



AAC Publications

Buena Suerte: The First Free Ascent of Jirishanca's Southeast Face

Peru, Cordillera Huayhuash

Bivouac at 5,700 meters below one of the ice barriers on the east buttress of Jirishanca. Photo by Drew Smith.

I've been home from Peru for several months—plenty of time to reflect on my experience on Jirishanca in July with Josh Wharton. While the afterglow has faded, I have a lingering sense of something more than just “sending my project,” whatever that means. Of all the climbing genres, alpinism alone does this for me. After narrowing my focus on the minutiae and intimacies of the climb itself, I love it when I can finally more fully recall the light and beauty of other parts of the mountain, of the shadows and the valleys below.

Due to midlife circumstances and a lack of training focused on acclimatization, the climb was hard for me—harder than I'd anticipated—but we made it anyway. And though Josh and I shared this experience and the details of the climb are as they are, I can only recount how climbing Jirishanca was for me on a personal level.

The Cordillera Huayhuash, home to the peak, is more compact and rugged than the nearby and better-known Cordillera Blanca. It takes two full days of bus rides from Lima and another day of trekking to reach a base camp. The area feels remote. It's dominated by three main peaks: Siulá Grande, Yerupajá, and Jirishanca. Jirishanca is the lowest of the three, at 6,125 meters, though it's perhaps the most singular and the least summited of the main peaks.

The mountain was first climbed in 1957 via the east buttress, by Austrians Toni Egger and Siegfried Jungmeir. It was the final 6,000-meter peak in Peru to be climbed, and their ascent was a major feat for its time, especially considering the difficulty of the ice and the climbers' lack of modern equipment. Interestingly, it was because of the skill Egger displayed on Jirishanca that Cesare Maestri (falsely) claimed that his and Egger's ascent of Cerro Torre, in 1959, was possible. Toni Egger tragically died on that attempt with Maestri—a fantastic and sad story in its own right.

I made my first visit to Jirishanca—and to the Huayhuash—with Josh in the summer of 2019. His goal was to free a “new” route on the southeast face of this seldom-climbed peak, one he'd tried twice before. I put “new” in quotes because much of Josh's envisioned route followed Suerte, a climb established in 2003 by the strong Italian team of Alessandro Piccini, Stefano DeLuca, and Paolo Stoppini. The three men used a power drill to place numerous bolts in the bullet-hard limestone of a prominent pillar and create an 11-pitch 5.12a A2. On its own, this is a technical and fun alpine rock climb. They then climbed another seven pitches (perhaps a few more?) of water ice up to WI5 and mixed terrain (M4) to intersect with the 1957 climb on the east ridge. They stopped well below the summit, having reached the proverbial “end of the difficulties.”

Josh had gotten quite high on the wall in 2015 but didn't free the climb's cruxes, and he was thwarted by bad weather during another visit in 2018. In 2019, we made the most of our monthlong expedition, though in the end we came up short, turning back just 100 vertical meters from the summit. On both of our efforts, we found a mountain radically altered by climate change, with the supposedly easier upper ridge of the 1957 route now comprising a bona fide crux. [A German team following the same line also reached a point about 100 meters below the top in 2012.] Our research showed that only three parties had climbed to the peak's main summit from the east before us: the 1957 party and two teams—Japanese and French—who did big-wall-style routes up the southeast face very near Suerte.

Josh and I arrived in base camp on July 14 to perfect weather and what appeared to be nice, dry conditions. The immediate forecast looked good, and we headed up the two-hour approach the following day to ferry supplies and try the first few pitches.

Josh Wharton leading the crux pitch (5.13a) of Suerte's rock pillar before his and Anderson's final push on the route. Photo by Drew Smith.

The Italians had equipped Suerte (Spanish for "luck") with bolted anchors and numerous 1/4-inch bolts and a few rivets for protection. The route starts with a bang, comprising the most technically difficult pitches: a super-physical 5.12a off-fingers layback corner, the 5.13a crux, and then a sustained pitch of 5.11c. The pitch-two crux features a short V7 slab that's techy and balancey, with small crimps requiring hand-foot matches; this section was established as a bolt ladder, so it is well protected. In 2018, both Josh and Mikey Schaefer had freed these lower pitches and agreed on the grades. During our 2019 attempt, Josh was unable to free the wet crux pitch, though he did free it on top-rope, which would have given an asterisk to our complete ascent had we summited (an asterisk we would've gladly accepted under the circumstances). The base of the wall lies at 5,000 meters, and so the altitude compounds the difficulty of the free climbing.

In 2022, our plan was to work out the first three pitches and fix that portion, so that when it was "go time" we could quickly jug this section and get a good start on the full route. Josh cruised through, freeing the crux on his first real try. I fell while following but felt comforted by the fact that I'd made all the moves despite not feeling well acclimatized. Pitch three—a technical and thought-provoking vertical face with a few traversing bulges—was the sort of pitch that would get three stars at any roadside crag in the United States. With those pitches done, we returned to base camp to rest and wait for a good-weather spell.

