

BREATHLESS ALTIPLANO



Lupinus oreophilus



Oreocereus varicolor



Exodecodus flavus

As the north shuts up shop, the south awakens. One of our favourite countries is Chile, a long country with an extraordinary flora, where you can travel from desert to temperate rainforest without leaving its borders. Bound entirely by the Andes to the east it has breathtaking landscapes to go with all of this. And where better to begin than as far north as you can, in the high altiplano wedged between Bolivia and Peru. The last time I visited I enjoyed a wonderful morning on the coast at Arica, surrounded by thousands of gulls, terns and other shore birds whirring about. But sea level was deceptively comfortable and my brain received a shock later in the day. To reach the wonders of Lauca national park one has to drive inland, first through the Atacama Desert following oases where emerald cultivation is hemmed in by contrasting dry, barren hills in a garish extreme juxtaposing. The road climbs.

It seems impossible for anything to grow naturally here, but a higher and cooler and plants start to appear. The neon trumpets of *Exodeconus flavus* are an example, glowing by the roadside near *Browningia candelaris* cacti, whose bizarre architectural forms march forlornly across the mountain desert. This is the puna and things become increasingly scrubby and cacti-filled



Mutisia acuminata



Volcan Parinacota



Azorella compacta



Caiophora rosulata



as one gains height. Enough moisture spills over from the east to nurture plant life here. It comes at a price. The first morning I awoke up here (having endured a restless night), was cold and clear. Breakfast was lukewarm, coffee cooled too fast, eggs arrived with no forks, time to use some rudimentary Spanish, service was charmingly, Andeanly leisurely, but breathing was faster than usual. Fortunately, in Arica I'd purchased two big french presses so at least the essential double coffee problem was solved.

I was at 3500-metres, staying in Putre, the only town between Arica and Bolivia with accommodation. Alpacas trotted down the street followed by Aymara ladies in wide skirts and bowler hats. Definitely in the Andes. The first sunlight warmed the mountains. And what mountains they are here, but too high for day one, so to acclimatise a little we drove out across the puna, finding the fireworks of *Mutisia acuminata*, lots of woolly *Oreocereus varicolor* and stands of the handsome *Lupinus oreophilus*.

Next day Parque Nacional Lauca awaited, a stunning place, the centrepiece of which is a pair of near perfect volcanic cones. On one visit Pierre urged me to get us into the park before dawn; coffee helped again here and I'm so glad we went, the



Alpacas with Volcan Parinacota



Werneria aretoides

waters were mirror-calm and Volcan Parínacota looked magnificent, the only ripples produced by fighting coots in the lake. At a giddy 4600-metres, everything looked wonderful; time to chew more coca sweets to hold back that headache.

The lake edge is fringed by bofedale bogs, which may look soft, but are actually filled with tough, spikey sedges and spreading mats of *Werneria aretoides*. Somehow both domestic alpacas and vicunas (their graceful wild relative) manage to eat these plants. Best not to get bitten by an alpaca. Shady nooks in the rocks around some of the many languid pools have the bizarre scarlet pouches of *Caiothora rosulata*, a plant that looks benign, but is bristling with pain-inflicting urticating hairs.

However, the star of the show up here is *Azorella compacta*, an incredible cushion plant that forms immense, vivid green domes, some of them centuries-old. They pepper the rocky slopes, often with a stunning snow-capped cone or two in the background. The issue here is reaching some the best plants where climbing up a slope feels like walking with lead boots on. Cute, thick-furred mountain viscachas laugh at our pathetic progress. One even tried to raid our picnic supplies once, correctly realising that breathless humans from out of town, posed no threat to it becoming a woolly hat.

And then there is getting back down again. I've had more than my share of Chilean car adventures. But having a plane to catch (in the days we did such things) adds a little urgency when either: a) one of the cars fails to start that morning and six people have to squeeze into one car with luggage and pisco sour bottles or b) Chilean highways decides to shut the road and then the man responsible for stop/go falls asleep (luckily I woke him in time) or c) you are stopped by police for performing a u-turn trying to reach a petrol station and given a time-consuming lecture as to how terrible a crime that nobody in the whole world ever commits.

He needs to come to Turkey with a very large book of traffic fines!



Browningia candelaris