1984

The world's highest inhabited place: Aucanquilcha, Chile

Jose Araneda
THE WORLD'S HIGHEST INHABITED PLACE;
AUCANQUILCHA, CHILE

by

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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12. The woman's daughter peals potatoes, accompanied by a lamb.

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A Bolivian child.

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Truck driver prepares to leave from Amincha Camp at 7:00 pm., at a temperature of 11°F. The smoking volcano in the background is Ollague.

Good weather at 16,400 feet.

Tin house at 19,700 ft., where the six miners live.

Ice beneath sulfur in Aucanquilcha mine.

Lunch break at the mine, good weather, just 32°F. Bread and ice tea.

Drinking tea.

Carrying chunks of sulfur.

Carrying chunks of sulfur.

Breaking up the material. Tractors made-to-order for this work.

Loading the truck.

The dangerous trip downhill, loaded with 12 tons.

Bad weather at the mine. Workers clear snow from path where truck will pass.

Clearing snow.

The trucks slide at 17,000 ft., and workers must walk up. The mine is between the two cones of Aucanquilcha.

Miners leave truck to walk, from 17,000 ft. up to 20,000 ft.

Long way up to walk. (No bus, no car, nothing.)

Tin hut barely visible through snow and fog.
These men live at 19,700 ft., the highest inhabited place in the world. Photographer in red cap.

Inside the tin house.

The Aucanquilcha mine. Man at work, ice in the foreground.

Stopping for a drink of hot tea, prepared with melted snow.

Melting snow for tea.

After a full day's work at the mine, the men walk down on foot (17,000 ft.).

Back in Amincha.

A deaf-mute Bolivian worker. He has no family or relatives. Lips brown from coca-chewing.
INTRODUCTION

By the Editor of Revista del Domingo

It turned out to be an original unpublished editorial enterprise. The reporter had to train himself, during several weeks climbing up and down mountains around Santiago, to be able to set forth on the adventure. And all that was absolutely necessary to reach the 19,800 ft. of altitude without being defeated by the mountain sickness "puna" (as had happened to him in his first attempt). Not even the Andean condor can reach so high.

It was a pretty busy month for Armando Araneda, a contributor to Revista del Domingo (Sunday's Magazine)* and a student of the Rochester Institute of Technology, Graduate School in the United States of America. When we asked him to do this assignment he undertook the task with professional passion. To him it was incredible that the National Geographic Atlas of the World printed that in our country, Chile, men lived and worked in the world's highest place, and we in Chile ignored it.

The fruit of that enthusiasm and that effort is shown here in the following article that Armando Araneda wrote
with the editorial assistance of Luz Maria Astorga.

This is his report.

* A Sunday's Supplement of "El Mercurio", the largest newspaper of Chile, and one of the oldest in Latin America.
THE WORLD'S HIGHEST INHABITED PLACE:

AUCANQUILCHA, CHILE
THE WORLD'S HIGHEST INHABITED PLACE IS FOUND IN CHILE. "REVISTA DEL DOMINGO" GOT THERE, WHERE NOT EVEN THE CONDOR CAN REACH, TO LEARN ABOUT A GROUP OF MEN THAT WORK AT 19,800 FT. OF ALTITUDE.

THE AUTHOR OF THIS REPORT WAS DEFEATED IN HIS FIRST ATTEMPT TO REACH THIS LOCATION. HERE HE NARRATES BOTH EXPERIENCES.
There are occasions when the eyes serve only as a decoration. Open or closed we only see a white wall in front of us. This happens when at the top of the mountain, heavy snow covers the ground and the "white blizzard" (wind plus snow) is flapping at you like a frozen phantom.

Temperature swings from 17ºF down to -30ºF, depending upon whether it is day or night. However, the air always maintains a basic characteristic: oxygen deficiency; and atmospheric pressure which never gets over 400mm, half the normal human requirement.

It wasn't easy for me to climb Aucanquilcha, of course. "Devil Mountain" (Aucan=Mountain, Quilcha=Devil), a sulfur mine 19,685 ft. up the Andes, is located East of Chuquicamata and 2-1/2 miles from the Bolivian border. Up here dwell six men. They are oblivious to the fact that they live at an altitude higher than any human in the whole planet.

To climb where they are it is necessary to push through the terrible experiences of overcoming mountain sickness: a pounding headache, dizziness, and nausea, and to be capable of sustaining a speeded up heart beat of over 130 times a minute.

According to mountain climbers in places like this, it is possible to survive only with two additional liters of
blood and a pair of huge barrel-like lungs that can expand to absorb the most oxygen through breathing.

