

PERU'S CORDILLERA BLANCA, 1996

Big mountains, tropical ice and easy access - what more could you want?

by Grant Dixon



The Cordillera de los Andes are the longest mountain range on Earth, extending more than 7500 kilometres down the west coast of South America (with the geological structure continuing further southwards down the Antarctic Peninsula). There is an incredible variety of mountain landscapes contained within this range, from the rock towers and icecaps of Patagonia to the utterly arid (and, in some cases, active) volcanoes of northern Chile, from Bolivia's rolling altiplano to the glistening, glaciated ranges of Peru. The aptly named Cordillera Blanca epitomises the latter, arguably offering the best tropical mountaineering in the world.

Expedition style mountaineering has been popular in the past, however most climbing in the Cordillera Blanca is now undertaken by small, flexible groups. Potential for new, hard routes still exists in many areas, despite 60 years of exploration and climbing throughout the range. The area is, however, also ideal for a climbing holiday for just two travelling with little more than is acceptable under normal airline baggage allowances. The following is a description of such a trip undertaken by myself and Rolan Eberhard; an example of what can be readily achieved in this spectacular and accessible range. During 30

days in the area we undertook four forays, each of 4 to 8 days duration, in different parts of range, and successfully ascended medium grade routes on six peaks.

There is little incentive to spend time in Lima, a huge, sprawling, city permanently shrouded in grey sea mist during the southern winter (the climbing season). We left within a half day of Rolan's flight arriving from the USA, by bus north along the totally barren coast, then inland, climbing rapidly out of the coastal mist and haze. It was dark when the bus crossed the 4200m pass and entered the Callejon de Huaylas,



the valley which parallels the Cordillera Blanca to the west, so we had to wait until dawn to see the glistening white peaks of the Cordillera Blanca outlined against a blue sky. From Huaraz, the regional capital, the massive Huascaran and multi-peaked Huandoy are clearly visible across the tiled rooftops some 50 kilometres north down the valley.

Whilst acclimatisation was our first priority, we were itching to get to the peaks, so we settled on the Quebrada Ishinca for our first excursion - it was close to Huaraz, had a short approach trek, a valley head camp at moderate altitude and several surrounding peaks. Camp guards are often recommended for such popular valley base camps (we knew no better so decided to hire one for this first outing). The first prospective guard turned up at our hotel, discovered he would need to provide his own camping gear then vanished! Hence we ended up employing our burro driver, hired at the roadhead, to stay on as a guard. In hindsight such a guard wasn't necessary, and we didn't use one again.

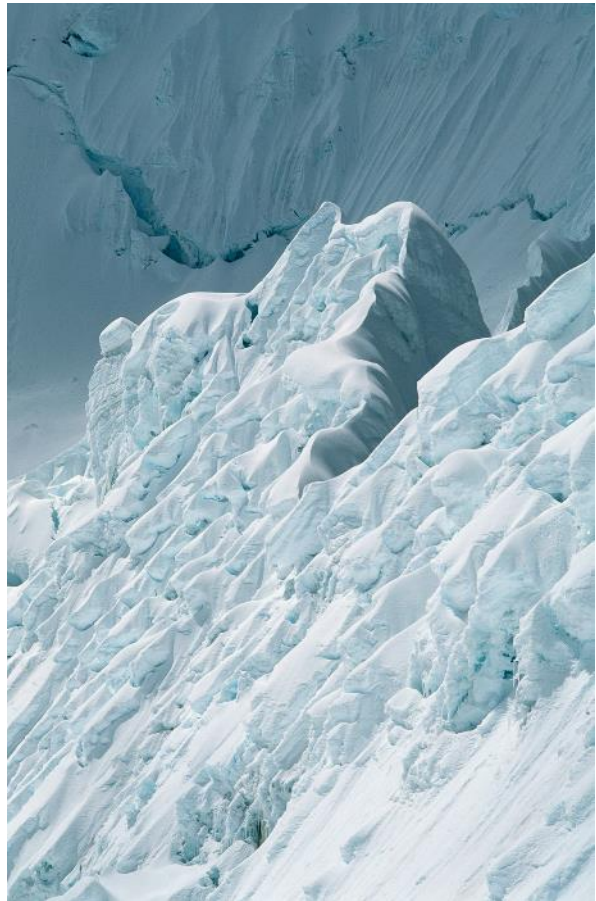
It was late morning before we were organised at the roadhead and commenced walking, climbing progressively more breathlessly under a clear sky and fierce sun. The route eventually entered a gorge and the relief of shady quenua forest, their papery orange-barked trunks and branches overhanging the trail, then levelled out on the floor of the broad U-shaped glaciated valley above. An icy wall capped by cloud ringed the head of the valley. The clear morning weather had turned to cold and grey, then to icy showers at dusk as we set up camp.

