



AAC Publications

Gigante Grande (5,750m), southwest face, Via del Minero

South America, Bolivia, Quimsa Cruz

Traditional Aymara people have descriptive names for their mountains: Illimani is Water Bearer, Huayna Potosi is Thunderous Youth, and Mururata the Beheaded Peak. Our expectations were therefore high as we set off to climb Gigante Grande in the southern Quimsa Cruz.

Previously, this area has been difficult to reach, but high mineral prices and intense mining activity in recent years have ensured much-improved road access. Gregg Beisly (NZ), Chris Clarke (USA), and I reached the Laram Khota lake and mining camp at the foot of Gigante Grande in barely four hours from La Paz. From there, a mining road zigzags right to the start of the imposing 650m southwest face, at 5,100m.

USA climbers Dakin Cook and Kevin Starr climbed the southwest face in 1993. They were forced to bivouac near the summit, finishing the route the following day in a storm. A direct descent looked so difficult that they crossed the range instead and emerged next day at a mine. In the meantime, Dakin's friend, longtime Bolivian resident and activist Stan Shepard (USA), fearing they were trapped on the mountain by storm, drove from La Paz to organize a rescue and died tragically after his car veered off the road in snow. [Editor's note: Cook and Starr are thought to have repeated the central line, the first on the face, climbed a month earlier by Teo Plaza and Iñaki San Vicente at UIAA V 75°. However, in the upper reaches these routes may take differing lines.]

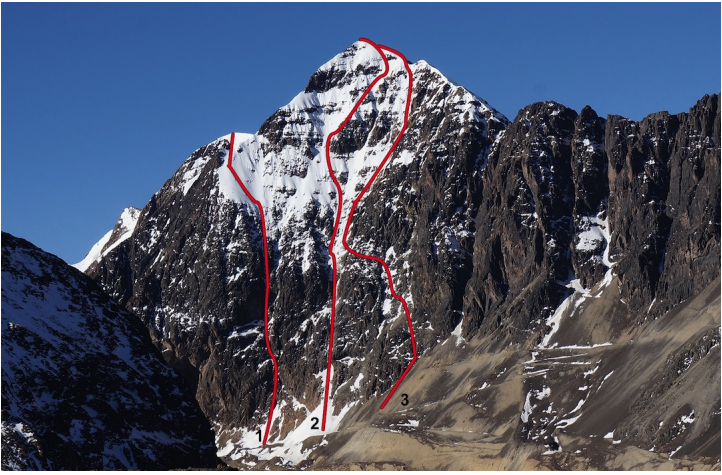
In 2001 Bruce Hendricks and Andy Selters climbed a new route left of the 1993 line, naming it Via Loco (AAJ 2002). They reached the west-northwest ridge but did not continue to the summit. They felt it might have been the most technical route in Bolivia at the time. The only two other known attempts on the mountain, by Bolivian mountain guides in 2013, were unsuccessful.

At 7 a.m. on August 1, as we walked toward the face, a local miner warned us that rockfall was common by mid-afternoon, and added that her husband had fallen to his death while mining on a nearby peak. We started up the right-hand couloir, roping up as the mixed ground became steeper and more technical. The climbing was engaging, with vertical sections of thin ice, mixed terrain, and long moderate slopes of ice and névé. By midafternoon we'd climbed eight pitches but were still only two-thirds' height on the face, which was now receiving sun and sending down intermittent rock showers. Though we belayed from beneath overhanging rock, all of us took minor hits. The safest way was up, and rockfall became less severe as we homed in on the summit. At 4 p.m., after 12 pitches, we stood on top.

Our relief was short-lived. Our proposed descent of the northwest ridge looked ominous, threatened by loose rock. Chris, fearing altitude sickness, took off. Gregg and I descended more slowly, our pace determined by my lack of acclimatization and exhaustion (it was only five days since I'd left sea level).

Nightfall caught us high on labyrinthine cliffs, making navigation a real challenge. Gregg guided me onto the final moraine wall, which became steeper as it spilled onto the glacier. We eventually had to rappel to the glacier, and three hours later, at midnight, we joined Chris. During a glissade, he had flipped over several times before coming to a stop, and was lucky to have survived without serious injury. We named the climb Via del Minero (TD+ AI4 M4).

Images



Southwest face of Gigante Grande. (1) Via Loco (2001). (2) Plaza-San Vicente (1993). (3) Via del Minero (2013).



Erik Monasterio on the first ascent of Via del Minero.

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