

Three Excursions in the Peruvian Cordilleras

The UK–NZ Andes Expedition 1986

Roger Payne

Plates 14–17

Both Julie-Ann Clyma and I had, on separate trips, visited the Peruvian Cordilleras in 1985 and were keen to return. We shared our enthusiasm and information with two Wearside friends, David Hood and Martin Hair. Suddenly we were an organized trip with Mount Everest Foundation and British Mountaineering Council support (gratefully acknowledged), and we determinedly set about making our plans affordable. Julie-Ann undertook most of the organization, and it was by her efforts that we all met in London with the necessary equipment and money. We could still hardly believe it when we found ourselves airborne for Lima on 10 May. We went to Huaraz first and planned to have in total three excursions into the mountains.

Quebrada Santa Cruz

With six donkeys carrying all our equipment and food the two day walk-in provided excellent acclimatization. Rinrijirka (5810m) was just opposite our base and seemed ideal for a first attempt. Setting off next afternoon for a bivouac at the glacier edge (4860m) Martin, on his first climbing trip out of Europe, summed up the uniqueness of these equatorial mountains: '15,000ft; full alpine gear; and still at cowpat level!' Next morning we made a 6am departure; Julie-Ann and Dave for the unclimbed E ridge and Martin and I for the also unclimbed couloir line on the right of the S face. Julie-Ann and Dave found a good way through the Taulliraju-Rinrijirka col but were stopped on the E ridge at c 5200m by a bergschrund and poor snow. Meanwhile Martin and I were struggling with every type of bad snow known. The angle was reasonable so I was not concerned about falling off, but was terrified about falling down. At one non-existent belay Martin said sarcastically 'Rock-climbing granite slabs with 3 feet of powder-snow on top; just the thing to travel half-way around the world for. Is all climbing in Peru as good as this?' We had to pass under some temporary-looking séracs after which the climbing steepened. Eventually we were faced with the final slope leading to a prominent col in the E ridge. Martin looked as if he might suggest a bivouac, so I kept breaking the trail; exhausting work balancing breaths against steps and heart beats. Eventually we reached the ridge at c 5650m and stepping on to the N side found perfect névé. We decided against the last part of the corniced ridge to the summit but abseiled down to a broad ledge on the N face, completing our descent in a tranquil sunset and then darkness.

After a rest at Base Camp Julie-Ann and Dave set off again over the Taulliraju-Rinrijirka col. This time they were headed for the N face of



14 *Martin Hair beneath the S face of Rasac.*

Photo: Roger Payne

Taulliraju (5830m). Martin and I wanted to attempt a route on the S face of Taulliraju, but a couple of abrupt snow-storms kept us at base waiting. Eventually we set off for the SW spur Italian route (1980).

After fighting off acute Base Camp lassitude, Martin and I set off on 23 May for Taulliraju and bivouacked at the glacier edge, c 4800m. At 3am we left our bivouac and arrived at the foot of the couloir in the SW spur as daylight broke. It soon became apparent that we had underestimated the length and steepness of this couloir, and we were soon tackling sustained steep ice. Nonetheless the climbing was excellent as we stretched our 50m ropes to reach belay pitons left in place by the Italians (who had fixed ropes on the first ascent). Some time in the middle of the day a violent storm passed through; we could only stand in the downpour of hail. Above, the ice ran out, so I led a short nerve-racking pitch on unconsolidated snow; this necessitated a couple of aid moves on snow-stakes held in by stacked ice-tools and hands. The storm clouds passed and the temperature rose. Martin, who usually swears when the climbing gets difficult, was cursing some aid moves on rock necessary to get us back into the main couloir. I looked across to our left at the sky, now blue, and at an ice mushroom level with us. To my horror the several-transit-sized mushroom detached itself, and open-mouthed I watched it cascade down our couloir, exploding into a huge cloud accelerating across the glacier below. In unison Martin and I exclaimed something unprintable. Martin said he felt sick. Not surprisingly, I found him at the next stance securely tied in the recess of a large cave. There we regained our mental equilibrium and were glad that the storm earlier in the day had not made us retreat. We pondered the unpredictable nature of Peruvian snow-structures and continued to climb.