After a day spent drinking in both the view and appropriately large quantities of liquid, as an aid to acclimatisation, we set out for our first Andean peak (the easy 5420m Urus). We climbed steeply up frosty gullied slopes and loose moraine in the pre-dawn darkness, panting in the cold, dry, thin air, swam up a steep slope of unconsolidated snow, then plodded up past rock towers into a cold wind, before a short

snow arete led to the isolated summit. Cloud had drifted up the valley below, and was wafting over the divide to the east, adding atmosphere to the extensive view. The descent to camp couldn't have been more direct, sending a message of things to come to aged knees!

Nevado Tocllaraju (6032m), an impressive triangular peak, dominates the head of the Quebrada Ishinca valley. Another steep, loose and dusty moraine climb led to a high camp on the glacier below the west face. Cloud shrouding the peaks dissipated near sunset, giving a grandstand view of orange peaks. Anticipating a long day, we left camp at 1:30AM, and were not disappointed. Wading through deep unconsolidated snow, toes soon cold, then numb, we climbed towards the steep and uninviting west face. Seeking a route around large open crevasses necessitated several tiring detours, however energy returned when a sprint beneath the hanging seracs of the west face was called for.

By dawn we were below the upper bergschrund. The line of ice cliffs and seracs above looked impassable, and after the cold and effort of the previous hours I probably would have turned back if it was seriously suggested. However Rolan persisted in wading and scrambling up to the ice pinnacle below the 'schrund and the hidden bulge above turned out to be only a couple of metres high, with open snow slopes above. So on we went, seeking the warmth implied by the sun now shining on the northwest ridge above. The ridge is really a broad shoulder, cut by a line of seracs and ice cliffs. We threaded a route through this terrain to reveal the summit dome capped by an extensive line of large cornices. Traversing north, we then climbed three unprotectable pitches of steep, aerated honeycomb ice, plunging ice axe shafts into the slope to make progress. The cloud beat us to the summit by one pitch, robbing us of a view but adding a feeling of isolation to our 30 seconds on top. We made it back to the tent at sunset, knackered, after 17 hours on the go - and hoping the snow conditions on our other planned climbs weren't going to all be like this.



Back in Huaraz we continued our exploration of the town's eateries. Whilst some Peruvian market delicacies were not particularly attractive to us by nature (roast guinea pig for example, or the thick olive green "drink" on offer at a number of street stalls), the fruit and bread available from any of dozens of

street vendors was usually fresh and excellent and became our standard breakfast. For other meals we eventually settled on a small selection of restaurants which we hoped would not upset our western stomachs, and frequented these between climbing forays.

The entrance to Quebrada Santa Cruz is a spectacular gorge slashing the steep slopes above the small village of Cashapampa, several hours by colectivo (minibus) north of Huaraz. We climbed steeply up this, in the hot midday sun, en route to the first of the “name” peaks we hoped to climb, Nevado Alpamayo (5947m), christened the world’s “most beautiful” mountain in a survey of a number of European mountaineers during the 1960s. The walk in was an appropriate introduction to such a peak. The U-shaped valley above the gorge is lined with high, steep cliffs, giving only occasional glimpses of the icy summits above. Purple and yellow wild flowers and a turquoise lake occupy the valley floor.

