

Episode 115: Into the Mines

Summary

Nick and Wendy visit a working silver mine in Bolivia. They talk about the extremely difficult conditions they saw and the impactful experience they had in the mines.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you once again from Bolivia. And last time we were coming off the high, figuratively and literally, of the Salar de Uyuni and the Bolivian *altiplano* and all of the great sights that we saw there. What we want to talk about today that's maybe not quite so flowery and positive, but something that's really important and something that affected us both quite a lot. Uhh, and this is the silver mines of a city called Potosí in Bolivia. And two days ago we had the privilege, I suppose you could say, of going down into these mines, and spending about two-and-a-half hours inside the mines. And it was quite an emotional and a very interesting experience.

Wendy: Yeah, very emotional. Uhh, very draining¹ emotionally and also physically. Uhh, I was really exhausted for all of that day and really all of the next day after we got out of the mine. Umm, it was something that I was really quite afraid of doing, but at the same time, I wanted to do it. I felt like I needed to conquer that fear, and it was something that I wanted to experience. And I'm really glad that I had the experience and I'm also really glad that it's over and I will never do it again.

Nick: So to give a bit of an introduction, this city of Potosí, uhh, was a colonial city, uhh, when the Spanish were ruling this part of the world and they found silver in this big mountain, which is next to Potosí, and it became one of the two major silver mines of all of Spanish America, and that's what basically fuelled², uhh, what in Spain is called the *Siglo de Oro*, so it's actually the Golden Century but it's actually, literally, fuelled by silver. And this mine in Potosí is one of the major, uhh, mines where they had discovered and extracted silver. And so for the last nearly 500 years, it's been this famous mine and it's been this place where a lot of people in the area, especially a lot of indigenous people, have worked. And working in mines is always dangerous. Umm, it's not glamorous in any way, shape or form³. And it's - well, depending on what you're able to find - it's not usually, umm, very well paid either. Umm, and so we wanted to go there and just really see what it

¹ draining: tiring, exhausting, leaving you with no energy

² fuelled: generated, incited, was the power behind

³ in any way, shape or form (fixed phrase): (not) at all, in the slightest

was like, to go into a mine in the third world, and to see what the conditions were. And we felt that was important to see how local people are not forced (to live), but it's certainly a major way that the people in the city earn a living. Uhh, today there are about 18,000 miners who go in regularly, uhh, who go in day-by-day, and so it's obviously still a huge industry, and so it's such a big part of this town, and so we felt that it was important to go and see it.

So there are quite a few agencies that do these tours inside the mines, umm, but they're very careful to point out at the beginning that it's not a tour, it's not a tourist activity in the normal sense. It's a working mine, you go down in there and you have to be very careful. Umm, you'll be in these very narrow passages which have tracks where the carts that the miners use to bring out and bring, uhh, back in, the minerals. And so you have to dodge⁴ these carts. You know, they're going very fast sometimes, and you have to get out of the way. Uhh, and so, yeah, it's definitely not a walk in the park⁵.

Wendy: No, and because this hill has been mined for nearly 500 years as you said, they've, umm, created, you know, more and more tunnels so it's really like Swiss cheese inside there. And it's not very stable in many cases and sometimes it does collapse. And that could happen, you know, while we were inside there, it could have collapsed. And then we would have been in just as much danger as the miners working inside there.

Nick: Yeah, we did sign a form saying that, umm, if that did happen, we couldn't sue⁶ the agency that brought us there or anything like that. Or it wasn't their fault.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Umm, but, yeah, we kind of put our life in their hands to a certain degree. Umm, and so the conditions in the mine are very harrowing, or the whole experience was very harrowing⁷. So it's very dark in there, obviously. You have a torch or a flashlight that's attached to the, umm, kind of...

Wendy: Helmet.

Nick: ...helmet that you're wearing. Umm...

Wendy: But there's no lights inside at all. It's just the lights that you carry yourself on your helmet.

⁴ dodge: avoid, get out of the way of

⁵ a walk in the park (fixed phrase): something that's easy, a cakewalk

⁶ sue: start a lawsuit demanding money for loss or damages

⁷ harrowing: emotionally difficult, disturbing, distressing

Nick: And the tunnels and the passages are not very tall and I am quite tall, I guess, and so I had to duck a lot as we were walking, and that ... that was quite trying. You know, when you're in there for a couple of hours, it becomes really annoying to have to walk like a hunchback with your head ducked all the time. Umm, and so if you're, yeah, if you're a very tall miner, that would just be really, really annoying. Just hour after hour, day after day, to have to walk like that.

Wendy: Yeah, uhh, probably most of the Bolivians working there are a bit shorter than you are. But I'm shorter than you are, uhh, and I still hit my head, I'd say probably about 30 times while I was inside the mines. Even though you know that you're supposed to duck, but somehow, I would always stand up too far at some point and, yeah, I hit my head a lot of times. Thankfully that's the most ... the worst thing that happened in terms of us getting hurt. Umm, but it is a dangerous place, certainly, to work, and I cannot imagine going in there every day for nine or 10 hours a day like these miners do.

Nick: Right, so Potosí is at altitude. It's actually higher than La Paz, which is the capital. And so the mine is about 4000 metres above sea level, so that just adds to it. Because when you're in there, the quality of the air is very, very poor. There's a lot of dust and it can be very toxic and you add the altitude to that, and, umm, it's not good breathing inside there.

