

## San Miguel de Tucumán (Argentina) - Uyuni (Bolivia)

### Leg details

**Date** April 23 - May 28, 2013

**Leg** San Miguel de Tucumán - Parque Nacional de los Menhires - Tafi del Valle - Quilmes - Cafayate - Reserva Nacional Quebrada de la Concha - Parque Nacional El Rey - Parque Nacional Calilegua - San Salvador de JuJuy - Purmamarca - La Quiaca (AR) - Villazon (BO) - Tupiza - San Pablo de Lipez - Reserva Nacional de Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa (Laguna Celeste, Termas de Chalvirí, Laguna Blanca, Laguna Verde, Sol de mañana, Laguna Colorada, Arbol de Piedra) - Volcano Ollagüe - San Cristobal - Rio Grande - Uyuni

**PDF**



**Leg map** (click to enlarge in separate window)



On Tuesday, April 23 2013, we leave **Monteros** to drive into San Miguel de Tucumán to pick up our spare parts.



One can tell that the northern part of Argentina is poorer than the south .... we start seeing horse- or donkey-drawn carriages. The highway is good and soon we reach **Tucumán**.



Even in a large city like Tucumán there are all sorts of vehicles on the road ..... all with equal rights.

Soon we reach the hardware store Reginato where we had our parts ordered. They are ready and are done correctly. We are pleased.

As we pay the manager of the mechanical workshop of Reginato asks if we would be interested in selling the OKA.

We are a bit amused but not surprised as it is the second offer we get within two month.

As we had done previously we reply that it would be for sale but very expensive.

And as the previous time we hear that money, even US\$, which are in high demand in Argentina, is no problem as long as we can fix something with cash in hand.

That would be difficult as we don't have a clue how to get a few ten thousand dollars out of a country like Argentina .....

Well, it is good to know that there is a market for our OKA but for the time being we want to travel and not replace the OKA.

But we will definitively start thinking about how we want to replace the vehicle or the backsection depending on whom we sell it to (the previous offer had been for the backsection only).

We leave Tucumán in the afternoon and head south-west on RP38.



On the way we come past a special horse-drawn carriage ..... one with a loud-speaker on it!

In Argentina loud-speaker vehicles are used to drive around towns and advertise what ever, from a local fiesta to election slogans to specials at the local butcher or shopping centre.

We have seen (and heard!) many of them but we have never seen a horse-drawn one ...



As we refuel we spot this piece of engineering ....

In **Acheral** we leave the highway and head west into the mountains on the RP37 that will lead us to Tafi del Valle.

The drive up the valley is very pretty.



We climb from the dry valley up into a semi-humid rainforest.

The trees are covered with mosses, bromelias, lichens, etc.

As we climb up hill we pass the Monumento del Indio.

The road is under construction as so many roads we have travelled on recently.

It seems that Argentina is spending a lot of money in its infrastructure.

Then we reach the plane and **El Mollar** where we settle at a pretty camping right on the border of the lake.

The manager on duty asks us if we had been here the week before ..... he had had a truck like ours but the couple had been older ..... ah, Joop and Adrie, our Dutch Overlanders!

They are waiting for us in Cafayate ....

As we are the only guest the manager invites us to use the warm water shower in the office so he does not have to fire up the donkey on the campsite..... nice gesture and nice shower too!

Again we are surprised at the low prices for communal campsites: 10 pesos per person and 10 for the vehicle .... and that includes hot showers and electricity!  
After the hot weather with day-temperatures above 30° C we have had the last few days we enjoy the cool weather up here.

On Wednesday morning we head into town.

Susi wants to see the Menhires, large rocks similar to the ones on Easter Island.

We follow the instructions of the manger and the GPS and after some driving around finally find the **Parque Nacional de los Menhires**.

A friendly lady shows us around.



The Menhires were all found in the valley.

Some of them have motives on it, some don't.

But as they all have more or less the same shape ..... of a phallus .... they think that they are symbols of fertility.

They were placed in front of houses, fields, where ever they wanted the "Gods" to give fertility to.

There are still many Menhires in the valley but the population does not want them taken to the national park .... they want them left where they were placed .... there was a reason for them to be placed there .....



Then we leave town and continue on the RP37 passing the lake.

At the other side of the lake lies **Tafi del Valle**, where the people from Tucumán have their summer residences.

There are many boats anchored as well.

There must be money around .....



A good road starts climbing up to 3 000 m above sea level to the **Paso El Infernillo** where there is a restaurant with views over the valley.

Some llamas walk around .....

Then the road gets narrower and the quality less good .....

The road continues through a valley and then starts descending.



In certain areas we can see groups of large Cordones (cacti).



There are also an interesting variety of rocks around ..... as if they had been poured ....

When Susi asks for a photo stop she sees that the OKA is losing cooling water.

As we are close to Cafayate we decide to open the cap of the radiator to reduce the pressure and drive down into the valley.

We turn north on the RN40 and stop at **Quilmes** to visit the ruins.



Our guide is a descendent of the original people.

We hear that the Quilmes where first concurred by the Incas.



The Incas were much more advanced and the Quilmes learned from the Incas a lot about terracing.

Later on the Spanish came and the Quilmes resisted them for 30 years .... but at the end were concurred.

The people were forced to walk to Buenos Aires ..... but from the 6'000 that left some 400 arrived at their final destination ..... the Spanish were known for this tactic to "relocate" people .....



The rocks that were used to ground corn are still intact.

Amazing if one thinks that wooden poles can generate holes like this just by grounding corn on the same part of the rock every day for years and years .....

Then we drive to **Cafayate** where we stop at the Camping "Luz y Fuerza" (GPS: S 26° 04.814, W 065° 58.620) where Joop und Adrie are already waiting for us.

The camping must have been renovated recently ..... the power is new and works, the bathrooms have toilets with seats, showers with shower heads ..... and plenty of hot water!

Nice!

We celebrate Ruedi's birthday with an extended "happy hour" and have a real good time.

The next few days go past with working on the vehicles.



Joop's big solar panels are not strong enough and he has to reinforce them for support.

Ruedi looks for the leak in the cooling system.

First it looks like the radiator is leaking.

As we don't know how to remove the radiator we use the local WiFi-connection to Skype with Switzerland were by coincidence Paul Nott, "Mr. OKA" from Melbourne is visiting

Ruedi's sister Heidi and husband Peter.

Paul recommends that we should use a sealant that is just added to the cooling water as it seals small holes and really works well.

Joop tells us that he had bought a cooler sealant and when he had opened the box had found it to contain some kind of ash .... we all have a good laugh.

Then Ruedi opens the sealant we had bought in Africa ..... and it contains chopped up Linseeds!

We have an even greater laugh and decide to go into town and have a look for another one.

Ruedi doesn't like the idea of just adding the sealant without exactly knowing where the leak is.

Unfortunately the leak in the system is at a place inaccessible and invisible.

After a lot of searching and discussing possible scenarios with Joop they finally find the leak:

When we covered the inside of the driver cabin with carpet to muffle the noise of the engine a screw that holds the he carpet had been placed exactly through one of the hoses .....

Next thing Ruedi wants to look at is the problem with the 2WD/4WD change that does not work properly.

He builds a new matrix for the gears and Joop helps him adjust the cable shift accordingly.

It looks like it works .....



While Adrie gets a haircut by the local figaro Joop Susi decides to tackle her "chocolate-problem":

On our trip from Hamburg to Montevideo on board of the Grimaldi ferry we had not realized how hot it gets in the hull of the ship and our Swiss chocolate had melted .....

When we realised it we had taken the chocolate and put it into the fridge in the cabin.

This was a mistake!

