
NICK BULLOCK

Blind Date on Quitaraju

(Plates 10, 11)

Inside a steamy ski chalet in Chamonix, there were clothes hung on every available beam and the windows were running with condensation. It was crowded. Some were celebrating a successful ski trip, others mourning a washed-out winter climbing trip. Snowflakes swept against the window, stuck there for a moment, then slithered down the pane to be quickly replaced by others. This was the only time Al and I had met. We'd spoken a few times over the phone since, but that doesn't help much when it comes to recognising your future partner.

Now waiting at Manchester Airport, looking for a face that I recognised, I replayed my last phone conversation with Al, particularly his parting shot: 'This will be the ultimate blind date.' He wasn't wrong.

Spending the first week getting to know each other, we did the usual stuff that strangers do when together for the first time, carrying gigantic bags to base camp, arguing with taxi drivers, getting ill. We marvelled at the size of American climbers' rucksacks as we returned exhausted from climbs we were planning as warm-ups.

We acclimatised by going into the Parron Valley. Parron would be our first peak, at 5600m as good a starting point as any and a three-day round trip, according to the guidebook. We begged to differ. Setting off from base camp at 11pm, we returned successful at 10am next morning. A round trip of eleven hours. We were cruising.

The next peak was Artesonraju. The climbing this time was a little more sustained than on Parron, but still relatively straightforward. At 6000m, though, it tested our lungs. From the summit we had views of many of the Cordillera Blanca's finest, including the very thing we had come to Peru to climb: Quitaraju. Standing proud, the mountain threw down its gauntlet in the shape of its fantastic, massive South Face. There was only one existing line on this and plenty more room left to pop in another, play around, and enjoy our blind date.

Tucked up for the night, I stared at the roof of the tent, wondering about the next few days. Originally we'd planned a recce into the hanging valley beneath Quitaraju's South Face, but the hillside below was so steep we decided just to go for it. Al had scoped the face out the previous day and sounded suitably impressed: 'It's like several Galactic Hitchhikers stacked one on top of the other.' Secretly, I was pleased with his appraisal. It wouldn't do to bring someone all the way to Peru for a boring snow plod.

The following afternoon we flogged up the hillside, and then into the hidden, hanging valley of the Quebrada Quitacocha. It was a stunning place. The sun shone through the quenal trees covering both sides of the valley. Long marsh grass swayed in the wind. We descended onto the dry lakebed where the sun beating down on the mud had dried the cracked surface into millions of herringbone lines. Following the crazy-paving at its edge, we picked our way to the end of the lake and, passing through quenal trees, started to climb to the head of the valley. Unfortunately we had other things than the scenery to occupy our thoughts: the massive, broken icefall spewing out from the bottom of Quitaraju's South Face for one.

During our MEF interview in London the panel of eminent mountaineers had dared to suggest that this icefall might explain why there had been so little action on this face. Al and I are quite similar in some respects. We are both driven, in a quiet way, although friends would probably describe us as just pigheaded and bloody-minded. At times though, such traits may be advantageous and the icefall looked like one of those times. The closer we got to it the more difficult it appeared – in fact, it looked impossible. This was the moment when any sensible party would have looked at other objectives, licked its wounds, laughed a little at how blind it had been, felt a little arrogant, perhaps, to have thought it could get through where others had failed; even, it has to be said, run away. Somehow that just wasn't an option for us.

After resting and eating the only proper food we had brought with us, we set off to try to find a way through the icefall. Our plan was good, but it depended on the ability to move quickly, continuously and lightly. The only food we took was to be eaten while we climbed: chocolate, biscuits, and sweets. There would be no food for cooking and so no fuel. We wouldn't be stopping so we didn't need sleeping bags or duvet jackets. We packed just one homemade Pertex bivvy sack. We'd sprint through the icefall, move together on the route using our recently gained acclimatisation, and reach the summit in no time at all. Then we'd abseil the opposite face which, as the standard route, was likely to be equipped. Once on that, we would endure a cold, hungry but safe bivvy, or more likely keep moving to reach base camp that night, exhausted but safe. It was a good plan.

Al started on the icefall, the beam of his head torch picking out small ice blocks he could hop between. But as we moved further into the icy maze, route-finding became more difficult and the blocks grew to monstrous proportions. Often, unable to go round towering séracs, we were forced off our line and had to tackle them head on, pitching hard and worrying ice and hoping the whole lot wouldn't tumble on our heads.

On the sharp end, I suddenly found myself beneath an overhanging ice wall. Getting started up the thing was desperate and the climbing was horribly steep from the first move. The ice was so hard it took two or three axe-swings to get a placement. Thuggery took over as Al surmounted the

first obstacle and throwing in a cramponed heel-hook at the top, hauled his body ungraciously over the edge where even steeper ice awaited him.

