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Cordillera Central, Peru

It seems strange that the one range Peruvians and foreign tourists visiting Peru will unavoidably meet has never received an acceptable description, not even a brief monograph. The main reason, at least for mountaineers, is a valid one: it is the great ice ranges of that country that monopolise all attention. Admittedly, the Cordilleras Blanca, Huayhuash, Vilcanota and Vilcabamba are truly magnificent ranges. But still, it is not easy to understand why an area embracing some 200 peaks between 5000m and 5477m, situated only 150kms inland from the Peruvian capital, has received no coverage other than short notes in mountaineering journals. This Cordillera Central is a range that, if modest in some respects by Peruvian standards, could at the very least offer easy access from Lima and provide a suitable place for training and acclimatisation, as a preparation for greater enterprises in the higher mountains of the country.

But it must be stated at the beginning that what mountaineering sources call the Cordillera Central of Peru is not what they have been accustomed to name as such. The real Cordillera Central is a much more restricted area than ordinarily portrayed and the purpose of this contribution is to present it under the proper perspectives.

The Central Andes of Peru includes the following ranges, each one with its own distinctive name, limits and characteristics:

- **the Cordillera Central**
in turn composed of two ranges, the Cordillera de la Viuda and the Cordillera Cascacocha. Its description is the purpose of this paper.
- **the Cordillera Huarochirí or Pariacacca**
located south of the mining town of La Oroya.
- **the Cordillera Yauyos**
south of the Cordillera Huarochirí or Pariacacca.
- **the Cordillera Huaytapallana**
mostly north and east of the city of Huancayo.
- **and the Cordillera Chonta**
wholly within the provincial department of Huancavelica.

Thus, the Cordillera Central is a district with its own identity, wholly separate from the other areas mentioned above.

