

The Cordillera Real is the traditional mining region in Bolivia where, for centuries, rich lode deposits have been worked. In the 1500's, it was here that the Spaniards discovered the fabulous silver deposit of Cerro Rico de Potosí. Some three billion ounces of silver are believed to have been extracted from this deposit over the last 400 years, and it is now thought that a similar amount still remains within the mountain in disseminated form.

Other notable silver deposits have long been worked in Oruro, Colquechaca and Pulacayo.

Tin mines in the Cordillera Real became gradually more important after the end of the colonial era in 1825, and from the turn of the present century, tin became the leading export. From mid-century the state corporation COMIBOL dominated this resource. The most important tin deposits on the Cordillera Real are those of Catavi, Huanuni and Viloco.

It is only very recently that attention has shifted from narrow veins in sedimentary structures to the potential of disseminated metals in the Tertiary intrusives of the Cordillera Real.

The Sub-Andean zone is the fourth major geographic region exhibiting important geological potential. Here, in the eastern slopes of the Andes, Devonian shales host silver and base metals. Although hundreds of prospects have been identified, difficult terrain and lack of infrastructure have so far prevented development. Only one important mine has been established, working a zinc-silver deposit at Quioma.

Foothills north of La Paz and across the border in the Peruvian province of Madre de Dios are drained by a network of tributaries and rivers which run generally northward into the Amazon basin. This drainage area comprises a fifth geological region of Bolivia, important for extensive alluvial gold deposits. Nuggets have been extracted for many years from the Tipuani fields north of La Paz. So far, very little attention has been paid to the recovery of fine gold, as extraction has been dominated by technically primitive, labor-intensive cooperatives. Only one or two dredges have operated in this region of Bolivia; however, several dredges operate upstream in Peru on the Madre de Dios river and small suction dredges work on the Brazilian border to the north. It is estimated that there are 4 billion cubic meters of alluvial deposits with gold potential in this region. The Madre de Dios and Beni rivers are considered promising, but infrastructure is rudimentary and very little exploration has taken place.

The sixth geological region of Bolivia is the least explored and is currently generating some of the greatest interest. Extending in from the Brazilian border, the Bolivian Pre-Cambrian occupies about 250,000 square kilometers in the tropical eastern lowlands. Although narrow gold veins and stream beds have been prospected in a small way since colonial times, the Bolivian Pre-Cambrian did not attract serious attention until very recently.