



## AAC Publications

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### **Nobody Knows Anything**

Two New Routes in the Cordillera Blanca of Peru

**THE IDEA of going to Peru wasn't sparked by some coveted unclimbed line.** It was simply out of convenience and practicality. As the winter season in the Canadian Rockies wound down, I was getting antsy to go on a trip. Peru seemed ideal: big mountains in a country I had never visited, a chance to see how my body did at altitude, with simple logistics and low costs to boot. My schedule would allow me a month to "train" (i.e., go climbing), and I could go right in the middle of Peru's dry season. Finding a willing partner with the same open schedule proved more challenging, but eventually I convinced my friend Quentin Lindfield Roberts to take three weeks off. I booked a ticket for six weeks, with no clear plan for the second half of my trip.

Upon arriving in Huaraz, Quentin and I quickly found our favorite breakfast hang at Café Andino. Over an endless stream of espresso, we bounced ideas off each other for what to do with his brief time in the country. Eventually we agreed to acclimatize in the Santa Cruz Valley and then consider trying something new.

We departed a day later with packs light on climbing gear and heavy with good food, wondering why we'd decided not to cough up the \$20 to get our loads hauled in on burros. After a rest day in Alpamayo base camp and a riveting game of bocce ball among the boulders at the moraine camp, at 5,000 meters, we slogged up to the Alpamayo-Quitaraju col, where we decided we still had enough daylight and energy to head up Alpamayo that afternoon. Ditching the camping gear, we relished in the light packs as we slowly simulated the pleasant 300-meter ice face. Next morning we climbed the north face of Quitaraju, grateful for our friends César and Vincent's hard work in digging the impressive snow bollards we used on the descent. Returning to the valley, we were dismayed to find that some gear and food we'd stashed had been stolen. On the bright side, our packs were somewhat lighter for the hike out.

Back in Huaraz, we spend a luxurious morning at Café Andino scarfing breakfast burritos, drinking coffee, and hashing out a plan for the rest of Quentin's trip. After banging around several options, we decided to attempt an unclimbed line on the east face of Chacaraju Este (6,001m). The south face of spectacular, twin-summitted Chacaraju rises above Laguna 69, one of the hottest tourist attractions in the area, and has been climbed by numerous routes, but the other aspects are rarely climbed. Chacaraju's eastern peak was first climbed in 1962 by a French party that traversed left to right across the lower east face, moved up the south ridge, then diagonaled back left across the upper east face to summit via the southeast ridge. A direct line up the east face had been attempted several times over the years, culminating in Slovenians Jure Juhasz and Andrej Markovic finally pushing a route through the headwall over six days in 1999. In photos of the face, we had noticed an appealing corner system breaching the left side of the roughly 250-meter headwall, and a potentially moderate passage snaking up the left edge of the lower wall. It was a bit of a gamble, as we hadn't yet seen the face in person—picking a route from a 20-year-old photo has its risks in a range with such rapid glacial recession.

We left town with six days remaining before Quentin's scheduled return to Canada. We had decided to approach from the Llanganuco Valley, which would intersect our planned descent route on the south face, allowing us to stash some gear for our return. On the second day we gained a 5,000-meter col

below the southeast ridge of Chacaraju and began a surprisingly complex traverse to the base of the east face, with some tricky route-finding and technical scrambling.

We took a rest day to study the face and acclimatize, which unfortunately was quite exhausting due to the total lack of shade. Both of us were not feeling 100 percent, and we would have to move swiftly through the lower half of the face to avoid falling rock and ice in the morning sun. Quentin, being the eternal optimist, convinced me that it was worth a shot. If we went home empty-handed, we would feel a lot better for having given it an honest effort.

We went to bed early and set the alarm for the ungodly hour of 9:30 p.m. We both barely slept, and when we headed out an hour later, I was battling waves of nausea. Quentin led for the first six hours, and I sluggishly followed, the gentle tug of the rope the only thing spurring me onward. He took us through the first rock band, a pitch of splitter granite crack climbing, and, forced to focus on the tricky and fun mixed climbing, I started to feel a bit better.

