

## **Expedition Report**

written by Jason Currie and Guy Robertson, October 2001

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**Abstract**

An account of the first ascent of the East Face of Santa Cruz Chico (5 800 m) in the Cordillera Blanca region of the Peruvian Andes by Jason Currie and Guy Robertson on 17 July 2001.

## Introduction

The Cordillera Blanca is a long, narrow chain of icy summits running alongside the city of Huaraz, 300 km to the north of the Peruvian capital, Lima. It forms part of the Andes, one of the great mountain systems of the world. The highest summit within the tropics, Huascarán (6 768 m), is to be found here, together with more than two hundred other summits over 5 000 m.

Roads travel along the length of the Cordillera Blanca on both sides and in some places penetrate its valleys for the purposes of mining or the monitoring of lake levels. This feature combines with the narrowness of the range to allow easy access to all the peaks.

Good weather for climbing is almost assured in the Cordillera Blanca. The climate of the range is made up of a wet and a dry season due to it lying wholly within the tropics. This means that between the months of May and August the weather in the mountains is generally stable. Crisp, clear mornings give way to afternoon cloud that, in turn, clears by dusk. This pattern sometimes breaks down to allow one or two days of snowfall.

The combination of these elements of altitude, accessibility and the guarantee of good weather motivates many groups to take on the challenges of the peaks of the Cordillera Blanca and their infamous snow formations.

The main objective for this expedition was an alpine style ascent of the unclimbed East face of Santa Cruz Chico (5 800 m). The peak, also known as Atuncocha, is a satellite peak of Santa Cruz (6 259 m) situated at the northern end of the Cordillera Blanca.

## Expedition Members

### Jason Currie

A 31 year old teacher living in Aberdeen, Jason has climbed extensively in the UK, as well as the European Alps and the Andes. He has made numerous first ascents and early repeats of winter routes in the Scottish Highlands up to grade VIII, as well as first ascents of many rock routes across the country.

In the Alps Jason has completed many ascents including the S pillar of the Barre des Ecrins, Aurore Nucleaire on the North face of the Pic sans Noms and the Supercouloir of Mont Blanc du Tacul.

A highly successful trip to Bolivia in 1996 saw Jason make the first ascents of the SW face of Ascarani (5 580 m), the W face of Cuchillo (5 655 m) and the W face of Acamani (5 666 m), as well as an ascent of Cololo (5 915 m), all in the Cordillera Apolobamba. A further five peaks in the Cordillera Real were ascended, with the W face of Huayna Potosí (6 088 m) rounding off a memorable and lucrative expedition.

### Guy Robertson

Guy is a well-known face in the Scottish climbing scene. During the last five years he has put up many difficult new routes across Scotland and further afield, climbing up to E5 in summer and grade 9 in winter.

At home in Scotland he is best known for his ground-up ascents of quality lines often in remote mountain areas, particularly the North West Highlands. Guy excels in winter. Many of his own winter creations are still unrepeated, and he has made a number of notable clean second ascents of modern grade VIIIs.

Finding his feet with an apprenticeship in the Western Alps on some of the classic *grandes courses*, Guy has since made some difficult first ascents in the remote desert regions of Jordan to the north of the Wadi Rum. More recently, in March 2001, an imaginative winter visit to the Lofoten Islands in Arctic Norway yielded over 2.5 km of hard new routing in a mere two weeks. The prize of this trip was the first all-free winter ascent by a new line of the awesome 800 m North Wall of Vagakallen.

Diary

1 July

The expedition flew from Glasgow to Lima arriving at 6.30 pm. After clearing customs a taxi-ride to the Hotel Limatambo followed. The ex-pat Italian owner treated us very well, with large measures of *pisco* and chat. We then visited friends for a few hours and collected bus tickets.

2 July

10.30 am saw us on the Imperial service to Huaraz from the Cruz del Sur terminal on Avenida Javier Prado. This is by far the most relaxed way to catch a bus, with the terminal wholly surrounded by security fencing and videos, meal and reserved seating provided.

The bus arrived in Huaraz shortly before dark, offering us excellent views of the southern end of the Cordillera Blanca. The Hotel El Tumi II was our chosen accommodation after Jason had enjoyed friendly and secure service in 1999.

