Come see the mountain. It dominates the Bolivian city of Potosí. When viewed from a distance, it looks like a perfect brown triangle hanging over a spread of colonial avenues. Move closer and see how hard-used the mountain looks. All vegetation has been scraped away. Its slopes are littered with tailings. There are multiple holes punched in at various levels and an eczema of trailers and mud huts on the trails winding upward. The triumphant cone at the peak has recently collapsed from overtunneling.

This is Cerro Rico (“rich mountain”), and it has been scoured for its minerals for 468 continuous years, ever since an early Spanish

The Mountain That Eats Men
Dark Ecotourism in Potosí, Bolivia

Tom Zoellner

Ecotourism flourishes in a historic mining city in Bolivia, and a barbaric labor practice is put on display. But is it a good idea?
expedition found blobs of pure silver lying close to the surface. The conquistadors forced the local Quechuan Indians to dig corkscrewing tunnels deep under the surface, and little about the mining methods has changed ever since: drill, blast, shovel, and haul. Approximately sixteen thousand miners still toil at Cerro Rico, and dozens die in its innards every year. Hundreds more perish at home from the silicosis caused by the dust motes suspended in the tunnels. This dust has a sharp taste, like chalk laced with acid. I can describe this because I paid a tour company the equivalent of ten dollars to be taken into the tunnels to watch the miners at work. At least a dozen of these outfits promise touristic access to “the mountain that eats men,” which is now as much a public spectacle as a workplace. “You will experience the working conditions of the miners,” says one un-spell-checked brochure. “For example some of the heavy smoke after dinamite explosions.”

I was fitted with a blue jumpsuit, rubber boots, a helmet, and a miner’s lamp. And then I and ten other paying customers were loaded into a van and taken to a tumbledown neighborhood called Calvario at the base of the mountain, where we were encouraged to buy gifts of beer, soda, booze, ammonium nitrate, dynamite, and detonators for the miners. Potosí is one of the few cities in the world where explosives are sold legally and openly, no questions asked. I settled on two sticks of dynamite, a bag of coca leaves, and a bottle of 96 percent alcohol with the brand name Ciebo. Then we were taken to the portal of the Candelaria mine, whose entrance looked like a stone arch in a railroad bridge. It is doused with llama blood in a purifying ritual twice a year.

“After this,” tour leader Ronald Vargas said, “you are all going to love your jobs.” And then we all followed him inside.

The term ecotourism, with its modernist note of incipient tragedy, was coined in the early 1980s as a method of labeling that kind of travel which was already familiar to Victorian beachgoers or to surveyor-adventurers journeying to African jungles. The object is to see a part of the earth that is generally hidden from the eyes of city-dwellers and to contemplate the scale and magnitude of nature as well as its fragile balance with the settled part of the globe. In its broadest definition, it encompasses the glamorous to the dubious, from ice-trekking in Canada to lemur-photographing in Madagascar and the hike to Machu Picchu, as well as sad little animal parks and bed-and-breakfasts that happen to be adjacent to a forest. Ecotourism is said to be a $77 billion annual business.

What is happening in Potosí might be classified as Dark Ecotourism. The extraction of minerals is a necessary business of civilization that happens to be aesthetically unpleasant and environmentally disruptive. Mines are almost never opened to outside eyes, and especially not those of gawking vacationers, except for a few rare cases in the United States when a portion of a decommissioned shaft will be turned into a novelty museum years after the last carload of ore was trundled out. Potosí shows the hollowing out of a mountain and the systematic destruction of human beings—silicosis is probable for these men within ten years—in real time. Going on a mine tour here is not unlike chartering a
plane, as some have done, to overfly the North Pacific garbage patch or taking a cruise to see ten-thousand-year-old glaciers crash into the saltwater in Alaska. We have enjoyed the fruits of an industrial economy; here are the tragic and photogenic aftereffects.

“There are some who say this is like showing animals in a zoo,” said a former miner named Jose Luis Burgos. “But I prefer to think of it as a living museum.”

