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The Central Cordillera of Colombia

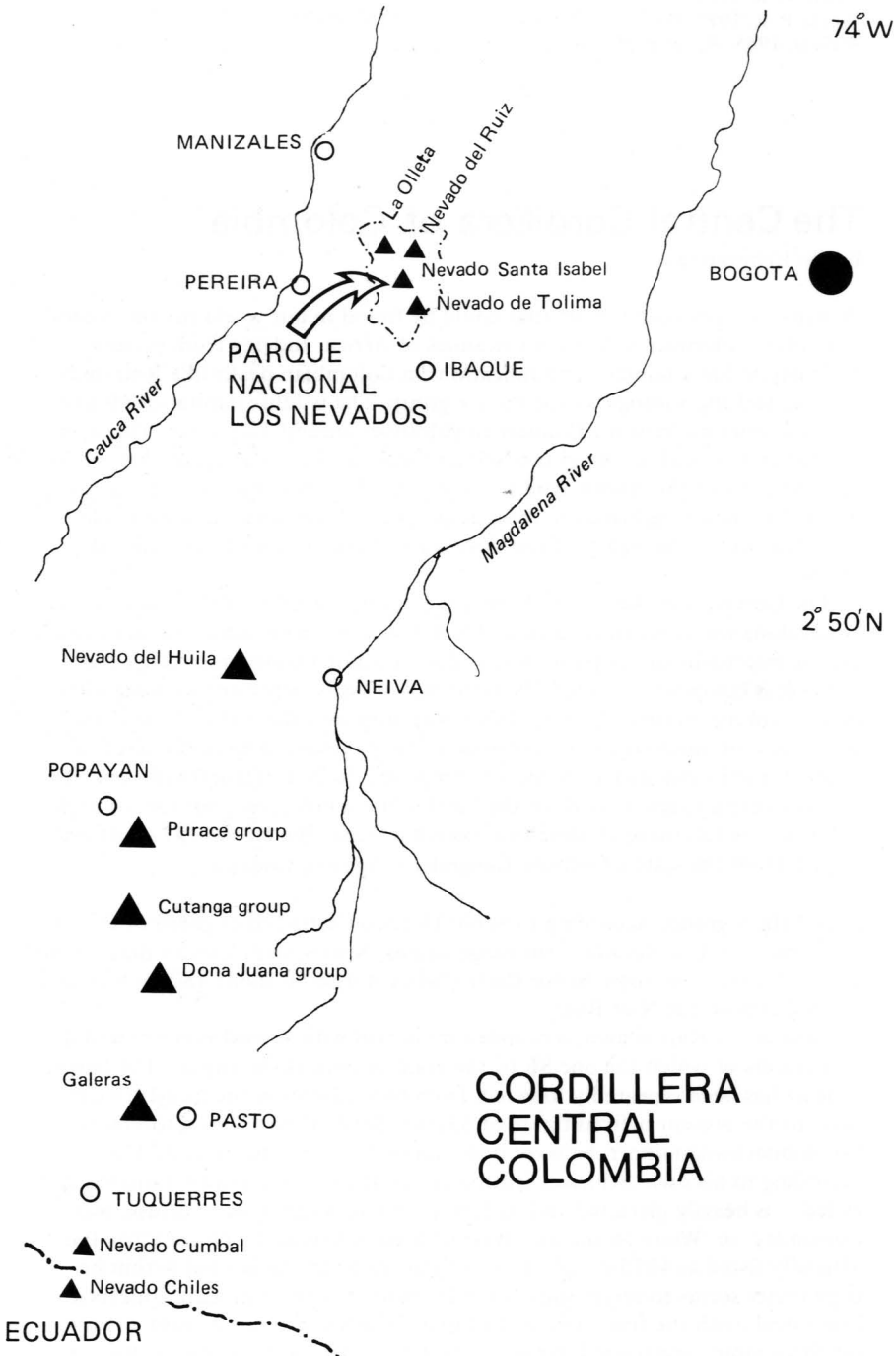
Evelio Echevarría

Perhaps the only counterpart that could be found in our world for the Andes of Central Colombia is the high volcanoes of Africa. Judging from pictures, Kilimanjaro has a number of duplications in Colombian peaks like Ruiz and Tolima, and the Virunga, in the Puracé group. The wildlife habitat of Mount Elgon is imitated by some Colombian volcanoes around Túquerres. The striking plants of E Africa, like groundsels and lobelias, have also close equivalents in these parts of the Andes. And to round out the similarities, it is not unusual in the Colombian highlands to meet at times a hillman with undoubted Negroid features – the legacy of the slave trade, handed down from colonial times.

