventually found to be called vizcachas (but at the time were simply christened “weird chinchilla things”). Vizcachas might be described as half-squirrel, half-rabbit, large and bouncing, and much better at climbing than any of us. After returning to the campsite to “enjoy” some hot chocolate and porridge (which was really gruel, since it didn’t have any milk), we set off keen to climb.



*Picture:  
Martha  
Climbing  
Bolivian Crack  
(V3)*



*Picture: A  
Decent View*



**Picture: Dara getting some sends in**

Our first day, along with many sends, was one of discovery – from llamas and alpacas, to large drystone walls standing seemingly abandoned, breathtaking rock forms cut by ancient waters and ancient winds, and several groups of tourists, led around by their guides.

A typical encounter with such a group would unfold as follows:

Tourists: *"Did you guys really camp out here last night?"*

Us (stifling traumatic flashbacks to frozen water, wet wipes, washing-up liquid, beards, breath, toes, and souls):  
*"Yes, yes we did."*

Tourists: *"I bet that was cold!  
Hahahahaha!"*

Us: (Pained laughter)

A slightly more uplifting interaction was that with a friendly local guide (one of

many, who were always kind and always helpful), telling us exactly where we were (Valle de Catal), what the “weird chinchilla things” actually were, and where the true Valle de las Rocas (the area we primarily intended to visit) was.

At the end of a successful first day of climbing, the team settled back into camp and began to prepare for dinner. Charlotte, in the meantime, launched her earnest mission to ensure our evenings were never so cold again, constructing FirePit V1.0, and gathering dead and desiccated brushwood to fuel it.

Jacob had brought with him a book about colours – each chapter a different colour and its story. That night began the tradition of a bedtime fireside reading from this book, adeptly narrated by Ben W, who opened with mauve: a tale of Queen Victoria, malaria, and Bunny – the eccentric inventor of Capri pants. This evening proved far warmer, both in temperature and in spirit, than that which came before it.



*Picture: The First Campsite*

Back in Uyuni, be it due to Ben J's inextinguishable cheer, or Peter's medical mastery (there being no other conceivable explanations), Veera was thankfully starting to feel much better. After the three of them had breakfast, Veera returned to bed, whilst Ben, determined to make up for lost time, took Peter to experience some authentic street food. Peter, being a squeamish eater and until this point opting to eat as much western food as possible, very graciously kept his complaining to a minimum

Reuniting for lunch, the trio decided to return to the train graveyard in the early evening (which Ben J was yet to see). They sat in a street level dining room adjoining the market hall. Here, they ate a rich, salty vegetable stew, into which a fiery chilli salsa could be mixed to ward off the cold. With cakes and pastries purchased in town, they sat atop one of the broken locomotives and watched the sunset over the deserted steel cemetery. They followed the rusted tracks back to town unde starlight.



*Picture: An Uyuni Street towards the edge of the town, wide and empty*



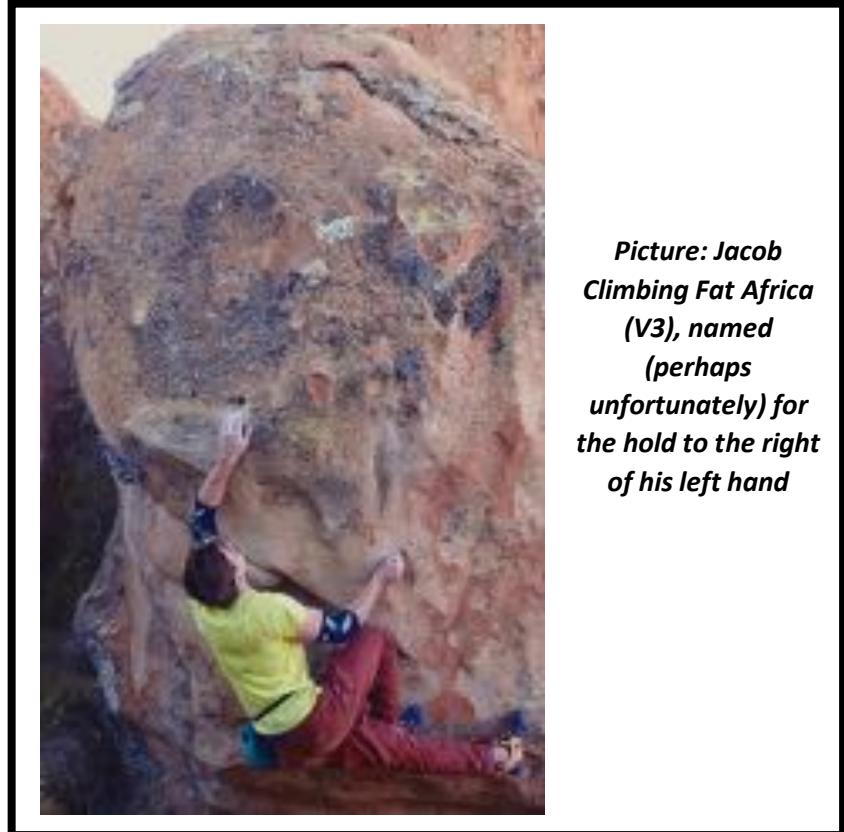
*Picture: The Long Walk Back to Town. Ben J and Veera leaving the train graveyard*

