

Two Bolivian Climbs

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Ai-Yai-Yai-Yai

The English engineer reminds me of one of my schoolmasters. We've spread a map of Huayna Potosí in front of him, and asked if the water-gathering aqueducts on the western flanks are passable on foot. Yes, he is positive, adamant. His pink index finger bristles against the map's dun colors and wavering contour lines. Terrific: we lap up the good news. After the kind company truck drops us at the Estancia Botijlaca on the Zongo Road, the beginning of the northwest ridge should be but four hours away.

First steps on the aqueduct's retaining walls are weirdly dreamlike. Water flows one way, we float the other, tiptoeing over a precipice. Yet the dream is shattered, when the aqueduct exits from a narrow tunnel which is cut from a massive rock face. The water runs too fast, too cold, the tunnel is too dark and cramped to negotiate with our packs.

Roman, Ken and I retrace our steps. Our faith in the English engineer-schoolmaster persists, because a few hours later we have trucked south to the dam and power station, and are hiking along another aqueduct, with the same result. Back to the main road: another hitch, south again, to the quavering lights of the mining village of Milluni. After dinner at the neolithic village eatery, we descend more than six hundred feet underground, touring the near depleted tin mine. The slime underfoot, the stifling heat, the safety hazards—I keep telling myself this isn't such a bizarre approach to a climb.

Next morning, in the main square, a crowd gawks at us. It's the double boots that intrigue them. Maybe they think we are related to astronauts. How much do the boots cost? I tell the guy. He looks no less puzzled than if I'd told him of the billions of light years between us and the stars.

A squatting woman, wincing at the fierce sunlight, asks: "Where are you going, caballero?"

"To the mountain. Huayna Potosí."

"Ai-yai-yai. And what do you do on the mountain?"

"We climb it."

"How far?"

"To the top, if possible."

"And how much do you get paid?"

"Nothing. We do it for the sport, ma'am."

"Ai-ai-yai-yai-yai, caballero!" she laughs, warmly, scornfully. She has a true sense of the absurd.

