

Episode 113: Beautiful Bolivia

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about returning to Bolivia 13 years after their last visit. In particular, they discuss the country's amazing natural beauty, including the world-famous Salar de Uyuni salt flats.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Bolivia, and this is the first time we've been in Bolivia for 13 years. So it's been a long time coming.

Wendy: Yeah, the first time we went to La Paz and a couple of other places in the northern part of the country. Uhh, we were planning to explore all of Bolivia but we ended up accepting jobs and leaving South America a bit early. So we've finally come back to finish Bolivia and see all the things that we missed the first time.

Nick: Yeah, it's one of the only countries - maybe the only country - where we really have felt like we didn't get to see what we wanted to see and we always knew that we wanted to come back. Umm, it's just taken a very long time, but here we are.

Wendy: Yep, here we are!

Nick: And so this time we actually came from the other direction. So last time, as you mentioned, we were in the north because we'd come from Peru. This time, we had come from Paraguay via Argentina. So we came into the south. And so that was good to deliver us into a place in Bolivia that we'd never been before. And I think, you know, when we talk about how we had to cut our trip short previously, I think the one thing that we really missed or thought that we really missed was what's called the Salar de Uyuni. So it's a giant salt flat and it's the largest salt flat in the world. And that probably actually doesn't sound that interesting by itself, just to see a huge field of salt, essentially. Umm, but it is the most famous site in Bolivia and we didn't get the chance to see it last time, and so that was going to be a big priority for us this time.

Wendy: Yep, and so we have now seen it and, uhh, I can say that it is the most famous site in Bolivia for a good reason. It really is spectacular.

Nick: Yeah, and South America is just full of these incredible natural sites. And I feel like other continents just don't have them, umm, to the same degree, and this is really one of them. The thing about the *salar* is that it's not just this one salt flat.

What you do is you go on a trip for three or four days, and you see all kinds of natural phenomena¹, and it's really incredible.

Wendy: Yeah, uhh, so people usually talk about the, you know, the salt flat trip or the Salar de Uyuni trip. Umm, but most people ... I mean, you can do just a day trip where you only go to the *salar*, but most people end up doing a three-day, or what we did was a four-day trip, where the *salar* is really just one part of it, and you see lots of other things along the way too. And those were just as spectacular, if not more so, than the salt flat.

Nick: Yeah, I think what makes the trip, as a whole, so wonderful, is that you see such a variety of different natural sites. And you almost never really know what the next one's going to be. But, umm, it's quite amazing to see this variety within that landscape. So it might be a bit hard to describe some of these things, but basically you're on what's called the *altiplano*, which is the high plain of Bolivia. And so the *altiplano* is over 4000 metres above sea level. And so you spend that entire time, essentially, at that level or higher. We got up to 5000 metres. The *salar* itself is about 3650, umm, but we spent two nights sleeping above 4000 metres. So firstly that's a bit of a shock because you have to deal with some altitude sickness.

Wendy: Yeah, umm, we didn't have it too badly, but we definitely felt the effects of the altitude. We both got headaches. Uhh, I found it kind of difficult to breathe. And so, umm, yeah, we didn't sleep all that well, at least the first night. But it could have been much worse. Umm, you know, sometimes if ... uhh, altitude sickness can even be life threatening if you don't get treatment. Umm, but the company that we were going with, they kept oxygen tanks, uhh, in our jeep, so we knew that if we did have problems with the altitude, uhh, and we really needed help, then we would be OK. But we didn't need the oxygen, we just, uhh, drank coca tea, uhh, which is, uhh, made from coca leaves. It's also the same plant that cocaine is made from. But when you, uhh, chew² the leaves or put them into a tea, it's not a hallucinogenic effect, it's not any kind of drug like that. It just helps to oxygenate the blood, and to bring the blood ... the oxygen into your blood more easily, and that helps with the altitude.

Nick: Right. So we began in a city called Tupiza in the south, and that's at about 2800 metres, but very quickly we were up on the *altiplano* at 4000 metres. Umm, when you do this four-day trip, you have this extra day, which is that first day. You can also do the three-day trip from the other side and then you miss out on that first day, although I think probably, to be fair, that was the least interesting day with the most amount of driving in the jeep.

Wendy: It was a lot of driving that first day. Umm, the second day was my favourite, I think, even though that means that the *salar* was not included in my favourite day. The *salar* was wonderful too, but I really loved, uhh, some of the

¹ phenomena (irregular plural of phenomenon): extraordinary or impressive things

² chew: crush with your teeth, bite (food) before swallowing

other sites that we saw like the Green Lagoon and the Red Lagoon. Umm, we saw lots and lots of flamingoes, we saw incredible desert scenery and just really interesting rock formations and geysers³ and hot springs where we got to swim at, as you said, more than 4000 metres above the sea. Really cold conditions, but then you jump into the warm water and that was a lot of fun. Uhh, so, yeah, the first day, we saw, uhh, a ghost town⁴, so an old colonial city that, umm, at one time was very wealthy because of mining, uhh, but then, uhh, well, basically, people started dying and they didn't know why all the townspeople were dying, so they moved the town, uhh, to several kilometres away. And apparently people stopped dying. So maybe it was something in the water, something about the environment, but for whatever reason, uhh, it wasn't a safe place to live anymore, so now you have just this abandoned city, uhh, with all of these old buildings. So that was probably the most interesting thing for me that we saw on the first day of the trip.

