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Cordillera Santa Vera Cruz, Bolivia



Panoramic view from the north of the main group of peaks of the Santa Vera Cruz. Left to right: Pico (or Cerro) de la Fortuna (5493m), Cerro Chupica (5100m, the reddish dome), Nevado Cunocollo or Santa Vera Cruz (5560m), Cerro Huariananta (5400m). (Javier Sánchez)

Its name was typical of the invading *Conquistadores*: Range of the True and Holy Cross. It only reflected the intense Christian faith of 16th century Europe and not the spirit of the relief itself. The Santa Vera Cruz seems to be the smallest range in the immense mountain world of Bolivia, but several of its scant eight or ten rock and ice peaks did merit the attention of unusual mountaineers at unusual times. Its story has so far been only partially told. This brief contribution purports to tell the rest.

Briefly, it is a conglomerate of very alpine, granodioritic peaks rising to over 5,500m, with an ice field in their midst. It is located some 125km north-north-west of the mining city of Oruro and south of the larger and higher Cordillera Quimsa Cruz, from which it is separated by the wide 4,300m Abra Tres Cruces: Pass of the Three Crosses. The range rises above the Bolivian high plateau, often likened to a Tibetan landscape. Wide, barren valleys, scant pastures and some occasional lakes or lagoons are found below the peaks. Natural life is limited to the *huallatas* or wild geese (*Chloephaga melanoptera*) that alight on lagoons. Pastures are used by small flocks of llamas and sheep belonging to a few local villagers, mostly of Aymara descent.



Climbing the south-west ridge of Pico de la Fortuna in 1999. The terrain to the east is unclimbed. (Javier Sánchez)

Few peaks make up the range but they are imposing. Official Bolivian maps at 1:50,000 do not clearly show them. It is better to describe them one by one as travellers would face them from their only known point of access so far, the Huariananta valley and lake, rising above the Huañacota village and close to the Abra Tres Cruces.

Starting place for mountaineering is the large Huariananta lake area, some 6km south of the Huañacota village. At 4,500m it offers good campsites and access into the map's Campo de Nieve or ice field. The bold, enormous pyramid of Pico (or Cerro) de la Fortuna (5493m) rises almost above village and lake. Its southern gap, quite wide, connects it to the south with Nevado Cunocollo (Aymara: 'ice peak'), also locally called Nevado Santa Vera Cruz. At 5,560m it is the highest in the range. Nestled under it is unmapped Cerro Chupica (Aymara: 'red blood'), about 5,100m high. The ice field yields access to the flanks of the steep rock peaks of Huariananta (5400m), Trinidad (5360m) and to the south, San Roque (5300m). The latter rises above a small cluster of mines and hamlets. West and north-west of these major elevations are scattered groups of unglaciated, milder rock heights, around 4,600m. Several may be unnamed – see sketch-map.

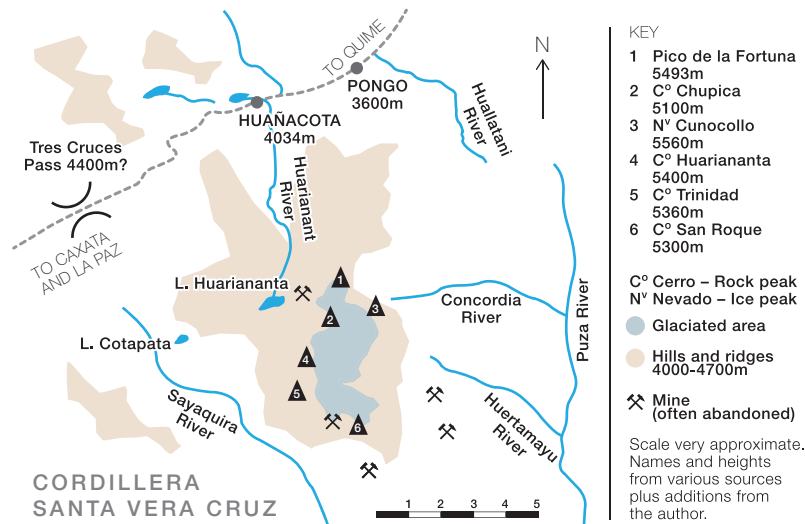
Unknown to mountaineers is the eastern side of the range. It is constantly cloud-covered. I myself gained a brief sight of a very sharp pyramid of glaciated rock, about 5,100m high, situated east of the Fortuna gap. The official Bolivian chart shows contour lines for three heights, c5200m high, in that location. Access to the eastern flank of this range has not been



Aymara relics found on summit of Cunocollo (5560m) by the Spanish expedition of 1999. (Javier Sánchez)



Ice slope of up to 55° on the west face of Nevado Cunocollo, climbed by the Spanish in 1999. (Javier Sánchez)



determined. Likewise, its southern flank is unknown. The entire massif appears to be around 12km north to south and some 10km wide. Incidentally, it carries the southernmost glaciers in the Bolivian Andes.

