

Some Climbs in Peru and Bolivia

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By the time I eventually got round to climbing in the Andes, in 1982, it seemed as if almost everyone else had been and gone, leaving nothing worthwhile to be climbed. It was partly for that reason that we chose to visit the Cordillera Vilcanota, in Peru, and the Cordillera Real in Bolivia—both areas which are not quite as spectacular but are also slightly less frequented than the Blanca; also, Dave Wilkinson had climbed in the Blanca in 1979 and was keen to try a new massif. Dave and I arrived early in July, but the rest of the team were not due until August and rumour had it that during that month we were more likely to find good weather further south, in Bolivia. So, after our lightning visit to the Vilcanota, Dave and I would meet the others in La Paz.

We spent 12 days in the Vilcanota. The approach from Cuzco involved a day's bus ride, worthy of the most painful Himalayan bus journeys, followed by a 2 day walk-in from Tinki, over the gentle terrain of the altiplano. Our arriero, Gerardo, charged 12000 Soles (about £11) for the services of his horse, which carried about 40kg. We camped at Ticlacocha, a little turquoise lagoon at 4700m, to the E of Ausangate, just below the Campa Pass. It is a popular spot with trekking parties and we were glad of the company of a gregarious French team camped nearby.

One week after leaving Lima, at sea level, we climbed to 5500m. The peak, Campa I, was very easy and made an ideal training route, climbed in 2 hours from Base Camp. We left early and arrived at the Campa Pass in time to witness a perfect dawn, with the Cordillera Vilcabamba glowing above the altiplano, 130km to the north.

The second training route took us to the summit of Coapana (5725m), via its NE glacier. After a steady plod up the glacier we were rewarded with a short ice wall and a summit ridge with spectacular views down the horrendously steep slope flutings of the S face. The peak was first climbed in 1957, by the Harvard expedition, and we followed their route. We could also see their route up the NE face of Pachanta, a sharp spire, with corniced ridges worthy of the Cordillera Blanca. At least 3 other routes, all hard, have been climbed on Pachanta—the E ridge by a French team in the '70s, the S face and the SW face both by Yugoslavs in 1979.

We were now ready for our main objective, the 700m W face of Jatunhuma I (6094m). The mountain is also known as Tres Picos, and its 3 summits dominate the view E from Ticlacocha. At the time we



Photo: Steven Venables

7 Concha de Caracol (left) and Pachanta from Campa Pass in the Cordillera Vincanota

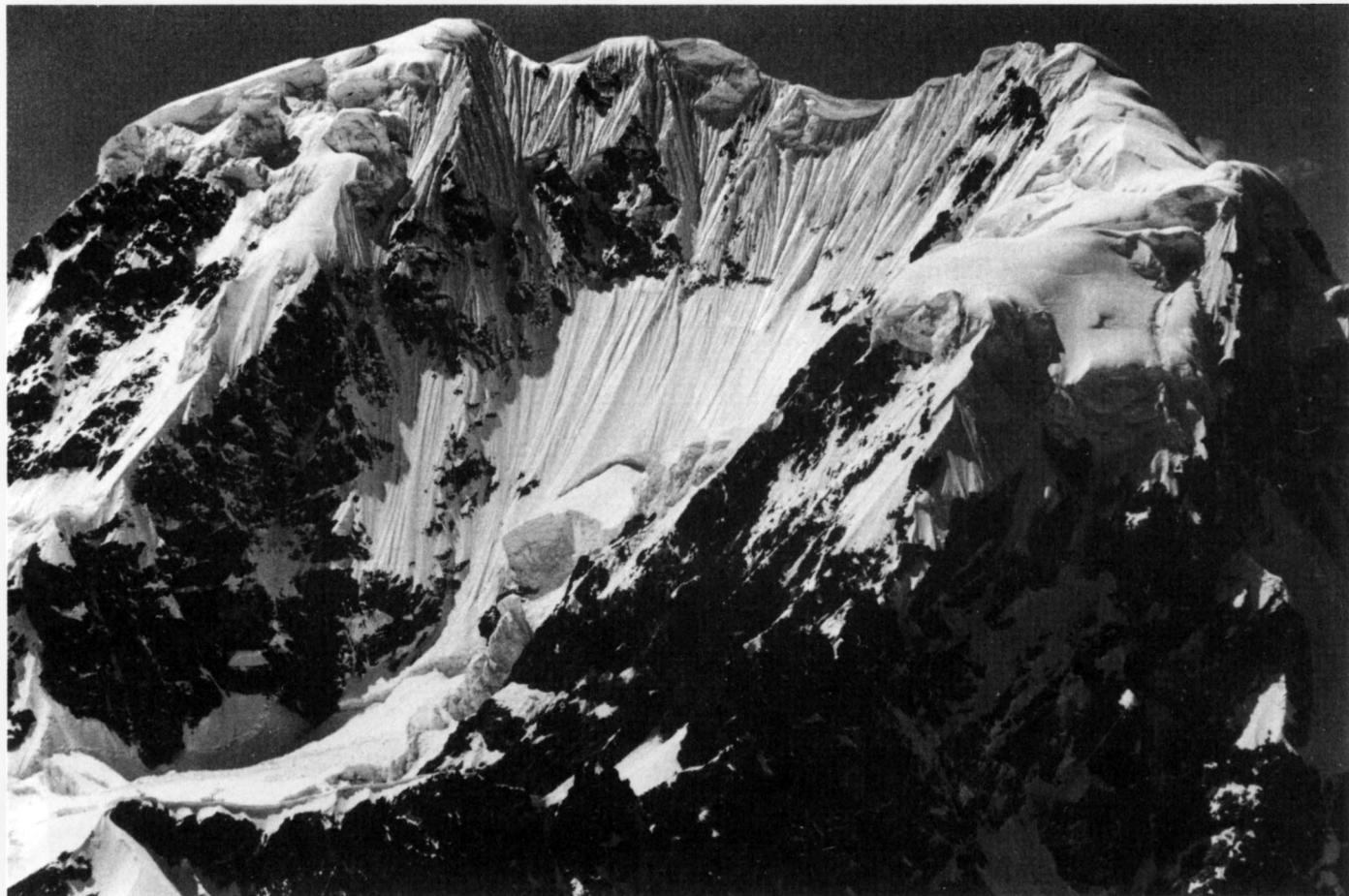
didn't know that the W buttress of the N (highest) summit had been climbed; but anyway, we were interested in the main face, and our route climbed directly to the central summit (about 10m lower than the N summit). Gunter Hauser's expedition made the first ascent of Jatunhuma I in 1957. They climbed the NW ridge, overcoming considerable difficulties on the summit seracs. Since then the three Jatunhuma peaks have been traversed from south to north by at least three parties, and in 1977 an Italian team climbed the W buttress, mentioned above, with the help of fixed ropes.

Our first bivouac was a five star affair underneath an enormous rock overhang at the foot of the face. It was a suspiciously warm night and the clouds failed to disperse; but, as clouds in Peru at this time of year rarely come to anything, we started climbing, regardless.

There is not a lot you can say about ice faces. Half the attraction for me is the sense of height and space on those great sweeping lines of ribs and runnels. We started to the left of a great serac barrier and then curved round to the right, above it, aiming for a rocky narrows, two-thirds of the way up the face. Dave's 30-inch snow stakes made excellent belays. The narrows provided some welcome entertainment—a delicate traverse on hard ice and shattered rocks, followed by a rocky rib; then it was time to return to snow and ice—65 degree flutings and runnels curving up to a break in the summit cornices.

We were still climbing when the sun set. I shivered on my stance, trying to dodge the debris Dave was knocking down in his search for a bivouac site. No luck, so he tied the two ropes together and carried on up into the gloom. It was completely dark when I set off on the last 75m pitch. With a little light from my headtorch and the moon and the help of a tight rope, it went quite quickly. Dave was dug in under the summit cornice, tied to a threaded icicle. After half an hour's digging we settled down for brews and a meal, followed by a fairly comfortable sleep, with only our feet poking out over the 750m drop.