Inevitably night fell with no good bivouac place in sight. We cut a large ledge and spent a reasonably comfortable night. Dawn however brought two bad-weather signs: lenticular clouds on the peaks to the west, and a halo around the moon. We set off up a steep couloir on bad snow and ice and were eventually halted in an amphitheatre of soft mushrooms similar to the one which had descended the route the previous day. Unable to climb out on to the ridge proper, we made two abseils hoping to find another way on to the ridge. That morning we had started brewing at 4am and had begun climbing by 7.30; it was now 11.30 and we were back at the bivouac spot. We discussed the possibilities and conditions, then looked to the sky saying 'send us a sign'. With that it started to snow. The Italian pitons made the abseiling quick and straightforward. It was at about 4.30pm, walking through the drizzle, that we reached Base Camp.

Julie-Ann and Dave had fared no better on the N face: the conditions looked poor and the climbing was harder than expected. Hence they opted for a second attempt on the E ridge of Rinrijirka and, although they got higher than the previous time, they were stopped by poor conditions and bad weather.

It took Martin and me one day longer to decide, but next day Julie-Ann and Dave left for the SW face of Alpamayo (5960m). On 28 May Julie-Ann and Dave set up a tent at the Alpamayo-Kitiraju col; on this day Martin and I walked from Base Camp to bivouac at the edge of the Arequocha glacier (c 4800m). Over the next two days Julie-Ann and Dave (together) and Martin



15 *Martin Hair — second day of ascent of Rasac.*

Photo: Roger Payne

and I (on different days, solo) climbed the superb SW face of Alpamayo. Martin described it on first sight as 'nowt but a pimple!', and, as for being the most beautiful mountain in the world, well . . . However, I think we were only too pleased to discover that from bergschrund to summit was only about seven rope-lengths of perfect snow and ice, nowhere steeper than 60 degrees. It was a memorable day; Dave's second summit ever, and shared with a comical but competent Swiss/Peruvian/Mexican rope. Our laughter on the summit could be heard far away at the Alpamayo-Kitiraju col.

This was my fourth trip to the 'Greater Ranges', and on the 30th I soloed the straightforward N face of Kitiraju (6040m). It was the first time I had reached a summit over 6000m. That night, back down in the Quebrada Arequocha, all four of us were together again. The bivouac around the wood-fire complemented our satisfied state. It was an idyllic end to our first excursion.

