

Chimborazo and Monja Grande

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THREE attempts on Iliniza, the shakedown peak for our expedition, had failed and no wonder—in a half a week its two summits had been visible for a total of fifteen minutes. The rock faces of the north summit were covered with several feet of rime. Winds were of hurricane strength. Iliniza Sur was just as hostile as the northern peak. To find a route through its intricate icefalls in a pea-soup fog would have required supernatural capacities. When we retreated from the mountain, it was certainly not because of lack of determination. On the contrary, George Barnes' death-or-victory philosophy was really frightening. Luckily, the rest of the group, Herb Hultgren, Bill Ross, Margaret Young and I, were more conservative toward Ecuador's "unclimbable" peaks.

Having met defeat, we began to rationalize—was Iliniza not one of our minor objectives anyhow? Had we not tried this frequently climbed peak only to get more rapidly acclimatized?" Since we were not having trouble with the altitude, why not forget this repulsive mountain and try something different, for example Chimborazo (20,563 feet), Ecuador's loftiest mountain? For more than eighty years, since Whymper's time, it had always been climbed, with one or two exceptions, by the same route. Its entire northern and eastern sides were virtually untouched.

Little more than a day after our departure from Iliniza, we found ourselves at the end of the jeep trail on the northern slope of Chimborazo. Though the weather was less than perfect, it was incomparably better than the Iliniza variety. We could see far enough to study possible ascent routes. Evidently, there was only one fairly safe line, free from the dangers of falling ice and avalanches, the northern ridge. Its lower part was sharp and pronounced and did not appear too difficult. Higher up we expected technical difficulties where the ridge ended under a several-hundred-foot-high ice barrier, which goes all the way around the north side of the mountain. It was evident that we would need several camps above our 14,000-foot roadhead, which was still a couple of miles away from the proper base of the mountain.

For two days we carried loads to establish an advanced base camp at 15,300 feet and a cache at 16,500 feet. Our advanced base was a lovely

place at the foot of a giant moraine. Water trickled from the rocks and the last struggling outposts of vegetation surrounded us.

On August 8, all of us moved to a higher camp, slightly above 17,000 feet. That afternoon George Barnes and Bill Ross set out to explore the great ice barrier. Meanwhile, the rest of us brought more supplies to Camp I, a small platform between the edge of the glacier and a steep frozen slope with none of the friendliness of our last camp. George and Bill brought good news in the evening. They had found a route through the icefall and reached a point from which comparatively easy slopes led to the summit. From there on, the rest was mainly a matter of determination.

The next day, carrying loads of 50 to 60 pounds, we all began to feel the altitude but were in high spirits because of the second straight day of fine weather. Around noon we reached the icefall. The first few rope-lengths were just as steep as they had looked from below. This cliff was composed of the strangest material. It was not ice, nor one of the 23 sorts of snow known to science. It must have been that sweet stuff: meringue, made from sugar and egg whites. Oh, Lord! How tiring it was to climb a 60° meringue-slope with a heavy pack at 18,000 feet. Close to exhaustion, we reached a great crevasse just above the icefall. That was to be Camp II. We descended to the bottom of the crevasse and after testing the bottom, set up both our two-man tents. It seemed ideal—level, roomy and well protected from the wind. A little later we had to change our opinion. Had we, by mistake, set up camp in a supersonic wind tunnel?

The following morning intense cold and an immaculate sky promised more gorgeous weather. This was to be the summit day! Shortly after seven o'clock we left camp, dressed in all our clothing. There were a few big crevasses and some minor problems of route finding but the rest was toil and monotony through more of the meringue. The first man broke trail but did not leave a packed trail behind him.

At 1:30 we dragged ourselves up the last slope of Chimborazo's north peak. Ecuadorian climbers had told us that this summit was previously unclimbed. True or not, it hardly deserved to be called a peak; north shoulder would be a more appropriate name.

After the fog had lifted, in which we had spent some fifteen minutes, we noticed another, higher peak to the south. For a moment we were confused. Was that the main peak over there? Or had we not even reached the north summit? Whatever it was, we would climb it. After another hour of toil, we reached the top of a vast, almost level plateau, half the size of a football field. There was no higher peak. Hurrah!—we

had scaled the highest mountain in the world, higher than Mount Everest—if you measure from the center of the earth!

The trip back to Camp II was uneventful. During the night a terrible storm came up, robbing us of our sleep. The next morning everything was covered with fresh snow and rime. Visibility was poor and the wind was still blowing fiercely. We broke camp and descended immediately. Taking with us only the more valuable things from our lower camps we arrived at the car at five P.M. What do you think, comrades, about driving tonight to the city of Ambato, there to enjoy the hospitality of the Hotel Florida?