When I tried to climb Aucanquilcha the first time, the threat about the mountain sickness "puna" didn't bother me at all. "I'm in excellent physical condition", I thought. But it didn't help. Four days later, convalescent, I had to return 1,000 miles back to Santiago. Fresh in my mind was the pounding headache, nauseousness and the vomiting. In my bag were the many rolls of film, under-exposed, blurred or completely blank, never exposed.

I had spent two nights over 12,000 ft., unable to sleep, walking up and down and going to the bathroom. The miners gave me a drink of hot water and "puna flower". The magic cure, they said. It didn't work. Then came garlic and onion. It didn't help either. Nothing helped, my head was like a carrousel. Finally I fainted.

Later in Santiago, for many weeks, obsessed by my failure, I planned a more reliable system. First, climb the low mountains around Santiago, followed by a couple of days in Calama (6,000 ft.), then climb "Big Stone Mountain" (9,000 ft.) and next the "Inca" (10,500). Only after that could I face "Devil Mountain."

I'm now travelling third class in the "International Rail Road Antofagasta-La Paz" that will leave me in Ollaque. It's the last station before the border. It is my second attempt to climb Aucanquilcha. Around me most passengers
are Bolivians, but I call them "foreigners" not to offend them. A group of fat women, dressed in red and yellow and with green hats, talk lively in Quechua, a Bolivian dialect. Suddenly one of them uncovers a huge pot of hot meal "39 pesos a portion" (one dollar). The word goes around and portions go around too. Every one eats fast. The inspector will come any moment! When he appears the pot is disguised by a blanket thrown over it. Everyone keeps eating anyway.

"This is the highest bridge in Chile", a friendly "Foreigner" said to me.

I get my camera, focus, ready and... a firm hand grabs my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" inquired (I suppose) a policeman in street dress.

"Nothing, nothing."

"Give me the film!"

"I have done nothing."

"This is a military zone, and picture taking is forbidden."

"I haven't taken any."

Everything gets cleared and the ladies stop speaking Quechua and switch to Spanish to comfort me. They offer me a fish sandwich, complete with bones and spines.

"Are you a tourist?" The unusual, very informal question sounds, however, friendly.

"No, I'm a Chilean."
"Ho!... since you are carrying a backpack..."

"I'm a photographer. I'm going to Aucanquilcha to make a report."

"Aghrrr, it is so ugly. Your country is ugly, brown all over, nothing else, only desert. Everything is the same here. That's why we prefer Bolivia, there we have green areas."

"Do you know some other places in Chile?"

"Sure, Calama, San Pedro de Atacama." (They knew just the desert areas of Chile, nothing else).

In my lonely trip I think of Camp Amincha, the place where Chilean and Bolivian miners live at 12,600 feet. From here they go up 7,000 feet more to the mine to gather the sulfur at "Cerro del Diablo", where the six solitary men live.

The truck from the mine is waiting for me at Ollaque. In just 15 minutes we will be in Amincha. We go through still, huge, forsaken, salt lakes. A variety of brown tonalities on the surrounding bare mountains.

Shimmering by might, Amincha stands alone. Several little adobe houses, lined up in orderly rows, house 300 people, 50 Chileans and 70 Bolivians - workers with their families. They have no water in the houses. People must wash outside and use collective outdoor bathrooms. There is no police station*, no restaurant, no clinics.

*(There is one in Ollaque, 6 miles away).
The miner's wife makes her own bread. Food comes once a week from Antofagasta. They have nonetheless a little school. The teacher, in addition to instructing 70 kids, must come sometimes to help a woman who is giving birth and has problems. But most women get through fine on their own.

A friendly welcome, at the "Rancho", the Company host housing. But since the Company owner has decreed it a "dry zone", nobody attempts to offer me their "whiskey-sour", "el cuadrado" (the square). It is 98 percent alcohol, plus a few coca leaves. Officially nobody drinks, but I see two miners zig-zagging down the street.

Keeping up with my "acclimatizing plan" I spend a couple of days in Amincha walking up and down. It looks like a town of the past. Children very often spend their free time getting wood to prepare meals and to warm up. Chileans and Bolivians have a dark skin, white teeth, and deep furrows around the eyes and the mouth. The white-brown tone of lips reveals their collective habit to chew coca leaves. They seem older. Only by speaking with them is it possible to guess at their ages.

"A few years ago 34 Chileans signed up to work in the mine" - recalls Hector Moraleda - "I'm the only one that stayed. The others didn't even last 15 days, they couldn't take it, the altitude defeated them".

It is a hard life. Heavy work, inhospitable atmospheric conditions. In Amincha they go through two winters, eight
months in total. December through March - the Bolivian winter - and from May to July, ours. "But no matter what, the worst enemy is altitude", says Alberto Larenas, manager of the Mining Company.

