

IN THE CORDILLERA VILCANOTA

BY STEVEN JERVIS

THE Harvard Mountaineering Club's Andean Expedition of 1957, doubtless like so many other such trips, had its beginnings one autumn day in the local tavern. It was 1955. Craig Merrihue had just returned from an exciting summer in the Himalayas, eager to explore new ranges. Caspar Cronk, Bill Hooker, Earle Whipple, Mike Wortis and I had similar desires, and soon we and Craig were considering food, equipment, transportation and all the other problems which must be taken into account before an expedition can move into the mountains.

Our personal finances were low, and they consequently loomed large in our planning. Craig thought that, even with two weeks of sight-seeing, the cost per person of a three-month trip to Peru could be kept well under \$800, and he was right. The most vital factor in keeping costs down was the use of TAN airlines, by far the least expensive line flying from Miami to Lima. We shipped nothing. Each brought in his weight allowance of 30 kg. his personal gear, as well as a share of such community equipment as tents, stoves, ropes and ice-axes. We also carried a small amount of dehydrated vegetables, meat and some powdered drinks. The rest of our food we bought in Lima, where most supplies to be found in American supermarkets are available, at slightly higher prices.

From Lima three of us flew to Cuzco, while the others accompanied our gear in a truck over the long mountain road. Soon we were reunited, and, in our pseudo-Spanish, engaged another truck to take us and the equipment some 70 miles south-east of the city. Our objective was the Cordillera Vilcanota, an area of massive glaciers and snow-peaks. Thanks to George Bell's aerial photographs, taken several years before, we already had our eyes on some interesting objectives. The range's high point, Ausangate (20,945 ft.), had been reached in 1953 by a German party which also climbed several of the highest mountains on the area. But, except for the activities of Piero Ghiglione in 1952, the Vilcanota had seen almost no other climbing, and long chains of peaks remained untouched.

Our truck took us to the little town of Ocongate, where we fortunately met Eduardo deBary, whose parents owned a hacienda close by. He generously entertained us as guests and also arranged for a mule train to take our gear to our first base camp. Unfortunately, once bereft of Ed's multi-lingual abilities, we had some difficulty talking to the mule-driver; he took us a tremendously long way south and west of Ausangate. As can be seen from the map, there is a much more direct



Aerial photo by George Bell, 1952]

NORTH AND NORTH-WEST FACES OF AUSANGATE. HIGHEST POINT REACHED WAS ABOVE ROCK BANDS ON SUNLIT NORTH FACE. PACHANTA PASS IN LEFT CENTRE. ON LEFT HORIZON: SHOE PEAK, SHOE COL, JATUNHUMA. UNNAMED PEAK IN CENTRE BACKGROUND.

route from the valley, through the pass between the Ausangate massif and the chain of peaks which we called the 'Cayangate Wall'.

Our first base camp was located on grassy meadows, about a mile beneath the Jatunhuma Glacier, which lies between the Cayangate Wall and the ridge-like bulk of Jatunhuma itself. On June 27, the day after Hooker, Wortis and I had carried out preliminary exploration on the glacier, we made our first attempt on a peak. Hoping for an easy climb and a good view, Cronk, Merrihue, Whipple and I set off for Jatunhuma III, the second peak east of Jatunhuma's South summit. Our route presented all sorts of problems, and we never did get to the top that day. The snow on the south side of the summit ridge was very soft; soon we were wading in it up to our thighs. Then crevasses appeared, rendering the route impracticable. If this is what this apparently innocuous peak is really like, we wondered, how would we ever get up the more imposing summits? We beat a retreat this time, but the day was not a complete loss, for we found an easy rock ridge a little way to the east, which seemed to lead past the crevassed area on to good snow.