The term dark tourism was coined by the British academics Malcolm Foley and John Lennon in 1996 to describe the urge to travel to places like Masada and Dachau. This is the green—or sickly greenish—version thereof. And there could hardly be a more historically tragic arena for this activity than Potosí, which is a high and frigid settlement that the Spanish founded in 1545 after they heard stories of pure lumps of silver being dug from campfire ashes at its base. The local Quechua were made into slaves and told to dig for twelve hours a day, with many sleeping in the underground galleries for four months at a time. To relieve the misery, the miners were given alcohol and coca leaves and told to pray to God. As an act of rebellion, some of the miners decided to pray to whomever the foe of God might be, and they found their totem in a devilish figure named “Tío,” who was said to be the real landlord of the mountain and the force that offers protection against cave-ins, silicosis, and the failure to find silver. They were officially Catholic outside the mine but desperately pagan within.

Spain used the silver not to build up Bolivia’s domestic industries but to buy silks and palaces for a tight circle of nobles and to pay off the extravagant loans it took from its European neighbors. The distinctive mint mark of Potosí—the letters PTSI layered over one another—was recognized widely throughout the Western world, and one theory of the origin of the American dollar sign is that the $ is merely a simplified version. This hard currency paid for tea in China and financed steam engines in Britain; it was more than a symbol of global economy: it was a global economy.

The coins were struck near the plaza at the National Mint, where teams of harnessed donkeys traveled in ceaseless circles to turn the oak wheels that made ingots into thin sheets, a cycle that mimicked the human cycle of suffering in the mountain. It was said that eight million perished there, and that while the riches were enough to build a bridge of silver across the ocean to the Spanish port of Cádiz, the bones of the dead Indian miners could have built another bridge across the ocean in return.

The inside of the mountain was turned into a midnight bazaar of shafts, drifts, and adits that spin off in wild directions and conceal sharp drop-offs into deeper chambers. The Spanish took the purest silver, and the remaining deposits of tin, zinc, and lower-grade silver are picked

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Oblivion and Stone
Eduardo Mitre

The wind leaves the cordillera.
With a thunder-voice it calls to the water,
but there are no clouds: only weapons
and blood. Oblivion and stone.
Alone, with no face, groping
down a long, hard chain
of butchery and tears,
Land, I look for your face.
The wind comes in: its harsh embrace
puts out my eyes and the lamp.
Acrid, the memory of that sea
beats waves of thirst in my throat.

Translation from the Spanish
By Sandra Reyes

over by companies known as cooperatives, which
are often semicorrupt family enterprises that
have divided up the territory and hired work
gangs to do the labor. Evo Morales—the nation’s
first indigenous president—has said he would
like to nationalize the mines and bring in better
equipment, but virtually nobody in Potosí likes
the idea. A big company would mean layoffs,
and though people get killed and see their lungs
go to ribbons under the present system, at least
everyone has a job and eats.

Dark ecotourism in Potosí has another
aspect: the mountain itself is sick. The silver
has been vastly depleted, and the international
market for the precious metal has declined since
the advent of digital photography made silver
nitrate obsolete. Nobody gives silver cutlery—a
legacy of the conquistadors—as wedding pres-
etents anymore. The bigger game is moving zinc,
and that is becoming harder to do because the
mountain is collapsing from the inside, according
to Edwin Bejarano, the acting director of a local
mining college.

The flourishing anarchy of all the coop-
eratives means that there is no central mine
engineer, and the daily decisions of where to
dig are left in the hands of the crew boss. In the
scramble to find unexploited seams, nobody is
leaving solid “bridges” of rock in place between
the galleries. The principle is the same with the
room-and-pillar style popular among American
coal operators. Remove too many pillars, and
the chambers are at risk of collapse. While
a catastrophic cave-in, such as the type that
imprisoned thirty-three Chilean copper min-
ers in 2010, is unlikely, it is almost certain that
localized tremors inside “the mountain that eats
men” will increase the more it is pierced with
new chambers. It has become as tattered as the
lungs of the mineros.

