MEXICAN TRILOGY, 1963

(Ixtaccihuatl, 5,286 m., Popocatepetl, 5,452 m., Citlaltepetl (Pico de Orizaba), 5,700 m.)

BY MARIO FANTIN

(Translated from the Italian by C. M. D. Eales)

(Four illustrations: nos. 10–13)

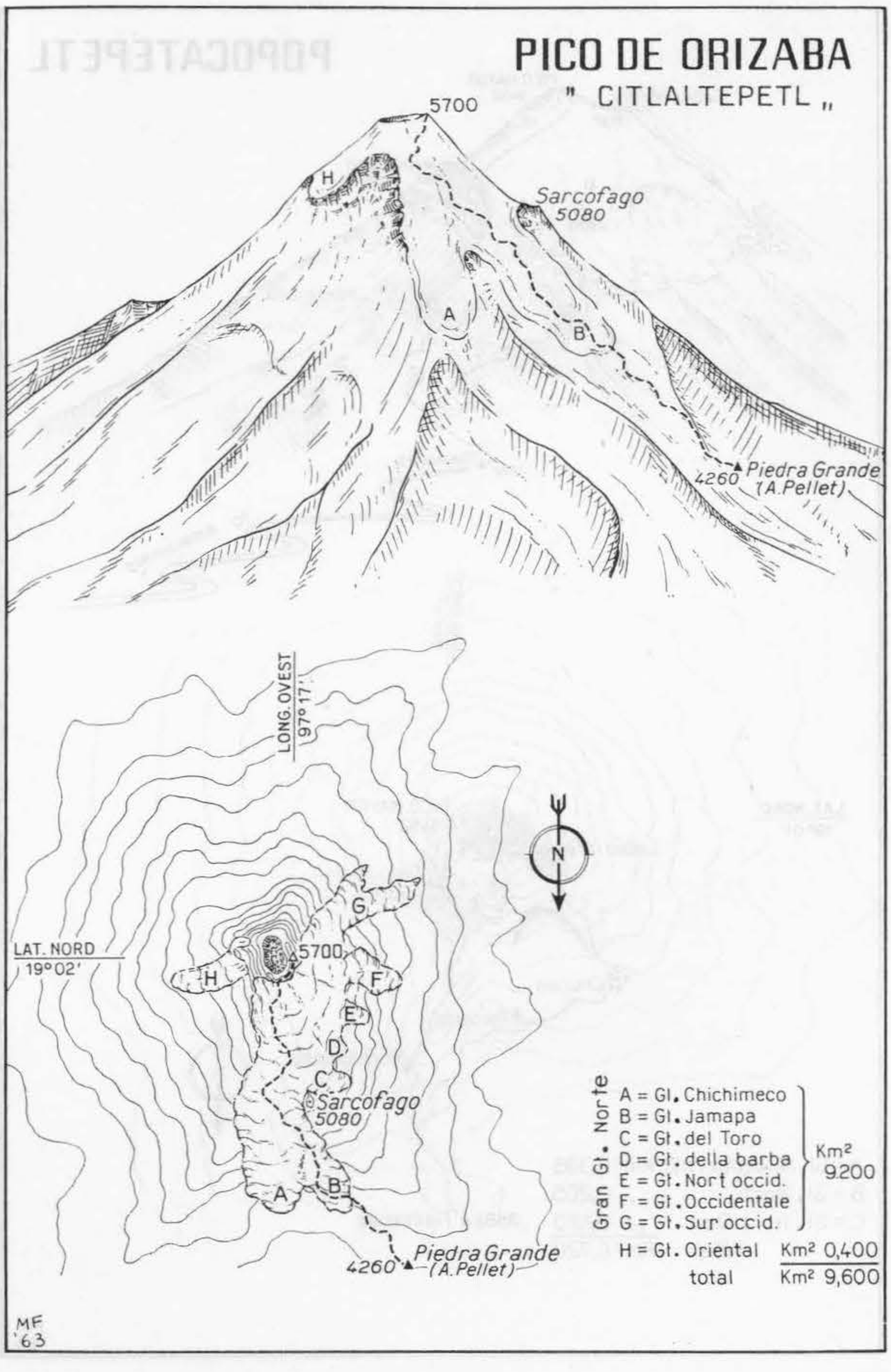
MEXICO is a country of contrasts and also of surprises in the field of alpinism. Surprises of a very marked character, which reveal an unexpected enthusiasm for mountaineering in a country which because it is habitually wrongly described, is imagined by all of us to be inhabited by a quiet and fatalistic people, apparently quite unadapted to the difficulties of mountaineering. On the contrary, the Mexicans are very sporting; and a very large number of them climb mountains with a total and almost fanatical dedication. In this field the Mexicans give us a lesson which should provide us with serious food for thought: their enthusiasm has brought about a programme of hut construction which in my opinion is quite without parallel in the mountaineering world.

