

14 July 2008

Prior to departing for South America I collected a set of GPS waypoints from prior overlanders. They included service locations, fuel stops, points of interest and, most importantly, camp sites.

We like to find our own places, make our own discoveries and generally have our own adventure rather than follow exactly in others footsteps, but, when the sun is sinking and we need a safe, proven place to pull over for the night, the collection of waypoints has been invaluable.

Such was the case five days ago when we pulled into the little town of San Pedro de Atacama in northern Chile.

We did a quick reconnoiter of the town and made plans to return after a day off recovering from a week of continuous travel. We checked the available waypoints we had for the area and found one in the municipal parking lot, about 100 feet from where we were parked, one about two kilometers / 1.2 miles away to the north and another back out of town the way we came in, five kilometers / 3.1 miles away to the west.

The sun was getting very low, so we chose the path we knew and headed back out of town west to the waypoint named DG 080 San Pedro de Atacama. The waypoint came from Don and Kim Green, who had preceded us through South America in a Fuso based expedition vehicle. Don and Kim's waypoints are great for us because we know if they fit in the spot we stand a good chance of doing so too. We'd only used a few of their waypoints before on the trip and had always found them good, so we had high hopes for this one as we headed up into the setting sun.

Steph counted down the meters to the turn on the GPS and we finally found the two-track turn leading off the highway onto the rock plateau. We went carefully down the track following the GPS bearing to the waypoint while negotiating the sand, gravel and bare rock two track trail.

Don and Kim really delivered on this waypoint. We ended up on a perfectly flat spot on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Cordillera del Sal (Salt Mountains), the Atacama Solar (Atacama Salt Flats), and the Andes, including six extinct (we hoped) volcanoes.

It was a stunning view, and we quickly settled in for the night and following day.

For a variety of reasons we ended up running our errands and doing our area explorations in the truck instead of the bikes. We checked out all the other camp site waypoints we had and found a handful more on our own, but at the end of each day, we always returned to our cliff top home, DG 080.

It was a beautiful spot and we greatly enjoyed our time there but it did present one very real challenge.

Because of its location in a generally bland brown desert and the salt mountain's subtle mix of grays and white highlights, it was difficult to capture its beauty and grandeur in a photo.

Mid day lighting offered its usual harsh, flat lighting, which doesn't complement much of anything. It's why most shooters spend the mid day shooting interiors, things in the shade or macro subjects.



Late afternoon wasn't much better. The hard light of the high desert leads to dark shadows, which add texture, but make for loss of detail in the shadow areas.



DG 080 San Pedro de Atacama

Even sunset proved challenging. It was hard to hold the subtle colors of the dying sunset while pulling anything out of the dim and shadowed foregrounds.





Sunrise wasn't much better. As soon as the sun cleared the mountains the light was instantly hard, and we were back to deep, dark shadows.



DG 080 San Pedro de Atacama

After many frustrations I discovered that the pre-dawn light, when the sun was just beginning to paint the peaks of the mountains in the west, was the only lighting where you could truly see the subtleties of tone, the complexity of texture and the subtle beauty of the features.



In the end though, I wasn't really happy with any of the images I shot. For me, DG 080 will remain one of those places that is impossible to capture in an image.

You'll just have to go there yourself to discover just how stunning it really is.

DG 080 San Pedro de Atacama

DG 080 is located at S22.91768 W68.25240, just west of San Pedro de Atacama, Chile.

And, to our parents and kids, yes, we double blocked the wheels, used the parking brake and had the truck parked in gear.



The collection of South America waypoints, including our camp sites, is at:
<http://www.hackneys.com/travel/index-gpssawaypoints.htm>

All photos by Douglas Hackney



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>