

## Report by Matt Balmer of the Cordillera Oriental Range Expedition

In June 2011, Dan Fitzgerald, James Wake and Matt Balmer visited the Cordillera Oriental range.

The Cordillera Oriental range has been sporadically visited through the years and it certainly is not a mainstream climbing destination in Peru. Many climbers flock to Peru to climb in the Cordillera Blanca for alpine climbing. A plethora of information exists, mountains huts are starting to appear, and park permits are now a pre-requisite. Huaraz, the main city of the Blanca, is geared up for climbers and hosts climbing shops, cafes and countless hostels; you can even find a curry house selling bottled UK ales! In contrast, the Cordillera Oriental is served out of the tiny town of Huachon. The town boasts one hotel, of which if you are lucky, you will get a room with a window; bed bugs are compulsory. We found no one in the village who spoke English and not many people could understand why we would go up into the mountains, as it's cold up there apparently.

The Cordillera Oriental has been explored over the last decade by Tony Barton and various partners, and it was reading about his new route with Tom Chamberlain on the south face of Huaguruncho (5723m) last year that sparked our interest in the area. In a photo of the South face of Huaguruncho our eyes caught a mountain to the left, Huaguruncho Chico, and an interesting spur climbing up it's own icy South face. After various emails and report reading, we were set to attempt this unclimbed face.

During the walk in to base camp, we spotted an interesting looking gully on the South face of Huarancayo Sur (c5200m). This line had been identified by Tom and Tony as a potential objective on a previous trip, but as they were in the area later in the season (August), they found the line had melted out. We appeared to be in luck with our trip earlier in the season, and quickly decided to take a closer look at the route as part of our acclimatisation.

For the following week we explored the area, watched the mountains, drank tea, ate biscuits, and acclimatised. Finally, on the on the 5th of June we set off to Huarancayo Sur to attempt the unclimbed gully on the South face. This mountain has only one previously recorded ascent, with this being in June 2006 when Tony Barton and Andy Houseman climbed the South East ridge to the top of the twin summited mountain. The team descended the first part of the ridge before abseiling to easier ground.

On the first day we simply scrambled to the foot of the small glacier below the cirque of the South face, where we then bivvied for the night. The following morning we made our way through the crevasse field of the glacier to the bottom of the gully. As we were unsure of the conditions we would find, the true angle of the gully, or it's length, it was nice to finally see the route up-close. For 350m we climbed some of the finest icy gully climbing any of us has ever done any where in the world. The climbing was sustained and full of interest. In particular, the last pitch exiting the gully provided some exiting climbing on steep ground, with loose snow and poor gear. We perched on the top in the late afternoon, and then watched with a sinking feeling in our stomachs as we saw the cloud rolling in towards the mountain.

Unfortunately, due to the topographical nature of the valley and the fact that the cloud seemed to predominantly come in from the North, we couldn't see any approaching weather whilst climbing on the south faces until it was upon us. Therefore, we now faced the prospect of a decent in thick cloud, and ever reducing light.

After one abseil from the summit we were well and truly in the cloud. The rapid cloud build-up made route finding incredibly difficult, and therefore compromised the safety of the descent. In the thick cloud we set up a second abseil in what we believed was the right direction, but with such

reduced visibility it was all too easy to envisage taking a slight wrong turn, or abseil into the wrong part of the cirque. This had the potential of turning what should be an easy descent back to our bivvy site, into an epic. Therefore, we then decided that the safest thing to do was to wait and see if the cloud was going to disperse later in the night, thereby allowing us to make the way down by starlight (and torchlight!).

Sat on the snow a mere 50m below the summit of the mountain, was not the situation we were hoping to be in, and the prospect of an unplanned bivvy loomed. It was now dark, and the visibility still incredibly poor, forcing us to prepare as best as possible for the night ahead. We shared out some energy bars and our remaining water, and started the process of using the adzes on our axes to dig into a windscoop. As we did not have our sleeping/bivvy bags it was essential to make some kind of shelter, and after many an hour, the windscoop "remodelling" resulted in a very cramped snowhole for the three of us to crawl into. A feeling of dread surged through me, as the winter nights in Peru are long and cold. For the next 11 hours we talked rubbish, and I even heard Dan sleeping at one point.

The following morning at first light, with clear skies and a beautiful sunrise, we made our way to the abseil point we had prepared the evening before, and continued our descent down the mountain. Five and half hours later we returned to our bivvy below the South face, and greedily ate the food we had been planning to eat the night before, and had spent the evening at the bivvy thinking about. We then packed our kit and made the long walk back to base camp.

Once back, we chatted about our route over dinner and agreed on a grade of Scottish V. Despite the unplanned bivvy, the route itself was fantastic, and we thought it to be up there with the classic gullies of the Ben in terms of quality.

