



Nevado Palqay, West Buttress

Peru, Cordillera Vilcanota

Nevado Palqay (5,422m) is a peak to the northeast of Salcantay (also spelled Salkantay) in the Cordillera Vilcabamba. Technically, it is the east-northeast ridge of Salcantay, which drops down to Palqay Pass and forms the peaks Chuyunco and Palqay. Further along, this ridge ends in the famous site of Machu Picchu and the peak Huayna Picchu, before dropping steeply to the Vilcanota River.

To my knowledge, Nevado Palqay was unclimbed. Tom Hendrickson, who has lived in Cusco since the 1970s, told me he climbed one of the summits along this ridgeline in 1978 with a lady from New Zealand. There are a few glaciated peaks between Chuyunco and Palqay along this ridgeline, and, after talking with him, I believe they summited the south peak of Palqay.

Waldemar Niclevicz (Brazil) and I left Cusco for Mollepata on May 8 to meet Edwin Espinoza, our third climbing member. Edwin has cabins located in Soray Pampa (ca 3,900m), and we stayed there that night. On May 9 we traveled with my friend Doña, her daughter Edith, and their pack horses to reach their home at the base of Nevado Salcantay's northeast ridge (ca 4,200m). This 22km approach took us over Inkachiriaska Pass and Palqay Pass before dropping into the meadow where their rock house is nestled between the mountains.

On May 10 we headed to the east and then north into a pasture below the west buttress of Nevado Palqay. We used one of the large scree chutes to gain the ridge-like feature. The plan was to camp on the ridge, but we found a more protected spot on a shelf next to the glacier, out of the wind, which we flattened out to make enough room for our tent (ca 4,800m). The night was pleasant, looking at the north face of Salcantay with the Southern Cross twinkling over it.

On May 11 we left the tent at 2 a.m. and started traversing the glacier below the west buttress. After a route-finding error, we climbed steep snow up the glacier until we gained a snow rib (60–70°). We gained the west buttress proper at daylight. After a quick break we decided to climb on the northern aspect of the ridge because of massive seracs threatening the other side. Route-finding was a bit tricky at first. Eventually, a steep 5m section of ice allowed us to gain the ridge and a subsummit; from there the route was easy to see.

Continuing up the west buttress and a short snow face, we reached the col between a snowy subsummit and the rocky main summit. The final ridge involved two pitches up 60° snow with rock traverses and fun exposure. At 7:30 a.m. we reached the summit. Waldemar's altimeter watch read 5,370m, close to the map elevation. It was a beautiful day and we stayed on the summit for almost an hour, taking in the views of Nevado Veronica, Salcantay, and the airspace above the Inca Trail and Machu Picchu. Our route is 500m, D.

We downclimbed our tracks with some running belays, reaching camp early in the day. Our original plan had been to acclimatize with this peak and then go to Salcantay after a rest day; however, four days of rain forced us out of the valley. Later in the year, on July 26, Edwin Espinoza (Peru), Roger Gasser (Switzerland), Duncan McDaniel (USA), and I repeated the Fritz Kasperek Memorial Expedition's route on the north face of Salcantay; this climbs the direct north face of the east peak (AAJ 1969).

Nathan Heald, Peru

Images



Waldemar Niclevicz on the approach to Nevado Palqay.



Approaching high camp below Nevado Palqay.



On the summit of Nevado Palqay with Salcantay behind.



Descending the west buttress of Nevado Palqay.



Nevado Palqay 5,422m
Cordillera Vilcabamba
First Ascent, West Ridge (600m, D)

Waldemar Nielewicz,
Edwin Espinoza,
Nathan Heald

High Camp
Ascent

The line of ascent up Nevado Palqay's west buttress, making the probable first ascent of the peak.

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