The second day saw us camped amongst quenua trees at the head of a side valley, sorting gear in a futile attempt to minimise the effort of the 1000 metre climb up moraine then glacier to a high camp below Alpamayo. I stared at my feet, grinding up steep moraine, then gritty granite slabs (in plastics boots and wearing a full pack, it was like walking on marbles), then a sinuous route up a glacier amongst large open crevasses along a hard, nicely trampled trail. The “sting in tail” was a steep ice gully, quite an effort with



our big packs at the end of the day. We climbed past crystal icicles, then emerged onto a broad snow col tiredness forgotten as the fluted southwest face of Alpamayo, the subject of thousands of photographs (and to be so for a few more before I left), appeared before us, .

Nevados Alpamayo (the “most beautiful”) and Huascarán Sur (at 6768m, the highest peak in Peru) are by far the most popular big peaks in the Cordillera Blanca. Virtually every day during the dry season there are one or more parties attempting these peaks. Despite this, given my general preference for less populated climbs, the classic and aesthetic nature of the route on Alpamayo drew us to it. It was a steep but straightforward climb up a particularly aesthetic line, but a somewhat unusual social experience.

We left camp early, crossing the glacier and the two ‘schrunds below the steep, fluted face before sunrise.

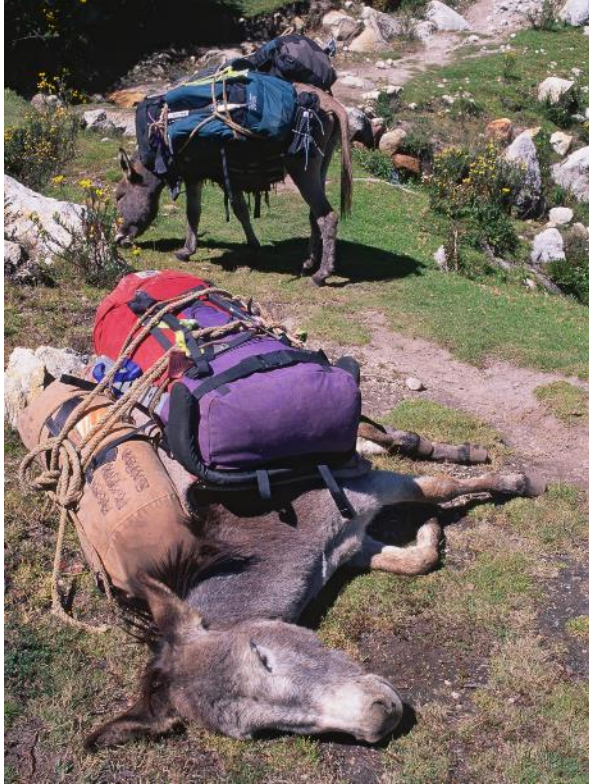
The first pitches up the face up followed a broad runnel, our axes biting into near-perfect neve with only light swings. Open, steeper slopes comprise the middle of the face, before the runnel narrows again. The large cornices of the summit ridge now loomed overhead. The runnel veered right, steepened further, the ice becoming hard and glassy, then sneaked right of cornice to the narrow ridge crest (and sun) above. This point is generally considered the top by most ascensionists, however the actual summit is a tottering, unstable ice tower further south along a corniced ridge - we admired the view from where we were, commencing an abseil descent after more than an hour taking the view.

Several pitches down we encountered the next party - a German guide was leading furiously, with his four charges appearing to be training for some sort of synchronised jumaring competition up the rope he was fixing. Such commercial groups are not uncommon on the Cordillera Blanca's "name" peaks, however this style of climbing in the steep and narrow runnels of Alpamayo's southwest face seems singularly inappropriate, and potentially rather dangerous.

