

# A visit to the Ishinca valley, Cordillera Blanca, 1968

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(Translation: E. N. Bowman)

The starting point for our visit to the Ishinca valley, east of the Rio Santo, was Monterey, 20 km north of Huaras (3063 m), a pleasant, well-equipped mountain hotel excellently managed by a German couple, Herr and Frau Klemm, and built around a hot spring. From this point we travelled by pickup with three porters and luggage, along the worst road in my experience, to Collon (3320 m) where we waited for hours for our drivers, fifteen horses, and donkeys. The ascent led first of all past small settlements surrounded by eucalyptus trees and planted principally with potatoes and corn. Barley thrives up to heights of 4000 m. Queñua (*Polylepis*), a sort of small oak, grows on the high plateaux





23 *Abseil on  
Nevado  
Ranrapalca;  
looking down  
the route of  
ascent to the  
camp*

up to a height of 4500 m often in small clusters. We set up our first tented camp on the evening of 23 June at a height of 4190 m and also made a further camp on the south side of the Ishinca valley at 4900 m where the pack animals left us and returned to the valley.

Our first objective was the Nevado Ishinca, 5530 m, for acclimatisation purposes. We left our camp at about 6.30am on 26 June, set foot on the glacier at about 5000 m and reached the summit without difficulty about 11am, whence we had a fine view. The last short ascent to the twin ice summit was steep and forced us to proceed one at a time. I humped my Hasselblad camera and accessories to the top of the mountain, which made me ponder up to what height on a mountain photography can be a pleasure.

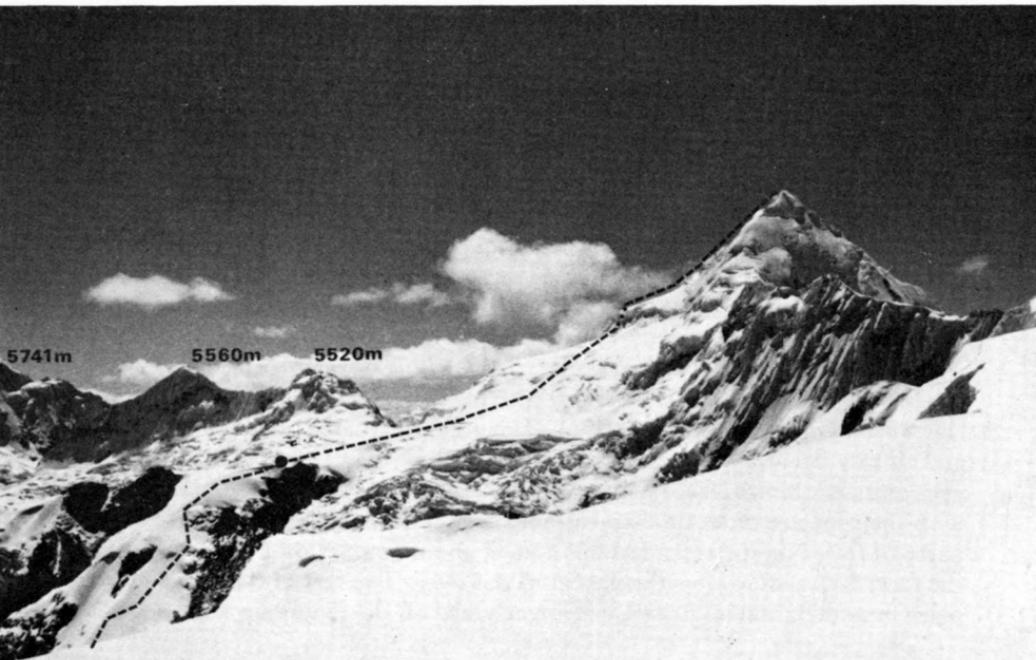
We set up a high camp on 27 June at the foot of Nevado Ranrapalca. Meyer and Naegeli remained in Base Camp as they were somewhat affected by the height. We thereupon formed two ropes: Luchsinger, Zimmerli and von Rütte, and Grimm and myself. Luchsinger and Zimmerli went on ahead next morning to reconnoitre the route, while the rest of us organised the transport. Just before we set out we were involved in a crisis as our head porter suddenly demanded double pay because the loads had to be carried on the glacier up to 5200 m. This, he said, was not in the contract. A lively and highly comical discussion ensued as none of us either spoke or understood much Spanish. We finally reached what both parties thought was an acceptable compromise, though this eventually proved to be an illusion. Despite this contretemps, we managed to set up camp where we wanted by early afternoon and the porters returned to base.

