

# The Colombian Andes

## Nevado del Huila — Pico la Cresta

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Pico la Cresta is one of four peaks in Nevado del Huila, Central Cordillera, south-east of Cali and due west of Neiva. It is reached from Cali by driving via Pradera to Corinto. Here take a left turn to Tacueyo. From Tacueyo to Toéz on the E side of the Cordillera a new track, not yet marked on maps, has been constructed by the army. In places the surface is very rough but quite passable in a jeep. There is very little traffic on this road. Toéz can also be reached by road from Neiva, via La Plata and Paéz.

Toéz and Irlanda are the nearest settlements to the start of the trail where guides can be hired, or provisions purchased. It is as well, also, to make friendly contact with the military, as they would be the only people available to help in an emergency. About 13km north of Irlanda is situated the Inderena hut, the warden's house, but not always manned. The Páramo de Santo Domingo, Laguna del Paéz and Nevado del Huila are all part of the National Park system managed by Inderena.

The only available map of the area, No. 321-IV-B, scale 1:25000, is almost useless as the whole of Nevado del Huila was covered in cloud the day the aerial photographs were taken, hence the great majority of the map is blank. It does, however, show the road coming in from Irlanda in the south, the Thermal Spring at km 42 (distance from La Plata), which is opposite the Inderena hut, itself unmarked, and the small hut named Berdún, which is situated at the point where the trail through the cloud forest leaves the road. This map is only available from Instituto Geografico 'Agustin Codazzi', Carrera 30, No. 48-51, Bogota. It is available only as a photocopy.

Our party consisted of two climbers, Luis Fernando Toro, known as Bis, and myself, Crispin Heath, and two guides, Carlos and friend. We spent the night of Boxing Day, 1981, huddled into a lean-to beside the hut Berdún (also spelled Verdún) courtesy of Daniel and Filomena, who scrape a subsistence living making cheese from the milk of their handful of cows that graze in a small clearing at the edge of the forest.

The last expedition to the nevado had been over 2 years before and the trail was overgrown and very difficult to follow. The route travels along the N side of Quebrada Verdún for about 2.5km before crossing the river and soon after turning SE to climb more steeply, out of the cloud forest to the páramo. At this point, around about 3500m, the map goes blank.

It is impossible to describe the route through the forest in any detail as



55 *Pico la Cresta (left) and Pico Mayor del Huila, shortly before making camp on the glacier*

*Photo: Crispain Heath*

visibility was rarely more than 10m, and often less, as we cut our way with machetes in a steady drizzle of rain. Despite our guides we frequently lost the route and had to retrace our steps. The first 2.5km took us 3.5 hours, with a height gain of only 380m. The point at which we crossed the river registered 3290m on my altimeter; Verdún was 2910m.

Thereafter the going gradually became less cluttered by vegetation, but also much steeper. The next landmark is a fork in the trail after a journey of about 1km and a climb of 250m which took us 1hr 40min. The left branch leads after less than a minute to Campamento Polaco, the site of a previous Polish expedition's camp, at 3540m. The right branch continues on to the páramo. It was still drizzling.

Now the trail took a large loop to the south-west, climbing steeply up a ridge at first, before turning due east to continue more gradually to our projected campsite, named Piedras on account of the series of huge boulders, some of which offer rudimentary shelter. We stopped to set up our tent at the higher group, altitude 3980m. It had taken us a further 2hr 50min from the Polish camp, a distance of about 2km. By this time our guides, who were each carrying around 20kilos, were ready to drop.

The next morning, 28 December, we said farewell to our assistants, arranging that Carlos should return to Piedras on the 30th to await our return. If we failed to turn up by 31st he would go back down and alert the military. At Piedras we left a cache of food and any extra gear we would not require for the summit attempt, for example, our wellies that we had used for the forest section.

