



Volcán Nevado del Huila, Complete Traverse

Colombia, Andes

Volcán Nevado del Huila (5,364m; 2°55'25"N, 76°1'41"W) is the highest volcano in Colombia. However, ongoing volcanic activity and sociopolitical conflict has limited access. In 2019, we attempted to reach the volcano via the town of Gigante to the southeast but retreated after supplies ran out on day nine of the trip. In February 2021, Timothée Callec (France), Alex Torres (Colombia), Luis Silva Pete, a guide from the local indigenous community, and I made a second attempt. Our goal was a complete north-to-south traverse of all four summits of Nevado del Huila, including Pico Norte (ca 5,300m), Pico La Cresta (ca 5,200m), Pico Central (ca 5,365m; a.k.a. Pico Mayor), and Pico Sur (ca 5,030m).

On February 8, we traveled from Cali to Tacueyo by bus. We then arranged transport with the Nasa, an indigenous people living in the surrounding area, and continued by jeep via a rough military road through the jungle. We spent the night at Luis' house (ca 3,600m), where wax palms give way to the páramo. The next day, five local porters helped us reach base camp, Campo Colombia (4,500m). We first hiked on the road for a few kilometers then branched left into the forest, crossing Río Paez, and made a long, steep ascent. After 11 hours, we made camp just below the glacier. Pico Central loomed above, covered by light clouds, and we could hear the volcano rumbling in the distance.

On the 13th, after three days acclimatizing in camp, Luis recited a prayer in the Nasa language, requesting safe passage for our team, and we set out for Pico Norte at 3:15 a.m. The climbing was on straightforward snow (50°), and we reached the summit at 8:30 a.m. From here, our route toward Pico La Cresta and Pico Central would cover new terrain. We descended from Pico Norte by crossing over a broad ridge and then rappelled and downclimbed to a col. Our ascent of Pico La Cresta was mostly on soft snow (60°) with a thin, meter-wide section to the pointy summit, which we reached at 11:30 a.m. Our next challenge, Pico Central, lay bathed in volcanic green smoke. Descending the south side of La Cresta turned out to be the crux of this peak, with steep, loose rock.

We climbed up and over a small ridge, with several ice formations to negotiate, before reaching the flat glacier between La Cresta and Pico Central. With soft snow, exhaustion, and one near miss from a failed deadman anchor, our confidence had taken a real hit. We needed to bivouac close to Pico Central that night to keep pace. At around 5:30 p.m., we reached a 10m, near-vertical section of snow and ice, which led to a narrow ridgeline above. Pico Central has 14 active volcanic vents, and we snaked alongside them with little protection from the sulfuric fumes. Black smoke billowed above us in the night sky. It was terrifying. At nightfall, we found a small rock ledge. Huddled together, we endured the night, falling in and out of sleep until sunrise.

At daybreak, we heated aqua panela, ate cheese, and tried to de-ice our equipment. For the next few hours, we navigated short, steep sections before ascending a gradually steepening slope (60°) to reach the summit of Pico Central at 10 a.m. As the clouds lifted, we glimpsed Pico Sur for the first time: a distant, low-lying dome. To our knowledge, this section had not been traversed before.

Descending from Pico Central, we navigated around large ice walls and crevasses, eventually making a 30m rappel to a vast glacier hugged by tall cliffs. The snow was tough going, and we plunged up to our waists. At the end of the glacier, after climbing through a maze of rocks, we arrived at the foot of

Pico Sur at around 2:30 p.m. To avoid the soft snow, we climbed on rock until we could reach the upper ridgeline, where the condition of the snow improved. We followed the ridge (40°) for several hundred meters, reaching the summit at 4 p.m. In all, our traverse of the massif (1,500m, AD) covered approximately 5km.

To descend, we traced along the west side of Pico Sur, hugging rocky cliffs prone to rockfall. Any water we found was undrinkable due to the sulphur, and we struggled for nine hours in the dark using a combination of GPS, moonlight, and the volcano's shapes to navigate. At Campo Colombia, we cooked up an almighty meal, recounting impressions from our climb—of the sound of dogs barking in the distance, voices on the radio, and whispers in the wind. It was strange to think of how, even together, our experiences could be separate, though that is probably the magic of this place.

— **Thomas Palmer, U.K.**

Images



Traversing from Pico Norte (ca 5,300m) to Pico La Cresta (5,200m) on day one of a two-day traverse (1,500m, AD) of the Nevado del Huila massif.



The summit of Pico La Cresta (5,200m) on day one of a two-day traverse (1,500m, AD) of the Nevado del Huila massif.



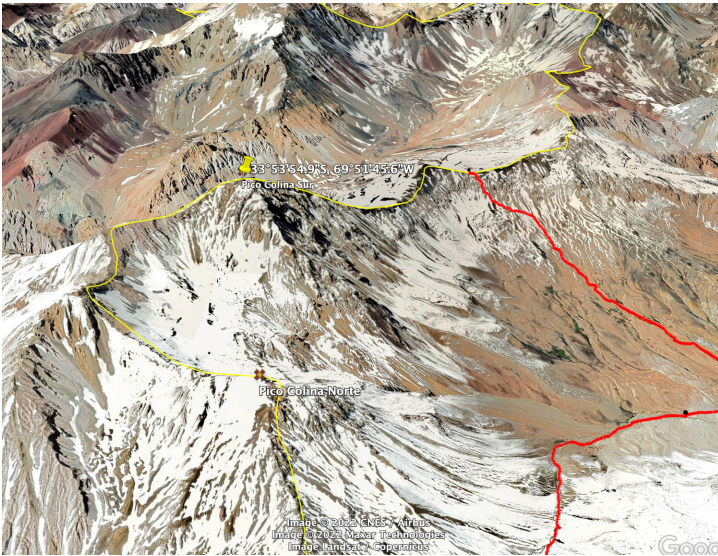
The team rests at a rugged-looking bivouac en route to Pico Central (ca 5,365m) on a two-day traverse of the Nevado del Huila massif.



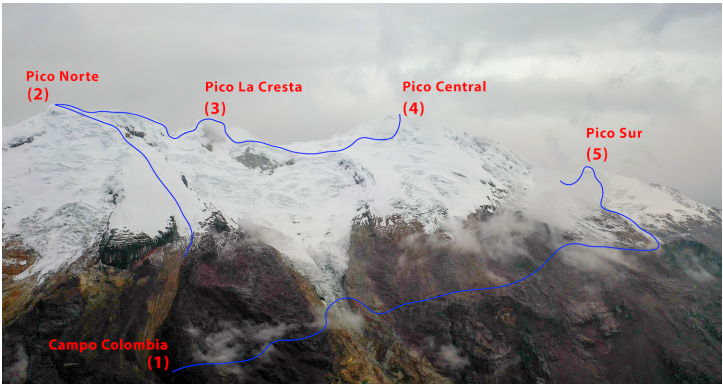
Alex Torres traversing to Pico Central (ca 5,365m) on day two of a two-day traverse (1,500m, AD) of the Nevado del Huila massif.



Luis Silva Pete descends loose rock bathed in eerie volcanic smoke.



Google Earth image of the Volcán Nevado del Huila group. The traverse went clockwise, starting with Pico Norte.



Annotated view of the Volcán Nevado del Huila group, showing the north-to-south traverse in February 2021.

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