

Mina Mejicana & Its Cableway

Introduction

The Mejicana mine is located near the city of Chilecito, in the province of La Rioja, in northwest Argentina. The workings themselves are sited between 4400 and 5000 metres above sea level (m.a.s.l.), at the foot of the Nevado de Famatina whose summit is at 6125m.a.s.l.. “Famatina” translates from the indigenous language as “Mother of Metals”. Gold, silver, iron, copper, lead & uranium have been mined on the Sierra Famatina massif. It is very likely that the Incas and their predecessors mined here, as Inca remains have been found on the neighbouring summit of Negro Overo.

The 19th century mines in the area, attracted miners from across the Andes in Chile. Eventually there were so many Chileans living in the town that it became known as “Chilecito”, or “Little Chile”. Today it is the second largest city in the province of La Rioja, with a population of 43,000 people. Much of the modern economy is based on agriculture and many good wines, including some of the Co-op supermarket’s Fairtrade ones, are grown in the Famatina valley.

In 2007, local pressure groups were successful in preventing the Canadian multi-national corporation, Barrick Gold, from restarting mining operations in the area. There were concerns about the environmental impact of mining, especially cyanide based chemicals getting into the water supply. Water running off the mountains is essential for the irrigation systems for local agriculture. The ensuing political scandals led to a change of leadership at provincial level and a change of national government policies in Buenos Aires. Any modern operations would almost certainly be opencast and destroy the remains described in this document.

Mina La Mejicana

S 29° 00.761 W 067° 46.484

The Sierra Famatina is a large, ancient volcanic massif that lies to the east of the main Andean ridge. There are mines for various minerals all around its edges. La Mina La Mejicana lies on the eastern slopes of Nevado de Famatina, also known on official maps as “Cerro General M. Belgrano”, though this name is rarely used. The only access is on dirt roads through the villages of Famatina and Coralles. Beyond Coralles, there is about 30km of “proper” off-road driving on a mixture of tracks and riverbeds where a “camioneta” (4x4 pick-up) is essential.

There must have been ancient mines in the Sierra Famatina but it was in the early 19th century that things really got going. In 1820, the riches that came out of the mines near Chilecito enabled Governor Davila to establish his own mint, replacing coins made with metal from the famous Potosi silver mines in Bolivia. Throughout this period in Argentine history there were civil wars between those who wanted a centralised state and other who wanted a federation of independent provinces. This wealth effectively made the province of La Rioja independent. The following 30 years saw controversial attempts by people from Britain and Buenos Aires to manage the wealth and the mines. In 1847, Governor Mota changed the official name of the town to “Villa Argentina” and laid out its modern grid pattern of streets, typical of South American towns. Today it is officially known as “Chilecito”.

The site today consists of a central collection of buildings & ore hoppers at the head of the cableway, with the remains of inclines radiating out, up to the adits. The site is also criss-crossed by a network of modern bulldozer tracks that go up to around 5100m.a.s.l. These were presumably the work of Barrick Gold, from when they were looking at the site to potentially re-open the mine.

The buildings at the head of the cable way must have included some accommodation and store rooms. There are also cast iron parts with Ingersoll-Rand's name on them, so there must have been a compressor house here to supply the rock drills. However it is unclear how the compressor was powered but there is a spilled wagon load of coal at the cableway's head. Was there a steam engine here or was the coal for heating the miner's barracks? There are barrack type buildings a short distance from the cableway and others next to some of the adits, higher up the hill. It must have been hard work to acclimatise to the altitude, arriving at the mine at 4500m.a.s.l. from Chilecito at only 1075m.a.s.l. A similar experience can be had by taking the cable car from Chamonix to the top of the Aiguille du Midi near Mont Blanc today.

Ore was moved in trucks on rails out of the adits, along levels and then down self-acting inclines to the cableway. One incline head is intact on site, along with evidence showing that the incline rails were attached to metal stakes in the ground, rather than resting on sleepers. The nearest trees are over 30km away so any timber used on site would have had to come up the cableway. From the construction of the incline head staging, trucks on the incline must have sat on platforms to keep them level.

Although this was a gold mine, there is a lot of chalcopyrite in the spoil tips. Presumably this was taken along with the gold and smelted somewhere. The river banks in the valley below the mine are coated in layers of sulphurous clay that have washed out of these deposits. The water is undrinkable and visitors to the site need to bring all of their water for their stay with them.

Presumably as work went on, the mining moved further uphill, away from the cableway. About 500m above the cableway head are two compressors on wheels.

There is no evidence of any ore processing happening on site. The ore must have been in such quantity and of such quality that it could be hand sorted and sent to the cableway.

For photos of the remains, please visit www.aditnow.co.uk.

The Cableway

W 29° 10.830 S 067° 29.496 (Terminal in Chilecito)

It was at the start of the 20th century that the Mejjicana mine became properly mechanised. Dr. Joaquin V. Gonzalez, a famous Argentine educator from nearby Nonogasta put forward the idea of a cableway up the mountain. The money for the project came from British investors and it was the withdrawal of their capital at the start of the First World War that started the decline of the mine.

The law to allow the construction of the cableway was passed by the Argentine Congress in November 1901, with Presidential approval coming in July 1902. Construction started in 1903 and the cableway was fully operational on the 1st January 1905. Parts were sourced from five foreign companies: Leishman and Son Rope Co. (Saint Louis, USA), Bullivan & Co. (London, UK), Henderson & Co. (London, UK), Ceretti & Tanfani (Turin, Italy), J. Pholing & Co. (Cologne, Germany) and Adolf Bleichert & Co. (Leipzig, Germany). For its time, this was leading edge technology and included one of the first telephone systems in Argentina, for the stations to talk to each other. Around 1,600 people and 1,000 mules were involved in the construction project.

The finished cableway was just over 34km long, ascended 3510m and was supported by 262 pylons between the 9 stations. It ran at 9km/h and could move 450 wagons of up to 500kg, transporting around 12,000 tonnes per month. As well as ore trucks, there were special trucks for transporting supplies up to the mine, tankers for water and trucks with 2 seats for people. There was also a cable-greasing car, with space for a person and a manual grease pump. Power came from steam engines located at winding stations. The engines powered sections of cable on either side of them. For more information and statistics please see the excellent Wikipedia page listed in the bibliography.

The cableway ran until the closure of the mine in 1920, though the bottom section ran as a tourist attraction until a fatal accident in 1929. In 1982 it was declared to be a National Historic Monument by the Argentine government and in 2000 the cableway briefly ran again.

It is still possible to visit the terminal of the cableway in Chilecito. Access to the site is free, but it is appropriate to pay the guides a tip. There is a small museum on site but the labelling and the guides speak Spanish. As well as the end of the cableway, there are four giant ore hoppers and tall sitka spruce crane. As at the mine, there is no evidence of any processing plant here, so presumably the ore was just transhipped onto the railway. For photos of the remains, please visit www.aditnow.co.uk.

Summary

El Cablecarril de la Mina La Mejicana is an amazing feat of engineering, set in a spectacular location. Hopefully it will be preserved for future generations to wonder at. If you're ever passing, the terminal in Chilecito is well worth stopping to see: impressive for specialists and non specialists alike. The town of Chilecito is a small, friendly place and rural Argentina is a great place to visit, eat steak, and drink wine.

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☺ Thanks to:

John Biggar of "Andes" for taking me to the area and putting up with being stuck in a tent with me whilst I went on about rocks & mines!