



AAC Publications

Wall Of Ice

A Tactical Tour De Force On The West Face Of Siula Chico, Peru

Benjamin Guignonnet, a guide from Nice, hatched the idea for our Peruvian expedition. His friend Stéphane Benoist had told him there was a huge dihedral still waiting to be climbed on the west face of Siula Chico in the Cordillera Huayhuash. In 2007, Jordi Corominas and Oriol Baro established the first and only route up the west face during Corominas' third year of attempts. He had first tried going up the central dihedral (which we ended up climbing), then made an attempt on the left side of the face, and finally succeeded on the right side. They climbed this line over six days, using a portaledge.

During the summer of 2013, Robin Revest and I shared an apartment in Chamonix with Ben for the guiding season. He was already planning an expedition to Siula Chico with Fred Degoulet, and Robin and I did not yet have any trips in the works for the coming year, so we proposed that we join them for this ambitious project.

With advice from Jordi and two other Spanish friends, brothers Simón and Martín Elías, we decided to make our attempt in early season, right after the spring rains, when the ice would be in the best possible shape. However, this strategy is a bit risky because the great flutings, runnels, and daggers of ice that form when the big faces purge themselves of their huge winter snow loads soon begin to melt in the warming temperatures. In order to climb these walls you have to time it just right, acclimatizing during the very end of the rains so you're ready to go during the first 10 days of the dry season. We were lucky in that the rainy season in 2014 was longer and wetter than normal, and when we saw the face for the first time it was even more iced up than it had been in Jordi and Oriol's photos.

We landed in Lima on April 24. It was a week later than we had planned, but I had to do some last-minute guiding in Chamonix to help pay for the trip. The four of us partied in Lima while waiting for the late-night bus to Huaraz—I think we drank a few too many Pisco Sours. When the bus arrived in Huaraz in the middle of the night, in a torrential rainstorm, we piled into a taxi toward the Huayhuash. In order to make the most of our time, we had decided to leave immediately for an acclimatization hike and to check out Siula Chico via the Rasac Punta col. In the taxi, Ben suddenly realized he had left a pouch full of euros and some expensive electronic devices on the bus. We turned around and early in the morning discovered the empty bus back in Huaraz, missing all of Ben's cash and valuables. The trip was off to a great start.

We regrouped at our friend Zarela's house in Huaraz. Zarela is an extraordinary and very helpful woman, and I can't recommend La Casa de Zarela enough—you live well there. Over the next few days we acclimatized as planned, taking the bus to Pocpa and then hiking over Mancan Punta and up the Rasac Valley, past lush greenery and lakes full of trout. On April 28 we climbed to Rasac Punta at 5,129 meters, but the visibility wasn't great and from so far away we could see little other than the great size of Siula Chico's west face. We were back in Huaraz on the evening of the 29th. During this acclimatization trek the weather was relatively fair in the mornings, then it would rain until evening. On May 1 we went to Hatun Machay to climb for a few days. This is a beautiful place, with sport routes and bouldering at all grades, on a plateau at 4,200 meters. Once again, it rained every afternoon.

Back in town we finished our preparations. Our base camp would be near Laguna Sarapococha at 4,482 meters. We started the approach on May 6, and rain continued during the three-day trek—in fact

it had rained every day of the two weeks we'd been in Peru, but each day it seemed to rain less and less. At base camp we thanked our *arriero*, who had loaded his mules with many kilos of gear and brought them all this way for the sake of a few Frenchmen who just wanted to waste their time and money in the Peruvian mountains. We were now at the foot of the mountains described in Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void*, a huge wall of 6,000-meter peaks: Yerupaja Sur, Siula Grande, Siula Chico, and Sarapo.

On May 10 we headed toward the west face of Siula Chico. It was tough going. The glacier was a labyrinth of crevasses, very tricky and dangerous. However, at last the weather was nice all day. The sun shone fiercely and the mountains purged themselves with big avalanches. We moved slowly—the packs were heavy and we were still acclimatizing. On this day we made it up to about 5,200 meters, and the following day we climbed to 5,400 meters and established our advanced base at the foot of Siula Chico.

