



AAC Publications

Illampu, West Face, Mental Ward

Bolivia, Cordillera Real

Part of the west face of Illampu (6,368m), showing (1) Nada Mañana, (2) Mental Ward, and (3) Koroska Smer. Other routes not shown.

At around 8 a.m. on July 30, Brad Ward (no relation) and I stood together on the summit of Illampu (6,368m), having arrived there by a completely independent new route on the left side of the west face.

Illampu is the fourth-highest peak in Bolivia and has a reputation as the most difficult 6,000m peak in the country, at least on the standard routes. Our route was the first new line on the west face in 30 years, and we found very different conditions than those visible in old photos. The glacier below the face has receded, and the lower snow and ice pitches of routes such as Alpos Secret (1991) appear to have disappeared. In some ways we benefited from changing conditions, as we found good water ice in places where in the past only snow existed.

From the road head at Lackathiya (ca 4,010m), we used burros to reach base camp at Aguas Calientes. We then made a reconnaissance trip to the west face and left a gear cache at the edge of the glacier. On July 29 we left base camp at 1 a.m., arrived at the bottom of the face at sunrise, and began climbing.

Low on the face, nearly every pitch had lovely alpine ice and often perfect névé for step-kicking. Protection and anchors were plentiful. There were several pitches of water ice, including high-quality WI3 and WI4, and several mixed pitches on good granite up to M5.

High on the face, we climbed pitch after pitch of steep Andean flutings and struggled to find a suitable bivouac site. Any attempt to dig into the steep, sugary snow struck ice after 30–60cm. As we gained altitude the flutings often dead-ended, forcing unprotected traverses into new ones. It was often only possible to place one or two ice screws in 70m. Around midnight I climbed the worst of the flutings while Brad froze at the anchor; I've never understood how near-vertical powder snow stays on those faces, nor how humans manage to cling to it, but there we were, slowly gaining ground.

We were exhausted, having been on the move for 24 hours and gained over 1,600m from base camp, and I had led more than 20 pitches. Nearing desperation, I suddenly climbed out of a fluting and found myself on the summit ridge. Moving onto the leeward side, we were able to dig a shallow bench with a backrest at around 6,250m. Sheltered from the wind, we made a brew, got into our thin sleeping bags, and began spooning and shivering through the rest of the nearly sleepless night.

Five hours later, the sun had warmed us enough that we could move. Brad led off and very quickly took us to the north summit. He ran the rope out again and again through the morning as we traversed the long, corniced ridge that leads to the higher south summit. We celebrated in warm sunshine and congratulated each other for not dying during the preceding night. Then we started down the standard route of the southwest ridge. The descent took most of the day and many rappels before we arrived in base camp.

Our route lies between Nada Mañana (1991) and Koroska Smer (1986). We called it Mental Ward (850m, WI4 M5). Our trip was funded in part by the McNeill-Nott Award from the American Alpine

Club and the Mazamas Adventure Grant. [For a history of climbing on the west face of Illampu, see AAJ 2018.]

— Matt Ward, USA

Images



Good alpine ice during the first ascent of Mental Ward on the west face of Illampu.



Approaching Illampu. The west face is in profile above the receding icefall.



Matt Ward on the west face of Illampu, climbing good ice below the upper flutings, during the first ascent of Mental Ward.



Matt Ward in the seemingly endless flutings at the top of the west face of Illampu during the first ascent of Mental Ward.



Part of the west face of Illampu (6,368m), showing (1) Nada Mañana, (2) Mental Ward, and (3) Koroska Smer. For all the routes on this face, see AAJ 2018.



In the middle section of Mental Ward on the west face of Illampu.



Traversing the summit ridge toward the south top of Illampu.

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