Fortunately, the shelf Alf now found himself sprawled on followed a curving chimney. I placed an ice screw and began to follow this icy fault-line upwards. As the chimney increased to near vertical I started to bridge out over the dark void below. Nearing the top I noticed a large rounded block of ice wedged into the chimney. Moving onto the right wall to bypass the obstruction, I reckoned that a few more moves would put me on top of the sérac. Pulling level with the ice block, I took a breather. Then, planting the right axe as I leaned backwards, I began to move the left pick towards the top of the block. The pick touched and the block instantly fell away, plunging into the darkness below. My left axe had ripped free from the block's soft outer layer and I was left hanging from one axe. The freezing air stung my lungs as I panted. My sweat froze. The block bounced off the walls below, echoing down as tons of ice shattered in the blackness. Then it was still again. I did the only thing I could. I took a deep breath and pushed on. Reaching the top I quickly set up a belay and shouted: 'Safe!'

Safe?

The ice levelled out. Snow had settled, but not consolidated. Al now took over trying to find a way through. As his head torch swept from side to side, crystals sparkled. The snow deepened, first to our thighs and then to our shoulders. The ice creaked as the temperature dropped. Every so often the sound of a collapsing sérac detonated in the silence surrounding us. Slowly, carefully, we inched through. There was no respite. The water we had melted for the climb on the face had already been drunk. Our muscles ached and there was still more deep wading to come. The plan was ruined.

Finally, at 8am we finished crossing the icefall. Eight hours of continuous climbing and wading had made serious inroads into our reserves. We talked about traversing the base of the face, and so escaping. The most obvious line looked steep and hard. If it was covered in powder it would take for ever. After all the hard work getting through, we at least had to take a look at the face. If there was névé perhaps lost time could be clawed back. We would push it out, move together and reclaim everything that had been taken from us so unfairly.

I started off, dipping my toe in the water. The joint decision was made: if the ice was anything but perfect we would scuttle off to the left and escape. The steep, rocky bergschrund proved hard. More time was lost but I pushed on, climbing furiously up our chosen line. The snow was generally good – patches of névé mixed with water ice over bulging rock. Al climbed up to me, collected some gear, then climbed past. The decision was made. There would be no retreat. We were utterly committed.

Sweeping ice sheets of vertical sastrugi rippled over névé as far as the eye could see. Moving together we pushed upwards. The climbing was excellent Scottish IV with steeper sections of V. Our calves screamed, but there was nowhere to rest. We had been moving together now for a long time. Al had

all the gear, putting even more pressure on his calves. He had to traverse from one side of the climb, teetering on front points, over to the opposite side recovering running-belay as he went. I pressed on urgently, the rope tugging at Al's waist.

'What the hell are you doing?' Al yelled, yanking at the rope. I knew what was happening below but the angle of the face and lack of anything solid to anchor to forced me on.

Stopping at the first available belay, an exceptionally poor spike with only axes as a back up, I waited hesitantly for Mr Powell to join me. Attached to the worst spike ever I waited to face the music. Al's anger was justifiable, perhaps – but with a great deal of climbing left, we were going to have to kiss and make up very quickly. The nature of the face changed. Thin, hollow ice now took the place of *névé*; powder snow thinly covered exposed rock. The angle of the face increased. I couldn't know it, but I was about to tackle the crux pitch. At least the confusion of the previous section was over. From here we would be pitching the climb.

A direct line would have been possible had the ice covering the near vertical slabs been good; but it wasn't. The slightly overhung corners might have gone, but for rotten ice. The whole pitch would certainly have been less scary with one or two good pieces of gear. By now I was twenty feet above my last piece, a shaky cam in loose rock. Rock poked through above and to either side where my picks had shattered the ice. I scabbled at the ice but huge sheets peeled off. My forearms and shoulders burned, I needed a decent placement, a rest. Now. But upward motion was impossible. I could see a better-looking line to the left but reaching it would mean reversing to the cam. It was the only option. I started reversing, teetering down, expecting at any moment that my axes would rip. I fought to stop my limbs shaking while Al looked on, checking his belay. If the cam ripped, he would be holding a factor two fall. Come on, Nick, I told myself, stay with it.

I started the traverse. It was even more difficult but at least the cam had a better chance of holding and that gave me courage. The ice rang hollow as I tapped my picks into the thin skin covering rock with an inch of air between. Trusting it seemed madness but there was no other way. Putting all my weight onto my arms, I could find nothing for my frontpoints. I made a gentle kick but the ice peeled away revealing blank rock. Moving as quickly as I could, climbing on eggshells, I headed for an overhanging corner ahead where the ice looked thick and comforting. The trick is, I told myself, not to let the ice know I'm here. The trick worked. Al breathed out. Finally I pulled through the overhang on better ice.