The Central Cordillera of Colombia is born in the heart of the country and heads along the continental divide of S America in a SSW direction, until reaching the international border with Ecuador. It is not a continuous range but rather it is composed of several isolated high massifs, separated by wide *páramos,* or rolling moorland, rising above deep tropical valleys that drain E and W. In spite of much recent aerophotogrammetry undertaken in the last few years by the Colombian air force, the range still lacks an accurate survey. Detail on existing maps is good for the inhabited country, but poor for the higher areas. The following orographical sketch includes the latest (1973) official heights from the state's Institute Geográfico 'Agustín Codazzi'.

Ruiz-Tolima group. According to Señor Octavio Castro, chief guard of the national park of 'Los Nevados', the range begins, N to S, with Volcán Bravo, which does not appear on maps. Señor Castro believes it to be about 4800m high and located almost due N of Ruiz.

Nevado del Ruiz is next, a rounded mountain with several summits and 2 or 3 craters of which the one SE of the main summit is the largest. The height of Ruiz has been repeatedly lowered, from over 7500m in the mid-19th Century, to the present official figure of 5320m. Señor Erwin Kraus, foremost Colombian mountaineer, believes it should be further reduced to 5237m, according to his own estimates (altimeter). El Ruiz – as it is affectionately called – is heavily glaciated and its former Indian name, now in disuse, was Cumanday, or 'White Mountain'. West of Ruiz is Volcán La Olleta ('The Pot'), officially listed as 4855m high. It is not glaciated but the ground within its large crater seems to retain snow all year round. South of El Ruiz appears a lower peak with the fine name of El Cisne ('The Swan'), too elegant a name for this simple, unglaciated mound of 5000m, indeed a mere spur of Ruiz. I


74° W
MANIZALES
La Olleta
Nevado del Ruiz
Nevado Santa Isabel
Nevado de Tolima
PEREIRA
BOGOTA
PARQUE
NACIONAL
LOS NEVADOS
IBAQUE
Cauca River
Magdalena River
2° 50' N
Nevado del Huila
NEIVA
POPAYAN
Purace group
Cutanga group
Dona Juana group
Galeras
PASTO
CORDILLERA
CENTRAL
COLOMBIA
TUQUERRES
Nevado Cumbal
Nevado Chiles
ECUADOR

discovered in some researches that the name is a shortening of *Cisner*os, the last name of Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, the dreaded Great Inquisitor of Spain, after whom it was named. The black rock crown of El Cisne is known as Morro Negro ('Black Knob').

South-west of El Cisne is Nevado de Santa Isabel, a heavily glaciated mountain with 3 tops, of which the northernmost is the sharpest and the central one is the highest (c 5100m). The mountain rises above a vast moorland locally called Páramos de Santa Isabel, endowed with numerous lakelets and tarns and with thousands of *frailejones*, the striking groundsels of the tropical Andes. South of Santa Isabel follows a ridge of fairly high volcanic rock peaks, averaging perhaps 4600m. A dark rounded mass called El Palomar appears to be the highest of them. At the S end of the ridge rises, or should rise according to official maps, 5400m high Nevado del Quindio. Judging from what I have seen, Quindío is in fact a small volcanic range of 4 or 5 peaks of very poor rock, disposed around a crater as a horseshoe. But these peaks seem to be no higher than 4800 or 4900m.

