

***Scottish Cordillera Real  
Expedition 1993***



Flat 7, 87 Wilton Street, Glasgow G20 6RD  
Tel: 041-946 4276 (24 hr)

SCOTTISH CORDILLERA REAL EXPEDITION 1993

EXPEDITION REPORT

## MISSION STATEMENT

To mount a small lightweight climbing expedition in pursuit of adventure and excellence to the Cordillera Real range of mountains in Bolivia.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this six week expedition were to attempt first Scottish ascents and new routes in the region, specifically on Huayna Potosi (6088m, 19970ft) and Illampu (6380m, 20873ft). All climbing to be done Alpine style. This was the first expedition organised by the team members and they were all planning to gain experience of climbing in one of the world's Greater Ranges.

## TEAM MEMBERS

Lee Collier

Expedition Leader. 26 years of age. Retail Assistant with Graham Tiso, Glasgow.

A climber with many years experience. Rock climber and technical winter specialist with three Alpine seasons and at least eight Scottish winter seasons worth of knowledge.

Dougie McQuaker

25 years of age, access engineer with an oilfield inspection company.

Rock and winter climber with experience of Scotland, the French Alps and the USA.

Andrew McQuaker

30 years of age. Careers adviser with a local authority.

Many years of general mountaineering and travel experience.

### TRIP ONE

After a short period of acclimatisation in La Paz at an altitude of around 13,500ft, we were fortunate in being offered jeep transport by the British Vice-Consul, Robin Shackell, to the Zongo Pass. This offer was gratefully accepted. The pass is overlooked by Huayna Potosi (6088m) and Charquini (5392m). The latter was our objective for this training exercise.

The top of the pass lies at around 4750m. From the roadside we were able to follow an aqueduct around the hillside to a suitable campsite at 4750m. The weather was excellent - sunny with a cloudless sky - very much what we had been led to expect for the season. During the night all experienced minor altitude symptoms, such as headache and 'cheyne-stoke' breathing.

Next morning a short walk further along the aqueduct brought us to the start of the climb. The route lay directly up stony, barren ground to the start of the glacier proper, where the snow proved to be in excellent condition, with crevasses clearly defined.

The head of the glacier was at a col lying at 5300m, by which time the altitude was beginning to take its toll on everyone. Progress was becoming increasingly slow. Fortunately the continuing good weather and proximity to the summit allowed us to dump the bulk of our gear before carrying on up snow slopes and a little rock to the summit. The peak gave excellent views towards Tiquimani and Huayna Potosi.

Returning to the campsite before dusk allowed us time to relax before eating and retiring to the tent as darkness fell for the eleven hour night. Despite physical tiredness, sleep was in as short supply as oxygen. All were glad when dawn broke.

A short walk-out took us back to the roadside where a chance meeting with a 'micro' meant a speedy return to the bright lights of La Paz.

One week in Bolivia, and all was going suspiciously well.

### TRIP TWO

This was in reality a brief day excursion from La Paz, aimed simply at enhancing acclimatisation. The two members who were fit that day, Douglas and Andrew, took a ride by bus to 'the worlds' highest ski resort' at Chacaltaya. An easy walk from the ski lodge took us on to the 5600m peak, which gave stunning views of Illimani, Mururata, Charquini, Huayna Potosi and Tiquimani, as well as the opportunity for a little high altitude bouldering.

As most of the 'tourists' on the trip fell unconscious in the bus on the return journey, we reflected that acclimatisation appeared to be proceeding satisfactorily, although there were only two of us fit, and Andrew's tendinitis-afflicted knee was showing no signs of easing off.

### TRIP THREE

Illness struck. Douglas came down with chickenpox which meant that he would be out of action for some time. Unwilling to waste the continuing good weather conditions, Lee set out for a lightning solo attempt on Huayna Potosi (6088m). His plan was that by travelling light and fast, and doing without sleep, he could complete the climb and return to base within two days.