A truck briefly helps us over the pass, towards the eastern flanks



PLATE 39

Photo by Doug Scott

**Boysen attempting the route to Shipton
Col below Changabang.**



PLATE 38

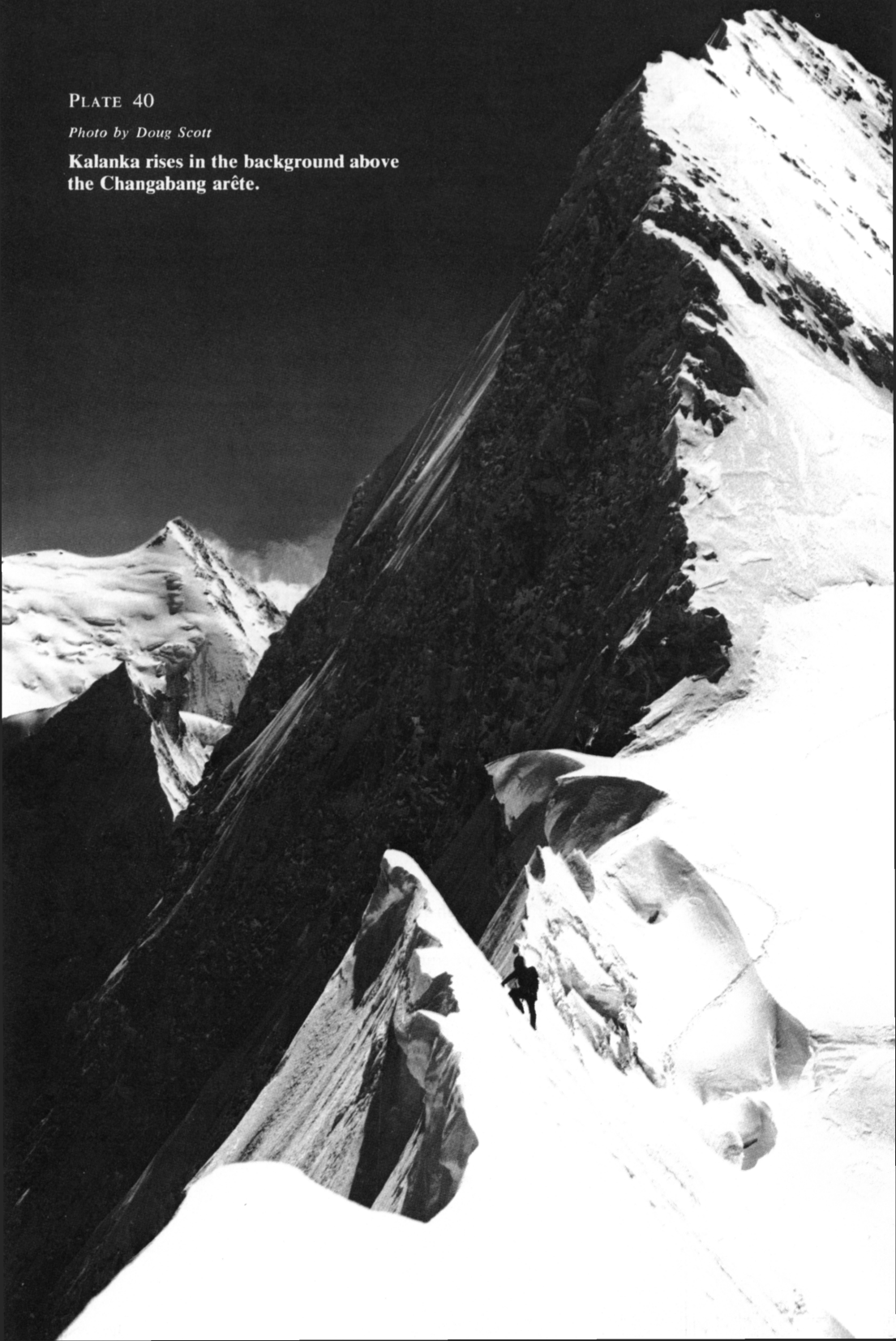
Photo by Doug Scott

On the Changabang ice arête.

PLATE 40

Photo by Doug Scott

**Kalanka rises in the background above
the Changabang arête.**



of Huayna. From here we could take a short cut, onto the conspicuous eastern glacier, and thence to our ridge. But warily we opt instead—unnecessarily, as it turns out—to give the mountain a wide berth, and make a detour that ends up being over twelve miles long.

This plan does not sit well with Ken, who has been making poor time, and having trouble with his pack. By the late morning I wonder what is taking him so long to drop out. During a mid-day break he asks if there are camiones leaving for La Paz from the settlement marked on the map as three miles away. Camiones? Sure. You bet. Lots of them. (How should I know?) We redistribute supplies. Ken regards a subsidiary peak, called Maria Lloco, 5522 meters, and thinks of soloing it. Kenny Loco. He is easily unpersuaded. His departure leaves us strangely dejected, sluggish in our movements and drained of morale throughout the afternoon. He's put a curse on us. We pass one abandoned, timorous cluster of mud huts. Guiltily, I think something like this gutted settlement was Ken's destination.

Twenty-four hours later on, we reach the foot of the climb. We'd trucked and hoofed over a 300° arc around the summit finishing past Laguna Esperanza and shimmering Jankho Khota. Now, finally, the mountain is close up, palpable. A broad, steep, sparkling ice gully faces us.

"Why don't we solo it?" Roman cheerfully suggests.

"All right with me," I reply, while inside I'm wailing "ai-yai-yai." I've never climbed before with Roman, never done such serious ice unroped, never been on a glacier. But the anxiety is only partly real; it is part pretence, the hyperbole all climbers indulge in.

The five-hundred-foot gully takes about an hour, and is to be the finest moment of pure climbing on the route—almost worth our oblique approach. On the ridge proper, we negotiate a small rock outcrop. Then an easy walk to a decent campsite.

The chief obstacle across our path is a broad rock band, topped by a chorus of glistening séracs. We are both agreed that the best route lies up the ramp. However it turns out that Roman means one ramp, and I another. We start up mine, which is steep, narrows into a gully, lies directly below the séracs, and is technically excessively difficult. Roman curses and swears. Our early morning strength has been squandered. He swears some more. The sound of the piton he is hammering for a rappel might upset the séracs. He discovers that his pin lies in an expanding flake. Emptying himself of oaths, he flays the pin unavailingly. We secure the rope to an ill-shaped, dubious bollard and descend gingerly.

Roman's ramp doesn't lack excitement. The snow soon peters out at a seventy-foot pyramid of broken faces, and unstable conglomerations of boulders. Some of the moves seem like 5.1 or 5.2. The whole section feels as stable as a house of cards.

Back on ice, in the afternoon we rope up for the first time on this climb, and cross a few crevasses. We hope to take the summit plateau by

nightfall, but are restrained by inadequate acclimatization above 17,000 feet. There are no usable bivy spots to be seen. Upward rolling ice fields only, which are periodically sliced open. These giant wounds expose the history of the glacier, like rings on a tree trunk.

Eventually we find relief. We will sleep in a portion of a crevasse, that is covered with a snow bridge the size of a monk's cell. The crevasse's towering, upward lip of ice is curved like a wave over us—a protecting wave, we hope. Blue tinted, ectoplasmic in the dark, it reflects the stars and glossy moon. Far below we see grey and fluffy clouds from the jungle doze and nestle against one another. Roman and I debate the problems of technological, post-industrial societies. The effect is strangely consoling.