We rested for a few days, and watched the weather, before we set off for what we had been considering as our main feature of the trip, the unclimbed south face of Huaguruncho Chico. Information about ascents of this mountain are scarce, it has possibly not been ascended since its first ascent in 1956. The South face was attempted by Tony Barton and Andy Houseman in 2006, but they retreated low down on the central spur due to poor snow conditions.

Unfortunately, by now the reliability of the weather had become a concern, as every time the cloud came it rolled in from the north, meaning we couldn't see any approaching weather. The problem was enhanced by the fact that there was no clear pattern to enable us to predict the advent of bad weather. Everyday we had watched the mountain, and the same cloud that obscured our descent off Huarancayo Sur, would arrive fairly reliably at around midday. However, some days the cloud would remain and by mid-afternoon the top of Huaguruncho Chico would be in cloud, and others it would dissipate within an hour or two. As we could not predict what would happen each day (There were no tell-tale signs such as wind direction etc), this left us with the option of sitting at base camp, or taking a chance with the weather after a clear spell. We decided on the later.

There are two obvious ridge lines on the South face, and whilst we had looked at the right hand spur on the South face, on closer inspection, this season, large mushroom of snow seemed to be frequently noted through binoculars along the spur. Some of these looked quite "interesting" to get through. The left hand ridge line looked slightly better, and we thought we could see a line through the rock bands and seracs.

As descent was something we were unsure of, we had taken a day to walk about to the North side of the mountain for our acclimatisation. However, getting off the North side didn't look great, as the glacier did not appear to be in good condition. Luckily, we did also think that it could be possible to descend the glacier beneath the South-West ridge on Huaguruncho Chico. Although, how exactly

we would be able to get down to the glacier in the first place was not known.

On the first day we worked our way up to the foot of the glacier beneath the South-West ridge and found an uncomfortable looking crevasse to attempt to sleep. Due to the chance of impending cloud, we wanted to try and be on the top and descending by the time this had a chance to come in, so we set off early. We had spied a line through the lower rock buttress on the snow ridge that would lead us up to the headwall on the South face. In the dark we set off up the glacier to get to our spied snow ramp through the buttress. After about 300m I reached where we thought it to be and looked up. In the light of our headtorches, we could see that between the snow ramp and ourselves, there appeared to be about 60m of rock wall. For the next hour and a half with heavy rucksacks, we scratched our way up the rock buttress in the dark. The climbing was awkward, steep, loose, and time consuming. Eventually we were on our ramp line and were soon on the main ridge moving together through amazing snow mushrooms.

After sometime along the ridge, we arrived at what we had identified as "the bad step" from basecamp. This provided more loose rock and poor rock gear; but least this time it was light! At the top of the snow ridge, below the headwall, we moved into a gully on the left hand side of the face. Here we found excellent ice and thought we were in luck, and had found a way through the upper headwall; which appeared to sport lots of loose snow and flutings. This was especially welcome, as over the proceeding hour or two, the weather had started deteriorating and visibility reduced. Unfortunately, on the third pitch in the icy gully, the ice disappeared and changed to loose snow, making climbing and placing protection much more precarious. Dan led out getting into steeper and looser snow, but before long it was sleeting, and mini avalanches were triggering. The snow pack was changing rapidly which, combined with the increasing poor visibility, meant we decided it was time to bail. We cautiously made our way back to the ice gully, where we then started retreating on Abalakov threads towards the glacier. Luckily, this gully ran all the way to the glacier, and afforded us a quick and relatively safe descent to flatter ground.

Unfortunately, whilst we were now on flat ground, the visibility was still very poor. We attempted to find a way down the glacier, but it very quickly became clear that we needed better visibility and contrast to negotiate our way through the complicated maze of crevasses. For the second time in as many routes, the weather was going to force us to bivvy. Thankfully this time we were better equipped with more food, stoves and bivvy bags. We managed to find some "good" snow and dug a more luxurious snow hole than our first, this time with a shovel! For me, the time went slower on this bivvy and at 5am I shivered my way out of the snow hole as we geared up to start descending. The glacier was complicated and some of the holes could lose a whole street of houses down them, but thankfully most of the snow bridges were well frozen in the early hours of the morning, as was I. We reached our crevasse bivvy later that morning, and lay outside in the sun. The walk back down to our valley camp seemed to last forever.

Back at basecamp we looked at what we had done. We had frustratingly got to within 150m of easy ground and the summit, before poor weather (Which came in much earlier than usual), and snow conditions forced us to turn back. The following day rain showers swept through the entire valley. After this, the weather in the area took a turn for the worse, with cloud/rain moving in everyday and enveloping the mountain. This, combined with the fact we had blown the majority our snow stakes on the descent down the glacier, meant that we could not justify another trip up to the face, so we began to make plans to leave the valley and four days later we eventually did. Whilst it was an incredibly difficult decision to leave the valley, and subsequently lose any chance of attempting the mountain again after coming so close, it was eased slightly by the continuing poor weather. The adventure remains to be completed.

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