“I went to give a training session to miners
that explained the necessity of the bridges,” said
Bejarano. “They heard it, they understood, but
they didn’t put it into practice. They told me,
‘You don’t work in the shafts. You can’t tell us
what to do. Go back to your university.’”

The dust from the morning explosions
got thicker as we walked further into the
mine, and the light from the portal faded to
black. Vargas moved like a jaguar in the half-
light from our bobbing helmet lights, and a
few Swedish tourists in the rear struggled
to keep up with him. We passed a dead-end
littered with plastic beer bottles made as
offerings to a statue of Tío, crawled through
another tight passage like spelunkers, and
then descended a level through a twisting
muddy passage that was perhaps two hundred
years old.

And then we came upon a crew of miners
loading ore into a rusting cart with a shovel.
Vargas greeted them with our gifts of alcohol and
dynamite, and then he took a shovel from them.

“Who wants to give this a try?” he asked.
“Who wants to work like a miner?”

“I’ll give it a go,” offered a man from Lon-
don, who went to work on the pile of rocks while
the miners passed our beer around and watched
him. One cut a plastic water bottle in two with

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a knife and used the bottom portion as a cup to pass around the pure-grain alcohol.

"If we don’t like this, we have no choice," a miner named Flavio Mamani told me. “We have to support our families.” He had been working here twenty years. I asked him what he thought of the tourists, and he gave me a tight-lipped smile and said nothing.

“Who wants to work in here?” Vargas asked, holding out the shovel to the group. “Who wants me to leave them here?”

Potosí remains an open wound of the colonial system in Latin America: a still audible J’accuse,” wrote the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano in 1970, and nothing has changed about that conclusion in the intervening years, except that the misery is now on open display, and the finger of j’accuse might be seen as more directly pointing at the visitor, the dark ecotourist.

The talk was halting on the bus ride back down Cerro Rico. “That was sort of sick,” said Liv Sodahl, from Gothenberg, Sweden. “We get to see a glimpse of reality, but I have mixed feelings.”

Mike Brewer, a management consultant from Canada who works with oil companies, had a less complicated view. “Being down there is like, oh my God. I wanted out after thirty minutes. Our clients would never let us get away with this. Their teeth were falling out and their eyes were red. It’s sad for the miners suffering so much. But all those coca leaves and the beer came from us. We’re a good influence. We did give back to them.”

Colonial Potosí was a hidden canker, a gilded city famous throughout the globe, but one whose brutalities were cloaked under a layer of Spanish legal deceptions and the sheer inaccessibility of the altiplano. In an age of cheap air travel, electronic communication, and branding schemes like ecotourism, at least one exploited hellhole now enjoys a rare version of transparency, even though the access is for sale like any other product.

Is this a good thing? Is it right to view the horrific working conditions of other human beings as a kind of amusement? The answer may not be so simple when you consider the alternative; that is, is it better not to look and therefore not to know?

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Like Fire
Pedro Shimose

for Jaime Choque

We no longer feel shame going out on the street and jostling the world.

Here they are, blood and sweat – our blood and pain and our land – our land

(I look at what’s mine – what’s always been mine)

Now our hearts are burning like fire and our thoughts are flashes of lightning.

Like flames
our fathers were herded away to war.
Cannon fodder, they died without knowing why
– they simply served as a ladder –
our fathers were buried
alive
in the mine
they treated us like animals
– saying, “dumb Indian,” they scolded us like ill-bred children –
we couldn’t even wear a coarse cotton shirt, they wouldn’t let us enter cities,
– “filthy servants” – they sold us and no one protested
we were meant to suffer in misery, shoved around, to suffer contempt, that’s what we were there for . . .

They took away our land, they stupefied us,
but we no longer feel fear
(never again will we return to feel it, I swear)
now we’ve learned to speak your language, sir, to tell you we are men – many men – and that our hearts burn with the very same fire.

Translation from the Spanish
By Ronald Haladyna