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## Cordillera Central, Argentina

Five of the seven Andean countries have a 'Cordillera Central' but, curiously, that of Argentina, by far the largest and the highest, is generally the least known of the five. It is commonly called 'the roof of America' since it contains 19 peaks between 6000m and the 6960m of Aconcagua, as well as some 600 or 700 other peaks between 4000m and 6000m. But to the average mountaineer, reasonably well versed in developments in international expeditionary and trekking activity, this particular Cordillera Central could at best evoke two or three names of mountains: Aconcagua, Tupungato and, perhaps, Mercedario. The hundreds of climbers who attempt Aconcagua every year, together with the ordinary trekkers who march along prescribed itineraries, do not seem to notice the world of lesser peaks in the neighbourhood of their destination, for there is no information readily available to draw attention to those other peaks. No monograph of such a vast area has been written and most of the existing information is stored in Argentinian mountaineering journals not readily available abroad. This contribution endeavours to offer a basic monograph, with the stated purpose of drawing attention away from the well-known trio of giants, Aconcagua, Tupungato and Mercedario.

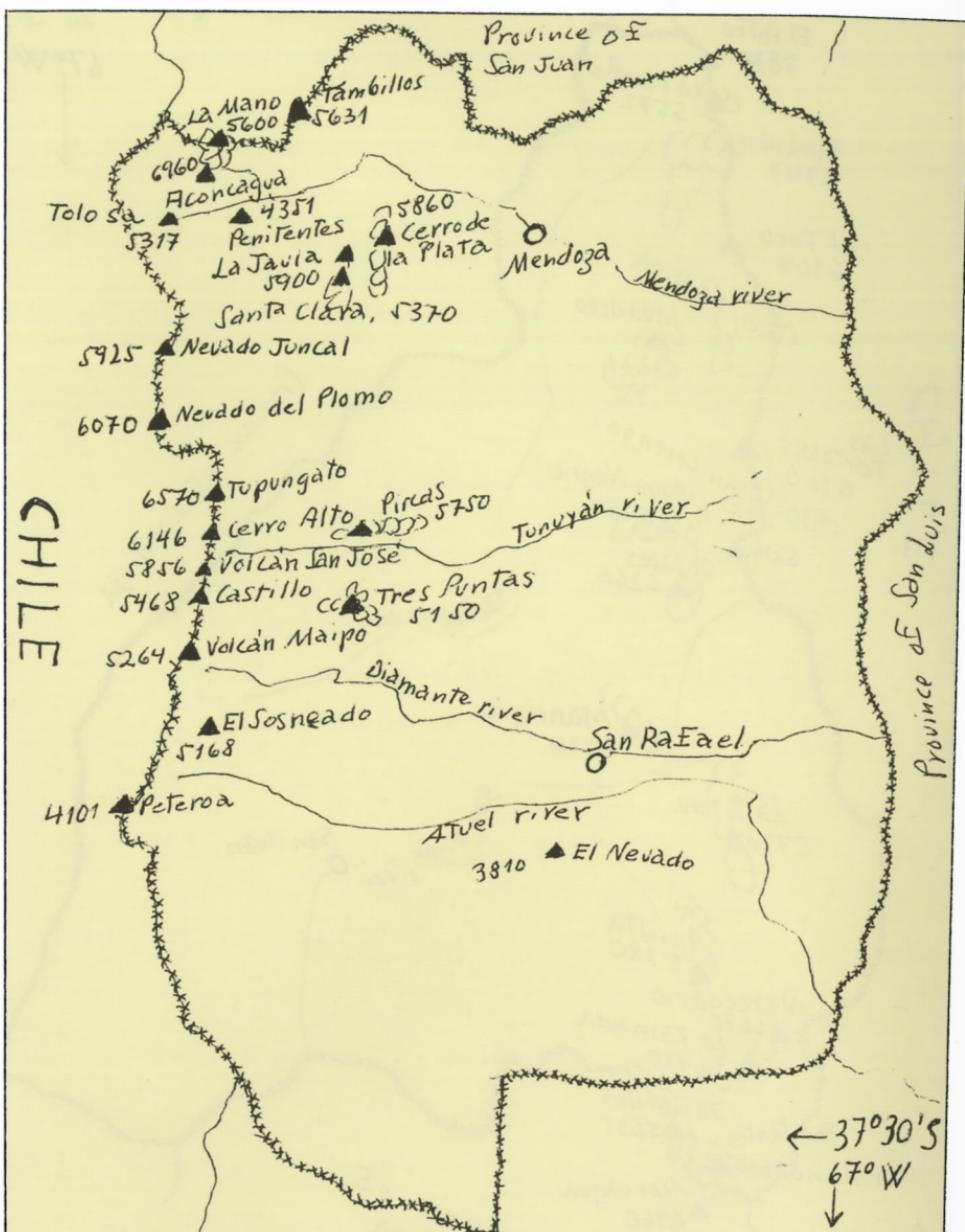
A succinct introduction, which appeared in a British Aconcagua guide-book about the region surrounding the mountain, can be applied to the region as a whole:

The area ... is quite civilized; transport is good and there is an established structure for mountain access. There are no "nasties" in the region, such as snakes, mosquitoes or wildcats. The people are friendly; food is great and language is not a particular barrier.<sup>1</sup>

The Cordillera Central of Argentina is situated in the central west part of the territory, on the border with Chile and within the political limits of the two provinces of San Juan and Mendoza. It runs north to south for an approximate length of 750kms. The highest point is, of course, Cerro Aconcagua (6960m) in Mendoza province, while the highest point in San Juan province is Cerro Mercedario (6670m, 6770m or 6800m).

### Cordones and Cerros

So vast is this world of mountains that in order to gain even a general overview, a step-by-step approach is necessary. First, there are six great rivers born in the high snows: Jáchal, San Juan, Mendoza (or Las Cuevas),



CHILE

96. Cordillera Central, Argentina. Province of San Juan. Not to scale.  
Approximate location of main peak. (Sketch map by Evelio Echevarría)

C  
H  
I  
L  
E

El Potro  
5830

Tambillos  
5747

El Toro  
6168

Las  
Tortolas  
6160  
5830

6216 Olivares 6266

La Tofora  
5770

Anisita  
5780

Mercedario  
6670

La Ramada  
6420

Penitentes  
Tambillos  
5631

La Manda 5600  
Aconcagua  
6960

Cola Flecha  
5572

Brea  
Lavadero  
6122

San Lorenzo  
Agua Negra  
5484

Manrique  
5026

San Juan river  
San Juan

Province of  
Mendoza

← 28°30' S  
67° W ↓

97. Cordillera Central, Argentina. Province of Mendoza.  
(Sketch map by Evelio Echevarría)

Tunuyán, Diamante and Atuel. Then the *cordones* (singular: *cordón* and *cordillera*); these are well-defined chains or ridges of peaks. There are 14 such chains in the province of San Juan and eight in Mendoza. Concerning altitude and glaciation, the main San Juan chains are in the south-west portion of this enormous province (90 000 sq.kms). The Cordillera de la Ramada, including Cerro Mercedario, is located there. Other *cordones*, including several 6000m peaks, are near the Agua Negra pass. The chains farther north are not well known and often only the highest point of each has received an ascent.

The even larger province of Mendoza (149 000 sq.kms) shows only eight such chains but they carry heavier glaciation than those of San Juan. The Cordillera del Tigre (c5631m) in the Mendoza or Las Cuevas valley can be seen rising abruptly over the pleasant village of Uspallata (1753m). The Cordón del Plata contains the massif of Cerro de la Plata (5860m) and the resort of Vallecitos, Mendoza's nearest base for rock, ice and snow sports. In the west central district and above the Tunuyán river is the Cordón del Portillo (c5800m), one of the most rugged and heavily glaciated *cordones* in the Cordillera Central. For a diposition of the *cordones* and their major points, see sketch map and Appendix A.

