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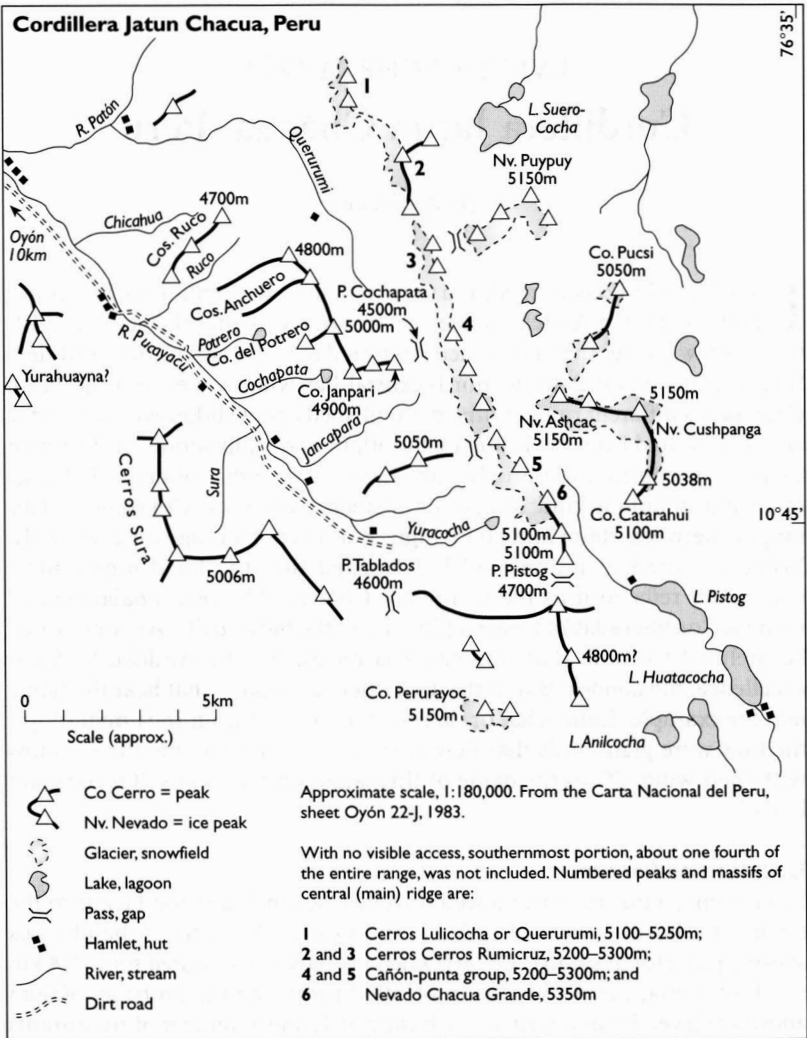
Cordillera Jatún Chácua, Peru

(Plates 27, 28)

It was the 1971 Polish expedition to Peru that drew attention to this almost wholly unknown Andean range. Before, and also after the year of 1971, the very few parties that had visited it referred to it as a part of the Cordillera Raura, which belongs to the north-central Peruvian Andes. But the Jatún Chácua is a different range, with an established and well-known local name and is separated from the Raura by the 30km-wide hilly moors of the Oyón basin. This contribution briefly introduces a range that offers a challenge of an almost unique kind: long walls of steep, black rock with smooth slabs ranging between 200m and 500m high. But it is not a range for everybody. When I visited it in June 2002, I learned that the local highlanders commonly refer to it as the Cordillera Chácua. The real, unabbreviated name is Cordillera Jatún Chácua (Quichua: 'the big birds'). Anyone would be inclined to think that this name is meant for the Andean bird par excellence, the condor. But in the area, there are places that bear the name *luli*, for example, Lulicocha, or 'lake of the lulis'. Within Inca mythology, the lulis were giant birds that flew at summit level, touching the summits with their wings. Thus the name of this range simply means: 'Of the giant birds.'

Location and access

From Lima, a bus-ride over a well travelled, second-class road leads to the towns of Churín – thermal baths! – and Oyón. The latter is the obvious starting place for this range. Oyón (Quichua: 'barren') is located some 190km north of Lima, has a population of 5000 people and is probably 3000m above sea level. It has a hostel, two basic hotels and a number of restaurants and small grocery shops. Through Oyón flow the waters of the Pucayacu River (Quichua: 'red waters'), which is born in the heart of the Jatún Chácua. In Oyón, one can take a van that runs daily along the Pucayacu valley, servicing small hamlets and local mining operations for coal and copper. The van, locally called a *combi*, does not usually go higher than the last Pucayacu mines, located halfway up the long valley. But drivers are quite willing to accept an extra sum to reach the mouth of any of the several higher, lateral valleys running into the Pucayacu (see map on following page). This additional ride is done over a rough road. In my case, for his extra trouble, the driver left me at the very end of the mining road for an equivalent of US\$15.



The range and the highlands

The Jatún Chácua is composed of three parallel ridges running north to south for some 30km. The Pucayacu River and its parallel mining road run between the west and the central ridges. Lateral valleys leading to the peaks of those ridges are short, but to reach the eastern ridge, which offers some pleasant glaciated domes, there seems to be no direct access. It may be necessary to ascend to the Pistag Pass and descend into the Pistag and Huatacocha basins of lakes and moors to reach the base of these little-known mountains.

This range is typical of central northern Peru – rock and ice peaks over 5000m, rising over moorlands populated by sheep and llama herds. There are, however, a few lower valleys with healthy vegetation. Their rocky sides have forests of *quenua* (Q: *polylepis*), a small Andean, red-barked tree that prefers steep slopes. They seem to reach as high as 4600m above sea level. Are these the highest forests in the world? Fringing the local meadows are also blue lupins and yellow daisies. Human population in the highlands is extremely reduced, with barely a clan established at the entrance of each valley descending into the Pucayacu. Climate is typically Andean Peruvian. In normal years, a dry winter from April to September is followed by a wet tropical summer. Water is found in every valley, but somewhat polluted by grazing animals.

The peaks and the icefields

This range offers no other attraction than mountain climbing. It is a peculiar one. The western ridge is composed of rock and scree mountains rising to some 5150m. Only their north-east flanks are visible from the Pucayacu road. The main or central ridge is by far the chief attraction of this range. It is a continuous wall of exceedingly steep domes, peaks, towers and needles, composed of a remarkable black rock, perched above a fairly even icefield. Western sides are long slabs rising in some parts to some 500m of unyielding smoothness. Since this ridge is long, rugged and spiky, it is not easy to determine which its individual peaks are. According to the Carta Nacional del Peru (1981, 1:50 000), the central ridge begins with the Lulicocha massif at the sources of the Paton and Querurumi streams and continues south unabated, all the way to the Pistag Pass. South of that pass, there are rows of rock and scree mountains, some 4800m to 5150m high.

The western ridge is lower, and judging from the little I was able to see of it from Pistag Pass, also tamer. But it has several rock peaks and rounded ice domes that seem to promise pleasant exploratory work.

The Oyón sheet of the chart just quoted, encompassing almost the entire Jatún Chácua range, shows 30 peaks worth that name, between 4800m and 5000m and 42 others, between 5000m and 5350m. It is not known which is the highest point in the range. Besides the imposing Chácua Grande (5350m), the map shows at least six other peaks of the central ridge attaining at least 5300m. At the southernmost end of the range, there is also a Nevado Chururuyo, 5350m high. There is no obvious approach to the Chururuyo section.

Exploration and climbing

The modern history of this range is brief. In 1927, a surveying party of the American Geographical Society, New York singled out and measured four peaks here and there, leaving vast tracts of uncharted spaces between them. Thus, we cannot locate the four peaks this party listed: south to north, Peak 1, 5412m, Peak 2, 5390m, Peak 3, 5356m, and Peak 4, 5229m.

About 1966, a preliminary chart, the Pre-Carta, was issued in Lima. It continued in use until 1981, when the Carta Nacional, 1:50 000, with its Oyón sheet properly surveying the entire Jatún Chácua, appeared. Unfortunately, few peaks on this last chart were listed with exact heights. Most of 70-odd high elevations over 4800m needed to be identified according to their contour intervals. Besides, many local peak names, not on this chart, seem to exist, but the absence of local inhabitants in the highlands will make their collection difficult. The search for local mountain names and the determination of the very highest peak in this range remain a geographical task yet to be accomplished.

The history of climbing is also brief. In the 1960s, Peruvian parties, apparently from the large town of Churín, ascended four peaks in the Yurahuayna massif, in the north-west periphery of the range, from 5000m to 5190m. In 1971, an enterprising Polish expedition led by Henryk Furmanik, climbed the difficult Nevado Chácua Grande (5350m) and a couple of lesser peaks. The good reports produced by the Poles were under the proper heading of the Jatún Chácua range. As to heights, the Poles quoted the accurate Pre-Carta of 1966. In the year 2000, however, a German expedition from Saxony, led by Markus Walter, reascended Chácua Grande and ascended other lower, nearby peaks. In spite of the existence of the good 1981 Peruvian chart, the Saxons quoted higher elevations and referred to the area as a part of the Cordillera Raura, whose nearer peaks are not to be found until one travels some 25 km north of the Oyón basin.

Future parties to this range will then have to choose between extremely exposed rock-work on the central ridge, or less difficult mixed work on the eastern ridge. Small parties are advisable because there are no resources in the higher valleys. Logistics are simple, since Oyón is served by several bus lines from Lima, an eight-hour ride costing about US\$5. Then, in Oyón, a van is hired to the entrance of some higher valley, a ride some three hours long costing about US\$15. Spanish is an absolute necessity for all forms of communication. Those who may seek new ground are advised to avoid the Yuracocha and the southern rim of the Jancapata valleys, which have been explored already by the Poles and Germans.

In June 2001, I travelled alone to this range. Bad weather was my constant companion (the same type of weather that caused several deaths in the Cordillera Blanca). I first ascended the Pistag pass, but the typical unstable weather of the Peruvian eastern slopes forced me to head back to the west side of the main ridge. I finally camped on the Cochapata pass. Visibility had been poor for an entire week. I set out, all the same, for an attempt on some of the southern Rumicruz peaks, shown on the chart at 5300m. But when the mists dispersed, the black, smooth walls of those mountains appeared so wicked and sinister that I recoiled in fear back to my tent. In another valley, still under bad weather, I climbed the pleasant west rock face of the unnamed, serrated mountain of 5000m, rising west of the

Cochapata pass. On the summit (probably no higher than 4900m), I found a cairn, no doubt erected by local highlanders, since there was an easy route on the north side of the mountain. I christened it Cerro 'Janpari' (Quichua: 'many points').

In all, in the Range of the Giant Birds, I spent thirteen days, ten of which were in bad weather. I was not to see blue skies again until I finally arrived back in bleak Oyón.

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 Two brief notes in *American Alpine Journal* 1972, p167 (Polish expedition) and 2001, p283 (German expedition).

MAPS

Carta Nacional del Perú, sheet Oyón 22-J, 1:50 000, 1983.



27. Nevado Chácua Grande (5350m) in Peru's Cordillera Jatún Chácua, seen from the NW, upper Jancapata valley. (*Evelio Echevarría*) (p111)



28. The north end of the Cordillera Jatún Chácua, with the Rumicruz seen from the SSW. (*Evelio Echevarría*) (p111)