

# Yerupajá—The Amazon Face

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SOMETIMES I am asleep when reading, other times my mind is in neutral. I had read the article before, but only now did it register. "The fantastic northeast face, perhaps the finest challenge in all Peru." I had no idea if it was snow, rock, or both, but I liked the sound of it; I wanted to go. We worked quickly on Yerupajá, imagining that everyone had read the ad; we just had to be there first. Dean Caldwell and I, in the best California tradition, had made some vague plans to climb in Peru. We had decided on the year, and no more. He was soon convinced, and after the usual problem of no cash or climbers we were on the road, along with Paul Dix and Roger Hart.

Once in Lima we learned that a dozen Italians were ahead of us, and had listed their objectives as climbs on the east side of Yerupajá. Dismal news, for the northeast face, *our* face, was the obvious climb from the east. But they were a short-lived threat, for once at Chiquián, the Peruvian Chamonix, we heard a different story. The Italians had spent a few days watching the mountain, and decided it was not their style. A New Zealand party was also in the range, attempting Yerupajá from the west side. This might be a way down for us, so Roger Hart and I walked over to their Base Camp. Dishevelled and disorganized, we contrasted sadly to this model expedition, with its tables, chairs, and typewriters. They had not done the route yet and were having trouble with cold feet. Total disbelief when we had to admit that, no, two of us did not have overboots. Feeling rather small, it was only on the way back that we realized we had not played our ace—electric socks.

Next day we crossed the Huayhuash and saw the unlikely Jirishanca and then Yerupajá. This first view was distinctly alarming; it looked like the original unclimbable. We kept telling each other that, of course, though ice climbs always look vertical head on, they simply can't be . . . simply *can't* be?

Our idea in coming to Yerupajá was to do an alpine climb, not an expedition. In much climbing that is being done today, it seems that fixed camps and fixed ropes, in all but the most unusual circumstances, are inappropriate. Climbers no longer siege Yosemite walls, for the idea is to have a go at it, rather than beat the mountain into submission. Similarly, in other climbing areas we adapt to the style of climbing that

applies. No one would go to Britain and nail up Cenotaph Corner. In Himalayan, Andean and Alaskan mountaineering, there is not yet this self-imposed discipline accepted by all climbers; but we must hope it will come. Employing expedition tactics on what is essentially an alpine route is as absurd as nailing Cenotaph Corner: it attempts to reduce the commitment required to one that the climber feels he can face, and thus makes him ridiculous. This problem is becoming acute, as in the seventies some of the greatest climbs that exist will be attempted. The incredible faces in Patagonia, Alaska, and the Karakoram, possibly represent the last new dimension in mountaineering. Will we confront these in the spirit of Cassin on the Grandes Jorasses, Joe Brown on his climbs, and Chouinard and Herbert on the Muir Wall? Or is "conquest," no matter how, the sad future of mountaineering? At the moment, the balance, unhappily, may be going the wrong way.

Notwithstanding our supposed ethics, we had brought 1200 feet of thin line; everyone seems to take the stuff. As we got nearer the mountain, the truth of Patterson's remark, that the main problem lies in getting to the face, become only too apparent. The Yerupajá glacier was an icefall, and our way was through it. Malcolm Slessor had led two Scottish parties attempting the east ridge, and one of his team recommended we follow their approach. José Fonrouge, on a reconnaissance, had taken the other side and suggested it was much quicker. Would-be believers in the quick dash, we thought this would save time; it did not.

The scheme involved skirting the glacier by rock climbing on Yerupajá Chico, before starting on the icefall. In the next few days we were involved in some improbable manoeuvres as we tried to force a route across glacier-polished walls. The only way was into the icefall, and it was an unholy place. The weather remained cool and cloudy, the icefall relatively quiet, as we wound through the worst mess of séracs any of us had seen. By next day an ice bridge had collapsed, but I was able to persuade Paul Dix he could jump it at another spot. We put an intermediate camp by the glacier, so that we could start on the ice before sunrise, and hopefully find the route intact. But now the skies were clear, the heat terrible, and the glacier dissolving. A few days later we got up in the dark, yet as soon as the sun arrived the melt began. An improbable ice fin crossed a vast crevasse, and today, as we were on it, it was splitting apart. Twenty minutes later we heard a thunder behind us; the fin had died. Going on or going down both looked equally bad, so we ate some food where we stood, trying not to think about the creaks and groans from under our feet. It really hotted up when a sérac fifty

feet away keeled over, crashing through our route, as we ran nowhere looking for shelter. All this spoiled our breakfast and enthusiasm; our world was a shambles, our existence in doubt, and our quick way a slow, unpleasant one. We turned back and began to patch up our route. Near where the fin had been, I again got Paul—"You're a specialist"—to slide and leap over, then crawl across an ice boulder jammed in a crevasse. Down was what interested us, but most crevasses required working on—someday we had to get back up. The collapsed fin had supported an ice wall, now we ran over the debris, beneath the wall. Next time up, it too had gone. In two more places ice bridges had disappeared; it was becoming absurd. Off at last we grinned at each other and the Gods—it had been a bad one.

