

Alpamayo

by IAN TATTERSALL

In the summer of 1994 I joined the Rucksack Club meet in Chamonix after a rather wet and unsatisfactory time in the Bregaglia. In 6 days of pretty good weather Graham Heath and I managed just two sports routes on the Vallorcine Slabs, something inconceivable a few years ago. We spent the week having a wonderful time paragliding and thus avoided the long hut walks, early starts, uncomfortable bivouacs, storms, fear, etc. that had characterised my alpine career. So after 25 years I finally believed that I'd got big mountains out of my system - how wrong can you be?

I hadn't been home long when Joe Simpson (he of literary fame) reminded me that I'd expressed an interest in one of his cunning plans when we'd been together in Nepal in 1993, the 'Seven Night Clubs Expedition' to Peru; the night clubs in question being situated in Huaraz, the Chamonix of the Cordillera Blanca. The plan was to hit the 7 clubs and during a period of rest and recuperation go and climb Alpamayo, said to be the most beautiful mountain in the world. The only specialised item of kit required could easily be obtained from Boots. ('Anything for the weekend, Sir?' 'Err..., well... for 3 weeks actually.') Joe can be extremely persuasive.

There's a predictable reaction when you mention a trip with Joe - 'are you sure you'll be all right?' As Joe correctly points out, when he's had a mishap while climbing, he's been the one to suffer, not his climbing partner. As Clint Eastwood succinctly put it - 'do you feel lucky?'

Needless to say Joe had it sussed. He got himself employed as a guide for 'High Places' for the month of June and intended that I join him at the beginning of July in Huaraz. He would, of course, be fit and acclimatised, while I would be my usual honed athletic self! Now Joe is a lovely guy, but even his closest friends would have to admit that he can be a little abrasive at times, so at my suggestion two ladies were invited along, who I secretly hoped might have a restraining influence. No chance! He was definitely the same old Joe. Needless to say we got on like the proverbial house on fire and returned home firmer friends than when we left.



Alpamayo summit ridge looking N. Photo: I . Tattersall

So it was that Val Randall, Diane Triner and myself left Manchester on the 3rd July for the 17h flight to Peru. On arrival at Lima it was better than a package holiday to Mallorca, we were met at the airport, installed in a 5-star hotel and the following morning driven by minibus the 8h to Huaraz. Who said Joe couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery - me! Joe met us in Huaraz, well pleased that he'd got his 12 clients to the top of Pisco, no mean effort considering it's 5,800m. My fears of him being fit and acclimatised quickly evaporated on finding him slowly recovering from a severe bout of tonsillitis; well, considering the local entertainment it could have been a lot worse. Joe had already organised the transport to Cashapampa and the burros for the 2-day walk in from there to base camp, so all that was left was to go shopping for our provisions.

Huaraz was a smashing little place, colourful, cheerful and lively, and despite being so-called 'third world' was pretty clean in contrast to Asia. The 3h drive to Cashapampa down the Rio Santo valley was fascinating. On our left as we drove N was the Cordillera Negro, black and barren, virtually a high altitude desert in the rain shadow of the higher Cordillera Blanca to our right. The number of peaks we passed was awe inspiring - all were dominated by the highest peak in the Cordillera, Huascarán at 6768m. Interestingly, as opposed to most other areas of the globe, the prevailing wind

was from the E, generated by the vast Amazon basin on the other side of the mountains.

During the final hour of the road journey I began to feel a little queasy and by the time we'd pitched the tents at the road head I was definitely NTC (none too crisp). Feeling extremely dizzy and expelling copious amounts of fluid from both ends simultaneously was certainly not the best start to the coming days' exertions. It didn't really require a brilliant physician (such as myself!) to diagnose a particularly nasty bout of Montezuma's revenge. As we'd already booked the burros there was no option but to just get on with it, which I proceeded to do with alarming regularity.

Consequently the walk in along the Quebrada Santa Cruz passed in something of a daze, only interrupted by Joe deciding to go fishing at our first camp. My interest in whether or not he caught anything was totally non-existent as by this time I'd only graduated to the short term loan of half a cup of soup. Finally, on the second afternoon, we arrived at base camp and set about organising ourselves. Base camp was in a great spot, camping on grass with clean water in a forest of stunted trees to provide us with plenty of firewood. To the N were stunning views of the southerly aspects of Alpamayo and Quitaraju and, across the Quebrada Santa Cruz, the brilliant looking pyramidal Artesonraju.

Fortunately my three companions were all interested in the culinary arts; those readers who know me will appreciate just how vital that is. By now my various potions were beginning to work and, to put it mildly, I was beginning to feel a trifle peckish. To augment our provisions Joe had procured a couple of chickens, live ones naturally, who because of their inquisitive nature, i.e. their total bloody-mindedness, were christened Utter and Bastard. The idea was that the two birds would be sacrificed when our rather bland diet was beginning to pall. However, Pedro, our arriero (burro driver), precipitated matters by cutting an air hole in the chicken sack, which Bastard promptly stuck his head through. Over the course of 6h being bounced about on the back of a burro he'd succeeded in strangling himself, thus saving us the trouble of 'necking' him. Consequently we celebrated our arrival at base camp with a delicious chicken stew. There are a number of drawbacks attendant upon being the non-cooking member, namely having to fulfil the roles of general dogsbody, water carrier, washer up, etc. I'm surprised I didn't end up ironing their bloody clothes.