## Day 8 – Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> July

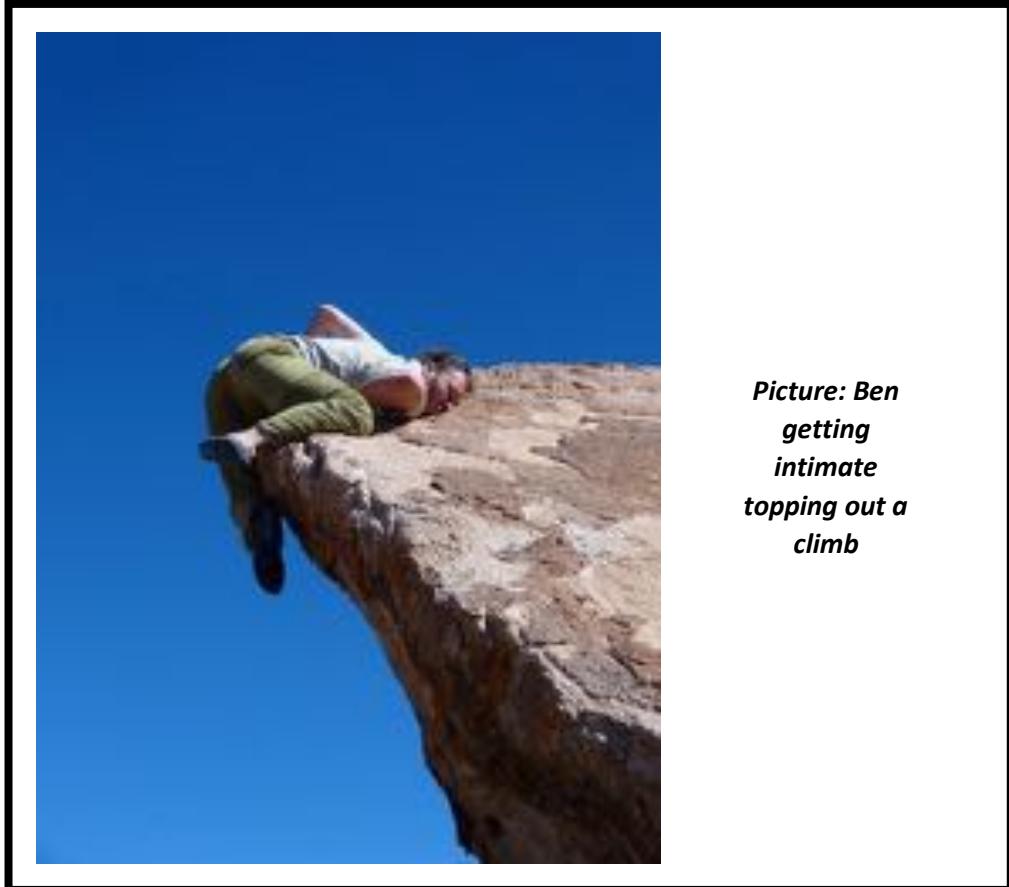
Charlotte and Dara left that morning to retrieve the straggling team members from Uyuni, the route now familiar, and negotiated in far better time. In town, the group stopped by the market to grab some lunch and fetch some extra supplies, bringing back sensational new culinary possibilities, as well as at least a kilogram of biscuits. Lunch consisted of thin strips of chicken, beaten flat, battered in egg and fried. Before driving back to camp, the return journey accommodation in Uyuni was rebooked a day earlier, and another night was booked in La Paz, offering us an extra day to explore the city and tie up loose ends.

Back at camp, the morning was spent battling a very broken stove, it having somehow become clogged with molten plastic the previous evening. After some considered tinkering, the blockage was successfully removed, the team treating themselves to some salty porridge in celebration, followed by a mindful yoga session led by Ben W and Jon. While many tourists stared, the group were too engrossed to care (since yoga (as it turns out) is hard). The session completed, Team Camp capitalised on their newfound physical, mental, and spiritual liberation, heading out to explore a new area close the Laguna Negra itself. One of the more iconic climbs of the trip – Fat Africa – was set up, and they sat down to birdwatch across the water.

Team Uyuni having returned, camp morale improved decidedly with the arrival of Ben J and his dazzling collection of fairy lights, really putting the cute and cosy into desolate desert campsite. A freak pasta spill proved but a small obstacle to people hungry enough to eat straight off a rock, and Charlotte upgraded the FirePit to V1.1. The nightly “Poo Circle” was born, to check in and make sure that everyone had a healthy digestive tract, and before we all went to bed, Ben W read to us about celadon green, in the flickering light of the campfire, the fairy lights, and the Milky Way.



*Picture: Jacob  
Climbing Fat Africa  
(V3), named  
(perhaps  
unfortunately) for  
the hold to the right  
of his left hand*