There are only twelve high mountain huts in Mexico, serving the three highest mountains: one on the Pico de Orizaba, two on Popocatepetl, nine on Ixtaccihuatl. They have been built by a group of a hundred mountaineers, called the Group of One Hundred, who each year contribute 100 pesos (= 5,000 Lire) and supply materials and transportation, themselves doing all the construction work and all the carrying, either on their own shoulders or on mules. There are a hundred of them, from all the cities of Mexico, who have undertaken this work with admirable personal initiative—a work which neither the Government nor any other public or private institution could have undertaken.

This 'civil association', which commenced work in 1950, already has to its credit the construction and maintenance of twelve huts; at the same time it has other similar work planned and being carried out. It is naturally a question of small constructional work: prefabricated huts (in wood and sheet iron) with accommodation, normally, for six to twelve bunks and, as a maximum, for twenty-four bunks. Many of the Mexican huts are similar to our fixed bivouacs of the C.A.I. It has been laid down that, in the event of the liquidation of the Group of One Hundred, the huts shall become the property of the Mexican Mountain Rescue Service. There is no national Alpine Club yet in existence in Mexico, although it

is the intention of all mountaineers with whom I have spoken soon to form a national group which will embrace all the various groups whose energies are at present dedicated to mountaineering.

At the moment there are more than three hundred clubs (some of

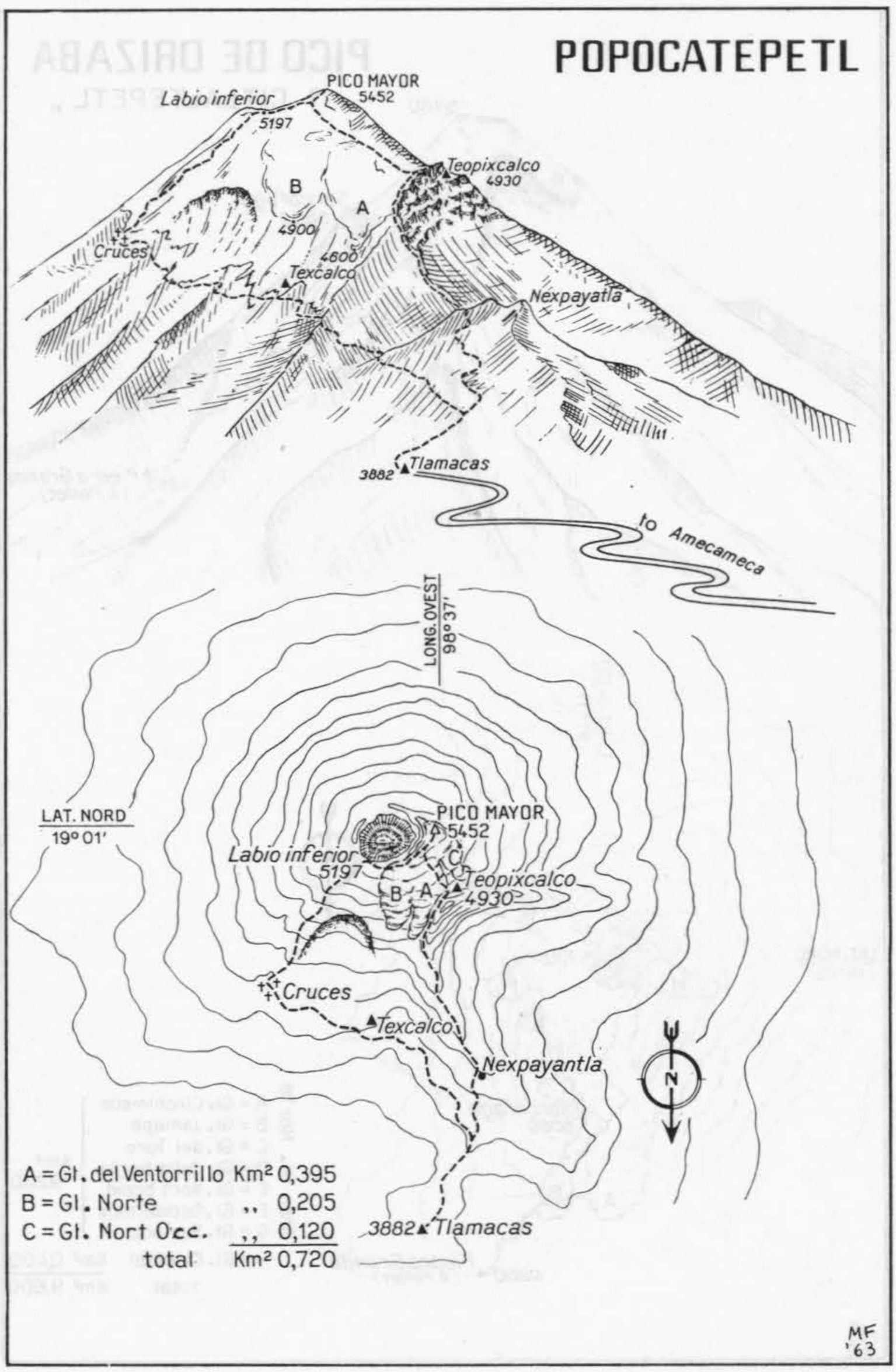


which have no more than eight or ten members) which make expeditions into the mountains and which are associated with the National Touring Federation. This Federation, and those of all other branches of sport which include 'non-professional amateurs', are at the head of an 'Athletic Confederation' which is entirely supported by the Mexican Government.

The National Touring Federation, founded about 1935, has had Ingeniere Luis Garza Galindo as Chairman for the last two years. By

reason of his outstanding gifts of dynamic and enthusiastic organisation he has been able to impart to it a special personal drive. The Federation is now directed by Dr. Santiago Ramirez.

