

A translation of an article published in the Swedish climbing magazine "Brant", December 2002

"Long days on Huayna Potosi West Face"

Avalanche!

Olof wakes up and looks around confused.

Any moment a white wall can come down over us, but the darkness of the night doesn't reveal anything. The only thing that worries us is the sound, as if a train is driving out on the glacier.

A few seconds pass, and after what feels like an eternity we are hit by some spindrift. The avalanche passes to the side of us. Mike goes back to sleep, but Olof is sitting and quietly trying to understand what just happened.

We have spent two months climbing in the remote Cordillera Apolobamba in north-western Bolivia. Even if we were tired from amoeba dysentery and high altitude cough, we decided to make an attempt to climb Huayna Potosi west face.

The hut owner Hugo, from the Refugio Huayna Potosi, gives us valuable information and warns us about the previous accidents and many unplanned bivouacs. "Suerte", good luck, he says with a smile.

After a short approach involving delicate balancing on a pipeline, we stand under the face.

It's the biggest face in Bolivia, and it really is massive with a huge hanging glacier in the middle.

We realize that we never have climbed anything that big before, and we watch it with fascination and respect. We bivouac near some sastrugis (snow formations) which provide some shelter from the cold wind. We fall, asleep and later wake up to the sound of the avalanche.

After a couple of hours sleep, the alarm rings at 12 o'clock and we start melting snow on the MSR stove. We think about the avalanche incident and also realize that today is Friday the 13:th...

We start climbing at 3.30, and as we move up the glacier it gets steeper and steeper. The lower part of the route has got crevasses which we jump across. Then we climb up to the bergschrund. Olof tries to cross, but falls through the snow bridge. Finally he stops hanging from his armpits. Looking down all he can see is a black hole. "Hold me tight" he screams, and succeeds in climbing up from the hole. After a short pause he crosses the crevasse and the climb can continue up to the hanging glacier. There we make a 200 meters long traverse to the right to reach the other end of the glacier. The sun rises and reveals the huge seracs which previously only looked like shadows. From the right side of the hanging glacier the route goes straight up. At first the snow consists of good névé, and occasionally we put a snowstake as belay. But higher up the snow gets worse, and 200 meters from the summit the snow is loose and unstable. It's pointless to place any protection, since it wouldn't hold anything.

The climbing goes slowly and can best be described as swimming upwards. We are both tired after our previous climbs, and during the day all we have eaten is two energy gels each.

Olof leads every pitch and after a couple of hours he can climb over a loose snow rib, and he finds some better snow. Mike leads the last pitch and finds a way through the top cornice.

The climb has taken us 13 hours and darkness is falling. After a short break on the summit we decide to solo climb down the normal route. It's quite steep near the summit, but we have to descend fast. In one and a half hour we finally reach the high camp "Campo Argentino" in darkness. There is only one tent in the camp, with some German climbers. They don't greet us, but when we get into our sleeping bags and light up the stove they shout "keep quiet, we want to sleep". We don't care so much, and fall asleep with the stove on.

The next morning we wake up in broad daylight with a bunch of climbers curiously watching us. They look confused, and they probably think that we either have problems or are crazy since we don't have any tent.

Stiff legged after another cold night we stagger down the glacier. On the way down we meet a surprised Hugo. Obviously he didn't quite believe that we would succeed, and when he hears about our climb he gives us a kiss on the cheek.

Down at the refugio we manage to get lift with an old taxi. Since the campesinos are on protest with the government, the roads are partly blocked by rocks and debris. After a while we get our first flat tire and a while later the spare tire breaks too. We continue on the broken tire and reach La Paz driving on metal...

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