

*The Seduction of
Real de Catorce*



Mauro Degollado

▶ The two ends of the Ogario tunnel.



Courtesy of the San Luis Potosí State Ministry of Tourism

“The magic of Real de Catorce lies in the energy of the ore lying underneath us, the ore that is the cause of the attraction, like a magnet that makes people who come once return,” says Doña Candelaria, an old resident of the town.¹ And you would have to agree. Real de Catorce exercises a kind of supernatural influence that, with time, turns the wish to return into a need.

Nevertheless, every outsider who visits it gives a different reason for returning. In my case, it would be to get rid of that feeling of a “presence” that I carried with me from the moment we went through the tunnel and came out into that unexpected scene, jammed between arid mountains with an almost metallic blue in the background. I think that it is the souls of so many dead who refuse to leave the place, since, according to legend, from its very foundation, many have died violently here. It is said that the first were 14 outlaws who held up the stagecoaches loaded down with the gold and silver mined in the area, who were all hanged. That is how it began to be known as “the place where the 14 were killed.” But, even before that a meeting of souls must have started because of the many miners trapped in the belly of the mineshafts in over a century of working its veins.

◀ Photo previous page, Elsie Montiel.

Even today, sporadically, some people “stay behind.” That is what the guides who take you around the town say. They are people who explored the area without a guide and carelessly went into the innumerable tunnels, never to come out again alive.

Others have come attracted by the desire for a mystical experience. Real de Catorce is an obligatory stop on the way to the Cerro del Quemado, home of the gods of the Huichols.² Every fall, from Nayarit, Jalisco and Zacatecas, Huichols make the journey on foot to the place where they will find their sacred food, peyote. The trip takes many days, but they never fail. Accordingly, hundreds of young backpackers from all over the world come with the hope of reaching the place where the legendary peyote grows and, perhaps, to test its virtues.

Real de Catorce is also the place of residence of the venerated image of Saint Francis of Assisi, known as the “*charrito* saint” or “Panchito.” His annual fiesta, culminating October 4, attracts thousands of pilgrims who invade the town and its environs from September 22 to October 12, making it impossible to get there by any means of transportation, whether public or private. Trucks and cars have to park kilometers away, before the tunnel leading to the town. Legend has it that this saint is not only completely miraculous, but that it also has its own ghost story. The articulated

wooden figure of the little *charrito* (or traditional Mexican cowboy) was originally placed in the Guadalupe Chapel, until it began to be “seen” wandering around the town in the middle of the night. It walked through the town toward the late eighteenth-century Purísima Concepción Church, where it disappeared. The watchmen saw the figure so often that it was decided to move it to the church, whereby the sightings ceased and the miracles and multitudinous pilgrimages began. So they say.

More recently, the town became famous and made some money because it was used for filming movies with world-famous actors, who left behind them innumerable stories that the guides through the town take full advantage of. For example, they say that Julia Roberts, who made a movie here with Brad Pitt, did not want to come by car, and the only way to bring her was by helicopter. Of course, the town did not have a heliport, so one had to be improvised near the old cemetery. But that was unsatisfactory to the illustrious actress, because when it landed it stirred up enormous clouds of dust. So, the production team asked for the space to

land the helicopter to be cemented over overnight. Naturally, Roberts is not around to corroborate the story, and the only remains of the cement are a few traces eroded by wind and soil, but the site is known as the Julia Roberts Heliport anyway.

But, even with all this background, a first-time visitor will not understand the inexplicable seduction the town exudes, with its streets that can practically be counted on the fingers of two hands, with no more than 1,500 inhabitants, abandoned buildings, arid scenery, situated at more than 2750 meters above sea level, making its nights freezing and its days dry and hot. Not at all surprisingly, until recently it was considered a ghost town, a name well earned in my opinion because here, I repeat, the souls of those who refuse to leave even when they have gone on to a better life continue to wander around together with the living.

ORIGINS AND DESTINY

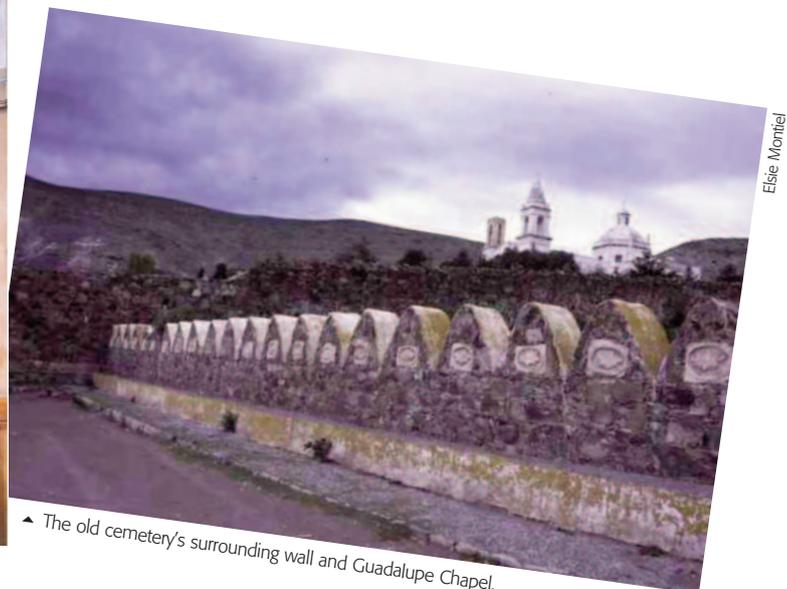
Real de Catorce is one of the countless towns that grew in the wake of the mining bonanza and de-

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Mauricio Degollado

▲ The “charrito” saint.