Each evening at camp provided another opportunity to admire the sunset display on Alpamayo, always different due to the afternoon clouds, sometimes just wisps about the peak, perhaps clearing completely only minutes before sunset, sometimes more substantial clouds over the ridges and valleys west towards the Pacific Ocean.



Nevado Kitaraju (6040m) beckoned south of our camp, and is frequently also attempted by climbers drawn to the area by Alpamayo. However its steep and attractive north face was scarred by recent slab avalanches. We decided on a circuitous approach via the west ridge. Preceded by a long plod up the glacier, this turned out to be a face climb, past open crevasses and ice cliffs, steepening towards top. Breaking through the small cornice at the top of the face I experienced a good example of contrasting Andean snow conditions - hard packed snow on the northern slope suddenly gave way to deep, dry powder on the southern slope. Higher than Alpamayo, and further south, Kitaraju provided a much better view of the surrounding peaks, despite us being discouraged from continuing along the ridge to the actual summit by the deep snow and fearsome cornices.



We descended from our camp, expecting an enforced rest in the valley during the afternoon whilst we awaited a burro driver to come our way and ease our outward trek. However several burros had just arrived with another party, and the driver was keen to return to Cashapampa that day! Hence we found ourselves feeling our way down the Santa Cruz gorge in inky darkness, loose rocks underfoot, dust thrown up by the burros up our noses. Then, arriving at Cashapampa, a colectivo (which had driven up with other climbers earlier in the day) was waiting and the driver was keen to leave immediately! We declined the opportunity of an excessively exciting ride down the narrow, switchbacked mountain road by night, and returned to Huaraz next day (the driver waiting all night to get our fare; there being no other gringos to finance his return journey).

Nevado Huascarán (6768m) is a massive mountain, spectacular for its bulk rather than form, like Alpamayo. The relatively straightforward nature of the “normal route”, and the fact that it is Peru’s highest mountain, means that Huascarán is attempted by many climbers (and the occasional ill-prepared backpackers on their first mountain outing) who visit the Cordillera Blanca. We were no different and so, now well acclimatised, we settled on a dash up Huascarán’s higher south peak for our next foray.

Our attempt at an early start from Huaraz didn’t come off - first we had to scour the town for somewhere to buy breakfast, then the hotel owner wasn’t out of bed to receive our gear for storage. When we finally made it to the colectivo departure area (after attracting considerable attention clumping through town in our plastic boots!) we sat for ages before the driver deemed that his colectivo was full and we rocketed off northwards.

Arriving in the small village of Musho, the end of the road on Huascarán’s lower slopes, and were instantly the centre of attention for most of the kids from the village school. Musho perches on a broad spur with Huascarán filling the sky above, firstly hazy slopes covered with a eucalypt plantation, scrub then granite slabs rise above, topped by a glacier apron, then Huascarán’s twin peaks glisten more than 3500 metres above the village.

The first 1000 metres of climbing follow a good trail, so we elected to rest our bodies and hired a burro to carry our packs. The burro found the steep, dusty and hot climb somewhat harder work than us, or perhaps he was just expressing disdain for having been dragged from a comfortable field at short notice?

Steep slabs reared above. We started up what initially appeared a rather improbable route, trying to think sticky or find small bumps on which to stand in our plastic boots. Easier ground followed, and we reached a flat area with a small stream just on sunset.

The distinctive shadow of Huascarán moved towards us as the sun rose higher next morning lighting first the dry, rolling Cordillera Negra across the valley, then the patchwork fields and toy houses now far below us. By the time the sun found us, we were well up the broad glacier apron below the peaks, with the intimidating Garganta icefall which guards the saddle between Huascarán's twin peaks close above.

Many parties camp on the glacier below the icefall, rather than lower on the slabs as we had done. This popular camping area is hidden from below by a rise in the glacier, however its presence was announced by a sudden concentration of exposed turds lining the trampled route. Such a casual and inconsiderate attitude to camp hygiene was not uncommon around popular camping sites - one needs to take care selecting snow for melting at such campsites.

