

# Old Routes and New in the Cordillera Blanca

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I WENT TO SOUTH AMERICA in May of 1988 to pursue my profession as a mountain guide. For starters, I traveled to Bolivia and escorted a group from Illinois up the standard route on Illimani Sur. Some made it to the top, we all had fun, and I got tuned into sucking thin air and hauling heavy loads.

After this mini-expedition, I had a few weeks free before meeting more clients. I flew to Peru. Students were rioting in the streets of Lima, teachers were marching in the streets of Huaraz, and I escaped to the relative calm of the Cordillera Blanca.

Straightaway, I trekked to Taulliraju with Annie Waterhouse. We had our sights set on some awesome ice runnels which are plastered to the west and south faces of the granite tower. Impressively, the fourth ascent of the mountain was accomplished in 1979 by the Frenchman, Nicolas Jaeger, who stormed up the south face alone and on a new route in a mere eight hours! I was truly inspired by this futuristic achievement, and so while Annie spent a day acclimatizing, I took off alone, aiming for a line shooting directly up the west face. The crux was wandering across the convoluted glacier in the middle of the night. Once through the glacial maze, I could relax and enjoy the security of ice axes slammed into soft alpine frosting. Ice conditions were consistently solid and comfortable and never more than 80°, but continuous enough to demand my total concentration.

I took a line straight to the Italian Ridge. A slow but steady pace got me to the ridge at two-thirds height in a few hours. I took a break at a welcome flat spot. Above, a stone wall interrupted the ice. Since I had no rock gear, I traversed on snow and ice far to the left until I could move up and right again onto the ridge crest. The ridge was typical of the range: weird and scary, littered with towers and cornices set to squash the unwary.

After cruising up the ridge for a while, I reached the summit just as a hint of dawn appeared in the east. I dropped down to a more comfortable stance and took time out to snap a few photos of the sunrise and inhale a couple of candy bars. I relished this spectacle of a summit sunrise and then wandered around, looking for the way down. Eventually, I got to the south ridge and plunged down its soft slopes to rejoin Annie twelve hours after I had left.

PLATE 19

*Photo by Jörg Steinsberger*

**West Face of CAYESH.**

—— = American line;

... = German; — — — = Czech. Solid  
line at right is Italian fixed rope.



After a day stretched out in Base Camp, we headed back to the mountain, hoping to do another smear on the south face, near Jaeger's route. As the ice there was too thin or non-existent, we settled for an attempt on the south-southwest buttress. Unfortunately, there was powder snow over smooth rock there and we retreated.

Discouraged by dry conditions so early in the season, we bailed out of the mountains, determined to return soon. We then headed for Chacaraju Oeste, but here we met a similar fate. We completed six pitches, but powder snow over rock made climbing too slow and precarious and so we went down.

We hiked to Huandoy Este, but our intended climb avalanched moments before we got there. We took the hint and strolled up Pisco instead. The summits were eluding us, but I was getting pretty fit backpacking heavy loads up and down the range.

Annie had to split for home, but two friends from Colorado, my next clients, arrived on the scene. John Arnow and I had climbed extensively on Western crags, but John's buddy, Bill Mooz, was a relative newcomer to the whole sport of climbing. Actually, neither had done any alpine ascents. They came to Peru to learn a new game.

A quick trip to Chopicalqui gave them their first taste of the high mountains. Encouraged by their strong performance, we then entered the Quebrada Santa Cruz and jammed our way up Alpamayo's southwest face. This was Bill's first ice climb! Ascending by the light of a full moon, we arrived on the summit minutes before the sun popped over the horizon, and well ahead of the hordes of climbers streaming up below us.

After our easy success on Alpamayo, we were feeling ready to tackle something longer and harder. I took the fellows back to Chacaraju Oeste to have another go at the south face, figuring conditions might have improved since my attempt with Annie. Alas, they hadn't. As an alternate plan, we traversed beneath the south face until we were below Chacaraju Este. I had reached the east summit alone in 1985 via the American route. On this outing, I chose a line left of that and between the American and Japanese routes, probably a new line.

The first day on the wall was spent weaving among the séracs that guard the fluted face above. Intricate route-finding and overhanging ice walls provided the main challenges of the day. The final obstacle blocking us from the upper face was a long, overhanging sérac which I surmounted with considerable effort and aid. I fixed a rope over this barrier and retreated to a breezy bivouac on the broad crest of a ridge.

We were up early, jümaring the line and plowing up the final face by headlamp. The climbing was reminiscent of Alpamayo's face, except that there wasn't a mob of climbers crawling up Chacaraju. I told Bill and John that the final pitch would probably be the hardest, and my prediction came true. The last section led up, down and around sugary towers precariously plastered to the wafer-thin summit ridge. I topped out, wading in total mush. The last possible anchor was back at the belay. It seemed as if the whole summit was going to topple any minute. I got out of there really quickly. With adrenaline flowing at

full tilt, I reversed the pitch back to the boys and regretfully informed them that it was too dicey to continue.