"Many Bolivians come here looking for jobs, begging for the opportunity to work. They come through the desert on foot, sometimes carrying a bicycle on their side with their meager possessions, without documents. We get their papers in order and accept them. However, the Chileans that come say that they don't even have money to get back home. After a couple of days they can't take it any more. They are not made to work in the heights, as the Bolivians".

Ten years ago, however, the situation was much harder. People were housed in a camp 4,900 feet above Amincha. It was known throughout the world as "Aucanquilcha Camp" (17,500 feet).

"I began working there in 1963", remembers Martina Quispe, 65. "At that time the 'quilcha' was even worse. The snow was six-and-a-half feet deep in the camp. We had brought chickens, to have eggs, but as soon as they touched ground they began spinning like a whirling top and dropped dead. The Chileans tried to adapt, and held out longer than the 'chicks' ... suffering headaches, nausea and vomiting. When blood began to pop out through ears and nose, they were whisked down the mountain".
THE GUNG

This is a special, picturesque, hardworking, clever group. Temistocles Troncoso, years ago, was the head of the mine. Today, partially blind, he waits for retirement. He gets the equivalent of $385 a month, but spends 300 United States dollars in food and education. His modest house is full of kids.

"Are all these children yours?"

"Sure, there are others outside ... and some more that are dead".

"How many are there all together?"

"Let me see ... Segundo, Ignacio, Custodio, Luis, Humberto ... Ema, Nelly, Zulema, Dina, the little baby 'chicks', Trinidad del Rosario and Yamilet. Ho!, I have forgotten Alfonso and Rodolfo. Five are in Calama (a nearby town). The dead ones are another group".

"Do you plan on more?"

"No, I don't think so. My wife is using pills".

They are also smart. Well, to live here you must be, or you don't have a chance.

Some time ago, Lucio Quispe, Supervisor of the mine, ran out of gas while driving his truck. He was 20 miles from Ollaque, right in the desert. Now he remembers:
"I was beginning to despair when I recalled that my cargo was kerosene! I got three gallons and made it just right. You know, it got 1-1/2 miles an hour ... it had no power!"

THE ROUGHEST JOB ON EARTH

Already acclimatized to Amincha I decided to climb "Cerro del Diablo". Nine hundred feet in two hours, and everything is fine. I try six hundred feet more, but nausea begins.

I made a new attempt the next day. "Quilcha" has been hit by a storm and is rapidly buried by the snow. The "white blizzard" hit my face hard. My breathing and heart beat is all I can hear. It kept snowing. My feet are two blown up blisters. Night sets in, and suddenly I found myself twelve miles from camp. I can't see anything, not a light in the distance, the road, or even my hands. Truly, to walk with my eyes open or closed is the same. Only a white wall stands in front of me.

Although a day was not enough to get my feet well and capable of walking without suffering, time was running out. I had to reach the top today, no matter what.

A truck departs at 7 a.m. from Amincha with 60 tightly packed miners in the back (where the cargo should go). We are carried up to the mine. I mix with them. No one talks. White blizzard, fog, and the wind-chill factor drops the temperature to -4°F. We keep our faces down, trying to
protect them from the wind and driving snow. At 16,400 feet the truck comes to a halt. We still have 6,600 feet of curves to climb to get to the mine. We must try on foot.

Once again the Bolivian winter does what it pleases. The workers climb one step at a time. Slowly, 1,000 feet and stop - they can't make it. Retreat! No way - up today! It is the fourth time in a month that the weather has closed down the mine.

NIGHTMARE

Next day, with heavy fog, I make my last attempt to reach the top. Even so I had to return the very same day to Santiago. The same truck, same man, slightly less chilled. Half the way, at the first turn, the truck skids. Get down everyone! The truck keeps going back and stops right at the edge, suspended over 2,300 feet of emptiness. The road is truly slippery, and you can hardly see. The men start climbing up again. I keep behind. Shortly I lose sight of them. I don't know where we are, perhaps 3,000 feet from the top. I can't see.

Exhausted, and barely walking, I keep going. Now I am knee deep in the snow, at 18,000 feet. I take four steps at a time, and stop to rest. My pulse is over 136 beats a minute! ... I am exhausted!

I make 100 feet more. A queer drowsiness takes hold of me. I feel cozy and nicely warm and suddenly comforted.
For a while I feel an overwhelming desire to sit down and relax. I eat a sandwich, hot soup and an apple. I feel drowsy again, and sit in the snow ready to fall asleep. Suddenly I remember that this is exactly when mountain climbers fall asleep and freeze to death! I keep going. The very edge of the road is the only way, but room for one foot only! The danger of falling down to the bottom terrifies me. But it is the only way out. Keep holding on for 1-1/2 hours. Suddenly, a strange hard pounding noise breaks the silence. The Ferry Cable of the mine! I can't see it, but I know I have made it! A few more steps .... somebody shouts from inside a tin hut on top of "quilcha", "Come in!" ... I don't answer, I can't talk, my tongue does not obey. Words come out confused. I am drunk. A voice with a Bolivian accent invites me to sit down on a bed with two light blankets and no sheets. "Don't worry, it is lack of oxygen ... you'll feel better". They comfort me. I rested on one of the three beds where six men were crowded together.