East of Quindío is located the very fine Nevado de Tolima. Placed at 5620m a few years ago, it is nowadays listed at 5215m (and at 5160m by Señor Erwin Kraus). Tolima has a heavy glaciation, particularly on its N face, with a characteristic tooth breaking through its W ridge. The peak has the distinction of being by far the best known mountain among the Colombians, who seem to ignore that in the Santa Marta range, Colón and Bolívar peaks rise to almost 5800m.

Huila group. The range continues S with elevations of no importance from the mountaineering standpoint, although at all times rising well above 3000m. But W of the pretty colonial town of Neiva, in Huila department, rises Nevado del Huila, the highest peak in the entire range. Listed as 5750m high in national and foreign maps even today, it appears to be, according to climbers, only about 5350m. Huila, a range in itself, has a row of 4 peaks running roughly N to S. First comes its Pico Norte (c 5300m) and then, Pico La Cresta (some 20m lower than the former). Pico Mayor is the highest (c 5350m); it has a number of vents of hot steam breaking through thick glaciation. The southernmost peak, unnamed, is the lowest, perhaps about 5150m high, judging from pictures.[1] Señor Kraus believes that Huila has the lowest glaciers in all of Colombia, descending to as low as 4200m. Since Huila is surrounded by less moorland and more semi-tropical valleys and plains, its weather is worse than that characteristic of the other massifs of the range.

South of Huila a somewhat unattractive portion of the range begins, with small clusters of volcanic peaks devoid of snow. The following are worth mentioning.

Puracé group: on the borderline between the departments of Huila and Cauca, and S of the well-known colonial town of Popayán. It is formed by Puracé itself, a semi-active young volcano, listed as 4750m high, but only 4590m according to altimetric readings by geologist V. Oppenheim in 1949. Nearby are Sotará (4580m), Paletará (4482m), Pan de Azúcar (4670m) and the twin peaks

[1] *AAJ* 1970, plate 73.

of the Sierra de Coconucos (4512 and 4544m). The latter 3 peaks are said to keep snow-drifts all year round.

Cutanga group: S of Popayán and E of the archaeological site of San Agustín. The massif is formed by Volcán Cutanga (4300m) and an unnamed peak of 4200m rising above the moor of El Buey.

Dona Juana group: on the borderline between Nariño and Huila departments are located Doña Juana (4250m), Las Animas ('The Ghosts', 4242m) and Petacas (4300m). West of the town of Pasto is Galeras ('The Galleons', 4276m), a well-known place for tourists. Plans are at present being considered by local tourist officials to establish a *téléférique* to its crater.

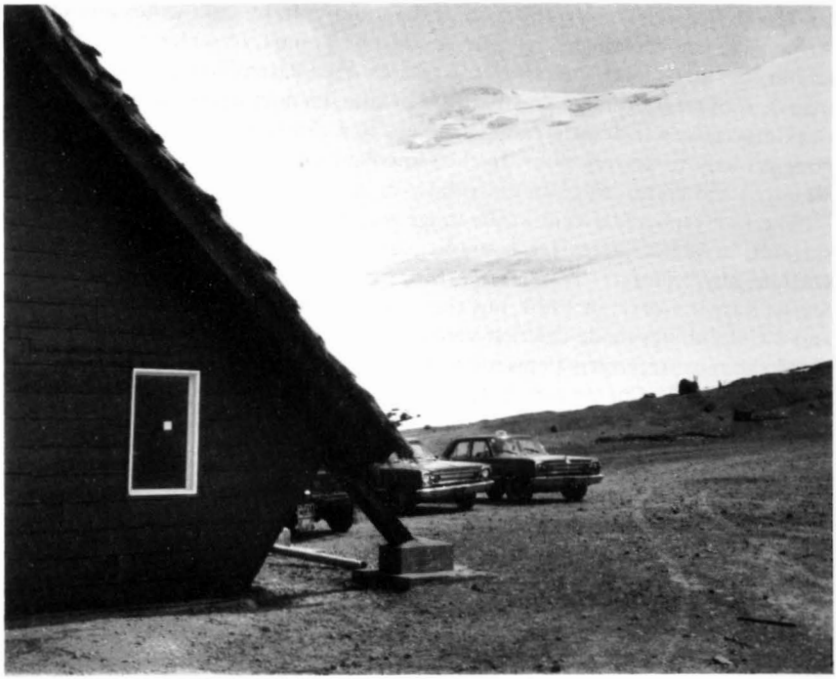
Cumbal group: near the town of Túquerres. Almost on the international border with Ecuador is Nevado Cumbal (4764m), that has a snow and ice crown and, on the border itself, Nevado Chiles (4747m), also ice-topped. It is often heard in Colombia that in the beautiful valley of Sibundoy and near the town of Túquerres there are several round volcanoes whose craters are filled either with beautiful, albeit chilly, green waters or, if dry, are the habitats of a rich flora and fauna, very much like Africa's Mount Elgon.

