

The West Face of Chacaraju

Cracking one of South America's long-standing problems

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Translated by ANA PERCIC

1995. Dusan, Viki, Aci and I stare at the west face of Chacaraju in the Paron Valley, still shocked by the death of Slave Sveticic. This face was a problem to him, the greatest and most modest among "the great ones." Soon, we will face it ourselves.

Half a year passes in no time. The plan for the next year has to be sent to the Slovenian Alpine Association.

"Guys, where to this year?" Dusan, who is, as usual, the bravest when we all get a little lost in our own problems, comes up with the west face of Chacaraju. I feel I have a lump in my throat when it comes time to confirm whether I am in or not. We invite our friend Igor Oblak-Tehniks, who, like us, spends his "spare" time doing rigging work, to join us.

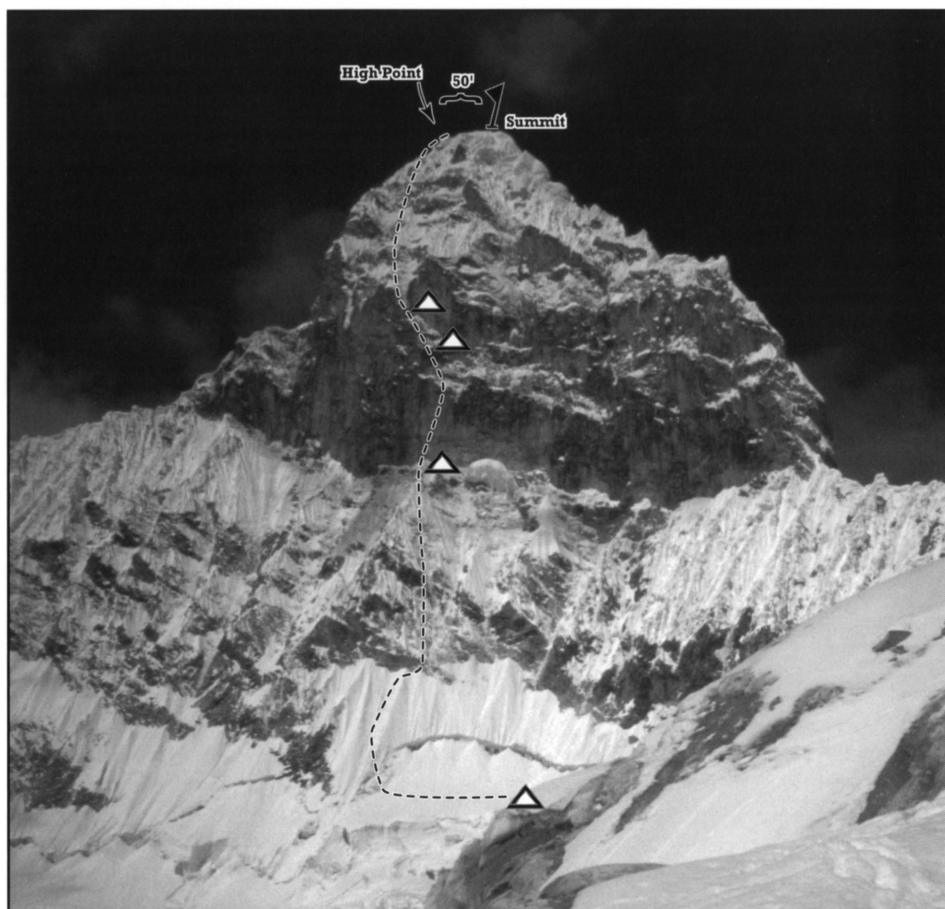
In the middle of May, 1996, Dusan Debelak, Viktor Mlinar, Igor Oblak, Ales Nesmah, Joze Cajzek and I are in Huaraz, the center of the Cordillera Blanca. After two weeks of moving from one inn to another and rambling on about all the problems of the world, the weather still shows us no mercy. Jure (whom we met in Huaraz), Ales, and I decide to make a short visit to Cuzco.

I have to admit that this visit to the city called "the center of the world," where the air is filled with energy, has given me the power and patience necessary for confronting such a face. (It is not without a reason that the Indians call this place *la ciudad de los locos*!) When I return to Huaraz a week later, and continue on to Paron the next day, I am fascinated by the beautiful route our boys, together with the Basque, Aritza Monasterio, our friend from the previous year who knows how to make the best local food—and in his own restaurant—have found over the slopes of Pisco and the glacier. We also hire two altitude porters, who help us carry all the food and equipment to the glacier. Matco, who is already a couple of times a grandfather, beats us all with 30 kilos on his back.

