

# Northeast Ridge of Huayna Potosí

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AS JOHN HUDSON and I began to consider leaving Patagonia, I told him about a beautiful climb to be done in the Cordillera Real of Bolivia, a rock and ice ridge, which was the boundary between the arid *altiplano* and the jungle. It would be the hardest climb yet done there. Besides, the ridge had a history. Three parties, made up of French, English, Bolivians and Americans, had attempted it. So I told John about the English *yob*, Roger Whewell, in La Paz, whose climb it really was. If we asked him nicely, perhaps he would let us go with him.

John went to study Spanish in La Paz, while I toured in Bolivia. Roger was teaching. Not until late June were we glacier walking to the base of Huayna Potosí. We had already come once before and had been astonished — after all we were from the Shawangunks — but high winds had almost stopped our getting out of the car. Then, John's crampons broke in fifteen places and he had to go home. The next day, after Roger and I had climbed up a fifth of the way, his crampons fell off and I had to lower him for ten pitches. That was not the worst. Below, we had to pass fast underneath a threatening hanging glacier on the face.

Heavy snowstorms honed our desire. More than a week later, joined by Keith Miller, the four of us broke through deep snow to the base of the climb at 16,500 feet. High winds drifted snow into our wretched bivouac sacks throughout the night and blew doubts into our minds that we could climb the next day. The Englishmen looked dour and hard. We Vulgarians giggled.

In the morning, later than it should have been, John and I quickly brewed tea next to the obstinately motionless forms of our friends. Then John and I front-pointed up very steep styrofoam ice, unroped at first. The speed of our pace restored confidence, and in only a couple of hours we had covered the first quarter of the ridge. The climb changed now to strips of rock and hard blue ice, not suited to John's mended but breakable crampons. Being roped now did not change the breathless fashion in which we climbed. Begrudging time for rest and food, we were slowed only by six pitches of solid blue ice at 18,000 feet. At 19,000 feet

John very efficiently led a fifth-class pitch through the third and final rock buttress. "Just like the Rockies," he yelled down as I secretly realized how glad I was it had not been my turn to lead. Above, on the steep névé, we ran the rope out each time for 150 feet. As we belayed, we would look down onto the Yungas side of the Cordillera Real, where ridges soared for 10,000 feet out of jungle valleys. A sort of peaceful desperation took hold of us as the sun sank towards the horizon; we saw nothing better for the night than a standing bivouac on a climbing pitch. But just in that short moment between sunset and night, so fleeting in the tropics, we emerged at nearly 20,000 feet on a plateau below the summit pyramid. The next day we walked to the summit and floated balloons out over the jungles, 15,000 feet below.

What more could we do but dream of future climbs under the clear morning sun?

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Cordillera Real, Bolivia.

NEW ROUTE: Huayna Potosí, 19,996 feet, via the Northeast Ridge, July 4 and 5, 1969 (Hudson, Laba), 12½ hours actual climbing time.

PERSONNEL: John R. Hudson, Roman A. Laba, Keith Miller, Roger Whewell.