What caused the problem we still do not know. It could have been a latent chest infection which was activated by the cold night air, or it could have been a case of going too high too fast in the bitterly cold night air, however by the time he reached 5450m, Lee was not well. It was at this point that he began to cough up blood, and made the unavoidable decision to return. Fighting unconsciousness and the incredible lethargy which altitude sickness brings, he descended as fast as darkness would allow. Good fortune played a large part in ensuring his return to La Paz, whereupon an x-ray confirmed our worst suspicions. Lee had suffered the onset of a pulmonary oedema, a potentially fatal condition. Rest would be needed to allow his lungs to recover, and there was no guarantee that he would be able to operate at altitude again for the rest of the trip.

### TRIP FOUR

Things were not now going well. To recap: the state of Lee's chest was uncertain after his mild pulmonary oedema, Douglas was weak though recovering fast from his chickenpox, and Andrew was vowing never again to believe a physiotherapist as he limped around on his dodgy knee.

A hard decision was taken; not to move to Sorata and attempt Illampu. The reasons for this were as follows: the health of the team was unsound; lack of time would preclude more than one serious attempt on any mountain in that area; reports from parties returning from Sorata indicated that conditions there were uncertain, with even the 'tourist route' on Illampu now considered impassible.

Instead, we decided to remain based in La Paz and attempt any routes from there which appeared to offer a chance of success. To this end we chose Maria Lloco, for two reasons. Firstly, after the recent heavy snowfall other peaks would be inaccessible and dangerous. Second, a rapid and fairly straightforward ascent would allow fitness to be judged, and condition and morale to be improved.

Transport in the form of a taxi was procured to take us out to the abandoned mine of Milluni, and from there over a pass at 5100m to where an aqueduct struck around the hillside to the base of the glacier between Maria Lloco and the West Face of Huayna Potosi. The base of the glacier was our intended first campsite.

Unfortunately the recent snowfall had blocked the road at Milluni. Our walk-in began from there. That night was spent on the Milluni side of the pass, while our second day took us over the pass, down the other side, then around by the aqueduct to a campsite about one hour short of the glacier.

The third day dawned with a change apparent in the weather. Clouds were building and this could only mean that snow was on the way. Common sense dictated that our ill-fated attempt be abandoned then and there, but no-one could face the thought of turning back without setting foot on the mountain proper, so in a mood of hollow optimism we set off. At the base of the glacier the decision was made to avoid the 'official' route, which tracks up the glacier and then along a rocky ridge to the summit. Instead a direct assault on the south-west ridge was preferred. There was a possibility of the shallow gully to the right of this ridge holding neve, and if not, the crest of the ridge presented a straightforward line to the top.

It soon became apparent that any sort of decent snow on the mountain was in short supply. Our gully was filled with soft deep snow and we switched to the ridge, where the solid rock we had imagined turned out to be steep and very unstable scree, sometimes covered with soft snow. Progress was hard work.

As height was gradually gained, Condoriri came into sight, or would have done had it not been inked out by rather black clouds, which were heading our way. Clearly the ascent had become a race against time. Time won. A high point of 5360m was reached on our totally unreliable altimeter. By now the slope had steepened to Grade II angled snow, and it was clear that a descent on the unconsolidated snow could hold dangers. Visibility was very poor, and the amount of snow rapidly building up on the lower slopes was a worry, as we would have to recross these to regain the glacier.

Downwards we went, and after a couple of scares it was good to reach the glacier once more.

As we arrived back at the tent the snow was still falling heavily, and the chances of making it back to the main road the next day began to recede. While Lee and Douglas were both holding up well, Andrew's cold was now descending into his chest and beginning to threaten trouble.

Things were brighter the next morning. The walk out back over the pass was uneventful despite the deeper snow though visibility remained mostly poor. The 'main' road at Milluni was still open, and after a wait of only five hours we were able to secure a lift back to La Paz.

