

Expedition Report

Welcome to the February 2005 Namaste Aconcagua Expedition Report...

On 4th February 2005, 5 climbers from 3 countries set out to scale South America's highest mountain at 6,962m (22,832ft). On Day 9, we all reached the summit in perfect weather, one day ahead of schedule, a fantastic result.

Aconcagua is often underestimated, partly because it is easily accessible and offers non-technical routes, including ours, the Normal Route; and partly because people are unprepared for the effects of high altitude climbing, when the weather

and terrain can present massive physical and mental challenges.

Our expedition was fortunate in that we did not experience the worst that Aconcagua weather can bring, but the challenges and endurance required were tough enough.

Here is our story, and with it, everything you need to know to make a successful ascent of this incredible mountain...

Cheers, Chris

Contents

Aconcagua Overview	1
Route Summary	2
Expedition Story...	2
Aconcagua Provincial Park	7
Personal & Group Kit	7
More about the Normal Route	8
Climbing History	8

Aconcagua - the Stone Sentinel - Overview

6/2/05 BaseCamp
Plaza de Mulas 4,250 m



10/2/05 Camp 1
Canada Camp 5,000 m



11/2/05 Camp 2
Nido de Condores 5,400 m



12/2/05 Camp 3
Berlin Camp 6,000 m



14/2/05 Summit Day
Summit 6,962 m



About Aconcagua

Set in the heart of the Andes within Aconcagua Provincial Park on the western edge of the Mendoza Province of Argentina, Aconcagua's North Peak, at 6,962m (22,832ft) is South America's tallest mountain.

Either Ayamaran for "Stone Sentinel" or Quechuan for "White Sentinel", the mountain lies about 12 miles (20 km) east of the Chile-Argentinian border. Whilst it was first climbed in 1897 by a Swiss guide, there is some evidence of Incan passage, though this has yet to be verified.

There is a wide range of climbing possibilities, ranging in difficulty from relatively straightforward to extreme. The majority of people reach the summit via the ruta normal (normal route), which follows the northwest ridge of the mountain. The

second most popular route is via the Polish Glacier. Other routes include south face lines, which present some of the greatest climbing challenges in the world. No route, however, is easy due to the mountain's extreme altitude and weather.

The Normal Route

Following acclimatisation at Puente del Inca (2,700m), about 112 miles (180 km) from Mendoza, the normal route winds its way along the Horcones Valley, usually stopping at Confluencia Camp (3,360m).

Following further acclimatisation camps, the route reaches Plaza de Mulas (4,345m) which serves as base camp. This is the normal stopping point for the equipment-bearing mules, though some do take them to higher camps.

There is then a sequence of higher camps, which groups carry to, and then climb to, the speed of progress depending upon acclimatisation and fitness (7-10 days on average). Summit day is usually attempted from Berlin Camp (6,000m), around 12 -15 hours for the round-trip.

It is also known as the northwest route as part of it follows the northwest ridge.

The Team...

Andres Jones, 31 from Mendoza, Argentina
Ase Bente Sinnes, 28 from Sirdal, Norway
Chris Charlton, 34, from Surrey, England
Gregor Tait, 38 from Bath, England
Jon Cook, 43 from Derbyshire, England

Expedition Story

Prelude

After arriving in Santiago a few days earlier, I was pleased to see the team arrive safely on 31st January. There was a small problem in that the hotel we had booked into no longer existed, but fortunately I had managed to let everyone know of the hotel change before setting out.

As not everyone knew each other, the next



few days would be a good chance for the team to begin to gel before we got onto the mountain. So we took the time to explore the city a bit before a fabulous dinner at Acqui esta Coco, a speciality fish restaurant in town.

The next day, 1 February, we loaded up the Landie with all of our kit which led to some interesting looks from passers-by. With a little dead-reckoning navigation to find our way out of Santiago, we began the 4 hour drive to Mendoza.

On route, we stopped for a drink at a lovely little restaurant I had found a few days before on the outskirts of a town called Los Andes. Then up into the La Cumbre Pass via a series of amazing S-bends, across the Chile-Argentinian border where we were amused by the difference between the two sets of border guards. On the Chilean side, they were dressed in smart uniforms; on the Argentinian side, they were more like garage mechanics on a bad hair day.

Just beyond the border, the team had their first views of Aconcagua, at the head of the Horcones Valley. It was great to see their reaction to finally seeing the mountain in the flesh, as I had done a week or so before.

Dropping down the other side of the valley into Mendoza, we found our way to the hotel, but not before some fun and games following a taxi driver through the dark, city streets to hotels that he thought I had said, rather than the one I had said. It gave the guys some great ammunition for taking the piss!!

On 2nd Feb, we checked all of our kit, did a bit of shopping, and obtained our Aconcagua Park permits, necessary for an ascent of the mountain. We all really enjoyed Mendoza, a lovely city, and can recommend both restaurants we explored - Zur and Los Tijanes...



3 Feb: Day 1

I awoke early to finish the January Namaste Newsletter which I sent to my web team back in the UK just fifteen minutes before we were due to set off. We loaded the Landie and took off for the 2 1/2 hour drive to Penitentes, our base before the trekking began.

We sorted gear into bags for the mules, one load of which was going to Base Camp at Plaza de Mulas; and one for Confluencia Camp early the next day.

That evening, we sat down to enjoy our last great restaurant dinner, our last whiskey at the local bar; and our last bed at Hosteria Ayelen, as we made our final preparations for the ascent...

4 Feb: Day 2

After taking a truck to the Horcones Ranger Station to check-in, we set out on our approach trek up the Horcones Valley. With a perfect blue sky, sunshine and little wind, we first passed the lake which created a lovely reflection of Aconcagua's South Face. Then, after 40 minutes we reached the swing bridge, a present from the producers of "Seven Years in Tibet", which was filmed here.