*Picture: Ben  
getting  
intimate  
topping out a  
climb*

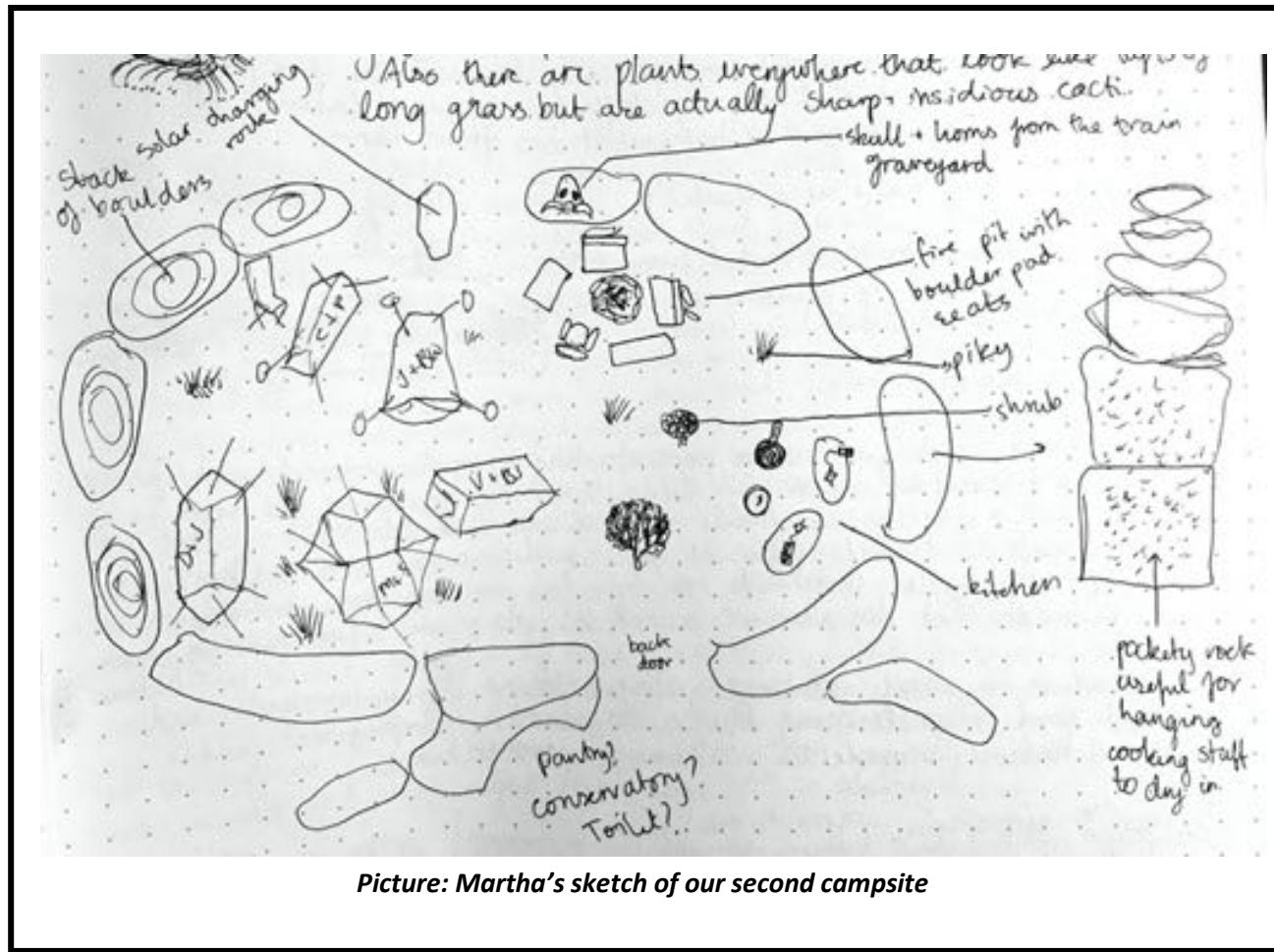


*Picture: FirePit V1.1, haloed in fairy light*

## Day 9 – Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> July

Every morning, the strained grunts of Ben W trying to get out of his 3 sleeping bag liners echoed throughout the valley. This particular one was the morning we decided to move from Valle de Catal to Valle de las Rocas, so we packed up and bid farewell to the llamas and vizcachas. We initially ended up in the car park for Valle de las Rocas, where we had lunch and a local guide told us of a mystical river somewhere in the valley. We all split up and discovered, over the course of an hour and some sunstroke, that there was no river. There were only dry and depressing streambeds containing bones and dead shrubs. However, despite this misery and dehydration, Dara and Jon managed to find us the Most Perfect Campsite of All Time.

It was enclosed by tall stacks of pockety rock, with a naturally formed entrance, back door, and places for the kitchen and living room. However, there were also a lot of plants that looked like soft grass but were in fact sharp and insidious cacti which we fondly named Devil Pubes (Do Not Sit On!). Best of all it was far away from the road and potential tourists.



Then began the water adventures. We split into Team Camp and Team Water – Team Water had several disasters while Team Camp peacefully pitched tents and found a table rock. Because there was no water in Valle de Las Rocas and we had nearly run out, it was decided to do the short drive back to a lagoon we had spotted and filter the water from that.

[MS1][KC2][GM3][MS4][RPN5]

The disasters included but were not limited to:

- Wet, boggy, muddy ground requiring building of a dead-shrub bridge into the lagoon
- Red larvae in the water
- Leeches in the water
- Loose filter and no tool to tighten
- Filter washer broken
- Thought had fixed filter, it rebroke with a popping noise
- Containers used to collect water from the 1 functional filter were leaky
- Water so sedimented it took 4 people to pump the filter
- Even when filtered through sock, silk, and sand, water was too sedimented to go through Ben W's filter without immediately clogging, deeming it undrinkable

Due to this, Dara and Jon had to head back to the closest village by car to fill all our containers from taps there. Team Camp made FirePit V1.2, set up the fairy lights, and started chopping for dinner. Dara and Jon returned just as people were starting to worry, and just as dinner was done – perfect timing.

That night we made bananas with dark chocolate melted in them, wrapped in tinfoil and put in the fire. They were delicious but very hard to retrieve. People realised that feet can be even more warmed if you take your shoes off, and many socks were happily singed as toes defrosted.

That night's colour was gamboge yellow – poisonous, earwaxen, yet beautiful. A comparatively warm night!



*Picture: Milky Way  
behind the Rocks*



*Picture: The  
Second Campsite.*

## Day 10 – Monday 8<sup>th</sup> July

As soon became tradition, Jon led a topless yoga session whilst a small contingent of clothed rebels left the campsite to investigate the rocks nearby. Many top-class climbs were set up, and eventually the flexible people joined the stiffness. All routes were sent except “Tall and Snappy”, which was avoided after the largest hold snapped off in a freak accident. Peter told the rest of a mystical cove of steep, tempting overhangs that he’d seen on his morning run. Everyone set off to try and find it but settled for a slightly less overhanging area after doing several exploratory loop-the-loops to no avail.

The first tragedy of the day came when Stuart, whilst trying the group’s most difficult ascent so far, ripped a chunk out of his finger on a small spike in the rock. It was a gruesome scene. Blood was everywhere, Stuart was put out of action, and we no longer had a resident wad. The climb was named “Finger Shredder,” to honour the occasion, but was never finished.

Little did we know that this was just the beginning. A lovely peaceful evening, containing a blissful massage train and a stunning watercolour by Ben W, was a brief respite in our stress, before the most notorious event of the trip began: Beangate; the longest wait for beans any group of humans has ever endured.

We boiled the beans for 20 minutes, having soaked them in the day – they smelled absolutely delicious! Oh, how joyfully and naively we chopped the onions to throw in. We were told they’d stew for an hour. We made the table; we played cards on the table. We built a fire. We wrapped corn in tinfoil and put it on the fire. We listened to music. We unwrapped the corn and passed it round for 1 bite each at a time, ultimately having 8/9 of a corn cob each. We waited hours. The beans kept being “nearly done”. The rice was cooked. The beans still weren’t done, and the rice went cold and mushy. Peter went to bed, no longer hungry. Eventually, the beans were given up on. We had cold rice with soy sauce and avocado, followed by desperate handfuls of very dry cake that Ben J had bought in Uyuni. There was no poo circle; no colour bedtime story. Just desperately trying to warm up by the fire before bed.

*“Possibly the most disappointing thing to have happened in the universe.” ~ Stuart McClune, who’d recently lost 5% of a finger on a climbing expedition over 6000 miles from home.*

Beangate was at least 4 hours long. It was a cold and empty night.



*Picture: The making of a table*



*Picture: Stuart Climbing Flexy Arête (V3)*

## Day 11 – Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> July

After another morning of topless yoga, we decided to head back to the car park of Valle de las Rocas in search of good rocks to climb. Peter's excellent rock divining ability lead us to the moon boulder at the start of a ridge full of many promising rock formations. Stuart and Martha went on a hike Southwards to do some adventuring despite the shredded finger, and still ended up finding a beautiful boulder to climb despite their trekking intentions.

By this point in the trip we were starting to feel quite comfortable in the flow of wild camping. Our campsite became very homely. The kitchen included a table, stove, drying rack; the living room had a great fireplace; the bathroom was massive with amazing views.

That evening Ben created firepit V2.0, inspired by the cooking of the corn the night before. Firepit V2.0 is an impressive feat of engineering, allowing for a flow of air underneath the embers to keep the fire burning hot all night. It enabled us to keep warm whilst we tried to contain our anticipation for the arrival of the beans. Unfortunately, despite having been cooked for many hours the night before, they still took another 3 hours of them being almost ready for Beangate to finally be over. That night, we also treated ourselves to dessert. We combined the last of Ben Js cake with two cans of unsweetened condensed milk. This was passed around the fire with varying degrees of enthusiasm. It was only by the next morning that some of the more lactose challenged members realised that maybe they should have had a little less concentrated milk cake. That night we learnt about Vantablack before bed.



*Picture: Ben J  
Climbing Midday  
Moon (V3))*

## **Day 12 – Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> July**

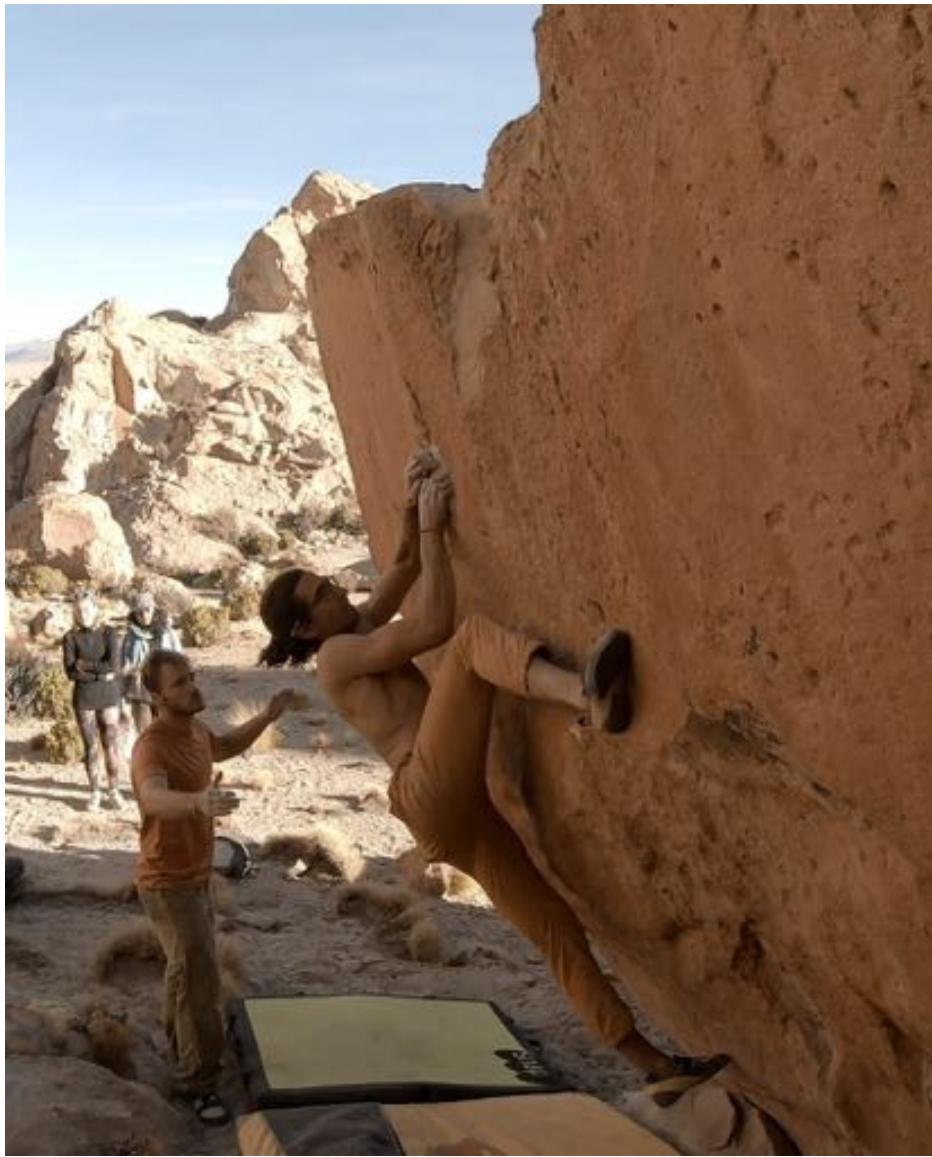
Everyone woke up exhausted. The day started with a slow breakfast and no yoga, and then, with three climbing days in a valley filled with literally thousands of rocks, we decided to go back to the ones we went to the day before. The worst thing about Bolivia continued to be the extremely persistent flies that refuse to leave you alone. Dulce de leche wafers ran out rapidly – a highly prized currency in our desert community.

There came a point where we'd exhausted the boulders in our small area, so decided to check out what we called "The Lone Boulder" - a reasonable looking rock a short walk away (or so we thought). What we hadn't considered is the distance warping effects of the desert light on a vast flat plane. We eventually reached the boulder, not sure how far we walked to get there.

We decided that there was some interesting, if probably quite hard climbing on it. However, we hadn't brought crash pads or shoes.

After the walk back, Martha and Stuart lead us to a boulder they had found on their hike the previous day. It had one challenging, sharp problem, removing 30% of the groups fingertips. However, it was finally defeated by Jon, but only after he had taken his top off.

That night, we discovered that if you don't eat carbonara quickly enough it turns into a solid cold mass that's quite hard to eat. Martha's feet were so cold that she melted the soles of her shoes before her feet were successfully warmed by the fire. The new and aggressively ventilated firepit was much needed.



