

A report of the

IMPERIAL COLLEGE ECUADORIAN
ANDES EXPEDITION

(British El Altar Expedition)

July - September 1984

ABSTRACT

El Altar, 5319m is Ecuador's steepest and most impressive massif. It is essentially a horseShoe shaped mountain comprising 10 interdependant peaks of over 5000 metres. Once a dome shaped volcano over 6300 metres high a catastrophic explosion left Altar a caldera - a shattered relic of its former self. Altar remains a remote peak, and some of its peaks still await a second ascent.

There follows an account of the first British expedition to visit El Altar.

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Supported by :
Imperial College Exploration Board
university of London Convocation Trust

Patron John Noble Esq.

Part 1 Members

Andy Fanshawe	Expedition Leader
Bill Alexander	Expedition Treasurer
Simon Lamb	Medical
Mark Dixon	Equipment
Neil Travers	Food
Mike Homer	External Affairs

All the members of the expedition were at the time of leaving active members of Imperial College Mountaineering Club. The decision to go ahead with an expedition to Ecuador was made in November 1983 and organisation got quickly under way.

Part 2 Our Supporters

Once provisional approval was granted by the Imperial College Exploraton Board; following a meeting in November, appeals to a number of other organisations and companies were made, seeklng financial contributions.

The Convocation Trust Dunsheath Award 1984 donated 400 pounds to our expedition becoming our second biggest supporter

and other monies were received from Peter Grimley of the Bank of Montreal (personal donation of \$100), and Imperial College Union (200 pounds). Personal donations from individuals inside and outside college were also gratefully received.

Part 3 The Objectives

The expedition objectives were therefore purely aimed at making first British ascents of some of the peaks of El Altar (5319m) as well as to add first overall ascents of some of their faces and ridges. The inside-crater faces such as the North Face of El Obispo and the South Face of El Canonigo, some 3000 feet high still awaited ascents and were to receive attention from the group.

Chimborazo (6310m) was the only other mountain of interest being the highest peak in Ecuador and having a summit at the furthest point from the Earth's centre on the Earth's surface!

Part 4 The Trip

Table 1 outlines the notable successes of the expedition. The few days at Bogota, Colombia were spent chasing Ontej (our travel agent) by telephone and telex. We quickly

realized that land transfer to Quito, Ecuador was not going to be supplied by them, as arranged! We therefore collected receipts and made our own arrangements - we are presently making a claim for reimbursement from Orinoco Travel and Tours, London.

A Toyota four wheel drive "Land Cruiser" was hired to take all our gear and 4 expedition members to Banos, Ecuador our resort for the climbing areas of El Altar and Chimborazo in the Cordillera Real. Bill and Simon remained in the City to collect our donated propane gas, which was being air-freighted from Manchester.

Bogota, like so many Latin American Cities is rapidly expanding in both size and population. This is reflected in the very high proportion of children and young adults. In our area they took a great interest in the newly arrived gringos and we found that we could get on really well with them all. The people; of our age especially; seemed never too busy to help us and we quickly made some very good contacts. One friend, Ignacio Praaa, travelled with us all the way to Banos being virtually invaluable, translating and guiding lion the road".

In Quito, the capital of Ecuador, the obligatory British Embassy contact was made. In particular Alan Miller and Dick Whittingham there became tremendous friends and were to visit us at base camp on occasion and later entertain us in Quito!

TABLE 1 Expedition Achievements

PEAK	DATE	ROUTE/ASCENT
El Obispo, 5319m	3/8/84	1st ascent of the West Ridge approach route to the Italian Couloir TO (pitches of V) 1000m Added direct finish onto the West Summit (TD-) 5319m
Fraile Occidental, 5100m	21/8/84	1st British and second overall ascent of peak. Route followed crater rim in upper reaches. AO+
El Obispo, 5319m	22/8/84	Ascent of Italian Couloir Route (TO-)
Monja Grande, 5160m	23/8/84	1st British and 4th overall ascent of peak by possible new route on the SW flank (AD+)
Monja Grande, 5160m	24/8/84	1st solo ascent of peak
Chimborazo 6310m	30/8/84	Whympers Route (PO)
Chimborazo 6310m	31/8/84	Whympers Route (PO)
Huascarán Sur, 6767m	12/8/84	original Route (O+, at altitude)