On July 21, having waited out a light storm, we got a predawn start. The extra time at base camp, at 4,400 meters, had helped me acclimatize, which I noticed in my less-labored breathing while juggling.

In the condition we climbed it in 2022, the integral route broke into three main sections: the lower rock section, the middle ice section, and an upper mixed snow, ice, and rock section. We climbed the rock section in (no surprise) rock shoes and used a haulbag. It was like a slightly slabby big wall, with the bag inevitably getting stuck and needing to be freed from below from time to time. By 8 a.m., we were starting up pitch four.

The weather was near perfect on the sunny, east-facing wall as Josh and I made our way up eight more pitches, completing them around 2 p.m. We climbed in an efficient "fix and follow" style, in which the leader fixed the rope to his anchor and let the follower second on self-belay (versus ascending the fixed line) using a Micro Traxion and ascender backup. This method allows the leader to rest/eat/drink or haul while the other person climbs, assisting with the haulbag as needed.

During our 2019 attempt, one big issue had been a lack of good, flat bivy sites— the snow coverage was minimal, leaving exposed, sharp, and sloping rocks. About 350 meters up from our start, above the rock section, we'd found a well-protected cave that summer; however, it was far from flat, and we punctured our air mattresses. This made for a poor night's sleep, and we suffered again the following night due to the flat mattresses, despite finding a relatively flat, sheltered site higher up.

We were unsure what we'd find in 2022, and so brought more bivy gear—and a heavier haulbag. To our delight, the cave bivy was in far better shape, with ample snow that we flattened into a nice footprint for our tiny two-person tent. Not only did we have overhead protection thanks to the cave, but we also had the added warmth and air-mattress protection inside a cozy tent. Josh and I had a great night's sleep and were poised to head up into more alpine terrain the following day.

To start day two on Jirishanca, we stashed much of our rock equipment in the haulbag and left it at the bivy, planning to pick it up on the way down. Above, we tackled several pure snow and ice pitches in more conventional alpine style: each wearing a pack, continuing along in our same fix-and-follow

manner.

The weather was again nearly perfect: clear and still, with ambient temps just below freezing. The terrain was probably the easiest we found in our three days on the route (snow and ice that was never beyond vertical), and by 3 p.m. we'd covered 13 pitches to reach a stunning bivy spot at around 5,700 meters, right below a large ice barrier guarding the upper mountain. This ice roof was about twenty degrees overhanging and varied from five to ten meters tall. It also had numerous large icicles dangling from its lip, none of which touched the ground. Features like this, now prevalent on the upper mountain, are partly the result of climate change, as snow and ice has melted away to leave the terrain from the 1957 first ascent hollowed out, overhanging, and unstable.

Josh and I had noticed this phenomenon back in 2019, and Josh had encountered it in 2015 as well—confirmed also by vintage fixed ropes left by the Austrians that now hang out in space where before there were ice slopes or smaller overhangs. The slow but steady melt-back has stripped away the ice to reveal the underlying raw, chossy rock below. Sometime in the next few decades, these roofs will be gone entirely, I believe, leaving only rock.

The attempts in 2015 and 2019 had given us a vague idea of how to surmount these barriers. In 2015, Josh and his partner Stanley Vrba aided out the first roof, while in 2019 Josh and I found a nice free climbing variation through a big overhang.

After setting up our bivy, we decided to get this section done and fix a rope over it for the next day. Josh spied a solution on the far right end where the roof was smallest, though it was guarded by five meters of super-chossy rock. This proved to be a crux: spicy M7 climbing followed by wild WI6+ onto the overhanging icicles. It was amazing to watch Josh climb with such grace and ease, especially considering our spectacular position and the rarefied atmosphere—it would've been an awesome lead to behold even in the Ouray Ice Park.

Our third day started by ascending the fixed rope, followed by a few pitches of 5.10ish/M5ish rock to the second ice roof, which we hoped would be the last of the "real hard" technical difficulties. The second ice wall also went at WI6+, but easier than the first one and much easier than in 2019, when we had encountered a ten-meter-long, ten-degree-overhanging traverse. With only 100 vertical meters to gain the summit, we'd reached our high point from three years earlier.

The extraordinary meeting of two teams on the summit of Jirishanca. The mountain hadn't been climbed from the east in two decades, and on one day two parties summited, one by a new route and the other by the first free ascent of the southeast face. Photo by Drew Smith.

Now we found mostly steep snow and some easy but scrappy mixed climbing, with plenty of traversing. We were near the ridge crest, but the unconsolidated sugar snow and the crest's large, foreboding mushrooms prevented us from simply following the ridgetop to the summit, as the 1957 party likely did. Instead, we did a lot of ducking around, over, and under the gargoyles while traversing rightward, until we were on the north face directly below the summit pyramid. We topped out via surreal, three-dimensional glacial ice tubes that ended up being much easier than they appeared.