**WHITE INFERNO**

In this tin box live the men that are closer to the sky than any one else in the whole world. They are in charge of sending sulfur down through the Ferry Cable, even when snow stops work at the mine. All six of them work from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sometimes, when "caliche" (saltpetre) is short down
in Amincha they must keep working until midnight, despite weather conditions. They get $2.50 (United States dollars) a day, 2¢ per bucket, and some pay also for overtime work.

It takes two hours before I'm able to talk. Chilly winds blow through every crack in the room. They don't feel it. They only complain of cold hands and feet.

Warming up with a kerosene stove, they keep a coffee pot permanently over it. "There are potatoes for lunch", says one of the men. "It takes about four hours to cook them. Not so long for boiled eggs. That takes only half an hour".

It is one of the many consequences of low pressure and high altitude. Many times they start cooking their lunch the night before. Even so, they eat late. Any explanation? Yes, the boiling point is reached when the liquid in the pot equals atmospheric pressure. If air pressure is normal (700 mm) this balance is achieved at 212°F degree of temperature. If atmospheric pressure is less (In this place it does not even get to 400 mm) liquids boil at less temperature, thus cooking is very slow.

I feel better, but I can't move fast or talk clearly or breathe easily. Simon Morales, 43, cheers me up.

"I used to live at 13,000 feet, but when I began to work here I felt very dizzy and almost fainted at the least effort. I couldn't breathe. It is hard to live here ... not to say anything about working! When the mine is snow covered, and
the cold is -22°F below, it is an inferno!"

"Do you live here all year around?"

"Yes, we do. But weekends, or at least on Sundays, we drop down to Amincha".

"How do you get down?"

"On foot ... over the snow. We have snow here three days out of four!"

**UNEXPECTED GOOD HUMOR**

"How do you get food, water and fuel?"

"Every week a truck brings us all that we need. We are never out of tea, bread, rice or spaghetti. Even some times we have powdered milk!"

"Did you know that you are living higher than anybody else in the world?"

"Hey, are you kidding? Now I know why nobody ever gets here".

We walked to the mine in slow motion. Just a few steps away, but I am exhausted. My body feels very heavy. I can hardly make sense. I can't think clearly. The miners, instead, move and bend down easily, lifting heavy rocks weighing up to 70 pounds each. I am astounded and say it aloud.

"It must be because here you sleep great", jokes someone. Not the least sound in the night!
A BIT OF HISTORY

Aucanquilcha from 1913

The world's highest mine, Compania Azufre Aucanquilcha, formed by brothers Raul, Hipolito and Vicencio Carrasco, was found by accident in 1913 - a year of good luck - by one of them while traveling by mule through Ollague, At 19,800 ft. of altitude, on top of the extinguished volcano Aucanquilcha, tons of yellow-green dust were an irresistible temptation.

They began selling rough sulfur - caliche (saltpetre) - to several large industries, producers of niter. They first used llamas, then mules and finally cars, Ford A and Chevrolet, four cylinders. To bring the material down was a difficult thing to do. In 1920 they built the first andarivel (the Ferry Cable of the mine) and five years later began refining sulfur. Today, the owner of the mine, the engineer Raul Carrasco, remembers:

"At that time the administration offices were in Ollague, and the miners used to live at 17,200 ft. (Angulo Station). The problem was that with the old trucks we needed about five hours to reach the top. Therefore, miners had to live as close to the mine as possible. Afterwards we ordered trucks made especially for these roads. They were assembled
in the U.S.A. according to information given by a computer, with parts of several different kinds.

Thanks to these monsters "trepa-caminos" (road-climbers) we were able to move the camp from Estacion Angulo (where the miners live) down 1,000 meters to Amincha. There the mine lends them a modest house, or a room if the family is small, with free water and electricity."

DOWN HILL

A 10 million dollar investment brings today about 15,000 tons of refined sulfur, and 50,000 of "caliche" (unrefined sulfur). There are 120 men at work. ("Sometimes it is up to 150 men, depending on their acclimatization to altitude"). "However, business is not good", says the owners.

"In the last ten years, things have gone down hill. The 95% of total sulfur needed in the country is imported so we are unable to expand or compete with that. Our production costs are too high, and we cannot compete in the international market."

That is why they are working in the most economic possible way.

