

# Kachi Lodge: camp in style on the Bolivian salt flats

A chic new lodge has opened on the Salar de Uyuni



Kachi Lodge, Salar de Uyuni

I am bumping along in the back seat of a 4x4 across the Bolivian salt flats, trying to remember to follow my orders and keep my eyes closed for the surprise ahead. I'm starting to feel peaceful when we stop. Now for the tricky bit. "OK," says my guide, Vivel, "I'll open the door, but keep your eyes shut." She helps me to clamber out then leads me slowly by the arm. There's a sound of sloshing, the drag of water against the wellies that I've been given for the occasion.

"Now I leave you," Vivel says. "Keep walking, count to 50, then open your eyes." I do as she says, although I feel I will fall. It's a strange sensation, like being in some interactive art installation. I reach 50, then stop and look, ready for the big reveal. Shimmering to the horizon on each side, the salt flat is beneath a couple of inches of silver-blue water, so calm and level that it acts as a mirror, creating an immaculate reflection of the heavens, the sinking sun, wisps of cloud and the crocodile forms of low, dark rocks far away. It's heart-stoppingly beautiful.



The central dining dome at Kachi Lodge

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Covering more than 4,000 square miles, the Salar de Uyuni is one of the most astonishing sights the world has to show us, but they are remote, difficult to access, and until now there has been nowhere truly luxurious from which to experience them. That changed last month with the opening of Kachi Lodge, the first permanent luxury accommodation on the flats, with high-spec white dome tents, food by Bolivia's finest chefs and excursions to explore this gobsmacking area in style. I was the first British journalist to stay.

As the sun sets I regroup with the five other guests, and the guides and drivers pull out tables and chairs, a tin of freshly cooked tacos and bottles of sparkling Bolivian white wine, and we toast the sky's (and ground's) explosion into streaking orange and pink.

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From January to April rainwater covers the expanse, and driving across it is like flying, clouds beneath the wheels. I'm actually here later, for the start of the dry season, when the flats become as bare as bone, desiccated white to the retina's farthest reach. Yet the clever guides have located one last patch of water so that we can experience the best of both seasons.

Whenever you come, Kachi is absolutely where you will want to stay, farther out into the flats and with superior style and level of service to anything Bolivia has had before.

When I last visited, seven years ago, accommodation was uniformly chilly and unsophisticated, limited to hostels at the fringes and the salt hotels built from blocks cut from the Salar near Uyuni, the dust-blown gateway town to the east. One was so draughty that travellers had stuffed the gaps round the windows with used teabags. Reaching the flats from La Paz entailed a bone-rattling, 15-hour bus ride. But a lot has changed. I make a stop at the smartest salt hotel, the Palacio de Sal, fresh from a hefty renovation and rather lush, with a fab new spa (although bedrooms aren't quite up to par). The highway has been so improved that the same journey now takes seven hours, while a new domestic airport at Uyuni means that you can fly there from La Paz in 45 minutes.

During the rainy season Kachi's guests will arrive by hovercraft, but we drive an hour north from Uyuni in smart 4x4s. Distance and size are so distorted by the great white nothingness that I keep asking whether the round white lumps on the horizon are Kachi's dome tents, to be informed that no, those are the snow-capped peaks of the Andes, hundreds of miles away.

There's no mistaking the camp when we pull closer. With the towering red Tunupa volcano (5,400m) as a backdrop, it resembles a lunar space station, with six Nasa- designed geodesic bedroom tents connected by wooden boardwalks and a huge semi-transparent dining dome. Just like in space, oxygen is limited — we're at 3,600m and out of breath from the slightest exertion.



The interiors, though, are homely and cool, with wood-burners, designer lighting, proper bathrooms built in Amazonian hardwood with hot (well, warm) solar-powered showers, and heaps of gorgeous Bolivian textiles, all stripes and pompoms, to lend some funky Latin American zest.

There's witty artwork too, by Gaston Ugalde, Bolivia's best-known contemporary artist, nicknamed the "Andean Warhol" to reflect the pop-art aesthetic of some of his paintings and that he worked at the Factory in New York in his youth. Kachi is a gallery for his work — everything's for sale; you can even hire him to take your holiday snaps. I rather fancy the life-size fabric llamas from the sundeck, several cactus sculptures and the photograph above my bed of llamas on the flats dressed in bundles of balloons.