On June 29 Merrihue and I climbed the expedition's first peak, which we named Ccapana, after the hacienda where we had stayed. The bulk of the route, which followed scree and snow from the glacier east of the summit, had been laid out by Hooker and Wortis the previous day. The snow was much firmer than on Jatunhuma III, and the route presented no technical difficulties, except for occasional ice. We hoped to descend Ccapana's South ridge to the col it forms with Pachanta, and thus to gain access to the latter peak, which looked like a spectacular challenge from base camp. It was too late and windy for any such endeavour on the 29th, but four days later, with the aid of an intermediate camp, Hooker, Merrihue, Wortis and I regained the summit of Ccapana early in the morning. But our attempt to reach the col was a failure almost as soon as it began; the South ridge was steep—in places, at least vertical—and the rock and ice were unstable and terribly exposed. There seemed a good chance of gaining Pachanta's summit from the north-west, but it would have taken a long time to move a camp to the proper assault position for such an attempt. The ridges leading up from Caracol and the south looked out of the question, so a climb direct from base camp seemed the best possibility, although not very promising. We decided to let the problem rest a while.

Jatunhuma, the big peak which dominated camp, seemed a logical objective; Hooker, Merrihue and Whipple set off for it on July 5. By July 6 they had established a camp on the glacier, and they moved it higher the next day. The north-western buttresses of the mountain appeared to offer the best approach; on July 8, after considerable step-



Aerial photo by George Bell, 1952]

UPPER END OF THE PACHANTA VALLEY, SITE OF THE FIRST BASE CAMP. PACHANTA PASS IN RIGHT FOREGROUND, PACHANTA PEAK IN CENTRE FOREGROUND. IN BACKGROUND FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SHOE COL, JATUNRITI, JATUNHUMA, THE PAW GLACIERS AND PART OF THE ICE PAMPA.

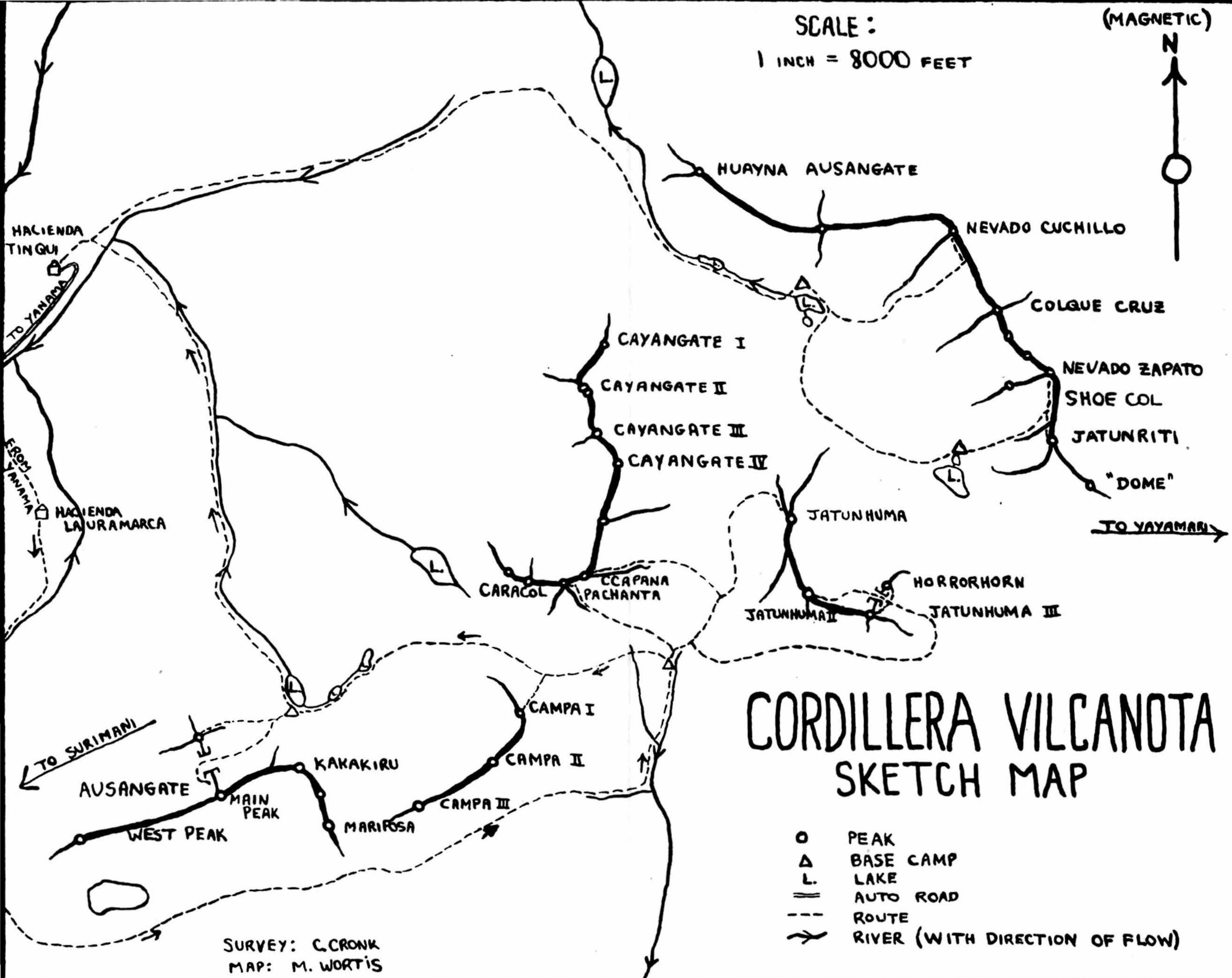
cutting in steep ice, the three reached a huge ice-block overhanging the route. There, about 500 ft. from the 20,000-ft. summit, they turned back because of the late hour and the lack of sufficient ice pitons. Two weeks later the route was completed by a German party which included the American Ted Achilles, and was led by Günter Hauser. The group surmounted the ice-block on direct aid up the prominent crack, which is visible from far below.