In Ambato, we immediately began to talk about future plans. There was general agreement on El Altar, a group of beautiful and rugged 17,000-foot peaks, some 15 miles east of Riobamba.¹ We had seen pictures of El Altar and knew it offered the greatest challenge and the most difficult climbing in the Ecuadorian Andes. After countless unsuccessful attempts, dating back to Whymper, the highest peak of the group, El Obispo, was finally conquered by an Italian expedition in 1963.² With the exception of El Canónigo, which was climbed by the same climbers two years later,³ most of the other peaks were untrodden.

On the afternoon of August 12 we left Ambato, our number reduced to four, as George Barnes had to return to the United States. In our rented jeep, a little less crowded now, we hoped to reach the Hacienda Puelazo, the starting point for El Altar, by evening. Actually, we arrived the next morning after spending the night in the middle of nowhere. To our great surprise, we were immediately offered two pack animals and an *arriero*. In a couple of hours we were on our way again. I do not know why the packer and his animals were in such a hurry. In spite of being in good shape, we could not climb that fast. Fortunately the horses' loads not infrequently slipped and it took time for our packer and his son to load them again.

In the afternoon we came to the *Vacaría*, an Indian grass hut, presumably built as in Inca times 500 years ago. It housed five dogs, three pigs, a billy goat, five people and an undetermined number of guinea pigs.

1. El Altar is really a single horseshoe-shaped mountain, whose high point, El Obispo (17,457 feet) lies at the southern end of the horseshoe while El Canónigo (17,257 feet) lies on the other. This horseshoe is broken into many peaks and gaps. A number of the summits were given names by Hans Meyer in 1906. Along the ridge beside El Obispo lies first Monja Grande and then Monja Chica (5100 meters or 16,733 feet). El Tabernáculo (c. 17,400 feet) lies near the head of the horseshoe on the Canónigo side. It is apparently between these two latter peaks that lie two peaklets climbed in 1939 by Hirtz, Ghiglione and Kühn. A German in Chile, who knew Kühn, told me that they had climbed two of the northern peaks called Pailacajas (5070 and 5100 meters) and this may help identify them.—*Evelio Echevarría C.*

2. *A.A.J.*, 1964, 14:1, p. 209.

3. *A.A.J.*, 1966, 15:1, pp. 164-5.

Everybody seemed happy and healthy, free from ulcers and hypertension, and not afflicted with television, traffic jams and smog. They will need much foreign aid to develop all these things.

On rougher going next day the pack animals frequently fell off the trail but failed to get hurt. Herb Hultgren did slip into a hidden stream, breaking a rib. By the end of the afternoon we reached Machay, a damp little cave at 14,000 feet, our Base Camp for El Altar. There we met our new friend and companion, Shoichi Hinohara, who had just completed the fifth ascent of El Obispo with Ecuadorians under the leadership of Pablo Williams.

Herb's rib was so painful the next day that he hiked out with Pablo Williams. The following day, August 16, the rest of us including Shoichi moved to a higher campsite in a glacial basin under the south face of El Obispo.

In spite of poor visibility, Bill Ross and Margaret Young left camp shortly before noon the next day for a reconnaissance of Monja Grande. Near El Obispo, it was unclimbed and its steep faces and wild, cascading icefalls looked forbidding. Only just at nightfall did our companions return. In a daring dash they had made it all the way to the top of Monja Grande.

Of course Shoichi and I wished to repeat this climb but had precious little time left. Tomorrow our packer would rendezvous with us at Machay. It would be a hard long day, the climb and hike out. Leaving camp at 7:30, we reached the top of Monja Grande in four hours. On a number of very steep and at least two exceedingly steep rope-lengths, our ice-axe belays were of only token value. The descent was even harder since we did not have enough rope and pickets to rappel. Back in High Camp at three o'clock, we started the long hike out to Machay. Darkness fell and it began to rain. We continued, sliding, stumbling and falling under our heavy packs, wet and caked with mud. How miserable can life be! Was that not a human voice, a dog's bark? There was the cave with our *arriero*, his son and the dog. All of a sudden, life was worth living again.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Ecuador.

ASCENTS: Chimborazo, 20,563 feet, first ascent of North Ridge, August 10, 1968 (whole party).

Monja Grande, c. 17,444 feet, first ascent, August 17, 1968 (Ross, Young); August 18, 1968 (Hechtel, Shoichi Hinohara).

PERSONNEL: J. Richard Hechtel, *leader*; George Barnes, Herbert Hultgren, M.D., William Ross, Margaret Young.