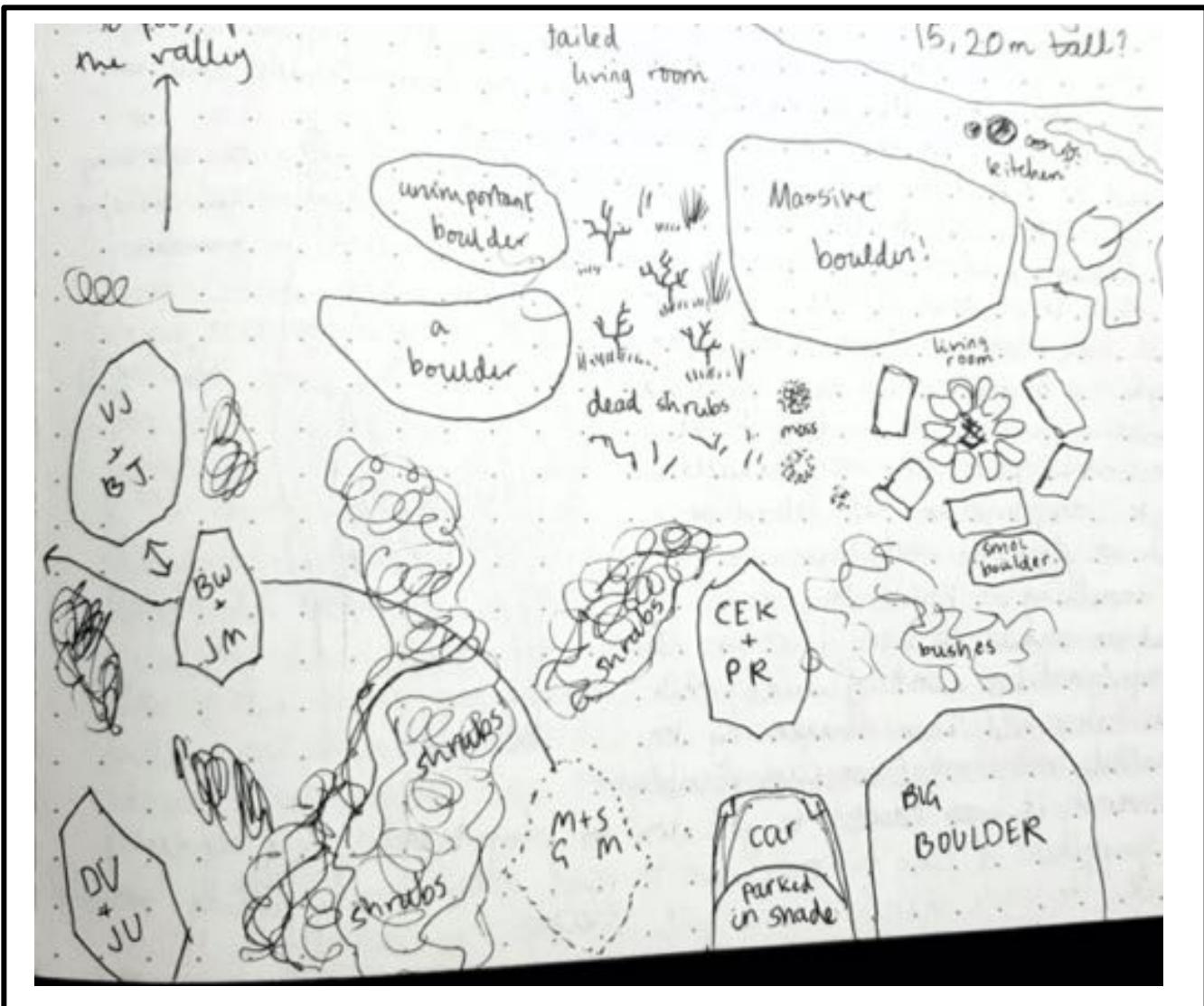
*Picture: Jon  
Climbing Pale  
Australians Don't  
Need Layers (V5)*

## **Day 13 – Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> July**

Dara, Jon, Peter and Charlotte left early in the morning for a general resupply, heading to San Cristobal. Unfortunately, because it was market day in Uyuni, the market in San Cristobal was somewhat depleted. Nevertheless, the group was still able to buy some jerry cans for water storage and top up food supplies. Jon also went on a mission to try and find a source of internet as Charlotte and Peters exam results had been released and they were eager to know whether they needed to start practicing for re-sits. He tried asking a man who worked in the local phone shop, but the shopkeeper didn't appear to know much more than we did. It was only after talking to the local youth that we discovered you can get data after purchasing a Bolivian SIM. Jon then successfully purchased a SIM card and Peter and Charlotte found out they had passed their exams!! But not after a dramatic day of Peter refusing to look at his results \*cough\*

The San Cristobal team returned to the old campsite where everything had been packed away ready to move on. In a handstand/stretch session, Ben J did a forward roll straight into a cactus. After packing everything onto the back of the 4x4s the group said a sad goodbye to a perfect campsite, then ventured off into the unknown – towards Lost Italy.

As we drew close to Lost Italy, the group became slightly skeptical, looking up at the tall rocks either side of the road. Becoming conscious of the time, we pulled over and split up into pairs, heading in different directions to find somewhere to set up camp. The terrain was so full of guinea pig burrows that people frequently fell through the ground. Jacob and Charlotte came back victorious with potential site away from the roads. At this stage in the trip the group set up camp like a well-oiled machine, quickly identifying the kitchen, living room and sleeping areas. Firepit 2.1 was set up and the group settled into their new home. Ben W read aloud about woad and its indigo defeat, and everyone felt much better after food.



*Picture: Martha's Sketch of our Third Camp*

## Day 14 – Friday 12<sup>th</sup> July

At this point in the trip people were starting to feel quite tired. Half of the group went on a long walk up a nearby hill ...

The other half decided to chill at the campsite. For some people this decision was made due to laziness. For others it was due to unfortunate ailments, mainly diarrhoea. A very relaxed day was had lounging in the sun, and occasionally disappearing out of sight with a shovel.

Martha and Stuart went on a hike, and found a valley containing a stream and very many llamas. The llamas had tiny scarves, and while lots of them made normal llama sounds, a select few made noises of other species – cats, sheep, quiet cows.

Dinner was good and lentilly, and Jacob did a poo about 3m away from the fire, still a part of the poo circle [GM6]. The colour we studied that eve was heliotrope, which is so pleasing to say it “feels like a rich, buttery sauce in the mouth.”

