



AAC Publications

Huandoy Norte, East Face, BOYS 1970

Peru, Cordillera Blanca

Breathing rapidly, I try to get more air into my lungs, wordlessly opening my mouth as a fish would struggle for the last bits of oxygen. It is a nasty feeling to suffocate slowly. Especially when it is purely voluntary. Why am I doing it then? Things will get worse, for sure.

As I left for this year's expedition to Peru, I felt a certain deficit. My body was ready to go, but my mind was tired. It was no surprise to me, though, as I had just returned from an expedition to Nepal. I could have stayed at home in the hot summer, but winter in other hemisphere was calling. Such sacrifices often offer a valuable and transforming experience.

Step by step, I climb slowly up the slope. My mind is full of images: Lima, nature, friendly locals, acclimatizing on the surrounding peaks—now motivating me for this ascent. Crampons screech as they bite into the frozen snow. The screeching grows louder and louder as the temperature falls. Is the virtuoso Stradivari slowly tightening a fiddle's frozen strings? I search for today's goal: a bivouac at the very foot of the wall. It doesn't look particularly luxurious, just a hostile spot in the midst of a broken, flowing glacier charmed into a momentary halt. I share the silence with Radoslav "Radek" Groh, who walks a few steps ahead. At last we place our tent just below a cascade of crevasses that provide us with at least some protection against possible stone or snow avalanches.

We have followed conditions, which pointed us to the eastern face of Huandoy Norte (6,360m). It is a beautiful and natural line that follows the middle of the mountain face from the glacier all the way to the summit. We simply cannot resist.

The east face of Huandoy Norte (6,360m) showing the route BOYS 1970 (1,200m, ED+). The middle of this line shared ground with a 2003 route (Adam Kovacs, solo), which continued up the rocky section where the 2019 route angled right. Earlier routes to the left are not shown.

I spent the few days before our ascent observing the daily rhythm of the mountain, focusing on the parts crucial to our route. Whizzing ice and rock bullets constantly showered some sections. Obviously, we planned to avoid these shooting ranges. The daily regimen of sun and wind that puts the mountain to sleep would be no less important. I could make all of these observations with a high-end telephoto lens. That was few days ago, though. Now, the man behind the lens watching and filming us is Tomáš "Galas" Galásek. He's my old friend, talented filmmaker, and personal paparazzo, who has followed me on many previous expeditions. As we climb, he has one major advantage: When he starts feeling cold or bored, he can simply go indoors, have a beer, a warm shower, and go to sleep on the bunk of the refugio.

We start climbing at dawn. I feel a bit stiff, but the steep ascent soon warms me. Step by step, the wall gets more vertical. The firm snow turns into ice, then mixed with large rock steps. After two hours of simul-climbing, we stop at a 150m rock barrier. I belay Radek up and we prepare for this first major challenge, an obligatory section to reach the next thousand meters. The climbing itself is not the major problem. I climb as quickly as possible to minimize the risk of getting hit by stones sent by the mountain. Forcing my way under each overhang, the rock provides at least some shelter from the never-ending shower. The height and terror press hard on my lungs. Fortunately, the rock is quite compact. Once past, it's too dangerous to consider retreat, so our only option is up anyway.

The next challenge is a long traverse across an icefield, which in its top left corner continues with

some mixed climbing. This part looks like an “S” and starts with a tricky rock step followed by a narrow corner. From where we stand, we can see that the corner is well-armed with massive columns of loose ice that look like majestic organ pipes. Normally, I would just drive my axe into the ice as deep as possible, but this is more like frost than ice. The rock doesn’t offer many holds either. Let’s not even talk about possible protection. The rope is now more of a fashion statement.

Fortunately, the setting sun freezes all movement on the wall. We’re in the upper third of the route, which is strictly steep. I know we won’t make it to the ridge before dark, so I hope that a miracle will happen and we don’t have to spend the night on a tiny ledge like two icicles. We manage to find two ledges as big as a chair, situated two meters apart. What a luxury! I tell Radek, “We have to bivouac here.” Our smiles are literally frozen to our faces.

We breathe cool air through the tiny holes of our sleeping bags, watching the theater of never-ending blood-red light from the setting sun. Minutes after the burning sun’s gone below the horizon, the mountains stay on fire. Rocks, ice, sky—everything is burning. This unique spectacle can happen only in the Cordillera Blanca, which is situated close to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. The first few minutes of sleeping at the bivouac are the best. You are absolutely fatigued after the ascent. Later, the cold and discomfort wake you up. The ground feels harder than ever before. Finally, the dawn comes.

