

The South African Cordillera Blanca Expedition 1982

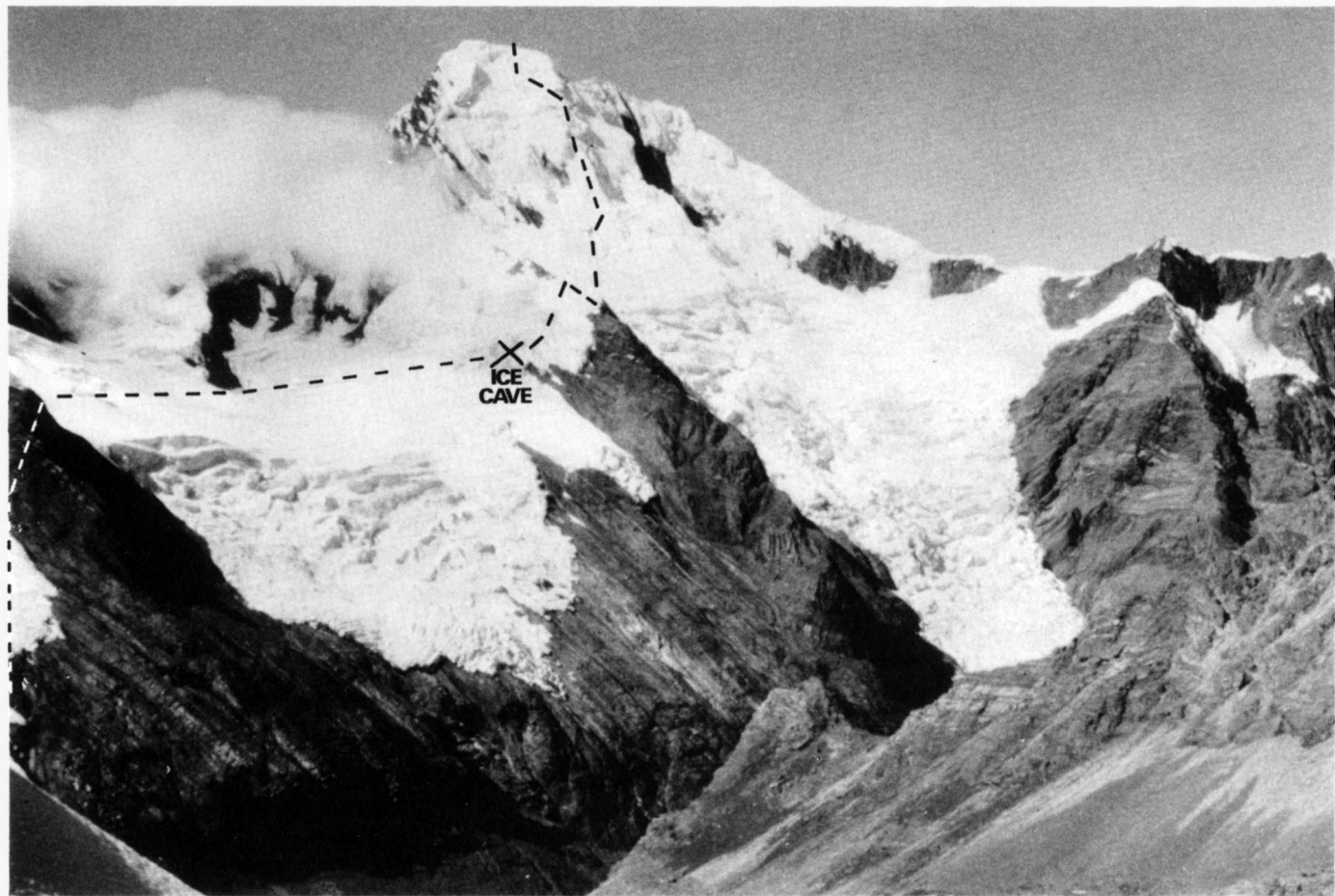
Michael Scott

The big Volvo bus thundered around the corners on the tortuous coastal road N from Lima on a 400km journey away from the squalor and smell of the decaying city, through unbelievably barren desert and across the contrasting fertile hills of the Cordillera Negra. Cloud draped the horizons as we rolled into Huaraz in the river-torn Rio Santa valley and no mountains were visible. A Pisco sour or two later and negotiations with our guide, Emelio Angeles, completed, we settled into our hotel. What a view the next morning! Huascarán stood like a white colossus in our awed gaze, and all around us were unpronounceable attractions in rock and ice soaring upwards.

Huaraz sported many other unpronounceable attractions, we discovered, as we explored for souvenirs and rations, or rather should I say unmentionable? Take the ice-cream for instance—glacier blocks, portered by cocaine chewing Quecha Indians, which are ground up with luminous syrup and typhoid bugs—try it only if daring or immune!