CLIMBERS	COMMENTS
Alexander and Fanshawe	A three day climb characterised by very loose rock on the faces and gendarmes, coupled with a delightful snow ridge.
Homer and Lamb	An extremely remote peak - taking 3 days of uncomfortable approach. The route carried high objective danger from serac and avalanche.
Dixon and Travers	This is the most popular route on El Altar and was the original climb on the Massif
Dixon and Travers	A pure ice route weaving through large seracs and over delicate snow bridges.
Fanshawe	This climb usually a 2/3 day effort, was completed in just 5 hours from base camp.
Alexander and Fanshawe	An overnight ascent taking 7 hours carrying a hanglider to the summit. (see text)
Dixon, Homer Lamb and Travers.	
Dixon and Fanshawe	A 4 day route from 3100m including 2 bivouacs above 6000m. The 2nd highest peak outside the Himalayas.

Hotel Sangay in Banos, became our mail contact for the duration of the expedition to which thankfully no emergency mail was sent though we did receive a number of welcome letters from family and friends.

From Banos another "pick-up" truck was hired to take us to Candelaria, the last civilisation before the 15km. trek to Altar basecamp near the foot of El Obispo, the highest peak in the range. This trek was made with the help of 7 mules, though with reluctance we still had to carry extremely heavy packs ourselves!

El Altar was more impressive than any of us had imagined.

Obispo (the Bishop), Monja Grande and Monja Chica (Big and Small Nuns) were all visible through a variable cloud cover from time to time and were connected by an incredibly impressive ridge. So steep are the north faces (inside the caldera) of the Monjas that no snow can be accommodated and 2000 feet unbroken black walls guard each peak.

Obispo N Face, by comparison, looked easier laid back at an angle of about 60-70 degrees and holding much snow though it is a massive face - 3000 feet in total and a multiple day route. Stonefall and avalanche dangers are high at that time of the year - the face receiving the morning sun very early. The dimensions of the face are much the same as those for the Droites North Face in the Alps, but the climbing would be considerably harder.

Not surprisingly the other walls of the crater were whiter and colder. Large seracs were held on every face. This provided an added danger as collapse of these occurred frequently and their prediction was difficult. Each summit on the east and north sides of the caldera rim (the Frailes (Friars), El Tabernacular (the Tabernacle) and El Canonigo (the Canon)) consisted of a huge ice mushroom not apparent in the photographs we had/which were taken one year before. This was particularly worrying as, unlike seracs, summits are unavoidable when climbing a mountain! We hoped the outside crater routes would look a little less formidable.

Basecamp consisted of four small sleeping tents and 1 large •• Stormhaven" communal cooking tent. Over the five weeks we stayed at Altar, it held up well to the foul weather experienced for the majority of the time.

The climbing at Altar was on appallingly loose and friable volcanics (Quaternary Basaltic Andesites). To add to this, after midday the snow over the whole range became soft and wet - climbing then became tricky and walking strenuous. However nights were frequently clear and a moonlit approach to the start of the main difficulties was usually possible.

Only four successful excursions in which one or more summits were reached from basecamp were made. These are outlined in table 1. However Canonigo (5160m) received considerable attention, especially on its West Ridge and south

Face. Sheer difficulties, to say nothing of objective dangers, prevented us climbing an inside crater route on this or any other peak. A strong eight man Spanish/Ecuadorean expedition made an attempt on such a face (North Face of El Obispo) but in two weeks failed to overcome the initial 600 feet vertical rock wall which gives access to the upper slopes. In their attempt one Ecuadorean, Jorge Anhalzer, their leading climber suffered a broken femur from stonefall near the high point of their route. It was 24 hours before he was completely evacuated from the face after a multiple abseil on the back of one of his colleagues. Our expedition was able to assist in the rescue and give "temgesic" for pain relief.

Obispo North Face received no further attempts and still remains one of the most attractive objectives in the whole of the Northern Andes.