Conditions have been excellent up to now. But the last passage, the final lift, is climbed on crystalline, unstable snow, almost greasy feeling. Roman, who has been steadily gaining strength and verve as I've been losing mine, takes the lead. From the plateau the summit is clearly shaped, distinct, like a canine tooth. It is livid white, beckoning, throbbing against the electric blue sky.

We have arrived. There are foot tracks leading up from the west, which peeter out fifteen feet from the top. We know whose: the other half of our group, who have been climbing the normal western route. They must have made the summit yesterday, and stopped short, fearing a possible cornice.

Roman prepares to take my photograph on the summit pinnacle.

"Stand up straight," he says. I'd been slumping, gasping, over my ice axe.

I smarten up, now assume the traditional conqueror's pose, right foot pressed down on the vanquished prey, and with stern profile gaze far into infinity—"ai-yai-yai, caballero!"

Climbing the Unseen, on Illimani

We are descending the standard, west ridge of Illimani. Was it four or five days we had climbed? At this point we hardly care. We are spent, inwardly and outwardly. Our equipment is pathetic, some of it lost; our food is zero; and fuel is scant. I've frostbite on my fingers, and water sloshes in my boots, due to failed gaiters, from which I will suffer trenchfoot. Roman is ill with what is later diagnosed as bronchitis. We can't tolerate another night on this brutish mountain.

We are thumping weakly through deep powdery snow, about three hours down from the dawn summit, when Roman starts hallucinating.

"I see climbers down lower on the ridge," he says.

I look down. Nothing. Nothing for the next hour of plodding—the next two hours. Poor Roman. He's lost touch with reality, thinking now that we will meet someone we know in this chilling, steep wilderness. But I understand, and share the impulse. We want to be ac-



PLATE 41

Photo by Arthur Mudge

**Northwest Ridge of HUAYNA POTOSÍ,
Cordillera Real, Bolivia.**

knowledgeed, welcomed back into the human community. We are full of pride and loneliness.

In the early afternoon, the dream turns into reality. I do see a couple of thin, stick-like figures far below. A vindicated Roman now says one of them is sure to be André Contamine, the French mountaineer, who I imagine is now tucked in a cozy Parisian bed. As we approach to within a thousand feet, four figures are setting up camp.

"I'm sure they are women climbers," I tell Roman. "Something about the way they move."

But there are no warm, embracing alpine Amazons. Instead four sartorially perfect climbers setting up an immaculate campsite. Their cheerfulness, energy, pristine equipment are enviable. In contrast, we are like wild mountain savages.

Amidst a polyglot of different languages, punctuated by our exhausted breathing, it emerges they are Poles, from Lodz. Generous Poles who feed us non-stop, coil our rope, take our photographs. The name of the late Andrzej Mroz is mentioned, a legendary Pole, whom Roman had climbed with in France. Piotr, the handsome leader, says: "If you knew Mroz, maybe you know Roman Laba?"

"But I am Roman Laba!" he protests.

"You don't look like him. You have changed," says Piotr, recalling how years ago they both met with Mroz and went to the movies in Paris.

And thus we are welcomed back to civilization, more generously and more aptly than we could have imagined. We feel reluctant to break off this encounter. Yet the earth's colors at the hem of the mountain look warm, tender, inviting. The Poles direct us to their palatial Base Camp, where we will be feted like kings. Unfortunately Illimani is not so kind as they. As a final gesture, we are benighted on a moraine, hooked in the mountain's last claw.

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Illimani is not an elegant peak. Rather than character, it has hulking mass. It emanates a grim power, which can be felt from La Paz, twenty miles away. Perhaps because of its proximity to the capital, Illimani is climbed more than any other peak in the Cordillera Real. All the new routes on the visible northern and western flanks have been done, local savants tell us. One new route possibility remains, tucked out of sight of the view from La Paz: the south face of the south peak. More information than this is hard to find. We have seen one far-away aerial color slide that makes the route appear foreshortened and hard to judge. And we would, in fact, never see our face in its entirety—just as well, perhaps, or we might never have dared start up.

The open *camión* is standard long-distance transportation for Bolivian peasants, miners, and indigent mountaineers. By now we thought ourselves inured to this mode of travel. Yet on the road to Illimani, we discover a new dimension of discomfort and terror.

First signs of trouble begin an hour out of La Paz, when the truck stops, the driver's assistant produces a stone-breaking mallet. With this he flays at the bolts securing the truck body to the suspension. At other halts, the generator, the fuel pump, half the electrical system are all dismantled, repaired and put together. Once we pause for over an hour, to exchange one almost bald tire on one side of the truck with another, treadless tire on the other side. Then we passengers must inflate one of these massive truck tires, using a bicycle pump.