#### TRIP FIVE

Frustration was now mounting within the team. Since returning from Maria Lloco, more heavy snow had fallen on the Altiplano and even as low down as La Paz, unseasonable in the extreme. Many roads had been blocked and even the airport closed for a while. Accepted local wisdom was that the

mountains should be avoided for 4-5 days after snow to allow conditions to settle. However time was now our enemy; our only possible ally was chance, and so only two days after the snow stopped we left for Huayna Potosi.

Taxi took us to the head of the Zongo Pass once more, where we camped one night to aid acclimatisation for the climb ahead. Unfortunately during the night Douglas fell victim to severe vomiting and diarrhoea and by dawn it was clear that he would not be ascending the mountain. After some discussion the decision was taken that Lee and Andrew would attempt Huayna Potosi while Douglas remained at Base Camp to recuperate. This meant splitting food, repacking gear and making the ascent without a tent.

We set off up the main route on the east side of the mountain. This gave the option of attempting the Route Normale or the French Route, depending on conditions. Although the snow level had lowered by several hundred metres in the preceding days, the route was quite navigable. The weather was good.

Campo Argentino, the usual campsite at around 5500m was reached earlier than expected, so we decided to move on to a higher bivvy site. This was reached after a little axe work, just as the sun left the mountain, whereupon the temperature plummeted from 35C to -11C. With a chill wind and further temperature drop as true darkness fell the nighttime low must have been around -25C. Certainly it was cold enough to freeze the kerosene stove we were relying on, which caused a few problems in the morning!

An avalanche tumbling down the east face as we thawed out the stove persuaded us that the French Route was no longer on the agenda. It was the Route Normale or nothing.

The weather held as we continued upwards to the base of the summit pyramid. Altitude ensured slow progress, but on the plus side it also slowed Lee's supply of poor jokes. The final slope, some 200m of poor quality snow/ice of around Grade II angle, was particularly lung-bursting.

The summit at 6088m was a knife edge, providing incredible views over the whole Cordillera Real, up to Illampu and Aconcagua, and also revealing the Altiplano down to Sajama. Lake Titicaca could be viewed, and beyond it, the Peruvian Andes.

Descending, we downclimbed the first 100m for safety, as the snow was now softening under the sun. From then, it was downhill all the way, firstly to the bivvy site for a brew, and then on down the glacier and across the moraine, by which time darkness had fallen. A recovered version of Douglas came up to meet us, guide our shaky legs safely back to camp, and then feed us some desperately needed rehydration in the form of beef and tomato soup.

## TRIP SIX

A success had been snatched from the jaws of poor health and bad weather. Could we make it two? Time would allow only one more serious try, and that would have to be a fast one.

Once more Robin Shackell offered help, this time in the form of jeep transport to the roadhead, from where we planned to attempt Condoriri (5785m), surely one of the most beautiful mountains anywhere.

From the end of the track we hired mules, a luxury which allowed a leisurely walk up the valley to the glacial lake below Condoriri itself, a truly magnificent setting. We pitched camp by the lakeside. Robin and Lee, feeling fit and energetic, decided to make a quick foray to Alpamayo Chico and set off up the glacier. Shortly after they left, clouds rolled in and it became clear that their trip could quickly become serious. They returned after some hours, having gained pt 5300m on the altimeter, turning back some little way short of Alpamayo itself due to poor visibility and worsening snow conditions.

The following morning the weather was better though still unsettled. For several days now it had been gradually deteriorating and a storm was due. After some discussion it was decided that a rapid two man ascent of Condoriri offered the only chance of success. Robin and Lee were still suffering from their exertions of the previous day, and so at 3am, Andrew and Douglas prepared to set off. Two early-rising Australians passed, with the same summit in mind.

With the snow level well below the seasonal normal, the going was hard. While the now fully fit Douglas pushed ahead, Andrew floundered in the steep gully filled with deep, soft snow which led to the higher reaches of the mountain. After a rising traverse from the top of this gully around the base of some massive buttresses, we found ourselves on the glacier leading to the summit ridge. The stonefall and evidence of recent avalanches concentrated the mind well. A decision had to be made. The summit ridge was seen less and less often as the swirling cloud thickened, and the full strength of the wind was now becoming obvious. Andrew's lack of fitness was evident.

The sight of the Australians returning settled the issue. After nearly being blown off the ridge they had retreated, and had found some difficulty in this due to lack of secure abseil points in the shattered and fragmented rock. As they headed off downwards we looked at each other and agreed on the unpalatable decision. Retreat.

As we trekked out from the campsite it was difficult not to glance back to the cloud obscured Condoriri without vowing to return.

That evening as we ate a hearty meal in La Paz a giant thunderstorm broke over the city. Knowing that this meant the mountains would again be under heavy snow, nothing was said. It was the end of our expedition.

### WEATHER REPORT

As will have been gathered from above, the weather was neither as settled or as reliable as we had been led to expect. This particularly affected us as we were in the Bolivia for a relatively short time and so could not afford to spend long periods waiting for suitable conditions. In fact, one reason for selecting Bolivia was its reputation for enjoying a settled winter with consistently good climbing conditions. We were assured by locals that the early part of the winter (May/June) had been good, but we were also told that the previous winter had been generally poor.

Whether the relatively poor weather we experienced was due to overall climactic changes, bad luck or an exaggerated good reputation is impossible to tell.

### MEDICAL REPORT

One advantage of a small expedition is that there are fewer people who can fall ill. The downside of this, however is that any member becoming unwell can disproportionately affect the balance of the party, and indeed this is exactly what occurred.

As our initial period of acclimatisation was ending after around ten days in Bolivia, Douglas fell ill with what was initially diagnosed as hepatitis and smallpox (!) but later turned out to be 'only' a bout of chickenpox. This effectively put him out of action for ten days, and we were most grateful for the support offered by Robin Shackell of the British Embassy during this time and afterwards. Lee, as has been recorded above, fell victim to a suspected pulmonary oedema and was quite fortunate to return from his solo attempt on a 6,000m peak - again this put him out of action for several days. Andrew avoided serious illness but was slowed up by the effects of tendinitis of the knee, an injury picked up before leaving Scotland. In addition, all members at some stage suffered symptoms of altitude, as well as colds and stomach upsets. In fact, at no point was everyone fully fit and acclimatised. Nothing we could have done in preparation, or during the actual trip, could have changed this.

On reflection, after the original diagnosis of Douglas's condition in a downmarket hotel room in La Paz, we can only consider ourselves fortunate to have done any climbing at all.



## FINANCIAL REPORT

<u>INCOME</u>	
	£
Sponsorship.....	1188.00
Grants.....	1250.00
Members contributions.....	4579.27
Total	<u>7017.27</u>

<u>EXPENDITURE</u>	
Printing and stationery.....	206.20
Postage.....	32.71
Telephone.....	15.76
Maps.....	31.50
Flights.....	2141.00
Insurance.....	437.00
Equipment: medical.....	46.21
Equipment: climbing.....	2476.89
Expenses: Brazil.....	150.00
Expenses: Bolivia.....	1480.00
Total	<u>7017.27</u>

Expenses: Brazil. A stopover in Rio de Janeiro was required on the outward trip. The sum of £150.00 includes airport taxes, taxi fares, accommodation costs and food and drink.

Expenses: Bolivia includes	Travel.....	200.00
	Accommodation....	350.00
	Provisions.....	450.00
	Medical costs....	180.00
	Miscellaneous....	300.00
	Total	<u>1480.00</u>

## CONCLUSIONS

We must admit to mixed feelings when reflecting on our expedition. Illness and poor weather served to frustrate careful plans and eager hopes. We cannot claim to have achieved all of our own expectations in climbing terms. Having intended to ascend a mix of 'trekking' peaks and more technical routes, a combination of bad health, weather and snow conditions left us attempting 'normal' routes to try and get up anything at all. Under these conditions morale is bound to suffer and our team was no exception.