Emanating directly from the Federation are the Mountain Rescue

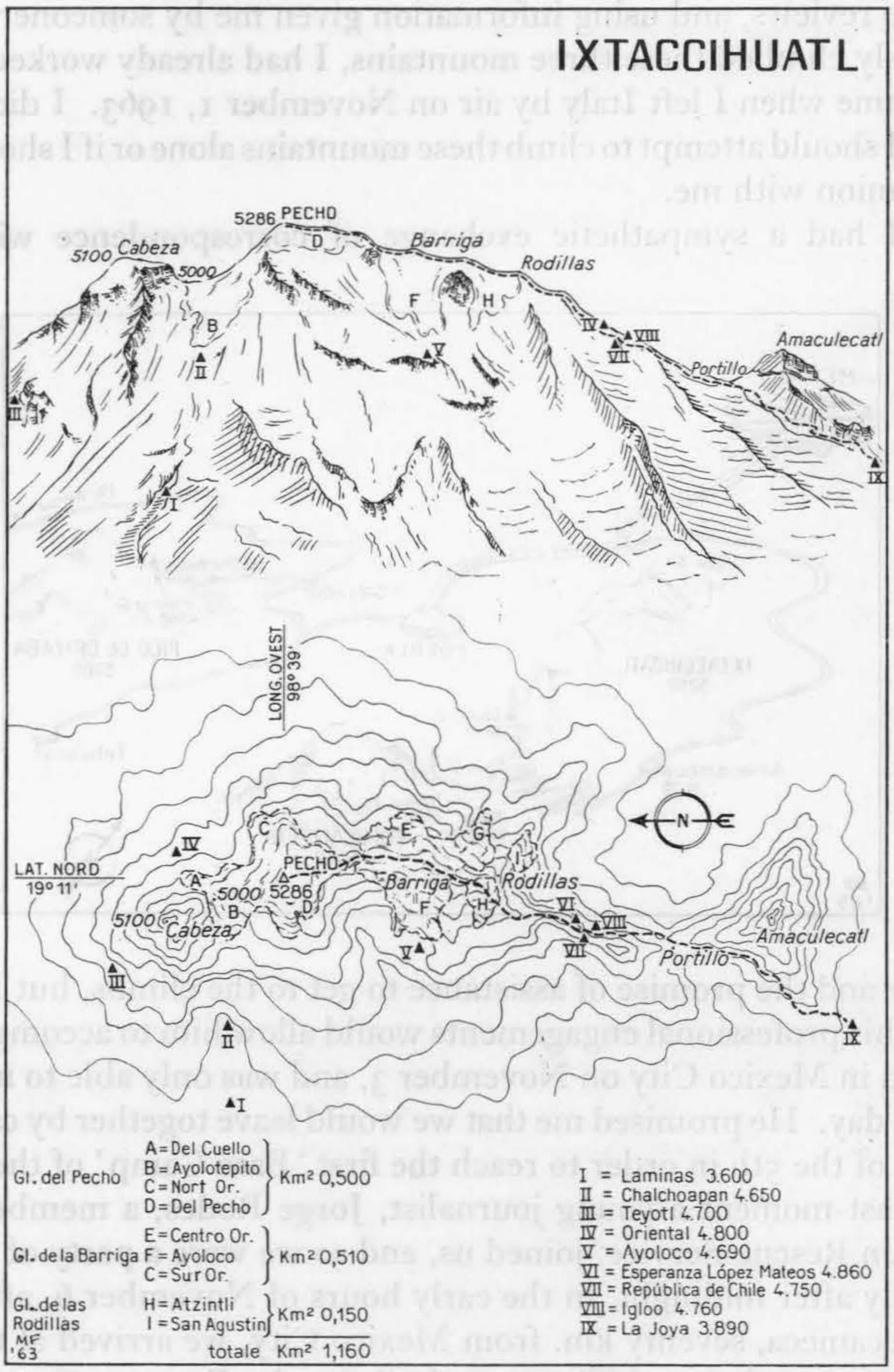


Service, which commenced mountain rescue work in 1942 and is today an independent organisation, and the National Mountaineering School, founded in March, 1962, and directed by Raul Sanchez Lopez (who perfected his mountaineering experience at the Chamonix Mountaineering School in the Alps), where theoretical and practical courses are held periodically.

'Alpine guides' do not exist in Mexico, and only a few have been able