While the attempt on Jatunhuma was being made, Cronk, Wortis and I returned to the vicinity of Jatunhuma III, this time with enough food to spend several nights on the assault. As we had hoped, the previously discovered rock ridge led past the crevasses to a gentle snow-field northeast of our objective. Traversing the soft snow with packs was exhausting, but, after two days, we established a good camp above 18,000 ft. On July 8 we climbed Jatunhuma III and II; neither presented much technical difficulty, although some step-cutting and belaying was required on the latter. The next day, after climbing the easy snow-peak which we facetiously called 'Horrorhorn', we returned to camp.

The entire expedition met and decided to attempt a new route on Ausangate. While Whipple and Cronk went out to fetch the mules that would be needed to move base camp over to Ausangate, Merrihue and I went to prospect new routes on the peak. We returned four days later to find the mules not yet arrived, so, with Hooker and Wortis, we set off for a final try on Pachanta. As we approached the Pachanta-Ccapana col from the Jatunhuma Glacier, we decided to split up. While Merrihue and Hooker headed for the col, Mike and I tried the direct East ridge. Factors of time and conditioning prevented us from completing our route; we stopped below the prominent vertical step in the ridge. Above us the rock-climbing looked difficult, and there were some bosses that would probably have to be cut through. It seemed to be a beautiful climb, well worth the attention of future parties.

Merrihue and Hooker reached the ridge leading south from the col with little difficulty, but found harder going on the ridge itself. Their progress was accordingly slowed, and they did not reach the summit until late afternoon. The early sunset (before 6 p.m.) caught them near the col, but, with the aid of a single rappel, they descended the steep snow below the saddle and returned to camp that night.

