

# Imperial College Cordillera Real Expedition 1972

**Paul Bunting**

In 1970 members of the Imperial College Mountaineering Club visited Nuristan in the Hindu Kush, and so enjoyed the climbing there that it was decided to launch another expedition in 1972—the only problem was where. As we had been *E* the obvious answer was to go *W*, and two possibilities sprang to mind, first Alaska and secondly South America. The latter seeming more distant was chosen. Then came the question of where in South America—Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile or Argentina, and as none of the proposed expedition had visited South America everything was decided on second-hand knowledge. After talking to people who had climbed in Peru and Bolivia we decided to climb in the Cordillera Real in the same area as the Bangor University Expedition of 1966. According to Dave Challis, a member of that expedition, all the larger mountains had been climbed but there were many new routes to be done.

Bolivia has been described as a land of contrasts, and this is certainly true. To the *N* lies the Beni, a hot tropical region, to the *S* the cities of Cochabamba, Sucre and Potosi, to the *E* the Yungas and the jungle areas, but in the mid-west lies the Altiplano, a great flat plateau, bounded on the *W* by the Cordillera Occidental and on the *E* by the Cordillera Real. The Alto is at 3950 m, scorched by the sun yet swept by harsh cold winds, but nevertheless it supports a large proportion of Bolivia's Indians, the Campesinos, who farm the barren plateau.

The Cordillera Real comprises four great granite batholiths, tens of miles across, and these have withstood weathering and been left standing high above the country rock to form the mountains. At the *S* end of this chain lies the Illimani batholith dominating the capital—La Paz, whilst at the *N* end is the Sorata batholith. Massive and snow-clad it overlooks the Alto, Lake Titicaca and the village of Sorata which nestles in the valley 5000 ft below the *N* end of the Alto. The peaks of the Sorata batholith form an enormous horse-shoe ridge, broken and complicated in many places, with the Cooco valley running out to the *NE* from the heart of the mountains. The highest mountains Ancohuma (6388 m), Illampu (6362 m) and Pico del Norte (6030 m) form the most continuous section of the ridge, steep on both sides with rock, ice, snow, cornices and ice cliffs.

The expedition left La Paz on 21 July, and after the usual delays reached the road head at Mina Candelaria, a wolfram mine 30 miles from Sorata, two days later, and there hired porters and llamas for the walk up to Cheracota, the Base Camp. The head porter, a local Indian called Angelino Silber, organised the transport of food and equipment to Cheracota, one and a half days' walk from the mine. To say one and a half days' walk is misleading, because it took the porters one and a half days on the way up, one day down, and Angelino

four to five hours up, three hours down. However, we, the British, must hold the record for the longest-ever haul from the mine to Cheracota. After all the porters and llamas had left the mine there were still two cans of paraffin, two food boxes and various oddments left, and being the only people left to carry this, four of us, Paul McCartney, Steve Ridgill, Neville Jordison and I loaded up. From the mine the path drops 2000 ft to the valley and the village of Cooco, rises on the opposite side of the valley and then contours round to Cheracota. By the time we had reached Cooco there was no sign of the main group, so we headed up the Cooco valley, as this seemed the obvious pathway. With the heavy packs, unaccustomed altitude, boulder hopping, stream crossing, scrambling and slithering that ensued, our intrepid group of four arrived at Cheracota two and a half days later, much to everyone else's amusement.

Cheracota, at 4700 m, beside a cold mountain lake, was well chosen as a Base Camp by previous expeditions. Behind the lake is 90 m of granite, a fine practice crag, and at the side of the lake flat ground for tents and a stream; above the camp on all sides rise the mountains. The camp is well situated for access to the Viluyos and Hankopiti peaks, Casiri Este, and all adjoining peaks and Ancohuma, but to reach Pico del Norte, Illampu and the Yacuma peaks one has to descend 250 m to the site of the Germán 1971 expedition camp and then rise again. However, this camp is nothing more than a collection of boulders and beer cans, with no view, and in no way compares with Cheracota.

The members of the expedition were either from the ICMC, past members or friends; all had Alpine experience and three had climbed in the Hindu Kush. Paul Bunting, Bruce Hooker, Neville Jordison, Paul McCartney, Steve Ridgill, Roger Scull, Dave Steel and Richard Wroot completed the party of eight. We decided to climb in pairs, each pair staying out from Base Camp for five or six days; signalling between groups to be done by flares; green for 'all is well', red for distress and white to answer a distress call.