to obtain the official qualification of 'guide' during the last two years. In Mexico, everything develops in the idealistic, friendly and pioneering spirit of mountain climbing.

The topography of Mexico causes mountaineers to converge on the



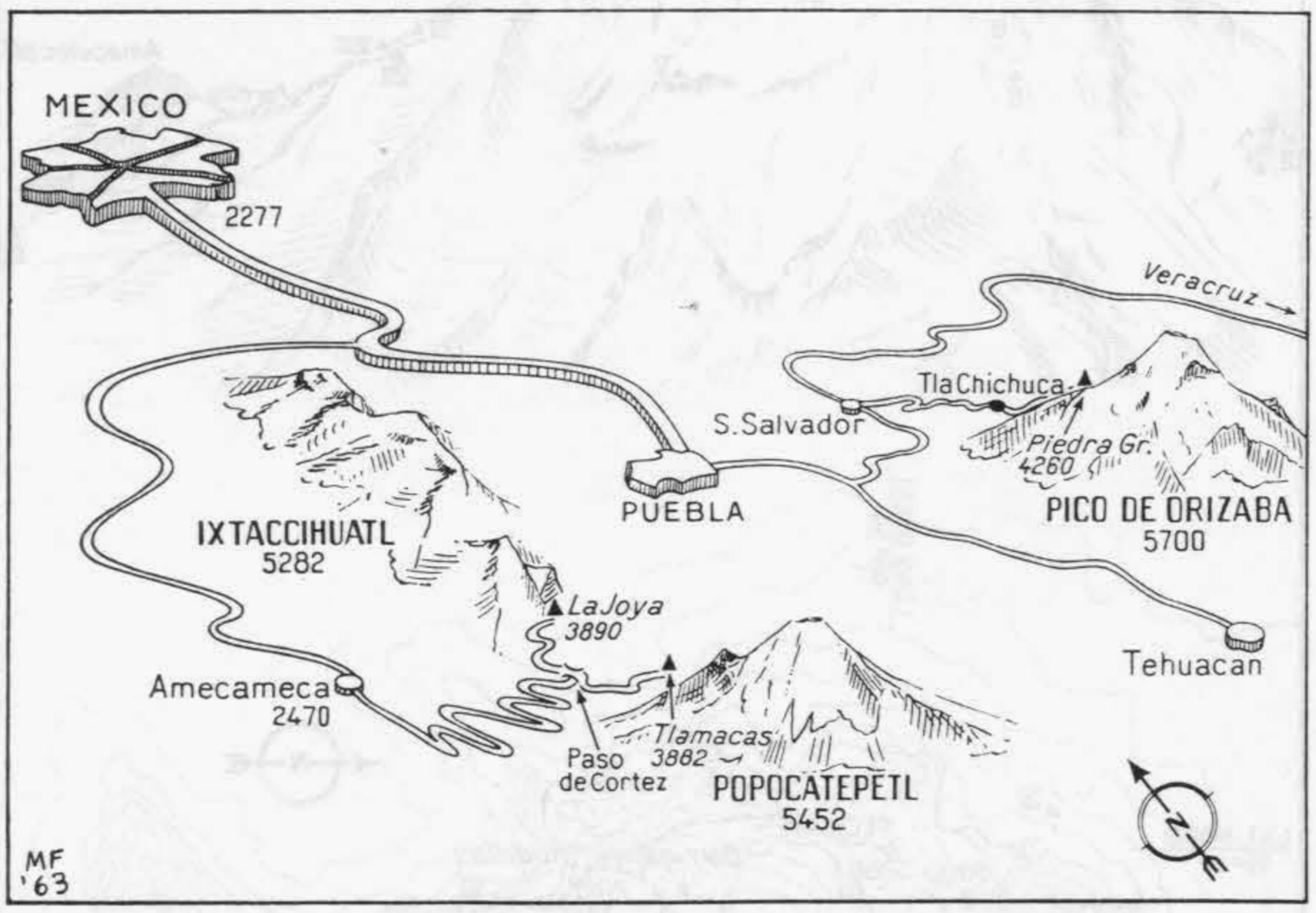
following main areas: the Sierra Negra (4,400 m.), Cofre de Perote (4,280 m.), Nevado de Colima (4,450 m.), Tlaloc (*c.* 4,000 m.), El Teyotl (4,700 m.), Malinche de Tlaxcala (4,461 m.), Nevado de Toluca (4,874 m.), which latter includes the well-known peaks, Pico del Fraile and Pico del Aguil. In fact, there are ten mountains above 4,000 m. which interest climbers.