We were really enjoying the day, slowly kicking any stiffness out of our legs as we began the journey upwards. We had also soon nicknamed Andres "Leggy" as he seemed to have an impossibly long stride - and this stuck for the rest of the trip.

In 3 hours we had walked to our first camp at Confluencia, aptly named as it lay at the confluence of the Horcones and Francia valleys. The camp had recently been moved to a new location to allow the old location to re-generate after years of use.

Our logistics organisers, Inka Expediciones,



keep a camp here permanently during the climbing season (Nov-Mar), so there was no need to put up tents. Kitchen tent, dinner tent and sleeping tents were all laid out for us. Ase said, "Isn't that cheating...?", but soon realised its significant benefit on saving effort and energy for higher on the mountain when we would be on our own. In all, including all logistics companies and private groups, Confluencia consisted of about 100 tents.

We met other guides and groups there, and I was intrigued by the dedication of one guy who was on his 4th attempt. We also met Mitch from the U.S., who was to share our climb for most of the way.

We listened to stories of other parties returning from high camps the previous week - it had been very cold (e.g. we saw an Italian climber with frostbitten fingers), and only limited successful summit attempts. This year had so far seen low percentages summiting - the Rangers had estimated that only 15% had so far managed to reach the top - partly due to the recent low temperatures, as low as any in the previous 20 years!

[After arriving at Confluencia, I began to notice the altitude, feeling short of breath though not as yet uncomfortable. I was most amused by our evening routine which revolved around testing our oxygen saturation levels - the finger of destiny machine...Greg]

Summary

Day 1 - 3 Feb: Land transport in the expedition vehicle from Mendoza to Penitentes (2,700m). Check on loading gear on the mules. Night at Ayelen hosteria in Penitentes.

Day 2 - 4 Feb: First approach day



from Penitentes to Confluencia Camp (3,360m).

Day 3 - 5 Feb: Acclimatization trekking to Plaza Francia, South wall base camp (4,200m). Return to Confluencia Camp.

Day 4 - 6 Feb: Approach day from Confluencia Camp to Plaza de Mulas, Base Camp (4,345m)

Day 5 - 7 Feb: Rest and acclimatization at Base Camp (4,345m).

Day 6 - 8 Feb: Carry of food and gear to Camp 1, Plaza Canada (5,000m). Return to Base Camp (4,345m).

Day 7 - 9 Feb: Ascent from Base Camp to Camp 1, Plaza Canada (5,000m). Carry of food and gear to Camp 2, Nido de Condores (5,400m). Return to Plaza Canada (5,000m).

Day 8 - 10 Feb: Ascent from Camp 1 to Camp 2, Nido de Condores (5,400m).

Day 9 - 11 Feb: Ascent from Camp 2 to Camp 3, Berlin Camp (6,000m).

Day 10 - 12 Feb: Summit day (6,962m) from Berlin Camp. Return to Camp 3



(6,000m)

Day 11 - 13 Feb: Descent from Camp 3 to Base Camp (4,345m)

Day 12 - 14 Feb: Descent from Base Camp to Penitentes. Night Out!

Go to Page 3

Expedition Story cont...

5 Feb: Day 3

After a hearty breakfast, and it was a pleasure to be cooked for, we were away by 09:15 on another gorgeous sunny day. This was to be an acclimatisation day, trekking from Confluencia to Plaza Francia at 4,365m, the base camp for climbers attempting routes on Aconcagua's awesome South Face. Heading up the valley on the eastern edge of



the glacier, you gain increasingly spectacular views of that massive face as it gradually emerges into view.

I spent some time chatting with Leggy about the mules which only have a 5 year life expectancy dragging kit backwards and forwards between the trail head and base camp (a 34km, 1,600m climb one-way)

I was also acutely aware of the "wind" I had gained (along with one or two of the others), an unfortunate side effect of the high magnesium content of the water supply at Confluencia; and it made for some smelly tent moments (sorry Ase!)

On reaching Plaza Francia after 3 1/2 hours, it was deserted, as no parties were taking on the toughest routes on the mountain this season. Seeing some small avalanches on the face in the small time we were there - no wonder.

On our return to Confluencia we were surprised at the steepness of the descent. It is often strange how perspective, speed and direction can combine to give you a different feel on the same ground. It just didn't seem that steep on the way up, certainly a function of our focus and carefully paced outward journey.

Back at Confluencia, we were joined by Adrian and Gabriel who had just returned from the summit. It was good to meet a team who had made it as we had heard of more that had not, either because of weather or altitude-related problems

We were then told by Belen, the Confluencia camp organiser and cook, that one of her girlfriends had summited with a 14-year old Argentinian boy from her mountaineering club, the only 2 (of 10 trying) to reach the summit that day. What an accomplishment. The youngest Aconcagua summitter was 13. Imagine that compared to other 14-year olds...



[It's great coming back into camp to tuck into melon, olives, cheese and biscuits, tea and coffee...Apparently a couple of people summited today, one of them being a 14-year old lad. It was humbling to think of him up there when we face the possibility that we may not make it...Jon]

After dinner, we ended up playing the name game to keep ourselves amused - though I reckon Ase had a bit of a disadvantage coming from Norway!

We also began our routine of checking our oxygen saturation levels and pulse at the end of each day to ensure that we were acclimatising properly. With each of us looking good after our trip to Plaza Francia, we headed for bed. At this lower altitude, though, our 5-season sleeping bags were a little too warm...

6 Feb: Day 4

A big day today as we had to trek 11 miles up the remainder of the Horcones Valley, climbing over 1,100m to reach Base Camp, known as Plaza de Mulas at 4,345m. We had noticed some tiredness in the legs at the end of yesterday, so this was a good chance to test our endurance on the 3rd consecutive day of trekking.