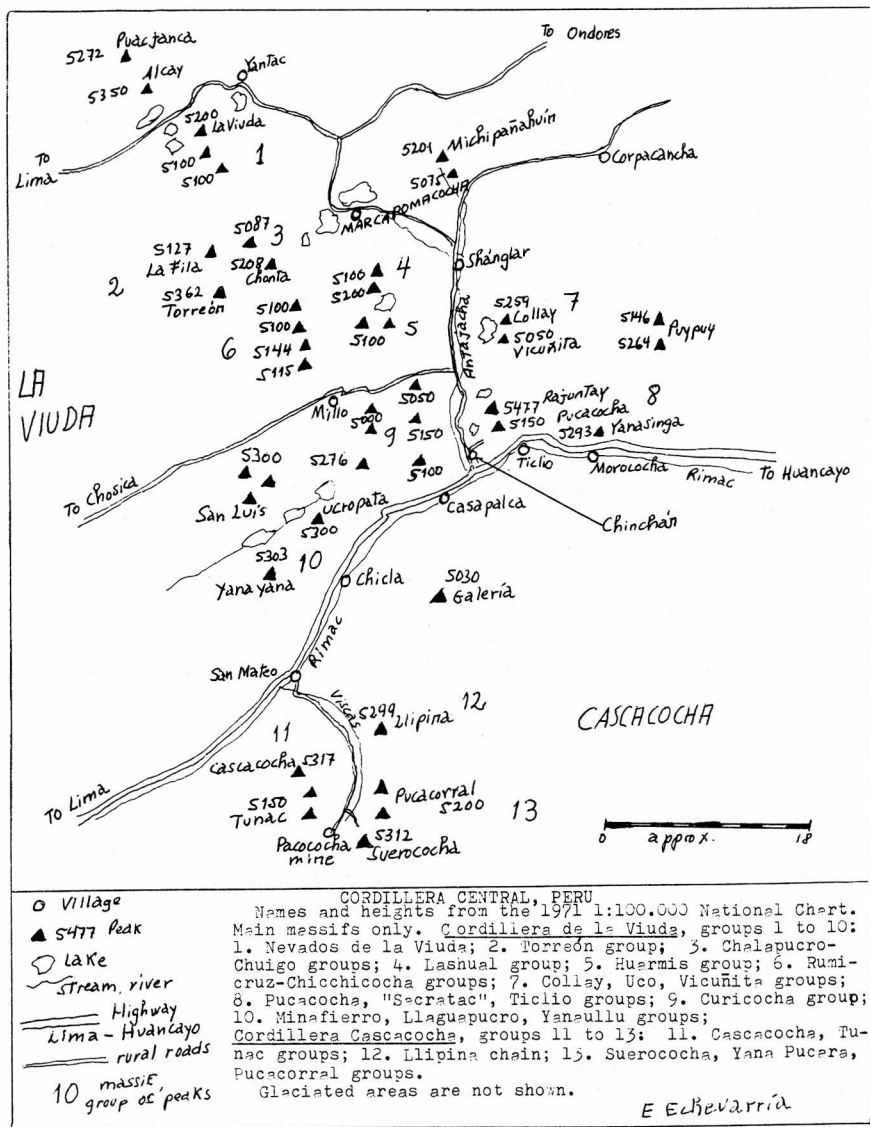
A Range with Two Ranges

The Cordillera Central of Peru is contained between the coastal desert to the west, the high moors of La Oroya and Junín to the east, a vast tract of frigid moors extending from Junín to the north and the unattractive badlands at the sources of the Carhuapampa river to the south (see map). The area is split into two by the Rimac river, which rises in the moors of Ticlio and, somewhat increased along the way, flows west to travel across Lima. For some 200kms, the highway Lima–Huancayo runs parallel to the river Rimac and, being paved and well-maintained, it offers an easy access route to the mountains. For the Viuda, the crossing at Chinchán, just a few kilometres up from the mining village of Casapalca, is by far the best entrance. The town of San Mateo, situated also on the highway and at the entrance of the Viscas valley, is the best point of access to the Cascacocha district.

On the whole, the higher valleys are empty or populated only by a few shepherds, who tend their flocks of llamas, alpacas, and sheep. Horses and cattle are seldom seen, since there is not much grass to feed big animals. The few inhabitants, if not occupied in work at some small mines, are there to open roads and build dams, the latter occupation for the benefit of the ever growing city of Lima. Natural life is very much reduced. Lakes, big and small, are the refuge of small colonies of wild ducks and wild geese. Bushes are seldom seen and flowers are nearly non-existent, except for the diminutive but beautiful sky-blue forget-me-not. Only the Andean cactus (*Opuntia floccosa*) and the steppe grass, locally called *ichu*, adorn the slopes between 4000m and 4500m. In some watered meadows, the silvery *senecio* (*Culcitium rufescens*?) is at times found.

The best inhabitant of these highlands is the human being, who is organised into clans or families, usually one per valley. These highlanders, descendants of the Quichua race, and the main component of the old Incadom, are friendly and polite. Since their Spanish is very good, communication in this language is easy. But the entire Cordillera Central is a rather unpopulated region, with people settled mostly along or near the roads. Resources and supplies are seldom found. Mountaineers have to rely on what they are able to carry on their backs.

Each of the two ranges has an important road that yields easy access to most peaks. La Viuda's is an unpaved trunk road that heads north to the village of Marcapomacocha ('town of the puma's lake'), located at the north end of the range and near the new dams now being built by the Peruvian government. This town has a gendarmerie quarter and two very basic stores. Small buses, locally called *combis*, depart almost daily from the mining town of Casapalca, located on the highway. An average ride to Marcapomacocha costs about 10 to 15 soles per person.



The Cascacocha range is actually a horseshoe of mountains and at its lower centre is located a fairly large, but inactive mine. Some population is found along the valley, mostly settled near the Viscas river, which runs down to San Mateo to join the Rimac. A gravel road leads from San Mateo to the mine at the end of the valley. Transport between San Mateo and the mine consists of a station-wagon which departs daily from San Mateo at noon, returning from the mine at 5 the following morning. Cost per person is 10 to 12 soles.