The most important ascents are those of the three highest volcanoes,

which rise quite separately from the *altiplano* and reach heights of 5,286 m. (Ixtaccihuatl), 5,452 m. (Popocatepetl) and 5,700 m. (Citlaltepetl, or Pico de Orizaba). The ascent of these three mountains is described by Mexicans with the single word, 'trilogy'.

From a number of articles and inaccurate descriptions which I read in alpine reviews, and using information given me by someone who had previously climbed these three mountains, I had already worked out my programme when I left Italy by air on November 1, 1963. I did not yet know if I should attempt to climb these mountains alone or if I should have a companion with me.

I had had a sympathetic exchange of correspondence with Raul



Sanchez and the promise of assistance to get to the climbs, but I did not know if his professional engagements would allow him to accompany me. I arrived in Mexico City on November 3, and was only able to meet him the next day. He promised me that we would leave together by car on the evening of the 5th in order to reach the first 'Base Camp' of the climbs. At the last moment a young journalist, Jorge Rodes, a member of the Mountain Rescue Service, joined us, and so we were a party of three.

Shortly after midnight, in the early hours of November 6, after passing Amecameca, seventy km. from Mexico City, we arrived at the large and hospitable chalet of Tlamacas, built by the Forestry Corps on the upper edge of the beautiful forest at the foot of the slopes of Popocatepetl. This forest is known as the National Park.

My first view of Popocatepetl was unforeseen, on a fine, moonlight night, in a very cold temperature and calm air. Framed by the trees, white as a phantom, the very high dome of Popocatepetl appeared, looking immensely high and inspiring feelings of wonder and awe. Suddenly the question crossed my mind as to who had climbed these Mexican