As for the mountain peaks themselves, it would prove an onerous task to review even a small proportion of the some 700 that belong to this region. A few of them could be briefly profiled, if only to provide an idea of the bonds between local inhabitants and their mountains. One should, perhaps, begin with the 16 six-thousanders, somewhat lower than Tupungato (6570m), which, curiously, attract fewer local or visiting expeditions than some lesser montains. Nor do the mountaineers of San Juan show a special predilection for any peak other than Mercedario. Mendoza, however, is different: it has its favourite mountains. Cerro de la Plata (5860m), for instance, visible from the streets of Mendoza city itself, is as revered as Aconcagua. Cerro Tolosa (5317m) was much praised by the Europeans in their writings of the last century. It is indeed a fine pyramid especially when seen from the valley around Puente del Inca, the gateway to Aconcagua. The equally visible but smaller Cerro Penitentes (4350m), located a few kilometres south-east of Tolosa, is a serrated mountain showing a steep reddish wall to the travellers who use the highway along the Mendoza valley. In spite of its modest size, it is the depository of more legends than much greater mountains, including Aconcagua itself. And Cerro Penitentes, unlike nearly all the other peaks in the region, can be ascended at any time of the year, even during the southern winter (June to September).

Volcanoes in the area are few and inactive. The main ones, El Toro (6168m) and Las Tórtolas (6160m), are in northern San Juan province. Bleak and remote as they are, they nevertheless received Inca shrines. In Mendoza, on the border with Chile, both Volcán San José (5856m) and Volcán Peteroa (4101m) have weak steam columns rising from their summit craters.

Glaciation is found mostly on the south and south-east side of the major peaks. Glaciers that occupy the upper valleys are in the Mercedario–La Mesa group (Cordillera de la Ramada), in the Cordón de los Penitentes, north of Aconcagua and on the east and southern flanks of the border mountains. From these glaciers flow unfordable rivers, like the Tunuyán and Atuel. In both provinces there are hundreds of peaks of all kinds and all shapes, a good many as yet unnamed. Some may be close at hand, some in the next valley or quite remote. Others may be rejoicing in impregnability behind wicked, impassable brown streams. And, needless to say, countless peaks, tall and small, rise up everywhere, independent of the *cordones* close to them.

### The Past

Unfortunately Aconcagua, or the ‘White Sentinel’ (not the ‘Stone Sentinel’ as widely advertised), has always monopolised attention; but some very important mountaineering events, unrelated to the giant, have occurred in this cordillera. In 1883 Dr Paul Güssfeldt, on Volcán Maipo (5264m), made the highest solitary ascent then known. Between 1897 and 1910 the boundary commissions of Chile and Argentina carried out the first scientific survey of their Andean boderlands, erecting a total of 182 two-metre iron benchmarks on mountain passes and even on some summits of this zone. They are still there. In 1897 members of E A FitzGerald’s expedition (including the guide Mattias Zurbriggen) climbed Aconcagua (6960m), Tupungato (6570m) and Catedral (5335m) and produced a first-class book covering the entire Mendoza valley (E A FitzGerald, *The Highest Andes*. Methuen, 1899). In 1925 Austrian immigrant Hans Stepanek and one or two companions performed numerous first ascents and even traverses in the Cordón del Plata. In around 1930 the Vela brothers of Mendoza introduced skiing to the Vallecitos area. In 1939 the Club Andinista Mendoza was founded, followed by the Club Andino Mercedario of San Juan in 1945. Since the 1930s national *andinistas* have been participating in the exploration and climbing of their country’s central hinterland. They have often invited foreigners to join them since, throughout her history, Argentina has been a country very open to European immigration.