By July 20 we had moved camp to a lake beneath Ausangate's huge North face and began moving supplies up the route which Craig and I had mapped out earlier. As seen from the lake, the upper part of the North face resembled the side of a pyramid, with a jumble of rock ridges and ice-falls below it. We followed moraines and boulder fields to a glacier beneath the right (west) side of the face. Easy snow, followed by a small ice-fall which presented route-finding difficulties, led Merrihue, Whipple, Wortis and me to a good camp site near the base



of the pyramid. The ridge to the right led directly to the summit plateau, but it looked steep, knife-edged, at places corniced, and certainly more of a project than we cared to tackle at that moment. We had noticed a steep, narrow glacier, beginning perhaps a mile and a half east of the ridge, which ran between rock walls until it approached a beautiful, sharp, snow-ridge. This ridge in turn led back west to join the other ridge below the summit plateau. On July 23 the four of us set off to try to establish a camp on the snow-ridge by climbing the glacier. All looked well, but within an hour we were stopped by a huge crevasse spanning the snow from one rock-wall to the other. The back of the gap was accessible, but it overhung steeply and was nowhere less than 45 ft. high. Our attempts to surmount the obstacle seemed too arduous and time-consuming to be worth while. There was a bad ice-wall by the rock to the left; to the right was a possible route through broken ice, but one rock had already cascaded over the lip of the crevasse, and the morning sun was becoming hotter. We retreated to high camp, where we decided that our best chance lay in passing the crevasse on the right before the sun was strong. Accordingly, on July 25, Wortis and Merrihue started up as soon as it was light—before 6 a.m.—with enough equipment for a bivouac. The ice-pitches on the right of the crevasse were difficult, especially as Craig and Mike carried packs, but by early morning they had passed the gap and were on the easy snow above. They reached a point only a few hundred feet below the base of the snow-ridge without especial difficulty, but they decided to turn back after a treacherous ice-block had given way under Wortis. Above them there were still some problems: the snow-ridge culminates in steep ice, and it seemed as though the summit plateau might be hard to attain. Now our supplies had almost run out, and we were forced to descend to base camp and thence to the valley for more food. A return to Ausangate was a tempting prospect, but we elected instead to explore a different part of the range. Back at base camp we learned that Bill Hooker had climbed the peak (*ca.* 18,000 ft.) just to the west of camp.

Our midsummer break was longer than we expected, because of the antics of the unreliable mule driver. We spent the time as guests in a near-by hacienda and also took in the various *fiestas*. At one of these we met Günter Hauser's party, which had been in the vicinity of our first base camp. We learned that they had climbed Jatunhuma, Caracol, Cayangate I (second ascent), Kakakiru and Mariposa. The two last-named are the northernmost and southernmost, respectively, of the three peaks just east of Ausangate.

The mules were finally persuaded to move, and, on August 8, we were established in our final base camp in the eastern part of the range. Our primary objectives were Jatunriti, *ca.* 20,050 ft., and 'Shoe Peak'

(Nevado Zapato), somewhat lower. The best route to these mountains seemed to lie via 'Shoe Glacier', which leads east to the col separating the two peaks. To reach the foot of the glacier we relayed loads 6 miles over a moraine impassable for mules and established an advanced base camp. Then we headed up to the moraine to the right of the snow, moving on to the glacier, where it swung around to the right. We picked our way through a crevassed area and pitched camp on the good snow beyond, about 500 ft. below the col. We felt we were in excellent position to assault both objectives; the one sore point was that the weather, which until then had been excellent, had begun to deteriorate. Nevertheless, on August 13, Cronk, Merrihue, Whipple and I climbed to the col and headed left toward 'Shoe Peak'. We reached the summit before we knew it, having followed an easy route fairly directly from the saddle. The next day we returned to the col to attempt Jatunriti. Easy snow and ice-slopes just west of the saddle brought us to a steep ice-pitch which led directly to the long, gentle North ridge. From the summit we had tantalising glimpses through the clouds of what on a clear day would have been a splendid view. To the south-east we saw an attractive snow dome and, much farther in that direction, a high, snowy peak, Yayamari, climbed by Günter Hauser's party. Hooker and Wortis ascended Jatunriti on August 15; then the entire expedition went down the glacier and across the moraine to main base camp.