The brief mountaineering history of this small range complements the above. In 1939 the active Austrian mining engineer Josef Prem ascended Cunocollo. He was a major figure in the history of Bolivian climbing having made, besides other good ascents, the first of Nevado Sajama (6542m),

highest in the country. (A German engineer and traveller, Hermann Reisach, is at present researching the mountaineering career of Josef Prem.) On Cunocollo, Prem was followed in c1942 by the German-Bolivian scientist and explorer Friedrich Ahlfeld. Both had climbed the exposed north ridge, all rock.

Thereafter the Santa Vera Cruz was forgotten. In December 1983, out-of-season, and with local hill-man Pantaleón Calisaya I made the first ascent of Cerro Calacala (Aymara: 'rock-rock', c4600m), situated on the north shore of lake Huariananta. I returned in June 1991, entered the edge of the Campo de Nieve or ice field and ascended the dome of Cerro Chupica (5100m?), but stopped short below the three sharp needles of smooth granite that crown the peak. I did not dare to tackle them, feeling that instead of my rather big boots I needed light, tight sneakers to negotiate the smooth granite. Whether through common sense or pusillanimity, I left the summit needles unclimbed.

The true year for Santa Vera Cruz mountaineering was 1999. Three young Madrid climbers led by Javier Sánchez climbed the bold Pico de la Fortuna as well as Cunocollo, the latter by its icy west face. Sánchez narrated in *AJ 2001* the climbs he led and also an incredible, unexpected find on the summit of Cunocollo. Rescued from the top was Josef Prem's card, proof of his 1939 ascent. And the Spaniards also found proofs of hitherto unsuspected forerunners:



Above: Josef Prem's calling card, recovered from the summit of Nevado Cunocollo in 1999. (Javier Sánchez)

Left: The highest peak in the Santa Vera Cruz: Nevado Cunocollo or Cerro Santa Vera Cruz (5560m). On the left is the north ridge taken by Prem in 1939 and Ahlfeld in the early 1940s. On the right is the top of the ice face climbed by the Spanish party. (Javier Sánchez)

*'...archaeological remains dating from the last period of Tiwanaku culture. Apart from several silver brooches and the remains (teeth) of a sacrificial rat, the artefacts included ceremonial objects such as wooden pots and goblets, a hawthorn's needle and a human collarbone, which would have been used as a spoon. Although this cordillera is within easy reach of La Paz these treasures had been kept from the human eye for centuries.'*¹

Within the context of international summit archaeology, that is, unknown mountain ascents by Pre-Columbian peoples, the discovery of that material by Sánchez bears a double importance. He introduced the new field of summit archaeology, already practised in other Andean countries, to Bolivia. And after the Aymara summit objects had been analysed and dated in Spain, it was learned that they had been buried on the high ground between 900 and 1030, which preceded by some five centuries all Inca ascents believed to have taken place around the year 1400.

It will never be known which route the Aymaras took on Cunocollo. They either followed the exposed north ridge, as Prem and Ahlfeld did,

or they scaled the west ice face. Sánchez stated that on this face 'one has to climb.' He estimated that it starts at an angle of 55° and is about 40° in the upper part of the mountain.²

Leading a joint Spanish-Bolivian party to conduct archaeological studies, Javier Sánchez re-ascended Cunocollo a year later. But no other party has visited the Range of the True and Holy Cross again. To approach the north and west flanks of the area, the only ones so far used by mountaineers, is easy and not costly. From the capital city of La Paz one can use any of the two bus companies operating between La Paz and Quime, located at the city's bus terminal. A ride of some eight to 10 hours will take travellers through Caxata town and the Tres Cruces pass to the hamlet of Huañacota (4034m). This place is devoid of resources but there a herdsman and his donkeys could be hired to carry loads up the Huariananta valley and its large lake, which yields access to the north side of the main group of peaks. The climbing season runs between late April and September. Weather is then normally dry and clear but cold.

1. Editors, 'Renewed Interest in the Santa Vera Cruz', *High Magazine* 206, 2000, pp53-4.

2. Sánchez, J, 'Bolivia: Cordillera Santa Vera Cruz', in *Desnivel* 157, 1999, pp32-40.



South-west face of Pico de la Fortuna (5493m). (Javier Sánchez)

For prospective visitors three options are obvious: open new routes, probably quite difficult, on the different flanks of Pico de la Fortuna and on the east and south sides of Cunocollo; explore the unknown east side of the range, with the aim of identifying the unnamed peaks that are shown on maps; explore and attempt unclimbed Huariananta (5400m), Trinidad (5360m) and the summit needles of Chupica (5100m). Acclimatisation could be gained on the lower, c4400-4700m high peaks around the north and west sides of lake Huariananta.

Quick access, low cost and simplicity characterise mountaineering in this range. It seems to be indicated for light expeditions or small groups of climbing friends.

Background

Ahlfeld, F, 'Las Altas Cordilleras y el Andinismo en Bolivia', *Boletín de Ski y Andinismo (La Paz)* 1, 1945, pp6-19.

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Maps

Instituto Geográfico Militar of Bolivia, 'Carta Nacional', 1:50,000, *hojas* (sheets) Ichoca 6142-I and Yaco 6142-IV, 1991. The Ekkehard Jordan work listed above includes a glaciological sketch-map.