We dropped down to the river to cross the bridge before climbing back up the other side of the valley. On the way, you can't help thinking 'that will be a bitch on the return trip' - just when you think you've reached confluencia on the way down, there is a big hill just to finish. After crossing the river, we reached what is known as "the Beach" - the great expanse of the Horcones Valley, slowly winding its way inexorably upwards. This barren, arid and rocky mountain landscape, shaped by thousands of years of intertwining geological processes, reminded me of the Bolivian Altiplano.



Thankful that it was not too windy, as it can often be, we fell into a rhythmic team stride as we pounded out the miles. Working our way towards Finger Mountain, so-named as its summit resembles a fist, we reached Ibanez Rock after 3 hours or so and stopped for some lunch and a breather.

From there, the trail continues to climb, with a series of undulations, along the eastern side of the valley to Columbia, the ruined military base which was destroyed by an avalanche back in the 70's.

As we wound our way along this trail, we glimpsed our first views of Base Camp, perched atop the valley head wall. We were also passed by many mules, some on their way up, some down, and we were quite surprised at the speed of their progress. As the mules game is a commercial enterprise for many locals, it is no surprise that the animals have a low life expectancy. I hope that soon the logistics companies are able to begin to use helicopters to transport kit. But then this presents its own environmental and noise problems for the transportation of kit to base camp. The constant dilemma for ecologically-friendly climbing...

For now, there is a single helicopter run by the Rangers, used for transporting sick and injured climbers off the mountain in emergencies (as well as the stock of toilets that exist at Base Camps - a necessary evil given the volume of climbers that attempt to climb the mountain). It was a somewhat comforting thought that in the event of

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an emergency, we could obtain helicopter support up to it's high point of Nido de Condorez at 5,400m.



In 45 minutes, we could have an injured climber transported to Mendoza hospital.

The final 30 minutes to Base Camp was the steepest ground of the day, as it wound its way 300m up the valley headwall in less than 2km. Pulling into Plaza de Mulas we were welcomed by the Inka staff who man the camp throughout the season. We were also treated to our first views of the initial ascent of the Normal Route - about 600m up to Camp Canada and on towards Camp 2 at Nido de Condorez and the northwest ridge.

Being our third consecutive day, there were some tired legs and combined with the effects of altitude and cumulative effort, we were pleased and ready for the following day, a rest day.

We pitched our sleeping tents after locating our kit which had been transported earlier by the mules, then settled down to relax in the remaining sunshine.

[The view of Aconcagua's west wall from Base Camp is quite magnificent. It towers above you like an ever-rising fortress. Protecting the summit, the uppermost castle-like peaks reach high into the sky, dwarfing us below. The face changes during the day becoming a golden red in the evening as the sun sinks behind the mountains to our west... Greg]

There we chatted to two Swiss guys, one of which was 70 years old. They had reached as far as Berlin Camp at 6,000m before descending, an impressive performance for a man of that age. It just goes to show that the mountains frequently highlight what is possible at any age...

With a good dinner and more chat, we headed for an early bed. Frustrated by residue wind from Confluencia water, I finally managed to get to sleep about 5am, very thankful that it was a rest day so



I could sleep in.

7 Feb: Day 5

Aaaahhhhhh, rest day...and we certainly made best use of it! Starting with a lie-in, and followed by relaxing, reading, hamburgers and coke, and even

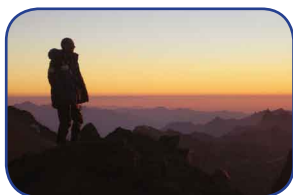
Go to Page 4

Expedition Story cont...

a chance to check email at the satellite tent.

I also took the chance to discuss our climbing strategy with Andres. Whilst Andres was our local Aconcagua guide, as he had been working on the mountain for the last 10 years or so, I remained in overall charge of the team, so it was important that we shared our thoughts regularly.

We were quick to develop a strong rapport and understanding as we shared ideas on the most



appropriate strategy given the condition of the team and the weather forecast. Whilst the standard for teams is to have a second rest day at Base Camp after a carry to Camp Canada, I felt that it would be better to rest higher on the mountain, at Camp 2. This would give us a chance for a rest, but would also put us within 2 days of the summit if the weather forecast turned. We also discussed the options for carrying and moving to different camps and decided to delay our final decision on climbing strategy until the next day to capitalise on the latest weather forecast.

We also covered all the what-if scenarios in the event that one or more of the team became sick due to altitude or injured higher on the mountain. Having agreed our course of action in each scenario with Andres, I presented the strategy and scenarios to the team. This is always an important step as it is better to agree all this up front so there are no surprises further up on the mountain when the stakes are high. With everyone happy with the plan, we settled down for some dinner and an enjoyable evening.

8 Feb: Day 6

With an easy start at 11:30am, we set out for Camp 1 at 5,000m, carrying loads that we would leave there before descending back to Base Camp. The aim of this type of day is twofold: firstly, to get as much food and camping gear to the first camp to lighten the load for the following day. At this stage in the climb, it would be foolish to try and haul all our gear in one go.

And secondly, to acclimatise to the altitude. Aside from being fit and having good teamwork, equipment and preparation, the most essential



component of a successful big mountain ascent is acclimatisation. "Climb high, sleep low" is an oft-heard cliché amongst climbers, and the most frequent reason for unsuccessful summit bids is poor or too rapid approaches to this key ingredient.

The route climbs steeply out of Base Camp on rocky scree slopes that zig-zag their way over 600m upwards to Canada Camp, which is perched on a small rock promontory jutting out from the

west face.

We were pleased to reach Camp 1 in only 2 hours 45 minutes, a sure sign that our rest day had paid dividends. After securing our food and gear into bags, weighed down by rocks to stop them blowing away in the wind, we soaked up the magnificent views over lunch. Upwards, we could see the route winding its way up towards Nido de Condores, Camp 2, and the imposing West Wall. Downwards, fantastic views of the Horcones Valley and the surrounding peaks - a geologist's dream as the stratified layers of rock created amazing multi-coloured patterns on each mountain.