The road itself is a masterpiece of casual construction and persistent neglect. Even our typically steel nerves are turned to water when the truck, groaning and heaving at two miles an hour, pitches and tosses like a ship in a storm as it sways down and out of deep ruts and bottomless potholes. Once the driver tells everyone to get out and walk the next mile, because the surface is so treacherous.

Worst of all are the outward turns in the road: when the truck lurches into space and hovers, suspended over a precipice for a sickening, timeless moment—a maneuver that is especially gripping when snow and ice cover the turn. Roman tells me that in Peru he has read newspaper stories where such trucks often topple off mountains, sending dozens of Indians to their death. So we scan the valley floor for charred and shattered truck debris. When fear is uncontrollable, we ride on the backboard, ready to leap for safety. Our fellow passengers laugh at our terror—laugh generously, with a humor that, as always with these Indians, is easy for us to share.

After this twelve-hour ordeal, we arrive at the village of the Mina Urania and quickly hike out. Somewhere south of the prominent southwest ridge, which is visible from La Paz, we begin the search for the route. There is a full day of crabwise traveling, and another morning, before, high to the east, we glimpse a sharply raked, floating icefield, topped by a scattering of séracs.

It is time to move up. An easy ramp to the face is blocked by a mean, slack-jawed whale of a crevasse. We tiptoe over unstable, mushy snow bridges, then climb three pitches of severe, technical ice gullies. It's nearly twilight, and there is no sign of a bivouac spot. Our ground is brick hard, and unmitigatedly steep. Occasionally we cross grim sections of impenetrable, very brittle, slippery black ice.

We are frantic for a place to sleep. We feel angry, betrayed by the mountain. In almost total darkness we grumpily beat down a couple of narrow snow platforms, and tie-in to a short, protective rock face above. To the east we hear avalanches trundling and roaring persistently. Illimani is having nightmares.

It is a dazzling morning when we reach the face and finally understand what we are committed to. To the east and below there is a zig-zag road that leads up to the mine. Had we approached that way, we'd have saved a day, and better understood the route. The face itself is uniformly steep, and snow conditions are poor. But it's the séracs that cause

enormous qualms. They are not, as we imagined, a random half dozen, but a whole regiment of them, who menacingly, shoulder to shoulder, guard all direct lines to the summit. "If I'd known about them, I'd never have come on this climb," Roman mutters. "Maybe we should retreat," I bravely suggest. But it will take as long to get off as to finish the climb.

There is little elation as we snow-kick our way heavenwards. By the time we are directly under the towers, it is late afternoon. Again there's not a decent bivy place anywhere. We are stunned by the séracs' stature. Most of them are over a hundred feet tall. We imagine there is some way that we may sneak a path through them. I prepare to lead, when clouds swiftly close in across the séracs. The sudden loss of visibility saps my confidence. Light drains from the sky. My movements become sluggish, incoherent. I decline the challenge. So, roped together, we traverse level with the base of the séracs, treading some of the hardest ice yet encountered. I slip on a patch of black ice. Roman saves.

Again we feel betrayed, unfairly tested by the mountain, which refuses to yield up a level space. The best bivouac we can find is a coffin-sized break in a sérac wall, wide enough for Roman to get his back on. I dig a platform for my pack, and sit on it; tying into an ice hammer that only bites into the ice by a miracle. Neither Roman's hammer, nor our axes can do more than repeatedly shatter this ice into thousands of shards.

Next morning we are in bad shape. My brain is stuffed with cotton, my limbs with molasses. After five hours of groggy climbing, we pass through the séracs and, in an orderly fashion, collapse on the southwest ridge about three hundred feet from the summit, and about 5000 feet from our start. We sleep through the afternoon at 21,000 feet, wake for supper, and then doze off. I often sit up to stare at the lights of La Paz levitating on the dark horizon.

For the first time, we try climbing before sunup, hoping to master the upper part of the descent route before the now customary afternoon clouds roll in. The cold is stinging, remorseless. A wispy light breeze has a vicious, searing chill-power. Pining for the sun, in an hour we reach the summit and the dawn. But its warmth is negligible.

There's a newborn, utterly luminous and limpid sky. An intense vibrancy radiates from the mountains of the cordillera to the north and the Quimsa Cruz to the south. But we don't tarry long, because of the cold, because we are summoned to our welcoming reception.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cordillera Real, Bolivia.

NEW ROUTES: Huayna Potosí, 19,996 feet, Northeast Ridge, June 17 to 20, 1974 (Roman Laba, John Thackray).

Illimani, 21,201 feet, South Face of the South Peak, started on July 2 and reached summit on July 6 (Laba, Thackray).