



Dragon Mushrooms: The First Ascent of Reino Hongo on Jirishanca

Peru, Cordillera Huayhuash

A rickety cart lurches down cobbled streets toward the Huaraz indoor market, its driver hidden behind a heaping payload of dead pigs and chickens. Iodine-yellow snouts poke skyward, and waxy bird-bushels sway on display. I step behind the cart as vehicles rush past, dousing the scene in Peruvian road grime.

Alik Berg and I are back in Peru, this time to explore the Cordillera Huayhuash. Specifically, we have our eyes on the eastern aspects of Yerupajá (6,635m), the highest peak in the range, and Jirishanca (6,125m), both accessible from the same base camp at Laguna Chaclan (4,526m). Yerupajá interests us for its height and size, but it's the beauty of Jirishanca that has captured our imagination. The "Hummingbird Peak" boasts serrated ridges like the wings of a white bird, its bill of black limestone thrusting skyward through ruffled feathers. Jirishanca is also rich in climbing history, yet there have been surprisingly few ascents to the summit from the east, despite efforts by some of the best.

I follow the cart down a ramp through a small entrance into a labyrinth of stalls. Alik is standing at our favorite, waiting, as kilograms of local coffee are ground for our upcoming month in the field. Coffee accounts for 25 percent of Peru's agricultural profit, but it's much easier to find good Peruvian coffee in Canada than in Huaraz. We've finally found some in this market at the heart of city, and it's delicious. I hold my breath as I walk through the stench of slaughtered animals toward the golden aroma beyond.

Alik and I rekindle a conversation and decide, for economy's sake, not to hire a private van from Huaraz to Queropalca, the village at the end of the road, 17 kilometers from Laguna Chaclan. This means we've got to figure out how—and if—we can pile eight duffels of gear and food onto several different colectivos (small, shared vans packed with people) to get there. From Queropalca, arrieros and their burros will carry those duffels to base camp.

We travel the last two-hour leg from the town of Baños to Queropalca in a cab. Our duffels are tied on top, and there are five Peruanos crammed in with us. We're as chuffed as two gringos could be, but as we roll into the village the atmosphere changes. We've left the cityscape of bright colors for a rural landscape of country huts and road ruts. The cracked, colorless buildings would shrink into the earth if it weren't for the political slogans screaming in red paint. There's road dust on everything. A local stares us down through the open car window, his wrinkled face shaded by a wide-brimmed hat. There's not a wisp of kindness on it. He walks toward Alik with locked eyes and disregards Alik's friendly "Hola" as we drive on.

The Cordillera Huayhuash was a historical stronghold for the terrorist group El Sendero Luminoso ("The Shining Path"). These Maoists launched their "People's War" in 1980, and it wasn't until the end of the century that the government regained control. Led by Abimael Guzmán, El Sendero Luminoso believed in violent, rapid takeover using guerrilla tactics. It was a gruesome conflict that left 70,000 people—mostly civilians—dead. Peru is safer now, but Queropalca was under their influence during the war, and reverberations of the conflict still linger.

Largely due to the violence, there was a 20-year gap in alpine climbing in the Huayhuash, from the

mid-1980s to the early 2000s. Globally during that time, a different mindset and huge leaps in climbing-equipment technology allowed climbers to expand their purist visions to the hardest and steepest walls. But not so much in Peru.

Thus, it wasn't until 2000 that the daunting east face of Jirishanca saw its first alpine-style attempt, when a guide and friend of ours from Huaraz, Aritza Monasterio, teamed up with Pavle Kozjek and Marjan Kovac (both from Slovenia), to try a route on the wall's left side, close to Jirishanca's south-southeast spur. They took a similar path to that of an Austrian siege attempt in 1974, climbing on the glacier behind the spur toward the col between Jirishanca and Yerupajá Chico (6,121m), and reaching a height close to the col. They wanted to breach the unclimbed south headwall but were turned around by deep snow 23 hours into their push. However, their attempt had set the stage, and nine other expeditions launched to the east side of Jirishanca in the early 2000s.