Cordillera Huayhuash

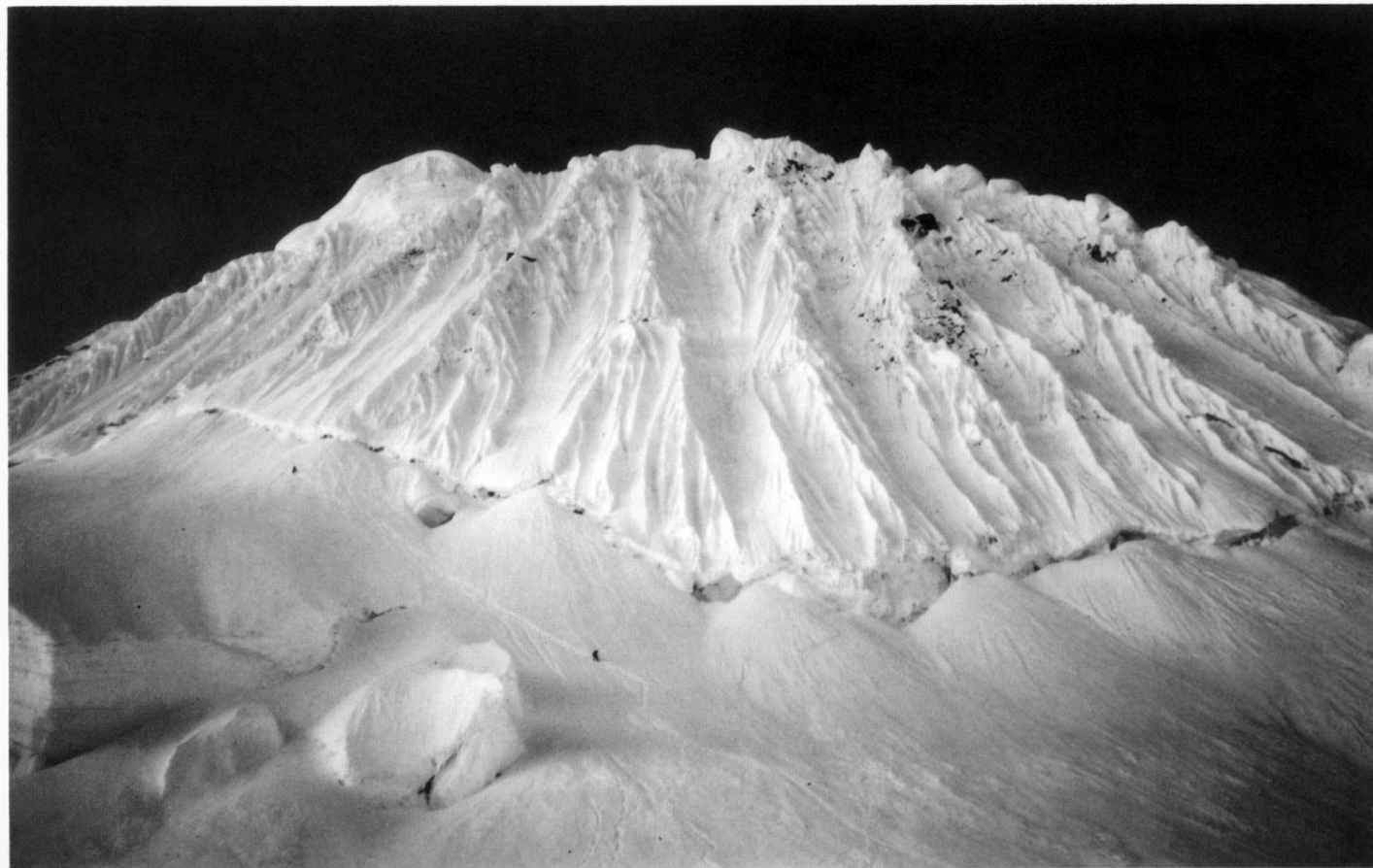
Huaraz is an ideal place for the tired mountaineer: swimming pool/hot spring, 'secret' bouldering, endless supply of good food and drink, discos which require enthusiasm rather than dance skills, unlimited sunshine and friendly people. As a result the Wearside pair journeyed to Chiquian in the Cordillera Huayhuash suffering a 'post-recreational coma', whilst I, meanwhile, was fighting off the debilitating effects of a bad egg.

Chiquian, in contrast to Huaraz, is not really set up for tourism. We enjoyed the change and were soon befriended by a local family who knew Julie-Ann from the previous year and invited us to stay as paying guests; our holiday seemed to be starting all over again.

The walk-in here is very different from those in the Cordillera Blanca. We travelled in the company of two American climbers we had just met in Chiquian and our *arriero* this time, Maximo, was a friend from the previous year, and a Peruvian aspirant guide. Our journey was an enjoyable mixture of new and old friends; we put the climbing world to rights at every drink-stop.

The most frequented Base Camp on the west of the Huayhuash is Laguna Jahuacocha which has a plentiful supply of trout. The few local inhabitants are only too pleased to sell or exchange fish or cheese, eggs, etc. These people tend sheep and cows and are friendly, but they see few manufactured goods, so it is prudent to keep temptation out of the way. We shared Base Camp with eight Argentine climbers who invited us to 'score some tea' on the first day. Together that evening we finished our precious supply of 12-year old malt and we cringed our way through their rough Pisco and *matte* tea. The mountains had transcended national boundaries, and we hope to drink more *matte* with them through a Patagonian storm and enjoy their 'granito perfecto'.

After a day at base we set off for an attempt upon Rasac (6040m); Julie-Ann and Dave via the E face and Martin and I, hopefully, via a new route on the S face. Martin and I had to walk around to the other side of the mountain, so we made an early start to avoid the heat of the day. We had to find our own route, but the terrain was quite straightforward. To get under the S face meant crossing a col just to the west of Rasac. This crossing was also uncomplicated, but at one point some honeycombed ice gave way, causing me to trip. My ice



16 *Alkamayo after the ascent. Julie-Ann and Dave descending.*

Photo: Roger Payne

hammer smashed into my face, and I found myself upside down with my head in a small hole looking at my perfectly acclimatized blood dripping into the snow. My sunglasses were in three pieces, my cheek was lacerated inside and out, and a tooth was knocked out. I pushed the tooth back into place, picked up my glasses and descended to Martin for some much-needed words of consolation and applications of sticky tape. Although very painful, my injuries were not serious. We carried on over the col, after which a descending traverse led to a good bivouac site around 300m below the S face. I was very pleased for the opportunity to rest and sleep.