## Day 15 – Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> July

On the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup>, half of the team woke up to find that the other half had diarrhoea. Ben and Peter left at 10am to climb a nearby 5200m mountain, in a casual manner. The campsite boulder was climbed, and a route was named “fizzy pineapple”, after the slightly fermented pineapple that we suspected was the cause of the diarrhoea. Stuart made the decision to climb again, but with his finger very strapped up, and climbed a very difficult route annoyingly quickly after making this decision. Ben and Peter returned victorious to a beautiful sunset, having climbed a closer 4990m mountain instead of the 5200m one.

After dinner, a car stopped quite close to our camp and everyone was healthily concerned. Then they turned their lights off, and a large portion of the group became unhealthily concerned with thoughts of bandits and people creeping towards us in the darkness, with us blind to their progress. Just as we let the fire die down to gain better night vision, another car drove towards the first and stopped, lights off.

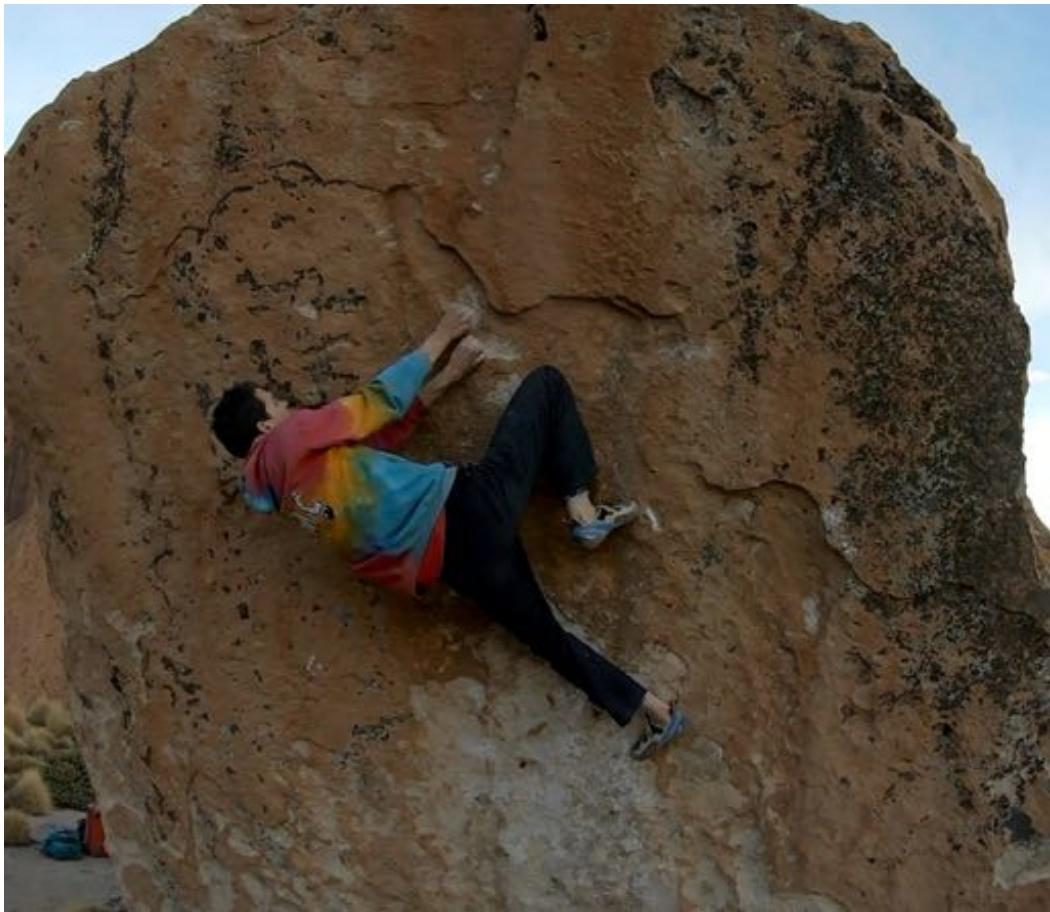
“They could outnumber us now,” said most of the team.

“They probably have a puncture and that’s the mechanic,” said Stuart.

In a chaotic move, Ben J sneaked away in the darkness and then jumped out at us, causing several near-heart-attacks. Eventually both cars turned their lights on and drove away, presumably because the faulty tyre had been replaced. Ben W read to us about khaki, which comes from the Urdu word for “dusty”.



*Picture: Veera  
Climbing Fizzy  
Pineapple (V3)*



*Picture: Stuart  
Climbing God  
Awful Farts (V5)*

## **Day 16 – Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July**

The group decided to relax and climb in an area that Jacob and Ben J had found the day before. Peter did a little climbing, attempting some more challenging boulders which he didn't quite manage to top, then went back to camp and relaxed in the sun with a facemask and some good music. He has absolutely no idea what anyone else was doing.

The first cloudy day of our expedition led to some very calm and creative cloud-spotting by the people who stayed at the climbing place. We walked back to the campsite along a very beautiful sunset-lit ridge, as the full moon rose.

As a treat for dinner, we chopped up all the potatoes we had left, and Dara deep-fried them in a wok above the fire. Ben W was the "monkey with a bunch of spices" who seasoned the chips before they were passed round. Whilst we were eating our delicious desert-junk-food, a dog came up to us! It was a bit scared though, and only emerged twice before disappearing forever (or so we thought). It had a bow around its neck and a single dreadlock and was very overgrown. We also had corn on the fire, and deep fried some bananas in whiskey sauce.

People went to bed at different times due to differing levels of illness, so there was not a colour that night.



*Picture: Martha's Sketch of Our New Best Friend*

## Day 17 – Monday 15<sup>th</sup> July

We woke up early to set off for the National Park, leaving some beans to soak ready to be cooked on our return. We stopped off for a quick breakfast at Villamar Mallcu before taking some small winding roads towards the national Park. Whilst stocking up on petrol there, we saw the same little dog that had visited our campsite! We ate in the restaurant “todo pollo”, who definitely don’t normally do breakfast, and had bread with jam and eggs. On the drive, some concerns were raised as one of the cars seemed to have a slowly leaking puncture. However, with no way of fixing it the group decided to carry on. There were a few hiccups at the entrance to the National park, including not having enough bolivianos to enter. Fortunately, the group had enough US dollars, but these needed to be exchanged inside the park before we could leave. After much deliberation and Jon’s expert help in translation we were let in. The scenery inside the park was amazing, with magnificent multicolored mountains. The first attraction we saw was an outstanding orange lake, home to a fair flock of flamingos. After

taking an appropriate number of pictures and doing some litter-picking, we set off to try and find the geysers.