With empty rucksacks we romped back to Base Camp in only 35 minutes to enjoy the afternoon sunshine. Taking full advantage of the camp facilities, we pulled out some mattresses and lay in the sun. Not forgetting to stretch after the day's exertions, we even shared a spot of massage.

Later, we began to organise the remainder of our kit for higher on the mountain. As we would not be returning to Base until after the ascent, this was our last chance to leave anything behind we really did not need. Long years of climbing mountains has taught me to go as light as possible, though the odd little luxury can always be accommodated, such as the minidisc and speakers. Sometimes, these things can have a more beneficial effect on morale than the downside of the extra weight. With our packs ready for the next day, we settled down for



dinner.

Our bellies full, we popped over to the satellite tent to consult the latest 5-day forecast. Andres and I agreed on missing the second rest day that we had planned for Nido (Camp 2) as on the 5th day and beyond the forecast was predicting high winds and unstable conditions. This would give us only 4 days to summit...

As the team had so far proved to be strong, we also built in an extra carry from Camp 1 to Camp 2. Whilst this would mean a hard day on Day 7, it would mean easier days on Day 8 and 9. Day 9 needed to be as easy as possible to conserve our energy for the following Summit Day.

9 Feb: Day 7

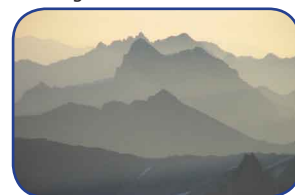
Settling out early, we were aware of the fact that this would be our hardest day, excepting summit day, so our pace was suitably slow. We made good progress though, reaching Camp 1 in 3 hours, where we stopped to pitch our tents and leave our sleeping bags and other kit we would not need for the carry to Camp 2.

We made a point of pitching our tents at that point to save having to do it when tired on our return to the campsite.

From Camp Canada to Nido de Condores, the trail continued to zig-zag its way up the endless

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scree slopes, all the time arching its way towards the northwest ridge.



Reaching the coll at the mid-point on the trek from Camp 1 to Camp 2, we noticed that Jon had fallen behind somewhat. Andres fell back to join Jon while Ase, Greg and I continued on. As we pulled onto the large plateau that forms the site for Camp 2, we took the time to rest our weary limbs while we waited for Jon and Andres.

Only 20 minutes later they arrived, and I took the opportunity to film Jon as he ambled into camp, clearly knackered from the effort.

This had been a particularly tough day for Jon, partly because his rucksack had been wearing heavily on his shoulders and partly because of the altitude. Though Andres had offered assistance, Jon's determination had kept him going - something to do with his experience of walking to the South Pole across the Antarctica continent for 63 days - the mental toughness required to keep it going when the body wants to stop.

[Today could well be the toughest day I've ever known, both physically and mentally...My kit was so heavy and bulky, my hands were frozen when we set off and seemed to take an age to warm up. Although it is a spectacular walk as you walk up at the endless scree slopes and Base Camp drops away beneath you, it does not take any of the effort and pain away...Jon]

We spent a further 30 minutes at Nido caching our supplies and enjoying the beautiful vistas. As you ascend Aconcagua, the views just get better and better, and from Nido you get your first views right across the coastal mountains to the Pacific Ocean some 80km away.

The descent back to Camp 1 thankfully only took 40 minutes, from where we sat in awe at the incredible sunset whilst we hoovered up a plateful of meat and potato stew cooked by Leggy.



As the sun dipped below the horizon, the temperature plummeted, a sensation familiar to any high altitude climber. Whilst we were only 600m above Base Camp, the air at 5,000m at Camp 1 became noticeably cooler, but certainly warmer than it had been a week or two before...

Expedition Story cont...

10 Feb: Day 8

Enjoying the benefits of caching some of our supplies at Nido the day before, we set off at a relaxed pace at 11:30am. We all made good progress, including Jon who was feeling markedly better, which was reflected in a significantly higher oxygen saturation reading that evening.

It was such a good feeling as the team moved



as one, and it was often noted by other climbers how we seemed to get in step and glide inexorably upwards. We pulled into Nido in only 2 hours 45 minutes, including a stop for lunch on route, so I was pleased with our performance.

After pitching our tents in a surprisingly crowded campsite, we took time to relax, take photos and rest our weary limbs, chilling out to the sounds of Van Morrison and Jon's jazz collection. We even played some cards, though by this time Ase had begun to really feel the effects of altitude.

Until now, she had been really strong, though by 5,400m the signs were showing. Flu-like symptoms were all tell-tale signs of altitude sickness in the frigid, thin air. However, they were relatively mild so could be handled with a few drugs from the medical kit. Mixed with good food, lots of water (imperative at altitude), and a reasonable night's sleep, Ase awoke the next day feeling as right as rain and ready for the day's challenge, as strong as before.

11 Feb: Day 9

Oh no! Not more god damn biscuits for breakfast! One oversight we had made which had become a bit of a laughing point was our lack of variety for breakfast, something we would definitely rectify on future trips.

It had been a noticeably colder night again (around -16 C), a function of the gains in altitude. Mentally we were preparing for temperatures of -30 C which had been recorded at our intended next camp, Berlin Camp at 6,000m, so our kit was well prepared. Still, I think Ase noticed it more than the rest of us, as without a pee funnel, she determined to leave the tent every time she needed a pee.



And this was 3 or so times a night as a result of the large daily intake of water, tea and coffee! But then, coming from Norway, she was more used to the cold than most of us and often remarked that it was not very cold!