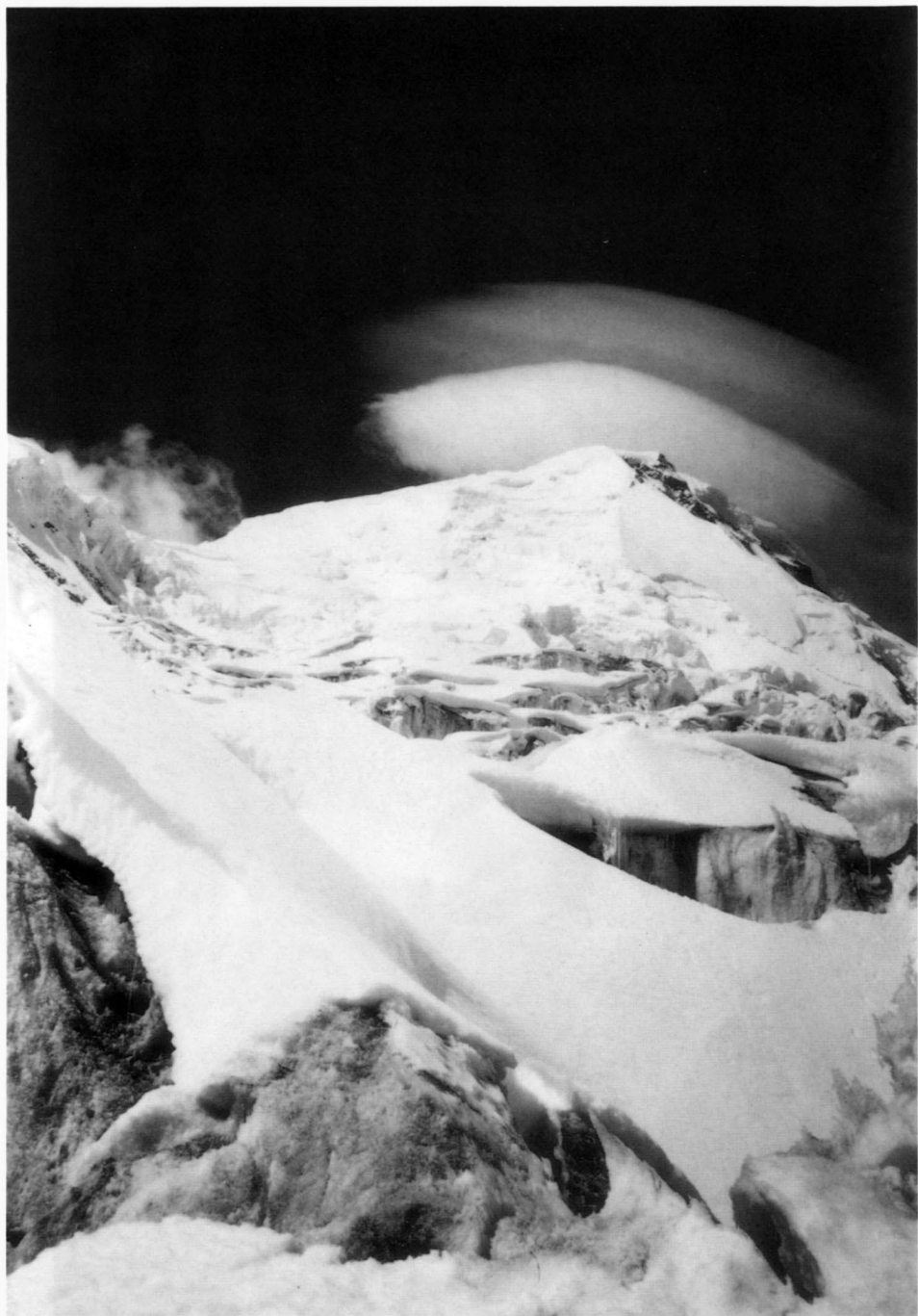
Because of the discomfort to my mouth and the time taken to change the improvised sutures on my cheek, we were a bit slow getting away in the morning. I was keen to prove to myself that I was alright despite my throbbing head, so I somewhat stupidly decided to break trail and find the route. This only served to tire me further and disturb my already damaged psyche.

