

More About the Santa Marta

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THOSE who have read accounts of the Cabot Expedition to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta will recall that unique range in which its members made mountaineering history. Located in the northeastern bulge of South America, these comparatively unknown peaks rise to a height of nearly 19,000 ft. within 600 miles of the equator and 30 miles of the Caribbean Sea. In 1939 the Cabot group explored extensively, climbed the highest summit and gathered data on the region sufficient to make life easy for those lucky enough to follow.

That we were thus fortunate two years later was certainly no fault of world events. Some people, in 1941, are content to stay home in times like these, close to the radio and the things they can count on. But *carpe diem* feelings attack others not so sensible and I was fortunate to find mine shared by Elizabeth Knowlton and Paul Petzoldt, whose expedition experience more than made up for my lack of it. On February 5th we sailed for Colombia where we were joined by Max Eberli, formerly of Zürich. Finding a comrade like Max had been another stroke of luck. His knowledge of Spanish saved us many headaches and his fine Swiss yodels, added to Paul's Wyoming bass, are probably echoing still through the rocky glens of the Sierra.

We had hoped for some advance glimpses of our mountains-elect. On clear days they are visible from the Caribbean as one approaches the coast, from the port of Barranquilla where we landed, and from the plane going across the bay to Cienaga, deep in the fruit country. In each case, however, haze hid all but the outlying slopes. From Cienaga we went by train and bus to Valledupar, circling the Santa Marta massif for the easier approach from the S. Then we varied traditional procedure a little and proceeded northward to San Sebastian by way of the lovely valley of Pueblo Bello, with pack animals carrying our 1000 lbs. of supplies and equipment. Here, 3000 ft. up from the sizzling tropics, a faraway shimmer against the sky was our first hint of the mountains. Almost a week passed before we saw them close to. On February 23rd, just 18 days from the New York skyline, we crossed the 13,000-ft. pass above

Mamancanaca and a line of snow-covered peaks met our eyes, marching splendidly across the northern horizon.

The intervening days had been filled with interest. The steaming banana lands had given way to the tawny slopes and high clear air of the *paramos*. In the jungle we had been fascinated by bright parrots, by blue and yellow butterflies big as robins; now huge condors were soaring overhead. Tropical growth was left two vertical miles below but up here there was color too, in the low-lying mountain flowers, clusters of vivid lupin and great trees of alpine rose in full bloom. The negroid types of the Colombian lowlands had not been prepossessing, but this was Indian country now and we were finding the Arahuacos a picturesque and pleasant people. Our interest in them and their costume (an all-over affair of cream-colored, hand-woven woolen and oddly shaped straw cap or *gorro*) was hardly greater than their interest in us and ours. Some mysterious grapevine had brought the news to San Sebastian, days before our arrival, that two American women were on their way, and *in pants!* It created a sensation.

Some extraordinary things had happened to us, like the *sancocho* we went to in Pueblo Bello, for instance. There never was a party like it. The food (very juicy, very strange) was dumped from a large pot onto a table, covered with shiny green banana leaves, around which the dozen or so guests clustered. From then on it was every man for himself. Things kept mysteriously disappearing from your plate. Where was that nice drumstick you had beaten everyone to?—the old Spaniard two seats away was hard at work at one strangely like it. The day wound up with singing and dancing at the farmhouse where we were staying and next morning, rather sleepy after all the festivities, we started on our way to San Sebastian, 3500 ft. further up. Our four days there, waiting for a reluctant transport to assemble, were filled pleasantly with swims in the river, calls on the padres at the Capuchin mission (the sisters fled at the sight of our trousers) and picture-taking sorties into the village where photogenic figures lounged against the pale plaster walls.

We were taking everything very easily, on purpose. It was part of a definite plan by which we hoped to avoid the high altitude maladies so often experienced by climbers in the Andes. Nobody walked if he felt like riding or carried anything when there was a bull or mule to carry it for him. Having allowed ourselves plenty

of time (five weeks in the interior) we weren't in a hurry and could afford frequent rest days to help acclimatization. An almost comical amount of food had been brought; we ate nearly all of it. We were testing out various conditioning devices too, such as salt rations to offset the effects of dehydration, and daily doses of vitamin tablets. As to clothing, we were prepared for extremes of temperature and nobody went out into the incredible glare without sun helmet and glasses. Just which of all these things was responsible for our astonishing freedom from mountain sickness will never be known; maybe it was just luck. Anyway we approached base camp in a tremendous good humor and on the 24th were pitching our tents at historic Gloomy Gulch, which only the greatest respect for the previous party kept us from renaming. They had discovered here that their pack animals could go no further; we knew all that ahead of time. No rude shocks awaited us to spoil our pleasure in its deep-green lake with the Valkyrie rocks piled high above.