Most of the peaks described above are semi-active volcanoes, with vents of hot steam and sporadic eruptions. Much of the year these peaks are not seen, due to the heavy local mist and fog. The entire range has green slopes almost to the higher ridges or near the snow line, which attests to the high degree of humidity of its own climate.

The high country below the snow-line is a weird highland, a tropical tundra, populated by small bears, a very small deer called *pudú,* rabbits, condors, eagles, hawks and many kinds of ducks. Except for the grey ducks that alight on the high tarns, the traveller does not usually see these animals. Far more striking than the fauna is the flora. Grasses are abundant, almost always growing in clumps (Chusquea scandens). Mosses, lichens, cushion plants, rosettes and creepers are most common in peaty or turfy places. The giant groundsels (espeletias), known as *frailejones* or 'big friars', never cease to attract the photographer. They emerge out of the fog – according to Quimbaya tradition, belched out by Chen, the Cloud God – and, as fronts of rain and sleet move from one valley to another, they seem to come out of the clammy mist as rows of ghostly phantoms with plumed heads. And in a break of the clouds they are an unforgettable sight when one sees armies of them on the high ridges or standing as guards around mysterious tarns. The *frailejón,* which can grow to a height of 4m, seems to be the Andean equivalent of the giant groundsel of E Africa.

The range as a field for mountaineering

I visited the Ruiz massif in December 1974, just at the beginning of the dry season (December to mid-March). From the large town of Manizales, a jeep or a bus takes tourists every weekend to the 4790m high Refugio (hut) del Ruiz. This is a lodge built by the state's tourism corporation, and large enough to accommodate 35 to 40 persons. It is reached in 1½ hours from Manizales (alt. 2140m), by driving over a winding road, half-way paved, another half gravel.



17 The ski lodge of El Ruiz with Nevado del Ruiz (Photo: E. Echevarría)

About ½ mile from the hut the NW glacier of Nevado del Ruiz begins, gentle, solid and easily climbable. Once the top of the glacier, visible from the hut, is reached, the summit (5320m) is attained by walking over several rounded domes to the main (N central) summit. For an ascent of Ruiz an early start is advisable, since by 11am the whole area is usually engulfed by a sea of cold mist.

From the hut one can also descend about 3km, losing some 300m of height in order to reach the SW foot of La Olleta (4855m), which is easily climbed by any route, by way of loose detritus. Both Ruiz and La Olleta, because of their height and easy access and the convenience of the ski lodge, are excellent places for scientific research connected with altitude.

After climbing both mountains I travelled in a potato-loading lorry to Campo Alegre, a farm located 16km SW of Ruiz. There I hired a boy who took my modest equipment and supplies on his mule to Otún lake. This is a very large body of water at 3740m, at present under the supervision of a Colombian institution for fish hatching purposes. From the road above the lake I was able to verify that my goal, 5400m high Nevado del Quindío, simply did not exist. In its place there rose a group of 4 or 5 rock peaks, perhaps no higher than 4900m. Nor was my second goal, Nevado La Paloma ('The Dove'), listed on maps as 5000m high, anywhere to be seen. Again the hillman pointed to a Pico El Palomar ('The Dovecote'), a dark mass devoid of snow. But its height could have been at best 4700m. I then turned my attention to the pure white ice-domes of Santa Isabel, but after a cold and wet camp by a tarn, I was turned

back even before reaching the base of the mountain, by cold winds and mist. At no time could I see the majestic Nevado de Tolima, of which the hillmen, and in fact all Colombians, sing only praises. Pico Paramillo (not shown on maps), about 4400m high, lies W of Otún lake; its northernmost and highest peak may pose a little interesting problem to a climber, but the rock of its final cone is likely to be very poor. In the same Paramillo group there may exist an uncharted crater, since an old yellowish lava flow still shows on its E flank.

