Underground!

Posted on



One of the tunnels of the Bogala mines that seem to lead into a black abyss

Cramped in the small space occupied by six people, a sense of foreboding came over us as we stood there waiting. A sudden clunk and the journey had begun. The lift sped downwards and we watched the sunlight disappear, sending a shiver of exhilaration through us. It quickly converted our fears into a feeling of anticipation as darkness surrounded us. So it had commenced; the descent into the Bogala mines.

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The Alfred Shaft, as the lift was called, carried us to the transit level – 124m from the surface – in our quest to go deeper into the mines. Here, the dim fluorescent

lighting cast an eerie glow on the tunnel carved out of stone. Discarded railway sleepers and timber-lined sections of the roof prevent cave-ins. Trollies filled with rocks stood on a set of metal tracks that ran along the slightly muddy ground. Although we had mining lights on our helmets, they were only able to light up about ten feet of the tunnel ahead of us. Beyond the reach of the lights, a yawning black chasm swallowed up the stone walls, the set of tracks and the trail of trolleys.

As the mines have been functional since 1847, all the graphite at this level has been excavated, informed our guide. But leading us to a wall he showed us a touch of graphite that still remained. As we traced our fingers along the wall, the dusty particles blackened our hands and shimmered. Our surroundings were so surreal that already we felt we had experienced adventure. Our guide told us however, that the adventure was only just beginning.

Trudging along dressed in baggy overalls and clunky boots, proved to be quite a challenge. At the second lift, the ‘bankman’ maneuvered a sophisticated communication system. As he pressed a button, a bell like sound rang, giving a signal to the operators far below.

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Then, once more – packed into a lift – we gravitated downwards, trying to make out shapes in the darkening surroundings, with walls of rock encircling us. During the eight-minute descent we stopped at each level, as trollies were loaded into the three-deck lift, finally disembarking at the deepest level – 476m from the surface. Guided by only two mining lights, we walked single-file along the narrow tunnel, at times ducking to avoid timber holding up the roof, at times slipping in puddles. The ear splitting sound of a ventilator fan seemed almost too much to take until we passed it by and the din began to fade.

Model of Bogala Mines
The two dark structures on either sides show the two Graphite veins, where the graphite is deposited. The white vertical line portrays the Shaft or where the lift is operated, while the white linear lines stand for the tunnels that lead the way from the Shaft to the Graphite veins. (Refer 9-copy)

Eventually, the tunnel branched out and a dim light beamed from a hole above us, where a ladder led aloft. Mounting the ladder, strewn with graphite dust, we came to a confined landing lined with wooden planks. Here the noise of a drill could be

heard distinctly and our bodies shook with the ensuing vibrations. Looking around we spotted another ladder and after clambering up we came upon the ‘work stope’, the working place, where two miners were hard at work. Glowing silvery with graphite dust and perspiration, they took on the appearance of frightening mythical beings, but as we passed by them to examine the graphite vein they were drilling into, their friendly smiles reassured us.

When work ends in the afternoon and the mine is empty, the tunnel will be packed with explosives and blasted to extract the precious graphite.

Embedded in stone, the thick vein of graphite glowed a gunmetal grey. Drops of water from the spray guns the miners were using, slid down the smooth reflective surface of the graphite. It resembled solidified mercury. Glitter-like dust particles, broken loose from the drilling, drifted towards the ground. The miners were working to build a support for the roof of this tunnel to prevent cave-ins. When work ends in the afternoon and the mine is empty, the tunnel will be packed with explosives and blasted to extract the precious graphite.

As the tunnel had become too hot to bear any longer, we retraced our steps down the ladder, and towards the lift. There we had the opportunity to wash our silvery-black hands and faces somewhat. While lingering for the lift, our guide filled us in with juicy tidbits about the mine, including a story of a ghost that haunts the tunnels. When the lift arrived, we boarded and headed back to the transit level. Here we met two workers carrying explosives down under and they let us have a peek inside the boxes.

We made a couple of detours as we advanced back to the Alfred Shaft. In one tunnel, we encountered some limestone like substance that glowed white and yellow as the flicker of the lights fell upon it. Compelled to touch, it proved to be very smooth and hard in contrast to its glutinous look. Stopping by an abandoned tunnel, we observed an old nonfunctional mine, with iron supports and a very high roof. Here we turned all our lights off to experience ‘absolute darkness’. We soon found that our eyes never adjusted; it stayed pitch black no matter how long we waited.

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In due course we ascended to the surface and welcomed the sunlight and fresh air

with relief and delight. Marvelling at the things we had seen, we felt fortunate for having experienced them as the Bogala mines are not generally open to visitors. At the same time we were humbled by the hard work and endurance of the miners who descend to the deep darkness each day.

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