The route then climbs steeper slopes through seracs, ice cliffs and crevasses beside the icefall. Here we were overtaken by a German guide, dragging an unfortunate Peruvian porter along on a rope behind (he reminded Rolan of the "Jacko" toy, powering on, in the Duracell battery television advertisements). When we reached our chosen campsite the reason for his behaviour became apparent - he announced, with teutonic directness whilst standing amidst the largest tent platforms, that the best sites were "reserved" for his party (who were then still struggling with the altitude far below) and that we should camp elsewhere on one of the smaller platforms. Whilst I felt like erecting our tent right there under his nose, we decided a night amongst his party would be even less pleasant and moved on.

The campsite in the Garganta col is a particularly scenic location - like a stage perched above the valley some 3000 metres below, sheltered below a scalloped ice cliff, and with the steep dome of Huascarán's north peak occasionally visible through cloud above.



We left camp early next morning and hence, as on Alpamayo, again had the mountain to ourselves. We climbed steeply through seracs and crevasses above the broad Garganta col as the pre-dawn pink, then apricot, band sank towards the western horizon. Cloud below hid much of the landscape from view, but heightened the sense of being on the biggest and highest mountain.

The last hour or two to the summit traverses an easy-angled slope, with many false summits, and I found was best ascended by counting steps between short rests, rather than dwelling on the seemingly endless slope above. The cold and windy summit was one of the more uninspiring I have had the pleasure of standing upon, simply the near-flat highest point of a broad snowy dome. Nevertheless it is obviously the top of the Cordillera Blanca, everything else appearing small, distant and lower.

On the descent we exchanged “pleasantries” with the German party, then making hard work of the aforementioned endless slope.

Despite some effort to spare the knees on the descent, we were back in Huaraz for lunch the following day, planning our final outing.



Another trip north from Huaraz by colectivo saw us on the shore of Lago Paron for an early lunch, despite a puncture on the steep winding road below. This delay actually provided a welcome opportunity to ogle at the at the scale and form of the valley, a classic U with granite walls towering up to 1000 metres on either side - potential for rock routes for generations to come but with hardly any ascents undertaken to date.

Lago Paron is a large, bright turquoise lake set amongst the granite walls, with the steep fluted faces of the aptly named Nevado Pyramide rising beyond. An obvious tideline attests to the lake having been lowered to reduce the risk of its moraine dam collapsing during earthquakes and a resulting alluvion devastating the villages far below.

Beyond the lake, and out of sight from the roadhead, lies the symmetrical triangular peak

of Nevado Artesonraju (6025m), our objective for this final foray. We set up camp on gravelly flats beyond the lake, a mere 2 hours walk, then next day climbed to a high camp before lunch. This was another centre stage campsite, amongst moraine high above the Paron Glacier beyond which rose the fluted Pyramide, the unclimbed rock and ice wall of Chacaraju and towering Huandoy further down the valley.

An afternoon of eating and dozing then an early night (encouraged by a rather dramatic temperature drop with the disappearance of the sun) preceded another pre-dawn departure. We climbed and sidled below Artesonraju's steep southwest face, the darkness thankfully hiding an array of rather unpleasant leaning seracs above, before ascending unconsolidated snow up a steep gully to the base of Artesonraju's southeast face. The face was 800 vertical metres of nearly constant (apart from a couple of short, steeper sections) 50-55° good neve snow. By the time we neared the summit the climbing was becoming almost boring (almost!) - the same movements and exposed situation for virtually the entire climb, with just the glacier dropping further and further below.

After Huascarán, this was a real summit - small in area and dropping steeply on all sides, and with large icecream roll cornices on the northern side - with a dramatic view of all the famous big Cordillera Blanca peaks, from Alpamayo in the north to Huascarán to the south. A fitting peak on which to conclude our Cordillera Blanca experience.



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