The first reported ascent in the range was that of Nevado Cumbal, by Boussingault, in 1848. Thereafter, sporadic parties claimed the peaks one by one without much fanfare. Tolima, the trophy of the region, was claimed by a Swiss, Kaspar Golay, in 1923, but this has never been accepted. Three Germans and 3 Colombians made the first verified ascent in 1926. The Huila massif provided the most interesting episode in the climbing history of the range. The Swiss team of G. Cuenet and A. Gansser hurried in 1943 in order to beat a German-Colombian party (K. Drees, H. Hũblitz and E. Kraus). The Swiss reached the N peak, from which they ascertained that it was a few metres lower than the central one. The other team, led by Erwin Kraus, foremost name in Colombian mountaineering, climbed the main peak (Pico Mayor del Huila, 5350m) in 1944, at the second attempt. An American expedition repeated this ascent in 1970 and a strong Japanese group failed in the same undertaking a year afterwards, on account of very bad weather. There seems to be little scope for technical climbing in this range; only Huila appears to offer difficulties (ice). Incidentally, its N peak, called La Cresta, and its S dome (unnamed) seem to be the highest unclimbed peaks in the New World N of the Cordillera Blanca of Peru.

Of the thirty-odd peaks that compose the range, only Nevado del Ruiz is climbed very often (5 to 20 ascents every weekend during the dry season, December to March). Mountaineering has been slow to develop in the area. But it is easy to forecast that it will soon become fairly popular in the Ruiz-Tolima group, whose ice-fields will provide a good training ground for the university youths of Manizales, Medellín, Ibagué and Cali. There is a ski club in Manizales, one climbing club (Club 'Los Yetis') in Ibagué and another in Cali. A group of climbers from the latter city achieved the main triumph so far won by Colombians, the first ascent of the icy N face of Nevado de Tolima (F. Arias, M. Rocha and D. Valencia, 1 January, 1973).

In March 1973 the 'Parque Nacional Los Nevados' (of the snow-peaks) was created by Inderena, the national corporation for developing natural resources. The park encompasses an area of 38,000m^2 and includes within its limits the whole Ruiz-Tolima group plus a large tract of moorland all around. Inderena has also created another natural reserve in the Puracé group, which is becoming fairly popular among campers and tourists. However, since both reserves are at the preliminary stage they are, as also is the whole highland region, as wild and desolate as ever. A number of small farms are located on the E and W fringes of the national park of Los Nevados. The farmers, still uneducated as to the benefits of the preservation of nature, hunt, burn and destroy in the unguarded areas at will. But it must also be remembered that Colombia, in many respects, is still a frontier country and farmers and settlers regard nature as one more enemy they have to face.

From this brief exposition, it can be seen that the volcanic domes of the

Colombian central cordillera are not a playground for the helmeted tiger, nor a desirable goal for large expeditions. But the range, even to the Colombians themselves, is what we could call *exotic.* Its strange volcanoes, iced or otherwise, its peculiar vegetation and its sullen mood of sleet, drizzle and fog, broken dramatically by sudden revelations of black-blue skies and direct sunlight, make it probably one of the most unusual regions a mountaineer may ever find in his lifetime.

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Antipodean ventures

III. Mount Cook

J. G. R. Harding

Six days after my third abortive attempt on Mount Townsend – finest mountain on the Australian mainland, but without a route upon it meriting a grade – I arrived in Christchurch, New Zealand with the object of climbing Mount Cook within the week. It was 21 November 1970, the year in Australia when