

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

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The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the highest coastal range in the world, is situated at the extremity of the Cordillera Central, a branch of the main Andean chain in NE Colombia. They rise to 5775 m, within 50 km of the Caribbean Sea.

Some of the previous expeditions that have entered the range have been predominantly low-altitude groups with scientific objectives, concentrating on the geological, anthropological and botanical aspects of the area. However, the intrepid Simons in 1881, Cabot in 1939 and Cunningham in the mid-50s did venture above 5000 m, recording brief accounts of their ascents. In 1943 Frédéric Marmillod and his wife repeated the ascents of the 5000-ers already climbed and made the first ascent of Pico Simons. Nor must Piero Ghiglione's expeditions in the late 1950s be forgotten.

In our nineteen-day stay at Base Camp (4150 m), the principal objective was the highest peak in the range, Pico Bolivar (5775 m) and if time and weather permitted to attempt other of the major peaks.

34 *Pico Cristobal Colon, Pico Santander* This and next photo: D. Snoswell



Travelling costs to these mountains, located approximately 5000 miles from Britain, would deter most European climbers from making a visit. It was the promise of a free return passage on a large oil tanker that enabled us to contemplate a visit to the Andes. After careful consideration of several areas, the most suitable in respect of distance, weather and exploratory climbing turned out to be the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

As it happened it was not possible to take advantage of the outgoing sea passage, and the seven-man expedition from the Royal Military College of Science arrived in the humid, sprawling town of Barranquilla, Colombia on the evening of 5 July after a circuitous route via Gander and Jamaica by courtesy of the RAF, completing the journey from Jamaica on a scheduled commercial flight to Barranquilla after a few sun-drenched days' delay. A 75-minute 'brawl' through the Colombian customs with our hand luggage enabled our linguist to familiarise himself rapidly with the intonations and exclamations of South American Spanish.

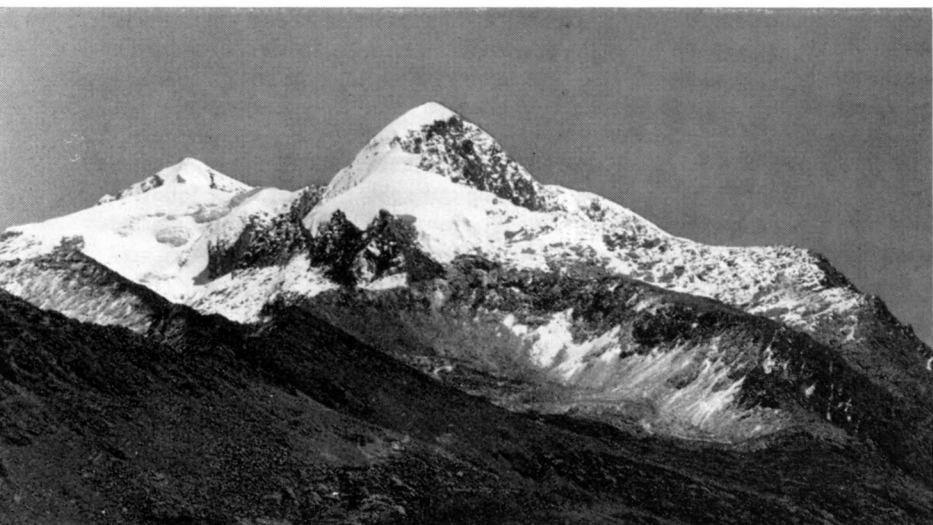
The expedition equipment of 21 pieces weighing a total of 845 kg was extracted in record time (six hours) from the customs shed with the invaluable assistance of the British Consulate officials. The latter also supplied us with a copiously rubber-stamped *carnet de passage* that helped to speed us on our way past road blocks and local police on our subsequent journey. The 250-km body-crunching bus ride mostly over unpaved dusty roads terminated at Valledupar, with the amenities of the tourist hotel soon reviving our aching bodies. The following day local maps were eventually found in the most unlikely shops-cum-market-stalls of this parched cowboy town where jeeps have replaced the horse.