At the belay below the next rock band, I offered to take over the lead as we continued to simul-climb. Diverging from the original French route, which we'd basically followed to this point, I deked way left until I could gain the deteriorating remnants of an ice fluting, which brought me to a point level with and about 80 meters left of the easy snow slopes we needed to reach. From below, this crucial section had looked blocky and featured but not dead easy. Gingerly balancing over stacked blocks and loose flakes, I felt right at home—just like the Rockies! Luckily, most of the rubble was frozen together, and we finished the traverse just as the mountain began to heat up.

Reaching the base of the headwall in midmorning heat, we hacked out a ledge and siesta-ed for a few hours. Once things cooled off in the afternoon, I led the first pitch of the headwall, a full rope of beautiful mixed climbing—not too hard but intricate and engaging, and with perfect gear in bomber granite. I left the rope fixed and headed down for an early bivy.

Lying in the tent that evening the air was perfectly still, and as the sun set I left the door wide open and enjoyed the beautiful moment. Perched on our tiny oasis, surrounded by stark granite walls and otherworldly snow mushrooms, I watched as tiny ice crystals tumbled down the headwall and the stars came out one by one. In that moment of stillness and tranquility, the raw power and beauty of the mountains held me transfixed. The climbing had been good, but really this was what it was all about.

Early the next morning, Quentin self-belayed the pitch I'd enjoyed the day before while I juggled the fixed line with the heavy bag. The next pitch held the last big question mark: The crack system I'd followed the day before dead-ended in large overhangs above, and we needed to connect to a small hanging snowfield to the right, near the exit gully. Quentin traversed around the corner and found a steep crack choked with loose blocks. He tried another option farther right that also dead-ended but put him within spitting distance of the first crack. With no pro but positive edges, he holstered his tools and carefully tiptoed his way back to splitter hands, solid pro, and before long a good belay at the end of the hard climbing.

A couple more pitches of loose but easy simul-climbing brought us into the exit gully we had spied from below. Unfortunately, in the late-morning heat, the gully was running with water, and the first step of ice fell down when Quentin gave it the gentlest of taps. I started up easy-looking rock to the right and soon found myself balancing past more precarious stacked blocks. A few tense minutes later, I gained another ledge and decided I'd had enough.

The next pitch was obvious: another short but steep step of ice, with water pouring behind the pillar. With the summit so close, we briefly tried to convince ourselves the pillar was solid enough to climb. Luckily, common sense prevailed as we realized the sun would be off the face in an hour or so. Time

for another siesta!

Once the face was in shadow, the pillar refroze in a matter of minutes—an impressive thing to watch. I won a hard-fought rock-paper-scissors round and took off up a beautiful pitch of water ice that brought us to a wild ice cave below the final snow mushroom. In the final rays of another perfect day, I plowed a path up the steep sugar guarding the summit. After two full days of climbing, we found ourselves on the flattest ground since leaving the glacier. We dug into the facets and called it a night.

With Quentin's bus out of Huaraz leaving in a little over 24 hours, we woke a couple of hours before dawn. In temps below -20°C, we packed up and left the summit without ever actually seeing anything outside the spheres of our headlamps—I assume the view was very nice. The south face afforded us a straightforward descent via 10,000 V-threads, and before we knew it we were jockeying for position on the crowded Laguna 69 trail. We made it to Huaraz that evening, and the next morning I said good-bye to Quentin and embarked on the second half of my trip.

**ARITZA MONASTERIO, a longtime local climber, originally from the Basque Country of Spain, owns the Albergue Andinista, where we'd been staying in Huaraz.** He had some free time at the end of July, and we agreed to do some climbing after he finished guiding a group up Pisco. Elated to have found a solid partner, I needed something to do until Aritza was free. I decided on the beautiful Parón Valley and spent four days alone there.

My first objective was the once-classic Renshaw-Wilkinson route of Pirámide de Garcilaso. Spooked by serac danger on the standard route, I attempted a safer line to the left, but poor climbing conditions sent me down from about halfway up. I later learned that, only a couple of days after my attempt, three climbers were tragically killed by serac fall on this face, and that there had been several similar incidents in past years. It seems that some of the old classics in the Blanca are no longer what they once were. I salvaged my Parón outing by hopping across the valley and climbing the south arête of Artesonraju, a pleasant slog up another very picturesque peak.

Back in town, Aritza called me into the guestroom that holds his climbing wall. He pointed to an old photo of an intimidating face pinned to the wall.

