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Treasure in the Andes

By Sandin Phillipson

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I awoke to strange surroundings, my first view of the plaster-peeling room in which I had spent the night being afforded by the early-morning sunrise on the Bolivian Altiplano. After arriving near midnight in the frigid darkness of the high desert, my thoughts had been only of how quickly I could unpack my sleeping bag and crawl in. Now as I peered out of the window, it became apparent that I was in a quadrille, the famous architectural style of squares-within-a-square that is a hallmark of the former Spanish Colonial Empire from California to South America. My "room" consisted of a small shack, which with a series of other small, straw-thatched, adobe huts, defined the walls around a central courtyard paved with flagstones. There was no heat source, and thus my morning dressing routine required only that I emerge from my sleeping bag, it having been too cold to consider removing my several layers of clothing the previous night.

The courtyard upon which I gazed had been the home of a Polish mining engineer who came to seek his fortune in the fabled land of the Inca, drawn, as many before him, by stories of fabulous wealth. The first reports of silver to reach the Spanish Colonial authorities came from a Spanish priest in 1537, although the Inca had undoubtedly extracted the precious metal for their own use before that. I had also come to seek my fortune in this place, not by extracting tons of silver ore, but by unraveling the geological history as a subject of thesis research. In fact, I was living my dream of working as an exploration geologist amid remote, rugged surroundings, as the only Norteamericano for a hundred, and probably three hundred, miles.

I exited the courtyard through a low wooden door that represented the only means of egress, and found myself on a narrow, cobblestone street bounded by the adobe walls of other cuadrilles. The stygian darkness that accompanied my arrival the previous night had concealed the size of the town. I trudged up the street, panting for breath in the thin, 12,000-foot air. Upon reaching the outskirts of the village, which required only a few minutes, I assailed a ridge and, upon reaching the crest, took in what the view afforded. I surveyed a desolate landscape devoid of trees or vegetation, save for the small, wind-worn tufts of spiked grass that dotted the hillsides. The Bolivian Altiplano stretched to the horizon

in all directions, broken only by jagged mountains that floated in a shimmering, salt-tinged mirage in the distance. The bright blue sky similarly stretched everywhere to the horizon, unblemished by the smallest cloud, until merging with land in the parallax of distance. The blazing white sun constituted the sole occupant of the sky, and although its rays burned my skin and faded my clothes within days, no warmth seemed to emanate from that orb. Instead, the biting wind tore through my layers of clothes, chilling me even as I was being sunburned. The thin air, lack of vegetation to provide perspective of distance, the expanse of blue sky, and blazing sun combined to induce a detached, dreamlike state of near-hypoxia in which concepts of distance and time ceased to have meaning.

The village below was laid out in a grid, consisting of four streets by five streets, and apparently little changed since the 16th Century. There was no electricity, no running water, and no source of heat except bundles of mesquite acquired at some remote location. The source of water that was available was frozen except for two hours in the afternoon. A haze of mesquite smoke hung over the village, nestled in a shallow valley within a larger depression. The village appeared to have some natural

fortification, hidden by a ring of volcanic hills. The valley breached the ring of hills along a fault zone, which fractured the rock into three giant spires. In local lore, these three great rock spires were known as Tres Gigantes, or the Three Giants, and appeared in pictures with the patron saint of the town. Who knows but that the founding saint, Saint Christopher, might have been the same Spanish priest that first reported the presence of silver to the outside world?

The surrounding hills were white, the volcanic rock having been altered to the consistency of powdered sugar by acidic solutions. But rather than tasting sweet like sugar, the powdery rock was alkaline, like corroded battery cables. Far from being associated with the feelings of defeat and failure evinced by a dead battery, this natural acid-bleached rock constituted the bulk of the silver resource at the site and was a source of great excitement. The countless miners who toiled to wrest high-grade ore from wide silver veins would have found it impossible to recognize this as silver ore. How ironic that for centuries, miners had removed silver ore from the district until all thought it exhausted, when in fact the vast bulk of silver occurred in this white, crumbly rock, unseen to the naked eye. As often occurs in life, great treasure may lie at our very feet if only we could but recognize it.

I am a geologist and have visited several countries in Latin America and Europe, and worked on various civil engineering and mining-related projects throughout the world. I have published in journals with a scientific perspective, but thought it would be fun to write about some of my travel experiences on a more informal level. I have some other pictures and geology-related items at my web site, at:

Travel To Argentina: Tango Your Way Through Temptation

By Frank Johnson

Argentina is in all ways the definition of fabulous, as most Argentines would be more than happy to tell you. South America's darling and second largest nation (after Brazil) is teeming with fantastic culture and biodiversity, ultra hip cities like Buenos Aires and an unabated passion for fine wine, scrumptious steak and an uncompromised quality of life. Following a recent economic crisis, the

country is just as splendid a destination while leaving a far smaller hole in your wallet.

Raise Your Glass, Your Consciousness and Your Elevation Argentina's central fertile plain of the Pampas is the main agriculture hub and South America's world renowned wine producing region. Córdoba, Argentina's second city, is the heart of this region and full of universities, historic museums and an extremely posh and youthful nightlife. Just southwest of Córdoba is the wine capital of Mendoza. Come for the harvest festivals at the end of February and stay to enjoy the warm hospitality during a vineyard tour of the many bodegas in March and April. Explore the surrounding rocky desert by hopping on a horseback riding expedition or paddling down some whitewater with a local guide.

Nestled against the Andes Mountain Range, the Mendoza region is also home to South America's tallest peak, Cerro Aconcagua, at 22,834 ft. Guided trekking expeditions to the top can be arranged for those with appropriate expertise. Others may find the trip to base camp exhilarating enough. The area is an extremely popular Andes ski destination as well, including the winter resorts of Las Leñas and San Carlos de Bariloche.

Global Heritage, National Treasure The diversity of wildlife and terrain in Argentina is arguably unmatched in South America. Península Valdés is a World Heritage Site on the east coast of the Patagonian region with more visible biodiversity than any other region in Argentina. Sea lions, penguins, whales, armadillos, guanacos and gray foxes all grace the shores with their regular presence at certain times of the year. Enjoy the pristine quality of surrounding Patagonia, quite possibly the cleanest place on earth. Farther south, Parque Nacional Los Glaciares (Glacier National Park) is literally an incredibly moving experience. Strategically placed cat-walks and guided tours allow visitors to see the remarkable sliding ice blocks from stable distances, including the gargantuan Perito Moreno Glacier. This also might be the closest you have ever found yourself to the South Pole!

Argentina's unique north-south axis makes for a most dynamic single-county travel opportunity. Jungles in the far north, glaciers in the deep south, the Incan Andes to the West and just about everything imaginable in between make up just a few reasons why anyone must explore Argentina - not to mention the wildly alive and electrifying epicenter that is the capital city of Buenos Aires. Don't forget that in the southern hemisphere the seasons are reversed. January is extremely hot in the north, with temperatures exceeding 110F in places. The south is cold, still with the coldest months from May to September.

For more information on international travel and discount airfare to Argentina, visit

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