Expedition leader André Schoon had collected a team consisting of his son, Alastair, Tim and Janet Hughes, Jonathan Levy, Pete du Preez, Felicity Eggleston, Tony da Cruz, Des Watkins, Dr Robin Sandell and myself. The 180km by 20km Blanca is rent by several Quebradas (valleys) which we planned to use for a traverse of the glaciers and peaks from Nev. Chinchey to Nev. Uruashraju. The weather during June to July, the dry season, is settled and mild and approach to our chosen area was relatively easy. Señor Ames of the Glaciological institute in Huaraz told us that all of our planned traverse had been done in sections, but never in one continuous trip, and possibly not using some of the cols we planned to cross, so there was a challenge. Even Cesar Morales, famous Peruvian mountaineer, now working for the Dept. of Tourism, could not say whether some of the passes would 'go' or not. He had officially welcomed us in Lima, and we not only enjoyed his hospitality, but borrowed all his snow stakes as well because we expected difficulties. We had brought snow shoes along, and the big riddle was whether we would be wallowing on soft unstable S slopes or be able to make full use of the hard N slopes.

A spine jolting truck journey brought us to our first frosty, enjoyable bivouac at Pitec, the roadhead, *arriero* station and potato plantation. Tony was already suffering from altitude and we hoped we wouldn't lose him so soon, because he had been wowing the locals with his smooth



57 Uruashraju (5735m) NW face viewed from Yawarraju col (5250m)

Photo: Mike Scott

Spanish, while the rest of us were still waving phrase books around. With 18 laden burros trekking up the Quebrada Quelkaywanka, one was bound to get stuck in the mud, which it did right up to its ears like a hippo from Flanders and Swann. Nobody particularly wanted to touch the poor pariah, but we had to help get him out.

Camp was set up on a shoulder at 4300m, immediately below Laguna Tullparaju. The circle of peaks all around us was a delight to the eye, as was the abundant firewood in the Quena forest nearby. We had to restrain our no.1 *arriero*, Alexandro, from keeping a continuous Guy Fawkes blaze day and night. It proved very useful for tea on tap though!

We now set about some training climbs, and Jatunmontepunka (soon renamed Monty Python) was fun, except we left the lunch behind. On the descent Alistair crashed through some loose snow and dragged Robin along, until Pete's belay stopped them. Meanwhile Tim and Jonathan were more seriously involved on Chopiraju Oeste, with Des filming away fit to put Cecile B de Mille in the shade.

Chinchey seemed like a fine target, so we broke our backs portering up onto the glacier, with me muttering constantly about what I would like to do to 90 metre ropes. On the third day we were sitting in a bergschrund cave high on Nevado Chinchey (6222m), with a howling gale whistling past. Our previous cave below the Pukaranra Chinchey col had been an amazing chamber of stalactites and ice shapes, with running water too; now at 6000m we were in cheap digs again. We had met an American party trying Chinchey for the second time. They had been thwarted previously by soft snow and bad weather and that is exactly what eventually caused us to turn back. Chinchey seems to beat most teams with that line of defence. If we have to struggle like that to get to the top, we at least wanted to be able to see the view!

Six of us now set out on the first phase of the traverse, while the support group moved base around to the Quebrada Rajuquolta to meet us. The Cordillera Blanca is an amazing place with near vertical grass and aloe slopes; beautiful meadows, full with flowers and butterflies; and snow. Two days later we were on the col between Nevado San Juan and Nevado Kimarumi. Our expert snow-cave real-estate agents turned up trumps again and we moved in. We had the most incredible window onto the serrated blade of Nevado Kayesh—an unbelievable peak straight out of 'blood on the rope' fiction. From here Pete and Robin did Kimarumi (5451m) with its perched block summit undercut by wind holes. Pete was prepared only to peer over the top edge, but wouldn't risk standing on it.

André and I followed Tim and Jonathan up San Juan (5843m). My crampon had a habit of coming adrift everytime we soloed a steep bit. Afterwards we roped, which seemed to fool the crampon okay, but put us far behind the other two. San Juan has a weird aspect from the side—the ridge looks like a spook in a sheet with 2 eyeholes, so we called it 'Casper'. Casper's head was a flick-flack cornice defying gravity and



58 *Clouds boiling over from the Amazon basin behind Kayesh (5721m)*

Photo: Mike Scott

due to mutual heebie-jeebies, André and I declared that the bachelors could continue, but the married men were going back! The warming sun had turned all the 'penitents' into slush and André took a short fall when some collapsed as we descended. The granular ice scraped his face as raw as an overdone surfer.

