The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia

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Have you ever of a winter's evening reached up on your library shelf for your favorite atlas, settled down comfortably in a favorite chair and commenced thumbing over the pages with a vague but hopeful idea of finding some previously untouched range whose proximity and topographic composition might provide novelty for next season's climbing program? And, having given due consideration to the Himalayas, as you have done many times before, the Alps, Caucasus and New Zealand ranges, have you returned with a sigh of contentment to your favorite Coast Range, Selkirks or St. Elias, satisfied that nothing has escaped your notice? If so, you have missed the boat. If you had stopped at the map of South America, allowing your inspection to omit the great peaks of the Andes from Ecuador to Chile, your gaze might have alighted on an apparently insignificant area in northern Colombia called the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. It is not probable that you would have stopped there, for most atlases fail to inspire curiosity in their portrayal of these mountains. And if you had so hesitated and consulted alpine literature you would almost certainly have dropped the matter then and there, as there is nothing save a short sentence in Mountaineering describing the range as worthy of attention. The purpose of this paper is to describe the climbing aspects of a visit made to the Sierra in March, 1939.¹

Without a doubt one of the most interesting things about the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is the lack of information concerning it. It would not be unfair to say that more has been written on the remote ranges of Asia or of Antarctica than has ever appeared on the Sierra. The more astounding is it then when you discover that here is, by almost any definition, the highest coastal massif in the world, with peaks rising to approximately 19,000 ft. within 30 miles of the Caribbean coast of Colombia, girdled on the W. by a railroad and on the S. and E. by graveled motor roads.

¹ For a complete report on many aspects of geographical interest in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta see "The Cabot Expedition to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta of Colombia"; Geographical Review, xxix, 587.
The important banana lands of Santa Marta snuggle against the foothills and the snow-crowned summits are visible from the modern city of Barranquilla. During the dry seasons and sometimes during the rains, ships bound for the coastal ports sight the high peaks from miles away, while pilots of planes flying S. from Miami use them as landmarks from 100 miles off shore. Finally, the Sierra is but slightly more than 2000 miles from New York and while some of our own Rocky Mountains fall within such a radius none are alpine in character to the same extent as the Sierra. They can be reached in less than twenty-four hours from New York by air and in less than a week by sea. Despite all this no serious mountaineering party entered the range previous to 1939 and a bibliography of the few investigators who have studied various aspects of the lower slopes is short indeed.

The Sierra massif is an isolated offshoot of the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes. It is surrounded by lowland on three sides and the Caribbean Sea flanks it on the N. If the sea were to rise less than 1000 ft. the range would become an island. The massif reaches its greatest elevation some 30 miles from the coast, then slopes gradually to the south for about seventy miles to the valley of the Reo Cesar, a tributary of the Magdalena. There are three routes by which the high peaks may be reached; from Dibulla on the coast, which exposes the traveler to the malaria-infested rain forests of the northern slopes; from Rio Frió on the W., the most direct route but unsuitable for animal transport through the steepness and inadequacy of the trails; and from Valledupar on the S., the longest approach, but offering good trails and exempt from the danger of malaria.

In 1930 Thomas D. Cabot saw the high snows from the deck of a cruise ship, immediately disembarked at Santa Marta, and spent two weeks investigating possibilities of ascent. Attempting to reach the peaks by two routes on the N. and W. slopes, he finally reached 13,000 ft. above Rio Frió only to find himself cut off from his objective by a maze of intervening ridges and valleys. Since that date he had sought an opportunity to return and complete the job.

The dry season in Colombia occurs in the first three months of the year and, having long since succumbed to Sierra Nevada

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2 "Mountains of the Caribbean"; *Appalachia*, xviii, 17.
propaganda, there came like a bolt from the blue a phone call from Cabot asking me to join him in an exploration of the range and an attempt on the high peaks—no, not in 1940—but sailing from New York in less than two weeks. And so it came about that Cabot and Henry Hall flew luxuriously to Barranquilla on February 22nd, leaving Anderson Bakewell and myself to follow by boat in charge of some 1000 lbs. of baggage.

On March 23rd we assembled in Santa Marta, the seagoing contingent being greeted even before it had disembarked by the disconcerting news that a German party had just returned from the range and had climbed the Central Peak of the main group. Why is it, I wonder, that two climbing parties so often seek the same objective, each independent of and completely unbeknown to the other? And the more so “why” here in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta which has stood within sight of all comers for centuries without so much as a mountaineering finger being raised in its direction. The German party bore the awe-inspiring title of Deutsches-Kolumbien-Kordilleren Expedition, and of its five members three had reached the summit. Of these one, a Swiss-Italian prospector named Praolini, was in Barranquilla and was persuaded by Cabot and Hall to accompany our party. Discouraging as was the news of the German conquest, we determined to carry out our original plan for, in the only published photograph of the highest peaks, a photo taken from 20 miles away, it could be seen that the central summit had an eastern neighbor which appeared to rival it in height and Praolini stated that, from the summit of the Central Peak it appeared as though the two were ganz gleich. The East Peak was then to be our goal.