We summited around 4:30 p.m., both overjoyed and pleasantly surprised to find ourselves with no more mountain to climb. Just moments later, we were joined by Alik Berg and Quentin Roberts, two talented Canadian alpinists who'd climbed the mountain by a new route—Reino Hongo— up the south side of the southeast face (see story on p.34). We had shared base camp with them, and they'd departed more or less when we did, so we knew they were up on the mountain, but we had no idea we'd happen upon them up top. Jirishanca had gone almost 20 years without anyone standing on its summit, and here, within the span of a few minutes, we became only the fourth and fifth teams to do this by its most difficult face. It was an amazing moment!

We shared high fives and congratulations, and then without much pause began the daunting task of

descent, all four of us deciding to reverse Josh's and my route. Many of the traversing pitches Josh and I had climbed on the way up had to be re-climbed, which made for slow going. It got dark quite quickly, further complicating route-finding. Tired, but cautious, Josh and I slowly made 12 to 14 awkward rappels back to our bivy, dealing with a few fatigue-induced route-finding errors and some seriously tangled ropes.

After a short night, we were greeted by another near-perfect day and continued down the remaining 20 rappels in about four hours. As a bonus, we had the supreme pleasure of launching our haulbag, stuffed full of camping equipment, off the first bivy ledge. After falling well over 1,000 feet, it slid to within a few feet of where we'd cached some other gear at the base of the wall—buena suerte indeed.

SUMMARY: First free ascent (and first ascent to summit) of Suerte Integral (a.k.a. Italian Integral, 3,500', 5.13a WI6+ M7) on the southeast face and east buttress of Jirishanca (6,125m) in the Cordillera Huayhuash of Peru, by Vince Anderson and Josh Wharton (both USA), July 21–24, 2022. The two free climbed the first three (crux) rock pitches earlier and then ascended fixed ropes to begin their final push.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Vince Anderson is a mountain guide based in Grand Junction, Colorado, and the owner of Skyward Mountaineering. A father of three, Vince splits his time between guiding, rocking out to vinyl records, and having mind-expanding climbing experiences.

The Cutting Edge · Vince Anderson and Josh Wharton on Jirishanca

Images



Josh Wharton leading the crux pitch (5.13a) of Suerte's rock pillar before his and Anderson's final push on the route. The Italian trio that established this line used a power drill to place a bolt ladder that now protects this pitch.



Suerte Integral: the free linkup of Suerte (2003) and the east buttress (1957) of Jirishanca. The upper portion of the route is mostly hidden behind the right skyline.

JIRISHANCA FROM THE SOUTHEAST: NOTABLE ASCENTS

Only five teams are known to have reached 6,525-meter Jirishanca from the southeast or east. Here, a time line of ascents and various attempts.

1957: East Buttress. Toni Egger and Siegfried Jungmeir. A team of Austrians climbed expedition-style, fixing ropes up the buttress. Deep snow on the summit ridge turned them around, but Egger and Jungmeir returned after making the first ascent of nearby Yerupajá Chico. Judged the fixed lines to their high point, and climbed the remaining (and demanding) terrain to the summit on July 12, claiming Peru's last virgin 6,000m summit—a visionary ascent.

1973: Southeast Face, team led by Masayuki Shinohara. Climbing siege-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.

2000: Attempt on Left Side of Southeast Face. Mojib Kozak and Paolo Stoppani (both from Slovenia) and Antipa Monasterlo (Peru). The trio quickly climbed to the south ridge but descended from there. Note: This line was drawn along the southeast spur in A.A.J. 2004; the climb was farther left.

2003: Southeast Face, Fear and Loathing. Nick Bullcock and Alan Powell. Climbing alpine-style, the British pair climbed 900m of ice and mixed left of the Japanese route. They reached the east buttress and continued up about 150m before



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 A.A.J. 2004 for all route lines on this aspect. Quentin Roberts

reheating without a summit.

2003: Southeast Face, Tambo, Churro, y Amigo. Americo Couet and Didier Jourdain (France). The pair fixed ropes for four days (six pitches), then climbed alpine-style above this (using a portledge) 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 DeLuca, 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 (5,13a) and continued up the east buttress to the top.

2022: South-Southeast Spur. Reino Hongo, Aik 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 outcrag 900-up.

Time line of ascents and attempts on the southeast side of Jirishanca.



Biviouac at 5,700 meters below one of the ice barriers on the east buttress of Jirishanca. The climbers turned the roof on the right side with M7 WI6+ climbing. Behind is Yerupajá Chico.



Josh Wharton free climbing overhanging ice during the 2019 attempt to pass one of the big ice barriers on Jirishanca.



Moving up the east buttress of Jirishanca during the 2019 attempt, with one of the ice roofs that block the ridge looming above.



Josh Wharton (left) and Vince Anderson below Jirishanca in the Cordillera Huayhuash of Peru.



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