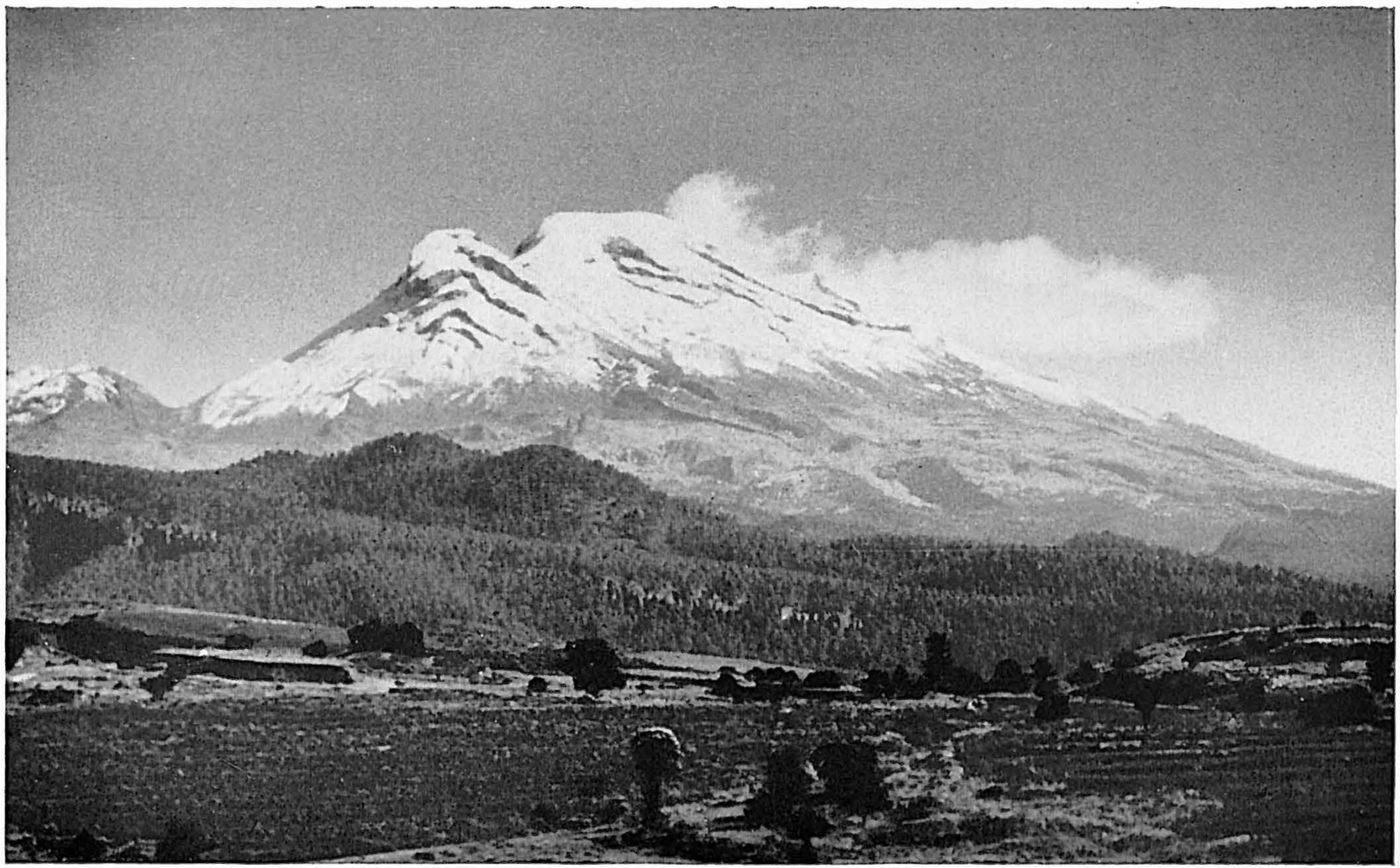


Photo: M. Fantin]

IXTACCIHUATL (5,286 M.) FROM THE NORTH-WEST.

(No. 10)



Photo: M. Fantin]

POPOCATEPETL (5,452 M.) FROM IXTACCIHUATL.

(No. 11)



Photo: M. Fantin]

EVENING VIEW OF PICO DE ORIZABA (5,700 M.).

(No. 12)