We climbed Ranrapalca (6162 m) on 28 June, via the South-east face of the North-east ridge. The peak was first ascended by Brecht, Rohrer, Schmid and Schweizer in 1939. The first part was névé and was good for crampons, but towards the end the tropical ice forced us to cut many steps. Rests were taken at 8am at 5590 m and again at 9.30am at 5700 m. With Luchsinger in the lead we reached the névé plateau and the North-east summit at about 3.15pm, whence an easy but laborious trudge led up to the main peak. We had to consider whether climbing to the top, which included an hour and a half's slog up and down, was worth the risk of an unpremeditated bivouac on the face, and rightly decided to go down at once. We had, it is true, brought wooden pegs and aluminium stakes with us, for abseiling, but complicated manoeuvres with the rope are often time-consuming even at low altitudes, especially for a party of five. Night descended upon us at about 6.30pm on the lower part of the face, fortunately after the abseiling was over. The rest of the descent took place in total darkness. Fritz Luchsinger's lead off the mountain was a master-



24 Peaks 5560 m (left) and 5520 m (right): telephoto from camp c. 4900 m at foot of Ranrapalca. See also below

25 Nevado Tocllaraju, 6032 m; from Nevado Ishinca, looking north



piece of orientation, such as I have seldom or never experienced before. Encompassed by the deceptive darkness, he led us through the maze with the traditional invulnerability of the sleep-walker. It was mainly due to him that we succeeded in eluding an unpleasant forced bivouac at about 5500 m. Bone-weary and wet through we crept into our tent at about 10.30pm.

The same party left a camp in the valley with two porters on 2 July. We first clambered up a moraine and then along a glacier until we reached a glacier plateau at 5130 m to the west of our objective, the Nevado Tocllaraju, 6032 m. (First climbed by Brecht and Schweizer in 1939.) It was very cold in our camp and we left it at 5am. In our opinion the bergschrund which we encountered at about 5400 m would not go, so we turned away to the north-east and reached the col (5510 m) which falls steeply away to the east, at about 8am. We had some trouble with steep slabs of rather loose formation. The rock itself afforded holds but was smooth and consisted of dioritic granite, similar to the tonalite of the Bregaglia. Luchsinger wormed his way up over some tricky rock and ice pitches, putting in three pitons. Eventually, at about 10am we attained the North face of Tocllaraju via a steep *névé* slope. Although difficulties were over, unfortunately the weather was obviously breaking up. Soon the summit and ourselves were completely enveloped in cloud which often occurs on the watershed of the Cordillera about mid-day. This is one good reason why an ascent should be made early in the day. We waited for a good hour, but conditions did not improve and although we were only about 150–200 m below the top we decided it was wiser to beat a retreat. We abseiled twice down the tricky pitches and regained our tent about 4pm. In the meantime our two porters had come up again from the valley, and bearing in mind the cold night we had spent we decided to strike camp and go down to Base Camp the same day. Our decision was right, for Tocllaraju was still shrouded in thick clouds that evening.

Next day was an off-day, but not for Luchsinger and Zimmerli, who spent the time in climbing Nevado Urus (5495 m). This was a not inconsiderable achievement after the strenuous efforts of the days before. The night of 4–5 July was again cold and next morning we found our tents lightly covered with snow, which helped to make our departure from the mountains of Peru less hard to bear.

