Atacama Initiation

The British 1991 Andean Volcanoes Expedition

GRAHAM LITTLE

(Plates 59, 60)

The gusting, swirling wind snatches at my bivvy-bag, forcing a wave of freezing powder against my exposed face. It doesn't wake me, as sleep has been an unattainable dream for the last two nights – a nagging, persistent headache the harsh substitute. Adrian Baker and I are enduring a second night huddled behind a rib of dark, contorted lava, at a height of 4680m, on the bleak col between Volcan Licancabur and Volcan Juriques. We are on the edge of the Atacama Desert, one of the driest places on earth, yet low cloud and snow flurries create a Scottish winter environment and mocking irony. A few hours drag by; Britain is but seven days and a world away. We have come too high too soon and must pay for our presumption.

I take a sip of precious water, stored in my sleeping-bag to prevent freezing. A tentative glimpse into the outside world reveals a pale lightening. Today is our last chance to climb Licancabur as we are due back in San Pedro tomorrow. Adrian eats some chocolate and immediately vomits. A brew of tea gives psychological support; four layers of thermals and an outer shell give some protection against the biting wind.

Taking only cameras and water-bottles, we start up the E spur – an endless rib of unstable lava thickly coated with powder snow. Clouds break and some warmth filters through, and then the sun. We glimpse the summit sail of Juriques (5704m) through a rent in the cloud, its volcanic darkness bleached with fresh whiteness. We gauge our ascent by the diminishing size of the Indian ruins to the north of the col. For a thousand metres our route is dictated by the gust of the wind, by the tilt and tumble of volcanic rubble, by the whim of our bodies' balance. We move up slowly, yet inexorably towards two rust-red towers on the edge of the crater.

Out over the salt-saturated waters of Laguna Verde, over the burnt brown domes of Bolivia's rooftop to the Cordillera Lipez, we gaze, at each lung-quenching rest, soaking up the barren grandeur of one of the highest plains on earth. Time slips by in a monotony of lava. As the towers move closer, a dragging weariness comes upon me; internal dialogue saps my will. Adrian spurs me on, leading a snowy groove between the two towers. The rock is so loose that it must be held in place as we ease up and out onto the lower crater's rim.

Relief gives way to despair as the 200m higher cone of the true summit looms above, its head still in the clouds. Despair turns to anger, and my anger calls upon reserves of energy, as I stomp up the final slope, a fiendish mix of sand,



59. The Andes: high on Licancabur, looking out over Laguna Verde to the Cordillera Lipez. (*Graham Little*) (p68)



60. The classic cone of Licancabur, 5916m , from the south. (*Graham Little*) (p68)

pumice and snow. We pass strange freeze-dried spars of wood, incongruous memories of the Atacaman Indians' affinity for these high places. (Remains exist on many Chilean summits, including ruins on Llullaillaco at the remarkable altitude of 6739m.)

As I reach the summit (5916m) the view down into the inner crater, through a brief window in the mist, reveals a perfect circular ice-pool, perhaps 100m in diameter and of unknown thickness. The cloud wells up as Adrian arrives. He takes a token photograph, yet already the night is chasing the day; barely an hour of daylight remains. We speed to gain a shallow snow gully on the NE face and plunge down, on weakened legs, into the gloom. Soon the nightmare begins: ten hours of lava-block stumbling, of knee-crunching tumbling, of shiver-woken sleep from stone pillows, of jarring falls and despairing calls, of praying for the dawn.

Somehow we are both delivered from purgatory. We return to the col, bruised and battered, as the first long, low-slanting rays of the day's healing sun pick out every stone – each frosted tuft of yellow grass in the shadow of its own rebirth. We have disregarded the rules of acclimatisation, overestimated our own ability, foolishly forgotten that high mountains, even those with little technical difficulty, deserve great respect.

We drink tea and munch shortbread before setting out to cross the wide, dry grass and thorn expanse that leads to the distant sulphur road to the south. The level appearance of this intervening ground is, however, an illusion. Deep cliff-flanked *quebradas* running across our path are a final chastisement. We become separated as the maze of steep-walled, sand-filled canyons leads us along different, often blind ways. As the sun burnishes the sky of another dying day, we lie isolated in our own doubts and concerns. Some lessons must be learned the hard way.

The great long shadow of our mountain stretches far out over the Atacama plain with the first flush of dawn. Adrian and I reunite in the dusty square of San Pedro, Licancabur watching to the east.

Summary: Graham Little and Adrian Baker made a winter ascent of Licancabur (5916m), via the E spur, on 5 August 1991. Straddling the Chilean/Bolivian border, Licancabur is by far the most prominent volcano in a mountain chain running along the E side of the Salar de Atacama. The two-man team went on to climb Volcan Simbad (5924m), Cerro de Pili (6046m), Volcan Lascar (5641m) and Ojos del Salado (6885m).