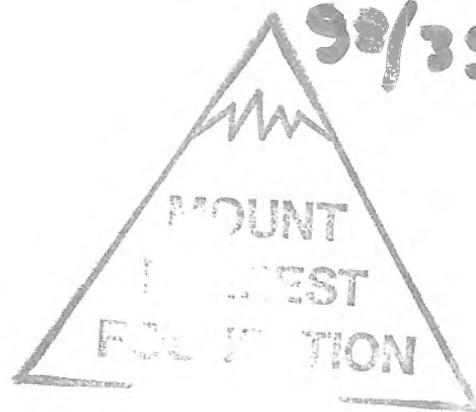


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SIULA CHICO EXPEDITION 1998

Supported by:

Finance:

Mount Everest Foundation
British Mountaineering Council

Equipment:

First Ascent
The North Face
Black Diamond
Cascade
MSR Stoves

+ 533

Siula Chico 1998 Expedition

1. AIM OF THE EXPEDITION

To make the first ascent of the West Buttress of Siula Chico (6080m) in the Cordillera Huayhuash range in Peru.

2. THE TEAM

Mick Fowler (42) Civil Servant (Leader)

Regular climber in the greater ranges since 1982. Last visited Peru in 1982 when, with Chris Watts, he made the first ascent of the South Buttress of Taulliraju in the Cordillera Blanca.

Simon Yates (35) Author

Regular climber in the greater ranges since 1985. Last visited Peru in 1985 when, with Joe Simpson, he made the first ascent of the West Face of Siula Grande. The epic descent prompted Joe to write his best selling book "Touching the Void".

Mike Morrison (41) Heating Engineer

Regular climber in the greater ranges since 1982. Last visited Peru in 1982 when he was on the Taulliraju expedition with Mick Fowler.

David Walker (43) Computer Analyst

Experienced alpinist with numerous ascents in the European and North American mountains. This was his first expedition to the greater ranges.

3. PREPARATION

One of the pleasures of climbing in Peru is that it is unnecessary to do any bureaucratic preparation before leaving the UK. Permits and visas and Liaison Officers are not required and one can simply visit the Cordillera Blanca or Huayhuash with no need to advise anyone else of the expedition's plans.

Be aware that hardly anyone in Peru speaks English. Spanish is the usual language and a comprehensive dictionary is well worth taking.

4. FLIGHTS TO LIMA

We flew KLM at a return cost of £555 (including taxes). The cost was the same starting from Heathrow or East Midlands Airport. There was a £75 per person charge for changing the date of the return flight.

The planes fly four times per week and the service was excellent. On the downside the weight allowance was only 20Kg per person and the service is very popular. All return flights were all fully booked and the only way to change the return date was by queuing for "stand by" seats at the airport. We did this and all four of us managed to get on the same plane.

By having rather heavy hand luggage we managed to transport all our equipment to and from Peru without having to pay any excess baggage charges.

5. LIMA

(i) Food

The supermarkets in central Lima have improved tremendously since our previous visits in 1982 and 1985. They now stock a similar range of goods to large supermarkets in the UK. If you have fussy tastes on the mountain (freeze dried foods for example) then it may be worth bringing a few items from Britain but one could easily get by just on food bought in Lima.

(ii) Gas

We were unable to buy propane/butane gas in Lima but found the importer of Bluet gas who will sell direct to the public and whose address is well worth noting:

TECNICA IMPORT S. A.
JR. DAVALOS LISSON 323 – CASILLA 171
LIMA 1

Tel. 244921 - 237059

The cylinders we bought were imported from France. They were new (not refilled) and were of the puncture and use (not self sealing) type. Make sure you take the right burner unit!

If the above source fails we were told that the large Wong Supermarket in the Miraflores suburb sometimes sells both Camping Gaz and resealable screw thread (propane/butane?) cylinders.

6. LIMA TO THE ROADHEAD

We walked in from the town of Cajatambo which has a population of approximately 5000.

Normally this is accessible by a straightforward 12 hour bus ride from Lima. Unfortunately storms in January/February (1998 was an exceptionally bad El Nino year) had completely obliterated large sections of the direct route and we were forced to take a bus to Oyun and a truck from there across a 4700m pass to Cajatambo. This took two days.