But an expedition is more than just climbing mountains. Privately we have always seen our primary objectives as being: to return, to return alive, and to return as friends. These we fulfilled. Even to arrive in Bolivia was a minor triumph of optimism and pragmatism over the dark and incredulous voices which greeted our original plans. Friendships of a lasting nature were formed, and just to have the privilege of being in the wonderful Cordillera Real range of mountains is an opportunity few have had. The hard work of organising even a

small expedition to go half way round the world was an eye-opener but all agree was worth it. In climbing terms, we can sadly claim no new routes or first ascents, but have gained our first experience of operating at altitude, and to reach 6000m+ can never be taken lightly.

The final question must be: 'would you do it all again?'

The final answer is: 'YES!'

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This expedition would have been impossible without the support of many people. The support we received varied from financial, to aid in kind, to moral and it is hard to compile a definitive list of all we wish to thank.

##### Grants

The Scottish Mountaineering Trust  
The Mountaineering Council of Scotland.

##### Financial Sponsorship

Tunnocks, Macallan Whisky, Grants Whisky, Mr Tim Ambrose, Ms Fiona McQuaker, Mrs Janey McQuaker, Mr Collier, Mr Grant Cathcart, Mr Mark Reynolds and all who contributed to various fund-raising events.

##### Goods and Equipment

Famous Grouse Whisky, Graham Tiso, Duofold International, Cairngorm Ropes, Pheonix Mountaineering, North Cape, Karrimor, Lyon Equipment, Ventura and Rab Equipment.

Many thanks also to each and everyone who offered words of encouragement or help of any kind. To all who gave some of their time, trouble or cash to help us realise a dream, please accept our most sincere gratitude.

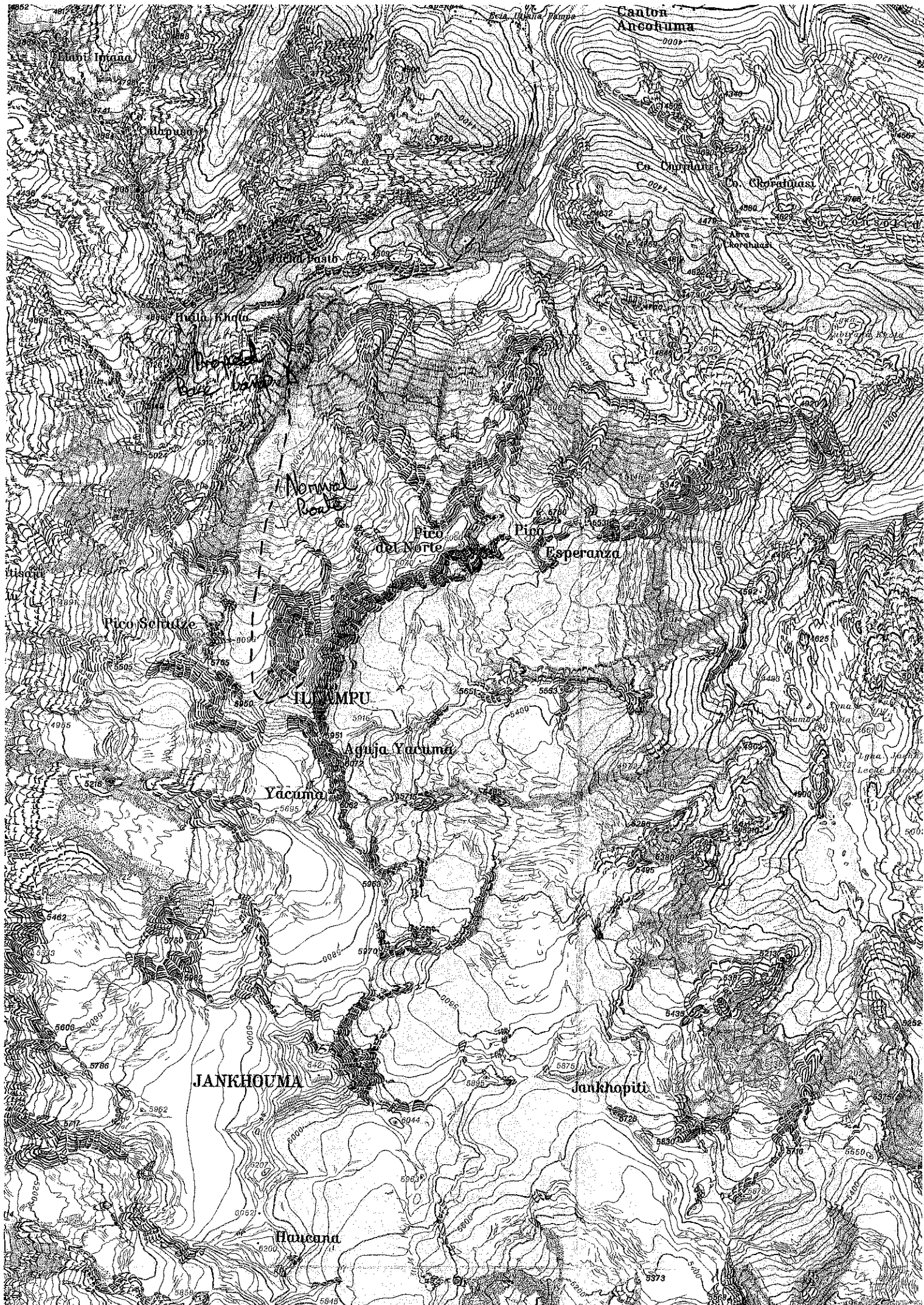
#### AND FINALLY.....

