

Kings College London Mountaineering Club Expedition: Bolivia 2006

In August 2006, two members of King's College London Mountain Club travelled to Bolivia to climb in the remote Northern Apolobamba. We were funded in great part by grants donated by the King's College London Annual Fund, the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council. These generous contributions allowed us to achieve our objectives despite the injury of one member of the team. The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that all or part of it may be copied for the purposes of private research.

Leader's details

Name: Charles Netherton Telephone: 077990 62152
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Team composition

Charles Netherton (25), British, Student.

- Leadership experience: organised and ran 3 University Alpine Trips (12 people), 2 Winter climbing trips (Scotland and French Alps – 8 people), 8-day trekking trip in Cairngorms, unguided vehicle crossing of Bolivian Salar, 20+ University Rock Climbing Trips
- Climbing Experience: 3 Alpine summer seasons, 5 winter-climbing trips, extensive rock climbing in UK and abroad, several extended trekking expeditions.

Jonathan Holman (21), British, Student.

- Climbing Experience: 3 Alpine summer seasons, 3 winter-climbing trips, extensive rock climbing in the UK, substantial summer hill experience, remote jungle trekking with organised party and extended trekking trip to Cairngorms

Pedro Luis Quispe Mamani (25), Bolivian, Trainee Mountain Guide (replaced Jon in week 2)

- Climbing Experience: Extensive alpine climbing and guiding experience in Bolivia

Background

The planning for Bolivia began back in the summer of 2005. Having had a successful 3 weeks climbing in the French Alps, a longer expedition was suggested for the following year. Charlie had done some climbing there the summer before and had established good contacts with a local guiding company. Serious planning began in November. Charlie began to investigate the possibilities with his local contacts and came up with the Northern Apolobamba; meanwhile Jon studied the activities of previous expeditions. The cost of a two-man, two-month expedition was likely to be considerable, so we began to look into funding opportunities. The Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Club and King's College London were all seen as suitable organisations. In order to prepare for the expedition physically, we combined several trips with our finals: ice climbing in January, a winter attempt on the Cuillin Ridge, a few weekends rock climbing and finally four weeks climbing in the Alps in June.