We had only been away thirteen days from Monterey, our point of departure, which was much too short a time to be able really to enjoy the wonderful mountain scenery. We had not contemplated any first ascents and the four peaks we climbed had all been done before. Our real objective was a glimpse into the mountain world of Peru. We were fortunate in that the weather

remained favourable, except in the case of Toollaraju, and we couldn't wish for better than that.

The smallest ascent in the Cordillera Blanca requires preparation, for both climate and topography present problems of transport and supply, although they are nothing as great as those in many other overseas mountain areas. The highest mountain in Peru, Huascarán, is 6768 m, which is not as high as the Himalayan giants, although the Cordillera Blanca is one of the greatest continuous mountain chains in the world. Situated as it is on the equator, the days and nights are the same length and twilight is very short. The differences in temperature vary enormously within a few hours and it is said that a day in the mountains of Peru is equal to a year anywhere else: spring in the morning, summer at mid-day, autumn in the evening and winter at night. There are sometimes temperature differences of up to 60°C within a few hours, which is extremely trying for the human body at heights of over 5000 m where lack of oxygen is a problem. Owing to the prevalence of solar radiation from the north and precipitation from the east, it is preferable to attack the sunny side of the mountain, for the north faces in the Andes correspond to the southern faces in the Alps. Also, glaciers tend to be very crevassed.

If time is of importance, it is advisable to attempt a relatively easily accessible area. It would be very attractive to attempt one of the many unknown and still unclimbed 5000 m peaks, or one of the twenty-nine 6000 m peaks of Peru, some of which are still unconquered.

All equipment for an expedition to Peru must be brought from Europe. Generally speaking the porters are very inadequately equipped and expect to be supplied with boots and clothing. With this in mind it is useful to bring used boots and wind proofs for them. We learned on Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya that the use of ski sticks up to a height of 5000 m or over can be of great assistance while ascending or descending. The porters are prepared to carry large loads, in general they are decent and willing men, except when they are under the influence of a local 'shop steward'. It is, however, very advisable to have every detail down in writing before starting out. The excellent general maps of 1:200,000 and 1:100,000 by Heckler, Kinzler and Schneider of the Alpenverein, Innsbruck, are indispensable.

Señor Cesar Morales Arnao, head of the Andes Department, as well as some Swiss residents in Lima, such as Herr Paul Roth, a climber from Berne and employed by the Quimica Suiza SA., and Frl. Beatrice Berger, owner of the Travel Bureau Panorama, afforded us considerable assistance.



26 Camp at c. 5130 m on Tocllaraju; looking east



27 Nevado de Copa, 6188 m; from the Tocllaraju camp



28 *South-west face of Tocllaraju; from above the camp (overlaps with left side of [26])*

A journey to the Cordillera Blanca is a high spot in any climber's life. The physical effort required, though considerable, is not unreasonable even when one is over 65, as is the case with me. The exhaustion is soon forgotten after a successful expedition. It is quite another thing as regards the travel to and from the mountains over execrable narrow and winding roads in completely decrepit and antiquated vehicles. In fact it's enough to give you the willies!

SUMMARY—Peruvian Andes, Cordillera Blanca, Ishinca valley. Schweizerischer Akademischer Ski Club Expedition, 1968.

Party: W. Amstutz; H. Grimm; F. Luchsinger; E. Meyer; W. Naegeli; A. von Rütte; A. Zimmerli.

Ascents:

26 June Nevado Ishinca, 5530 m. Whole party.

28 June Nevado Ranrapalca, 6162 m. (North-east summit by South face of North-east ridge.) Amstutz, Grimm, von Rütte, Luchsinger, Zimmerli.

3 July Nevado Tocllaraju, 6032 m. (c. 150–200 m from summit.) Amstutz, Grimm, von Rütte, Luchsinger, Zimmerli.

4 July Nevado Urus, 5495 m. Luchsinger, Zimmerli.