7. ROADHEAD TO BASE CAMP

It took us two days to reach a base camp just below the terminal moraine of the glacier at an altitude of about 4300m.

Cajatambo is at about 3400m. The first day involved crossing a 4150m pass, dropping down to about 3100m and reascending to Huaylappa at about the same height as Cajatambo. We found this a long day and it may be best to rest for a day in Cajatambo whilst arranging donkeys etc. From Huaylappa a less strenuous but more altitude affected day leads up to grassy meadows and fine base camp sites with lots of fresh water.

Negotiations over the price were long and tedious. Eventually we agreed an all in price of about £275 which covered us for 8 donkeys and two arrerios (donkey drivers) on the way up to base camp and four donkeys and one arrerio on the way down. Once the deal had been struck and a contract signed all went smoothly. The deal was struck on the basis that the days the donkeys spent returning to base would be charged at the full rate...i.e. we paid about £5.75 p/day for 48 donkey days although the donkeys were only actually carrying our loads for 24 donkey days.

It is worth noting that the days are long enough to make it impractical to join the two into one long stage.

8. BASE CAMP

We had heard of one team having all their visible equipment stolen from a base camp in this area and so employed the lead arrerio (Snr Esposito from Huaylappa) to act as our base camp guard. He cost us £60 for a pre arranged total of 19 days and we paid him this sum (as agreed in our contract!) in full even though we left earlier than planned. We felt this to be expensive and it may be possible to negotiate a better deal.

9. THE CLIMBING

We climbed strictly as two pairs of two. Mick Fowler/Simon Yates made up one pair and Mike Morrison/Dave Walker the other.

After acclimatising by exploring the ridge (at about 5000m) above the base camp we all spent a couple of days beneath the face at about 5100m.

Thereafter Fowler and Yates attempted the West Face but after 1.5 days, when they were about 1/3 of the way up, they decided that the objective dangers were too serious and retreated.

Morrison and Walker decided that they needed more acclimatising but Walker injured his knee falling on loose moraine and was then unable to undertake any serious mountaineering. In any event the expedition's objective had by this time been judged as being too dangerous.

The following article was written by Mick Fowler and includes the detail of his attempt with Simon Yates:

The Pleasure in Failing

I recognised it immediately from the photograph in Joe Simpson's book "Touching the Void." There was no doubt about it, it was the distinctive rock that Joe lay beside at the end of his epic three day crawl after he had been given up for dead. We had arrived at our Peruvian base camp site. This would be our home for the next few weeks.

There were four of us, Mike Morrison and Dave Walker climbing as one team and Simon Yates and me as the other. We were from diverse areas of life. Mike an industrial heating installation contracts manager, Dave a computer wizard working on reducing noise vibration in aircraft engines, Simon a director of a newly formed adventure holiday company and me a taxman. If nothing else this mountaineering game appeals to a cross section of society. Mike and I had been friends for over 20 years and Simon was known to us all by his long standing reputation as a talented mountaineer, not to mention the world-wide notoriety gained 13 years before when he last visited this part of the world and had the harrowing and well publicised experience of having to give up Joe Simpson for dead only to witness him crawl into base camp three days later. Dave was a friend of Mike's who Simon and I had not met before. In climbing terms though our professional lives had little relevance. We were all drawn together by the urge to climb the unclimbed west face of Siula Chico (6080m) in the Cordillera Huayhuash range in Peru.

This very steep 3,500 ft face had been photographed by Simon on his 1985 trip and had been on my list of interesting objectives ever since. It just so happened that in 1998 everything fell into place and we ended up in Peru.

Simon was of course familiar with this area from his previous visit. When he left the base camp site all those years ago he and Joe were young adventurers with little money and little in the way of ambition beyond the next mountaineering objective. The elation of succeeding on the first ascent of the West Face of Siula Grande (6356m) was soured by Joe breaking his leg on the summit ridge and the resultant epic which culminated in Simon having to cut the rope and leave Joe behind, assuming him to be dead at the bottom of a deep crevasse. He could never have guessed that Joe's crawl to safety would capture the public imagination and "Touching the Void", Joe's book covering the affair, would become a world-wide best seller. That trip has gone down in climbing folklore and now 13 years later here Simon was back again intent on climbing a route on the mountain right next to the scene of his epic with Joe.

The approach was exactly the same as Simon had done before.

"How did he crawl down here?"

I groaned, falling over yet again on the razor edged unstable boulders covering the glacier. The ground really was just about the most difficult walking country imaginable. Even upright on two legs I was having trouble, the thought of crawling dragging a broken leg behind me did not bear contemplation. Simon stared around him.

“I think it’s got a bit worse over the years”

And then, almost as a sympathetic afterthought:

“But not that much worse”

We looked around us for a few moments in silent contemplation of Joe’s private agony. It was, I felt, the greatest crawl in mountaineering history.

Siula Chico looked hard. In climbing terms it seemed to be everything that we had hoped for. Drooling ice streaks lined the back of steep ramps and corners to provide an alluring and challenging line. But conditions have changed a lot in Peru over the last 10-15 years. Simon kept staring at his and Joe’s line on Siula Grande.

“The ice has all gone” he marvelled, eyeing up the rocky lower slabs where his photographs from 13 years ago showed glittering white, snow/ice slopes.

Siula Chico too was not exactly as per the photographs I had seen. Above the bergschrund a 45 degree snow/ice slope formerly lead to the start of the difficulties. Now though bare rock slabs sported streaks of stone pitted ice and an ominous band of overhangs, once hidden beneath the ice, now guarded the face.

Our observations on the way up had been mixed but the deep, crisp cold of the Peruvian night followed by a crystal clear dawn re-ignited our enthusiasm and sent us scampering across the frozen snow bowl to see if we could pinpoint the best way of getting to the foot of an obvious ice choked diagonal ramp which looked to provide the best way up the first major steepening on the buttress.

“How about that yellow ramp?”

Simon was approaching from one side and felt sure that he had spotted a weakness in the overhangs immediately above the bergschrund. It looked promising from my position directly below too and I felt a healthy glow of optimism as I panted my way up the snow runnels beneath the face. Perhaps the dry conditions really wouldn’t matter after all.

The reality was depressing. Simon too looked rather taken aback. What from a distance had looked like a reasonably angled ramp giving access to a tongue of ice on the slabs above was in fact a leaning corner of appallingly disintegrating rock. There was a distinct lack of worthwhile cracks in the back and the right wall overhung considerably whilst at the same time being peppered with distressingly precarious blocks. The left wall lay back in a steep slab but was seriously exfoliating and steepened markedly at about 60 feet. It might be possible but on the other hand it might be an immense time waster. I stared intently trying to imagine how we could make quick progress up this unaccommodating feature. I was intrigued to see Simon’s reaction. We had bumped into each other many times over the years and I knew of his reputation but this was the first time that we had actually climbed together. What would he make of this problem? He too was peering intently.

“Up and out to the left perhaps?”

He started to point gleefully to a very loose looking line of holds that ran up to a thin veneer of ice. Clearly he wasn't intimidated in the slightest. I liked his attitude. A positive approach is a real boost in such situations. I sensed that we would climb well together.

But this was only a reconnaissance and a bit more ferreting about was definitely in order. However a fresh problem was developing. It was now 10.30am or so and the sun was striking the top of the face thousands of feet above us. Small pieces of ice and little stones loosened by the sun were beginning to clatter down. Occasionally one would zoom past with a high pitched hum and thump into the frozen snow below.

Feeling slightly uncomfortable I sneaked along leftwards beneath the overhanging rock wall. The next weakness had looked promising from a distance but close up it turned out to be a shattered overhanging crack which led out onto blank rock slabs. Further left, with the rockfall now increasing considerably, I stayed just long enough to note that the rock wall ended and an ice streak on the slabs above stretched all the way down to connect with the glacier. But it really did look too far to the left and would involve a couple of potentially difficult and time consuming traverses across blank rock between ice streaks to get to where we wanted to be...but at least it did allow a way through the initial overhangs. I stayed as long as I dare and scurried down to our little tent on the glacier. Simon was already there and we sat silently together staring at the face and absorbing the possibilities.

Simon was the first to speak.

“Didn't like those rocks. What do you reckon?”

I too was feeling uncharacteristically hesitant. It all seemed rather dangerous. The idea of being wiped out by falling rocks on the way there did not exactly appeal.

Simon though was thinking out loud before I had a chance to answer.

“I think the left hand line. We can climb up the ice streak and link up to the streaks further right by penduluming across the rocky bits.”

I stared again at the face. The line we intended to climb really did look excellent. From here I could see that the ice streaks were not continuous but were linked by short rocky sections and culminated in a fantastic icicle fringed amphitheatre at the very top.....if only we could somehow get quickly and safely up these lower slabs.

I agreed that the left hand line looked the best of a series of bad options and we settled down to spend the day, resting, acclimatising, eating and face watching.

As the sun's rays crept round onto the face volleys of stones and the clattering of falling ice increased in frequency. The sounds echoed menacingly around the small glacial cirque that we were camped in. Interestingly it was rarely possible to see exactly where the rock and ice was falling. There didn't seem to be one particular line down which most things fell. In fact, from what we could make out, the danger was

fairly evenly spread. Not a good sign. We lay there soaking in the sounds of the mountain's defences whilst sheltering from the hot sun by spreading our sleeping bags out over the tent. By the end of the day we had decided that we could climb safely in the mornings, when the mountain was quiet and frozen, and would give the line a go.

I felt more relaxed once the decision had been made and we headed back down to base camp to eat as much as possible and sort out food and equipment for the six days or so we reckoned the round trip from base camp could take. Three days after leaving the foot of the face we were back and ready to go. The weather was absolutely perfect.

Even on our chosen line the bergshund presented a steep step. Simon took the first lead and I watched the ice shattering in the light of his head torch as he fought his way up. It was 4.30am and the air was completely still. Suddenly a rushing noise signalled problems above. I could see that Simon had stopped climbing and was hunched over his axes. I could see nothing else but reasoned that I should be safe, protected by the steep wall of the bergshund which sported an overhanging lip directly above me. As I watched a curling white cascade sailed through the air in a spectacular arc and caught me full on. Being unable to move anywhere I stood miserably feeling the forces increase as the flow built up. I prayed that there would be nothing large enough to hurt me in this onslaught. After what seemed an age the cascade of ice crystals eased and then stopped completely.

"OK.?"

Simon sounded distinctly chirpy (I found out later that the ice fall had all but missed him!) and was straining to continue.

"Yes...er... Go for it"

I struggled to sound enthusiastic when if the truth be known I was feeling rather intimidated and hesitant about the whole affair. It was not really a very serious incident but where had the ice come from I wondered? There were no seracs above us and I could only assume that one of the uniquely Peruvian ice formations decorating the buttress had collapsed. Peru is infamous for hugely outrageous ice formations and I was uncomfortably aware that our objective was peppered with hanging ice brackets which stuck improbably to the steep, rocky walls. Some of these were 20 feet wide and 100 feet long with huge damoclean icicles decorating the underside. They clearly weighed hundred of tons and I could think of one area in particular where we could well be exposed to them. There will always be an element of risk in Greater Range climbing but here I was beginning to feel a distinct sense of unease.

Simon disappeared and I followed, the exertion helping me to overcome my fears. Soon we had followed the ice streaks to their end at a huge overhanging rock wall which offered obvious safety from anything falling from above. The ice was hard and grey, so different from the white snow/ice slopes shown in Simon's pictures taken back in 1985. I cursed at the climatic changes as we tensioned and pendulumed from one ice streak to another. 13 years ago we would have been soloing at this point.

Simon too was looking rather disgruntled.

“Bloody rope manoeuvres.....take up too much time”

I couldn't help but agree. By the time we reached the foot of a slanting ice gangway cutting through the overhanging walls the sun was beginning to peep over onto the face and the first little stones, released from their nightly freeze, hummed past. I was grateful for the steep angle and watched, in a detached sort of way, as they bounced down the slopes we had just climbed. Our ramp line was protected from such nastiness and we turned to face the difficulties. It had looked relatively short from below but now we were here it's true size was revealed. It would take at least three full rope lengths of very steep ice climbing. Simon's eyes lit up.