Had we left it in the camper and allowed it to cool down slowly it would not have separated the cocoa butter ... but now it smells and tastes funny.



So Susi now melts the damaged chocolate, fills it into a Tupperware and lets it cool down slowly ..... and it works!

It may not look pretty but much to Ruedi's delight the taste is ok again.

The days are sunny and hot (32° C) and the nights cool (7° C), there are almost no insects, the town is within walking distance ..... perfect.

The afternoons and evening are spent exchanging routes, talking about travelling, just having fun.

Time flies .....

Ruedi also gets a replay from BAE in South Africa regarding the "jumping" out of 4WD lows we had experienced on the steep descent into the Galan crater a few weeks back.

Basically they say that they have no explanation what can cause this "jumping" .....

Ok, we will have to investigate further and let them know.

On Sunday evening Ruedi discovers a loose filling in his mole.

Another problem to solve ..... just so it doesn't get boring .....

On Monday, Joop and Adrie leave the camping and continue their trip.

We head into town to get a new hose for the coolant system.

In town we bump into Joop and he gives us directions to a good little car-parts shop he had found earlier.

And we are lucky ..... they have the hose, some sealant powder for the radiator (should we use it) and some good quality antifreeze liquid so we can top up the cooler.

Next we visit the dentist the tourist information office had recommended.



And we are lucky again as one of his patients is late and he has time to apply a temporary fix to Ruedi's mole.

But it will need proper fixing once we are back in Switzerland.

In the afternoon Ruedi replaces the hose and all works fine.

The next few days are spent updating our web page.

Even though the days stay pleasant, cold nights with only 4° C point to the winter coming to Cafayate too.... it is time for us to go further north .....

So on Wednesday, May 8, we leave Cafayate on the RN 68.

There are bodegas (wineries) here too, even though it looks dry and even so there are sand dunes along the river.

After some 17 km we reach the **Reserva Nacional Quebrada de la Concha**.

Over and over again Susi asks Ruedi to stop so she can take pictures .....



... from **Los Colorados** with its "clavel del aire", Bromelia (Tilandsia Zecheri var. cafatayensis) ....



... past all the other colourful formations and its inhabitants.



We also go for walks ...



and find time to have a closer look at the cacti .....



Every formation has its name but for us it is just very pretty.



Especially the rapid change in colour is fascinating.



After the last bit of climbing at the **Garganta del Diablo** we continue on and after **Alemania** start leaving the mountains.

The rather new road has already been damaged by the river ..... it seems that the architect built the road during the dry season and when the first big rain came ..... bye-bye road ..... and not just once!!!

They also have problems with the debris that is washed down from the mountains.

In many locations it has already filled up the space left behind the retainer walls and is spilling onto the road.

The valley gets wide and seems to be fertile.

In **Coronel Moldes** we leave the RN68 and turn east to the RP47.

Soon we reach the **Embalse Cabra Corral**.

The nice houses along the lake show that there must be lots of money in Salta .....

Large houseboats are parked along the shores .... it is a very nice setting.



We drive all the way around the large lake.

Towards the end we see an area that seems to be used for camping.

To get in Ruedi wants to enable 4WL but a nasty noise from the transfer case is all he gets.

All the positions on the shifter are now off by about 1 cm.

This sounds like trouble .....

As the trees in the area are too low and there are midges and and and .... we leave and continue on until the RP 9/34 leaves at the dam wall.

We follow it and soon find a spot for the night.

Ruedi wants to have a look at the 4WD.

The insects are very abundant ..... and they bite!



On Thursday morning we continue on along the river.

It is a very pretty setting.

Soon we reach a small dam with a power station on it.

From there on the road is a bit smaller and less travelled.

At one of the small river crossings Ruedi wants to test the 4WD again but only the 4WD highs works. Then he tries the lows and after quite some noise he gets the gear in, but as soon as he wants to drive with it it falls out again. So the problem seems to be in the transfer case between 4WD low and high.



The track is nice and Ruedi enjoys driving it.  
For Susi there are many things to take pictures off ..... "Boabs" .... and large cacti .....  
But the insects are a real pain and make life outside of the driver cabin very unpleasant.  
The midges are so fast in getting into the cabin that we have to spray the legroom after every stop!



We also spot nets along the road that look similar to the ones built by the Funnel Web spider in Australia. We don't dare disturbing them as the Australian version of the spider jumps and is dangerous too.  
Bustards cross the road ..... now just Kangaroos are missing to complete the impression that we are in Australia!

Then the valley opens and becomes cattle country.  
In **Juramento** we leave the RP47 and turn south on the highway RN9/34,.  
In **Lumbrera** we get off the RN9/34 and take the RP5 in easterly direction.

Soon after we reach the turn off to the RP20 that leads to the Parque Nacional El Rey.  
The dirt road leads mostly through forest with a few farms along the road.  
The forest gets denser and overgrown.  
Bromelias and ferns grow on the trees.  
We have to cross many small creeks but size does not matter.  
It looks like when it rains back here a lot of water comes down .....

We reach the entry of the **Parque Nacional El Rey** and the friendly ranger explains all.  
The park and the camping are for free and there are many hiking trails we can use.  
So we drive the last 10 km to the camping and settle in.

Ruedi has a look at the gear box and finds that the gear lever at the box has a problem.  
But at the moment he cannot communicate with BAE in South Africa as the Sat-mail system has a global outage and there is no internet at the national park.  
We will have to wait for the Sat-mail to recover ..... when we had rang the provider on Wednesday the support team had said "it can take a few days" .....

The midges are a real pain here and we are forced to close the windows to stop them from biting us.  
Luckily the temperature is not too high and we can sleep well.

On Friday morning the Sat-mail works again.  
Good because we have agreed with Ruedi's sister Heidi that we tell them every day where we are.  
So quickly we contact them so they don't get worried.



Today we want to explore the Parque Nacional El Rey.  
There are birds everywhere!

To be able to get down to the **Río Popayán** we have to get the key off the ranger.  
The track down to the river leads through light forest with a lot of low laying trees.  
Every so often we have to "push" the OKA through some branches ..... one of those times is too much for the Sat phone antenna on the roof and we leave it as a souvenir on a tree .....

But we have a spare with us, no worries.



As we drive along the track we see vultures.  
They are feeding on a carcass.



The track leads along a small river.  
Every so often we have to cross it.  
It also has wash-outs.  
At one of them we cannot get past as a tree blocks on the other side.  
So we park the OKA and continue on foot.  
Soon after we reach the first river crossing.  
So we take the shoes off.  
Then comes the second one .... shoes off .... the third one ....  
Ruedi decides to keep his shoes on and get them wet .....

At the forth crossing Susi decides the same .....



After many more crossings we reach the end of the track and go down to the river.  
 Luckily we already have wet shoes as we can explore the river and its banks without problems.  
 There are large fishes in the river.  
 They look a bit like carps.



We find fresh tracks of otter and tapir but we cannot spot the animals themselves.  
 We cannot be lucky all the time ....

We return to the OKA ..... get dry shoes and trousers .... and drive back.  
 On the way back, when Susi closes the gate again, she realises that her trousers are virtually covered with small red animals, either ticks or spiders.  
 They rapidly spread all over her.  
 She starts wiping them off but they are everywhere.  
 Susi is close to panicking.  
 For Ruedi the only solution is to get the insect killer and thoroughly spray the cloth inside and outside as well as Susi with it.  
 That works!



We deviate to the **Laguna Los Patitos**.  
 There is a hive there and we climb it to see what is swimming around.  
 But there is not much happening on the lake except some nice insects.  
 We decide to drive up to the **Cascada de Los Lobitos**.



