



Japonés Directo: The North Face of Nevado Ausangate

Peru, Cordillera Vilcanota

Kei Narita and I saw a truly beautiful photo of the north face of Nevado Ausangate (6,384m), and we thought, “This is the perfect objective to climb alpine style.” I didn’t know why this magnificent wall was still unclimbed. Maybe the rock was too loose and the serac at the base was too huge, or maybe there was a lot of avalanche risk? I didn’t know of any previous attempts. We decided to go on a trip into the unknown. It felt like there was only a 30 to 40 percent chance that we would even be able to start the climb.

Because this would be an ice and mixed route, we thought July or August (the usual season for this range) would be too late. By that time, we expected the ice would have melted. So we planned to climb in May, and that was a key decision. We acclimatized on the normal route, climbing the east and south faces to the summit. Several teams usually do this route every year, but this season, apparently, no one climbed it.

On May 17, we headed for the north face. We left our bivouac at Laguna Azul Cocha (4,500m) at night and passed the broken glacier as quickly as we could. The glacier was threatened by the huge serac, but we passed the most dangerous part in about an hour. At the 5,300m level, we made an excellent bivy in a little cave that was completely protected. After we had reached the cave, the sun hit the face and we heard countless avalanches.

We started climbing again at midnight so we could minimize the rockfall and avalanche risk. Kei led an initial pitch of WI4+ that was like a waterfall, so it was difficult to use ice screws. The second pitch was also WI4+, including some vertical mixed climbing. While passing this vertical section, I was struck by a huge spindrift avalanche that included some falling rock. I stabbed in my axes as hard as I could and held on. It felt like I was pounded for more than three minutes. Fortunately, the intense shower eventually slowed and then ended. I climbed quickly to the left for the protection of a rock wall and made a solid anchor. It was hard to find the route in the dark, so I had to trust my feeling.

The third pitch was the crux of the lower half of the route. It was still completely dark, yet somehow Kei found a crack in the rock and climbed through the hard section at about 5.10a. Climbing this with crampons and gloves took some hard effort. It was an absolute miracle that a crack existed here—we could not have passed the vertical section without it.

After this first crux, we merged into an obvious snow and ice couloir. Here we mostly simul-climbed to move rapidly, hoping to avoid potential avalanches and rockfall. After reaching 5,700m, we were super lucky to find a small, flat bivy spot covered by a huge rock roof. Our tent was slightly too big to fit on the flat space, but we both managed to lie down and recover body and mind.

We left the bivy around 3 a.m. and simul-climbed the rest of the couloir in one super-long pitch that would have been about eight or nine rope lengths had we belayed. I only placed one or two pieces of protection every 60m to save on gear.

This brought us to the base of the vertical ice section on the upper wall. When the sun had only just hit the ice, we started up the first pitch. The ice was really hard, like metal, so it was quite tough both to lead and to follow while wearing the heavy pack. The 50m first pitch was WI5. The second pitch

was 40m and WI6. On the latter, I was about to give up on free climbing the slightly overhanging ice, but I wanted to push as hard as Kei did on the hard rock crux of the previous day. I was really relieved after topping out without hanging on the rope. The ice crux at 6,000m felt much harder than the last pitch of Polar Circus in the Canadian Rockies or any ice I had climbed in Japan.

I quickly realized that the real crux of our climb was probably still to come. We had to simul-climb, breaking through soft snow that was melting in the intense sun. It felt like it went on forever, and we also were threatened by seracs in some sections. We had hoped to camp at a flat area on the foresummit, but we couldn't reach it that day because we climbed so slowly in the knee-deep snow. I was feeling somewhat sick from the altitude, and I took a minute to climb every meter. We decided to bivvy on a snow slope at 6,250m. We had carried an 80-liter plastic bag, and I filled it with snow and hung it from the wall to make additional space for the tent. After two hours, we had created a ledge that was nicer than the previous bivvy, giving us a safe spot to recover and stay motivated.

The next day, I led the final snow slope at sunrise, when the snow was still firm, and we reached the summit ridge relatively smoothly. Yet Andean ridges are rarely simple and easy. A complicated rock barrier stood in front of the foresummit, and it was obvious we would not be able to climb over it. Instead, we rappelled for 40m and made a big traverse on the south side. It was a difficult decision, because losing altitude at this elevation is mentally and physically tough. However, after the rappel, we could see an obvious traverse to a 60° slope leading to the base of the true summit.

Again, the strong sun hit us and we had to break a trail through deep snow at 6,300m. When we finally reached the foot of the summit cone, about 20m below the top, the weather turned bad. We were completely blind in the whiteout. After an hour of drinking hot tea, we decided to spend another night there (6,360m), because descending from the top with no visibility would have been unrealistic. That night was so cold. Our small sleeping bags were wet at this point, but we survived with big hope for the next day.

On the fifth day of our climb, we started before daylight, hoping to avoid the melting seracs and crevasses on the upcoming descent. The visibility was good, but the wind was the strongest we'd felt during our month in Peru. Our hands and feet were freezing. We reached the summit about 15 minutes after leaving our final bivvy.

The suffering of the past five days turned to pleasure. The 360° view at sunrise was stunning, and I was glad we hadn't climbed to the summit in the whiteout.

We started down the normal route, rappelling three pitches down the steepest section and downclimbing. We had a near miss when the wire on a snow picket snapped as I tested it before rappelling on a 60° snow slope. At the bottom of the face, we carefully managed the dangerously crevassed glacier.

We descended from the summit all the way to the tiny settlement at 4,300m at the base of the mountain, and there we caught a ride on a small motorbike that was passing by—two climbers with big packs struggling to hold on to the bike as we left Ausangate. After a bus ride, we returned to the village of Pacchanta and woke the owner of our hostel, who was surprised to see us and offered hearty congratulations.

The north face of Ausangate was still faintly visible under the starlit sky as I soaked in a wonderful hot spring and felt the warmth of the steaming water all over my body. Looking up at the line we had climbed, it was hard to process the intense five days of climbing. I felt sad, happy, and an emotion that is inexpressible in words. I wanted to bask in that afterglow for a while.

We called our route Japonés Directo (1,100m, 5.10a WI6), after a Peruvian friend suggested the name.

– **Yudai Suzuki, Japan**

NOTES ON AUSANGATE'S NORTH SIDE: The only prior route on this side of Ausangate was on the northwest face, a shallow buttress well to the right of the 2023 route. A line on this face was climbed in 1982 by an Italian team, who descended the far side without going to the summit. In 1983, a Swiss trio climbed the face and continued to the summit, where they were forced to bivouac for two nights before the weather cleared enough for them to navigate down the south side.

Images



Yudai Suzuki leading the 40-meter WI6 ice pitch at around 6,000 meters on the north face of Ausangate.



Japonés Directo (1,100m, 5.10a WI6), the first route up the north face of Nevado Ausangate (6,384m). After a bivouac at the foot of the wall, the pair made four bivouacs before reaching the top. They descended Ausangate's normal route on the far side of the mountain.

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