Only a young French duo—Aymeric Clouet and Didier Jourdain—was successful in climbing to the summit from the east, making them the second team to climb the mountain from that aspect, after Toni Egger and Siegfried Jungmeir's visionary first ascent of Jirishanca by the east buttress in 1957. Impressively, the French climbed their route without bolts. Since that ascent in 2003, Jirishanca hasn't seen another ascent from the east, which is exactly what Alik and I have come to try.

Alik trudges ahead of me, carrying seven days of food back down to base camp. We've just bailed on Yerupajá. It was an easy decision, made after sprint-dodging a volley of rockfall while roped up on the glacier at the base of our prospective route. We are also running out of time for Jirishanca, so we've decided to focus on that instead. We spend the next few days dialing in a line from base camp, from which Jirishanca's east face is only a few hours' walk away.

We scrutinize the mountain through binoculars. The steepest, most sustained wall is without a doubt the southeast spur on the right side of the face, but it's riddled with previous attempts and existing climbs. We are drawn instead to the other spur—the south-southeast spur—that sits between the gully of the 2000 attempt and the giant drainpipe of the east face. The terrain here is far more complex, and the vertical rock seems to be the easiest part. Above the spur rises one of the most absurd ridges either of us has ever seen—giant mushroom towers of ice and snow glued to a knife edge in the sky. All cap and stalk, the mushrooms grow there for decades, before freefalling hundreds of meters into shaded funnels on either side of the spine. It's an obstacle course of snow features so large they're clearly visible from base camp.

Above the ridge rears the unclimbed south headwall. Alik has hiked up a nearby moraine to get a better view of the headwall, and it too looks wild, with vertical, ice-riddled limestone that takes you to the summit ridge at 6,100 meters. We are consoled by the fact that this headwall resembles the climbing we're used to in the Canadian Rockies. It might be hard and steep up there, but it seems far less uncertain than that wild ridge. We'll have to navigate the mushroom kingdom if we're to stand a chance.

As we explore the approach to the left side of the east face, a multitude of colorful tents pop up in base camp. Josh Wharton and Vince Anderson have arrived with Cheyne Lempe, Drew Smith, Chris Alstrin, and Dionicio Huaranga. Everyone's here to help document Josh and Vince's latest attempt to free Suerte, a not-quite-freed, not-quite-finished route on the southeast face. It's "Daddy Alpinism," as they humbly deem it, with bolts protecting the hard climbing on the lower wall and relatively little objective hazard—a good route for climbers with kids at home. It's cool to hang with these guys. Acquaintances turn into companions, and we're thankful for the company.

Soon after they arrive, the mountain gets a dump of snow. The snow needs to melt for the line we had envisioned on the south-southeast spur to be safe to climb, and there's not enough good weather for that to happen. We change our plan slightly: We'll only climb on the spur for five or so pitches before wrapping south into the shade, where we can climb mixed terrain to the same point on the ridge. It's a shame not to climb the pillar directly, but we are happy with our decision. The bulk of our line lies

above the pillar anyway.

The late-day sun is neon on the horizon, and Alik has found our first bivy in an ice cave below a bus-sized cornice. We've just climbed the lower pillar, and this cave—a wind-sculpted blue room, with windows into the abyss—overhangs its entire southern aspect. It's nice to tuck in early. I hand Alik the bag of half-cooked freeze-dried meal and drift off.

We set out at daybreak. Above, the intimidating ridge snakes upward like a petrified dragon's back, three-story ice towers glued to it like iron filings on a magnetic blade. We simul-weave through them, over them, under them, around them, and atop them. Each gargoyle mushroom is its own puzzle to solve, but never as much of a showstopper as we had expected. As daylight fades, we've navigated most of the ridge and are only a hundred meters from the Jirishanca headwall. It looms above, steep in the blackening sky, laced with overhanging ice roofs and compact stone. We pitch the tent under a cruxy-looking ice-blob roof.

That'll taste good for breakfast! I think as I squeeze into our tent.

Far to the east, golden light catches clouds high above the Amazon. We've watched them build over the last two days. Distant thunderheads flash through the tent walls. A dusting is forecast for tomorrow, and heavier snowfall the following day. We have packed lots of food in case we need to sit out the weather, and because we don't know how long this route will take or where it will lead. There is a high probability we'll have to descend to the west, and then hike all the way around the massif back to base camp. We shoot Josh and Vince a satellite message.

