# The Roof of Colombia

*The first ascent of Simon Bolivar, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia, was made 50 years ago on 2 February 1939*

JORGE RUIZ

(*Plates* 73, 74)

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is located in the north-west of Colombia, rising from the sea-level of the Caribbean. It is the highest massif on earth so close to the sea, and includes the mountains Bolivar and Colón, both 5794m high. At Parque Tayrona, north of Santa Marta (an important Colombian port), the Sierra drops sharply into the sea.

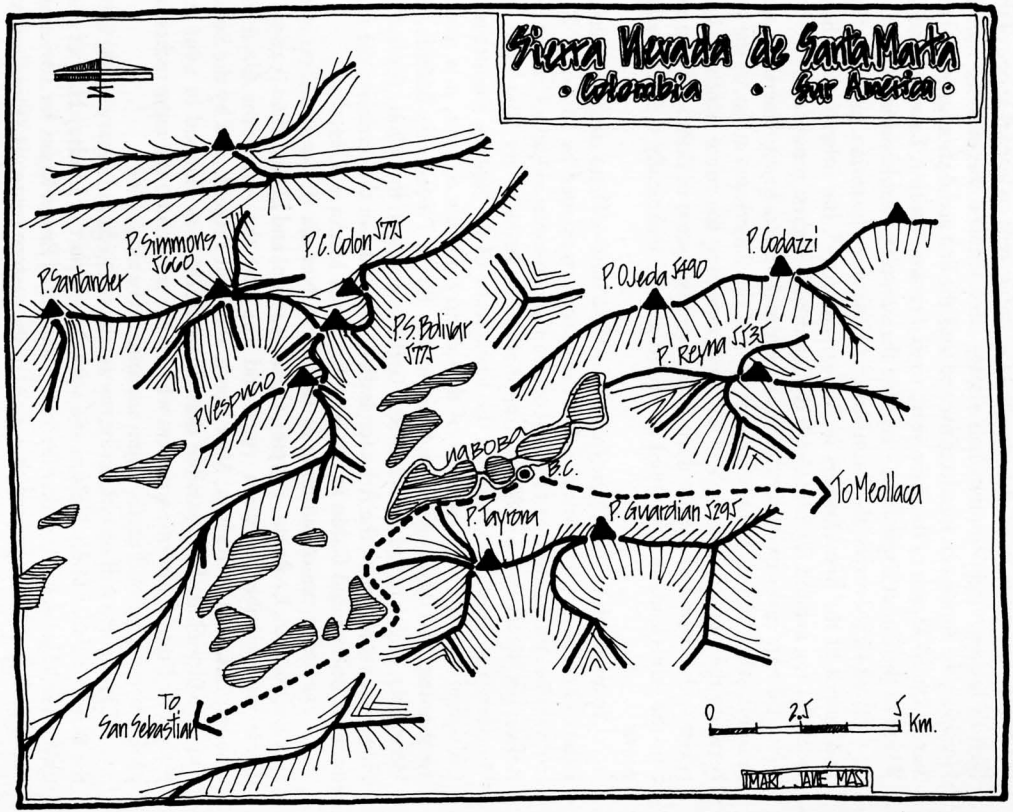
The fact that these two mountains share the highest altitude in the country has made the history of their first ascent both exciting and confusing. This article attempts to clarify the fog surrounding the subject and then describes a recent climb of Ojeda (5490m), another of the Sierra's high summits.

Erwin Kraus, a Colombian of German origin – with Enrico Praolini, an Italian, and Gustav Pichler, an Austrian – conquered the summit of Bolivar on 2 February 1939. They named the mountain 'Pico Olaya Herrera', after a liberal president, but a conservative head of the Geographical Office was not willing to include such a name on the official maps.

With Heinz Franke and Alex Stiernon, Kraus left Bogotá with the aim of climbing the highest summit in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. But at Valledupar they met Praolini and Pichler, who had climbed Tayrona the previous year. There were no maps then, and it took them three weeks to reach Base Camp from the sea. The approach walk was hard, and Stiernon and Franke abandoned the group. Kraus, Pichler and Praolini built their Base Camp near the S face of El Guardián and from there attacked Bolivar. Nowadays, Base Camps are usually set up at Naboba Lakes.