After a leisurely breakfast we went to work to find a way off the mountain. There is no easy way down, and our descent of the E face was in many ways more interesting than the actual climb. We traversed the summit ridge to the col between the central and S summits, then abseiled down the E side, off one of the snow stakes (a heavy investment!). Another abseil down steep rocks took us down to a couloir leading down to a glacier shelf. We then made a long traverse along the heavily corniced SE ridge to a large rock buttress. It was a pleasure to get onto rock and take off crampons. We down-climbed for about 150m until the rocks dropped away in a sheer cliff. It was nearly dark, so we bivouacked, leaving the final two abseils for the following morning. Once down off the mountain, we had a long day's plod right round the back of Jatunhuma II and III, crossing a broad glacier col, before descending deep snow on its SW side and then following the long moraine back to our valley. There was one final bivouac, and we arrived



8 *Jatunhuma I (6094m) W Face; Cordillera Vincanota*

Photo: Steven Venables

back at Base Camp exactly four days after leaving it.

During the descent of Jatunhuma I we had a good view of the Colque Cruz group to the north-east. This is where there is the greatest scope for new routes—attractive peaks, between 5000m and 6000m, with typically mushroomed ridges and steep ice and mixed climbing on the untouched S faces. The highest peak in the Vilcanota, Ausangate (6384m), has inevitably received the most attention, but its daunting N face is a remaining challenge. The Caracol-Pachanta group above our base camp has been fairly well worked out, but there are big face climbs waiting to be done on Chimbaya and Cayangate I-IV, further along the ridge. Jatunhuma I has a very steep SW face and the NE ridge would provide a long, epic climb. Jatunhuma II has an attractive W couloir.

We walked back to Tinki and a day later we were back in Cuzco. In spite of the hordes of 'travellers' in regulation denim jeans and alpaca jerseys, it is a lovely place, with its Baroque churches, arcaded plazas, cobbled streets and Inca walls. Most people fly from Lima, but for a third of the price (about £15) you can take a bus and spend three days acclimatising on the way. We now continued by road to La Paz, in Bolivia. Morales Maralitos run buses three times a week, seem efficient and reliable, and take great care with their customers' baggage. (The risk of theft can't be overemphasised.)

Lake Titicaca lived up to its reputation—turquoise water, fringed by golden reeds, wading cattle, the famous reed boats and, strung along the western shore, the Cordillera Real. Because of a general strike we had considerable difficulty in finding transport from La Paz to the mountain and had to pay £75 to hire a special truck. Three weeks later the strike was over and we used local transport to make the 160km return journey from Ancoma; it cost the four of us £7.

Ancoma is the little village at the end of the road, on the E side of the Ancoma/Illampu massif. The approach involves a long drive up the altiplano and then right round the N end of the massif, crossing a pass to the town of Sorata and then another 4800m pass to Ancoma. Occasional trucks continue up the track from here to the Mina Candelaria, but most of the traffic is equine. The arrieros here were all honest and extremely efficient. On the first day we took horses to the mining village of Cocoo; we continued on the next day with llamas. They objected violently to their 14kg loads but, once loaded up and ready, they stopped all the spitting and set off up the steep track at high speed, hardly pausing for breath until they reached our base camp at the lake, Chearcota (4700m), a few hours later.

We were based at Chearcota for two weeks. Unfortunately we had to spend more time at camp than we had intended, because of bad weather from the north-east—one bad spell lasted for five days. Dave and I were now climbing with Lindsay Griffin, who wasn't yet acclimatised, so we started off with some fairly short climbs. Lindsay and I climbed Viluyo I (5600m), which gave us an enjoyable climb with a good view of the



9 *Jatunhuma II (5800m); Cordillera Vincanota*

Photo: Steven Venables

whole massif. Then the three of us climbed Lhirini (5970m), a peak on the E side of the main Ancohuma/Illampu watershed. After a seven hour moraine and glacier plod, we bivouacked just below our peak, with vague ideas of climbing somewhere up the S face in the morning. We were half way up the face when dawn broke, livid red, over the endless clouds of the Amazon Basin below. It was only eight pitches up the face—straightforward 50 degree snow and ice, leading to the long, crenellated NE ridge, which we followed to the summit. The ridge was entertaining—snow mushrooms, ice tunnels and rock gendarmes providing a delightful variety of moves. On the final section we found Cassin pegs and some very bleached rope, probably relics of the Italian ascent, via the N face, in 1969. We descended to the col at the foot of the NE ridge of Ancohuma and from there returned down to the bivouac site. The following day we returned to Base Camp, climbing Hancopiti I, a shapely 5860m pyramid, on the way.

We wanted to climb at least one 'big route' on this side of the massif. There were several possibilities. The most attractive was the NE face of Illampu (6362m), which sports several steep, mixed pillars; but the safest and most logical line had already been climbed twice. There were hard buttress routes on Pico del Norte (6030m) and there was a steep granite pillar on Ancohuma (6427m). We decided on Ancohuma and, after 5 days of rain and snow at Base Camp, we made the long climb back up to the glacier, arriving below the pillar in the evening. Lindsay and Dave wanted to bivouac immediately below the cliff. I protested weakly, muttering things about stonefall, and later regretted my weakness when we were hit by flying lumps of granite, in the middle of the night. Lindsay and Dave were both hit; luckily they weren't seriously injured, but it became clear the next day that, sadly, neither Lindsay's leg nor Dave's elbow was in a fit state for climbing a 'Gervasutti Pillar' which started above 5500m. The pillar remains unclimbed. As a consolation prize, I climbed the couloir in the S corner of the face, which took me onto the steep ENE ridge. It was extremely exhilarating to be alone on a six thousander, with deep valleys plunging into the clouds of the Amazon basin on one side and Lake Titicaca stretching out across the brown alitplano on the other. There was just time on the summit to admire the possibilities on the W side of Illampu and on the other peaks of the Cordillera Real, to the south, before the afternoon cloud rolled in. The following day I was back at Base Camp and we all left for La Paz.

Time was running short. Dave had to return to Lima to sort out complications arising from the theft of his air ticket (together with money, cheques, maps and both our passports) seven weeks earlier. Lindsay went to climb the W rib of Illimani (6462m), accompanied most of the way up by Jan Solor. I went to have a look at the tremendous E face of Illimani, never set foot on it and decided to return another year with a big helmet and someone to keep me company. One week later I

met Jan and Lindsay at Lima airport and we flew home.

Our flight went via Zurich. Flying past the Alps on an immaculate September morning I wished that we could stop off for a few days to do some climbs. After two months in the Andes, I didn't feel tired or satiated. It summed up the difference between an Andean trip and a Himalayan expedition; the latter often leaves people tired and emaciated and longing for home; in the Andes everything is easier, cleaner, more lighthearted and relaxed. The weather in the Vilcanota was perfect; during August the weather was deteriorating but, apart from the one bad spell of 5 days, we only suffered mild afternoon storms. A glance through back copies of the *AAJ* soon reveals numerous ascents in the Vilcanota and the Real, but the scope for new routes is still enormous. I have already mentioned possibilities in the Vilcanota and of course there is also the Vilcabamba, with famous peaks like Salcantay and Pumasillo, also within easy reach of Cuzco. The Cordillera Real is similarly perched above the altiplano, with easy approaches from the west and several roads leading to the deep valleys on the E side. Illampu is to my mind one of the finest peaks and, unlike many of the Bolivian peaks, has no easy descent. Further south along the chain, before Huayna Potosi, there are the great bulks of Chachacomani and Chearoco, both over 6000m, with a cluster of smaller peaks round them. Nearer to La Paz are Huayna Potosi, Condoriri and Tiquimani and, finally, the highest peak of the range—Illimani, a vast, three peaked mountain with ridges of Alaskan dimensions sprawling in every direction and a forbidding E face, reminiscent of the S face of Aconcagua. At least six routes have been climbed on the mountain; most of them have not been repeated and there are numerous worthwhile routes still waiting to be climbed. I always think that the best way to choose objectives is to go and have a look, but for those who want detailed information there is plenty available in the various journals. The southern Cordillera Real is quite accurately represented on the Bolivian 1:250,000 map (Sheet SE 19-3, series H531). The sheet further north doesn't yet exist; but there is quite a good map of the Illampu/Ancohuma massif in the 1979 *AAJ*, p.250, and there are several useful maps of the Real and the Vilcanota in Mario Fantin's book 'Le Ande' (copy in the AC library). Official Peruvian maps of the Vilcanota can be bought in the Plaza de Armas, in Cuzco.

No doubt there will one day be guidebooks to the whole of the Andes. Until that time one can enjoy the vague muddle about who has climbed what and make the most of the exploratory nature of the area. Provided that one is prepared to stick one's neck out, just a little, any expedition is almost bound to be rewarding.