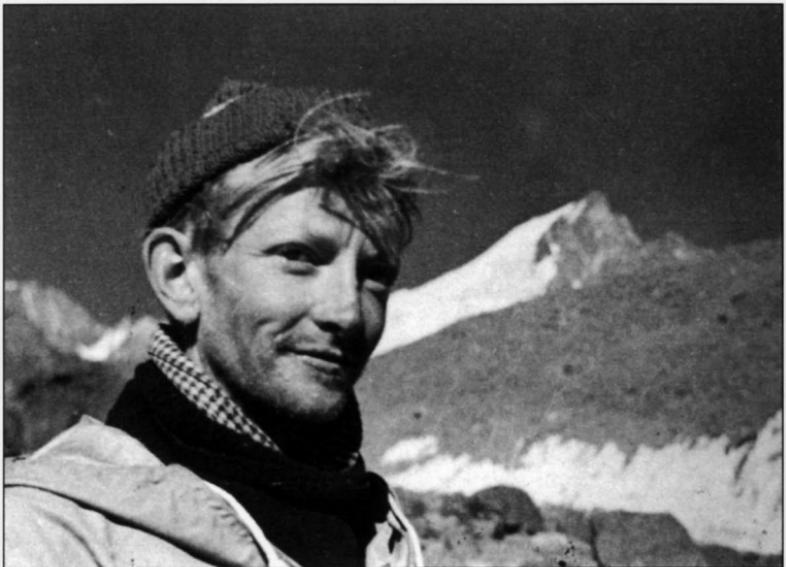
In connection with the history of mountaineering in this region, I would like to mention two Britons who distinguished themselves in its exploration. Stuart Vines, a geologist, was the real source of strength behind the FitzGerald expedition of 1897. It was he who climbed the major peaks; he also contributed magnificent chapters to the leader’s book *The Highest Andes*. He must have been one of the strongest mountaineers of his time and yet his name is – and has been – very rarely mentioned. As far as I know, only one photograph of him as a mountaineer exists. His card, recovered in 1906 from the summit of Cerro Catedral, read, ‘M.S.R.S. Vines, Fiskerton Rectory, Lincoln’.<sup>2</sup>



98. Cerro Tolosa (5317m) seen from the south. The south face of Aconcagua in the background. (*Evelio Echevarría*)



99. Mendoza: the upper Las Cuevas valley, looking north, with Cerro Piloto (5064m) in the background. (*Evelio Echevarría*)



100. Nigel Gallop in the southern Cordón del Portillo, 1955.  
*(By courtesy of Nigel Gallop, London)*



101. Cordón del Portillo, with the Tres Picos del Amor (5000m), ascended in 1954. *(By courtesy of Nigel Gallop, London)*

The other Briton was Nigel Gallop, a Londoner, who resided for a time in Argentina in the 1950s. He took advantage of his holidays to climb in Mendoza. His favourite hunting ground was the Cordón del Portillo where, in the early 1950s, he made good first ascents, among which, with two companions, was that of the difficult Torre del Campanario, 5200m, ('Bell Tower'), surely the most difficult peak in the zone. He also pioneered the exploration of the then unclimbed south-east ridge of Aconcagua. I am indebted to him for the constant exchange of much information and many photographs.

### The Present

Even for short forays, mountaineering in this region may mean expeditioning. Except for the Aconcagua and Tupungato mountain parks, no permits are necessary. Mountaineering equipment and supplies can be found in trekking company shops and in general stores in Mendoza.

Although access is simple, the valleys are long and the summer sun is strong. Rivers can be impassable on foot for most of the climbing season (December to mid-March). Porterage does not exist but mules and horses, led by the capable local *arrieros* (herdsmen), can be useful for long trips. Transport is not a problem if the Mendoza valley is the destination since it is well serviced by public transport; but in the remaining valleys private transport would need to be arranged.

