

# Nevado Chopicalqui, South-east ridge

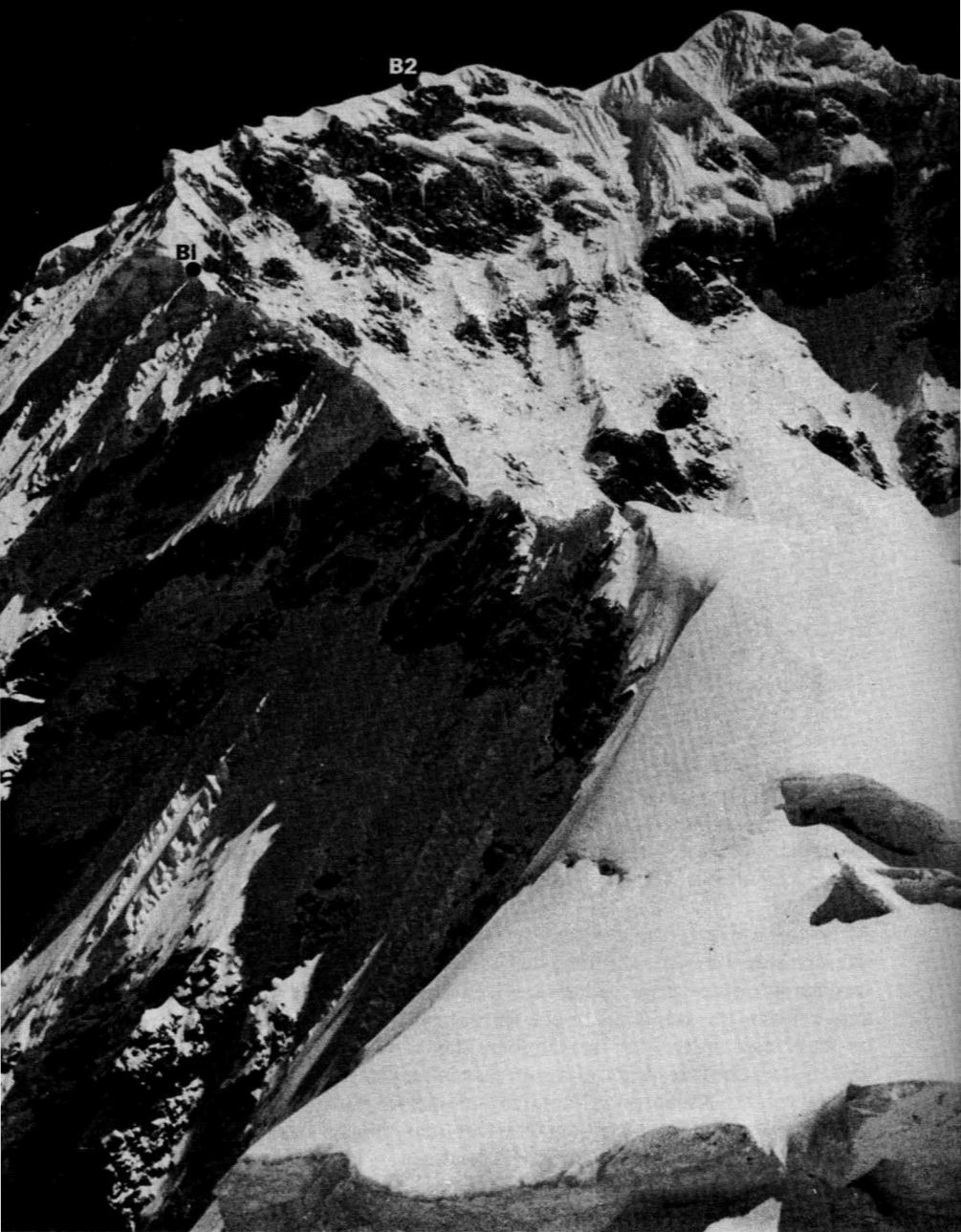
Malcolm Clarbrough

Although Nevado Chopicalqui, 20,998 ft, is the second highest peak in the Cordillera Blanca, it has not, until recently, commanded much interest in so far as new routes are concerned. Since the first ascent of the peak in 1932, by a German expedition via the West ridge, all the following five ascents were also made by this route. In 1968 two expeditions showed interest in new routes: an American party climbed the North ridge (*A.A.J.* 1969 423), while a Canadian–New Zealand party attempted the South-east ridge, but were forced to abandon it due to continued bad weather (*A.J.* 74 249). The East ridge, which is undoubtedly the mountain's most difficult ridge, is still virgin.

