

Climbing Peru's Highest Mountain

Contributed by Jeff Marlow
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At 6768m Mt Huascarán is the highest peak in the tropics.

3500m

The Huaraz market is not a good place for a vegetarian. A bag of squirming fur resolves into dozens of guinea pigs awaiting conversion into the Peruvian delicacy known as cuy. Sheep heads return a passing gaze with glazed-over eyes. Plucked chickens adorn the stalls.

But I'm not in Peru for the food, and, feeling slightly queasy, my friend Adam and I make our way through the town to meet our climbing party. At an elevation of roughly 3500 meters, Huaraz is the outdoors capital of the Cordillera Blanca, the rugged mountain range that cuts through northern Peru. It is here that adventurers from around the world flock to take advantage of the splendors of the second-highest mountain range on Earth — a playground of trekking, ice climbing, mountaineering, and white-water rafting.

The town itself, about 100,000 strong, is an intriguing mix of hyper-fit foreign trekkers and traditionally-dressed native Peruvians. High-end climbing stores stocked with the latest and greatest gear stand next to colourful thatched huts.

The real draw, however, is the mountains, and we are here to climb Mt. Huascarán. The peak is 6768 meters tall: the highest peak in the tropics and more than a vertical mile higher than anything I've ever climbed. I've spent a mere 5 days acclimitizing in preparation for the attempt, and I note with dread that Anne, our normally cheerleading tour operator, cautions me against getting my hopes up. But I'm ready to go: I've rented my ice ax, stocked up on snacks, and sent my last flurry of emails, making sure to let everyone know I love them…just in case.

3622m

We start walking from a small town north of Huaraz, exchanging awkward bi-lingual greetings with giggling villagers. Next to me are three fellow climbers and our guide Saul, short and muscular, coiled like a spring. Like most multi-day climbs, the first day is a relatively leisurely trek to base camp, and today's hike is like a field trip to the natural history museum. We pass small farms growing local varieties of potatoes as playful children entertain themselves in the

streams.

Next comes the perfume of the eucalyptus forest, a section of the trail that is made slightly less fragrant by the pack animals that overtake us. It's hard not to feel a little defeated seeing a dozen donkeys and their barefoot caretakers nonchalantly breeze by us.

4200m

As a soggy moss-covered forest gives way to a rocky amphitheater, we are greeted by the symphony of base camp: velcro, screeching kettles, and the clanking of tin cups. Climbers are by nature a competitive breed, so we approach our new neighbors with caution. There is a range of moods permeating the camp: some drained yet jubilant having returned from the summit, others focused and antisocial, eager to have their shot and unwilling to expend energy in unnecessary conversation.

There's a hypochondriac in every climber; after all, a small discomfort at base camp can become a full-blown crisis at higher elevations. Is that headache just minor dehydration or the onset of altitude sickness? Was that twinge in my ankle a passing pang or a sign of a debilitating sprain?

As we wait for the advancing twilight, I share the glory of country music on my iPod with Saul. He reciprocates with the tinny melodies of Los Angeles de Peru on his tape player. Every comment becomes a language lesson, a chance to delve deeper into a new culture. The five of us sip heavily sweetened mate de coca tea, laughing and congratulating ourselves on the day's triumphs, naively thinking we'd had a hard day.

5379m

We reach the glacier a few dozen feet later than last year's expedition and are greeted by a percussive of melting icicles. Strapping on our crampons, we climb onto the largest tropical icefield in the world — yet another barometer of global warming. With the crunch of crampons on snow, I settle into a sort of meditative march, struck by the unusual blend of extreme discomfort and inner peace.

5521m

Naturally, we're starving, but the altitude shrinks one's appetite. At high camp 1, the altitude is foreign territory. I monitor every movement, every breath, but so far, so good. Perhaps there's something to this coca tea...

5827m

I'm struggling. My pack feels like a load of rocks and my legs protest every step. Adam and the others power by

me, seemingly unbothered by the lack of oxygen. I desperately need energy, yet I can hardly choke down a candy bar. Fortunately, the stunning surroundings provide an effective distraction: for all its challenges and dangers, the glacier is alluring with its jagged iceflows and translucent blue ice caves.