[I awoke this morning to find myself snug and warm but with a thick layer of frost on top of my sleeping bag. Greg had a very cold night and didn't really sleep. Ase feels much better today; and Chris

is still Chris...Greg is one of those pain-in-the-arse types who has to get up once he is awake and then somehow makes you feel bad for staying in bed... Jon]

Today was crucial as we wanted to reach Berlin Camp, the camp from which we would make our summit bid, so we packed our stuff away carefully and set out on the trail from Camp 2 to Camp 3. This took us up to the northwest ridge for the first time which was great as we took in the views all around us, including northwards over the ridge for the first time.

3 hours or so later, we reached high camp, happy that we had decided to skip the rest day at Nido and continue on to make best use of the forecast weather window. As the lower level was already crowded we continued on a bit further in order to find space for our tents. These we pitched in sites that had already been levelled, though Jon and Greg had to dig a little to create a good site for theirs.

Having already put up our tent, Ase and I went over to help with the pitching of the others'. It's quite amusing how tiring it can be just putting up a tent at 6,000m altitude, particularly after a hard trek.

Settling into camp routine, we reflected on our luck with the weather. Thus far, we had had perfect conditions consistently for 9 days and it



was forecast to hold for one more day...our summit day! We crossed our fingers and hoped the forecast would turn out to be accurate as the frustration of getting this far, only to be turned back by the weather, would be unbearable.

As if reading our minds, the sun played a magical sunset dance as its rays reflected off the clouds and mountains below. The temperature effect of the sun at this altitude makes its appearance and disappearance highly significant, so we enjoyed its warmth for as long as possible before retreating to our tents for an early night before the big day!

Before turning in, I paid a short visit to Leggy to discuss our Summit Day. With the team in good shape, all was looking good, including the weather, so no reason to delay. Tomorrow, we would go...

But, as the evening wore on, Ase began to cough more persistently, enough to worry Andres and Pablo, another guide nearby. They peered into our tent to enquire if all was well. I had just given Ase some Perles, which would calm the dry cough that I had put down to breathing the high, cold air directly, rather than through a scarf. To be safe, they thought it wise to check with a stethoscope. Using this classic doctor's instrument, you can detect any sound of liquid in the lungs, a sign of odema. At high altitude, there are 2 forms of odema caused by the lack of oxygen in the air. Cerebral, which affects the brain; and pulmonary, which affects the lungs. Both can be fatal if not recognised and

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treated early (including immediate descent) so it's always important to keep an eye out.



And it was a classic scene...Ase sitting up in her sleeping bag, shirt lifted up, with 3 guys in the tent: Leggy at the door, Pablo with a stethoscope listening to her breathing, and me with the headlamp! And then Leggy and Pablo swapped over as Pablo was not sure what he could hear. Confirming my suspicions though, all was well, it was just a nasty cough, so Ase and I returned to sleep. I was pleased at their attentiveness however, a good sign for a team at altitude.

12 Feb: Day 10

We were woken by Leggy at 4am, with welcome hot water for coffee, but with more biscuits!! Discarding the biccies, we enjoyed pouring 3 cups of sweet coffee to get the body engine started, not all that easy so early in the morning.

By 5:30am we had kit packed and all our protective clothing on. Being a cool -20 C or so, we were wearing our down jackets, head gear and several layers of gloves and mitts. Prepared for the hill, we set out, slowly making our way up the rocky trail along the ridge, picking out a route in the darkness with the light from our headlamps.

It became increasingly colder as we ascended as the sun had still not risen. For 3 hours we climbed, often noticing the further chilling effect of the wind as we passed exposed portions of the ridge.

The final steep section to the Independencia Hut at 6,400m was hard on the lungs, though we were pleased to take the time to rest and enjoy the sunrise. Not wishing to stop before this time due to the cold, it was a really welcome break and a chance to eat something. And the sunrise was spectacular, one of those beautiful mountain moments when the view appears out of the darkness and you are way



up above the clouds.

After 30 minutes, relaxing and enjoying the warming effect of the sun's rays, we set off again, this time over a short snowy rise and onto the traverse which takes you beneath the ridge and up to the Canaleta, the infamous and final gully to the summit ridge. But not before donning our crampons and taking out our ice axes, as from here

Go to Page 6

Expedition Story cont...

on, the rocky route was to be interspersed with snow and ice.

The traverse started out being relatively flat which was a pleasure to walk along and enjoy the fantastic views out towards and including the Pacific Ocean. Base Camp was a very distant, long way below by now and I smiled at the thought of having climbed up from there over the past few days.

Then it steepened sharply as we headed for



the Canaleta, which starts at about 6,700m. The gully itself is mostly scree with pockets of snow and ice, and intensely steep. This 200m section up to 6,900m was hard, hard work; combining the cumulative effect of the altitude, the steepness, the difficult terrain, and the exertion required after an already tough day. No wonder that this is the section that beats most climbers that fail to reach the summit via this route.

So we stopped at its base for a rest and some fuel, time to recuperate and prepare mentally for the final push. As we slowly picked our way skywards, the summit comes into view. Sometimes it appears a way off, other times it draws you nearer, all part of the mind game you play at this altitude after this amount of effort.

Fortunately for us, the weather had turned out to be perfect again which made the going a little easier. We also enjoyed the morale-boosting effect of passing a few other groups as we ascended, clearly strong and by now, clearly going to summit.

As we broke onto the summit ridge at 1:00pm, there was only about 300m distance and 60m of up left, so it was now just a matter of time; slow time for sure, but time only. I reached the summit first to find another 15 or so climbers already there, so there was quite a buzz. Jubilant at reaching the top, I waited the few minutes for the others to arrive, congratulating each of them with a big hug as they stepped up to the summit, 6,962m, a number that will remain in our memories forever.