A possible new route was alarmingly obvious: a steep-looking shallow couloir crossing the two icicle barriers going straight to the summit cornice. The climbing was very steep, always sustained on mostly good ice of varying thickness. Even after cutting a step it was not usually possible to stand in balance. On the third pitch I was thinking cogently enough to realize that here was a climbers' eldorado—'for once I am in the right place at the right time' I shouted down to Martin; and thought to myself: 'but am I all right?' At the end of the pitch we had to move together on ice steeper than 70 degrees to reach the belay. After some doubts about my injuries and performance I seconded the next two pitches to regain my usual equilibrium. I got back to enjoying myself just in time to lead a pitch with no real protection comprising a crust of near-vertical collapsing snow with marginal aid placements to overcome a small overhang to a good névé slope above. I was pleased with my efforts; no more so than when Martin arrived saying 'so bold . . . I thought I was going to die and I was seconding!' We climbed into the night hoping to find somewhere reasonable to bivouac, but eventually cut a ledge in a 60/65 degree ice-slope.

After an uncomfortable night, the main problem of the second day was the largest of the icicle barriers. Some superb ice led to this, but the way ahead was far from obvious. After one blind alley, some devious route-finding led through vertical and overhanging ice. We agreed never again to use the expression 'only steep ice'. We prayed for something resembling Scottish grade 3 when Martin suddenly pulled out of a concave scoop on to easy terrain. We soon climbed out of this, and, after two short pitches of night-climbing, we resigned ourselves to another ice-ledge in a 60/65 degree slope.

Technical difficulties continued on the third day of climbing, but now a way through seemed reasonably certain. On this day, from the six titanium ice-screws we took, one split and another had the eye sheer off, so we were pleased to arrive at the compulsory snow-flutings. After a blind alley we gained an easy snow-field which led to a flat patch below a huge (but easily avoidable) cornice. It was the first natural resting-place for three days. Martin declared it 'Bivouac City' and insisted that we lie down, although it was only mid-afternoon.

After an excellent sleep, and in the cool of morning, the summit was easily reached. A small one-at-a-time peak of snow gave a delectable view-point.



17 Huascarán Sur: the (Gargantua) col is L, and the icy face is the 'Shield'.

Photo: Roger Payne

However, looking for the normal E face route, we mistakenly descended in the wrong direction by heading towards what had looked like old tracks. Nonetheless we were able to make a safe descent of the unappealing and dangerous ice-fall descending NE from the summit, and in so doing completed a traverse of the mountain by two previously unclimbed routes.

In the three days' climbing on the S face of Rasac, apart from moving together, we climbed 22 pitches (mostly of 50m). Out of these at least five were equivalent to sustained Scottish grade 5, and three were harder (5/6). The most difficult pitches on the route were comparable to the hardest pitches on Minus One Gully, Ben Nevis.

We met our Argentine friends on the glacier below Yerupaja where they had a camp. Tea, handshakes and smiles. We learnt that Julie-Ann and Dave had not been having such a good time. Dave had felt unwell once he got above 4800m. On our descent we met them on their way up again, making a second slower ascent which was again to be thwarted later.

Martin and I meanwhile enjoyed the rest at Base Camp and I was able to lick my wounds. We had misjudged our timing; we would have liked two more days to try another route. However, our *arriero* arrived and we turned our backs on the Huayhuash. Martin and I in an ethereal state, so pleased with our climb, Dave perhaps relieved to be leaving the mountains which had made him unwell, and Julie-Ann very frustrated: her second visit to the Huayhuash, this time with excellent weather and conditions, and no mountains climbed.