At first the weather was fine, with plenty of sun and clear blue skies, but as the days wore on cloud appeared in the early afternoons in the valleys. During this time Paul Bunting and Steve traversed the three Viluyos peaks, tried to descend but could not and traversed over an unnamed peak to the SE before descending. The pair then climbed Hankopiti VII by the NW face, the initial difficult rock pitches giving way to rock and snow scrambling. At three-quarters height, the summit snow-fields overhung the rock in a shower of 20-ft icicles which we by-passed by some hard ice climbing. On top the hail began. Hankopiti IV a short climb of 150 m from the col between Hankopiti III and Hankopiti IV gave difficult and exposed climbing up the NW face and again it was finished in hail. Bruce and Richard made the two-day walk from Base Camp to the Casiri Este region twice and climbed Mesketanta, Monte Triangulo and Casiri Este. The S face of Monte Triangulo was steep, the climbing mixed and the snow variable, thus providing a fine route. On Casiri Este this pair found the W face barred at half height by smooth slabs, which did not yield despite Bruce's two-hour attempt at pegging. Finally they traversed off to the left-hand ridge, and after an airy bivouac hewn out of a solid ice-ridge reached the summit.



80 *Hankopiti V from Hankopiti VII* This and  
next photo: P. Bunting



81 *Climbing on Casiri Este*

The largest of the Hankopiti peaks, Hankopiti I was climbed by Paul McCartney and Neville by the long SE ridge. They had tried a route up the W face, a series of broken buttresses flanked by fine snow-ridges, but had turned back because of poor snow.

The ridge of Illampu and Pico del Norte looks down on to Cheracota and sitting in Base Camp one's eyes would wander over the many possible routes. Dave and Roger chose the SE ridge of Pico del Norte, a dog-legged ridge, with many gendarmes, leading directly to the final summit snows. Having dumped some gear 60 m up the ridge they returned with more supplies and completed the 600 m+ route in two days' descending by abseil. From this climb the pair had perfect views of the E face of Illampu, a long wall of fine buttresses divided by snow-gullies. A few days later Dave and Roger were camped under this buttress, but the weather was poor and the two returned to Base Camp.

On 14 August they left Cheracota with a six days' supply of food for an attempt on the E face of Illampu; the climb itself was successful but an accident occurred on the summit ridge, in which both Dave and Roger lost their lives. The other three pairs of climbers had rested in Base Camp on the 14th and 15th, but on the 16th and 17th fresh snow and strong winds confined them to Cheracota. On Saturday the 19th the weather had improved, and so on Sunday three of the party left camp to make a food-dump beneath the E face of Ancohuma. The remaining three who had stayed in Base Camp saw a red distress flare at 7.30pm on Sunday and left on Monday morning for Illampu. The three who returned on Monday evening from the reconnaissance to Ancohuma left for Illampu on Tuesday after reading the note explaining about the siting of the red flare. By walking in the dark, these three arrived beneath Illampu by 9.30 that evening. A further flare was sighted from the ridge that night. The six members of the rescue party decided it was essential to reach the pair as quickly as possible; thus four climbers equipped with the minimum amount of food and gear set off up the S ridge leaving two on the glacier to follow with poles for a stretcher and more food if required. The S ridge was heavily iced and the steep rocks up from the col took the whole of Wednesday to climb. During Thursday the weather worsened and this and the unstable snow conditions slowed the progress along the ridge. Finally, on Friday the 25th the four from the rescue party found Roger's body; he had apparently died from cold and exposure, but of Dave no trace was ever found.

The four in the rescue team abseiled down the E face in a blizzard but finally reached the two support climbers in the tent on the glacier late on Friday night. The following day the six were unable to find their way off the glacier because of total white-out conditions, but on Sunday the weather brightened a little and they did get off, cold and tired, and sad at the loss of their two friends.

On reflection the expedition was worth while. It had climbed twenty-one peaks, some straight-forward, others more difficult. In the main the rock-climbing was easy, but the snow and ice climbing difficult, varying from soft snow to hard blue ice. For any future expeditions to the area, the E face of Ancohuma, 900 m of gigantic rock pillars topped by snow, is waiting, but the

time to visit the Cordillera Real is June and July when the weather is reliably stable, or at least this is what our porters said. But they also told us that this year had the worst weather for many, many years, and as all climbers should know, every year has the worst weather for many, many years.

For map, see *AJ* 72 296.

## LIST OF ASCENTS

Mountain	Height (m)	Route	Climbers
Unnamed	5578	N ridge	} Hooker, Wroot
Haltatawa	5578	s flank	
Mesketanta	5624	N flank	
Monte Triangulo		s face	
Casiri Este		w face, SE ridge	
Viluyos III	5563	NW ridge	} Ridgill, Bunting
Viluyos II	5605	NE ridge	
Viluyos I	5639	w face	
Unnamed	5578	NW ridge	
A traverse was made of these four peaks above			
Hankopiti VII		NW face	} Bunting, Ridgill
Hankopiti VI		NE gully and face	
Hankopiti III		E ridge	
Hankopiti IV		w face	
Pico del Norte	6030	SE ridge	} Steel, Scull
Hankopiti VII		NE ridge	
Unnamed		SW ridge	
A traverse was made of these two peaks above			
Illampu	6362	E face	Steel, Scull
Buena Vista I		NW ridge	} McCartney, Jordison
Buena Vista II		SE ridge	
Hankopiti I	5867	SE ridge	
Kimsakolyo	5893	N ridge	
Kunotana II		NE ridge	