At the top we stayed for 20 minutes or so to enjoy the attainment of our collective goal, and to take lots of photos and film. I even filmed Greg fulfilling his rendition of "I'm a little teapot" which he had been sponsored to do for charity. Then Greg filmed Ase, Jon and I lying on the summit



plateau smoking cigarettes, which gave rise to a few raised eyebrows! We also took time to chat to other parties on the summit and congratulate new friends we had made on route, in particular Paul and Pat, both of whom had suffered with the altitude but had both made it nonetheless.

With the Namaste Aconcagua Expedition Summit Photo in the bag, a last chance to gaze over the precipice that is the South Face and the classic view over to the South Summit, we began the long

descent downwards.

As any experienced high altitude climber knows, getting to the summit is only half the story as getting back down can be just as serious, if not more so than the ascent. Long days, exhausted bodies, bad weather rolling in, any of which can catch (and has on many occasions) an unwary climber out. So we made our way down, slowly and carefully picking our route through the Canaleta.

Once at the base of the Canaleta, it was a relief to know that the going thereafter would be easy, if long and knee-crunching. Cruising down, I felt fantastic. Elated both from a personal achievement perspective, and from a professional one - everyone successfully on the summit on Namaste's first Aconcagua expedition. 100%, top stuff, I was chuffed, and so was everyone else. What more could I ask for?

By 4:30pm, everyone was safely back in Berlin Camp which felt fabulous. We were all tired, but beginning to soak up the experiences of the day. Ase and Greg both commented that their achievement had barely sunk in yet, but the smiles on their faces said it all. Even Leggy, the ever resourceful and enormously fit guy that he is, looked tired. And as for Jon, that tough day up to Nido was an artefact of ancient history. Though he said that he might do a little more training next time!

[It's odd that I have little recollection of my



thoughts of that 7 1/2 hour climb. I think my mind just finds ways of blocking out pain and the concept of time and I just keep being able to plod. There was only one place to go, and that was up...It felt like forever, but at the same time the next thing I knew I was hugging the others at the top of the highest mountain outside of the Himalayas. I don't know if I felt shocked or delighted or what but it was just so good to feel that sense of achievement and all the fears of failure blow away in the wind... Jon]

With another delightful sunset to enjoy, we watched from the comfort of our tents, sound in the knowledge that tomorrow we would be back in Base Camp. And I had a little surprise in store...

13 Feb: Day 11

With no need to rush, we took the tents down, feeling both relieved that we were on our way down and somewhat sad that we would soon be saying goodbye to this beautiful place.

We were also greeted by another glorious day, though as forecasted, the wind had indeed picked up, though not to the extent that had been anticipated. This was good news for our friend, Mitch, who was due to go for the summit today. He had set off at 4am so we looked forward to catching up with him on his way down.

Through Nido, we stopped to pick up some gear that we had left there. On top of already heavy packs, we were grateful that gravity was doing most of the work on the descent. The scree slopes were great on the way down as the loose rock gave slightly with each step making it easier on the knees, though we had to be careful not to end up arse-over-tit in the process!

Racing past Canada Camp, we couldn't help



wondering how other teams on the way up would fare; and empathising with the effort they were about to expend. Finally, we pulled into Base Camp to the congratulations of other teams and staff there. We had done it, and it felt good, really good. And time for celebration had begun...

Out came the beer, followed by the champagne I had sneaked into one of the mule bags on the way up, and the festivities rolled on. More champagne and wine with dinner, then off to the bar, yes bar, at base camp. It was such a cool feeling sitting in a bar tent on sofas, playing table football, dancing and having a few more beers with other teams and staff at the camp. A truly jubilant time was had before we finally fell into our tent around 2am...

14 Feb: Day 12

Moderately hungover the next day, we packed the mule bags for the final descent before setting off for our final day on the hill. Only 34km and 1,600m down to go...!! In 6 hours, we steamed through the Ranger Station to check out and then, relief, a truck. No more trekking, just rest & relaxation... but not before a large double rum smoothie care of Capri in Puente del Inca.

Feeling slightly intoxicated already, we checked in to our hotel in Penitentes and enjoyed long, hot showers and baths, a real treasure after 11 days on the mountain; then dinner and a few more celebratory beers and even a whiskey or two!

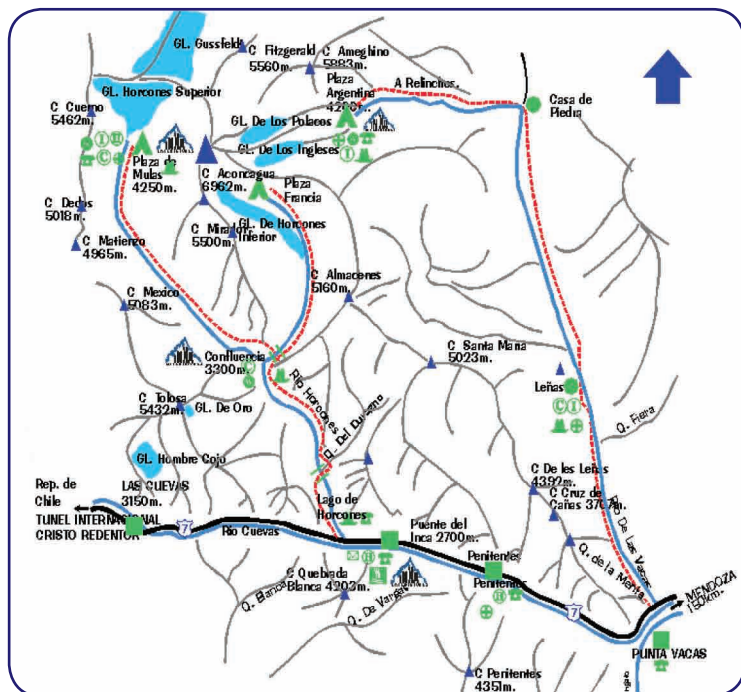
It's always funny how the exertions melt away and the discussions of what next begin. Until the next time...

by Chris Charlton



Go to
www.namaste.co.uk/7-summits
to find out about more about
climbing one or more of the other
7 summits...