"What do you think of this? Do you want to climb this?" he asked.

"What is it?"

"North face of Hualcán. It's hidden from the road and not visible from any of the popular treks, so nobody knows about it. The face is 1,000 meters and has never been climbed. Probably never attempted."

That was enough to get my attention. Turns out Aritza had first laid eyes on this face 12 years earlier while attempting the south face of Nevado Uta (which he later climbed in 2008), and he had returned a couple times to attempt 6,125-meter Hualcán but never had good enough conditions. It was settled.

Our planned descent would bring us down the opposite side of the mountain, so we left town prepared to carry everything over the top. With double boots on our feet and day packs overloaded with food for six days, we boarded the 6 a.m. bus toward Chacas, on the other side of the range, and settled into a bumpy three-hour ride over a nearly 5,000-meter pass and through the Punta Olimpica tunnel. Not long after descending onto the eastern slope of the Cordillera Blanca, we were dropped off at the head of the Cancarcá Grande Valley.

Starting up the pastoral valley, I confidently strode ahead through open meadows and soon found myself mired in a small bog. I looked back and found I was alone. A quick scan of the valley found Artiza waving at me from the dry cattle track along the edge of the meadow. Variations of this continued for the next two days, as Aritza's mastery of mountain navigation became clear and my lack thereof even clearer. The glacier we traversed on the second day had caused Aritza some grief on a previous attempt, and he was pleased that we were able to find a relatively painless though time-consuming route to the base of the north face. By midafternoon we had established a safe campsite on the glacier near the wall's east end.

Unfortunately, the face was enshrouded in clouds and we still hadn't had an opportunity to study it in detail. The bottom was clearly much drier than it had been in the 2006 photo that Aritza had shown me. Feeling the pressure of my impending departure, I worried that we wouldn't even get a chance to try the face. Aritza was *tranquilo* about it all and pointed out that we still had plenty of time—we just needed to be patient and let the mountains dictate the schedule.

The next day the clouds broke enough to give us a few brief views of the entire face. The mile-wide, kilometer-high wall reminded me of the glacier-capped north face of Mt. Kitchener, back home in the Rockies—only this face lacked the convenient couloir breaching the upper headwall. Additionally, Hualcán's central ice slopes were guarded by smooth rock slabs along the base of the face. Below the biggest (and most rockfall-prone) gullies, meltwater would freeze overnight, offering fleeting delicate passages through these slabs, but neither of us much liked the idea of entering these bowling alleys. Aritza eventually spotted a slender, partially hidden snow ramp that breached the lower slabs on the right side. It appeared to provide rapid access to the central ice slopes—just what we needed! The upper headwall was another story, but it looked featured enough to be worth a shot.

We started early under clear skies. The last bit of glacier travel below the face proved more complex than expected, and we lost precious predawn hours, but by 5:30 we were simul-climbing up the ramp. At dawn, a tricky bit of mixed climbing gained a thin ribbon of ice streaming down from the central face. Pitch after pitch of calf-burning 60° ice in unrelenting heat followed, but the face remained quiet. Near the top of the ice, Aritza led an impressive near-vertical pitch, and soon we were at the base of the headwall. Chopping out a bivy ledge took several hours, and we finally collapsed into the tent after an exhausting day of climbing in the sun.

Our tiny ledge provided just the right amount of respite from the exposure and stress of being on a big face, and soon we were brewing hot soup, recharging, and talking politics and life. It was great to learn more about Aritza's path and philosophy in life, from an upbringing in Basque Country to becoming a young guide in Huaraz and starting a family and business in Peru. Before leaving Huaraz we'd barely known each other, but over the last few days we'd become good friends, balancing our time between pushing hard on the mountain and relaxing at the bivies.

At daybreak we returned to the unfortunate reality of the looming headwall. Intimidating as it was, it did have a very obvious break, so there was no question about where to start. Two rope lengths of challenging but not outrageously difficult rock and mixed climbing got us to a distinct crux: a short, gently overhanging wall guarding an exit ramp that was so close we could have lobbed a snowball onto it. A squeeze chimney onto a small curtain of ice seemed like the way to go. I wormed my way as high as possible, plugged some gear, and stretched for good sticks in the curtain. As soon as I committed to the curtain, I realized the feet were terrible and I was weak as a kitten at this altitude. Luckily, it was only a couple of moves, and soon I was back on my frontpoints, gasping for air. One more pitch of mixed climbing brought us to easy ice slopes and the summit plateau, just as the sun was setting. We dropped the packs and after 30 minutes of post-holing reached the rarely trodden main summit of Hualcán.