Anyone wishing more detailed information on routes attempted, equipment used, useful contacts or on the Cordillera Real generally, please get in touch with Douglas McQuaker at:

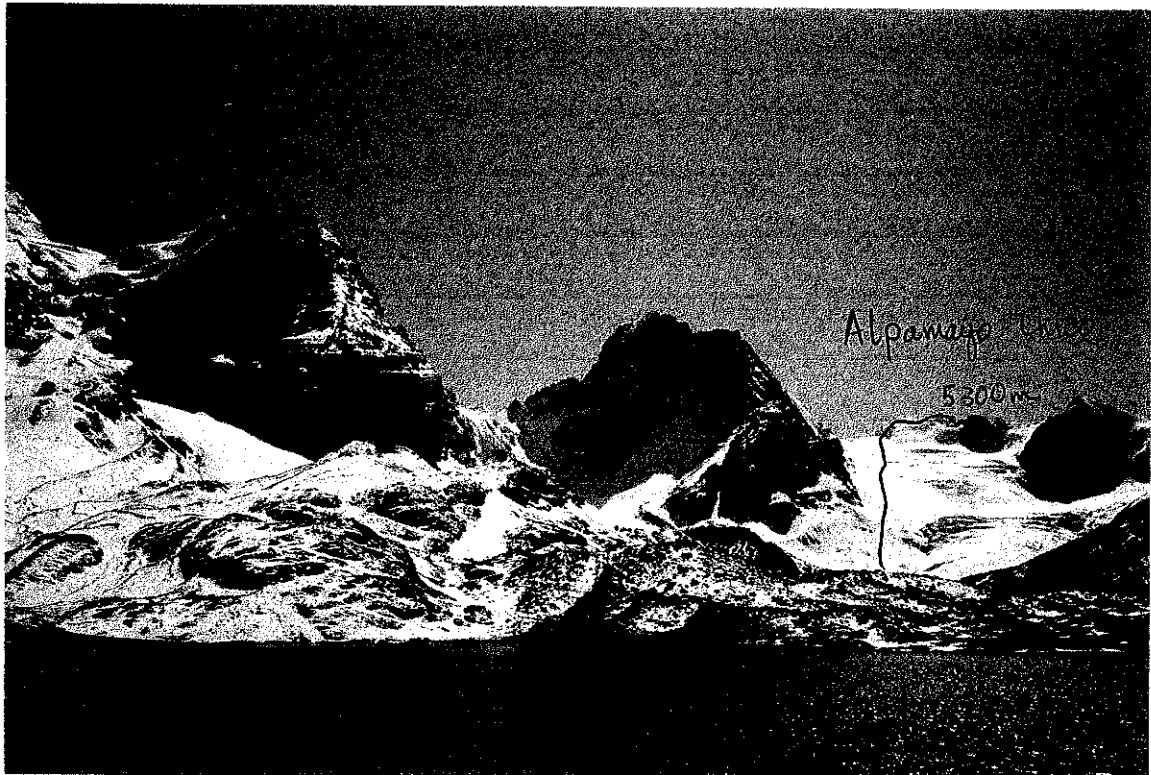
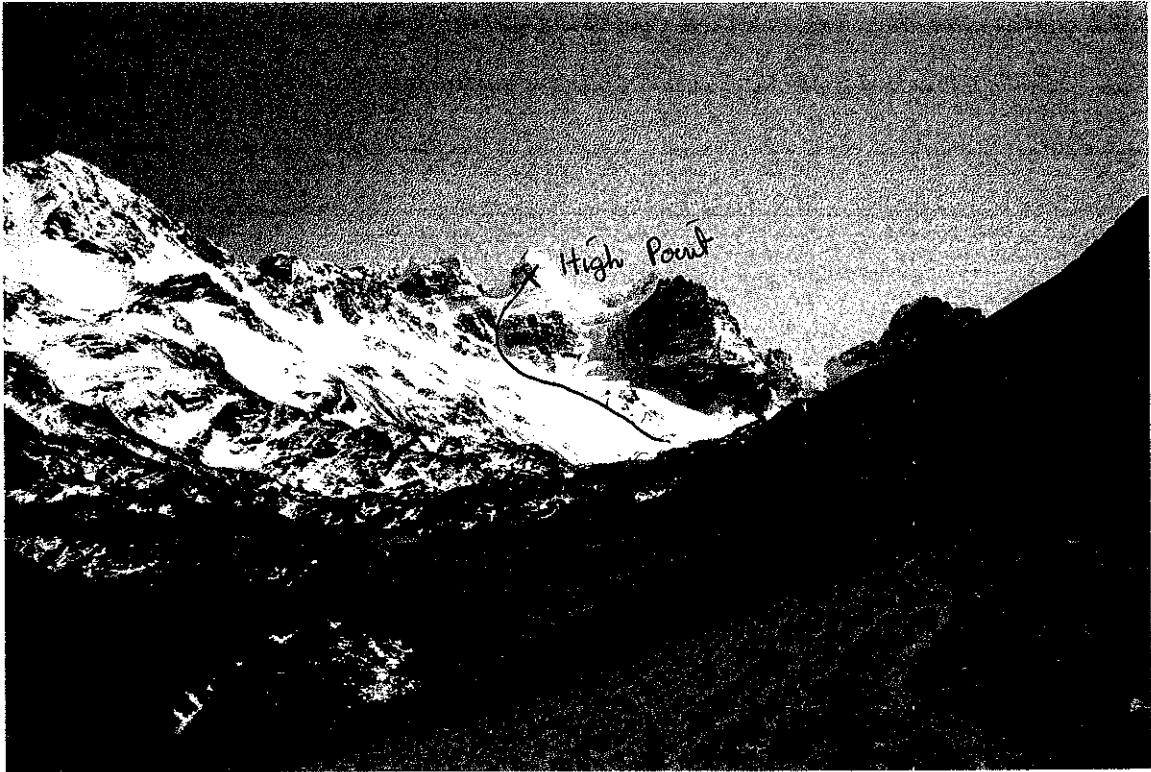
2, Doune Quadrant, Glasgow G20, tel 041-946-7390.

