

Snow Mountains of Irian Jaya

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THERE ARE FEW mountain ranges less known or more interesting than the Snow Mountains of Irian Jaya. Thrusting above the equatorial jungles in the heart of the island of New Guinea, the Snow Mountains contain some of the most remote and isolated glaciers on earth, as well as the highest peak in East Asia: the Carstenz Pyramid (4884 meters, 16,024 feet). The area surrounding the peaks is inhabited by the Dani, a fascinating tribe of reputedly cannibalistic people who still live in the stone age.

First sighted from the sea by the Dutch explorer Jan Carstenz in 1623, the Carstenz Pyramid resisted all expeditions until Henrich Harrer (of Eiger fame) succeeded in penetrating its formidable defenses in 1963. Six expeditions followed in the next ten years. In 1974, when Indonesia claimed West Irian from the Dutch, tourists were restricted from visiting the area. In 1979 Fabre and Domenech of France; and Boardman and Collins from England reached the range. Both groups spent so much time overcoming logistical obstacles and the inclement weather that plagues equatorial mountains that each only had time for one major ascent.

During February of 1980 Robert Shapiro and I began writing letters in hopes of raising enough money to cover our travel costs. Generous contributions from the American Alpine Club, Mazamas, Mount Everest Foundation, Oxford University Expeditions Council and the A.C. Irvine Trust Fund brought us close to the initial air fare to New Guinea. In March, *Sports Illustrated* magazine shocked us by offering to cover all travel costs if we would allow them to send a reporter with us. On July 9 we left London for Jakarta, our first stop in the Catch 22-filled bureaucratic steeplechase required to reach the mountains.

In Indonesia's capital we obtained letters of recommendation from the head of their Olympic Committee, the National Sports Federation, the Governor of Irian Jaya in Jakarta, the British Embassy and, most

importantly, a *Surat Jalan* or "travel permit" from the military police allowing us to visit Irian Jaya. In New Guinea we would have to get a permit to go to the mountains.

On July 16 we reached Jayapura, the largest village in Irian Jaya. We stayed with Leroy Kelm a missionary pilot who was most helpful, and agreed to fly us into the interior. Two days later Sam Moses, the *Sports Illustrated* reporter met us. He had been training very hard in the Shawangunks and was ready to climb. However, we had been unable to acquire the necessary permits to reach the mountains. The military police required a letter from military intelligence to grant us our *Surat Jalan*. The military intelligence demanded a letter from the regional police, who claimed that it was no problem; all they needed was a letter from the military police. After much discussion, we finally agreed to fly into the interior illegally.

We flew into Ilaga, the closest Dani village to the mountains. After an adrenalin-producing landing in a field overlooking the village we were engulfed by Dani yelling a primal guttural scream which can not be spelled in our language. They gathered around, fascinated by us, our plane and our clothing. Dani men are naked except for a large gourd worn over the penis. Dani women wear grass skirts. Unfortunately, there was an Indonesian Army outpost nearby, installed in an effort to control the Dani. Lacking the proper permit, bribery and luck allowed us to move on. We hired ten Dani for porters, but left with a contingent of twenty who accompanied us to Base Camp.

The approach was fascinating. We went through dense jungles, a vertical bog and beautiful plateaus. The Dani were kind, generous and completely in tune with nature. It was a true education camping with them. They carried their staple diet of sweet potatoes, and foraged for everything else. They caught bats and birds with wooden sticks. Without matches they built roaring fires in the tropical rain with wet wood. In the same amount of time it took us to set up a tent, they erected wood and palm-frond houses. When it rained they took palm fronds and sewed them together with strips of palm as the thread. Reciprocally, everything that we did fascinated them. Sam Moses' tape recorder filled them with awe, and they loved singing into it. Our various articles of clothing, freeze-dried food and even the concept of garbage were new to them.

The Dani's strength was incredible. Without complaint they carried heavy loads on their heads over a pass at 15,500 feet. Over sharp rock and through snow they marched barefoot and naked. It seemed a bit silly that we were the ones who claimed to be outdoorsmen and climbers.

They left us at our Base Camp at 14,500 feet. We asked them to return in twelve days, counting the number on hands, sticks and in the mud. We were alone in a range the size of the Tetons with limitless first ascents to be done. We failed on an attempt of a new route on Carstenz, then climbed Harrer's original route to acclimatize. After a few days



PLATE 33

Photo by Geoffrey Tablin

Dani Porters about to set out from their village, Irian Jaya.

of waiting out bad weather, we climbed a new route on the 3000-foot north face of Carstenz Pyramid. It yielded a spectacular free climb of continuous F6 to F7 pitches with two F8 cruxes. The rock was extremely rough, giving excellent friction, and contained numerous small nubbins. The two-day ascent featured a surprisingly cold and unpleasant bivouac halfway up the face. On the summit the three of us paid tribute to our porters by stripping naked and putting on penis gourds for our victory photograph.

Two days later Bob Shapiro and I made a traverse of the two next highest peaks in the range, Nga Pulu and Sunday Peak, via a pleasant snow-and-ice route. The next day Bob and I set out on a three-day trip to attempt some unclimbed spires and the fourth highest mountain in the range, the Idenburg. Less than an hour from camp we encountered our Danis returning for us. They yelled happily and embraced us. We tried to ask them to wait a few more days, however without a language in common it was impossible. We returned to Base Camp and packed up.

We exited via Tembagapura, an American copper-mining camp on the other side of the mountains. It was a mistake. The noise and garbage of the mine shocked us back into the twentieth century. The area is restricted and we were essentially held prisoner for a week until a flight could be arranged to take us to the public airport on the Island of Biak. Worst of all, it showed us how the worst aspects of "civilization" are encroaching on one of the last unspoiled primitive cultures in the world.

Despite this anticlimactic ending, the trip provided us with beautiful mountains, amazing people, constant adventure and some very satisfying climbing.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Irian Jaya, New Guinea, Snow Mountains.

ASCENTS: Carstenz Pyramid, 4884 meters, 16,024 feet, first direct ascent of North Face (NCCS V, F8), August 2 and 3, 1980 (Geoffrey C. Tabin, Robert S. Shapiro and Samuel Moses).

Nga Pulu, 4879 meters, 16,009 feet and Sunday Peak 4842 meters, 15,887 feet, August 5, 1980 (Tabin and Shapiro).