The crux pitch was over, but that didn't mean the climbing was easy. Rope-length after rope-length we moved on. The climbing was superb, similar to the Orion Face on Ben Nevis. Finally the light faded. Al fixed an anchor while I dug out a snow ledge for us to spend the night. We huddled under Al's Pertex sack. My body cramped every time I moved, Al's eyes

streamed with water. Avalanches poured down the face as cornices from the summit ridge high up collapsed. A cold night lay ahead. We were still only halfway up the face.

Climbing the first pitch of the morning Al shook the stiffness out of his legs. A steep, fluted snow-runnel led to a ridge and we followed more rocky runnels. Both of us looked up at the ridge, visible now, but so far away. Spindrift poured down and we screamed obscenities. The flurries slowed their pace. We crawled through a white wilderness. The runnels, on both sides, became fringed with bulbous mushrooms of ice. Al looked at them, weighing them up, wondering about a way off the top of the face. The idea of having to dig through some alien-shaped ice-monstrosity to escape appalled him.

Still alternating pitches, we continued to find consistently hard climbing, nothing quite as tenuous as the first day, but nothing easy enough to allow us to relax. Entering a large bay, Al set up an ice-screw belay. The summit looked very close now and continuing direct looked to be the best bet. Two or three pitches, perhaps, assuming the ridge we were looking at was the summit ridge and not a subsidiary top that led to more climbing. The next pitch should put us beneath the summit although climbing it was not going to be a breeze. Ahead the bay steepened to a rocky backwall with only one possible exit – an ice runnel guarded at the bottom by a rock overhang.

I placed three screws, more than on any other pitch so far. I knew how weak I had become. Steadying myself beneath the runnel, the effort required for this was going to be more than I wanted to make. Placing my left axe as high beneath the overhang as I could, I breathed deeply and closed my eyes. Forcing the air back out of my lungs, I stepped up. Locking off with my left arm I reached over and swung my right axe to get a placement. The ice was hard, too hard to get my pick in. I swung again. And again. Finally, I had a placement I could trust. But my body was empty. Muscle was being eaten by muscle to fuel movement. Pulling now on my right arm, I twisted the left and pulled the axe free. My upper body was past the overhang. The next placement needed to be as high as possible. The next placement needed to be good. I drew back my arm and swung. My feet stayed put while my left axe was driven home. Pulling now with both arms, I felt my feet cut loose. Quickly I drew my knees upwards towards my chest and carefully placed my front-points just above the lip of the overhang. I stood up, straightening my legs in a massive effort. I was established in the runnel and retched, my dry guts heaving.

Al watched as I set up the last belay on the route. Then he climbed up to meet me. We hardly spoke; there was nothing to say. We'd had enough. We deserved the summit. Wading, Al forced a trench through unconsolidated sugar for fifty metres. And then, finally, he was rewarded. The mountains all around were deep red as the sun dipped below the horizon. He looked on the whole of the range, re-born into the horizontal world. The sky turned

dark and stars appeared. Al breathed deep. He was alive. The wind whipped up spindrift, stinging his face. The spell was broken. Time to belay.

We spent our third night out on the summit in a snow hole. The temperature plummeted. The night was shivered away. At dawn we quickly set off. Packing is a short affair when there is nothing to pack. By midday we'd reached the bottom of Quitaraju's North Face even though the fixed anchors hadn't materialised. We down-climbed all the way. We passed first Swiss climbers, who gallantly fed us tea and chocolate, and then a French team at the Alpamayo high camp who, magnificently, gave us all of their spare food. We dropped down to the very busy Alpamayo base camp, sneaking through without talking to anyone. Doggedly we pushed on, driven by the thought of food, flat ground and sleeping bags.

The meadows below our base camp were beautiful. Having just spent the last three days on a big, snowy, cold mountain we savoured the scene, our senses amplified. There were hundreds of lupins, forests of quenal, their bark peeling and their branches covered in damp thick moss. Mountain streams gushed down the steep slopes to join the swollen river running through the centre of the meadow. Even the dust, kicked up by our dragging feet as we headed back down to the Santa Cruz, was refreshing. A massive Condor swooped overhead, no doubt looking for tasty morsels. I don't imagine it saw anything worth picking from our bones.

At 8pm we reached the rock where we had stowed our kit three and a half days ago. The food bag was the first to be opened. It was time to dine.

A few days later, I leaned back in my seat and took a second drink from the flight attendant. I couldn't help but wonder what Cilla would have made of our blind date.

'Will I need my hat?' Cilla might ask.

'Oh, I don't think so. But we're going to stay in touch!'

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10. The Central Buttress on the South Face of Quitaraju (6040m). Powell and Bullock's route began at the black buttresses at the bottom of the face and followed the line up and slightly right to the summit. (*Nick Bullock*) (p73)



11. Al Powell following the crux pitch on the Central Buttress of Quitaraju. (*Nick Bullock*) (p73)