

Challenges, personal bests met in Peruvian Andes

BY LEO BEZMAN

I climbed my first 6,000-metre peak on an Alpine Club of Canada trip in 2010. That success opened new thoughts and plans in my never-ending passion for mountains. I returned home to Montreal with a desire to offer other climbers the same chance of discovering, and eventually enjoying, high altitude mountaineering.

That's how a long-time dream, Peru's Cordillera Blanca came on stage. This compact range of mountains with 25 peaks above 6,000 metres is well suited to a wide spectrum of climbing skills and experience levels. It's one of the best places for an introduction to high altitude mountaineering or serious technical climbs.

I began planning mostly alone, last October. I presented the trip to the ACC Montreal Section in December, then to other sections. Eventually nine ACCers joined from Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Outaouais. As a fellow Club member once said to me, climbing with people we don't know well or sometimes barely at all is a fundamental element of the ACC experience; from all nine, only two knew each other before and only one had ever climbed above 5,000 metres.

The trip was conceived as an introduction to high altitude mountaineering for people with good climbing skills on ice and snow. The schedule included a generous acclimatization period, two 5,500-metre introductory summits and two technical summits above 6,000 metres.

We all flew to Lima from where we

based to the charming, colourful city of Huaraz. In Huaraz and around we spent three days acclimatizing before travelling to Ishinca Valley base camp. Easily reached from Huaraz and with a nearby alpine hut, the base camp is famous for being crowded, but was rather lonely during our nine-day stay. At 4,400 metres, the challenges of high altitude become very real, so we began negotiating our new reality.

On day seven, the alarm rang at 2 a.m. All nine of us started up a steep and rocky ridge, each walking alone for a long while, fighting the night and the cold and wondering if we might reach the top. Regardless of experience, it's probably the same for the first climb of every trip. Regrouping after two hours we counted the first bail-out. One hour later as we crested the glacier at 5,000 metres, the second bail-out ensued, so only seven roped up to continue. With just a few crevasses and moderate snow slopes to negotiate, at 8:30 a.m. we reached the 5,420-metre summit of Urus Este—a personal record for six ACCers. Overwhelmed by emotions, as always after a long time away from mountains, I sat a few minutes and enjoyed the beauty, the purity and the untouchable. Those indescribable minutes that make sense of all the efforts and the sacrifices; those minutes only very few can understand.

Back in camp by early afternoon, we found one trip-mate in trouble with acute mountain sickness symptoms. As

the situation deteriorated, we arranged an emergency evacuation using burros and one ariero (burro driver) plus a taxi from the trailhead. He returned to safety in Huaraz, but it took him several weeks to fully recover and we learned once more that not everybody acclimatizes at altitude. Although I felt sorry for my distressed friend, I was happy to see the remaining group well acclimatized and in good spirits.

Two days later at 2:30 a.m. under a bright full moon, we left camp for the summit of Ishinca. With a longer approach, more crevasses and steeper sections, our entire team of eight made the 5,530-metre summit in wonderful sunshine. Ishinca gave legacy to our trip and successfully concluded the introductory portion. Back in camp by mid-afternoon, another altitude record for seven ACCers was good reason to celebrate—albeit somewhat anxiously with our thoughts already to more serious climbs ahead.

The next morning we moved to high camp at 5,000-metres to climb 6,032-metre Toclaraju, which impressively dominates the valley. In cold thin air, that evening we decided to seize the weather opportunity and climb the next morning, as I believe people well acclimatized at 4,500 metres should be able to climb at 6,000 metres after very little or no additional time at 5,000 metres. Moreover, a good weather day should not be traded for unnecessary rest or acclimatization time. That decision, however, would come under fire the next day as at least one of us questioned whether more acclimatization time at the new altitude would have put us in a better position to summit.

I don't do a 6,000-metre mountain every year, so my night was full of emotions with very little sleep. We headed out at 2 a.m. with three and four climbers, respectively, on two 60-metre ropes. Saving weight, we carried no additional long ropes, thus making the teams dependable on each other for at least the descent rappels—a logistical oversight with serious implications.

