



A mountain of salt

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The *Salt Mountain* is a geological site in the town of Cardona, Spain, composed of an impressive and complex web of saline rock formations. Today a tourist attraction, the mountain, as the official website Cardona Tourisme claims, “is still growing as the rain erodes it” resulting in a diapir of almost 2 kilometres in depth. But how was the mountain perceived before it became a cultural park and, even earlier, a salt extraction mining complex in the 20th century? The following report, possibly by Paul Gruyer, appeared in English in an 1898 issue of the *Wide World Magazine* and recounts the experience of the author as he approaches and accesses this mysterious mountain.

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The salt mountain of Cardona, in Spain, is an instance of Nature’s caprices. A mountain of salt! Were so curious a phenomenon situated in a country where communications are an easier matter than in Spain, thousands of visitors would flock to it annually: but, buried as it is among the most remote of the buttresses of the Iberian Pyrenees, north of Lerida, between Barcelona and Seo de Urgel, in the midst of an inhospitable region, glacial in winter and torrid in summer, it is only seen but rarely, and then by a small number of people.

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The railway only runs to within forty kilometres of it, and after that the traveller has recourse to a tartana, a species of long, two-wheeled vehicle drawn by four or five mules. One is here in the midst of Catalonia; the sunburnt peasants all wear the scarlet Phrygian cap and long and graceful cloaks. Gradually the cultivated lands fade from view, the soil begins to present a harder and more pebbly surface, and for six long hours the tartana jolts one over a stony road much cut up with ruts. A kind of sea-sickness, produced by the rolling motion of the peculiar conveyance, does not add to the traveller's enjoyment.

At last Cardona is reached. On the summit of a perpendicular mountain stands the ancient citadel, with its walls and turrets of brick, which was for ages one of the most impregnable throughout Spain, but which long-range guns would nowadays shatter in less than an hour. A few sandal-shod soldiers are listlessly mounting guard on the ramparts. A curiously white-looking stream, apparently frozen, lies at the base of the rock. The water, however, is not frozen, and the fleecy snow on its bank is not snow, it is salt.

Our jolting conveyance pursues its uneven course up a narrow mountain pass, the source of this remarkable stream of salt. The landscape becomes more and more strange. In places the soil is studded with deep holes, in others, covered with blister-like formations; there is no trace of vegetation, all is a desolate waste, akin to the surface of the moon as revealed to us by the telescope. In all directions whitish slabs, gradually increasing in numbers, dot the landscape.

Suddenly, as the conveyance turns the corner of a mountain path, a huge resplendent mass greets the traveller's dazzled vision. It seems like a glacier, with its sharply cut ridges, its light green transparencies, its bluish shadows, and its almost perpendicular coulées. On drawing nearer the illusion increases: it looks as though the whole stupendous mass were glazed with a frost-rime composed of tiny and immaculate crystallization, which emit a crackling sound under one's tread. A lakelet with deep blue water lies still and quiet in a frame of dazzling white; its water is as salt as that of the sea. Salt is everywhere – we have arrived at the mountain of salt.

Salt, such as is commonly used for household purposes, is derived, as we all know, from the evaporation of salt water; but salt is also found in the soil in a natural state, when it is known as rock-salt. In the latter case it is generally in the shape of subterranean reefs, which are worked in the same fashion as coal-mines. Such deposits are met with in France in the departments of the Isere and Savoie: but more especially in Roumania, in Poland, and at Wieliczka, in Austria. Here at Cardona the salt has gushed from the earth. This extraordinary phenomenon was doubtless produced by some antediluvian cataclysm, at a time when the ocean partly covered what are now continents and its waves dashed against the Pyrenees.

It is estimated that the mountain contains 500,000,000 tons of salt. Now, as France consumes some 700,000 tons of salt yearly, it would take her something like seven centuries to dispose of this huge mountain. Hence it is that its partial exploitation – which produces annually 40,000fr – seems to have had hardly any appreciable effect on it. Pieces like slabs of marble are cut out of its flanks from the mountain-side and rolls a little way down.

Salt attracts lightning, and a magnificent spectacle is presented when the lightning flashes dart across the sky and converge on the scintillating mountain. At such times it is wise to stand at some distance away from the peak. As to the blocks thus torn away by the lightning, they later on become more or less cemented to its flanks, and so the compact mass of the mountain remains practically the same.

The mountain possesses, however, one formidable foe, who slowly, but relentlessly, gnaws it from the inside. Scattered about in the mountain are tiny openings—"monkey holes" they are locally styled – and from out of each of these comes a rivulet, so tiny that it seems powerless to do harm. But little by little these subterranean springs drill their way through the entire thickness of the mountain, digging out long tunnels into which the visitor may enter if he be so inclined.

The guide accompanying him will, however, begin by warning him that it is prudent for him to make his will ere doing so, since, owing to the destructive work of the tiny streams, continual salt-slides occur in the narrow channels. Blocks of salt weighing from fifty to a hundred kilos are liable at any moment to crash down upon the explorer, crushing him like a fly – the sound of one's voice, the weight of one's body on the soil being sufficient to detach them from the roof.

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Let the visitor, however, proceed a few steps farther: from the ceiling depend stalactites of salt of immaculate whiteness, to all appearances chandeliers; the streamlet seems to flow along a crystal bed, and the drop of water hanging from the sharp point of each stalactite scintillates like a diamond by candlelight. Suddenly the guide pulls you back, calling your attention to a feeble sound akin to that emitted by a squeezed sponge; it is hardly perceptible to the ear, and yet it sounds a warning of an imminent salt slide, and it becomes imperative to retrace one's steps without having been able to penetrate farther into the fairylike interior of the mountain.

The mountain of Cardona being private property, three or four gorgeously-uniformed keepers are entrusted with the duty of seeing that the inhabitants of the surrounding country do not come and help themselves to salt; it is, however, an easy matter to take away a crystalline fragment by way of a memento. So limpid is the substance that spectacle glasses can be made out of the more transparent pieces. The men employed at the salt works turn out crosses, rosaries, goblets, and bottles, which they sell to tourists for a few pesetas.

The reader will perhaps regret that this curious mountain is so difficult to access. Its inaccessibility, however, is its safeguard. On the day when it becomes easy to access its destruction will have become imminent, for commercialism will set its grasp on it and will exploit it on a large scale, with the inevitable result of its speedy disappearance.