

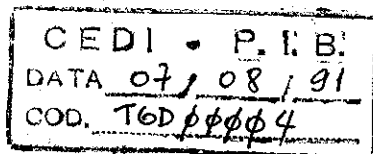


Ephemeral Frontiers

In Venezuela, the last of the independent diamond miners lead a rugged existence'

by David John Thomas

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The diamond mines of Venezuela have attracted men from all over the world. Found among the scattered diggings and cut-up stream beds, the palm or canvas shacks, are Italians, Czechs, Hungarians, Syrians, Lebanese, and most of all, Brazilians. There are also a few Pemon Indians, whose ancestral lands form the southeast corner of Venezuela. In Brazil these men are called *garimpeiros*, or "prospectors," while in Guyana they are known as "pork-knockers," presumably because of the salt pork they carry; in Venezuela they are simply *mineros*.

Pick-and-shovel diamond mining has been around in South America for more than two hundred years, but it became particularly important in the twentieth century as Europeans and South American nationals penetrated and expanded into various parts of the Amazon and Orinoco drainages. In the 1930s, the *garimpeiros* in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso worked at the fringes of the cattle economy. After World War II, mining surged in Venezuela and in the Brazilian territories of Acre, Rondônia, and Roraima. But in 1970 the Brazilian government shut down the independent miners of Acre and Rondônia in favor of international consortiums and transferred the *garimpeiros* by air to Roraima. In a few years' time, when the consortiums have also taken over the diggings in Venezuela, the last of the independent miners will be gone and with them will go a frontier phenomenon that evokes the famous gold rushes of California and the Klondike in the last century.

Antonio examines his largest mesh suruca sieve for diamonds, which may weigh a carat or more. His partner has emptied his first two screens and is double-checking the sounds for the glitter of diamonds.

Like Dawson and Whitehorse, which were centers for the Yukon miners, Uriman, Icabaru, and other locations in southeast Venezuela are stepping-off points for independent miners. Uriman, on the middle reaches of the Caroni River, consists of a small airstrip and a bunch of mud- or concrete-walled buildings that have fallen into varying degrees of disrepair. It is quiet now, but in 1950 Uriman knew the first of a series of booms that brought miners into the area in droves. Ramon Peña, the local *patron*, or "boss," is known to the inhabitants of Uriman as either *comerciante* ("merchant") or *comprador* ("buyer"), as the occasion warrants. He recounts his story this way:

Icabaru [a mining site on the river of the same name] was discovered in 1947. I spent four months at the mines then. Here, nearby, in 1950, some Italians found the mine called Abeki. They were hidden, working secretly. When the boom hit, there were six hundred miners overnight. But the governor closed the mines five days after I got there, and they flew the miners out by military plane. In '52, after the elections, they freed up the mines, and I came here as a *comerciante*.

Los Frijoles ("the beans") is almost a day's hard walk from Uriman, across the river and beyond a humpbacked mountain known as Morrocoy ("turtle"). The settlement comprises just a few palm-roofed lean-tos—with hammocks strung under them—and a kitchen shack. Various contingents of miners, numbering from two to five or so, have come and gone, leaving their marks in the open pits along the nearby stream bed.

The miners work under a section of the Venezuelan mining law of 1945 known as *libre aprovechamiento*. According to this provision, anyone can explore and excavate empty lands, with certain restrictions. (Many of these so-called empty lands in southern Venezuela are actually occupied by Indian tribes, who have suffered the

disruptive effects of mining while deriving little or no benefit.) The miners' deep excavations cannot exceed four square meters (4.8 square yards) in cross-sectional area, and each trench or other surface excavation cannot exceed one hundred square meters (120 square yards). Of course, if someone has filed a concession claim with the government, then only the concessionaire and his employees are permitted to work the land for mineral deposits.

When they think they have found a likely spot, the miners often must dig down twenty or thirty feet to get to the diamond-bearing layer, or formation. The diamonds in this part of Venezuela have been deposited in scattered clumps, usually along or actually in the stream beds and riverbeds; there are few if any diamond pipes, as are found in South Africa. The miners work with a shovel, a bucket, and a set of sieves known by the Brazilian term *suruca*. The *suruca* is a stack of three circular sieves with progressively finer meshes. Standing in the pit, knee-deep in water, the miner shakes the top sieve, swirling the earth half in, half out of the water to allow the heavier stones to come toward the center. After handpicking through the sieve for the small gray white stones he is seeking, the miner proceeds to the next, finer sieve. When all three meshes have been used in succession, the leftover gravel and sand is dumped in a pile beside the pit.

