



AAC Publications

Pico del Norte, Northwest Face, Shit Happens

Bolivia, Cordillera Real

Rodrigo Lobo and I climbed a partial new route on Pico del Norte (6,050m) in the Illampu group in July. After waiting a day at our base camp because of snowy weather, we started up the left side of the northwest face by climbing the initial corner pitches of Ñeq'e Ñeq'e (Fava-Molina, AAJ 2014) and then followed a parallel line to the right, more or less on the crest of the pillar that defines this side of the face. [Editor's note: Some sources describe a prior route up this buttress at a grade of TD+ UIAA III AI4, but first ascent records are unclear—possibly German, possibly 1984.] The first 300m were difficult but well protected; the remaining terrain was more moderate climbing, between 5a and 6a. The northwest aspect means sun from 10 a.m. or earlier to nightfall, so the rock was warm and fun guaranteed. We simul-climbed about half the route and unroped for easier sections to gain time. There were a few meters of ice climbing and loads of huge penitents on the summit icecap.

We descended via the northwest ridge, which is mostly moderate ice with crevasses and penitents. However, we made a mistake in route-finding and rappelled to the north too early. Because of this we were forced into an unexpected bivouac. We had no bivy gear and it was very cold. Next day, cloud covered the sky and we waited in vain for the morning sun to warm our bodies. We reached our camp in late morning and rested all afternoon, eating the rest of our food. Between 30cm and 40cm of snow fell during the ensuing night, and the granite slopes we had scrambled up on the approach became impossible to descend. We sought and eventually found an alternative, with animal tracks showing the best way in the lower section. We took many acrobatic tumbles on slippery, snow-covered rock.

When we finally reached the Cocoyo-Sorata road we headed for Sorata, hoping a vehicle might pick us up before we got there. It was a great surprise when suddenly three 4WDs stopped beside us in the pouring rain. It was the rescue team: A large group of Rodrigo's friends from Cochabamba and La Paz had driven 17 hours to look for us. Because of our experience on the mountain we named the route Shit Happens (1,000m, 6c), a great climb on excellent granite.

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Editor's note: Previously unreported is the route L'hétacombe des Avionnettes (900m, TD) climbed on the southeast ridge of Pico del Norte in July 2010 by Frenchmen Vincent Bailleu, Rémi Labourie, Benoit Montfort, and Josselin Perrugault. This is the prominent ridge or spur to the right of the Bettembourg Pillar. It seems likely that this is a similar line to that first climbed over two days in the summer of 1972 by David Steel and Roger Skull, two U.K. alpinists who, later in the trip, both died on Illampu after completing a difficult new route up the east face.

Images



Pico del Norte (6,050m) from the north-northwest. The arrow marks the start of Ñeq'e Ñeq'e (Fava-Molina, 2013), which continued to the left of the prominent pillar above the initial corner. In 2016, Rodrigo Lobo and Robert Rauch followed the same steep corner to start their new route Shit Happens, then moved right to climb the pillar directly, continuing up the upper face on more moderate terrain to reach the summit ice. The climbers descended the northwest ridge (right) before rappelling back to the north to return to the base of the peak.

Article Details

Author	Robert Rauch, Bolivian Tours
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	0
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions