



AAC Publications

Cerro Willa Sallaloma, Southwest Ridge; Cerro Arkhata, Southeast Face, The Keep; Mururata, South Face, Power to the Process

Bolivia, Cordillera Real

From mid-June to mid-July, Brian Houle and I visited the Cordillera Real to explore new technical routes on some of the big ice faces in the range. Our main objectives were the southeast face of Cerro Arkhata (5,650m), believed to be unclimbed, and what's traditionally been called the south face of Mururata (5,871m), though it actually faces southwest. Both are accessed from a remote high camp at Laguna Arkhata (16°31'51.44"S, 67°50'4.56"W), a spectacular glacial lake fed by the icefall of Mururata.

After acclimatizing with an ascent of Huayna Potosí, we slogged nine days of supplies up to Laguna Arkhata and immersed ourselves in the vast, towering faces of rock, snow, and ice spilling straight down to the lake. They provided sustenance for both body and soul.

As with any big mountain expedition, our success was at the mercy of conditions, weather, and health. It was a snowy year in the Real, and upon arriving at the lake we were pleased to see ice formed on both faces we hoped to climb. There was also a stable forecast for the week to come. Unfortunately, Brian was feeling ill. On July 6, unable to suppress my excitement, I set off solo and climbed the southwest ridge of Cerro Willa Sallaloma (ca 5,588m) in a round trip from camp of about six hours, the first known ascent. Following shattered ledges from the base of the ridge, I encountered several steep rock steps until I was forced off the ridge proper. I then traversed a big ledge system leading to a long snow and ice gully, which I soloed in approach shoes with one ice tool, stemming onto rock where possible. Easy and loose rocky terrain led to the summit (400m, III 5.5 WI2). I basked in the sunshine, built a small summit cairn, and, after going down the ridge toward Mururata, descended loose scree gullies.

Regaining camp, I found Brian feeling better, and we decided to attempt the southeast face of Arkhata the next day. Leaving camp at 2 a.m., we traversed around the lake to the foot of the face and roped up for two pitches of good water ice, which provided passage through the first rock band. We then soloed long snow (and sometimes scree) slopes to a mixed gully. We simul-climbed around three pitches, which had sections of fun stemming between rock and névé or unconsolidated snow. These deposited us below the large snowfield leading to the summit. Since I had led the technical sections below, Brian generously broke trail up waist-deep sugar snow leading to the summit ridge. We traversed onto the west side of the crest (which was in much better, icy conditions) and followed it to the top. We were psyched to have realized our first big route in the area: The Keep (700m, III WI3+ M4). We mostly descended our route of ascent but were able to bypass both the mixed gully and ice pitches via easier ground, returning to camp around 11 hours after leaving. [In 2015, Gustavo Lisi and friends climbed a route on another face well to the left of the Keep; see AAJ 2016. It was later repeated by Rodrigo Lobo and Robert Rauch. The initial icefalls of the Keep may have been climbed before, but local climbers are not clear on this.]

We then turned our attention to the much steeper south face of Mururata. Since arriving at the lake we had been eyeing an aesthetic, unclimbed ice runnel on the left side of the face, one of the only viable lines that was not guarded by massive seracs spilling off the summit plateau. It appeared that conditions were prime and the weather gorgeous. However, our ascent of Arkhata had not helped with Brian's recovery, so we decided on two days' rest before giving it a go.

On the 10th we left camp at 2 a.m. and climbed what was for me a dream line: a strip of perfect ice giving passage through a massive, daunting face of shattered rock. The approach involved a quick yet hazardous traverse under the band of seracs guarding the majority of the face. From the base of the route, we soloed snow in the initial gully to reach a steep rock band. Here, we got the rope out for two long pitches of mixed terrain, including a rock traverse with limited pro and a thin ice runnel leading to a snow band.

Above, I led a 60m pitch of stellar WI3 ice and set the belay in a small cave on the side of a steep, two-body-width vertical pillar. This proved solid and led to a section of wild stemming on rock with a ribbon of ice in between. I climbed slowly and meticulously, burdened by the thin air well above 5,000m.

Elated to be above the main technical difficulties, I led a long simul block up to the top of the face, where Brian took over and broke trail up the glacial plateau to the summit. The weather was a bit unsettled, so after a few photos we headed down, rappelling Goulotte Marie on Abalakov anchors. This was a more direct descent to our camp than either our route or the normal route, and it avoided the serac band. We are thrilled to have climbed Power to the Process (750m, IV WI5 M5) in a 17-hour push camp-to-camp. The name is a reminder of how the digital and social-media era can sometimes indoctrinate us with the fallacy of instant gratification, but what is most important is to stay focused on your passions and embrace the long and sometimes convoluted process that leads to your dreams.

This expedition was the culmination of a long partnership and friendship, and a lot of hard work and preparation. We are ecstatic—and still somewhat in shock—at the incredible conditions and weather we encountered, and the aesthetic nature of the lines we ascended. We would like to give huge thanks to the American Alpine Club's Live Your Dream grant, the Mazamas, and Alpine Ascents International for their support in making this trip a reality.

– Ethan Berman, AAC

Images



Ethan Berman at the belay below the crux ice pillar on Power to the Process, Mururata south face.



Brian Houle on the summit (south) ridge of Cerro Arkhata, completing the first ascent of the Keep on the southeast face. Laguna Arkhata is visible in middle distance, while in the background is the northwest side of the Illimani massif (and in the very far distance left the Quimsa Cruz).



Ethan Berman on the initial ice pitch above the first snowfield on Power to the Process, Mururata south face.



The left side of the south face of Mururata with the obvious, thin, but more or less continuous runnel taken by Power to the Process.



Camp at Laguna Arkhata, looking north and showing the 2018 approach routes and climbs on the southeast face of Cerro Arkhata (left), Mururata (center), and Cerro Willa Sallaloma.



The southwest ridge of Cerro Willa Sallaloma.



The famous "south" face of Mururata actually points more southwest. (1) Normal Route (1915). (2) Power to the Process (2018). (3) Guías AGMTB (2013). (4) Goulotte Marie (1987). (5) South-southeast ridge (1970).



The southeast face of Cerro Arkharta and the line of the Keep.

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