The rainy season seemed to have truly ended, and the west face of Siula Chico was drying out very, very quickly. Day by day, we watched the face melt and fall apart. I would have preferred to rest and acclimatize at base camp for a few more days, but it was obvious that we needed to move if we didn't want to miss our chance. Our strategy would be to start each day extremely early and climb as much as possible during the night, before the sun rose. By noon, we needed to be somewhere sheltered from the falling ice and avalanches. While scouting we picked out potential bivy sites on the face almost by instinct. And we were not wrong—the sites we scoped were well sheltered and we didn't need portaledge, just tiny bivy tents. We packed lots of screws because of all the ice remaining on the face.

We planned to climb as a team of four—one big rope team. The leader would lead on double ropes, two of us would second, and then one would belay the leader on the next pitch while the other hauled our bag. The fourth climber would climb alongside the haulbag, belayed by one of the seconds on our third rope, while keeping the bag from getting hung up. We planned to change leaders every two or three pitches—the climbing is very difficult at this altitude and it would be exhausting for any of us to do more. We hoped to free all the pitches. Thinking about it now, this climb would have been very tough if there hadn't been four of us.

On May 14 we headed back up to our advanced base camp, ready to blast on May 15. That night it snowed. We sat out the day and allowed the face to purge itself of this fresh snow. The following night we gained the first ice runnels in two pitches. The climbing was not difficult, about 60 degrees, so we climbed side by side. At one point during the night a large projectile fell right past Robin, making a terrifying noise that pierced the quiet night air. Arriving at the first technical section of the wall, we formed one large rope team as planned and climbed to an amazing bivy site, chopping a narrow, flat ice ledge under the shelter of a rock overhang. The crux of the day was several pitches of sustained ice of about WI5 in difficulty, with one pitch of WI5+ or WI6, all of which Fred led. Fred and Ben set up the bivy site while Robin and I climbed two more pitches of ice up to a very steep dihedral. On this day, we climbed about 400 meters.

The rest of the day we hung out at our bivy, sitting on our Thermarest pads, our feet dangling over the void. As we sat safely under the shelter of the overhang, ice plunged from the face. The huge wall was decorated with overhanging umbrellas of ice, like the visors of ball caps, with massive stalactites hanging from them. We imagined ourselves on the famous north face of the Tête de Gramusat in Fressinière, and we were thankful for the training we'd done on the super-steep ice there all winter. The sun set, night arrived, and the falling ice stopped.

Early on May 17 we headed up to the base of the very steep and impressive dihedral where Robin and I had stopped the day before. Ben took the lead and spent a fair amount of time on this difficult pitch, using a few points of aid to get through blank spots without enough ice to climb. While following, we freed this pitch at around M6—and this at about 5,850 meters and with daypacks, which made it feel even harder. All four of us preferred leading on the face since the leader got to climb without a pack.

Hauling the big bag at this altitude was exhausting.

Above the dihedral, Ben led another ice pitch at WI5+ and then turned over the lead, exhausted. I led two more pitches, one of WI6 and one WI5+, and then Fred led two more pitches to our second bivy at 5,980 meters. We had only climbed five pitches for the day—we aren't used to climbing so little. But seeking shelter from the coming avalanches and falling ice required us to cut the day short and, besides, we were pretty worked from the climbing. It took us a few hours to set up our bivy. During a break, a falling rock put a hole through Ben and Fred's tent.

Still in the dark, Robin set off the next day on mixed terrain. Then Fred brought us up a steep wall requiring two moves of dry-tooling at about M5 and more thin ice. It wasn't terribly difficult, but falling in that terrain would not have been good. Watching Fred climb such a delicate and dangerous pitch in the dark, with only the light from his headlamp, didn't exactly reassure the team.

The next pitch was a dead end. Above us was a hanging dagger, and Ben started toward it. He is really strong, but we feared he'd knock the dagger onto the rest of us. After many minutes he retreated, frustrated to be off-route. I took off and led two pitches around the obstacle and onto a huge umbrella of ice. Ben wanted to redeem himself, and so he led the next pitch, an M5 traverse to our third bivy site. We set up our two tents on top of a huge cornice, at the base of the summit headwall at 6,170 meters, perhaps four pitches from the top.

That night the wind picked up and the temperature dropped. In the morning, when it would have been time to start climbing, the wind was blowing too hard for us to leave. We all huddled in one tent to try to stay warm. This had to be our summit day or we would run out of food and fuel. Ben wanted to redeem himself and lead the last two technical pitches. "Allez!" we said. He led a pitch of M5+ then a desperate and dicey M6+/M7. At the end of this section, he placed a bird beak in a small seam and headed onto a thin smear of ice that fell apart under his picks and frontpoints. When it was our turn to climb, the little ice that had been there during Ben's lead was mostly gone and none of us succeeded in freeing the pitch.