The miners spend long, silent hours at the grueling work of *o surucazo* ("swishing gravel"). Clothing is minimal in the water-filled pits—swimming trunks, shirt, broad-brimmed straw hat. Shoes are useless and are saved mainly for trips away from the mines. A small, gasoline-powered pump is often needed to reduce the water level in the pit enough to permit work. During the rainy season, mining is often suspended because there is too much water in the pits.

The miner is up before dawn and,



His shop in Ciudad Bolívar helps support Zurita's diamond-mining ventures in the wilderness. Here, he arranges the supplies, while his experienced Pemon Indian helpers rest up for the river journey.

Logs shore up the sides of this nearly forty-foot-deep cut. A miner removes large stones and lumps of clay that are clogging the pump used to reduce the water level.



unless he takes time out for hunting or fishing, may work until dusk. A cup of coffee and a lump of bread usually do for breakfast, while most afternoon or evening meals include pasta, the ubiquitous staple. Some miners operating at sites such as Los Frijoles often clear plots by the slash-and-burn method so that they can grow manioc, corn, and sugar cane. Evenings are sometimes spent exchanging stories. Miners with transistor radios usually tune in to "Correo de Guayana," an informational program broadcast daily from Ciudad Bolívar at 6:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. The broadcast transmits messages from miners to their partners, friends, and relatives, for example, "Meet me in two weeks in Uriman with your partner so-and-so."

Miners work as partners, or *socios*,



and share the proceeds equally, unless one is the owner of the pump, in which case he takes a bigger cut. The *socio* relationship lasts only until the diamonds have been sold; the miners are then free to go their separate ways or to join together in a new round of work. The miner continues his backbreaking labor until the site is played out or he cannot get any more credit for supplies. In one type of arrangement, known as *medio plazo*, an entrepreneur will stake miners to provisions and equipment in exchange for half the income from their sales. Such an entrepreneur usually owns equipment, has had experience in the mines, and is sharp enough to prevent individual miners from dumping diamonds on the refuse pile in order to return for them after dark.

The swift-flowing rivers and up-and-down trails of the upper Caroni region are long and arduous. Getting provisions into these areas is difficult, and the markup on goods of all types is enormous. Various small businessmen, transporting their wares by canoe from the nearest airstrip, sell everything from rice, salt, pasta, sardines, and other staples to transistor radios and sports clothes at prices three to four times those of Ciudad Bolívar, about two hundred air miles away.

The lines of supply to the miners are ultimately by air—either the workhorse DC-3s of World War II vintage ("U.S. Army Air Corps, 1943," says the plaque just inside one cabin), smaller one- or two-engine planes, or if the find is rich enough, costly helicopters that can land in a small patch of cleared forest. Private concerns

Agustín and León walk a canoe against the strong current of the Caroni River at a point where the shallow, swift water is dangerous. They must make this arduous trip to get supplies for the camp.

operate cargo planes out of the airport in Ciudad Bolívar, and the government airline, Linea Aeropostal Venezolana (affectionately called *la ataúd volante*, "the flying coffin"), runs flights to the upper Caroni region on an average of three times a week. During a boom time, they may land four flights a day at the Uriman airstrip. If the boom is big enough, private messenger services, known as *representaciones*, transmit cash and messages by air from the miners to their relatives or friends in Ciudad Bolívar and elsewhere in Venezuela. Some equipment makers, including one American engineer from Texas, have set up shop in Ciudad Bolívar to supply mechanical rigs and pumping platforms for deep water and river work in some of the more intensely mined areas; they fly these rigs in by air.

A miner's life is a long series of wanderings, searchings, booms, and blow-outs. One miner I knew was a man in his forties from Sicily, who prided himself on his home-baked bread. When I first encountered him on a mountaintop many hours upstream by canoe from Uriman, he was on the last six months of a four-year stretch spent there with his Pemon Indian

In the village of San Salvador de Paul, a miner from the island of Barbados and a shopkeeper relax in the latter's grocery store.