3 July

The day was spent relaxing and getting used to the 3 000 m altitude of Huaraz.

4 July

Transport to Cashapampa was arranged through Pablo Tours in the morning before a prolonged shopping trip in the afternoon gathering all the necessary supplies of food and fuel for nineteen days in the mountains.

5 July

At 6 am prompt Descio collected us from the hotel and loaded the four-wheel drive pick-up for the journey down the Rio Santa valley to the roadhead village of Cashapampa (2 900 m). There we waited in the early morning sun while he made final arrangements with our *arriero* Gerencio. After loading up our two donkeys we signed in at the National Park checkpoint and walked north along a dust road to the smaller village of Hualcayán (3 139 m). Our first hard walking followed - in the baking heat of the afternoon sun. A zigzag track lead tortuously up an enormous slope and across a huge landslide scar to a campsite beside, of all things, a cow shed at about 4 000 m.

6 July

An early start allowed us to avoid climbing uphill in the hottest part of the day. We continued along the path to Laguna Cullicocha where we gained our first sight of the Santa Cruz group of peaks gleaming in the noonday sun above the turquoise waters of the lake. A pass at 4 860 m, a descent and subsequent tedious re-ascent all passed quite smoothly before a long, plunging descent into the Quebrada Alpamayo. We chose a camp-site amongst the remains of Ruina Pampa (4 100 m).

7 July

The walk eastward up Q. Alpamayo was marred by sleet showers that unfortunately kept the surrounding peaks hidden in cloud. A turn south at the vividly coloured Laguna Jancarurish and a short steep section saw us reach the less popular base camp for Alpamayo where our arriero insisted we set up our own camp. However we were equally insistent that we should continue further up the valley and by mid afternoon we were setting up the expedition base camp below the moraine ridge coming down from the glacier below the N. face of Santa Cruz, at an altitude of about 4 700 m.

8 July

A well earned rest day. Jason took a short stroll up towards the glacier below the East face of Santa Cruz Chico in order to get a first close-up look at the face.

9 July

Another day of recuperation with Guy suffering from a cold.

10 July

Both Guy and Jason spent the day walking around the base of their chosen objective to look for the best possible line of ascent, especially through the seracs of the upper reaches of the face. A possible descent down the NE ridge was also considered.

11 July

Another day of rest and recuperation to overcome the unpleasant side effects of a change of water!

12 July

The morning was spent preparing equipment for an attempt on the face. Then in the cooler conditions of the cloudy afternoon we carried our packs up to the base of the glacier, dumped them and then returned to base camp.

13 July

A 3 am start from base camp. We walked back up to our rucksacks in the darkness, and picked our way up the final few hundred metres to the very edge of the glacier. Bad timing meant that we had only got half way across when the sun rose and proceeded to bake our heads and bodies, reducing our progress to a snail's pace and forcing us to drink our water earlier than planned. Worse still the snow conditions in the initial gully were dreadful. Seemingly bottomless powder only occasionally lead to better ice and the three pitches took far longer than imagined. Thereafter our progress was slowed by our lack of water and without a stove we had no means of melting snow. Eventually we ground to a halt at a snow ledge about 150 m below the summit shortly before darkness. A remarkably cosy bivi followed through the long, icy Andean night.

Diary

14 July

Two pitches higher up the face and we ran out of steam. We were both very dehydrated and had not eaten much, leaving neither of us in the right mental and physical state to attempt a steep ice gully formed between two seracs. The decision was made to retreat. For the remainder of the day we rappelled back down to the glacier just making it back onto the rock below it by nightfall. Then a demoralising trudge followed back down to base camp where we ate and drank before getting into our sleeping bags.

15 July

A twelve-hour sleep. The rest of the day was spent eating and drinking.

16 July

Another day of eating while we prepared our gear for another attempt. That evening we carried our rucksacks up to the base of the glacier, this time electing to bivouac under the shelter of steep rocks. Our new strategy also involved climbing with no bivouac gear and less clothing, but this time we had a stove. If we were to be benighted then we would simply carry on climbing or descending.