"At the mine the truck driver not only drives, but each man from the top to the bottom does several different jobs."

To economize, miners are contracted with a base salary of 90 to 100 dollars a month. The rest is bonuses given to stimulate production. The bonus does not pay taxes, of course.
"It is the best system", argues Carrasco. "Every year, due to bad weather the mine closes down for at least three months. If we cannot produce, how can we pay them!"

The miners only pastime recreation is "las pichangas" (free-for-all soccer games), if the weather is all right. ("Sometimes dust and sand blows like a tornado for a full day. You can hardly see your own hands.") Years ago they used to bring commercial movies. "But now you can't find them, except for those of 16mm that are really bad." They even tried to set up a TV antenna, but it was too expensive.

"Anyway - says Raul Carrasco - people are happy. I think they enjoy living as they do, isolated from everything. We have never had a strike."

SANTIAGO DE CHILE, August 1981
APPENDIX
BOARD MEMBERS

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THESIS PROPOSAL
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by

Jose Armando Araneda

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
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PURPOSE

I intend to produce a first-hand photographic and written report on the people of Aucanquilcha; their dwelling place at Camp Amincha, 12,600 feet high in the mountains of Chile; and, at 19,800 feet, the sulfur mine in which they work. Some 90 families live and work in this place, a barren, dormant volcano. My report, journalistic in approach, will attempt to follow the style of a typical National Geographic article.

BACKGROUND

Several main factors led me to choose this topic as my thesis proposal.

First, my passion for adventure, mountaineering and the outdoors.

Second, as a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, I have a strong feeling for people, particularly those living in harsh conditions.

Third, the encouragement I received from Bruce Dale, a National Geographic staff photographer who was my instructor in a summer workshop, "Photography for the National Geographic Magazine".
Fourth, the inspiration I received from the works of Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Fifth, the surprising fact that Aucanquilcha, listed in the "National Geographic Atlas of the World" as the world's highest inhabited place, is found in Chile - but this fact is virtually unknown in this country.

I first visited Aucanquilcha when I returned to Chile following my graduate studies at R.I.T. As I researched this project, it became evident that nothing had been published about the miners' extremely difficult working and living conditions. Therefore, I intend to illustrate through my thesis work how these people live, work and play in their inhospitable physical environment.

In order to take the full measure of the effort these people must make every day to live their lives, I will counterpoint my own experience as a typical city dweller.

PROCEDURE

The work, already in progress, is being shot in 35mm color slides. If the thesis board finds the material acceptable, a selection can be transferred to color prints and an exhibit arranged at the MFA Gallery, in consultation with my board.

I have researched the works of several photographers, among them: Dorothea Lange, Alfred Einsenstaedt, Gordon Parks, Eugene Smith and Henri Cartier-Bresson. I found I had
the most affinity with Eugene Smith and Cartier-Bresson. Smith most impressed me for his highly personal involvement with his subject, particularly "Minamata" (Japan, 1971-75) and his earlier photographic essays for LIFE Magazine, such as "Country Doctor" (September, 1948) and "Spanish Village" (April, 1951). I was also influenced by Cartier-Bresson's emotional and human approach to photographing people and events.

To bring myself up-to-date, I have chosen three photographers from National Geographic Magazine: Thomas J. Abercrombie, Jonathan S. Blair and Bruce Dale.
exclusivo

lugar habitado más alto del planeta se encuentra en chile

REVISTA DEL DOMINGO LLEGÓ HASTA ALLÍ

izquierda abajo: nuestro fotógrafo Amaldor Añudea junto a los restos menores, que vivieron allí, donde los científicos en Aconcagua. En las otras fotos, el "techo humano" del mundo con el "hombre" complacidos y otro hombre de la región.
En Chile se halla el lugar habitado más alto del planeta. Revista del Domingo llegó hasta allí—adonde ni siquiera llegan los cóndores—para conocer a un grupo de hombres que viven a 6,000 metros de altura.

Autor del reportaje fue vencido en su primer intento. Aquí relata ambas experiencias.

Hoy momentos en que los ojos sólo sirven de adorno. Abiertos o cerrados, sólo se una muralla blanca tocando nuestra nariz. Esto ocurre cuando en la cumbre la nieve cubre la tierra y el viento blanco (viento frío) se pasa como una nube de fantasías refrigeradas.

La temperatura oscila entre 8 y 35 grados bajo cero, según sea noche o día. En ello el aire mantiene siempre una característica: la pobreza de oxígeno, y la presión fisiológica no alcanza a los 400 milímetros.

Por eso no me fue fácil llegar hasta la cumbre del Aucánquilla, “cerro del diablo”, quien se encuentra en la alta puna de la cordillera de los Andes, al Norte de Chile. A mi alrededor sólo veo y escucho a bolivianos, que, para no contradecirme, debo llamar “extranjeros”.

