

## ***Silver & Ivory - The El Triunfo Legacy***



The streets of El Triunfo were bustling on Sundays. Home to more than 10,000 miners seeking silver, gold and other valuable minerals from the surrounding mountains, they came from the played out discoveries in California. The smoke rose continuously from the stacks of the Progreso Mining Company smelters and beautiful homes, were the benefit of hard work and a bit of luck.

Silver was discovered in the mountains in 1862, the draw for those seeking their fortunes from the earth. Some were 49'ers looking for another chance, while merchants and dancehall girls came to profit from life in a boom town. The faces came from England, France, Russia, Germany Italy and China. All had the hope of finding their fortune. Wagons made their way to and from the port of La Paz in a steady stream of supplies, profits and hopefuls. At one point El Triunfo was the largest city in the Baja.



The silver that flowed from the surrounding mountains made the city a cultural center. Classical music was a favorite of the successful. Around the turn of the century El Triunfo was in it's hay day. Francisca Mendoza had studied music in San Francisco and returned to the city to teach and perform. Her talents were eagerly sought by the well to do for themselves and their children. Pianos were brought to El Triunfo from around the world and at one time El Triunfo had more pianos per capita than any other city in Mexico.



When I first heard there was a piano museum in El Triunfo I didn't know what to expect. Today the town is comprised of a few hundred residents, a couple of mini-markets and a few topos, hardly more than a blink on the road thirty minutes south of La Paz on the road to the East Cape. Hardly the place you would expect to find an international piano museum.

But there it was, a quaint, well kempt white and orange brick building on the east side of the road. The only clue to finding it is the official state "MUSEO" sign and an arrow. Needless to say, parking was abundant.



Inside we were greeted by Maestro Ncolas Carrillo Castro who graciously accepted our \$20 peso entrance fee and personally conducted our tour of the museum. As I understood in my burgeoning espanol, Sr. Castro is curator of the museum. The first room housed some recent evolutions of the keyboard, including a 1960's electric organ that looked very similar to a Hammond B3 I dragged to many a gig as a long haired musician in the late 70's.



Large, well presented graphics in English and Spanish augmented Sr. Castro's espanol guidance though the museum. In the central room a beautiful concert Steinway stood ready for the next special event. After being persuaded to scrape my way through a studied by rusty rendition of "Moonlight Sonata" Sr. Castro assumed the keys and filled the room with his rendition of the same and "Claire de Lune" to boot.

The front rooms housed turn of the century (the previous century) Baldwins, Steinways and even a very old Clavichord. Clavichords are the precursor to pianos, the 'pluck' the strings with little barbed rods. Bach wrote on and his music sounds so authentic on a Clavichord, although I'm not sure if the one in the museum still plays.



The focal point of the front room is a French Provincial white grand piano. Sr. Castro tickled the ivories for us for several more minutes on this grand instrument with his flamboyant style bring visions of a Mexican Liberace.

Other exhibits in the museum include a Stradivarius violin, well not exactly, one made by a later famous apprentice, cellos, horns and other stringed instruments.

performances. Sr. Castro performs in La Paz, along don't be codo, the museum praise for their work. to a live performance) The work to the pianos Monday thru Sunday 9AM to museum is affiliated with the



On you way out through the lobby you can purchase souvenirs of the museum, postcards and even a recording of Sr. Castro's piano also teaches and on occasion with regular student recitals. Please guides appreciate a little propina and (particularly if you have been treated museum is still growing, restoration continues. The Museum is open daily 6PM and admission is \$20 pesos. The Estatal de Promocion al Turismo de

BCS.

The rest of El Triunfo is a pleasant stroll through the crumbling brick works of the old smelter and warehouses of the silver days.

See, the silver started to run out during World War I and the town started to dwindle. Francisca Mendoza did continue to leave her footprints in Baja history through her husband's family. She married Carlos Aramburo who came to El Triunfo from the mainland to open a mercantile. In 1918 they gave up on the declining town of El Triunfo and moved their market to La Paz. The original location on Madero near the Port Captains office. It's known to newcomers to La Paz as "The Cow Store" for the large Herford Heifer that hangs over the entry. Aramburo Markets can be found at multiple locations throughout La Paz and Cabo San Lucas.



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The mines shut down in 1926 and things dried up pretty quickly for El Triunfo. The clay bricks were taken from the fire bins and built homes around southern Baja. The remains of the silver industry today are a few smoke stacks and the crumbling local soft brick walls.



The river channel behind the museum still has the bulk works for the waterwheel and the channel itself is artistically made from core samples, rock and cogs and wheels from the bygone industry. The smelter pits are still coated with the creosote from 60 years of firing. The above picture shows the original smelter stack right and the newer one built around 1900 to the left.



Currently, the international mining registry lists 27 active mines in the El Triunfo region. But, they are mostly independent prospectors looking to hobby or eek out a living. Mineral reports show they are finding silver and a dozen other lesser marketable minerals along with plenty of fools gold.

El Triunfo Mission is another worthwhile stop on your way north out of town. Freshly painted in lively Baja color the mission is in excellent shape and a great photo op. Inside the feel of frontier mission fills the air as surely as the smell of oil on the wood beams. A few hewn pews are all that are left to seat the remaining parishioners. The decor is frontier utilitarian and probably a shadow of its glory days.


El Triunfo struck me as a town, struggling to become the Todos Santos of the East Cape drive. The walk ways around the old mine are well kempt, and even the crumbling buildings along the highway seem to do so in an artistic fashion. There isn't much for recreation yet in town. I spent some time chatting with the market owner and admiring his fighting cocks under the shade of a large tree. There are still a number of the old homes that use to ring with the gaiety of mine management and their families on the news of another vein of silver. There are a few blanket tiendas further up the road and a restaurant or two. You

won't find too much English spoken in El Triunfo although the people are friendly, your phrase book will help the communications.

El Triunfo was still green as of late April and a trickle of water still flowed freely though the channel around the town. The altitude helps a bit, particularly with summer thunderstorms in the mountains. But unlike Todos Santos, no Pacific breeze cools the afternoons. In the summer months the heat from the desert is blown west and El Triunfo becomes very warm.



El Triunfo is located about 48 kilometers from La Paz. Take Hwy 1 south from La Paz to Km28 and the intersection of Hwy 1 Sea and Pacific legs. West takes you to Todos Santos while south, 20 Km further, lies El Triunfo. From Cabo you proceed along East Cape about 1 hour north of the San Jose del Cabo Airport. You can't miss it in either direction as the road runs right through town.

So take a little jaunt along the [Baja Sur Loop](#) and enjoy the different aire of this diamond in the rough and imagine yourself back in a silver boom town of the late 19th century. 



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