We left Santa Marta and the lavish hospitality of the United Fruit Company on March 4th, traveling by rail to the terminus at Fundación and thence by truck to Valledupar, reaching the latter on the evening of the same day. Losing no time, a creditable feat in Latin America, we enlisted mules to carry ourselves and our supplies over the first part of the route and were under way by noon of the next day, making our way along the bank of the Guatapuri River and into the foothills of the range. The dry forest through which we passed was lovely in the extreme. Overhead whirled screaming macaws and parrots; flowering trees rose in a tangle on all sides and, though the heat seemed excessive to
us who had left winter behind only a short ten days previously, the gushing torrent at our side provided the wherewithal to quench an unruly thirst. The delights of the trail were all too quickly dissipated. We camped that night at a corral called Ariguani and during our occupation were speedily and effectively devoured by the whole gamut of tropical pests—ticks, sand flies, fleas and chiggers. Probably we should not complain too much for this persecution lasted only one night. The following day we crossed a 7000-ft. pass and dropped into the settlement of San Sebastián at 6400 ft., above the limit of even the most persistent tick.

We spent two days at San Sebastián negotiating for bulls to carry our equipment to the higher country and were greatly aided in so doing by the fathers of a Capuchin monastery whose history goes back prior to 1680. During the two days we stretched our still protesting legs by climbing the 9000-ft. summit of Figueroa for survey purposes and were rewarded with a late afternoon view of the first snow peaks of the range 20 miles to the north. The highest snows were cloud covered but their satellites beckoned encouragingly and provided the stimulus for an early start the following morning on the long climb ahead.

Up at four, the six bulls and two mules were packed and under way by six. After considerable indecision as to the way, we found ourselves climbing by steep zigzags towards the paramos or grass-covered uplands. Dehydration from a scorching sun plus our first contact with moderate altitude produced an acute lassitude in nearly all of us who, unwilling to admit of such a complaint, contrived to produce all manner of excuses to dawdle and it was mid-afternoon before we reached a pass at 11,400 ft. and dropped a few feet to the head of the Aduriameina Valley where a campsite of doubtful virtue, due to its limited water supply, was found. Here we saw the first traces of former glaciation. On the north slope of the valley were several terminal moraines and above our camp a large lobate moraine descended to below 11,000 ft., the lowest altitude at which we saw definite traces of past glaciers. The high rocky peaks above us had by now taken on the appearance of having borne ice, their slopes being smoothly scoured, though with few cirques and no remnants of ice. An interesting characteristic of the upper slopes of the Sierra Nevada is the fact that the topography appears to have supported an ice mantle but yesterday, so
clean is the scouring and so perfectly preserved are the moraines. However long ago it was that glaciers mantled these slopes (11,000-15,000 ft.), it is the opinion of Mr. Frank Notestein, chief geologist of the Colombian Petroleum Co., who accompanied us, that the glacial epoch was of rather short duration and that such glaciation began in the late Pleistocene.

On March 10th we crossed a 12,600-ft. pass and from its crest had our first comprehensive view of the great peaks of the main range about twelve miles to the north. Three high peaks stood out sharp and clear against a cloudless tropical sky. Praolini pointed out the route followed by the German party to the Central Peak and we immediately set to work speculating on the relative height of the East Peak. Vertical angles measured with the theodolite were no encouragement for these gave a greater angle to the Central Peak. At once all sorts of thoroughly unsound reasons were advanced as to why the angles were no true indication of relative height. Only one held water; to be higher the East Peak must be further away, and this appeared to be the case. The discussion dragged on as we descended into the Cataca Valley where we camped at a corral called Mamancanaca, snuggling between two huge lateral moraines at an altitude of 11,250 ft. Our triangulation later showed that the moraines rise over 900 ft. above the valley floor.

Mamancanaca was to serve as our base camp and so we dumped our return supplies and superfluous equipment there in order to reduce the loads which the animals were to carry to the higher camps. Though a good idea, we had not counted on a number of our animals disappearing during the night and when we came to pack our remaining animals the following morning each beast had at least the equal of its previous day's load. We were not long in having this state of affairs borne out to us. Despite an early start, the hot sun and the altitude soon made itself felt and one after the other the laden animals lay down, and once down no device which we could conceive would get them started again until the spirit so moved them.

In mid-afternoon we entered a deep and sullen glen, shut in to right and left by towering walls of rock and in which lay a number of deep blue lakes. Making our way around these we reached the highest and found to our dismay that our animals had reached the
end of their journey. Instead of an easy saddle connecting our glen with drainage from the high peaks, there rose at the far end of the lake a steep and rocky couloir giving access to a notch in the ridge, the only break in the perimeter of cliffs save the defile through which we had come. We named our surroundings "Gloomy Gulch," a name which described not only our surroundings but our feelings as well. Our altitude was 13,500 ft.

At this point a combination of circumstances made it advisable to split the party. First of all, altitude was making itself felt on several of us; secondly, it was felt that, now that the animals could go no further, a small climbing party would have a better chance of success than a large one; and finally, since climbing was only one of the interests of the trip, a wider understanding of the geology and complex topography could be had if our itineraries diverged. Consequently Cabot and Notestein went off to investigate the neighboring valleys and ridges while Hall, Bakewell, Praolini and I with a week's supply of food turned toward the high peaks.