On the way we come past a Taruca or Corzuela, a deer-like animal.  
 Susi misses her animal guides but we haven't got any for South America ....

The ranger had said that to spot the otters we must be there early in the morning so we want to know the way and the condition of it.  
 When we reach the cascade there is just a trickle of water coming down the wall and the pond below is brown and not inviting at all.  
 And there are no otter tracks to be seen at all.  
 They must all have moved down to the river, the fresh water and the large fishes ....

After this disappointment we discuss what we want to do.  
 The clouds look like rain ..... and that would not be good on this dirt track ..... and without the low range gears.  
 So we decide to leave the park and travel back toward the bitumen.  
 This will give us a bit of a head-start for tomorrow's trip to the Parque Nacional Calilegua.  
 And should it rain, it will only be a short distance to the bitumen.

We find ourselves a nice little spot beside the small creek .....  
 Here too there are a lot of midges but it is not as bad as in the camping area of the park ...  
 During the night the frogs perform a splendid concert.

On Saturday morning Ruedi first cleans the roof from all the debris of yesterday's drive through the trees ..... enough wood bits to make a nice fire with it ....  
 He also notes that the box on the roof that contains the jerry canes has suffered a blow yesterday; it needs fixing before we can continue travelling.

The sky is overcast and it looks like it could start raining any moment.  
 We are glad to reach the bitumen and on the RP5 head north again.

We make it to **Las Latijas** shortly after 12 o'clock, just before the shops close for siesta.  
 We find Las Latijas to be a strange little village; people are not as friendly as we are used to ..... they are kind of reserved ....

We also top up on good quality diesel (EuroDiesel) as we don't know when and where we will find another service station that has EuroDiesel or NitroDiesel.  
 The last service station in Cafayate did not have it .....

The next town we drive through is **Apolinaria Saravia**.

It is the first time that we see "chosas" (huts made from reeds) since we are in Argentina.  
 This area must really be very poor.

They are building social housing but they must have run out of money .... the buildings are half finished and plants are growing in them .....

The road sinks to 360 m above sea level and the temperature rises to 32° C.  
 Even though there are dark clouds over the **Sierra del Centinela** the country on both sides of the road is pretty dry.

It must be harvesting season.  
 Many harvester machines pulling small caravans cross us.  
 Some of them seem to work in teams with a few harvesters, truck, service vehicles.

The road is straight for kilometres and in good shape.  
 Quickly many kilometres are driven.  
 On the now empty field cows are feeding on the left over seeds (mostly Soja) but on one field we can see a group of Suris (Argentinian emus) feeding.  
 Again some Boab or "palo boracho" (drunken stick) as they call them here grow along the road.

In **La Estrella** we turn west onto the RP13.



The road is sealed but in a lousy condition ..... almost Zambia-style ..... the whole road is covered in holes and most people seem to drive on the gravel on the side .....

Luckily after a few km the bitumen is completely gone and good gravel covers the road.

We reach the state border, where the Salta state ends and the JuJuy state begins.

We have actually managed to cross the Salta state without a police control.

We had been warned about the police in Salta as coming through a pain in the bum ..... it could have been an endless discussion because of us not having an under-ride protection .....

After **Siete Aguas** we turn north onto the RP1.

The challenging road conditions continue with the road changing back to gravel, then bitumen again .... but just one line at times ..... but the closer we get to the RN34 the better the bitumen gets.

We are stopped by police but when they realise that we are tourists they very friendly wave us through.

On the RN34 we turn south and shortly after are stopped by police again.

The officer gets a good laugh when he realises that "all is wrong" on our vehicle.

He is very friendly and gives us instructions on how to reach the Parque Nacional Calilegua.

We have now reached the sugar can region.

All is green and it seems to be a very fertile area.

But poor too ..... we pass a full village made just of reed houses ..... just the school is made with bricks .....

Or maybe this is the way they want to live here?

People look well dressed .... so maybe it is just a misunderstanding from our side.

We reach **Calilegua** and deviate to the RP83 that leads to the national park.

The ranger at the **Parque Nacional Calilegua** gives us a lot of information ..... and also tells us that at the Parque Nacional El Rey it is easier to spot the animals .....

Hmmmm ..... that's where we come from .....

Let's hope he is wrong and we are luckier here .....

In the evening Susi finds lots of insect bites on her body.

And they itch!

Susi also finds a small tick (similar to the Kangaroo ticks in Australia) crawling on her leg .....

One?

We stop counting after removing ten!

Then it is Susi's turn to check Ruedi ..... she removes some 30 ticks off him .....

We are quite busy disinfecting the bites so they stop itching.

We will have to ask the ranger if there are any creatures in the parks that carry diseases.

Luckily here the midges are not that aggressive and we can leave the windows open over night.

We can hear the frogs again but the river is too loud so sadly the concert is a bit muffled.

On Sunday after a warm night with 17° C (we haven't had that for a while ....) we wake up to an overcast sky.

Not much sun to charge our solar cells today .....

When the ranger comes past we ask him about the ticks

He laughs and replies that they all just itch.

Good to know.

While Ruedi types an email to BAE in Johannesburg because of the gear box Susi goes for a walk.



But besides an Ibis and some flowers there is not much happening.

There are also not too many animal tracks that she can find.



The river has some interesting rock though .....

We pass the day with a bit of PC work.

In the evening we have another tick-removal-session ..... at least 10 more removed from Ruedi .....

Susi is covered in bites.

She reckons she has never had that many bite in her life.

Luckily they only itch every so often .....

On Monday morning we wake up to rain drops falling on the roof from the tree above us.

It drizzles and fog hangs in the trees.

Since we have crossed into Argentina almost 3 month ago this is the first real rain we see!

We decide to leave the jungle-forests and head north.

We will come back to the national parks when we are equipped with better mosquito-nets and when the weather is better.

On the RN34 we drive west towards San Salvador de JuJuy.

There is a lot of traffic.

Also there are many huts along the road ..... it is a very poor area with many immigrants from Bolivia.

For them Argentina is the promises land .....

We reach the RN66 which is very good and later on turns into a highway.

The road climbs slowly but surely.

By the time we reach **Jujuy** we have already reached almost 1 500 m above sea level.

We stop in Jujuy for some serious shopping (the last one before we reach Bolivia) and also fill Diesel with NitroDiesel, the one for the altitude.

Then we leave Jujuy on the RN9 in northerly direction.

We want to camp at the Termas de Reyes as suggested by the guide book.

But the hotel that would have some hot pools has been rebuilt and is now a fancy spa that charges 110 Pesos [approx. 20 US\$] for 2 people for 1 hour and offers no more camping.

And in the campings that have pools the water is not that hot ....

So we decide to continue on to **Yala** and stay at the camping El Refugio there.

As the position on the electronic map is different to the actual one and as the camping is in really good condition it must have been moved recently.

We enjoy the pretty clean hot showers ..... WITH shower heads and the toilets WITH rings .....

On Tuesday the weather is better.

Susi gets busy with washing,

In Argentina it is rare to find washing machines, so we take the laundry to "lavanderias" (washing salons), but they only use cold water .....

So all she can do is wash the laundry by hand if she wants it to be clean.

Then she pre-cooks the food for Bolivia ..... meat, vegetables, rice ..... in the altitude it takes much longer to get food done as because of the reduced air-pressure water boils at a much lower temperature (at 80° C instead of 100° C).

In addition the Wallas diesel cooker will not work above 3500 m and she will have to use the electrical inverter and the induction cooking plate instead.

By pre-cooking the food she wants to save energy in the altitude.

Ruedi is busy with the OKA.

He has found that the door have severe rust on the lower part.