Shouldering our heavy packs for the first time we set off at 0700. For the first 50m we climbed the N bank of the stream by our campsite then crossed to gain a ridge heading roughly south-east. The occasional small cairn told us we were still on route, and climbing through a small rocky notch we came to a plateau area dotted with morain humps and small lakes. The time was 0820 and the height 4285m. We kept to the N of these, still heading roughly SE across some morain ridges to the foot of a small tongue of glacier. This we climbed diagonally to reach a rocky ridge on its other side, on a heading of around 150° mag. This we scrambled up to its highest point where it met the permanent snow, and here we built a prominent cairn—altitude 4450m.

It was now 0930, and occasionally, when the sun burnt through the cloud that swept around us, it was glaringly hot. As we put on crampons for the trudge eastwards between the icewall to our left and Colombia's lowest glacier to our right—it drops to near the 4000m level—we caught occasional glimpses of the highest peak in the range, Pico Mayor, rated by Augustin Codazzi at 5300m, although I would guess it was about 100m lower.


It took us a further hour of steady ascent to reach a suitable campsite, at 4630m, from which we could tackle the peak the next day. The heat that afternoon was unbelievably intense as we lay and sweated, clad only

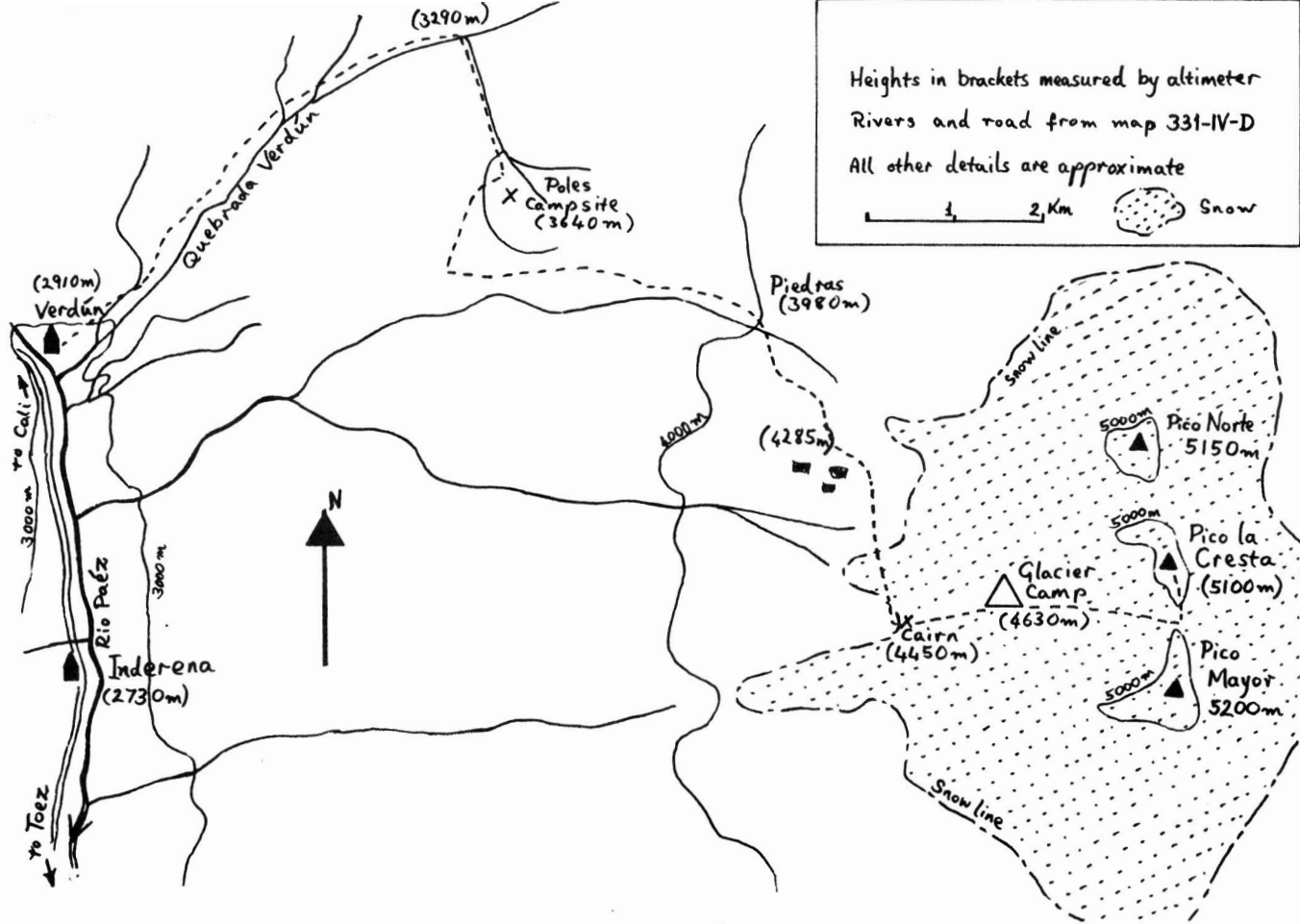


56 *Pico la Cresta: view of the ascent ridge from just below the col. The final section contains all the difficulties*

*Photo: Crispain Heath*

Heights in brackets measured by altimeter  
 Rivers and road from map 331-IV-D  
 All other details are approximate

1 2 Km  Snow



in underpants, in the shelter of our tent. The clouds drifted on and off the peaks of la Cresta and Pico Mayor to its south, giving us plenty of time to wonder about a route through the icefall and onto the ridge between them. La Cresta had been climbed only once before our attempt, by Sergio Gavidia, one of Colombia's top climbers, in company with a Spaniard in 1979. We planned to follow a similar route up the S ridge.