17 July

With an early start and knowledge of the lower section of the face we were able to make rapid progress. The sun only rose as we exited the first gully onto the open section of the face and we reached our previous high point by lunchtime. But we then slowed dramatically as we searched for a way through the maze of seracs and snow mushrooms of the upper face. Eventually a rightwards line below a menacing and overhanging serac barrier allowed access to a broad snow couloir that led without incident to the summit ridge. Unfortunately the cloud obscured any view and the final 20 m to the summit proper were dangerously corniced. So we wasted little time in beginning our descent, finding our previous anchors after four long rappels. We made it back to the bivouac gear as darkness fell, leaving a contented two hour walk back down to base camp.

18 July

Snow and sleet showers prevented us from moving far from the tent - not that we needed an excuse.

19 July

Another day of bad weather. This meant that any thought of another peak had to be abandoned, but unfortunately Gerencio was not due to return until the 22nd.

20 July

The problem of what to do for the remaining two days was easily solved when the boulders surrounding base camp were inspected for potential problems. A great day of bouldering followed under a cobalt sky surrounded by beautiful snow peaks.



Diary

21 July

Another day of bouldering, together with packing up equipment for the morning and tidying up the base camp area.

22 July

Gerencio arrived very early after walking for the whole of the previous day and night with a third donkey and his little dog Chaupolín. Quite an effort. He rounded up the other two donkeys that he had left to graze the pampa below base camp, loaded them with our equipment, and then we walked down to Ruina Pampa.

23 July

From Ruina Pampa we walked steeply uphill to a campsite an hour's walk below the 4 860 m pass that leads back to L. Cullicocha. Here we double-checked with Gerencio that we could buy food in Hualcayán before finishing off all our supplies. After so many days eating out of packets and tins we were looking forward to finally eating some fresh vegetables.

24 July

The descent back down to Hualcayán was marred by the death of one of Gerencio's donkeys. It was a sad but philosophical face that joined us for our slap up meal of potatoes, carrots and scrambled eggs. A bottle of beer and couple of cigarettes seemed to help.

25 July

The walk from Hualcayán to Cashapampa had the possibility of a refreshing soak in some thermal baths. Unfortunately they were quite crowded and the thought of chicken and chips in Huaraz hastened us up the last stretch to Cashapampa. Here we bid farewell to Gerencio and gifted him a little tent as a tip for bringing all our rubbish back out of the mountains and as some kind of replacement for his donkey. Our pick-up truck arrived at the arranged hour and we were soon showering and preening before a big night of eating in Huaraz.

26 July

Another day of eating and drinking, only broken to buy bus tickets back to Lima.

27 July

The bus journey to Lima passed uneventfully, although the videos were far more watchable than any of the films on the flights. A pleasant evening was spent with friends in Lima.