The door is built in such a way that the lower part of the door is a closed room without access for paint or wax or rust-converter.

It looks like we caught some salt water and this has "eaten" its way through the metal ..... sadly but true, Ruedi cannot fix it and we will eventually have to replace the hole lower part of the door .....

Ruedi has a look at the route and calculates that it would be wise to use 3 - 4 days to climb to the almost 4 000 m above sea level in Bolivia to avoid height-sickness.

On Wednesday there are still clouds about but we decide to continue north on the RN9.

When we check our Sat-mails we find a message from BAE in Johannesburg. They cannot tell us what is wrong with the box without us removing and opening the box, but they will send us a new transfer case on warranty if requested. As they don't have any connections to South America we will have to tell them where to send it and who will do the import papers.



Shortly before **Leon** we are stopped by police at a check-point because we don't have the day-lights on. This is almost not possible because Ruedi's newly installed day-light switch which is on ..... We put our orange west on and have a look ..... there is no light ..... Ruedi tries the switches but has no success. Then he finds a burnt fuse. But a burnt fuse usually points to another problem ..... it does not "just" happen ..... The police officers are very friendly and try to help with finding the problem. They also decide that our missing light was not bad intension and let us go without a fine (all along the road there are signs indicating the law that makes light mandatory all the time in Argentina). As we cannot find the problem on the spot we get off the road and Ruedi starts checking the electrical connections. It does not take long and he finds a burn cable in one of the main plugs in the dash board. We have had a similar problem in Namibia and tried to replace the plug ..... without success. Ruedi then soldered the two cables together. Looks like he will have to go for a similar solution here .... After finishing the fix we had back to the police officers and show them that it now works ..... just to show them that their work is appreciated .... they appreciate the candy too .....

We continue on and the road starts winding its way uphill. The mountains start changing in colours. As we are spoiled from having seen the Canon Arco Iris in the Parque Nacional Talampaya (see last trip's journal) we wonder what we will find here ..... the guide book says that it is one of the main attractions .....

We deviate west towards the Paso the Jama and drive to **Purmamarca** on the RN52.



The **Cerro de Siete Colores** is pretty in the afternoon sun but the greens don't show nicely so Susi asks that we stay for the night and try again tomorrow morning.



To find a spot for the night we choose the dirt track to **Cienaguillas** and strike it really lucky. The views are splendid!

With only 16° C it is fresh up here (2 727 m above sea level) .....



On Thursday we wake up to 3° C outside temperature and fog. We take it easy and wait but the fog (or clouds?) take their time to disappear .....

So we head back into Purmamarca and check if the ATM is working .... yes, it does. Equipped with our last lot of Argentinean Pesos we stock up on essentials.

We also walk past the markets with all the very pretty handicrafts. Should we not have already bought all the things we want in Bolivia or Peru this is definitely a place to come back and shop.

But even after all the shopping and ogling is finished the clouds still "hang around" so we decide that, as we most probably will be travelling over the Paso Jama another time, we will next time stop for the ultimate photo with perfect weather conditions and light .....

We reach the RN9 again and turn north into the valley of Humahuaca.



The erosion is very well visible. Only where plants have been able to hang on the soil is not washed and blown away by wind and weather.



The drive up the valley is very nice.



The colours of the mountains change constantly.

Then we reach **Humahuaca** at 2 790 m above sea level and the end of the **Quebrada de Humahuaca**.



The valley gets narrow and the road constantly climbs.

Then we reach the altiplano.

By now we have reached an altitude of more than 3 500 m.

The folding of the Andes in certain parts is quite impressive.



The train tracks have been washed away and only ruins are left.



When Susi gets out to take some picture she sees that we are losing coolant again .....

Ruedi gets really upset ..... which is not that surprising .....

We search but cannot find the source of the problem.

So we decide to continue on and keep an eye on the loss of fluid.

To reduce the pressure on the leaking part we remove the lid on the expansion unit again - standard procedure by now.

We come past a military checkpoint and the guard tells us that we are losing fluids .... yes we know .....

He tells us that the next garages are in Abra Pampa, some 28 km from here.

Shortly after just as we reach the highest point with 3 750 m above sea level the motor starts overheating.

The temperature of the coolant is close to 100° C

Quickly we stop.

The water is boiling!

Of course - at this altitude the water boils with 70° - 80° C.

One should NOT remove the cap at this altitude to reduce pressure because 85° C is standard temperature of the coolant.

So much to standard procedure .....

We have lost a lot of fluid, all is dripping wet.

Susi can slowly fill 6 lt of water into the expansion unit.

We inspect all.

It is leaking at the same spot as last time.

After a lot of searching Ruedi finds a hose with could have a hole in it.

The other day when he had fixed the last leak he had fixed the radiator hoses with a cable tie and then probably damaged the hose.

We refill the expansion unit, close the lid and start the engine.

No more dripping.

So we decide to carefully drive to Abra Pampa and there try to get a new hose.

All goes well and we reach **Abra Pampa**.

But neither of the two service stations has hoses and the shop that would have some is closed for the day.

On the way into town we had seen a Swiss flag painted on the Hotel Rincon Suizo.

We decide to go and see if they are home but today is not our lucky day: A sign says "Cerrado, de vacaciones" ..... closed for holidays.

As we have not lost any more fluid we decide to continue on to the border town of La Quiaca and see if we can get some spares there.



We are surprised to find sand dunes on such an altitude!

Then we reach **La Quiaca** and at the last YPF gas station fill up with EuroDiesel.

They also have coolant so we get enough to cover the loss in the radiator and also some spare.

Then we drive to the border.

This is easier said than done as there are no signs.

We have a look at the city map we have and try to find our way.

Suddenly our side of the road is closed .... but the car in front of us just gets over to the other side of the road and continues driving .... ok, so do we .....

Then we see the correct road leading to the bridge and the immigration ..... and even manage to get there!

The border crossing is well organised and swiftly we are processed and cross the bridge into **Villazon**, Bolivia.

But we only get a visa for 30 days instead of the requested 90 days.

Instantly we are in a lively and very busy city.

The main road seems to be one large shopping area.

Luckily there is not much vehicle traffic.

As we need to find an ATM we ask the local police.

They also give us instructions where we can find the correct radiator hose.

We find all and try to make our way out of town onto the RN14 ..... but the road is blocked, under construction.

It looks like it is getting a new coating with stones ..... but there is no sign on how we could get to the RN14 .....

So again we try the city map in the GPS.

At the main railroad station we try to get to the RN14 .... too early, the road is still "under construction" and covered with large piles of building material.

So we turn around and continue on side roads.

Finally according to the GPS we reach the end of the city without having reached the RN14.

So we just follow the other cars in front of us and turn as they do.

We reach the RN14 .... still under construction and full of dirt piles ..... but the traffic has made a one-lane "off-road"-track over the dirt piles.

If they can get through with their 2WD you bet we can get through with the OKA.

A few hundred meters later we finally reach bitumen again.

Happy about that we start driving out of the city ..... but don't get far: the only bridge out of town is blocked by protesters!

Now what?

Susi goes down and tries to find out what is happening.

She is informed that this is a country-wide thing and all major cities are being blocked during the day.

When she asks how long the protesting will go on she is told that they have no end in sight .....

Great.

They are supposed to lift the blockade by 6 PM ..... it is already quarter past 6 .....

Ruedi parks the OKA a bit further away so we are not in the "firing line" should things get nasty.

Time goes past ..... it gets dark .....

We can see a vehicle colon coming towards the bridge on the other side of the blockade but nothing happens.

The police come and eventually drive over the bridge ..... but nothing happens .....

Trucks start lining up and we hope that now things will get moving .....

