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# Chimanta 2008 Expedition Report



## **Abstract**

This expedition report describes climbing the first ascent of Amurí Tepui in the Chimanta massif of Venezuela, a wall previously unvisited even by any indigenous population. The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

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## **Introduction**

This report describes the successful attempt to climb a new big-wall route on a remote and relatively inaccessible tepui in the Chimanta region of Venezuela.

The expedition is grateful for financial support from The Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council, UKSport and the Alison Chadwick Memorial Fund.

## **Expedition Members**

### **Anne Arran (expedition leader)**

Age 40. Photo-journalist, contract international worker & coach. British.

A former British competition climbing champion, Anne was one of the first women in Britain to climb F8a. Subsequently she concentrated on traditionally-protected climbs, on-sighting routes up to E6. This wealth of experience has proved useful on expedition, where she has played a significant part in establishing major new big-wall routes in Venezuela, the USA's Grand Canyon, China and at altitude in Kyrgyzstan & Pakistan. Has several winter seasons in Scotland and summer and winter in the Alps.

### **John Arran**

Age 45. UN aid contract worker, IT consultant and photo-journalist. British.

One of Britain's most experienced and most accomplished rock climbers, with first ascents up to E10 in the Peak district and hard onsights up to E7 throughout Britain, including new routes. Has several seasons of winter climbing in Scotland and many ice routes in the Alps. His first expedition to Kyrgyzstan (1999) resulted in a first ascent of possibly the hardest traditionally-protected free-climb in the country. Has climbed to 5,700m in Kyrgyzstan and Nepal. Has since climbed in Iran, Egypt, China, Pakistan and led three expeditions to remote regions of Venezuela, each of which was successful in establishing major new free-climbs of the highest standard.

After staying with Ivan Calderón in Caracas, we were expecting him to join us to climb this new route, however he wasn't able to make it out to Yunek. We liaised one of the village leader, Leonardo, and some other villagers who helped us by cutting a new path with machetes to reach the base of the wall.

## Objectives

- A. First recorded climb by steep rock walls of Chimanta (2700m), which has only been explored in a limited way by cavers and ecologists. Possibly the most overhanging wall in the world (around 100m overhanging)
- B. First ascent of Upuigma Tepui summit via its steep 500m rock walls (2300m). First female ascent.
- C. To explore other neighbouring tepuis and caves

We concentrated on fulfilling objective A. making the first visit ever to the base or summit of Amurí tepui.

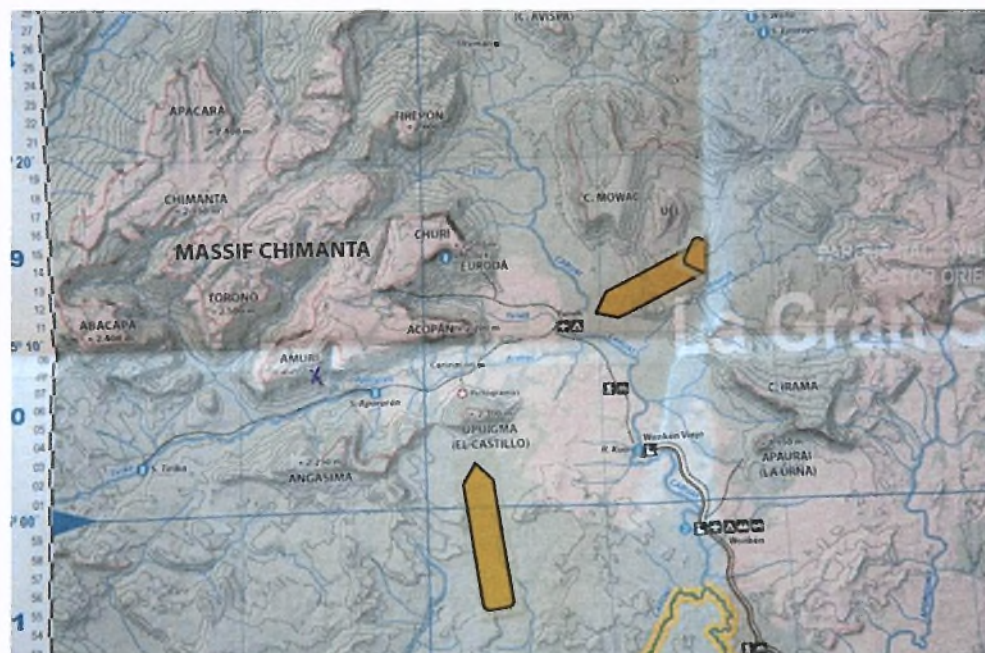


Figure 1

We climbed just to the south of where Amurí is marked on the map, as shown by the red circle.

## Logistics

### Fund-raising

Support was requested from a number of sources. Financial assistance was obtained from The Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council and the Alison Chadwick Memorial Fund. We were supported also by a Lyon Equipment expedition award of £500 value of kit, Wild Country donated rocks and First Ascent lent us a portaledge and haul bag. Ongoing sponsorship from Arc'teryx and Boreal meant that we were well supplied with great clothing and footwear.

## Finances

The approximate expedition accounts for 2 British members share are as follows:

<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>£</u>		<u>Income</u>	<u>£</u>
Transport flight	1100+	1686	M.E.F.	1100
	586			
Food & accommodation		320	Alison Chadwick memorial fund (for Anne)	300
Porters		1165	BMC	1600
Other		443	Personal Investment	1139
Total		4139	Total	4139

## Insurance

We were covered by STA Travel insurance for couples with extra extreme sports cover.

## Travel

Travel between the UK and Venezuela was by Air France to Caracas. The return bus to Santa Elena cost 240Bs/person (£68) for the 21-hour journey (18 hours on the way back!). Bag allowance on the bus was one 40kg bag per person, additional bags being charged at 40Bs each for each journey. Chartering a Cessna light aircraft to Yunek cost \$500 each way with Raul Helicopters. The journey to the wall by foot was particularly expensive per person because we were down to just two people and we needed 7 porters/trail cutters for 4 days on the way in and 3 porters on the way out for 2.5 days.

## Food and Accommodation

Accommodation in Caracas was with Ivan Calderon. Most other accommodation was free camping, though on a couple of nights accommodation in Santa Elena on the way in and way out cost 45Bs/room/night (£13).

Food of all types is readily available in Caracas though we shopped for all food in Santa Elena. It was the same as UK prices or more! In hindsight the availability and price of good dried foods for use on the wall may have been better in Caracas. We did not take any food from the UK.

## Communications

Mobile phone coverage is patchy in the Gran Sabana. Networks are accessible near the towns of Canaima and Santa Elena, though away from these areas it becomes much less reliable.

We used two-way walkie-talkies on the wall, which were extremely useful, but were totally alone when the Indians left us at the base of the wall with no means of communication.

## Specialist Equipment

A portaledge was used on the climb.

A full aiding rack, including bolt kit, was taken. 2 pegs were placed (and subsequently removed) and 2 bolts to reinforce belays or hauling stations where the natural protection was insufficient.

## Risks and Hazards

The risks associated with climbing tepuis are considerable.

The rock, while often sound and generally excellent for climbing, is at times loose and in some cases exceptionally so.

There are risks associated with the jungle environment. We judged the water to be safe to drink without treatment when it was coming from tepui streams and had not passed human habitation. But we treated any drinking water obtained from more significant rivers and no one became ill.

The hazards from wildlife were real but did not appear to be great. Dangerous snakes and spiders existed but were not problematic. I had a close encounter with a scorpion on a handhold but it crawled further inside, when I was next to it, luckily! Burrowing ticks were a problem and twice we had to spend over an hour removing them. Puri puris (tiny flying insects that bite) were bad at some times of the day but not up on the wall. 100% DEET was about the only thing, other than a physical clothing or mesh barrier, which would repel the mosquitoes, and covering up well (including tucking trousers into socks) was necessary on the approach as colonies of large biting ants could get extremely painful very quickly if allowed access to unprotected skin. Mosquito coils were extremely useful at basecamp. After heavy rain we had difficulty crossing the river on the way back and I don't think I could have crossed it without the help of the Indians because it came up to my shoulders and was a strong current.

We were much further away from help than on previous expeditions.

### Medical Arrangements

A comprehensive first aid kit was carried including antibiotics and itch ease.

It is noted that no rescue system is available anywhere in the Gran Sabana and this tepui objective would not have been easily accessible by helicopter (too many trees) and was at 2-3 days walk from the nearest airstrip.

### Environment and Social Impact

Naturally everything taken into the tepui environment was brought out again, and every effort was taken to minimise the effects of our passage. It is worth noting that in places the jungle grows back extremely quickly if left. We were in a unique situation this time to get to know the Pemon Indians because we were the only Spanish speakers (ish!) present. We talked about tourism with them, found out how they eat and survive and really got an insight into their lives. Maybe the RGS would be interested in a lecture? We also had to bargain on price and give them kit because the portering costs had worked out more than we had anticipated – so it was a very interesting experience.

### Photography

The Gran Sabana is a fantastically beautiful region, and we came home with many fine photographs and some video footage.

### Itinerary

#### Amurí Tepui

Climbing Team members: John Arran, Anne Arran

Others Ivan Calderón helped us in Caracas but wasn't able to make it to Yunek when expected –due to financial reasons. This meant only Spanish speaking with the Indians and quite some concentration required to reach the base of the wall and return again after the climb.

3/9	Team members arrive in Caracas
4/9 – 5/9	Preparation and provisions
6/9 – 7/9	Overnight bus from Caracas to Santa Elena

8/3	Cessna flight –to Yunek
9/9 – 13/9	Load carrying to base camp and cutting new trail
13/9 – 14/9	Climbing (fixing)and desending
15/9	Retrieving more rope left at last jungle camp
16/9 – 19/9	Climbing (capsule style)
20/9	Abseil descent
22-24/9	Walking out
25/9	Fly back to Santa Elena
26/9-27/9	Bus back to Caracas
28/9	Caracas - Manchester

### **Conclusion**

The expedition was successful in its objective of reaching and climbing a previously unclimbed tepui tower by a hard route E7 – but the worlds steepest big-wall remains unclimbed. With more time the steepest part of the wall to the right of where we climbed could possibly go at a higher grade (E9?) and maybe would need some bolts to make it feasible. We estimated that this climbing may take around 15 days.

The Gran Sabana region of Venezuela is a fascinating part of the world and offers huge potential for further exploration and for new climbs on tepuis, many of which are still unclimbed. The main limiting factors are the difficulty of finding detailed information about the area, the expense, complexity and difficulty of accessing the foot of many tepuis, and the need to be climbing at a very high standard if the climbing is to be steep and relatively free from unpleasant thick vegetation. We managed to really know the Pemon Indians this time and felt like real explorers because even the Indians had never before reached the base of Amurí.

Many thanks for the support of the BMC, UKSport, MEF and Alison Chadwick memorial fund.

## Appendix 1 Amurí – ‘the world’s steepest big-wall?’



**Amurita E7 6b/J4**





## Appendix 2 Other images



### **Amurita big wall climbing in Venezuela by John & Anne Arran**

*John and Anne Arran have made a remarkable first ascent of Amurita E7 6b on the remote Amuri wall in Venezuela.*

The British climbing couple John and Anne Arran have just returned from another trip deep into Venezuela's jungle where they carried out the first ascent of Amurita E7 6b, a route which takes a line to the left of an unnamed 600m waterfall on the remote Amuri wall.

Adventure was top on the agenda for the Arran's as the two reached the base of the untouched face after a Cessna flight and a grueling 4 day approach trek through the jungle, aided by local Tepui Indians. Once established, the duo remained in perfect isolation and spent a total of seven days on the wall, climbing in remarkable style and with total commitment.

Banking on all their previous big wall experience, the 10 pitches were all climbed on-sight except for the "frustratingly close failure on the top pitch blank section" which forced John to return to the belay and scope a different line. The duo made use of 2 portaledge camps and placed a mere three hand-drilled 6mm bolts and two pegs (subsequently removed) to back up belays which were not up to standard. John explains the choice "I don't like using fixed gear in Venezuela as much of the challenge for me is in climbing the pitches without it. I wouldn't have used any fixed gear to protect the climbing. But some belays weren't well supplied with natural gear so we chose to reinforce the occasional one to make sure. The decision was made a little easier since we planned to abseil down the line of ascent and were therefore never going to be able to leave the line totally clean anyway."

The Arrans are no newcomers to big walls in remote places, and jungle adventures in Venezuela have resulted in new routes such as "No Way, José" (E7 6c, Cerro Autana, 2002) "Pizza, Chocolate y Cerveza" (E6 6b, Acopántepui, 2003) and the 2005 creation "Rainbow Jambaia" E7 6b up the immense Angel Falls. Compared to all these, Amurita however was "much more off the beaten track and much more isolated with a team of only two. We're quite used to being dependant on each other, having done big routes in many remote places, but being literally days from the nearest person and with no satphone we needed to be pretty sure of everything we were doing."

When asked what draws them back to Venezuela again and again, John replied convincingly: "If you'd climbed there you'd certainly understand the attraction. Amazing landscape & people, untold rock potential, all hard with enough gear to climb trad (so far!), and every time a new adventure!" Talking of which - some pitches are given a J grade... for the nature of the overhanging jungle vegetation!

#### **Amurita E7 6b**

Amuri wall, Venezuela

John & Anne Arran, 09/2008

E4 6a, E5 6a (&J4), E5 6a, E6 6a, E5 6b, E6 6b, E7 6b, E5 5c, E5 6a, E4 6a (J3)