Now it was past the middle of August, and the clear weather seemed gone for the season. On August 18, however, the skies cleared, heralding the advent of a few days' good weather. Merrihue, Whipple and I set out for a sharp peak, which we call Nevado Cuchillo, or 'Huayna Alpamayo', because of its resemblance to the fine peak in the Cordillera Blanca. The glacier leading east from camp to the Cuchillo-Colque Cruz col was the worst encountered all summer. Crevasses appeared virtually at every step, and nearly two days of arduous route-finding were required to bring us to good snow beneath the col. Fortunately, good weather prevailed, and, early on the morning of August 20, we stood on the saddle, trying to find a route up Cuchillo. It seemed unwise to attempt the ridge leading from the col, as it was sharp and steep, and corniced over the precipitous face to the left. So, after one pitch on the ridge proper, we followed a route which kept below the crest, on the right, throughout. Several pitches of snow and ice, necessitating considerable step-cutting, brought us to a steep rock band. We climbed up this a rope-length, then traversed right (north) and descended on rock to a snow and ice gully, which we ascended for several hundred feet. Now the summit seemed close, but it was almost mid-afternoon. We crossed a field of 'nieves-penitentes' and traversed up to the right until we reached the top of a rock gully. Now we were only about 20 ft. below the ridge crest, but we continued to



Aerial photo by George Bell, 1952]

SHOE COL FROM THE EAST. HUAYNA ALPAMAYO ON EXTREME LEFT, COLQUE CRUZ IN LEFT CENTRE, SHOE PEAK LEFT OF THE COL, JATUNRITI RIGHT OF THE COL. THIRD BASE CAMP WAS IN LOWER RIGHT.

avoid it by climbing right. The summit, less than two rope-lengths away, was gained about five o'clock, and it afforded a fine view in all directions. We hastened to rappel down the rock gully and regain our route of ascent on the snow. By the time we had it was quite dark, the only illumination being provided by the frequent flashes of lightning over the jungle, some 50 miles to the east. Although we had some extra food and wore down jackets, the prospect of spending a night on the steep face in bitter cold was unattractive; we decided to keep moving. We were forced to descend very slowly, rappelling down the snow gully and the steep rock pitch farther on. We had one flashlight, which was essential for route-finding. It slipped from my hands at 2 a.m., but the moon had come up at last; before six we were in our tent on the glacier, and in base camp that afternoon.

Cuchillo was our last climb that summer; we left the Vilcanota, feeling that the area was worth revisiting. Of course, with two parties in the area in 1957, the number of unclimbed peaks has been considerably diminished. Among the more prominent that remain are the peak between Mariposa and Kakakiru, the mountain east of Cara col, the two points on the ridge between 'Shoe Peak' and Colque Cruz, and 'Dome'. In addition, it would appear that the points which we call Cayangate II and III have not been reached. And surely there are others.

Like most Peruvian ranges, the Vilcanota abounds with possibilities for new routes. I have tried to suggest some; there are surely countless more. Climbs on the west side of the Cayangate wall, for instance, or perhaps an ascent of Jatunhuma from the east. The southern summits of the peak have not, to my knowledge, been reached; it would be a difficult and interesting task to reach them from any angle.

I could go on speculating about the Vilcanota for some time, but the best thing is to go and see the beauties of the range for oneself. A few months in these mountains is a thoroughly feasible and rewarding way to spend a summer.

The mountains climbed in the main chain of the Vilcanota, with date of first ascent (my apologies for any inaccuracies or omissions) are as follows:

Surimani (1953)	Cayangate I (1952)
Unnamed peak west of our second base camp (1957)	Jatunhuma (1957)
Ausangate (1953)	Jatunhumas II and III (1957)
Kakakiru (1957)	Horrorhorn (1957)
Mariposa (1957)	Huayna Ausangate (1953)
Campas I, II, and III (1953).	Nevado Cuchillo ('Huayna Alpamayo') (1957)
Caracol (1957)	Colque Cruz (1953)
Pachanta (1957)	Nevado Zepato ('Shoe Peak') (1957)
Ccapana (1957).	Jatunriti (1957)
Cayangate IV (1953)	Yayamari (1957)