The day after reaching Gloomy Gulch was a rest day for everyone but Petzoldt who went off with a gleam in his eye to reconnoiter, returning at nightfall with the good news that the route beyond opened up well and a site for our next camp lay about five hours higher up. The supplies and equipment left in a vast mound by our departing transport had then to be sorted and classified. Rations for the high camps were assembled and packed, and our first loads weighed and assigned. The next day back-packing began.

After climbing the steep defile at the end of the gulch, our way led eastward. It wasn't easy country to get around in. The scenery was all chopped up into deep Vs, with a lake at the bottom of each one. These lakes, lovely in their varied color tones, led upward in ascending chains. The sides were sheer in places and we had often to make long detours around cliffs that afforded no convenient ledges for traversing. In plain sight now were the two peaks to which Walter Wood had introduced us months before in his office at the American Geographical Society. They had been fine to look at on the maps and in the pictures he had put so generously at our disposal, but here, face to face, they were unbelievably exciting. The higher one (triangulated at 18,160 ft.) was a splendid affair with a gleaming cataract of snow and ice pouring down its northern slope. The second, slightly lower, was a handsome rock pyramid. We hoped to establish a high camp somewhere between the two from which they could both be climbed.

These mountains seemed to belong to us from the first, and we christened them almost immediately. The higher one we called La Reina for Queen Isabella of Spain and the second Pico Ujueta after Juan Ujueta of Barranquilla, the good friend of both American expeditions and a member of the first. These names have since been approved by the Colombian government, to our great pleasure. The Colombian government would have its hands full if it bothered with all the other things we named. From the moment we struck eastward we had been in new country and, like the two peaks, we felt it to be uniquely ours. Eberli was kept busy translating our ideas into Spanish and such mellifluous titles emerged as Lago de Ciel Azule, Lago de los dos Islottes, and El Nido del Condor (our high camp, perched on a rock).

After two days of relaying and a day of rest, we were ready to move up to Camp 1. It is amazing what a few heavy loads do to one's whole philosophy; we became Thoreaus at once, determined to reduce to a minimum the impedimenta of living. Our last sense of expeditionary self-importance vanished forever as we surveyed the pile of things we were leaving behind, including items no bona fide explorer would dream of being without. Then, heavily laden in spite of our economics, we made the trip up to our new quarters and pitched camp as the sun set. The sky colors were reflected in the narrow lake below us, with a black border around the edge made by its cliff walls. To the S. rose the snow-plastered flank of De Brette Peak, a strikingly handsome mountain in spite of its being almost 1000 ft. lower than the others.

After a day of rest here, our march upward began again. We skirted two more lovely lakes with a rock wall between down which a graceful cascade poured. We were beginning to get up in the world and the flowers, scarcer now, had become furry as if for greater warmth. The color of the second lake was all but unbelievable, reminding one of the strong bright tint of laundry bluing. Shiny black patent-leather frogs hopped about on the water's edge, one of the rare signs of life in that strangely dead landscape. Only the sound of our bootnails scraping against the rocks broke the brooding stillness, or the hum of a condor as he drifted by, speculating perhaps on the edibility of the new arrivals.

Blue Haven Lake was the last in its chain; above it we climbed into a world of ice and snow. The glacier flowing between our two peaks split against a sharp rock rib and poured down its either side.

Ascending this rib to about 16,000 ft., we found a place level enough for our camp, perched above everything like the crows nest of a battleship. The late sun glimmered on Pico Ujueta, now very close. La Reina was just out of sight behind a snowy shoulder. The scene was indescribably grand but we had only time for a hasty look around as we deposited our loads and descended in double-quick time.

It took two days of relaying to stock our Condor's Nest camp and on the third day we moved up, I looking like a jalopy with the pots and pans dangling on the outside of my pack. That night we built tent platforms and cooked our first supper on the primus stove (below, withered branches of *freilejon* sufficed for fuel). We were in a different climate bracket here. Everyone slept in his clothes and next morning the little pool that was our water supply had frozen solid.

We climbed our first mountain, La Reina, on March 5th. The ascent proved unexpectedly easy after we gave up an attempt on the W. ice ridge as unsafe without the crampons unwisely left behind at base camp. But it was a pleasant climb over the ripples and crevasses of the N. slope and we emerged after four hours' climbing on the snowy dome of our first Santa Marta summit. The scene was indescribable and so were our feelings at being there, the first to see the treasures of the Sierra from this place. To the N. W. lay the highest group of the range with its two summits so nearly alike in height, the one ascended by Wood and Bakewell in 1939, the other by the German party that preceded them by such a short time. The third peak in this cluster lies further W., and, of that one, more anon. These mountains were very striking with their black rock faces, dazzling white crests, and masses of whipped-cream clouds gathering around them.