After lunch I sip coca tea for the altitude, while another guest has a go on an oxygen cylinder, rolled to the table as though it's a dessert trolley. Then we set out in the cars to hike up the nearest island: this one, of more than 30 protruding from the flats, is also named Kachi — “salt” in the local Quechua language. A craggy path scented with desert varieties of mint and thyme leads up between giant cacti, some centuries old, and sharp, pocked rocks formed from coral 2.5 million years old, before the seabed was lifted by plate movements to create the prehistoric lake that became the Salar. We admire our alien space camp from above, then head back on foot across the salt's popadum-like crunchy yellow crust.



A view of the resort from Kachi island

Having the 4x4s means that we can pack the highlights of the Salar into three days (bikes and dune buggies are coming soon, as well as stand-up paddleboards for the wet season). We also beat the midday crowds to cactus-covered Isla Incahuasi, the most-visited island, because we're staying closer than anyone else. I sit alone at the flat ceremonial stone where llamas are sacrificed annually by the local community to give thanks to Pachamama before seeds are sown for the first rains. One cactus is a whopping 10m tall.

Later Vivel takes me to see the Chullpas, 4,000-year-old mummies that are entombed above a winding desert canyon at Alcaya. A hummingbird zips past my ear as we climb ancient deserted steps to see dozens of skeletons, hunched into cracks beneath sacred cliffs. They are incredibly well preserved, with patches of skin, hair and cloth intact. In pre-Hispanic times bodies were curled into the foetal position in woven baskets resembling the amniotic sack, for rebirth into their next life. I'm astonished to find this pretty much world-class archaeological site almost totally unprotected, save for two watchmen in the village, but Bolivia does not yet have the resources to conserve such wonders properly.

One early morning we visit some very smallscale llama and quinoa farmers around Tunupa's haunches near the tiny village of Jirira, where the camp staff live and from whose community Kachi has leased land. The llamas have been held back for us in their pen and are so desperate to graze that once released they scamper off into the scrub like young maids to a ball, all elegant necks and eyelashes. Apparently the salty desert mint on which they feast gives their meat a delicious flavour, but who could eat such cuties?

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The company behind the camp, Amazing Escapes, usually specialises in bespoke travel experiences for high-spending clients, and initially created Kachi as a one-off for a single group's holiday four years ago. Now it is its first permanent tourism project, with two more camps planned — in the spectacular Sajama mountain region to the northwest and among the coloured lagoons of the Eduardo Avaroa national park to the south, so travellers could connect the dots, perhaps linking in Lake Titicaca and Chile's Atacama Desert.

While Kachi proves that high-end travel has finally arrived in Bolivia, it is telling that even in La Paz only a few hip coffee shops and restaurants have recently appeared, and there isn't yet a real blow-you-away boutique hotel. The one I stay in at either end of my Salar trip — Atix, in wealthy Zona Sur — has a cool top-floor bar with glass walls and a pool, where I swim looking out on this most geologically bonkers of cities, then breakfast in a chic dining room full of Gaston art. Yet the bedrooms are rather corporate.

A new contender is Altu Qala, scheduled to open next month and of which I get a sneak preview tour. Launched by Berlin-based Boris Alarcon, one of the Bolivian diaspora returning during this auspicious period to help to create the new face of the city, it joins his other downtown ventures — the moody grey Writer's Coffee and HB Bronze, a lively coffeehouse sharing the hotel's neoclassical building — as some of the first properly stylish venues. With its mid-century designer lighting, antique brass and reclaimed wood, not to mention Bolivia's first singani bar on the roof, it's going to be lush. Gustu, the inventive Ali Baba vegan restaurant, and Gaston's Gallery Salar are also not to be missed.



As Alarcon says: “We are all part of a big new product, and that product is La Paz.” It’s Bolivia, too, and no doubt by the time you go everything will have changed again, and there’ll be plenty more to get excited about.

### **Need to know**

Gemma Bowes was a guest of Kachi Lodge and the travel company Black Tomato.

A two-night stay at Kachi ([kachilodge.com](http://kachilodge.com)) costs from \$1,980pp (£1,568) full board, including guides, transfers and excursions.

Black Tomato ([blacktomato.com](http://blacktomato.com)) has a week’s package to Bolivia, including three nights at Kachi and three in La Paz and internal flights to Uyuni but not international flights, from £5,400pp.

B&B doubles at the Atix hotel in La Paz cost from £98 per night ([atixhotel.com](http://atixhotel.com))