

THE MOUNTAIN THAT EATS MEN

CERRO RICO'S SILVER IS ALMOST GONE, BUT THAT HASN'T STOPPED THE DANGEROUS MINING IN POTOSÍ, BOLIVIA

Mining is a family affair in Potosí. Boys may join their fathers in the trade in early adolescence while mothers and younger siblings often lend a helping hand. The entrance to Caracoles mine doubles as a play area; families typically live near the mines to guard against thieves.



Santiago Quispe, 29, hollows out a hole for dynamite in the mountain's largest mine, Paylaviri. Silicosis, a respiratory disease caused by mineral-laden dust, is a major cause of low life expectancy—around 45 for men in Potosí.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM HUSSIN

When Simón Bolívar first laid eyes on Potosí in 1825, he recalled the city's standing as the "axis of an immense world." Bolivar was referring to the time when its silver mines and mints fueled the global conquests of the Spanish empire he had just overthrown—before it became a dusty provincial town in the country that bears his name. When it was first discovered, Cerro Rico—Potosí's looming mountain landmark—was the most valuable silver strike in history. Its vast wealth swelled Potosí's markets and population as rapidly as it did the Spanish coffers and treasure fleets. In 1650, Potosí's population numbered 160,000, greater than even the Spanish capital of Madrid, making it the largest city in the New World at the time.

Nestled in the Andes, Potosí wasn't a natural site for urban growth. Key staples and luxuries needed to be imported on the backs of llamas, tethered together by the hundreds, to a city some 4,000 meters above the sea. When the silver bonanza began to wane in the early 19th century, so did the population, which eventually dwindled to a low of 8,000.

The days when "valer un Potosí" meant "to be worth a fortune" are long gone, but inside Cerro Rico's 180 active mines, the past still lingers. Sacrificial llama blood adorns mine entrances and workers chew coca leaves to boost their bodies and minds for the underground. They chip away, as their ancestors did, at the mountain's pockmarked passages with picks and shovels. And they tunnel deeper with dynamite, seeking veins of tin and zinc previously considered too dangerous and remote to be profitable. Although their lifestyle resembles that of Potosinos who toiled under the Spanish *mita* conscription system, miners now belong to worker-owned cooperatives. Spurred by the early 20th-century labor movement, those were formed as miners pooled their resources and expertise to exploit abandoned or marginal mining claims. Why do Potosí's miners persist in abject conditions for meager returns? "It isn't just work for them, it's an identity," says photographer Tim Hussin. "It has tied them to the land—and as a people—for years."
—William Shubert



Workers take an extended hiatus to march into Potosí during the annual carnival season. The boisterous month-long event preceding Lent devotes a week to celebrating miners—some 10,000 live in this city of 145,000. "We are all brothers," says one.



Imagining fortune, Basilio Julian examines a high-quality piece of ore. With mines exhausted after centuries of extraction, he is much more likely to strike a vein of tin than silver. Quality—not quantity—dictates wages, and Potosí's miners can range from making about \$140 to \$1400 monthly.



The camaraderie of the mine extends to the soccer field as a team from the Socavón Hambres mine celebrates the championship win in its league (top left). A collective spirit endures in Miner's Plaza (bottom left), where a statue commemorates miners who rallied during the Bolivian Revolution of 1952,

later spurring the nationalization of Cerro Rico's mines. Today, miners in cooperatives receive a share of the profits from their labor. And when metal prices rally, so do miners (right). Streets come alive with music and a corn-based liquor called *chicha*, brewed and sold by Andean women for centuries.



Alejandro Seco, 50, and his sons Arturo, 19 (far left), and Milton, 14 (right), offer tributes to *El Tio*—an ancestral spirit that serves as an otherworldly foreman. Without the customary gifts of coca, alcohol, and cigarettes *El Tio* could inflict calamity; with them, miners hope to strike riches.



Packed into a flatbed truck, miners ascend Cerro Rico (top left). Inside the mines, trolleys of ore are often hauled to the surface without the aid of machinery, sometimes with deadly consequences—in tight tunnels, runaway trolleys can crush unsuspecting miners. After resurfacing, miners cleanse their soot-

coated bodies in mountainside recesses (top right). Loved ones pay tribute to those lost to the hazards of the trade (bottom right). Since the 16th century untold numbers—estimated in the millions—have perished at the hands of Cerro Rico, earning it the nickname, “The Mountain That Eats Men.”



Looming over a miners' neighborhood, Cerro Rico has a dark legacy extending far beyond Potosí—centuries of heavy-metal contamination have poisoned regional watersheds. “They are unsafe for wildlife, livestock, people, and crops,” says engineer William Strosnider, who is leading a pilot clean-up project.