Peaks, Valleys and Glaciers

For me, the peaks are the main, and perhaps only, attraction of the Cordillera Central. There is no archaeological interest in the entire area. This is a feature unique to this district and almost unrepeatable elsewhere in Peru. Nor are there any tourist services or facilities. But the mountain peaks compensate for whatever else is missing, and anyone who visits the area as a traveller-adventurer-mountaineer rather than as a climber-tiger or caravan-tourist will surely accord me some right in my opinion.

The two ranges that form this Cordillera Central contain some 200 well-defined peaks, named and unnamed, surveyed and unsurveyed, ranging from 5000m to 5477m.

Cordillera Cascacocha

This small range is horseshoe-shaped, with the Viscas river running between its arms. At the north-west end rises the highest point, Cerro Cascacocha (5317m), which sports a surveyor's benchmark on its top. The main group of peaks is found at the base of the horseshoe – Nevado Suerococha (5312m), with its spiky subjects, most of them unnamed. On the north-east arm of the horseshoe rises 5299m Nevado Llipina (unglaciated when I saw it in the middle of the 1997 drought). Its chain, running south, is composed of barren rock peaks. A special attraction offered by any mountain top in the Cascacocha range is that the very glaciated Cordillera Huarochiri, some 20kms to the east, is within sight.

Cordillera de la Viuda

This district contains about 90% of the peaks belonging to the Cordillera Central. It reaches its highest point in Nevado Rajuntay (5477m), whose west glaciers can be admired from the trunk road heading north from Chinchán.

To the north of Rajuntay are found the massifs of Collay (5259m), also listed as the owner of a benchmark by military surveyors, and Nevado Pucacocha (5150m). The area east of the trunk road comes to its southern end with the remarkable ridge of Sacratuc (Quichua: 'the demons' – an unofficial name) and three unnamed peaks, all about 5100m high. To the east of them there is yet one more ridge of rock and ice peaks, reaching 5293m in the well known Cerro Yanasinga (Quichua: 'black nose'). This massif is the one showpiece of the Andes for most Peruvians since, when travelling along the Lima-Huancayo highway, they stop to photograph it from the convenient Ticlio pass (4844m).

The area west of the trunk road is the richest in mountains. It must include some 100 to 120 peaks, some with small glaciers. Many of these peaks have not been entered on the latest maps and a good many are also unnamed. The trunk road has halfway a bifurcation to the left (west) leading to the mining area of Millo. North and south of the Millo road rise scores of peaks of mixed composition – rock, scree, snow, and, at times, small icefields.

The San Luis and Ucropata are the main ones. Near the small dams and inactive mines north of that road are, according to maps, the ice peaks of Torreón (5362m), Chonta (5208m) and Cashpe (5200m). Farther north, rock massifs are grouped around fairly big lakes, like the Huancash, Antacota, and Chucchun. The last lake named is near another gravel road running east to west, connecting Lima with the mining centre of Cerro de Pasco. The range of La Viuda, and with it the Cordillera Central, comes to an end with the white trapezoid of Nevado Alcay (5350m) and the unknown chain of Puacjanca (5272m). North and east, the moors of the Junín department, swept by icy winds, are the only trait of scenery to be seen.

All these ridges and massifs have in common a striking uniformity, evident in their even altitude range, 5000m to 5477m, in their short rock walls falling to the south and east, in their scree slopes and rockeries facing north, and in their small snowdrifts lying in gullies and walls facing south-west. Glaciers are rare, although they do show on the higher peaks or *nevados*. There is a further uniformity in the physiognomy of the valleys, nearly all with some lakes or lakelets, a narrow stream and some pastures around 4200m and passes around 4700m. Weather in the climbing season of mid-May to September is also uniform: cold and dry days, some clouds and even a few rain or sleet squalls in the afternoons. Temperatures range from a low of -10°C . to a high of 16°C . In the Peruvian summer of November to March, temperatures are somewhat higher, but there is fog, rain, and light snow.