Nevado Chopicalqui lies directly to the east of Peru's highest peak, Nevado Huascarán; convenient access is gained from the Santa Rosa valley, either to the north via the Quebrada Llanganuco or to the south via the Quebrada Ulta, neither taking more than 1½ days of easy walking.

Our Base Camp was established at about 14,000 ft in a pleasant wooded area in the Ulta. Route-finding to gain access to the ridge was fairly obvious, but we were grateful for a sketch-map given to us by the previous year's expedition. The permanent snow level on the ridge lies at about 16,000 ft; at this point we built a rock bivouac in which to store supplies and for use as an emergency shelter. Our climb began from this crude shelter, as it was not until we had set foot on the mountain's mantle of snow that we felt at grips with the climb. A second camp was established in a small snow-basin at c 17,000 ft, the only difficulty in gaining this camp was a rock step of about 200 ft high; the difficulty lay in the very loose rock though some fixed rope was still in position, and being in good condition we had no qualms about using it.

After a one-day reconnaissance it was decided that it would be practical to attempt the climb in Alpine style. The camp, being in a snow basin on the western side of the ridge, did not catch the early rays of the sun and this made us very reluctant to crawl out of our warm funk holes until the sun had reached us. At 9.30am on 19 June two climbers started to make their way up the ridge. The initial 1000 ft from camp was perhaps the most enjoyable part of the climb, being a combination of good snow ice and rock; in parts the ridge was excitingly sharp, with airy cornices overhanging the South-west face. Ice-screws, snow-stakes, deadboys (i.e. the small deadman—*A.J.* 74 327) and pitons were all used for belays on this section. This enjoyable climbing eventually gave way to a large snow-step at about 18,500 ft and our first encounter with the infamous Andean powder snow, which is exhausting work at any altitude. A small crevasse was found at the upper rim of the step which gave us shelter for our first night's bivouac; sleep was intermittent and cocoa was brewed at every waking.



10 *Chopicalqui, 20,998 ft, from the South-east ridge* The route followed the ridge, with two bivouacs as marked. Descent by the West ridge.  
This and next photo: Malcolm Clarbrough



The second day dawned sunny and clear, but it was obvious from the cloud build-up over the Amazon basin that we were in for a murky day. We continued up the steep but straightforward snow-ridge, using stakes and our Lima-made deadboys for running belays. At noon, in the swirling mist, we arrived at what we had previously decided would be our first major obstacle, a rock gendarme obstructing the ridge at its sharpest point; the problem was not the gendarme itself, but the steep flutings which flanked it. Step cutting into the southern side of the flutings was no problem as the sun had consolidated the snow, but the northern sides were a different story, the ice was rotten and overlaid by powder snow. Using two ice-axes, one was thrust as high as possible into the snow and used for balance, the other for digging; one could thus make a way to the rib between the flutings and so gain a good belay and in this way we eventually rounded the gendarme. The climbing eased off in all respects except for the increase in powder snow, which began to sap our strength rapidly; sinking up to one's knees at every step, it was not much easier for the second, as the leader's tracks would fill as soon as he had left them. "Come and have a look at this, Geoff." In front of me, shrouded in mist, loomed a monstrous ice-wall. I had arrived at the second major problem, a huge crevasse splitting the ridge, which we had previously seen from the camp. As Geoff arrived the mist cleared momentarily to reveal a cliff of no more than 40 ft, with a feasible way round it; relief spread through my body, followed by the wish to lie down and sleep. We decided that we were over 20,000 ft and that this would be an ideal bivouac site, even though it was only 4pm. We found a suitable ice-hole and after clearing it of powder snow it was quite comfortable. We spent a jovial night, brewing, smoking and singing. When the mist cleared, it revealed the twinkling lights of the town of Huaras, appearing so close, yet at least thirty miles away. At 8am the following morning we were gazing at the final slope to the summit. The crevasse had been rounded with ease on its eastern side and the freezing winds, which whipped the ice crystals into our faces, forced us to move as quickly as our straining lungs would allow up the now broad, easy ridge. The final slope was a trial in determination, as waist-deep powder snow at a steep angle forced us to plough a zig-zag course to the summit.

Descent was by the West ridge and a traverse under the South-west face to return to the camp on the South-east ridge.

SUMMARY Peru, Cordillera Blanca, Nevado Chopicalqui, 20,998 ft. First ascent of South-east ridge, 21 June 1969, M. Clarbrough and G. Wayatt of the Anglo-Australian Andean Expedition, 1969. For other climbs by this group see pp 211, 212 and 219.