

Volcano Climbing in Ecuador

As part of its continuing programme in mountaineering, Simon Fraser University Department of Recreation sponsored an introductory course in High Altitude Mountaineering on the Ecuador volcanoes during December 1981. The Seven member expedition succeeded in climbing Cotopaxi (6000m), the world's highest active volcano, but continuing bad weather precluded an ascent of Chimborazo (6310m).

Dans le cadre de son actif programme d'alpinisme, le Département des Loisirs de l'Université Simon Fraser a organisé un cours d'introduction à l'alpinisme de haute altitude, qui a eu lieu en décembre 1981 dans la région des volcans de l'Équateur. Une expédition de sept membres a réussi l'ascension du mont Cotopaxi (6000m), le plus haut des volcans en activité; mais la persistance du mauvais temps a interdit l'escalade du Chimborazo (6310m).

The expedition left Vancouver on Friday 4th December and arrived in Quito the following Sunday. The next three days were spent in Quilto (2900m) and during this time an acclimatization hike was made to Pinchincha (4500m), a volcano overlooking Quito. This phase of the expedition provided an excellent basis for our future acclimatization to altitude.

On 10 December we left Quito for Cotopaxi National Park. We spent the evening in the first refugio, Armada Nacional at 4400m. The following morning we left our rented mini-bus at 4600m and hiked up to the Jose Ribas Hut (4800m), situated at the bases of Cotopaxi's northern aspect. That afternoon a snow school was conducted on a snowfield at 5000m. Further training in rope work and ice climbing was held the following day crevasse rescue was also practised.

Given the favourable conditions on the mountains we arose late Sunday evening, had breakfast, prepared our equipment, and left the hut at 11.20pm for a summit attempt. By 1 am, having walked up some 400m of ash and shale, we were at the base of the glacier. The first 150m on the glacier were of the most difficult and intimidating of the whole climb. The middle 45m consisted of ice overlain by snow at an angle of 45 to 50 degrees. After surmounting that obstacle the route meandered through crevasses and below ice walls until we reached the Yanasacha, a large, obvious rock face at 5300m. At this point a large transverse crevasse necessitated a lengthy westward traverse until a snow bridge gave access to the snowfield above. We followed a faint ridge until it abutted the west ridge of Yanasacha and the final headwall that loomed above. At this point dawn was breaking and, although strenuous, the headwall (40 degrees) was not as difficult as we had been led to believe. The 300m headwall was in prime slab avalanche condition but the slope remained in shadow during our ascent and descent.

The headwall led directly to the crater and from here it was barely 10 minutes to Cotopaxi's summit (6000m) which we reached at 7 am.

Concerned about the avalanche condition of the headwall and deteriorating snow conditions further down, we spent little time on the summit. The descent was carried out in short order, much to the chagrin of some tired group members. The snow on the bottom 400m of the climb was appallingly soft even at 10 am. On the descent one section of 30 m with a bad runout and the initial steep 100 m were rappelled. The group reached the Jose Ribas Hut at 10.30 am, some 11 hours after setting out.

We left the Jose Ribas Hut that afternoon (14th) and drove to Banos for some well deserved rest and relaxation. Banos is an idyllic village (well know to the international travel set) set in a deep valley overlooked by the volcano called Tungurahua. It is Tungurahua that provides Banos with the hot natural baths, which give it its name and reputation. We ate good food (at Mercedes) and participated in the local festival before leaving Banos for Chimboraza on the 16th.

Chimborazo's (6310m) southern aspect is an impressive tangle of crevasses and icefalls and from a distance appears very intimidating. Our chosen route was the original (1880) Whymper route on the south-west flank of Chimborazo, serviced by a new hut built for the centenary of the first ascent. We reached the hut (5100m) late that day in a snow storm, having parked our mini-bus some 300m in lower at the end of an excellent network of roads which lead in from either Riobamba or Guaranda. The hut, although only a year old and soundly built, was in surprisingly poor condition. It was cold (there was no wood for the fire), dark (the generator did not work), and lacked amenities (no water for the stainless steel sinks and no gas for the stoves). It was also dirty and the guardian was not very concerned.

The snow and heavy cloud cover that accompanied our walk to the hut also characterized our stay. Apart from a brilliant two hour sunburst early on the 17th and a briefer less dazzling occasion the following morning, the weather remained cold and cloudy, with persistent precipitation and occasional high winds. According to the guardian this had been the pattern for the previous eight days and there seemed little prospect of it abating. We monitored conditions on the mountain during the night of the 17th/18th and 18th /19th but on neither occasion did we feel that the weather conditions justified an attempt.

This was a great pity as the south-west flank is very impressive face and the Whymper route follows an elegant line up it. There were also opportunities for more technical (though not extreme) routes on the face. Conditions on the face were very icy during our stay and the sun hit face relatively early in the morning.

We left the Whymper hut on the morning of the 19th and drove to Otavalo. We enjoyed an evening and the following morning there, wandering the markets, bartering for Christmas presents, and soaking up the rich Otavalian culture.

We left Otavalo the following day, drove back to Quito, and packed ready for an early departure for Miami. We stopped over Miami on the 21st, swam in the sea, and finally arrived in Vancouver just in time for Christmas.

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