After some wrong turns, we ended up at some hot springs. It was at this location that we learnt that usually when tourists went to the National Park they would spend a few days there to make the most of it. The group thought that this was a good idea and decided to stay the night. Despite the last-minute change of plans, half the group miraculously had their toothbrushes. Unfortunately, none of the group had any swimwear. We checked with the locals if there was a dress code for bathing in the hot springs, and we were assured that going in naked was acceptable. We cautiously peeled all our layers off and dashed into the deliciously hot water. To our alarm, there was also a group of young local children trying to enjoy the hot spring as well. We made sure to keep to opposite ends of the pool. As we sat there soaking, the grime that had built up over the last two weeks slowly washed away revealing whether you really had got a tan or not.



*Picture: everyone enjoying the hot springs*

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end and as the sun started dipping down towards the horizon, we decided that getting out the hot water was probably better done sooner rather than later. Shivering and somehow with only 9 towels between 10 people, we got dressed again and headed back to the hotel. Long hair held enough water to freeze, which we discovered as Veera's hair turned into dangerously sharp corkscrews. Exhausted, after a much-needed warm dinner we went to bed. To maximise warmth we decided to sleep two to a bed with double the amount of blankets. This was a good tactic, as the "beds" were actually just blocks of concrete that were continuous with the concrete floor. It was not warm.

## **Day 18 – Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> July**

Without the light of the sun to wake us up, the group had a long lie in. During breakfast we exchanged our dollars for bolivianos so we could pay to exit the park. After talking to the local guides of the park we set off for Laguna Verde, a bright green lake as the name suggests. Next we went to the Geysers, where you had to choose between freezing winds or smelly warmth.



*Picture: A chilly time at the geysers*

After this we decided we should head back to camp to try and avoid returning too late. We had decided to not visit the fabled rock tree of the National Park (a rock that is in the shape of a tree) as you can't climb it, and what's the point of a rock if you can't climb it. We were sure that there were plenty of better rocks back at camp. The drive back to camp was long, requiring us to use our emergency fuel after following the wrong path. It was getting late by the time we returned to Villamar. We had to beg a local restaurant to stay open and feed us. Whilst they prepared our food, we were entranced by the TV showing Clash of the Titans poorly dubbed in Spanish. After Clash of the Titans finished, we set off for camp, guided by the GPS.

We were blessed by our previous forgetfulness of not turning the fairy lights off (also blessed by long battery life). A thin line of light amid the darkness guided us home (helped by Peter having saved the camp location to the GPS – a useful, albeit slightly less romantic tool).

## **Day 19 – Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> July**

We woke up to our last full day in the valley. One last day to fulfill our climbing dreams. The morning started slowly, with people trying to get their sends in on the camp boulder. However, some members were keen to find some new boulders. Jon and Peter wandered off to investigate some potential new boulders...

Charlotte, Jacob and Ben tried to find them, and when they couldn't ended up going back to the cloud spotting area where they found some parkour problems and an interesting traverse. Unfortunately, skin got too thin and stomach started to gurgle before anyone could send the traverse. They left it as a project and went back to find out what everyone else had been up to.

The unfortunate incident of the undercooked beans part II, moral of the story – don't try to soak beans for three days, or even better, just avoid them at all costs while camping.

### Beanageddon

If you recall, some beans were left soaking before we left for the National Park. We thought we were being smart by leaving the beans to soak for all that time. We thought we had learnt from our previous mistakes. We split the beans into two large saucepans and started cooking them on the fire. As they cooked we reminisced, laughed and planned for the next day. A few hours later one of the saucepans of beans was cooked. We eagerly dished out the beans, proud that they had cooked in only one night. Only Peter, who wasn't feeling hungry did not have any beans. There was an incentive to eat everything to minimise food waste, thus those who could eat more forced themselves to have as many beans as possible. We forced ourselves to wash up after dinner so we could pack away everything ready for the morning. Everyone settled in for an early night, aware that we would be waking up early the next morning to get back to Uyuni in good time.

As people settled into their sleeping bags Beanageddon began. Frequently through the night people had to run out of their sleeping bags, grab some toilet roll if they were lucky and sprint as far as they could make it into the night (which sometimes wasn't very far).



*Picture: Peter  
Climbing Khaki Shoes  
(V2)*

## **Day 20 – Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> July**

After a miserable night for some (and miserable morning for others) the group packed up camp as quickly as possible, shivering with cold and generally feeling sorry for themselves. Soon they were in the cars with the heating on full blast, driving back through the valley towards civilisation. We stopped at a mechanic in San Cristobal so they could check the tyre of the car. It turns out there was a large nail through one of the tyres. This was quickly patched and we were on our way back to Uyuni, feeling a bit better.

We checked into the hotel around lunch time, marveling at the luxury of it all. However, we didn't have time to stop as we wanted to go and see the salt flats. After hurriedly unloading a mountain of equipment into the foyer we divided up into our different rooms. We paused quickly to buy some food before getting back on the road and heading to the salt flats.

We marveled at how truly flat and salty it was. We visited a closed down hotel made out of salt, and saw the sunset from a cactus island. The group was sad, as it was likely our last beautiful sunset in Bolivia, and our last chance to see the magnificence of the stars.



*Picture: The gang walking dramatically outside the hotel*

We returned back to the hotel and got changed for dinner. We returned to the restaurant recommended by Ben J. It was very strange to be around other Caucasian people and to be spoken to in English. After a very satisfying dinner, everyone headed back to the hotel for a much needed shower with soap.

## **Day 21 – Friday 19<sup>th</sup> July**

In the morning we had to wait for the cars to be cleaned after our salt flat adventure. This allowed the group to have a luxurious buffet breakfast and do some last minute shopping for friends and family. Once everything was ready, we packed up the cars and started the drive back to La Paz. In Daras car, we were initially entertained by medical facts from Peter. However, the drive was long and things soon changed.

Peter the indestructible medic who had been well all throughout the trip was struck by an awful bout of diarrhea and vomiting. He ended up almost pooping in someone's front yard on our journey back out of urgency and desperation.