After a cold night on the plateau, we began the long descent down the south glacier, with Huaraz visible in the distance. Over the next 10 hours we dropped over 3,000 meters and experienced a 40°C temperature change. At dusk, our taxi dropped us off at Aritza's house and we could finally remove

our boots after a memorable traverse of the width of the Cordillera Blanca.

“We should call the route Nadie Sabe Nada,” Aritza said. Nobody knows anything—a nod to the fact that the north face of Hualcán had been veiled in obscurity, despite over 100 years of climbing in the Cordillera Blanca, and that many people consider these mountains to be “climbed out.” For such a well-trodden range, the Cordillera Blanca still has plenty of secrets.

**Summary:** New route and first free ascent (The Devil’s Reach Around, 900m, 5.10 M6 90°) on the east face of Chacaraju Este in Peru’s Cordillera Blanca, by Alik Berg and Quentin Lindfield Roberts, July 14–16, 2017. First ascent of the north face of Hualcán in the Cordillera Blanca: Nadie Sabe Nada (1,000m, 5.9 M6 85°), by Alik Berg and Aritza Monasterio, July 28–30, 2017.

**About the Author:** Alik Berg, 30, is a self-described “obsessive climber” living in Canmore, Alberta. In his free time, he works as a high-angle industrial access technician to fund future climbing trips.

## Images



The Devil's Reach Around (Berg-Lindfield Roberts, 2017), believed to be first free ascent of the face.



East face of Chacaraju Este (6,001m). (1) Upper southeast ridge (Kondo-Yoshino, 1976). (2) French Route (1962, first ascent of peak). (3) The Devil's Reach Around (Berg-Lindfield Roberts, 2017), believed to be first free ascent of the face. (4) Slovenian Direct Start (Kozjek-Krezel, 1993, to ridge). (5) The Shriek of the Black Stone (Juhasz-Markovic, 1999). Baró-Corominas direct finish not shown.



Alik Berg in full sun on the traverse toward the headwall on Chacaraju's east face. Completing this section before the mountain dangerously heated up was key to success.



Alik Berg leading a key passage on the left side of Chacaraju's east face.



Quentin Lindfield Roberts high on Chacaraju's east face on day two.



Climbing the lower section of the north face of Hualcán.



Heading into the difficulties on the second day on Hualcán's north face.

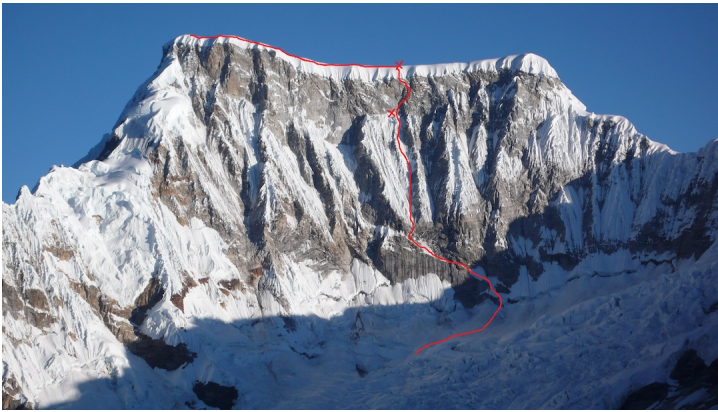


Aritza Monasterio following the crux pitch of the north face of Hualcán.



Trudging across the summit ridge toward the top of Hualcán.





The north face of Hualcán (6,125m) and the line of the first ascent. Berg and Monasterio bivouacked once on the face and once on top. The 1,000-meter face is hidden from roads or popular trails and may never have been attempted before 2017.



Aritza Monasterio had pinned a photo of the north face of Hualcán to his home climbing wall in Huaraz as inspiration.



Alik Berg fully engaged in the crux pitch of the north face of Hualcán.

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