On the summit the three men used a hypsometer to determine the altitude, taking into account some additional data such as time of day, latitude and temperature, and the Trautwein Tables. Kraus's original reading was 5520m, but this was later corrected to 5794m by the Office of Longitudes and Frontiers at Bogotá (today *Instituto Geográfico Agustin Codazzi*). Another estimate, 5834m, was given by Dr Enrique Uribe White.[1]

Although the hypsometer was invented by a Colombian scientist, El Sabio Caldas (Francisco José de Caldas, 1768-1816), Kraus's instrument was manufactured in Berlin and weighed 6kg. Even though Kraus never climbed Colón, his estimate of almost identical heights for the two mountains seems to be right. A recent climb by Cristobal von Rotrich and Juan Pablo Ruiz to both summits gave readings, with an altimeter, of 5790m for Bolivar and 5775m for Colón.


Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta
• Colombia • Sur America •
P. Santander
P. Simmons 5660
P. C. Colon 5775
P. S. Bolivar 5775
P. Vespucio
P. Ojeda 5490
P. Codazzi
P. Reyna 5535
NABOBO
B.C.
To Meollaca
P. Tayrona
P. Guardian 5295
To San Sebastian
0
2.5
5
Km.
MARC JAVIÉ MAS



73. *Erwin Kraus on the summit of Bolivar, 2 February 1939. Looking W can be seen Santander and Simmons Peaks.* (Erwin Kraus) (p 150)

When Kraus left Bogotá, he did not know that an expedition to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta was being organized in New York; this was the Cabot Expedition of the New York Geographical Society. It is easy to imagine the faces of the North Americans when they reached Colombia, only to learn that one of the Sierra's highest virgin summits had already been climbed the previous month. However, the Americans hired a plane and took the first aerial photographs of the Sierra. On 16 March of the same year, 1939, Praolini – with A Bakewell and W Wood of the Cabot Expedition – reached the summit of neighbouring Colón.

Evelio Echevarría, the Latin-American climbing historian, gives the date and names of the first climbers of Bolivar correctly[2], but other writers have created a fog around the first climb of Colombia's highest mountain.

Ullman[3] gives credit for the first ascent in the Sierra to the Americans and Praolini, when in fact Praolini merely guided the Americans as far as the col between the two equally high mountains, repeating the route which he had taken with Kraus and Pichler during the true first ascent of Bolivar. From the col, the Americans and Praolini ascended Colón, technically a much easier route.

In an article in the *Alpine Journal* by D M Snoswell[4], no credit is given to Kraus's first ascent of Bolivar; nor is this ascent mentioned by M Kurz.[5] The truth is that, unlike the first ascent of other major summits in Latin America (eg Bolivar in Venezuela by Weiss, Chimborazo in Ecuador by Whymper, or Huascarán in Peru by Ms Peck), the first ascent of the highest mountain in Colombia was led by a national of the country. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the highest summit in the Sierra Nevada de Mérida, in Venezuela, is also called Bolivar (see L Griffin's article in the *Alpine Journal*[6]). However, according to the Arhuaco Indians who inhabit the territory, the real name of Bolivar and Colón in the Sierra de Santa Marta is 'Chundua'.

The other major summits in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta are: Simons (5660m), La Reina (5535m), Ojeda (5490m) and El Guardián (5285m). These were climbed between 1941 and 1943 by the Americans Elisabeth Cowles, Elisabeth Knowlton, Max Eberli and Paul Petzold, and by the Swiss couple Marmillod. It is possible that El Guardián was climbed in 1898 by Joseph de Brettes, but one wonders why he chose to climb the most technical peak when higher and easier virgin summits were available.

This article will now describe my ascent of Ojeda in January 1988, with the British climber Philip Nelson and with the support of Lindsay Harper and Catherine Marquette. In December 1987 we visited Erwin Kraus for advice on our expedition. He suggested that we take the eastern route via Donachui, an Arhuaco town, reckoning that this was the easiest way into the Naboba Lakes area. A Base Camp at Naboba would be well placed for all the summits of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. We also borrowed from him a map which Kraus himself had helped to prepare, giving detailed information about the glaciers.

We managed to get all the food for our expedition from local supermarkets in Bogotá, except for dried fruit which we obtained from health food-shops. At a hardware shop we bought gas cylinders and long-life batteries. (European climbers should note that head-torches must be equipped with an AA battery adaptor.)

All expeditions to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta start from Valledupar, an agricultural town south of the Sierra from which there are at least four different routes to it. The town can be reached by plane from Bogotá in under an hour. Although it is possible to reach Base Camp (Naboba Lakes) from the west (from Santa Marta), there are many reasons against this; guerrilla activity is just one of them.

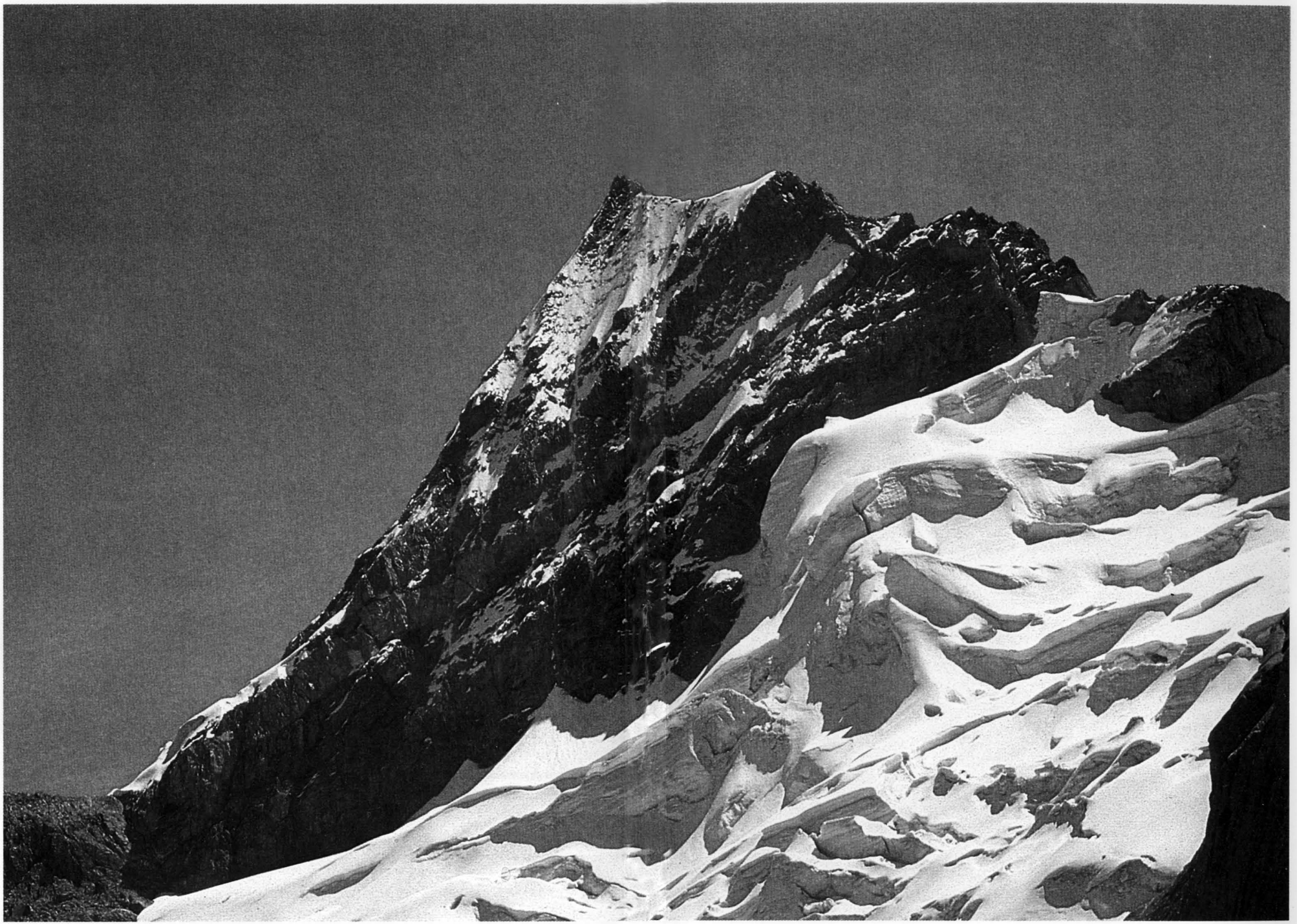
After driving for a day in a slow Land Rover from Bogotá, we arrived at Bucaramanga to stay the night at the hotel of the local country club. The next day we should have reached Valledupar, but an electrical fault with the car forced us to stay at Caracoli. Travellers from abroad need not go via Bogotá, unless they want to do some rock-climbing at Suesca.[7] Alternatively, one can fly from London to Caracas, change planes for Cartagena or Barranquilla, and from there drive or fly to Valledupar.

There are only two aboriginal tribes left in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the Arhuaco and the Kogi. Formerly there were also the Wiwa and Canguamo tribes.[8] While the two tribes share much the same environment, the former are more accessible to the white man than the latter and it is nearly always the Arhuacos who act as guides; they use mules rather than the donkeys favoured by the Kogis.

To enter the Sierra one is supposed, in theory, to have a permit from the Indian authority. Unfortunately, we arrived at the weekend and the office in Valledupar was closed. Since we were unwilling to hang around until the office reopened, we took the risk of entering the Sierra without a permit. In fact, possession of a permit is no guarantee that a climbing team will not be turned back when it meets the authorities of the tribes within one of their territories.

Most expeditions enter the Sierra by driving from Valledupar to San Sebastián de Rápagos (1940m), the largest settlement of the Arhuaco Indians.[9] This was Snoswell's route with the Royal Military College of Science.[4] From San Sebastián the approach starts on mules, through a series of valleys and many ups and downs, gaining height and losing it again. However, our own team took Kraus's advice and entered the Sierra via the eastern route: Valledupar-Atanques-Chemesquemena-Donachui; a 'less documented' route, according to Snoswell. A jeep goes as far as Chemesquemena. From here the mules carried our rucksacks – and some presents that we hoped might be acceptable instead of our missing permits. On the first morning we let our guides load the mules, but it soon became obvious that their abilities left much to be desired. Loads were distributed unevenly, and the mules were being injured by the ice-axes. From then on, we supervised the loading ourselves, and we always kept the ice-axes in a separate bag. At the beginning the food, in a heavy 60kg duffle-bag, was easier to manage if loaded on to just one mule. In general, we found that the animals were able to carry two fully-loaded rucksacks and one light one. Mules must be carefully looked after, not only for their own well-being but also for the sake of one's belongings. It would be hard to find anyone who has been to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta without 'losing' something. Unfortunately, one hour before reaching Naboba, one of our own mules collapsed while crossing a small river.

The trip was not straightforward. For instance, the Arhuaco Indians



*74. NW face of Pico Guardián, 5295m. If not the highest summit in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, certainly the most technical one.* (Jorge Ruiz) (p 150)

normally live on their farms and use their towns only for social gatherings at weekends. We arrived at Donachui on a Sunday, after a six-hour walk, and, being the only aliens in town at the weekend, we were easy prey for the picking. Our first guide had escorted us only as far as Donachui; our next guide did not show up at sunrise next day, as planned. Thus, we had to visit several *fincas* (farms) before acquiring enough mules.

It was strange to walk through crops and see coca leaves being grown. This is legal only for Indians. As with other tribal groups, the government respects the Indians' custom of chewing the coca leaf. In fact, one Arhuaco mentioned to us that he travelled outside his reservation with fewer problems if he brought along his 'poporo' and coca leaves. A poporo is a wooden instrument containing sea-shells. The powder is placed on the tongue with a stick when the Arhuaco is chewing coca leaves. A base is used to neutralize the acidity of the leaves. The mixture adheres to the stick, which is later rubbed against the poporo, making the ring wider and wider.

With our new guides we went through Sogrome, another aboriginal town like Donachui. Both towns have houses built in the rectangular or square shape characteristic of the Arhuacos. The Kŏgis, on the other hand, build their houses in a circular shape. However, the Kogis have been displaced by the Arhuacos, so that sometimes one finds an Arhuaco living in a circular house that formerly belonged to a Kogi. Probably the easiest way to distinguish an Arhuaco from a Kogi is by the hat worn by the former but not the latter.

During the approach walk, we had to feed the Indian guides and provide them with sleeping-bags and a tent. Fortunately this was no problem for us, but it was something we had to bear in mind when dealing with climbing logistics. The altitude gained in just one day was amazing. While coffee and plantain are grown around Donachui, only potatoes will grow around Meollaca.

On the third day we arrived at Naboba Lakes in the early afternnon. Here we set up our Base Camp at 4600m. Other climbers, whom we met at Naboba, confirmed that 'the living history of Colombian mountaineering' (Kraus) was right. The San Sebastian route is considerably longer and the vegetation is scarce. Our own route, via Chemesquemena-Donachui-Sogrome-Naboba Lakes, was both pleasant and shorter.

After a two-day rest, we made our first attempt on Ojeda. However, poor acclimatization prevented us from going very far. We attempted to reach the glacier via a col which can be identified by a helicopter wreck. This accident occurred some years ago when an American diplomat was being 'rescued', when he was actually safe and back in civilization. We returned to Naboba and the next day climbed Tayrona, a mountain with a small fast-disappearing glacier. Two days later we moved our camp to the border of the lake by La Reina. Just before sunrise, Philip and I left for our final attack on Ojeda; this time it was Philip who felt the altitude and our progress was slow. We followed a series of cairns. A couple of times we roped up, but the unstable rock made protection difficult. The weather was brilliant and the views of La Reina and El Guardián were magnificent. I agree with the many climbers who consider El Guardián the most beautiful mountain in Colombia. It looked like a true alpine peak. Near the summit of Ojeda there was an exposed bit, but the rock at this

altitude was granite and gave good protection. From the flattened summit, 10m of rock and ice, there was a superb view of Codazzi.

Going down we sometimes strayed from our route, but every now and then we would recognize a reassuring cairn. The weather, fortunately, remained fine; in bad weather the scramble could be lethal. Because of our slowness earlier in the day, it was dusk when we arrived at our last camp; this prevented us from returning to our original Base Camp at Naboba and meeting our guide the next day. There was no alternative but to spend the night at our Camp 1, and to walk at first light to Base Camp and on to Meollaca in search of the guide and mules. At our Naboba Base Camp we split into pairs: two remained at the camp and two took just a tent (food was already running short) as far as Meollaca in order to get the mules for the return trip. The highest Arhuaco farm in the area is owned by Don Antonio; it is easily recognized by a huge hole in the mountain which lies directly behind his farm. We learned that Don Antonio could supply fresh or dried meat (beef, lamb or pork) and even potatoes. Catherine and I, the pair who had gone down, spent a night at Don Antonio's house and he kindly sent two of his sons, with our tent, back up to Base Camp. They left at 7pm and were back, with Lindsay and Philip, before noon the next day. Our last night was spent at a *finca* somewhere between Sogrome and Donachui. Unfortunately it was not a pleasant one and, as before, we were picked on as aliens. Finally we arrived once again at Chemesquemena, and of course enjoyed the pleasure of a cold beer. For the trip back we chose another route – via Cartagena, a beautiful colonial port on the Caribbean – and from there continued to Medellin, arriving only three days after leaving the Sierra. In spite of being careful with the water (always putting in one of those pills), Philip became very sick after leaving Cartagena. A week later the rest of us suffered the same affliction (Montezuma's revenge?).

If you would like more information about rock and ice climbing in Colombia, the place to go in Bogotá is the *Centro Nacional de Montaña*, located in the north of the city (Transversal 10 No 106–35, tel 214 0884). The centre has a library, an outdoor gymnasium and a café with warm fireplaces.

The author is indebted to Erwin Kraus and Marc Jané for their kind collaboration.

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*See also:*
*Le Ande* – 67 (concise history of first ascents in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta); and
J Ruiz, 'Kraus Pisada Alta'. *El Tiempo*, 13 February 1989.