Un grupo de mujeres gordas, vestidas de rojo y amarillo con sombreros verdes, conversan animadamente en quechua. De pronto, en un rincón, una de ellas desata un tiento con comida humeante—A 35 pesos el plato—se corre la voz. Y corren también los platos por el viento. Todos comen rápido. Los inspectores van a pasar a un momento a otro. Cuando aparecen, se tapa la olla, se disfraza con una frazada, pero todos siguen comiendo igual.

Este es el puente más alto de Chile—me indica un “extranjero” amistoso. Ubico la máquina, enfoco...y sorprenderá, con fuerza, me toman el hombro.

—¿Qué hace? —interroga un (supongo) policía de civil.

—Nada, nada...

—Dime el rollo...

—Pero si no he hecho nada...

Ellos y rollos de fotografías sub-expuestas, definitivamente negras...

Había pasado dos noches a 4 mil metros de altura, sin dormir, caminando, o en el baño. Los mineros me convidaron “aguiña flota de puna”. Saino remedio según ellos. No surtió efecto.

Entonces me dieron coca y cebolla.

Tampoco... Nada servía. Mi cabeza era un carrosel. Al final perdí el conocimiento.

Durante varias semanas, obsesionado con mi fracaso, planifiqué un sistema más confiable: primero subir cerros en Santiago...y luego un par de días en Calama, escalar los cerros Piedra Grande (3 mil metros) y Del Inca (3 mil 500). Sólo después de eso podría enfrentar al “cerro del Diablo”.

PESCADO ESPINUDO

Ahora viajo en la tercera clase del Ferrocarril Internacional Antofagasta-La Paz que me dejará en Ollagüe, última estación chilena antes de la frontera. A mi alrededor sólo veo y escucho a bolivianos, que, para no contradecirme, debo llamar “extranjeros”.

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Sigue a la vuelta...
CUMBRE...

...viene de la vuelta.

—Este es recinto militar y está prohibido tomar fotos.

—Si no he tomado ninguna...

Se aclara el multitudinario y mis compañeros de viaje decidieron tranquilizarme. Abandono el quechua, terrono en el que no puedo entrar, para ofrecerme un sandwich de pescado con espinas incluidas.

—Eres turista? —el turista sueña cordial.

—No, soy chileno.

—¡Ah!, es que como vas con mochila...

—Soy fotógrafo. Voy a hacer un reportaje al Aucanquilcha.

—Ufff, si se te feo. Tu país es feo, pero café no más. Puro deserto. Por eso nosotros prefirieron Bolivia. Ahí hay verde.

—Conocen otros lugares de Chile?


CAMINO A AMINCHA

Sigo mi viaje silencioso, pensando en Amincha, el lugar en que viven los chilenos e bolivianos que se arrebatan el azufre al "cerro del diablo". De ahí salen diariamente 2 kilomètres más, hasta la mina donde viven esos 6 hombres solitarios.

De la estación de Ollagüe a Amincha has recorrido 8 kilomètres.

Quince minutos tarde en llegar. La camioneta de la empresa azufriera avanza por un sendero de riopaso rodeado de salares. El paisaje reúne todos los tonos imaginables del café. Aquí viven 70 trabajadores bolivianos e y unos 50 chilenos con sus familias. En total, unos 300 habitantes.

Amincha me recibe de noche. Vislumbro una serie de casas de adobe, viejas, ordenadas en hileras. Adentro no hay agua. Se lava en el patio. Se usan servicios higiénicos colectivos ubicados fuera de las viviendas. No hay retén de carabineros, pensones ni policílicos. La mujer del minero hace su propio pan. Y la comida llega desde Antofagasta. Tienen, eso si, una escuela. El profesor, además de enseñar a 70 niños, debe acudir ocasionalmente al llamado desesperado de las mujeres cuando tienen problemas para dar a luz. Pero la mayoría se siente sola.

Algo en la casa de huéspedes "El Rancho" de la empresa. Muy cordial es la bienvenida, pero como el dueño de la mina ha decrecido zona seca nadie se atreve a ofrecerme el pisco-sour del lugar que llaman "el crucero". Es alcohol de 98 grados con hojas de coca.

Oficialmente nadie toma. Pero por la calle van dos mineros ziguezagueando.

Respetando mi plan de aclimatación, dedico un par de días a recorrer Amincha. Parece un pueblo de viejos. Los nidos, muchas veces, deben ocupar sus ratos libres en recoger leña para cocinar y calentarse. Chileños y bolivianos tienen la piel oscura, dientes blancos, profundos surcos alrededor de ojos y boca. El color blanco-azul de los labios del nueva la afición colectiva de mascar hojas de coca. Se ven mayores. Sólo hablando con ellos es posible adivinar sus edades.