"Bivy 2 under the headwall. Hope you guys are going well. Going to push for the top tomorrow. Will see how it goes!"

There's no reply—they must be climbing.

Alik takes the morning charge up the overhanging sn'ice, leading a simul-block to the headwall as I dig for feeling in my extremities. Before long, we're there. I pay attention to the slack in the Micro Traxion as Alik climbs more slowly, moving into steeper terrain. He goes a pitch and a half up the headwall before belaying. I climb up to him, smiling, noticing that he didn't get in much gear and that the ice is only centimeters thick. At least the anchor is better!

Already racked up, Alik has the next pitch planned. It's a steep, stout-looking chimney to a shelf of snow. Soon I'm seconding his lead, huffing the thin air, fighting my pack so I can jam a shoulder into the maw. Alik made it look so graceful, and I am definitely not following suit. I pull out of the chimney and struggle to get established on a facet-covered, down-sloping slab. The underlying rock on the ten-meter traverse is bulletproof and featureless. This section is equally horrifying to second as to lead, with both of us risking an injurious swing into the cliff below.

I've taken the sharp end again and am standing under a steep 20-meter corner with sparse protection: what turns out to be the crux pitch. It looks technical, intimidating, and pumpy. I climb up and back down before committing to a powerful layback sequence that leads to a good hook. I'm starting to feel run-out when I mantel the hook, but then manage to bash in two decent Peckers. Another body length or two of intricate, core-intensive movement gets me to a marginal Hex placement in a water runnel. Breathing like a rhino, I make the last hard moves to decent ice and sink a good stubby. I feel blissed-out, tired, relieved. These pitches are what we climb for.

The crux unlocks one of the crisscrossed ice roofs on the upper headwall, where the ice is glued to the rock like frozen waves. When you're on top of them, they're walkways; from below, however, they present difficult, icicle-capped overhangs. We're back to simul-climbing on them, connecting a ramp to a frozen dagger, which joins another ramp to the summit ridge. After more time-consuming snow-

manteling, mushroom navigation, and runnel climbing, the angle eases, signaling our proximity to the summit.

It's early afternoon, and the clouds are swirling. Alik makes a brilliant and sneaky traverse, avoiding the smaller and more unstable mushrooms of the summit ridge. When I next see him, he has punched through and is standing on top, grinning ear to ear, with Josh. I double-take—there's no way those guys are actually up here at the same time as us! I push hard up the final snow and confirm that my vision is real: Josh and Vince have just finished their own climb, and we're all up here together. Josh and I congratulate each other with unfeigned respect, while Vince initiates the descent.

I feel my mountain armor coming off, and the tension in my body dissipates. Not only is there nowhere higher to go, but we can also follow Josh and Vince down, which should make things significantly simpler. We descend together until nightfall. Alik and I pass the night under a cornice, and Josh and Vince continue down to their second bivy spot. We descend separately the next day, but it's easy to follow their trace, and the going becomes more straightforward once we reach the bolts on Suerte. Back at base camp, we all cram into the mess tent while the snow falls heavy and thick. Dionicio cooks us trout that he has caught in the laguna. We feast, thankful for this life and the great people in it.

On the drive back to Huaraz, I ponder how on earth everything went so well up there. Perhaps it's because we gave ourselves such a long time window, or perhaps it's because we acclimatized well. Perhaps it was because of Alik's and my seven-year partnership and fluency climbing together. Or perhaps it was just sheer, dumb luck.

It's rare that plans align amid so much uncertainty—the route had presented us with countless question marks. We surrendered ourselves to the whims of a wild mountain in this wild place, and somehow we were granted passage. Passage through Reino Hongo, the mushroom kingdom of Jirishanca. Special things happen when you stick out your thumb and go for the ride.

SUMMARY: First ascent of Reino Hongo (3,300', VI A15+ M7 90° snow) on Jirishanca (6,125m) in the Cordillera Huayhuash, Peru. The climb followed the south-southeast spur to the southern aspect of Jirishanca's headwall, with descent via the east buttress and lower southeast face, by Alik Berg and Quentin Roberts, July 21–24, 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Quentin Roberts climbs professionally and is based in Canmore, Alberta. This was his and Alik Berg's second expedition to Peru: In 2017, they made the first free ascent of Chacraraju Este's east face by a new route (AAJ 2018).