Nick: Yep, yeah, for me too. Umm, and so as you mentioned, on the second day and the third day, we saw a lot of these lagoons or these small lakes. And two of them in particular that you mentioned were coloured, and so that was an amazing view to see the colour of the water against the blue sky and against the mountains. Umm, you know, the whole scenery was just quite amazing. It's sort of semi-desert, umm, there aren't that many people who live there. There are some small villages. Umm, the people who live there tend to grow quinoa, which is the only thing that you grow there, umm, or they tend to farm llamas, which are the, uhh, I guess the emblematic animal of the *altiplano* and of the Andean countries in South America, and the only large animal, umm, native to South America, or native to South America at the point when Europeans arrived. Umm, and so it was nice to see and play with some llamas for a while as well.

Wendy: Yeah, we made a short stop at a llama farm, and that was a nice photo opportunity, 'cause we got to get close to the llamas and take photos with them. And they're very cute and cuddly and furry. Umm, yeah, and we ate some quinoa too, uhh, which as you said, is a local crop⁵ that's grown here, umm, which has become popular recently in, you know, in the western world, in Europe, where we live. Uhh, but it has been grown in Bolivia for a very long time and it's only recently become discovered by other parts of the world. So it's actually, umm, a very profitable crop right now for the Bolivians on the *altiplano* to grow, because they get really high prices for it in Europe and in western countries.

Nick: Yeah, I think we were told that it costs ten times as much as rice, umm, and also that Bolivia grows about half of the quinoa in the whole world. Umm, so yeah, it's definitely a profitable crop for them. And so on the last night, or the third night, we slept in a salt hotel, which is a hotel made out of salt. Umm, and then finally late that afternoon and also for all of the next day, we reached the Salar de Uyuni

³ geysers: underground hot springs that send water or steam into the air

⁴ ghost town: a town that still has buildings but no longer has any inhabitants

⁵ crop: fruit, vegetable, grain etc that is grown in the ground

itself. And it's hard to describe but it's just this enormous flat and all you see is the white of the salt and then the blue of the sky and that's basically it.

Wendy: Yeah, so at one time it was a body of water⁶. Uhh, I guess you would call it a sea, an inland sea. Umm, and so, yeah, just imagine, you know, this huge expanse that at one time was all covered in water and now all of that water has gone and, because it was a salt water sea, what's left behind is the salt. And so it's just a huge expanse of nothing, but at the same time, yeah, the contrast of the colours, the white and the blue, is really striking. And, uhh, it's an incredible site.

Nick: Yeah, and you can't even imagine how big it is even when you're in it. So it's about ten-and-a-half thousand square kilometres. And it's just huge. You just see this nothingness as far as the eye can see⁷. Umm, and so it's something that you wouldn't think would be so interesting. Umm, but somehow it is.

Wendy: Yeah. And we also got to see sunrise from this island or what would have been an island back when it was a sea. Umm, right in the middle of the *salar*, and it's covered with about 5000 cacti⁸, uhh, lots of cactus growing on this island. And so it was an incredible vantage point to watch the sunrise from there, and you have a 360-degree view of the *salar*. Everywhere you look around you, you're just surrounded by this salt. Umm, yeah.

Nick: Yeah, so we don't really do bucket lists⁹, but if we did do one, this would definitely be on it. It's something we've known about for a very, very long time and we've wanted to do (it), and finally we did it, and it was wonderful.

Wendy: Yep, definitely lived up to our expectations¹⁰.

⁶ body of water: generic term for any water feature (e.g. lake, sea, river)

⁷ as far as the eye can see (expression, always 'the eye'): all the way to the horizon

⁸ cacti (irregular plural of cactus): spiky plants that grow in dry conditions

⁹ bucket lists: lists of places people want to visit or things they want to experience before they 'kick the bucket' (die)

¹⁰ lived up to our expectations (expression): was as good as we hoped it would be

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Nick and Wendy return to Bolivia for a second visit?
2. What did Nick like the most about the trip?
3. Where did they watch sunrise from over the Salar de Uyuni?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Lake Baikal is the biggest _____ in Russia. Actually, it's the seventh largest lake in the world.
2. It used to be a prosperous town but ever since the copper mine closed, people started moving away and now it's practically a _____.
3. They both had visiting Macchu Pichu on their respective _____, so they decided to go together. They had an amazing trip!
4. We went to the pyramids in Egypt. Even though we had seen lots of pictures and knew what we were going to see, the size of them was so imposing and they definitely _____.
5. If you're a farmer in the U.S. state of Idaho, the chances are that the _____ you grow is potatoes.
6. After she had surgery on her jaw, it was difficult for her to _____ food for a while, so she ate a lot of soups and drank a lot of smoothies and fruit juices.
7. Yellowstone National Park in Montana is one of the most famous parks in the United States. In particular, it's known for its _____.
8. If you go deep into the Sahara Desert from Morocco, there's nothing but sand dunes _____ in every direction.
9. People who believe in aliens and extraterrestrial life point to many unexplained _____ that have occurred over the years.
10. One of the stereotypes about Mexico is that the whole country is hot and dry scrubland with _____ everywhere.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to Bolivia? If so, what did you think of it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Of these three natural sites Nick and Wendy described - the salt flats, the coloured lakes and the hot springs - which would you like to visit the most, and why?
3. Have you ever eaten quinoa and if so, do you like it?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because the first time they went, they cut their trip short to accept jobs, so they didn't get to see everything they wanted to see in Bolivia.
2. He liked the variety of different natural sites - e.g. the salt flat, the lagoons, the mountains etc.
3. They watched it from an 'island' in the middle of the *salar* with lots of cacti.

Exercises

1. body of water
2. ghost town
3. bucket lists
4. lived up to our expectations
5. crop
6. chew
7. geysers
8. as far as the eye can see
9. phenomena
10. cacti