—Hace unos años nos inscribieron 34 chilenos para trabajar en la mina —contesta Héctor Moraleda—. Fui el único que quedó. Los otros no duraron ni quince días. No pudieron acostumbrarse.

Es una vida dura. Trabajo pesado y clima inhóspito. En Amincha se viven dos inviernos. Ocho meses en total, de diciembre a marzo, el boliviano. De mayo a julio, el nacional. Pero sin duda el peor enemigo es la altura. Me cuenta Alberto Larenas, gerente de la empresa minera:

—Muchos bolivianos llegan aquí buscando trabajo, rogando una oportunidad. Atravesan el desierto a pie o con una bicicleta en las manos, pero no traen documentación. Les conseguimos los papeles que quieren. En cambio, los chilenos que dicen no tener plata ni para regresar, después de un par de días no quieren saber nada de la mina. No están hechos para la alturas como los bolivianos.

Hace diez años, sin embargo, la situación era más difícil. El campamento minero estaba ubicado mil 200 metros más arriba, en lo que hoy se llama Estación Angulo. Era conocido mundialmente como "Campamento Aucanquilcha".

—Yo empecé a trabajar en 1943 —recuerda Martina Quispe—. En ese tiempo el "quichca" estaba más malo. La nieve subía hasta diez metros en el campamento. Llevábamos gallinas para tener huevos, pero en cuanto pisaban suelo empezaban a desahogarse como trampas y caían muertes. Los chilenos trataban de acostumbrarse y se aguantaban no más. Dolores de cabeza, vómitos... Cuando empezaban a salearse la sangre por los oídos y la nariz, bajaban derrotados. Claro que ahora el cerro se ha aclimatado.

—¿El "quichca" se ha aclimatado?

—Sí, porque ya no le hacen mal a la gente. Dicen que es un volcán que no tiene respiración. A veces sale alguna vena y se revuelve.

LA PATOTA

Es un grupo especial. Pintorescos, sacrificados, astutos. Temístocles Troncoso fue; hace años, jefe de la mina. Hoy, esfermo de la vista, espera su jubilación. Gana alrededor de trece mil pesos mensuales, pero gasta sólo alarma.

...doce mil en comida y educación. Su medida, casa estar llena de niños.

—¿Todos estos niños son suyos?

—Sí, hay otros en la calle... Y otros que están muertos.

—¿Cuántos son en total?

—A ver. Segundo, Ignacio, Custodio, Luis Humberto... Después sigue la Erna, la Nelly, la Zulma, la Dina. Después, las dos cádiz chicas... La Trinidad del Rosario y la Yanmin... ¿Se me había olvidado Alfonso y Rodolfo? Los muertos, de otra patria. Uno está en Calama...

—¿Piensa tener más?

—No creo, ahora la señora toma pastillas. También son ingeniosos. Es que viendo aquí parece no existir otra posibilidad. Hace poco, Lolo Quispe, supervisador de la mina quedó botado a 35 kilómetros de Ollagüe porque a su camión se le terminó el bencina. Hoy recuerd:

—Me estaba desesperando cuando me acordé que mi cargo era... ¡parafina! Le eché 15 litros y llegó justo. Claro que andaba a dos kilómetros por hora... ¡No tenía fuerza!...

RIGOR SOBRE RUEDAS

Acostrumbrado al aire de Amincha devido subir el "cerro del diablo". Trescientos metros sin problemas. Intento 200 más, pero vuelven las náuseas.

Hasta el otro día. El quichca está cubierto de nieve y sopla viento blanco. Aterro, después de tres horas, en medo. En el mina, alcanzo los 5 mil 200 metros. Mi respiración, el latido de mi corazón rebosando en las venas, son los únicos ruidos que escucho. Sigue nevando y, de pronto, descubro que estoy a 18 kilómetros del campamento, que anhelo, y que mis pies pasan sólo un par de gigantesca y robustas arpilleras. No se ve nada. Ni una luz a la distancia. Ni una huella del camino. De verdad, caminar con ojos abiertos o cerrados da igual.

A pesar de un día no para arañar mis pies (y volver a poner un salvo) me preparo para subir hasta la cumbre de este solitario volcán apagado. Un camino de la mina parte a la derecha a 7 de la mañana desde Amincha con 60 minutos apruebados en la carretera para carga. Los lleva hasta la...
AUCANQUILCHA

desde el año 13

La mina más sítia del mundo, propiedad de la compañía Aucanquility, que formaron los hermanos Raúl, Hipólito y Vicente Carrasco, fue descubierta casualmente el año 13. Habiendo que suerte cuando uno de ellos recorría en mula los alrededores de Ollagüe. A seis mil metros de altura, en la cima del volcán apagado Aucanquility, toneladas de tierra amarilla verdosa fueron una irresistible tentación.