The original plan to follow Cabot's route via San Sebastian to the centre of the Sierra was compared with an alternative, less-documented route further to the E that went up the Guatapuri and Donachui valleys. The paucity of information in respect of jeep tracks, availability of mules and feasibility of the latter route confirmed our intention of heading into the Sierra via San Sebastian. To our relief the first 40 km, to the village of Pueblo Bello, of the 100 km to Base Camp were negotiable by jeep. Eventually a hard-up sixteen-year-old was persuaded by the sight of a few hundred pesos to take us and equipment up the rough dirt track of Pueblo Bello. This jeep ride saved an anticipated two-day donkey march. From Pueblo Bello the route to Base Camp transversed the large valleys which emptied to the E.

Several hours of haggling at the Pueblo Bello 'Hilton' produced nine mules, and amidst the muleteers' celebration of their unexpected custom we set off at 3am for San Sebastian, a village 20 km away. The tiring first day's mule march entailed a walk over a 2300 m ridge and a drop down into San Sebastian at 1800 m. This Aventiqua Indian village consisted of about twenty small, mud-walled, thatched huts enclosed by a low, loose stone wall. A few hundred metres away from the village was a large, brick-walled corrugated-iron roofed Capucian monastery, whose hospitality in the form of a dormitory we enjoyed for three nights.

Apparently mules, like humans, require acclimatisation and once again we entered into protracted negotiations this time for high altitude mules. Four days of not unwelcome rest and continuous haggling produced nine large-lunged mules accompanied by three muleteers at a price we could afford (approx £1.00 per day per mule or muleteer). Three days of rough going along steep and narrow tracks lay ahead, and it was no surprise when the muleteers insisted on transferring the equipment from the large wooden boxes into hessian pannier sacks. This necessitated a cut back in the non-essential provisions and cooking utensils, as well as a pruning of the climbing equipment.

During the next three arduous days we left behind the lush valley of San Sebastian, heading up into the barren moraines where there is virtually no vegetation except the hardy frailejon. Nights were spent at the two hut villages of Duriamiena (2550 m) and Mamancanaca (3150 m) where we were viewed with curiosity by the rough wool-clad Kogi Indians whose diminutive stature (5 feet 3 inches for a full-grown male) may have been the cause of their temerity.



35 *Picos Bolivar, Santander and Cristobal Colon (half hidden)*

Base Camp was established at the end of the third day at 4100 m by the side of a long narrow lake on the only reasonable piece of flat soil. It had been hoped to proceed further to lake Naboba (4400 m) but the mules were unable to negotiate the very steep moraine at the head of the narrow lake.

Our main climbing achievements in our nineteen-day stay at Base Camp were:

Pico Santander, 5540 m. This ice-domed peak is situated at the end of the ridge that runs SE from Pico Bolivar. An initial reconnaissance of this peak revealed a difficult 200 m snow and ice climb to the summit. The actual summit bid made on 26 July was commenced from assault camp 2 (4845 m) at 3am after a frugal

breakfast cooked over a temperamental petrol stove which succeeded in melting most of the quarter-inch of ice on the inside of the tent.

The exposed snow-covered E ridge of Pico Santander was gained in brilliant moonlight, and followed until it met the S ridge. Weather conditions were deteriorating by this time (6.45am), a strong westerly wind blowing up spin drift and causing poor visibility. Despite the early start and clear sky for most of the night, the snow was powdery and very soft. Progress was slow with dead-man and ice-axe protection on the summit ridge ineffective. The summit was gained at 7.45 after 'swimming' up the snow dome. The intention was to continue up towards the summit of Pico Bolivar via the SE ridge that joined Pico Santander. However, this extremely narrow ridge on which visibility was at most 50 m, was exposed on both sides. Moreover, the soft snow cornice had fracture marks and even changed sides along the ridge: progress in these conditions was slow and dangerous, and after several hundred metres we retreated back to the summit of Pico Santander.

After waiting an hour to see if the weather would improve we retraced our steps to Base Camp rejoining the support party who had remained at assault camp 2.