Eventually we have dinner in the back.

When we come out again more trucks and other vehicles have gathered around us.

As still nothing is happening Ruedi goes into the back and tries to get some rest.

We will drive through the night to reach Tupiza, the next larger town, as we need to find a garage that can help Ruedi to take the transfer case down so we can let BAE in South Africa know what they have to send us to fix it.

We also want to know what the problem in the gear box is so we can judge what we can drive in Bolivia and what's off-limit.

For the moment we are without 4WD lows which is with our weight basically is 2WD only.

Around 9 PM the blockade is lifted and the traffic gets chaotic.

Everybody is trying to get over the bridge which is not easy with the oncoming traffic.

After the worst is over we line up.

The traffic is slow and constantly we see people running past the OKA with papers in their hands.

After a while they come back and then the corresponding vehicle jumps the queue.

We wonder what this is all about ..... so Susi goes and checks.

She is informed that she needs the Bolivian transit permit and some money for the toll.

Equipped with the necessary she goes to the first office, where she has to pay 3 Bolivares toll to Tupiza (mind you, it's a return ticket valid 60 days .... ;-)

Then she is sent across the road to the police for registration.

The details of the OKA, us and our destination Tupiza are entered in a book and Susi is informed that in Tupiza she will have to check with the police again.

Cost of the registration is 5 Bolivares.

Then we are free to leave.

The road is really good and very well marked with reflective markers.

It makes driving at night easy.

After a while we start catching up with the trucks that had left before us.

Luckily there is almost no incoming traffic and passing the trucks is not a problem.

From Villazon to **El Tambo** we stay more or less at the same altitude.

Then the road winds down into the valley from 3 500 to 2 900 m above sea level.

For quite a while we follow the river and pass village after village.

It is a shame it is night and we cannot see anything.

Then the road starts climbing again a bit and shortly before midnight we reach **Tupiza**.

Right outside of the town we are stopped by police and Susi has to go into the office to register again.

The officer wants to know our next destination but as we don't know yet he reminds us to register again before we leave Tupiza.

To be sure that we have the OKA in town and can reach a mechanical workshop in town we cross over the bridge and find ourselves a spot for the night outside the sports complex.

It is well light and there seems to be no traffic.

The bed feels so good .....

On Friday morning shortly after 6 AM we hear voices from the bridge and fire crackers being lit ..... sounds like they are blocking the bridge again .....

When we get up we meet the guard of the sports complex.

Friendly he asks how we have past the night.

After a bit of conversation he gives us the locations of two mechanical workshops.

He also tells us that the whole town is blocked off at many intersections and we will only get through on foot.

After getting some instructions from the friendly police we reach the first workshop, Huaranca.

They have too much work and will possibly be able to look at our problem tomorrow .....

We will have to wait until the blockages are lifted and move the OKA to here during the night.

As we are not really convinced that this workshop is what we are looking for we decide to search for the other workshop the guard had mentioned.

As we wander about in search of the workshop we meet Ariel in his workshop.

He is a tour operator and has his own mechanic, Jorge.

Jorge is in Uyuni at the moment and will return tonight.

Ariel will call him and we will meet Ariel again after 3 PM in his office to know if Jorge would have some time tomorrow to have a look at the box.

Ariel also gives us directions to another workshop with a good mechanic, just in case Jorge would have no time for us.

But the workshop is closed .....

As we both like Ariel we decide to check with him in the afternoon.

We head back into town and bump into a group of protesters.



The discussions are heated and we decide to leave the area.

But at least we are successful in getting a SIM-card with Internet connection and also money.

We are pleased that in Bolivia we are not charged extra fees on the ATM like we used to get charged in Argentina (up to 31.44 Pesos per withdrawal, no matter how much one gets out of the ATM) and also that we can get larger amounts of money (the max in Argentina was 1 000 Pesos (approx. 200 AU\$) per withdrawal).

Back at the OKA Ruedi gets busy in trying to figure out where the leak in the cooling system is.

Susi goes into town to organise things.

Tupiza is a bit hopeless ..... no tourist info ..... no campground (the hotel that according to the guide book offers camping closed down two years ago .....) ..... but Susi is lucky and gets good info regarding a spot to stand and also the ok that Jorge will have a look at our truck tomorrow.

After 6 PM the blockades are lifted and we move the OKA into the vicinity of the workshop.

Now we should be all set for tomorrow.

In the evening Susi has some new bites.

She is worried that these are not mosquito bites but flea bites or something like that.

Susi remembers her Mum chasing fleas every time her father had come back from a trip in a "collectivo" (some kind of a long distance taxi) in Peru ..... the bites had looked similar.

On Saturday morning it is warm with 16°C but the sky is overcast.

We drive to the workshop and wait.

Susi had agreed with Ariel that Jorge would be here between 8 and 8:30 AM .....

But she did not ask if Bolivians are punctual or if it is like it is in Peru, where one has to ask if it is "hora Peruana" (= Peruvian time, plus at least 1 hour .....) or "hora Suiza" (=Swiss time, punctual).

Shortly after 9 AM a man stops at the OKA and introduces himself as Jorge.

Then he sends us a block further up the road ..... we had been waiting in front of the wrong workshop!

Jorge wants to make a full analysis of the problem himself.

After a while he also comes to the conclusion that the transfer case must be removed to know exactly what is wrong.

He reckons that we will be able to get it fixed here in Tupiza and will not have to get some spares in from South Africa.

Well, let's hope he is right .....

We agree that we will be here on Monday morning again and start work then.

We also discuss the possibility that the gear box is so broken that we will not be able to go off-road in Bolivia at all.

We decide that we would then go for a 4 -5 day trip with Ariel instead.

We had been able to have a closer look at his vehicles and in comparison with the other tour operator their tyres still are good and also seem to be maintained better.

Should you want to see the wild and pretty side of the mountains and not drive yourself here his details:

Tours Grano de Oro, Av. Pedro Arraya N. 3, Tupiza, a bit north of the bus terminal, GPS: S 21° 26.758', W 065° 43.01'.

Then we head out of town to the spot that had been given to Susi, park beside the railway track and have a quiet afternoon.

It is a relatively sunny afternoon and we see the solar panels charge with up to 26 Ampere.

This is much more than we are used to.

Probably it has to do with the thin air up here.

Later on some storm clouds appear and the wind picks up quite a bit.

This must be the change in weather Ariel had mentioned.

He had said that it is much too warm for this time of the year.

During the night Ruedi wakes up and find new bites too ..... now we are sure that we have a new "pet" in the OKA .... most likely a flea ....  
 The problem is that we don't know how to fight it!  
 Susi's Mum used to soak all clothes in the bathtub and drown the "beast".

We will look into the problem in the morning .....

On Sunday we wake up to a sunny but a bit fresh morning (8.5° C).  
 As we intend to go for a hike we will put all clothes that could be "inhabited" into a bag and spray it with insect killer.  
 We will also spray the mattress, linen and pillows as well as the whole backsection just before we leave for the walk and hope that this will kill the little bugger.  
 We hope it is just one beast and not a female that already has had babies!!



We drive down along the rail tracks towards **El Angosto** and the **Tunel Las Ventanas**.  
 Here the river, train and road share a very small opening in the mountains.



As the track is in even poorer condition the train track is partially used instead.  
 But at one stage we just have to give up as the OKA is too heavy to use the already weak train bridges .



The train tracks are in pretty poor condition.  
 Apparently the passenger train to Villazon until recently used to run on them but rain washed some parts of the track away ..... but they are fixing it .....



The harvesting of the corn is done by hand.  
 The dry corn cobs are then placed in a metal mesh drum and turned to separate the kernels from the middle part.



