

Manchester Apolobamba 1997

Summary: The expedition took place from 25 July to 1 September 1997. The members were Andy MacNae and Kevin Dougherty. Three areas were visited. Condoriri (Cordillera Real); Rio Sanches Chuchu (Apolobamba); and the North side of Illumani. The following ascents were made;

Cordillera Real

Pico Alapamayo 5300m
Condoriri 5600m

Apolobamba

Glacier A (5300m)
Lloco (5605m)
Radiofacion (5508m)
Bures (5560m)
Apollo(5650m)
Presidente(5700m)
Montserrat South and North (5655m)
Sorel Oeste (5641m)
Sulika (5633m)
Qurae(5630m)
Manresa (5655m)
Montserrat N (5655m)
Kantantica Oeste (to 50m from Summit)

Illumani

Attempt on new route on Pico Norte(6400m)



The expedition was lightweight and low budget, with a total expenditure of £2400. The support of the BMC and UK Sports Council (£600) is gratefully acknowledged. The Mount Everest Foundation granted Approval to the expedition.

Background

The original incentive to visit Bolivia came from old friends Yossi Brain, who lives in La Paz and works as a mountain guide, and Andy St Pierre, who had previously guided in Bolivia and who planned to return in Summer 1997. Their description of climbing in Bolivia, new routes, excellent weather and easy access, proved very attractive and equated nicely with what I was looking for. Kevin Dougherty, a Kenyan with British Citizenship and veteran of the 1991 Cerro Kishtwar Expedition, was also interested in a spot of peak bagging and immediately started phoning around for flights. Tickets were acquired in May for the reasonable sum of £590, flying with Areolineas Argentinas via Madrid and Buenos Aires.

The Apolobamba was selected as the main focus of the trip. The area, in the north of Bolivia near the Peruvian border, has only recently become regularly visited and it seemed that scope remained for new routes and some satisfying exploratory climbing. On the advice of Yossi we selected the Rio Sanches Chucu area in the northern half on the range. The reasoning for this was simple, Yossi had spent little time there and so there was a fair chance of some decent new routes being left. Beyond this information was sketchy. Paul Hudsons excellent map (1993) showed the layout but apart from a few distant shots from Yossi's collection we had little to go on and so did not identify specific objectives at this early stage.

Shortly before we were due to fly Andy St Pierre dropped out for financial reasons. Kevin and I packed Alpine sacks and flew on 25 July.

UK to La Paz

The journey took slightly longer than expected as 'technical problems' enforced overnight stop overs in Madrid and Buenos Aires. Should anyone find themselves in a similar predicament the clubbing in Buenos Aires is to be thoroughly recommended, although it can be a little hard on the pocket.

In due course we arrived in La Paz on the 27th. Yossi had arranged accommodation for us in a flat rented above his own for the express purpose of housing visiting climbers. This excellent doss accommodated anywhere from two to thirteen inmates at any one time and was a ideal base for the sort of trip we had envisaged.

Having established ourselves we got down to some serious planning and having reviewed Yossis slide collections decided on a warm up week at Condoriri in the Real followed by two weeks in the Apolobamba and a final flourish on an intriguing looking new route on the East Face of Illumani. Decisions having been made we the spent the next two days acquainting ourselves with a variety of excellent bars and restaurants in a process that, in La Paz, passes for acclimatisation.

Condoriri (30 June to 4 July)

We took advantage of jeeps hired by a trekking group to whisk us to the roadhead some three hours from La Paz. Feeling a tad lazy we hired a mule for the short (2-3hour) walk in and reached the splendidly positioned base camp area (c4700m) early afternoon. The area has a number of very accessible 5000m peaks and is very popular with commercial trips as well as 'amateur' climbers. The base area was busy and pleasantly sociable.

Our first full day was spent getting our bearings and checking out a couple of potential new lines we had identified. These proved out of condition and would doubtless be better options early in the season.

On the 2nd we climbed Pico Alapamayo by its standard route. This gave a pleasant non technical snow climb and the round trip took 6 hours.

After resting on the 3rd Condoriri was climbed on the 4th in a 9 hour round trip. The final, almost horizontal, ridge to the Summit is superbly exposed and distinctly satisfying. A fortuitous meeting with a couple of US geologists led to a lift back to La Paz and about 6 hours after standing on Condoriri's summit we were firmly established in yet another of La Paz's fine bars.

Apolobamba (7 to 23 July)

A series of unfortunate incidents led to myself losing a jacket and a rather useful air ticket just a few hours before we caught the weekly Bus to Pelachucho. As a partial consequence of this we slept for the majority of the 22 hour ride and arrived in the proverbial one mule town feeling less than dynamic. Pelachucho is situated in the heart of the Apolobamba and is now seeing significant trekking business. As a result it now boasts a hotel with a toilet, which I am told is a considerable improvement on past facilities.

Yossi had given us the name of the local mule man, an excellent fellow by the name of Freddie Ortega, and we arranged a single mule for the next day. Unfortunately the weather had other ideas. Two days of fog and heavy rain left us feeling distinctly frustrated and it wasn't until the 11th that Freddie pronounced conditions satisfactory. The walk in takes 5 hours and we sighted our camp next to the streams flowing down from the MO ABA glacier (4700m).

Activity on the 12th consisted of a rec. and an ascent of Glacier A. This gave us a good impression of the areas possibilities and allowed us to formulate a plan of sorts. This plan was altered later that evening when Jane McKay from an Edinburgh University team appeared at our camp. Amongst other things she reported an ascent of the South East face of Sorel Este via what sounded like an excellent ice line. The route has a serious looking approach and we now felt able to scrub it off our list.