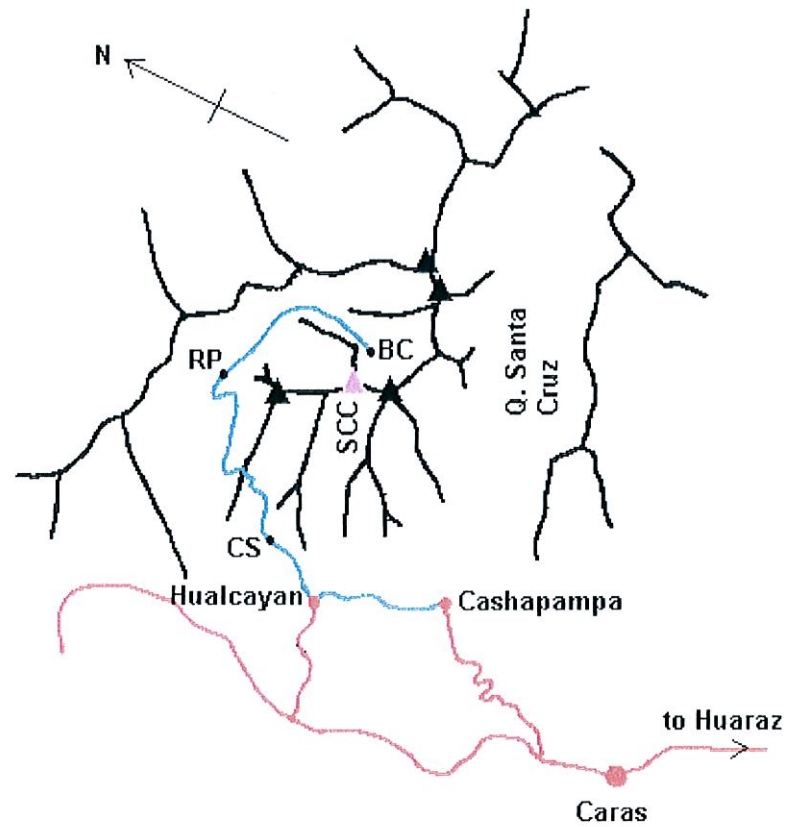
28 July

A day of conversation and relaxation. In the evening we were driven to the airport for our flight home.

Diary

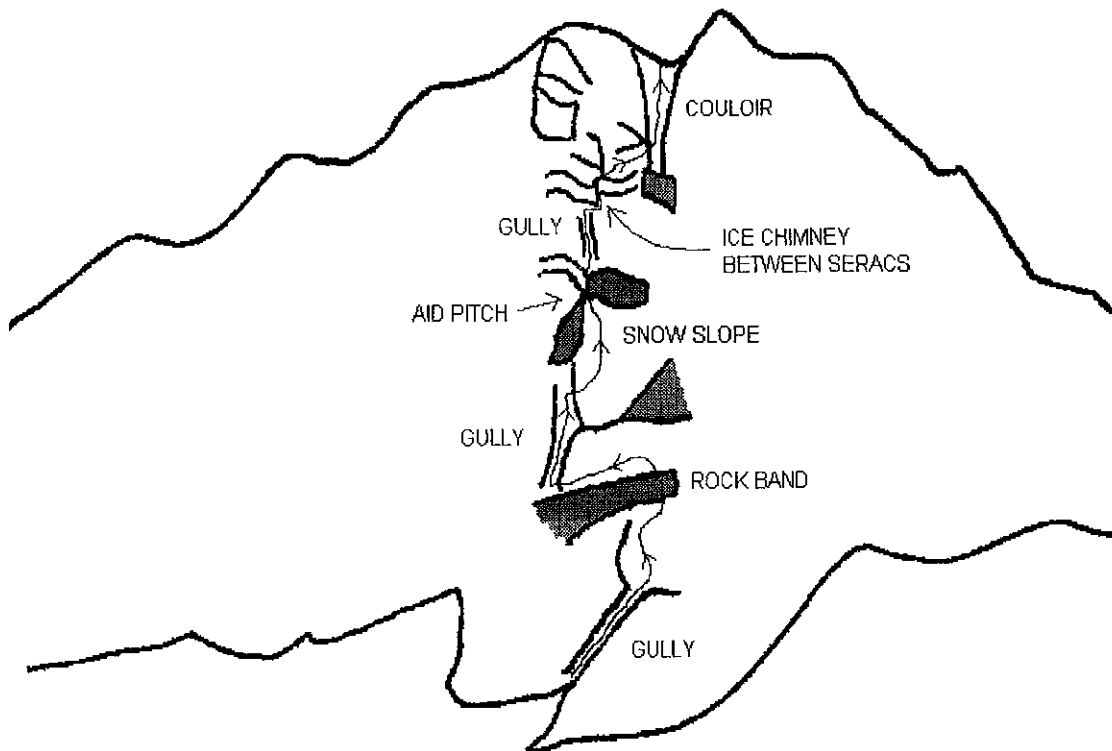
29 July

Back in Glasgow we were picked up by the security park van and were back in Aberdeen by midnight after a memorable time in South America.



- |     |                  |
|-----|------------------|
| BC  | Base Camp        |
| CS  | Cow Shed         |
| RP  | Ruina Pampa      |
| SCC | Santa Cruz Chico |

## Route Description and Diagram



East Face of Santa Cruz Chico (400 m, TD)

### Approach

An intermittent path can be followed onto the moraine ridge running down from Nevado Santa Cruz. This leads directly towards the glacier below the East face of Santa Cruz Chico. The glacier is crossed easily, aiming for the toe of the buttress in the middle of the face.