The descent from La Reina was fast, uneventful and hot. The white trough down which we made our way seemed a concentration point for all the sun's rays and they played on us like searchlights while we hid as best we could under every conceivable device of scarf and handkerchief.

On March 7th we climbed Pico Ujueta. A preliminary glacier approach was followed by a few rock pitches; then we made a diagonal traverse of a steep ice slope. At first step-cutting was necessary; then, as we went further, its surface became oddly contorted until finally it was like clambering from one statue-less niche

to another. Above this rather diverting passage, a long snow incline took us to the foot of the final pyramid. Broken rock made easy climbing here and five hours after the start we were on the summit, looking over the breath-taking N. face to the smiling Caribbean below. To the S. La Reina looked like an enormous helping of vanilla ice cream ("Pass the chocolate sauce," said someone). On the other side, a ship was leaving a long streamer of smoke trailing lazily across the water. It was our finest day for color. The afternoon clouds boiled up, shot with oblique shafts of light, giving the photographers so much reason to linger that it was a wonder we ever got around to descending at all.

Early next morning we broke camp and made the descent to Sunset Lake with heavy loads. On March 9th we returned to Gloomy Gulch, the all-time high in load carrying being made that day by Petzoldt with 102 lbs. We found base camp untouched and unbelievably luxurious. Just why no roving Arahaco had molested our belongings we were never able to fathom. Perhaps Paul's timberwolf cry, amplified by the echo of the rock walls, had convinced the Indians that a pack of wild animals guarded the camp, even in our absence!

To celebrate this and everything else, we had our private *sancocho* that night and stopped at nothing. If you wanted dessert first and then again at the end, you could have it; or, if seized with a longing for sardines in the middle of the meat course, you could have that too. What a sky the Sierra treated us to! Shooting stars were chasing each other across the heavens like 4th of July fireworks. As we climbed into our sleeping bags the moon came out, like a benediction on the first chapter of our Santa Marta adventures.

Two days later Petzoldt and I started off for a try at the third peak of the highest group, travelling light as we still had a touch of backache. This mountain is considerably more remote than the others and the lake chains that had led in the direction of our first peaks crossed our line of march here. It made a vast difference. The better part of two days was spent struggling through a maze of wildly tangled valleys that forced us constantly off line into costly detours and retreats. Still the mountain kept its distance. Finally a shortage of time and food made it clearly unwise to go on and we retreated like Napoleon from Moscow. Back we went through the old labyrinth of cliffs and lakes, in one place sinking to

the waist in mud when we decided rashly to wade a last water hazard.

It took a while to recover from the rigors of this trip; then we started off again on March 15th for De Brette Peak, hoping not to find ourselves *persona non grata* to this mountain as well. That night we bivouacked at the foot of the fine S. ice slope. The weather had been threatening for the first time but the mists parted at sunset and showed, high overhead, the summit's white spire touched with gold. We made an early start next morning, up ice perfect for the crampons which, this time, we had brought along. We tacked back and forth steeply and after occasional pauses for breath and photography reached the top at about 10 o'clock.

It was a fine last summit for the Santa Martas. The familiar and well-loved places were all in sight. There was La Reina across the valley and, beyond her, Pico Ujueta shot into the sky between us and the sea. Over to the S. the parallel lines of the great Mamanacanaca moraines marched down the valley and above them hung the crescent of Cungacaca Pass from which we had seen the Sierra for the first time, weeks before.

On that pass, four days later, we stood saying goodbye to the mountains where we had met so much fun and adventure. "Even a stone rolls downhill" is a Spanish saying, Juancho Ujueta had told us, and certainly our descent to San Sebastian was far from slow, taking half the time required on the way up. On the 23rd we left the high country behind and, taking the route by the Guatapuri Valley, plunged back into a landscape vibrating with heat. Late that night we covered the last of the 36 miles into Valledupar.

The next evening we reached Barranquilla after a bus trip that began at 3.30 in the morning and did not end until long after night-fall, when we and our 16 pieces of filthy baggage were unloaded on the terrace of the Prado Hotel, to the horror and astonishment of the clientèle. Three days later Elizabeth and I took the clipper to Miami. As the plane emerged from the haze above the city, we looked over to see our mountains, shining warm and joyous in the sun. It is so that we remember them and take them with us, a "light for memory to turn to when it wishes a beam upon its face."