For exploratory work, ie new peaks and new routes, visitors would need to make their decisions bearing in mind the following points:

- The majority of unclimbed and often unnamed mountains are at the sources of the main river valleys, usually near the border with Chile; for example, peaks at the sources of the Diamante river, south and east of the big lake of Laguna del Diamante.
- Local institutions, such as the Club Andinista Mendoza, can be contacted to obtain maps, sketch-maps, reports of previous expeditions and statistics of ascents in any given valley. Local mountaineering journals and reviews can also be very useful in this respect. However, a fair command of Spanish would be necessary to make use of them.
- Unclimbed faces abound. To mention but two: the impossible-looking east ridge of Cerro Castillo (5468m) and the near-vertical south face of Cerro Santa María (5023m).

Even in very accessible and well-trodden valleys, like Aconcagua's Horcones Inferior, there remains new ground: for instance, the *cerros* at 5450m, 5400m, 5260m and 5274m on the ridge connecting Aconcagua and Cerro Almacenes (5102m). These peaks are unclimbed and look strikingly difficult on account of the downward-leaning rocks, like roof tiles, which cover their walls.

Those who respond to the challenge of this vast and accessible range will have to be flexible enough to adapt themselves to the peculiarities of the region. Relief and landforms are likely to be on a grander scale than those most visitors have previously encountered. Quantity, size and diversity of mountain peaks, severe and solitary valleys and boundless pale-blue skies are the characteristics of the Cordillera Central of Argentina.

#### Appendix A SUMMIT ARCHAEOLOGY

An Inca mummy, recovered from the summit of El Toro (6168m), is exhibited in an archaeological museum in San Juan city. Another, excavated from the south-west ridge of Aconcagua at 5300m, is kept in a museum of the city of Mendoza. Any archaeological or historical finding becomes automatically the patrimony and property of the two provinces involved. Top experts in this field are Dr Juan Schobinger, Mendoza and Antonio Beorchia, San Juan. Beorchia founded in 1973 in San Juan the Centro de Investigaciones Arqueológicas de Alta (high) Montaña.

#### Appendix B CORDÓNES AND THEIR KNOWN MAJOR POINTS

##### In the province of Mendoza:

Cordillera del Tigre (Cerro Tambillos, 5631m)  
Cordón del Portillo (Cerro Las Pircas, c. 5750m)  
Cordón Bravo or Tres Puntas (Cerro Dos Hermanas, 5150m or 4850m)  
Cordón del Plata (Cerro de la Plata, 5860m)  
Cordón Chorrillos (Unnamed, c. 5450m)  
Cordón de la Jaula (Unnamed, c. 5900m)  
Cordón de Santa Clara (Cerro Santa Clara, 5370m)  
Cordón de los Indios (Unnamed, 4931m)

##### In the province of San Juan:

Cordón del Inca (Cerro de la Flecha, 5572m)  
Cordillera de la Brea (Unnamed, c. 5900m)  
Cordillera de Colangüil (Cerro Lavadero, 6122m)  
Cordillera de San Guillermo (Nevado Tambillos, 5747m)  
Cordillera de Olivares or Majadita (Cerro Olivares, 6266m)  
Cordón de Manrique (Cerro Manrique, 5026m)  
Cordillera de la Totora (Cerro de la Totora, 5770m)  
Cordillera de San Lorenzo (Cerro San Lorenzo, 5830m)  
Cordillera de Ansilta (Cerro de Ansilta, 5780m)  
Cordillera de la Ramada (Cerro Mercedario, 6670m, 6770m or 6800m)  
Cordón de los Penitentes (Cerro La Mano or La Iglesia, c. 5600m)  
Cordillera de la Ortiga (Cerro de la Ortiga, c. 5990m)  
Cordillera de Agua Negra (Cerro Agua Negra, 5484m)  
Cordón del Espinacito (Unnamed, 4968m)

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### Maps

Some 15 different hojas (sheets) covering this region at a scale 1:50 000 and 1:250.000 can be obtained from the Instituto Geográfico Militar in Buenos Aires. For a complete list of all pertinent maps available see John Biggar, *The Andes: a Guide for Climbers*, 1999. Photocopies of the same maps can be bought at the offices of the Club Andino Mercedario, in San Juan and the Club Andinista Mendoza, in Mendoza.

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