



Serac-torn east face of Huayna Potosi. Summit or Die climbs through icefall left of center, before slanting up left toward summit ridge. Robert Rauch

narrower, and at one point I was looking down a steep rock face 400m high. It was preferable not to lose one's balance, easier said than done with a big pack. By the time I left the aqueduct for the glacier below the face, it was almost dark. I walked for two hours by headlamp and camped at the start of the glacier.

I should have stayed at this campsite for a day, to examine the face in light, but I had a guiding engagement in Chile. I don't normally climb into the unknown, but next day I made an exception. The first 200m of the face were easy, and at dawn I had arrived below the crux. Swinging axes I gained height, into a complete mess. Steep, unstable ice

blocks were everywhere: I got nervous, but it was too late to go back. Succumbing to time pressure is the worst of all mistakes in alpinism. I concentrated fully; the ice was not quite vertical, but I could not trust the blocks. Finally I reached easier terrain and took a deep breath. "Done, you bastard of a wall," I said to myself. The silence was wonderful, but I knew I'd never come back to this face again.

I climbed slopes of 55°, often covered with powder snow. It was still a long way to the top. After a long, rising traverse left, I finally reached the normal route and followed a one-and-half-meter-wide track to the summit. I was soon following the track down, reaching the Casablanca Hut where I'd left the car.

At the Casablanca Hut I saw a guy in a T-shirt that said, "Summit or Die." He didn't look fit, or ready for suicide. He probably survived without summiting. It seemed a fitting route name. Summit or Die (1,100m) has a crux pitch of 60m, up to 85°. It's probably the most significant first ascent in this region for 20 years.

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Hampaturi Group, Serkhe Khollu (5,546m), southwest face, La Venganza del Don Gringo. The rainy season ended at the end of May, and I've returned to the Hampaturi. I pitch the tent near my vehicle and fall asleep. At 3 a.m. I set out for the southwest face, which I've been dreaming of for years: I'm well acclimatized and during the rainy season kept fit on the cliffs of Aranjuez and improved my balance and coordination by slack-lining. I start up the first vertical icefall without pausing; conditions are excellent, and I am quickly gaining height.

An Austrian pair, I think Markus Kronthaler and Michael Rechberger, were the first to climb this face. In 2001 there was almost no information about Serkhe Khollu, and they walked far to reach the mountain. An ice nose in the middle of the face led steeply to the upper glacier, the crux being an ice cave that they had to crawl through. There was steep climbing, and their line, which led directly to the summit, may have been one of the most difficult ice routes in Bolivia. The ice nose disappeared with glacial recession, and the original route no longer exists. A new mining development below the mountain has changed the character of the area, and access roads should soon be improved. These miners have caused no problem to visitors who don't bother them.

I knew the way to the mountain, because I used to visit the grasslands below to buy llamas for my restaurant. I went there almost weekly to separate llamas from the herd and kill them. When time permitted I'd walk higher to scope lines on the face and spotted a hard ice/mixed route to the right of the Austrian line.

The middle section of the face gives mixed climbing, on brittle rock (UIAA V) and 65-75° névé. A wide belt of seracs looms above. Deep powder lies to the left, so I choose a stepped, direct line—safe, elegant, but with overhangs. There is no room for fear, and my concentration is total. The key section is 125°, and I climb it quickly, then catch my breath in a small depression. The final slopes are 55° and excellent snow, leading to the ridge a short distance from the summit. I at last enjoy the warming rays of the new day. In the distance banks of cloud rise from the tropical valleys of the Yunga region. Have I ever been this alive?

I name the 700m route La Venganza del Don Gringo (Don Gringo's revenge). To make money during the quiet rainy season, I sometimes wrestle. My opponents in the pre-arranged fights are Cholitas, women in traditional dress. My fighting name, Don Gringo, has become popular, not only at the wrestling ring but also with my employees and friends. La Venganza del Don Gringo is by far the most difficult of my three first ascents on Serkhe Khollu and may be the most difficult ice/mixed climb in Bolivia. I don't think I can climb harder ice, with or without a partner.

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Hampaturi Group, Serkhe Khollu (5,546m), southwest face, The Birthday of the Broken Leg. Frozen gusts of thin air painfully escaping our weary lungs. Infinite stars splashing over dark velvet. "Happy birthday!" Robert Rauch screams into the Andean storm as I lean on my ice axe, panting. "Thank you," I want to tell him, but my words are violently ripped from my mouth and spiral high up into the air before they slowly drift down into silent insufficiency, somewhere between frozen cracks and ice shining with the reflection of southern stars.

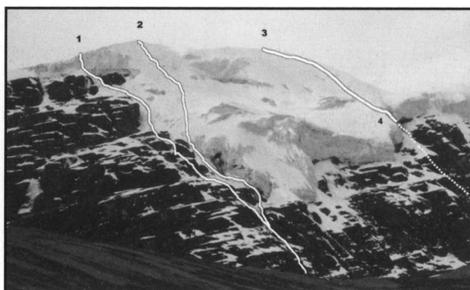
It was my birthday indeed, and no words could explain what it meant to me to watch once again the Bolivian Andes merge into the night. Exactly one year before, I had been climbing Ala Izquierda when one single second tore me apart from life. My imagination of the future was shattered along with my bones 300m below.

I spent the following two days and nights between my exposed bones and ghostly apparitions from the realm of hypothermia while I crawled over the ice. And yet I knew I was going to return to the magic world of ice.

I knew I had to return despite the doctors' verdicts. "You won't ever climb again," they would keep telling me. One year, 10 surgeries, and infinite sessions of painful physiotherapy later, there I was, emerging from the slightly overhanging last pitch of "The Birthday of the Broken Leg."

That day daylight had found us hiding my specially adapted "climbing crutches" in a cache before we ventured into the realm of verticality. The ice was hard as stone. The first ice shower that Robert sent down from above felt uncomfortable after such a long off-time. Then it was my turn.

On a small plateau in front of a majestic blue serac, Robert and I devoured some candy. Another 80m of steep, hard snow took us to an uncomfortable ice traverse that led to the face's last great obstacle, the final 95° ropelength, while daylight began to wane. As I followed Robert over the dreadfully hard overhanging ice, my admiration for him kept on soaring, not so much because of his ability to lead such



Southwest face of Serkhe Khollu. (1) Birthday of the Broken Leg. (2) Chamaka (Berger-Hill-Rauch, 2010, incorrectly drawn in *AAJ* 2011). (3) Summit. (4) La Venganza del Don Gringo. The 2001 Austrian route *Durch das Nasenloch* climbed an ice hose, long since disappeared, between 2 and 4 to reach the upper hanging glacier. *Isabel Suppé*