The fog as we drove through Oruro, a major city on our way back was incredibly thick. Making it very difficult and stressful to drive. However, we managed to get through unscathed and the rest of the journey to La Paz was uneventful.

## Day 22 – Saturday 20th July

Last day in La Paz. Team car split off to take Cat-Cat and Rollcage back home to Europecar. On the way they were rewarded for their hard work as they stumbled across a Peruvian Gastronomical Festival and gorged on local(ish) delicacies. The remaining part of the team went around La Paz for last opportunities to buy mementos and soak up the culture. The last evening with the whole group together, now more a family than a team, was spent eating traditional local food, drinking locally brewed beer and being absolutely exhausted but merry.



*Picture: The gastronomical festival*

## Day 23 – Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> July

Our alarms went off painfully early, with many people only getting a few hours sleep. We rushed to get our final things packed and get to the taxis. However, we had to do all this as silently as possible as one person in the room wasn't part of our group. We made it successfully to the airport and blearily walked through security, crossing our fingers that all our luggage would make it back to the UK. We tried to amuse ourselves by reading, sleeping or watching

the free movies on tiny screens. Dara loved watching How to Train your Dragon 3 for the fourth time.

## **Day 24 – Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> July**

We landed in the early hours of the morning in Madrid, exhausted after the long flight. As it was early most of the shops were closed. We hoped that burger king would open before our next flight. But alas, our dreams came crashing down and we had to eat more expensive but equally unhealthy food. The only redeeming aspect of the airport – and perhaps the biggest triumph of the expedition – was the 3 for £10 deal on 300g bars of Milka in duty free.

After a not too long flight to Gatwick we stood waiting for the train back into London with our mountain of luggage (thankfully it all made its way to London with us). It was a moment of strange surrealness. Returning to normal life after spending two weeks in the desert without showering. Sadness spread through the group as one by one, people parted ways from the group they had spent all their time with for the last 3 weeks. It was a truly unforgettable experience with a bunch of amazing people (and Peter).

## **What we would do differently**

In the future, we would make sure to properly check water filters are working before the trip, and to take with methods of pre-filtering water. This would have saved a lot of time and money on our trip.

The vast majority of Bolivian people only spoke Spanish. Many people of our group did not speak any Spanish. This therefore made communicating quite tricky, for all aspects of the trip. It was infinitely useful having Jon on our trip as he spoke fluent Spanish. It would have been useful if more members of the group had a greater understanding of the language.

Trying to cook dried beans was a mistake both times. We would not recommend attempting to cook beans on any camping trip.

It would have been useful to have more information on the National Park before visiting it. It was difficult to access information online beforehand as the main way people visit the Park is through tour guide companies. However, it would have been useful to know the cost beforehand and how long it would take to drive round. Then we could have planned for a two day trip rather than it being a spontaneous decision.

## Section 6 - Climbing

### Rock type

The rock was sandstone with a crisp outer shell. In some cases, this outer layer was very hard and made for brilliant climbing. Unfortunately, it was often very flaky and would snap off, exposing the soft inner core of the boulders. This meant a large amount of the rock was not suitable for climbing. However, with such an endless supply of boulders, there was still masses of great rock.

### Camp1 - Valle Catal



#### Armchair Rock VB

**FA:** Martha Gutteridge 05/07/2019

**Location:** -21.592626, -67.591676



**Escalator VB**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 05/07/2019

**Location:** -21.592626, -67.591676



**Steasy V1**

**FA:** Charlotte Krishek 05/07/2019

**Location:** -21.593376, -67.592419



**Vanilla Groove VB**

**FA:** Charlotte Krishek 05/07/2019

**Location:** -21.593529, -67.592571

**Light at the end of the corner V1 (no photo)**

**FA:** Jacob Mitchell 05/07/2019

**Location:** -21.592713, -67.590813



**Bolivian Crack V3**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 05/07/2019

**Location:** -21.592597, -67.591649



**Weak at the Knees V2**

**FA:** Martha Gutteridge 05/07/2019

**Location:** -21.593551, -67.592604



**99 With Extra Flake V4**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 06/07/2019

**Location:** -21.591883, -67.596300 (?)



**Stiff Upper Lip V3**

**FA:** Jacob Mitchell 06/07/2019

**Location:** -21.591883, -67.596300 (?)



**Boliverance V0**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 06/07/2019

**Location:** -21.592494, -67.597984



**Fat Africa V3**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 06/07/2019

**Location:** -21.593304, -67.600857



**E9 Trousers V3**

**FA:** Benjamin Warmington 06/07/2019

**Location:** -21.593184, -67.600218

Camp2 - Valle de Las Rocas



**Rookie Corner V0**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 08/07/2019

**Location:** -21.528509, -67.585234



**Saturday to Thursday is Not All Week V1**

FA: Stuart McClune 08/07/2019

**Location:** -21.528509, -67.585234



**Flexy Arête V3/4**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 08/07/2019

**Location:** -21.528509, -67.585234



**Don't Trust The Holds V2** sit start

**FA:** Peter Rhodes 08/07/2019

**Location:** -21.523394, -67.596575



**Evil Rabbit V4** sit start

**FA:** Stuart McClune 08/07/2019

**Location:** -21.523394, -67.596575



**Static Dyno V2**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 08/07/2019

**Location:** -21.523394, -67.596575



**Midday Moon V3** sit start

**FA:** Peter Rhodes 09/07/2019

**Location:** -21.533917, -67.578510



**Group Segs V3 sit start**

**FA:** Varalika Jain 09/07/2019

**Location:** -21.533917, -67.578510



**Charlotte's Pockets V1** sit start

**FA:** Charlotte Krishek 09/07/2019

**Location:** -21.533917, -67.578510



**Pale Australians Don't Need Layers V5**

**FA:** Jon Urquidi Ferreira 10/07/2019

**Location:** -21.531453, -67.588120

## Camp3 - Italia Perdida (Lost Italy)



**Fizzy Pineapple V3** sit start

**FA:** Stuart McClune 13/07/2019

**Location:** -21.727635, -67.520352

**Note:** The two foot pockets on the right at the start are eliminated because Veera said so.



**God Awful Farts V5**

**FA:** Stuart McClune 13/07/2019

**Location:** -21.727676, -67.520012



**Khaki Shoes V2** sit start

**FA:** Stuart McClune 17/07/2019

**Location:** -21.729538, -67.519365