On March 12th we backpacked loads over "Gloomy" notch and camped beside a crystal clear lake in the valley at the head of which stood the East Peak. This valley, above the point where we camped, contains three large lakes, all occupying glacier-formed depressions and flowing one into the other in swift-running streams and waterfalls. From below it seemed impractical to follow the margins of these lakes and so we packed our loads high onto the retaining slopes and then traversed across talus, grass and slabs to the shore of the highest lake at 15,000 ft. It was a day not soon to be forgotten and the less said of it the better, climaxed by the stubborn refusal of what Hall called the "ultimate in pressure stoves" to produce heat for more than a few seconds at a time.

The following morning we moved forward once more and, following the axis of the now narrowing valley, reached a campsite by a pool of glacier water a few hundred feet away from the ice wall which forms the terminus of the glacier. The altitude was 16,500 ft. All in all, it was a happier day than yesterday for not only did the stoves behave a trifle more normally, but the monotony of packing heavy loads was relieved by our coming face to face with, not a mountain sheep or goat, but a plain, ordinary cow. The hilarity of such an encounter at such an altitude (about 15,700 ft.) so
affected us that packs were forgotten for at least a quarter of an hour!

From the 16,500-ft. camp the obvious route appeared to be one which followed the true right (W.) margin of the glacier to a point safely beyond the much-crevassed lower portion and thence over moderately steep snow to the col between the East and Central Peaks. The final ridge to the summit seemed to present no difficulties.

At 7 o'clock on March 15th we left camp and in an hour were making our way up the trough between the ice-cliffs of the glacier and the rock wall of a spur of the Central Peak. Gradually this became more encased and forbidding and finally we were brought to a halt where the ice became annealed to the rock wall in a vertical joint over 100 ft. high. Neither rock nor ice could be climbed and, after an attempt to reach the surface of the glacier had shown that we were still in the midst of the unthreadable lower icefall, we called it a day and returned to camp. Arrived there, out came the field glasses and for the remainder of the day we studied alternatives.

The following morning Hall, who had packed tremendous loads up from "Gloomy Gulch," was feeling unfit for another attempt, so Bakewell, Praolini and I left camp at 6.45 a.m. and this time made for the eastern flank of the ice. Some delicate scrambling on ice-smoothed slabs brought us to the least forbidding portion of the frontal cliff and some intricate and well-executed maneuvering by Praolini brought us onto the less crevassed surface of the glacier. Up this we slowly made our way, progress being hampered by razor-sharp nieve penitente. I have yet to decide whether this tropical snow condition is more wearisome than deep soft snow, for one breaks down the brittle ridges just as the weight is thrown forward to the next step and sinks in, usually knee deep, in a mutilated mass of ice crystals.

At about 10 o'clock we reached the ridge which falls away abruptly to the rain forest of the N. slope. Through gaps in low-lying clouds could be seen the shore line and blue water of the Caribbean. We had now the alternative of passing below the S. face of our peak and joining our intended route of yesterday above the icefall or of climbing the steep rocks of the face itself to the E. ridge. After some debate the face route was chosen and the real work began. A steep rock step gave access to a couloir and up
this we made our way. The rock was excellent, a biotite granite rich in quartz, and though steep and exposed, the rock provided holds of gratifying proportions. Shortly after noon we emerged on the crest of the E. ridge. Here ice was present and steps had frequently to be cut, but progress was rapid and at 1.15 P.M. we gingerly examined the cornice of the highest point and, finding it to be almost non-existent, sat down to reply to the shouts reaching us from Hall in camp below.

Throughout the climb clouds had been boiling up from the south and by the time we reached the summit the entire range was blanketed, the sole exceptions being the Central Peak and our own. We were naturally much interested in the relative heights of the two summits and had brought a hand level to determine approximately the vertical angle between them. Four readings were taken. Two of these gave slight depression angles to the Central Peak, one gave a zero reading and one a positive angle. At all events the difference of elevation between the two highest points of the Sierra Nevada appeared very slight and this was confirmed on our return when the triangulation indicated a difference of only two meters in favor of the Central Peak. On the map resulting from our work, both peaks will bear the same height since it seems likely that the relative heights will vary from season to season due to fluctuations in the heights of the snow cornices.

The descent was uneventful. Mists swirled about as we roped down the rock face and obligingly lifted as we reached the glacier. From above a route was picked out which led us around and across innumerable crevasses and emerged immediately above camp. We were then treated to the rare privilege of roping down the ice front of the glacier and finding ourselves home through the back door.

A week later we arrived in Santa Marta and two days later flew over the range to secure air photographs necessary to the topographic survey and, these having been successfully obtained, there ended a month’s work in a region which offers the climber endless possibilities. There are at least five unclimbed peaks of from 17,000-18,400 ft. and a score over 14,000 ft. All of these present problems of approach and ascent, and should provide climbers with as keen enjoyment as any mountains in the world.

*Why didn't he mention 18,770 ft.?*