Pico El Guardian, 5250 m. This beautiful Alpine type of peak is the major peak on the S flank of the Donachui valley. It is separate from and to the SE of the big four peaks (Bolivar, Cristobal Colon, Simons and Santander). Two routes were attempted on this peak, the W ridge and S face; the routes being identical as far as the top of the lower snow-field. The route to the bottom of the lower snow-field entailed gaining Peak 4600 m directly N of Base Camp, traversing E over a ridge that runs S from Pico Tairona and then contouring clockwise over rough broken rocks around to the bottom of the lower ice-field on the S face of El Guardian. Access to the bottom of this ice-field was difficult, due to the smooth, glaciated sides of the cwm containing it. Fortunately, a gallery ran down the W side of the cwm, towards the bottom of the lower ice-field. The early Alpine start at 4.30 and ever-improving acclimatisation meant that by 8am we were cramponing easily up the lower snow-field, the weather was superb and for once the snow conditions were good. At the top of the lower snow-field the two routes diverged, Kay and Howshall setting off up a very wide gully to a col at the foot of the W ridge. The snow conditions in this very wide gully were again powdery and did not improve when the ridge was gained. An hour's wading and swimming up the steep exposed snow-ridge convinced the pair that this ridge was only feasible in better snow conditions. They retreated cautiously from their high point of 5050 m.

The other route, directly up the S face, entailed climbing a 200-m gully that linked the lower and upper snow-fields. Snow and ice conditions in this sheltered narrow gully were excellent, giving superb climbing on the steep first pitch and over a difficult lip at the bottom of the upper snow-field. The ascent of the upper snow-field consisted of seven pitches on easier angled snow ($\sim 50^\circ$). By this time (10.45) the clouds had rapidly closed in, giving a total white-out. It was difficult to maintain balance, direction or even momentum up the now

very soft snow. Eventually after an hour and a half of alternate lung-bursting leads the summit rocks were gained. A brief respite in the white-out gave us a glimpse down into the yawning Donachui valley 2000 m below, during our much needed 45 minutes on the summit.

In view of the poor weather conditions the descent followed the ascent route only as far as the bottom of the upper snow-field then, to avoid reversing the gully linking the two snow-fields, a wide traverse to the E along the foot of the upper snow-field was made until the E ridge was reached: this was descended to a point level with the bottom of the lower ice-field, whence the ascent route was retraced to Base Camp in poor visibility and continuous rain.

Pico Tairona, 5050 m. This sugar-loaf-shaped mountain is situated to the w of Pico El Guardian, being separated from the latter by an exposed one km snow and loose-rock ridge.

The start of the route to Pico Tairona was the same as that for Pico El Guardian; from Peak 4600 m located due N of Base Camp a large 2-km ridge traverse was made, initially to the E but becoming progressively more northerly, towards the w face of Pico Tairona. The ridge presented little difficulty except where basaltic gullies 5–10 m deep cut the pink and blue granite of the ridge; the walls of these gullies gave plenty of short technical moves which proved taxing at 4800 m with a 20-kg rucksack. The lower snow-slopes were soon gained, and this time were in fair condition. The final steep snow-ramp was, however, not so good, but suitable cracks in the protruding rocks enabled us to anchor securely 50 m of fixed rope to the summit.

During our nineteen-day stay at Base Camp the weather was generally good, except for a daily period of afternoon rain which arrived progressively earlier and lasted longer. On the mountains even above 5000 m the snow did not come into condition, despite clear skies at night during July. Meteorological literature suggests November to March to be the best time to visit these mountains.

Our undulating route to Base Camp via San Sebastian, traversing the large river valleys that drained to the E, is not perhaps the easiest or most direct way to the centre of the mountains. An alternative route, further E via the Guatapuri and Donachui valleys may be quicker and less demanding on man and mule, though local information on this route is vague and possibly misleading.

SUMMARY Group: Royal Military College of Science Andean Expedition; July/Aug 1972. Members: Lts Howshall, Kay, MacNally, Palmer, Scaife, Spencer. Dr Snoswell. Mountains: Pico Santander (5540 m) Kay, Snoswell, Spencer (Grade II–III; assault camp to summit 6½ hours); Pico El Guardian (5250 m) Scaife, Snoswell (Grade III; Base Camp to summit 7½ hours); Pico Tairona (5050 m) Howshall, Kay, Scaife, Snoswell, Spencer (Grade I–II; Base Camp to summit 4½ hours).