The Past and the Present

The mountaineering history of this particular range shows that nothing sensational ever happened within its realm of peaks. Its first visitors must have been the local Quichua pastoralists, who erected cairns on a number of lower tops, either to demarcate their landholdings or to propitiate the mountains themselves, givers of water. They were followed by surveyors, who worked for mining companies or for the national geographic authorities. Some remarkable rock peaks, like Collay (5259m), Yana Yana (5303m) and Cascacocha (5317m) have benchmarks on their summits.

During the Second World War years and some time after, foreign residents in Lima climbed those peaks that were more approachable, either from roads or mining camps. I take advantage of this occasion to mention among such Lima residents Londoner Nigel A Gallop, who provided me with useful information when, in the early '90s, I was beginning to look at the Cordillera Central as a possible goal. In 1957 he made the second ascent of Nevado Rajuntay (5477m) and in 1959 the first ascent of Leóncocha (5215m). The first ascent of Rajuntay, highest in the entire cordillera, was made by the accomplished Swiss couple Frederic and Dorly Marmillod, in 1944. Rajuntay is also the only peak in the range that can boast a 'technical' route: in August 1975, five Italians, using fixed ropes, climbed its south ridge. But the main contingent of visitors has been drawn from

Lima. Indeed, because of its location, this range seems to be indicated for residents of that town. Local Peruvians, plus some foreign colleagues, have climbed some 100 of the 200 or so peaks belonging to this area. Their best climbs were performed in the '50s on Alcay and Michipanhauin (5201m). In the mid-'80s, Father Marcelo Corazzola, of Lima, founded the Club Andino Cordillera Central; he himself led several parties to the rock peaks around the Millo mining area. Unfortunately, all activity came to a stop about 1986, when internal political conflicts began to hinder travel in central Peru.

The above historical summary refers to the Cordillera de la Viuda. Its sister range, the Cordillera Cascacocha, had no history until 1996. Why nobody showed any interest in this small but attractive range I was unable to understand until I climbed Nevado Suerococha (5312m), the finest peak in the district. The Cascacocha is usually seen only from the north, which means that it displays to onlookers its more barren, unattractive side. But from the summit of Suerococha I was able to admire the opposite side of most peaks, draped with long snow, perhaps ice, sheets.

After 1995, stability and peaceful travel, at least within the Lima hinterland, were restored. Mountaineering within this range at present offers limited but pleasant options. Valleys are short and quiet. Even in the drier years, water can be found in the upper foothills. Weather is quite stable from May to September. Heights are moderate, ideal for acclimatising or for carrying out a long campaign of climbs without suffering much physical deterioration. Access is easy and short. The highest unclimbed peak, to my knowledge, would be Torreón (5362m), if maps do not lie. Walls are to be found everywhere, even if ice is absent. Rock of the best quality, as in the Escaparate group, alternates with rock of the vilest quality, as in the 'Sacratac' massif.

Ascents, 1987-88 and 1995-99

In these years I managed to climb some 25 peaks, mostly first ascents, initially in rather short trips. When political conflicts intervened, I abandoned Peru for Bolivia, not returning to the former until 1995, when stability was widely advertised. Beginning that year I made longer forays, marching from one end of a massif to the other, climbing what seemed feasible along the way.

I also undertook several exploratory trips to try to locate the ice peaks of Chonta and Torreón, clearly shown on the latest maps. But I failed to locate any *nevado* in those parts of the range. Was that ice destroyed by the persistent droughts that for years have been afflicting our planet? Or were the official maps improperly executed? Thus far, I have no explanation.

Every time I came to the end of a trip, and sat by the gravel road to wait for a vehicle to come my way, I had enough time to look at the peaks and to think about what I had done, and what I had discovered. The general impression I gained was that I had become fond of a rather toned-down range. I found only silence in those lonely moors. I saw no wall worthy of a desperate feat. My own climbing was either moderately difficult or pleasantly easy. The peaks I won were uniform in shape, height and challenge. But those characteristics were precisely what drew me there.

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