Elicé Morrón

▲ The old cemetery's surrounding wall and Guadalupe Chapel.

clined when the veins wore out. It was declared a “real de minas,” or a mining town, in 1639 under the viceroyalty of the Marquis of Cadereyta. At that time it was called Real de Minas de Nuestra Señora de la Limpia Concepción de los Álamos del Catorce. They used the word “real” to designate a mining town, especially if it had silver. It was dedicated to the “Purísima Concepción”, the Immaculate Conception, because of the Spaniards’ Catholicism; it was “de los álamos” because poplar trees abounded in the town and its environs; and “del catorce” because of the aforementioned 14 outlaws. Down through the years, the name changed and was finally condensed to Real de Catorce. It was founded as a town in the 1770s when the first vein of ore was stumbled on by chance in the area.

Perhaps the difference between this mining town and others is that its location in the Catorce Mountains determined that when mining declined in the early twentieth century, it was abandoned and condemned to isolation. At its height, the town had more than 15,000 inhabitants, three daily newspapers, magazines dedicated to art and culture, many two-storey buildings, a theater, a cock-fighting ring and a bullring. The Mexican Revolution and overexploitation of the mineral deposits brought ruin. By 1915, the population had plummeted to less than 200. One part of that handful

of inhabitants were dedicated to local trade, and the rest eked out a living by subsistence agriculture. Until a few decades ago, when its fame as a ghost town turned it into a tourist attraction.

Here, there are no big restaurants or multi-star hotels; no banks or exchange houses; television is only available by satellite and few cell phones have a signal. However, time flies because its cobblestone streets can be explored parsimoniously; there are several points of interest, places to have an excellent meal, and inns that, without losing their local flavor, offer modern accommodations. Of course, the visit of international stars turned some hotels into luxury villas.

As the sun sets, the cold and wind make themselves felt, and the feeling of being accompanied by “the others” increases. However, you do not stop wanting to stay the night.

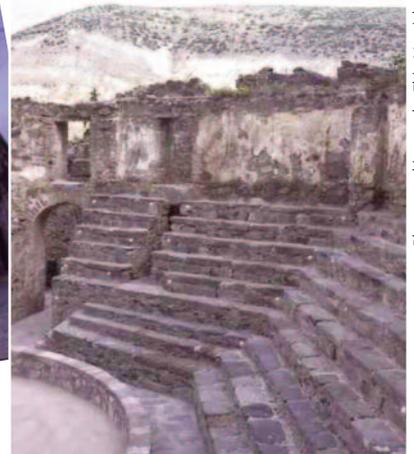
Real is reached by an ascending stone-paved highway that offers wonderful views of the valley; you pass by the Luz and Santa Ana Mines until, turning a bend, you reach the Ogarrio Tunnel, the only access on foot or by motor vehicle. The tunnel stretches 2.3 kilometers through the mountain’s solid rock, and was built in the early 1900s, using dynamite for the first time in Mexico to blast through. Since it is only wide enough for one vehicle, watchmen at each end of the tunnel



▲ A panoramic view of the town.



▲ One of many two-storey buildings now in ruins.



▲ Cock-fighting ring.

Photos on this page by Elsie Montiel



Photos on this page by Mauricio Degollado

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direct traffic so that two vehicles do not enter at the same time in opposite directions. It is riddled with innumerable semi-invisible caves, and they say that a ghostly miner also makes his appearance here at night.

Once in the town, it is time for a panoramic tour, and you turn around to the left on a narrow road that curves until it comes to a point that gives you a view of the entire *real*. Its terraced constructions, with the Purísima Concepción Church as the centerpiece, merge with stone-colored mountains behind them. Getting to the town takes a few minutes; then there is time to leisurely visit the places of interest on foot. Outstanding among them are the church where “Panchito” is displayed waiting seated for his annual fiesta; the old mint; the central plaza; the magnificent late nineteenth-century cock-fighting ring that reminds you of a Greek theater with its circular forum and stone seating. The old cemetery, surrounded by an imposing wall with an original wrought-iron gate; though the Guadalupe Chapel is one of the oldest buildings in the town (1770), it still has some frescoes. On the outskirts, with a guide on horseback, in a jeep or on

foot, you can still visit old abandoned mine buildings or the Huichol reserve. Even if you have visited everything on your check-list, and the feeling of “being accompanied” turns into something to be considered during the night; it is not easy to leave Real. Little by little, the mind and spirit become obsessed with staying a few more days, living at another speed and in another time. When there is nothing for it but to go through the tunnel and leave behind this supernatural landscape, the only thing that seems certain in the future is that some day we will return. **MM**

Elsie Montiel
Editor



NOTES

- ¹ “Leyendas vivientes,” *Ruta sin Límite*, second special edition of a magazine from San Luis Potosí, published by Editorial Ruta Sin Límite, July-September 2006, p. 35.
- ² Leonardo Fernández Borja, “Huiricuta: The Routes of the Huichols,” *Voices of Mexico* 77, October-December 2006.