Back in Huaraz, Bill had to pack up and head home. John and I started for our next objective: the west face of Cayesh. Cayesh is the *femme fatale* of the Cordillera Blanca. Though gorgeous to gaze upon, she'll break the hearts (and backs) of most suitors. Few have stood on her enticing but elusive summit. We packed a big rack for a big wall. Our full kit was not lacking in rock-and-ice tools. The only thing in limited supply was John's experience; he had none whatsoever on a climb of this nature. What better place to learn the craft of alpinism than on a new route on a difficult mountain!

With John in the lead, we fourth-classed the moderate snow-and-ice slope below the bulging rock of the main face. When it became time to strike out onto the rock, I took over the lead. The climbing was not outrageously difficult, 5.8 and 5.9 at most, but a large portion of the gear we were lugging was useless as there were few, if any, cracks. Also, the rock was very loose. One of our two ropes was ravaged by rockfall. Chunks of ice flew by with unnerving regularity. It was a true alpine experience. The climbing was never really extreme, but the mountain kept throwing obstacles at us that weren't too friendly.

John and I swapped a few leads until I brought us to a severely sloping stance that was, unfortunately, the best bivy site around. We spent a long, long night, constantly sitting up, then sliding down and wishing we had brought hammocks. We packed up quickly at dawn. John had the honors on the first pitch of the day, which got us to a hanging patch of ice. Firing up this was a welcome respite from the insecurity of shattered rock. After a brief interlude on ice, we were back on rock, but the complexion of the climb had changed. The rock was solid and there were cracks for protection. We could relax and enjoy a superb climb in a wild setting. I got the best lead of the climb, up a sweeping buttress with miles of exposure on warm, sunny, solid rock.

John learned a lot on Cayesh. He did his first pack-hauling and following on Jümars. And just below the top, he ripped off a big, loose block which sent him for his very first leader fall. Undaunted by this temporary setback, he got right back on the sharp end and finished the lead, which was the last on rock.

The next pitch up a knife-edge of soft snow was one of the scariest leads of my career. It was like walking a tightrope with thousands of feet of exposure and no net. With toes over the east side and heels over the west, I held my breath and shuffled along for a rope-length. Fortunately, this horror show ended abruptly and we scampered to the top, too tired to savor our success. John had his first open, unplanned bivouac on top. We had left almost everything back at the previous bivy spot, figuring to tag the summit and get back there in a day. We shivered all night long in a trench scratched out of the summit. The only consolation was another sunrise from another summit.

Our new line was the most direct that has been done of the west face of Cayesh, lying halfway between the British and Czechoslovakian routes. The Germans two weeks ahead of us, coming from the right, emerged onto the south ridge close to where we did.



A couple of days later, we were in Huaraz, getting ready for another go at Taulliraju. Although I was anxious to do a new route on the south face, it was obviously too dry in the late season. Instead, we turned our attention to the south-southwest buttress which Annie and I had tried earlier. Luckily, the snow had turned into ice. John and I cranked off ten wonderful pitches of classic ice and mixed thrills. We both agreed that the climbing on Taulliraju was the best, although not the hardest, of our holiday. The angle was moderate, averaging 70°, the ice was thin (rarely would a screw go in all the way), and the scenery was as spectacular as the crystal clear weather. High on the buttress was the crux. An abrupt wall of granite required some aid. Then free climbing led to mixed action. The pitch ended on a vertical patch of water ice. Only easy snow remained to climb to the top of the buttress.

From there we descended slightly and camped on the south ridge. The next morning we slogged up the low-angle slopes of the ridge, aiming for the true summit. Unfortunately, the snow was excessively unstable. We reluctantly but wisely turned back just short of the highest point. This route had been climbed shortly before by French and American parties, who like us did not make the short distance to the true summit.

Traveling light, we dashed up Huascarán via the west rib, ticked off Artesonraju by the south face and finally finished our tour by blitzing Tocllaraju in a 30-hour round-trip sprint from Huaraz.

I went back to Bolivia to catch a plane home, but was delayed in La Paz. Taking advantage of a few extra days, I returned to Illimani. I gained the last summit of the season by a direct route up the west face of the south peak. According to local climbers, it may have been a new route, but American and German parties have done lines on this broad face. On another solitary summit, high in the cool, thin air, I reflected on the fun of the last three months and dreamed of future adventures in the big mountains.

*Partial Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Cordillera Blanca, Peru.

NEW ROUTES: Taulliraju, 5830 meters, 19,128 feet, West Face, up the South Flank of the Italian Ridge, which was reached two-thirds of the way up and followed to the summit, June 4 and 5, 1988 (Charles Fowler, solo).

Chacaraju Este, 6001 meters, 19,688 feet, South Face between the 1972 Japanese and the Richey-Brewer routes, July, 1988 (Fowler, John Arnow, William Mooz).

Cayesh, 5721 meters, 18,770 feet, West Face between the British and Czechoslovakian routes, July 1988 (Fowler, Arnow).