The village has grown with the discovery of fresh diamond deposits.

helper. Every six months, having mined just enough to pay off his debt to Ramon Peña, he had come downriver to Uriman to sell what diamonds he had, get new provisions (on credit), and throw a good drunk. He spoke of the work in the mines as difficult, but said proudly, "No one tells me when to get up in the morning." Whenever he could manage it, he would fly out of the airstrip at Uriman to Ciudad Bolívar, there to spend his gains on liquor and women until the money ran out. Miners, like horse-players, most often die broke. There are fabulous tales told on the riverfront in Ciudad Bolívar of miners who blew \$10,000 in two weeks and had nothing to show for it at the end.

As a seller, the miner is at the bottom of a long marketing chain, which stretches from the remotest parts of Venezuela, Brazil, and other parts of the Amazon area to local centers, such as Ciudad Bolívar, to national metropolises, such as Caracas and São Paulo, and on to the world market centers of New York, London, and Amsterdam. The miner sells his diamonds to the *comerciantes* or to local diamond buyers, many of whom are financed by firms in Ciudad Bolívar. If there is a boom going on, these buyers arrive with thousands of bolívares in cash, which is usually in an attaché case chained to their wrist. Once at the boom camp, a buyer sets up a stand with scales and a magnifying eyeglass and awaits the miner. As one buyer, a Lebanese, confided to me, the whole game for the buyer is to classify the diamonds into as low a category as possible, in order to manage a suitable profit margin. During a boom, many buyers are present and the miner can go from one to another if he does not like the price offered for his lot of diamonds. But if there is no boom, he will have to sell to the available local buyer, in order to meet expenses.

Diamonds fall into three categories: *talla*, the best class, are high-quality stones with no defects; *industrial*, the next lowest category, represents the



bulk of Venezuelan production; *fondo*, the lowest category, is almost worthless. Stones are paid for according to size, quality, and condition (internal defects or surface scars diminish the value). While prices respond to world market fluctuations, the buyers on the Caroni are quick to point out that a drop in the world market price reaches the mines in twenty-four hours while a rise in the market may take up to fifteen or twenty days to reach the mines. The companies in New York and London simply send out orders to "buy more, buy more." The buyer, then, must be willing to pay just enough to get the miner to sell and just little enough to earn his 5 percent when he resells in Ciudad Bolívar.

Buyers who do not judge correctly will soon experience severe losses, and all of them have their ups and downs. When asked about the percentage gain on a transaction, one buyer had this to say: "Well, that depends a lot on the ability of the buyer and of the seller since there are diamonds with imperfections—containing carbon, badly scratched, or of wrong color. The most common color, the white, has the most value. But when there is a defect, not even the buyer really knows the value."

Ramon Peña is the most important diamond buyer and merchant in the vicinity of the Los Frijoles and Guacharaca mines. Although he owns a house in Ciudad Bolívar, he prefers the relaxed life style at Uriman.



I have had times when I have lost 10,000 bolívars [\$2,500] in one lot of diamonds. Sometimes I have gained 5, 10, and even 20 percent. But not all the time."

The next level of the chain, after the local buyer, is the intermediary in Ciudad Bolívar, where a number of small firms buy diamonds for export. Some firms are one-man operations; others consist of two or three partners, working with their own capital or with that of foreign companies. One intermediary, for example, is a representative of a Belgian firm. He has his group of agents, who buy diamonds in the mines for him. He gives them their percentage and then exports the diamonds to Belgium. He also buys directly.

The local buyer who only resells within Venezuela pays for a permit

from the *consejo municipal* of the district he buys in. The exporter, however, must pay a 3 percent tax on the market value of all diamonds he exports. At the Ministry of Mines and Hydrocarbons, officials weigh and calculate the value of the diamonds, give the exporter a form that indicates the amount of his tax, and send him to the bank to pay it.

From the miner's point of view, the constraints of the market are just the price one must pay for going where one wills or where the action is. Some complain that diamond price rises are much slower to reach the mines than are drops in the value of their diamonds. They know full well the disparity between the prices of food and clothing in Ciudad Bolívar and those at Uriman or the mine. And they know that gradu-

ally the lands of the upper Caroni and similar areas are being consolidated into concessions. But the miners will hang on as long as they can in small pockets such as those at Los Frijoles. Many of them left home so long ago that there is no place to which they could return, even if they could afford to get back.

The process of consolidation will gradually overtake these independent miners, as the shifting mining frontier is transformed into an assemblage of extractive industries manned by the employees of huge national and multinational firms. The chain of market exploitation will be merged into the vertical structure of the modern corporation, and the free-lance miner will become a wage-laborer, insofar as he survives at all. □