Next morning saw us up at 0430 and off before sunrise at 0615. In perfect weather we made good time threading our way up through the maze of the icefall to gain the ridge in about 2 hours. At first the route was straightforward if exposed, climbing steeply then descending before surmounting a further bump. Then we faced the first problem; a steep climb to an ice cave, followed by a grade 3 exit on the left to gain the top of yet another bump in the ridge. Now we had to descend, via a notch and some unstable snow onto the shattered rock of the west face to bypass a rotten and tottering tower. The 60m traverse was the most risky section of the whole route; footholds and handholds crumbled away, loose rock fell from above as the sun melted the ice that had bound it to the mountain and belays were far from secure! Having exhausted my reserves of nervous energy leading these two pitches, I gladly handed over to Bis the lead of the next section, a rock corner and grade IV ice pitch to regain the summit ridge. One further exposed but straightforward section saw us onto the summit at 12.45, now shrouded in cloud as the weather deteriorated. The altimeter recorded 5100m, between 100m and 150m lower than most other estimates, but I do not know if it has ever actually been measured before *in situ*.

The ascent had taken 6.5 hours but now, with the weather worsening rapidly, the descent turned out to be quite a test too. Fortunately we got off the ridge before the snow started, but this meant the threading of our way down to the tent though the icefall and crevasses became very tricky as drifting snow covered up any clues to the route. Luckily, Bis has an excellent pictorial memory and was able to guide us home successfully. Even so, the descent took 4 hours. It had been a long day!

It took us only an hour the following morning to descend to Piedras where we relaxed, ate and washed, awaiting the return of Carlos, who duly arrived at midday. As we were all feeling somewhat tired we decided to spend the night at Piedras, and set off at 0630 the next morning, 31 December, to return to Verdún. The descent took a mere 4½ hours.

A general survey of the Central Cordillera and climbing thereon is available in *AJ 82*, pp 49-55, by Evelio Echevarría, who has, over the years, collected a large amount of material on climbing in the Andes, and his bibliography at the end of the article lists most other publications on the range. The only other reference I have come across is an article by Steve Coombs in *Backpacking in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador*, by Hilary and George Bradt (1979).