Inside the mountain that eats men *(Potosi, Bolivia)*

A mine tour like no other.

Every member of the Cerro Rico tour group was issued a rubber coat and pants, calf-high gumboots, a helmet with headlamp and batteries worn in the small of the back. Our garb also included a checkered kerchief to cover our mouths from the dust and a waterproof backpack for carrying our 'gifts' to the miners. Under the direction of Jonny, our guide and a former miner, we suited up in the back of our hostel.

Before entering a pit, our group was to ascend half-way up the mountain overlooking Potosi, which at 4,050-meter altitude, is itself one of the highest cities of the world. The tour promised a glimpse inside a working mine with an incredible history: over four centuries, the *'rich hill'* had produced more silver and possibly more human misery than any mine in the world. The guidebooks warned that the two-hour tour was neither for the delicate of health nor for the faint of heart...

We stood in a semi-circle as Jonny, a Quechuan Bolivian, asked our names and nationalities. The group of twelve included Chileans, Argentinians, Uruguayans and a Costa Rican. The group was predominantly men under thirty but there were three young women and a mid-fortyish Argentinian, conspicuous with a heavy camera bag. I was a quarter century older than him and the solo gringo. Unable to catch my name, Jonny thereafter referred to me as 'Forrest Gump'. With his shoulder length hair and hawkish features, our guide could have been a model for a Quechua warrior staring down *conquisidores*.

After the introductions, Jonny herded us around the block whereupon we squeezed into a battered white microbus. Our first stop was at a mining market shop near Plaza Calvaria at the base of Cerro Rico. The shelves were crammed with mining equipment including boots, lamps, helmets, pickaxes and shovels.

As we crowded in the doorway, Jonny began displaying mining accessories and all the while flirting with the girls. He gave particular attention to locally manufactured items such as fuses and detonator pins stamped with '*hecho en Cochebamba'*. For the finale of his show n' tell he held up sticks of dynamite, also Bolivian made, before playfully tossing them for us to catch. We

then each contributed twenty Bolivianos for gifts to take into the mine: orange soda, coca leaves, beer, cane spirit and a few sticks of dynamite. We stored our gifts in the canvas backpack.

Back in the microbus, we wound our way up the reddish-tinted slope of the triangular mountain stopping at a pull over to allow the group to take photos of old Potosi stretching below. Above us loomed Cerro Rico pocked with pit-openings rather like swallow nest holes on a cliff side. Only at that moment did I realize that I had forgotten both cell phone and camera...

While waiting for the others to take their shots, I tentatively chatted with the Argentinian boy whose father I had spoken to outside of Hostel La Casona before departure. While the lad stood smiling politely, I also spoke in English with the young Danish carpenter taking the English tour. Even with my limited comprehension, I had opted to save thirty Bolivianos and get some additional listening practice in Spanish.

Back in the decrepit microbus, we creaked up more switchbacks to a tunnel entrance. As soon as we pulled over, Jonny pointed to the path up the slope and bade us wait there. As he sprinted towards a nearby shack, we picked our way up the slope through rusty equipment and garbage to where mining cart tracks led into a dark and dripping maw. About fifteen minutes later, Jonny scrambled up to join us. His red eyes and grin suggested he's taken a few fortifying tokes of weed. Still, in a most confident manner he signaled for us to turn on our lamps, crouch down and follow him into the tunnel.

As the grey light from the entrance receded at our backs, we trudged in single file through ankle-deep water along the rails. At first the ceiling was high enough to stand but soon it sloped down to where it was necessary to crawl forward in a crouching position. As it became evermore difficult to duck while maintaining the slippery footing, helmets often struck the top, scoring off bits of rock.

After ten minutes, the ceiling dipped even lower— requiring a squatting duck-walk shuffle. In that position— especially combined with fumes, dust and the dizzy altitude— it became evermore difficult to breathe.

We made our first stop at a grotto containing the shrine of the legendary '*El Tio'*, [uncle]. the fat leering idol representing the spirit of the mine. *'El Tio'* was surrounded by sacrifices from the miners: cigarette butts jammed in its small red curved horns with beer cans, plastic cane alcohol bottles and coca leaves filling its lap.

Jonny teased the young women by pointing to the reddish phallus as well as to the idol's "titties" suggesting that the *El Tio* was androgynous. Still, in a more serious tone, he spoke of the figure as both a representation of a Christian *El Diablo* and a Quechua *Mama Pacha*. He pointed out that that in indigenous belief, the mountain itself was considered feminine.

After sprinkling some coca leaves on *El Tio*, we followed the mine cart tracks for a few more minutes before clamoring up a slippery slope and crawling through a narrow passage to reach an open cavern. We were bidden to sit on the loose rock beside two open shafts descending into seemingly bottomless blackness.

After replenishing the bulging wad of coca leaves in his cheek, Jonny related more history: In a question-and-answer style, eliciting tentative responses from the group, he gave ethnographic and demographic information including the environmental hazards of the mine (silicosis, cave-ins, and poisoning with toxins such as arsenic or asbestos) and cited miners' alarming mortality rates, past and present.

Even in straining to comprehend, I was humbled by the toughness required to survive for even six months in conditions that tested the limits of my endurance in less than a half-hour. As the dust grew thicker in the lamplight, we were stuck between breathing in the rarified (and possibly toxic) air or pulling the black kerchief even tighter which made it more difficult to catch a breath. Then in turning a corner it suddenly became sweltering hot. At that juncture, even the young *machos* must have wondered whether they could stick it out. I immediately thought of the *Lonely Planet* description which noted that usually one or two members of every Cerro Rico tour needed to be escorted out early. There was certainly no shame in that.

"*Puede a ir abajo, Forest Gump*?" ["Can you go down?"] Jonny asked the *abuelo* [granddad] of the group.

"Si, esta bien. No problema," I assured, not knowing just how harrowing the following ten minutes would be.

Right behind Jonny, I edged down a slope of slippery rocks (the pitch blackness pierced only by the wavering headlamp) and scrambled across slippery boards spanning chasms and shafts to the lip of a narrow chimney. More spelunking than crawling, we then half-slid down the chimney whereupon we reached a rickety ladder that extended a further five metres to the bottom of a lower shaft.

Only when the whole group reached the bottom did Jonny relieve the anxiety of how in hell we were to climb back up through the slippery worm hole we'd just squeezed through.

"*Pasamos por otro tunel*," he said back up pointing though the headlamp beam to the different tunnel by which we were to exit.

We walked five minutes along the lower-level tunnel to an alcove where two miners were at work with pickaxes. Upon our approach, they crouched down chewing coca leaves. We crouched in a semi-circle around them then Jonny asked the pair questions in Quechua and Spanish. Meanwhile, we pulled out our gifts from our backpacks. One miner nodded thanks as I handed over a big bottle of orange drink concentrate.

Jonny, standing alone in the soft glow of the headlamps, continued speaking of the shocking history of Cerro Rico and the contemporary workers' cooperatives that were marginally improving the working lives of Potosi's miners. Before signaling the group to move forward, he exchanged a few words with the miners in Quechua and shook their hands.

Before joining the group, I bent to pick up a bit of rock as a souvenir. The same miner to whom I gave the bottle of orange, stepped beside me and neatly chipped off a small chunk of zinc-veined rock. After profusely thanking him, I followed the others into the blackness. Over the next stretch it grew icy cold.

Moments later, our way was blocked by an empty mine cart. We clambered over it and picked our way forward to another alcove where four other miners were taking a break. Again, Jonny bantered with them in comradely fashion while we distributed the rest of the gifts. One miner spilled out a libation on the ground for *El Tio* before taking his first swing from the proffered can of beer.

After a few more minutes rest, we doubled back to the empty cart that blocked our egress. After Jonny failed to roll it forward, we clamored over it again whereupon my helmet struck the roof of the shaft— sparking as it knocked off a fist sized chunk of rock. On the other side, we reached a junction where the tunnel mercifully widened out. It was a tremendous relief to be able to stand up straight. Through the final ten minutes, the growing anticipation of breathing fresh air again made it difficult to focus on the slippery footing. In the final stretch of the shaft, we edged along behind 3 miners pushing a laden cart. Finally, a shaft of gray light appeared in the distance contrasting with the dancing white lights of the miners' helmets.

Despite nearly falling several times in my eagerness to be out of the belly of *El Tio*, I emerged, blinking like a mole but unscathed into the gray light of the afternoon. We followed behind the miners who pushed the cart of slurry to the end of the tracks and dumped it down the slope. Looking back half-dazed, at the tunnel entrance, we realized that we had reemerged lower on the mountain. Brushing greyish silt from clothes, we made our way down the bank to the waiting van. Liberated from nightmarish claustrophobia, we wound back down the mountain in the microvan in silence. In the lingering chemical smell, I rubbed my palm stained grey from the desperate handholds. Looking around at the faces, I had no doubt that everyone felt both as deeply relieved as did I.

Still, if we were barely able to endure a two-hour peek inside Cerro Rico— what of those hundreds of miners—some only children— who work there every day? What of the thousands in recent years who have been poisoned, maimed or killed outright? What of the largely nameless millions who have suffered and perished in that malevolent mountain over the centuries? Thus, in that silence of my fellow tourists, there was a sense of a shared humility…

In my last day in Potosi, in staring up at the looming Cerro Rico, it was hard not to remember the *El Tio* smirking within. Something in that idol's visage seems to convey the hideous injustice of the *mita* system of colonial era, by which so many *Indios* were virtually enslaved to extract the fabulous lodes of silver which bankrolled Spain's imperial power. Although suffering is both unquantifiable and incomparable— it may well be that the misery and death centered in Cerro Rico exceeded that of the genocide wreaked upon Europe by Nazi Germany…

Hopefully, hundreds of others who take the mine tour, feel equally bound to learn more of this dark history. If even a few of us, in sharing travel photos or anecdotes, take a moment to speak of that history— then however murky the justification of the tour—some good may be served.

Just the briefest illumination of lives otherwise unremembered is surely as honourable an outcome as any engagement of tourism is ever likely to achieve…

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