Copies of equipment reports are available as are slides.

Since Bolivia, the team have continued in their climbing ways, sometimes together, often apart, as new opportunities and challenges have presented themselves. Lee and Douglas have both spent some time in Spain, Lee has also seen some winter action in the French Alps, and plans for 1994 include some Alpine classics and possibly the USA. Divergent commitments and income levels conspire against major expeditions in the near future, but for next year.....anyone fancy Alaska??



Condoriri 5785m



Charquini 5392m



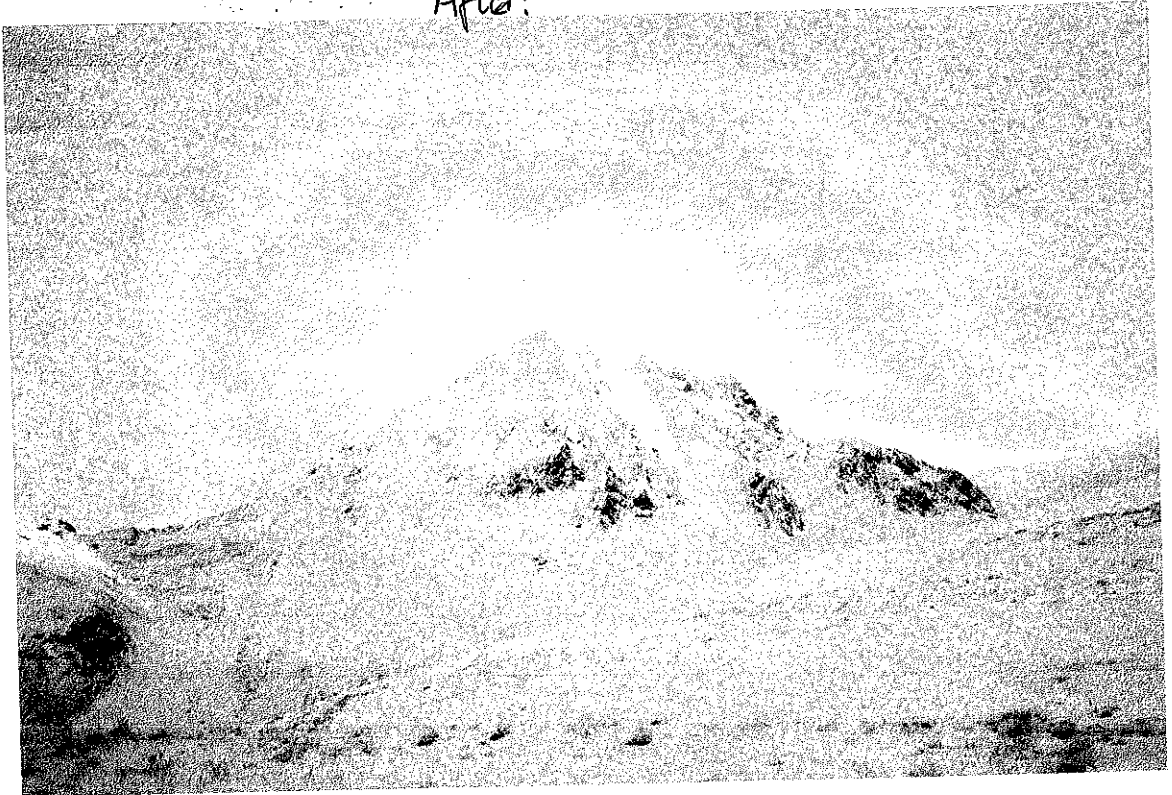
Huayna Potosi 6088m





María Lloco  
5400m

After!



Before....