We spent a day pottering about, straightening the camp,

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building a kitchen, fireplace, etc., in effect making life comfortable and contemplating our next move. The approach to our route on the SW face of Alpamayo led up the moraine and then glacier to the col between Quitaraju and Alpamayo. We planned to camp on the col and climb the mountain from there. As base camp lay at about 4000m and the col at 5300m it was obviously going to be a grunt, so initially we carried loads to establish a cache at the foot of the glacier. Now Joe and I had been through this movie before, whereas Val and Di, while experienced hill walkers, had never carried loads at altitude. As part of the inducement to put up with two dirty old men - well, to be exact, one dirty old man - for 3 weeks, we'd promised to take them to the col, a promise we were beginning to regret, especially as their snow and ice experience was limited, i.e. nil.

After another day's rest - a good trip this - the four of us set out for the col, picking up our previously cached loads on the way. Now Val is over 6ft like me, but without my delicate constitution, while Di at 5ft nothing and less than 7 stone was the one who impressed me most. Needless to say, Joe and I are impeccably politically correct and as such were extremely careful not to be sexist, i.e. the girls carried the same loads as we did. Fortunately there was a good trail up the glacier, ploughed by an American group a couple of days previously. This reduced the grunt factor and also gave us a good excuse to dispense with a rope, which I always find a pain as I constantly trip over it. At one point this decision seemed a definite no-no when on a steep section, above an enormous crevasse, it transpired that Val didn't know the difference between the pick and the adze of her ice axe! The final section to the col became quite steep and was made a little more alarming by the trail weaving underneath some large overhanging seracs. It was interesting to find that Val and Di felt more comfortable in the enclosed section threatened by the seracs than on the exposed, steep, final slope. At this point Joe and I did feel a trifle guilty as regards the lack of rope - we soon got over it.

As the col was very exposed we descended the far side to a nice level spot beneath the beautiful flutings of Alpamayo's SW face. This descent was not without its traumas, steep, exposed and crevasse-ridden, all of which was pointed out in no uncertain terms when the girls eventually arrived. Whatever happened to my childhood image of womankind?

By the time the tents were pitched and the first brew on I was

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beginning to wonder, as I usually do in such circumstances, why the hell I was here? I was completely shattered and, just to complete the misery, it now began to snow heavily. Have you noticed, it's always when one is most strung out that nature goes for the jugular? Joe and I were far too tired to contemplate climbing the next day, so much to everyone's relief it was decided that Val and Di should descend to base camp while we stayed on the col. Easier said than done as down climbing is always more difficult, especially if one has never practised it before. So while Joe stayed at camp to re-pitch the tent and get organised, I took the girls back up to the col with our two 50m ropes. The intention was to top rope/lower them down the first 100m and then let them descend the rest of the way on their own those guilt feelings again. Fortunately the Yanks, a guide with two clients and two porters, were also descending that day and it didn't take much persuasion for Val and Di to join them. The age of chivalry is not yet dead, but what the American guide thought of this selfish Brit I dread to think.

When the girls disappeared from view I returned to our now comfortable tent and the Sheffield brewing machine. As Joe spends most of his time when not being a celebrity clutching a pint pot in the Broadfield, I believe his insatiable desire to make mugs of tea is a form of Freudian compensation. We spent that afternoon playing chess and studying the face where, much to our consternation, we saw two French climbers retreat from the first pitch across the bergschrund after 2¹/₂h of trying - surely it couldn't be that difficult? It was at this point that Joe informed me that this would be my pitch as he had an understandable phobia of icy holes - who was I to disagree!

We left the tent at about 4am the following morning and slowly plodded through the darkness to the foot of the face about 300m above us. The first pitch didn't really look too bad, climbing by head torch has its advantages, you can't see too far ahead and, even if you are stupid enough to look down, you can't see the yawning schrund below, especially if you are as myopic as I am. Anyway, it went without too much trouble at about Scottish grade IV. The rest of the climb was fantastic, in total control, swinging leads up the ice, initially not too steep but rearing up for the final pitches to the summit. We topped out after about 6h from the tent feeling really pleased with ourselves, especially as the views from the summit were superb, a long double corniced ridge in both

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directions, traversing which would have been a nightmare. We sat on the top in brilliant sunshine with the mist from the changing weather rising up both sides of the mountain towards us, an incredible sensation. Joe got the job of rigging the abseils for the descent, ostensibly because his eyes were better than mine in the encroaching murk, more likely because I was feeling my years and, yes, age should have its privileges. The descent was uneventful except for one incident when I was struck squarely on the helmet by a lump of ice which I managed to deflect onto the back of Joe's neck. I saw stars, Joe passed out, fortunately we were both attached to an anchor at the time. We finally returned to the tent at about 2.00pm and, yes you've guessed it, to more frenetic brewing by my companion.

By mutual consent our rather vague plan for climbing Quitaraju as well was firmly vetoed, a 45° soft snow plod followed by interminable down climbing did not appeal, so next day we retraced our steps to base camp. It was only when we descended from the col ourselves that we fully realised the enormity of what we had expected the girls to actually do. Put simply, we abseiled down what we had left them to down climb solo, well, I suppose experience has its advantages. There were no hard feelings, surprisingly the girls seemed quite pleased to see us on our return. In fact the only individual who was not too happy was our old friend Utter, who joined our celebration rather unwillingly, spitted on a snow stake. Variety being the spice of life, not to mention chickens, it was now time for a roast.

The problem with a successful trip is that it generates illusions. One tends to forget the close shaves, frustrations and disappointments of the past and sees only a future of continuing success. Consequently I'm now looking forward to another adventure or, more likely, fate is luring me on towards my destiny.

*The road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the road has gone
And I must follow it if I can,
Pursuing it with weary feet
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet,
And whither then? I cannot say.*

J.R.R. Tolkien