“This is more like it”

I had to agree. Objective safety and difficult climbing are far more my cup of tea than scrabbling about on dangerously exposed slabs. I sat back to admire Simon's climbing. Initially all went well and progress was fast; soon though the angle steepened markedly and there appeared to be a 3 inch layer of loose snow stuck to the ice.

“Even steeper than it looked” puffed Simon.

He was on 80 degree ice heading up towards an apparent cul-de-sac where icicle fringed overhangs barred the way. Much as he has large arms (not difficult when compared to my weedy specimens) the angle was clearly taking it's toll. It would relieve the strain if he could clip himself into the ferrule of his ice axe. I marvelled as he persevered without taking this simple option.

“Why don't you clip in?”

Simon turned and looked down at me. His surprise at my suggestion was openly visible.

“Would you?” he enquired.

“Definitely”

A short ethical discussion ensued. It seemed a mildly ridiculous place to be having such an exchange but this can be a sensitive subject in Britain and first ascentionists on home ground have been criticised for “giving it clip.” I argued that Simon had two options. He could, if he wished, take off his 15kg rucksack climb without clipping and then haul it up or he could adopt the Fowler mountaineering ethic of anything goes as long as it doesn't involve bolts.

Simon considered for a few short moments before clipping a short loop into his ice axe and sitting back to relax. We had of course never climbed together before and I was amazed that, in all his previous mountain exploits he had never readily resorted to such techniques. Conversely he was clearly surprised at my willingness to lower the ethical barriers. The scope for varying approaches to mountaineering is wide indeed.

With a routine “clip as necessary” policy firmly established progress became more methodical...but the hours were passing quickly. By the time we reached the top of the ramp line darkness had fallen and the temperature had plummeted from perhaps +1-2 degrees to about -20 degrees. We shivered together tied onto a couple of ice screws on a 55 degree ice slope wondering exactly what to do next. Finding a place to spend the night was an urgent priority but the beams from our head torches revealed nothing but steep uncompromising ground in all directions. Having studied the face closely through binoculars from the glacier below we knew that the way ahead lay to traverse rightwards to gain an ice choked groove line just right of the buttress crest. Our armchair sports plan had identified a spot on the traverse which might provide a reasonable bivouac. With this in mind I headed off to the right peering optimistically into the gloom. Soon the ice slope gave way to mixed ground with the overhanging crest of the buttress leaning out protectively overhead. One line of ice continued to the right and I continued in the only direction that I could. Soon though the ice band tapered to nothing. Above me a huge ice overhang draped in icicles looked to be the underside of a monstrous ice bracket clinging to the rock face.

One good thing about these brackets is that the sun shining against the rock wall tends to melt the inner edge of the upper side with the result that, with a bit of work, the tops tend to provide excellent, if potentially unstable, sleeping ledges. Presumably the process ends when the sun severs the grip of the ice and the whole lot collapses. As I pulled onto the top of this particular specimen I noticed with alarm that there were substantial gaps between the rock and the ice in a couple of places. It would provide a wonderful hanging balcony on which to spend the night but, with the rock wall being completely crack free, our faith would be 100% in the whole lot not parting company in the night.

Simon came up and we assessed the pros and cons of our possible bedroom.

“Very comfortable” observed Simon.

“Those might add some interest” I pointed up to some huge icicles hanging from an ice boss 20 feet or so above us.

We deliberated. A close inspection revealed that there were some areas which appeared to be very well frozen to the wall. Also we could be pretty sure that there wouldn't be any thawing in the night. But then presumably the little avalanche of ice crystals as we crossed the bergshroud was the remains of a similar feature which had partially collapsed at 5am or so. Eventually we decided to go for it and carefully secured ourselves to ice screws in the most permanent looking pieces of ice we could find before snuggling down inside our sleeping bags.

I was tired and must have slept soundly for several hours. I returned to consciousness when something hit my sleeping bag just next to my head and I felt a cold, wet sensation against my ear. I was wide awake immediately.

“Shit.....That wasn't very nice.”

I fumbled around for my head torch, studied the small icicle that had woken me and thought of the much larger ones up there in the gloom. It was perfectly calm and there was no obvious reason as to why this one should have fallen down in the middle of the night. Simon said nothing. It later transpired that he had been half awake but had thought that I was groaning about his backside pushing me off the edge!