The climbing from the outside was considerably easier but access was more difficult. Hence these routes were usually attempted with food and bivouac gear for three or more days. For instance Simon and Mike were away from basecamp for six days to climb Fraile Occidental.

One visitor to basecamp was Dave Kirke of the Dangerous Sports Club who declared his intention to jump off one of the peaks of Altar! This he didn't manage but he did succeed however in persuading us to help him in his attempt to glide off Chimborazo. Altar basecamp was dismantled and we prepared

for Chimborazo.

The snowline here is much higher than at Altar and the mountain is more popular too. Hence it is possible to drive to 4700 metres and sleep in a hut (Whymper Refugio) at 5000 metres.

At one time Chimborazo was considered to be the highest mountain in the world and it can be seen on fine days to dominate over a vast expanse of Ecuador. Its summit, rarely in cloud, receives only slight precipitation. The existing snow is not therefore compacted by fresh layers - resulting in laboriously deep steps when walking. Distances on the dome summit are great and in the "thin air" they are felt.

Although the climbing, on snow for all the way, is easy the steepest portion of the ascent is at over 20000 feet. The weight of the hangglider (45lb) at such altitudes made the ascent a strenuous one.

Dave and the Cine-Cameraman, Christobal Corral were not acclimitized to the extent we were so spent some time at the hut in preparation. Meanwhile Bill and I walking through the night carried the hangglider and two tents (to set up a camp on the top) to the summit. Then Christobal, Dave and Jeremy Adams (an Englishman we met at Altar) guided by the rest of our team set off for the summit. Radio contact was maintained on each and every hour. Christobal, unable to reach the top through fatigue, handed the camera to Mike who

then stayed overnight on the summit with Dave, ready for an attempt the following morning. The rest of the party returned from the summit to escort Christobal to the hut. Mark and I that night returned to the summit to help with the "launch". However by the morning there was no wind whatsoever, prohibiting a take-off. It simply was not possible to gain the necessary speed for take off at that altitude. However some rewarding photographs of this bizarre scene were taken and an eruption of Sangay (5120m), the highest active volcano in the world, to the south east was filmed.

Following Chimborazo, Mark and I decided to go down to the Cordillera Blanca of Peru to attempt Huascarán Sur (6767m) whilst the others prepared in Quito for a possible attempt on Antisana (5605m) and Cotopaxi (6005m).

permission to climb Antisana was not granted so all turned their attention to Cotopaxi. However they were stopped by crevasse and serac obstacles and were forced to retreat.

Mark and I, meanwhile arrived in Huaraz, Peru ready for an attempt except that we barely had enough money to buy food for the bivouacs! We swiftly sold some unnecessary rock climbing equipment and set off for Musho (3100m) the nearest point to Huascarán accessible by road. From here it took 3 days to reach the summit snow fields. Progress on the extremely complex glaciers tumbling down from the North Col at

6000 metres was very slow. Visibility on the summit day was very poor - a little less than 100 metres and route finding was then difficult. It took 12 hours to reach the summit from the Col bivouac, climbing in that time entirely over 20000 feet.

Some of the serac ice pitches were over 80 degrees in steepness and sustained for 40 feet or more. Vertical ice steps were also encountered. The top was rounded, indefinite and unrewarding. Demoralized and very tired we were unable to find the very top but we were thereabouts. With no bivouac gear, a bar of chocolate between us and just two hours of remaining light we made our descent in deteriorating weather.

Quito was an especially welcoming place when we were all again reunited for the final few days preparations before coming home. In this time we were to be given an official reception at the house of the Defence Attache to the British Embassy to which a number of Embassy staff and leading Ecuadorean climbers were invited. This was a splendid occasion and we presented to the Whittinghams (whose house it was) a signed and framed aerial photograph of the El Altar crater.

In summary, a highly successful expedition which may be viewed as a serious climbing trip, furthering British mountaineering interests in the less often visited regions of the world, providing us with a challenge and an immense amount of enjoyment.

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To our other supporters; in particular the University of London Convocation Trust and Imperial College Union we are most grateful.

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parke Davis

Beecham Laboratories

Glaxo

ER Squibb and Sons Ltd

ICI Pharmaceuticals Division

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Andy Fanshawe

Simon Lamb