Wendy: No, no, the silicon dust that they are breathing in all the time. If ... for people who stay in there for a long time and work there for years, uhh, they develop a lung disease. I think it's called silicosis. Umm, and that's because of the dust that they're constantly breathing in. Also, they can't eat at all while they're inside the mines because if they ate, that dust would get onto their food and they would end up eating the dust, ingesting the dust, and then that would cause terrible problems for their, umm, for their insides, for their stomach and intestines. So, uhh, because they can't eat at all, they end up chewing cocoa leaves, which I mentioned in our previous episode about Bolivia. It's a common thing to chew cocoa, uhh, to help with the altitude sickness, but it also helps, uhh, alleviate⁸ hunger. So you'll see them with ... it looks like they have a big pouch inside their cheeks, and that's because they've stuffed a bunch of cocoa leaves inside there, and that's what they chew to keep them from being hungry all day.

Nick: Right, so the way that you go around in the mine, as we've said, mostly is walking down these passages, and that's also where the carts come and go from, so there are tracks, as in train tracks, that are there. But you also sometimes have to climb down tunnels. Uhh, so we did that, we went down 35 metres below where the main passage was that we were walking on, and we were on hands and knees trying to go down this tunnel. And you had to, umm, grab on with your hands and try to find footholds, and that was quite difficult.

⁸ alleviate: ease, lessen, make easier to deal with

Wendy: That was very difficult. That was when I was the most frightened. Umm, I had kind of come to grips with⁹ walking through the tunnels, but, yeah, this wasn't really a tunnel. It was just something that, you know, they had carved out of the mountain. And, uhh, it was very difficult, but that's how we had to go to get to where the miners were actually working, and were using their hammers and chisels to carve the minerals out of the wall.

Nick: Right, and you even had a go at doing that yourself!

Wendy: I did, yeah. Our guide asked me to come and give it a try. And I'm glad that I had that experience, because it just added another element for me to help me understand how difficult the work is. 'Cause the hammer was really heavy. And I only did it for two or three minutes, uhh, but even then, you know, my arm was so sore the next day just from hammering with this thing for two or three minutes, and they do it for hours and hours.

Nick: Right, so it's this kind of double aspect of the job that they do. It's the very difficult conditions in terms of the danger, in terms of the air and all of that. And it's also the very physical work of hammering and chiseling out of all these minerals.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And depending on what they find, you know, that influences how much money they're able to make.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And so we were talking to some people, and they'd only recently been finding the kind of lower grade minerals. And that really doesn't produce a lot of money for them at all.

Wendy: No, so it's a big lottery, really. Sometimes it can be lucrative¹⁰, it can be profitable. And in fairness our guide said that overall, he used to be a miner, and he said that overall, he made more money as a miner than he does now as a tour guide. But you never know what you're going to come home with. Umm, and so if you have an unlucky streak, then you could be in real trouble and not have enough money to feed yourself and your family.

Nick: Yep, so overall it was a very difficult experience for us. And I mean it's just so hard to imagine that after two, two-and-a-half hours, we were ready to be out of there and to never go back again. But these people have to come back, day after day, week after week, and in some cases decade after decade - there are people who have been doing it 20, 30 years. And so, umm, it's, uhh, it was very emotional for us and to see what life is like for these people and, umm..

⁹ come to grips with (phrase): adjusted to, adapted to, begun to manage

¹⁰ lucrative: profitable (financially)

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: ...hopefully, uhh, everything works out OK for them all.

Wendy: Yeah, it gave us a lot of perspective and helped us to realise how privileged we are and how lucky we are to have the lives that we have.

Nick: For sure.

Comprehension Questions

1. Which part of being in the mines did Nick describe as 'trying' and 'annoying'?
2. According to Wendy, why can't the miners eat while inside the mine?
3. What is the 'double aspect' of the difficulty of working in the mines that Nick referred to?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. If you take medicine when you're sick or injured, it can help _____ the pain.
2. The exam was really easy. I studied a lot for it because I was worried about it, but in the end it was _____.
3. Online businesses like Amazon struggled in the early years of the Internet, but they quickly became very _____.
4. In the late 1970s, China began opening up its economy and this _____ enormous economic growth that continues to this day.
5. I thought the orchestra performance was outstanding, but I'm not an expert _____, so I can't really say it with conviction.
6. The extreme heat makes it very _____ just to go outside, so I tend to stay inside and conserve energy instead.
7. If you have an accident in the workplace and the company is at fault, you can _____ them for damages.
8. She's still trying to _____ with the death of her mother. It's been a few months but she hasn't been able to move on with her life yet.
9. Going to Africa and seeing a lot of people in poverty was a very _____ experience for them. They had never been out of the first world before.
10. In the classic video game Frogger, you have to try to cross the street and _____ moving cars at the same time.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you go into the mines if you went to Bolivia? Why or why not?
2. In general, do you think this kind of tourism is a good thing or a bad thing? Explain your answer.
3. Have you ever had a similar experience to the one Nick and Wendy had in the mines? What was it?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Having to duck constantly and walk hunchbacked, because he is too tall to stand upright in the tunnels in the mines.
2. Because the food will get dust on it, which can be toxic if consumed.
3. That the conditions are very difficult and the work itself (hammering and chiseling) is also difficult.

Exercises

1. alleviate
2. a walk in the park
3. lucrative
4. fuelled
5. in any way, shape or form
6. draining
7. sue
8. come to grips with
9. harrowing
10. dodge