6018m

Having reached high camp 2, we spend another afternoon setting up camp, drying out our gear, and fueling up for the big day ahead. Tomorrow is our summit bid. The sleepless night is made even more nerve-wracking by the groans of the glacier that sound like a twig about to snap. I hear a rumbling in the distance, and a flash of fear paralyzes me – it’s a sound that we’ve come to respect over the last couple of days as we’ve watched several small avalanches send snow and ice hurtling down the mountain. Fortunately, this avalanche steers clear of our tents.

Breakfast at 12:30AM is a quiet affair as we think about the challenges ahead of us. Saul rounds us up and we move forward willfully.

6411m

It’s 3:30 in the morning and the only light projects from our headlamps. It’s probably just as well given the intimidating mass of rock and ice looming overhead. The glacier is unpredictable, particularly in the climatic uncertainty of global warming. Because of this uncertainty, high altitude mountaineering is often a nocturnal endeavor: if we don’t get off the steepest parts of the climb (that is, up and down) before the warmer sun-soaked afternoon hours start to thaw the ice, we could very well trigger the next avalanche.

Most of us in the group have never held an ice ax, much less used one to ascend a 30-foot frozen wall at 6500 meters in the pitch dark. Fortunately, we don’t fully grasp the extent of the task at the time, and we’re going up this cliff whether we like it or not.

6706m

We’re six hours into summit day, and my breaths-to-steps ratio has increased to five in the rarified air. I’m panting loudly, and my throat burns. I call out feebly for a water break, but my request goes unheeded. I wonder whether Saul just can’t hear me or if he is wisely ignoring me, well aware that a “quick rest” at this stage is halfway to turning around.

6768m

I stumble to the crest of a hill and am confused by the flat ground. I see my companions smiling and snapping photos, and I realize that we’ve made it. I’m more relieved than anything else - no more breathless panting, no more worrying about every twinge of pain, no more watching every coming cloud for signs of a blizzard.

According to some scientists, the elliptical shape of the Earth makes the summit of Huascarán closer to the stars than any other point on the planet. It sure feels that way, seeing crags of rock emerging from a layer of clouds below us.

3500m

The climb down from the summit revealed the full extent of the frightening walls we had blindly ascended hours before, but back in Huaraz we celebrate our success. Anne responds with poorly-disguised shock when we arrive (mostly) unscathed.

Back at lower altitude and with appetite restored, Adam and I head boldly for the market in search of dinner.

Want to climb the Huascarán? Here's all the practical information you need

Getting There:

Huaraz is best accessed via Lima, Peru's capital city, which is serviced by several international airlines. From there, take the 8-hour-long bus ride to Huaraz on Cruz del Sur, Expreso Ancash, or Movil (roughly £5 each way).

Lodging:

There are many cheap lodging options catering to the trekking set. The Morales Guest House is a brand new budget hotel (£10 for a single room, £12 for a double) on the north end of town; the owner runs a leading guide service and can point you toward the best hikes in the region. The Albergue Churup provides a dormitory bed for £4 or a single room for £10, and its common room and patio are comfortable and tastefully decorated while offering a stunning sunrise view of the mountains.

When to go:

Huaraz and the Cordillera Blanca are located just south of the equator, so there is not much seasonal weather variation. However, tourist services build up during the northern hemisphere summer, when most commercial climbing expeditions take place.

What to do:

Huaraz is an outdoors town first and foremost, and the main road is lined with dozens of companies offering a range of treks and climbs. Options include day hikes (Lake Churup is a local favorite), tours of the Pastoruri Glacier, or multi-day climbs and treks. Peaks range from the beginner-friendly Ishinca and Pisco to the more technically and physically demanding Huascarán and Alpamayo. For more ambitious climbs where equipment and technical know-how are at a

premium, make plans before arrival.

Recommended outfitters include Pony's Expeditions and Peruvian Andes Adventures. Be sure to allow sufficient time to adjust to the altitude before undertaking strenuous activity. Before the daily hike, head over to Café Andino – the center of expat culture in Huaraz – and check out the Huaraz market to expand your culinary horizons.

Author Profile:

Jeff Marlow is always in search of a new adventure. By day he works toward an MPhil degree at Imperial College London, studying how to best search for life on Mars. A native of beautiful Denver, Colorado, Jeff is an avid (yet amateur) skier, mountaineer, and runner.