We also come past some men that are cutting cane.  
 It is used to build roofs that are then covered with mud.  
 The bricks are made from "adobe", a mixture of mud and grass that is dried in the sun.  
 To prevent the walls of being washed away by the rain they are covered with rock, cacti leaves, plastic foil .....



Then we head to the **Cañon del Inca**.



Susi also find some flowers ....



The "rocks" are mud layers that have been lifted a long time ago and are now slowly eroding away generating interesting formations.



Guess how this formation is called ..... **Valle de los Machos** ..... valley of the machos ....



On the way back we stop at the **Puerta del Diablo** (The devil's door).

Interesting how nature works and leaves only some stone structures standing while the rest is turn to rubble .....

Then we had back to our night-spot behind the workshop as we don't know if on Monday morning they will start the blockades again.

We fiddle around with the floor heating and after two unsuccessful tries with the NitroDiesel we find that if we add 10% gasoline to the diesel the heater burns all fuel and works nicely.

Ok, we will try the solution in a bit more altitude and see how we go.

On Monday morning there is no blockade ..... there is a 48-hour moratorium where they discuss terms to end the strike.

Let's hope that they manage .....

We head down to the workshop just before 8 AM and find Ariel already waiting for us.

Soon after Jorge arrives and he and Ruedi get busy.



Luckily the OKA is so high making work under it as comfortable as possible.

But don't look at the "security" ..... everybody just has to make sure that the arms and legs are far away from the transfer case when it is moved around ....



A few hours later the box is out and it gets interesting.



The box is moved to the concrete patch.

Then Jorge painstakingly cleans the box, himself and Ruedi of any sand.

We are surprised to find such careful working practices in Bolivia .....



They find that the bearing for the high/low shaft selector had collapsed and some of the balls of the ball bearing had started destroying the gearing.

The reason for the collapse is the screw in the lever plate that had play in the thread.

This must have given a huge force to the bearing until it collapsed.



The marks on the tooth wheels are very visible but do not look severe.

But we are worried that the main bearings may have been damaged.

So we will ask BAE in South Africa to send us a new box.

What we also find is that the gear box had already been fixed previously ..... one screw was an after-market screw and also there were two different colours of sealant visible on the box.

So not only with the axles but also with the gear box we had not received new material from BAE but poorly refurbished one.

This is a bit hard to swallow as we had given them our gear box as a favour so they could analyse it and see how wear-and-tear had worked on it.

But what can we do .....



Happily we get all spare parts required in Tupiza.

Carefully Jorge reassembles the gear box and we lift it with our "secure" gear into position.

Jorge is quite happy with his "wiper", as they call the "apprentice" Ruedi.  
From now on we have another repair that we can do on our own.

On Tuesday morning we have to get up early as Jorge will come early to finish the job before he heads out on a 5-day trip to Uyuni.  
Soon Jorge sits in the OKA and tests the change to 4WD lows .... and it works beautifully!  
Great!

We head up to the Canon del Inca and play around a bit with 4WD high and lows.  
All works fine and we are happy with the repairs.

During the day we get ready with shopping, pre-cooking and sending a large email to BAE in South Africa with a description of the damage and pictures of all.

In the afternoon we leave Tupiza.

As the discussion between the striking people and the government are still ongoing and the problem is not yet solved we want to be out of town .....

Again we have to pay toll and registration.

Susi learns that one has to pay from one town to the other one, no matter how one gets there.

So we have to pay Tupiza to Uyuni even though we will travel it the long way round.

And again we have 60 days time to do it ..... shame the visa is only valid 30 days .....

Right after the town is the **Quebrada de Papala**.

As it is very pretty we decide to park here and have a closer look tomorrow morning ..... hopefully with sunshine .....

As the sun sets the road gets really busy with tour operators coming into Tupiza.

Also a few trucks with ore come past.

Even during the night Ruedi wakes up a few times because he hears vehicles ..... and wants to be sure that they don't stop for an unwanted visit .....

On Wednesday morning, May 22, before it really gets daylight the tour operators already start rolling past.

We guess that at the time where we leave the spot some 10 - 15 Toyotas with up to 6 people in them (driver, cook and 4 passengers) have driven past.



The sun does not really make it through the thin layer of clouds so we leave without any photos of the pretty Quebrada de Papala ..... we must leave something for next visit, don't we?



The track climbs and climbs and within 9,5 km we climb 700 meters to **El Sillar**.  
The views are splendid!



The track continues to climb further for another 2 km and makes another 200 m in height.  
Then it flattens a bit but continues to climb up to the abra (watershed) at 4 360 m above sea level.



We are already higher than most mountains around us and it is very pretty.



Nature has a hard stand up here.

Only where there is a bit of a wind shield some grass grows otherwise it is rocky with green moss cushions.

Even the cacti don't grow high up here .....



There are plenty of llamas up here.

They seem to find enough to eat ..

They all have coloured pompoms in their ears indicating to whom they belong.

Every so often we come past a lonely house.

We wonder what they eat besides Llama and sheep meat .... nothing grows here!

And how do they heat?

There are no trees up here either!

Then the road starts descending into a valley.

It is quite a descent down to 3 800 m above sea level but the dirt road is in excellent condition and seems to have been recently graded.



Down in the valley we come past the tiny village of **Nazareth**.  
Here they have small fields with corn.  
But it must be a meagre existence up here.



Then we come past the graders.  
So we were right .....



The road starts climbing again and soon we reach the next pass and 4 100 m above sea level.  
The road leads on top of the crest giving good views into the valley around us.  
There are also active mines every so often.



We also see a rabbit like animal ..... again the mammals book is sadly mist ....



We reach an altiplano.

Here we see some strange black "circles".  
Later on we find out that it is poo from the lamas.  
They congregate in small groups over night and leave their "mark".

Then the track divides the main track and a 4x4 track.  
Both at the end lead to the same place but on different routes around the mountain.  
We decide to take the 4x4 track that is shorter.  
It is well-driven and we guess that the tour operator also take this one.  
The track is also very well maintained.

It climbs to over 4 400 m above sea level.  
We reach a valley and follow the river downwards losing some 300 m in height.  
It is very pretty with the red soil and the yellow grass.

Then we come past a sign indicating a track to Viluyo in only 15 km ..... much shorter than the track that we have prepared.  
The track is a bit narrower but also in pretty good condition.  
It climbs again up to 4 400 m above sea level.



We head up to a view point and the views are great.  
The wind is pretty strong too with gust of up to 95 km/h!

After that we descend.  
There are only 5 km left to Viluyo and we have to get down from 4 400 to 3 900 m above sea level.



The track goes down into the dry river bed.  
The road has been washed away ....  
The track stays in the river bed.  
We pass **Viluyo**.  
It has a stunning setting with the washed out mountains and the two rivers.



The river we had been driving down reaches the main river.  
 On the other side of it we see a track heading uphill.  
 It looks pretty rough and not too inviting.  
 And also it does not match the track on the GPS.  
 So we decide to follow the marks in the river and drive up it as long as it more or less matches the GPS track.



The river bed is sandy but the water of the flowing river makes the sand wet so it is firm and easy to drive.  
 We come past a road but it does not look like it has been driven much lately so we continue on in the river bed.  
 The river banks show the various levels of material that is piled up and then washed away again over the years ....



We reach a narrow passage and just make it with the OKA.  
 Then the valley widens again and after some kilometres of river bed driving we finally reach the road again.  
 Here we settle for the night at 4 000 m above sea level.  
 Tomorrow all will be higher and we don't want to push our luck with losing our good night's sleep because we have climbed too quickly .....