Robin led up through the summit cornice in a long pitch of vertical snow, then up an arête of unconsolidated snow, and after four days of climbing we were on the summit. We all knew that despite our lack of experience in this range and our young age, this route would likely be one of the hardest we would ever climb. We headed back down to our bivy to rest a bit before descending the wall.

That night was epic. Violent winds and heavy snow whipped the dark face. We woke at midnight, packed up our bivy site, and began the descent. All of the rappels were incredibly steep and airy. We used the following technique: Two of us would rappel a single fixed line. At the end of the line, the two lower climbers would make a V-thread anchor. The two climbers still at the upper anchor would then drop the single rope so the lower climbers could rappel again. Then the upper climbers would rappel on their other two ropes, pull these ropes, and thread them through the V-thread the lower climbers had just left. Using this sequence, we were able to descend the nearly 900-meter face in three hours. True teamwork!

During the night, we barely recognized the pitches we had climbed. "I climbed that? Me? Impossible..." At sunrise we reached the bergschrund in snow and fog. With a bit of luck, we found our tents and plunged into sleep in our wet down bags, completely exhausted and happy.

Summary: First ascent of Looking for the Void, a direct route up the west face of 6,265-meter Siula Chico (865 meters, M7 WI6 R), by Frédéric Degoulet, 31, Benjamin Guignonnet, 26, Hélias Millerieux, 26, and Robin Revest, 23. The team climbed alpine-style between May 16 and 19, and descended early on May 20. Every pitch was led or followed free.

About the Author: Hélias Millerioux grew up in Paris, began to climb at age 14, and now guides in Chamonix. Later in 2014, he and two friends did the first ascent of Boktoh in Nepal (see Climbs and Expeditions).

Translated from French by Todd Miller.

Images



Climbing as a team of four was crucial to the success of the French climbers, seen here on day three of the “ice big wall” of Siula Chico.



he author follows a steep M6+ corner on day two. The leader, Ben Guignonnet, used some aid, but the pitch was followed free.



Sunset at the exposed second bivouac on the west face.



Siula Chico (6,265m) showing (1) Looking for the Void (2014) and (2) Baro-Corominas (2007). Corominas attempted the line of Looking for the Void in 2003, reaching the second bivy site shown, and then a line farther left in 2005. Center: Siula Grande (6,344m). Far left: Yerupaja Sur (6,515m).



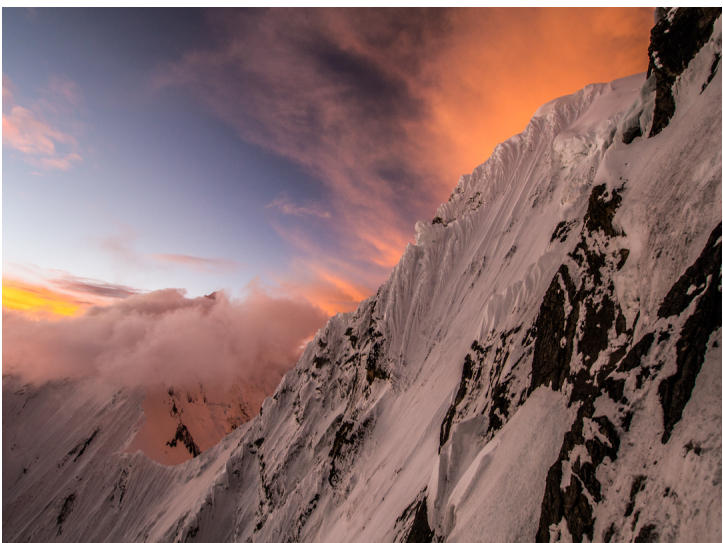
Ben Guignonnet starts day four with a pitch of M5+ at 6,200m.



With a clever system for rapid rappels, the team's nighttime descent of the nearly 900m face took only three hours.



Tackling a steep ice pitch on Looking for the Void, Siula Chico.



The view toward Yerupaja Sur from the second bivy on the west face of Siula Chico, Peru (p.38).

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