Aconcagua Provincial Park



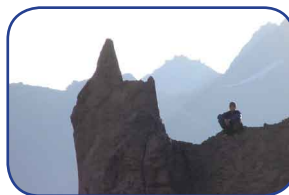
Permits

Climbers and trekkers must obtain a permit before a trip to Aconcagua Provincial Park. Two types of permits are issued, climbing and trekking, and the cost varies with the time of year (US \$200 - \$300 per person).

Each and every member of a team must register in person at the office of Direccion de Bosques y Parques Provinciales (Parks and Forests Department) located in Parque San Martin in Mendoza City.

Upon entry into the Park (rangers maintain posts at a number of entry corridors) all climbers and trekkers must show permits, and pick up rubbish bags that must be deposited (full of rubbish) upon exit from the Park. Rules are strictly enforced.

Trekking Routes



A number of trekking opportunities exist in the vicinity of Aconcagua, from single day forays to multi-day mini-expeditions.

A trek up the Horcones Valley to Plaza de Mulas is spectacular. Another popular trek is to go to Plaza Francia, under the awesome south face. The Vacas and Relinchos valleys also provide incredible scenery and long treks in a wilderness environment.

As part of our acclimatisation for Aconcagua, we will complete the trek to Plaza de Mulas over several days, taking time to visit Plaza Francia. Climbing high, sleeping low...

Personal Kit

FOOTWEAR

Socks - Inner / Liner	3
Socks - Outer	3
VBL Socks	1
Trekking Shoes/Boots	1
Double Plastic Boots	1
SuperGaiters	1

UPPER BODY

Polypro/capilene Top - light	1
Polypro/capilene Top - med	1
Fleece Jacket	1
Fleece Vest	1
Gore-tex Shell	1
Down Jacket / Parka	1

LOWER BODY

Capilene Underwear	3
Polypro/capilene Long - light	1
Polypro/capilene Long - med	1
Fleece Trousers	1
Gore-tex Wind Shell Trousers	1

HEAD

Sun Hat	1
Warm Hat	1
Lightweight Balaclava	1

HANDS

Inner Gloves (capilene/fleece)	2
Insulated Ski Gloves / Mittens	1
Goretex Overmitts	1

SLEEPING

Sleeping Bag	1
Compression Stuff Sac	1
Sleeping Pad - foam	1
Thermarest	1
Sleeping pad stuff sac	2

BACKPACK & BAGS

Back Pack (75+ litres)	1
Day Pack (25 litres)	1
Back Pack Liner	1
Stuff Sacs	3

Large Duffel	1
Large Stuff Sac (for storage)	1
Plastic Bags (to line stuff sacs)	1

MISCELLANEOUS

Mountain Sunglasses	1
Goggles (optional)	1
Nose Guard	1
Headlamp	1
Lamp Batteries & Bulb	1
Water Bottle (1 litre)	2
Water Bottle Insulator	2
Thermos flask (1 litre)	1
Lip Balm/Screen	2
Sun Screen - spf30	1
Pocket Knife	1
Toilet Articles	1
Tooth Paste	1
Baby Wipes 20	1
Hand Disinfectant	1
Toilet Paper	2
Watch	1
Lighter	2
Pee Bottle	1
Pee Funnel (for women)	1
Compass	1
Book (for reading/writing)	1

CLIMBING

Mt. Ice Axe 60-70 cm	1
Ski Poles - pair	1
Step-in Crampons	1

MEDICAL

Personal Medical Kit	1
Antibiotic - (1*7days)	14
Diamox -20, 250 mg. tablets	20
Ibuprofen (400mg)	20
Immodium	20

CAMERA & VIDEO

Camera kit	1
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Plus travel clothes, documents and wallet...

Group Kit

SLEEPING

Tents - 2man	3
Kitchen & Pole	1
Tent Repair Kit	1

TRAVEL

Mule equipment	1
Mule Lashing Lines	6

MEDICAL

Trauma Kit	2
Emergency Shelter	1
Emergency Blanket	2

FOOD

Stoves (MSR)	3
Stove Repair Kit	1
Fuel - white gas, 1 gallon	5
Breakfast/Dinner Food Bags	16
Snack Bags	16
Fresh fruit & veg bag	7