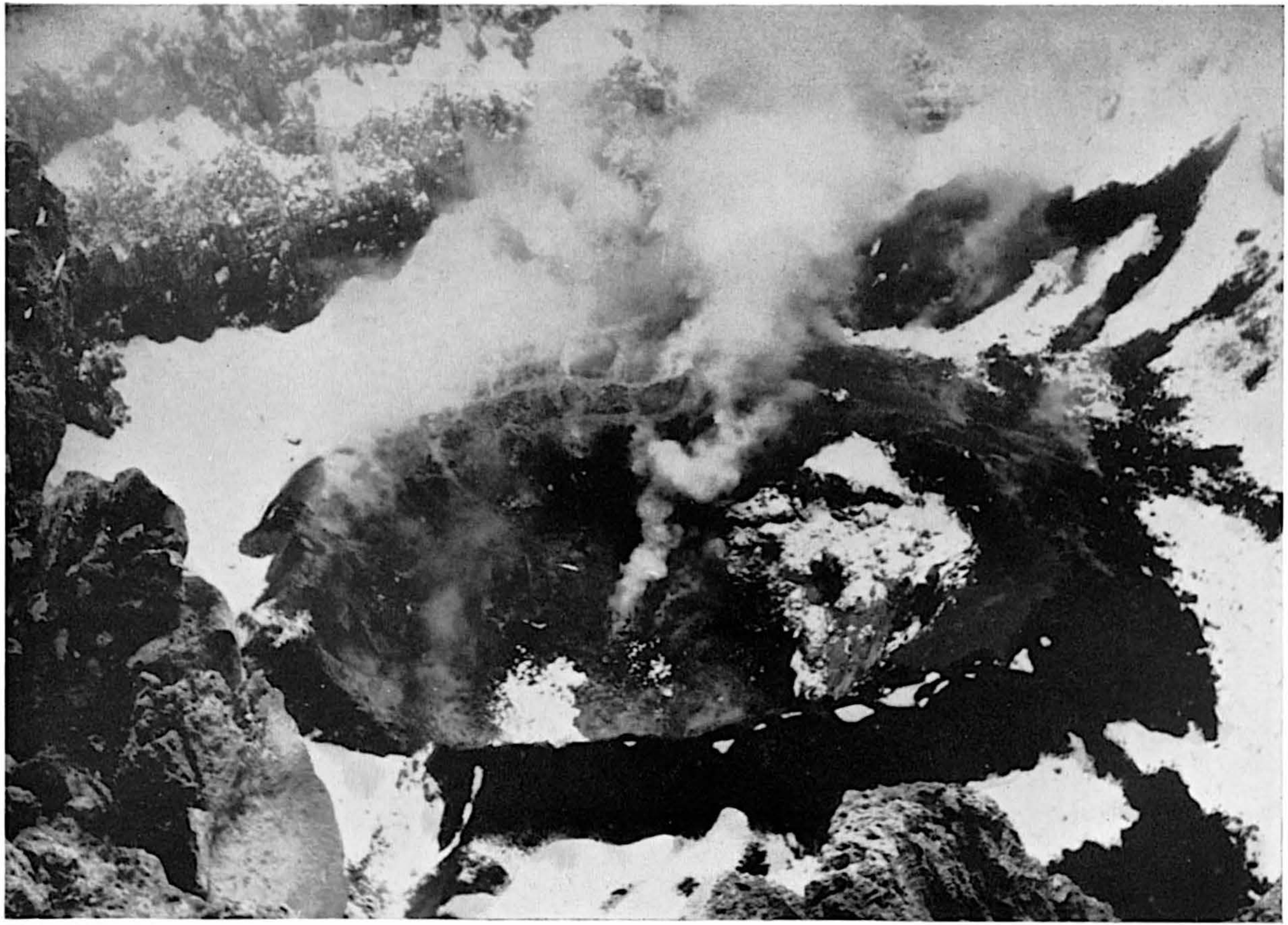


Photo: M. Fantin]

THE CRATER OF POPOCATEPETL.

(No. 13)

mountains and had subsequently been above 8,000 m. in the Himalayas. There were certainly warnings enough that, even in Mexico, climbers had suffered from the altitude.

If one starts out unacclimatised for peaks of between five and six thousand metres (which is impossible in Europe), the physiological rule of gradual acclimatisation must be observed. It is only the unprepared climber who arrives at the summit physically exhausted, at the limit of his energy. Anyone who has the slightest experience likes to do his climb well, in the best physical condition and with considerable reserves of energy for every emergency.

We were in the best condition to be perfectly acclimatised, particularly as we were leaving the highest summit to the last, and were regularly descending to heights of 3,400–4,000 m. to spend the night after each effort. We should thus be following the classical pattern for acclimatisation recommended by physiologists, a pattern which in diagram resembles the teeth of a saw.

We spent the morning of November 6 in quiet preparation; and in the afternoon we went very slowly along the rocky crest of Nexpayantla to the bivouac of Teopixcalco (4,930 m.), which is at the Cuello del Ventorillo. The Pico del Ventorillo is a characteristic rocky point to the north-west of Popocatepetl—the only extraneous element which breaks the perfect conical shape of this great volcano, which is still slightly active. We spent a very comfortable night in this hut which has eight bunks, and left as soon as it was daylight on the morning of November 7, going straight up the steep slope, generally covered with ice, which leads to the summit.

The snow crust which broke at every step, and the soft snow underneath, made our progress very tiring, and we often sank in up to our knees on a slope of forty-five degrees. It took five hours to climb a difference in height of 500 m. up to the Pico Mayor (5,452 m.), which we reached at about eleven o'clock in the morning. From the summit one looked down into the interior of the crater, rimmed by snow and ice. A small wisp of smoke rose from the bottom of the crater, bringing with it a strong smell of hot sulphur. Bright vapours rose from the edge of the crater, up the rock and also near the snow.

According to a legend, Ixtaccihuatl was a prosperous and beautiful girl and her lover, Popocatepetl, a famous and brilliant warrior. While Popocatepetl was far away during a war with enemies of the kingdom, a jealous rival spread the false news of his death in order to win the heart of the lady. Ixtaccihuatl was so overcome by this news that she fell into a swoon, as if she had died (Ixtaccihuatl = the lady who has fallen asleep). Popocatepetl returned from the war, and carried his sleeping lady very high up the mountain and covered her with a white sheet. Ixtaccihuatl still sleeps today, and her sculptured figure can be made out under the

white mantle of snow. Beside her, seated in expectation of her awakening, is Popocatepetl, who continues to smoke to deceive time (Popocatepetl = the man who smokes).

The descent is made by the 'lower lip' (5,197 m.), and then by following the crosses which mark the normal route up the mountain. In the middle of the afternoon we again entered the chalet of Tlamacas, where we dried our clothes and boots in front of a large fire.

We woke at 2 a.m. on November 8, and went down by car from Tlamacas to the Paso de Cortez (the valley which separates Popocatepetl from Ixtaccihuatl), soon arriving at La Joya (3,890 m.). Jorge, who was feverish from the efforts of the previous day, remained in the car while Raul and I began to walk along the path which crosses the Portillo. At 5 a.m. it was still dark. From this path one enjoys a beautiful panorama of the distant Popocatepetl.

The track goes up again among small rocks to the snow where the hut 'Republica de Chile' is located (4,750 m.), at a place called Espinillas. About a hundred metres from this hut, there is a second aluminium building, temporarily christened 'the igloo', where we left part of our kit (4,760 m.).