Images



The line of Reino Hongo on the south-southeast spur of Jirishanca. The climbers descended by the east buttress and lower east face.



Reino Hongo (in red) on Jirishanca. The yellow/blue lines show the approximate route of an attempt on Jirishanca in the year 2000 that ended at the south ridge.



Alik Berg at the first bivouac during the ascent of Reino Hongo on Jirishanca.



A view of the upper ridge on Jirishanca, leading to the south headwall.



Quentin Roberts climbing on day two of the ascent of Reino Hongo on Jirishanca.



Quentin Roberts climbing on the second day of the ascent of Reino Hongo.



Quentin Roberts follows a pitch across the wild snow fins of the upper south-southeast spur of Jirishanca.



Quentin Roberts on the headwall of Jirishanca.



Quentin Roberts leading the crux mixed pitch on the south headwall of Jirishanca. He writes of looking up at this daunting face: "We are consoled by the fact that this headwall resembles the climbing we're used to in the Canadian Rockies."



Quentin Roberts on the crux mixed pitch of the headwall on Jirishanca.



Quentin Roberts approaching the summit of Jirishanca after the first ascent of Reino Hongo.



Alik Berg (left) and Quentin Roberts on the summit of Jirishanca.

JIRISHANCA FROM THE SOUTHEAST: NOTABLE ASCENTS

Only five teams are known to have reached 6,025-meter Jirishanca from the southeast or east. Here, a time line of ascents and various attempts.

1957: East Buttress. Toni Egger and Siegfried Jungmayr. A team of Austrians climbed expedition-style, fixing ropes up the buttress. Deep snow on the summit ridge turned them around, but Egger and Jungmayr returned after making the first ascent of nearby Yerupajji Chico. Bad weather forced a retreat from there.

1974: Left Side of Southeast Face. Team led by Kirgen Gumpold. Eleven Austrian climbers forged a new line on the face's far left, joining the south ridge near the Jirishanca-Yerupajji Chico col. Bad weather forced a retreat from there.

2000: Attempt on Left Side of Southeast Face. Marjan Kovac and Pavle Kozjak (both from Slovenia) and Ariza Monasterio (Peru). The trio quickly climbed to the south ridge but descended from there. Note: This line was drawn along the southeast spur in AAJ 2004.

1973: Southeast Face. Team led by Masayuki Shinohara. Climbing single-style, the Japanese team of 15 spent more than a month and a half working on their route on the left edge of the right-hand rock face. They joined the 1957 climb below the upper rock pillar and continued to the summit.

2003: Southeast Face, Fear and Loathing. Nick Bullock and Alun Powell. Climbing alpine-style, the British pair climbed 900m of ice and matted left of the Japanese route. They reached the east buttress and continued up about 150m before retreating without a summit.

2003: Southeast Face, Tambo, Churros, y Amigos. Aymeric Ocalet and Didier Jourdain (France). The pair fixed ropes for four days (six pitches), then climbed alpine-style above this (using a portage) in the center of the main face, climbing mostly free. They reached the summit via the upper east buttress.

2003: Southeast Face, Suerte. Alessandro Piccini, Stefano Daluca, and Paolo Stoppani (Italy). Using a power drill to place dozens of bolts, the climbers forged a line up the right side of the rock face, then ascended mixed ground to join the 1957 route. They did not summit.

2022: Southeast Face, Suerte Integral. Vince Anderson and Josh Wharton (USA). The two free climbed the lower rock face on the Italian route (S.13A) and continued up the east buttress to the top.

2023: South-Southeast Spur. Reino Hongo, Alik Berg and Quentin Roberts. The Canadian duo climbed along the south-southeast spur and then up the south-facing headwall to the summit.

Other attempts have been made, including two near misses on the Suerte-east buttress link-up.

Jirishanca from the southeast, showing the 2022 climb: (1) Reino Hongo and (2) Suerte Integral, continuing on the original 1957 east buttress route to the summit. See AAJ 2004 for all route lines on this aspect. Quentin Roberts

Jirishanca from the southeast: A Timeline of Notable Ascents

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