Ah, yes, one more thing:  
 The 4WD lows are working beautifully.  
 Jorge has done a great job!



On Thursday morning it is rather cold.  
 The water in the river has frozen over night .....

But the sun shines and soon we are on our way again.  
 Again we climb into the mountains, 400 m in height over 4 km!  
 Then it flattens out a bit but continues climbing until we reach 4 750 m above sea level.



A mountain fox runs along the road and then crosses right in front of us.  
 There are plenty of vicuñas around but as in Argentina they are rather shy and run away.



We reach the mining area.  
 The mountains are covered with tracks and debris.



As we drive around a bend suddenly a very pretty panorama of snowy covered mountains opens up in front of us.  
 But it is also rather fresh up here with only 4.5° C .....



Here the vicuñas are less shy and finally we can get some nice photos of them ..... no, it is not made in Photoshop .....



Soon after we descend down to **San Pablo de Lipez**.  
It is a quite new mining town.



They are just setting up a football field and laying the grass.



After the town we leave the main track and take the 4x4 track up the valley.



We come past some interesting formations of wash-outs again ..... and a mountain called "Piedra Luz" (light stone) ....



In some sections it is fascinating to see the different layers and how the lower layers are washed out creating some very instable formations.



The track is well maintained and has some original signs.



Again and again we see pretty things along the way.  
The "organ pipes" remind us of Australia again .....

After **Kollpani** the track is not maintained anymore.  
It has some tilting sections and is no fun at all to be driven with the OKA. Larger trucks would not be able to pass due to some narrow washouts.  
The terrain becomes very rocky and we have to reduce the speed to 15 - 25 km/h for a long time.  
Then we leave the mountains and get out into the flat areas.  
The track still is very rocky and very tiring to drive.



The grass that grows here looks similar to the Spinifex in Australia.  
It also grows from the inside in circles.  
Here we also see lamas with very colourful decorations around their necks.



The major landmarks have their sign ..... **Cerro Lipez** ..... **Volcan Uturuncu** ..... all very well organised for the tourists ....



We reach the lagoon area.  
Some have names, some just numbers and some are not even listed in the GPS .....



We want to visit the Laguna Celeste.  
We see a sign "Desvio Laguna Celeste" (deviation to the light blue lagoon) and take it.  
The track is not on the GPS but this is not unusual as Bolivia has very poor paper and electronic maps.  
First the track is well driven so we drive and drive .... on rocks .....

Then we reach the point where the track hasn't been driven for a long time .....

Ahaaaaa!

The most driven track is usually the wrong one as everybody that goes in after a while comes back on the same track .....

so we turn around and head back.  
The correct desvio is only a few hundred meters later .....

and it is an interesting one too ....  
Some of it leads through lagoons .... or for us: around it .....

Some of it is tilting so we find a new way around it .....



And some of it is sooooooooft .....

and we get stuck .....

Luckily there are plenty of rocks around and only 30 minutes later we are afloat again.  
But it is almost dark and the temperature has already fallen close to 0°C .....

We head down to the "camping area" of and settle down for the night.

The **Laguna Celeste** is at 4 494 m above sea level and Ruedi has problems with sleeping.  
As soon as he falls asleep he wakes up feeling as if he is suffocating due to the body not adapting to the lack of oxygen in the air.  
While sleeping at this altitude the body should breathe faster, but it doesn't.  
Also the brain is working in overdrive mode .... always the same pictures and thoughts over and over again - unstoppable.



On Friday morning the lake is frozen.  
The ducks stand on the ice and wait for it to melt.  
The temperature has dropped to - 8.5° C over night and even with the 10% petrol added to the fuel our old Eberspaecher diesel heater doesn't work above 3 000 m.  
It looks as it would have a switch installed: up to 3 000 m it works fine but above 3 001 m it fails.  
But our new system of managing the warmth and the fresh air has worked: In the morning we still have 12° C in the camper.



But the windows are covered with ice inside .....

Today we don't use the inverter plate to warm the tea water but the good old hotplate we had bought in Africa, with its heating coil.  
It does not take long and the camper is cosily warm.  
Still .....

the floor is cold and we miss our floor heating dearly.



We leave Laguna Celeste and head back to the spot where we got stuck yesterday.  
We choose to lay a new track and drive over the grassy area.  
It is a good choice and we make it over the wet area without a problem.

The next challenge is to get up the hill where we had laid a new track yesterday.  
But without a problem the OKA makes it uphill.  
Had we had a 4WL-problem in this section we would have been in deep trouble.



Soon after we are back on the main track and head further south-west.



We come past the **Quebrada de los Fantochoes** an area covered in "sandwich" rocks.



As we already have used almost a tank of water we decide to take up some water at the next fresh water river. The ice has not yet fully melted .....



It is amazing where people build their housing in this cold and unfriendly environment ....



Then we reach the entry to the national park **Reserva Nacional de Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa**. Actually the Laguna Celeste was already part of the park, but the area is accessible without passing a ranger station. We drive down the valley and come past **Quetena Chico**. According to the ranger we should have mobile reception here. But our mobile phone does not react. Ruedi does not trust the phone we inherited from his sister Heidi and exchanges it with the old one we still have ..... and we have reception! But the Internet has a "technical problem" as we are told from the provider Entel. So it is not meant for us to contact civilization ..... so be it.

We pass **Quetena Grande** and a few small dwellings. There are many lamas and also sheep around in the area. The dirt track is not well maintained and has a lot of corrugation. The tour operators have laid many new tracks in parallel but they are already also heavily corrugated. A bit of grading would not harm .....



As we stop to engage the lockers before crossing a vado (crossing) we see a rabbit-like animal. Then the track leads uphill rather steeply to 4 731 m above sea level again.



We come past the **Laguna Hedionda** and **Salina Kollpa**. Then the track leads downhill towards the **Salar de Chalviri**. The salar (salt lake) is still wet and we have to make sure we stay on the main track. There are plenty of reminders of vehicles that got stuck .....



There are flamingos on the salar. Also we pass some salt mines .... hard job in this altitude and temperatures ....

We reach the track that comes from Uyuni and shortly after reach **Polques** and the **Termas de Chalviri**.

We decide to stay the night here as it only has an altitude of 4 410 m above sea level.

As it is already 5 PM we quickly get ready for a swim.

The water has some 40° C and is great.

One can pick warmer or cooler areas in the pool.

As we are enjoying the hot water we see a truck arriving from the south.

It looks rather familiar ..... could it be Joop and Adrie?

We wave and indicate them to come to the pool too.

As they get closer we realise that they are not Joop and Adrie .... but twice the same truck???

It is Jürgen and Ruth from Germany and they just come from Iquique (Chile) ..... and from seeing Joop and Adrie.

Small world .....

They get into the pool and we start chatting.

They are worried about the blockage that has been ongoing in Bolivia in the last few weeks.

They had heard of a tourist that had been stuck in La Paz for the last 4 weeks and when they finally had made it out of La Paz and to Oruro they had been sent back to La

Paz by the striking public servants.

We can only tell them that in Tupiza it had been peacefully and they had opened the roads over night.  
We agree that as long as we are out here in the puna we will not really be affected by the strike and road blockages.  
It could affect the fuel situations and that Uyuni is out of fuel but we will see if we are there.

A group of empty tour operator vehicles comes from Chile and after a stop continues on towards Uyuni.  
We wonder if they have finished their tour in San Pedro de Atacama and dropped passengers there?

Then it is time to leave the hot pool. Jürgen and Ruth decide that they will continue on for a bit more so we say goodbye.

We get out of the hot water and as quickly as possible we get over to the OKA.  
It is only 8° C by now and the wind is blowing .....