That we were on the wrong approach was obvious, and it was equally clear that with our equipment all over the glacier, this was now the only approach. We made three more dawn starts, but knew better when the sun came up. Finally came the clouds we needed, and we had our camp under the face.

The climb looked good, a two or three day push; our other problem was how to get off. Yerupajá has no *voie normale*, and climbing back down a mile of steep ice was not popular. We would have to rappel, and, as we could only carry a certain number of pickets and pitons, they would have to be long rappels. Being of the Yosemite mould we had rather strangely brought sixty rock pitons, ten pickets. The thin line was our white hope, and to try it out we had a rapid look-see. The bergschrund was under constant stonefall, very unpleasant. Rock climbing to one side got us onto the face itself. We fixed a rope over the schrund, and the following day were on our way.

The dihedral in the face is the destination of all the rockfall from the summit and east ridge, and as the sun got up, the stones began to come down. "That missed me, too," I shouted, as Paul, having avoided a quick one, looked around for some sign of encouragement. Generally moving together, except on the harder pitches, we tried to keep two pitons between us, joining when the leader ran out of hardware. We turned back at midday, hoping to be down for tea.

I had had my doubts about the effectiveness of a 1000-foot rappel line. I did anticipate, however, that some sort of progress would be possible. It was not. We wrestled and coaxed, and after two hours were nowhere. The master plan was beginning to crack, had cracked, so we cut the rope in half and tried again. It began to snow, supper was long gone, it got dark, we cursed and fought. Sometime before midnight we dribbled into our tents—up had been faster than down.

With bivouac equipment I usually end up bivouacking, and if we had carried 10 days' food I have no doubt it would have taken 10 days to ferry it up and down. Theoretically, then, we had a light load, but prusiking over the schrund it did not seem like that. There was a long way to take it, and by midday the climbing was harder, the day hotter, the air getting thinner and the lads tired. We hoped the séracs would be our home, but as time passed the dismal possibility of a bivouac *in der Wand* increased. More time, more front points, finally the séracs, delusion, a head wall—no more. Too tired to cut a platform, as a last chance I went up; our crevasse was waiting for us. Sleep was a problem, too. Paul had convinced me his *pied d'éléphant* was shot, so we left them and took a sleeping bag. Worked great at Base, not now. It was a one-man bag. A fiasco. We hardly slept, shivering or cooking most of the night.

The great red morning sun watched us doing nothing, the golden midday sun saw us turn back. We had tried a few pitches, but it was hopeless, our legs disjointed, our throats as the desert sand. The bivi sack doubled as a sun shade, while we watched and waited. The day before Dean Caldwell and Roger Hart had bivouacked lower, at the top of the rock spur. Now with evening came voices. Cloud obscured the schrund, so they were carving a hole in the middle of nothing. Shouts; they joined us; tomorrow we would try again.

It was tomorrow, twelve hundred feet, an ice gully, the summit ridge. Cornices and sad memories of Rondoy. We began by passing the cornices on the face, later walked over them. What the hell; we had a long way to go. One of those humps had to be it; they can not all be false summits. Paul is there; a tricky summit, we can see through it. The Scotchmen's east ridge seems a place to avoid. We look around in clouds; only Huascarán greets us. There is no reason to hang about, and it is already late as we begin to rappel off the ridge. We have the technique now, yet even so we end up on another night special.

In their turn Dean and Roger had been too tired for the summit. Tomorrow they go; we will wait for them. It snows; they stay. Too late to start the rappel marathon, we sit it out. Early morning again. Snow blows across the face; we sweep down in 250-foot leaps; we are going home. Pull line, pray, it comes, coil, throw the coil, pay it out, sticks, down anyway, and on, and on. Again it is night; again we are rappelling.

*Summary of Statistics.*

AREA: Cordillera Huayhuash, Peru.

NEW ROUTE: Northeast face of Yerupajá, 21,759 feet, July 27 to 31, 1968 (Dix, Jones).

PERSONNEL: Dean Caldwell, Paul Dix, Roger Hart, Chris Jones.