

lingua weekly

March 3rd 2006

Felix

By Jeremy Quinton



Monday. Late for work. In the office, in a hurry. The phone hasn't stopped r-i-n-g-ing. The mobile goes off too. A cold caller. The number of e-mails to read is big. Uncomfortably big! Bigger than Señora Beckham's shopping list, and agh!...the monthly project meeting has been changed from Friday to Tuesday. Now it won't be possible to send in those restaurant receipts to the accounts department. And the coffee machine still hasn't been repaired!

This could be you, me, a friend of ours, or one of millions of office workers worldwide, right?

I'd like to tell you a story about someone I met last year in the Bolivian city of Potosí, an incredible place located at over 4000m above sea level, in a windswept basin from where you could almost reach out and touch the moon. At that altitude the sky is a deep-blue colour all day long...the type of blue that you find in Christmas cards. But it wasn't up in the sky that the city's main attraction was to be found...it was under the surface of "El Cerro Rico".

"Spanish Potosí, or the "Villa Imperial de Carlos V" was officially founded in 1545 and quickly grew to be the largest (as well as being the highest) city in the western hemisphere. The mine became the world's most prolific, and the silver extracted from it underwrote the Spanish economy, particularly the extravagance of its monarchy, for at least two centuries". This is what the Lonely Planet guide says.

If you want you can visit the mine with a guide. *"...there is a chance that an accident can occur in the mines. There are some dangers beyond the control of your guide. In the event of a cave-in you will be in as much danger as the miners. More miners die from cave-ins than any other cause of death".*

This is what our tour guide was kind enough to put in writing (the last sentence being in brackets!). But with a 4 hour visit, with guide, transportation & protective clothing all thrown in...I couldn't resist the adventure.

Bang! BOOm!

The ground moves, as if a bomb has gone off.

First stop is the miners' market, to buy ourselves & the miners food, explosives, and coca leaves. The miners, like many people from this part of the world, chew the leaves for much the same reasons that the Spanish drink coffee or the British, tea.

....The dust shoots back along the tunnel. Rock fragments fly in every direction. Silicon dust enters the nose & lungs, and the nauseous smell of dynamite & rock gases penetrates the choking air...

Second stop is the area where the rock is sorted, crushed & sifted through by a team of young men searching patiently for minute traces of silver & other precious minerals. Finally we arrive at the entrance to one of the *hundreds* of mine shafts that run through the mountain like a Swiss cheese.

Third & final stop. The entrance to Hell is a hole two metres high by one metre wide, almost 5000 metres up the Cerro Rico. Our guides took us, with charm & humour, further & deeper into the mine, the temperature increasing by a degree for every 100 metres that we progressed. The altitude sickness, the dust, the water & mud on the floor...the awareness of the conditions left me physically sick.

Felix sits and waits, having seen it all every day of his working life. As I wipe the sweat from my face, and try to comprehend what's going on, Felix returns to explore the hole left by the explosion.

Finally a small group of us are brave enough to admit ...that we are afraid enough to *need* to return to the surface! The guides arrange an escort, but we have to sit down and wait briefly. Then Felix comes along.

Felix told us that he'd worked in the mines since he was 12. Now, at the age of 40, his two sons are miners too. One of them was in the middle of a 17 hour shift. Felix knows men who've recently spent over three months working without having found any silver to sell. That means no wages. There are no job perks, no extra benefits, no insurance covers, no career plan. They get what they give, so to speak.

I'd forgotten about the bag of coca leaves I was carrying. "What's wrong with you?" asked Felix. To think that I'd only survived an hour of hell and Felix had survived almost 30 years made me feel pathetic.

"Would you like the bag?" I asked him. And as another tourist offered Felix his own bag too, Felix smiled and said "How lucky I am!".

"`Lucky´?" I thought. "Felix...¡vales un potosí!"

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