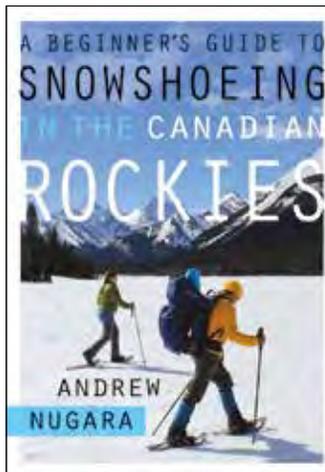
Seven hours into the climb, and finally into the sun, 400 metres below the summit, the unthinkable, and still so predictable, happened. One climber was exhausted and unable to continue. This

The ACC Eastern sections team is all smiles on the 5,420-summit of Ishinca.

From left, back row, Josiane Ruffa, Alain Turgeon, Geneviève Lefebvre and François De Léan.

Front row, Benoit Mayer-Godin, Leo Bezman and Ryszard Tokarczyk. PHOTO BY VALENTIN JAUMOUILLE.





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was quite dramatic since the rope shortage and missing bail-out strategy would force us all to withdraw. Furthermore, hesitation in communicating the crisis made the situation even tenser, and the decision to retreat more difficult to accept. We were six ambitious climbers with a strong desire to reach our first 6,000-metre summit in full view only a couple of hours away. The first goal of the trip, that everyone should return safely, was forgotten for a blip of a second, and the responsibility on my shoulders became unbearable for the first time.

We retreated with broken hearts and broken team spirit, but found the energy to spend another night at our 5,000-metre camp to gain more acclimatization for our remaining big mountain. I was heartbroken too. I bear the heavy responsibility of not trying to conciliate, regain confidence and the next day, make a second attempt that would have had a reasonable chance of success, I now think. We descended to base camp instead, returning to Huaraz the day after for a good rest, good food and team reconciliation.

We spent two days in Huaraz preparing for Chopicalqui, at 6,354 metres one of the highest, most beautiful peaks in the range—the final, most desired objective of our trip. We reviewed strategy and decided to proceed with faster teams of two climbers carrying two 60-metre ropes and enough pickets and screws to independently descend from any point. To match everyone's ability, fitness and dedication, we hired three professionals—one guide and two assistants, increasing the team to 10 climbers, four porters and a cook.

With lots of gear and food, we crowded into a van and drove to trail-head in the Llanganuco Valley, then

hiked directly to Morena Camp at 4,900 metres. For the first time on the trip, bad weather grounded us there an additional day. With clear skies the next day, we eagerly climbed to high camp at 5,500-metres, navigating fields of crevasses with half-collapsed bridges and numerous hanging seracs. Although in a tense mood, everybody felt well and ready for the challenge.

Fifteen lights lined up Chopicalqui's first steep slope at 1 a.m. Three Peruvians and two Germans joined our group of seven ACCers and three local guides. Climbing with the lead guide in the first team, I quickly realized fresh snow from the previous day's bad weather would make our climb more difficult. With that, climbing at night on an unfamiliar glacier was not an easy task. Focused on my own work, I didn't notice as the Germans, then Peruvians and two Canadian teams turned around, leaving only four ACCers and two guides on the mountain after sunrise.

Gaining altitude, we ran into more technical terrain but also reached the warmth of the sun and the splendour of the views; the Cordillera seen from the steep slopes of Chopicalqui was breathtaking. I was finally living the dream. Soon we reached the final ridge before the summit mushroom, subject of a famous Chopicalqui picture that obsessed me for

Peruvian guide Felix Silva and Leo Bezman set the track as they approach the summit mushroom on 6,354-metre Chopicalqui.

PHOTO BY RYSZARD TOKARCZYK.

years. On a sunny and rare windless day and overwhelmed by emotion, I reached the 6,354-metre summit of Chopicalqui, 10 hours after leaving camp. The minutes on the summit were profoundly rewarding; the views and feelings again beyond belief. In such moments, my thoughts flew to the ones far away I love the most, the ones who missed me so much this year and to whom I dedicated the climb.

Another ACCer and guide reached the summit shortly after me; two other Canadians stopped at 6,200 metres, less than one hour from the top. We all had climbed higher than ever before and enjoyed the clear day and astonishing views from the heights of Chopicalqui.

With many thanks to fellow climbers: Ryszard Tokarczyk (ACC Ottawa Section), Alain Turgeon (Outaouais), Geneviève Lefebvre (Montreal, Outaouais), François De Léan (Outaouais, Ottawa, Laurentian), Benoit Mayer-Godin (Montreal), Manel Nitu (Montreal), Josiane Ruffa (Toronto) and Valentin Jaumouille (Toronto).

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