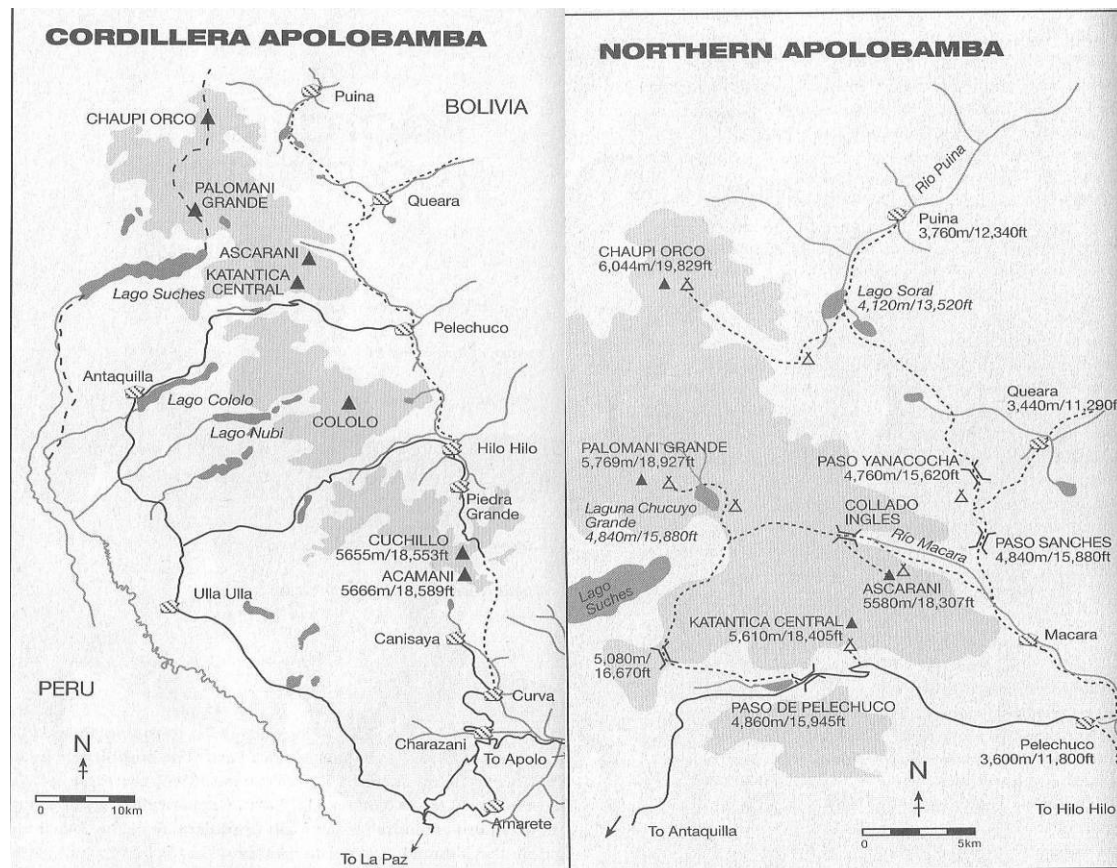
Trip objectives

From our research we learned that most expeditions to the Apolobamba visit the southern region. The north, therefore, appeared to have more scope for exploration and new routes. Our objectives were twofold: exploration of the region and climbing new routes, preferably on previously unclimbed mountains.

Exploration: we planned to base ourselves in the vicinity of Palomani Grande, potentially moving to a second base camp as the expedition progressed.

New routes: although many of the easy lines had been climbed there was little evidence of major traverses and local contacts suggested that many harder lines remained without previous attempts.

The Apolobamba



Source: Yossi Brain, *Bolivia A Climbing Guide* (The Mountaineers, Seattle 1999)

The primary objective of the expedition to Bolivia was the exploration of the Cordillera Apolobamba. 'This little-explored area is considered to have literally thousands of potential unclimbed routes and unclimbed peaks over 5000m' (Yossi Brain 1999). Due to its inaccessibility and uneasy political relationship with Peru this area has not been heavily explored. The only maps of the area are a restricted military 1:100,000 and a 1993 sketch map based on a 1911-13 RGS survey.

Expedition – planning in La Paz

Our plan from the outset was to not set our objectives too firmly before leaving the UK. Charlie's previous experience of South America in general and Bolivia in particular was that setting inflexible objectives without assessing the situation locally was not likely to be particularly productive. Therefore, the first week in La Paz was spent talking to local guides, acclimatising and working informally for Bolivian Mountains in client-liaison. We learnt about the current snow and ice conditions, took photographs of several unclimbed routes on Huayna Potosi and climbed up to Huayna Potosi high camp. Several guides had some experience of the Apolobamba, either leading treks or climbs, and were able to give us a lot of logistical advice. With this knowledge we set our objectives more specifically. We also planned our access to the Apolobamba.

The Expedition – Apolobamba achievement

The expedition achieved its primary objective in difficult circumstances. While we only climbed one new route, it was on a mountain that had not seen an ascent before. Our exploration of the region, while not as comprehensive as we had hoped, identified two easier routes to Palomani Grande – one by 4x4 track and one by foot.

Jon's injury was a huge setback for us. Not only did it remove one climber out of a team of two, but we spent two weeks out of action while Jon sought treatment in La Paz. It was psychologically very difficult for both of us. Jon was unable to walk without painkillers and was very upset that he would be unable to continue to participate in the expedition. Charlie had to find a new climbing partner and attempt to achieve our goals without Jon. Pedro Pedro Luis Quispe Mamani, a trainee guide for Bolivian Mountains, welcomed the opportunity to climb in a range of mountains that he had not climbed in before and joined Charlie. However his guiding schedule made it difficult to find very much time and our climbing was severely restricted by his timetable.

Additionally, we were beset by bad weather throughout the two months that we were in Bolivia, which on three separate occasions led to climbs being cancelled.

Expedition – secondary objectives

Given the distance involved in travelling to Bolivia, we decided that while our primary objective would be to climb in the Apolobamba, we also wanted to climb elsewhere in the country. Before heading out the Apolobamba, we planned to climb in the Condoriri range to acclimatise and get a feel for the local conditions. Charlie returned to Condoriri for a solo ascent of the direct route on Pequeño Alpamayo after returning from the Apolobamba.

We also hoped to climb new routes on the east and west faces of Huayna Potosi. Charlie and Pedro tried to the mountain via a new route on the east face but we both came down with food poisoning on the ascent and turned back. We never had an opportunity to attempt the route that we'd outlined on the west face.

Of these two secondary objectives the acclimatisation and preparation in Condoriri was invaluable. The extra strength the acclimatisation gave Charlie for trekking into the Apolobamba was extremely useful, and ultimately this is where Jon injured himself, so we were very lucky that this happened relatively close to La Paz and not in the Apolobamba.

Timeline

8th August: Arrived La Paz

9th – 14th August: Acclimatising in La Paz and on the altiplano with our contacts at Bolivian Mountains, helping to support their clients on treks and climbs

15th August: Rock climbing in La Paz

16th August: Went ice climbing on the glacier at the foot of Huayna Potosi

17th-21st August: Progress slowed by chronic gastro-intestinal upset!

22nd August: Travelled to Condoriri Base Camp to begin high-altitude acclimatisation and climbing of technical routes

24th August: Jon developed acute tendonitis on Pequeño Alpamayo, had to be heavily medicated and evacuated

25th August: Heavy snow destroyed Charlie's solo attempt to make the first British ascent of a route first climbed the year before on Huallomen; multiple avalanches were heard from base camp and John's condition was not improving so we retreated to La Paz

26th August – 31st August: Remained in La Paz seeking medical treatment for Jon and assessment of his physical condition; realised that Jon was not going to be able to continue; Charlie decided to continue to achieve expedition objectives with a local guide, Pedro Pedro Luis Quispe Mamani, who he knew from a previous trip

1st September: travelled La Paz-Pelechuco; because of new time constraints due to Pedro's limited time off work (only 8 days rather than our planned 22) we push straight to Paso de Pelechuco, arranging to meet porters there the next morning

2nd September: Pedro, his cousin (camp guard), myself and two porters (to expedite the journey given limited timeframe) trekked from Paso de Pelechuco to a provisional base camp about 1 hour south of the Palomani Grande base camp (7 hours from the pass)

3rd September: Pedro and Charlie left base camp at 10am, climbing to a high camp (5000m). Then we climbed a rocky peak to south of Palomani Sur for reconnaissance and returned to high camp.

4th September: left high camp at 4am, made first ascent of Palomani Sur and traversed Palomani Central, returned to base camp at midday.

5th September: weather turned for the worse and heavy snow began to fall; Pedro and Charlie both fell very ill with high fevers; we walked out due south to Estancia Apacheta Pampa (7 hours over a 5500m pass); bus to Pelechuco. Jon repatriated to the UK.

6th September: returned to La Paz from Pelechuco on public bus.

7th – 10th September: recovered from bad flu and fever in La Paz.

11th September: Charlie made a solo attempt on the French Route of Huayna Potosi but turned back because of heavy snowfall and lightning storms.

14th September – 16th September: trip to Condoriri and solo ascent of direct route of Pequeño Alpamayo (poor snow conditions and wide rimaye makes route interesting; it was certainly out of condition)

20th September: Charlie and Pedro attempted new route on South Face of Huayna Potosi; turned back due to poor weather

25th September: Charlie left Bolivia for Santiago de Chile, hoping to find better weather conditions further south

Route details

A first ascent of Palomani Sur was made by Charlie and Pedro Luis Quispe Mamani. We climbed from the Bolivian side and traversed Palomani Sur and Palomani Central. The route took a direct line to Palomani Sur and we climbed over two days to facilitate navigation and reconnaissance of the area. The route was approximately alpine difficile in difficulty.

Walked from Paso de Pelechuco to a provisional base camp about 1 hour south of the Palomani Grande base camp (7 hours from the pass).

Left base camp, climbing a rock face (III) and frozen waterfall (WI4,4) to the west of base camp to a high camp at c. 5000m (3 hours). We climbed loose scree then good rock to the south of the high camp for reconnaissance (1.5 hours up and down).

Climbed directly up right-hand face of glacier (50 degrees), arriving on Palomani Sur summit plateau (Paul Hudson's sketch map is rather unclear about the particular peaks here: in my opinion there are three major summits along the ridge – the southernmost is Palomani Sur, the middle is Palomani Central and the northernmost is Palomani Tranca – together they make up the Palomani Tranca group). Then ascended all the minor peaks on the plateau for reconnaissance before climbing Palomani Sur (II), rappelling off the north-west face to the ridge below (very loose rock and poor anchors). Continued north along the ridge, overcoming a tricky step onto a subsidiary summit (loose snow, steep ridge, no obvious way to go round it). Continued to south end of Palomani Central. Climbed south face directly on steep snow. Continue to Palomani Tranca subsidiary summit. (5 hours from high camp)

Descended steeply on snow directly south off ridge connecting Palomani Grande and Tranca. Returned to base camp over treacherous scree. (2 hours)

Although the possibility existed of continuing the traverse, we decided not to continue due to appalling condition of rock and danger of descending N ridge of Palomani Tranca.



Figure 1: Palomani Sur from the East



Figure 2: Palomani Sur and Central from the rocky peak to the south of high camp



Figure 3: Palomani Central (left) and Sur (right, pyramid) from the west



Figure 4: east-west ridge leading to Palomani Tranca (right) taken from the south



Figure 5: Palomani Grande (left) and the Palomani Tranca group (Palomani Central and Palomani Sur visible)

Notes on the Apolobamba

Access to Palomani Grande

- There is an old mining road (4x4 access only) that leaves the road to Pelechuco in a North Easterly direction at Estancia Apacheta Pampa and winds its way over the watershed, drops down towards Laguna Suches on the Peruvian/Bolivian boarder and then heads north east, passing within two hours walk (due North from the road) of the Palomani Grande base camp. It continues east in the direction between Sorel Oeste group and the Matchu Suchi Coochi group (i.e. the group that contains Presidente). The road is marked as a wide track on Paul Hudson's (2003) sketch map.
- We walked in north on the path from Paso de Pelechuco (marked in Yossi Brain's book). The descent from the pass was extremely loose and would have been extremely difficult to ascend from the north.
- We walked out south on the old mining road (heading south). This crossed the mountains to the west of Paso de Pelechuco. At the pass we headed south-west (turned left off the road), crossed the mountains at the 'obvious' pass and descended into Estancia Apacheta Pampa on the south.
- The river to the south of our base camp can be hard to ford – caution recommended.

The north/south question

- The Northern Apolobamba becomes more rounded the further north one travels; consequently a lot of the interesting lines have already been seen ascents.
- Southern Apolobamba
 - More 'rugged' than the part of Northern Apolobamba we explored.
 - More scope for harder routes
 - More accessible
 - More extensively explored

Planning

- Very difficult to work out what has been climbed before
- Numerous routes have been climbed by local guides who have not recorded them.
- John Biggar has climbed a lot of the Northern Apolobamba from the Peruvian side.
- Hotel owner in Pelechuco will try and rip you off any way he can.
- Phone access/service in Pelechuco unreliable

Opportunities

- A direct route up the south face of Palomani Grande, weaving between the crevasses and seracs, might be feasible; John Biggar climbed what he called the south rib from the foot of the glacier, several years ago when the glaciers were much less pronounced. This takes a line somewhat to the east of the south face line.
- There may well be a new route climbable up the south face of Chupi Orco, and a traverse of the immediate group.
- A traverse of the Sorel Oeste would be nothing less than a high altitude stroll after a laborious rocky ascent.
- A traverse of the whole 'ridge' between Palomani Grande and Chupi Orco will involve a significant amount of walking along high altitude moorland; therefore a traverse of the entire Palomani group would be rather discontinuous and contrived.
- A traverse of the whole Palomani Tranca group remains possible, by a team prepared to risk descending 400m of loose, unsecured and steep ridge, without secure rappel points.

Appendix: General observations

We learnt the following from our experiences in Bolivia. It does not constitute advice, merely our observations.

Equipment

- 14 point crampons useful on steeper routes (lots of bad ice)
- Plastic boots or sandals useful for stream crossings
- Alpine kit (with storm over-clothes) perfectly acceptable in August/September
- Leather boots used by locals without thermal gaiters
- Screw gas obtainable but expensive (UK prices)
- Petrol/kerosene mix works in stoves (local petrol dirty, pure kerosene doesn't ignite well)
- Bomb proof base camp tent a real haven (Trango 2 used on expedition to sleep 3 people)
- Trekking tent (North Face tadpole) useful for traverses and preferable to bivvy bags
- Equipment dependent on style of route

Weather

- Often poor snow later on in year
 - No gear, bad axe placements
- Locals say climate is changing
 - Season starting as early as April (sometimes)
 - Winds increase as season continues.
 - We experienced moderate snow and generally unseasonably bad weather in August and September
 - Local mythology suggests that October is usually clear (although windy)

Logistics

- Local contacts invaluable
 - We used Bolivian Mountains and they were excellent in every way.
 - Using an agency for advice, transport and logistical support was extremely good value when considering the amount of time it saved.
- A basic knowledge of Spanish is essential; without it expect to waste a lot of time!
- Local medical services in La Paz vary widely
 - It is possible to buy almost any prescription drug over the counter in any pharmacy
 - There are English-speaking doctors; they tend to operate out of the private medical clinics in the southern end of the city
 - Sports injuries are treated very differently – where Jon's English doctor put him on over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs and recuperative physiotherapy (upon his return to the UK), his Bolivian doctor ordered twice-daily anti-inflammatory injections and ultrasound treatment

Appendix: Budget

Income from sponsors (balance from personal contribution)

King's College London Annual Fund	£4700
Mount Everest Foundation	£400
British Mountaineering Council	£550
Total	£5750

Expenses

Transport	
Air flights	£1700
Bus Lima - La Paz (including Lima costs, taxes, etc.)	£150
Local transport (Bolivia)	£500
Living Expenses	
Flat La Paz	£600
Food La Paz	£400
Taxis La Paz (Jon couldn't walk, needed daily physio)	£50
Miscellaneous	£150
Medical Expenses	
Local medicines and doctors' bills	£300
First Aid training	£160
BMC Alpine Insurance	£440
Equipment	
Plastic boots	£440
Trango 2 tent	£250
Sleeping bags	£400
Bivy bags	£150
Down jackets	£300
Local supplies	£100
Personal Costs (total not per person)	
Equipment (personal and climbing)	£600
Entertainment La Paz & Coroico	£500
Total	£7190

Notes on expenditure:

1. Our expenditure was significantly higher than anticipated –
 - a. We spent far longer in La Paz than planned
 - i. Higher living expenses
 - ii. Higher personal costs
 - b. We incurred unplanned medical bills that we couldn't claim from insurance
 - c. Our transport bills were higher due to the need to make the most of available time, particularly when climbing with Pedro
2. We saved less money than we anticipated by travelling from Lima to La Paz overland due to costs incurred en-route – flying direct would probably have been worthwhile
3. The BMC informed us that their 'Alpine' insurance would cover what we were doing, their advice seemed to be completely accurate