We set up two tents on the glacier, hardly an hour from the bottom of the face that bears all the rockfall bombardment. Dusan and I fix the first 300 meters of rope over the snowy, dangerous lower part of the face. The next day 100 more meters of rope are fixed and all the necessary gear is cached under the rock barrier. As we check the equipment and food, we realize that a lot of energy necessary for preparing a meal has been spent while packing. The weather is also not very good, so we return to Huaraz. Unfortunately, this is not the day when a smaller truck drives from Paron, and we have to walk 13 kilometers to reach the first village, where we manage to catch a van.

The drawing of lots decides that Viki, Tehniks and Ariza are the first to dash forward up the rock barrier. Dusan and I will join them in two day's time. The boys have set up a portaledge, made and designed by Tehniks. It proves to be very useful because there is no other place to sleep.

In two days Igor and Viki manage to fix an 80-meter barrier and, as I arrive with Dusan at the tents, Viki is drilling the last belay. He sends us a message, screaming that his last drill broke, without which he cannot go on. We decide the boys will descend to us the next morning. The afternoon is far too dangerous for descent because of the rockfall. The next day at dawn, they start to descend. Dusan and I come out of the tent, shuddering with cold, when we see a big snow cornice falling straight on Tehniks.



*The west face of Chacaraju, showing Alpos-Facig-Slovenije (945 meters, ABO VII+ A3+ 95°).
Dusan Debelak*

"Watch out, Tehniks!" A large white cloud envelopes Viki and Ariza, too. A few moments of silence drag on like a year, a fast train of thought runs through my mind. A million whys appear. Questions, condemnations, and misunderstanding of the universe are interrupted by Tehniks. "It's all right!"

He reaches us, and we can tell that it is not all right. A part of the cornice, which collapsed three meters above his head, hit his arm so hard that he has lost his overglove and glove. His arm is no longer useful for climbing. Hoping the mountain has taken its toll, we leave for Huaraz to repair the drill.

Although Igor's arm is not doing well, we are lucky. The Basque expedition offers us the use of their drill. Viki and Tehniks, known for modesty, don't want to comment on the troubles. We make out from their conversation that they hooked a lot and what the gear was like. Viki only remarks, "You will climb it free?" with a hidden, though not evil, smile.

Dusan and I don't climb it free, of course, but we do get all of the necessary equipment and food over the face. Fog covers us and a cold wind blows. It is time to descend to the portledge. We stretch a tarp over our bed. When we wake up in the morning all covered with snow, small

spindrift avalanches keep rushing past us every 15 minutes. Everything is surrounded with dense fog. The mountain turns back our third attempt to beat it. This "garden" of ours, as Chacararaju means in Cechua, is very stubborn. The next (and last) time we drive toward Paron on the truck, I notice unrest on Tehnik's face, which rarely shows what is on his mind. His hand is good for eating, but not for the 500 meters of trouble we have ahead of us. When we unload, he decides to stay along, encouraging us—but he will stay below the mountain.

This time it is for real. We have exactly one week before the plane flies back home. The first day we are hampered by a waterfall that completely soaks Dusan after three hours of difficult climbing up a 30-meter rock wall. All of us, soaked to the bone, catch the last of the sunbeams and spend the night under the overhang.

The rock barrier yields the next morning. The warm weather continues. Ice is melting as if somebody switched off the refrigerator, so we decide to spend the afternoon and night under a small overhang, where you can't even sit properly.

The third day on the face we start climbing early. Viki climbs two delicate pitches up to the frozen waterfall, which hangs from the face like a guillotine, and over which everything from above falls down. This is, however, the only way to the upper part.