The others reached the summit after an inexplicable delay, then came back descending the completely unknown NW Face where they had quite an epic with their short rope. Jonathan also took a 20m slide when a snow stake he was lowering off, came out. He was stopped finally by a rock sticking out, which was fortunate, because Tim was busy climbing down simultaneously and was not belaying at the time! Later, they explained that the ridge they crossed was so dangerous that they were punching steps right through cheese-like ice and were already so committed they couldn't retrace their steps but had to go on. They made it somehow, but even the unknown descent seemed preferable to reversing that section on the way back.

Next day we descended to the Shallap glacier and spent many hours crunching our way round loose scree slopes of great size and horror. From a bivouac below Peak P5406 (Nevado Kiso) (the spot from which Ricker photographed one of his beautiful panoramas in his book, 'Yuraq Janka') we climbed what was probably the second ascent of the NW route. Mixed snow and ghastly rock took us to the cairn on top and we now had some highly spectacular views of Nevado Huantsan, at 6395m the giant in this area.

Crossing the gap next to Nevado Kiso next day held only a short problem at the top, a steep snow and dirt gully, dangerously loose, and then we trudged down the massive bush slope to the Ingemmet huts, next to which the bright tents of base were colourful mushrooms. (The Ingemmet is the official body looking after the glacial lake overflows.)

Tim and Jonathan meanwhile had not climbed Kiso, but took a pass higher up and descended the Huantsan glacier to spy out their next line of attack. They were very determined, and spent four miserable bivouacs climbing Terray's 1952 route on Huantsan via the N Peak, while cloud and storms boiled over from the Amazon basin. Down at base the tin roofs of the Ingemmet huts had been ripped off and tossed hundreds of metres away like paper. Two Mexican climbers had parked with us, optimistically looking at the American West face route from their bags, but they sloped back down again after 2 days without even having climbed as far as out of bed due to the weather. Constant rumbles of awesome avalanches crashing down did little to improve confidence in the prospects either. Under these conditions I think we all felt a bit proud of Tim and Jonathan's fine effort.

Lured on by a guidebook description of the Yosemite of Peru, Pete and I set out for the Wamashraju Spires. We got stuck in the mud next to the river; climbed the wrong buttress onto the ridge; found a serious and ghastly rotten rock route to the summit of what looked like an

unclimbed peak; and we didn't have ice gear for all the snow which wasn't supposed to be there. All in all you can understand my terse reply to Jonathan's radio enquiry, to the effect that Wamashraju compares to Yosemite, like Lima does to New York.

Back at base, meanwhile, the main excitement was Janet's birthday party and cake, and Alexandro's tireless efforts at chasing off marauding 'Torros' wanting to graze inside the tents.

André, Alastair, Janet and Robin trekked up Yawarraju (5675m) and Nevado Rurek (5700m), while Des, Felicity and Tony did the pilgrimage to Cuzco and sundry tourist traps. Tony had retired permanently to the lower altitudes as he had never acclimatised, but the rest of us were just getting our second wind. Pete went to look for surf at Chicama, and André, Alastair and I moved over into the Quebrada Rurek to climb Uruashraju (5735m).

From the grand-daddy of ice caves, replete with glazed ballroom floor and ice pillars, we tackled the involved crossing of the Uruashraju Norté ridge. André led us up the big NW wall through an involved zig-zag route. This cunningly avoided the major difficulties, especially the huge cornice step near the summit, which the first ascent party had had to contend with. Progress was slow, so three pitches from the top we took a calculated gamble and left the packs tied to a stake. This enabled us to reach the summit with three quarters of an hour's daylight left. From our elevated viewpoint, the endlessness of the Amazon basin stared back from one side, the gaunt horizon of the seared Negra on the other, and luminous soap powder peaks, whiter than white, chained North and South. It was grand. The descent was not. Right through the night we inched down, painstakingly, reversing the two ice pitches and getting lost in the seracs and penitente slopes. A short cut back over the Norté ridge didn't go, so with failing energies and in sub-zero temperatures in the wind, we hauled ourselves around the ice overhang guarding our original line. At last, back at the cave we collapsed, exhausted. Seldom have I felt so few pangs at lying in my sleeping bag during a magnificent sunny day. But this luxury couldn't last; by lunchtime we were headed back to base.

During the farewell ceremonies, Jonathan made a solo ascent of Nevado Kashan (5723m) by a new route, and we didn't have the heart to stop him. They have an expression for that in South Africa, which, roughly translated, means 'Bush fever'. It was a delightful walk out down the Quebrada Rajuqolta, past primitive Quecha households and villages operating much as they had for centuries. At Macashca we knew we had reached civilization when we could buy beer again!