I look up at Radek, who starts to boil water. He screams. Somehow, he has poured half of the water right into the boots hung by his side. A moment later, an ice block hits my back, winding me—a friendly reminder that we should start as soon as possible. About 300m of elevation stand between us and Huandoy’s final ridge. The climbing is now easier but not “easy.” After one section with mixed climbing, firm snow alternates with passages of ice. Three hours later, we make our way through the last snowy part. From the valley, it had looked like a draped skirt. Below us, the whole wall is exposed. Twenty minutes later, just before noon, we stand smiling at the summit of Huandoy Norte.

A six-hour rappel descent gets us back to the refugio, 55 hours after leaving (August 7–9). Our route bears the name BOYS 1970 (1,200m, ED+ WI6 M6). Maybe it should be labeled “Hell,” but this is not reverent to the mountain who gave us such a strong experience. The name is dedicated to the group of 14 Czech climbers who died in the massive earthquake and avalanche at the foot of Huascarán in 1970. Their dreams faded together with their lives. A few minutes later, another 70,000 lives were lost in the valley below. This accident reminds us of the fickleness of life. Some are lucky without any apparent reason; others lose it all in a second despite so much effort. Unfortunately, they did not find the same inscrutable and indescribable happiness as Radek and I. Let’s think about them for a while now.

– Marek Holeček, Czech Republic

Historic routes on the east face of Huandoy Norte.

Historical notes on Huandoy Norte’s East Face: The main east wall of Huandoy Norte has seen at least five ascents by slightly different routes. The 2019 Czech route, BOYS 1970, was mostly to the right of the line followed by Adam Kovacs (Sweden) in an impressive solo ascent in 2003, but shared one significant portion through the rock band in the middle of the wall. In 1979, Tobin Sorenson (USA) reported a solo ascent of the east face that was very likely near the 1976 Polish route (Stryczynski-Waligora) and 1996 Slovenian variation (Meglic-Soklic), both of which were left of the Kovacs and Czech routes. However, the exact line of Sorenson’s line is unknown since he died in 1980. Snow and ice levels on the east face have reduced dramatically in the past half-century. Most ascents today would hardly reflect the conditions found during these earlier ascents.

Images



Marek Holeček rock climbing on day one on the east face of Huandoy Norte.



Radoslav "Radek" Groh leads while Marek Holeček belays the final section of the east face leading to the summit ridge of Huandoy Norte.



Above: The East Face of Huandoy Norte (6,395m) in 2003. **(1)** Original Route – South Face (Hein/Schneider, September 1932: AD+/D-: Serious). **(2)** The lower variation to the South Face Route followed by Adam Kovacs in descent during July 2003. The South Face is now usually gained via a similar line (D). **(3)** MESO. The Slovenian Start to the 1976 Polish Route (Meglic/Soklic, 1996: c900m: TD-: did not summit). **(4)** Polish Route (Marcinkowski/Stryczynski/Waligora, August 1976: c1,000m: TD). **(5)** Alexandra (Kovacs, solo, July 2003: c1,000m: TD+) **(6)** South East Face to North East Ridge (de Naurois/Parmentier, July 1974: c1,000m: D+). **Below:** The South East Face of 5,900m Huandoy Este. **(1)** West Ridge (Hudson/Laba, June 1969: D). **(2)** Kovacs Route (Kovacs, solo, July 2003: 550m: TD/TD+). **(3)** Lowe Route (Lowe, solo, July 1984: 550m: TD). **(4)** North East Ridge (Casarotto/Martini/Piana, August 1975: c600m: at least D+). **(5)** Two days after their ascent of the North East Ridge, Casarotto, Martini and Piana climbed up the far right side of the South East Face via mixed terrain to join their previous route. They then continued to the summit.

Historic routes on the east face of Huandoy Norte



Radoslav "Radek" Groh on the upper slopes of the east face on day two.



The east face of Huandoy Norte (6,360m) showing the route BOYS 1970 (1,200m, ED+). The middle of this line shared ground with a 2003 route (Adam Kovacs, solo), which continued up the rocky section where the 2019 route angled right. Earlier routes to the left are not shown.



Marek Holeček climbs a narrow ice ribbon on day one on the east face of Huandoy Norte.

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