

Illimani

Stan Stephen tops out above bergshroud.

Kurt Aronow

By Kurt Aronow

This is a story about one of my favorite places. Bolivia is a place where you can do cool, classic climbs on 20,000 foot peaks. (You can also go off and do things no one's ever done before.)

In La Paz, Bolivia, during June 1991, I reconnoitered with mountaineers Charlie Winger, Dave Cooper, and Stan Stephen from the Denver Group of The Colorado Mountain Club. To acclimate for Illimani, we climbed within ten meters of the crowded, corniced summit of Huayna Potosi 19,993'. A very beautiful mountain, Huayna Potosi is rather accessible from La Paz. Though a bit technical, it is easily the most popular climb in Bolivia. If we had actually managed to summit, I think we would have found it a pleasing climb.

The three peaks of Illimani rise 8,900' above the La Paz skyline. We were all very excited about the idea of climbing Illimani 21,200'. We hired a Landcruiser and then mules and a mule driver to take us into base camp. We traipsed across rolling terrain. Then, we hedonistically hired porters to carry our loads from base camp to high camp.

Our high camp was at the "Nido de los Condores" (Condors' Nest). The Nido is just below the glacier, so we didn't have to sleep on snow. Spirits were high as we cooked our dinner packets and melted snow that evening. Even after Charlie's double-aught Optimum stove toppled and two quarts of water flooded the tent, we felt confident.

We left camp at 3:30 the next morning for the summit. Not too far from camp, the trail in the icy snow split, and we took the most well-tracked. We soon found ourselves traversing across water ice on a 50° slope. With screw placement, our running belay went very slowly. The wind howled all around us. Cold hands had a hard time working carabiner gates.

When dawn found us back on the ridge, we were already tired and two hours behind schedule. At 2:30 in the afternoon we called a halt about 1,300' from the summit. We were worried about being be-nighted above 20,000'. Stan, in his fifties, announced this was his last high alpine climb. We walked out the next day behind the mules feeling melancholy about the failures on Huayna and Illimani.

Ah, sweet, teasing adventure. A month later, I planned a second, solo attempt on Illimani. It's amazing the difference it makes when you do a climb the second time. Dawn on the summit day found me where we had been at noon on the previous attempt. The main difficulty was that the upper slopes were much icier than a month before.

At one place I gingerly stepped across a long crevasse on a bad snow bridge. For the next 250' I was climbing 50-60° water ice that kept dinner-plating beneath my axes. I suppressed thoughts of just how I was going to get down this while I climbed up.

I summited at ten-o'clock. I felt strong; I could still smell the olive oil from a massage I had gotten three days before. To the

east, I could see La Paz in the distance. To the west, I could see Sajama 21,423', the highest peak in Bolivia 200 miles away.

On the way down I tried a different way to get to the snow bridge, involving only five meters of water ice. I was in high spirits as I arrived in high camp. The high altitude porter was waiting; we arrived back in base camp by five that afternoon.

I looked up at the three peaks of Illimani 6,500' overhead and wondered at the fact that I had been up on the highest summit just a few hours before. I had survived the ice and felt very alive with the sweet adventure.

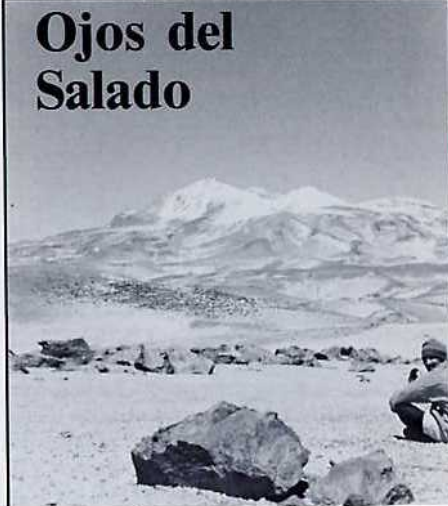
RESOURCES FOR TRAVELS IN BOLIVIA

Bolivia has the finest alpine climbing weather in the world during its Andean summer of June, July, and August. Several cordilleras remain relatively unexplored. Many feature rock spires and mountains with neither names nor ascents. The Sendero Luminoso guerrillas don't operate much in Bolivia, so the backcountry is safe compared to Peru.

The Club Andino on Calley Mexico in La Paz can be helpful. It is a good place to meet other climbers, buy photocopies of topos, and get advice from Alfredo, the old man of Bolivian climbing. You can hire guides or transport here. Also Benardo Guarachi, on the third floor of the Santa Anita building in Plaza Mendoza, can provide guides or transport. Finally, Club Sorata, run out of the Copacabana Hotel in Sorata, can provide guides for trekking around Illampu 20,938' and Ancahuma 21,086'.

The *South American Handbook*, published annually, provides the best travel information available. A poor climbing guide, *La Cordillera Real de Los Andes Bolivia*, can be purchased at Amigos de Los Libros in La Paz or Cochabamba. Kelsey's *Guide to the Mountains of the World* has some climbing topos for Bolivia.

A fine new series of shaded topographic maps of the Real, published by the German Alpine Club, is just available at Chessler Books in Evergreen. The South American Explorers Club has trip reports on some of the classic climbs in Bolivia.



Near base camp.

S. Hershey

By Stephen Hershey

As our trucks departed from Copiapo, we began to realize we were entering a different world. Missael, the Chilean who commanded our lead truck, pulled off the highway to inspect a thread-like track leading off into the desert and acted unsure of the correct course to take.

He had climbed this peak before, but he did make several wrong turns in the course of the day. Makeshift cuts of sand posing for roads split off and intersected without warning — all leading into a shimmering distance. We were never sure where the road taken would lead us.

We comprised the 1992 American Expedition to Chile's Ojos del Salado, at 22,600' the second highest mountain in the Americas. It's a remote, seldom seen, and rarely climbed summit at the outer limits of the Atacama Desert — truly al fin del mundo (at the end of the earth).

Led by Everest and Kangchenjunga veteran Greg Wilson, we were; Bill Carl, a dentist from Hamburg, NY; Tom Siebben, a pharmacist from Seymour, CT; Pete Spatt, a physician from Denver; and myself.

Fernando Vivero Castro and Missael Alvia Sid from Puerto Natales and Santiago, respectively, complemented Greg as guides, but also drove the rugged Toyota trucks in which we spend much of our time. The trucks never broke down once in our 500-mile journey.