### Route Description

The route followed climbs the centre of the East face as directly as possible. A start was made on the left-hand side of the buttress in the middle of the face. Three pitches up a gully (75°-80°) lead to more open snow slopes. These were negotiated first diagonally right, then back left after a short rock pitch. A further brief section of rock lead to a snow gully (55°-60°) sporting a section of very steep ice at its top. This was turned on the right gaining access to snow slopes that lead leftwards to a short section of aid climbing on a very steep rock band (A1). Thereafter a rightward trending line was forced through an area of snow mushrooms and seracs to reach a 100 m snow couloir (55°) leading to the summit ridge. The final twenty metres to the summit proper were avoided due to very heavy cornicing and awful snow conditions.

### Descent

A rapid rappel descent was made using mostly rock anchors together with a few abalokov threads.

## Special Considerations

### Language

Some people in Huaraz are beginning to recognise the commercial advantage to be gained by speaking English. However such entrepreneurs are thin on the ground, and a working knowledge of Spanish is almost essential. This is certainly true in the smaller villages.

### Permit

A climbing permit is not required for any of the peaks of the Cordillera Blanca at present, although there are rumours that a small peak fee may be introduced for the more popular summits. However, all ground above the 4 000 m contour, with the exception of the Champará massif, lies within the Parque Nacional Huascarán, entrance to which is \$20 per person.

### Transport

There is a bus service running the length of the Callejón de Huaylas after which colectivos (minibuses) can be used to complete the journey to the roadhead. However in the press of people looking for clients it is not uncommon for equipment to go missing as it is being unloaded. Taxi drivers can be persuaded to make the trip, they know which roads their cars are capable of negotiating.

### Arriero/ donkeys

Arrieros (donkey handlers) and donkeys can be organised at most roadhead villages, but arrangements can take a day to finalise. In some villages a syndicate has been formed that sets the price for arriero and donkeys. An arriero charges about \$10 per day, and a donkey costs about \$5 per day. Expeditions are expected to provide food and tent space for the arriero for the trek to base camp and their return home.

### Trekking Agencies

Transport and arrieros can be organised through one of the many trekking agencies in Huaraz. It is wise to shop around before entering into an agreement. Most agencies are to be found on Avenida Luzuriaga and all expect the entire fee to be paid in advance - quite daunting. Pablo Tours can be recommended for their reliable and friendly service.

### Theft

Peru has an unfortunate reputation for petty theft. In towns and cities a careful watch should be kept over all equipment. Vigilance is also necessary in the mountains. When camping near villages all equipment should be stored inside the tents. At the busier base camps it is prudent to employ a guardian to look after equipment while the expedition is climbing. The base camp used by the expedition was in a little frequented valley away from popular treks allowing the tents to be left unguarded.

## Special Considerations

### Environmental

The recognised campsites on the established treks and approach routes are used many times each season. The signs of human passage are all too clear at these favoured spots: litter and human waste pollute the surroundings.

The expedition removed all of its own litter, as well as any found around base camp, to a National Park collection point in Hualcayán. The arriero received a tip for his efforts in ensuring that this happened.

Both members had their own toilet site among the boulders of the moraine and used it throughout the time spent at base camp. The places were chosen with due consideration to streams and were covered over when base camp was left.

### Food

In Huaraz food can be bought most cheaply in the covered market off Av. Raimondi three blocks down from Av. Luzuriaga, and in the shops and stalls on the opposite side of Raimondi. Almost everything needed for a trip into the mountains can be bought here. A few luxury items can be found in the little supermarket on the corner of Luzuriaga and Raimondi, but at a premium. The expedition also took full advantage of dehydrated meals left by other expeditions which are sold by the many trekking agencies in Huaraz.

### Other Objectives

The NE ridge of Santa Cruz Chico appeared to offer a reasonably straight forward route.

The other mountains around base camp also seemed to have potential for new routes. Notably, a line to the left of the 1976 route on the West face of Quitaraju (6 040 m) appeared possible, and there were a number of lines on the northern aspect of Abasraju (5 550 m).

**Finances**

**Income**

MCoFS grant	500
BMC grant	500
MEF grant	300
Personal contributions	1 505
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£2 805</b>

**Expenditure**

Flights	1 300
Insurance	300
Car storage	60
Food	300
Equipment	200
Taxis	40
Photography	40
Arriero and donkeys	125
Transport	190
Accommodation	150
Miscellaneous	100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£2 805</b>

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