It should be noted that Ixtaccihuatl is an 'anatomical' mountain. From many sides the image of 'the lady who has fallen asleep' is evident; on the other hand, looking at the mountain from some directions, a certain amount of imagination is necessary. It is a fact that several points on the mountain are named: the feet (Amaculecatl), the knees (Rodillas), the shin bones (Espinillas), finally the chest (El Pecho) which represents the summit. Then follow the neck (Cuello) and head (Cabeza).

About a hundred metres above the two huts, there is a third building with twelve bunks, called Esperanza Lopez Mateos (4,860 m.), and we had a light meal there. We then went on, wearing crampons, up a steep snow-slope and over rocks to the first peak, Rodillas. The persistent morning wind kept us cool, and the snow had not been affected by the sun. We went along the snow-crest, which was interrupted now and then by slabs of rock or icicles, and finally by rocks leading up to the summit. The culminating point is not easy to determine, as the summit is an extensive inclined plane; but it is customary to go on until one no longer sees 'the head'. Thus one is certain to have reached the summit, as the ground at this point begins to slope downwards. It was shortly after midday. Meanwhile the wind had increased in violence, and it was a real discomfort to take the usual photographs in a very cold temperature. We began the painful return with the wind increasing steadily.

The taut rope between us was describing a horizontal arc, while our faces were lashed with particles of ice in the violent wind. The track all along the crest was tiring, as the wind and cold had really put us to the test. We allowed ourselves a short rest at 'the igloo', and then went on

more easily to La Joya, while up above a violent hurricane unleashed itself; fortunately we avoided its most extreme phase.

We again went through the Paso de Cortez by car, going down to Amecameca to get fresh supplies of food and drink and then on towards Puebla, where we only arrived at 5 a.m. the next morning owing to engine trouble.

The desired night's rest was thus reduced to barely three hours. The same morning (November 9) we drove on to S. Salvador El Seco and then to Tla Chichuca, on the western side of the Pico de Orizaba.

In the very short gaps between clouds I saw the high cone of ice (5,700 m.) which is the highest point in the whole of Mexico. The native name of the mountain is Citlaltepetl, or 'Mountain of the Star'. In the small village of Tla Chichuca it was possible to hire a jeep which, travelling over a very rough track on the north-west and east sides of the mountain, brought us in about two hours to the Augusto Pellet hut, commonly known as 'Piedra Grande' (4,260 m.), which has twelve bunks. We left quite late on the morning of the 10th in a cold temperature. We started to climb at about six o'clock, and in about two hours we reached the first snow, at first going up a very steep moraine and then on solid ice. One always climbs the steep slope of the North-north-east face with crampons on a breakable snow-crust and short patches of hard snow. In our party of three, now roped, Raul was the lightest (60 kg.), and for that reason he always took the lead, leaving us the job of stamping down the snow in his track.

Once more the wind continued almost dead against us, making progress tiring. The slope of the final cone for the last 800 m. of its height is nearly fifty degrees. Large crevasses, almost invisible because they were covered over, or perhaps full of fresh snow, cut across the slope high up and always seemed to go obliquely towards the east. Near the edge of the crater a step of about a metre indicated that a large sheet of snow on the slope beneath had slid away. After climbing for five to six hours from the hut, we reached the edge of the crater, on which was a large rock gendarme (called 'Faraglioni').

After a short rest squatting on the ground to avoid the wind, we went along the 'Aguja de hielo', or Ice Needle, which is a steep slope of rock and ice leading to the West ridge, which surrounds the deep funnel of the crater. It was after midday when we reached the culminating point, from which we descended a few metres into the interior of the crater to shelter from the wind.

We started the descent about two o'clock, buffeted by violent gusts of wind, blowing up sleet which at intervals obscured the sun. We again reached the Piedra Grande hut, and went down in the jeep to Tla Chichuca. At eleven o'clock that same night we reached Puebla, before going on to Mexico City the following day.

At Puebla we allowed ourselves a substantial supper based on chicken and lots of beer. We had suffered from a sudden lack of appetite as a result of going to high altitudes on several successive days, and we had not had very much food except for the vitamin pills taken to help us with rapid acclimatisation

My companions informed me that the three summits had been climbed in less than a hundred hours, and that this was almost a record for the 'trilogy', involving a total of 8,500 m. of climbing and descent. It made me smile to think of the tiny, virtually one-man 'Felsinea[1] Expedition', undertaken with only 30 kg. of baggage. None the less, it was undertaken with enthusiasm, as my personal celebration of the centenary of the C.A.I.—and not only as a personal celebration, but as that of my own section of the C.A.I., Bologna, which is among the oldest sections of the Club.

[1] Felsinea is the ancient Etruscan name for Bologna.