It was difficult to get back to sleep. I lay awake intently aware of my position. The night was crystal clear and a myriad of stars brightened the sky. Every now and then a sharp crack from above or below would focus my attention on the dangers. Everything seemed OK but it really was impossible to say just how dangerous our position was. I didn't like it though and couldn't return to my deep sleep. More I cat-napped and clock watched my way through the rest of the night.

Dawn broke to reveal another perfect day. And with us being on a west face there was no immediate need to worry about the warming effect of the sun on our bivouac ledge. I lay soaking in the view while Simon took charge of the stove and applied himself to producing a rather unappetising but calorie laden breakfast of bland noodles. Such are the joys of mountain cuisine.

I am not sure what excuse we can make. Perhaps the previous day was a bit too long, perhaps my unsettled night had something to do with it. But for whatever reason we were late getting started and it was 8am or so before we were underway again, creeping across ice brackets similar to the one we had spent the night on. But even Simon, who had seemed remarkably calm about the likely longevity of our sleeping ledge, was making unhappy noises about these ones. I think we were both finding the situation rather wearing. Hard technical climbing is fine, uncomfortable bivouacs can be put up with.....but the ever present possibility of instant wipe out was not quite so easy to live with or ignore.

A couple of traversing pitches led us to the foot of a groove which our binocular reconnaissance had identified as the key to the central section of the route. There was a gap in the ice here and it was clear that very difficult rock climbing on disintegrating rock would be necessary to gain the point where the ice started again. This in itself was not a problem but a few little stones clattering down brought it home to us, as if we didn't already suspect it, that the groove would act as a funnel for falling debris. This in itself was not a problem; climbing it in the cold of the morning would largely avoid the danger. But to make matters worse two enormous hanging ice brackets overhung the corner. We had spotted these through the binoculars but had judged their fall line to leave us in relative safety. Now we were here though it was clear that if either of them fell the chances were that we would simply be swept off the face. Morale dropped. We suddenly felt very small and vulnerable. There was little need for conversation. The odds had stacked up against us.

“Time to go down”

I can't remember who actually voiced our thoughts first but no sooner had we started the descent than a ton or so of beautifully ornate ice chandelier collapsed without warning and swept down between us. It made us feel better about giving up our dream. But we were not yet safe and sound.

Awkward traverses back across the delicate ice brackets led to abseils down the ice ramp. The rock was so uniformly poor that we abseiled from ice anchors all the way. Mid way down the ramp the rope stuck. The little piece of sticky tape wrapped round the end, which tells how long the rope is, must have somehow caught in the sling that we had tied through the eye of the screw. Try as we might it would not budge. We both hung on the rope, maximising the stretch and therefore the length we could retain, whilst Simon produced his penknife and suddenly we slumped onto the belays. At the sight of the knife I couldn't help but think of Simon's previous trip to this area when, during his epic descent of Siula Grande he had been forced to cut the rope thinking that he was sending Joe Simpson, who already had a broken leg, to his death. Joe didn't die but it took him three days to crawl back to base camp.

The rest of our descent was uneventful but as we staggered down over razor sharp ever shifting boulders covering the glacier I couldn't help but think of Joe 13 years previously. He got up Siula Grande and crawled down to a hero's welcome. We tried Siula Chico, failed and slunk away. But at the end of the day we had a good time.

Climbing is like thata balance of judgement, ability and endurance. If we had continued we might have got up, but then we might have ended up in a worse state than Joe all those years ago. We will never know. But then success every time implies that one's objectives are not challenging enough. We enjoyed ourselves and we live to climb another day. These are the really important things.

Expedition Accounts

Expenditure

Air Fares	2520
Insurance	364
Medical Expenses	112
Base Camp Guard	60
Donkeys/Arrierios	275
Hotels	150
Transport (Buses/taxis)	145
Food in Peru	165
Food brought from UK	100
Base Camp equipment	150
	4041

Income

British Mountaineering Council	1650
Mount Everest Foundation	900
Personal Contributions	1491
	4041




 Parque Nacional Huascarán
 Huascarán National Park

LIMA

Cordillera Huayhuash y Raura