CLIMBING

Ropes (9mm, 60m)	1
Slings	6
Karrabiners	6
Spares Bag	1

COMMUNICATION

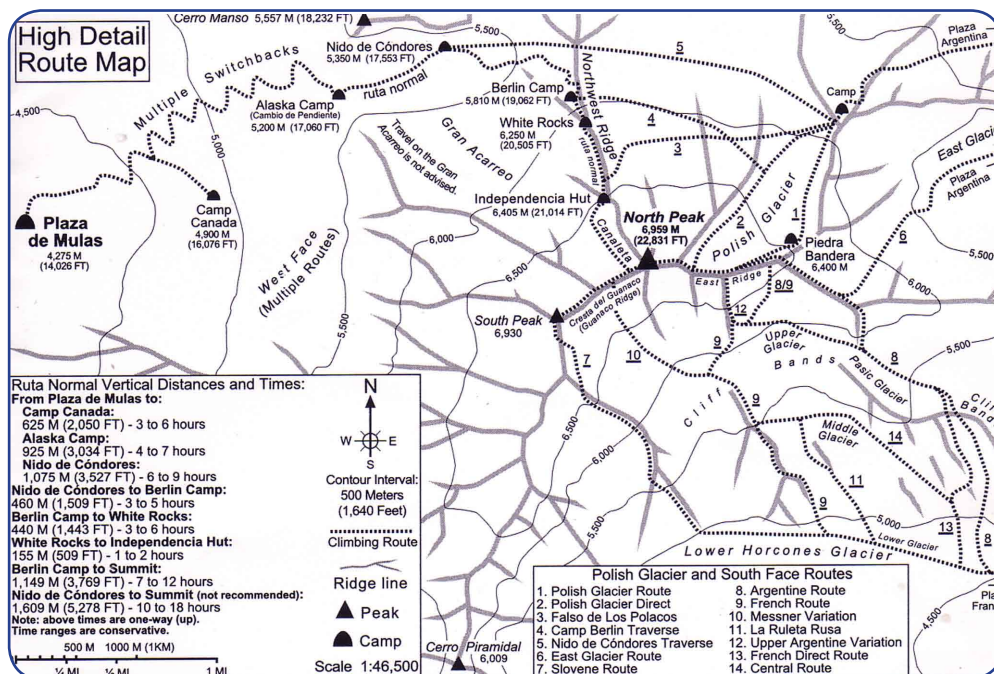
CB Radio	1
Mobile Phones	2
Batteries	3

MISCELLANEOUS

Map	2
Compass	2
Park Permits	4
Minidisc player	1
Speakers	1
AA Batteries	12
Playing Cards	2
Cribbage board	1
Toilet Bags	10
CMC's	3

All group equipment will be finalised in Mendoza and organised locally

The Normal Route (Ruta Normal)



Horcones Valley

This valley (see map on page 3) is used to approach the normal route, as well as the routes on the west and southwest sides of Aconcagua. And the lower part of the valley is used as the initial approach for the south face. From the trailhead at the Ranger Station, the approach to base camp is a total of 14 miles (23 km) and 1,420m of altitude gain. Many parties spend extra nights on the trail, though, as part of their acclimatisation.

New Plaza de Mulas

New Plaza de Mulas is the new base camp for the normal route. Old Plaza de Mulas received a tremendous amount of use and abuse, but the park rangers have wisely moved the camp to a new location. Portable water is available during warm afternoons from small streams immediately north of the camp, and outhouses are in place.

Camp (Plaza) Canada

From Plaza de Mulas, the well-worn trail leads north, climbing the steep slope that is east of the Horcones Glacier. Camp Canada is a flat spot atop a promontory marked by some rock pinnacles, about 0.3 miles to the south of the main trail.

Climbing History

The first significant exploration of the Central Andes took place in 1817, when General Jose de San Martin crossed the range to liberate Chile from the Spanish. In 1832 Charles Darwin took note of Aconcagua (but made no climbing attempts) after he docked the *Beagle* in Valparaiso, Chile while en route to the Galapagos Islands.

But the first serious attempt was by the German Paul Gussfeldt, who made it to 6,560m in 1883. A remarkable feat considering the difficulties of the approach (from the north) and poor equipment available at that time. The first person to reach the summit of Aconcagua was a Swiss guide named Mathias Zurbriggen. As part of a British expedition led by Edmund Fitzgerald, Zurbriggen reached Aconcagua's summit on January 14, 1897, alone, via the northwest ridge of the mountain (roughly paralleling today's *ruta normal*). This expedition approached from the south via the Horcones Valley; and a total of five attempts over six weeks were needed before Zurbriggen finally summited.

The Polish Glacier was climbed in 1934 and the south face in 1954. Comparable to two Eigers, the South Face is huge, almost 3,000m high, defended by bands of loose rock, ice cliffs, and huge avalanches, so it was a huge accomplishment by the French expedition. The first Argentine ascent was made by Nicolas Plantamura in 1934, who now resides in the cemetery for *andanistas* just east of Penta del Inca.

Remains of a guanaco (relative of the llama) were found just below Aconcagua's summit in 1947 - evidence of Incan passage (possibly to the summit) long before Europeans set foot in the region.

During the 1983-84 season, 346 climbers attempted the mountain. Ten years later, this number had increased to well over 2,000 climbers in one season. Aconcagua's popularity is well deserved.

Nido de Condores

From Camp Canada, the trail turns right and climbs a steep scree slope with long, shallow switchbacks to Camp Alaska. From here, the trail climbs a short distance to the south before turning left (east) to avoid a field of *penitentes*. There is a hut up and off to the right (south) of the trail, but this tiny shelter is in ruins. The trail continues to Nido de Condores, a large, flat area with some rocks serving as wind breaks. There is a small pond here, and water can be obtained from it on warm afternoons.

Berlin Camp

The route above Nido de Condores at first goes east, then turns to the south and ascends the subtle crest of the ridge to the 3 huts that mark the Berlin Camp. This camp is marked as "Plantamura" on some maps, as the first hut is named after the first Argentine to climb Aconcagua. The second, slightly larger hut is now known as Libertad (it was named "Eva Peron" after it was built in 1951). The third and most recently constructed hut was built by some climbers from Berlin in memory of a friend who had died on the mountain. These huts are usually used as cooking areas.

Summit Day

From Berlin Camp, the route heads left and continues up the vague ridge. It passes another campsite known as White Rocks at 6,250m. It then continues up and then slightly to the right to reach the Independencia Hut at 6,400m. Now in ruins, it has served as a bivouac site for descending climbers. From this hut, the route continues up and right, crossing the Cresta del Viento (Windy Crest), and heads across the upper part of the Gran Accarreo to the infamous Canaleta, the most notorious part of the Normal Route.

The Canaleta is a 400m 33-degree chute filled with disagreeably loose rocks. The challenge is overcome not by any technical skill, but rather by the mental and physical stamina necessary to keep moving. The Canaleta ends atop the Cresta del Guanaco, the ridge that connects the lower South Summit with the higher, North Summit of Aconcagua.

The final part of the route follows the crest up to the small, sloping summit plateau, where an aluminium cross marks the top. The descent is then back to Berlin Camp, overnight, then return to Base Camp.