On the 12th we moved up high and pitched a tent on the edge of the glacier at 5000m, just to the North West of Azucarani. This was to be our base for the next four days. Looking at the layout of the peaks it was clear that they offered a variety of traversing opportunities.

On the 13th we traversed from Lloco to Presidente. This gave an excellent long day out. The Lloco peaks are pretty rocky and gave some technical climbing after which a simple snow ridge leads over Radiofacion, Bures and Apollo to Presidente. A lively electrical storm rolled in at 3pm and made the last hour back to camp most interesting. We took a rest on the 14th and on the 15th went for the intriguing looking South ridge on the Monserrat peaks. This ridge had been climbed once before by the Spanish in 1969, they gave it 5+ and although mostly straight forward it does have a couple of technical pitches made serious by extremely loose rock. The Spanish topo of the route shows a snow ridge leading to the main summit of Monserrat N. This no longer exists and has been replaced by a nasty steep loose pitch which I backed off 20ft from the summit. With the afternoon bad weather on the way we descended a probably unclimbed couloir on the east side and were back at camp by 5pm.

One of the more alluring lines in the area is the sharp snowy South ridge of Sorel Oeste. This had been climbed the previous week by Jane and Heather from the EU team but it looked like an ascent could be combined with a lengthy traverse leading to the north side of Monserrat N and hopefully some compensation for the partial failure of the previous day.

This traverse was done on the 16th and was of exceedingly high quality, taking in a total of five summits including Monserrat N. Conscious of time pressure and having run out of food we packed up our tent and dropped back down to our base camp that evening. This proved to have been a good idea as heavy snow arrived the next day keeping us pinned down for the 17th and 18th. A clearing on the 19th allowed us to attempt the South Face of Katantica Oeste. After a pleasant snow climb we ground to a halt about 50m from the top as we encountered unstable slab layed down over the previous two days.

A Kevin foot problem and light snow prevented activity on the 20th and Freddie and mule arrived on the 21st for the return to Pelechucho.

We had been expecting to catch a bus that evening but arrived to find it cancelled and were not able to leave until the 23rd arriving back in La Paz on the 24th.

Illumani (25 to 27 June)

Our Illumani trip was planned for the 25th but Kevin had to drop out with illness. The heavy snow of the previous week had put our proposed route on the East Face out of condition in any case. Fortunately Yossi and fellow guide Pete had recently reced a line on Pico Norte and were keen to return.

I spend the 24th trying to rectify the lost air ticket situation and we set off for the North Side of Illumani early on the 25th. We had no mules and the walkin took about five hours. The route followed a valley heading south from Tres Rios before cutting east over a high col and into a parallel valley below the complex north side of Pico Norte. A prominent buttress forms the base of the long North Ridge climbed by the Spanish in 1969. They avoided the buttress by climbing a serious looking gully on its left. Yossi's plan was to climb the buttress as direct as possible and then to cross over the Spanish ridge and ascent a subsidiary ridge that he was convinced paralleled it (pictures seen since suggest he may be mistaken).

We attempted the line on the 26th. In the end we found ourselves forced onto the right hand edge of the buttress but this gave good climbing on reasonable rock. The ground was moderately complex and progress was not quick. The weather turned in the early afternoon and after climbing a couple of pitches in condition that more closely resembled a Cairngorm winter we ground to a halt faced with a short unprotectable slab. This was frustrating as it would have been a 5a friction problem in the dry but in the wet and driving snow it posed a problem more serious than I was willing to accept. The frustration was doubled as this would have been the last pitch before easier snowy ground was reached. Incoming lightening and our rather exposed position helped us finalise a decision and we abseiled off forthwith. A couple of hours sleep and a rapid walkout followed and we caught the 6am bus back to La Paz.

Home time

In theory we were supposed to fly on the 29th and we spent a couple of enjoyable and intermittently dangerous days saying farewell to La Paz. We did find time to sample the local cragging. The best that can be said of which is that it could be handily combined with a game of basketball should the urge take you.

Sadly when the time came to fly it became clear that my air ticket situation was far from sorted. Kevin flew and I spend a further three days of tediously complex negotiations before finally flying on the 2nd. Sadly my bags didn't, which somehow did not come as a surprise.

Tips

Learn Spanish-it makes all the difference.

Don't go looking for hard mixed or rock climbs in the Apolobamba-the rock is poor.

All food and drink can be bought in La Paz's excellent markets.

Don't over organise a Bolivia trip, keep it simple and you will have more fun.

MSR's are your best stove bet.

Don't take your air ticket out clubbing with you.

Budget (per person)

Expenditure

Flights	£590
Accommodation La Paz	£30
Accommodation Other	£40
Jeeps	£50
Mules	£15
Food (Mountain)	£80
Film	£60
Misc Eqt	£100
Buenos Aries clubbing	£50
La Paz general spending	£200
Total	£1215

Income

BMC	£300
Personal contributions	£900

References

Paul Hudson: Report of the 1993 British Apolobamba expedition: Excellent and comprehensive including a list of all ascents to 1993 and the best map of the area.

Yossi Brain: Generally good contact and author of the soon to be published Bolivian climbing guide. email: bolivia@ozono.bo

BMC Information Service: Bolivia sheet

A sketch map indicating peaks referred to in the report.
 Based on Hudson's map from 1993.