Huascaran

Before our trip to the Huayhuash we had decided to change climbing teams for our last trip into the mountains. Julie-Ann and I wanted to attempt Huascaran (6768m) in a lightweight, rapid style. Dave and Martin decided to do likewise, starting one day later. From the edge of the glacier we wanted to make the ascent in one day rather than the usual three. We found this idea attractive, as it would mean taking no tent or other Base Camp paraphernalia. Julie-Ann and I left Huaraz on 23 June following the usual route via Mancos to Musho at the roadhead. The locals in these parts seemed less well disposed towards the foreign visitor than elsewhere; presumably the larger number of big and well-equipped 'expeditions' have caused resentment. To me the atmosphere and appearance of the area was inferior to any of the other parts of Peru I have visited. However, we organized a comfortable bed for the night with 'Don Pedro' and, for the morning, two manic but strong-looking porters to help us. It is an understatement to say that the locals and Park officials were pessimistic when we told them when we expected to be back.

Next day, with our porters' help as far as the so-called 'Raymondi' or Advance Base Camp site, we walked to the glacier edge (c 4800m). There are many comfortable rock-ledges here, so a good bivouac was easy to find. The afternoon and evening were sheer enjoyment, lazing around in the sun. The sunset was spectacular. Alas, as I lay in my sleeping bag I realized that I had eaten another bad egg.

At about 1am on the 25th we left the bivouac. Progress to the usual Camp 1 (c 5500m) was straightforward but slow because the bad egg made several stops

necessary. We arrived at Camp 2 (c 5950m) at around 8.30am, having found a good way through the ice-fall below. We decided to rest here and make a drink. We were approached by a Spanish climber whose companions had set off for the summit at 6am leaving him behind as he had felt unwell. Hence, at around 10am three of us left Camp 2, hoping to reach the summit in a further five hours. Julie-Ann and I were wearing all our clothes, so we decided to leave our rucksacks at Camp 2 and, with the benefit of the rest, good progress was made initially. However, once across the Gargantua Col (c 6000m) and starting through the sérac barrier above, we were out of the wind and subject to the debilitating effect of the hot sun. I was now feeling very unwell and was slowing down the others. We tied excess clothing into a ball and left it at a conspicuous spot to be collected on descent. Crevasse problems were easily overcome, but it was almost 3pm by the time we reached the final snow-field. Although easy-angled, the snow was in poor condition, and the summit was still depressingly distant. I felt like a pantomime donkey as I walked bent double on the almost flat terrain, resting on two 50cm ice tools. I could just about manage 100m at a time before needing to lie down for a rest. As I counted paces and heart-beats I realized that our Spanish friend could only manage 99m at a time! At these intervals he and I would keel over gasping, leaving Julie-Ann in the middle of the rope wondering what was the matter. Progress was painfully slow and Julie-Ann, concerned about my condition, suggested turning back; but I had endured too much to stop now. After a number of false summits we finally reached the top at about 7pm, as the last rays of sunset left the sky. The head-torches were 800m lower at Camp 2 and, although I felt very confident about finding the descent route in darkness, José insisted on waiting until moonrise. We spent a chilly 4½ hours just below the summit without any extra warm clothing or bivouac equipment. With the aid of moonlight we eventually returned to Camp 2 at around 3am and had a few hours rest and a drink in the Spaniards' tent before setting off down.

Julie-Ann and I left Camp 2 at around 8am and soon met Martin and Dave on their way up. We continued our descent at a moderate pace with plenty of rehydration stops and eventually reached Musho at 7pm to a greeting of Cristal beer and a chorus of 'mucho rapido'. At the Gargantua Col however, Martin and Dave decided to abandon their attempt, Martin finding that his upward energy had all been spent lower down.

Julie-Ann and I were very satisfied with our ascent; it was probably one of the fastest ascents of Huascarán, and almost certainly the fastest by a woman.

Back in Huaraz our American friends from the Huayhuash turned up, and so did a friend of mine who had just finished 2½ years in Antarctica. We spent a few days together swimming, bouldering, exchanging stories, drinking and having a good time.

Martin and Dave's special enthusiasm for climbing and beer, and Julie-Ann's reliable organizational skill and zeal for the mountains combined in a unique way to make this a successful and enjoyable climbing trip. As to the area: for alpine-style climbing in a 'big mountain' type range, the Peruvian Cordilleras are hard to better.