

RAINBOW ROADS TO ATACAMA DESERT



Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.



Atacama Desert, sandwiched between the Andes mountain range and the Chilean Coast Range, stretches 1,600km over the northern third of Chile. Occupying an area of 105,000 sq km, it is one of the driest places on earth. The greatly varying landscapes, ranging from bizarre moonlike rock formations to palette-like salt lakes and high altitude geyser fields, attract tourists from all over the world and the pre-Columbian adobe village of San Pedro de Atacama is undoubtedly one of the most convenient gateways to the enchanting world of Atacama.

My brother, Mee Sin, and I, together with our wives, hired a car and drove from Salta in north Argentina to San Pedro de Atacama, a distance of 633km. After spending 3 days exploring Atacama

Desert, we chose to drive back to Argentina by another route. Both routes were spectacularly beautiful, and I call them the "rainbow roads to Atacama Desert".

It was mid-April 2019, autumn in the southern hemisphere. With Mee Sin at the wheel, we left Salta and went north on the narrow and winding national road RN9 at 9 in the morning. We passed several police checkpoints.

Once on the RN51, however, the views became drastically different. There was no more forest. Instead, barren multi-hued mountains staggered into a kaleidoscope of

colours, interspersed with sharp pinnacles that had resulted from eons of erosion. Giant cacti emerged as the dominant vegetation. Stony riverbeds became exposed in the dry season. Llamas, guanacos and donkeys wandered in search of grassy vegetation.

The road from Pumamarca to the border at Paso de Jama and on to San Pedro de Atacama was generally in very good conditions and there were several extremely beautiful salt



flats on both sides of the border. Only one had water though and a few flamingos were seen foraging for food in the water.

We joined other tourists at Salinas Grandes, a vast salt flat measuring some 4,700 sq km at an altitude of 4,500m above sea level. The road cut right across the salt flat and the dazzling white plain extended from the road to the distant horizons.

Large and small figurines of camelids carved out of salt were put up for sale at the visitors' centre. Mining of salt was taking place at one corner of the vast salt flat. In the case of the other salt flats, the juxtaposition

of phantasmagoric colours made them so atmospheric that they almost appeared to be surreal.

We went through the border control with hardly any hassle and in just half an hour, we were back on the road. Three days later, we visited the otherworldly Valle de la Luna in the morning and then left San Pedro de Atacama for Argentina. We opted for a different route, hoping to see more beautiful scenery on the way, and we were not disappointed.

Heading southeast on Road 23, we had lunch in the village of Socaire. Paso de Sico at the border was 120km away. The road led us through another part of the large Reserva Nacional Los Flamencos, and we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn, marked by a cross-shaped pole and a signboard by the road.

Later we came across several beautiful salt flats

and an equally charming salt lake. All these were more than 4,000m above sea level. The air was crisp and the lighting ideal for photography. There was hardly any traffic on the road and we had the whole paradise to ourselves.

Other than the salt flats and lagoons, the road also wound its way in between rocky outcrops of various hues and colours which, together with the distant mountains, occasional groundcover vegetation and the blue sky, formed a patchwork of colossal scale and exceptional beauty that can only be produced by Mother Nature. ■