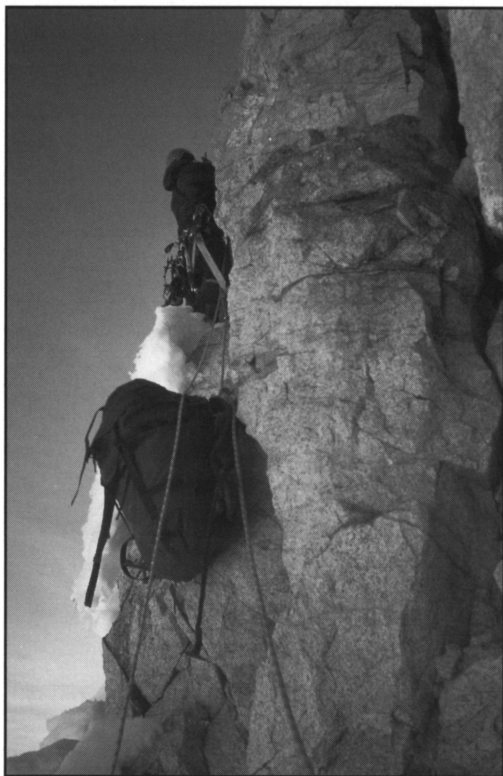
In the afternoon we cower, sleep, cook, and consolidate what energy we've got left. At 11 p.m. the moon lights up the face, and Viki starts climbing the ice. Somewhere in the background, Dusan and I can see a light; every now and then we hear Viki's voice coming from out of the

corner. When we hear the sound of the drill after an hour of intense climbing, it puts our minds at ease.

The hauling of the rucksacks begins, but even before that Dusan has to climb a traverse and make it over the waterfall so he can direct the rucksacks from the middle. When the rucksacks, still heavy because of the trouble we expect, are in the upper part of the face, Dusan climbs another mixed pitch. He carefully installs the protection, when suddenly the moon dips behind the ridge, leaving us in the dark for three full hours. I am alone under the waterfall, following the course of the moon while it sets somewhere in the Pacific. In my loneliness I know the Earth is round, but still I am aware of my smallness and that of the universe.

At about 4 a.m. the moon comes out again. The light first appears on the peak of South Huando. I get my frozen limbs to work again, and after half an hour I join Viki on a small icy ledge. The snow above is not the best, and it slows our progress. We keep on swinging leads.

Approximately four pitches below the



The hauling of the rucksacks begins. Dusan Debelak



Nearing the end. Dusan Debelak

summit we decide to leave the unnecessary equipment behind. In the upper part there are some great ice pitches. Right below the edge of the face we have to dig a shaft through the cornice. I manage to dig it in half an hour of mining—not alpine—work.

It is 4 p.m. and we have come to the edge of the face. We are 50 vertical meters from the top, but can't reach it because of the very bad conditions. Photos are impossible, since there is hardly room for two of us; Viki stays in the shaft. We don't get much enjoyment because we know what is still to come.

Rappeling will take the whole night. We start to descend.

A pitch from the top the rope gets stuck. I ascend 50 meters, climbing hand-over-hand to set the rope free. Darkness and cold catch us. A few more pitches and we are above the waterfall, which is not the best way for descending, because you have to traverse a lot. Besides, our ropes get stuck again, this time to the icicles beneath the waterfall. As the last one on the rope, I am again the one to set them free. With my last atom of strength I manage—luckily—to do it. Here we are, on the ledge again. I start cooking. It has been half a day since we last drank, and half of the descent is still ahead of us. Some time after midnight we continue our descent.

In the 75-meter traverse beneath the ledge, the rope gets totally stuck. We leave it; none of us has the power or will to go back up. A spare rope waits for us on the ledge, and we will be able to rappel with it. At dawn we find ourselves in the lower, snowy 300 meters of the face. I descend last together with Viki. Twice we catch ourselves sleeping. We are below the face. Each alone, we slouch as if beaten toward the tent, where Igor awaits us.

Drink. We drink, hold each other, and at the same time pack our rucksacks for the return into the valley. Igor, our first contact with the rest of the world, feeds us liquid that gradually gives us back strength. We are aware of the friend we had while climbing, of his patience, of how much more scared he was than we.

There is no end to happiness in Huaraz. The next day, as we finally decide to jot down a sketch, the pencil stops writing somewhere in the middle of the route. Alcohol and exhaustion have won.

On the expedition and at home we have thought about our achievement. It is the most difficult thing we have done so far. I often ask myself, "Do the Andes, with their difficult faces, deserve to be neglected in comparison with the Himalaya?" Ultimately, the answer to this question is known only to those who have climbed in both ranges.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Cordillera Blanca, Peru

NEW ROUTE: *Alpos-Facig-Slovenije* (945 meters, ABO VII+ A3+ 95°) on the west face of Chacaraju, to 50 meters below the summit, June 26-29, 1996 (Debelak, Mlinar, Zerovnik)

PERSONNEL: Dusan Debelak, Viktor Mlinar, Tomaz Zerovnik, Igor Oblak, Aritza Monastero (Spain), Ales Nezmah, Joze Cajzek