Empiezan entregando caliche (azufre no refinado) a las salitreras. Se trabajaba con llamas, maras y, luego, Ford A y Chevrolet de cuatro cilindros. Transportar el material era difícil. El año 20 construyeron el primer andarivel y cinco años más tarde comienzan a refinar. El actual dueño de la mina, ingeniero Raúl Carrasco, recuerda:

En esa época las oficinas estaban en Ollagüe y los mineros vivían en un campamento ubicado a cinco mil 200 metros de altura. Es que con los camiones antiguos se necesitaban las mismas cincuenta horas para llegar a la cumbre. Ellos tenían que vivir lo más cerca posible. Después, mandamos a hacer unos carnives especiales para estos caminos. Se arman en Estados Unidos, según las indicaciones que entregó una constructora. Tienen piezas de mucha marca.

Gracias a estos “monstruos trepa-caminos”, todos los mineros pudieron trasladarse mil metros más abajo a Aucanquility. Ahí la mina les presta una modesta casa, o una pieza si la familia es chica, con agua y luz gratis.

CUESTAABAJO

Con una inversión de 10 millones de dólares, hoy la mina produce al año 15 mil toneladas de azufre refinado y 25 mil de caliche. Trabajan 126 hombres (“A veces son 180, todo depende de cuántos se acostumbran a la altura”), pero según su dueño, el negocio está malo:

—En los últimos años la cosa ha ido para abajo. El 95% por ciento del azufre que necesitamos se importa y no podemos pensar en crecer y competir con los mercados internacionales, porque nuestras costas se elevaron mucho.

Por eso están trabajando en la forma más económica posible. “En la mina el choper no sólo maneja un camión. De mañana para abajo, cada hombre hace cinco o seis trabajos distintos”. Por economía también, a los mineros se los contrata con un sueldo base de 3 mil 500 a 4 mil pesos y el resto se les entrega en forma de bonos de estímulo, que, supuestamente, no imponen.

—Es el mejor sistema —argumenta Carrasco. Cada año, por mal tiempo, la mina se paran alrededor de tres meses... Si no se produce, cómo vamos a pagarlos?

Los mineros tienen como único pasatiempo las pichangas de fútbol, cuando el tiempo se les permite. (“A veces, cuando un día viene con tiempo, es imposible ver su propia mano”). Antes se les traía películas, pero hoy no se encuentran, salvo las de 10 mil metros que son píntimas”. Se intentaban poner una antena repetidora de televisión. Era muy caro.

—En todo caso —concluye Raúl Carrasco— la gente está contenta. Creo que a ellos les gusta vivir así, aislados de todo. Jamás hemos tenido un huésped...
La cumbre, donde ellos se dedicaban a desenterrar los huesos de los mineros asfixiados por el hielo en el cuerpo de su compañero, fue invadida por una neblina que deslumbró a los trabajadores. Al llegar a la cumbre, los mineros se dispusieron a trabajar. El dia siguiente, con esperanza, se inició el nuevo viaje hasta la cumbre. El mismo camino, los mismos mineros, un poco menos de frío. Aunque de camino, en la primera curva, patinaron... ¡Todos a tierra! El suelo estaba resbaladizo y no se veía a más de tres metros de distancia. Los mineros se dijeron: Sigo detrás. Luego los perdió de vista. Deben subir aún más metros.

Con grandes esfuerzos siguió el camino. La nieve le llegaba hasta la rodilla. Era imposible caminar sin deslumbrar cada cinco pasos. Controló cada curva, las 136 veces por minuto. En tres cuartos de hora (exhausto) consiguió avanzar 200 metros. Me inundó un sueño extraño, un calentón, re-convenciendo que me invitaba a sentarme. Al rato, casi entre sueños, recordó que es así como muchos indios se riñen y mueren.

Sigo subiendo. El borde del camino es la única parte sin nieve. ¡Pero... ¡cabe sólo un pie! La posibilidad de resbaladuras y caídas por pendientes de 300 metros me aterra. Pero eso es la única salida.

De pronto, el silencio recae con un ruido seco, persistente. ¡El andador de la mina! No lo veo, pero su ruido me dice que estoy en la cumbre. Avanzaron unos pasos más. Escuchó voces:

Pase no mía... ¡me gritan desde arriba! \( \Box \)

**CAMINO**: El suelo está cubierto de hielo, pero a menudo no hay pistas que salvan cerca de 200 metros de altura.

**FUTBOL A 4,000 M**: La estación de los mineros, pero a menudo sus partidos se suspenden por temperaturas de invierno con registros de hasta 200 metros de altura.
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