The thermal waters really are relaxing and we are in bed soon.

Soon we realise that we have made a mistake by taking the wet bathers and towels into the camper.  
There is so much humidity inside that water starts condensing in every possible cold spot .... one of them being the frame of the roof hatch above the bed.  
But we don't want to open the windows too often as the warm air would escape too!  
So we have to wipe the drops off a few times during the night.

Tomorrow we will chuck all the wet stuff into the driver's cabin ..... even though it will freeze .....

During the night Ruedi wakes up again and cannot go back to sleep.  
So by 1 AM he decides to go for another swim in the relaxing hot waters of the pool.  
Amazingly he is not the only one!  
4 people are already in it.

Later on it starts raining a bit, luckily not much.

Amazingly even though Ruedi has only slept very little for 3 nights in a row now he doesn't feel tired during the day.

On Saturday morning the tour operators arrive early.  
By 7 AM there are at least 10 vehicles parked around us and the hot pool is full of tourists.  
It is interesting to see that the drivers of the vehicles go away from the pool and have a bath in some little holes.

The sun just about makes it through the clouds and soon the solar starts charging again.  
We use the electric hotplate to warm the OKA.  
By the time we are ready to leave the majority of the tour operators have already left in direction of the Lagunas Blanca and Verde.



As we come past the **Rocas de Dali** the first tour operators are already coming back from the lagunas.



We cross the pass and suddenly find ourselves on snow covered roads.  
These are the left overs of last week's snowfall that had closed off the entire area and the border crossing into Chile for a few days.  
It is obvious that the tour operators don't like the snow.  
There are tracks all over the place.

As we don't fancy putting the snow chains on we also try to find the best way through which sometimes takes a bit more effort .... but we make it.



We visit the **Laguna Blanca** and stay at the **Laguna Verde** for a while.  
The Laguna Verde used to change the colour from blue to green during the morning due to some photosynthesis happening.  
But these days it just stays green.



In the afternoon clouds start moving in and we decide to head back and go for a swim in the hot springs again.  
A lot of the snow has melted away during the day but it still looks pretty wintry .... like Switzerland in spring .....



As we sit in the hot water we can choose what weather we want to see:  
The sun or the snow falling on the surrounding mountains .... we just hope that not too much snow falls in the direction we want to drive tomorrow morning ....



On Sunday morning we leave at 6 AM.  
The full moon is still shining on the snow and it feels even colder .....

We reach the geysers of **Sol de mañana** just as the sun reaches them.  
To our delight the majority of the tour operators have already left .....

We are a bit disappointed about the geysers.  
We had expected water squirts into the sky and not just steam .....



We like the bubbling mud .....  
 Mind you, every so often a bit "more" comes up and if you don't watch out you get your share of it!  
 And it is hot!



Still, it is very cold.  
 No wonder, we are at almost 4 900 m above sea level!



We see that the road to the border crossing into Chile goes over the 5 000 m above sea level mark.  
 Of course we have to drive there so we can say that we have taken the OKA there .....  
 Yes, it made 5 000 without missing a beat - a bit sluggish, that's normal, but it made it!  
 We wonder how non-electronically controlled vehicles of our class would make it.  
 Our Cummins motor burns absolutely clean if driven in the turbo range between 1 400 and 2 500 revs.  
 Below 1 400 revs there is quite a bit of black smoke leaving the exhaust.  
 Up here the locals, mainly tour operators, only drive petrol driven cars.  
 The only diesel driven vehicles are the heavy trucks.



There is not much up there ..... just a few mines ..... nothing grows .....



Next stop is the **Laguna Colorada** (Colourful Lagoon).



It sure has the correct name!



Susi takes an hour to sit by the waters and have a closer look at the flamingos.  
 One could sit for ever in the warming sun and watch the birds take off and land .....



There are also other birds at the lagoon.

After lunch we find that Jürgen and Ruth have placed their truck right beside the OKA.  
 We wonder why they are here because they had left one day ahead of us .....  
 We see them down at the water but it is too far away to talk.  
 We expect that they will be heading in the same direction as we are so we continue on travelling north.



We leave the park and head north towards the Arbol de Piedra (rock tree).  
The track is so badly corrugated that we have to reduce the speed to below 30 km/h.  
Every bit of space has been used by tour operators to create new track that (hopefully) are less corrugated.  
Now we think we know what Jürgen and Ruth were doing:  
they may have turned around and were on the way back towards the good mining road that leads from the Laguna Colorada to Uyuni .



We are very lucky at the **Arbol de Piedra** as there are no tour operators there.  
But Susi has to move quickly to take her pictures ..... at least 4 tour operators are approaching!  
And then the tourists are all over the Arbol de Piedra ..... and we leave .....  
For some 50 km or so we drive on badly corrugated tracks in 4WD highs ..... not very funny .....  
The track leads over 2 passes.  
Then we reach the Laguna Ramaditas and Laguna Honda.  
Then suddenly the 4WD lows fall out of gear again.  
Not again!!!  
Carefully we continue on driving, always afraid of losing the gears again.



It spoils the nice view of the **Laguna Chiar Khota** and the volcano a bit .....  
We reach the **Laguna Hedionda** where we stay for the night.  
As we are getting short on Diesel and we have to change our planned route.  
We decide to take the shortest route to San Cristobal to refuel.  
The diesel consumption in high altitude is pretty stiff, almost as bad as in deep sand .....  
But at least now we know that we will have a save range of 900 km under any conditions using our 300 l of diesel.  
Under optimal condition (bitumen, flat, 70 km/h) we can make 1600 km.

On Monday morning we deviate from the main route and head more or less straight towards San Cristobal.  
Soon we reach a crossing that does not look too good for our weight and without the 4WD lows.  
In addition we are off the main route and should we get stuck we would most probably be alone with our problem.  
So we decide to get back to the main track past the **Laguna Canapa** and some rocky sections Ariel had said that it might be tricky for us.  
Luckily we are early and the tour operators have not yet reached this section.  
We make it to the main road without problems.



We stop for a photo of the **Volcano Ollagüe**.  
It is an active volcano but currently only a bit of smoke can be seen.  
Then we turn and head towards San Cristobal.  
The road is a good dirt road and after all this bad and corrugated roads it is a real pleasure to drive it.



We come past the **Valle de las Piedras** and shortly after reach **San Cristobal**, where we refuel.



The area around San Cristobal is a mining area, not very nice but very active.  
As the gear box has behaved well in 2WD we decide that we can continue with our trip to the Salar de Uyuni. It will be all flat terrain - more or less.  
Shortly after the small mining town of Rio Grande we slow down because of a motor bike ..... and we hear this steady "clonk clonk clonk" from below the OKA .....



Ruedi gets underneath the OKA to find out where the noise comes from ..... it is coming from the transfer case .....  
Ok, this is the end of it, we will have to try to make it to Uyuni and hopefully the box will last that long .....

We park the OKA at the side of the road for the night.  
On Tuesday morning, May 28, we limp into **Rio Grande** and try to find a mechanical work shop.  
As it is a supply town for a particular mine all is owned by the mine.  
And they don't even have a trolley jack like we used in Tupiza .....  
So this will not work.  
Next we try to find a truck that can bring us the 100 km to Uyuni - on the truck or by towing.  
Finally we find one but he wants 1 000 US\$ for the transport.  
Come-on!  
That's a bloody rip off.

At the end we give up and decide to drive there on our own ..... a bit risky ..... slowly ..... with 20 - 30 km/h ..... and we make it to **Uyuni**.

And this is the end of this journal.

No liability for timeliness, integrity and correctness of this document is accepted.  
Last updated: Wednesday, 25.09.2013 2:50 PM